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

Volume II

By

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Content: Volume II

Chapter Seven: Analysis and Discussion of Interviews Findings (2)	
 Vision, Objectives, and policies of Higher	308
7.1 Introduction	308
7.2 Why the State Did not Formulate a National Long-Term Vision and Strategy for HE in the Past Period	308
7.3 Principles and Objectives for a Vision and Strategy of HE	320
7.4 HE and the Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020'	335
7.5 The Extent to Which Government Officials Depend on the 'Vision of Oman 2020'	345
7.6 The Extent to Which Current Activities and Roles Played by HEIs Link with the Country's Development Plans	353
7.7 The Extent to Which Interested HE Organisations are Participating in Formulating the Country's Development Plans	358
7.8 Conclusion	362
Chapter Eight: Analysis and Discussion of Interviews Findings (3)	
 Administration and Management of Higher Education	364
8.1 Introduction	364
8.2 Administration and Management of the Omani HE Sector	364
8.2.1 The plurality of organisations administrating the Omani HE System	365
8.2.2 Interviewees' suggested organisational structure	376
8.2.3 The extent to what the current supervisory organisations of the HE sector are equipped to discharge their duties	387
8.2.4 Is there is a need to seek help from international experts and institutions	393
8.2.5 Evaluation system of HE	399
8.2.6 Other difficulties facing the administration of HE	404
8.3 Conclusion	409
Chapter Nine: Analysis and Discussion of Interview Findings (4)	
 Financing of Higher Education in Oman	411
9.1 Introduction	411
9.2 Financing Higher Education	411
9.2.1 The reality of governmental funding of HE	411
9.2.2 Privatisation of HE or partnership in HE	417
9.2.3 Does the country need privatisation in HE	420
9.2.4 The extent to which the private HEIs participate in reducing the pressure	430
The impact of Omani families low income	431
The tuition fees	435
The financial position of private HEIs	437
The lack of support and encouragement for private HEIs	439
Private HEIs poor marketing strategies	445
The character of the private sector	446

9.2.5 Alternative resourcing	448
Increased government investment in the sector	449
Revised enrolment and removal of additional expenses and allowances	451
The participation of the private sector and the parents	452
People and community participation, dedications and endowments	455
Student Student-loan Scheme	461
9.3 Conclusion	467
PART III	469
Introduction	470
Chapter Ten: Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations	471
10.1 Introduction	471
10.2 The Challenge of Demand for HE	471
10.2.1 Dealing with the social demand	473
10.2.2 Dealing with the economic demand	477
10.2.3 how to improve the situation of the national workforce in the private enterprises	480
10.2.4 Filling the gaps in the Omani marketplace	488
10.2.2 Most needed specialisations and fields of work	492
10.3 Enhancing the vision, Objectives and plans of HE	495
10.4 Expanding the Capacity of HE and Meeting the Demand	501
Different view towards the main reasons	502
Working to enhance the capacity of HEIs and filling the gap	505
Promoting the capacity of the current key state's HEIs	506
The issue of establishment of another governmental university	507
Restructuring and promoting the other state's HEIs	509
Enhancing the role of the private HEIs	512
10.5 The Challenge of Financing for HE	514
10.5.1 The state role in HE funding in Oman	515
10.5.2 Student contribution and Student-loan scheme	521
10.5.3 Participation of other private companies and businesspeople in HE funding	528
10.5.4 Public and community participation, dedications and endowments	529
10.6 The Challenge of Administration and Management Facing HE	532
10.6.1 Multiplicity of supervisory organisation of HEIs	533
10.6.2 Solutions to the problem	534
10.7 Recommendations	540
10.8 Conclusion	549
References	551
Appendices	573

Chapter Seven

Analysis and Discussion of Interview Findings (2) Vision, Objectives and Policies of Higher Education

7.1 Introduction

Throughout the previous chapter, the interviewees' responses relating to the first theme concerned with the demands for HE in Oman, were considered. These confirmed the high demand, and explored the various reasons (social and economic) for its increase over the last three decades. Discussion about the capacity of HE in Oman followed, from which it several factors were seen to negatively influence the expansion process of HE and limit its capacity and efficiency, thereby preventing its appropriate response to the high demand for places.

Consequently, the questions of what the government envisages, what its future visions and plans for dealing with this situation is, and how young Omanis are going to be prepared to participate in the next phase of the country's development, now remain, and the focus of this chapter is on these issues, which will be considered through a discussion of the interviewee data and in the light of documentary information.

7.2 Why the State Did Not Formulate a National Long-Term Vision and Strategy For HE in the Past Period

At the onset of the 1970s it was evident that there was no modern education system, and certainly no clear philosophy for education on which to base aims, objectives or national curricula. For HE the situation was worse, and no form of HE existed at time; indeed the concept was alien to most people in Oman. Although there were numerous achievements in HE sector during the last thirty as in other fields in the country, there has been little opportunity to accumulate a body of literature relating to this philosophy as noted in the governmental

documents prepared by Murphy (2004), who regarded the recent publication by the MoE (2004a) entitled 'The Philosophy and Objectives of Education in the Sultanate of Oman' is regarded as a major first step in this direction (Murphy, 2004).

However, as observed already, many attempts had been made to develop the educational system, particularly in the last two phases of education reform, when the new system of Basic Education was introduced in 1997, and several changes were implemented in Secondary Education during 2004 and 2005. In fact, these changes could be regarded as result of some visions and reports, such as the Ministry of Education, 1994a, Ministry of Education, 1994b, Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*', Ministry of Education 1998, and the findings of a number of symposiums.

The situation within HE is different, however, and there has been less opportunity for development, since the greatest attention was necessarily directed towards GE/BE. Consequently, it can be seen that up to the time of this study (conducted in 2004/2005), and it is well understood, as verified by the responses from the majority of interviewees, there has been a lack of officially published documentation regarding the philosophy, vision, objectives or general plans for HE in Oman, and the current ongoing governmental project is the first attempt in this respect.

In addition, there are now several provisional plans for each stream or division of HE, for instance, there is a plan for the MoHE which administers a number of HEIs, a plan for SQU, a plan for the Colleges of Technology which are supervised by the Ministry of Manpower, and other plans for other governmental bodies which manage different HEs. Each of these plans includes a number of objectives and procedures, most of which were reviewed in Chapter Five. Nonetheless, all these plans are components of Oman's FYDPs, and are mainly action financial plans consisting of a range of objectives, policies and procedures regarding certain

targets to be achieved within designated budgets. Hence, these plans can not be regarded as a theoretical framework for the country's HE system based on some national philosophy, or vision.

Consequently, it can be appreciated that there is a need to ascertain the reasons why the State has not formulated such an educational vision and strategy despite 35 years of Oman's Renaissance period; and at the same time, to probe the interviewees for their opinions on what are the reasons or why the government has recently begun its first project to prepare such a mission that includes HE in the Sultanate. The following question was, therefore, asked of participants: *In your opinion why has there been no official national vision or comprehensive strategy for higher education in Oman during the last 35 years?*

Different views were expressed by the interviewees, many justifying the lack of national vision and comprehensive strategy for HE, by the relative infancy of the country's period of modernisation, for example, (L1uv3), (L2d13g), (L3gu3), and (L4sc4) believed that 35 years has not been long enough to establish, build and provide the necessary infrastructure, services, vision, and implementation strategies for all aspects of life, in all of the country's regions. Therefore, Oman was seen to be going through the natural stages of development, with the government prioritising the urgent needs and most important services required by citizens across the country, for basic living, such as making GE available throughout Oman, providing fundamental health services, roads, electricity, water and other similar essentials. In this regard, (L1uv3) said 'it is natural development since the Sultanate started only from 35 years from zero, which needs time to develop all fields and sectors' . Other participants such as (L2d14g), (L2ex2), (L3prc4), (L3prc2), (L4sh1) and (L4bs1) gave similar responses, while interviewee (L3gvc4) explained this view very clearly, by saying that:

because you know our own development age in Oman is only 34 years, for example, in the 1980s at that point it was just trying to get basic human needs, the Primary education, getting people into school, the same time developing infrastructure, developing health, because health is important for the

development, because if do not have health for a population, you would not have population, getting the roads, the water, the electricity, just basic thing So I think in the 1970s and 1980s in Oman we were still just trying to get our infrastructure, our basic things. So you have to go through these basic human needs, before you go to other things and at that point in Oman we were getting our basic needs, so you can not expect in that time to start putting a strategic plan when first of all we have to figure out how we can get a road or electricity to a certain region. You know you only have a certain capacity, if you try doing too many things then you never get to it. So I think that the 1970s or 1980s would have been the wrong time, because if they made a plan then it would not have been the plan that is needed for now.

Another similar reason was offered by other participants who drew attention to the difficulty facing the process of HRD including education and HE if there were to be too much haste in the preparation of young people. In this respect, one interviewee said:

Because as you know, in any field of the human development process, it is not possible to burn the stages, since each stage has its own circumstances and elements, and what you can do now you could not do it before 10 or 20 years, for example in the 1970s we had faced several critical challenges, so we focused on obtaining and preparing teaching and administrative staff for schools and other relevant jobs and on any programme help in this area, because without national cadre who can manage and supervise, the implementation of national objectives, plans and programmes will fail. So, there was no point at that time to build a national vision and strategy, while now we have well qualified people in several areas, with experience of 30 years or more. We now have national experts and specialists with international competences, who can build and supervise such comprehensive vision and strategy, and that is now what the state assumes to do. So each stage of the development has its challenges and potential, and any jump may impede the success, because skipping some stages will make people unable to understand things before moving to the next step (L1pscm1).

