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**The Development and Expansion of Higher Education in Oman:
Planning for the Future**

Volume I

By

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List of Used Abbreviations

HE	Higher Education
GE	General Education
BE	Basic Education
HEI/HEIs	Higher Education Institution/s
SQU	Sultan Qaboos University
CoHE	Council of Higher Education
SS/HSS	Secondary School /High Secondary School
SSGs	Secondary School Graduates
HRD	Human Resources Development
Bs/ BsC	Bachelor/ Bachelor Certificate
FYDPs	Five-Year Development Plans
GCC	Gulf Co-operation Council
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperative and Development (an organisation of Industrial Countries that Encourages Trade and Economic Growth). Source: OXFORD Advanced Genie
VT	Vocational Training
TE	Technical Education
MoD	Ministry of Development
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoHE	Ministry of Higher Education
MoI	Ministry of Information
MoNE	Ministry of National Economy
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualification
HND	Higher National Diploma
OND	Oman National Diploma
RO.	Riyal Omani

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ABSTRACT

In common with many other developing countries, particularly in the Gulf region, Oman has been experienced on educational renaissance over the last 35 years. This renaissance put substantial pressure on HE, and created considerable disquiet within Omani society, as the majority of young secondary school graduates are unable to be accommodated in the one state university and other colleges. Consequently, the country's mission to 'Omanise' its workforce (and thereby rely less on expatriates and migrant workers) is far from being achieved, particularly in the private sector agencies. Questions naturally follow regarding the adequacy of state planning for HE and the implementation of the vision whereby Oman's younger generations can fully contribute towards Omani life in all respects – economically, socially, and culturally.

This study takes the HE context in Oman as its focus, considering issues relating to its development and expansion, and concentrating specifically on the provision for, and progression of, Secondary School Graduates (SSGs) to HE. In this regard, the study aims also to investigate different demands for HE, socially and economically, and to identify the vision, aims, policies, and implementation plans of HE as currently articulated in the country's published Development Plans, with particular reference to the Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020', and the 5th and 6th FYDPs. It explores the funding, administration and management of HEIs, and considers in detail, the contribution made to the country's HE sector by private institutions.

Using two research techniques of documentary analysis and an exclusive interview with fifty key figures, senior and influential personnel and stakeholders in Omani HE, HRD organisations, industry and society at large, the study reveals the challenges currently facing HE system. It demonstrates the limitations of HE provision and the serious mismatch between the nature and level of the system's outputs, and the country's development requirements. It proceeds to offer suggestions regarding the need to enhance the future vision and plans of HE, the state role in the administration and financing of HE and the benefits that might

accrue from public-private partnership and cost-sharing measures. It considers, in particular, re-structuring the sector in order to make more effective use of resources, remedy the current various difficulties and to promote the future plans and provisions this extremely vital aspect of the nation's development.

Part I

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Part I

Introduction:

This first part considers the theoretical framework of the study and consists of the first four chapters.

Chapter One provides an introduction to the study, producing the context, a statement of the problem, the study focus and aims, the importance of the research, the proposed research methods, the scope of the research, the structure of the study, and the rationale for the size of the thesis. Chapter Two presents a general background to Oman, and reviews the relevant national literature in order to position the reader in the context of the research study. It clarifies the geographic location of the Sultanate and its importance, and provides detail regarding its population, people and culture. It proceeds to discuss the status of Omani society since the beginning of its Renaissance in 1970, including the social transition and the economic developments over the last thirty years. The HRD strategy, including the developments of education sector, were also considered in the light of the country's development plans. Chapter Three explains the circumstances of the establishment and development phases of HE in Oman. It discusses the role of the key HE institutions in the country's development process, with particular reference to the enrolment capacity and fields of study of these institutions, and it sheds light on the most important challenges currently facing this sector. Chapter Four considers the methodology and techniques adopted for the research. It clarifies the research design, and data collection methods, providing a rationale for both, and explains the methods of analysis, ethical issues and general difficulties that the researcher encountered.

Part II is proceeds to an analysis and discussion of the documentary evidence and findings of the empirical research.

Chapter One

Introduction of the Study

1.1 Introduction

This chapter gives an introduction to the thesis, which is essentially concerned with investigating the current planning process for the expansion and development of the Higher Education (HE) system in the Sultanate of Oman, and establishing whether the implementation plans and policies are appropriate to meet the demand for HE, particularly the declared objectives of the provision for, and progression of, the Secondary School Graduate (SSGs) to HE, as documented in the current Development Plan. Section 1.2 provides a brief cultural background to the study, whilst Section 1.3 explains the context of the study. Section 1.4 offers a statement of the precise problem to be investigated. Section 1.5 then considers the focus of the research, and from this, the aim and objectives are constructed. Section 1.6 discusses the importance of the study, and hence, provides a rationale, while Section 1.7 briefly introduces the methodology to be employed. Section 1.8 then details the scope of the study. Section 1.9 provides an overview of the chapters that comprise the thesis, and since the final size of this thesis is rather longer than expected, the chapter ends with section 1.10, which explains rationales and circumstances for the size of the thesis.

1.2 Cultural Background to the Study

Like all developing countries, Oman must be engaged in planning for the future. Indeed, planning is needed in all fields of life, since without it no country can develop any kind of service or any essential type of social and economic initiative. However, several challenges are generated by the interaction between the countries around the world, such as the interlacement between, and the overlap of, advantages, illustrated by the growth of globalisation, international trade and competition. A current example of such challenges is the economic and political impact of the World Trade Organization (WTO) agreement. Clearly, planners

everywhere must be aware of these challenges when plans are being constructed and implementation strategies devised.

In the field of education, planning is needed in all dimensions of the process. The increased competitiveness and the influences of market forces in education are other factors that stimulate an even greater emphasis on the importance of planning. Nowadays, higher education institutions (HEIs) must anticipate a society's future needs (Nevis et al, 2000) and challenges, and prepare their generations accordingly. Hence, there is a pressing need for comprehensive strategic planning for the development and expansion of HE systems and their various institutions.

As well as planning for new courses, many countries around the world have felt the urgency to review the aims and social benefits of their HE systems, as they have perceived the many forces currently impinging on HE, such as: the pursuit of 'value for money'; pressures towards a greater degree of managerialism; the encouragement of a closer relationship between industry and HE; changes in curriculum and pedagogy; the development of credit accumulation and transfer; and other key changes in HE. All of these begin to define the educational experience and its assessment in relation to ends which come from outside the educational system – preparation for employment, personal competence, career advancement, and so on (Eggins, 1988).

On the other hand, in this information age, the hegemony of the strong ideologies is affecting all aspects of our life. Thus, planning is not only required in the educational infrastructure but within the moral dimension as well. Therefore, planning is necessary if organisational excellence is to be achieved in our institutions, and as noted by Rajput (1999:63), 'It should aim at equipping the learners not only with knowledge and skills, but with values, which protect the students from the other perverted values and hollow temptations of life'.

Hence, it is obvious that the planning is the roadmap, which focuses the attention not only on national economy resources, but also on other pivotal dimensions of the process of the nation's preparation for life in general. Undoubtedly, there are several reasons for sanctioning or authorising a process of planning in the education field, whether for general education or for HE. Obviously, such a process must show a clear and strong link to the development strategy of the country, and all other dimensions of society's development processes.

1.3 Context of the Study

Many countries around the world, particularly developed ones, where major social changes have occurred, understand the aforementioned pivots. Such countries have worked on improving and developing their educational systems, including HE sectors and their relationships to the social development process. In this respect, Al-Ramadhani (2003) claims that in most Arab countries there were delays in establishing institutions of HE, and that their growth is a recent phenomenon in the Arab World. Indeed, some authors (see for example, Al-Nu'aymi, Al-Rabi'i, and Al-Nu'aymi Al N'imi, 1990 in Al-Ramadhani, 2003) argue that 65% of Arab universities were established between 1981 and 1998. The pattern of development, according to Al-Ramadhani (2003), is for universities to be established first in the capital cities, and then in the main and provincial towns, in order to widen the HE base, and thus provide for the 'significant growth in the human population and society's demand for higher education' (2003:37).

The Sultanate of Oman is only at the beginning of this type of development, and faces a pressing need, like other countries in the region, to improve its HE system. Consequently, the expansion and diversification through the development of universities, multifarious colleges and any other institutions as required, is desirable. Developments such as in the structure of HEIs, their programmes and activities, and in their adaptation to the requirements of society and of the period, which is characterised by increasing social transformation and major

technological developments, is desperately needed. In addition, it is necessary for those improvements to take into account the need to deal with increasing numbers of students and to make adequate provision for the labour market by supplying it with well-qualified manpower.

In common with many other countries, particularly Gulf countries, Oman has been witnessing a contemporary educational renaissance for more than thirty years. When His Majesty Sultan Qaboos assumed the country's leadership, the initial focus was mainly on the expansion and growth of General/Basic Education (GE/BE), as dictated by the special requirements of the developments at that time (Ministry of Education, 1999/2000), which will be clarified in the next chapter.

Given this emphasis on GE/BE, there was no kind of University or formal HE study before 1986, and thousands of Omanis who graduated from Secondary School were sent abroad to continue their university studies. Such a strategy has both benefits and disadvantages, since whilst graduates from overseas universities brought back new knowledge, this was often of a western tradition, and since travel restrictions upon women largely prevented their participation in overseas study, a large slice of the potential student population remained unsatisfied, amounting to a waste of national human resources.

Commenting on the opportunities at home for those who could not take up university places abroad, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) documented:

Other students enrolled in intermediate colleges in order to obtain the Diploma of Education with the aim of preparing them for teaching jobs in primary schools. In view of the urgent need for higher education, the Sultan Qaboos University was established in 1986 to serve as the base for the university education in the Sultanate (2002a:1).

Additionally, a number of governmental institutes for Vocational Training (VT), and many small private institutes for Administrative Training, were established.

From the above situation it might be said objectively, that Oman has exerted serious attempts and noticeable efforts to achieve a number of exciting aims; for example, enabling young people to continue their studies, preparing citizens to serve their country through the national development plan and its aims. Indeed, in 1994 the MoHE was established to supervise the HE system in Oman and its institutions. Furthermore, as some expansion in student demand for HE was expected, the private sector was encouraged to participate by establishing its own varied institutions.

However, as observed by the World Bank, many developing countries 'are currently under great pressure to meet increased demand for higher education, and many are finding it hard to keep up' (The World Bank, 2000:52), and Oman is one such country. Therefore, since 1995, the government has made several attempts, as will be outlined in the thesis, to absorb the increasing numbers of students who graduate from Secondary School.

Consequently, in 1995, in the line with its efforts to reform the economic development of the country, the government decided to apply a new long-term economic strategy, entitled "The Vision Conference for Oman's Economy [*Oman 2020*]", for the period 1996-2020. This strategy was implemented from 1996, one of its most important targets being to develop and upgrade Omani human resources in order to cope with technological progress, to meet the requirements of the Omani labour market, and to attain international competitiveness. Five Five-Year Development Plans (FYDPs) were constructed and implemented in the context of this 25-year Planning Strategy.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

Oman is a country with a young society, by 2003, over 45% of the population being under 19 years old (Ministry of National Economy, 2003a). High population growth rates have placed substantial pressure upon primary school enrolments in most developing countries around the world, in turn causing further increases in Secondary Education enrolment as well as in HE, as documented by the World Bank:

More Secondary students would mean more people entering higher education, even if the proportion progressing remained constant. However, the proportion who do want to graduate to higher education is increasing substantially, as globalization makes skilled workers more valuable and the international market for ideas, top faculty, and promising students continues to develop (The World Bank Report, 2000:34)

Although it appears that in Oman there are many plans and policies to develop and expand the HE sector in order to educate the increasing number of SSGs, in accordance with the development needs of the country, the reality is that the sector is beset by a number of problems, which together result in a huge number of these graduates emerging with no opportunity to enrol in any type of HE. Simultaneously, because they are outputs of the traditional education system, they are unqualified to join the labour market. Furthermore, while there are more than half a million expatriates occupying senior positions in the Omani labour market, substantial numbers of Omani HE graduates in different specialisations are unable to find suitable jobs. This situation reveals a mismatch between the output of HE and the declared national development needs.

Furthermore, as society has evolved, social aspirations have also changed, and there is a difference between the ambitions of many young Omani people, and the jobs that are actually available for them after graduation, such that many students and parents are dissatisfied with the employment and career opportunities in the Sultanate. Moreover, despite the growing number of private institutions offering HE courses, the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) is still the only state university in the country, and it has limited capacity. Table 1.1

indicates the growth of student numbers in the University, yet also demonstrates the relatively small numbers of students that can actually be accommodated by the institution.

Table 1.1
Enrolled Undergraduate Students in Sultan Qaboos University

Year	Number of enrolled undergraduate students		
	Male	Female	Total
1986	-	-	557
1987	-	-	624
1988	-	-	724
1989	402	347	749
1990	417	433	850
1991	386	438	824
1992	366	506	872
1993	463	634	1097
1994	642	610	1252
1995	581	609	1190
1996	671	683	1354
1997	872	945	1817
1998	941	892	1833
1999	915	908	1823
2000	1065	973	2038
2001	1084	1289	2373
2002	1179	1266	2445
2003	1353	1444	2797
2004	1328	1369	2697

Sultan Qaboos University, *Statistical Year Book*, Volume 9, June 2005 (p.20).

(-) No evidence is available for the number of Male and Female students

Essentially, student admission to the University is one of the major challenges facing Omani HE, and two lines of argument are heard on this issue. On the one

hand, there is a strong view for increasing the number in each intake simply by reducing the pass mark that must be obtained in the final Secondary School examination. Indeed, in some specialisations the mark required for acceptance is 98%, and whilst there is a clear difference between a mark of 88% and 98%, questions can legitimately be raised regarding what, if any intellectual difference, separates a student with 97% from 98%. The opposing view is that SQU is regarded as a symbol and a major national achievement, being established just fifteen years after the new government came to power, and that it should be the best HE institution (HEI) in the Sultanate, of world class quality, a status that will not be achievable if there is an attempt to admit a large number of lesser able students. Additionally, the argument is made that any such attempts would reduce the level of individual student support provided currently.

However, the student unit cost in SQU is considered to be disproportionately high, when compared with other OECD countries, since the Omani HE student unit cost is 20 times that of a student in elementary education, whereas in other OECD countries it is only 2.5 times the cost (World Bank, 2001:21). Clearly, there is an enormous imbalance, which is problematic, given the large numbers of Omani students who are considered to be qualified for HE by the private colleges, many of which operate according to western entry level criteria, but who are denied access to their national university because of an over-resourcing provided for a very few.

Moreover, it is not enough to plan for the development of a new HE infrastructure, since it is equally important to establish a work environment in which the new capabilities gained by individuals as they pass through university, can be appropriately used in employment positions that are commensurate with the qualifications and specialisations obtained in HE. Indeed, without fulfilling employment, there is a definite possibility of a brain drain to other similar culture countries, which can offer better prospects for job satisfaction and career progression.

And in this respect, there are some difficulties because although at the turn of the millennium, the MoHE made some attempts to form a concerted view regarding the future of education provision for the nation at the turn of the millennium, the fact is that there are several gaps in the co-ordination process between the authorities/ministries which supervise HEIs, the MoE which is responsible for preparing the input to HE, and the HEIs themselves. Each of these governmental bodies has its own vision, plans and policies, as will be clarified in the thesis.

From this brief sketch of the Omani HE situation, and the problems identified, it is apparent that many questions arise in relation to the previous and current periods of development, the most important of which are: What are the vision, and principles that support the previous and current attempts to develop an adequate HE system? To what extent have the specified aims been achieved? What policies are involved and how can these be translated into an effective expansion and development process? Have the efforts and attempts to expand and develop HE been appropriate? What are the supposed human resource needs of the country?

1.5 Aims of the Study

In view of the problem as stated in the previous section, this study focuses on the planning process for the development and expansion of Higher Education in Oman. It aims to identify the vision, aims, policies, and implementation plans for the development and expansion of HE in Oman, with particular reference to the provision for, and progression of, SSGs to HE, in the light of demand for HE and the current capacity and funding.

In identifying the vision, the study also aims to define some aspects of the relationship between HE plans and the socio-economic development process of the country, and to identify the extent to which these plans have been constructed to prepare young Omanis to meet the human development requirements

associated with the promotion of their modern country. In this respect, the research aims to study these issues within the context of the Government's Economic Development Plans, particularly referring to the Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*', the 5TH FYDP and the 6th FYDP.

From these wide-ranging aims, a number of objectives follow, these being:

- To identify the demand for HE in Oman, and ascertain progression routes of SSGs in Oman to HE;
- To identify the vision, aims, policies, and implementation plans for the development and expansion of the HE system in Oman, and its capacity;
- To define the challenge regarding HE funding, administration and other important factors that affect the implementation process of developing and expanding HE capacity;
- To consider government targets for the development and expansion process of the HE system in general, and for the progression of SSGs to HE in particular, in the light of the role of HE as expounded in the country's Development Plan.

1.6 The Importance of the Study

The study is important for a variety of reasons, some of which have already been indicated in Section 1.4. Clearly, since 1970, education in the Sultanate of Oman has completely changed, and the entire system (including HE) now faces a number of pressures. Such pressures arise from the fact that the changes were not only in the number of schools, students in GE/BE, nor in HE institutions, but also in all other related dimensions, such as requirements, attitudes and activities. To date, given this relatively rapid expansion, there has been no attempt to determine whether the planning and the resulting efforts, have been appropriate to serve the expansion and development process of the HE system in the Sultanate. This study will, therefore, provide vital information.

The problem of the increasing numbers of students who graduate from Secondary School, with no chance of continuing their university studies or other post-secondary studies, has been briefly mentioned in Section 1.4, but the seriousness of this situation needs to be emphasised, because it is not only a continuing problem, but also a growing one, which has been present for about ten years, and a solution must be found. The underlying causes of this problem will be established through this study, which will assess the adequacy of the previous and current plans in addressing these difficulties.

The associated aspect of importance of this study, is the situation that the profound economic and major social changes, which have taken place over the last thirty years, have generated demands for a higher level of education for the Oman's citizens, and consequently, there are personal, social, and economic demands which have all surfaced within the last decade, and which impact on HE as well as other aspects of the socio-economic development process. These developments are interlinked and create an important need to study different aspects of this process and its elements, and this study attempts to do this, and answer some questions which have arisen over the last few years.

In addition, the Sultanate's implementation of the new Basic Education (BE) System from 1996, to replace the old General Education (GE) system, introduces another factor that will definitely affect HE provision for the immediate future. The BE System as defined in The National Report on the Development of Education, is 'a 10-year unified education provided by the state for all children of school age' (2001:14), and although not fully implemented, it is proceeding rapidly.

This educational system has been applied in Oman as a part of the overall Educational Development Plan. Its function is to impart basic cognitive requirements, develop skills and attitudes needed by the students to continue their further education or training according to their potential, and prepare them for the present and future challenges of the modern world (Ministry of Education, 2001:14)

As a result of these developmental events, there will be inescapable changes in the BE system's output, which will in turn require a suitable response from the Omani HE system, but as yet there has been no academic research on the process of planning for the development and expansion of HE in Oman. Accordingly, this study will focus on this field, and will specifically investigate how the HE provision in Oman can keep pace with those developments. Given the emergence of many private universities and colleges and other institutions offering HE, the possibilities of rationalisation across the sector will be brought to the fore for full consideration.

Finally, although the study is of national importance, it may at the same time, provide some valuable insights for other countries. The lessons drawn will be valuable in the planning process for the expansion and development of HE to meet the economic, social and cultural challenges of the 21st century.

1.7 Proposed Methodology

In order to achieve the aims and objectives of the study, both primary and secondary sources of data will be collected. Secondary sources will be obtained from the literature relating to planning in the expansion and development of HE and will be reviewed. Additionally, data from all the universities, colleges and institutions of HE in Oman will be requested, to establish student inputs and outputs, and details of their discipline areas.

Primary data will be obtained from Omani policy documentation, and from interviews with senior and influential personnel and stakeholders in Omani HE, industry, and society at large. Consequently, a strategy that will combine the analysis of documentary evidence with data obtained from an extensive interview exercise, has been chosen. It is anticipated that about 52 interviews will be conducted by the researcher, in which attitudes regarding the current planning for HE, and the directions for development and expansion will be probed. These interviews will be tape-recorded and transcribed by the researcher, who will

subsequently translate them from Arabic into English, and analyse their contents according to the themes identified in the research.

1.8 Scope of the Study

The study is restricted to a consideration of HE in Oman, and in particular the planning for development and expansion of HE, with reference to the provision for and progression of SSGs to HE. Hence, it does not involve itself with education at the lower levels, or with links between GE/BE and HE, which require a special study, although some investigation of the reality of that relationship will be necessary. Having been confined to the HE sector, however, the study will encourage the participation of a large range of stakeholders, such that the attitudes from government officials, industry leaders, HE practitioners, and members of society at large, will be a feature of the research.

It is also appreciated that there are certain issues related to the development and expansion of HE, that the study will touch; such as the requirements of some economic and social sectors for well-qualified labour, and the extent to which there is a match between these requirements, and the specialisations and fields of study provided by HEIs, either public or private.

Moreover, the study will consider the administration and management system of HE in Oman, including the most important elements that comprised this system and factors that influence it. In addition, the research will study the financing of HE, which is regarded as the key issue in its development and expansion. However, there is no intention to produce a cost effectiveness study, since this would require another type of research effort involving a quantitative methodology and analysis. Likewise, the role of the private sector in the expansion and development of HE is important and will be considered, but an in-depth investigation would require a thorough exploration of other economic, political and social factors affecting this role, and this is not the business of this research study. Furthermore, because of the time limits imposed on the study,

these issues will be out of its scope. Consequently, such issues will remain for investigation by other researchers.

1.9 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis will be presented in three parts: Part I consists of the first four chapters which consider the theoretical framework for the study, and Oman's historical developments, including its education and HE systems. Chapter One presents an introduction to the study, providing a statement of the problem, the research focus and aims, the importance of the research, the methodology to be adopted, the scope of the research, an outline of the study and rationale for the size of the thesis.

Chapter Two provides a general background to Oman, and charts the development of the country since the beginning of the new renaissance (modernisation) of the Sultanate in 1970, when Sultan Qaboos became the nation's leader. It presents the remarkable economic and social developments particularly in education, and sheds light on demands for human development and more highly-educated people, across the main social and economic sectors of the development process. Chapter Three considers the circumstances of the establishment and development stages of HE in Oman. It discusses the key components of the HE system and provides detail of the HEIs and inflows and outflows of graduates, and their specialisms. Chapter Four focuses on the methodology adopted for the research, and the various methods used. It considers the research design, providing a rationale for the selection of documentary analysis and interviewing, and details of the data collection procedures, and the management and analysis of the data gathered.

Part II of the thesis contains five chapters that provide a deep discussion of the interview findings. Consequently, Chapter Five concentrates on HE in a state of transition in Oman, and discusses the main focus of the study, by analysing several relevant governmental documents (one of the two research methods

employed). The chapter then considers the various demands placed upon HE by society and a developing economy, and the Vision and Objectives of HE approved by the government to meet the demand. The matter of the increasing number of SSGs is considered, in the light of the current HE capacity and the funding allocated to the sector, which comprise two of the most serious challenges and the most important national issues in Oman.

Chapters Six to Nine provide discussions of the findings of the semi-structured interviews with key persons in the HE sector, other senior officials in governmental bodies concerned with Human Resources Development (HRD) and other interested people from societal organisations and the private sector. Hence, Chapter Six discusses interview finding related to the first two main themes; first one is the theme of demands for HE including the main two dimensions of this issue - the high and increasing number of SSGs, and the requirements of several sectors of the marketplace, and the second is the theme of the HE capacity in Oman, discussing the current situation and the future trends toward expansion of this capacity from the interviewees viewpoints. Then, each of other three chapters covers one of the prime themes of the study as follows: Chapter Seven covers the theme of vision, objectives, plans and policies of the HE system in Oman, while Chapter Eight considers issues of administration and management of HE in Oman. Chapter Nine analyses and discusses the interviewees' responses relating to the issue to the financing of HE and different resources that could be used to fund either students or institutions.

Part III of the thesis consists of Chapter Ten, which draws the research study to a conclusion of the previous discussions that related to the main themes of the study, and offers recommendations to the Omani government for an improved vision for HE, and enhanced planning and implementation strategies.

1.10 Rationale for the Size of the Thesis

The final size of this thesis is rather longer than expected, due to circumstances surrounding the nature of the data, the sample population, and the socio-political context of the research. There was no initial intention to produce a study of this size, since this has actually resulted in more time, effort and money, but the nature of the research demanded additional procedures, which in turn lead to increase the amount of data collected, and pressure to incorporate that data. Two methods of data collection, documentary evidence and semi-structured interviews were adopted, in order to gather the published picture as presented by Omani officialdom, and the personal views of key individuals in high-ranking positions in the Sultanate. To do the former, it was necessary to review and analyse hundreds of documents and governmental records, such as plans, policies, workshop papers, conferences, symposium reports, Royal Decrees and Speeches, official letters and other similar records. And to obtain this wealth of documents in the Omani context required many arrangements, as will be explained in Chapter Four that details the Research Methods adopted.

To obtain the personal views of key figures and senior officials, 52 in total, on a one-to-one basis, required extensive preparations. These personnel represented several supervisory authorities and organisations of HEIs in the Sultanate, and included other interested people and experts in civic organisations and private institutions, and each interview required unique arrangements to be made, as will be illustrated later. Conducting all these interviews, which were audio-taped, resulted in a total of 70 audio cassettes being collected by the researcher, who felt that he had had a solemn duty to save such important secret and confidential records. This stage was followed by another major process to transcribe all the contents of these cassettes, which could only be undertaken by the researcher because of the confidential status of their contents and need to protect the anonymity of the interviewees. As a result, three large box files were filled with the transcriptions, after which another heavy task began, that being the

careful review of all these materials, the refinement of the required responses, and then translation of all these materials from Arabic into English.

The refined responses from the interviewees resulted in over 30,000 words, which served as the basis for analysis, using the two strategies of 'thematic interpretation' and 'ethnographic analysis'. This weight of data required four separate chapters for its proper and adequate analysis and discussion, in which respect it is important to appreciate the socio-political and cultural context of the research. Being conducted in a developing country, and involving a large number of people of national reputation, the research could not be seen by its sponsors as being dismissive of interviewees' responses, of cutting out responses that might simply be seen as confirming earlier observations, or of not giving due consideration to the opinions expressed by extremely busy and prestigious individuals who had given their time in the interest of academic research. Consequently, the four chapters devoted to the analysis and discussion amounted to over 70,000 words. Such a large undertaking required an extension of my study period as well as the size of the thesis. In discussions with my academic supervisor, I received advice regarding how to deal with this situation in a realistic and scientific manner, and the content of these chapters has been revised several times to remove extraneous material, such that what remains is crucial to the research, and thus the current size of the thesis was approved by the research office as my supervisor has been informed.

Chapter Two

The National Context - Sultanate of Oman

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the relevant national literature in order to position the reader in the context of the research study. It explains the geographic location of the Sultanate of Oman and its importance, and provides detail regarding the population, people, culture and traditions of Oman. From this background information, the chapter proceeds to discuss the status of the national economy before the discovery of oil, and then considers the economic developments during the last three decades, including the Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*' which documents, among other things, the aspirations regarding HRD between 1996 and 2020.

Thereafter, the chapter discusses the fundamental changes in Omani society which have occurred in tandem with the economic advancements over the last thirty years. Within this section, the civil society organisations are introduced, before the standard of living and quality of life in Oman are considered, and then the vision regarding the development of human capital is presented. Moving from this image of HRD, the role of GE, as the means by which the move to improve the country's human resources for the future, is explored, before the chapter ends with a short conclusion, which shows the importance of the numerous achievements of Oman's Renaissance in both economic sectors and social fields, and the implications for the development of HE, which is discussed in Chapter Three.

2.2 Oman's Location and Importance

The Sultanate of Oman is situated at the entrance of the Arabian Gulf, in the eastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, and is located between latitudes 16.40 and 26.30 north, and longitudes 51.50 and 59.40 east. It is bounded by the Strait

of Hormuz and Iran in the north, the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean in the east, Yemen in the south and Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates in the west. The total land area is 309,000 square kilometres, and a long coastline extends for 1,700 kilometres (Ministry of Information, 1999), see Appendix (1).

Oman is a pivotal commercial and naval site in the Indian Ocean Area and the Arabian Gulf, and has a relatively strong economy, which depends on oil and gas exports. It also has an agricultural economy, involving the export of dates, fishing and livestock breeding. Therefore, Oman has a national economy, based on internal productive sources, and its role as commercial mediator in the axis of the Indian Ocean and Arabian Gulf.

The Sultanate is composed of eight administrative divisions, four of which are 'governorates' (Muscat, Dhofar, Musandam, Al Buraimi), while the other four are 'regions': (Al Batinah, A'Dakhliya, A'Sharquiyah, A'Dahira, Al Wusta). Each of these is divided into smaller administrative divisions, called 'Walayat', the total number being fifty-nine. Appendix 1 shows a map of Oman illustrating the administrative governorates and regions including the walayats affiliated to each one.

2.3 People and Culture

The Sultanate of Oman conducted its second National Census in 2003, according to which, the population was 2,341 million. Omanis constitute approximately 1.782 million (76.1%), while non-Omanis comprise approximately 0.559 million (23.9%) <http://www.moneoman.gov.om/123/population/sum.htm> (13/10/2005). In the first National Census in 1993, these statistics were 1.483 million (73.5%), and 0.535 million (26.5%) respectively (Ministry of Development, 1993:37), showing little change in the balance of Omani nationals and expatriates in the intervening decade. Additionally, the statistics showed a population increase of 296,092 from the previous census in 1993, representing a 1.8% annual growth rate. It was noted that there are only 17,000 Omani males

more than Omani females, in which this ratio remain constant in most of the governorates and regions, in addition, the ratio of expatriates to Omanis had decreased from 26% in 1993 to 23.7% in 2003 (MoI, 2004).

The 2003 National Census confirmed the well-known fact that the Omani society is a young one, with almost 34% of the population being accounted for by children under 15 years old. Another 11% are between 15-19 years old, and a further 10.8% are between 20-24, meaning that around 56% of the total Omani population are under the age of 24. In contrast, only 2.63% of the population are 65 years and above, while the rest, between the age of 25-64, constitute slightly more than 40%.

<http://www.moneoman.gov.om/123/population/sum.htm> (13/10/2005).

Table 2.1
Percentage Distribution of Omani Population (by Age Group and Sex)

Age Group	Male	Female	Total
0 – 14	30.77%	37.76%	33.85%
15 – 19	10.40%	12.67%	11.40%
20 - 24	9.98%	11.85%	10.80%
25- 64	46.36%	34.93%	41.28%
65+	2.45%	2.77%	2.56%
Unknown	.04%	.02%	.16%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: <http://www.moneoman.gov.om/123/population/sum.htm> (13/10/2005)

Additionally, as Table 2.1 shows, the age composition significantly differs between young males and females, particularly in the category up to 14 years, where the percentage of females is 7% higher, whereas males outnumber females by more than 11% in the 25-64 age ranges.

Oman is an Arab Muslim country, being one of first to embrace Islam in 630 AD. From the 6th Century AD, Oman became a stronghold of Islam, helping to spread the faith to south-east Asia and to eastern and central Africa. By the Middle Ages, Oman was a prosperous seafaring nation, sending dhows from the great port of Sohar to trade with Africa, India and the Far East (MoI, 2002). In 1744, Omani tribes elected Ahmed bin Said (the first leader of the current Royal Family) as a new Imam. He expelled the Persian invaders, and restored national unity, reviving Oman's fortunes by building a strong naval and merchant fleet. Since the 16th Century, no country has successfully invaded Oman and by the 19th Century, the country was an imperial power in its own right, expanding its territory across the Arabian Gulf and into East Africa, where it controlled the Island of Zanzibar. Oman established political links with other great powers of the time, including France, Britain and the United States (MoI, 2002).

However, world events at the beginning of the 20th Century precipitated a period of decline and isolation for Oman, and when Sultan Qaboos came to power in 1970, the country was poor and backward, lacking even the most basic infrastructure. Many educated and wealthy Omanis had migrated to seek their fortunes abroad. Sultan Qaboos' challenge was to encourage Omanis to return home, to help to turn the country into a modern, competitive society (MoI, 2002).

Oman's population are Muslims and most people are Arab, but there are other ethnic groups in Oman, such as the Balushies (originally from Balushstan in Pakistan), the Khoja or Lawatiya who originally came from Iran, and Zanzibaris, Arabs of Oman who once lived in Zanzibar and have returned to Oman (Cameron and Hurst, 1983 in Al Farsi, 1994). Omani society is characterised by Islamic beliefs, values and traditions and as noted by Alkitani (2001), education has always been considered as essential. In the 19th and early 20th century, children would receive religious teachings, together with

basic literacy and numeracy, usually in the mosques (Alqasmi, 1999, in Alkitani, 2001).

Like many other modern Islamic societies, Oman is open to external influences, some of which are not in harmony with the Islamic conception of a good society, and when decisions must be made about what is acceptable or otherwise from a foreign culture, religious and ethical criteria are always used (Madkour, 1991 in Alkitani, 2001). However, in reality the behaviours, attitudes and day-to-day lifestyle of most people in Islamic societies are influenced by the new features of modern society, in addition to their religious beliefs and traditional values.

2.4 The National Economy Developments

The discovery of oil was in 1964, but the economic impact of the first crude oil export in 1967, was not evident until the 1970s, when aspects and influences of a new economic age became visible. As happened in other Gulf and oil countries, the age of oil exportation led to radical and fundamental changes not only in the economic sector, but in all dimensions of society. Prior to this era, there was little country infrastructure. No government agencies or ministries existed in the modern sense, roads were poor, only one small port had developed, and basic social services, such as education, health, and public utilities, barely existed (The 1st FYDP, 1976-1980 in Al-Moamari, 2000).

2.4.1 The National economy prior to and at the start of, the Renaissance

Prior to 1970, the Omani economy relied on agriculture, fisheries, and trading with other countries, such as India, East Africa and China, and the traditional exports before 1970s were dates, dried fish, frankincense or olibanum, and dried limes, while the imports were restricted to some basic food stuffs, building and simple goods. Although agriculture has long been the livelihood of most Omani people, the soil is poor and water resources are short

(Calvin and Allen, 1987). However, from the 1970s the oil revenue increased, reaching 75.5% of the overall national revenue in 1996 (MoD, 1996a). Clearly, the Sultanate has relied heavily on oil, but appreciating that oil is not a sustainable resource, the government has made every effort to diversify the national economy in order to decrease this dependency.

2.4.2 The national economy in the 1970s

From the beginning of Oman's Renaissance, which followed the accession of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos on July 23rd, 1970, the development process was based on long-term objectives outlined in the Royal address on the occasion of the 1st National Day. In explaining his vision the Sultan stated that 'Our plan inside the country, is to build our country and provide for all its peoples the easy and luxurious life and an honourable livelihood'. Emphasising the need for strategic planning he added that 'any work meant to be a public service without a clearly studied plan must be subject to failure and loss ... we concentrate our attention to find the economic level of our country and the provision of jobs and honourable livelihood for each citizen' (MoD, 1997:7). Then, in his speech on the 4th National Day in 1974 he specified the goal of the development process by saying 'the human being is the creator of development, that is why the objective of development should be to make the human being happy' (MoD, 1997:7).

In November 1975, the Development Council, which was later cancelled by Royal Decree 6/1996, approved the long-term fundamental goals; the most important of which are summarised as follows:

- Developing new sources of national income as a future replacement of existing oil revenues.
- Concerning the development and upgrading of national human resources to enable them to fulfil their role in the Omani economy.

- Geographically distributing investments for the benefit of all the country's regions, in order to eliminate the disparity in the standard of living existing between the various regions, with particular focus on the less developed ones.
- Supporting and developing the present population centres and safeguarding them from the dangers of mass migration to the densely population areas.
- Completing the building of basic infrastructures.
- Completing the foundation for a national economy based on private sector activity in a competitive market with loan provision for vital projects in accordance with resources available to the State.
- Increasing the efficiency of the State's administrative capability.

(MoD, 1997:8).

During the first five years of this decade, the government attempted to lay the foundations that would provide the conditions and climate for rapid development within the country. Efforts were concentrated on meeting the urgent needs of most of the country's regions and the provision of the infrastructure necessary for socio-economic growth. Major objectives included the development of production, development of national HR, extending education opportunities to most areas of the country, increasing national income, and establishing the base for the foundation of a modern economic society.

The second half of the decade witnessed the preparation of the 1st FYDP for the period 1975-1980, which coincided with the oil boom and the start of benefit from the natural gas resources in Oman. The plan was regarded as the preparatory stage for the country's entry into a new stage of development within the context of comprehensive socio-economic planning. Its main focus was: the completion of the infrastructure, increasing the capacity of the economy, and implementing policies to support and encourage the private sector in order to increase competition, thus providing the foundation for a free national economy.

One of the remarkable events of the decade, in recognition of the fact that oil is a non-renewable source of income, was the issuance of Royal Decree 1/1980, which established the State Public Reserve Fund. The Fund's resources were

mainly composed of 15% of the net value of each advance payment of oil revenue, in addition to any other governmental surpluses. The increase of oil revenue during the first half of the 1980s enabled this Fund to maximise its role in meeting the developmental needs of the country, particularly in the critical periods, such as when the oil prices sharply fell in the second half of 1980s (MoD, 1997).

2.4.3 The national economy in the 1980s

The increasing oil revenue during the first half of the 1980s was the major contributor towards the acceleration of economic development rates, and the realisation of a level capital formation. Within the 2nd FYDP (1981-1985) there was a concentration on completing the national infrastructure, to enable the development process to extend throughout the country, with priority being given to areas that required special care and intensive efforts. Additionally, interest began in the natural water resources, and new water development projects were launched. The plan also detailed several direct and indirect policies and mechanisms to encourage the private sector to participate in the country's socio-economic activities.

Unfortunately, at the beginning of the second half of the 1980s, which coincided with the implementation of the 3rd FYDP (1986-1990), the national economy faced a major challenge as world oil prices fell sharply and the international crisis became a national crisis. During this period the country was faced with 'the burden of increasing current expenditures and the difficulty of increasing revenues from other sources during the economic recession which coincided and followed the collapse in oil prices' (MoD, 1996b:10).

In response, the government implemented a set of policies and procedures aimed at sustaining a reasonable level of national economic activity, and continuing with the provision of basic public services, such as education, health and social assistance, while maintaining the economic and financial balance of the

country. As noted by the MoD, 'Those policies and procedures included the reduction and suppression of expenditures and the amendment of the priority structure in the 3rd FYDP for investment programmes' (1996b:10).

In fact, the existence of the State Public Reserve Fund enabled the continued development of the country, particularly in this critical half-decade (MoD, 1997), when the government was able to cover the major critical and urgent needs, by making good the deficit between revenues and planned expenditures. During the period of the 3rd FYDP, this reached OR 1,254 million.

2.4.4 The national economy in the 1990s

At the beginning of 1990s, and as a result of the Second Gulf War, oil prices witnessed a high increase, which enabled the country to improving its national income, but simultaneously, there were several serious negative influences of that war on all developmental and social sectors, although this is not the place to discuss these. However, early of the 1990s, most of the infrastructure, which was a pre-condition for development and the acceleration of progress, was completed, alongside which, a number of non-oil economic sectors were relatively developed and the role of private sector could be observed. The 4th FYDP for the first half of this decade (1991-1995), became more developed according to the experiences encountered through implementing the previous FYDPs. Consequently, that plan was concerned with directing investments towards projects intended to assist the expansion and diversification of the production base within Oman's economy. The development process was strengthened sectorally, and regionally.

Twenty years on from the 1st FYDP in 1976, a long range of remarkable achievements affecting all aspects of life, were evident, as the economic and social indicators at the end of 4th FYDP shown in Appendix (2) reflects, yet despite all this progress a number of factors challenged the Sultanate's development process. Recognising this, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos directed the government to conduct a thorough evaluation of the situation and to identify the

challenges and difficulties that hindered the achievement of a number of national economic goals, particularly those related to diversification of the national income, and HRD (MoD, 1995a).

In accordance with His Majesty's instructions, the Council of Development, in Decree 79/1994, created seven ministerial committees, in addition to a leading committee headed by the Deputy Prime Minister for Economic and Financial Affairs (MoD, 1995b). The task of reviewing and evaluating the planning for Oman's development process was fulfilled systematically by these various Ministerial Committees, and the outcome, approved by the Council of Ministers and the Council of Development, was the convening of the Vision Conference for Oman's Economy for the next 25 years, in June 1995 (MoD, 1995b), which will be discussed in the next pages.

Internal and external challenges of the future

The reports of the various Ministerial Committees clarified several internal and external challenges to the development process within the Country. In particular, the national economy was facing some serious difficulties, and there was a lack of progress in HRD and in the social development fields. The MoD urged that these issues 'should be addressed to remove negative impacts that may result from continuing the current policies' (1995a:165).

In fact, Oman was not alone in these respects, and many countries around the world encountered similar challenges, due to the global changes witnessed at the end of 1980s, and the emergence of a new international order, centred on economic, commercial and technological competition, and based on free market mechanisms, economic liberalisation and the promotion of the private sector role (MoD, 1995a:165). Clearly, a pressing need in this regard relates to the development and upgrading of human capital. Figure 2.1 summarises the most important challenges, both internal and external, identified by the MoE (1995).

Figure 2.1
Internal and External Challenges of the Future

1- High Population Growth Rate
2- Changing Attitudes to Post-Secondary Education, Training and Employment
3- Omanisation of the Work Force
4- Need to Diversify the Economy
5- Globalisation of the World Economy
6- Changing Employment Opportunities
7- Need to keep Pace with Technological Change
8- Increased Role for Private Sector
9- Need for Entrepreneurial Skills
10- New Attitude to Learning
11- Imperative to Retain Religious and Cultural Values

Source: MoE 1995: A2-1

Moreover, the oil boom led to several challenges, such as the globalisation of the world economy, the import of expatriate labour to Oman and other countries in the region, and foreign interests within the Middle East, which created many security problems and economic difficulties. These considerations and other factors made it necessary for all the governments in the area and Oman's government in particular, to review and develop their political, economic, social and educational policies.

In this respect, the Omani government recognised that the two decades leading up to 2020, would be particularly critical to the further successful development of the Sultanate, since in order to achieve sustainable development through efficient integration into the global economy, and to cope with the rapid technological developments, it must overcome several difficulties and challenges; for example, the dependence of the national economy on a single depletable source, which is affected mainly by external economic and political factors, together with the expected gradual decline of this resource in the coming 25 years. Simultaneously, there is weak integration between the oil sector and other production and services sectors, which are characterised by low efficiency and poor quality (MoE, 1995).

Moreover, there was an increasing deficit in the general budget, poor production efficiency in government systems and the inefficient utilisation of available resources, poor productivity of HR, particularly the low status of some professions and handicrafts, as well as the incapability of national labour to cope with the rapid developments in technological field. All these circumstances impacted negatively upon the national economy (MoE, 1995), and it is fair to say that some of these challenges are still present.

The Vision of Oman's Economy "Oman 2020"

As already documented, the government decided to hold an extremely important conference entitled "*The Vision Conference for Oman's Economy: Oman 2020*", on June 3rd/4th 1995. The most important objectives were: debating and articulating a vision for Oman's economy for the year 2020, articulating and identifying the policies necessary to realise the vision of '*Oman 2020*' through a number of pivotal axes, and identifying successful international experiences, and finding ways of utilising those experiences to realise this vision (MoD, 1995b).

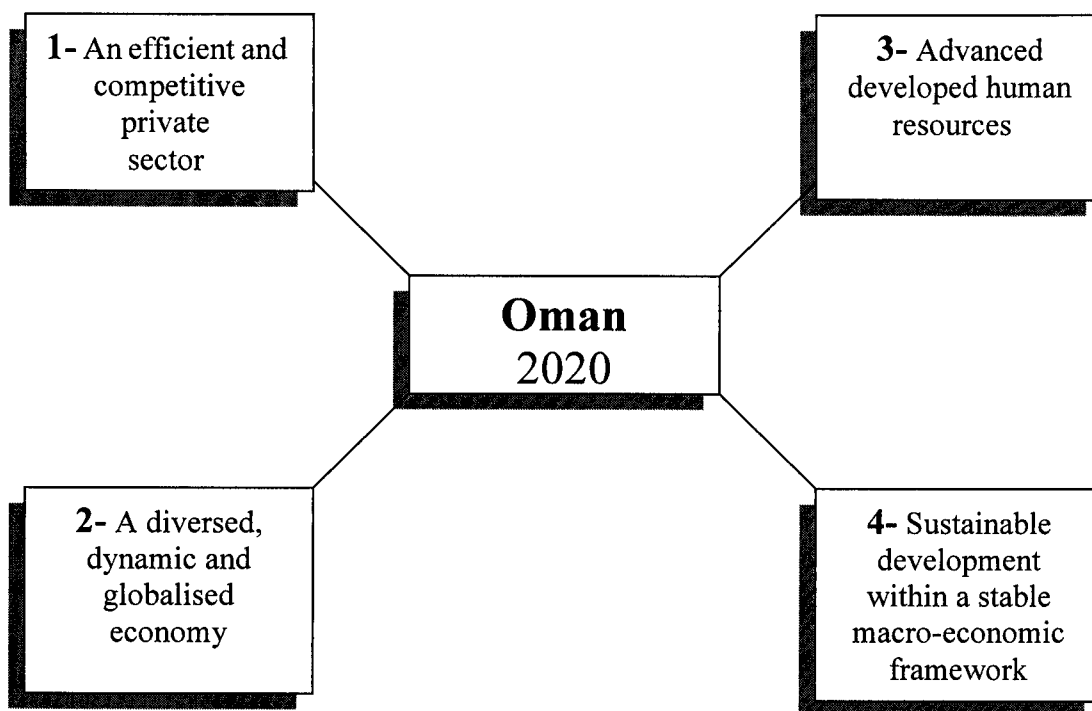
All members of the seven previously mentioned ministerial committees and all governmental and indigenous corporations participated in this conference, in

addition to a group of international corporations and international experts. Thereafter, The Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*' was approved for implementation. Figure 2.2 shows the four major guiding themes in '*Oman 2020*', and the next FYDPs will be formulated within the context of this 25-year planning horizon. The fundamental goals of the '*Oman 2020*' are as follows:

1. Development of human resources, and upgrading Omanis' skills and competences to keep abreast with technological progress; to manage the dynamics of this progress in a highly efficient way; and to face the ever-changing domestic and global conditions.
2. Creation of a stable macroeconomic framework aimed at the development of a private sector capable of the optimal use of human and natural resources of the Sultanate in an ecologically-sound way.
3. Encouraging the establishment of an effective and competitive private sector; and consolidation of the mechanisms and institutions that will foster shared visions, strategies and policies between this sector and the government.
4. Providing appropriate conditions for the realisation of economic diversification, and striving toward the optimal use of natural resources and the geo-strategic location of the Sultanate.
5. Enhancing the standard of living of the Omani people, reduction of inequality among regions and among income levels of various groups, and ensuring that the fruits of development are shared by all citizens.
6. Preserving the achievements accomplished in the past twenty-five years, safeguarding and developing them, along with the completion of some of the necessary basic services.

(MoD, 1996a:4,5)

Figure 2.2
 'Oman 2020' Vision For Oman's Economy



Source: MoD (1995a)

Hence, and as mentioned previously, in this long-term vision and other seasonal plans, it could be seen that priority was given to enhancing and promoting HR through the development of a BE and HE system to upgrade citizens' skills in order to enable them to develop their country. Chapter Five will clarify the vision and objectives of '*Oman 2020*' as related to the HE sector and there will be more explanation about the objectives and policies in this field in the 5th and 6th FYDPs, which came after approval of '*Oman 2020*'. Consequently, most plans relating to other developmental sectors also included several goals, policies and mechanisms relevant to the dimension of HRD, since this is a cornerstone of them all.

The first implementation stage of 'Oman 2020' - The 5th FYDP (1996-2000)

After five years of implementation of this long-term economic vision, through the 5th FYDP (1996–2000), the MoNE concluded that performance to the Plan was mostly positive (MoNE, 2002a:28-61), and achievements were reported in detail. For example, it was stated that the national economy recorded a high growth rate, with an actual average for the Plan period of 7.5% compared with the planned estimate of 4.6%, the improvement being attributed to the increase in oil prices. In fact, the oil sector achieved an actual average annual growth rate of 13% during the Plan period, when it was believed that it would decrease by an average annual amount of 1.1% over this time. The non-oil sector which was given much attention in *'Oman 2020'*, showed a slower growth rate than planned, with a decreased average annual growth of 3.9%, compared with the planned estimate of 6.3% (MoD, 1996a:36). In sequence, other state provision in the field of HRD, such as GE/BE, HE, VT, Health Services, Social and Cultural Fields and other relevant areas, reported a high level of performance and achievement.

Indeed, it could be argued that the improvement of the national economy within that period was not attributed to the performance of the plan or to the Vision of Oman Economy *'Oman 2020'*, but rather to the increase in oil prices as the MoD stated. This view can be evidenced by the low growth of the non-oil sectors which was actually prioritised in *'Oman 2020'*, and therefore it indicates the low performance of that vision and the 5th FYDP. Although *'Oman 2020'* included a number of goals and policies to promote HRD, including the development of HE, in the ten years since the publication of this strategy, many questions have arisen, for example, why the percentage of the national workforce is still too low and under the planned level in most developmental sectors of the country, except the administrative and school teaching staff of the government institutions, what extent are the state plans for HRD realistic, and to what extent do they reflect the needs of society and the ambitions of Omani citizens, why did the state not intend to establish another governmental university or colleges despite the high demand for HE?

2.4.5 The national economy in the 2000s (6th FYDP - 2001-2005)

Following the review of '*Oman 2020*', and the 5th FYDP, this section summarises the most obvious features of the first four years of the current decade, which are covered by the 6th FYDP. As mentioned previously, most of the country's infrastructure was completed during the three last three decades, allowing the 6th FYDP to focus on stabilising and developing national economic performance. This was aimed at through the diversification of income resources, strengthening of the private sector with emphasis on privatisation policies and programmes, policies and procedures adopted to attract domestic and foreign investment, regional and international economic co-operation, HRD and finally policies, procedure and plans adopted to boost research and development and advance IT in the country (MoNE, 2003a).

Furthermore, several objectives of the 6th FYDP (2001-2005), are aimed at economic diversification (MoNE, 2001a:3), hence, many other natural resources have been targeted as able to play an effective role in the socio-economic development process, such as HR, natural gas, industries, agriculture, fisheries, the tourism and services sector (MoD, 2001a). Consequently, during the last four years, a range of pre-planned projects have been undertaken in most regions across the country, including road projects, electricity, health services, the building and provision of schools, water development resources, ports etc., some being achieved by private sector participation. Additionally, other projects were approved to provide basic social services to meet the needs of the citizens particularly in the least developed areas. Some of these were initiated in accordance with Royal Directives during His Majesty the Sultan's Annual Tours in which he meets people directly (MoNE, 2003b).

2.5 The Development of the Government and the Civil Society Organisations in Oman (The Key Councils)

Previously, there was an absence of modern government administrative system except small agencies, only a small army and police force using traditional

systems. Since 1970, and alongside the enormous developments of the country, His Majesty has worked hard to develop his government and its administration.

2.5.1 The Council of Ministers

Currently, there are ministries for each sector, and a modern administrative apparatus. The Ministers involved are members of the Council of Ministers. Additionally, there are several independent governmental bodies, unsupervised by the Council of Ministers, such as the Royal Oman Police, Sultan Qaboos University, and the Muscat Stock Exchange. Oman has developed its administrative system, and separate ministries through:

- Regulating traditional state activities such as security, defence, justice, foreign affairs, managing public and the state economy, and setting up ministries to administer these sectors.
- Changing the concept of the state, to promote productivity and provide services. Ministries exploit and manage natural resources including oil, gas, agriculture, fisheries, commerce, industry and manpower. Other ministries and public services authorities were created to develop health, education, social development, information, the civil services, awqaf and religious affairs, justice, transport, communications, housing, electricity and water (MoI, 2002).
- Giving the state a leading role in planning and economic activities. Oman created several specialist councils, including the Council of Economic Planning, the Council of Civil Services, and the Council of Higher Education (CoHE).

In order to organise the state system, and to improve government performance, the Basic Law of the State, which is regarded as one of the remarkable national achievements of the current age, was issued by Royal Decree 101 in 1996. This is considered as Oman's foundation for further development and progress. Several principles concerning most aspects of life are embodied in the Basic Law of the State, for example it clarifies the regime, the characteristics of Omani society, the principles of education, principles of the relationships between the citizens and the government, the rights of the Omani citizen and his/

her responsibilities and duties towards the country and the Sultan, the responsibilities of the state towards the citizens and many other dimensions.

2.5.2 The Council of Oman (Majles Oman)

As one of the significant outcomes of the Basic Law of the State, the Council of Oman (Majles Oman) was created in 1997. It is comprised of Majles A'Dawlah (the State Council), whose members are appointed by the Sultan every three years, and Majles A'Shura (the Consultative Council) whose members are elected by the Omani people across the country every three years. The council has not determined role or duties. It is convening annually, when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos presided over the annual convening of the Council. However, since it is comprised of Majles A'Dawlah and Majles A'Shura, through the next two sections, the role and duties of these key councils will be reviewed.

2.5.3 Majles A'Ddawla (The State Council)

Majles A'Ddawla is 'another powerful building block in the Omani social edifice, which reinforces its achievements and reaffirms the principles we have laid out' (His Majesty's Speech in MoI, 2002). These principles established a Shura (Consultation) process, inspired by Oman's national heritage and values and Islamic Sharia'h (Law), that incorporates features of the modern age. This Council acts as an upper chamber, central to the national development goals. Its president and members are prominent figures in the Omani community, appointed by Royal Decree and chosen for their expertise at senior levels in various fields, and they cannot be elected to the Majles A'Shura (Consultative Council). Membership is for three years and is renewable. The size of the Council does not exceed that of the Majles A'Shura (MoI, 2002).

Members of the Majles A'Ddawla are drawn from: former ministers, under-secretaries and those of equivalent rank, former ambassadors, former senior judges, retired senior officers, those of proven expertise in science, literature and

culture, academic staff of universities, colleges and higher institutes, dignitaries and businessmen and people who have given distinguished service. The current State Council members are 53, including five women (MoI, 2002), which reflects society's attitude and belief that women can and will participate in the process of the country's development and the welfare of the nation, and simultaneously demonstrates the Sultan's commitment to promoting Omani women to senior positions.

The Royal Decree 86/97 defined the responsibilities of the State Council, the most important of which include research to assist the implementation of development plans and programmes, finding solutions to economic and social problems and proposing ways to encourage investment, reforming the administration, and improving performance. The Council has power to review and revise laws prepared by the ministries and government agencies and to propose amendments. It submits proposals and recommendations to the Sultan or to the Council of Ministers, and its president provides an annual report for the Sultan on its activities and deliberations (MoI, 2002).

Hence, the Council of State has studied many projects and draft laws relating to the development process, including a study on national population policy, the draft law on civil transactions, the draft labour law, the draft communications law and many others. These are referred to the Council of Ministers for approval. Other social and economic issues debated by the Council members, include the creation of private sector jobs for Omanis, private universities, the future of tourism, decentralisation of the administration, economic diversification and the social effects of economic changes.

2.5.4 Majles A'Shura (The Consultative Council)

The second council within the Majles Oman (Council of Oman) is the Majles A'Shura (Consultative Council). The first election of members of this Council was in 1991, and its 59 members representing every wilayat in Oman are elected

by Omani citizens every three years, whilst the Council president is appointed by the Sultan, and the two vice-presidents are elected by the Council members. The members may stand for re-election when their term ends. By 1994 the membership of Majles A'Shura was extended to include two elected women. It is worth noting that there are no political parties in Oman, and that the Sultan stresses the need for partnership between the government and the Omani people.

The prime task of the Majles A'Shura is to 'assist the government in all what pertains to the Omani society and offer what it deems fit to support the society's basic and fundamental components and original values' (Majles A'Shura, 2001:60). In order to achieve this main task, the Council has the following responsibilities and powers, the most important of these are (Majles A'Shura, 2001:60-61):

- a) Review of draft laws prepared by the ministries and government agencies prior to promulgation.
- b) Submission of what it deems appreciate to develop enforceable/valid economic and social laws and regulations.
- c) Setting forth views on the issues submitted by the government and present appreciate proposals in their regard.
- d) Participation in the preparation of the country's development plans, commenting on the plan's general outline/framework referred to the Majlis by the government.
- e) Participation in affirming the public awareness of the development objectives, roles, priorities and the efforts for their implementation, and deepen the link between the citizenry and the government.
- f) Consideration into matters related to services, public utilities and economic matters, suggesting means for its development and improving its performance.
- g) Setting forth views on other issues or matters, which His Majesty decides to refer to the Majles.

(Majles A'Shura, 2001:60-61)

To play its part effectively, the Council established five specialist committees; the legal committee, the economic committee, the health and social affairs committee, the education and cultural committee, and the services and local community development committee, each of which has duties related to its field. The Council has the power to establish any committee according to its needs and projects. Its role is purely advisory, although it shoulders some parliamentary tasks, such as reviewing the laws prepared by the government and evaluating the governmental performance in some aspects. Nonetheless, it has no real legislative role, and is confined to submitting recommendations and delivering citizens' views to the Sultan or to the Council of Ministers. However, it can be readily observed that the Sultan is gradually preparing this body to perform legislative tasks by issuing a number of Royal Decrees giving it more power, and referring several government plans and projects for its discussion and review. For example, nowadays the FYDPs require the Council approval.

Moreover, the Majles A'Shura organises reciprocal visits with similar organisations in other countries, and attends a number of meetings and conferences, for instance; the Arab Women Parliamentarians Conference, Conference of the Parliamentary Union of Member States of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). Furthermore, the Council participates in, and sometimes hosts, the annual meeting of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC).