A similar response was given by (L2d14g), indicating that the process of qualifying Omanis was perceived to be advancing in a reasonable manner, and in line with this belief, another view compared the requirements of the country during the previous three decades and the present need, saying that:

in the past the state felt that the need for a long-term vision was not necessary, since all sectors need to be built and filled, so any number of graduates in any type of specialisation were needed, while now there is a feeling that there is a need to build a vision for higher education and education in general, because the country economy was developed, some sectors already started to produce, some

fields are covered or mostly by Omanis while others still need to be filled. Therefore, these factors call to diversify the economy, to direct the fields of study, to serve the knowledge-based economy and to focus on information technology, communications and geographic engineering and others. All these fields were non-existent 10 or 20 years ago (L1u4).

There were other interviewees who produced similar answers, such as (L2d5g) and (L2d14g). Basically, the common opinion was that the changing needs of the country justified the current attention to a new vision for the development of HE. This comparison between the past and the present led the researcher to pose another question in order to establish whether the interviewees believed the state had delayed in undertaking this process or not. In response, one interviewee said: ‘because there is feeling now that we have a need for such vision and strategy while previously there is not such feel for this need’ (L2d11g), and (L2ex3) responded similarly, while another interviewee who believed that the present time was right to undertake this step, explained the difference between the past and the current time by saying:

no, I think it is a good time to do this [to prepare a new strategy for the Development and Expansion of HE]; because now we need to look at human development and we need to look at our manpower and it is a time when we have a lot of people coming out of High Secondary School and they need to continue their study ... Also, another reason is because we can not do two things at the same time, open institutions and have a strategic plan, people will not be ready actually. We did not have enough people who had experience or were highly qualified indeed ... but now I think with people doing PhDs in education, people with experience in these educational institutions with the mistakes maybe that they made in the past that we can learn from, it is a good time now (L3gvc4).

Another participant identified another motivation for the state’s preparation of a new vision, saying:

you know the Ministry of Higher Education was newly established, as well as the Council of Higher Education, and to settle down these institutions and see the way of their tasks, they need time. Then, to prepare for a long-term vision or strategies and policies needs time, qualified people, experiences which lead to build such visions. And now it is the right time, since several things have arisen within the last few years, especially the high growing rate of the population, the high number of graduates from Secondary Stage which indicate the need for building a long-term vision for this field (L3guv4).

In line with this thinking, other interviewees emphasised the high and increasing number of SSGs as a pressing need to formulate and publish a strategy for HE, for instance (L2guv2) and (L4sc3) who said ‘the high number of graduates from Secondary Stage with too limited opportunity to enter higher education indicates the need to build a long term vision for this field’, while interviewee (L1u4) pointed to another factor, saying:

the Omani economy has now become part of the international economy, and the international economy has its own conditions to cope with, such as competitive dimension either in the national domain or in the international. So the national economy has become unclosed economy which means it is open to other economies and to be emulated, so all these things call now to consider this issue (L1u4).

This extract indicates that the ongoing changes in the national and international economies, together with the future predictions about the post-oil period in Oman, have generated a pressing need to qualify the young population so they can compete with others in the global market. Furthermore, another participant illustrated some consequences of the absence of a national vision and strategy for HE, which could be regarded as problems for the state to deal with, through establishing a clear vision and comprehensive strategy for HE. In this regard, it was said:

... the statistics indicated that there are many Omani families who directed and sent their children abroad to study in particular specialisations, and as a result of absence of knowledge, co-ordination between these families and the authorities of HE in the country, we have seen now that there are thousands of graduated teachers without jobs, while thousands still study in the local colleges of education, Sultan Qaboos University, United Arab Emirates and other countries. Also, there are many graduates from the Sultan Qaboos University and other higher educations institutions in some specialisations without work, while there is a lack of national manpower in several fields and sectors which mostly rely on expatriates (L2d12g).

This extract points to the problem of unplanned scholarships (discussed in Chapter Five). Since many families sent their children abroad to study and obviously were allowed to make choices freely, the majority studied Education

(8,417 students in 2003 according to the MoE, 2004a) because of the public perception that obtaining a job in education is much easier than in other sectors. In addition, most of these students are female and studied in the UAE, because of the social and religious factors explained in Chapters Three and Five. However, because of several circumstances such as the financial situation of most Omani families, and the fact that the numbers of Omani state school teachers are now enough, the need for Education graduates has declined. It is worth noting that because of the availability of education studies in the local new private universities, the number of student going abroad to study education has declined to 5,485 (MoHE, 2005:190).

Indeed, there is a large number of students in this area in contrast to the limited job opportunities in this field, whereas other sectors suffer a severe shortage of national manpower, suggesting a problem with the planning process for HRD in general, and HE in particular. The implications of this are an urgent need to promote HE and expand its capacity, and simultaneously to change attitudes among young people and their families regarding some fields of study or kinds of work, thereby persuading them to consider education and training in areas of importance to the country.

Turning again to the interviewees' opinions, a contrasting view emerged regarding the timing of the current preparation of HE vision and strategy, this being that an undue delay had occurred. Interviewees such as (L1u7), (L3gus), (L3gc2), (L4bs2), and ((L4sh3), all believed this to be the case, whereas others saw this as a very long delay, for instance (L1u10), (L1uv3), (L1u11), (L1u8), (L2d8g), (L2d10g), (L1d12g), (L2d13g) and (L4sc3). Most of these interviewees produced several justifications and reasons for their opinions, one being as follows:

there is delay, because it is supposed to be prepared in 1985. Despite many calls from the first Five Year Development Plan (1975-1980) which include one important axis concerned with the education, the preparation of productive society, how to replace the expatriates by the national workforce and the

technical training. Therefore, from that early time we had this theoretical view for development of the country. Unfortunately, we were too late in taking the practical steps and very slow in the implementation process either in the General Education or in Higher Education (L4bs2).

there is delay, I think if the state prepared a vision or strategy for the development of this sector in 1986, I mean after the establishment of the Sultan Qaboos University that could be better. Since, that time is the beginning of the country's change in its higher education system from reliance on the overseas scholarships to the local higher education institutions and to start settle down this field in the country (L3gu3).

Similar to the response of (L3gu3); another participant said 'I think such vision and strategy could be developed after opening the Sultan Qaboos University, so I think it was late around 15 years. And I think the reason may be because the infrastructure of higher education was not completed' (L1-u11). This interviewee stated one of aforementioned reasons, regarding it as one of the factors responsible for this delay, while other extracts illuminate different factors, for example (L2d12g) mentions the effect of the absence of a database saying:

I think there was long delay, if there was an accurate database and information about the needs of the marketplace this would not happen, so we need to feel the responsibilities regarding this increasing number of unemployed young, and direct them to the specialisations that are useful for them and for the country.

The lack of a database was also mentioned by the interviewees as one of the problems facing organisations in trying to deal with the marketplace, because they were unable to determine the precise requirements of a national workforce. Indeed, the researcher also encountered this difficulty when trying to gather information for this research. Moreover, the management of HE was also cited as a reason for the delay in HE vision and strategy development, one interviewee saying that:

maybe the plurality of the organisations administering higher education institutions cause this delay, since each of these authorities is concerned with its field and has its own plans and policies, with weak co-ordination and co-operation between these organisations (L2d8g).

Another interviewee referred to a different aspect of HE administration, saying 'because of a paucity of well-qualified high officials who are able or interested in this area, who can understand the requirements, problems, future plans of this sector' (L3-gc2). This view was verified by a different interviewee who started with another reason already mentioned before, as follows:

maybe the delay in the establishment of the Ministry of Higher Education was one reason, as well as the establishment of the Higher Education Council, which also participated in this delay, since most of this Council's members are not specialists or experts in this field, and all or most of them are too busy with their responsibilities in their organisations, which lead to less concern for this sector's requirements and this caused the delay of many things related to this sector (L2-d6-g).

Actually, most of the Council's members are interested in this field, and some have long experience of administering some divisions of HEIs, but it could be appreciated that most members were ministers or under-secretaries and themselves responsible for their organisations, whereby most are more concerned with their organisations, which in turn might lead to delay or less concern with the sector as a whole. Nonetheless, this will be highlighted later when the interviewees' opinions on the theme of management of HE, are discussed. With regard to the responses of other interviewees, it seemed strange that some who had a high level of responsibility in an important HEI had no knowledge or clear concept about such an important issue, such as (L2gv2) who said:

I do not know, this is a matter of government policy, and we do not know the reason. Sometimes the things come suddenly, sometimes with strong pressure. Sometimes, some problems and difficulties generate a need to study the reality and then to establish some solutions or strategies to solve the problems and to improve the situation.