Since both Councils have some involvement in the process of HE development, this study will attempt to interview key members of these two bodies, to obtain their views regarding HE and relevant issues, and to explore the extent to which these councils and their members are participating in the development process. In other words, to discover the extent to which government gives them the opportunity to play their roles effectively, and whether Council members are qualified to perform these duties as determined by the Basic Law of the State and the Royal Decrees.

2.6 National Social Developments Within the Last Three Decades

With the assumption to power of His Majesty the Sultan Qaboos, the Omani people began to see the influences of a new economic age, through remarkable changes in the Omani economy, precipitating root changes in society, in common with other Gulf societies. Previously, there was an absence of modern infrastructure, no roads to connect other parts of Oman, except only one asphalt road in Muscat the Capital, health services and public utilities such as electricity and water, scarcely existed, while there was no modern airport, and no postal services. The education system consisted of three schools, 30 teachers, and just over 900 male pupils, and no form of HE (MoI, 2002). Hence, the economy has been transformed by the export of oil, and social transition has followed with a modern government structure.

In fact, substantial developments in the social life of the citizens have been achieved, and whilst some of these were indicated in Chapter One, and earlier in this chapter, this section will present a short resume of the most important social achievements, which show how Omani society was transferred from what could be called the Middle Age, to a new form of civilisation - Modern Life.

2.6.1 Standard of living and quality of life

Overall, the Gulf countries have been considered as rich by international and economic organisations in other countries, according to their oil revenues, which have underpinned increased standards of living and quality of life (Al Ansi, 1994). And although Omani oil production is far less than other Gulf countries, the living standards of Omanis have improved enormously since the 1970s. However, this circumstance does not mean that there are no difficulties in Omani society; indeed, there are several challenges facing the country and its people, both in economic and social dimensions, particularly, as noted already, in human capital, HE and the world of work.

Generally speaking, the most important targets of the socio-economic development process which could be regarded as criteria by which the standard of living and quality of life can be measured, are summarised below:

- A) Improving the economic and social standards through increasing the country production whether through natural resources or industrial productions, which lead to increased national, and individual income, and enhanced standards of living.
- B) Improving living conditions and circumstances through adopting comprehensive developmental plans, which include clear and realistic aims, policies and mechanisms.
- C) Meeting and responding to individuals' basic needs, which include:
 - biological needs, such as enough good food, drink, housing, clothing, health care and education,
 - economic needs; for example work, productivity, commutation of utilities and consumption,
 - sociological needs such as security, being free from stress and anxiety, and enjoying peacefulness, comfort and affluence,
 - social needs, for instance, ability to establish relationships with other people in society, needs for co-operation, correspondence and harmony, feeling of social responsibility towards society's values and traditions and popular criteria.
- D) Achieving balance integration/complementarity between economic demands and social demands for development of the society through reliance on the national capabilities and resources and developing and upgrading them.
- E) Realising homogeneity between the different social classes and providing equal chances for individuals' self-development according to their competences and capabilities.
- F) Ensuring people's participation in the development process of their country.

(Translated by the author from Arabic, Al Ansi, 1994:21,22).

In a study such as this, it is not feasible to review the implementation levels of all these objectives, but most can be achieved by providing two key inputs: a balanced economy and a suitable social environment. According to the

evaluations conducted by the MoNE (previously-named MoD) in 1995 and 2000, the developmental indicators revealed significant improvements in most life's aspects of the Omani citizens.

2.6.2 The average per capita share in the national income

The average per capita share in the national income and in the private consumption increased significantly, with a six-fold rise in the final private consumption during the years 1970-1995 (MoD, 1997:13). The Social Indicators Report for 1995 issued annually by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which concentrates on monitoring and evaluating the social dimension of the development efforts on the international scale, indicated that the quality of life realised in Oman in 1994 was identical to that achieved in the average high income group of countries (MoD, 1997:15). In 2005, the report of the Gulf Organisation for Industry Consultation indicated that Oman had the lowest inflation rate, at 0.2%, of Gulf countries. The report confirmed that except for Oman, all Gulf countries' economies witnessed declining growth rates, although with the high increase in oil prices during this year, it is expected that such rates within the Gulf economies will improve www.omandaily.com/daily/mainstory/main4.htm (01/11/2005).

2.6.3 Social care and provision of life services

Several aspects for social care that achieved during last three decades. Many welfare bodies country-wide, that provide Omani citizens with the resources required for a decent, and comfortable life. However, it could be noticed that this field is suffering from a lack of resources, and many Omani families are unable to afford for example their children studies as will be clarified later in this study. To reduce the cost of social security, subsidies and training for people on low incomes to run their own business projects are offered. For example, training in crafts and traditional Omani industries is provided to Omani women and the government promotes them at local exhibitions and outside Oman (Ministry of

Information, 2001:127). Although there are now some non-government associations which can participate in supporting this social field, these are very few, and their role is still under needed level.

In connection, since 1970s, the early stage of the country's renaissance, provisions of houses were offered by the state for those on limited incomes, and have been offered low-cost housing schemes. In 1991 to introduce a soft housing loans scheme, which offers interest-free loans on condition that the borrower repays in equal monthly instalments before the citizen retirement from either the public or private sector. The size of the loan is determined by the age and the needs of applicant. Unfortunately, from 1999 no funds were allocated for this programme (MoI, 2000). By 2000, Royal Decree 24/2000 authorised the Ministry of Housing, to continue offering interest-free housing loans and assistance to those on low incomes within the budget allocated for this purpose. Since then, the Ministry of Housing has adopted a decentralisation policy to enable citizens living in the wilayats to complete their applications for lands and loans as quickly as possible. Directorate Generals have been established in various regions of the country, (MoI, 2000).

Additionally, a governmental bank, the Oman Housing Bank provides finance to low and middle-income families for the purpose of construction, purchase, addition and completion of residential properties. The aim of the Bank is to provide a social service rather than maximise profits, while simultaneously producing sufficient returns to cover its administrative expenses. The government is the major shareholder with 60% equity while the remaining shares are held by state pension funds. There is considerable demand for loans from this bank, but the bank has adapted its plans according to its allocated budget. However, recently, the private sector has participated in this field and in 1998 the first private sector bank, the Alliance Housing Bank, was established. It provides housing loans and relieves some of the pressure on the Omani Housing Bank. The Bank has opened seven branches throughout Oman to cover the majority of the population.

Indeed, it is understood that such above mentioned supporting programmes will be discussed when the theme of financing of HE considered throughout this study. Since there is a difficult situation facing most Omani families in financing their children's HE, whereby such programmes would help them to meet this demand. For instance, the soft loans scheme, which offers interest-free loans on certain conditions, offering assistance to those on low incomes, establishing a governmental bank, such as the Oman Housing Bank for providing finance to low and middle-income families, and encouraging the private sector to participate in this field through establishing similar banks; could be regarded worth initiatives that would lead to face the current challenge.

2.6.4 Health services

Regarding health services, in 1970 there were a few small traditional health centres in Muscat and Salalah, while other regions had no kind of health care. Adult, and infant mortality rates were both extremely high. Table 2.2 depicts some health indicators from 1980-2000.

Table: 2.2
Development of Health Indicators

	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2004
Infant Mortality Rate	64/1000	45	29	34	32.58	24
Crude Death Rate	13.2/1000	9.9	8.0	6.1	3.65	2.60
Life Expectancy at Birth	57.5	61.6	63.0	67.4	72.4	74.27

Ministry of Information (2000:117) and Ministry of Health (2005:1-4) *Statistical Year Book (2004)*, issued in 2005.

The data shows, for example that infant mortality dropped from 64/1000 in 1980 to 16.7/1000 in 2000, and the crude death rate declined from 13.2/1000 in 1980 to 3.7/1000 in 2000. Consequently, life expectancy at birth increased significantly from 57.5 in 1980 to 72.4 in 2000 (MoI, 2000:117), compared with 49.3 years in 1970 (MoD, 1997:13). Indicating that Omani citizens receive

suitable health care, which has been praised by international bodies, the report of the World Health Organization (WHO) for the year 2000, named the Sultanate as the country that had achieved the greatest progress in improving health standards, and ranked Oman eighth in terms of overall health care.

In Muscat there are seven referral governmental and three private hospitals, in addition to six hospitals in Dakhiliyah Region, ten in Sharqiyah, ten in Batinah, five in Dhahirah, three in the Governorate of Musandam, and one main hospital in the Governorate of Dhofar. Furthermore, there are over 600 health centres and clinics covering towns, villages and small areas.

Moreover, at the end of 2001 there were 17,054 staff employed in the health sector including 2,374 doctors and 6,901 nurses with an Omanisation level of 56% compared to 1970 when there were barely 100 people employed in the health, there being just 13 doctors (MoI, 2000:116), no type of medical training, and all doctors and nurses were expatriates. Currently, in order to prepare a national workforce for this field, the College of Medicine in the SQU educates doctors, whilst nurses, pharmacists, dental hygienists and other categories of auxiliary medical staff are trained at 15 governmental institutes. However, the indicators show gaps in the Omanisation of certain jobs in this field, for example medical doctors, consultants, pharmacists and specialists in several specialisms, in which most personnel are expatriates (AlBarwani, 2002). In this respect, such situation indicates the responsibility of the HE system of the country, which will be discussed widely through this study.

2.6.5 Promoting cultural, heritage and religious fields

The Sultan values the country's heritage, encouraging Omanis to protect this for future generations, and to promote Omani culture to the outside world. Omanis have also played a noticeable role in spreading Islam over several centuries, by their moral behaviour. Indeed Omani businessmen have taken Islam to Eastern and Middle Africa, South Eastern Asia and the South of China.

Religious conflicts are not evident in Oman, where tolerance of Muslims and non-Muslims is apparent. In his speech on the 14th National Day in 1994, the Sultan 'emphasised that Islam is liberal and condemns the fanaticism based on a lack of knowledge that leads some Muslims to violence, discord and hatred' (MoI, 2002:139). Several ministries participate in promoting cultural, heritage and religious fields, the most important being the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture, the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, and the Sultan Qaboos Centre for Islamic Culture..The two latter organisations focus on religious issues and provide Islamic guidance, whilst the Ministry of Sport and Ministry of Information shoulder some responsibilities for culture and information dimensions.

The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs promotes the role of Islam in Omani society. Awqaf are religious endowments, properties and revenues administered for the benefit of the community, such as help for the needy, serving Quranic Schools and mosques and other charitable projects. The Awqaf and Bait Al Mal (Treasury) both earn revenue from properties and other assets, such as date palms and commercial premises. The Ministry also collects and administers the Zakat, an income tax which is one of the five pillars of Islam, that every Muslim is obliged to pay. Officials collect the Zakat and distribute the proceeds to the needy. The funds also pay for printing the Holy Quran, and distributing religious work to students, mosques and individuals. The State also runs Quranic schools, which employ a number of teachers and accommodate thousands of male and female students. Additionally, there are several private Quranic schools catering for a smaller number of students than the state schools.

By 2002, Oman had over 13,000 mosques, more than 2,000 having been built at private expense. Their operation is funded by government and non-government sources. Mosques in Islam are not only places for worship, but also have social and cultural roles. 'Omani mosques were traditionally built near to the village's water channel, which named (Falaj) before water taps become widely available, allowing worshippers to complete their ritual ablutions before prayer' (MoI,

2002:141). However, the main ones, such as Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque which opened in 2001, houses a modern library with computing and internet facilities, a Cultural Centre with a large hall for lectures and multiple purposes, and an Institute for teaching Islamic studies.

Alifita is another religious role played by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. In addition to the Grand Mufti of the Sultanate, there are other specialist officers in Islamic sciences who are able to answer religious questions asked by institutions and the public. Alifita also promotes awareness and provides Islamic advice and guidance. It issues Fatawa (religious instructions, answers and advices), and organises lectures and religious events in Oman and abroad. The Omani Grand Mufti represents the Sultanate at Islamic events in Arab and Islamic countries (MoI, 2002:141).

Various cultural activities are organised by these bodies and others to promote culture and arts in Omani society. For instance, exhibitions have been staged to publicise publications, books and other arts initiatives. According to data available, in 2002 there were 24 registered non-government libraries, and numerous books and publications have been donated to government libraries. The state also encourages the theatre, focusing its activities on social issues, and developing the talents of young graduates and theatre-lovers (MoI, 2002:145, 146).

Another most important dimension of the cultural social field is manuscripts and documents. The Ministry of National Heritage and Culture that publishes books on a variety of subjects has also collected around 4,300 valuable documents with public co-operation over the years (MoI, 2000:131,132). This reality reflects the extent to which the Sultanate has consolidated and supported its rich and valuable culture. However, it should be recognised that the aims behind whole this effort could not be achieved without preparing and qualifying

Omani specialists in such fields and enabling them to obtain higher and specific qualifications.

Furthermore, Oman has numerous important archaeological sites as well as very old forts and castles, which present other opportunities to raise awareness of Omani civilisation, in addition to contributing towards the national income as well as individuals. Clearly, this field requires many national well-prepared forces, such as qualified people in culture, heritage, archaeology and tourism. In 1997, for instance, no less than 68 ancient sites were identified by foreign teams of experts. A German team has investigated the fort at Nizwa, while French and Italian archaeologists have found evidence in Ras Al-Jinz to confirm that Oman traded with India, Mesopotamia and East Africa 3,000 years ago. In 1992 and assisted by satellite technology, the ancient city of Ubar was discovered in the sands on the edge of the Empty Quarter. Sultan Qaboos University's team found evidence of six ancient settlements during an expedition to the Hallaniyat Islands (formerly named the Kuria Muria Islands) located off the coast of Dhofar, and these are also important as a wildlife habitat. With the help of French archaeologists the Sultanate has prepared a map of all the most important archaeological sites in Oman (MoI, 2000:137,138).

Consequently, over 100 historic forts and castles which have been restored are now open for the public as some of Oman's foremost tourist attractions, and the Ministry of National Heritage has recorded around 300,000 visitors to forts and castles in just a year. Some of these historic sites, such as Bahla Fort, have been listed as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO, and there are many other historic buildings worthy of preservation (MoI, 2000:136). Unfortunately, there are no qualified people to preserve and promote these valuable heritage sites, and no scientific studies about their ancient and historic roles. Yet there are numerous SSGs without a chance to enrol in HEIs, and others with arts qualifications without job opportunities, a situation which reflects a mismatch in the planning for HE and employment structures.

2.6.6 Improvement of the status of women

From the beginning his reign, the Sultan has resolved that Omani women should participate in building their modern country, and the ratio of female students to the total number registered in GE in the academic year 1995/1996 for example, increased to 48% from 32.8% in the beginning of the 1980s. The 1994 report of the March of Nations indicated that according to 1992 indicators, the Sultanate occupies the second place among the Middle Eastern and North African countries in terms of the total rate of girls registered in elementary schools (MoD, 1997:14). By the academic year 2005/2006 this proportion was 48.5 of the total students registered in GE (MoE, 2006), reflecting the extent to which Omani females responded to the call of the Sultan to modernise their lives in accordance with their national and Islamic values.

As Muslims, Omani women believe that even though they have to stay at home for some periods of their lives to learn and to undertake certain family care duties, they do nonetheless have a vital mission and the most important role to play in raising, promoting and teaching the younger generation. In this respect, the mean age of marriage for women was 20.7 years in 1990s, compared with 24.7 years for men, but according to the governmental educational and health programmes during recent years, a social transformation is under way with women tending to marry later and have smaller families, which also reflects the new social values affecting the traditional trends of Omani women.

And this belief is not regarded as contrary to the effort to modernise the role of women. Therefore, 'now the government is keen to encourage Omani women to contribute to the national economy as working women, arguing that careers boost women's self confidence and equip them to play a greeter role in Oman's future development'(MoI, 2002:44). In accordance with this approach, the first Omani female was appointed as a ministerial under-secretary in 1988, marking a first among the Gulf countries. In 1989, an Omani woman was elected to the Board of Directors of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and a year

later, Oman appointed its first female ambassador to The Hague. In 1994, Omani women were allowed to stand in elections for the Consultative Council (Majles A'Shura) in Muscat governorate, and by 1997 all women were able to stand as candidates for elections in all wilayats of Oman.

Currently, there are four Omani women Ministers, several women as under-secretaries, ambassadors, members in the Council of State (Majlis A'Dawlah) as well as in the Consultative Council (Majlis A'Shura), and a large number have emerged in both government and the private sectors. Many women are working as teachers, doctors and nurses, while others work in the hotels, banking, financial, and tourism sectors. Additionally, others do voluntary work within national bodies, and the Omani Women's Associations. The voluntary centres also organise a variety of activities, including lectures and literacy classes. In co-operation with the Ministry of Health, women are given courses in hygiene, birth spacing and other health matters (MoI, 2000:124). Women's achievements in the education field will be reviewed in the next sections of this chapter.

The Ministry of Social Development, the governmental body responsible for women's development, has created several women's training centres in various parts of the country, while other centres have been established with voluntary contributions. The centres train women in needlework, embroidery and home economics, as well as in traditional local crafts, and they are helped to sell these through marketing facilities provided the Ministry. Additionally, women are encouraged to open tailoring shops in rural areas after attending training courses (MoI, 2000:124).

To conclude this section, although the many achievements demonstrate the enormous transition in Omani society since 1970, this is not to say that there are sufficient appropriate social services. Indeed, there is much room for improvement, and the government is gradually responding. Consequently, it can be seen that all these aspects of social and economic development highlight the

need to promote the qualifications of Omani people, whose social status and circumstances have completely changed since the 1970s. Furthermore, these achievements indicate a:

need for higher levels of education is increasing with the growing demand for qualified personnel to staff the rapidly expanding public sectors of government, health, social services and basic education as well as the burgeoning petroleum industry's requirements for trained technologists and technicians (Murphy, 2004:10).

However, the focus of this research is on the HE sector only which will be investigated in the following chapters.

2.7 Education in Oman

Before 1970, traditional education took the form of Quranic schools named 'Kuttab' or 'Katateeb (the traditional word for schools teaching Quran, Islamic and Arabic Sciences). These schools were located in small buildings beside mosques, in teachers' homes or under trees. Additionally, other schools were established by individuals, for example, heads of Omani tribes called Shaikh, or religious scientists, and there were public schools located in Sabla (public meeting places), that were widespread in the villages and towns. Schools taught literacy skills such as reading, writing, religious basic sciences and Arabic language sciences, in addition to fulfilling a community role for exchanging news, and renewing acquaintances among individuals (Al Sharuuni, 1990).

2.7.1 General Education in Oman Between 1970–1995

Simultaneously with the above form of traditional education; the American Mission operated some schools in Muscat and Mutrah which continued until the early 1970s when the government decided to close them since state schools were widely available in these two cities (Al-Dhahab, 1987). In addition, there was a kind of formal state education consisting of only three elementary schools, in which there were 909 students by 1970, all of them boys (MoE, 1999/2000). In

this situation, many Omanis sent their children to be educated in the neighbouring Arab countries such as, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Egypt. Sultan Said bin Taymor, Father of Sultan Qaboos had sent a limited number of Omanis for education so that, on their return, they could be employed as teachers in the three state schools in existence at that time. And some Omani societies such as the Imama Movement and the People's Front, sent certain of their members to study abroad (Al Ramadhani, 2003:19).

As already documented, since His Majesty Sultan Qaboos assumed Oman's leadership in 1970, education has been witnessing contemporary developments, and for thirty years, attention has been given to providing education for citizens who are the means for the country's development. Thus, the government has constantly concentrated on the expansion and growth of education for the benefit of Omani citizens. The initial focus was mainly on GE, regarded as the special and most important requirement for the development of all sectors at that time.

Although Oman had known some sort of formal education, as indicated already, the vast majority of the school age population was deprived of this (MoE, 1985 in Al Kitani, 2002), requiring every effort to spread education throughout the country, and to improve whatever educational services existed at that time. The newly-formed Ministry of Education started with six employees who shouldered the responsibility of establishing an educational system and an educational plan for the country's future. After some time, still only two staff members had a university degree, and only five had completed their secondary education (Al-Dhahab, 1987). Thus, since 1970, the MoE has competed to establish schools and educational facilities in all parts of the country, with whatever means were available.

Hence, the 1st FYDP (1976-1980) focused on the quantity of education (Raziq, 1989), inspired by the Sultan's well-quoted words 'We will educate our children even under the trees', and indeed in the 1970s and the early 1980s, schools were

set up in tents, and where buildings existed, schools were sometimes operating a two shift system, morning and afternoon, to allow for two cohorts simultaneously (Raziq, 1990). Additionally, to diversify the education services, some institutes of a specialist nature, such as the Nizwa Agriculture Institute, the Commercial Secondary Schools, the Teachers' Preparing Institutes and the Secondary Islamic Institute, were established in the early 1980s for students who had preparatory certificates (MoE, 1999/2000).

By 1999, the number of schools across the country had reached 953 and admitted slightly less than half a million pupils (MoE, 2002:19-29), with a new approach to promoting the quality of the system and initiating diversification of education according to the development process requirements (MoE, 1993), compared with three schools with 909 male students in 1969/1970. Developments in this field have been enormous over the quarter century from 1970-1995 as demonstrated in Table 2.3. Elementary education has become available to all. The percentage of enrolment in the elementary stage reached approximately 83.5% in 1995/1996, while the total percentage in the secondary stage reached 57.6% in the same year (MoD, 1997:12).

Table 2.3
Developments in GE/BE Between 1970-2005

Years	Schools	Male	Per cent	Female	Per cent	Total
1970	16	5,805	83.6%	1,136	16.4%	6,941
1975	207	40,708	73%	15,044	27%	55,752
1980	373	70,842	66.8%	35,190	33.2%	106,032
1985	588	126,587	57.8%	92,327	42.2%	218,914
1990	779	190,011	53.4%	165,975	46.6%	355,986
1995	953	252,466	51.7%	236,331	48.3%	488,797

Ministry of Education, (2002:19-29) *Development of Educational Statistics in the Sultanate 1970 – 2001*.

Another area that has received attention, is illiteracy, and education for adults who previously had no opportunities to benefit from education. Two-year adult literacy programmes were developed, to include other subjects including Basic Arabic, Islamic Education and Mathematics, to take them to the equivalent of Grade 4 Primary Stage, after which successful graduates become eligible to enrol in Grade 5 Primary in Adult Education Centres if they wish to continue. In 1973/1974, 602 adults had completed literacy programmes, and by 1999/2000, that number had reached 50,507, 15,103 being male and 35,404 being female (MoE, 2001). By 2001/2002 there were 346 literacy centres with 5,632 male and female adult learners, and 2,214 adult education centres had enrolled 8,696 learners, with a further 18,540 people signed up for self-study courses (MoI, 2002).

Those who prefer to continue their learning by themselves are given a set of 30 library books, specifically designed and prepared for adult self-study, aiming at helping them remain literate. The MoE formed a national committee in 1998, involving the community, to consider alternative approaches to ensure a decrease in illiteracy. This committee has developed a comprehensive national plan for providing literacy programmes for 108,000 adults in the age cohort 15-44, in addition to any learner above the age of 44 who wishes to join. Implementation of this plan coincides with the 6th and 7th FYDPs for the period of (2001-2005 and 2006-2010) (MoE, 2001).

With regard to educational aims, the first document issued in 1978, addressed the general aims of education in Oman, as being based on the values and attitudes of Omani society. The document stated three pillars for education in Oman: the Islamic faith, the traditions, customs and historical heritage of Omani society, and the country's comprehensive development plans (MoEa, 2004).

Hence, the educational system has built up a profile of Omani societal features and used them to develop the national educational aims, which are defined as follows (MoE, 1978, in Alshanfari, 1991), (MoI, 1984):

- * To develop the mental faculties of individuals to enable them to digest scientific facts and acquire practical skills.
- * To strengthen the individual's belief in God by teaching the basic fundamentals of the Islamic religion and the ideals that are derived from it, so that their religious life may guide their deeds and conducts.
- * To pay sufficient attention to the physical growth of individuals to allow them to acquire good habits to promote health.
- * To develop the idea of patriotism and citizenship as well as respect for the heritage, national achievements, and pride in the Arab fraternity.
- * To work for the best interests of individuals and their society.
- * To develop the vital manpower resources on which the county's economic and social growth depends.

2.7.2 New vision for General/Basic Education in Oman (1996–2020)

With the infrastructure for GE now in place, at the beginning of the current decade the percentage of enrolment in the elementary stage reached around 91.7% in the school year 2000/2001, and the total percentage in the secondary stage reached 76.2% % in the same school year, while in the year 2004/2005 these two proportions were 92% and 76.9% respectively (MoE, 2005). The MoE began to focus on improving the quality of education in the 1990s, since the rapid spread of education had been quantitatively driven, and the pressing needs to provide a well-qualified national labour force, and change the negative perceptions of young people towards vocational and craft studies were appreciated (AlKitani, 1996). Although there were extraordinary achievements in the education field in Oman, in 1995, the evaluation conducted by the MoD recognised the serious challenges facing GE/BE, documenting these as follows (MoD, 1997:12), and (MoE, 1995:A2-1):

- The weakness and inadequacy of GE/BE to cope with rapidly changing scientific and technological developments.
- The low level of productivity of labour resources. The reluctance of Omanis to join certain professions and occupations has led to reduction of their capacity to face future challenges, affected their integration with the world economy, and at the same time has hindered the substitution of expatriate labour, especially those engaged in professions with low value added, and whose productivity is less than their real economic cost.
- The need to change attitudes to Post-Secondary Education, Training and Employment.
- The need to improve employment opportunities
- The need to increase the private sector's role
- The need for entrepreneurial skills
- The new attitude to learning
- The imperative to retain religious and cultural values

In addition, other serious challenges have existed since the 1990s, these being, the low level of skills and performance of the outputs of the education system, the gap between education system outputs and HE requirements, and the lack of a national qualified labour force to meet the requirements of the marketplace. Accordingly, '*Oman 2020*', recognised those difficulties and challenges, and being aware that developing human capital, which includes GE as well as HE and other related divisions of education, is the country's most important and urgent need, addressed the process of upgrading the skills of the Omani workforce by various plans and policies focussing on GE/BE for the next 25 years (MoI, 1999).

Consequently, '*Oman 2020*' produced a vision of HRD for the period 1996-2020, that included new directions for developing and promoting all sectors and dimensions related to human development, hoping to prepare the nation for the 21st Century and to enable the young to cope with technological progress and attain international competitiveness. Thus, the main educational aims, which are regarded as some of the most important targets of this long-term vision, are:

- 1- Creating an environment which encourages the spread of education, knowledge and eradicating illiteracy.
- 2- Giving a priority to spread and develop Basic Education, for all citizens and anywhere, through a system characterised by cost effectiveness and efficiency, in order to achieve equal opportunities for all citizens

(MoD, 1995:36).

New plans and policies for development of General/Basic Education (1996-2020)

This long term vision of Education for 1996-2020 focused on the preparation of young Omanis to be productive in all life domains, aiming to achieve self-sufficiency, the variation of the sources of economic income, technological development (MoE, 1999/2000), and to keep up with the development and modernisation in all social and economic fields (MoD, 1995). To translate these concerns into reality, plans, policies and mechanisms for promoting the Omani education system, were formulated, and in respect of those relevant to GE/BE, several policies and mechanisms concerning the national educational system were also documented as elements of the long-term educational vision (1995-2020):

- 1- Activating progress in BE to correspond with the standards in advanced societies, through: reviewing school curricula concentrating on scientific specialties such as mathematics, science, computers and economics, teaching English language from the start of BE, dropping evening schools, which will eventually increase the time for each class and avail more time for basic learning, developing pedagogy practices to embrace modern educational technologies, and introducing computers as a main subject in the school curriculum, specifically at Secondary Level.
- 2- Investing in BE, recognising all its requirements, such as equipment, buildings, curricula, books, capable educators, educational instructors, social experts, laboratory technicians, and librarians, so that students emerge well-prepared for joining the work market, TE, VT and/or HE.

- 3- Development of an appropriate standard for secondary education which suits the future demands, so that graduates are ready to join the work market with the least training.
- 4- Improvement of teachers' affairs so that the Ministry can succeed in recruiting excellent educators and personnel.
- 5- Introduction and improvement of in-service training courses for existing personnel in the educational field in order to raise their performance and improve professional efficiency.
- 6- Allocation of additional funding to the MoE to maintain and improve its standards. Education of citizens regarding the need to become accustomed to contributing, even on a gradually-increasing scale to educational expenditure beyond BE. To facilitate this, the government approved a number of policies and mechanisms, including free BE for ten years for all Omani citizens, and developing a two-year advanced Secondary Education of which the government shall bear 70% of the costs, whether in public schools in their present capacity, or through private schools.
- 7- Periodic evaluation to compare the educational standard with best practice elsewhere, as happens in many industrial countries, especially in Mathematics and Sciences.
- 8- Encouragement of the private sector to take greater part in the education sector through: offering easily obtainable and long-term grants for the construction of schools, institutes and intermediate colleges, encouraging parents to place their children in private schools in order to lessen the burden on state schools, developing mechanisms for the supervision of the private sector schools, and to avail the MoE needs for such implementation.

(MoD, 1995:40-43)

Hence, the MoE undertook multiple reforms in collaboration with international educational experts. Within the 5th FYDP period (1996-2000) and after many research projects and practical initiatives, the new 'Basic Education

System' began in 1997/98, to replace the old 'General Education' (Al-Belushi et al, undated). Accordingly, the general aims of education were modified to take account of the needs of the economy, and technological and scientific advancements, being reformulated by the MoE as follows:

- First : developing the personality of the Omani citizen to enable him to interact positively with the past and the future.
- Second : spreading developments in Omani society.
- Third : articulating the need to accept change and to participate in it.
- Fourth : emphasising the need for Omani citizens to adopt scientific thinking in life and to use science and modern technology

(MoE, 1997 in Al-Belushi, et al, undated: 10 -12)

Although the above general aims of education were addressed in the ministerial document published in 1997, some difference between these and their formulation as in the most recently-published philosophy of education in 2004, are noticeable. This newest document reported the aims as being to (MoE, 2004a):

- Build the well-integrated personality of the Omani citizen who can interact positively in the present time and in the future.
- Achieve comprehensive development of the Omani society.
- Emphasise the necessity of coping with the changes of the present time and participating in making them.
- Emphasise that Omani citizens adopt the scientific thinking approach in life and deal with modern sciences and technology.

There is, however, little change in the fundamentals of these two formulations of the general aims, the remarkable difference being between the previous general aims of education issued in 1978, mentioned earlier, and the newest ones, which make no reference to the individual's Islamic ideals, and how these guide their behaviour. Nevertheless, the 14 principles of the new philosophy, and the sub-

aims and relevant explanations include many indications that Islamic ideals remain within the consideration of Oman's educational policy-makers, as shown below (MoE, 2004:28-33):

- 1- Achieving integrated development of the individual.
- 2- Retaining Omani originality and identity.
- 3- Modernisation of society and dealing with modern technology.
- 4- Adoption of scientific thinking in current life and in the future.
- 5- Sustainable education and learning skills.
- 6- Qualitative trend in instructional strategies.
- 7- Economic development and vocational training.
- 8- National unity and affiliation with the Gulf region and the Arab World.
- 9- National pride and strength.
- 10- Social liberation.
- 11- Environment and population.
- 12- Development and sponsoring emotional tendencies.
- 13- Enforcement of international peace and understanding.
- 14- Caring for the proper investment of free time.

Although more review and analysis of this issue appears in Chapter Five, it can be said now, that the new system of BE was founded on '*Oman 2020*' issued in 1995 as the newest long-term strategy for the development of education. Hence, Basic Education (BE) is defined as:

A 10 years unified education provided by the state for all children of the State at school age, to impart basic cognitive requirements, develop skills and attitudes which enable students to continue their further education or training according to their potential and abilities, and prepare them for the present and future challenges of the modern world and in the term of comprehensive society development (MoE, 1998:7).

Consequently, this educational system has been applied in Oman as part of the overall Educational Development Plan. Its function is to prepare students to continue their further education or training according to their potential, and in the light of the current and future requirements and challenge of the modern world

(MoE, 2001). Through these changes, the state aimed to develop the quality of education, improve its outcomes, reduce the cost and finally prepare Omanis for practical life and the labour market in the 21st century (MoE, 1999/2000). Therefore, the new reforms included improving the general aims of education in Oman to suit the new changes, paying more attention to quality rather than quantity of education, improving the curricula and resources, aligning the assessment with the new practice applied in curricula and providing teacher training to help teachers thrive in their work (Al-Belushi et al., undated:9,10).

The implementation of this system began in 17 schools distributed around the country (MoE, 2001:14), and is proceeding rapidly such that GE will be phased out during the coming year. The MoE must then ensure that the educational system in Oman overcomes the serious challenge of improving the quality of education to enable the country to survive when oil revenues run out, anticipated to be in less than 30 years' time.

Basic Education consists of ten academic years divided into two circles, the First Circle from grade one to four, and the Second Circle from grade five to ten. The subjects introduced throughout this system are divided into fields depending on their nature. Islamic Education, Arabic language and Social studies are considered as one field, Mathematics and Sciences are another, while English language is regarded as a third. In the first Circle, each field is taught by the same teacher while there are other subjects requiring a specialist teacher either in the First Circle or in the Second Circle.

The reform of the educational system also involved the development of new curricula fostering critical thinking skills, problem solving, experiential learning, and practical applications to real life situations. Thus, students are not encouraged to memorise facts, but to use the knowledge with their background experiences as important factors in dealing with matters or facing certain challenges (MoE, 1995). Furthermore, the teaching of English has been a major part of the reform,

having been introduced from level one instead of level four, as in the old system. The English language curriculum, and teaching methods have also improved, and the number of periods allocated weekly have been increased for all levels, the emphasis being on developing skills in various aspects of the language. Similarly, Information Technology has been introduced from level one as a most important tool to gain knowledge and for use in daily life, and the time devoted to it gradually increases as the level of the study rises. Additionally, changes to the overall assessment regime have been introduced to ensure that pupils are examined at all levels of study.

Such developments inevitably require school teachers to be sufficiently qualified to implement these changes, and this has necessitated another dimension of educational reform, this being the training of teachers, educational supervisors, head teachers and other educational staff through providing them with pre-service and in-service programmes centrally and regionally, aimed at helping them to understand the reform and to respond positively to the development process.

It worth noting that at the start of the educational reform in 1995, there were about 11,000 Omani school teachers with two-year certification (MoE, 1995:iii). This situation required the allocation of a substantial budget by the MoE to upgrade these teachers' qualifications. Accordingly, in 2000/2001, the MoE co-ordinated with the MoHE and the University of Leeds in the UK, to upgrade the qualification of Omani English Language teachers with intermediate college diplomas to Bachelor degrees, and since then similar programmes for other teachers have been mounted. Regional training centres have also been established and provided with training staff (MoE, 2001).

Additionally, the MoE has developed Diploma programmes in collaboration with SQU, for educational management staff (school head and deputy head teachers, and educational supervisors) (MoE, 2001). Schools have also been equipped with the newest facilities: science and computer laboratories and

Learning Centres, which are replacements for traditional school libraries, in recognition of the fact that most activities now involve the use of computers, videotapes, audiotapes and televisions, as well as books. Moreover, the reform involved a re-structuring of the MoE (approved by Royal Decree 19/1997), to include new departments and divisions with new responsibilities and duties, intended to help the Ministry to apply the new system in an integrated manner, and to improve staff communications and performance.

GE/BE Status during the first half of the current decade

It could be said that there is a new educational reality in Oman, with a modern educational system. At the beginning of the decade, in the school year 2000/2001 the school number was 1,010, with 554,845 students, 284,501 male and 270,344 female students (51.3% and 48.7% respectively). According to the report of the MoNE concerning the outcomes of the assessment of the first two years (2001, 2002) of the 6th FYDP issued in 2004, the total number of students registered in BE in the academic year 2002/2003 reached 594,000, showing an increase of 1.7% from the previous year. The total number of BE schools in the academic year 2002/2003 reached 288, and schools in most regions around the country were expanded by the addition of classrooms. By the beginning of school year 2005/2006, there were 1,046 state schools accommodating around 586,074 students (MoE, 2006). Additionally, the rate of student attrition declined (Ministry of National Economy, 2004:11,12).

By 2005, Omani schools employed around 37,500 teachers (21,605 female), and thousands of administrative staff, educational supervisors, technicians and supporting staff (MoE, 2006), compared with 30 teachers in 1970 (MoI, 2002:120). Whilst these increasingly high inputs to the BE system reflect the successful implementation of Oman's educational policy, they do simultaneously demand good policy-making and planning in other spheres in order to respond to the reality outside of school, since the graduates from the system will require HE places, whether at university, technical and/or vocational training establishments.

This consequently, should influence the structure of HE, and the associated resources. However, in all of these areas, the HE system is still lacking. Moreover, the job market has many positions, particularly in technical fields, that can not be filled by national labour, yet many thousands of SSGs annually, are denied the opportunities to pursue HE which would allow them to be trained to fill jobs that are currently held by expatriates. This planning gap represents a main new challenge for GE as well as HE, which is becoming progressively worse.

Current changes in Secondary Education in Oman

In accordance with '*Oman 2020*', and the confirmation of Secondary Education's essential role in economic growth, the Omani government has recognised that Secondary Education also should be reformed to make it consistent with the requirements of the intended future society (Al Barwani, 2002). It has become apparent that the need for unskilled labour is now shrinking and being rapidly replaced by a need for technically-skilled labour, possessing adaptability, communications skills, problem-solving skills, creativity, entrepreneurialism, and self-employment skills. And it is widely-understood that no modern and open economy can develop unless the majority of its population are provided with quality secondary education (UNESCO, 2001).

Taking the international changes; countries intending to move from an industrial, towards a knowledge-based economy, should give much attention and priority to secondary education. Different countries worldwide have responded to this challenge through various programmes and initiatives. Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait have introduced Comprehensive Secondary Schools Programmes, while the state of Qatar has introduced another type of innovation called Modern Secondary Schools, the most important feature of which is to allow pupil choice of specialisation from a menu of options. Hence, in developing their Secondary Education, most countries share the following common elements (Al Barwani, 2002):

- A shift towards vocational skills and more direct response to labour market requirements.
- Considering the learner as an adolescent who is in transition from childhood to adulthood, and whose physical, emotional and psychological needs must be addressed.
- Offering greater flexibility in programme structure, streaming practices and selections.
- Providing life skills.

For many years, Oman has implemented a traditional two-stream system of Secondary Education, within which, after completing the first grade of Secondary School successfully, pupils choose either the Arts or Science stream. However, this system has witnessed a number of changes since its introduction in the 1970s, relating to curricula, instruction plans and assessment methods, all of which have provoked educationalists to believe that more innovation is possible, and desired, in this field.

Consequently, several studies were conducted throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s. For example, research undertaken by Eissan (1990) to gauge teachers' and students' views towards the secondary education system indicated the need for more modern approaches. Additionally, the Two National Symposiums of Employment of the National Labour Force in 2001 and 2003, showed that only a small percentage of SSGs have been absorbed by the labour market, and accentuated the pressing needs to upgrade the secondary education system and to prepare students with work skills to facilitate their employment within private sector enterprises (Ministry of Manpower, 2002 and 2004a).

By 2002, a survey conducted by the Consultative Council (Majles A'Shura), regarding several elements of the present educational system, indicated that about 35.3% of the participants believed secondary education was not responding to the needs of society, while 44% thought there was a response to some extent. Some of the most important findings of the survey highlighted (Majlis A'Shura, 2002):

- * The inability of the labour market to absorb the SSGs.
- * The poor preparation of SSGs for university study.
- * The heavy emphasis placed on theory and the lack of practice
- * The failure of the system to follow recent advances in science and technology
- * The failure of the system to develop the students' English language skills, highly evident in students' persistent weakness in the English language.
- * The fact that teaching is done by traditional, outdated methods, and teachers are not periodically refreshed in their particular subjects. Moreover, they are overburdened with administrative issues and constantly being changed or replaced.

These indicators and others reflect the extent to which Omani society believes in the need to develop and seriously advance the secondary education system. Accordingly, the MoE held several National Symposiums on Secondary Education during 2002, to generate more discussion and analysis. Additionally, in December 2002, an International Conference entitled Secondary Education for a Better Future; Trends, Challenges and Priorities, was held in Muscat, and many local and international organisations, institutions, experts were involved. In 2004, the MoE announced that having considered all evidence and initiatives concerning the process of secondary education reform, the two stream system would be abolished and replaced by a system of compulsory and optional subjects, starting from September, 2004 (MoE, 2004b).

Furthermore, the Ministry abandoned the term Secondary Education, calling this instead, Grades Eleven and Twelve of Post-Basic Education, and offering certification – the General Certification - at the end of Grade Twelve (MoE, 2004b). Not surprisingly, these developments required HEIs to change some enrolment conditions and procedures, and several governmental HEIs and other authorities expressed dissatisfaction with the MoE's actions, since there was no consultation, and merely a requirement to adapt.

In the new system, pupils select subjects according to their interests and abilities and in discussion with their parents. Additionally, more attention is paid

to the teaching of English language and IT has been introduced in Grades Eleven and Twelve as a compulsory subject. Moreover, a new system of assessment/examination was introduced to accommodate opportunities for coursework and other school activities, rather than relying purely on final examinations as in the traditional system. Consequently, the pupil's final profile is comprised of a variety of inputs (MoE, 2004b).

The various pressures, such as the globalisation of the world economy, changing employment opportunities, the need to keep pace with technological change, the increased role of the private sector, the need for entrepreneurial skills, new attitudes to learning and the need to retain religious and cultural values, that have been identified earlier as forcing a new analysis of HRD within Oman, obviously underpin changes in the Secondary System, but there were other difficulties presenting the education sector with a challenge at the end of the 5th FYDP period. According to the MoNE's evaluation of the 5th FYDP, some of these were (MoNE, 2002b:53,54):

- Poor standard of English language of the different educational stage outputs which affected their continuance in higher stages of academic and TE, and their absorption with the labour market.
- The increasing numbers of SSGs, with limited opportunities for enrolment in HEIs.
- The need to rationalise expenditure on the education sector.
- The urgent need to consider the efficiency of resource allocation among the different sectors of the educational system and within each sector.
- The reallocation of resources among the different education stages through price adjustment to reflect the actual cost, the reduction of financial support to students, and the obligation upon individuals to participate in financing.
- The reduction of educational loss. The data showed that pupils in the Sultanate take 12.6% years to complete a 9-year programme up to Grade Nine.

These difficulties and challenges were seen to reflect the pressing need to direct attention to the process of educational planning in Oman, especially because the new system of BE was introduced in 1997 and the first cohort from this system has not yet graduated, yet in 2003 the government announced that it was undertaking a new comprehensive long-term strategy for education and that some preparatory requirements were already fulfilled. Therefore, some questions impose themselves, for example why has the government decided to create a new long-term strategy for education before the outcomes of the recently-implemented new system of BE which was created in accordance with the long-term *Vision of HRD* which is a part of '*Oman 2020*', have actually been evaluated? Does this signal the belief that the educational reforms of the second half of the 1990s have been restructured and are going to be replaced? Was the 1990s educational reform and strategy based on sufficient, realistic and suitable research before its implementation? And to what extent is its current budget sufficient to underwrite the implementation process of those plans?

These questions and others reflect the important need to study the reality of education in Oman, the planning process, and the outcomes of the various policies and reforms implemented by the interested authorities and institutions. Such studies will help to avoid arbitrary and haphazard planning and procedures, and will simultaneously represent a better investing of the time, effort and money, especially in an era in which economic and social development mainly rely on advanced knowledge (World Bank, 2002:3).

2.8 Conclusion

Through this chapter, a comprehensive review of the national context has been presented, and details of Oman's economic transformation and the accompanying social developments have been featured. It was clarified that the different aspects of the Omani society's transition, required well-qualified national manpower to be placed in jobs and positions that now occupied by the expatriates and to be able to face the future challenges.

Although numerous developments in the education sector were mentioned and the long-term plan for education in Oman for the period 1996-2020 was introduced, many difficulties and challenges facing the education sector were also mentioned. The re-structuring of the BE system in 1990s was considered, as also was the development of Secondary Education. Finally, it was indicated that there is a pressing need to bridge the gap between the outputs of GE and the requirements of higher study and the labour market, and in turn to develop and expand the country's HE system.

Chapter Three

Higher Education in Oman: The Transitional Age

3.1 Introduction

Having gained an overview of the national context in Chapter Two, and realised the difficulties and challenges facing GE/BE, it is necessary to review the HE system in Oman and its development phases, and also to identify the most important factors affecting the reality of HE in its development and expansion process. The first section of this chapter reviews the early stage of HE and its development phases. Then Oman's HE provision, including the governmental university, different colleges and institutes, as well as the provision of private HE, is presented. The capacity and fields of study of these various institutions are discussed in the light of the country's human resource requirements envisaged in the governmental development plans, particularly the 5th FYDP for the period of 1996-2000, and the 6th FYDP, for 2001-2005.

The chapter also considers the role of the private HE sector, and the extent to which it contributes to the preparation of young Omanis. Finally, the chapter sheds light on the structure and organisation Oman's HE system, the so-called 'multiple organisations' system. Thus, in the review and analysis of Omani HE provision, and consequently, the identification of its strengths and weaknesses, a number of relevant governmental documents will be used.

3.2 Development Phases of HE in the Sultanate

In the early stage, the Sultanate depended heavily on foreign scholarships, which provided various study specialisations according to the urgent needs of the governmental bodies at that time. Simultaneously, however, attempts were made to expand the provision of vocational higher level study, and several specialist institutes, for example, the Nizwa Agriculture Institute, the Commercial Secondary Schools and the Secondary Islamic Institute, were established for students who had graduated from the preparatory stage.

In the same direction, and according to the expansion of school education scheduled in the 1st FYDP (1976-1980) which resulted in the number of school students reaching 49,229 in the school year 1975-1976 (Al Mantheri, 1992:78), the government launched a number of Teacher Preparation Intermediate Institutes within the second half of the decade. Those institutes offered three-year programmes to preparatory school graduates. At that time all the intermediate institutions were directed by the MoE, which decided in 1980, to upgrade the programmes offered there, from when they accepted General Secondary School graduates on a one-year training programme.

The definition of HE as promulgated in the International Conference for Higher Education in the 21st Century, held by UNESCO on 5-9 October 1998, declares that HE includes: 'all types of studies, training or training for research at the post-secondary level, provided by universities or other educational establishments, that are approved as institutions of higher education by the competent state authorities' (UNESCO, 1998).

According to this definition, it might be considered that, initially, some governmental initiatives were not in the form of HE, yet they were routes to diversifying Omani education and to meeting the urgent needs of society's development process, and they did indicate an increasing demand for HE studies in Omani society. This situation led the government to focus on the HE sector in the 2nd FYDP (1981-1985), which was crowned by the opening of the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in 1986. The next sections of this Chapter explain the nature of the resulting developments and educational divisions (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1

Development of Higher Education in Oman

1 9 7 0s

Scholarships

Vocational Training

Intermediate Institutes for Preparatory levels for Agriculture, Commerce

These two streams could not be regarded as Higher Education Institutions

1 9 8 0s

Scholarships

Sultan Qaboos University

9 Institutes for Preparation of Teachers

(Technical Education)
One Industrial Technical College and Centers of Vocational Training +

9 Intermediate Colleges for Teachers

1 9 9 0s

Scholarships

Sultan Qaboos University

9 Intermediate Colleges for Teachers

(Technical Education)
One Industrial and Technical College and 5 Institutes of Vocational Training converted to 5 Intermediate Colleges

Private Colleges award Diplomas only

One Private University Colleges

6 University Colleges for Teachers

2 0 0 0s

Scholarships

Sultan Qaboos University

6 University Colleges of Education

1 Higher College and 5 Intermediate Colleges of Technology

(9) Private Colleges award Diplomas only

5 Specialist Colleges and One College for Education

(14) Private University Colleges

(16) Private University Colleges and (3) Private Universities

3.2.1 Scholarships

As mentioned earlier, Oman began its modernisation age in 1970, when there was no national infrastructure, and all sectors were completely devoid of a qualified labour force. Indeed, SQU opened in 1986, there was no university or university college in the country to properly prepare more highly-qualified people to meet the urgent needs of Oman's development. To respond to the requirements for qualified personnel in most specialisations in both the public and private sector, the state had relied heavily on overseas scholarships, and funded a wide variety of study opportunities abroad. As a result, a large number of SSGs were sent overseas to continue their studies. Three years into Oman's Renaissance, the number of such scholarships was 273 (1973/1974), increasing gradually to 939 in the academic year 1980/1981, and reaching a peak of 2,681 in 1985/1986 when the SQU was opened (MoE, 1992 in Al Ramadhani, 2003:24, 66).

Underpinning this increase was the law governing scholarships and school subsidies, that was passed in 1973 and established a Scholarships Committee under the direction of the MoE, comprised of the Under-secretary of the MoE and representatives of other ministries. Responsibilities of the Committee included the implementation and supervision of scholarships, appraisal of the needs of governmental bodies for suitably-qualified Omani personnel, and the determination of priorities.

Reflecting the high level of attention paid by him to all sectors of Oman's development, His Majesty referred to the Scholarships Research Committee in his speech of the Fourth National Day celebration in 18 November 1974, saying:

And to protect our future scholarships students abroad, we have decided to form a permanent committee to examine their various responsibilities and look after their needs. This committee will, at frequent intervals, visit the countries where the students are studying, to ensure that they are not confronted by problems or obstacles that could hinder their studies (MoI, 1995:75 in Al Ramadhani, 2003:23).

As one of the most important results of that speech, the usefulness of sending Omanis to study abroad was re-appraised and it was decided to reduce or discontinue scholarships offered by certain countries and organisations that the government regarded as suspect (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 1990). From the 1970s this sector was administered by the MoE, until 1994, when the MoHE was established, and assumed responsibility for this Committee from the MoE, which is now directed by the Directorate General of Scholarships.

During the 1970s and 1980s, when the state was under substantial pressure to provide qualified personnel, the government funded most scholarships, but by the second half of the 1980s, some public sector positions (in ministries and other governmental bodies) were occupied by qualified Omanis, who had graduated during the 15 years of the modernisation period. Thus, the needs of the public sector declined. Moreover, after the opening of SQU in 1986, the need to send people abroad for Bachelors' degrees in certain specialisations evaporated, and the decline in scholarships continued until the mid-1990s when it became stable at 160-185 scholars annually.

Consequently, and in light of the decline of national oil revenue, the government began to encourage participation from other bodies, who benefit from HE, such as private sector agencies and individuals. The overseas scholarships policy continued, and the government worked towards obtaining more grants and scholarships from friendly countries. As a result, and in addition to the scholarships funded by the government either fully or partially, a number of scholarships were funded by Omani companies, foreign organisations and universities, and prominent Omani businessmen, such that Scholarships are now of four main types:

1. The Basic Scholarship, which is fully funded by the government including tuition fees and study allowance, and full salary in the case of a government employee, the duration of which is different, according to the degree, the specialisation and acceptance of the authority. The Full Scholarships are

divided into two types; scholarships abroad, and at home, for which the government pays tuition fees only.

2. Partial Scholarships, where the government funds the tuition fees only (limited to OR 4,200 annually) and the student or his/her parents pay all other expenses. If the student is a government employee, the government pays full or half salary according to need, or the availability of other funding.
3. Scholarships fully or partly-funded by an Omani company or some prominent Omani businessmen.
4. Scholarships/grants offered by other countries, organisations or universities.

Enrolments in the scholarships sector

With the advancement of the national HE system, the pattern of scholarships changed. As already mentioned, the number of such students was reduced in the 1990s, in a decline that continued until the mid-1990s when it became stable at 160-185 scholars annually (See Table: 3.1). On the other hand, some non-governmental bodies have made a contribution in this sector. For example, in the academic year 1999/2000, 54 students received such scholarships, funded by Omani companies and prominent businessmen, and a further 27 were supported by Petroleum Development of Oman Company (PDO), which is a semi-governmental company (see Table 3.1).

It might worth noticing that, in the academic year 1999/2000, the total number of Omanis studying abroad was around 9,133 (including those continuing their studies from previous years), of whom 635 were studying for Masters' Degrees or Doctorates (MoI, 2000:116). About 3,000 students at their own expense, and 643 students affiliated to the University of Beirut. Overall,

Table 3.1
Number Governmental Scholarships Between 1996-2005

Sponsor	Year									
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Overseas Scholars. Funded By MoHE	67	69	67	60	60	60	60	60	60	60 ¹
Overseas Scholars. Partly Funded By MoHE	67	69	67	60	60	45	30	30	30 ¹³	83 ¹⁴
Full Funded Scholars. By PDO	34	41	51	39	30	27	30	30 ¹¹	20 ¹²	16 ⁴
Full/ partial Funded Scholars by other countries and institutions	-	-	-	-	-	83	90	125 ⁸	96 ⁷	84 ⁵
Scholars. Funded by other ministries	-	-	-	-	32 by M. of Awqaf and Religious Affairs	50 by M. of National Economy	-	-	-	10 ⁶ by Royal Oman Police
Internal Scholars. By M. of Manpower	-	-	-	-	500	638	638	638 ¹⁵	604 ¹⁶	824 ³
Internal Scholars. For limited income families funded by MoHE	-	-	-	-	1000	1063	1000	1130 ¹⁰	1083 ¹⁷	1646 ⁹
Omani companies and some prominent Omani businessmen.	-	-	-	54	11 ¹⁸	2 ¹⁹	7 ²⁰	10 ²¹	5 ²²	300 ²
Total	168	179	185	213	1,682	1,966	1,848	2,023	1,898	3,023

MoHE, *Annual Statistics Books, 2001, 2002d, 2003, 2004, 2005*, and Unpublished Papers (2003,2004,2005).

And: www.omandaily.com (20/7/2005).

Although, in the 5th FYDP (1996-2000), one of the most important objectives for this sector was to 'increase scholarships abroad for undergraduate studies for various scientific specialisations in accordance with requirements of the Omani labour market' (MoD, 1997:477), the number of governmental scholarships, as shown in Table 3.1, continuously decreased after the opening of SQU and until the end of 1990s as mentioned previously. However, in order to achieve the objective the plan generated some policies and implementation mechanisms, one being:

Increasing the number of undergraduate scholarships in order to meet the requirements of the national economy for different specialisations. This will be done by the provision of grants for Secondary School graduates to pursue their studies. The grant will equal 50% of the cost of scholarships abroad. However, the maximum annual amount of such grants will be OR 4,200, catering for an

average maximum number of 800 Secondary School graduates annually (MoD, 1997:478).

According to the Council of Ministers' decision in session No. 20/96, the number of university scholarships was amended to 200 in the first year of the 5th FYDP, rising by 100 scholars annually, giving a total of 600 in 2000/2001. This was conditional upon the availability of financial resources, through an annual review of the proceeds from labour card fees (MoD, 1997:478). However, this decision was not implemented. The target of 200 scholars was not reached in the first year of the 5th FYDP (see Table 3.1), nor were there the planned annual increases thereafter, and although the total number of government scholarships increased sharply in 2000, reaching 1,682 scholars in one year, this was not in accordance with the 5th FYDP.

The 5th and 6th FYDPs have been taken as examples representing other FYDPs to review and analyse the aims and policies related to HE. The 5th FYDP (1996-2000), the first such plan after the approval of '*Oman 2020*', included the aim to increase overseas scholarships for undergraduate studies for various scientific specialisations in accordance with the requirements of the Omani labour market as mentioned above, while the next FYDP, the 6th (2001-2005) declared that the top priority was to increase the number of Secondary School leavers admitted to HEIs and to upgrade and spread BE, recognising the conflict between increasing the number of SSGs and the limited capacity for their enrolment at HEIs.

Accordingly, the plan envisaged 1,000 internal scholarships directed by the MoHE for private colleges and another 500 scholarships directed by the Ministry of Manpower for study in the private colleges (MoNE, 2002:60), thus indicating another aim behind that decision. Indeed, the 1,000 scholarships were restricted to young Omanis from limited income families, who were to study in local HEIs. As indicated in Table 3.1, these scholarships were increasing more than the determined number. Moreover, other bodies granted a number of scholarships. In

year 2000, for example, another five scholarships were funded by prominent Omani businessmen, six by the private sector, and for the first time, 32 were funded by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (although this latter initiative was unusual and a one-off investment) (MoI, 2000:116). Hence, there was no significant increase in the number of overseas scholarships during the period of these two plans, as explained above.

Specialisations and fields of study

As already documented, during the 1970s and first half of 1980s, a large number of SSGs with any grade were sent abroad to gain higher qualifications in any type of education, since the country lacked qualified people in all aspects of the developmental process and services sectors. After the opening of SQU in 1986, the need to send people abroad for Bachelors' degrees in certain specialisations evaporated. Although the 5th and 6th FYDPs recognised the link between the specialisations covered by the Scholarships sector and the requirements of the Omani marketplace, they did not determine the specialisations or study fields, nor the number of qualified people that were needed in particular areas of the economy and public services.

Table: 3.2
Number of Overseas Scholarships Funded by Government, Grants from other Countries, and Private Individuals Between 2000-2004

Specialisations	2000		2001		2002		2003		2004	
	MoHE	Grants & Own Funds	MoHE	Grants & Own Funds	MoHE	Grants & Own Funds	MoHE	Grants & Own Funds	MoHE	Grants & Own Funds
Medicine & Health Sciences	60	168	70	216	81	192	93	241	100	521
Pharmacology	11	151	7	184	6	200	8	173	8	164
Engineering	119	560	101	577	110	546	113	433	111	387
Science	43	445	16	323	16	367	18	323	27	298
Agriculture	9	47	8	47	9	34	11	56	12	35
Education	12	3443	8	6506	8	7809	11	8406	10	5475
Computer	13	483	58	582	51	573	43	495	32	470
Literature/Arts	11	511	12	519	12	506	13	634	17	2027
Law	18	96	18	156	28	168	23	420	26	415
Commerce & Administrative Secretarial	135	935	131	1019	116	1037	77	968	65	970
Economics & Political Sciences & Secretarial	8	83	9	78	8	420	13	48	3	59
Information	7	64	3	12	3	11	4	215	5	194
Islamic Law	0	1570	0	76	0	71	0	114	1	1220
Language	0	6	5	8	5	4	6	30	9	34
Others Subjects	17	204	17	361	8	248	4	217	0	124
Total	463	8766	463	10664	461	12186	437	12773	426	12393

MoHE, *Annual Statistics Books, 2001, 2002d, 2003, 2004, 2005.*

The imbalance in the numbers of students sponsored for particular specialisms, and the country's demands for these, is clear from Table 3.2 which indicates that the majority of those studying abroad, either through government or self-funding, have been in the arts, education, business and other social sciences, while those studying applied sciences, such as medicine, engineering and agriculture, were few. For example, in 2000, only 23% were studying applied

sciences, and this percentage dropped to 17% in 2002 and 16.8% in 2004. Moreover, the data in Table 3.2 show large differences between the number of students funded by the MoHE and students funded privately, also the number of students who study education in overseas HEIs increased from 3,455 in year 2000 to 8,417 in 2003. This number dropped significantly in 2004 when it reached 5,485, a decline attributed to availability of Education programmes in Oman's private local HEIs, which were approved in 2004.