This extract indicates that some high ranking officials in some HEIs do not have a comprehensive vision of the system, or are unconcerned with matters beyond their institutions. However, this participant continued by mentioning the high and increasing number of SSGs as an important problem to deal with, and indicated that the government sometimes takes steps suddenly as a response to a

strong pressure, or an urgent need to make progress in a certain area. Moreover, another interviewee from the Majles A'Shura said:

This question should be asked of the government officials, not to me because I do not know if there is a vision and strategy for the development of higher education or not. Regarding myself, I did not see anything related to this field either in the Council [Consultative Council] or out of the Council, I did not see anything regarding this issue (L4sh2).

Probing this interviewee, the researcher asked him, whether as a member of the Council, and as a person interested in the business field, and who has been appointed as Committee in the Council, he would be expected to know about such issues and discuss these with other members and in the committee as well. His response was:

indeed what I know is only by media or newspaper, I heard that His Majesty directed the government to present the project of the State's General Budget in the Council and accordingly we in the Committee will be pleased to discuss this project, while other plans I do not know anything about (L4sh2).

These two extracts may reflect two situations, the first perhaps being that the interviewee was trying to avoid responding to the question since he was not a governmental official, and held a good position in a private sector enterprise. Secondly, the level of Council members' knowledge and understanding of the country's plans may be minimal. In fact, this was not surprising since there are a number of members of this Council who are elected according to their position in their tribes or in their village communities. This was evidenced by the response of one senior official in the Council, when asked why the Council has no legislative role, which was:

I have to say this frankly, such a role is not easy to implement. It needs certain abilities and only when people have these, can they be given this role. However, the Council now has some legislative tasks, such as reviewing some legal projects, plans, and discussing these with the Ministers and other high-ranking government officials, and without doubt the whole legislative role is coming - it is on the way (L4sh1).

Indeed, this is perhaps one of several reasons why His Majesty the Sultan of Oman has taken a gradual approach to devolving power to the Majles A'Shura, which up to this point has not had a decision-making role (as explained in Chapter Two), as verified by this member himself, when he said 'I do not think we have reached that stage, however, the Council has now been given a stronger consultative role in the social and economic dimensions of the society' (L4sh2), and also by the response of another member who said 'the Council has no legislative role yet, and we wish to become a Legislative Council, in which we can have important statutory tasks. However, at the present time we have an effect on some projects and decisions if they are sent to the Council' (L4sh3). Finally, in the researcher's personal view, the situation could be attributed also to the relative infancy of the Council, and to the fact that the Omani people are not yet well prepared for such public civil activities.

In contrast to all previous views, there were some different perspectives voiced by other interviewees, such as (L2d7g) who said:

I do not agree that we have not until now, a vision or strategy for higher education, because if there is not how did you and me graduate from such higher education institutions? So I believe there is a strategy but it is divided into Five Year Plans, according to the circumstances of the country at the time. Well, there is a problem of limited capacity of higher education with a high and increasing number of graduates from Secondary Stage, while before there were a large number of chances for anyone who wished to enter higher education even those who want to go to gain PhDs they could get chance, because there were pressing needs for all graduates in any level and in any field, but this situation has been changed during last few years. Several places were filled by a large number of graduates during the previous three decades and the chances being limited in these areas, and this the law of the life. Therefore, sometimes the absence of strategy itself is a strategy really (L2d7g).

This extract reflects this interviewee's belief that although the past 34 years have not produced a formal written strategy, there have in fact been unstated plans and targets which have resulted in the development to date of all sectors, and all previous achievements. Thus, he/she did not regard the absence of a published

vision or strategy as an indication that no strategy existed, and furthermore continued to say:

however, some changes have occurred during the last five years or more, there is a decline of oil revenue which led to reduce the performance of the national economy, and more than one third of the Omani people have become students in the schools according to the young rate of the population, which generated high pressure upon the schools as well as upon the higher education institutions, and calls for solutions and policies to deal with these issues. I do agree the strategy which I have talked about was not written and maybe not determined in terms of modern documentation methods, because there was no need to write such strategy since we lacked all things and we needed everything in developing our country (L2d7g).

Hence, this participant agrees that it is the significant changes and developments internally and externally, which affect the reality of Oman's development process, that form the rationale for the current attention to providing a documented vision and strategy. Interviewees (L2d3g) and (L4sh3) also believe in the existence of a plan for the development of HE, since they produced a similar response, saying 'we have a plan, we have the Council of Higher Education and Ministry of Higher Education, and these definitely have plans' (L4sh3), whereas another participant said:

We cannot say we have no plans for the development of HE, we do have a long term plan which is the Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020', and Five Year Development Plans of the Country which translated this vision, and which all include the axis of human resources development including general/basic education and higher education (L2d2g).

Clearly, these interviewees considered the Vision of 'Oman 2020', and the FYDPs as representing the long term vision and strategy for HE, yet as mentioned in Chapter Three, these documents are purely concerned with economic strategy, and there are in fact, significant arguments about this vision and its role in the development process of the country, as illustrated by the interviewees themselves in the next section. Additionally, the FYDPs are mainly action for all sectors of the economy that concentrate on costs and other practical issues, rather than being

theoretical frameworks that focus on strategy to guarantee the future of Oman's youth.

Concluding this issue, it can be seen that some interviewees did not believe the absence of a documented long-term plan for the promotion of the HE sector during the last three decades to be a problem, perceiving this to be indicative only of the concentration on building basic infrastructure throughout the country to satisfy immediate and urgent needs, in a natural sequence of development.

In contrast, however, a greater number of interviewees believed that there has been a need to formulate an HE vision and strategy for the last 20 years at least, saying that the current difficulties facing this sector are the result of not having a formal plan. Nevertheless, irrespective of their views on what has occurred in the past, both groups of interviewees strongly agreed on the pressing need to take steps in this direction now, providing several reasons for their opinions. Hence, it seemed extremely important to discover what these key figures thought should be the most important principles and objectives of a long-term vision for HE development, and the findings in this respect are now presented.

7.3 Principles and Objectives for a Vision and Strategy of HE

In order to establish opinions on this theme, the interviewees were asked: *And if you have been given a role in preparing and formulating such vision or strategy for higher education, what are the fundamental principles, objectives and dimensions that you are going to suggest?* In response, a few participants suggested some over-arching principles, while the majority produced a long list of objectives. In terms of the fundamental principles, one of these key figures said that:

The most important principles are: to provide useful education for all, and the education which should be provided must be beneficial at each stage. This means the education provided should be suitable and respond to the needs of the marketplace. Second it should be responsive to the latest international developments either in education or in other fields. For instance, the Basic

Education System, which the Sultanate implemented from 1997 has as its the third and fundamental principle, education for the sake of education, which has only been approved by the government for a short time (L1pscm1).

Another interviewee offered other principles with a little more explanation, saying that:

Education should ensure the country's identity, the prime values of the country, and at same time be open to other perspectives and cultures in order to benefit from them and to benefit others, because this is a life principle whereby if you want to take from others you have to give to others as well. If you are a receiver only, that means the other side will impose what they want, and accordingly, to give to others you should be able to give and you should have something to give, which means that you should have knowledge of value to them. For example, when people say that globalisation will impose on us some things which we do not want, indeed globalisation will impose on weak people who have nothing to give others, but if you have valuable and worthy things to give this will lead others to accept what you want to provide, since they feel it is valuable and it is deserved to be earned, and this the law of the life. So, we should participate in the modern civilisation through benefit from it and give it as well (L1u4).

More principles were produced by other key figures, such as (L1uc1) who said it is 'society's culture and the ambition of people to obtain the education and knowledge', thus subscribing to the principle of '*education for the sake of education*', which was in fact, a principle strongly debated in government, and took a long time to be accepted. This situation was put to the interviewees, who were asked to what extent they supported this particular principle. The views expressed fell into three different categories, these being firstly, those in strong support or at least in favour, such as (L1u12), (L1pscm1), (L1u11), (L3 gu3), (L3gc2), (L3prc2), (L3gvc3), (L4sh1), and (L4bs1), all of whom placed no condition or limitation on the principle. For example (L4bs1) said '100% I support this foundation, the knowledge and education is the most important and valuable thing we can give to our children'. Along the same lines, (L1u11) offered more explanation saying:

I believe that this principle should be our prime target, because do you think that it will be right if the need of the governmental institutions was met, and also if all other sectors were filled by Omanis, that we should close all universities and colleges and other training institutions? I do not think that will be acceptable.

Therefore, we should agree with this foundation, and we should educate every one but in the field of study which enable him/her to emulate others

Another participant said ‘this is the right foundation, and according to this fundamental principle enough institutions to educate people should be provided, but where the graduates will work should be left to their efforts’ (L1u7). A similar response was produced by (L4sc4), when asked whether it was difficult to provide enough funding to allow all students to enter HE. In reply it was said ‘we have to provide enough money for this issue, we have to reprioritise our targets and plans according to the needs of this field’, while (L2d5g) confirmed this belief saying ‘the state should consider higher education as a special case’. Another interviewee verified the importance of planning to spread education and qualify the people asserting that:

The most important thing in this country is the planning for education, not other issues whether economic or social, because these will be sorted if the people are educated. If the state could develop humans' minds with the knowledge and skills from the first level of the study, we would be the best in the Middle East, otherwise we will be in difficult position (L3-gvc3).

The second category of responses came from interviewees who did support the principle but with some conditions, the most important being to satisfy the requirements of the marketplace, the individuals' need for jobs or work, and the needs for the country's development. For example, (L4sc3) said ‘I support this foundation, but we must take into account the requirements of the labour market’, and (L2d2g) and (L3gtc1) produced similar responses, the latter saying ‘we are educating for the sake of education and for the needs of the labour market’ (L3gtc1). In line with these sentiments, another interviewee said:

we have to take into account the principle of education for all, because we have to believe that education is for the sake of education, but at same time we have to consider the needs of the labour market. We have to take these two dimensions together with deep study and consideration (L1u8).

Another participant compared the two different slogans adopted by the government during the previous decades, and the current one discussed now, saying that:

the previous principle which was education for the sake of work or a job, failed as evidenced by the current situation which particularly links education and the number of graduates with the need of the local marketplace only, and now we have the new slogan, but the problem is not only with the slogan which we adopted, the real problem is in the national economy, is it growing in a suitable way to create job opportunities, investment chances and business or not? This is the main issue (L2d12g).

This opinion is clearly in support of a trend that takes into account both dimensions – education for its own sake, and for work. However, the issue of the national economy was raised, the interviewee attributing the success or failure of educational ambitions to the level of economic growth, rather than to any philosophy espoused in a slogan. Another participant added a further dimension concerned with the benefits of education for life itself, saying:

I say the education is for the sake of education, for sake of the work, and also for the life, because knowledge itself is life and is needed for life and the work is life as well, we cannot make a difference between the education and the work, imagine that any person has been educated then he has not any work to do how do you feel, I feel such status will affect his life and his family's life (L2-d15-g).

Moreover, and in line with this idea, another interviewee confirmed a belief in the principle of '*education for the sake of education*' but included conditions regarding ability to benefit, saying 'providing the chance of education for every citizen who has ability and who can benefit himself, others, and benefit the society as well. So this is aim, to spread education and higher education' (L1u9). So, although this participant supports the spread of education, the ability of each person to gain knowledge and use it for personal betterment and for the benefit of society, becomes a condition. This belief was also expressed by (L2ex3) who said 'to provide higher education to eligible students, coming from Secondary School', thereby reflecting some confusion in understanding the principle, since the principle implies that education is an unconditional right for all, yet there is no

firm declaration on how far up the educational scale, this goes. Clearly, around the world, education is usually compulsory (and therefore a right) at school age (normally from 5 to 16 or to 18 years old), but the situation is not clarified in Oman.

And finally, in the third group of responses, was the disagreement with the principle of '*education for the sake of education*', such respondents producing several reasons for their views. For example (L4bs2) said 'I cannot understand this principle, and I think in the light of our current circumstances and decline of the country income, we cannot educate people who do not benefit their society', and another one said:

I do not encourage such a principle, because we need every person who can serve his society, and at the same time there is a large number of expatriates who need to be replaced by the national workforce, which means we must qualify the young in accordance with the requirements of the labour market (L1u2).

In conclusion, it can be seen that most participants (30 out of 50) supported the principle of '*education for the sake of education*', five considered it should be applied in conjunction with the needs of individuals for employment, the marketplace requirements, and the country's development process, and three interviewees either disagreed with it or were unable to properly understand what was meant by it. However, it is worth noting that the Majles A'Shura submitted a recommendation to the government to authorise this principle and adopt it as a fundamental foundation for the education process in the country, as verified by the interviewees from this Council such as (L4sh1) and (L4sh3). And the government approved the principle and directed all interested institutions to adopt it, as confirmed by key governmental figures, such as (L2d9g) who said that 'this principle was approved from the Council of Ministers, and from His Majesty The Sultan', and also by (L1pscm1), (L2d7g) and (L2d12g).

In their responses regarding the principles, the objectives and other dimensions that were suggested by the interviewees varied according to personal beliefs. In this respect (L2d7g) suggested the need for the following:

[1] provide the education as a service for everyone, [2] all scientific subjects should be developed, [3] the outputs of education and higher education should respond to the requirements of local labour markets as well as the international one, [4] pay more attention to the quality of study, [5] establish partnerships with the private sector to shoulder some responsibilities of higher education, [6] encourage this sector to enable it to take part in providing suitable and good quality higher education. In addition to these objectives there are some important dimensions that we should take into our consideration when we build all our plans and strategies, these are [7] the social dimension, and [8] the economic dimension. Moreover, there is another important factor, which is [9] the pressure made by some big countries as well as by some international organisations upon the small, undeveloped and weak countries which make threats against these countries' culture, social, political and economic components (L2d7g).

It is obvious that the above extract gives a wide-ranging perspective on what should be included in a future vision and strategy. Points 1, 7 and 8 could be regarded as the basis for a vision for the sector, while points 3 and 5 could be regarded as objectives, points 2 and 6 as procedures, and point 9 as a factor which perhaps affects the reality of education including HE, as well the country's economic and social reality. Some interviewees emphasised other points more than others, for instance, (L3gc2) produced the following response, saying:

[1] The most important one is the expansion and development of the governmental higher education institutions, since for years this sector has not witnessed any significant expansion, same number of one university, some colleges for education, technology, and one for the Law, while the demand for higher education is increasing, and the number of graduates from Secondary Stage is high and increasing as well. So, there is a pressing and urgent need to expand the capacity of the governmental higher education system, [2] concern with the available funds for higher education which could have been better utilised, [3] addressing the suitable procedures for implementation of the plans, and finally, [4] establishing a new organisation for evaluating the higher education institutions, in addition to the self-evaluation which should be carried out by each institution.

As shown in the above extract, the last three elements represent implementation mechanisms, while the first is seen as one of the main aims that the vision or the strategy should work to achieve. Indeed, these two extracts embody the full range of comments and opinions expressed by all interviewees, and on the basis of which the following classification has been constructed as shown in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1
Principles, aims and ideas suggested by the participants Objectives for a future Vision and Strategy of HE

	Principles/ Dimensions/Elements	Stated by:	No. of Participants
1	Adopting the fundamental principle of 'education for the sake of education', which is already approved by the government.	(L1pscm1),(L1u12), (L1u11), (L3gu3), (L3gc2), (L3prc2), (L3gvc3), (L4sh1), (L4bs1), (L1u6), (L1u10), (L1u5), (L1u7), (L1u4), (L2guv2), (L2d8g),(L2d13g), (L2d14g), (L2d7g), (L2d2g), (L2d1g), (L2d4g), (L2ex2), (L3prc4), (L3gc5), (L3prc1), (L4sc4), (L4sh3), (L2d9g), (L2d5g).	30
2	High and increasing number of SSGs with the limited number of study places, and expansion of the capacity of the governmental HEIs to enrol more students.	(L1u12), (L1m2), (L1uv3), (L2d1g), (L2d4g), (L3gc2), (L4sh3), (L3gvc4)	8
3	Take into account the local labour market, which means that when we build our plans we should know the specialisations and other requirements of this market.	(L1u10),(L2d3g), (L2d4g), (L1u2), (L4sc3), (L2d7g) (L2ex2)	7
4	Take into account the international market, and accordingly prepare Omanis to be able to work abroad, either in Arab countries or in others. Accordingly, the outputs of education and higher education should correspond with the requirements of the local labour market as well as the international one.	(L1u10), (L1u8), (L1gu3), (L1u11), (L2d7g), (L2ex2)	6
5	Ensure quality.	(L2d6g), (L3prc1), (L2d7g), (L1u12), (L1m2), (L3gvc4)	6
6	Focus on developing applied Sciences more than Arts or Social Sciences.	(L2d5g), (L1u7), (L2d13g), (L2d7-g), (L2d7g)	5
7	Supporting the principle of 'education for the sake of education', and taking into account the requirements of the labour market.	(L2d2g), (L3gtc1), (L4sc3), (L1u8), (L2d12g)	5

Continue Table: 7.1

	Principles/ Dimensions/Elements	Stated by:	No. of Participants
8	The current age of knowledge and taking into account the accelerating developments of modern technology and communication field.	(L1u12), (L2d4g), (L2d15g), (L4sh3)	4
9	Promote education and training in a continuous way, develop the curricula at all levels of study, and improve the performance of the education system.	(L4bs2), (L2d13g), (L2d7g)	3
10	Continuous evaluation.	(L2d6g), (L3prc1), (L3gc2)	3
11	The economic situation.	(L2d7g), (L1u12), (L1u5)	3
12	Provide education as a service for everyone.	(L2d7g), (L2ex2)	2
13	The social dimension.	(L2d7g), (L1u5)	2
14	The use of globalisation.	(L1u12), (L4sh3)	2
15	Increase the funding of HE and training and look for other resources.	(L1u12), (L4bs2)	2
16	Link the plans for HE with the country's development plan.	(L1u12), (L2d15g)	2
17	Design more cost effective methods of providing HE.	(L1m2), (L3gc2)	2
18	Supporting the principle of 'education for the sake of education', and providing more education to those who have ability and who can benefit themselves, others, and society.	(L1u9)	1
19	Providing higher education to eligible students coming from Secondary School.	(L2ex3)	1
20	Providing useful education for all.	(L1pscm1)	1
21	Providing education which is useful at that particular each stage.	(L1pscm1)	1
22	Education should ensure the country's identity, and establish the prime values of the country, and at same time be open to other perspectives and cultures in order to benefit from them and to benefit others.	(L1u4)	1
23	We should participate in the modern civilisation to gain benefit and to contribute to it as well.	(L1u4)	1