Reflecting an imbalance in the specialisations followed by students overseas, the statistics show a high number studying Education throughout the previous five years, while there were six Colleges of Education in Oman with at least 2,000 enrolments each year during these five years, which were easily able to produce sufficient teachers in most subject areas for the MoE schools. The next most popular specialisation was Arts and Literature, followed by Islamic Sciences and Law, and then Commerce and Administrative studies. Clearly, these indicators pose a number of questions.

3.2.2 Institutes and Colleges of Education for male/female teachers

The rapid spread of schools across the country and the number of pupils in the Sultanate, brought a pressing need to hire expatriate teachers, from both Arab, and other countries. However, the government realised the importance of expediting the preparation of national teachers and attention has been focused on this process from the 1st FYDP (1976-1980) when the government launched Teacher Preparation Intermediate Institutes, for preparatory school graduates. The government used inducements including monthly maintenance grants, to encourage people to continue their studies by enrolling in these institutes, and on other programmes, to boost the enrolment in these establishments (Al Ramadhani, 2003). These plans also aimed to increase of proportion of Omani nationals amongst the higher ranked teachers, even in instances where promotion implied the replacement of expatriate teachers by Omanis, which occurred despite concerns regarding the quality of such replacements.

In 1980 the government decided to upgrade those Institutes' programmes and accepted SSGs on a one-year course (MoI, 2002). In 1984, the MoE launched two Colleges of Education, named 'Intermediate Colleges of Teacher Preparation', to offer one-year and two-year post-secondary teacher training courses and award an Intermediate Diploma. By 1990 there were nine such colleges across the country.

In 1994, two of those colleges, one in Nizwa for male teachers, and one in Rustaq for female teachers, were designated University Colleges and allowed to award BA degrees in teaching. That same year the MoHE was established under Royal Decree 2/94, with responsibility for certain HEIs and their funding, directing the scholarship system, and supervising private HEIs. The Royal Decree 42/95 transferred responsibility for the colleges of education from the MoE to the MoHE, and nine intermediate colleges were subsequently restructured to create six University Colleges, in accordance with the requirements of the 5th FYDP, to meet the public and private sector demand for Preparatory and Secondary School national teachers (MoD, 1997:203, 478). Candidates compete against students from across the country and are accepted on the basis of availability of places. By the end of academic year 2001/2002, 6,049 students had graduated with BA degrees from these colleges (MoI, 2002:125). The intake to these colleges has occasionally fluctuated, as indicated in Table 3.3.

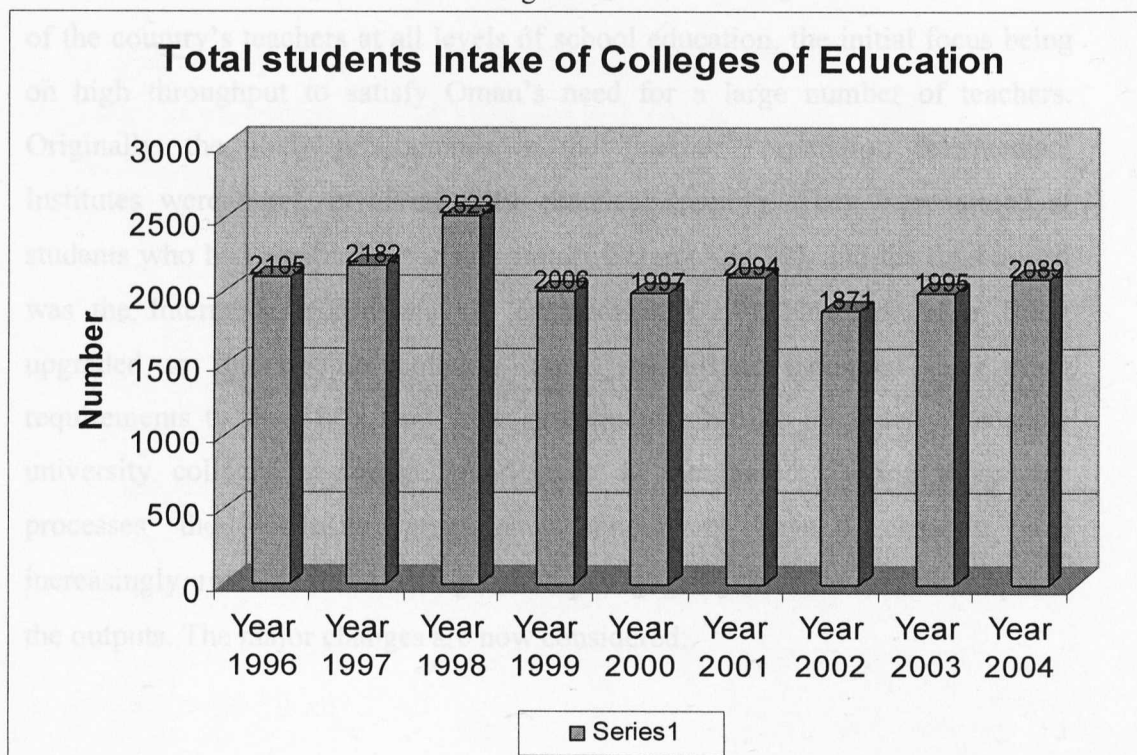
Table 3.3
Total Student Intake to Colleges of Education Between 1996-2004

Year	Student Intake
1996	2,105
1997	2,182
1998	2,523
1999	2,006
2000	1,997
2001	2,094
2002	1,871
2003	1,955
2004	2,089

MoHE, 2002d, 2003, 2004, 2005.

The 5th FYDP declared that in addition to upgrading these colleges to the status of university colleges, the colleges should admit 2,000-2,500 students annually, but that admission should not be linked to the demand of the region hosting the college, and that employment after graduation would not be guaranteed (MoD, 1997:203). That number was the same number determined by the National HRD Strategy for the period between 1996-2020 (MoD, 1997:478).

Figure 3.2



In fact, the numbers enrolled during the years of the 5th FYDP alternated between 1,997 and 2,523 students (Table 3.3), demonstrating an adherence to the National HRD Strategy. The 6th FYDP did not prescribe enrolment numbers for these colleges, but the MoHE (Table 3.3) shows the pattern to be the approved for the 5th FYDP. Although a noticeable drop occurred in 2002, when 1,871 students were enrolled, the number rose again, reaching 2,089 in 2004. Nevertheless, the question raised by these fluctuations is, to what extent do the state's schools need all these enrolments in those colleges? And why are the majority of teaching staff in the private schools expatriates, when there are Omani teachers graduating from

these colleges every year and others who remain without jobs? To what extent do the graduates of these colleges meet the requirements of the modern schools in terms of quality? However, investigation of the responses for all these questions is not the business of this study

Specialisations and academic programmes

The academic programmes in these colleges were designed to meet the needs of the country's teachers at all levels of school education, the initial focus being on high throughput to satisfy Oman's need for a large number of teachers. Originally, the study programmes in the Teacher Preparation Intermediate Institutes were short, involving little practical training. They were aimed at students who had completed the Preparatory Stage (Age 16), and the final award was the Intermediate Diploma (Al Manthari, 2002:9). However, after being upgraded to Intermediate colleges, these institutions increased their entry requirements to the SSGs, and were subsequently further upgraded to become university colleges awarding BA degrees as mentioned. During those two processes the academic programmes underwent several changes, and increasingly, more attention was given to pedagogical skills, in order to improve the outputs. The major changes are now considered:

1. Programme to prepare Preparatory and Secondary teachers

This was introduced in 1994/1995, consisted of two domains (Main-specialisation and Sub-specialisation), and included the 12 courses shown in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4
Academic Programmes in the Colleges of Education introduced in 1994/1995

Social/Arts specialisations	Sciences specialisations	
Islamic Education	Physics/Chemistry	Chemistry /Physics
Arabic Language	Physics/Computing	Chemistry/Biology
Geography/ History	Physics/Mathematics	Mathematics/Physics
History/Geography	Mathematics/Computing	Computing/Mathematics

Al Rabei (2004:41)

2. Programme to prepare First-Circle of Basic Education (1-4)

This was introduced in 1998/1999, and included two fields:

A- Islamic Education, Arabic Language and Social Studies

B- Sciences and Mathematics

3. Programme to prepare Life Skills teachers

This was introduced in 1998/1999, was of four years long, and divided into eight terms/132 credit hours, with the following elements: Specialised Abilities, Vocational/Professional Abilities, Cultural Abilities, Continuous Professional Development Abilities and Society and Environment Development Abilities. It was introduced to meet the needs of the MoE at the time, but was subsequently withdrawn by the MoE when the required number of teachers had been trained.

4. Programme to prepare Preparatory and Secondary teachers (Main specialisations)

This was introduced in 2002/2003, and included the ten specialisations shown in Table 3.5. Students who complete all required courses successfully, with the required credit hours are awarded the BSc in Education in the specialisation of study.

Table 3.5
Academic Programmes in the Colleges of Education introduced in 2002/2003

Social/Arts Specialisations	Science Specialisations
Islamic Education	Physics
Arabic Language	Chemistry
Geography	Mathematics
History	Computing
English Language	Biology

AlRabei (2004:42)

Current status of Colleges of Education/New Specialised Colleges

Recognising that the state's schools do not need all the graduates of these colleges; and in response to the 6th FYDP, the MoHE has formed a task force for exploring the future role of the Colleges of Education, and enlisted consultancy services from an Irish organisation that has canvassed opinion from industry, academic, governmental and private institutions, and made a number of recommendations.

After studying these, the MoHE and CoHE submitted a full report to His Majesty who, by the summer of 2005, approved the conversion of these colleges to five different specialist colleges, with only one remaining for Education. Thus, only one College of Education now exists in addition to the SQU College of Education. The study period of the BSc degree is now five years, the first year being a foundation year, particularly for preparing students in English language and other academic skills. www.omandaily.com (06/07/2005). The specialisations of the colleges are now:

- BSc in IT, which includes Applied Practical Programming, and Security of IT.
- BSc in International Business Administration, which includes International Business Administration, Tourism, Languages and Translation.

- BSc in Design, which includes Graphic Design, Location Design, Advertisement Design and Media Production.
- BSc in Communications, which includes international communications, Information Administration, Media, Journalism and General Relationships/Communication. www.omandaily.com (06/07/2005)

The one remaining College of Education receives a limited number of students annually according to the needs of the MoE and other institutions. In the first academic year 2005/2006, there were 362 students enrolled in the College of Education which operated its normal programme in September 2005, while the five specialist colleges, that began their courses in January 2006, registered 1,654 students www.omandaily.com (19/08/2005). However, in terms of the number of enrolments in these colleges, it could be noticed this number is still remain at same level as before the conversion.

3.2.3 Sultan Qaboos University (SQU)

HEIs are said to be a recent phenomenon in the Arab World, with 65% of Arab universities being established between 1981-1998 (al-Nu'aymī. al-Rabī'ī and al-Nu'aymī al-N~imi, 1990, in Al-Ramadhani, 2003:37). Al-Ramadhani (2003) claims that in most Arab countries there were delays in establishing HEIs. However, Oman 1970s, a country without the most basic infrastructure and services, cannot be regarded as delaying in this respect, for after only 15 years in power, the new government established the first university. On the 10th National day (18 November, 1980) His Majesty announced that the first university in the Sultanate would be established, and it would bear his name:

Steps are being taken to prepare our young people to become the scientists, technicians, doctors, agriculturists, and other specialists that we shall need in ever increasing numbers as our modern development continues to gain momentum. To this end, Sultan Qaboos University will be established and provide courses up to the highest international standards (MoI, 2000:114).

Construction was completed in 1986, and in September of that year the first students enrolled. The opening of SQU was one of the major achievements of the Renaissance of Oman, and marked the beginning of the transition stage for education in the Sultanate. The fundamental mission and objectives of the University, according to His Majesty:

should not be confined to academic and professional achievements, important as they are, but due regard should be paid to, and great emphasis should be laid upon, intellectual discipline and the development of positive qualities of character, with a view to turning out graduates with a sense of unshakable propriety and a deep sense of responsibility and integrity. As befits a residential University, campus life should be so organized as to create an atmosphere conducive to the fulfillment of the above aims as well as to the spirit of the Islamic way of life <http://www.squ.edu.om/adm/index.html> (18/7/2005).

Initially there were five colleges: Education and Islamic Sciences, Medicine, Engineering, Sciences and Agriculture and Marine Sciences. The College of Arts was established in 1987 and in 1993 the College of Commerce and Economics was added to the university. However, many questions have been raised during the last few years, such as: Is one governmental university enough for the country? Does it adequately meet the demands for HE? Why has the government still not planned to establish another (governmental) university more than 15 years after of the establishment of the first? And, is there a plan for establishing another university in near future? These questions are matters for this study.

In addition to the seven colleges comprising the University, the Sultan Qaboos University Hospital, the most advanced hospital in the Sultanate with 500 beds, and sophisticated equipment, functions as a training and teaching institution for College of Medicine students. Moreover, the University has diversified its activities, aiming to support its academic and research role, as well as its mission. Accordingly, the University runs several highly specialised scientific and research centres as follows:

- Centre for Educational Technology
- Language Centre
- Centre for Information Systems
- Educational Research Centre
- College of Commerce and Economics' Information Centre
- College of Arts and Social Sciences' Radio and Television Studio
- Solar Cells Testing Centre
- Water Desalination Research Station
- Agricultural Research Station
- Earthquake Detection Centre
- Virtual Reality Carbonic Study Centre
- Energy Research Centre

These Centres undertake research projects in collaboration with international scientific institutions, such as the Japanese Organisation for Renewable Energy, the Japanese Petroleum Centre and the Middle East Research Centre for Water Desalinations, and have embarked on joint scientific and research projects with German, British and French universities (MoI, 2002:124).

Sultan Qaboos launched a new era of development when he visited the University in May 2000, and initiated a debate about the value of history, scholarship and learning (MoI, 2002). His Majesty donated RO. 5 million (\$ = 0.380 RO.) to build a multi-purpose auditorium to host university activities with space for more than 6,000 people, and he promised an annual allocation of OR ½ million from his own purse to support research programmes and the establishment of an Advanced Industrial Park on the campus of the university (MoI, 2000).

Student intake

SQU has limited capacity, and admission to the University is one of the main challenges facing Omani HE. Indeed, there is considerable and open debate on this issue between concerned individuals and groups on the one side, and relevant governmental bodies on other. One view strongly argues for increasing the

number in each intake simply by reducing the pass mark that must be obtained in the High Secondary School examination. This mark is increasingly regarded as a 'mythical' requirement, reaching 98% for acceptance into some specialisations.

Conversely, others argue that the SQU is regarded symbolically as a major national achievement that should be the best HEI in the Sultanate, of world class quality. This will not be achievable if a large number of lesser able students is admitted, as the high level of academic services now offered and the level of individual student support provided, would reduce.

Table 3.6
Annual Student Intake and Total Enrolments at Sultan Qaboos University

Yea	Annual Student Intake			Total Enrolled Students		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1986	-	-	557	-	-	557
1987	-	-	624	-	-	1,057
1988	-	-	724	983	740	1,723
1989	402	347	749	1,374	1,099	2,473
1990	417	433	850	1,609	1,412	3,021
1991	386	438	824	1,634	1,632	3,266
1992	366	506	872	1,664	1,840	3,504
1993	463	634	1,097	1,722	2,136	3,858
1994	642	610	1,252	1,909	2,347	4,256
1995	581	609	1,190	2,271	2,563	4,834
1996	683	671	1,354	2,444	2,675	5,119
1997	872	945	1,817	2,848	2,937	5,785
1998	941	892	1,833	3,311	3,199	6,510
1999	915	908	1,823	3,629	3,477	7,106
2000	1,065	937	2,038	4,096	3,842	7,938
2001	1,084	1,289	2,373	4,491	4,329	8,820
2002	1,179	1,266	2,445	5,069	4,990	10,059
2003	1,353	1,444	2,797	5,583	5,592	11,175
2004	1,328	1,369	2,697	5,933	5,936	11,869

Sultan Qaboos University, Summarised University Statistics Books, 1999-2002;
Sultan Qaboos University, Statistical Year Book, Academic Year (2004/2005).
Issued June 2005. P.20.

(-) No evidence available for the number of Male and Female

In its opening year (1986), the University enrolled 557 students, reflecting the circumstances of the establishment. During the next ten years up to the beginning of 1999 (almost at the end of the 5th FYDP), the student intake increased annually in a steady manner by approximately 100 per year as shown in Table 3.6. Although one of the objectives of the 5th FYDP was to continue the provision of free education at the University (MoD, 1997); the 5th FYDP did not determine the student intake for its planning period (MoD, 1997), although it did reconsider the provision of non-educational services, such as housing, meals and transport, with the objective of alleviating the burden on the public budget, and achieving equality for all citizens in this respect.

In contrast, the 6th FYDP (2001-2005) was prescriptive, specifying an increase the total number of registered students from 8,000 to 11,000 students by the end of the planning period, in addition to enrolling 500 students annually for the Accounting Diploma or any specialisation to be defined in future as needed (MoNE, 2002b:58). In reality, by 2000, the last year of the 5th FYDP, there were 9,033 enrolments, and in 2001, the first year of the 6th FYDP, the number reached 10,678, indicating an increase of more than 1,500 students a year. This increase has continued, to achieve the target of 11,000 in 2003, two years ahead of time, since when the enrolment has been stable at just over 11,000 students.

Generally speaking, because of the limited capacity of Omani HEIs, including the capacity of the University; a number of questions have been raised such as: Does the current student intake adequately meet the demands for HE, particularly from the high and increasing number of SSGs? Do the physical facilities and curricula of the university enable it to receive more students? Is the current budget of the university sufficient to allow it to expand and develop its enrolment capacity?

Specialisations and academic programmes

The University has developed and extended the specialisms available in its seven colleges, offering new programmes aimed at providing well-qualified young people in various fields. Appendix 3 lists the colleges and specialisms in the academic year, 2004/05. These 50 specialisms were an attempt to respond to the requirements of the marketplace in both public and private sectors, in which respect, the 5th FYDP (1995-2000) produced the following general objectives:

- To review the specialisations available at the University, including the Faculty of Agriculture, in order that priority shall be given to the specialisations required by the national economy.
- The opening of complementary specialisations in the scientific and humanities faculties shall be according to the requirements and needs of the country for qualified graduates of these specialisations.

(MoD, 1997:200).

However, the plan also recognised the urgency of examining those needs and requirements, declaring that:

- The Ministry of Higher Education should prepare the necessary study by the end of 1996.
- Since some of the University specialisations are temporary and limited, a study is needed to determine the appropriate approach of instituting these specialisations. The study should examine the feasibility of establishing new faculties or utilisation of scholarships and secondment for study abroad.

(MoD, 1997:200).

However, the 6th FYDP (2001-2005) reported only one study, completed by the end of 1996, on University outputs and their relationship to the Omani labour market. The recommendations which were not mentioned in the plan, were presented to the Council of Ministers, who approved the formation of a committee to study the University specialisations (MoNE, 2002b), and subsequently,

The University produced new specialisations, which are in conformity with economic and social development. These included Biotechnology, Environmental Biology, Geophysics, Medical Statistics, Industrial Engineering, Petrochemicals, Engineering, Mineral Engineers, Public Relations and Environmental Studies. New courses of Tourism, Translation and French Language were introduced (MoNE, 2002b:48).

The 6th FYDP did not establish any aim in this area, merely indicating the need to improve external efficiency of the University education system through (MoNE, 2002b):

- supplying the labour market with training outputs in order to increase Omanisation rates in scientific specialist categories.
- specialisations consistent with the labour market needs.

The University has now developed a large number of postgraduate programmes and offers advanced courses of study and facilities for research in postgraduate degree programmes at Masters and Doctoral levels as shown in Appendix (4). The extent to which these specialisations are actually responding to the current and future needs of the marketplace and providing a well-qualified national labour force is not known, nor is it known whether enough co-ordination and co-operation between the University and other governmental bodies and private agencies exists to establish what might be missing. Additionally, it is not known whether the academic level and skills of the graduates meet the current required standards, and whether they find jobs easily.

3.2.4 Technical education and vocational training

Like other divisions of education, Technical Education (TE) and Vocational Training (VT) started late in Oman compared with neighbouring countries. However, this sector has undergone continuous change in its supervisory authority. The government's interest in this field of education was aroused by the discovery of oil in 1967. In the early 1970s, a number of VT centres were established, and from 1973 the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour began offering three-year training courses at Preparatory level, enrolling 12/13 year-old

Post Primary students, who graduated at the age of 15/16 to join the labour market.

In addition, by 1979 another three training centres were established: two in Muscat and one in Sur, each offering two types of training: a commercial Secretarial course, including accountancy and typewriting, and a Technical course including some elements of building, commerce, interior design, electrical and mechanical engineering. By 1980/1981 the total number of students following these courses reached 949 (Ministry of Information and Youth Affairs, 1980:82). Later, the government reformed the system, and these centres were upgraded to institutes of VT. Simultaneously, the MoE established several commercial, industrial and agricultural schools (Al Shanfari, 1991), with the aim of meeting the urgent needs of the national labour force in all those fields. In 1984 the first Technical College, the Technical Industrial College was opened in Muscat, and several such colleges were later opened across the country.

Changes in supervisory authorities of VT and TE

In the early stage of Oman's Renaissance, the government designated the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour as the authority directly responsible for VT. A higher authority, to support these sectors, the Council of Vocational Training was established in 1975 by Royal Decree No.22/75, with responsibility for studying, assessing, and compiling appropriate training programmes, and planning to meet the nation's training requirements according to the 1st FYDP .

In 1977, that council was restructured and a new Education and Vocational Training Council chaired by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos was formed by Royal Decree. 43/77, with responsibility for setting national objectives for Education and Training and formulating policies and plans to achieve them (Al Kharusi, 1991). According to the MoI (2001a:102) the governmental supervision of VT 'covered not only the training process itself in the government training centres, but also supervision of the private training programmes. It is required to lay

down training guidelines, having taken into account the needs of the labour market’.

The government view was that Social Affairs, Labour and Vocational Training should be within one Ministry and work closely with the education and HE sectors (MoI, 2001a:101). In consequence, the authority responsible for the administration of VT and TE has changed several times. During the 1970s, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour was changed to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, which had joint responsibility with the Education and Vocational Training Council, for administering the sector. Indeed, each of these three areas - Social Affairs, Employment and TE - required a separate organisation to play an effective role, as seen in other countries such as those in the Gulf. However, it seemed that the government recognised this fact and at early 2000s established an autonomous ministry for Social Development, and another ministry for Manpower, the latter one is now responsible for VT, TE, and employment in the private sector agencies.

Yet another major administrative change occurred in 1991, when Royal Decree 115/91 established the Public Authority of Vocational Training as an autonomous body, headed by a former under-secretary of another ministry; administered by several senior public sector staff, with the declared aim to give more support and bring effectiveness to this sector through an administratively and financially independent organisation. Thus, and to administer the technical industrial colleges and the state and private institutions of VT, the Public Authority of Vocational Training took over the planning and administration of Technical Education. However, in early 1998 that authority was closed down and dissolved, it being ‘said that the Authority of Vocational Training failed to implement policies and plans concerning Technical Education. Also many private training institutions were established, they did not function well because that authority did not monitor and follow up their work’ (Ramadhani, 2003:150).

Again TE and VT were transferred back to a renamed ministry, which became the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Vocational Training. By the end of 2001, the Ministry was divided into two ministries, the Ministry of Manpower and Ministry of Social Affairs. The responsibility and supervision of VT and TE now lies with the Ministry of Manpower. It can be said that all these rapid changes reflect a serious situation facing the TE and VT sectors of education in Oman, indicating instability and the unrealistic nature of the studies and discussions upon which those changes were based. Moreover, it could be observed that the greatest attention of governmental bodies was paid to GE/BE, and that TE received little attention.

As defined by UNESCO, the VT institutes are not regarded as higher education institutions. Accordingly, this study, being concerned with the planning, development and expansion of the Omani HE system including TE, will not concern itself with VT, unless there is an overlap of relevant issues.

Student enrolment in TE

Until the middle of the 1990s, Omanis, generally, were not interested in enrolling their children in TE or VT because of the then prevailing negative attitude towards this type of education in Oman (and other Gulf countries), which was perceived as inferior and leading to a low social position and low income. In consequence, there were many unoccupied places at this level of education, for example, in the academic year 1985/86 only 70% of the available places in the VT centres were taken. According to Alkharusi (1991) the former Director General for VT said:

Vocational Education is the type of education least accepted by the students and parents for its low perception ... most students join VT institutes as their last opportunity due to the screening process after the lower secondary stage, intermediate level. Most students who obtain 60 percent of the marks are accepted at upper general secondary schools. The low academic students are obliged to enter vocational education (Alkharusi, 1991:23-24).

Consequently, policy-makers included two aims in the 5th FYDP that intended to remedy this negative perception. The first required the responsible authority to design media programmes to enlighten and reduce negative viewpoints regarding the importance of specialisations and opportunities provided by TE and VT. The second was that the TE and VT authority should conduct an annual evaluation to gauge the extent of public interest in enrolment in this type of education (MoD, 1997:205).

In fact, attitudes are now gradually changing due to an increased understanding of the cultures and values in other parts of the world, one example being that women are now permitted to be taxi drivers (Al Ramadhani, 2003), and some young Omanis now work as fuel attendants and cleaners, which would not have been considered two decades ago. However, it seems that social vision and tradition was not the only reason for the low opinion of VT in the 1980s, the lack of a qualification system also being a cause, as documented by Alkharusi (1991):

The non-existence of a validation system for certificates and diplomas issued from VT institutes is one of the basic reasons that discourage students from entering vocational education ... No further opportunities are available for higher education in general to VT institutes' graduates because of the closed vocational education system (Alkharusi, 1991:24).

In this regard the World Bank recommended the Omani authorities to revise the VT system, saying 'it is vital, therefore that the training opportunities they [the VT institutes] provide do not lead to, and are not seen as leading to, a dead end in career development' (World Bank, 1981:93). From the early 1990s, the situation began to change, and by 1994 the four regional training centres were upgraded to Technical Industrial Colleges and began admitting SSGs. Gradually, the number of enrolments has increased, reaching 4,618 students by the academic year 2003/2004 (Ministry of Manpower, 2003b) as shown in Table 3.7.

Table 3.7
Admitted and Enrolled Students to the Technical Industrial Colleges
1994/95–2003/2204

Year	Number of Admissions		
	Male	Female	Total
1994/95	1,149	420	1,569
1995/96	1,364	561	1,925
1996/97	1,167	597	1,764
1997/98	1,632	640	2,272
1998/99	1,524	546	2,070
1999/2000	1,204	661	1,865
2000/01	1,344	744	2,088
2001/02	1,097	1,107	2,204
2002/03	2,335	1,179	3,514
2003/04	2,858	1,179	4,618
2004/05	2,950	1,350	4,300 ¹
2005/06	3,137	1,683	4,820 ²

Ministry of Manpower (2004b:58), *The Annual Report of Year 2003*.
And another unpublished papers (Ministry of Manpower, 2005).

In the 5th FYDP (1995-2000), there was no determination of student numbers, the clearest aim in this areas being to increase the participation of women, but the improvement is slight in this respect, although the evaluation of the Plan, in the introduction to the 6th FYDP (2001-2005), declared that the number had increased from about 30% to 31.8% in the academic years 95/1996 and 1999/2000 respectively. The total number of females in the areas of management, technical and handicraft training, and those in private training institutes, during 1996-1999, totalled about 2,382, accounting for 56.8% of students in the management area (MoD, 1997:49). The 6th FYDP (2001-2005), did set enrolment targets, moving from 4,500 to 6,000 students, including the admission of 500 students annually from the SSGs in the private colleges and increasing the intake in VT centres from 1,300 trainees to 2,000 (MoNE, 2002b:59).

Resulting from the increased government interest, the number of graduates has increased from less than 500 (313 male, 147 female) in 1995, to more than 1,200 in 2003. The total number of graduates from these colleges from 1995 to 2003 reached 7,580, the proportion of male technicians was 60.2% and the proportion of female technician was 39.8% (Ministry of Manpower, 2004b:59). This achievement reflects the recent attention paid by the government to this sector of education and the improved public attitude towards it. Nonetheless, the figures do indicate limitations in respect of female training, as a result of the following two factors:

- 1- Female students tend to choose courses in business and scientific subjects, and avoid courses that require physical work or vocational training.
- 2- Women in Arab countries, particularly Gulf countries, are barred from some areas of employment due to tradition and religious customs (Al Ramadhani, 2003).

However, the question of to what extent this increased enrolment meets demand, remains. While student enrolment appears to have increased significantly latterly, the extent to which these intakes have absorbed the high number of secondary school leavers is not clear. Moreover, whether the numbers of TE graduates and their specialisms meet the requirements of the marketplace, quantitatively, as well as qualitatively, is also not known.

Study and training programmes

As reported earlier, VT centres which could be regarded as the seed of TE in the Sultanate, used to run three-year programmes at Preparatory Level enrolling 12/13 year-old Post Primary students, but as Al Kharusi (1991) observed, on graduation at the age of 15/16, these students were not properly prepared for work. Indeed, the system did not meet UNESCO guidance, which stated:

It is in any case clear that up to the age of 15 no specialised education should be given. Rather, the education provided should have a general character, the technical and vocational elements serving as orientation by helping students to prepare for active life in the future (UNESCO, 1986:12-13).

Subsequently, the government attempted to reform the system, upgrading the old centres of VT to institutes of VT. Because the age of the entrants and maturity of the graduates play an important role in the success of any subsequent career, it was agreed that future entrants were to be ex-preparatory students, joining at the age of 15/16, and graduating at the age of 18/19.

In 1984 the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour established a twin-track approach to TE and VT, opening the first Technical College in Muscat called the 'Oman Technical Industrial College'. Initially, this was regarded as an intermediate college, providing Diplomas, and teaching Commercial Studies, Information Technology, Engineering, Building Construction, School Laboratories and Science. By 1993, when the government converted the Institutes of VT in Nizwa, al-Musana'ah, Ibra and Salalah into technical colleges, there were five such colleges, which accepted only students who had finished their secondary school study. In 1994 the first college which had been established in Muscat was renamed the 'Muscat Technical Industrial College', and produced a total of 1,760 graduates (1,103 male and 657 female).

As part of the Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*', the vision of HRD set out a new programme for preparing young Omanis, from elementary level to the level of HE, including BE/GE, Secondary Education, TE, VT and HE, as shown in Appendix (6). The programme designed in 1995, is regarded as the best preparation for young Omanis for the next 25 years, either to continue with higher studies or to join the labour market. It includes the NVQ and GNVQ as essential parts of the preparation and training process.

General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ)

At the beginning of the academic year 1994/1995, the Technical Industrial College in Muscat introduced the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ), and other colleges followed from the beginning of academic year 1995/1996. The GNVQ is a British qualification aiming to equip students with knowledge, skills and understanding in broad vocational areas, including communication, numeracy, and information technology. It was designed to improve employability and consists of six units that can be taken at two levels, foundation or intermediate. GNVQs are usually taken by students aged 16-19 in full-time education.

<http://www.connexions-direct.com/index.cfm?pid=82&catalogueContentID=114> (21/8/05).

Both students and employers were dissatisfied with this qualification. There were debates in the Majles A'Shura (Consultative Council) where MPs complained that the programme was not responding to the requirements of the local labour market and was unsuitable for the study and skill levels of Omani students, a view that was supported by a study conducted by the CoHE in 2001. The study indicated that the programme was not applied as in the UK, where students aged between 16 and 19 join the courses, while in Oman the students were joining the programme after finishing their Secondary Education, and thus had to spend another three years studying.

Consequently, the programmes did not produce an equivalent output, and furthermore, the costs were high (MoHE, 2001b). Also investigating the success of the GNVQ courses, another study undertaken by SQU highlighted that they suffered from insufficient resources, and that in some cases workshops and laboratories were not available. That particular study recommended a review and reform of the GNVQ system and the production of a curriculum focused on technical subjects. It also recommended financial support for this process, and the provision of new technology and practical training by creating partnerships with private sector industrial and commercial enterprises (Fahawi and Issan, 1997).

Oman National Diploma (OND) and the Omani Vocational Qualification (OVQ)

As a result of the above-mentioned debates regarding the GNVQ, the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Vocational Training decided to reform the system and introduced another program called the Oman National Diploma (OND) simultaneously with GNVQ in order to build another effective TE system that met the aims of the national strategy for HRD in Technical Manpower. This was first offered by the Technical Industrial Colleges at the beginning of academic year 1999/2000 alongside the GNVQ. The Ministry made a contract with BTEC in the UK to approve the new programme academically and to supervise the process of awarding certificates to successful students. The programme included the following specialisms: Commercial Studies, Information Technology, Engineering, Building Engineering and Sciences/School Laboratories (Al Baloushi, 2000). It was based on intensive theoretical courses and practical training in workshops and laboratories with English as the language of instruction (Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Vocational Training, 1999).

For the governmental VT centres, the Ministry introduced the Omani Vocational Qualification (OVQ) which was academically less challenging than the OND, and aimed to prepare a national labour force at the levels entitled 'skilled worker' and 'semi-skilled worker'. The programme was offered in the governmental VT centres beginning in the academic year 1999/2000, and included: General Mechanics, Automobile Mechanics, Building, Carpentry and Electricity (Al Baloushi, 2000). Similar to the British NVQ, the OVQ was introduced for students above VT level and lower than college level. The qualification is offered only in the private VT centres, for trainees who are already in employment, or have a job offer, in a private enterprise. The government pays all the fees incurred to the private institutes. This programme offers training in commercial vocational courses, technical vocational courses, and traditional handicraft vocational courses (Al Baloushi, 2000).

In 1996/1997, the OVQ faced several implementation difficulties, similar to those encountered by the GNVQ and NVQ programmes. These were (Al Baloushi, 2000):

- Students had difficulty with a foreign language.
- Some private enterprises which agreed and signed a contract with the Ministry or institute before the training courses started to employ trainees, simply refused to employ them on completion of the training.
- Some training institutes did not adhere to the Ministry instructions for choosing and accepting students for training.
- Students absented themselves from training courses.
- The foreign organisations that offered these qualifications withdrew their approval from the training institutes.
- The content of some programmes was not suited to the needs of the employer or did not meet the nature of the job.
- Some organisations that offered and approved these qualifications did not perform their duties well.

Accordingly, during 1998 and 1999 the Ministry assumed control and instituted several procedures to revise the system, as follows (Al Baloushi, 2000):

- Established a department for training quality assurance and another department for financial recompense.
- Established co-operation with the British organisation, Qualifications and Curriculum Assurance (QCA).
- Co-ordinated with the private VT centres and institutes to improve the language level of the trainees.
- Studied the reasons for student absence from the training courses.
- Ended links with the centres that did not work to Ministry instructions.
- Determined the enrolment capacity of each centre according to its capability and facilities.

Unfortunately, despite all these revisions and reforms concerning the GNVQs and NVQs, OND and OVQ there was no improvement in the quality of TE, and the level of training of the national labour force remains very low, the expatriate

workforce dominating. This conclusion was the result of the investigations conducted by CoHE and SQU already mentioned, and confirms views expressed in the debates in Majles A'Shura, supporting the opinion that the TE and VT system in place was irrelevant to the needs of the Omani labour market and students' ambitions.

Therefore, at the end of 2001, when the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Vocational Training was divided into the two ministries; root and branch changes began to reform the process as a whole, and the Ministry of Manpower became responsible for VT and TE, and announced TE as a governmental priority to meet market demand for trained manpower (MoI, 2002:129). This Ministry was given a high budget and supported by several well-qualified staff, and was consequently able to build a new strategy for the sector, which the government approved in 2002.

Preparations for a new TE and VT programme

This newest re-named Ministry undertook several measures to apply the new academic training system in accordance with the aim of the 6th FYDP to provide an open and flexible training and teaching system for the sector, capable of meeting market requirements and coping with technological updating (MoNE, 2002b). At this point it is pertinent to examine the qualificatory system established during the previous ten years.

Immediately the Ministry began the implementation process by upgrading TE structures, programmes and study curricula, to better prepare young Omanis for the requirements of the country's planned development process. As one of its procedures, the Ministry initiated and organised a number of open discussions and symposiums, with participation of society leaders and members, businessmen, experts, interested people and college faculties. Five professional teams were established, to conduct several studies of certain targeted areas, for instance, the current curricula and its suggested development plan, expansion

of the capacity of the technical colleges, and the relationships between the technical colleges and the private sector; and to develop an intelligent plan directly related to the targeted areas. Subsequently, a number of recommendations were submitted to the government, the most important of these being (Ministry of Manpower, undated:7-9):

- 1- To re-structure and diversify the study and training programmes as follows:
 - Programme for teaching English language.
 - Programme for Vocational Certificate.
 - Programme for Diploma (Technical Education)
 - Programme for High Diploma (Technical Education)
 - Programme for BSc in Technical Education
- 2- To develop and expand study specialisms according to the needs of the marketplace.
- 3- To expedite the provision of training for urgent vocational needs, by creating a number of specialisations in the Higher Technology College in Muscat, and to introduce them immediately, at the beginning of the academic year 2002/2003, to include:
 - Course for Geometric Diploma to meet the urgent needs of engineering consulting offices and contracting works.
 - Course for Assistant Pharmacist Diploma to meet the urgent needs of private hospitals and pharmacies.
 - Course for Insurance Diploma.
- 4- To upgrade the 'Higher Technology College' in Muscat to award a BSc, and develop and upgrade other colleges of technology in Nizwa, Ibra, Salalah and AlMusna'ah.

The Newest TE and VT programme

As a result of the symposiums initiated and administered by the Ministry of Manpower, and with co-operation from expert international bodies, the GNVQs and NVQs were completely withdrawn. It might be worth mentioned that in Britain,

within two years the GNVQs will be withdrawn, between summer 2005 and summer 2007 <http://www.connexions-direct.com/index.cfm?pid=82&catalogueContentID=114> (21/8/2005). Hence, the GNVQ and NVQ programme to prepare young Omanis, which had been created in accordance with the Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*' (Appendix: 6), and which included all levels of the qualification process, was replaced by a new academic programme designed for the Higher College of Technology in Muscat, other Colleges of Technology across the country, and VT centres and institutes, according to each academic level. Appendix (7) and the list below summarise the structure and stages of the new programme.

- A. The Foundation Year is for studying English to develop the students' language skills in order to prepare them in English language before registration on the specialised course/programme.
- B. The First Year prepares the student in a certain specialism for the next year of the programme. The level is '*Semi-Skilled*' and an 'Achievement Certificate' is awarded to students who do not obtain a sufficiently high grade to progress to the second year.
- C. The Second Year prepares the student in a certain specialism for the third year of the programme. The level is '*Skilled Technician*' and a 'Diploma Certificate' is awarded to students who do not obtain a sufficiently high grade to progress to the third year.
- D. The Third Year prepares the student in a certain specialism for the final year of the programme. The level is '*Technician*' and a 'High Diploma Certificate' is awarded to students who do not obtain a sufficiently high grade to progress to the final year.
- E. The Fourth Year has a final award of 'BSc /Tech.' at '*Professional Technician/University level*' in a certain specialisation, which is given to students who successfully complete the programme.

(Summarised and translated by the author from: Ministry of Manpower, undated:10-12).

The new programme is characterised by the following advantageous features (Ministry of Manpower, undated:13-14):

- Placing trainees with an employer in work for a 16-week practical training course every year of the programme. This is specialised vocational training in the workplace and is achieved by co-operation with private sector enterprises. In addition, the programme includes *additional training* for between 6-12 weeks each year, that must be completed before the student takes up his/her work placement or is awarded the certificate which determines his/her technical and vocational level in the given specialism.
- Assessment that depends on the student's skills and abilities to use the educational materials available, which are derived from the needs of the labour market, and his/her ability to achieve the aims of the course. These assessment methods are applied within a comprehensive evaluation frame at all study levels.
- The private sector participates in the assessment process, and students achieve their skills both theoretically and practically.
- The programme acts as a bridging process from the lower stages to the higher, enabling a student who first enrolls at Technical Education level (which is regarded in Oman as intermediate academic level) to continue his/her study to university level, and at the same time it allows students to graduate with Diploma or High Diploma level, according to their abilities.
- This programme has led to co-operation between Colleges of Technology and other universities and colleges which are known for their high standards in applied sciences and technology.

Furthermore, there were other significant developments, for instance in 2001 the Technical Industrial College in Muscat was upgraded to a Technical University College, named Higher College of Technology, awarding a BSc degree in a range of technical specialisations. And two further colleges for

technology are being established in Shunas and Ibri, thereby expanding the capacity of the current colleges to enable them to enrol around 3,500 students annually, and equipping the current colleges with new technology, laboratories and workshops (Ministry of Manpower, undated).

3.3 Other Specialised HE Institutions

Although the HEIs discussed so far represent the main streams and institutions of Oman's HE system, and play the most important role in absorbing SSGs, according to the UNESCO definition of HE; there are other HEIs that also contribute in the preparation process of young Omanis and enrol SSGs. Some of these institutions are relatively old, having been established in the 1970s or early 1980s. These institutions are responsible to certain authorities whose needs their outputs mostly serve. Some of these institutions are HE colleges that award BSc degrees, such as the College of Shari'ah (Islamic Law) and Law, the College of Banking and Financial Studies, and the Institute of Shari'ah (Islamic) Sciences, while the others award diplomas, such as several Institutes of Health and Nursing Sciences. Although these institutions play only a minor role in serving the country's workforce needs, and in absorbing SSGs, they will be discussed briefly in the following paragraphs.

3.3.1 College of Shari'ah and Law/College of Laws

The establishment of the College of Shari'ah and Law was announced on 18th November 1994, the 24th National Day festival, held in Nizwa, the City of Heritage in the interior of Oman, by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos in his annual speech. At the same time, Sultan Qaboos also announced that the Higher Institute of Justice would be located in Nizwa (H.M. Sultan Qaboos speech, 1994), but this Institute has not been established.

In his speech, the announcement of these two projects was part of an attempt by His Majesty to guide the government, and then the Omani people, to adhere to

Islamic principles and the demonstration of friendship and tolerance with people of other nations. He urged people to reject extremism in their belief and faith by striving to be more aware of their knowledge and religious culture, and of how to solve current problems. His Majesty spoke to the Omani people about the importance of stability and security of work and production. He emphasised the need to be more careful about foreign ideas and beliefs (Royal speech, 1994).

Three years later, in 1997, the College of Shari'ah and Law was established by Royal Decree. 26/97 which defined its objectives, structure, Board of Trustees, Council, budget, language of instruction and administrative duties. The College offers four-year Bachelors' degrees, and its main objective is to prepare qualified people to occupy certain jobs in several sectors, for instance, as lawyers, judges, counsellors, legislatives and Sharia'h researchers and preachers of Islamic occasions. In addition to filling judicial posts with well-qualified staff, it also aims to prepare young people to undertake research in the Islamic and legal field, in which the Sultanate has a rich cultural heritage.

Table 3.8 provides details of enrolment statistics from which it can be seen that much fewer women are accommodated in this College, largely because few Omani women study law, and possibly because most of them are unhappy to work in judicial field, although Al Ramadhani (2003:95) suggests this may be because the government limited the intake of female students (p.95).

Table 3.8

Number of Enrolments in the College of Shari'ah and Law
Academic Years 1997/1998 – 2004/2006

Year	Sharia'h		Law		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
1997/1998	-	-	-	-	128
1998/1999	33	15	54	14	116
1999/2000	30	15	57	14	116
2000/2001	26	19	55	11	111
2001/2002	18	37	100	4	168
2002/2003	23	29	102	15	169
2003/2004	11	23	116	19	179
2004/2005	Foundation Year				185

MoHE, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2005

A survey conducted to discover the needs of public institutions for the College of Shari'ah and Law graduates, produced a list of organisations and institutions showing a long-term requirement during the first fifteen years of the College's existence, until 2012/13. According to this study, the total number required is 341 (MoHE, 2001a), while the number of graduates of the College expected after 15 years, provided a steady annual intake of 120 students. By 2013, there will be an accumulated total of 1,800 graduates (Al Ramadhani, 2003).

However, it is seems that the 341 graduates of these Colleges, as the survey revealed, need to be more concerned and reassured. It could be argued that the need for qualified people in the judicial sector and other relevant staff is much than this number, considering the country's size and population. Furthermore, in the light of the development of all social and economic sectors, and the new external factors and influences that are likely to occur during the next 15 years are taken into account, it could not be imagined that 341 qualified people would be enough for this sector.

Given the needs of such governmental bodies over a 15-year period, for example, the Police Departments, the courts' staff throughout the country, the Ministry of Justice, the universities and colleges, the Administrative Court and other specialist courts, in addition to lawyers and consultants for all ministries and government agencies, as well as the private sector enterprises, the planned HE intakes seem definitely to be too low.

Moreover, the graduates of the College of Shari'ah and Law are required by the Islamic institutions and mosques, and their needs are no less than those of the Law generally, and might be more if thousands of mosques were to be built in the Sultanate, since this would cause requirements for a large number of Imams, orators, preachers, and religious teachers for Quranic and Islamic schools and institutes. Therefore, all these categories need a large number of well-qualified people, and the precise needs should be established by rigorous research.

3.3.2 College of Banking and Financial Studies

In 1983 The Oman Institute of Banks, directed by the Central Bank of Oman, was established by Royal Decree No. 64/83. In 1998 it was renamed to the Institute of Banking and Financial Studies, with the diversification of activities, and subsequently renamed again in 2004 by Royal Decree No. 12/2004 to become the College of Banking and Financial Studies. Although the College is a governmental concern, a number of governmental and private banks participating in its sponsorship. Its mission is:

To dedicate ourselves to the development of the nation by serving the financial sector of the Sultanate in its pursuit of excellence by endeavoring to build appropriate skills, work, culture and professionalism in the financial institutions of the economy <http://www.cbfs.edu.om/ncc.htm> (06/10/2005).

The number of enrolled students has varied during the previous two decades. Although gradual increases can be seen from 1997/98 to 2000/01, there was a significant drop in the following years. The representation of women was unstable

during these years, but has increased since then to exceed that of males in some years as Table 3.9 demonstrates. However, this reflects the participation of Omani women and their competition with men in all areas of academic study, and indicates to the large number of women employed in the country's banking and financial field.

Table 3.9
Enrolments in the College of Banking and Financial Studies

Academic Year	M Students	F Students	Total	M Per cent	F Per cent
1995/96	58	40	98	59%	41%
1996/97	32	31	63	51%	49%
1997/98	74	82	156	47%	53%
1998/99	132	111	243	54%	46%
1999/00	171	208	379	45%	55%
2000/01	183	227	410	45%	55%
2001/02	68	100	168 ¹	40%	60%
2002/03	139	112	251	55%	45%
2003/04	74	41	115	64%	36%
2004/05	114	67	121	63%	37%

MoNE (2003c) *Annual Statistics of the Year 2002*. And: MoHE (2003, 2004c, 2005) *The Annual Statistics Books for The Higher Education Institutions of the Sultanate*.

Regarding the fields of study in the College, over the years, the College has been offering courses, which are adapted to the emerging needs of Oman, and has been participating in the Omanisation of staff in industrial and financial enterprises. Consequently, the certifications in various specialisations, which are relevant to the needs of the industry and their staff, have international credit attributed to them, and many are affiliated to HE institutions in the UK and Canada. The courses prepare members for work in any sector of the economy – public practice, industry, commerce or further education, and include four major

specialisations: Computing, Insurance, Banking, and Accounting. Within these, the following training programmes which are affiliated to a number of UK and Canadian HE institutions, are offered:

- Professional Programme of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, UK.
- Diploma in Accountancy (Certified Accounting Technician) of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, UK.
- Diploma in Banking (the Financial Services Studies Programme) of the Institute of Canadian Bankers, Montreal.
- International Diploma in Computer Studies of the National Computing Centre, UK.
- Certificate of Insurance and the Insurance Foundation Certificate of the Chartered Insurance Institute, UK.

<http://www.cbfs.edu.om/ncc.htm> (06/10/2005)

The International Diploma in Computer Studies from the UK National Computing Centre, allows enrolment on an Advanced Diploma in Computers and subsequently to work towards a Degree in Information Technology from the London Guildhall University. These programmes are operated and recognised internationally, hence helping to motivate students towards an international standard of performance. Students who hold these qualifications are acceptable to other HEIs for further study. Therefore, the twin advantage of studying at this College is that there are two Diplomas to be obtained: that awarded by the College of Banking and Financial Studies, and the other by the international major.

The instruction language for all subjects in the college is English. Thus, a high degree of proficiency in English is required. All candidates must undergo a Preparatory Programme in English prior to enrolling on their specialisations, and some students may take up to nine months of preparatory studies, subject to passing all internal requirements.

The College also runs a Master of Business Administration (MBA) in affiliation with the University of Strathclyde, UK. The Financial Services Studies Programme enables students to be considered for the MBA programme. Moreover, the College has a consulting division, which provides services to the banks and other financial institutions in areas such as introducing new products and services, feasibility studies for opening new branches. It also has a research department that provides services not otherwise available within the banks and other financial institutions. These include conducting research in the fields of cost control and cost reduction, increasing efficiency and productivity of the staff, and increasing profitability of the organisations.

3.3.3 Institutes of Health Sciences

Clearly, the Sultanate is expanding its comprehensive health care system, both quantitatively and qualitatively. By the end of 2004 there were 49 Regional Hospitals including four National Referral Hospitals, and 136 Health Centres, with the newest provision and an extensive range of medical facilities providing health services for all citizens across the country.

<http://www.moh.gov.om/navstat.php?fNm=mohstats/Geog.Dist.MOHH.I.htm> (04/10/2005)

The Institutes of Health Sciences are some of those oldest institutions in Oman, since the first Health Institute was established in 1982. However, Health Sciences Education and Training has been considerably developed and extended within the last two decades. Between 1982-1998 the number of Health Institutions reached around 15 (MoNE, 2002b:40), all of which are directed by the Ministry of Health. This number of health institutes allowed the state to provide a reasonable number of nursing staff and other relevant qualified medical assistants to meet the increasing demand of people for health services in the country's regions, and to enable students to work in their regions after graduation.

By 1991, five Institutes of Nursing were established, in Nizwa, Sur, Sohar, Ibri and Salalah, in addition to another two institutes in Muscat, the first being the

Oman Institute of Public Health, and the second, the Oman Institute of Pharmacy Assistants. In 1993 another two Institutes of Nursing were established in Muscat and Ibra, and a year later a third was opened in Rustaq. In 1993 and 1997, further Institutes of Nursing were established in al-Batina North, al-Dhahra and Interior regions, bringing the total to 15 at the end of 1998.

Nevertheless, despite the noticeable achievements in health services, and the relatively large number of these Institutes of Health Training, and after around two decades of establishment of some of these institutes, the number of graduates in 2002 was only 4,879 as shown in Table 3.9. Published data recorded that in 2002, Omanis constituted 45% of the total number of nursing staff in the country's hospitals and health centres, 55% of radiographers, and 63% of assistant pharmacists (Ministry of Health, 2003:4-2).

Moreover, the data also showed that the degree of Omanisation among medical staff does not correspond with these achievements, for example the combined number of doctors, dentists, pharmacists and nurses, was almost 38.8% in 2002 (MoH, 2003:4-2). The data does not provide the details of the overall picture of this sector since it does not show the ratio of Omani doctors or dentists separately, and it is expected that this is very low, and hence the Ministry did not want to declare such a position. There is debate within the society about this issue, and some has argued that this aspect of education did not receive sufficient consideration during the previous decade, as the government gave more support to the establishment of basic health services.

Student enrolment in Institutes of Health Sciences

By the academic year 2000/2001, there were 961 enrolments in the Health Training Institutes, mostly on the Nursing specialisation, which represented around 75% as shown in Table 3.10. The rest were in the other specialisations, such as Health Assistants and Medical Technicians (MoNE, 2002b:40).

Table 3.10

Students Enrolled in Health Basic Education in Ministry of Health Training Institutes

Institutions/Specialisations	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Institutes of Health Sciences					
Medical Lab Sciences	85	90	103	41	39
Radiography	78	89	90	30	30
Dental Surgery Assistant	29	29	30	17	16
Physiotherapy	-	-	20	0	19
Oman Institute of Public Health					
Health Education	-	36	36	-	-
Oman Institute of Medical Record Technology					
Medical Records Technicians	-	-	14	20	20
Oman Assistant Pharmacy Institute					
Assistant Pharmacy	49	55	55	54	53
Regional Nursing Institutes (12)					
Basic General Nursing	720	730	739	679	537
Total	961	1,029	1,087	841	714

Ministry of Health (2005a), Annual Health Reports (2001-2005), and unpublished papers.

Additionally, small numbers of students are accepted annually in several other specialisations on the Post-Basic Health Diploma. Table 3.11 shows the discontinuation of some such specialisations, and the introduction of new ones.

Table 3.11
Students Enrolled in the Post-Basic Health Diploma
in Ministry of Health Training Institutes

Institutions	Specialisations	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Oman Institute of Public Health	Health Management	32	30	-	-	-
	Health Education (Post Basic)	-	-	16	15	14
Oman Specialised Nursing Institute	Nephrology	20	17	20	22	20
	Midwife	18	21	19	21	22
	Paediatric Critical Care and Neonatology	17	20	22	20	28
	Nursing Administration	-	-	-	26	26
	Critical Care Nursing (Adult)	-	-	-	-	23
	Mental Health Nursing	-	-	-	-	16
Regional Nursing Institutes	Midwife	-	-	22	28	50
Institute of Health Sciences	Physiotherapy (Post-Basic)	15	15	-	-	-
Total Health Post-Basic Diploma	All Areas	102	103	99	132	199

Ministry of Health (2005a), *Annual Health Reports* (2001-2005), and other unpublished papers.

The data above show that the number of enrolments increased after offering Paediatric Intensive Care and Neo-Natal specialisations in 2000 (MoNE, 2002b:40), Nursing Administration in 2003 in the Oman Specialised Nursing Institute in Muscat, and Midwifery courses in the Regional Nursing Institutes.

In fact, only one reference in the Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*' relates to this important sector of education and training, and this dictated that the Ministry of Health should make efforts 'to increase the outputs of these institutes from several specialisations of jobs that are required by the health services across the country aiming to achieve self-sufficiency in some newest required specialisations' (MoD, 1995a:38), while the 5th FYDP (1996-000) did not make any reference to this sector as it did to other types of education and training. Similarly, the 6th FYDP (2001-2005) was devoid of any objective, policy or

mechanism related to this field of education (MoNE, 2002b), an omission that perhaps led Al-Ramadhani (2003) to point out that this aspect of education did not receive sufficient consideration during the previous decade.

However, the number of these training institutions spread around the country reveals that there is definitely plan and policies, and Table 3.12 shows the number of graduates from these institutes within the last ten years in several specialisations at the Basic Health Education level.

Table 3.12
Number of Graduates from the Ministry of Health Training Institutes
in Basic Health Education between 1996-2005

Specialisations	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Assistant Pharmacists	33	28	35	35	50	48	44	47	49	52
Health Education	33	38	-	-	-	-	-	-	36	14
Public Health Inspectors	29	34	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Dental Surgery Assistants	10	14	12	14	12	13	15	13	16	16
Physiotherapy	9	12	16	21	-	-	1	-	-	-
Radiography	30	16	13	19	22	20	29	30	28	29
Medical Lab. Sciences	15	19	20	24	32	23	27	33	29	40
Nutrition	-	-	-	30	32	-	-	-	-	-
General Nursing	331	276	305	373	438	442	417	522	531	554
All Areas	490	437	401	516	586	546	533	645	689	705

Ministry of Health (2005a), *Annual Health Reports* (1997-2005), and unpublished papers.

Indeed, between 1984 and 2000 the total number of graduates from these Institutes reached about 3,800, of which about 2,600 (69%) were in the Basic Nursing area (MoNE, 2002b:40). The remaining graduates were in the allied medical and technical professions, meeting the country's need for Health Inspectors, Physiotherapists, Nephrologists, and Health Managers (MoNE,

2002b:40). The number of graduates at the Post-Basic Diploma level, qualified by these institutes to meet some demand for a higher level of qualified specialists in some specific areas of nursing, health assistants and medical technicians in the state hospitals is shown in Table 3.13.

Table 3.13
Number of Graduates from the Ministry of Health Training Institutes
in the Post-Basic Diploma between 1998-2004

Specialisations	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Health Management	30	31	28	27	28	-	-
Nephrology	20	19	19	20	17	20	21
Midwifery	-	-	18	17	21	29	48
Critical Care Nursing in Peadiatric & Neonatology	-	-	16	16	20	22	20
Physiotherapy	-	-	-	12	13	-	-
Health Education	-	-	-	-	-	16	15
Nursing Administration	-	-	-	-	-	-	25
Total	50	50	81	92	99	87	129

Ministry of Health (2005), *Annual Health Reports (1997-2005)*, and unpublished papers.

Although this overall output was below the required level and ambition, a difference is evident between the situation in the 1990s and the first five years of the current decade, compared with the 1970s or 1980s, the number of graduates and the proportion of Omanis among nursing staff in the Sultanate's hospitals and medical centres, reaching around 45% in 2002 (MoNE, 2003c). However, a number of important questions remain, such as: Where is the reference in the FYDPs to all these plans of the Ministry of Health? How can this absence be interpreted? Did this absence influence the development process of this pivotal sector and its activities? To what extent are these institutes contributing to the absorption of SSGs, and meeting the demand for outputs in this field?

Study Fields and Programmes

Obviously, there is an increasing health care need that demands well-trained health professionals, which led the Ministry of Health to establish that number of Health Sciences and Training Institutes, whose general purpose is to prepare

professional practitioners to international standards, in support of National Health Policy. Nursing and all allied health disciplines, in addition to their respective curricula requirements, focus on the forces of culture, family, community and health care system which influence individuals and groups in their attempts to maintain health. <http://www.moh.gov.om/moheduprog.htm> (04/10/2005).

Therefore, the Health Sciences Institutes offer a range of specialisations, the overall programme being divided into two stages, each with a number of courses as follows:

Health Basic Education

Nutrition
Public Health Inspectors
Medical Laboratory Sciences
Radiography
Dental Surgery Assistants
Physiotherapy
Health Education
Medical Record Technicians
Assistant Pharmacists
General Nursing

Health Post-Basic Diploma

Health Management
Health Education (Post Basic)
Nephrology
Midwifery
Physiotherapy (Post-Basic)
Paediatric Critical Care and Neonatology
Nursing Administration
Critical Care Nursing (Adult)
Mental Health Nursing

Some of these specialisations, such as Physiotherapy, Public Health Inspectors, Nutrition and Health Management have been withdrawn as shown in Tables 3.12 and 3.13, whilst others have emerged in the later years of the Institutes' operation, for example Midwifery, Critical Care Nursing in Paediatrics and Neonatology, Nursing Administration, Critical Care Nursing (Adult) and Mental Health Nursing. Moreover, some specialisations like Nutrition and Physiotherapy, were introduced after the Institutes' establishment, and withdrawn after a few years. Such changes indicate the attention paid by the Ministry of Health to the needs of its hospitals and medical centres, but did not take into account the needs of the other national health service sectors..

Other hospitals and medical centres, are directed by different governmental bodies such as the Royal Oman Police, the Royal Army, and the Diwan of Royal Court, in addition to the private hospitals. These facilities have been largely staffed by expatriates during the last 35 years, and the question of how long this will continue, and why the staffing needs of these institutions has not been considered in tandem with the governmental facilities must be asked. Additionally, it is noticeable that so far there has been no concern to prepare national manpower to meet the requirements of the private hospitals and health centres, despite these institutions' pressing needs. As mentioned earlier, there are thousands of SSGs with no opportunity to continue their higher studies because of insufficient places, and others with redundant qualifications, or who cannot find suitable employment. Such matters are currently being debated.

3.3.4 Institutes of Islamic Sciences and Culture

Royal Decree No.24/1986 created the Institute of Islamic Justice, Preachment and Religious Guidance directed by the Ministry of Justice, Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, with the aim of training judges, mosque imams and professional staff to work in the law courts (Institute of Shari'ah Sciences, 2005). Royal Decree No. 6/1999 in 1999 changed the name to the Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences (Institute of Islamic Sciences, 2003/03), and accordingly its role and curricula were changed. That decree also established the Ministry of Justice, separate from the Ministry of Awqaf (Endowments) and Religious Affairs.

The current aims of the Institute are: teaching Islamic Sciences, Preachment/ Propaganda and Guidance, and producing strong relationships between Islamic Sciences and guidance, in addition to training students with required skills. The Institute awards a BSc in Islamic Sciences over four years. Although the overall number of enrolments is unstable, it seems that the annual enrolment over the last decade has gradually increased from 40 to 66 students, as shown in Table 3.14.

Table 3.14
Number of Enrolments in Institutes of Islamic and Arabic Sciences
1996-2004

Specialisations	Number of Students
1996	55
1997	50
1998	93
1999	72
2000	79
2001	60
2002	84
2003	88
2004	97

Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences (2006), Ministry of Higher Education (2005), and unpublished statistics.

During the previous decades, the graduates of the Institute participate positively in the application of legislation, since many of them were appointed as judges in the former Shari'ah (Islamic Laws) which have converted recently to Law Courts, however, many of them now are involved in solving personal status cases in the law courts around the country, and other graduates of this institute are appointed as Mosques' Imams, scribes, exhorters or other relevant positions. Al Ramadhani's (2003) observation that the government plans to close the Institute, mainly because the College of Shari'ah and Law offers the same programmes, seems not to have come to pass, as a new campus is now being built in Muscat for this Institute. However, during last five years, the Institute and other religious institutions have had a limited role, and there is little published data about these institutions and other prior institutions of Islamic Studies, hence there is little detail about their enrolment or activities.

Regarding other institutes of Islamic Culture, in the late 1980s and early 1990s the government established several institutes (Sultan Qaboos Institutes for Islamic Studies), in Sohar, Ja'lan, Khasb, Salalah, sponsored by the Diwan of Royal Court. The study within these institutes consists of two stages, a Secondary Stage of three academic years, and a University Stage of four academic years,

which lead to a BSc. The aim is to qualify young Omanis in Islamic Culture and for employment in the country's mosques and other relevant jobs, which were mostly occupied by expatriates (Diwan of Royal Court, 1997).

By 1992 the Administration Board was established to formulate academic and curricular policies, by Royal Decree No. 50/92. The Head was the Grand Mufti of the Sultanate with a membership of the representatives of the Diwan of Royal Court, SQU, the MoE and the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs. The Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*' recommended the following, in accordance with the establishment of the College of Shari'ah.

- a- Diversion of the Secondary Islamic Institute in Wattiyah to a building for the College of Shari'ah and Law.
- b- Amalgamation of the Institute of Shari'ah Sciences, which is under the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, with the College of Shari'ah and Law in conformity with a time schedule to be agreed by with the concerned authorities.
- c- Amalgamation of the Islamic Institutes in Sohar, Ja'alan Bani Bu Hassan, and Salalah – except for the Islamic Institute in Khassab – with the College of Shari'ah and Law, as from the following school year.
- d- Financial allocations for the proposed amalgamated institutes to cover the needs of the College of Shari'ah and Law
- e- On preparation of this College, the concerned authorities shall identify the number of students to enrol into college, according to the work fields available to them.

(MoD, 1995a:49-50)

Between the academic year 1991/92 and 1996/97 the total number of graduates from the university stage of these institutes was 388 (male), reflecting the limited role and low contribution of these institutions in this field of education. In accordance with the above-mentioned recommendations of the

Vision of Oman Economy, '*Oman 2020*', the government decided to close the Secondary Islamic Institute in Alwatyyah, Muscat, the oldest and most popular Islamic Institute in Oman, and by 1996 had also closed another two in Sohar and Salalah. The other two institutes remain, in addition to a third one established in Muscat in 2000, operating at the Secondary Stage only. Prior to the establishment of the College of Sharia'h and Law in 1997, most of the above steps were undertaken.

3.3.5 Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Studies

The Royal Oman Police Academy was established in 1980 in Nizwa, central city in the Interior Region, to train and qualify Royal Oman Police personnel. It admits Omani staff of the Royal Police and other military and security organisations. The Academy was renamed by Royal Decree in 2002, to become the 'Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences' (MoI, 2004), which awards BA degrees in addition to the Diploma in Law and Police Sciences. This Decree also issued new college regulations to upgrade training and to award a higher certificate in the police services (MoI, 2002), for example, candidates must hold the GCSE at a certain grade level, must meet the physical requirements, and pass the College's academic and practical entry tests. By 2002, twelve cohorts had graduated with diplomas, and in that year two cohorts were enrolled on the BA courses, the first comprising 66 students, the second 57 (including seven from other Gulf Co-operation Council countries and Yemen) (MoI, 2002).

The courses are divided into four years, and students must complete 123 credit hours for a BSc degree. Additionally, students receive tuition in the law and police and other subjects, and graduate with the rank of Second Lieutenant, holding a BA degree in Law and Police Sciences (Oman Royal Police, 2001). Recruits holding university qualifications can train in police practice over two terms, gaining a Diploma in Police Sciences. Furthermore, the Academy attaches particular importance to training women police officers, and has seen a significant increase in female intake in recent years (MoI, 2002).

Graduates from Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences include several senior police officers. These graduates are gradually taking the places of expatriates, since Omanisation within the Royal Oman Police has been phased in incrementally since 1991 to avoid any negative impact on police performance and competence. Therefore, after training, recruits are assigned to various duties to gain experience and expertise, and gradually replace expatriate personnel across the service (MoI, 2002).

3.3.6 Royal Guard of Oman Technical College

The Royal Guard Boys Technical School was established in 1976 to provide a training environment where young Omanis could combine technical studies with a full academic programme. It has passed through several stages in its transition to the present status as the Royal Guard of Oman Technical College. In addition to being sponsored by the Royal Guard of Oman, the College receives funding from several other organisations, such as: Royal Army of Oman, Royal Navy of Oman, Palace Office, Royal Yacht Squadron, Diwan of Royal Court, Oman Aviation Services, Gulf Air, Royal Oman Police, Sultan Qaboos University, Petroleum Development Oman, other government ministries and private oil companies <http://www.rgotc.cjb.net/> (06/10/2005).

According to its restricted role in preparing personnel for particular security organisations, especially The Royal Guard of Oman, the College's programmes only serve the limited needs of these organisations, and hence, enrolment is too limited. At the end of the academic year 1999/2000 there were only 27 graduates (Oman Royal Guard, 1999), and enrolments in 2001 were 33 (MoHE, 2002b). The College admits government school pupils who successfully pass the fourth elementary level, from which they can progress to the Diploma course after completing the Technical Secondary Stage (Oman Royal Guard, 1999).

By 1994, the College was registered as an International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) centre, to give high ability students the widest

range of qualifications, and increasing numbers of students are now being entered for the University of Cambridge (IGCSE) examinations in English as a second Language, Mathematics, Physics, Arabic language and computer studies. It is worth noting that all technical subjects are delivered through the English medium. Recently, there has been an expansion of electronics and computer facilities at the college. <http://www.rgotc.cjb.net/> (06/10/2005)

Moreover, the College was originally one of the first schools outside the UK to be allowed to offer the BTEC Engineering qualification. Following many years of consistent high appraisal by visiting moderators, external verifiers and quality auditors from the UK, the College is now regarded by BTEC as a high quality 'Centre of Excellence'. Thus, from 1986 onwards, BTEC course patterns at the College were such that the first Diploma level was covered in Years 6 and 7, with National Diploma course modules being available to suitable students in Years 8 and 9. <http://www.rgotc.cjb.net/> (06/10/2005)

In addition, the College also offers Work Experience Courses, from Year 6 onwards, so that students can appreciate the link between education and possible future careers. In Year 6 these placements are for two weeks, one week in each of two factories on the Rusayl Industrial Estate. During the Year 9 work placement, students are often offered full-time employment by their chosen organisation, once they have completed their studies at the college.

3.4 Private Higher Education Institutions

Before 1995 there was no significant role for the private sector in HE, but this has since developed rapidly, as shown in Table 3.15. A steady increase in the number of colleges and enrolments between the period 1995/96-2000/2001 occurred, and then in 2001/2002 the number of HEIs was substantially increased by four during one year.

Table 3.15
Development of Colleges and Students in Private HE
1995/96–2004/2005

Academic Year	Colleges	Students
1995/96	1	81
1996/97	3	228
1997/98	5	655
1998/99	7	1,340
1999/2000	9	2,127
2000/2001	9	3,733
2001/2002	13	5,295
2002/2003	14	7,880
2003/2004	14	10,148
2004/2005	19	13,699

Ministry of Higher Education (2004, 2005)

Moreover, between 2003/2004-2004/2005 the number of these institutions increased significantly, from 14 institutions with 10,148 students registered, representing 25% of all students registered in the Sultanate's HEIs, to 19 private HEIs with around 13,700 enrolments, which also means that within one year five HEIs were established. Appendix (5) presents more detail about these institutions. This rapid expansion of private HE during the last ten years, particularly since 2000, might be interpreted as a reflection of governmental plans to encourage private sector investment in this field. It is obvious that the government plans rely heavily on the role of the private sector as will be outlined in the next few pages.

However, when private HE was first introduced in the Sultanate, it was hoped that it would lead to a significant reduction in the number of students choosing to study at foreign universities on undergraduate programmes, but that has not yet happened. By the end of the academic year 2002/2003, there were 41,573 SSGs, and of these 14,047 were admitted to both public and private HEIs (without

scholarships), meaning that 34% of SSGs had the opportunity to pursue HE in Oman. The private HEIs accepted only 8% of these students, the governmental HEIs accepted 26%, and up to the academic year 2003/2004, around 2,690 Omani students joined undergraduate programmes at foreign universities (MoHE, 2004a).

Several reasons might exist for this, but one is that the private sector applies negative procedures to secure a greater and faster profit by imposing higher fees and focusing on commercial programmes, which aim at securing employment and professional success, without giving attention to knowledge, research, values and community, and consequently, it is rejected by many in favour of overseas study (Al Ramadhani, 2003).

3.4.1 Governmental support for private HE

Throughout the newest economic plans of the government, there is heavy reliance on the role of the private sector, and several strategies and policies have been established by government to support this trend. For instance, one of the objectives in '*Oman 2020*' is to encourage 'the private sector to take greater part in the education sector through a number of policies' (MoD, 1995a:45), and a several policies are formulated to achieve this in relation to GE, and HE in particular. For example, 'offering easy and long-term grants for the construction of schools, institutes and colleges, and allowing the private sector to open private colleges' (MoD, 1995a:45, 53).

Later in the thesis, the business of whether these objectives and policies, are realistic will be discussed, together with government efforts to implement policies and practices leading to their achievement. The 5th FYDP (1996-2000) which was the first FYDP after the approval of '*Oman 2020*', and regarded as one of the implementation vehicles for its objectives, in fact addressed only two aims relating to the role of the private sector in education, these being the provision of support and soft loans to the private sector for the establishment of

schools (MoNE 2002b:476), which is relevant to the GE/BE, and the encouragement to the private sector to provide TE and VT services (MoNE, 2002b:479).

The 6th FYDP (2001-2005) was more determined, however, stating several aims and policies to promote the private sector's participation in the development process of HE, the most important being:

1. Encouraging and motivating the private sector to invest in HE through the establishment of specialised universities and colleges to meet the labour market needs (MoNE, 2002b:58). via the following policies and mechanisms (MoNE, 2002b:61):
 - Adoption of facilities for enrolment of students in the private HEIs.
 - Provision of incentives to attract the private sector to invest in HE.
 - Establishment of three new private universities with at least three colleges in each university. The government should provide a support for each university amounting to 50% of the establishment cost, with a maximum limit of OR 3 Million.
 - Involvement of the private sector in the planning, management and supervision of HE.
 - Encouragement and promotion of private sector financing of HE.
2. Encouraging the private sector to contribute to financing some programmes in SQU (p.61).
3. Upgrading and expanding the TE and VT opportunities through determined policies, such as the admission of 500 students annually from SSGs in private HE (p.59).
4. Participation of the private sector in the formulation of training programmes, follow-up of their output, curricula evaluation and improvement in the TE and VT establishments (p.60).

The previous sections have in fact, reported on some of the achievements of

these aims and policies, the most important of which can be summarised as follows:

- The MoHE has offered up to 1,000 full scholarships annually to students from families receiving social insurance benefits to study in private colleges and universities.
- The Ministry of Manpower has offered up to 500 partial scholarships annually to students attending private HEIs.
- Three private universities were established during the first four years of this FYDP.
- Between the academic year 2001/2002 and 2004/2005, 12 private HEIs were established, and from 1995 this increased to a total of 19.

A more in-depth analysis and discussion will be presented after reporting the research fieldwork findings, and examining appropriate governmental documents, projects and relevant activities relating to the last ten years, by the CoHE, SQU, MoHE, Ministry of Manpower, and other interested authorities in HE. While private HEIs have grown significantly in the last nine years, it appears that they are becoming increasingly dependent on governmental support, particularly through the funding of scholarships. Moreover, in addition to the internal scholarships scheme, the government supports private HE through the provision of land, grants of up to 50% of the capital (to a maximum of RO. 3 million), exemption from all taxes usually levied on establishments and companies for five-ten years, and exemption from certain other fees to government agencies (MoHE, 2004a).

Nevertheless, despite these incentives, there are questions concerning whether they are really enough to support private HEIs which have no basic infrastructure, and whether in a country like Oman with its small and limited labour market, it is really an acceptable thing to do, as the 6th FYDP declared (MoNE, 2002a:170).

3.4.2 Fields of study in the private HEIs

It is obvious that most private HEIs focus on programmes in Business and Administration. According to the data available (Table 3.16), in the academic year 2003/2004, one third of students in private HEIs were enrolled on Foundation or Intensive English language programmes, and 70% of the remaining students were studying Business or Information Technology (MoHE, 2004a:3).

Table 3.16
The Number and Percentage of Students by Programme in Private HEIs in
2003/2004

Programmes	Students	Percentage
Foundation	3,347	33%
Business	2,538	25%
Information Technology	2,252	22%
Engineering	1,314	13%
Arts and Languages	361	4%
Medicine and Health Sciences	328	3%
Other Major	8	-
Total	10,148	100%

Source: MoHE (2004a)

Business programmes include: Accounting, Business Administration, Electronic Business, Finance and Banking, Hotel Management and Tourism, International Tourism and Hospitality Management, Management and Marketing, Management Information Systems and Marketing, while the Information Technology (IT) programmes, which were the second most popular specialisation include: Computer and Internet Applications, Computer Applications, Computer Engineering, Computer Science, Computer Software, Computer Support, Computing, Hardware Technology, Information Technology and Telecommunications, Internet Technology and Software Technology.

Hence, the question of the balance between the labour market requirements and the programmes offered by the private HEIs still remains. So, to what extent do these institutions understand the reality of the labour market needs, why are they not offering other specialisations that are needed by the local and regional labour market, such as Medicine, Engineering and other Sciences, and what is the role of CoHE and MoHE in reducing the gap? Moreover, does their limited range of programmes influence student interest in the local private HEIs? Table 3.17, shows that in 2003/2004, 8,417 students were enrolled on undergraduate programmes at foreign institutions, around 64% of whom were studying Education, which private colleges and universities in Oman are not permitted to offer until 2004 (MoHE, 2004a).

Table 3.17
Number of Students and their study fields in the local and Overseas Private HEIs
in 2003/2004

Programmes	Omani Private HEIs	Foreign Institutions
Foundation/Undecided Major	3,355	
Business, Commerce, Accounting, Economics	2,538	1,133
Information Technology and computer Sciences	2,252	538
Engineering	1,314	546
Arts and Languages	361	659
Medicine and Health Sciences	328	515
Education	-	8,417
Law	-	443
Science	-	341
Information/ Library	-	219
Islamic Law	-	91
Agriculture	-	67
Other subjects	-	221
Total	10,148	13,190

Sources: MoHE (2004a)

Generally, the MoHE is the supervising authority for private HE, through the Directorate General of Private Universities and Colleges, established in 2000.

The government vision, objectives and role towards this sector will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

3.5 The Organisational and Funding Structure of HE in Oman

Before 1994, when the MoHE was established by Royal Decree 2/94, there was no independent authority to supervise HE. Thereafter, in additional attempts to organise the institutions and activities of this sector and to absorb the high number of SSGs through the expansion of HEIs' capacity, the government established some competent governmental bodies. To clarify the whole picture of HE system in Oman, as shown in Figure 3.2, the role and responsibilities of each organisation within this system and the relationship between them will now be reviewed.

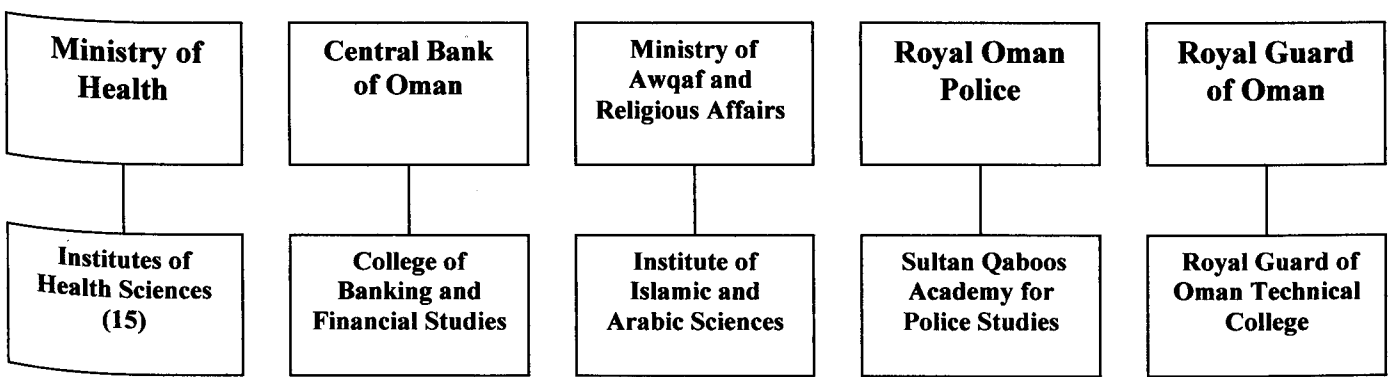
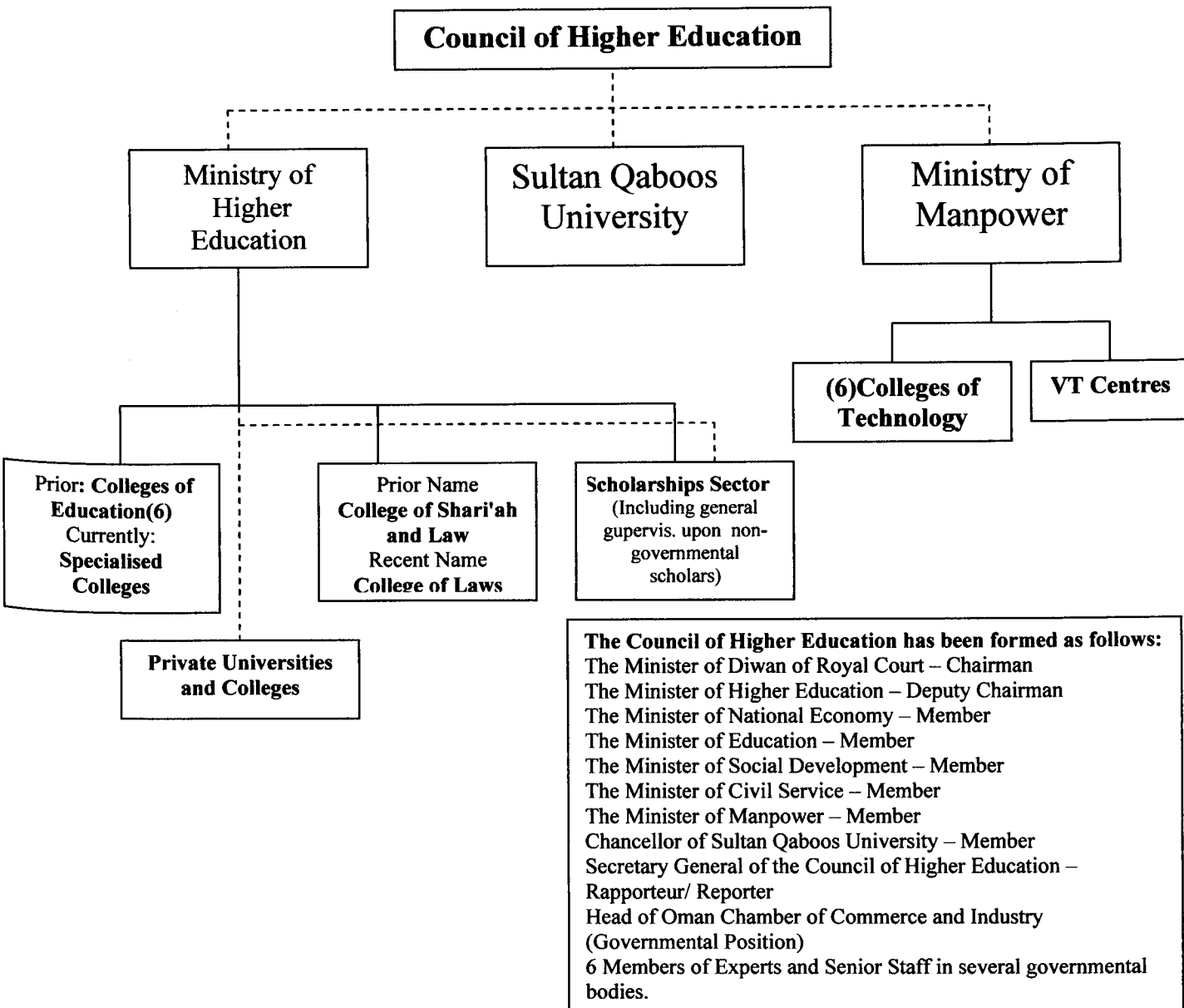
3.5.1 The Council of Higher Education (CoHE)

The CoHE was established by Royal Decree 65/1998, and is comprised of a number of ministers and other members, most of whom were re-appointed when the Council was restructured by the Royal Decree 31/ 2002. They include: the Minister of Diwan of Royal Court, as Chairman, the Minister of Higher Education, Deputy Chairman, the Minister of National Economy, the Minister of Education, the Minister of Social Development, the Minister of Manpower), the Minister of Civil Service, the Chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University, the Secretary General of the Council of Higher Education and six members selected from the intelligentsia, scholars and the private sector, appointed by the Royal Decree. According to Royal Decree 65/1998, many responsibilities and duties were listed that shaped the Council's role in this important era. Some of its responsibilities are to:

- Formulate the public policy on higher education and scientific research at universities and higher institutes in line with the requirements of the country and the state's cultural, social, economic and scientific objectives.

- Co-ordinate admission to universities and higher institutes and determine the number of entrants in co-ordination with the competent bodies.
- Review and propose amendments to the rules and regulations of higher education in the light of developments in government policies.
- Examine the difficulties facing higher education and propose solutions to deal with them. Study and comment on matters related to higher education referred by His Majesty the Sultan or the Council of Ministers.
- Consider higher education issues reported by universities and competent government bodies. (Royal Decree No. 65/1998).

Figure 3.3
Organisational Structure of Higher Education in Oman



The fact that the Council is comprised of a number of Ministers chaired by The Minister of Diwan of the Royal Court, indicates the high position and political nature of the Council. Although the Council has authority to build and approve the most important policies and plans for the HE system, as mentioned above, a number of governmental bodies which administer some HEIs are not represented in the Council, such as the Ministry of Health which directs more than 15 Higher Institutes for Health Sciences and Training, the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs which supervises the Institute of Islamic Science, and the Central Bank of Oman which supervises the College of Banking and Financial Studies (see Figure 3.2).

The Secretariat General of the Council, headed by the Secretary General and established by the same Royal Decree, assumes the tasks of the Council, and is responsible for taking the minutes, collecting data/statistics and preparing studies pertaining to the Council agenda in addition to any other tasks assigned by the Council (Royal Decree 65/1998). The Secretariat General is comprised of the Secretary General, and his office staff and other limited administrative members, and at the time of conducting this research there was no any expert or professional person in the area of HE planning, with the exception of one person seconded from the MoHE for a limit period. This lack of specialist resource might influence the Secretariat's ability to undertake its tasks and responsibilities. However, the Council has not supervisory, administrative or funding responsibilities upon HEIs in the country.

3.5.2 The Accreditation Board

The Accreditation Board was established by Royal Decree 74/2001, as an independent body responsible for the CoHE. According to the Royal Decree, the Board is formed from ten members selected from HEI teaching staff with the minimum title of associate professor, and also from competent and experienced professionals who hold postgraduate qualifications. These members are appointed by Royal Decree for the duration of five years, renewable by a decision from the

Chair of the CoHE. No member is permitted to have any financial stake in any private HEI for the duration of their membership (Royal Decree 74/2001).

Three permanent committees of the Board make recommendations regarding accreditation of HEIs, accreditation of programmes of study, and quality control. The Directorate General of Private Universities and Colleges at the MoHE assumes the tasks of the Technical Secretariat of the Accreditation Board. This Board has responsibilities to:

- Prepare necessary studies and research on the requirements and standards of accreditation of HEIs.
- Review the basis for HEIs' accreditation in the light of the policies made by the CoHE.
- Accredite HEIs.
- Evaluate competency requirements demanded for the practice of professions and ensure that the academic programmes in HEIs meet these requirements.
- Gather information and data on programmes offered by HEIs and report on their quality to the CoHE.

(MoHE, 2001c:30).

3.5.3 Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE)

The Ministry of Higher Education was established in 1994 by Royal Decree 2/94. It supervises and funds Colleges of Education (six), which were converted recently to five different specialist colleges with only one remaining for education, the College of Shari'ah and Law, and Scholarships, in addition to an overall supervisory role upon the private HEIs. The other governmental HEIs are supervised and administered by other governmental authorities, and some are autonomous, as will be outlined later.

Royal Decree No. 36/ 2000 has defined the responsibilities of the MoHE, which can be summarised as follows:

- Implementing approved policies on HE and scientific research in the light of economic and social development objectives and advances in science and technology.
- Formulate laws related to HE and scientific research and issue their respective executive regulation, and propose a public policy for HE and scientific research conducted in universities, colleges, higher institutes and research centres, which are supervised by the Ministry. Also, propose means and ways to direct such policy towards serving the cultural, social, economic and scientific goals of the state.
- Supervise HEIs that come under or are attached to the Ministry, and draw up their policy of students' admission.
- Apply laws governing scholarships and educational grants and give the opportunity to those qualified to pursue their postgraduate studies in specialisations which are needed by the country.
- Properly compile a register of postgraduate degrees held by Omani citizens in order to address them with their proper titles.
- Award, after co-ordination with the other concerned ministries and parties, licenses for the establishment of private institutions. Monitor and ensure that such institutions observe and comply with the rules and regulations governing their activities. (Royal Decree No. 36/2000).

The Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*' and the 5th and 6th FYDPs (1996-2000 and 2001-2005) approved the most important policies and mechanisms for the roles of the MoHE, which are relevant to the HEIs supervised by the Ministry.

3.5.4 Sultan Qaboos University (SQU)

The Sultan Qaboos University is an autonomous body, independent of any ministry, and the civil service system and its financial regulations. While SQU is one of the governmental bodies, which are notionally directed by the Council of Ministers, in reality the University is directed by the University Council, which could be regarded as its supreme governing body.

Royal Decree 9/1986 empowered this Council with responsibility for the planning process and formulation of the general and main policy of the University and of its implementation. Moreover, this Council has the power to

undertake particular duties related to the enhancement of the University standing to enable it to achieve its aims. In addition, there is an Academic Council, which has the subsidiary role to direct and supervise the academic process of the University. It is mainly responsible for implementing the academic policy and plan of the university, and supervising all affairs in this domain.

3.5.5 Authorities and Supervision of other Specialist Institutions

The other institutions are directed and funded by other ministries as follows:

1. Technical and Industrial Colleges (six), which were supervised in the past by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, and now by the Ministry of Manpower.
2. Institutes of Health Training (15), which are post-secondary institutes and receive only the SSGs, are also regarded as HEIs, and are supervised by the Ministry of Health.
3. The College of Banking and Financial Studies is supervised by the Central Bank of Oman.
4. The Institute of Shari'ah (Islamic) Sciences is supervised by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.
5. The Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Studies is directed by the Royal Oman Police.
6. The Royal Guard of Oman Technical College is directed by the Royal Guard of Oman.

3.5.6 Authorities and Supervision of Private Higher Education Institutions

Overall, the MoHE is the authority which supervises private HEIs. Due to the developing role of this sector and in order to organise its institutions and activities and to pay more attention to this sector, the Directorate General of Private Universities and Colleges was established by Royal Decree 70/2000, making it the responsible body within the MoHE for supervising private HE in Oman. Its main responsibilities are as follows:

- Receiving applications for the establishment of private universities, colleges and institutes.
- Following up the implementation of the decisions issued by the CoHE concerning the private HE establishments.
- Monitoring the performance of the private HE establishments in the light of the policies determined by the CoHE and MoHE. This includes verifying the compliance of these institutions in implementing the prescribed programmes to the required standards and conditions and in achieving the specific objectives of the institutions.
- Following up the implementation of the decisions approving the programmes of private HEIs, and supervising the implementation of the standards, criteria and conditions that are approved by the CoHE, Accreditation Board and the Ministry. (MoHE, 2002a:4, 5)

In addition to the Directorate General of Private Universities and Colleges, there is also a committee within the MoHE, that has some role in the direction of private HEIs, called the Private Universities, University Colleges and Higher Institutes Committee, and a number of Sub-Committees from this Committee assist it. The Committee was formed in accordance with a decision by the Minister of HE to be under the Chairmanship of the Under-secretary of the Ministry, and its most important responsibilities are as follows:

- Setting down the administrative and academic standards that are required in Private HE establishments.
- Setting up a system for the provisional licences and the necessary approvals.
- Studying the applications submitted for the establishment of universities and university colleges and higher institutes and expressing their views and decisions and also deciding on the renewal of their licence periods.
- Studying the applications submitted by universities, colleges or higher institutes to increase fees and submitting its recommendations to the Minister.

- Studying the reports of Sub-Committees concerning the evaluation of the private HEIs and the extent of their compliance with the implementation of the conditions agreed upon when they were licensed.

To conclude the dimension of HE's administration, it could be understood that, each of the above mentioned authorities that supervises and manages one or more of HEIs, has its own view, plans and financial regulations for its HEIs, and consequently, there is strong debate in the country about this polarity of supervising agencies within the HE sector, since some consider that this situation negatively affects the performance of the sector, and represents one of the main challenges facing HE in Oman (MoHE, 2004b)

Although most of these governmental bodies and institutions are represented in the CoHE, each one attempts to remove the role of others and secure a greater proportion of the benefits they are allocated Hence, several reports and studies claim to reform this situation and establish a new supervision structure with Oman's HE sector, see for example (Al Ramadhani, 2003), (Preddey, 2004), (Chapman, 2004) and others.

3.6 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, the developmental phases of Oman's HE system have been reviewed by examining various government documents and records in order to ascertain the exact situation that prevails in the HEIs, particularly in terms of their enrolment capacity and fields of study. It was explained that during the 1970s, there was no modern infrastructure of HE in Oman, and that in order to respond to the urgent national needs, the country relied heavily on overseas scholarships, and established other training institutes. However, in the last three decades the government has worked to provide the HE infrastructure, having established the Teacher Preparation Intermediate Institutes for preparatory school graduates, and continually upgrading these to their present status as university colleges. Additionally, a number of Health Sciences Institutes, Islamic Sciences

Institutes, the Commercial Secondary School, VT Centres and other training institutes were established. At the beginning of the 2nd FYDP, in 1986, the SQU was opened, some of the existing institutions were upgraded, the College of Shari'ah and Law was created, and the private HEIs came on the scene in the 1990s. The administration and supervisory system of these institutions were considered, and the current multiplicity of managing organisations was discussed in detail.

There is no doubt that the outputs of all these institutions have contributed towards Oman's development process and a quality transition could be seen in the different developmental sectors. However, the enrolment capacity of most HEIs did not undergo a significant difference, thus causing a substantial gap between HE supply and demand. Moreover, the specialisations and study fields offered by the existing HEIs and other training facilities did not match the requirements of different sectors in the country, particularly the private sector enterprises, which rely overwhelmingly on expatriate expertise and skill. Further investigation and in-depth discussion about these matters and related issues is provided in the following chapters. Prior to that, the next chapter will consider the methods employed to achieve the objectives of the study.

Chapter Four

Research Methods

4.1 Introduction

This research is concerned with the development and expansion of HE in Oman, and as explained earlier, its prime aim is to identify the vision, aims, policies, and implementation plans in this respect, with particular reference to the provision for, and progression of, SSGs to HE. From this prime aim, the following objectives are established:

- To identify the demand for HE in Oman, and ascertain progression routes of SSGs to HE.
- To identify the vision, aims, policies, and implementation plans for the development and expansion of the HE system in Oman, and its capacity.
- To define the challenge of HE funding and other most important factors affecting the implementation process of developing and expanding the capacity of HE.
- To consider government targets for the development and expansion process of the HE system in general, and for the progression of SSGs to HE in particular, in the light of the role of HE as expounded in the country's Development Plan.

The research has considered the overall problem in terms of the Government's Economic Development Plans, with particular reference to the Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*', and the 5th and 6th FYDPs. This chapter aims to identify the methodology of the study and the various techniques used to collect data. Hence, it will present the research design, the research population and sample, methods of data gathering and data analysis, problems and ethical issues.

4.2 Research Design

According to the aforementioned focus of this study and its aims, it can be understood that this piece of research is qualitative in nature. Its intentions are to explore and understand the character of the planning process associated with the development and expansion of HE and the dimensions that relate to this sector, and this requires complementary research approaches. Both descriptive and exploration approaches have been used to diagnose the reality of HE in Oman, in order to obtain an in-depth appreciation of the study's issues, and to ascertain whether the planning of HE and its implementation process are conducive to meeting the demand, and eventually to consider the government targets for the development and expansion process of the HE system.

This combined research strategy in turn, has required the adoption of two research methods - the analysis of documentary evidence, and an extensive interview exercise. Hence, and in accordance with the definition of the term of 'methodology' which appears in the New Oxford Dictionary as 'a set of methods and principles used to perform a particular activity' (2003:803), this research was enacted using the following procedures:

- 1- Reviewing literature on the general background of the country's development process, socially and economically, in order to shed light on the national context, which witnessed remarkable economic and social changes leading to the emergence of several demands and different circumstances that have culminated to affect education, including HE. This dimension which has been covered in Chapter Two included also a brief review of the development of the educational system.
- 2- Reviewing and describing the historical developments of the state's HE system and its institutions, starting from the time when the country relied on overseas scholarships, and the subsequent establishment of some educational institutes which were regarded as the initial seed of HE in Oman, until the current moment when key HEIs, such as the SQU, Colleges of Education, Colleges of

Technology and other specialised colleges and institutes, are in existence. In this connection, the focus is on the enrolment capacity and fields of study in these institutions. This historical review touched also on the development of private, and other small HEIs that are considered in Chapter Three.

- 3- Using documentary analysis, the research has attempted to diagnose the actual demand for HE in Oman, the social pressure, the increasing number of SSGs, and the demands of the marketplace, and to ascertain the vision, objectives, plans, policies, provision and capacity of current HEIs, both governmental and private, in addition to the administration and funding system of several streams and institutions of HE as discussed in Chapter Five.
- 4- Conducting semi-structured interviews with a large number of key figures in the Omani HRD sector and in society at large. The exercise of an extensive interview resulted in a substantial amount of rich data that are analysed and discussed in Chapters Six, Seven, Eight and Nine.
- 5- Presenting in-depth discussions of, and drawing conclusions about, the prime themes of the study and related issues. This is done as the last stage of the research in light of the interview findings, documentary evidences and related international perspectives regarding the presented areas, and appears in the last chapter of the study, providing a number of recommendations and suggestions that would help in the development and expansion process of the Omani HE sector.

4.3 Documentary Evidence as a Qualitative Research Method

Documents have several important advantages; they are convenient to use, easier to gain access to, and can often be collected in a shorter time than it takes when adopting other research methods, such as conducting interviews, administering questionnaires, or gathering data based on observation, and

consequently this reduces the cost (Crossley and Vulliamy, 1997:115). Furthermore, documents also:

provide information about such phenomena as meetings or speeches that cannot be observed either because they have taken place before the research commenced or to which the researcher may have difficulty getting access for reasons of sensitivity or geography (Crossley and Vulliamy, 1997:115).

In addition, documents can be analysed when institutions are closed. Indeed, the value of documentary sources of information, of all kinds, is noted by Crossley and Vulliamy (1997), as a common feature in sociological research, and 'Official statistics, ... government publications, and similar sources are the basis of much social research by academic and their students' (Scott, 1990:ix in Crossley and Vulliamy, 1997:113).

However, whilst this can be true in some instances, it is not always the case, and certainly, in some circumstances it is easier to interview people, or spend time observing a set of events, than it is to obtain certain important documents that will provide the information required. Sometimes the process of gaining access to documentation may be extremely complicated and costly, since much effort, communication, money, and time may be required to obtain the required documents. This is particularly so in a number of developing countries, where the absence of, or operational difficulties with, internet facilities, occur; and where many organisations and institutions have not yet progressed to the state of having websites.

Moreover, in some countries there is a culture of not publishing information to the same extent as in others, and any information or data that may be published is regarded as extremely sensitive and not available for unauthorised personnel. Certainly, it can be very difficult for any researcher to obtain some kinds of information that would be helpful in exploring particular issues. In other countries, 'the political or bureaucratic context can mean that it is extremely

difficult or enormously time-consuming to get official permission to carry out research involving access to educational institutions, [in Nigeria it took one whole year] ' (Crossley and Vulliamy, 1997:114), whereas in modern societies written records are kept by all kinds of agencies, and some may be readily available to social researchers (McNeill, 1990).

Nevertheless, despite some of the problems mentioned, many educational studies are using this research method. In some, it is used in conjunction with other research techniques such as conducting interviews with key informants (Blaxter et al., 1996) to supplement information obtained by the documentary search, whilst in others, it is used as the central, or even exclusive method of research (Bell, 2002). The lack of access to research subjects may be disappointing, but documentary analysis of records, such as the plans and procedures which were used in a particular situation, and reports of events, can lead to extremely useful alternative sources of data (Johnson, 1984, in Bell, 2002).

4.3.1 Rationale for Using Documentary Analysis

In this study, it is obvious that method that must be adopted is a review and investigation of government plans, policies and other records related to several streams and institutions of HE, so that as much detail as possible is obtained. Such documentary analysis should reveal the actual planning process, enrolment capacity in the HEIs, programmes and fields of studies, funding, and management process of HE in Oman. The purpose of such a review is developmental, because in order to promote the planning process, particularly in terms of expanding the capacity of HEIs, and diversifying their curricula to be in accordance with the country development plans, it is important to study and investigate the objectives, plans, policies of the sector as stated in the general plans of the country, and to assess the effectiveness of the associated implementation process. Thus, an analysis of the said documentation, should lead to knowledge that would help to improve the process of planning and enhance the educational services provided.

In this connection, it is important to consider Oman's economic situation, and identify the factors affecting the national economy. In particular, marketplace requirements, the state trends in dealing with current and future challenges, and the need to diversify the national economy in the light of the decline of the oil revenue, which is the main source of Oman's income, must be explored. Accordingly, the documents of the Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*', and the FYDPs of the country have been reviewed, and as a sample of the various plans, the last two FYDPs (the 5th - 1996-2000, and the 6th - 2001-2005) are considered.

Hence, the documentary analysis exposes the researcher to governmental records such as conference papers, workshop papers and perhaps some unpublished reports, as the evidence is required in order to gather a wide range of information, this being, what HE plans are being applied, and what are the policies, programmes and procedures which are used to implement and translate the approved targets and aims. In addition, the documentary analysis offers an identification of the shortcomings in the aims, plans, procedures and other elements in the field, so it helps to diagnose the provision for, and progress of, SSGs to HE in Oman.

4.4 Interviews as a Qualitative Research Method

As indicated already, the second intended method of data collection is the use of interviews. The research interview has been considered as a 'Two-person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information, and focused by him on content specified by research objectives of systematic description, prediction, or explanation' (Cannel and Khan, 1968 in Cohen and Manion, 1994:271). It is a qualitative research method considered as direct conversation and contact between the researcher and the respondent to gain certain information and to achieve pre-planned special purposes (Drever, 1995).

Interviews usually occur in a face-to-face situation, although they can also be conducted via the telephone. Whichever method is chosen, they allow the researcher to follow up ideas and probe responses (Drever, 1995), enabling the clarification of answers and comments made by the interviewee. This ability to clarify responses and comments made by the interviewees also helps the researcher in terms of analysing the opinions and views of interviewees (Al-Momari, 2000). Furthermore, face-to-face interviews have the advantage that the researcher is able to observe the participant's non-verbal behaviour, which can be both a supplementary source of data collection, and provide clues to the researcher about the emotional readiness of the interviewee for certain lines of questioning.

Marshall (1999:12) makes the observation that 'in an in-depth interview, the researcher should have an intimate relationship with the participants', but this can only be achieved if the researcher is well qualified with the necessary skills to enable him/her to forge this type of connection, which also needs careful preparation (Payne, 1999). Blaxter and his colleagues (1996:154) listed the advantages of interviews, that summarised as follows:

- They may take place face-to-face, or at a distance, e.g. over the telephone.
- They may take place at the interviewee's or interviewer's home or place of work, in the street or on some other 'neutral' ground.
- At one extreme, the interview may be tightly structured, with a set of questions requiring specific answers, or it may be very open-ended, taking the form of a discussion. Semi-structured interviews lie between these two positions.
- Different forms of questioning may be practised during the interview.
- Prompts, such as photographs, can be useful for stimulating discussion.
- Interviews may involve just two individuals, the researcher and the interviewee, or they may be group events involving more than one subject and/or more than one interviewer.

- The interviewee may or may not be given advanced warning of the topics or issues to be discussed.
- The interview may be recorded in a variety of ways. It may be taped, and possibly later transcribed by an audio-typist, the interviewer may take notes, during or after the interview, or, where there is more than one interviewer, one may make notes while the other conducts the interview.
- The interview may be followed up in a variety of ways. A transcript could be sent to the subject for comment. Further questions might be subsequently sent to the subject in writing. A whole series of interviews could be held over a period of time, building upon each other or exploring changing views and experiences.

(Blaxter et al 1996:154)

Clearly, there are disadvantages to the use of interviews, as with any research technique, and on this theme Cohen and Manion (1994) warned researchers that interviews as a directed interaction, have weaknesses as well as strengths. Specifically, they mentioned that although the interview provides the opportunity for an in-depth study, it is also prone to subjectivity and bias. In this respect, the interview might lead to what has been called interviewee (respondent) bias or interviewer bias (Sanders and Pinney, 1983). The interviewee might not respond in a truthful way, and instead say what he/she thinks is right, or what the interviewer wants to hear, what is not going to cause repercussions for the interviewee at some time later, or perhaps refuse to answer completely (Sanders and Pinney, 1983). Likewise, the interviewer might select certain ideas and information from what is being said by the respondents to serve his/her preconceptions and purposes (Mouly, 1978). Accordingly, some researchers have described the interview as a 'double-edged sword', in that on the one hand it can provide a valuable underpinning to qualitative research, yet on the other hand, it can negatively influence its quality (Kvale, 1996).

Nevertheless, as a qualitative research method, the interview is flexible and subjective, and allows the researcher to follow up interesting replies and

comments made by respondents. Also, it helps the researcher in terms of analysing the opinion and views of interviewees, and the respondent's body language and facial expressions can be observed and interpreted by the researcher. Consequently, 'the interview method involves questioning or discussing issues with people. It can be a very useful technique for collecting data which would be unlikely to be accessible using techniques such as observation or questionnaires' (Blaxter et al, 1996:153).

As noted already by several researchers, such as Merriam (1998), Al-Shaqsi, (2004) and Blaxter et al (1996), there are different types of interview. Merriam (1998) highlights three major styles, these being: structured, semi- structured and unstructured interviews. Table 4.1 shows the main features of each type.

Table: 4.1
Types of Interviews

Interview Type	Features
Structured Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Question words are pre-determined - Question order is pre-determined - Oral form of survey
Semi-Structured Interview	Mix of more and less structured interview questions
Unstructured Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Open-ended questions - Flexible, exploratory - More like a conversation

(Merriam, 1998 in Al-Shaqsi, 2004:87)

The semi-structured interview was considered to be the most appropriate in this research, since this would allow the researcher to gain specific and in-depth information, and simultaneously enable him to clarify how the participants understood the process of planning for the expansion and development of HE, and

its relationships with other relevant dimensions and elements, as well as the relationship between the HE system and the other sectors of the national socio-economic plan. This type of interview was also more helpful in enabling the researcher to obtain more accurate information about the reality of policies, plans, progresses and activities which are applied to develop and expand the HE sector in the country, because it offered the chance for deviation from the planned questions to pursue certain potentially-valuable comments.

4.4.1 Rationale for Conducting Interviews

In this study the interview technique has the potential to provide more specific information, and to allow the participants to reflect on their understanding of the relationship between Oman's HE system and the other sectors of the national socio-economic plan. Additionally, it is considered that interviews are more likely to provide accurate information about the various organisations' responsibilities and how the superiors or officials carry out their roles and obtain opinion about policies, plans, progress, and the activities which are applied to develop and expand Oman's HE sector. Interviews can be mechanisms to help the researcher to secure in-depth information, which in turn leads them to understand philosophical stances, and in the specific case of this research, they are believed to highlight the philosophy, attitudes and the actuality of the implementation.

Moreover, through the use of interviews, it will be easier to ascertain the differences between what has been written (documentary evidence) and what has actually occurred and been implemented. And being able to discuss such issues with interviewees will provide more clarity in respect of the reality of the plans and policies, and the obstacles and difficulties that appear to hinder the implementation process. In addition, it could be seen that the different governmental documents contain many ambitions and future trends, but the extent to which the various targets can be reached, and whether there is sufficient capability and provision in the system to enable their realisation, are dimensions

of the issue that can only be ascertained to an acceptable extent through direct conversations with the interested people.

Therefore, documentary analysis provides the necessary information, sometimes in detail, about the research issues and enables the researcher to establish the general picture of the system, while the interviews offer the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of these dimensions, leading to a clearer interpretation of the problems and relevant elements. Hence, the documentary analysis provides the underpinning for the interview questions.

To capitalise upon the potential advantages of the interviews with key personnel, several efforts were directed towards designing the interview questions for maximum benefit, such as carefully preparing the questions, and ensuring the process was properly conducted, both processes of which are discussed in the following sections.

4.4.2 Preparation for the Interviews

During the review of governmental documents, records and related literature, it became clear that interviews with key persons in the Omani HE system were crucial in order to achieve the study aims. Thus, from the early stages, preparation for conducting the interviews, was undertaken. This preparation process commenced by establishing how the information necessary for the research could be gained, if not from documentation, and from whom such data could be gathered. Additionally, the types and numbers of questions to be asked, was considered. Indeed, from the review and analysis of documentation, it appeared that several issues were important to discuss with interested people, in order to explore the actual situation, and to identify what trends were being pursued by the key governmental authorities in the development process of HE.

This required some thought concerning the study population, which would need to involve all interested organisations, educational institutions and other

agencies and people, whether governmental or non-governmental, which have any role to play in Oman's HRD sector, since ultimately this depends on the country's HE system, as will be explained in the next section. Consequently, this thought process step was followed by the selection of a representative sample, through procedures that will be clarified in the coming sections. Furthermore, the preparation for the interviews also included several arrangements that were required in order to interview people in high positions, and to gain permission to tape record the proceedings. In turn, the taped proceedings were transcribed in Arabic, and then translated from the participants' mother language to English.

4.4.3 Study Population

The study population was comprised of the government and private organisations and institutions in Oman, which play the most important roles within the HE system, and some other participating agencies with an interest in this field. Accordingly, the research covered the key governmental ministries, agencies, and institutions such as the CoHE, MoHE, MoE, SQU, Ministry of Manpower, Ministry of Health, Majles A'Ddawla (The State Council), the private HE sector, and the A'Shura Council (The Consultative Council), as representative of the general Omani public. These organisations and institutions are illustrated in Figure 4.1.

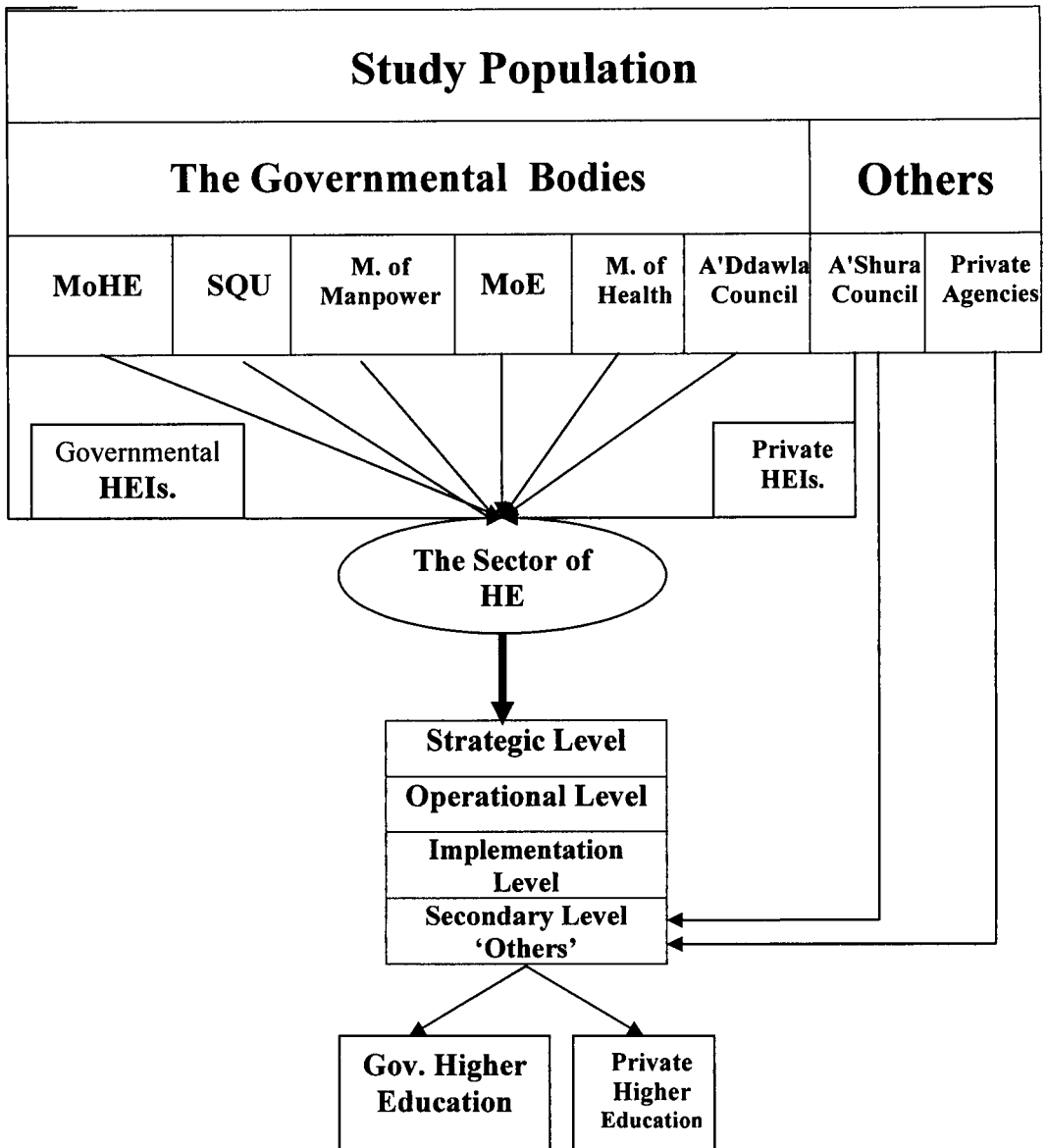
The overall population was sub-divided into four types of personnel, these being people at the Strategic Level, Operational Level, Implementation/or Institutional Level, and 'Others'. It was supposed that at each level, there would be a certain hierarchy of duties and responsibilities, and that there would be some kind of organisational relationship between these levels, as clarified in the next paragraphs.

The first level was identified as the *Strategic Level*. People at this level are supposed to perform the key roles of planning, formulating, directing and evaluating the national targets for any area of the country's development process,

through certain mechanisms instigated by the government. This level normally consists of the Ministers, Under-secretaries, State Consultants and Advisors, and other policy and decision-makers who are at the same level of responsibility. In sequence, people who are at the *Strategic Level* are supposed to direct people who are at the lower level of responsibility, the *Operational Level*, and which includes people such as Director Generals, Directors and other senior planners who prepare plans, policies and other procedures and projects that are required for the achievement of the previously-approved targets. People at this level are also asked to suggest any mechanisms or programmes or financial needs, and then they report to those at the *Strategic Level*, who consider those suggestions and recommendations, and make as many changes as they feel necessary before approving them. However, the personnel at the *Strategic Level* have to refer the strategies and general plans to the Council of Ministers to obtain their acceptance.

Thereafter, those strategies or plans, which have received approval, usually descend to the *Implementation Level*, which undertakes the execution. However, other institutions and officials from the above levels are expected to take some part in the implementation process, since this process depends upon the participation and co-operation of all parties and authorities with an interest in this field. Moreover, there are other organisations and institutions across the country that share in all the stages of the development process, for example Majles A'Ddawla (The State Council), the Majles A'Shura (The Consultative Council), and some sponsors of private HEIs and businessmen. In this research, this category of interest has been placed in the fourth level, entitled *Category of Others*. As was done with respect to the above-mentioned governmental bodies and institutions, a number of representatives were also taken from each of these organisations and the private sector, to complete the research sample.

Figure 4.1
Study Population



The interviewees were drawn from all the organisations, governmental, non-governmental, and private, that participate in the formulation and/or implementation of any aspect of the HE process.

4.4.4 Rationale for Selection of Samples and Interviewees

Certainly, it is impossible for such research to interview all the interested people in all authorities and institutions involved in the sector. Thus, it was necessary to determine an appropriate number for each group, that would be representative, and reflect the importance and role of the organisation. Representation was, therefore, sought from each of the above categories within the overall population of interest, and the sample consisted of the four levels of personnel previously mentioned - the Strategic Category, Operational Category, Implementation Category, and the Category of Others (Secondary Level). These categories of the sample are illustrated in Figure 4.2.

The first category of the sample, which was the *Strategic Category* involved 16 Ministers and Under-secretaries representing the interested ministries and agencies. As mentioned above, people at this level are charged with the key roles of planning and supervising all other lower levels of institutions and their activities. They are responsible for the major decision-making and the approval of key plans and policies. However, it was appreciated that many of the key figures in this level depend upon on assistant professional personnel and other senior officials from other levels of responsibilities, since a number of them, particularly the ministers, have a wide range of responsibilities, some of which are outside of their organisations. Therefore, the reality of the relationship between these levels must be understood.