Continue Table: 7.1

	Principles/ Dimensions/Elements	Stated by:	No. of Participants
24	It is society's culture and the ambition of people to obtain education and knowledge.	(L1uc1)	1
25	Establish partnerships with the private sector to shoulder some responsibilities of higher education.	(L2d7g)	1
26	Encourage the private sector to take part in providing suitable and good quality higher education.	(L2d7g)	1
27	Changing students' attitudes and directing them to enter the specialisations required by the labour market.	(L1u2)	1
28	The pressure made by some big countries as well as by some international organisations upon the small, undeveloped and weak countries which threaten these countries' cultural, social, political and economic components	(L2d7g)	1
29	Benefit from other countries' experiences in this field.	(L1u12)	1
30	His Majesty's vision, the government vision.	(L1u5)	1
31	The people willing, what they want in future.	(L1u5)	1
32	The education in Oman to be stronger and more concentrated.	(L1u5)	1
33	Provide in-service training for young Omanis.	(L4sc3)	1
34	Consider the need for other technicians for vocational jobs.	(L2d13g)	1
35	Consider the need of industry's projects and its need for human resources.	(L2d13g)	1

These represent the most important principles, objectives, ideas and associated issues identified by these interviewees, for inclusion in the national long-term vision and strategy for HRD, education in general, and HE in particular. However, several participants clarified their suggestions by providing more detailed information. For example, on the importance of ensuring quality, a number of

participants were keen to comment, and (L3gvc4) in particular clarified this, saying that:

I think the most important thing in HE is quality, and I think if we want to succeed we should do it in a way where we are providing quality education, because even if you start opening hundreds of colleges and they are all useless, then you need to ensure the quality, if the quality is not there you have wasted your investment; so I think the most important thing in HE is quality.

Another interviewee considered that if a new vision and strategy were established for this field, it should address the issue of how to help the government fund the HE sector, as noted by (L1m2) who said:

Therefore, we are looking for obtaining participation from the private sector and from the people as well, since the country cannot afford higher study for all these students if we want to preserve our resources. So the people must contribute in some way or another and we should cut out the extra allowances, free books and any other unnecessary services to provide tuition fees for other students. Because what we have is a situation where we provide a lot of things to a few people and many people do not get a chance at higher education. So what we want to do is to be able to provide good quality higher education. Therefore, perhaps we have to cut out some of the non-educational services so we can use that money to make more places available.

Certainly, the desire for the students (and/or their families) themselves to make a financial contribution is held by the government, but this is not openly declared, whereas efforts to encourage the private sector to increase its participation in this field, are very obvious. The government hope is that if more private HEIs were opened, families would fund the education of their children in those institutions rather than sending them abroad, since the overall costs would be less, and that this trend might gradually spread to parents who would not have sent their children abroad to study. However, the number of students who are being sent abroad is not high, compared with the total number of SSGs and with those who remain without the opportunity to continue into HE. In addition, the history of personal debt caused by such self-funding has been documented in the report of the World Bank (2001), and the financial situations of most Omani

families which are usually large in size, is another factor which may work against the government hope of personal funding for HE.

The matter of absorbing the high and increasing number of SSGs, was one of the most frequently-cited issues by the interviewees, who strongly recommended that any long-term national HE strategy should concentrate on this problem as a priority. One of these key figures who identified several issues for inclusion in the vision, prioritised this, saying:

One of these dimensions is the high and increasing number of SSGs with the limited number of study places, which means we have to push ourselves to work hard to increase the capacity of higher education and enrol more students in higher education. Other dimensions are; benefiting from other countries' experiences in this field, how to find other resources to fund HE, improve the quality of the outputs and link the HE plans with the country development plan, the globalisation trend and the current age of knowledge and the economic situation (L1u12).

Likewise, another interviewee highlighted this problem as one of main axes of a new HE strategy, saying:

If we are going to establish a comprehensive and clear vision and plan for higher education, a number of principles should be involved, these being; the high increasing number of Secondary Stage graduates, the need to make use of the globalisation trend and to keep pace with the new technology and communication developments. Therefore, the new vision and strategy should not solve only the matter of dealing with the high increasing number of Secondary Stage graduates, but it should take the above dimensions into account (L4sh3).

However, this interviewee was also concerned with the country's economic situation, which should be taken into account in the general development plan, saying:

we cannot plan without taking into our account the whole economic situation, since HE is affected not only by the available funding, but also by the economic growth of the country. Therefore, even if there are high quality and high numbers of HE graduates, if there is no labour market in which these outputs can get opportunities to work, there is no point to prepare and qualify these people (L1u12).

It can be seen from this extract that an improvement in the national economic growth is believed to improve performance in all sectors, producing more opportunities for investment, and accordingly more jobs. Nonetheless, this extract also reflects the expectation from some interviewees that the relationship between the needs of the labour market and the education and qualifications of people should be properly acknowledged. Furthermore, one interviewee suggested other mechanisms to help reduce the pressure on the government to fund HE, saying:

we need to look at delivering more cost effective methods of providing HE, not just a traditional form in class lectures, but also look at different types of education, such as open learning, distance learning, virtual universities, also to look at formal and non-formal education and to create more capacity, both in private HE and governmental HE (L1m2).

Another view, advanced by one interviewee was the need for the national vision to consider the preparation of specialised people in different fields, as scholars and specialists, rather than as personnel to fill vacant job positions, in which regard it was said:

I suggest that when we prepare a vision for the development of our country's educational system, we should pay more attention to prepare educated people not only for jobs and employment but also to be scholars and knowledgeable people in different fields of sciences. Because even now we do not have highly-qualified specialists in some important fields, for example as authors, artists or in medicine and in other fields, really I do not know why in our country we have not such scholars (L4sh2).

Such comments indeed reflect the absence of a wide international vision in Oman's education aims, since all previous efforts in this respect have revolved around the need to qualify people for entry to the national labour force in both the public and private sector, rather than to meet the requirements of the current knowledge age. There have been no specific aims to qualify people to become specialists in particular fields as occurs in other countries, such as specialists in environmental protection, in water sources development research, in agricultural development, in marine sciences, in archaeology, in meteorology, in space science, or even in the field of some social sciences.

Whilst the lack of provision of such education might be understood on the grounds that overseas experts in these areas are available and can be hired as expatriates, it is still true that eventually Omani nationals will be expected to step into these positions, and that other countries have taken steps to develop educational provision in such fields in order to lessen their reliance on overseas specialists.

Certainly, many interviewees offered some recommendations for repairing the planning process of the educational system, and thus attempting to solve the problems mentioned, and to at least meet the human development and resource requirements of the country. In this respect, one participant said:

the vision should involve a long-term policy to absorb the graduates of the Secondary Stage not only for one or two years but for at least ten years. Secondly, the planning should be generated by the people, which in addition to the members of the Consultative Council, also includes thinkers, cultured people, schools' head teachers, tribal leaders (A' Shoyoqh) and other educated people in order to discover the extent to which the people are suffering, and also to diagnose the gaps. This will enable the policy-makers to take into account all the factors that affect people's lives and their circumstances (L3gvc3).

It is obvious that this interviewee advocates greater public participation in the planning process, believing it will lead to improvements. Along the same lines, a different interviewee suggested other ways to promote the effective planning for HE, saying:

Our plans should not be influenced by temporary matters, such as the political matters of the region, international political issues, economic or social matters, which may be around for a short time and then finish. Our plan should be solid and ingrained. For example, the Sultanate now faces the matter of unemployed young people and this has happened in most countries across the world, particularly those who graduate from Secondary School. Well, is it right to deal with such issue by opening a number of institutes to train them to be barbers, cleaners and such low jobs just only to solve the matter of the unemployment? I think this is wrong, because we will have after some years most of our people with low qualifications, in low jobs and with very low incomes, and also the matter of unemployment will not be sorted, because after some time we will see there are greater numbers of unemployed people, what shall we do then? I believe we should have well-prepared plans for the development and expansion

of higher education which enable our system to meet the needs of the current marketplace locally and internationally (L4sh1).

This opinion was echoed by another interviewee who said ‘we do not wish to expand our plans to train our young people in the fields of vocational training to enable them to become workers, cleaners and mechanics when we still have a need for people in other better and higher jobs’ (L2d9g). In actual fact, there are still several fields with vacancies for good jobs that need better qualified nationals, one of which is the HE field itself, since many of the academic posts are still occupied by expatriates, as explained by (L2d14g) who said:

We have to prepare a strong cohort of well qualified academic staff, professors and experts, who can develop the different sectors through collaborating with international academics and using their experience, since we need this now, and we will need more in future, and if there are expatriates occupying these positions, we should know to what time we will still have to rely on these people. Why should we not prepare Omanis to fulfil these tasks in specific areas and to carry them out either in Oman or abroad?