The second category of the sample was *the Operational Category*, which consisted of 18 Director Generals (DGs), Directors, and experts who play an important role in the targeted ministries and agencies. Those selected, were mostly people who are supposed to play an important role and who are most closely related to the planning process for education and HE. Accordingly, this level was represented by a number of Director Generals, Directors of Planning, and HRD Directorates in the interested ministries, and also by experts and

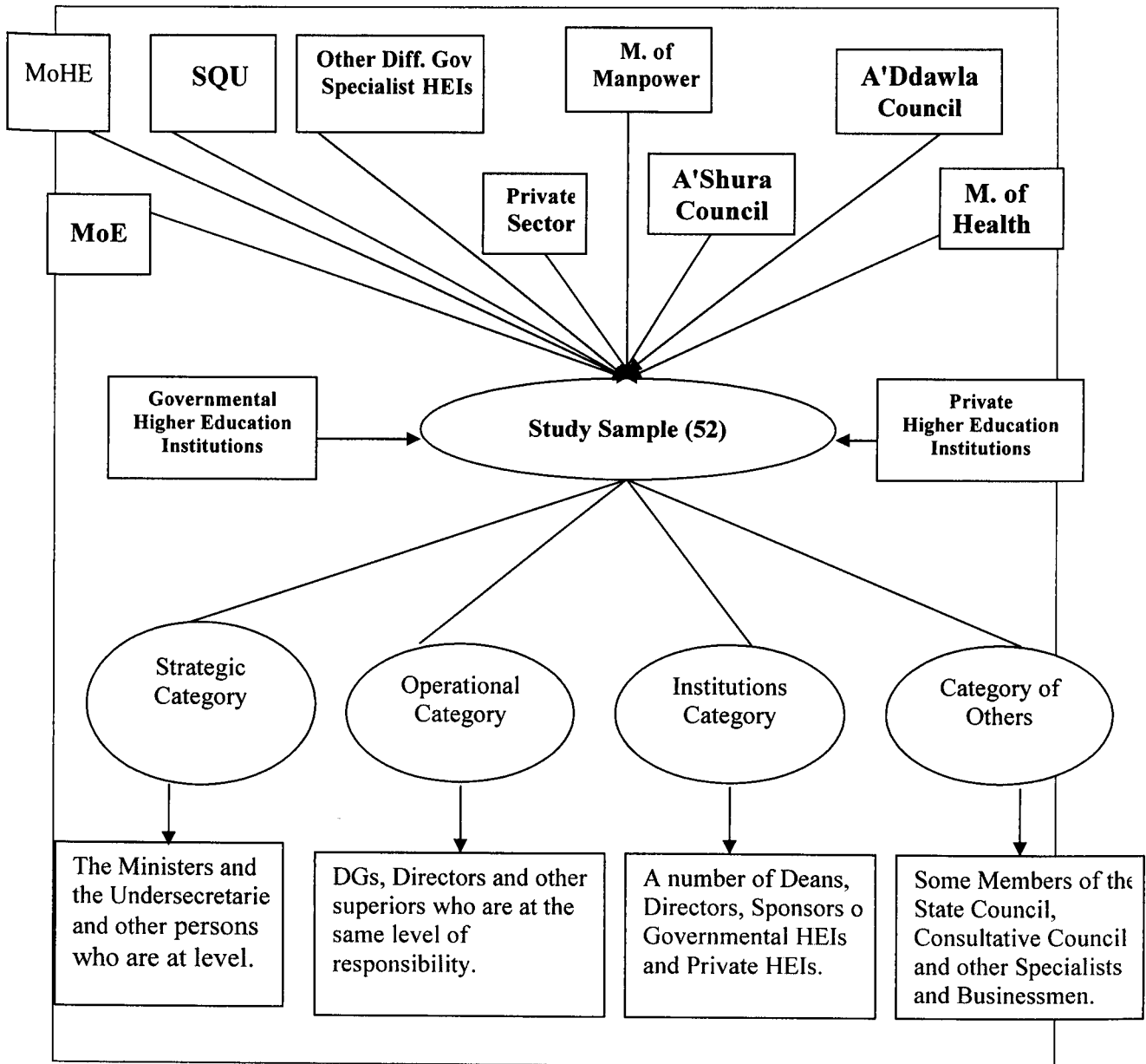
advisors in this field in the authorities and institutions who are closely related to planning for education and HE in the country.

Furthermore, and to be more accurate and balanced in choosing samples, and according to the different sizes and role responsibilities, the numbers of representatives were different. For instance, because the MoHE is the main governmental ministry which shoulders the responsibilities of several HEIs, such as the Colleges of Education, the College of Shari'ah and Law, the scholarships sector, and is also responsible for general supervising private HEIs, as well as the College of Banking and Financial Studies, it had greater representation. Moreover, as the SQU is the only governmental university, and is comprised of a number of colleges and specialist centres, it too was represented by several people. In contrast, although the CoHE is regarded as the highest organisation within the country's HE sector, in reality it has a limited supervisory role, with very few administrative staff, and no academic cadre, nor planners or experts in this field. Consequently, this Council was represented by only a small number of people.

The third category was *the Implementationl Category*, which was sub-divided into *Governmental HEIs* and *Private HEIs*. The first group included SQU, the Colleges of Education (6), the Colleges of Technology (5), and the different governmental specialist Colleges and Institutes. This group was dealt with as one group, represented by 7 of their deans or senior staff. The second group was the Private HE universities and Colleges, including three private universities which are in existence in the country, and 16 private colleges, most of which are involved in the same area of study, as mentioned earlier in the thesis. This group was represented by 4 of their deans or directors. Thus, the total number in the sample for this category was 11 representatives. The last category was the *Category of Others*, which consisted of 7 representatives from the A'ddawla Council (the State Council), the A'Shura Council (Consultative Council), sponsors of private HEIs, and businessmen.

The total number of representatives in the study sample was 52. The researcher intended to use the best possible samples for the study, and before proceeding to the sample decision, it was essential to determine an appropriate number for each group.

Figure4.2
Study Sample



However, upon reflection of Oman's traditions, and the researcher's personal experience, and being aware of individual Ministers' political positions, it was expected that the Ministers' responses would not be direct or frank, and that insufficient time would be granted to conduct scientific formal interviews with the Ministers. This belief clearly meant that the interviews with the Ministers were not expected to benefit the research as required, and therefore it was decided that it would be more advantageous to the research outcome if the interviews were held with the Under-secretaries instead of the Ministers. Consequently, the first category was initially represented by a number of Under-secretaries of interested ministries instead of the Ministers themselves. However, some Ministers were interviewed, and these were successful in achieving certain targets, as is explained later.

At this point, it is worth mentioning that during discussion with my academic supervisor regarding the number of intended interviews, valuable advice to the effect that 20-25 interviews would be sufficient, was given, with a recommendation not to exceed that number because of the time demands which would accompany greater numbers. However, because of the solid networks existing between my employer and most institutions, and good relationships with most target participants, I decided to interview 52 participants according to the aforementioned sampling procedures. As predicted, this task produced an extremely heavy load in making arrangements, giving the time to interviewing, transcribing, translating, and analysing, and in hindsight, I believe that it was unlikely decision to pursue so many interviewees. Unfortunately, having already built the categories and sub-samples around the total number of 52, it was not possible to make changes and interview less people, and therefore, the task was duly completed, albeit having taken much longer than scheduled.

4.4.5 Preparation of Interview Questions

The interview questions have been prepared in accordance with the study's focus and to serve its aims. In addition, reviewing a number of previous studies

and other relevant literature helped me in the formulation of these questions. Visits to several governmental bodies were made by the researcher before composing the interview questions, with a view to gathering any documentation related to the research topic. These visits served the dual purpose of helping the researcher to develop a good working relationship with a number of senior officials, which led him to obtain many governmental documents that it might not otherwise have been possible to obtain, and of facilitating the arrangement of interviews later on.

By reviewing the government records, information and data, it became possible to identify and clarify key issues, which allowed the determination of the semi-final list of questions. At that stage the first draft of the interview schedule was submitted to my supervisor, and to a number of referees in the SQU, the Institute of Public Administration in Muscat, and other specialists in the HE and HRD fields. The valuable comments and notes received from these 'pilot' personnel, were subsequently taken into account in correcting and revising the list of interview questions that were common to all four categories, and then after several meetings with my supervisor, the final schedule of questions (English version) was prepared as shown in Appendix 8.

One of the most important comments made at this pilot stage was that because of the pluralistic nature of Oman's HE system, which consists of a number of authorities and governmental bodies with responsibility for managing and supervising HEIs throughout the country, and in addition to the questions that were pertinent to all four categories, it would be necessary to prepare some questions that were appropriate purely for some interested bodies directing HE system, or participating in its field, such as representatives of the private HEIs' sponsors, Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, business people and other.

Thus, a number of questions that are more appropriate for the particular authority of the governmental bodies and institutions were prepared. These

questions, specific to the interest of the party concerned, were asked of the interviewees sometimes after the common questions, and sometimes between the common questions as will be seen in the following chapters that report the interviews findings. Additionally, since the language of Oman is Arabic, and most interviewees were speaking Arabic, and to avoid any confusion or uncertainty in the communication process, the researched translated the interview schedule into Arabic. This facilitated the interviewees' understanding of the questions, and the researcher's ability to document the responses. To ensure more accuracy and reality, the Arabic draft of the interview schedule was presented to some Arabic linguists who made language corrections, and their comments and notes were requested in order to assist the researcher in preparing the final Arabic version of the interview schedule.

4.4.6 Arrangements for Conducting the Interviews

This section produces a brief account of the strategy that was adopted to conduct the interviews. During the preparation stage of the interview questions, the researcher obtained letters of introduction from his employer, academic supervisor, and the Omani Cultural Attaché's Office in London. These were to introduce the researcher to the interviewees, to confirm his status as a university researcher, and to recommend the recipient to offer whatever support was required.

However, and although most of the participants were senior staff, not one person asked the researcher to produce any such introduction or evidence, probably because of the relationships developed by the initial exploratory visits, as mentioned previously. The benefits of personal relationships in facilitating the research process, were indicated by Marshal (1999:612) when he said 'in an in-depth interview, the researcher should have an intimate relationship with the participants'.

In addition, a covering letter for the interviewees was prepared, which included an introduction to the research topic, its importance and a request for their participation. It also provided a guarantee of confidentiality, and emphasised that no contribution would be used beyond the research purpose. In order to be more accurate and realistic, and to avoid the disadvantages of the interview as a research method, mentioned earlier, it was intended to record all interviews using audio tape, but as pointed out previously, the researcher's expectation was that a number of the interviewees would refuse to allow their conversations to be recorded, and some tactics were implemented which helped the researcher to gain their trust and agreement to record the interview, as well as to obtain true answers, as will be illustrated later.

However, there was no mention in the covering letter concerning the intention to tape record the interviews, because of the expectation that tradition would deter people from participating. The researcher's preference was to broach this subject in a face-to-face situation, where he would have the chance to convince interviewees of his need for such a strategy, and reassure them of absolute privacy. Furthermore, before conducting the interviews, and because of the high position of most interviewees that had been approached, the first step was to approach these people to obtain their permission to participate in the study, and thus the researcher managed to meet each of them before the interview, aiming to:

- explain the aims of the study and accordingly the aim of the interview, and the nature of questions, so they would feel satisfied and confident.
- enable them to prepare any data or statistical information.
- ask them to allocate sufficient time for the interview.
- probe their feeling about tape recording the interview, and to gain their permission.

Accordingly, the researcher began to contact most of the intended interviewees by telephoning them directly, complimenting them, and requesting permission for the researcher to interview them. Using this strategy, the researcher

was able to meet with most interviewees for a short time, giving them the covering letter which introduced the study area and purpose, praising his/her role and position, and then clarifying the study's aims and importance, appreciating his/her participation in this study, asking for enough time to conduct a semi-structured interview, and to use audio-tape to record the proceedings. In respect of the few who could not be met, these were approached by telephone. Thereafter, and acting on the advice of most of them, the researcher started to contact the director of office, or the secretary of each of these participants, to arrange a convenient time for the interview. This process of arranging appointments took several forms, and took a long time, according to the participants' positions, their diary commitments, and the length of time needed to undertake the interview, which was between one to one and a half hours. The difficulties that the researcher faced during conducting the interviews will be discussed later. However, at the end, and despite all these difficulties, it was possible to conduct interviews.

4.4.7 Conducting the Interviews

In order to explore any problem early and thus potentially avoid it in the future, the researcher began by interviewing one participant from each of the four categories in the study sample. Thereafter, the entire target participants were interviewed, coming as already indicated, from the MoHE, CoHE, SQU, Ministry of Manpower, Colleges of Educations, Colleges of Technical Education, Ministry of Health, Institutes of Health Sciences and Training, College of Shari'ah (Islamic Law) and Law, private university and colleges, a number of senior officials and members of Majles A'Ddawla (The State Council), and Majles A'Shura (The Consultative Council), a number of investors in HE, and other businessmen, and some planning experts in the HE sector.

During the interviews, efforts were made to ensure success, by being well prepared to meet the interviewee, attending the appointment on, or a little ahead of the appointed time, having a clear question schedule, fully-functioning tape

recorder, and note book. Although some difficult circumstances arose, as will be explained later, these were ignored and the focus on conducting the interview was sustained. Usually, each interview was opened with a reminder of the study's aims, and this was followed by the researcher expressing thanks for the interviewee's participation, providing a guarantee of confidentiality, and asking permission to switch on the tape recorder. During the interview, in addition to the tape recording, some important notes were also made to ensure that the researcher consistently followed up the interviewee's responses, and to assist in analysing the interview findings.

Since all interviews were conducted in Arabic, with the exception of some parts in some interviews, most interviewees were offered a long time to respond. Sometimes, the answers given were not focussed on the actual question asked, thus requiring the researcher to interrupt the interviewee via good behaviour, and steer the respondent back to the right issue. Often, it was necessary to repeat questions in order to obtain the required information, and on those occasions where even this approach did not produce an answer that was properly focussed, the question concerned was dropped and the interview proceeded to the next question.

Most of the interviews were arranged to take place in the participants' offices, and during the time of work. However, some were held during the afternoon or evening, and for others, the interviews were undertaken in the participants' homes. Also, since most governmental bodies are located in the capital (Muscat), most interviews were conducted there, although some were held in other regions, thus requiring the researcher to travel.

4.5 Data Management and Analysis

Huberman and Miles define data management as 'the operations needed for a systematic, coherent process of data collection, storage, and retrieval' (Huberman and Miles, 1998:180 in Al Kitani, 2002:149). Al Kitani (2002:149) added that

‘data management and data analysis are two integrated inseparable sets of processes. They represent ways and methods of recording, storing and retrieving data at various stages of conducting qualitative research’.

Because there is no standard form for such a process, and because this particular piece of research is explanatory and explorative, qualitative methods were used, and it became an essential part of the method to gather data and analyse it at the same time. This multiple strategy of combining the management and analysis of data is useful in a qualitative study as Dey (1995) pointed out, and prevents researchers from being overwhelmed by a mass of material, simultaneously giving them more confidence that they can analyse data effectively. Hence, in the approach to data analysis, the researcher decided to be guided by this precept.

After conducting all the interviews, which were audio-taped, a total of 70 audio cassettes were collected by researcher, who felt that he held a heavy duty to save such important records, which could be regarded as secret and confidential. It should be noted that whilst 52 interviews were held, two were badly recorded and it was necessary to omit these. Furthermore, to ensure confidentiality, all the interviewees were coded as well as their responses, such that they could only be identified by the researcher. This process involved ‘giving a number or letter to each possible answer. Codes are a useful way of summarising large amounts of information’ (Nichols, 1991:44). Thus, the interview data was coded into relevant categories as derived from the appropriate literature (See Marshall and Rossman, 1995:109). A long time was spent in transcription of all these cassettes, writing up in Arabic, except for some parts of some interviews, and making notes and comments on each interview.

Thereafter, another heavy task was the translation of all these materials from Arabic into English. Thus, in accordance with the strategy of combining data collection and data management, and in line with the guidance from the

researcher's supervisor, only those parts of the data that were directly related to the study's aims and objectives, were translated in conjunction with a refining process so that the researcher was able to turn ideas around and develop a focused interpretation as discussed by Miles and Huberman (1994:245 in Al Kitani, 2002:149), all the interviewees' answers to each question, were reviewed and classified in accordance with the themes generated as a result of the literature review, and the documents analysis, and finally, the analysis of the interview findings was undertaken as explained in the next section.

4.6 The Analysis

Clearly, this piece of qualitative research is dealing with written plans, policies, political speeches and other documents, in addition to verbatim responses from interviewees, and the analysis of such types of data can be undertaken in several ways, as indicated in the research methods literature (see for example, Cohen and Manion, 1995; Marshal and Rossman, 1995; Denscombe, 1998). In this respect, some researchers have tied particular types of analysis in with given methods of data collection, but in the case of documentary analysis and interview data analysis, it is possible to adopt the same approach. For instance, Murphy et al (1998) and Al Kitani (2002) suggested using the 'ethnographic analysis method' for the analysis of documents, and other researchers, such as Harvey (1990), Fielding (1993) and Al-Hinai (2002), have promoted this approach particularly for interview findings. This suitability arises from the nature of this method, which aims to enable qualitative researchers:

to be systematic and analytic but not rigid. Categories and variable initially guide the study, but others are allowed and expected to emerge during the study, including an orientation to constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings, and nuances (Atheide and Johnson, 1998:16).

In addition, this commonly-used analytical technique incorporates four stages, beginning with the collection of field notes and transcripts, moving on to a search for themes and categories, progressing to the marking up or cutting up of information, and finally the re-sequencing of data (Al-Hinai, 2002). Hence, features of this model of analysis are strongly related to a similar analytical strategy called 'thematic interpretation', which is also used with qualitative information, and which 'lies more in the discovery and identification of the multiple relations between different themes that make a textual corpus consistent and intelligible' (Forest, and Meunier, 2005:35)

Consequently, this research study has adopted a combination of these two analytical methods – 'ethnographic analysis' and 'thematic interpretation'. Since, 'thematic interpretation' is 'a process that can be used with most, if not all, qualitative methods and that allows for the translation of qualitative information into quantitative data if this described by the researcher' (Boyatzis, 1998:4), its use has assisted the researcher in understanding some matters that could not be found in the documents, particularly the issues and factors related to the inability of Oman's HE system to absorb more SSGs and to meet the increasing demand for HE, which is not only attributed to the lack of funds, but also to the matter of the plurality of supervisory authorities in HEIs, and other organisational and administrative factors. This distinctive feature of thematic interpretation was mentioned by Boyatzis (1998) who said 'people used thematic analysis to see something that had not been evident to others', and who also quoted from Fanklin Pensato, who said that he had used 'thematic analysis to 'read' the internal climate of the organisation and its divisions [and this had] helped him and other executives to discover a new strategic agenda for each of the various businesses' (p.3).

Hence, these two models were applied in tandem in analysing the information and data gathered, whether from documents or interviews. This approach led the researcher to sometimes re-visit certain documents after transcription of some

interviews in order to link the findings from the two, and enhance the interpretation, wherever possible, drawing on the evidence from the literature.

4.7 Validity and Reliability Concerns

Although there is disagreement among authors about the degree of validity and reliability that should exist in qualitative research, this research approach is, nevertheless, one of the main methods employed in the social sciences, and has led to deep understanding of educational and other social phenomena (see for example, Crossley and Vulliamy, 1997; Dey, 1993). Validity, as Bell (1993:65) observes 'tells us whether an item measures or describes what it is supposed to measure or describe' while reliability provides indications of 'the extent to which a test or procedure produces results under constant conditions on all occasions' (Bell, 1993:64).

Since all researches must be able to demonstrate validity and reliability, this attempted to ensure a satisfactory level of both, by adopting the following procedures:

- An extremely wide review of documentation and appropriate literature was made to identify key themes to be pursued during the interview exercise.
- During the preparation stage of the interview questions, several drafts of the question schedule were submitted to a number of referees in the SQU and in other specialised educational institutions, and these drafts were discussed many times with these people, as well as with the researcher's supervisor, in order to develop questions that served the study's aims.
- The final schedule of questions (English version) was submitted to an English specialist (a linguist).
- Since most interviewees were native Arabic speakers, the interview questions were translated into Arabic in order to facilitated the participants'

understanding of the questions, and to help the researcher to document and transcribe the responses easily. Furthermore, in order to ensure more accuracy and reality, the Arabic draft of the interview schedule was also presented to an Arabic linguist who made language corrections.

- The strategy of two research methods in combination was used.
- The research population was carefully selected to ensure balance and appropriate representation, and more than 50 interviews were held in order to establish the full range of opinion.
- Sufficient opportunity was given to interviewees, without any interruption from the researcher, or any attempt to influence their responses, and a friendly atmosphere was generated to ensure the interviewees' comfort and confidence, and thus promote frank and honest answers.
- All interviews were tape-recorded.
- Notes were made during and after each interview, so that the researcher did not lose important notes and circumstances that may have been alluded by the interviewee during the meeting.
- All transcriptions were made by the researcher himself. In addition, each interview was transcribed very soon after the interview, while the experience was still fresh in the researcher's mind, and the opportunity for error in transcription was low.
- All the interviewees were guaranteed complete anonymity and confidentiality, thereby making them feel more confident in providing genuine responses.
- Two analytical models were used for analysing and discussing the findings and data, thereby providing the opportunity for comparison and contrasting.

4.8 Dealing with Ethical Issues and General Difficulties

Reflecting upon Omani culture and traditions, the researcher was concerned that particular special and significant socio-political values that permeate Omani society, might have influenced how the participants in the study responded to the research. The ethical issues raised by this approach, including firstly, the need to seek the consent of the participants and to ensure that their understanding regarding the purpose of the research was clear and unambiguous. As discussed earlier, Omani society is still not open to academic research to any great extent, and it was envisaged that gaining access to governmental plans, policies, and other similar documentation would prove difficult, since these things are closely guarded as secret, and political in nature. Likewise, it is generally believed that people who are not part of the organisational members, have no right to be informed about that organisation's documents, or about certain data related to the country's policies, plans and procedures and so on, except for what is officially published. In addition, it was believed that some interviewees would be afraid to provide certain types of information or talk about their organisation's pitfalls and failures, for fear of punishment from a higher level.

In managing such situations, the researcher very carefully explained the focus of the study and ensured the confidentiality of the interviewee's responses, in order to give them the guarantee that any information would be used only for scientific research purposes. Moreover, the researcher had tried to choose the best way to question the interviewees, and used Arabic, Oman's first language, as the communication medium, thereby instilling a sense of security. Furthermore, a number of techniques to reassure the interviewees were used, such as repeating a question using a different form of words to aid understanding. In fact, there was no problem whatsoever with most interviewees, owing to the good relationships that the researcher tried to build prior to conducting the interviews.

Secondly, the issue of tape recording the interviews posed an ethical dilemma, as it is not part of the Omani culture to subject oneself to this level of surveillance,

as mentioned earlier. Nonetheless, it was absolutely essential to gain the agreement of participants to be audio-taped, and consequently the researcher had to persuade interviewees to agree to something that was fundamentally against their natural instincts. By being absolutely honest about the purpose of the research, guaranteeing complete confidentiality, explaining the anonymous coding system, ensuring that no person could be identified in the thesis, and promising that the tapes would be destroyed after the research was completed, the researcher was able to secure the agreement of all the people taking part. A few difficulties were encountered by the researcher in this process, but in general these were all resolved, and it is felt that the interviewees appreciated the importance of answering truly.

Of course, there were other factors that helped in obtaining the interviewees' agreement to be audio-taped. For example, most interviewees are well qualified, aware, and confident, and this helped the researcher to obtain their commitment; and the aforementioned good relationships between the researcher and most of the participants stood as a strong bond which instilled mutual trust.

Regarding general difficulties in conducting the research, there were understandable, but nonetheless numerous, delays in arranging a number of interviews and fixing appointments, since despite some interviewees' agreement to participate, their prestigious positions and corresponding high level of responsibilities meant that the research interview had to take second place, and there were many cancellations and re-arrangements because of more pressing matters. Hence, arranging appointments, and getting enough time to conduct the interviews was a major problem, involving ongoing efforts to liaise with their secretaries and offices.

Sometimes, an appointment would not be cancelled until the researcher had actually arrived at the ministry or organisation according to the pre-arranged time, and the secretary would inform the researcher, that the appointment was changed

to another time, would need to be re-arranged, or that she/he would call back. This involved further effort on the part of the researcher, as invariably the follow-up call from the secretary never came. On other occasions, having arrived at the appointed time, the researcher was made to wait for a very long time. Such problems were attributed not to a desire to avoid the interview, since agreement had already been obtained in this respect, but rather to poor levels of administrative expertise among secretaries, extremely busy diaries of the personnel involved, and to the general low priority given to participation in research matters in Oman.

There were other difficulties facing the researcher during the interviews, one of these being the fact that the majority of interviewees spoke for much longer than required, sometimes spending 15 or 20 minutes in answering one question. Given the need to collect rich data, the researcher was loathe to interrupt these flows, particularly as most interviewees were key figures in Omani HE. Consequently, some interviews lasted more than three hours, and others needed a second meeting to complete the interview, which cost the researcher more time, effort and money. However, there were interviewees who adhered strictly to the time, and some of these were able to address all the questions within one hour or less.

Furthermore, after conducting all the interviews, the resulting 70 audio cassettes, which represented confidential records, cost the researcher long time in transcription, writing up in Arabic. Initially, the possibility of employing an assistant for the transcription was considered, but the confidential nature of the material, and the undertakings given to the interviewees prevented this, and consequently the researcher completed this task himself, with the exception of some uncontentious material that was transcribed by very close relatives. At the end of this process, three large box files were filled with the transcriptions. Accordingly, another more difficult task was the translation of all these materials from Arabic into English. In this respect, as mentioned previously, the advice from the researcher's academic supervisor was to translate only those parts

actually needed for the research, since translation of the whole would have taken more than one year. Nevertheless, translation of those parts, reviewing and revising all that materials cost me long time and many efforts, and made the period of study longer than expected.

Furthermore, during the translation stage another problem arose as a result of the different languages used during the research, and the fact that in some interviews, certain sayings were used that whilst being common in Arabic, have no comparable phrases in English. For example, (L4sc3) when responding to the question about whether Oman should seek help from foreign experts and institutions, (L4sc3) said what could be translated as ‘The residents of Mecca know its roads more’, meaning that the national specialists are more likely to understand their society’s needs than foreign people. Although he/she believes that the county should seek for help and advanced experiences of other countries, but without ignorance of the national experts and experience which continued for around 35 years.

Another example can be seen in the response of (L1uc1) when asked about what and how the state could absorb the current increasing number of SSGs, and how it could provide sufficient funds for all those students. The response could be translated as ‘the boat sail should be taken down before the wind blew’ meaning that the state should have formulated its plans and financial budget to ensure it was prepared, before reaching the present difficulty. As a third example, when asked about the privatisation in the HE sector, (L2d10g) said ‘it is weapon with two sharp edges’ meaning that privatisation has two aspects, the first being beneficial, and the second being disadvantageous. The English phrase ‘a double-edged sword’ encapsulates this idea. Another example from (L2d2g) responding about who should enter HE from the SSGs, was the phrase ‘do not cultivate in the stone’, meaning that not all those graduate have the ability to proceed to higher studies, and should be directed to other, more suitable avenues to match their ability. In order to cope with such linguistic problems, a specialist English linguistic was asked to consider these kinds of phrases and revise the translations.

As a final comment, it can be said that the researcher found the interview exercise (50 interviewees) an exacting task that developed a number of skills within him.

4.9 Reflections on the Research Process

As a developing country, Oman like many other Middle Eastern countries that have undergone rapid advancement over the last quarter to a half a century, is still in the process of development and consequently its research culture is still in its infancy. As a result, there are endemic problems for any researcher since deeply-rooted attitudes towards the provision of information, especially where that information might be seen to run contrary to the official line, make it hard to conduct objective investigations.

In this study, the researcher came up against the whole range of obstacles in this respect, perhaps more so because the target population consisted of people in high positions, whose identities might be guessed. Specifically, this lack of research culture was apparent in the various barriers that presented themselves during the course of the study as serious challenges. Reflecting on this situation, the researcher believes that the strategy to adopt in any similar environment, is for the target sample to be substantially over-estimated, to account for subsequent changes of mind, as the cultural and traditional attitudes have time to dissuade the identified population from participating, between the initial time of contact and gaining agreement, and the actual data collection exercise.

A second reflection makes it clear to the researcher that it is necessary to appreciate when to stop trying to persuade someone to participate, for fear of being unethical. Where people who have agreed to be interviewed later erect barriers (not being available to start the interview at the arranged time, or cancelling at the last minute and suggesting a re-arrangement), the researcher needs to make a judgement as to whether they are actually refusing permission to go ahead, or whether there are genuine reasons for the hold up or cancellation, and the participant's permission is still intact.

Part II

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Part II

Introduction:

Part II of the thesis includes five chapters that provide a wide discussion of the documentary evidence and the interview findings.

Chapter Five concentrates on the reality of demand for HE, socially and economically. Different aspects of the demand, particularly the increasing number of SSGs and other categories of Omani citizens who wish to continue their higher studies, and the urgent needs of the local marketplace for a well-qualified national workforce, are all clarified. The chapter then proceeds to diagnose the current condition of the HE system, including the approved objectives and plans for HE, enrolment capacity and provision available at both governmental and private HEIs, and the funding allocated to the sector.

Chapters Six to Nine provide in-depth discussions of the findings of the semi-structured interviews with key personnel in the HE sector, in other governmental bodies concerned with Human Resources Development (HRD), and other interested people from public organisations and the private sector. Chapter Six discusses the interview findings related to the first two main themes, these being: the demand for HE, and HE capacity. Each of other three chapters then covers one of the prime themes of the study as follows: Chapter Seven considers the issues of vision, objectives, and policies of the HE system in Oman, Chapter Eight discusses the theme of administration and management of HE in Oman, and Chapter Nine analyses the interviewees' information and data relating to the financing of HE and several resources that could be used in financing HEIs as well as in assisting individual students who wish to join HE.

Part III contains the last chapter of the thesis which concludes the most important discussions and provides recommendations.

Chapter Five

Analysis and Discussion of Documentary Evidence: The Reality of Supply and Demand

5.1 Introduction

Chapter Three reviewed the developmental stages of Oman's HEIs, both governmental and private, and highlighted the capacity and fields of studies in respect of the one governmental university, and other different specialised colleges and institutes. Having thus established the overall history leading to the current structure and composition of the HE sector in Oman, this chapter will now focus on the key issues and challenges in the national context.

After this introduction, the second section will deal with the demands for HE from Omani society generally, and the economic pressures, since these influences will undoubtedly impact upon the planning process of HE. This will be followed by a section regarding the current capacity of the HE sector, and the increasing number of school leavers hoping for HE opportunities. The fourth section will identify society's role in dealing with the issue of limited capacity in the light of the high demand and increasing number of SSGs. Then, sections five and six will consider the current philosophy underpinning the vision and objectives of education in the Sultanate, and this will lead into the fourth section that will consider the vision and objectives of HE specifically, and present the response to '*Oman 2020*' in terms of curriculum development, by HEIs, both public and private. The seventh section will explore issues relating to HE financing in Oman. Then, the chapter will finish with a brief summary.

5.2 Demands for Higher Education in Oman

Since the early 1970s, Oman has witnessed remarkable achievements across all aspects of life, particularly in socio-economic terms, as presented in Chapter

Two. This growth of all sectors during the country's socio-economic development naturally brought a requirement for more educated, well-qualified, and well-trained people. For example, promoting health services required suitably qualified doctors and other medical specialisations, and likewise the development of commerce, the education system, social care, political affairs, and all other social services, demanded well-qualified personnel with suitable and advanced expertise.

5.2.1 The social demand

Omani's pro-HE society is, therefore, no exception to the international trend, and since the 1970s, the government has diversified educational services and attempted to meet the increasing social and economic demands for education generally, as well as for HE. Thus, from the 1st FYDP (1976-1980) when the first higher training institutes were established, there has been steady growth in this sector. However, the World Bank report (2001:4), observes that in spite of impressive progress in Oman, 'a major challenge facing the higher education system is the mushrooming number of secondary-school graduates who have difficulty finding places in higher education ... This trend is creating pressure on universities and other higher-education institutions to admit more students'.

The pressure is also increased by the large number of expatriates working in all economic sectors (Al Hashmi, 1999). Such pressure comes not only from the economic demand to replace these workers with well-qualified Omanis, but also from society generally, especially since there are known negative influences forthcoming from some categories of the foreign labour force. Furthermore, Oman and other Gulf countries, as Al-Barwani (2002) pointed out, are challenged to find solutions to glaring issues, for example, the social stigma attached to TE and VT, the lack of a solid infrastructure for a 'learning society', the lack of a proper environment for creativity and personal initiatives, and the lack of involvement of other partners and stakeholders in the education process.

These issues have generated other social matters and have led to an accumulation of problems that hinder the process of society's development. In this direction, for example, the Omani society is now facing what could be called work-type entrapment of SSGs, in which most of these graduates are trapped in intermittent low paying jobs (Al-Barwani, 2002). In addition to the lack of economic security and opportunity for personal development created by this situation, this has also led to individuals being frustrated, and feeling that they have been unjustly treated, which in turn produces other unhealthy social behaviour.

Furthermore, there are several factors affecting the social demand for HE, some internal and others external. The MoHE (2002c) reported the internal ones, as follows:

- The link between the HE qualification and financial level of the job, and special social prestige.
- The link between economic development and knowledge improvement, which demands HE outputs, and has led to HE qualifications being regarded as one of the most important conditions for entering the labour market.
- The continuous social pressures to increase the number of study opportunities for SSGs, to enable Omani families to enrol their children in the public HEIs, as recompense for their losses during the pre-modernisation age of the country, as stated by the Majles A'Shura (Consultative Council) and the State Council.
- The increasing fertility of the country's population and declining death rate resulting from improvements in health care over the last three decades.
- The comprehensive and rapid development process of the Sultanate, covering all aspects of citizens' lifestyles, as a result of high oil and natural gas revenues over the last three decades.
- The upward social mobility and increased aspirations, generated by the economic transition.

(Translated by the author from: MoHE, 2002c).

These internal and external factors, have generated a wide range of requirements for the development of society and its citizens, such as promoting knowledge, educating people, transforming society into a democratic system, spreading equity and justice, and all of these aspects require more highly-educated and well-skilled people to cope with the modernisation process. Appreciating this situation, leads to the understanding that the state cannot continue to shoulder the major burden of transforming the Omani society into a modern one, and that other agencies and organisations must participate in this process. Specifically, this requires the people themselves, the private sector, the social and cultural centres and institutions, and international organisations, to take responsibility for this large undertaking, as The World Bank (1994) highlighted when assessing the role of private institutions in helping to meet the growing social demand for HE.

(<http://www.ericfacility.net/servlet/com.artesiotech.servlet.search.SearchServlet?action=9> No. ED 381040 on 08/12/2003)

Moreover, it can be seen that Oman's HE system, like in other countries influenced by globalisation, is undergoing the transition from an 'elite' to a 'mass' HE system (MoHE, 2002c), in which the student cohort is more closely representative of the socio-economic distribution of the general population (Preddey, 2004). Thus, in keeping with the world view, education including HE, is a citizen's right, and the Sultanate recognises this provision as one of its moral and social duties towards its people (MoHE, 2002c).

Hence, in addition to the increasing demand from SSGs; there is a significant market for HE in the form of Omani employees in different governmental bodies, who had no chance to enter HE previously, and who now wish to do so. This is evidenced by the high number of Omani employees who can not gain government-funded scholarships, and who take Study Furlough (or holiday) with their salary only, paying tuition fees and other expenses themselves. Other employees take Study Furlough with only half of their salary, and others sacrifice their full salary in order to continue their study. Unfortunately, despite the

researcher's efforts to obtain accurate information and data about the number of such employees, none was found, since the task required contacting all the departments of personnel affairs as well as the departments of training and HRD across all ministries and other governmental bodies. However, this reality is well known in Oman, and many of Omani researchers whether here in Britain, Australia or in other Arab countries are paying tuition fees and/ or other expenses themselves.

5.2.2 Increasing number of SSGs

During the last three decades, HE has been the fastest growing sector of the education system in most countries (Li, 1998 in Al-Hashmi, 1999), and most developing countries are 'currently under great pressure to meet increasing demand for higher education, and many are finding it hard to keep up' (World Bank, 2000:33). According to the World Bank (2000), mushrooming primary school enrolments in the developing countries, has led to a further increase in secondary education enrolments, and in turn, an expansion in HE. The Report highlights that:

More secondary students should mean more people entering higher education, even if the proportion progressing remained constant. However, the proportion who do want to graduate to higher education is increasing substantially, as globalization makes skilled workers more valuable and the international market for ideas, top faculty, and promising students continues to develop (World Bank, 2000:34).

In consequence, the World Bank (2001) urged the expansion and diversification of HE programmes in both public and private institutions to reduce the pressure of increasing numbers of SSGs, and also encouraged the use of innovative methods of programme delivery, e.g. the extensive use of educational technology, which would allow more students to be served.

Oman has met the same challenges as other developing countries in this respect, as the rapid growth in the Sultanate's population over the past three

decades has created a large demographic pyramid with a wide base of young people. Those under 19 years of age form 41.2% of the total population of Oman in 2002 (MoNE, 2003c), a situation which ‘has proved a great challenge for development on all fronts. ... It is a daunting reality for both the government and the community, and has an impact on all service sectors in the country, including Higher Education’ (MoHE, 2004b:25).

Because of Oman’s relatively recent development, the last three decades of the 20th century have witnessed a period of unprecedented expansion of GE/BE, and at the beginning of the 6th FYDP, over 500,000 students were enrolled in over 1,000 schools across the country, generating more than 30,000 graduates from the Secondary Stage. In 2005, at the end of this FYDP, the number of schools had increased to over 1,046, the number of students reached 568, and the number of SSGs increased to more than 43,700 (MoE, 2006). Indeed, from the second half of the 1990s as Al-Hashmi (1999) pointed out, the Sultanate faced the serious challenge of the high and increasing number of SSGs and the limited capacity within HEIs, unable to absorb them. Table 5.1 indicates the continual increase in school leavers over the last decade.

Table 5.1
Number of Secondary School Graduates 1995-2005

Year	Secondary School Graduates
1995	14,460
1996	17,163
1997	19,179
1998	20,888
1999	24,877
2000	29,547
2001	32,959
2002	35,044
2003	43,851
2004	44,233
2005	43,705

Source: MoE (2006)

As shown in Table 5.1, the number of SSGs is now three times what it was in 1995, reaching 43,705 graduates in 2005, while the total number of places in HEIs has increased from 6,052 students to 12,089 students in 2004 (MoHE, 1998/1999 and 2005). Hence, in 2004 those eligible to enter HE were more than 44,000 in number, while those who actually enrolled were only 12,089, representing just 27.3% of the total eligible population, and meaning that over 32,000 students were left unsatisfied.

Actually, as mentioned this situation has been occurring since the second half of the 1990s, posing important questions about the size of the gap between the demand for, and the capacity of HE, and resulting in many low income families taking loans to educate their children. Indeed, some families sold their properties to invest in their children's HE in the hope that their later success would enable the families to eventually have a better standard of living.

5.2.3 The economic demand

At the beginning of the 1990s, it was expected that over 80,000 Omanis would be unemployed during that decade, while increasing numbers of expatriates would be employed (Al-Lamky, 1992). Results from the study conducted by Al-Lamky (1992) showed that approximately 65% of participants indicated that they were unable to replace expatriates and perceived no clear policy by the Omani government regarding this. The current signs indicate that this number is correct, or may even be higher.

Studies of the labour market imbalance in Oman, attribute these problems to the following: a mismatch between fields and requirements of the Omani economy, preferences of Omanis to major in Liberal Arts fields instead of scientific and technological fields, as well as Omanis' preferences for unchallenging and unproductive works (Al-Lamky, 1992:ix).

According to the Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*', there is an important economic demand for HE, resulting in a number of pivotal targets which are relevant to HE and its relationship to the national economy, these

being:

- A- To establish an HE system for graduates from secondary education, that provides study areas and specialisations that are needed by the national economy. Also, to prepare provision to facilitate practical research in the economic and social domains (MoD, 1995a:36).
- B- To provide and adapt systems for TE and VT which are able to prepare national working power able to be tasked with the needs of the work market, and possessing different specialisations and skills, and to verify a level of income which is appropriate with its performance and productivity (MoD, 1995a:98).

In contrast, although this strategy has been implemented for eight years, and despite the increase in educated Omanis, some studies indicate that the number of expatriates has also increased, and simultaneously there is unemployment and under-employment among Omanis (Al Barwani, 2002). The manpower statistics relating to Oman, demonstrate that at the beginning of the current decade there were more than half a million expatriates (530,000 workers in 2002) in the private sector workforce, but only 60,487 Omanis, representing 11.4% of the total workforce, while the expatriates comprise 88.6% (MoNE, 2002c). This means that despite previous efforts, expatriates continue to dominate the private sector labour market, accounting for 89.8% of employees at the end of 2001 (MoNE, 2001b).

Oman's labour market requirements

It can be seen that since the 1970s, the state has taken many steps to provide qualified manpower for the country's developing sectors. In this direction, it was explained that the government efforts throughout the FYDPs and the Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*', started by attempting to satisfy the administrative requirements of public sector agencies by educating a national workforce with appropriate qualifications.

Actually, between 1990 and 2000 the total number of workers in the public service agencies increased, as also did the number of expatriates (from 20.2% in 1990 to 27.7% in 2000) (MoHE, 2002c). However, some improvements are evident in this sector since in 1998 expatriates numbered 25,000, representing 31% of the total employees in the public civil service agencies (Al Mamari, 2000), whereas in 2000 the proportion of expatriates had dropped to 27.7% of the total number of Civil Service employees, and the proportion of Omanis in this sector had increased to 74.1%, from 69% in 1998 (MoHE, 2002c).

With regard to the education level of the workforce, the number of Omanis with university qualifications in the public sector increased from 2,763 in 1990, to 9,048 in 1998, representing 16.2% of the total workforce in the public civil service agencies. That increase was attributed mainly to the rising number of graduates from HEIs during the 1990s. However, the number of expatriates with post-secondary qualifications in this sector in 1998 was 21,100, 12,500 having university qualifications, 782 with high diplomas, and 839 with Masters' degrees (MoD, 1998).

By 2000, the total number of Non-Omani employees, qualified with diplomas, higher diplomas, university degrees, Masters and PhDs in the public sector agencies reached 20,603, and in the same year, there were 2,766 expatriates with different higher qualifications employed in this sector (MoHE, 2002c), which demonstrates the high demand for HE and a well-qualified national labour force, and also poses some serious questions about the process of Omanisation in the governmental sector as well as in the private sector. It is also important to note here that 'the majority of expatriates who work in the public sector are employed in highly paid, prestigious professions like medical doctors, university and colleges professors, consultants, experts etc.' (AlBarwani, 2002:10), and these indicators confirmed that the expatriates were placed in jobs which require higher qualifications.

Table 5.2
The Growth of Omani Participation Compared with the Growth
of Expatriates in the Private Sector Workforce

Year	Omanis			Expatriates	Total
	Male	Female	Total		
1999	41,910	8,750	50,660	475,000	525,660
2000	45,671	10,048	55,671	495,000	550,671
2001	49,584	10,903	60,487	530,000	590,487

Source: MoNE (2001).

Regarding the private sector, Table 5.2 shows that in the year 2001, expatriates constituted 530,000 workers, Omanis accounting for only 60,487, representing 11.4% of the total workforce. At the end of the same year, the ratio of expatriates in the private sector increased by 8.1% compared with their proportion in 2000 (Oman Daily, 2002, Issue No. 7564), demonstrating a large and increasing gap between Omanis and expatriates.

The statistics indicate that in 1998, there were 28,000 workers among more than half a million expatriates in the private sector with post-secondary qualifications (Al-Mamari, 2000), while in the year 2000 there were more than 42,000 employees (excluding those in the commercial banks, Petroleum Development of Oman Company, Oil and Gas sector) with qualifications of diplomas and university degrees (MoHE, 2002c). Although the number of Omani males and females who entered the private sector labour market has gradually increased, the total number cannot be compared with the expatriate workforce (Al Barwani, 2002).

It might be worth mentioning at this point that, as in the public civil service, a large number of those expatriates in the private sector agencies occupied senior positions or professional jobs and gained high incomes. In 1998, there were 25,170 in managerial jobs and business administration, 32,276 working as specialists in different professional areas, 26,186 as technicians in the sciences,

technical and social fields, and 44,100 employed in operational areas in the chemical, and food industries (Al-Mamari, 2000). In contrast, it can be seen that Omanis in this sector occupied very low positions, attracting low monthly incomes. For example, in 2000 there were 27,914 workers whose salary was between RO.100 and 120 (\$260) monthly (MoHE, 2002c).

Such statistics indicate the extent to which the private sector has a pressing need for a national workforce with high qualifications and skills, to replace the expatriates, and at the same time they demonstrate the high demand for, and the importance of, HE in supporting the private sector.

Table 5.3
The Omani Workforce According to Level of Education

Type of Education	Percentage of Total Workforce	Percentage of Employed	Percentage of Unemployed
Preparatory or Less	69.8	71.8	60.3
Secondary	18.9	15.5	35.3
Intermediate colleges Technical and others	7.0	7.8	3.1
University	4.3	4.9	1.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: (MoNE 2000)

Table 5.3 shows that 69.8% of all Omani workers possess preparatory or lower educational qualifications, indicating that this category of employees would most likely be in low paid and low status jobs, such as messengers, security men, gardeners, cleaners, etc. In contrast, the data indicate that the reason for the inability of the labour market to absorb the SSGs is not based only on the unavailability of jobs, nor on the level of education required by the labour market, but also, on the skills, attitudes, and experience required of workers, in which respect, Omani SSGs are not well-prepared, whereas expatriates are (Al Barwani, 2002).

Throughout an extremely important symposium held in Muscat in March 2004, entitled '*Higher Education and the Labour Market: Opportunities and Options*', and organised by eight governmental bodies including the Diwan of the Royal Court, MoHE, Ministry of Manpower, SQU, Ministry of Civil Service and other bodies, a number of discussions were held concerning the requirements of the local labour market and job opportunities in different sectors in the country. In consequence, the symposium participants recommended that more than 50 prime fields of study and specialisations were needed and should be available in the local HEIs, such as: management, management of HRD, marketing, business, IT management, tourism, hospitality, accounting, internet technology, computer sciences, computer engineering, communication engineering, mechanical engineering, industrial engineering, electro-mechanical engineering and other engineering specialisations. Each of these main fields included a number of sub-specialisations which generated a long list of provision required to satisfy the Omani market (Sultanate of Oman, 2004).

Moreover, another list of specialisations was drawn up in respect of overseas study, such as: industrial technology, industrial management, finance, and economics. In addition, 16 study areas relating to the fish wealth sector and ichthyology, and another 30 specialisations in medical technology, biology sciences, medical sciences, aviation, communications, and others were recommended. According to a study published by SQU, there is the expectation that Oman will need 153,200 university qualified employees by the year 2020, 104,900 of which will be required in the science and social specialisations, except graduates of colleges of education, 5,600 with masters and doctorates and 42,700 teachers (Al Mamari, 2000). In particular, the most important requirements of the marketplace are:

- The public sector still needs experts in most engineering specialisations, medicine (with higher qualifications), and nursing (with university qualifications).

- The private sector needs a workforce that covers several specialisations, such as business administration, finance, marketing, HR management, general management, planning and investment, IT, accounting, economics, and most engineering specialisations.
- The industry sector needs more specialists in certain areas, for instance, marketing, accounting, industrial engineering, quality management, engineering administration, design, chemical engineering, electronic engineering and production management engineering, as indicated by a survey conducted by the Public Authority of Industrial Areas (Al Mamari, 2000).

It can be concluded that all economic indicators and statistics evidence the high demand for HE, and the pressing need to expand and develop its capacity as well as to improve its efficiency and performance.

Most Important Factors Affecting the Economic Demand for HE

No country, however advanced the level of its industrial development, attempts to accommodate all SSGs in HEIs. Student ability and levels of motivation often determine that a large number will not aspire to immediate entry, but rather seek to find a useful place in the workforce (Murphy, 2004). Therefore, they must have at least basic preparation for success in the labour market. As the World Bank states: ‘... those secondary-school graduates who are not admitted to higher education should also have acquired the skills in areas such as communication and information technology to increase their chances of employment’ (World Bank, 2001:15).

In fact this is one among several challenges facing the Omani economy and social services. But most relate to the weakness of the education and training sector, either at the level of BE/GE or in HE, which appears not to be preparing the required number of young Omanis in the appropriate specialisms to adequately respond to the requirements of the country’s development process. In

a paper prepared by an Omani expert, and submitted to the International Conference on Secondary Education held in 2002, it was concluded that the most important of the challenges facing this sector, are:

- ❖ The inability of the labour market to absorb SSGs. Indicators of the labour market situation in Oman, studies on Omanisation, together with the seminar on the employment of the Omani labour force, have all shown that only a small percentage of SSGs have been absorbed by the labour market, while expatriates continue to dominate the private sector's labour market with their participation rates reaching 89% (MoNE, 2001b).
- ❖ The inability of HEIs to absorb SSGs. The official statistics provided by the MoE show that by 2002 the absorption capacity of existing HEIs, both government and private (including scholarships abroad) was only 44% of the total number of SSGs, and that this number represents only 12.6% of the total population of the 18-24 age group (MoE, 2001b).
- ❖ The high cost of HE. HEIs are carrying a considerable burden caused by the shortfalls in education provision at the earlier levels. This is evidenced in the government spending per student which reached RO. 5,000 (Approx. US\$14400.00). 'The consequence of students' inadequate preparation is manifested in students' ability to comply with high level academic requirements such as study skills, research skills, language skills and more importantly the right attitude to learn' (Al Barawani, 2002:6).
- ❖ Employers are faced with the high costs of training. This is because the SSGs are not equipped with the necessary work skills, and consequently employers bear the burden of the direct costs of training, or the indirect costs of supporting training programmes financially.
- ❖ The entrapment of SSGs in intermittent, low-paying jobs, because of their poor preparation for the world of work. This situation has led to young people having no economic security, or opportunity for personal development, and as a result there is employee dissatisfaction, low productivity and a high turnover of Omani manpower (Al Barwani, 2002).

All these issues and challenges facing the Omani economic sector reflect the extent of the gap between the education system, particularly HE, and the requirements of the marketplace in Oman, and indicate the high economic demands for HE. The gap also highlights the crucial role of the education system as a whole and its inability to prepare young Omanis for worthwhile and satisfying careers, and the increasing number of secondary school leavers presents a mounting and formidable challenge for HE planners, as is now discussed.

5.3 The Capacity of HE in Oman

Although HE in Oman has progressed reasonably as detailed in Chapter Three, it is still developing in terms of both quantity and quality, and several weaknesses point to room for improvement. A major problem is that the number of State's HEIs is insufficient to accommodate the SSGs population, and Oman compares poorly with some other Arab and developing countries, which are at the same level of development (Al-Hashmi, 1999). For example, in 2000, the percentage of enrolled undergraduate students in the cohort aged 18 to 22 years in Oman was 12.6%, while in other GCC and Arab countries, it was between 15-35% (World Bank, 2001).

This matter has rightly been recognised by the Omani government, as a national issue, being regarded as a major challenge, as documented by the MoHE:

Higher Education ... now, more than at any other time, is under pressure expeditiously to review enrolment policies and procedures to enable existing institutions to accommodate the demand. At the same time, the Ministry of Higher Education should prepare to accommodate the youth cohort by planning to expand Institutions of Higher Education, to diversify their specialisations, and to make their procedures more flexible in order to absorb the growing number of school graduates (MoHE, 2004b:25).

Despite the government's efforts to absorb high numbers of SSGs, it seems that the gap between those graduating and those enrolling in HEIs is increasing.

UNESCO statistics (1995) revealed that the number of students enrolled in HE in Oman was 726 per 100,000 inhabitants, compared with 1,369 in Qatar, 1,145 in Saudi Arabia, 1,918 in Turkey, 1,321 in Bulgaria and 4,757 in South Korea (UNESCO, 1995 in Al-Hashmi, 1999).

5.3.1 The capacity of governmental HEIs

With the developments in HE during the last 20 years, enrolment in the governmental HEIs is increasing in a gradual manner, as shown in Table 5.4. However, the question addressed here is: to what extent is this increasing enrolment responding to the high, and growing number of SSGs, and to other high demands for HE?

Table 5.4
Number of SSGs enrolled in Governmental HEIs
(for First University Degree and Diplomas) 1996-2004

Institutions	Years and Number of enrolled students								
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Sultan Qaboos University	1,344	1,802	1,800	1,800	2,038	2,231	2,445	2,797	2,697
Colleges of Education (6 Colleges)	2,105	2,182	2,523	2,006	1,997	2,094	1,871	1,995	2,089
College of Sharia'h and Law	-	120	120	120	128	169	169	179	185
Technical and Industrial Colleges (6 Colleges)	1,750	1,500	2,070	1,555	2,088	2,204	3,514	4,618	4,300
Health Training Institutions	528	580	684	568	694	695	832 ¹	841	714
Institute/College of Banking and Financial Studies	49	46	141	44	90	115	251	115	121
Institute of Sharia'h Sciences	49	49	95	40	59	42	84	88	94
Oman Academy for Tourism and Hospitality	-	-	-	-	-	217	123	N/A	N/A
Full Scholarships (MoHE)	67	69	67	60	60	60	60	60	60
Partial Scholarships (MoHE)	67	69	67	60	60	45	30	30	30
Full Endowments (Offered by GCC Countries and others)	-	-	-	-	-	83	90	125	96
Internal Scholarships (Ministry of Manpower)	-	-	-	-	500	638	638	638	604
Internal Scholarships (For Students from Lower Income Families only)	-	-	-	-	1000	1063	1000	1130	1083
Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Studies	-	-	-	-	-	-	123	N/A	N/A
Royal Guard Technical College	-	-	-	-	-	33	N/A	N/A	N/A
Oman Petroleum Development Company (Semi-Gov. Comp.)	34	41	51	39	30	27	30	20	16
Total	6,052	7,314	7,530	6,292	8,744	9,716	11,260	12,636	12,089

Ministry of Higher Education (2003a, 2003b), and statistics from other institutions as mentioned in Chapter Three

¹ This number as indicated in the General Statistical Year Book for HEIs (2002/2003) issued by the Ministry of Higher

Education, while the Ministry of Health recorded 1,087 enrolments in its institutes as mentioned in Table 3.10 in Chapter Three.

The data of Table: 5.4 shows the number of enrolled students in most public HEIs was fluctuated during last ten years. However, it could be seen that the number of the enrolments is increased significantly in some of these institutions, particularly during the last five years, such as enrolment of SQU and the Colleges

of TE. Whereas this number remained steady in some of these institutions during this period with some drops, as shown in the number of enrolments of the Colleges of Education (6 Colleges).

Table 5.4 also shows the Scholarships Sector, which has been explained in detail in Chapter Three. This sector consists of: full, partial, overseas and internal governmental scholarships, some being funded by the MoHE while others are sponsored by other governmental bodies. The figures above show that whereas the number of enrolments remained steady during this period with some drops, in the full and partial scholarships funded by the MoHE, there is a noticeable number appeared from year 2000, as Internal Scholarships, these being; 1000 scholars funded by the MoHE, and another 500 scholars funded by Ministry of Manpower. However, it was mentioned that this number is out of account of the 6th FYDP, and it was approved suddenly in accordance with His Majesty's instruction to the government aimed at meet the pressing need of those students from low income families and also to support the local private HEIs.

Additionally, there is a limited number of scholarships offered by Arab and other countries. Furthermore, there are a number of scholarships that are funded privately, the majority by the students' families (7,300 scholars, according to Murphy, 2004:13), and a minority by some private sector enterprises. In 2002/2003, the total number of overseas scholarships for undergraduate studies was 12,627, for 461 scholars whose fees were covered by the MoHE, and only 17% of these were in science specialisations (MoHE, 2004c:23,24). By the academic year 2004/2005, 2,268 students had been sent for studying in foreign institutions. Only 143 were funded by the MoHE and some of these were in receipt of partial scholarships, while the majority were funded privately, and others having obtained grants from other countries, institutions and private agencies, representing 5% of the total number of SSGs (MoE, 2006). By the end of 2005, the total number of students who had been sent abroad to gain undergraduate degrees was 3,023 (see Table 3.2).

Table 5:5
Secondary School Graduates' Progression into HE and the SSG Population with
no HE Opportunities

Year	Secondary School Graduates	Number enrolled in Gov. HEIs	Percentage of enrolled students in the State HEIs	Number of students with no HE opportunities	Percentage of students with no HE opportunities
1996	17,167	6,052	35.3%	11,115	64.7%
1997	19,179	7,314	38%	11,865	62%
1998	20,888	7,530	36%	13,358	64%
1999	24,877	6,292	25.3%	18,585	74.7%
2000	29,547	8,744	29.6%	20,803	70.4%
2001	32,959	9,716	29.5%	23,245	70.5%
2002	35,044	11,260	32.1%	23,784	67.9%
2003	43,851	12,636	28.8%	31,215	71.2%
2004	44,233	12,089	27.3%	32,144	72.7

Source: MoE (2006), MoHE Annual Statistical Year Books (from 1998/1999–2004/2005), and other statistics of other institutions as mentioned in Chapter 3.

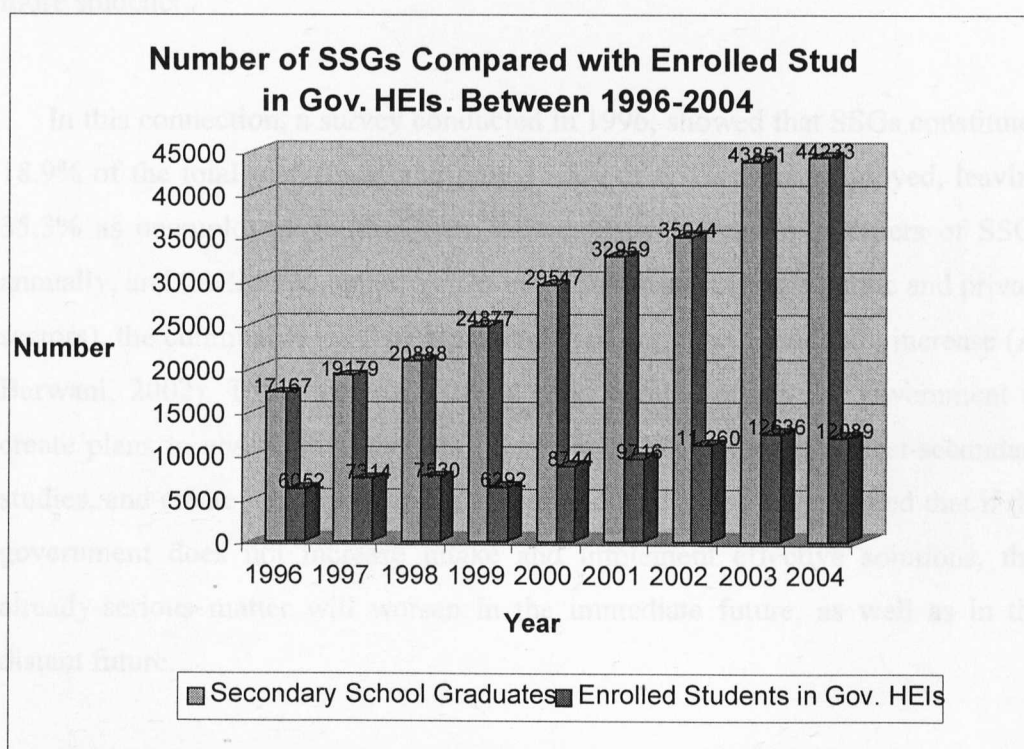
Table 5.5 also shows that the number of students with the opportunity to enter HE has doubled within the last ten years, this being 6,052 in 1996, and 12,089 in 2004. However, there were some drops within these years, and the annual average of 670 students, is relatively low, while the annual average of SSGs' increase was 3,007 students. Hence, the statistics demonstrate that despite the increased numbers of SSGs from 1996, and a passing of around ten years, the proportion of enrolled students in HEIs has remained relatively stable, effectively expanding the gap. They also indicate that the proportion of enrolled students in HE is still under 50% of the number of SSGs which represents a shortfall in meeting the target level determined in the current 6th FYDP.

Hence, the number of SSGs as shown above enrolled in HEIs still remains under the target of 52% declared in the 6th FYDP (MoNE, 2002b). For the academic year 2002/2003 for example, the total number of students accepted into HEIs, public and private, domestic and foreign, including privately-funded

scholarships, reached 14,063, representing 40.8% of the total number of successful SSGs (MoHE, 2004c:24), while the remaining 60% of the SSGs population had no chance to enter HE, confirming the increasing gap demand and supply. By the end of 2004/2005, the number of SSGs was 44,233, precipitating a drop in the percentage accepted into HE for the 2004/2005 academic year, to 27.3% as shown in Table 5.5.

Clearly, there is a significant gap between the number of students who graduate from secondary school and the number who enrol in public HEIs, causing extreme pressure on HE within the last decade and requiring the expansion of the capacity of public HEIs. Chart 5.1 provides a clearer picture of these statistics, covering the periods 1998-99 and 2002-03.

Chart 5:1



Given these prominent and well-publicised statistics, the question arises as to why, twenty years after the establishment of the first and sole governmental

university in the country, there is no plan to establish a second such institution despite the escalating demands as evidenced through the SSGs numbers. Despite the many plans issued by the government over several years regarding the development and expansion of this sector, the capacity of public HEIs has remained the same for ten years, while the numbers of SSGs and consequently, young people seeking job opportunities, has grown consistently.

In fact, the World Bank Report (2001:4) expressed concern that in spite of impressive progress, the educational system in Oman faces twin challenges: the need for quality and the need for expanding opportunities in the HE system. The report categorises the situation, documenting that ‘A major challenge facing the higher education system is the mushrooming number of secondary-school graduates who have difficulty finding places in higher education ... This trend is creating pressure on universities and other higher education institutions to admit more students’.

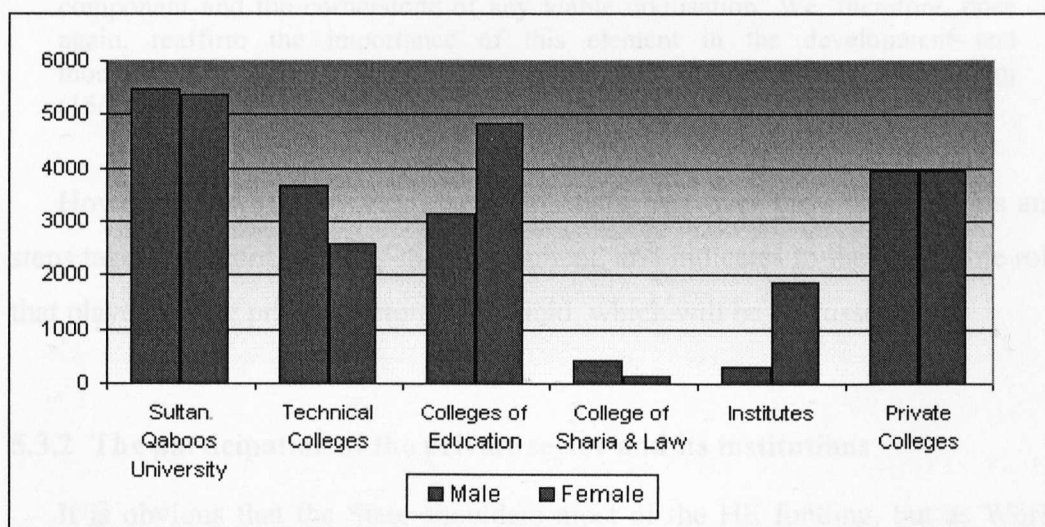
In this connection, a survey conducted in 1996, showed that SSGs constituted 18.9% of the total workforce, and only 15.5% of SSGs were employed, leaving 35.3% as unemployed youth. Given the currently increasing numbers of SSGs annually, and the limited opportunities in the job market (in the public and private sectors), the cumulative number of unemployed youth will gradually increase (Al Barwani, 2002). Thus, there are strong calls within society for government to create plans to absorb the increasing number of SSGs, diversify post-secondary studies, and create job opportunities for individuals. Some have argued that if the government does not increase intake and implement effective solutions, this already-serious matter will worsen in the immediate future, as well as in the distant future.

Indeed, when one considers the expected number of successful SSGs in 2020, the problem grows even more acute. Assuming a 1-2% growth rate, the MoE projects 50,920 graduates in 2010; 54,639 in 2015; and 57,426 in 2020. If the

capacity of HE remains at current levels, the percentage of graduates accepted would drop to 27.62% in 2010; 25.74% in 2015; and 24.49% in 2020. (MoE, 2004 in Murphy, 2004:12,13). 'The challenge is great. The response must be more than money from the government. It demands a high level of creativity and the co-operation of all sectors of the society' (Murphy, 2004:12,13).

It is worth mentioning that according to data relating to the academic year 2002/2003 the number of female students who enrolled in HEIs was almost at the same level as male students in SQU and private HEIs. In the Colleges of Education, and the Health Institutes, the number of female students was actually more than the number of male students, while in the College of Technology, and the College of Shari'ah and Law, the number of male students was higher than the number of female students, as shown in Chart 5.2. These statistics indicate that women in Oman have the same entitlements and opportunities as men to enrol in all the HEIs.

Chart 5.2
Number of Students registered in Oman's Major HEIs
by Gender: 2002/2003



Source: (MoHE, 2004a)

The high number of female students in the Colleges of Education and Health Institutes, and the lower number in the Colleges of Technology and the College of

Shari'ah and Law, confirm the trend that women in Middle Eastern countries generally prefer employment in teaching and nursing, rather than in more technical jobs like engineering, or utilities, which usually require the worker to be far away from his/her residence. Therefore, the differences in enrolment patterns are attributable to the desire of both sexes and to their expectations of returns and benefits from their chosen specialisations, when they join the workforce.

Reflecting the extent of the current challenge affects young Omanis who wish to continue their higher study; when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos presided over the annual convening of the Council of Oman (comprised from A'Shura Council and A'ddawla Council) in a very recent meeting dated on 14 November 2006, he emphasised this matter by saying to the members of the two councils and the government officials:

You are aware of the extent of the attention we accord to the development of human resources in order to provide our young sons and daughters with wider and better opportunities of education, training and employment. This is almost a fixed item in each of our speeches addressed through you (council members) to all the people of Oman ... There can be no doubt that human beings are the basic component and the cornerstone of any viable civilisation. We, therefore, once again, reaffirm the importance of this element in the development and modernisation of society' (<http://www.omanobserver.com/15/index.htm> (15/11/2006)).

However, His Majesty expressed his satisfaction over the sincere efforts and steps taken in recent years by the government, and indicates to the noticeable role that played by the private sector in this field, which will be discussed now.

5.3.2 The participation of the private sector and its institutions

It is obvious that the State shoulders most of the HE funding, but as World Bank recommendations have suggested, alternative sponsors need to be encouraged, and the Omani government has gradually involved the private sector in its HE provision, as explained in Chapter Three. Accordingly, the establishment and expansion of the private HEIs in Oman are attributed to the

government's endeavours in this respect, which have included offering a range of incentives to the private sector to play a suitable role in the continued development of HE in the Sultanate.

As a result, within the last five years it can be observed that the private sector has played an important role, particularly after the opening of three private universities, in addition to a number of university colleges. Table 5.6 compares the number of students admitted into public HEIs in the Sultanate and those admitted into private HEIs (both within and outside Oman).

Table 5.6

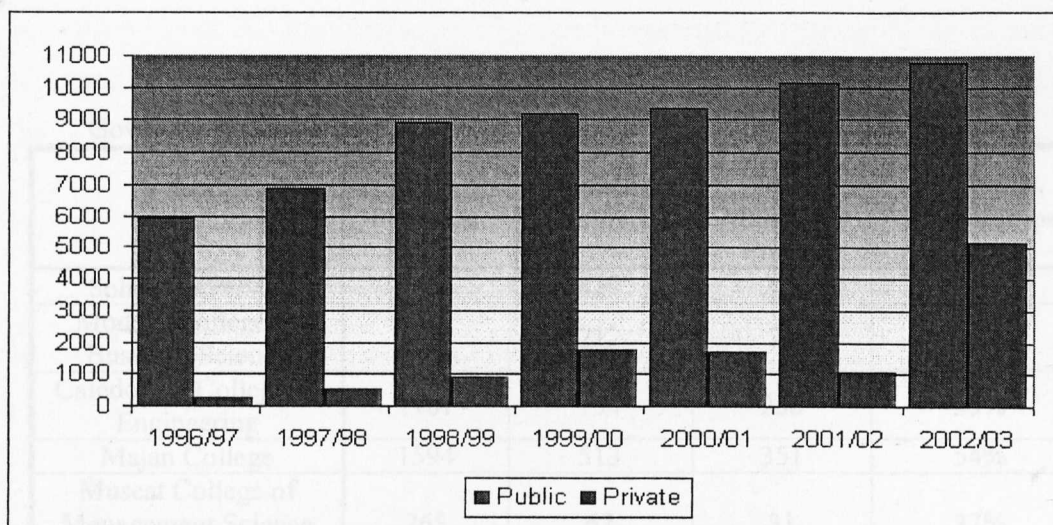
Comparison of Students enrolled in Governmental and Private HEIs in 2004-2005

Institutions	Admitted Students 2004/2005	% of Total
Sultan Qaboos University	2,697	16.88%
Colleges of Technology (6)	4,710	29.48%
Colleges of Education (6)	2,089	13.07%
Institutes of Health Sciences	714	4.49%
College of Shari'ah and Law	185	1.15%
College of Banking and Finance Studies	60	0.37%
Institute of Sharia'ah Sciences	299	1.87
Private Higher Education	5,223	32.69
Total	15,977	100%

MoHE (2005)

However, by the academic year 2004/2005 there were 5,223 students enrolled in the private HEIs as shown in Table 5.6, from a total number of 43,705 SSGs (MoE, 2006), representing around 12% of SSGs, while the governmental HEIs accepted 10,754 SSGs, representing 24.6% of the total number of SSGs in the same academic year (MoHE, 2004a).

Chart 5.3
Number of Students Enrolled in Governmental HEIs Compared with the Number Enrolled in Private HEIs - 1996/97-2002/03



Source: MoHE (2004a:24)

However, the Omani government believes this contribution to remain at an insignificant level, and it is also worth noting that most of the students registered in private HEIs in Oman are on government financial assistance programmes, since the majority are in fact, State-funded. Table 5.7 provides data regarding the financing of students in these institutions.

Table 5.7
Sources of Funding for Students in Private Higher Education in 2003/2004

Funding	No. of Students	% of total
Ministry of Higher Education	4,032	40%
Ministry of Manpower	1,733	17%
Other Sponsors	744	7%
Self Funded	3,639	36%
Total	10,148	100%

Source: (MoHE, 2004a:24)

Table 5.7 shows that in the academic year 2003/2004, 57% of students in private HEIs received government scholarships, and Table 5.8 demonstrates more detail, showing that more than 50% of students at eight private HEIs are government-sponsored. Specifically, 90% of the University of Sohar students

were in this category, 72% receiving full-fees scholarships from the MoHE, and 18% on half-fees scholarships from the Ministry of Manpower.

Table 5.8
Government Scholarships in Private HEIs in the Academic Year 2003/2004

College	Total Students	MoHE Funded	M. of Manpower Funded	% on Gov. Scholarships
Sohar University	1158	829	210	90%
Modern College of Business Science	614	212	73	46%
Caledonian College of Engineering	1101	134	250	35%
Majan College	1594	513	351	54%
Muscat College of Management Science and Technology	265	67	31	37%
National College for Science and Technology	1047	320	266	56%
Fire Safety Engineering College	398	173	80	64%
Mazoon College of Management and Applied Science	1003	476	24	50%
Al-Zahra College for Girls	954	425	188	64%
Oman Medical College	273	171	23	71%
Sur University College	509	259	95	70%
Waljat Colleges of Applied Sciences	518	151	51	39%
Oman Academy for Tourism and Hospitality	109	0	0	0%
Middle East College of Information Technology	605	302	91	65%

Source: MoHE (2004a)

As already mentioned, the Vision of Oman's Economy '*Oman 2020*' included several policies and targets regarding the development and expansion of HE, but most of the projects rely on the role of the private sector in this field, thus confirming that the government is facing difficulties in funding the increasingly high number of students wishing to enrol in HE, and the growing pressure upon it generated from the high increasing number of SSGs, and by other demands.

However, there is feeling within society that government could provide more funds to support this sector to encourage it to invest in this field. This could be understood from His Majesty's speech in the last annual convening of the Council of Oman (comprised from A'Shura Council and A'ddawla Council) in November 2006, Sultan Qaboos emphasised on the role of the private sector in this field. In this respect, His Majesty expressed his satisfaction in the participation of the private HEIs, and pointed out that the private universities and colleges are offering diverse sciences and art programmes which meet the requirements of the labour market, the melting pot that absorbs the output of educational institutions. (<http://www.omanobserver.com/15/index.htm> - 15/11/2006).

Nevertheless, His Majesty welcomed the establishment of new private universities in other regions of the country that require higher educational institutions, and, however, he stressed that (a) these institutions should be established provided that their objective studies prove their feasibility and (b) that their high-quality programmes will ensure that the graduates will be successful in the work place, and (c) also guarantee that their certificates are recognised at both national and international levels. His Majesty said:

besides the ability to accommodate large numbers of higher education seekers - a matter that we encourage and urge — these educational institutions should provide high-quality education for students, since quantity is useless unless high standards are maintained with a view to providing scientific and applicable skills. (<http://www.omanobserver.com/15/index.htm> - 15/11/2006).

In this connection, His Majesty declared that:

We should like to declare that we have decided to provide appropriate assistance for private universities to encourage them to carry out their duty to provide society with highly-qualified people, in order to raise the standard of their performance and that of their graduates in all fields of work as is required in these modern times. May God grant success.

(<http://www.omanobserver.com/15/index.htm> - 15/11/2006).

Reflecting a new governmental campaign to support the private sector to address more investments in this field. However, there is a question regarding the extent to which the government encourages private participation in formulating the plans and policies for development in the HE sector. And, obviously, the extent to which the current private HEIs are absorbing sufficient numbers of SSGs, is of interest.

5.4 Society's Role in Dealing With the Issue of Limited Capacity of HE

As indicated in Chapter Two, the Omani Consultative Council (Majles A'Shura) represents the Omani people, since its 59 members represent all the wilayat of Oman, and are elected by popular vote by all categories of Omani citizens. It was mentioned that there are five specialist committees in The Council, one of these is the Committee of Education and Culture, and the Council has the right to ask any governmental body or official about its performance of its role and responsibilities.

Consequently, in several meetings of the Majles A'Shura, the issue of increasing number of SSGs and limited capacity in HEIs, has been a main agenda item, and annually there have been meetings between its President and/or MPs with the government's officials to discuss this matter. In one such meeting held in January 2005, the Minister of Higher Education declared that although top priority has been given by the government to increasing places in HEIs for SSGs, the situation remains unsatisfactory. However, he acknowledged this to be a challenge facing not only the Omani HE system, but also one being encountered by most countries around the world. Responding to the request from MPs to establish another governmental university, the Minister clearly stated that there was no provision in the current FYDP to do this.

<http://www.alwatan.com/graphics/2002/04april/1.4/heads/1t2.htm> (25/01/2005)

In fact, there is another channel for the public to raise this issue with the government, which is through the annual journey that undertaken by His Majesty

the Sultan, in which he meets the Omani people, but there is no official or unofficial publication documenting such meetings, or reporting the issues that people bring to the Sultan's notice, except for short journalistic reports declared through the news media. Nonetheless, without any doubt there is a number of letters submitted to the interested governmental bodies either by people directly, or by the Consultative Council. Additionally, several Omani public websites in which people can raise and discuss such social matters, exist and indeed these issues have been considered in such forums many times. See, for instance, <http://www.omania.net> and <http://www.almajara.org>.

As a conclusion, it can be said that the issue has clearly attracted in-depth debate within society, and it becomes more entrenched every year, with the publication of the GCSE results, and the subsequent enrolment to HEIs, which reveals that more than 50% of SSGs (more than 20,000 graduates according to recent years' statistics) remain unemployed at home, with neither chance to continue their studies at a higher level, nor to join the labour market.

Every year, this situation negatively affects a large number of Omani families and creates other unhealthy social consequences. Furthermore, it has caused most Omani people to become very frustrated and become in vigorous debates regarding the future influences upon their children if such circumstances are allowed to prevail. Arising from such debates, are many forceful questions concerning the governmental philosophy and objectives for education in general and HE in particular, and how the government proposes to resolve matter for the benefit of the nation in future, since the reality in Oman is that the government plays the key role in the preparation, approval and implementation of the philosophy, vision and objectives of GE/BE and HE, which will now be discussed.

5.5 Philosophy, Vision and Objectives of Education in Oman

Clearly, at the onset of the 1970s, the Sultanate of Oman had no basic infrastructure necessary for a modern education system, there was no Ministry of Education, nor any philosophy for education and HE on which to base aims, objectives or national curricula. The renaissance of Oman which followed the accession of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos in 1970 has been extraordinary. Peterson (1978:205) marvels at the pace of progress already achieved as early as the late seventies ‘... the creeping, almost grudging pace of the pre-1970 development was quickly overturned by a plethora of crash projects for schools, hospitals, health clinics, housing, roads, government buildings, an international airport, and water, agriculture and fishing resources surveys’. Hence, after the accession of His Majesty’s government, there were extraordinary developments, especially in education, and accordingly, some attempts were made by the MoE to develop and promote an educational philosophy for Oman.

5.5.1 Early referential principles of education in Oman

During the last three decades, all activities undertaken throughout Oman have been aligned to His Majesty’s views and objectives, as expressed in his speeches, instructions and decrees. In Oman, such speeches, royal decrees and instructions are regarded as national regulations and enactments which control and direct all governmental plans and policies. Further rules, authorities and powers, are then derived from the royal decrees. A number of these speeches and decrees were clearly focused on the importance of HRD and preparing the citizens to serve the future of their country. In his first speech to the Omani people on 9 August 1970, the Sultan said:

For a long time our country has been deprived of education, which is the basis of administrative and technical expertise. Therefore, it is incumbent on us for the foreseeable future to fill the gap in administration with foreign employees. From now on, however, it has become clear that the education and training of our people should begin as soon as possible, so that the Omanis will be able to govern the Omanis (MoI, 1995:21).

After two years, in which the same high consideration continued to be given to education, in his 2nd National Day address on 18 November 1972, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos said:

Education is my great concern, and I saw that it was necessary to direct efforts to spread Education. We have given the Ministry of Education the opportunity and supplied it with our capabilities to break the chains of ignorance. Schools have been opened regardless; the important thing is that there should be education, even under the shade of trees (His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, 2nd National Day, 18 November 1972).

Given this situation, there is little opportunity to gather a body of literature relating to this field, since Oman had no constitution until 1996 when ‘the Basic Law of the State’ was established and issued by Royal Decree 101/1996. This is considered as the initial seed for the country’s constitution of the country and included the basic concepts underpinning how education is to serve the Sultanate. Article 13 of the Basic Law of the State, the current Constitution of the country focuses on the principles intended to guide the plans for development of the education sector. It envisions education as a key factor which will:

Raise and develop general cultural standards, promote scientific thought, kindle the spirit of inquiry, meet the needs of economic and social plans, and create a generation strong in body and moral fibre, proud of its nation, country and heritage, and committed to safeguarding their achievements. (Article 13 of the Basic Law of the State)

Instructions and guidance from His Majesty have also been implemented to establish organisations and institutions aiming to provide the citizens with the requirements of the new lifestyle. In the speech on the occasion of the 26th National Day (1996), His Majesty once again emphasised the importance of education as an integral part of the national goals in order to:

... secure the good nurture of the citizen and provide him with science and culture, and prepare him in an integrated and comprehensive manner that makes him a productive element of the society, well aware of the things that are useful to the nation and endowed with insight and proper appreciation of different matters so as to be able to serve his country and contribute to making proper decisions (His Majesty Sultan Qaboos 26th National Day, 18 November 1996).

However, in subsequent years, despite the emphasis laid on education, the national philosophy has been unstable, and perhaps for some reasons at the early stage of the new modernisation of the country, the government is hesitant to declare a national philosophy in this respect. Perhaps, there was an initial document issued in 1978, which included some philosophical principles and objectives for education in Oman, as mentioned in the recent publication named *Philosophy and Objectives of Education in the Sultanate of Oman*, issued by the MoE at the end of 2004. The 1st FYDP (1976-1980) was the primary official plan, which directed economic developments, including the field of education. It had periodic and temporary goals, which were characterised by its limitations since it was aimed at providing primary services. The same phenomenon could be observed in the 2nd FYDP (1981-1985), while the 3rd and 4th FYDPs were more progressive.

5.5.2 The educational vision and objectives in the Vision of 'Oman 2020'

It was explained throughout Chapter Three that during 1995 a major review of the country's economy was undertaken in a national conference, resulting in a vision for Oman's economy '*Oman 2020*'. HRD was hailed as the vehicle to achieve this long-term strategy, which included guidance and policies related to GE/BE and HE. The subsequent FYDPs were regarded as seasonal stages in the implementation of this long-term economic plan. Although this strategy was built in an economic context only, it is noticeable that it paid much attention to HRD including GE/BE, while HE and its different streams received less consideration. However, the Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*' set out one of its main sub-strategies entitled '*Vision of Human Resources Development between (1996-2020)*'. Accordingly, the Vision formulated a package of policies and procedures to achieve the approved aims.

Thus, Vision of '*Oman 2020*' did not declare a comprehensive vision for education or HE in their social and cultural dimensions. However, developmental initiatives, such as establishing new educational organisations and revising or

issuing new curricula either for BE/GE or for HE, were aligned with the FYDPs, which might be considered as provisional or seasonal plans rather than strategic comprehensive plans, since they are susceptible to changes due to social, economic and political circumstances. Therefore, within the next few pages, the key principles and dimensions of the latest publication, which the MoE has referred to as the Philosophy and Objectives of Education in Oman, will be introduced.

5.5.3 The new formulation of the philosophy of education

Obviously, the philosophy and objectives of HE should be different from those relating to BE/GE. However, there is undoubtedly a strong link between the two, and an examination of the MoE publication of the Philosophy and Objectives of Education, should make it possible to deduce an implicit approach to HE. Tracing the evolution of the philosophy, the recent MoE's publication (2004a) states:

The philosophy of education in Oman emerges from several starting points of which the most important are the ideology of the society and the political trend of the state which is interpreted as educational and philosophical attitudes that express the needs and aspirations of the nation. These attitudes represent the practical framework of the educational, social and economic policies in life in general and in schools and other educational institutions in particular. (p.19)

This document of the Philosophy of Education in Oman, suggested the philosophy as being:

A set of principles, beliefs, concepts and obligations, which are stated in an integrated, coherent and harmonious manner to serve as a guide and a mentor for the educational process. Thus, the philosophy of education is considered as the ideational references for education in the country (MoE, 2004a:19).

The document then set out the sources of the educational philosophy in Oman, as being the Islamic Faith, the thoughts of His Majesty the Sultan, the

Basic Law of the State, and the characteristics of Omani Society. The principles of this philosophy are summarised as follows:

- 1- Achieving an integrated development of the individuals, through upbringing them with regard to physical, intellectual, spiritual, societal and emotional aspects, also in the light of other characteristics and needs of individual development.
- 2- Omani originality and Identity, which stated that Omani people are Arab Muslims of an old genuine culture in history.
- 3- Modernisation of society and dealing with modern technology.
- 4- Adoption of a scientific thinking approach in current life and in the future.
- 5- Sustainable education and learning skills.
- 6- Qualitative trend in industrial strategies.
- 7- Economic development and vocational training.
- 8- National unity and belongingness to the Gulf region and the Arab world.
- 9- National pride and strength.
- 10- Social liberation whereby the education endeavours to liberate capabilities of individuals and groups and call for justice and equity, and for casting away fanatical instincts, partisanship and extremism. It encourages the spirit of co-operation and collective work for public interest. It pays special care for women as an effective element in all aspects of life, the thing that makes them occupy a remarkable position in society.
- 11- Environment and population whereby the Omani people devote themselves to exploit natural resources and wealth in a very rational way that keeps a balance between such resources on one hand, and development ratios and population on the other hand to meet several economic and social development requirements.
- 12- Development and sponsoring emotional tendencies.
- 13- Enforcement of international peace and understanding.
- 14- Caring for the proper investment of free times.

(MoE, 2004a:28-33)

However, and in the same year as the MoE publication (2004), Murphy (2004) pointed out that another recent formal study, mentioned earlier, conducted by a team of specialists from SQU directed by the CoHE, attempted to investigate whether there existed an alternative, de facto, philosophy which guided and

directed the day-to-day educational work in the Sultanate, and whether there was a clear vision of the educational system's objectives either over the past three decades or for the future. Three important elements for defining the Vision and Objectives for education in Oman were considered, as follows:

- (a) the objectives of education as expressed in His Majesty's discourses since the 1970s;
- (b) the objectives of education as stated in the FYDPs over the same period;
- (c) the opinions of educational leaders and former leaders, and of leading Omani intellectuals and academics about the vision and objectives of education in the Sultanate, at present and for the future. (Murphy, 2004:29)

This research study held interviews with informed Omani nationals, and the findings were divided into an assessment of the current situation and a future vision and objectives for Omani education. The key findings, according to Murphy (2004), were:

Current status

- The current objectives are vague and ambiguous, placing more emphasis on theory and rote learning than skills in writing, library searching and scientific research.
- There is a gap between the objectives of general education and higher education. Neither level prepares students for the job market.
- Teacher education is inadequate and the current quality of education does not meet international standards. Teachers do not encourage innovation, creativity and self-reliance.
- The management of education is characterised by centralisation and bureaucracy, whereas the delivery of instruction should be decentralised.
- The home-school relationship is not satisfactory.
- There is a shortage of the financial resources for education together with wastage through a high drop-out rate. (Murphy, 2004:30-31)

Hence, it can be seen that the national philosophy of education is not yet properly formed, and that what exist are some principles and objectives for

education in Oman. Furthermore, there is no document related to a philosophy or vision of HE. Nevertheless, as has been shown, Oman's education system has passed through several observable stages of development in the last three decades, and a review of the major changes indicates that there is not yet a stable philosophy, nor objectives to be pursued. This is perhaps not surprising since the current education system is relatively new, having been converted from the former system in the second half of the 1990s.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, from the school year 1997/1998, the Sultanate started implementing a replacement for the GE system which had been in existence for over 25 years, and consisted of three stages: Primary, Preparatory and Secondary. The replacement was the BE System, consisting of an initial ten years divided into two stages (First and Second Circle), Two more years, Years 11 and 12, considered as the Secondary Stage, followed. Prior to mid-2004, there were two specialisations at the secondary stage, Arts and Science. These have now converged into one stream. The Secondary Stage has been replaced by a General Certificate. Years 11 and 12 are still considered as separated from the BE, but the examination systems have been undergoing progressive changes, moving from the traditional system to different approaches which are still in the experimental stages.

These major and basic changes to Oman's education system indicate that the final form of the BE System has not yet been settled, and hence, the HE system is affected. It might, therefore, be deduced that the Sultanate has not yet produced a clear and comprehensive philosophy for education and thus, for HE. Consequently, the researcher expects that the above mentioned publication issued at the end of 2004 by the MoE, entitled Philosophy and Objectives of Education in the Sultanate of Oman, will be changed within the next few years and replaced by another, more advanced formulation.

Hence, the most important question being posed is whether these root changes

undertaken from 1996, are based on a clear and comprehensive philosophy and vision of the country's education system as a whole. And if there is such a philosophy and vision, why has the country now been preparing and building another strategy with a new vision and objectives for education? Also, to what extent do these major changes meet the requirements of post-compulsory education such as HE, TE, VT or other specialisations? And did the MoE coordinate with other educational authorities and HEIs, such as the MoHE, SQU, Colleges of Education, Colleges of Technical Education and other institutes which receive the outputs of GE/BE and complete the process of preparing young Omanis to build their country? However this research attempts to answer some of such questions through interviews with a number of interested officials in the education system in Omani, the study will not involve itself with all these issues which are more related to the lower educational levels than HE. Therefore, such questions appear reasonable for further studies, since these dimensions need a number of extensive separated researches.

5.6 Vision and Objectives of Higher Education

It is natural that given the lack of embedded philosophy regarding GE/BE, there should be no official formulation or text regarding the philosophy of HE, and indeed at the time of conducting this study, no such document has been published by either the CoHE or the MoHE, the two authorities with responsibility in this direction. All that has existed to date are some instructions and phrases from His Majesty's speeches, which are considered as guidance for establishing plans and projects for this sector.

Regarding the dimension of objectives of HE, there are a number of such objectives and policies included in various governmental plans and documents, such as the Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*', the last two FYDPs, and other seasonal and provisional plans. It can be observed that there are some differences between these documents in terms of the HE objectives given, their classification and prioritisation, and in the allocation of resources between them.

However, the objectives considered most important by the government can be deduced and identified from all those documents and records.

5.6.1 Higher Education in the Vision of 'Oman 2020'

Al-Yahmadi et al (2001) observe that in countries such as Oman, where the state plays the main role in the national advancement, the development of effective HRD strategies is crucial. Thus, with the recent realisation of the importance of HRD there is a strong need to review the initiatives taken by the government of the Sultanate regarding HRD and national advancement.

As stated previously, the most important aims of the Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*' are to develop and upgrade Omani human resources in order to cope with technological progress and attain international competitiveness, and to develop a private sector capable of using both human and natural resources optimally. This included an emphasis on BE, VT, TE, and the training of women to facilitate their entry into the labour force, but, HE particularly at the level of university study, has received less attention in the Vision of '*Oman 2020*', except in the dimension of the encouragement of the private sector to participate in this field.

Clearly, general objectives or policies relevant to the development of HE were included in the Vision of '*Oman 2020*' document, which as mentioned previously, is dominated by a consideration of economic factors. However, the document clearly declared that the achievement of all dimensions of '*Oman 2020*' relies on accomplishing economic equilibrium and sustainable growth, the diversification of income sources, and private sector development, and this cannot be realised without formulating a realistic and flexible strategy for HRD (MoD, 1997:189).

Accordingly, the vision of HRD for the period between (1996-2020) included six dimensions which form the basis of the envisioned achievement for this

sector. Specifically regarding HE and relevant disciplines, the following two dimensions were highlighted as main objectives:

- Establishing a Post-Secondary and Technical Education system based on the provision of the main specialisations required by the national economy, together with the provision of the necessary facilities for carrying out applied research in the social or economic fields.
- Providing a system for Technical Education and Vocational Training that is capable of preparing labour to adapt to the needs of various specialisations and skills in the labour market, and achievement of an income that conforms with performance and productivity.

(MoD, 1997:192)

In relation to these two objectives, there is a concern with the need to create employment opportunities for Omanis in the public and private sectors, in addition to equipping them with training and qualifications that conform to labour market requirements. The plan stated that, this could be achieved by substituting expatriate labour with highly-qualified Omanis, thereby shifting the economy from a low value added, to a high value added economy, and by increasing the participation of Omani women in the labour force (MoD, 1997:193). Hence, to achieve the targets of '*Oman 2020*', the government set out a package of strategies and plans for HRD, the main ones being:

- 1- To achieve balance between population and economic growth by reducing the current population growth rate to less than 3% by 2020, through reasoning and enlightenment.
- 2- Provision of health services and reduction of the rate of mortality and infectious diseases.
- 3- Dissemination, encouragement and patronage of knowledge and the development of education.
- 4- Establishing a Post-Secondary and Technical Education system based on the provision of the main specialisations required by the national economy, together with

the provision of the necessary facilities for carrying out applied research in the social or economic fields.

- 5- Providing a system for TE and VT that is capable of preparing labour to adapt to the needs of various specialisations and skills in the labour market, and achievement of an income that conforms with performance and productivity.
- 6- Creating employment opportunities for Omanis in the public and private sector, in addition to equipping them with training and qualifications that conform to labour market requirements.

(MoD, 1997:192,193).

The implementation of this long-term vision of HRD was to be commenced via the next FYDPs started with the 5th FYDP (1996-2000). However, it can be seen that some plans and policies have been amended during the last ten years. For example, the vision contained a comprehensive programme for the preparation of young Omanis, from the elementary stage through to the university or college stage, including streams of TE and VT. Appendix (6) shows that programme. This strategy was approved in 1995, being regarded as a new and essential part of the Vision of HRD for the future, and intended to be implemented for the next 25 years. By the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the current decade, most components of that programme had been withdrawn and replaced by other programmes as explained in Chapter Three.

In attempting to remedy some gaps in this preparation process, the previously-mentioned SQU study (2004) made several recommendations that should be heeded when preparing the future vision and objectives of this sector, the key ones, according to Murphy (2004), being:

- The increased demand for higher education is a challenge which requires innovative responses. The society should be involved in articulating the educational objectives.
- The reform of educational objectives will result in a generation with a global orientation within the national and societal context. Continuous development of the educational systems will be required to keep programmes current with global developments.

- Curricular reform should emphasise Arabic as the native language and English as the vehicle for openness and cultural exchange while preserving the religious, socio-cultural value system of the Omani society.
- Curricula should also emphasise the development of critical thinking, analytical and deductive methods together with competency in science, mathematics and computer literacy.
- Importance should be given to the production of trained graduates in technical education and the preparation of workers with the flexibility to perform different jobs, with the ability to compete in local, regional and international markets.
- Opportunity for access to higher education will be enhanced through increased capacity with education being regarded as a real investment in human capital.
- While government financial support for higher education should be maintained, the institutions should investigate ways of diversifying their resources and well-off parents should shoulder a portion of the expenses of educating their children in institutions of higher education. Educational loans should be provided for needy families together with proper mechanisms for repayment.
- Admission criteria for institutions of higher education will be multi-faceted: the marks obtained in the general secondary school certificate examination should not be the sole criteria.
- The status of teachers should be elevated and criteria will be introduced covering certification to practise and continue in the profession. The central role of teaching should be emphasised.
- While planning, data gathering and quality control should be centralised, the delivery of education will be decentralised.

(Al-Ghanbousi et al., 2004 in Murphy, 2004:30-31).

Nevertheless, such objectives and policies relating to HE were included in the FYDPs which were built and developed after approval of the Vision '*Oman 2020*'. However, it could be logically argued that the long-term Vision and the 5th and 6th FYDPs were dominated by a consideration of economic factors, which left the social and cultural dimensions relatively hidden, and thus, it might be suggested that research should be conducted to investigate the answers for

questions such as the following: Do the decision-makers and planners believe that the Vision '*Oman 2020*' was dominated by economic considerations, and if so how has this affected the social dimensions, especially the education field? Also, if so, to what extent is the vision for HE (including TE) appropriate, and an adequate response to the requirements for human resources for the modern labour market and the new developments in society? Has the Vision of '*Oman 2020*' remained the same, or been changed, and if so what are the changes, and what are the reasons? And finally, to what degree are governmental officials taking the Vision into account when formulating HE plans, policies and decisions?

These questions were posed to the participants of this study, and their responses will be reported and discussed throughout the next chapters. Although the afore-mentioned objectives did not make reference to university study, reflecting the low concern paid to this level of education in the Vision of '*Oman 2020*' as mentioned earlier; a number of sub-aims, policies and mechanisms were declared for each of the following HE authorities and agencies in the FYDPs.

5.6.2 Objectives and plans of HE in the country's FYDPs

As mentioned, throughout this study, the 5th and 6th FYDPs have been taken as examples representing other FYDPs, to review and analyse the aims and policies related to HE and other relevant divisions of HE. The 5th FYDP (1996-2000), which was the first such plan after the approval of '*Oman 2020*'; included several objectives regarding HE (including TE), followed by the policies and mechanisms required for achieving them, the most important being:

- Upgrading the curricula at SQU and the Teacher Training Colleges, in line with the requirements of the country's development.
- Linking the specialisations offered by the University and their quality to the needs of the Omani labour market.
- Encouraging scientific research and establishing a greater connection between the University and the needs of society.

- Increasing scholarships abroad for undergraduate studies for various scientific specialisations in accordance with the requirements of the Omani labour market.

The 6th FYDP (2001-2005) was more developed, and announced a number of objectives related to each authority or governmental HEI, including TE. However, it began by declaring that the top priority was to increase the number of Secondary School leavers admitted to HEIs and to upgrade and spread BE. It was declared that the aim is to expand the capacity of HE and to bridge the gap. Simultaneously, it also addressed the need to substitute expatriate labour during the current and subsequent plans (MoNE, 2002a:68). Further objectives regarding HE, which were included in the 6th FYDP are as follows:

- To consider conducting a feasibility study in relation to the establishment of another governmental university.
- To establish three private universities and provide support for these well as facilitating enrolment in private institutions, and continuing the policy of scholarships for study abroad.
- To increase TE and VT opportunities by establishing five new Technical Industrial Colleges at the rate of one college every year.
- To implement several diploma programmes in the specialisations needed by the national economy.
- To implement short training programmes to help people qualify to assume available positions.
- To establish new educational institutions, by using the buildings of Colleges of Education during the evenings to provide training in the specialisations not available in the private institutions.

(MoNE, 2002a:68, 69).

Then, the 6th FYDP therefore established a number of objectives regarding each stream of governmental HE, which will be summarised in the next few pages.

5.6.3 Objectives and plans of the Ministry of Higher Education

Since its establishment, the MoHE, has shouldered the responsibilities of directing and supervising certain HEIs, such as the College of Shari'ah (Islamic Law) and Law, Colleges of Education, and scholarships sector. Additionally, it has supervised private HE. The 6th FYDP established several objectives for these institutions and divisions of HE, for instance regarding scholarships, it stated:

- To increase the number of SSGs admitted into HEIs, through support and provision of scholarships at the private sector institutions and increasing enrolment in the government HEIs. To offer 1,000 scholarships directed by the MoHE for students to study in the private colleges and another 500 scholarships directed by the Ministry of Manpower and dedicated also to the private colleges (MoNE, 2002b:57,60), and other scholarships funded by other authorities and agencies.

For other HEIs, a number of objectives were addressed, the most important being:

- To improve the education quality through upgrading and modernising educational aids in the learning resources centres, laboratories, science and computer laboratories in the governmental HEIs as well as in the private HEIs.
- To upgrade and enhance the Omanisation process in the governmental HEIs.
- To conduct scientific research in the Teacher Training Colleges and the College of Sharia'h and Law.
- To encourage and motivate the private sector to invest in HE through the establishment of specialised universities and colleges to meet labour market needs.

(MoNE, 2002b:57,58)

In addition to these objectives, and to ensure their implementation, the 6th FYDP also made a number of proposals, the important ones being as follows:

- Revision of intake policy of Colleges of Education according to the present intake rates and in consideration of the results of the study conducted by the MoHE regarding the future of these colleges.

- Continuation and broadening of the overseas scholarships policy and working towards obtaining more grants and scholarships being offered by friendly countries.
- Adopting facilities for enrolment of students in private HEIs.
- Introduction of a postgraduate studies system in the government and private HEIs and broadening its domain.
- Upgrading HEIs under the jurisdiction of the MoHE in a manner which services the development needs and in accordance with the community demands and working towards formulating a new proposal for upgrading the Colleges of Education.
- Supervision and continuous follow-up of the private HEIs to ensure their adherence to the standards, bases and criteria formulated for this matter.
- Continuation of the Omanisation policy included in the MoHE plan within the future proposal for the Colleges of Education.
- Provision of incentives to attract the private sector to invest in HE.
- Establishment of three private universities with at least three colleges in each university. The government should provide a support for each university amounting to 50% of the establishment cost and with the maximum limit of OR 3 million. This is the policy that has been approved recently.
- Involvement of the private sector in planning, management and supervision of HE.
- Encouragement and promotion of private sector finance for HE.
- Increasing the government financial appropriations to overcome the challenges facing HE regarding the intake of SSGs.
- Reconsideration of the operational efficiency of the currently-approved capital for governmental HEIs.
- Creation of the appropriate climate for research through the provision of the necessary resources and incentives.
- Consideration of a study to assess the feasibility of establishing another governmental (public) university.
- Encouraging the establishment of private universities and providing support.

(MoNE, 2002b:60,61)

All these objectives and proposals are important, and if the proposals were implemented, many existing problems would be solved. Therefore, there is a need to examine the reality and the implementation process relating to them.

5.6.4 Objectives and plans of Sultan Qaboos University

As a self-governing institution, SQU has its own objectives and policy, which are defined in the University Charter as follows:

- To prepare generations of qualified Omanis aware of their nation's Islamic and cultural heritage; to strengthen their faith in God and their loyalty to Oman and the Sultan.
- To prepare young Omanis academically and technically; to instill in them self-reliance and the constant readiness to serve their country
- To preserve the identity of Omani society and to safeguard its moral and social values
- To foster scientific research; to undertake research in the fields of technology, economics, the sciences and humanities as they specifically affect the Omani environment and, more generally, other environments so as to enhance the intellectual capabilities and the quality of life of man as a whole and of Omani society in particular.
- To endeavour to serve Omani society by taking part in the process of finding suitable solutions to its cultural, social and economic problems
- To undertake a direct and effective role in the social and economic development plans for Omani society by contributing to the development of its productive capabilities and the best use of its resources.
- To exchange expertise and establish close cultural and academic links with Arab and international universities and educational institutions.

<http://www.squ.edu.om/adm/index.html> (25/2/2005)

Through these aims, the university takes account of the aspirations and characteristics of Omani society and the dimension of social and religious values

as well economic demand, while the FYDPs of the country set out only the measurable objectives and mechanisms, since they are economic and quantity plans. Overall, the FYDPs appear to ignore community requirements and social and religious values in the formulation of their aims and policies. The following aims which were addressed in the 6th FYDP for the SQU reflect this aspect:

- Increasing the number of registered students from 8,000 to 11,000 by the end of this plan, in addition to enrolling 500 students annually for the Accounting Diploma or any specialisation to be defined in future as needed (MoNE 2002b:58).
- Upgrading the admission and graduation criteria.
- Upgrading and enhancing the Omanisation of teaching staff who hold PhD, administrative staff, technicians' categories and nursing staff of the University Hospital.
- Providing consultancy and scientific research services against specialist fees.
- Improving external efficiency of the university education system through supplying the labour market with a trained workforce in order to increase Omanisation rates in the scientific specialist groups. This shall be done by:
 - increasing the number of scientific colleges graduates, such as Engineering, Medicine and Science.
 - specialisations consistent with labour market needs.
 - securing cost effectiveness and feasibility.
- Upgrading research and development mechanisms, organising potentials and capacities, and carrying out studies and research to support the comprehensive sustainable development needs.
- Upgrading the research, development and creative skills of the University graduates.

(MoNE, 2002b:58,59)

5.6.5 Objectives and plans of Technical Education

Technical Education is one of the most important streams of HE in most countries, but in Oman, like other Gulf countries, it has received less attention than other types. However, rapid economic and technological changes have caused more attention to be paid to this sector in the last decade. The Colleges of

Technology in Oman do not have their own vision or objectives, and the only aims and policies approved for them are those stated in the FYDPs. So, the Ministry of Manpower, the responsible authority for TE, attempts to achieve those aims and policies in accordance with the objectives of the country development plans. The most important of these aims are:

- Upgrading and expanding the TE and VT opportunities through: increasing the numbers of those enrolled in the Technical Industrial Colleges from 4,500 to 6,000 students, admission of 500 students annually from the SSGs in the private colleges and increasing intake in VT centres from 1,300 trainees to 2,000 (MoNE, 2002b:59).
- Upgrading the technical and vocational efficiency of outputs of the TE and VT institutions, increasing their productivity and contribution to national economy.
- Upgrading and accelerating rates of Omanisation in TE and VT institutions through increasing the Omanisation rate of teaching staff and administrative staff.
- Upgrading the productivity of the educational and training system and promotion of the expenditure efficiency through establishing specialised institutes and centres for preparation and training the labour force in agriculture, fisheries, handicraft occupations in the women's sector, English language skills, industry, electricity, communications and roads, traditional industries handicraft sectors, and conducting an evaluation of the TE and VT system.
- Upgrading the external efficiency of the educational and training system through supplying the labour market with a trained and educated labour force to contribute in increasing Omanisation rates in the private sector; and by reducing the dropout rate from the TE and VT institutions.
- Encouraging private sector participation in the formulation of training programmes, follow-up of its outputs, evaluation, and improvement of curricula applied in the TE and VT training establishments.
- Conduct of studies and provision of consultancy services by the academic staff of the Technical Colleges.

(MoNE, 2002b:59,60)

Furthermore, the plan adopted a package of policies to achieve these

ambitious targets, to be implemented during the years of the plan. The most important of these policies and mechanisms will be presented and analysed within the coming chapters of this thesis. Moreover, the fieldwork will examine these policies and mechanisms in order to explore their actual implementation. Of the policies mentioned, some of the most important are:

- Priority in allocating government resources to the implementation of the plans pertaining to the education and training sector.
- Conducting a study of the feasibility of establishing another governmental university.
- Establishing three private universities and providing support to them as well as facilitating enrolment in private HEIs, and continuing the policy of scholarships for study abroad.
- Increasing TE and VT opportunities through establishing five new technical industrial colleges at the rate of one per year.
- Implementing several diploma programmes in the specialisations needed by the national economy.
- Implementing several short-term training programmes that would help qualify Omanis to assume available employment positions.

(MoNE,2002b:68).

5.6.6 Visions and objectives of other specialist government HEIs

As already discussed, other governmental specialist HEIs include the College of Shari'ah and Law, College of Banking and Financial Studies, Institutes of Health Sciences and Training, Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Studies, Oman Academy for Tourism and Hospitality, and other small individual institutions. In Chapter Three, all these institutions were introduced, together with their objectives, capacity, and specialisations. Indeed, some of these institutions were established to serve the needs of all sectors across the country by qualifying young Omanis in their particular specialisations, while other institutions were established to meet the demands of only certain governmental bodies. For

example, the College of Shari'ah (Islamic Law) and Law which was established by Royal Decree. 26/97, and which defined its objectives as follows:

1. Preparing students in the Islamic Law (Shari'ah) and Law to enable them to qualify in these subjects and seek employment in law, justice and Islamic affairs.
2. Developing scientific research in Islamic Shari'ah, Law and Islamic culture.
3. Providing a specialised consultancy service to educational and public institutions and other establishments.
4. Promoting specialised training programmes

(Royal Decree. 26/97).

Hence, this college was established to serve the need of all the country's developmental sectors through its various courses, and therefore it was supervised by the MoHE, which is responsible for HEIs not supervised by other ministries or agencies. In this regard, the Institute of Shari'ah (Islamic) and Arabic Sciences was established in 1986 as the Institute of Islamic Justice, Preachment and Religious Guidance, with the aim of training judges, mosque imams and professional staff to work in the law courts (Institute of Shari'ah Sciences, 2005). Accordingly, the institute was established to meet mainly the requirements of the religious and Islamic culture field, although its outputs are serving the needs of other relevant institutions and fields. As mentioned early, the Institute was renamed twice (Institute of Shari'ah Sciences, 2003/04), and accordingly its role, curricula, and objectives were changed. The current aims of the Institute are: teaching Islamic Sciences, Laws and Guidance, and producing strong relationships between Islamic Sciences and guidance, in addition to training students with required skills.

Whilst the Institutes of Health Sciences and Training are qualifying nurses, pharmacists and other medical technicians, they only serve the needs of hospitals and health centres that directed by the Ministry of Health, without taking into account the need of other hospitals and health centres that are under the responsibility of other governmental bodies, or the private sector, and which are staffed in the majority, by expatriates, who are also well-represented in the

hospitals and health centres of the Ministry of Health. Clearly, most general physicians (GPs), specialists and consultants are expatriates, either in public or private health institutions as explained widely throughout Chapter Three. Indeed, this situation reflects the limitation of the respective aims and targets of these institutions, and several gaps in provision are generated as a result. Thus, society is asking the serious question of which HEIs will qualify Omanis to take over these posts, because after 35 years of Oman's Renaissance, expatriates are still needed.

The College of Banking and Financial Studies, which was established in 1983 as the Oman Institute of Bankers, was brought into being to serve the need of banks and other financial agencies. The College is directed by the Central Bank of Oman, and its most important objectives were defined as follows:

1. Teaching and training young Omanis and entitling them to enter the field of Banking, Finance and IT. Boosting employees' competency and efficiency in both Banking and Financial sectors.
2. Promoting studies, research and broadcasting in the banking and financial field and arranging lectures and symposia.
3. Activating the practice of banking and financial acts.
4. Broadcasting the banking and financial awareness and the intelligence.

<http://www.cbfs.edu.om/aboutus.htm> (20/2/2006)

However, it is appreciated that there are some institutions that have particular role, such as the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences and the Royal Guard of Oman College, which aim mainly to meet the needs of certain military and security organisations. The Royal Oman Police Academy was established in 1980 in Nizwa, directed by the Royal Oman Police. It was renamed in July 2000 to the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences, and aims to train and qualify Royal Oman Police personnel. It admits Omani staff of the Royal Police and other military and security organisations. Similarly The Royal Guard of Oman College, is supervised by The Royal Guard of Oman and sponsored by several other military and security Omani organisations. It aims to qualify Omanis needed to

replace expatriates employed in various technical fields within the Royal Guard of Oman, and to provide a training environment where young Omanis could combine technical studies with a full academic programme. In conclusion, such these institutions were established to serve the need of their supervisory or sponsoring authorities and their aims and objectives were built in accordance with the vision of their supervisory organisations.

5.6.7 Objectives and plans of private Higher Education

Private HE does not simply encompass one institution, or a number of institutions under one umbrella, but rather consists of many institutions, each of them under one or more business enterprises, and each of which has its own administrative council, operational administration, future plans and ambitions, about which some of them are confident, according to the competitive business environment. However, there are some of these institutions declared their general visions and objectives in order to identify their roles and future aspirations in educating young people, aiming at attracting more students. For example, the mission of the University of Nizwa stated that:

The University of Nizwa is a non-profit institution, which is governed by its faculty. It shall promote positive thinking and preserve the nation's Islamic and cultural heritage and identity, faith in Allah and loyalty to the country and His Majesty. Its purpose is to broadly educate students and equip them with the knowledge and life skills needed to enrich their lives and enable them to meaningfully contribute to the progress of society. To achieve its mission, the University shall develop dynamic integrative programs which provide high quality academic training and intellectual development.
<http://www.unizwa.edu.om/2006/e-index.php?id=7> (12/11/2005)

Although there are no aims or objectives stated in the university website, a number of principles were driven from this mission. Indeed, this university clearly stated that the cultural, social and human dimensions and values are some of its fundamental concerns, while the vision and plans of other institutions (public and private) as explain previously, are consider the economic dimension and the respond of the labour market as the core target of these institutions.

In relation, the Dhofar University stated its vision, mission and objectives clearly. Its vision; 'Dhofar University aspires to occupy a recognized position among the institutions of quality higher education, a status that Dhofar University students, faculty, staff, and alumni will be proud of'

<http://www.du.edu.om/About%20DU%20Main.htm> (15/1/2006), and in the same direction, its mission stated that:

Dhofar University strives to achieve excellence in teaching, and at a later stage in research, in an open learning environment conducive to creativity and innovation in higher education and to the acquisition of cutting-edge professional knowledge, to be exercised in a spirit of responsibility and community service. <http://www.du.edu.om/About%20DU%20Main.htm> (15/1/2006)

From the above statement, the following objectives were driven as the prime aims of the university, these being are:

- ❖ To ensure academic excellence in all fields of study offered at the University.
- ❖ To enable students to explore their capabilities and take best advantage of the educational opportunities offered at Dhofar University in order to develop to their full intellectual potential.
- ❖ To produce morally responsible individuals who are highly competent in their fields of specialization and well prepared to succeed in life.
- ❖ To produce life-long self-learners committed to serve their society.

<http://www.du.edu.om/About%20DU%20Main.htm> (15/1/2006)

However, it is clear that the above vision and objectives, the economic factors have been given more attention than to those related to the cultural and social dimensions of the nation. However, the economic reasons were clearly appeared through the objectives and plans of private HEIs that prepared from the government perspective, as appeared in the Vision of 'Oman 2020', and the FYDPs.

Throughout Chapter Two, it was mentioned that the encouragement of an effective private sector was one of the most important dimensions of Oman's

economic strategy, as approved in Royal Decree 1/1996. This sanctioned the main and basic dimensions of Oman's economy and the 5th FYDP, 'encouraging the establishment of an effective and competitive private sector, and the consolidation of mechanisms and institutions that will enhance joint government and private sector visions, strategies and policies' (Royal Decree 1/1996 in MoD, 1997:537, 539). In accordance with these words of the Royal Decree, the private sector was represented in the CoHE, Council of SQU and Sectors Committees of the National Labour force which are supervised by the Ministry of Manpower, that directs the Colleges of Technology.

Nevertheless, none of these organisations has formulated particular vision or objectives for the private HEIs. In this respect, these organisations might develop plans and activities that shared with the private sector or with certain private HEIs in order to implement predetermined state objectives. For instance, the Vision of '*Oman 2020*' set out the following aims related to this target:

- * Creation of a stable macroeconomic framework aimed at the development of a private sector capable of the optimal use of human and natural resources of the Sultanate in an efficient and ecologically-sound way.
- * Establishment of an effective and competitive private sector, and consolidation of the mechanisms and institutions that will foster shared visions, strategies and policies between the private sector and government.

(MoD, 1996b:4,5)

Accordingly, these targets reflect the government's understanding that the achievement of sustainable development and the take-off towards future horizons, is reliant on an efficient private sector, capable of facing future challenges, and such an approach requires a comprehensive governmental vision towards supporting this sector. It should be appreciated that in order to achieve such vision and plan, the government should involve the private sector and its institutions in formulating this strategy and give them an effective role in this area. However, it arrived at the following as a vision of the private sector role, demonstrating the

extent to which the government relies on private enterprise in the country's development process:

- A. The creation of a leading and highly competitive private sector characterised by being efficient, self-reliant and integrated into the global economy.
- B. The private sector, whether institutional or informal, shall be the main national income generator.
- C. The private sector shall be the main source of provision of fair employment opportunities for people.
- D. The provision of a private sector which is socially and environmentally responsible.

(MoD, 1997:251)

Therefore, one of the priorities of the 5th FYDP was to support and promote the private sector role, and encourage domestic and foreign investment. Regarding the HRD vision, a number of objectives were stated concerning GE/BE and HE in particular, these being:

- A. The development of advanced two-year secondary education of which the government shall bear 70% of its costs whether being presented in public schools in their present capacity, or through private schools, and the balance of cost should be paid by the families of students.
- B. Vocational training available for all those who are willing to enter the work market regardless of their educational standards, to which the government shall present an annual offer, which covers 70% of its costs.
- C. Encouraging the Private Sector to take a greater part in the education sector through a number of mechanisms such as: offering easy and long-term grants for the construction of schools, institutes and intermediate colleges, encouraging parents to make their children join private schools in order to lessen the burden on public schools. In addition, the Ministry of Housing should avail sketched plots to the Ministry of Education for the construction of private schools and institutes in accordance with the laws applied therein. (MoD, 1995a:42-46)

Sustaining this direction, the 6th FYDP (2001-2005) raised several objectives

regarding the role of private sector in HRD, in both the GE/BE and HE spheres. The most important are indicated as follows, from which it can be seen that some are the responsibility of MoHE, some are related to the SQU and others come under the jurisdiction of other authorities:

- A. The MoHE should work to encourage and motivate the private sector to invest in HE through the establishment of specialised universities and colleges to meet the labour market needs.
- B. In the field of TE and VT, the Ministry of Manpower should involve the private sector in the formulation of training programmes, follow-up of its output, evaluation and improvement of curricula applied in TE and VT.
- C. The SQU should provide consultancy and scientific research services to external organisations, whether governmental or private.

(MoNE, 2002b:58,59).