Another problem identified by some interviewees concerned the flaws in the implementation process, which were seen as the cause of certain problems. For instance, one interviewee said:

However, there are a number of principles which you will hear from people that you are going to interview or from those you have already interviewed, and which were addressed in several previous plans, and also emphasised by His Majesty, but the problem is that all these principles or plans have not been implemented as required or as intended, because of several reasons. So, we need to diagnose where the problem is, what is the wrong, and how we can benefit from previous faults. Moreover, we should not only take into account the inputs, but it is equally important to look into the outputs. So I do not mind how many millions the Ministry of Education spent on building a number of schools and in providing such facilities, I would like to pay more attention to what extent we achieved the pre-planned aims, how is the quality of education, what is the percentage of successful students, what is the rate of failing students, what is the percentage of the absent students [who drop out of their studies], and what is the unit cost in our education system ... etc (L4bs2).

Likewise, another interviewee said:

So we need a strategic plan for Oman regarding what we want from our higher education. Do we want to be a system that is open to the masses or do we want it to be a system where only a few get into this higher education, and should it be very specialised or what? So, we should invest in human capital, this is my theory. The human capital is what brings a country ahead. Knowledgeable people work together and build the country. Most developed countries were developed because they have access to higher education, open more accessible higher education (L3gvc4).

These two extracts demonstrate the lack of clarity surrounding the vision of HE in Oman, and the situation is all the more serious because the interviewees are high ranking people in governmental bodies, private, or other important organisations in society, and if they are uncertain in this respect, there is little reason to suppose that people delivering the HE will be clear about their objectives. Indeed, most of the interviewees urged the formulation of a new national vision and strategy for HE, as frankly stated by (L4bs1) who argued:

We should keep pace with the challenges, international changes and developments in all fields, which are rapidly advancing, and which require us to establish a new vision for our educational system including higher education (L4-Bs1).

In conclusion, this section has discussed the absence of a national vision and strategy for HE in Oman, and the reasons for the situation, as put forward by the 50 interviewees, who in their majority now believe that such a formulation of intent is now overdue. The general feeling was that the delay in this respect was attributable to the relative infancy of the country's modernisation period, during which time the concentration was necessarily on advancing the national infrastructure and supplying the most important social services. However, some other reasons were given, such as ineffective HRD planning which in turn did not set appropriate objectives for GE/BE and HE, or indicate what the most appropriate HE structure should be.

The identification of the reasons for the delay and the shortcomings of the current system which have resulted, is useful in knowing what should be emphasised, revised and avoided when reforming the sector. Moreover,

understanding these reasons will help in revising the current matters aiming at compensating for what has been omitted, and particularly this appreciation may be received positively with those financial officials, who may not understand the requirements of this sector, and its accelerative developments which require more support and funds.

However, as shown, some interviewees said that there is a vision and strategy for HRD included in the Vision of '*Oman 2020*', which could be regarded as a comprehensive long-term strategy for the development of the country. Accordingly, having asked interviewees to identify the weaknesses in the current HE system, it was important to canvass their opinion on the performance of the HE sector, ten years after the Vision of '*Oman 2020*'s publication, and whether they do perceive it to be a comprehensive and suitable strategy for the development of all economic sectors, and particularly applicable to HRD needs. Furthermore, since most of the interviewees are decision or policy-makers, and others have some role or interest in the field, the extent to which they depend on this vision as their main guidance in building their plans and implementing their duties, is also of interest. These are the most important issues that will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

7.4 HE and the Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*'

The Vision of '*Oman 2020*', was a serious government attempt to promote the Omani economy and improve its performance during the period between 1996 and 2020. Four key axes comprise this vision, these being, an efficient and competitive private sector, a diverse, dynamic and globalised economy, advanced developed human resources, and sustainable development within a stable macro-economic framework. The general background to this Vision has been presented in Chapter Two. As one of the main dimensions, the vision for HRD included several goals and policies related to GE/BE, HE, TE, VT and other training initiatives aimed at the preparation and qualification of a national workforce to meet the labour market requirements.

However, since the publication of 'Oman 2020', there have been two developmental phases, the first being the early stage of the implementation process and the second being a slowing down in this respect. The researcher's own observations are of a reluctance in several governmental bodies to implement the Vision or some of its policies, which is sometimes used as a reference point, and in other instances, ignored.

Furthermore, since there is no long-term plan for the development of the HE sector, as explained in Chapter Five and confirmed by the interviewees' responses, some governmental organisations or officials refer to the Vision of HRD 1996-2020 when considering HE developments, while others formulate plans according to their own perspectives. This has led as illustrated earlier, to different organisations producing a variety of objectives and policies, a fact that makes one wonder about the role the Vision of 'Oman 2020' in providing direction for HE developments. Accordingly, the following question was asked of the interviewees: *Ten years after the publication of the Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020' do you see this as a suitable, comprehensive and effective strategy for human resource development, and particularly for the expansion and development of the higher education sector?*

Different opinions were produced by the interviewees. Generally speaking, eight gave positive responses, 13 offered negative comments, and another 13 stated that they were not very familiar with the Vision, had not seen any related documentation, and some said they had learned about it only through the general media and journals. These were particularly people involved with implementation, such as deans or directors of some HE institutions, and some from the Majles A'Shura, and Majles A'Ddawla and others, but there were some interviewees from an even higher level who had negative attitudes towards the Vision, or who were simply not familiar with it. The remaining interviewees commended it in some respects, and complained about its failure or poor performance in others, and one interviewee said that the question was of no interest to him.

In detail, those interviewees who praised the Vision, clarified their positive viewpoints, one saying 'it is a comprehensive and clear plan' (L2d3g), and another explained this by saying:

The Vision of 'Oman 2020' took into account the development of human resources as a high priority; however, this plan emphasised HRD as a comprehensive concept, to include not only education or higher education, but also in-service training, the improvement of the government sector's performance, entry of Omani people in the labour market, and particularly in the private sector, and several training programmes. These dimensions indeed indicate to what extent this strategy is concerned with HRD.

With this regard, other interviewees referred to some successful aspects, for example one said 'the implementation of the Basic Education System was one result of this vision' (L1u11), and in fact, the new educational system was implemented in the school year 1997/1998, only two years after the Vision's publication. A different interviewee addressed another aspect saying that:

what I have seen is that most plans to encourage and support the private sector as indicated in the Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020' published in 1995 are going to be achieved, for example the number of private colleges and universities leapt from one or two in 1995 to around 20 institutions in 2004, including three private universities, in addition to the promotion of internal scholarships to a significant number which indeed encouraged the private sector to make a greater contribution in this field (L3prc4).

This extract indicates the success of this vision in encouraging the private sector to invest in HE through the establishment of a number of HEIs (as discussed in Chapter Five). This strategy was intended to reduce the pressure upon the governmental HEIs, but because most of these private institutions are only recently established, for example the University of Nizwa and the University of Dhofar were opened in 2004, it is too early to say whether these institutions are actually contributing in this way, and to assess the extent to which they are able to persuade students' families to register their children in these institutions. Indeed, the University of Sohar, as the first private university, is experiencing a very small annual intake.

Moreover, there is a question about the capability of Omani families, which are often large, to fund their children's study at this level; and the issue of the range of disciplines available and the quality of programmes in these private institutions, is still not resolved. Hence, these factors may affect the performance and the ability to continue, of any educational institution. However, the issue of participation of the private sector and the effect of the government's encouragements in this field will be explained widely in the next chapter through discussion of the interviewees' responses to other questions related to this area.

Additional questions also remain, a main one being that if the Vision is accurate and appropriate to prepare a national workforce, to promote the national economy, and to meet the current and future requirements of the country's development, as was stated by some interviewees, why has there been a slowing down of its implementation, as verified by (L4bs2) who said:

I think there were good efforts made and noticeable co-ordination between several categories during the preparation of the Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020', and for the first time in Oman team efforts were made involving the interested people. However, after the first year it was halted, and they refer to it as a reference only, with nobody implementing it.

This extract shows that despite the participant's praise for the vision and its preparation arrangements, he/she also felt that it was not being implemented as planned, and faced difficulties that have been mentioned earlier. Consequently, most participants who confirmed this reality, cited several reasons. However, another interviewee commented on the preparation process of the Vision, saying: 'there is the matter of the preparation process as well as the circumstances which synchronise with the preparation' (L4-sh1), and (L1-uv3) blames the preparation procedure by saying 'some institutions did not participate in this plan, such as the Sultan Qaboos University'. A few attributed the situation to external factors, such as financial difficulties, and another matter was noted by (L4sc3), who said that:

It is a good plan, comprehensive and sufficiently concerned with human development, but its implementation was little and low, because it faced many

difficulties. The most important one is the financial problem occurring after the significant decline in oil prices as well as the decline of oil production in Oman which followed the period of the publication of the Vision. Secondly, there is a lack of well qualified people who can undertake the implementation process of this vision (L4sc3).