Accordingly, the 6th FYDP created a package of policies and mechanisms to fulfil the above-mentioned objectives, some of which are as follows:

- Involving the private sector in planning, management and supervision of HE.
- Encouraging the private sector to finance HE.
- Establishing three private universities.
- Encouraging the private sector to contribute to financing some programmes in the SQU.
- Adopting facilities for the enrolment of students in the private sector education institutions.
- Broadening and encouraging the private sector contribution to VT and training programmes that conform with the private enterprises needs, the different economic activities and the skilled and semi-skilled labour force.

(MoNE, 2002b:60-62).

The 6th FYDP (2001-2005) of the MoHE set out the following aims for private HE, which indicate in some way that there is a pressing need to issue partnerships between the government and the private sector to promote this field:

- Participating in promoting the standard of HE and scientific research.
- Providing the new specialisations that enable the development of experts in

several modern areas.

- Providing social services in several educational and research modes.
- Ensuring the Omani identity, including its religious, moral and social values.
- Providing and using the newest educational and technological systems.
- Contributing in serving the society through offering free study places for a number of people.

(MoHE, 2000a)

However, it is seems that there were serious reasons that led the government to build this campaign of encouragements and to adopt such policies, and these were highlighted in the report of HRD (1995) which is part of the Vision of 'Oman 2020', which stated the difficulties experienced in availing the nation of the entire costs associated with the country's education needs, with improving quality, and the need to accustom citizens to the idea that they must contribute, even on a gradual basis in bearing the educational expenditures beyond the BE (MoNE, 2002b).

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the most serious difficulty facing the national economy is the increasing deficit in the general budget, and a decline in financial reserves which is expected to continue gradually in the coming 25 years (MoD, 1997:165). And according to the address of the Minister of National Economy to Majles A'Shura (Consultative Council) in March 2003, this status has worsened during the first two years of the current decade, because the petroleum companies have faced technical problems that have contrived to reduce crude production at some major fields of oil earlier than initially envisaged (MoN, 2003b:6). Therefore, it seems logical for the government to introduce policies regarding the encouragement and support of the private sector to participate and invest in HE.

Some have argued that these reasons are undeclared by the government, but indeed they have been declared and could be deduced through a review of relatively old documents and plans such as the report of HRD (1995) which is a part of the Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020' and other documents,

although the reasons are not easy to find among the regular or periodic governmental documents. Nonetheless, these aims are:

- 1- To help the government finance HE through the establishment of private HEIs.
- 2- To participate in the absorption of SSGs in order to reduce the pressure on the government.
- 3- To provide a set of new specialisations and programmes that are required by the marketplace and unavailable in the governmental HEIs.

These aims are the government's aims in respect of the private sector, but the questions of what the private sector sees as it aims, and whether there a unified policy formulated by the private HEIs or their sponsors, remain. Clearly, each private HEI has its own aims and policies, but to what extent these aims are beneficial for society is not properly known. And since the state supports private HEIs in many ways, the question of how well the private sector responds to the state's needs, is pertinent.

As a conclusion, the government should direct the private HEIs to build their future vision and objective in accordance with the state targets and in the context of the international developments in order to prepare young Omanis to respond to modern-day requirements and the future challenges.

Regarding the aims and objectives of the different streams of HE in the country as stated in the 6th FYDP which related to the expansion of HE's capacity, although it is the final year of the current FYDP; the reality of achievement of these aims is too far from the required targets as clarified from the data that gathered from documents reviewed throughout the previous sections. Furthermore, the actuality of implementation process of the aims and policies relevant to expanding the capacity of the interested HEIs, public and private, will be discussed with the interviewees in the fieldwork.

5.7 Financing of Higher Education in Oman

Clearly, the issue of HE funding is not peculiar to Oman, and many researchers have highlighted the worldwide debate in this respect, which has emerged because of the escalating demand for HE, caused primarily by an increasing number of school leavers, and limited and continuing reducing HE funding (Al Hijri, 2000). This incredible demand for HE has caused most countries around the world to face serious financial challenges in trying to respond, and Oman is no different. However, 'the challenge seems particularly acute for Oman because the country also faces perhaps within 15 years but inevitably over the next few decades, a transition to a post-oil economy' (Preddey, 2004:18).

5.7.1 The reality of the challenge

There is an absence of comparative information that might provide an accurate picture regarding the financing of HE with its all divisions and institutions. Different types of institutions are subject to different funding mechanisms and enrolment procedures, and are administered by different ministries and agencies. There is an urgent need to gain an overview of the allocation of resources to HE, since 'the funding framework must have a clear legal basis, with responsibilities for policy and funding decisions being properly defined, and with clear accountabilities for higher education providers that receive public funding' (Preddey, 2004:21). However, and because of the delicate nature of the finance area, it is not easy to obtain correct data about expenditures allocated, not only in the HE sector, but in most sectors, because this is restricted for official use only.

Therefore, the research in this area will rely on two references, one being the World Bank study in 2001 on cost effectiveness in Oman's education sector, and the second being a paper prepared in 2004, by Preddey, an international expert commissioned by the CoHE, to produce a study concerning education funding in Oman in general. In fact, both these references are restricted to official use only

and the researcher has made many efforts to gain access to these.

As mentioned, a wide range of arguments between scholars regarding the state role in financing HE, exist. However, the Omani state provides education free of charge at all levels, from grade one through to university, and HE students in some institutions also receive generous housing, food or cash allowances. Consequently, during the 1990s Oman's spending on education experienced significant growth. For example, by 1998 15% of total government spending was spent on education, representing 20% of the total civilian spending and 5.6% of GDP or 4.8% over a five-year period. This makes Oman's spending levels comparable to those of OECD countries, as well as to GCC countries (The World Bank, 2001). Given this level of expenditure, and the increasing demand for education spending, the World Bank recommended that the Omani government reconsider its spending priorities within the education sector before making any new increase in the education budget.

Recurrent expenditures in Omani HEIs are broadly comparable to OECD countries, and are even higher particularly for SQU, at 95% in 1999, and almost two-thirds for wages and salaries, while wages and salaries take up 55% of recurrent expenditures for the MoHE, which were 89%. Most of these resources are used to pay for living costs and other allowances for students at the Colleges of Education and SQU (World Bank, 2001). Moreover:

HEIs carry a considerable burden in order to correct short falls in education provision at the secondary level, ... also because the SSGs do not possess any work skills when they graduate, the employer has to bear direct costs of training or bear the indirect cost of supporting training programs by contributing specified amounts towards vocational training (Al Barwani, 2002:6).

It is clear that in tandem with the rapid growth and diversification of HE in Oman, there is increasing financial pressure resulting from the drop in national oil revenues, rapid population growth, and increasing demand for HE and demands on government to expand its funding for BE and Secondary Education

(Preddey, 2004:10), and in 2001, the World Bank recorded two serious challenges facing Oman's development as being:

- The need to improve quality in GE.
- The need for expanding enrolment opportunities in HE.

It noted the inability of HE to absorb the increasing number of SSGs who wish to pursue HE, this was regarded as one of the most serious challenge facing HE in Oman, as declared in the International Conference of the University of 21st Century, held in Muscat in March 2001 (Al Manthri, 2001), and the resultant exodus of many students to overseas HEIs, many funded at their own expense. Further, it expressed the need for HE to become more flexible and more responsive to demand (World Bank, 2001:ii), as the country moves from an 'elite' system characterised by low participation rates (typically less than 20% of the age cohort) and under-representation of students from poorer families, to a 'mass' HE system, characterised by significantly higher participation (typically 50-60% or more) and a student population that is more closely representative of the socio-economic distribution of the general population (Preddey, 2004:17).

5.7.2 Suggested Alternatives by The World Bank

It is obvious that the World Bank report is more concerned with HE spending than GE spending. It stated that rich households (20% of the Omani population) are more likely to enrol their children in colleges and university, and benefit three times as much from the public subsidy of HE than limited-income households. Thus, the Omani government was urged to provide limited-income Omanis with greater access to HE, to consider recovering some of the costs from families and students who can afford to pay, and to explore several alternative ways of raising finance for education (The World Bank, 2001).

Actually, considering the income of most Omani families, it could be argued that some of these recommendations might negatively affect the education sector in general and HE in particular. For example, the recommendation to redirect

spending away from so-called lower-priority items (student transport and allowances for some colleges and university students) and fund instead greater pedagogical inputs and expand the enrolments, is really a direction to extract much of the needed finance from within the education sector itself.

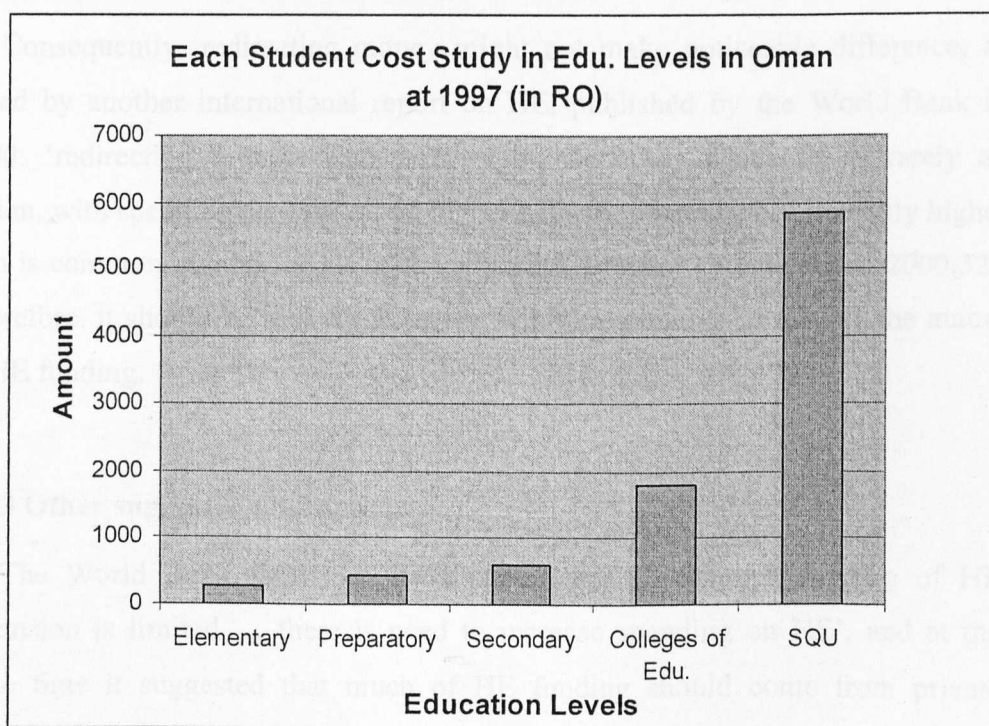
In fact, student allowances and transportation are not widely offered by the government, and particularly during the last decade, these have only been available for some of SQU students, most of whom are from regions across the country, and in some colleges located far away from students' homes. This status was proven by the World Bank (2001) itself when presenting the difference in unit cost between Colleges of Education administered by the MoHE. It was stated that the cost unit in these colleges varies by location, from a high of RO 2,221 at Salalah College, which is far from Muscat and other inhabited areas in the north of the country, to a low of RO 1,506 at Rusteq college (2001:22).

Thus, it is expected that the implementation of the World Bank recommendations would reduce enrolments in HEIs. According to World Bank Report statistics, the rich households in Oman comprise 20% of the population, while the poorest comprise another 20%, meaning that 60% of Omani households are between the low and middle income levels, and these, with the 20% of poorest households, can not be expected to pay for HE.

In addition, most Omani families at present are large, having between five to eight children, and sometimes more than ten. Hence, it is impossible to pay for HE. This situation might be the main reason why the Omani government has not implemented such recommendations. However, if incomes are increased, or family size decreases, it might possible for families to make a contribution, and there are indications in the 2003 national census that there is significant decline in the population growth rate, around 2% as mentioned in Chapter Two, while in 1993, this was 3.7%.

With regard to the Omani economy, in 1999 Oman's GDP was RO. 6 billion (\$15.6 billion), with a per-capita GDP of \$6,710, during the 1990s the real economic growth averaging 5.5 % annually (The World Bank, 2001:2). Total expenditure for the MoHE in 1999 (RO. 26.110m) was 86.5 % of the revised budget (RO. 30.177m), while for SQU the total expenditure in 1999 (RO. 54.509m) was 99.91% of the revised budget (RO. 54.555m), \$ = .384 Riyal Omani (Preddey, 2004:111). Consequently, the unit cost at SQU was RO. 5,855 representing 20 times the cost of elementary education, at only RO. 446, while other OECD countries spend on average only 2.5 times more per student at the level of HE than at the primary level. This led the World Bank to recommend the Omani government to increase the level of spending per student on primary and secondary education, and simultaneously to examine ways of reducing the unit cost in all HEIs, through reductions in student allowances and other support, along with the introduction of student credit schemes, such as income-contingent student loans (World Bank, 2001:22).

Chart 5.4



The World Bank (2001:22).

It could be argued that instead of reducing the unit cost by reducing student allowances, which might cause other social matters and lead Omani families to avoid enrolling their children in HEIs, it might be better to recommend the government to expand the capacity of enrolment within the current governmental HEIs by adopting other more equitable and useful solutions. This alternative is in accordance with what the World Bank recognised, when it mentioned that ‘This diversity reflects the existence of economies of scale: as the number of students rise, costs rise more slowly, making the unit cost lower at larger institutions’ (World Bank, 2001:22), and there are some institutions able to increase their intake. Al Rahbi (2004) recommended a study be conducted on family income level and the expense of HE in Oman, which would be more helpful in this respect. In addition, the implementation of such recommendations of the World Bank might lead to a reduction in the budget already allocated by the government to the HE sector, which at present unable to afford the SSGs’ study in HE, according to its limited capacity as explained.

Consequently, redirecting money might not make noticeable difference, as stated by another international report on HE, published by the World Bank in 2000: ‘redirecting money from primary or secondary education is rarely an option, with spending per student on higher education already considerably higher than is common at other levels of the education system’ (World Bank, 2000:32). Therefore, it should be seeking for more helpful alternative in solving the matter of HE funding.

5.7.3 Other suggested alternatives

The World Bank (2001:36) itself stated ‘the government funding of HE expansion is limited ... there is need to increase spending on HE’, and at the same time it suggested that much of HE funding should come from private sources, through three alternatives. The first source is family resources, which vary and thus the suggestion is inequitable; the second is current student earning,

which the report indicated would help but only in a small way; and the third is the student's future earning, which is tied in with a student loan system.

The student loan scheme proposed by the World Bank (2001), is already applied in some countries, such as the United States, Canada, New Zealand and other countries, and although perhaps the best solution, still has difficulties associated with it. Al Rabhi (2004) argues that the income level of Omani families is one factor to be taken into account in this respect, and clearly a study of this alternative or others as potential solutions for the major problems is beyond this study's scope.

However, The World Bank (2000), Al Rabhi (2004), (Preddey,2004) and others, have acknowledged that in developing societies, pursuing HE in a non-public institution can be a challenge for students since they cannot secure loans at a reasonable rate to finance their studies, because of 'the poor functioning of financial markets in many developing countries' (The World Bank, 2000:58). Additionally, in most such environments, student loan programmes that delay payment beyond graduation, do not exist, while in other countries which do offer these loan schemes, only a small proportion of the student population apply for them, and in most cases these programmes do not offer enough support to cover the student needs or numbers (Ziderman and Albrecht, 1995).

Given the discussion so far, it can be seen that the Omani HE system is too complicated to allow for a calculation of the associated expenditure, particularly because HE is comprised of different types of institutions that are subject to different funding mechanisms and enrolment procedures, and are administered by different ministries and agencies. Such a situation requires one to trace all these authorities and institutions, and investigate all dimensions and terms of expenditures, while the 5th and 6th FYDPs (the time domain of this study), determined the whole amount for the Education and Training sector budget, which includes GE/BE (almost two thirds of the overall budget of Education

Sector), HE, TE, VT with all of their levels, and all other pre-service or in-service training programmes across all the governmental bodies. Moreover, inside these ministries and agencies there are different directorates, divisions and activity streams concerned with HE, training and other streams of HRD, which make the calculation processes too complicated, and inevitably therefore, a separate study for each sector or perhaps even each institution, is required. One example is the PhD study of Al Ghanboosi (2002), that concentrated on only one dimension - the implementation of total quality management in one HEI, that being SQU - and Al Rahbi's research (2004) into the student loan scheme, which is one alternative to public HE funding.

Furthermore, as noted earlier, a number of these HE authorities and institutions might refuse to divulge financial data to potential researchers, since such information is usually restricted for official use only. Even the effectiveness study for education in Oman conducted by the World Bank (2001), which was to include the entire education sector from GE/BE through to HE, only managed to study two HE bodies (the MoHE and SQU), and the other HEIs introduced in Chapter Three, were not included. Moreover, this study was also regarded as confidential.

However, as an educational official, the researcher offers the opinion that the World Bank study does provide indicators that can be considered as fairly accurate. Particularly, during the last five years, the financial situation either of the country or of the HE budget has not witnessed significant changes. So, most of the governmental institutions' budget remains at the same level with small differences. Most developments witnessed in the HE system during the last five years were in the role of the private sector, where there has been rapid expansion. By 2005, as mentioned earlier, there were three private universities, and 16 university colleges with more than 13,000 enrolled students (MoHE, 2005:182), compared with nine private colleges with around 2,000 students in 1999 (MoHE, 2004a).

In conclusion, from the above statement, and according to several reasons, particularly the economic one, it is obvious that HE in Oman faces several challenges, the most serious, being that relating to finance. It was declared by several documents reviewed, that the state is facing difficulties in financing HE sector, particularly in absorbing the increasing number of SSGs who wish to join the HEIs. Therefore, and in order to solve this matter, the government has been intent on continuing its support for HEIs by increasing the state budget for this sector, and by providing free education (MoHE, 2002c). In sequence, the 6th FYDP set out a number of objectives and financial policies hoping to increase the capacity of HEIs throughout relatively sufficient and convenient funding, the most important of these being:

- ❖ Inviting and Encouraging the private sector to take part in the process of expanding HE, through several mechanisms aiming at increasing its investment in the establishment new universities and colleges.
- ❖ Increasing the annual budget for this sector.
- ❖ Reviewing the efficiency of the current capital expenditure of the governmental HEIs. (MoHE, 2002c)

On the other hand, the World Bank (2001) argued that the Omani government should provide limited-income Omanis with greater access to HE, and suggested that it should explore several alternative ways of raising finance for education. It suggested also to consider recovering some of the costs from families and students who can afford to pay, and to expand the role of parents in funding their children's studies. In addition, according to the high unit-cost in some Omani HEIs compared with other OECD countries; the World Bank recommended the government to redirect spending away from non-educational facilities and extra allowances for some colleges and SQU students, and fund instead a more consolidated educational process with increased enrolments.

However, whilst it is appreciated that the government should review expenditure policies, the implementation of suggestions regarding parental funding should be studied carefully in the light of the social and financial reality of most Omani families, ie, their large size, income and relative affluence, since it has been indicated that such moves may reduce enrolments in HEIs. Consequently, other options have been suggested, and will be put to the study's interviewees.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed and analysed a number of relevant documents and studies concerning HE in Oman. It began by establishing the extent of the demand for HE, socially and economically, from which it was obvious that demand is high. Different aspects of this demand were produced, in particular the increasing number of SSGs, and other categories of Omani citizens who wish to continue their higher studies. In addition, the pressing requirements of the local marketplace for a well-qualified national workforce were considered. In this respect, it was clarified that there is an urgent need to Omanise the large number of jobs in most areas in the private companies which now rely overwhelmingly on more than a half million expatriates.

However, the enrolment capacity of the state HEIs and different training streams is too limited, causing thousands of SSGs to be left without the opportunity to enrol in any type of HE or on a suitable training programme. To improve this unsatisfactory situation, the government has undertaken several steps, such as expanding the enrolments of some HEIs, and especially, encouraging the private sector to invest in this field. Such encouragement has resulted in the establishment of a number of private universities and colleges.

However, both state and private HEIs are now facing a number of challenges, and the gap between HE demand and supply is extremely worrying and damaging. Indeed, it was clarified that in order to bridge the gap, there is a need

to: formulate a clear vision, objectives for education, including the different streams of HE and training, enhance plans and policies, with direct and strong links to the country's development strategy. Additionally, there is a need to reform the current supervisory organisations of HE, and to review the HE funding system in the light of the current budget allocated for the sector, which is considered by the interviewees to be too low. The discussion touched also on the participation of other societal and private institutions, experts, international institutions and other interested bodies.

Indeed, these themes and other related issues were the subjects of discussion in the interviews, the findings of which will be analysed and discussed in the next four chapters. The next chapter will discuss the information and findings regarding the first two themes, which are the demands for HE and the enrolment capacity of HE in the Sultanate.

Chapter Six

Analysis and Discussion of Interviews Findings (1)

Demands for Higher Education and its Capacity

6.1 Introduction

Several aims can be achieved by using interviews as explained earlier, but specifically, the underpinning objectives of the interviews undertaken in this research were: firstly, to obtain first-hand data relating to the visions and strategies about the process of expansion and development of HE in Oman from key figures and other high ranking officials in interested organisations and society's institutions. Secondly, it was hoped to ascertain the influence of the current demand for HE, considering the high and increasing number of SSGs, the capacity of HEIs, the most important challenges facing HE in Oman, and particularly HE financing. The third objective was to obtain the views of these decision-makers and planners about the future targets for the development and expansion of HE, with particular reference to the issues just mentioned.

As explained in this thesis, Oman formulated a number of plans and strategies aiming at comprehensive human development, and invested much effort and resources in promoting its HRD, particularly after the publication of the Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*', which includes plans for HRD from 1995-2020. With respect to HE, however, it seems apparent that the State is not addressing the need to remedy some obvious weaknesses which are arising from the high and increasing number of SSGs every year, the limited capacity of HEIs and resources, the problems of developing a national workforce, and the country's reliance on expatriates in the labour market.

The analysis was based on five themes, selected in accordance with the study aims and interview findings, these being:

1. The demands for HE (including the social demand, increasing number of SSGs and the requirements of the marketplace)

2. The capacity of HEIs and the State plans for dealing with SSGs.
3. The government vision and plans for the expansion and development process of the Omani HE system.
4. Administration and management of the HE sector and its institutions in Oman.
5. The funding for HE, in which the participation of the private sector and other societal institutions are involved.

This chapter deals with the first two themes. The interviewees' responses related to each of these two themes will be analysed and discussed in the light the information obtained from the documentary analysis, and will end with a short summary, while the interviews' findings regarding other three themes will be discussed in the following three chapters. An overall conclusion will be provided in the last chapter of the thesis, with a final concentrated discussion that considers all the five themes together in order to draw lessons and offer recommendations that will help in developing an appropriate approach for the expansion and development of HE that best suits Oman.

6.2 Demands for Higher Education in Oman

Hence, this research attempts to remedy that shortcoming, and to comprehensively investigate this demand to establish its nature and its level in reality, as well to diagnose the underlying reasons for this high and increasing demand, through gathering the opinions of several categories of interested people in the Omani HE system, such as Ministers, Under-Secretaries, DGs, Directors, University and College Deans and Professors, policy-makers. Questions asked are: How do they perceive the demands for HE in Oman? Why is there a high demand for HE in Oman, and what are the reasons for it? The responses are now considered.

6.2.1 Are the demands social or economic, and what are the reasons for the high demand

The researcher opened this issue by asking: *How do you see the demand for higher education in the Omani society? And to what extent the graduates of Secondary School*

demand for joining higher education? In response, 49 of the interviewees said they perceived the demand to be high, with 29 of them believing it to be very high. This reaction confirmed the fact and opinions that had been gathered from reviewing the associated documentation and relevant literature. Only one of the all interviewees said the demand was moderate, and no one said it was low. In their responses, most participants produced evidence to support their belief. A senior official supported his answer, by saying: '[the demand is shown by] the annually high increasing numbers of Secondary School graduates, who have an overwhelming desire to take a place at Higher Education' (L1u12). The head of one HEI said:

I would say very high, most people want to go to Higher Education when they leave school. I think if you ask school students in 12 grade they will tell you I want to go to high. Even if you ask anybody here what do you want to do in the future after the diploma they will say I want to do my Bachelor, ... when they finish (Bs) they also want to do master, so I think the demand is very high (L3gc4).

Another professor gave almost the same response (L3gu3), while other interviewees, such as (L3gc2) and (L3prc1) also observed that this change in society's attitude which led to increase the demand for HE, had gradually developed, saying:

During the last few years, it could be observed that there has been a major change in citizens' priorities, it is seems that they recognised that their first priority should be given to their children's study, whereas before they concentrated on building their deluxe homes or buying other luxuries (L3prc1).

Furthermore, this high demand for HE was evidenced by the number of students who apply to register in most public HEIs, which sometimes reaches ten times the capacity, as indicated by a number of interviewees such as (L2d13g), (L2d14d), (L3gc1) and (L1u10). On the same theme, another participant said: 'it is obvious that this [entering HE] is the demand of most Omani families' (L1uv3), while another interviewee added:

Although some of the governmental employees could not gain scholarships funded by the government, they take what we call Study furlough (or holiday) with their full salary, while others with half salary, and others sacrifice their full salary in order to obtain only study furlough (or holiday) to continue their study, so making

such valuable sacrifice only to continue their study and to gain high qualification (L2d8g).

This extract in fact reflects how much Omani people in general, not only young SSGs, wish to continue their studies and gain higher qualifications. However, throughout reviewing the governmental documents as shown in Chapters Three and Five, the high and increasing number of graduates was demonstrated through official statistics, and the researcher just wanted to probe the interviewees' feeling towards this issue, and they confirmed this situation. The reality is that most of those graduates are not in HE, many of them working in jobs that do not require higher qualification or particular training.

Hence, it is important to ascertain the nature of this demand, and whether the reasons for it are social or economic, the interviewees were asked the following question: *How do you see this demand, is it a social demand, economic demand or other demand? In other words, why is there high demand or what are the reasons for this high demand?*

In response, most participants said that the demand was both social and economic but the majority believed that the economic demand was stronger than the social one. The detail of opinions about this issue are clarified in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1
The Participants' Views Regarding the Kinds of Demands for HE

Levels	Econ. First. A	%	Socia First B	%	Both C	%	Econ Only D	%	Socia Only E	%	Perso F	%	Not Know not Clear G	%
Participants' Responses	21		5		32/50 21(A+C) 5(B+C) 2(C+F) 4C	64	9	18	1	2	3/50 1F 2(C+F)	2	7	14
Total = 32 [(21A+C) + (5B+C) + (2C+F) + 4C] + 9D + 1E + 1F + 7G = 50														

From Table 6.1, it can be seen that 64% of the participants believed that the demand for HE was both economic and social. However, 21 of the 32 interviewees (representing more than 65.5%) suggested that the economic reason came first, while only five (15.6%) said the social demand was more important. Moreover, while there were a few participants who said the demand was only economic, in contrast there was only one interviewee who saw the demand as only social. Another three interviewees believed that the demand for HE was motivated by personal matters. Two of these people believed the demands were characterised by a combination of personal wishes as well as by economic and social characteristics, while another said the demand was entirely down to personal reasons. Moreover, the findings showed that nine participants (18%), believed that the demand was purely economic, while only one interviewee believed it was entirely social.

Hence, the majority of these key figures believe that the Omani people pursue HE opportunities in order to obtain jobs with a suitable income, or to increase their incomes through self-improvement which will lead to promotion in their existing employment positions, rather than because they are interested in cultural life, intellectual benefits, or acquiring social status. In fact, this interpretation was verified by explanations provided by most interviewees throughout their answers to the question, as the following excerpts from the transcripts show:

You will find many low income families across the country who get loans to educate their children, hoping that when their children complete their studies they can increase the family income and improve the standard of living, and accordingly become able to reimburse their families with what has been spent on their education (L1u10).

There are very few people who seek HE for the sake of knowledge, very few people who not take into their account that they want to increase their income or to improve their job position, and very few people who believe that the high certificate or other high qualification will not increase their income or will not improve their positions in their work, very few indeed (L2d8g).

Definitely economic, and I want to see if there is anyone who can argue with me in this point (L1u5)

I think both, social and very driven by economic demand. Because definitely if you come up with a BS Degree, you do get a job, and you can have a much higher

income than school leavers. It is definitely economic as well as social. And you know in our families and society, people are regarded well if they are educated, I mean now in our society education is important, and every family wants their children to be educated as much as possible (L3gc4)

Furthermore, these views indicate that the interviewees, who comprised the majority of the top government officers in the HRD sector in Oman, recognise that the Omani people have pressing economic reasons for wanting to continue their studies, reflecting the extent to which Omani families need to educate their children in order to improve their financial situations. Some of these interviewees conceived the demand for HE rather narrowly or instrumentally, saying ‘most students require HE for the job only, and this suggests that most of them are from low income backgrounds and they wish that they will improve their families income by gaining more higher education’ (L2u2g). Another gave a shorter answer when he said ‘the education is only for the job’ (L2d15g) while yet another interviewee said ‘of all the students I have met I did not meet anyone who said that I want to continue my study to obtain more knowledge and to be an educated person’ (L2d1g).

Nevertheless, it seems that some of these answers reflect in some aspects, a narrowmindedness of some interviewees, who perceived the demand for HE to be purely associated with getting a job, whilst interviewee (L4sc4) (and others) provided a more comprehensive opinion, saying:

The fact that the education system, including higher education, has been strongly linked with the job and income, led our society to be unconcerned with the preparation of scholars, and researchers with the ability for creative thinking. People only emphasised the job dimension, except for a few thinking people maybe in Sultan Qaboos University or elsewhere.

A number of participants addressed another important cause of high pressure on General/Basic Education (GE/BE) in general, and the resulting high demand for HE, as being the high growth rate of the country’s population, noted in Chapter Two. Thus, the youthfulness of Omani society is seen a major contributor of pressure and high demand, and several interviewees stated this as a main reason for increased demand for HE. For example, the interviewees (L2d5g), (L3gvu4) and (L2guv2) gave similar answers to

participant (L2d9g) who said: ‘the growth rate of Oman’s population is very high. During 10 years it has increased around half a million, so our society is young, and the cost to educate all these people is much, however, I am not one of these who call for limiting procreation, because still our population is too small’. Another participant said:

The problem is that our society is one of the youngest societies around the world. Our population is 1.7 million and there are more than 568,000 students out of the total number of the population are in the schools now, which means that all our society is at study or as students. So with this high number, which generated more than 40,000 graduates from Secondary School, do you imagine that the state can provide places for all this number in the higher education institutions? (L2d7g).

In fact, in discussing this challenge in Chapters Three and Five, it was pointed out that the 1993 census indicated a high population growth, and it was also noted that the last national census in 2003 showed the population growth rate is beginning to decline, predictions for the near future show such reduction, which means that this factor is more likely to reduce in importance in the near future. With respect to other social influences, a minority of interviewees placed more emphasis on, and attributed the increased demand for HE to, social reasons, offering such comments as: ‘in our society, educated people can get a suitable social position, and any person who can gain a higher qualification in whatever area, and from wherever, is guaranteed a higher social position’ (L1u4), and ‘there are many students and employees whose financial situations are quite good yet at the same time they continue their studies and demand more HE’ (L4sc3).

One interviewee believed that the reason for the HE demand was personal (L1pscm1), and when the researcher asked if he/she thought there was no economic or social demand at all, the response was:

Until now this thought was not clear or did not exist. But maybe now there are some educated people or researchers who talk or discuss such issues. However, they are also talking about the demand in the context of personal requirements, such as gaining social prestige or obtaining promotion in his/her job, and these are personal advantages, rather than being perceived as a contribution towards building and developing the country, in which he/she ought to participate.

Moreover, some interviewees, such as (L3prc1), (L4sh3) and others, differentiated between individual demand, and the State's demand, one of them saying:

As students they demand HE for social reasons, because most of them want to be educated and advanced or to become open-minded people, and therefore they want to continue their university studies, not Technical Education or Vocational Training, which is why they avoid the Technical Education. I think it is only for social prestige, while the government demand is economic, since it is moving to privatise most sectors, and this requires Technical Education or Vocational Training rather than other studies (L4sh3).

In fact, the students' negative attitude towards TE and VT was discussed in Chapter Three, and it was mentioned that there are now observable changes in this perception, and that the Colleges of Technology are currently facing a high demand for places for increasing numbers of SSGs (www.omandaily.com/daily/business/business1.htm 10/01/2005). This reality was also evidenced by the interviewees, one of whom said:

For example the registered students in The College of Technology in ... in 2001 was 400 students, while in the academic year 2004/2005 there are more than 1,400 students registered in this College. These days a number of parents come to the college to enrol their daughters while in the past they refused to enrol their sons (L3gc5).

Another view was expressed by one participant who perceived a distinction between the regions within the country in this respect, saying that:

The demands are different from region to region within the country. In most it is personal demand, but you do find in some regions the students or people need to continue their study to meet their financial commitments, while in other regions you maybe find people who demand HE despite their sufficient income or financial situation (L3prc1).

However, this view was not supported by other interviewees, nor by any of the reviewed documents, and there are no indications of such different approaches to HE on the basis of region. Generally speaking, most participants, the majority of whom occupy high positions of responsibility in the country, believe that the demand for HE in Oman is both social and economic, and that the economic reason is stronger than the social one.

In relation to the social dimensions, some interviewees' responses reflect some social aspect of this demand, for example one interviewee noted that 'females in our society are more likely to want HE than males' (L4-SC3) and supported the assertion, saying that 'the number of female students who graduate from Secondary school and gain high marks is much higher than male students'.

Another participant provided statistical information in this direction, saying 'there are more than 10,000 Omani students who study at HE level in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in addition to several thousands in other Arab countries' (L4sc3). Indeed, this figure almost corresponds with that indicated in one particular government document discussed in Chapter Two, and which stated that around 11,000 students were enrolled on first degrees in universities in the UAE, and that most of these were female and studying education (MoHE, 2004a). In fact, several circumstances regarding HE provision are reflected in this number, the first being the extent to which Omani families want to enrol their children in HE, which led some families as mentioned by two interviewees, to take out loans, or sell their homes in order to fund HE opportunities for their children abroad (L1-u8, L3gc2). In addition to this fact, these figures pose several serious questions relating to the financial status of many Omani families, and why most of these students chose to study education. Furthermore, the question of why most students sent to study in UAE are female, is also raised.

6.2.2 SSGs' position in the labour market

With this regard, the question presented to the interviewees was: *How do you see the situation or the number of the current outputs of the High Secondary School in the local labour market? Do you think they are qualified to join the labour market and to meet its requirements? If not, why, or if yes, how and to what extent?*

The responses were classified into four groups. The first one consisted of 12 participants' responses, stated that the number of SSGs in the labour market is low, because they are not well qualified to meet most requirements of the labour market, but they would meet some of them. Thus, if they had some training; they would gain a

good position, and their number in employment would increase, while the second group contained only three participants who said that the number of the SSGs is good since they could be regarded as qualified people but that they needed some training. In contrast, 27 interviewees of the 50 (more than half of all participants) said that the number of those graduates is very small, because they were not qualified at all to enter and meet the requirements of the current labour market, and would need full-time or long-term training programmes. The responses of the remaining eight participants were not definitive. Table 6.2 shows these groups' responses.

Table 6.2

Participants' Views Regarding the Extent to Which the SSGs are Qualified to Meet the Requirements of the Labour Market

Levels	They are qualified to some extent ----- but They need little training	They are qualified ----- but they need some training	They are not qualified need ----- and they need full training	Not Known	Total
Participants' Responses	12	3	27	8	50

In addition to this overall picture of all responses, most interviewees offered more explanations and produced reasons for their views. Firstly, and as indicated above, all the participants, even those who said that the SSGs could be regarded as qualified to join the labour market, believed in the need to equip those graduates with skills and knowledge through short courses or training programmes. Some of these interviewees made worthwhile comments in this respect, such as (L1pscm1) who said:

Yes, they [SSGs] can [join the labour market] with some good training, and if we analyse the workforce in the private sector labour market, we will find that the qualifications of most employees of this workforce are between HSS and Diplomas, so not all of the expatriates are with university qualifications, but because they are serious and have good training; they are doing well.

Indeed, it was mentioned in Chapter Five that 71.8% of the workforce in the private sector enterprises had pre-secondary school qualifications, 15.5% had High Secondary School and only 4.9% held university qualifications (Al-Barwani. 2002:8). However, and according to the SQU study mentioned earlier, a workforce with a wide range of knowledge and skill in several specialisations is needed for the private sector enterprises, and this demands university qualifications, or at least, college qualifications (Al-Mamri, 2002). Likewise, there were other interviewees from the same group who offered a positive view towards these graduates and verified this by personal experience, saying:

According to what the private sector says, they are not qualified, and they need to be qualified and receive a lot of training. However, I believe that we should not generalise this situation since there are many Secondary School leavers who have been able to enter the work world without a problem. Personally, I can evidence this by my experience when I needed to employ a secretary for my office, I have interviewed a number of applicants, university graduates among them as well as High Secondary School graduates. At the end I have chosen one of the Secondary School graduates. Nevertheless, as well known any employee in any place and in any specialisation needs to train before starting his/her work; so the Secondary School leavers may need some training before work, but this is normal (L1-u12).

In contrast to this view, the majority of participants as mentioned, considered those graduates not to be prepared to join the world of work, and to require a great deal of training before being able to do so. In order to support their position, these interviewees advanced several reasons, which will be illustrated later. According to a number of the participants, this issue was regarded as one of the main matters facing the labour sector in the country, and one of them said:

Actually, this is a big and serious problem, and we are as senior officers forgetting this issue, if we imagine that around 15,000 of SSGs will join HEIs, another 2,000 students will enter the labour market in low jobs, and 3,000 will enrol in overseas HEIs using their own funding, so the total is 20,000 out of more than 50,000 of SSGs this year, then what shall the rest do, who are around 30,000 more than half, where they will go to work, and who will accept them without suitable qualification or training, nor work skills, and I am surprised what shall the government do to sort such matter. It is really a social problem and a strange phenomenon which requires us to study more (L2d5g).

The Weaknesses and Reasons

Regarding the most important weaknesses in the preparation process of the SSGs, most interviewees provided a number of examples, one for instance saying: 'No, they are not qualified at all, they have no work skills or competencies and I hope that the Ministry of Manpower establishes sufficient institutes to train these people to enable them to enter the work world' (L1uv3).

Another interviewee complained that 'the SSGs have no communication skills, zero cultural knowledge, not only do they not know English, but they do not write Arabic either' (L4bs2), and another one added that 'the SSGs are weak in English as well as in Mathematics' (L2d13g, L4sh1), and 'these are the competencies which are needed by the private sector' (L2d2g), and 'the secondary school leavers are also very weak in accounting, using computer and communication skills, they really need training' (L3gu3). Another view is that 'the SSGs not only need to be trained in the dimension of skills or job requirements; but also they need psychological preparation. They are not prepared in this dimension at all, they refuse to work in the private sector' (L2-d14-g).

Moreover, another participant added: 'if they want to work as cleaners maybe they have no need to train, but if they want to be employed in other better jobs, they should be trained and qualified' (L2d7g), while another one said 'even as mailman or in a restaurant they cannot work, they have nothing' (L3gc1). Another one said 'if they will be employed in some jobs that do not need qualified or trained people it's ok, they can manage, but for other jobs which require specific qualifications, and certain skills, they are not prepared for such tasks' (L2d8g). Also, 'they can work as gas cylinder sellers, petrol pump attendants or as a fruit man which do not require high qualifications or long training programmes', as viewed by (L3gc4), (L3gu3) and (L2d15g) who said that the SSGs lack most of the most important requirements of jobs in the private sector. This situation means, as (L3prc4) stated:

Those secondary school leavers are qualified but for the low jobs, and they will be employed but you do not qualify them for the work, and they have no competitive chance against the expatriates who have professional qualifications and advanced

skills, so whilst the government attempts to allocate Omanis in place of expatriates, this could not be achieved because Omanis simply have not the abilities and competencies, you do not provide him/her with any service, so the expatriate will remain the most preferred employee (L3prc4).

Accordingly, lack of competence and skills were mentioned by the interviewees, the most important being work skills, communication skills, speaking and writing English, accounting, using computers, and also the psychological preparation to accept and adapt themselves to the work environment. Hence, the majority of interviewees who said that the SSGs were not qualified to join the world of work, particularly in the private enterprises, believe this to be due to the fact that the SSGs lack most of the important requirements of jobs in this sector.

The majority of participants referred this situation to the absence of job skills and work values in the curricula of the GE/BE and preparation activities, which some explain by the fact that the curriculum is too theoretical at the expense of providing practical skills and abilities, and that some curriculum inputs simply give the students unnecessary information. Some examples of these views are as follows:

No, because they are graduates of the old educational system, which was not designed to provide any work skills needed by the labour market. So they need some training at the beginning and then they could be provided with other training programmes which the enterprise required (L1u8).

The responses of participants (L3prc1) and (L1u5) who have experience in the academic field as well as in the planning process of the educational sector, provided some useful explanation, saying:

No, they [SSGs] are not qualified at all, because our secondary school system not provide students with any skill, it emphasises only theoretical knowledge text book without skills. Our curricula are not concerned with evaluation, analysis, sympathise and creativity. This means when the student leaves school he/she do not know anything about the work world, how to serve society or participate in solving community problems, while in Western countries, in Secondary Education there are special courses for how to serve society and the student has to practise what he/she studies, for example in a hospital, in an infirmary or in an orphanage. In the USA the Secondary School students in their last year join with any enterprise or factory, such as garages or restaurants. In these enterprises, the students are joining with a training team who train

them, and then when they leave school and go into society they can play some roles in serving their society. These training activities do not cost much, sometimes private enterprises participate in such practical courses. We have none of these programmes, because we just stay and wait for the state to do everything, provide everything; the government educates people, trains them, employs them and holds all responsibilities and the citizen has to do nothing. Thus, we should change this status and such attitudes. The citizens, private sector and society institutions should play some role in serving themselves and their country, and this should start with children from the primary stage until secondary stage in which they can hold a responsibility in doing certain tasks without any watch or hesitancy (L1-u5).

This view reflects the absence of practical activities and work experience in the Sultanate's education process, which is dominated by theory. Indeed, this reality is seen in the SSGs, since those who could not meet HEIs' grade requirements at the end of Secondary Stage, found themselves with nothing to do because most private agencies will not employ them because of their lack of work skills and other requirements. Moreover, even those graduates who are able to enter HE, still suffer in this respect because of the gap between demanded work skills and their experience of the Secondary Stage curriculum.

Hence, it is important to ascertain the participants' views about the extent to which the current outputs of HEIs serve the needs of labour market, the relationship between HE and labour market, and whether the current specialisations and programmes offered by HEIs, particularly governmental, meet the demand for a well qualified national workforce in different sectors and fields of the development process. The next few questions touch these dimensions.

6.3 Higher Education and the Labour Market Requirements

It has been indicated earlier that as a result of the HE provision during the last three decades, through the scholarships, the SQU and other different colleges and institutes, the process of Omanisation has been taking place so that now the majority of administrative staff in most public agencies are Omanis. However, the situation is not the same in technical jobs and other professional areas, which still rely heavily on expatriate labour. Despite 35 years of the country's Renaissance period, and although the state has attempted to qualify a national workforce in order to Omanise the private

sector; expatriates still dominate most private enterprises. So, questions such as: what are the causes of this situation, and to what extent will the current HE graduates serve the needs of the labour market, and reduce the country's reliance on foreign workers, need to be asked.

6.3.1 The extent to which the national workforce meets the needs of the labour market

In order to identify the gaps to be filled, the participants were asked what they considered to be the most important specialisations within the HEIs, both governmental and private, and whether their outputs would respond adequately to the requirements of the marketplace. It was expected that the discussion of the following question with interviewees would enable the researcher to ascertain their feelings regarding these issues, and to obtain important and specific information that would help in drafting recommendations that would enable HEIs to produce appropriate curricula to meet the demand. The first question asked of participants on this theme is as follows: *To what extent do the current graduates of higher education serve the needs of the labour market?*

The responses verified the existence of problems in the plans for preparing young Omanis, leading to a deficit of national labour in several areas, and a surplus of labour in others, in turn causing unemployment. As mentioned above, Omanis are mostly occupied in public sector administrative jobs, whilst a small number are in high positions and technical jobs in the private sector. Thus, the need for qualified Omanis in technical jobs and other professional fields in both the public and private sector was clarified. In detail, nine interviewees said they were not serving the nation in this way, while 17 believed the outputs of the HEIs did serve the need but not to a sufficient extent. In contrast, 19 participants indicated their belief that the needs for a national workforce were being met by current HEI provision. Table 6.3 summarises the responses.

Table 6.3
Participants' views towards the extent to which that the current outputs
of the HEIs serve the needs of the national labour market

Levels	Total	Serve	Not Serve	Not enough/ to some extent/ slightly/fairly	Not Know/ Not Clear
Participants' Responses	50	19	9	17	5

Hence, 36 participants believed HEI graduates to be serving marketplace needs, although 17 of these considered it was not to a sufficient extent, while only nine felt these graduates were not responding to the requirements. Consequently, these figures reflect the belief that the outputs of HEIs go some way to satisfying marketplace needs.

6.3.2 Why private sector companies rely heavily on expatriates

The interviewees were then asked: *Why do the private sector agencies in Oman rely heavily on expatriates, even though there are many Omanis who are unemployed and want jobs, and despite 35 years of the country's new age, and several plans prepared by the government to qualify a national workforce?*

Different reasons were offered in response to this question, and many interviewees listed a number of causes. For instance, (L2d12-g), (L1u4) and (L3gvu4) were some of these who produced several causes, while others stated only one or two reasons, but went into more detail [(L3gu3) and (L2d9g)].

The low remuneration of most private sector jobs

The first reason offered by most interviewees (for example, (L2d12g), (L2d7g), (L3gvc3), (L1u10), and (L1u11)) was the low remuneration of most private sector jobs, which discourages Omani workers from seeking employment in this sector. One of these key figures said: 'There are several reasons; for example: the most important reason is the low salary paid in most agencies in the private sector' (L2d12g), and similar to this statement was one provided by another participant who mainly blamed

the low salary (L3gvu4), while one interviewee (L1psem1) fully agreed with the influence played by salary, and gave more details, saying:

In fact this sector has its own problem with Omanis workers, for example the low salaries which are not suitable for the duties and tasks that the enterprise requires the Omani worker to do, while those salaries are suitable for the Asian expatriates according to their incomes in their countries, whereby their cost of living is not expensive like Oman. So, I think this is the main challenge and here is the problem between the two sides. However, there is now clear instruction from His Majesty to give the priority to the Omanis.

This reason was also given by another interviewee who spoke about the future problems which Omanis might face by accepting employment in this level of job, saying that:

Because of two reasons, the first one is not all jobs are desirable for Omanis, not because they do not want to work or to do these jobs but because the salaries of these jobs are very low and this status could be found in several countries around the world. You know the low income of these jobs will lead the employees to be unable to build their life, to establish their own families or houses ... (L1-u4).

The responses of participants such as (L2d7g), (L3gvc3), (L1u10), (L4sc3), (L2d4g), and (L1u11) were all in agreement that is one of the main reasons leading to the current situation. Another interviewee (L2-guv2) gave more detail, clarifying the average salary in the private sector, saying 'the salary in the private sector is between OR 200-300 [\$520 - \$781, \$ ≈ .384 OR] which means it is too low according the cost of living in Oman'.

The low qualification of Omanis for the professional jobs and specific areas

The second reason which was given by the interviewees was 'until now we have not qualified Omanis to occupy many types of jobs in this sector' (L1u4), and thus as another participant continued 'the expatriates are better qualified and have more experience than Omanis' (L3gvu4). Another interviewee commented on both experience and training, saying that 'because of the quality of training, the Omani worker does not have the same level of qualification and experience of the expatriate,

so can not emulate the expatriate ...' (L1u11). Emphasising the need for experience, yet another interviewee (L3gvc4) stressed its importance, saying that: 'Because it is difficult to get people with experience in specific areas. So, the qualification and experience is the fact'.

In relation, other interviewees commented on the lack of preparation, sincerely believing that Omani workers were hardworking, but that the system had failed them by not equipping them with the particular skills and knowledge required for many jobs. For instance, one of these interviewees said:

Because the Omani workers have not the basic work skills and work ethics. So, well, the students graduated from Secondary School or from colleges or from university, and they have some knowledge but they had not been trained to be creative and independent thinkers (L1u5).

In line with this direction, other participants gave more explanation, saying:

Although there are many Omanis who can work hard and seriously, there are some jobs which need certain skills and specific knowledge which are not provided by the education and training institutions, and this leads to Omanis not being able to emulate the expatriates. With regard to higher level jobs, these require a long time of experience and not many Omanis have these requirements and need time to gain such experiences (L3prc1).

Another interviewee blamed the preparation process of young people right from the early stages of education, rather than just at the HE level, saying:

... so, there is gap in the preparation process, but this was started from elementary stage, we did not train them [graduates] to be independent readers, creative, independent thinkers, analytical, research oriented, and seek knowledge, and also we did not provide them with communication skills, work skills and ethics and other skills required by the labour market. So, I think the problem with the Omani worker is he/she is not yet well qualified to join and enter the modern labour market. So we should train them to be independent readers and thinkers, creative, analytical, research oriented, and provide them with communication work skills and ethics and other skills required by the labour market (L1u5).

This extract from one professor and senior official at the strategic level clarified that the problem lies with the education and training system, since the poor preparation for the labour market was traced from the first stage of education, through Secondary Education, to HE and other training programmes.

Another interviewee drew attention to the poor quality of English language among young Omanis, pointing out that private sector employers were not interested in offering jobs to these people 'because most Omanis workers cannot speak English well, and this is the language used in this sector and in the business world in general' (I2-d4-g). This interviewee regarded the ability to communicate in English as a key qualification to join the labour market.

Moreover, some businesspeople have a very negative picture of Omani workers, one of them saying that, 'Omani workers do not possess some important skills and they will never obtain them' (I4-sh2), and reflecting the deep sense of despair that exists amongst some businessmen about Omani workers. However, although there were some interviewees who agreed that Omani workers are less qualified and experienced than expatriates, they nevertheless believed that Omanis had the potential to develop, such feelings were expressed by several participants such as (L4bs2), (L3gc2), and (L1u2). One interviewee suggested that:

The current limited occupation of Omanis in the private sector may be because Omanis are not well qualified, but also the private sector has not yet trusted the ability of Omani employees to work in private enterprises despite the fact that there are many young Omanis who have the ability but who have not been given chance to practise their skills and develop their competence and experience (L2d8g).

An absence of Omani technicians in the vocational work field

Another participant justified the existence of the large number of expatriates on the grounds that 'there is an absence of Omani technicians, and the most important areas that the country needs now are the technician fields' (L3prc2). Nonetheless, according to several circumstances which will be explained in the next few pages, this situation is currently changing, and with the improvement of most young Omanis' qualifications

during the last few years, the private sector is being encouraged to employ those who are interested and qualified, according to the needs of the agencies and other requirements.

Poor planning of the HRD process

Another reason for low numbers of Omanis in the private sector, was given by some participants as the poor planning of the HRD process, which has led to a poorly-qual workforce or to the existence of workforce not suitable for the requirements of the labour market. One person suggested that:

I think because our plans were not studied enough, do you think Omanis are qualified like the expatriates, we have to understand the private sector views that realise this is a competitive market, so when it finds well qualified workers either Omanis or non-Omanis, and they bring benefit the private agent, it will employ them without any problem. So, the main issue is the quality and the level of preparation (l2d13g).

Similarly, other participants such as (L2d2g), (L4sh1) and (L2d5g), attributed the lack of a national workforce in some specific areas to the weakness of the planning process of the education system in Oman, (L2d5g) saying ‘because the plans were not clear and were intended for a short solution. The plans should be built for a long time and should be clear about what we need for future’. Another participant argued it occurred ‘because of the educational planning, including planning for higher education in the country which indeed is in a critical situation, so I think there is pressing need to prepare or to bring specialists in planning’ (L2d12g).

The lack of comprehensive intelligence

A related problem is the lack of comprehensive intelligence to assist planners and decision-makers. In this respect (L4bs2) said ‘the absence of a comprehensive and accurate database is causing some concern’ and (L2d11g) said ‘moreover, we have a database problem since we do not have accurate information about our needs, and what is available and what is not’. Similar answers came from (L2d6g), and (L2d12g), while (L1u12) explained this matter by saying:

Because we have no accurate database, we do not yet know the needs of the labour market. Many times we received statistical information and after some time we have discovered that information was incorrect, so the absence of accurate data limits and hampers our performance and ability to adapt our programmes with the requirements of labour market.

Limited capacity of Oman's market

Another reason given was the fact that the reality and capacity of Oman's market is small and limited, since most companies are small and involved in basic business employing just a few people, having a low income and limited business activities. Thus, most jobs within such companies are at the lower levels attracting low salaries, which are suitable for some expatriates, but not Omanis who have to support their families at the Omani cost of living. This situation means that 'there are a huge number of the expatriates working as cleaners, helpers, bakers, barbers and other similar jobs which most Omanis still refuse to do because the income is very low' (L3prc2).

In fact, this situation was noted by other participants throughout their responses to the next questions, such as (L4bs2) who attributed this matter to the small size of most private companies, which he said comprised around 80% of the private sector, employing only a few people in low skill jobs, and doing little business. Accordingly, most of these small companies are in the service sector, agriculture, fishing, bakers, hairdressers, cleaning, etc, and most Omanis avoid doing such work, aiming to continue their studies or to work in the public sector, as mentioned by Al Mumari (2000) and Al Barwani (2002). On this theme, (L2d6g) said 'Indeed the private sector agencies want to employ Omanis in the lower level jobs, while the higher level jobs and administrative jobs are occupied by expatriates'.

Private companies' Poor Planning and Character of the business people

Other interviewees suggested the reason was bound up with the development of the private sector, (L1u11) saying:

Another reason is that most private companies do not have their own plans or programmes of professional development for personnel, and most of them have no regulations that ensure the rights of their employees, so the Omani worker maybe does not see any security for his job in the future, and also no chance to develop his skills and promote his abilities.

In fact, this reality only exists only in the small companies, but they do form the majority of Oman's private enterprises, as mentioned earlier. In the big companies the situation is totally different such that employees have almost the same benefits as those provided by the governmental sector, and in some of these companies the conditions of work are much better than in government jobs. Nonetheless, because the private sector is dominated by small organisations, most employees within it do not enjoy these benefits. Accordingly, (L3gu3) and another key official (L1u7), suggested that the private sector itself needs help in its development plans, policies and HRD, and (L1u7) went into more detail, saying:

The private sector itself needs help in this area. They need not only to provide them with some services and facilitate some procedures, but more important is that they need to assist them in identifying what are their needs and how they build and implement their planning process, which could lead to response to their needs. It is worth noting that the planning is absent in most private agencies, and they have no employees who hold university qualifications and who are interested in planning for HRD, except some big companies. This is because most private enterprises, almost (80%) are too small companies, with capital of less than RO 5,000, and consist of between one and two Asian workers, so how do you want from these two people to plan for themselves. This means that the government should help this small sector to determine how they build their business and to determine their aims, plans and requirements of HR and other elements.

On the other hand, there were interviewees, for example (L3gc2), (L2d9g) and (L4sc3), who believed that the negative view of private agencies and businessmen arose from the greed of the businesspeople involved and the absence of any national feeling or loyalty towards Oman's citizens. One such interviewee said 'the businessmen are avaricious, they want employees without helping them or participating in preparing or training them' (L4sc3). This greed is translated in the requirements and conditions made by some of the private sector agencies, which work against Omani jobseekers. The following extract explains some of these conditions as seen by (L2d3-g), (L4sc3), and (L2d11g) who clarified this point by saying that:

I think the problem is with the private sector agencies that ask for more than is possible, for example some of these private agencies say that we need to employ university and college graduates in some areas, but we want them with experience of three or five years, and as we know this Omani person who just graduated from the university or any college, from where or how can he/she gain the experience if the private sector in his/her country refuse to employ him/her without such period of experience.

In fact, the private sector should be aware that most Omani workers are recently prepared according to new age of their country, as noted by (L3gvc4) 'because it is difficult to get people with experience in specific areas. Many people still do not have enough experience in the private sector, because only recently have they been working in it, so it is difficult to get people with experience'. One interviewee with more experience than others, and with an interest in the government role in the employment process in the private sector, gave an example of what they are facing in this field:

... one of these difficulties is the conditions made by the private agency that prevent the Omani worker from employment, sometimes we have interviewed five jobseekers or more and all of them are holding the same qualifications, for example all of them are graduates of universities, colleges or institutes as requested by the private agency, but at the end and after interviews all of them were refused because they could not meet the conditions of the private enterprise, and we know there is no reason, other than this private agent wanted to bring expatriates instead of employing Omanis (L2d3g).

In their responses, some participants referred to what are called in Oman, '*the hidden business companies*'. In this respect, interviewees (L3gc2), (l2d9g) and (L4sc3) gave similar answers, the latter saying:

... another reason is the hidden business companies established by Omani businessmen and they leave these companies to the expatriates for some commission, and then these expatriates develop these enterprises and bring people from their own countries, which means more expatriates and less chance for Omanis (L4sc3).

Cheap labour force from Oman neighbouring Asian countries with large populations

Other interviewees attributed this reluctance of private agencies and businessmen to employ Omanis to the existence of nearby Asian countries, especially India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, which are considered as continuous cheap sources of labour.

Interviewee (L2d6g) noted this factor, saying ‘also because we are nearest to India which provides our region with a cheap workforce and other factors which have led to the domination of the private sector by these expatriates’, while interviewee (L2d11g) explained this in more detail, saying:

At the same time this sector has a main, near and continuous source of foreign workers coming from our neighbouring Asian countries, the Indian continent, which has a huge population and has generated a large number of workers and specialists in all specialisations, most of them with long experience and very cheap to hire. So this sector has said, well why don't we bring expatriates from these Asian countries because we can get any number we need, in any field of job and with very low cost, so why do I have to pay more to employ citizens? So, naturally, there is a problem of education, higher education and training, but also the problem of the private sector is more affected, particularly in terms of negative work environment, low salaries and the absence of other encouragements.

Hence, business people prefer to import labour from these countries because they gain in two respects, these being firstly that such migrant workers are usually better qualified than Omanis, and secondly, that they are prepared to work for very little pay in comparison to the expectation of the average Omani worker.

The low growth rate of the national economy of the country

Some interviewees believed there were some serious reasons for the small percentage of nationals in the private sector workforce, related to more complicated issues, and in this respect (L1u12) said:

The most important problem is the situation of the growth of the country's economy, because if there is a strong and growing economy there will be a big and active market in which there are enormous investments that generate a large number of job opportunities. We talk about 30,000 job opportunities needing to be created every year to absorb the national workforce, and this number of chances will be generated if there is a growing development process with an active strong economy.

In this regard another interviewee said:

Also because of the problem of the country's economy, I think it is not creating new opportunities for investment, the opportunities are too limited and the number is the same every year or may be reduced, so if the situation of the economy will remain the same this problem of employment will continue as well (L2d12g).

In fact these two key figures indicate that the national economy may be not be doing enough to help attract foreign investors whose presence would create a competitive environment, an active labour market and a large number of work opportunities, as well as business chances. And another interviewee provided an additional justification why private sector agencies avoid employing Omani workers, saying that:

Most Omani workers do not stay in their jobs for a long time, so they do not settle in one company, if one of them is employed in this company, in which he got training for some time and the company spend time and money in training him/her, then after some time when he/she got some experience, if he/she find another job in another company with a better salary he/she leaves the job immediately, and then the company has to look for another one to employ, and it has to spend again time and money on training the new employee, so there is unsettlement in which the private agency lost much in such situation, which leads them to make every effort not to employ Omani workers (L4sh2).

Indeed, it can be seen that since 1995 when the Vision of 'Oman 2020' was approved, the state has carried out a number of major steps to attract foreign investors aiming at diversification of the country's economy. Thus, it is hoping that this situation is going to change since a number of large overseas companies have come to Oman within the last five years in order to do business, and they are now offering a wide range of job opportunities for Omanis, with high salaries and other benefits. Several industrial projects have been established during the last five years, and a number of overseas companies have invested in Oman. However, until now the indicators demonstrate that although the numbers of Omani nationals working in the private sector have improved, most of these workers are employed in low pay jobs, while the number of expatriates is still increasing, especially in the professional jobs in some particular areas. Hence, this continuous situation could be regarded as another indicator that there is room for improvement in the state planning for HRD, which implicitly involves HE.

The difference in the work environment between the private enterprises and the governmental sector.

Another reason produced by some interviewees regarding the aversion of Omanis to work in the private sector was related to the difference in the work environment between that and the governmental sector. One interviewee explained this case and its causes by saying:

Because most graduates prefer to be employed in the governmental sector not in the private, and there are reasons for this which lead the person to go to governmental jobs, for example the salaries are better, job safety in which the employee feels that his job is safe and secure while in the private sector the employee feels that he/she is not safe in his job, because the employer can discharge him any time, also there is a difference in the number of days holiday and in the retired rules (L2d1g).

Another interviewee who confirmed all these features as reasons why Omani citizens prefer to be employed in the government sector, added 'the length of the working day is shorter than in the private sector' (L3gc2). Actually, a study investigating the status and situations of SQU graduates post-graduation published by SQU (Al Mumari, 2000), confirmed the existence of some of these factors. However, as mentioned previously, this situation is hoping to be changed as result of the current government's efforts to reduce these differences, and in the shadow of new opportunities created by large overseas companies that have invested in Oman and offer better chance and salaries than the governmental job. It could be seen now that, there are a number of graduates who prefer to be employed in the private sector rather than in government institutions, and also some government officials now transferring their employment to large private companies such Galfar, Liquid National Gas (LNG), and PDO, because these organisations pay high salaries to suitably qualified people.

General culture of Omani and other Gulf societies

Another interviewee referred to the general culture of Oman that might affect the reality of work in Oman's private sector, mentioning that as in other eastern Arab countries, many families do not allow their daughters to work in the private sector at all. The view of interviewee (L2guv2) was expressed, in the following extract:

For females, the reason is clear, most families do not encourage their daughters to work in the private sector, because of society's values regarding mixed gender and the distance of the work from their residence. So, either for the female graduates or for their families, work in the private sector means there is mixed gender and more other things, which cause them to reject this sector as a possibility for employment.

Although this interviewee suggests that there are still some families concerned by these features, this attitude is changing across the country, as noted in Chapter Five, since many female graduates consider that there is no point in staying at home after completing a long period of study, and furthermore, the financial difficulties facing most families over-ride their cultural attitudes. Moreover, another reason related to society's traditions was offered by one interviewee (L1u10), who spoke of:

... the social relationship of the Omani worker, since this country is the home of these Omani workers and they have some social traditions in their society, such as national or religious, relatives' visits, hospital visits and other private projects, while the expatriate has no such traditions and habits in this country.

In support of this observation, another interviewee said:

.... they [expatriates] have no social relations in this society. Omanis have social relations which require them to take time off, sometimes for visiting their sick relatives or friends in hospital, to go to console them, to care for their parents, to go to pray and so on. So the owner of the company prefers to employ the expatriates who have to do nothing of most of these tasks (L3gvu4).

It could be observed that none of these interviewees stated that such social relations and traditions negatively affected the performance of the worker or production. Nevertheless, it would seem that if an employee is absent many times in a week or in a month, his/her production must drop. However, according to society's traditions, citizens should not be encouraged to avoid these social activities because they are considered as important social duties, and indeed in Islamic culture, some are compulsory, particularly those related to caring for parents and close relatives. In the Holy Qur'an "... *and do good to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbours who are near, neighbours who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer [ye meet] ...*" (The Holy Qur'an, Surat Al Nisa, Ayah:36, translated by: Ali, 1994:75).

As a conclusion to all the previous discussion, it could be understood that most of the key figures believe the size of the national workforce in the private sector to be too low, and that expatriates are over-represented. In this respect, many reasons and factors were offered, most of which can be grouped into two main categories. While they both relate to the role of education in general, and HE in particular, the first relates specifically to a lack of advanced planning for the HRD sector, and the failure to qualify young Omanis. This planning is not rigorously undertaken or diverse enough to meet the needs of the economy and the country's development.

The second reason is the lack of preparation and education of young people from the early stages of education, since the educational system, including curricula, activities, coursework, and HE programmes, have failed the young by not equipping them with the particular skills, knowledge and work ethics required for many jobs. Additionally, the poor quality of English language, a key qualification for entry into the labour market, is blamed upon the education system. However, most interviewees sincerely believed that Omani workers had the potential to develop and were hardworking. Nonetheless, the majority of the workforce are expatriates because in addition to the above two important factors, they present the best opportunity for businesspeople since most of them are properly trained and well qualified, do not take time off for social duties, require less pay, and are loyal to their employers.

6.3.3 The most important specialisations needed by the labour market

As already indicated, despite several governmental plans to qualify the national workforce, expatriates continue to dominate the labour market, demonstrating an enormous lack of national manpower in many fields of work, except for some areas in the governmental sector, particularly in administration and school teaching (teachers). Thus, it is important to determine where these gaps are and what provision should be developed by the HEIs and other training institutions to enable Omanis to replace expatriates in those areas of the labour market which still rely on expatriates. The following question sought to generate discussion on this issue: *What are the most important specialisation areas or qualifications and skills that you think it is necessary*

for higher education institutions to provide in order to prepare a national labour force that responds to the requirements of the labour market?

In offering their opinions, interviewees referred to the workforce needs of the governmental or private sector in terms of specific specialisms of jobs, rather than as a field of academic study, but for the discussion purposes, these two will be regarded as synonymous. Also, a number of interviewees expressed exactly the same needs, showing a strong consensus of opinion regarding the requirements of both the public and private sectors, and thus indicating that the specialisations identified were the most important for the marketplace.

For example, one interviewees said ‘there is a pressing need for medicine at the first level and medical assistance jobs, then law, and teachers for those who need special care’ (L2d9g), while another added more fields of study, saying ‘as jobs for university level graduates, in the public sector [governmental jobs], there are still shortages in engineering, medicine, medical assistance jobs, law and accounting fields’ (L1u10). More gaps were identified by another key figure who said:

I think we need medicine, dentistry and other health sciences, IT, electrical engineering as well as mineral engineering. Also we need specialisations which combine more than one specialisation, for example, biochemistry, and the specialisation of computer engineering and IT, because the need for hardware specialists has declined, while the need for IT specialists with a good knowledge of hardware is very pressing and increasing, so the need to separate the specialists for each of these two areas, hardware and software was reduced and became little. Also there is a need for a College of Law to teach the law in English, to prepare the outputs of such college to work in the private sector agencies in which all work of these agents is in English, also to enable them to work in other international companies and overseas (L1u12).

Consequently, most participants such as (L1u10), (L2d5g), (L2d1g), (L2d3g), (L2d9g), (L1u7), (L4sh1), (L1uv3), (L2d6g), (L4sh3) and (L4sc3) were in agreement with the need for medicine, engineering, law, dentistry, pharmaceuticals, accounting, IT, nursing and technical and vocational education, while other fields of study such as marketing, security, safety, financial studies, political studies, political economy,

physical engineering, chemistry engineering, computer programmers and system engineering, were addressed by fewer numbers of interviewees.

Moreover, some slightly different views were expressed. For instance, one person believed that Oman would always require certain specialisations, saying ‘in addition to medicine and engineering which will always be needed [I mean for ever], there is also a need for accounting, electricians and IT’ (L1u7). This opinion might be a reflection of desperation about the country’s strategy for preparing national manpower to cover these important fields. Nevertheless, the interviewee made some suggestions which reflect personal hopes, saying ‘because there are a number of international or overseas companies coming soon to do business in the country, there is need for more specialisations, such as marketing, operations management, logistics, security, safety, system engineers and specialists in the financial field’ (L1u7).

Another slightly different view was offered by (L1-uc1), who identified some gaps in both the governmental and private sectors, referring to the fact that these positions are still occupied by expatriates instead of Omanis. The comment in this respect was:

In the governmental sector there are two categories of jobs that still depend on expatriates, first there are experts in several areas. As you know, the offices of these experts in most organisations are regarded as the decisions factory kitchen where all plans and decision are cooked, and then provided to the upper level just to approve, so because most of these experts now are expatriates, they should after some time select Omanis with long experience to be experts in the targeted areas. The second category is service workers, because to prepare the Omanis to work as service workers requires much work to be done with the young people to change their attitudes towards this kind of work.

This extract produces some signals that there are significant gaps, particularly within the public sector, since most experts in most specialised areas across the governmental bodies as well as in the private sector, are currently occupied by expatriates. In addition, the above extract also indicates that there is a wish to make a change in this field and to prepare national experts for these positions. Such a feeling reveals the fact that it is not enough to qualify national manpower through study and training, but that it is equally important to give a chance to those who gain enough

knowledge and experience through spending a long time in their positions, and performing well in their jobs which are regarded as specialised areas, instead of relying on expatriates.

Regarding the second category, which includes service-sector jobs, this requires not only a change in educational provision, but also a change in the attitudes of young Omanis as part of a comprehensive plan aimed at qualifying national manpower in all areas and at all levels. Such a plan includes the reform of GE/BE, HE, TE and VT training programmes in co-operation with all interested organisations, both governmental and private, taking account of the wide range of factors that predispose young Omanis not to want to occupy such jobs, ie, financial status (of the state and of the individual), social circumstances, marketplace requirements, global changes, technological developments, and ways to change young people's attitudes. So, this aim does not depend on one or two axes for its achievement, but rather on a national comprehensive strategy. Some indications can be seen in the following extract from one of the interviews:

There is a national feeling that a review process should be undertaken to study the specialisations produced by the higher education and training institutions, because what the citizens have seen in reality is a huge number of expatriates while there is a remarkable number of young people in the country without chance to continue their study or to join labour market, since they have not received any suitable training programmes required by the market (L1u8).

This extract indicates the contradictory situation in the Sultanate, whereby there are half a million expatriate workers (from the total population of 2.4 million), representing over a fifth of the population, all in gainful employment, while there is a large number of SSGs and other graduates who are unemployed, and have little chance to find work because they are not qualified (L1uv3). In fact, the number of those unemployed may be more than 100,000, as estimated by the researcher, through a consideration of the number of SSGs who enrolled in any stream of HE, TE, VT and any programme of training, over the last six years, and those who remained without any chance to enrol in any of these areas of HE or training. Although there are no formal documents detailing this information, the researcher has drawn his own conclusions from those statistics that are available. This situation poses a very clear and important question, which is

why does the state not make efforts to qualify this significant number of young people for entry to the labour market and replace the large numbers of expatriate workers, thereby also saving the country the large amounts of money which are continually transferred out of the Sultanate.

To conclude this particular discussion, it could be said that, first of all, most of the interviewees quoted several requirements and specialisations, some in terms of the extent or level of the need, some particular to a particular sector, and others in terms of the short, or long-term need for the specialisms. This led the researcher to classify the responses into three groups regarding the importance and the time scale. The first group includes those specialisations which are considered as very important and will be required for a long time, the second group covers those fields of study which are important and which will be needed for a moderate period of time, and the third category includes those that are less important but which will last for a short time or a long time. The classification will illustrate which specialisations are required by the governmental sector and which are needed by the private sector.

In respect of the first group, which contains very important fields of study that are not only needed now but which will continue to be required for a long time, all the interviewees agreed that there is a pressing need for people qualified in medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, law, accounting, and some specific areas of engineering such as electrical engineering, electronic engineering and IT. Additionally, they agreed that, while the government institutes provided sufficient outputs from nursing and technical and vocational education for the need of the governmental institutions, the provision did not extend to cover the needs in the private sector, and therefore there was an urgent need to address this gap. It was noted that there had been a decline in the annual needs of the hospitals and medical centres managed by the Ministry of Health for the graduates from the Institutes of Health Sciences, since during the previous 15 years all batches of these graduates were employed in the hospitals and health centres of the Ministry of Health, while the remaining governmental hospitals and health centres that are administered by the other governmental bodies, as well those managed by private sector, are heavily reliant on expatriates.

Likewise, the same situation applies regarding specialisations in technical and vocational fields, and this is important for the private sector to understand since the public sector needs technicians and other vocational specialisations, but the needs of this sector are less than those of private enterprises. However, there is a pressing need for graduates of TE and VE in both the public and private sectors.

The second category of important specialisations as expressed by several interviewees includes financial studies, physical engineering, computer programmers and system engineering, which are moderately important for the governmental sector but much needed by the private sector, while the third group of fields of study as seen by the participants includes: marketing, security, safety, political studies, political economy and chemical engineering. As a result and according to the needs of the national marketplace for most of above-mentioned specialisations and fields of study, it can be understood that in Oman there is high and pressing economic demand for most streams and divisions of HE, as a means of providing suitable and well-qualified national manpower aiming at responding to the requirements of all fields in both the public and private sectors.

However, with regard to preparing the national workforce, it can be seen that there are some other problems affecting the employment situation of the national workforce. There is a large number of graduates who are qualified in specific fields, but who still cannot obtain a job. This was indicated by some interviewees, one of whom said 'there is a number of graduates of some particular fields of study from Sultan Qaboos University who cannot find a job' (L1uv3). Several reasons exist for this situation, some of which were mentioned in the discussion of interviewees' responses to the previous question. The clear issue here is the mismatch between the specialisations offered by HEIs and other training institutes (and by implication the output) and the needs of the marketplace, as shown by the fact that in some areas there is insufficient manpower and in others, there is a surplus.

As noted, some HEIs such as SQU or Colleges of Education produce graduates skilled in some areas that are not required by the private labour market, and there are already enough people working in the governmental sector. On the other hand, on some occasions when SQU or other colleges have attempted to produce specialised graduates, there has been a reluctance by students to enrol on the courses, as observed by (L1uv3) who said ‘the University of Sultan Qaboos produced a specialisation in tourism in the College of Arts, but there were few students who wanted to register in the field’. Nevertheless, the institutions operated these programmes with a small number of students. This type of action poses questions relating to how the decisions were taken to produce these specialisations, and to what extent there is co-ordination between HEIs, the CoHE, and other governmental bodies on the one side, and the private sector on the other.

6.4 Enhancing The Capacity of HE

Before conducting this research, it was expected that the demand would be high, but this expectation was not based on actual facts or scientific research. Throughout this study, this expectation was discerned and verified. It has been confirmed that there is a need to enhance the capacity of HE in response to the overwhelming demand. Furthermore, from the interviewees’ responses regarding the nature and the reasons for the high demand for HE, economic factors, and to a lesser extent, social pressures, were cited, although some other factors were seen to contribute towards this problem. Furthermore, it was obvious that there is a big gap between the demand and the capacity of government, despite several state initiatives developed as a response. By 2004, for example, in over 32,000 SSGs (72.7% of the total number) being unable to not enter HE, and only 27.3% having this privilege (MoHE, 2005). This was a long way short of the target of 52% set by the 6th FYDP. Accordingly, it was felt important to ascertain the interviewees’ views about why the capacity of HE is too limited and unresponsive to the demand, and what could be done to improve the situation, and this issue will now be discussed.

6.4.1 Why the capacity and provision of governmental HEIs is too limited

Obviously, given the above clarification, an important question about the sufficiency and suitability of government plans and provision, was necessary to pose to the interviewees. Additionally, it was important to establish how these key figures interpret this situation, and what they perceive to be the reasons for it, since the identification of obstacles in this respect will help to overcome the current difficulties and prevent more in the future. Hence, the interviewees were asked the following question:

Are the government plans and provisions sufficient and suitable to meet the demand for HE? (High/Suitable/Low or Not enough/Very low/Not know)? And as it can be seen that there is a gap between the numbers of High Secondary School graduates and the numbers of those who are enrolled in public higher education institutions, how do you interpret, or what is the reason for this situation?

As seen above, the response was requested on a five-point Likert scale requiring interviewees to record their overall feeling, after giving their views about the issue. Consequently, the participants answered the question in its above formulation, and their responses were given in accordance with their opinions regarding the level of demand for HE, showing their belief that there is a very high demand. The responses of the interviewees are classified as shown in Table 6.4.

It was clarified from the findings of the interviews that the majority of participants (more than 44%) believed the plans, provision and equipment to meet the demand for HE to be both unsuitable, and insufficient, while around 21% said that these were suitable. Only two out of the 50 said the level of provision and equipment was high, in contrast to five participants who said it was very low. In addition, there were ten interviewees who gave long and ambiguous responses, so the researcher could not determine how to classify their answers, and it was clear that some participants were trying to avoid giving a direct response.

Table 6.4
Interviewees' Responses Regarding the Extent of the Sufficiency and Suitability of
Government Plans and Provision of HE

Levels	High	%	Suitable	%	Low/ Not Enough	%	Very Low	%	Not Clear/ Not Know	%
Participants' Responses	2	4	11	22	22	44	5	10	10	20

Clearly, these figures confirmed the gap between the demand for, and the capacity of HE, that was clarified through analysing government documents, since, 27 of the 50 key figures stated their belief that the current provision was not sufficient to meet the demand for HE. Hence, the majority of the participants confirmed this state of affairs, indicating current statistics. Specifically, these included (L1-uv3) and (L1-u8), and (L1u8) who said 'it is not enough, because as you know all the higher education institutions in Oman enrolled only between 27% to 30% of the total number of secondary school graduates whilst the aspiration for the current Five Year Development Plan is to reach 52%', and (L1m2) said 'as you know, the number of the students coming out of secondary school is around 40,000 plus, with only 10,600 seats funded by the government. Of course the private higher education has a lot of places'.

Accordingly, most interviewees began their response by clarifying the size of this problem and its critical effects. One said 'we are now paying the cost of our ignorance of the issue at the beginning, if we had taken care of this issue at the beginning you will not see the current situation, so there is no temporary solution - we must look for long time solutions' (L4bs2), and another gave the opinion that 'Actually this is a serious and big problem in our society, and I do not know how the government is going to solve it' (L2d5g). In the same vein, yet another participant explained the matter and its influences by saying:

Regarding this issue, I think there is a national haemorrhage, treasury haemorrhage, and I call it haemorrhage because biology is my work field, and the serious danger for anything that exists is the haemorrhage, whether it is internal or external haemorrhage, which may well lead to the end of its existence. Because all these generations of graduates every year left without a chance to continue their study or to qualify them to join the labour market, unless for very low jobs, such as cleaners, helpers and so on, whilst there is a huge amount of national income going out of the country through

appointing many numbers of expatriates for the academic and other higher jobs, and at the same time through the large number of citizens who send their children abroad/overseas to educate them (L3-gu3).

In addition, most participants who said the provision was insufficient were able to support their arguments by noting the inability of the Omani HE system to absorb the high increasing number of SSGs, one of them saying ‘the proof is that until now there is only one governmental university’ (L4BS2), and another interviewee answering ‘if it was enough you would not see the majority of students who graduate without a chance to enrol in any of our higher education institutions, which means that the capacity of higher education does not meet the demand’ (L1-u5) and (L1-u11).

Regarding the interviewees' interpretations of the current situation, several explanations were offered, some of which are too far from the focus of the study. However, given the prestigious posts occupied by most of the interviewees, the researcher posed a secondary question, this being: *You are one of the policy or decision-makers, and you said it is not enough, so why you do not to work with others to expand and develop the capacity of HE in the country and to develop its efficiency?* In response, they all said that the matter was not in their hands, that the problem was finance, and that they had to work within the budget available. The response from (L1u11), (L1u4), and (L2d11g) are examples of this sentiment. Hence, the majority of interviewees regarded the most important factor to be financial, since the budget allocated to the expansion of HE is considered to be either low, or very low. (L2d2g) and (L2d1g) were examples of people who felt it was too low.

As an example, one interviewee said ‘there is not enough funding for the HE sector’ (L4sc3), and another complained ‘we are facing financial problems, in relation to everything, most things we want to do, we cannot, because of the financial constraints’ (L3gvc4). Hence, it was absolutely clear that the difficulty of HE funding was one of the most serious challenges facing this sector not only in Oman, but in most countries across the world, with most of the other problems in the sector being attributed to lack of funding, as stated by World Bank Report (2001). However, this matter was discussed

with the interviewees as a separate theme, and their responses will be discussed in Chapter Nine.

In their responses, other participants blamed the problem on ‘the inadequacy of our planning process for development of HE’ (L1uc1), and similarly, (L3gtc1), (L3gc2), (L3gc3) and (L3pru3) believed the matter to result from inappropriate planning in addition to the financial difficulty. Another interviewee said ‘the previous plans, particularly the Vision of *'Oman 2020'* did not give enough attention to the HE field’ (L1uv3), while another attributed this to the authorities supervising the HEIs without appropriate co-ordination and co-operation, as stated by (L2d15g) and others. Indeed, there are several issues related to the vision and planning of HE, as well as to its administration and management, which will be discussed independently in the next two chapters. Furthermore, other views produced different reasons, which could be considered as conceptual grounds, which one of the interviewees expressed by saying:

the reason for this big gap between the number of students who graduate from High Secondary School and those who are enrolled in HEIs is the previous slogan that education is for the sake of a job or work, this as you know has been the common dominant slogan during the last decades, which led to people joining the enrolment in the higher education institutions (the university and colleges) and the extent of the local need for these institutions' outputs. And the failure of this slogan was proof. Now the new slogan that education is for the sake of education, but the problem is not only with the slogans produced, the main problem is with the status of the national economy as well. Is the national economy growing and creating investments chances, jobs opportunities and absorbing the workforce or not? I think our economy is in an impasse, and a critical situation, since it is not creating the chances, and the opportunities are too limited and repeated the same every year and sometimes are reduced. Therefore, the problem is also is economic (L2d12g).

Indeed, the old concept of what education is for might have affected the attitudes of government officers and the general public, but other economic and social factors had the major role in changing people attitudes. Nonetheless, this conceptual dimension will be discussed widely in the next chapter, which will be devoted to the vision, objectives and plans of HE. However, some participants indicated a strange viewpoint adopted by some governors in the HRD sector in the Sultanate, one interviewee saying:

Perhaps the problem is related to the beliefs of some people [means some senior officials] that if we provide a higher education opportunity for every one who wants higher education, this will lead to the production of generations of graduates, and without enough job opportunities the problem will be more critical than it is now. This is not my belief, but it is what I hear many times, although I do not believe it myself. My view is that we have to provide a study place for every Secondary Stage graduate, and we should not be concerned about providing jobs afterwards because the labour market exists, and every graduate can work anywhere, so the qualified Omani is better than the unqualified Omani, particularly the Omani person is well known as a serious and disciplined person. So this is my view, not to leave these Secondary Stage graduates without education or training (L2d8g).

Similarly, another interviewee stated 'I am not with the opinion that whenever we have a number of students or some demand, we open a new university or a new college, because it will become over-saturated and the problem in the future will not be manageable' (L1u5), while another view went beyond this point, saying 'some senior officials in the government do not believe in higher education at all, they feel that higher education is not necessary' (L4sh1). Nonetheless, there is no evidence for this last opinion. Furthermore, another participant expressed a view believing that:

if we open higher education for everyone, what do you imagine will happen? After some time we will have what we can call a graduate crisis, because we do not have enough jobs for all of them. In addition, not every graduate is eligible to enter HE, since some students have not enough ability to continue their higher study, so do not cultivate in the stone. Accordingly, they should be directed to other education or training stream (L2d2g).

It is obvious that some of these interviewees such as (L2d2g) justified the position of the government in limiting the number of enrolments in HEIs, considering that the intention is to force those lesser-qualified graduates towards the TE or VT sector, because of economic reasons. Therefore, the above mentioned interviewee believed this, extended his/ her above response by saying:

As you know our market is too limited, and we have a small population, so if we prepare those Secondary School graduates who obtained low grades in the Secondary Stage to join the work world rather than continue their university studies, they will be able to replace most of the expatriates, unless we decide to qualify our workforce to work outside of Oman, which means we need to review and restructure all the process of preparation of young Omanis. However, all things depend on the financial support (L2d2g).

This participant clearly considered that SSGs with low grades might face difficulty in studying at a higher level, and would be better directed into technical and vocational fields since the country has a pressing need for manpower in these areas, and is currently leaking money abroad by paying expatriates to perform the jobs involved. However, the interviewee also attributed the successes of such policy to the budget and financial support locating for this sector. Moreover, since this interviewee has been involved directly in the planning process of this sector, he/ she produced further interpretation, saying:

... observed number of students who repeat the same year (Year 12, the final year of Secondary Stage) in order to improve their grade in the next year. We study also this category and we found that around 80% of them are female graduates, and the reason is because male students at the end can do any work and anywhere, so they are not bothered about re-taking the year again, whilst female students have to do certain jobs and in certain places which are close to their residential places according to society's values. Thus, they have to repeat the same year and make every effort to improve their grade to enable them to obtain a place in a suitable field of study, which will lead to work in the same field in the future (L2d2g).

This extract indicated social reasons as well as economic, that lead female students to repeat the same year, since these female recognise that without obtain high marks in the final GCSE exam, they will be unable to enter any HEIs in the Sultanate unless they go to the private institutions, which most of their families are unable to afford. In turn, this situation leads them to stay at home without any chance of getting a suitable job, and of ending up in a difficult financial position.

On the other hand, a view was put forward that in fact, there is enough capacity because three new private universities have been established in addition to a number of private colleges, in which respect the interviewee concerned said:

well, the problem you know, as I said right from the beginning it that we have the capacity, but the problem is paying fees. People expect that the state can provide free HE, which means the country has shouldered 16 years of free teaching for each student of the Sultanate, and yet at the same time it must preserve quality, quality of the programmes - it is impossible. Yes we know about several countries which enrol a large number of students in each HEI, but you may find that there are more than a thousand students in one lecture hall, and a hundred students under one academic supervisor, and definitely the quality is compromised, and we do not want to be one

of these countries. We want to ensure quality, so that our institutions of HE will be real higher education institutions, which means also that the citizen has to participate (L1m2).

Similarly to this view, one interviewee from those who believed that the provision of HE and its ability to meet the demand were high, said ‘to prove this, we have now stopped issuing licenses to establish new colleges in the private sector, because the feeling is that we have so many colleges to cover the demand at least for the time being’ (L1u9). In fact, this view highlights at least three additional issues that need to be discussed. Firstly, there is the matter of finance, and the extent to which one can seriously regard the private HEIs as an available option for all students who meet the requirements. In reality, the opportunities in these private HEIs are only available for students who have the ability to pay the tuition fees, and all the other associated expenses.

Secondly, the extent to which Omani families can actually afford to fund their children’s study in the private HEIs, has not been empirically investigated, and given the changing demographics there are genuine questions about the capacity of families to do this. For instance, the average of Omani family as indicated elsewhere in the study has 8.5 (MoHE 2002c:15) meaning that it may be impossible for any one of those children to be supported in private HE. The response to the question of whether it is realistic to expect families to pay for HE can only be provided if a separate economic study is undertaken to investigate the financial status of Omani families and their ability to fund their children’s study in these private institutions.

Thirdly, there is the question of the extent to which a strong link exists between quality assurance and the expansion of the capacity of HEIs. Certainly, it can be imagined that an inverse relationship exists between the high number of enrolments and the quality if the capacity of the institutions were to remain at the same level, but if the capacity were to be expanded and supported by other developments, quality could be assured despite increased enrolments, as can be seen in several popular universities across the world.

Some interviewees did feel that there was suitable attention, plans and provision provided by the government to meet the demand for HE, one participant saying ‘in recent years it could be said it is suitable, particularly the private higher education institutions’ (L3prc2), and one mentioned that:

The current Five Year Development Plan addressed a recommendation to carry out a study for establishing another governmental university, the advantages and disadvantages, but until now and we are at the last year of the plan's period, no such study has been undertaken by the government. However, this reflects the official feeling that there is a need to work to meet the increasing demand (L2d5g).

Another interviewee justified the recent government attention, saying ‘it is a response to the increasing social pressure upon the government, and therefore these are sudden steps and procedures undertaken by the government not as deliberated plans and carefully thought out policies over a long time’ (L3gu3). Although, he did not agree that the plans and provision were sufficient to meet the demand, one interviewee said ‘our educational plans are more oriented towards satisfying social demand [means social pressure] rather than anything else’ (L2ex3). Another interviewee produced an alternative justification for the assertion that the plans were adequate, simultaneously drawing attention to an additional factor, saying:

the Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020' included several suggestions related to the training sector, particularly TE and VT, but this suggestion is undergoing several changes and the capacity of TE and VT is still too limited, so in terms of planning it is suitable, but the problem is with the implementation process (L2d10g).

This theme of poor implementation was echoed by several other interviewees, who said that whilst the plans were quite suitable, they perceived a problem with the implementation process, in which respect, one participant said ‘I am really aware we’ve got a problem in this area, 100% I am conscious that there is problem’ (L2d7g). Another interviewee also alluded to the implementation problem as well as the financial one, saying:

From our side we submit our plans to ... every year, including the requirement to expand the capacity and increase the intake of several HEIs, but nothing has been

done yet, except for the increase in internal scholarships for students from low income families, which was introduced in accordance with His Majesty's instructions, and another limited increase in the enrolments of some colleges, which did not exceed hundreds of students and has not made a significant difference (L2d8g).

However, that high increase in the local scholarships was discussed in detail in Chapters Three and Five, and through analysing the 5th and 6th FYDPs, it was clarified that the increase in 2000 was not accounted for in either of these FYDPs and that it had been directed outside their framework as a one-off measure to serve other functions. Accordingly, this participant and others considered that many of their plans and suggestion to remedy the gaps are not accepted and then they could not get them implemented, mainly because of the financial difficulty.

Hence, whilst these participants believed that the increase in government scholarships to allow students from low income backgrounds to study in the local private HEIs did not meet the demand, others considered there to be enough capacity in the current HEIs to meet the demand, justifying this by the existence of the three recently-established private universities and a number of private colleges. Such a view is strange, since study in these institutions is not free and costs beyond what most Omani families can afford, as confirmed by the majority of the interviewees in their responses to other questions, as will be seen in the next chapters. Consequently, the question of whether the participants believe the current state HEIs, and particularly one governmental university, is enough to meet the demand for university study, was the next subject of discussion.

6.4.2 What can be done to expand the capacity of HE?

It was verified that the capacity and the provision of the current HEIs is insufficient, although there is one governmental university and a number of colleges and institutes. Accordingly, the interviewees were asked this question: *In your view what can be done to expand and develop the capacity of HE in order to meet the high demand for higher education, particularly, to absorb the increasing number of Secondary School graduates in HE?*

Clearly, enhancing the capacity of HE should not be regarded as separate issue from the other matters concerning the HE system, since it is strongly linked, and thus, it could be understood that expanding HE capacity should be considered as part of a comprehensive process aimed at reforming the system. Consequently, the interviewees' suggestions in this regard could be found in their responses to several other questions. Indeed, they emerged when discussing three main dimensions, which actually form the prime themes of this study, these being: first, reviewing and reforming the visions, attitudes, objectives and plans of HE, second, promoting the finance of HE and searching for other alternative resources of funds and third, reforming the supervisory organisational structure of HE administration.

These perspectives have been considered as independent themes in this study, and a number of questions related to each issue were asked of the interviewees about. Consequently, the next three chapters will discuss the interviewees' perspectives and suggestions related to these three dimensions, whereby Chapter Seven will be devoted to the theme of the vision, objectives and plans of HE, Chapter Eight will discuss the dimension of the administration and management of HE including the supervisory organisational structure, and Chapter Nine will include the theme of HE financing. The remaining issues and suggestions related to the establishment of another governmental university and the enhancement of the private HE role will be discussed in this section. However, regarding the theme of HE funding and financial support, it is worth identifying some of the interviewees' views in this section which expound the strong reliance of the process of expansion of the capacity of HE upon the financial support and sufficient funds, before engaging in wider discussion of this theme in Chapter Nine.

Increasing the state budget for HE the sector

Clearly, the financial support was considered as insufficient, while the demand was seen to be very high. The vast majority of participants (42 out of 50) believed this circumstance required priority in a consideration of the expansion and development process of HE, most recommending the state to increase the budget allocated for this sector, as stated by (L2d6g), (L1d7g), (L2d9g), (L1u10), (L2d8g), (L2ex2), (L3guv3),

(L3gc3), (L4sh1), (L4sc4) and others. For instance, (L2d9g) said ‘the most serious problem facing this sector is the funding’, and another interviewee said ‘the governmental finance of higher education is low and insufficient’ (L2d6g).

Initially, when (L1uc1) was asked about what and how the state should do to expand the capacity of HE and to absorb the current increasing number of SSGs. The immediate response could be translated as ‘the boat sail should be taken down before the wind blew’ meaning that he/she blames the state on delay of its preparation of the necessary plans and provision, such as sufficient budget that should be ensured, before reaching the current difficulty. In demonstrating this situation, another participant said ‘however, even though the state recognises this situation, the public finances for higher education are same as before with very little difference, which is unsuitable given the increasing demand’ (L2d8g), while (L2d2g) said ‘if there is quite enough funding all problems will be solved’. Several interviewees strongly required the government to increase the budget of HE and promote its support, for instance (L4sc4) said ‘the State should provide a study place for every graduate from the Secondary Stage, and it should make every effort to provide the money needed to achieve this target, such as reprioritising our needs and create investments’.

A similar response was produced by other participants, such as (L4sh3) who added ‘the state should increase the enrolment capacity in the governmental HEIs, because not every one can go to the private institutions’, and (L1uv3) who said ‘it should increase the financial support to this field, either to the private HEIs or to the governmental one’. Furthermore, many participants offered several suggestions as to how the government could increase its support for the HE sector, which will be discussed widely throughout Chapter Nine.

Establishing another governmental university

Because the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) is the only governmental university in the country, despite 35 years of the Renaissance of Oman, there is strong argument within society regarding the need for another such establishment, and the interviewees’

responses reflected this, since in answering other questions; many of them mentioned this issue. Specifically, some of them expressed the urgent need for the state to establish another university, and showed surprise at the situation that it had not made any effort to do so up to now, regardless of the high demand having been evident over a number of years.

Indeed, this situation is one reason that led to pose the following question: *Is the one governmental university enough to meet the demand for the university study, in other words, is there is need to establish another governmental university? Do you support such request? Why?*

The responses of the majority of these key figures (35 out of 50), expressed the belief that one governmental university is not enough for their country. Two participants said that there could never be enough provision, and two believed the provision was more than enough, whilst five said it was just right (enough). The other six responses were not known or not clear. This seems a strange situation, since these interviewees represent the decision-makers for HE, and yet they are unable to convince the government of the need to take the decision to expand provision.

Table 6.5
Interviewees' Responses Regarding Sufficiency of One
Governmental University

Levels	More than Enough	Enough	Not Enough	Never	Not Now/ Not Clear	Total
Participants' Responses	2	5	35	2	6	50

Moreover, in their response to the second part of the question, concerning whether they supported the plea for the establishment of another governmental university, 29 of the 50 interviewees supported this requirement, while nine did not, and the responses of 12 participants were unclear or unknown.

Table 6.6
Interviewees' Responses Regarding the Establishment of Another
Governmental University

Levels	Support	Not Support	Not Now/ Not Clear	Total
Participants' Responses	29	9	12	50

In order to discover why interviewees responded in support or otherwise, they were asked the above question directly. One of those who believed that one governmental university was enough, and accordingly did not support the suggestion of establishing a second institution, justified the view by saying 'I think we have now one governmental university and many higher colleges and institutes, with three private universities and a number of colleges and these are more than enough for our country's population, I think we do not need to establish more' (L1u5), and the responses of participants (L1u11), (L2d3g) are similar to this response, as also is that of (L2ex2) who said 'do not forget, our population is only 1.7 million (Omanis), and we have already three private universities, so if we open another governmental university, I think all the private universities will be closed'. Other interviewees such as (L1u9) and (L1u7) believed 'that the current governmental colleges are as universities, so there are more than 13 universities', and accepting this understanding, the interviewee (L1u9) said:

It is more than enough, I think in reality we have more than one governmental university; because we have around 13 different specialist governmental colleges, if these colleges are combined they could form another new governmental university or more. However, this approach is not accepted by some authorities.

While the participant (L1u7) said:

More than enough, we need private universities and the government should support and finance them and participate in their administration and direction, and this is now the universal trend, no longer exist as governmental university 100%, this trend has finished.

In contrast, those interviewees who believed one governmental university was not enough (the majority, as indicated) produced two different views. While most of them

believed a new establishment should be built and created from scratch, the remainder agreed with the previous opinion, saying that ‘there is no point to say we have only one governmental university, because we have a number of colleges which are governmental institutions and at the level of the university’ (L1u8), and another said:

I do not think you will find anyone who says it is enough. However, in the light of THE existence of five Colleges of Technology, and six Colleges of Education, College of Law, and around fifteen institutes of Health Sciences and all of these institutions are higher education institution; so if we say we just have only one governmental university we are downgrading the state, in fact these can be seen as equivalent to three governmental universities, and the suggestion of merging these institutions is now being considered (L1u12).

Other interviewees produced similar answers to the answer given by the participant (L1u5) who said:

I think we have now one governmental university and many higher colleges and institutes, with three private universities and a number of colleges and these are more than enough for our country’s population, I think we do not need to establish more (L1u5).

Then he/she mentioned to the need for training programmes, saying ‘I would say that we need post-secondary training programmes which prepare those graduates for entry into several levels of the workforce according to the need of the labour market’, the issue that has been discussed previously within this chapter. Another interviewee said:

If the newly-established private universities will be supported enough I think we do not need another governmental university, particularly if the government continues and improves its support to the Sultan Qaboos University, in which many problems will be sorted (L1uv3).

This opinion indeed was evidenced by the responses of a number of sponsors of the private HEIs, such as (L3prc4) and (L3pru3) who said ‘frankly if they [the government] stop their support and their scholarships we will not remain in existence, we will close’. On the other hand, those interviewees who suggested that the state should establish another university justified their views with some evidence, for instance the participant

(L3gc2) said 'I think we should have another university because the capacity of the current governmental higher education institutions is limited and most of them cannot receive any more students'. Another one said 'according to the high increasing number of graduates from the Secondary stage, we should have other universities either governmental or private - not matter, but we prefer as citizens to be governmental, because we do not have to pay for our children to study' (L4sh2). In this respect, the response of another participant was that:

I believe that the existence of more than two governmental universities will create a competitive environment between the SQU and the others, and the competition is a healthy phenomenon and creates also specialism, and then those which specialise in some areas will be favoured in these areas (L3gu3).

In line with this direction, it is worth noting that the representatives of the (Majles A' Shura) in this study sample said 'this is one of the Council's recommendation to the government' (L4sh1), (L4sh3). Moreover, it could be regarded as strange that the view of most representatives of the private HEIs was to support the establishment of another governmental university, despite the possibility of this having a negative influence upon their institutions. One of these participants said that 'it should establish another governmental university, and then the Sultan Qaboos University will be specialised in some areas while the second university will specialised in other areas, for example as a vocational university' (L3prc1), while another interviewee said 'I strongly recommend the establishment of more universities not only another one' (L3prc2), and a third one believed:

The universities are the source for society's development, because the university normally includes important people, such as scholars, thinkers and professors in several areas who are able to develop their society better than any other people. So the university is as cultural centre in the society, and I suggest the state should establish universities in Muscat, Nizwa and Dhofar, because we cannot depend on the private universities and there is experience in some Arab countries (L3gtc1).

It could be said that the responses of the majority of these key figures, confirmed the belief that one governmental university is not enough for the country, whilst the minority considered it was. However, although most interviewees are key decision-

makers in the field of education, HRD and HE, and support the expansion of governmental provision, they all agreed that such an important decision is not dependent on their opinion, but on that of the government as a whole. Those interviewees who disagreed with the proposal to create another governmental university, offered several reasons, summarised as follows:

- A) In total terms, the state provision extends beyond one governmental university, since there are many higher colleges and institutes, some of which could be regarded as independent HEIs, and most of which already award university degrees. Additionally, the private universities and colleges offer HE opportunities, and between the public and private sector there is more than enough provision to meet the demand for HE, according to the country's population.
- B) The growth in the private sector has actually been partially funded by the government. Recently, three private universities and 16 private higher colleges have been established, and the government supports these private HEIs financially, aiming to encourage investment in this sector, so if the government were to proceed with the establishment of another university, it would be taking a competitive role against the private sector, which at the same time it is making every effort to encourage to participate.
- C) The government does not have the ability to fund the establishment of another university and to continue to support most of these private institutions, and if the government stopped its support; these private institutions would close, according to most of the interviewees.

Nonetheless, most interviewees as clarified above, suggested that another governmental university should be established in the country, and justified their view as follows:

- A) The capacity of the current governmental HEIs is too limited and most of these institutions cannot receive any more students.
- B) Because of the high increasing number of SSGs, there should be other universities to absorb most of these graduates.

- C) The existence of more than two governmental universities will create competition between the SQU and the other, and this is a healthy phenomenon.
- D) The Consultative Council (Majlis A' Shura) has submitted to the government a recommendation for establishing another governmental university.
- E) The establishment of another governmental university would allow the SQU to be specialised in some areas, and the second university to be specialised in others.
- F- Universities play a cultural role, operating as cultural centres in society, since they include scholars, thinkers and professors in several areas who are able to develop society, and who represent the source of society's development.

Finally, as is well known in Oman, the possibility of the establishment of another governmental university is one of the most important debates that attract most Omani people's attention, and the arguments will continue until some decisions or initiatives are carried out by the state, in which respect, this study will try to deduce some possible alternatives through a number of recommendations which will be presented in the last chapter of the study. Nevertheless, in this respect, it was remarked that the Council of Ministers was working to enhance the role of the private sector in providing HE in order to help the State in shouldering some of the responsibilities caused by the demand (L1pscm1), (L2d6g), and to reduce the pressure upon the governmental HEIs (Murphy, 2004).

Enhancing the role of private HE

Agreeing with the government trend, a number of participants indicated the private HEIs as the means of solving the problem. Clearly, this is the direction adopted by the government from the second half of the 1990s, by its efforts to encourage private sector investment in institutions and providing HE places for SSGs, as explained in Chapters Three and Five. On the other hand, through several methods, the state works to direct people to participate in educating their children and shoulder their responsibility in this dimension. Consequently, this theme will be discussed widely here in the light of the interviewees' responses regarding the relevant question.

Responding to the high concern paid by the government to the contribution of the private sector in this field, the role of this sector has developed during the last decade to reach to three private universities, and 17 private higher colleges in 2004. Thus, such growth could be regarded as a result of government initiatives to entice the private sector to assist in absorbing the increasing number of SSGs, and to provide fields of study that are not available for students in the governmental HEIs. However, the statistics show that the participation of these private HEIs in the absorption of SSGs is low. For example in the academic year 2004/2005, the total number of admitted students in these institutions was 5,223 (MoHE, 2005) out of around 43,700 graduates from Secondary Stage (MoE, 2005), representing only 12%, and most private universities only admit a small number, one receiving less than 300 students in 2004.

Obviously, this situation poses a very clear and important question, which is: *What are the reasons for the low absorption by private higher education institutions of secondary school graduates? In other words, despite the reasonable number of private HEIs, and despite several governmental encouragements, what are the difficulties and challenges that prevent these institutions from admitting more students and playing a more effective role?* This was the question posed to the interviewees.

Reflecting its importance, (L4sh3) informed the researcher that his/her organisation also wondered about this situation, saying: ‘we also wondered, it is low participation, which means we need to study what are the reasons for this situation ... really this is one important issue which needs to be studied deeply’. In their responses, the interviewees raised several factors and challenges, presenting some rich explanations as will now be illustrated. Indeed, some of these reasons and challenges are strongly linked with the theme of HE funding and financial issues, these being as follows:

- The impact of the low income of Omani families
- The tuition fees
- The financial position of the private HEIs
- Lack of support and lack of encouragement for private HEIs

- Poor marketing strategies for private HEIs
- The character of the private sector

Consequently the interviewees' responses regarding these issues will be discussed throughout Chapter Nine, which is devoted for discussion of this theme, while the other reasons and challenges will be discussed now.

The reputation of private HEIs and quality assurance

The importance of developing the people's trust in the private HEIs was one of the most important issues highlighted by interviewees, and 24 indicated this to be a matter that would have an influence on whether parents sent their children to such institutions. (L1pscm1), (L2d12g), (L1u5), (L1u4), (L1uv3), (L4sc4), (L4sh1), (L3gc2), (L2d5g), (L2d10g), (L3gvu3) and (L2d1g) were among the participants with this belief, and some offered explanations of what factors are taken into account in the development of such trust. The first factor mentioned was the ability to offer a quality education, as indicated by (L4sh3) who said 'the citizens have less trust towards these institutions because of their low quality and the low quality of their graduates', and (L2d2g) touched on the same theme saying 'these institutions need to gain the citizens' trust through promoting their quality'.

Reflecting the importance and effect of the quality of these institutions on the public's attitude, one interviewee gave the opinion that many people do want their children to study in the local private HEIs if they do not get the chance to enter the governmental institutions, but that their willingness depends upon the reputation of the institutions and their education quality. In this respect, the participant said:

I think most parents want to send their children to the local private colleges and universities, since everyone wants his children to be close to him according to our tradition, and because it will be easier to come and go, easier to keep watch on them, visit them and supervise them; therefore they send them to the UAE rather than other far away countries (L1u5).

In fact, this is more important if the student is female, since Omani culture and tradition urges most people to avoid sending their daughters abroad. Although this interviewee agrees with this attitude, s/he justifies the low number of Omani students entering the local private HEIs, saying:

However, parents want to be assured of the quality of the local private institutions since they going to spend money and they want to ensure that they spend this money to equip their children with good qualifications that enable them to get good jobs. Accordingly, if the local private institutions ensure high levels of quality and can establish their reputation in the market and emulate overseas universities, I am sure the citizens will prefer the local institutions rather than sending their children out of the country. Also these institutions should be marketing themselves nicely (L1u5).

This extract confirms that the reputation for quality is clearly a major concern, in which respect (L2d2g) mentioned that the private HEIs ‘should establish academic affiliations with other successful overseas universities or colleges’ as a way of developing a reputation and gaining the public’s trust, as is happening with some of these institutions already. However, and as mentioned in the previous section, quality assurance is costly, as noted here by another interviewee who said:

If you want good quality, you need modern laboratories, advanced systems and instruments, highly qualified academic staff and so on, and this costs much and people must pay more. And in the light of the current level of tuition fees of some of these higher education institutions which as I mentioned are less than the tuition fees of some schools in Muscat, it is difficult for these institutions to provide high quality education (L3pru3).

The link between quality, tuition fees and the institution’s financial position is indeed a central issue, as will be illustrated in the subsequent sections. A second factor that influences the amount of people’s trust in an institution, is the length of experience that institution has accumulated, and many parents prefer to send their children to old establishments which can boast a good academic history. Obviously, most of Oman’s private HEIs are in their infancy and have not yet had the time to develop such history, as was indicated by (L1u12) who said ‘most of these private higher education institutions are newly-established’. Similar responses came from (L1pscm1), (L2d1g) and (L1u5), while (L2d11g) clarified this factor and its effect, saying: ‘these institutions

are newly-established, and those parents who are able to pay for their child's study, prefer to enrol him/her in an old and common university or college rather than in a new one. However, this trend will disappear in time' (L2d11g).

A third contributory factor to the lack of public trust in the private institutions was indicated by some interviewees as being the size, since some are small and modest establishments, thereby lessening the students' willingness to enrol there, as mentioned by (L2d6g) who said 'these institutions are humble with a few small departments, some of what are now called universities are actually only colleges rather than universities' (L2d6g), while another participant described the services of these institutions by saying 'these institutions are small, with low qualified academic staff, weak facilities and laboratories, small lecture and teaching halls and too few other provisions and physical facilities' (L3gvu4). And (L1u7) noted a possible reason for this being that 'the private sector was not properly prepared when it started its investment in this field'. Confirming these sentiments, another interviewee said:

The provision and physical facilities are not convenient, most buildings are rented and not as educational or academic environments. The location of most of them is not suitable, also most are established as investments by two or three or a small number of investors (L3-gvc3).

Indeed, all these extracts verified that these factors affect the willingness of parents and potential students to be involved in private HE, and the point was well made that it is not enough just to build or establish these institutions, but that it is equally important for them to be developed in terms of buildings, facilities and services, academic and administrative staff, and for them to be located in a suitable area, otherwise these private institutions will find themselves in difficulties as mentioned many times by a number of interviewees.

The limited fields of study provided by private HEIs

Limitations on the study fields available in private HEIs was another factor, which six participants raised. In this respect, (L1pscm1) said 'one of these reasons is the

limited number of specialisations offered by the private HEIs', and similar responses were produced by (L4sh1) and (L2d3g). In addition, another interviewee drew attention to the fact that each of these institutions offers the same, or similar programmes of study, saying 'because these institutions have produced the same specialisations, there is no variety in the fields of study' (L2ex2). And (L2d8g) was more specific, observing that 'the private institutions provide few specialisations, and most of them are offering only Business, Management and IT sciences'.

Actually, this observation is correct, and only a few offer subjects like engineering, medicine or sciences. The most recently published MoHE statistics (2004/2005), indicate that most of the private HEIs produce IT and computing, and 13 private HEIs (universities and colleges) out of 19 institutions produce the specialisations of commerce, general management, business and economics, while there is only one college offering medicine and health sciences, and three institutions produced engineering. In addition, the statistics also indicate that only 491 students are studying medicine and pharmacy in the private HEIs, of a total of 13,176 Omani students enrolled in the HE sector, representing just 3.7% of the total private sector student population, and that a further 1,535 students were enrolled on engineering and science programmes, representing 11% of the total number of enrolled students, while there were 6,165 studying commerce, administration, arts, and education sciences which are offered by most institutions, representing 46.7% of the total number of enrolled students in these private institutions, and another 2,262 students representing 17% studying administrative courses at diploma levels, such as secretarial, business, marketing fields and general management areas.

The 'branding' of private HEIs – a negative image

Three interviewees referred to the general status-conscious attitude in Omani society which created preferences among parents for sending their children to establishments bearing the title 'university' rather than 'college' despite the fact that most private colleges award Bachelor degrees. In this respect (L1pscm1) said 'also because most of these institutions are called college not university, and the citizens

prefer to enrol their children in universities rather than in a college', and (L4sh1) gave a similar answer, while (L3prc1) offered more explanation saying:

.... the size and facilities of private universities for example in the UAE are the same as in the private colleges in Oman, but these institutions in Oman are called colleges while in the UAE they are called universities. Therefore, I am sure that if the name of any college for example was changed to University of; 100% the number of enrolled students will be increased sharply.

This may, in fact, be a main reason why numerous private colleges (particularly in the capital) join together to shape themselves into a private university, with the aim of establishing a private university, named for example, the University of Muscat. Also indicated in this extract was the fact that many students from Oman were funding their education in the UAE, with the apparent difference only being the title of the institution they were attending. However, this is an area that requires more research to uncover other variables that might have an influence on the students' choice.

The Plurality of Private HEIs

As associated issue, the matter of the plurality of private HEIs could be regarded as another demotivating factor in the eyes of potential students. Commenting on this, (L1u8) said:

The scattering of the efforts of these higher education institutions between intermediate colleges and other levels, leads the citizens to compare the situation in the Sultanate with that outside of Oman, and they actually decide to go to the foreign institutions since the cost is almost the same, but the prestige is higher.

On a similar theme, (L3gvc4) said:

There are many colleges producing mostly the same or similar specialisations, so what I think is that instead of having different ones competing against each other, they could have maybe three instead of having five or eight colleges, let them have three, so they join together and they can put all the funds together. So they can have within a college of business, administration and whatever they want, and they can share the library investment or other infrastructure investment.

Clearly, the element of competition, which is really the spirit of privatisation, is seen by this interviewee as being the downfall of the sector. Additionally, the idea that clusters of colleges offering the same specialism should gather together and combine their efforts, could lay the foundation for universities in the future as the different fields of study become rationalised in single institutions.

Language of study in the private HEIs

Another participant mentioned the fact that the medium of communication in the private HEIs might be a deterrent to enrolment, as noted by (L2ex2) who said:

The language of study in these institutions is English, which requires students to spend one or two years on a foundation course in these colleges until they become good enough in English, whereas they can study in the UAE and other Arab countries, such as Jordan and Egypt, without having to spend extra years developing their English.

In fact, most Omani students are very keen to learn English and make every effort to become fluent, and indeed many families send their children overseas to study English or enrol them in local language centres. Moreover, the government pays for a large number of Omani employees to study English, and from the school year 1997/1998 when Oman decided to implement the BE system, English language has been one of the main curriculum inputs, being introduced from the first level, whereas previously it was not introduced until level four, reflecting the state's awareness of this language's importance at this moment. In addition, this concentration on learning English arises because most people are aware that particularly in the private companies, English is required as the main medium of communication, and even companies that do not regard English as a basic requirement of their employees, still prefer those employees who can speak it.

In contrast to all previous views, however, one interviewee who indicated some of the aforementioned challenges facing the private sector, believed there were no serious difficulties facing it in its self-promotion, saying:

‘... but I think there is no serious obstacle facing this sector and hindering it except for its selfishness and lack of initiatives, since all circumstances are favourable, and governmental supports are available and provided for the private sector to play a real role in this field’ (L2d12g).

This view was not, however, supported by any other interviewees. Nonetheless, there was a general acknowledgement of the various difficulties encountered by the private HEIs, some related to their infancy in HE, others attributed to the sector itself, and others caused by the system and organisation of the field. Furthermore, it was apparent from the nature of these obstacles, that the sector needs time to be developed before its role and participation in this field become noticeable and before a reputation is gained.

In their responses, the interviewees emphasised the fact that in order to enhance the reputation (and hence, role) of the private HEIs, the above issues must be managed and the obvious obstacles removed. They suggested that the private HEIs should concentrate on gaining public trust, through ensuring a high quality educational experience, to include the provision of all necessary facilities and services required by the students. It was also recommended that these institutions should diversify their provision to appeal to a wider range of students, and that the merger of smaller institutions might be a way forward in this respect.

6.5 Conclusion

To conclude these discussions of the interviewees' responses regarding the demand for HE in Oman, and the capacity of the existing HE provision, it has been clarified that the majority of interviewees believe that the demand for HE is high, and both social and economic in nature, although, the economic pressure is stronger than the social one. Several reasons were offered by the participants for this high demand, the most important being: the high growth rate of the population, the social belief that people who can gain a higher qualification in whatever area are mostly guaranteed a higher social position, and the strong link between educational attainment and income. As a result of this social reality, the pressing need of most people whether in Oman or in

other countries to obtain a suitable income which will enhance their financial position, was regarded as the most important one. For the state, the high number of expatriates occupying most professional jobs in different sectors in the local market represents the main reason why the HE system and other training institutions feel pressured to prepare a national well-qualified workforce.

With respect of the capacity of HE, although the state makes every effort to expand the enrolment capacity of public HEIs, it was obvious that most participants believe the current capacity of these institutions to be too limited, leaving over half of all SSGs every year without the opportunity to enter HE. And although the interviewees indicated other contributing factors to this situation, the majority of them attributed the limited opportunities in state institutions to two main factors, these being, lack of funding, and poor educational planning, while others considered that the government wanted such a situation, in an attempt to direct those graduates to enrol in the TE or VT sector.

Consequently, most interviewees favoured urgent action to expand the capacity to meet the demand. In this respect, the majority recommended the state to increase the sectoral budget. In addition, despite the existence of a number of different specialised colleges and institutes in Oman, most interviewees expressed the opinion that one governmental university was insufficient to satisfy the demand, and recommended the establishment of another governmental university. Many participants also indicated the vital role to be played by the private sector in HE, referring at the same time, to the various obstacles that hinder this sector from playing an effective role in developing and expanding Oman's HE system. Accordingly, they offered many suggestions to improve the ability of the private HEIs to make a more effective contribution.

Furthermore, other interviewees offered additional suggestions for strategies to expand the HE sector, most of these being interlinked with other themes of the study, as mentioned earlier, and as a result, the next chapters will develop these ideas. However, the current limited capacity of HE and other serious challenges reflect the importance

of identifying the opinions of the key figures regarding the vision, principles, objectives and plans of HE, which would help in the future development process of this pivotal field, and this is the subject of discussion in the next chapter.