Thus, in addition to the financial problems, the difficulty of insufficient national manpower, mentioned previously by another interviewee, was raised. In contrast, other key figures cited several internal reasons relevant to the Vision itself, such as gaps and matters that caused the deceleration of the implementation process. Certainly, it was noticeable that very few interviewees indicated the positive aspects without noting the pitfalls of the Vision of '*Oman 2020*' or the difficulties which faced its implementation. For instance, one of these key figures who praised the Vision as mentioned above said:

One of this strategy's axes is the promotion of tourism to increase its participation in the national revenue, but to promote this sector it is necessary to have human resources. Another axis is the promotion of fishing, and this also needs people, but not just any people - qualified people with modern skills, and capabilities not with the old and traditional manners, and the same thing is true for other sectors, Even if an Omani person wants to work outside Oman, he/she should be well prepared and highly qualified to enable him/her to emulate others (L1pscm1).

This extract indicates that although the interviewee regarded the vision as comprehensive and paying much attention to HRD, he/she still believed there was insufficient national manpower capable of promoting all sectors within the economy. And another interviewee expressed similar sentiments, praising the Vision initially, and then referring to some difficulties which will be discussed later, one being the shortage of well-qualified people to undertake the implementation process of the Vision (L4sc3). This problem was also alluded to by another interviewee, who said:

I have only read the part about education, and I think it is good. However, the government decided to delay the implementation of some recommendations and suggestions. Nevertheless, there are some important sections, such as diversification of the income sources. The problem is that this plan was very

ambitious, wanting to achieve many things without taking account of the national economic situation (L1u12).

Hence, although the Vision was applauded by this interviewee, it was also criticised for being too ambitious, since this resulted in the government having to postpone the implementation of some of its recommendations. Nevertheless, the main aim of the Vision is to remedy the shortage of well-qualified people, so the conditions for implementation should have been considered during the preparation of the document. In other words, the policy-makers should have prepared a contingency plan to overcome any difficulties that might arise during the implementation of the vision, and that may have included the employment of more expatriates simultaneous with increased HE opportunities for Omani nationals.

In line with this approach, several participants, such as (L1u5), (L1u4), (L2d5-g), (L2d11g), (L4bs2), (L2d7g) believed the Vision of 'Oman 2020' gave a high priority to the HRD sector while others (L2d8g), (L2d12g), (L2d13g), (L3gu3), (L3gc2), (L3gvc3) and (L4sh1) considered the attention paid to HRD was insufficient. However, most interviewees in the two categories produced details about some shortcomings of the Vision, and in addition to those already mentioned, the most important one related to the low level of attention given to the public HE sector as noted by (L2d5g) who said 'there is an absence of a clear strategy for higher education'. A similar comment was made by (L2d6g), and another interviewee explained this gap, saying:

I think it is not a comprehensive plan. As an example, higher education has not been given what was deserved, and most attention was given to general education. It does not deal with human resources development in the correct way. Therefore, we still rely heavily on one resource, which is oil, and I do not think this is considered in the light of the need for higher education. I think there is no clear plan for higher education, and many countries are more advanced than us in this field (L1uv3).

Another participant gave a similar response, adding 'if there is enough attention given to human resources you will see an expansion of higher education

institutions, but except for the private universities which indeed witnessed some expansion, we have not seen any significant expansion of this sector' (L2guv2). Yet another interviewee raised another problem with the Vision, saying 'it is a comprehensive vision that includes a plan for each sector. Only one sector has not been given enough attention, which is the information technology (IT) sector' (L2d7g).

In addition, one of the interviewees who believed the Vision was very much concerned with HRD, referred to a limited appreciation of the needs, saying 'it was concerned with HRD, but it was restricted to the financial dimension' (L2d15g), and another key figure confirmed this reality by saying 'frankly, the vision was dominated by the financial dimension which was reflected in all axes and dimensions of it' (L4bs1). Furthermore, another participant suggested that the Vision was prepared to mimic to other countries' experiences, saying:

this plan is like a copy of those in Malaysia and Singapore, and does not take the local circumstances, social, political and economic situations into account. The plan of any country should emerge from that country's needs. This plan is dominated by the financial dimension, not the economic dimension (L1u10).

However, Malaysia and Singapore are some of the most successful countries in the developing world. Singapore, for example, despite being a small country and lacking natural resources, has planned and implemented a well-structured and modernised economic strategy, which promoted its HRD field, including the HE sector through different advanced policies (Selvarantnam, 1994). Similarly, Malaysia has achieved a high level of excellence, and promoted the national economy which is regarded by Atari (2000) as robust. In its expansion and development of the HE sector, which was planned in the prior Prime Minister's "Vision 2020" Malaysia developed its educational system from '*education as a tool to restructure the economy*' to a '*tool to develop the human resource*' (Atari, 2000:654), with the aspiration of Malaysia becoming a fully-developed country by 2020.

Accordingly, if Oman follows such experiences the situation will be totally changed positively, so in the researcher's personal view, there is no drawback to an Omani attempt to mirror such experience, as long as the government of Oman fully analyses that experience and makes adaptations in accordance with the local social, political and economic situations and circumstances. In fact, some interviewees commented on the preparation process of the Vision, and one (representing the Majlis A'Shura), alluded to the absence of the Council's participation or at least to the deficiency of its role in the preparation process, saying:

Without a doubt, there are some problems with the Vision. Also there is the matter of the preparation process as well as the circumstances which synchronise with the preparation. As a Consultative Council, they brought this Vision to us in the same way as other institutions, only to consult it (L4sh1).

Another participant indicated some big shortfall saying 'I am aware that the Vision includes one main axis of human resources development, but there is an absence in the Vision itself, since the end picture of how the Omani person would be is not clear' (L2d12g). Similarly, another interviewee explained such position by saying:

I did not study it deeply, but according to my knowledge, what it is happening now is opposite to what they planned. This vision did not involve all the country's sectors ... what I have seen is that the high ranking officials do not believe this strategy, and they see it as unrealistic and unfortunately it is not the aims of the country now which should be implemented within the next phase, I am sorry to say that, but this is my feeling and in accordance with what I am seeing now (L3gvu4).

Given these views, it can be understood why some interviewees said such things as 'I think it is now a suspended plan' (L2d6g). In addition, another interviewee produced an example of a recommendation that the government later abandoned, saying:

I do not know much about it, but it is not concerned much with the people and their circumstances. For example, it said that the citizens should participate in the

cost of their children's study at the level of General/Basic Education, by paying 30% of the cost, while the government paid 70%. All the people refused to accept such policy, and appealed to His Majesty through Majlis A'Shura [Consultative Council], then His Majesty directed the government to abandon this policy (L2d15g).

Furthermore, some of these interviewees recommended the need for a new Vision, one stating:

Therefore, I think we have a pressing need to build another vision and long-term strategy. We urgently need to see where we are going to be, and all the country's sectors and key institutions, figures and public need to bring their efforts together, so that each of us looks after the field we are interested in, with full co-operation and coordination with others to implement such a vision, aiming at achieving the targets. So it is very important that the vision be clear and comprehensive, and gain our commitment, and the trust of all sectors and categories of society that will be able to work to achieve it (L3gvu4).

A similar response was given by another key figure who said:

We should keep pace with the challenges, which are accelerating as well as the international changes and developments, which require us to prepare a new vision for our educational system including higher education. We should issue a new realistic strategy, which takes into account all components of the country's development process, all the previous and current difficulties as well as future challenges (L4bs1).

However, it could be seen that some sectors or organisations have worked to implement parts of the Vision which apply to their areas, and one interviewee expected that:

regarding the areas or policies related to the governmental sector, I think the government will implement around 80%, while the areas or policies which are concerned with the private sector, I think only 20% will be implemented. Also, I think there is a need to review some parts and change or revise them (L1u7).

This extract indicates that in contrast to the previous perspective that suggested building a new vision, another view recommends the revision and amendment of particular sections rather than a complete change of the document. In this regard, some interviewees approved the Vision and then referred to areas

for amendment, but did not produce details relating to these areas. For example, (L4sh3) said 'it is a comprehensive plan, but there is a need to review and amend some sections according to the present developments', and (L2d10g) said 'it includes the most important thing of HRD, but according to what I see and to what had been discussed within many symposiums, I think many things within it will be changed', and a similar response was given by (L2d5g).

Moreover, there are other views recommending changes, which should be capable of accommodation because the Vision is considered as flexible, in which respect one interviewee said:

The Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020' is not something solid or inflexible, it is a dynamic plan, responds to the developments, so the government builds the Five Year Development Plans in the light of this vision and accordingly some areas should be amended or changed according to recent circumstances (L1u4).

Another participant who seemed to support this attitude believed that although changes occurred in the implementation procedures, the targets and objectives of the Vision remained the same, saying 'let us say that the main aims were not changed, but some policies and details have been amended according to several circumstances. So we still work and aim to achieve the targets and objectives, while changing the strategies' (L2d11g).

In conclusion, from discussing the interviewees' responses it can be understood that the Vision of '*Oman 2020*', is a long-term vision, seriously concerned with several economic sectors, particularly the diversification of the national income, attraction of foreign investment, and encouragement of the private sector. Some aspects of success were indicated by some participants, such as the increasing role of the private sector in HE, and increased investment by overseas companies in the Sultanate. Although having a concern with HRD, some questions were posed, either in terms of targets, policies and/or implementation process. In this respect, several sectors were identified as having received less attention, particularly HE, which a number of interviewees believed had been

unsuitably dealt with. Indeed this omission was seen to negatively affect the development and expansion process. Consequently, it seemed important to probe the extent to which the interviewees refer to the Vision of 'Oman 2020' when preparing their plans and carrying out their duties.

7.5 The Extent to Which Government Officials Depend on the 'Vision of Oman 2020'

The question asked of the interviewees was: *And to what extent do you relate to this Vision when you formulate your organisation's strategies or when you implement its duties? Does it serve as your road map?*

Initially, the responses to this question were almost the same as those to the first part of this question. Twenty interviewees said they did not depend on this Vision at all, eleven said they did refer to it when they formulated and implemented their plans and discharged their duties. The remaining participants said they relied on it in some areas and ignored it in others, or hesitated and said they did not know whether they were adhering to the Vision or not, and yet others declared that they knew nothing about it, so could not depend on it.

Compared with the responses to the previous part of this question, of the twenty participants who said they did not follow this Vision at all, thirteen had previously made negative comments about the Vision, meaning that seven commended it or had insufficient knowledge about it. However, some interviewees who previously criticised the Vision, did depend on it in some areas since they had no other alternative plan, and others who considered the Vision favourably or did not possess enough knowledge about it, did not implement its recommendations because their organisations have their own plans or because they did not receive instructions to follow the Vision, as will be illustrated later.

Consequently, there were eleven participants who praised the Vision and offered almost the same reasons, because they initially had a positive view about it. For instance, one of these key figures said:

it is a strategic target and we are still working to achieve it - we still depend on it and the country's Five Year Plans are translating its content. It is implemented through these provisional Five Year Plans, and during these periods some amendments were made to this strategic plan according to the financial situation and social circumstances. The examples of these changes are; the last educational changes, such as implementing the education system of ten years, and the next two years after the first ten years [post-basic education]. These were involved in the Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020', but the Ministry of Education could not implement these developments in the previous period so it did now (L1p5cm1)

This extract indicates that this key figure has verified the Vision as still being the master plan for the government in terms of targets and objectives, acknowledging the various amendments in the subsequent FYDPs and the need to delay the implementation of some recommendations according to circumstance. A similar view was expressed by (L2d5g), and another interviewee registered strong support for the Vision, while recognising that it was not necessary to adhere rigidly to it, saying 'it is a reference, a guide, we do not have to adhere 100%. It is just like a guide, and circumstances change, they are not constant ... but it is very good to give us an aim. I do not want to ignore it' (L1u9).

In this direction, other interviewees clarified the extent to which they rely on the Vision, one saying 'yes, it is my road map up to now, naturally not 100%, but it is our plan even though some things within it were changed but generally it is a comprehensive plan' (L2d7g), another said 'we depend on this plan in areas which are relevant to our field of work' (L1u10), and (L2d3g), (L2d11g), (L2d5g) and (L2d8g) gave almost the same response. In addition, more details were offered by other interviewees. As an example, (L1u7) said 'In the we depend on it many times, but not always, and all large projects, factories and ports in Sohar, for example or in other areas you have seen, all of these are from the Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020'. However, we do not depend on it

always'. Accordingly, it seemed important to ask why their organisations do not adhere to the Vision completely, since they felt it has led to the success of some large projects, and the response was immediate, that:

Not all ministries and governmental bodies implemented what is in this plan, not all of them implement what we had agreed to implement. In addition, some parts were supposed to be implemented by the private sector, but they also did not implement its parts and the private agencies refused to invest and to participate as planned, which led the government to have to invest instead of the private sector, and all these circumstances led to change in some parts of this plan (L1u7).

The above two extracts indicate several points. Firstly, even those organisations with management responsibilities for areas of importance in the Vision, do not follow its recommendations completely as planned, because other governmental bodies have not adhered to it and there were knock-on effects of this. Secondly, the private agencies refused to invest as recommended, and this imposed a greater financial burden on the government. This demonstrates that the policies of encouragement to the private sector and overseas investors need to be reviewed to establish what incentives ought to be offered to attract investment. Thirdly, these situations led the organisation represented by (L1u7) to implement some recommendations of the Vision, which interested them, and to ignore others. This also indicated that the implementation of the Vision as an entire strategy required co-ordination and co-operation between all interested organisations and institutions whether governmental, civil community, or private sector. This fact was verified by another interviewee who said 'I cannot say it is my road map even as a Ministry, because when you adopt plan, you need to adopt it as whole, you cannot take some parts and leave others, otherwise, its aims will be lost. However, we depend on it some time only' (L1u12).

Finally, the extract from the interviewee (L1u7) confirmed what was stated by some interviewees, that certain sectors of industry and other relevant fields were accorded high levels of attention which culminated in the completion of some significant industrial projects. This was also verified by other participants, such as (L1u11) and (L1u8) who offered similar information, one saying:

regarding the areas or policies related to education, we took into account the dimensions of this vision, and the implementation of the Basic Education System was one result. However we depend on it, it is not our road map, we have our own road map, we took some things from the Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020', because this vision is purely economic (L1u11).

The end of this extract indicated the dominance of the Vision's economic framework, and as indicated in the previous section, some other participants considered it to be restricted by its emphasis on financial issues. Hence, it is obvious from all the aforementioned extracts that most organisations and institutions are implementing some of the Vision's policies and strategies, particularly those that have relevance to their responsibilities, and ignoring others, as frankly stated by (L1u12), (L1u4), (L1u11), (L4sc3) and (L1u8). However if all sectors and organisations within the country co-ordinated their efforts to fulfil their obligations under the Vision, the situation would be different and perhaps better than it is now, but there are different positions and levels of implementation throughout these institutions as will be explained in a discussion of other interviewees' responses.

Clearly, an ambiguous situation is reported by the interviewees. One expert, for instance, in a key institution within the educational system, felt that in the absence of a long-term national strategy, there was no option but to depend on the Vision of '*Oman 2020*', saying that 'we should depend on it because we do not have another one, we do not have a strategy, the one we have we should follow, we should be guided by it and there is no strategy now' (L2ex3). Another participant said 'I cannot say yes or not, maybe to some extent' (L3gc2), and (L2d9g) said 'actually, it is not clear to us whether we have to follow and implement this vision or not, there have been many changes made to it'. Moreover, another expert in another high organisation verified this by saying 'my information about it is too little, so I cannot say anything about it' (L2ex2). In addition, one of these interviewees who offered an explanation about the Vision in his/her response to the previous part of the question, said 'according to what I said, really I do not want to say if it is my road map or not' (L3gvu4).

Furthermore, there were a number of interviewees who stated clearly that officially they do not depend on this strategy at all, for instance (L3gtc1) and (L3gvc3) who said ‘we do not depend on it at all’, and (L1u5) who said ‘Officially, it is not, but as a reference point. However, we depend on it in the area of aims and objectives’. Also, (L2d13g) said ‘we do not depend on it, we have our own plan’. In line with this, other participants offered more explanation, such as (L3gu3) who said:

We did not see its details, we deal with it as a historical document and refer to it only in those terms. And in my position, I did not receive any instruction to refer to it when we plan for our institution, and the same goes for my colleagues, as well as the council of the [institution], despite the fact that our head was one of the key members of the Council which was involved with preparing this vision, and he did not mention or direct us any time to refer to it when we formulate this organisation's plans, so we do not feel we should ever do this (L3gu3).

Certainly, these extracts indicate the extent of some organisations’ or officials’ negative attitudes or complete indifference towards the Vision. More importantly, this indifference appears to be present even amongst the Vision’s formulators who do not give any instruction to implement its recommendations, as mentioned in the above extract, and as verified by one of the aforementioned interviewees who said ‘what I have seen is that the high ranking officials do not believe this strategy, and they see it unrealistic and unfortunately it is not the aims of the country now which should be implemented within the next phase’ (L3gvu4).

Regarding the stance taken by other organisations which could be considered to be semi-governmental institutions, a member of the Majles A'Shura gave a diplomatic response, saying ‘we in the Majles A'Shura, depend not only on the Vision of *'Oman 2020'*, but also on other plans, the Basic Law of the Country and other policies’ (L4sh3), and another member said ‘as I told you I am not familiar with this vision at all, so I do not refer to it at all’ (L4sh2). In addition, a senior person in the Council said ‘as a Majles A'Shura, we were brought this Vision by

the government, the same as other institutions, only for our comments. We just refer to it sometimes' (L4sh1).

Similar to the comments of this member of the Majles A'Shura, a member of the Majles A'Ddawlah commented 'Majles A'Dddawla does not depend on one plan, it carries out studies which deal with certain fields. I regarded this vision just as a reference for our studies and research' (L4Bs1), and another member of the Majles A'Ddawla said ' as I told you, from the first year it was halted, and they refer to it as a reference only - no one implements it' (L4bs2). Although these interviewees are businessmen, they are nevertheless members of the State Council and are amongst those people who are participating in most economic plans of the country. Furthermore, it could be noticed that some interviewees attempted to interpret this situation, and one said s/he was not familiar with the details of Vision, having learned about it only from the general media, ' but formally I have not had any communication about it. I do not know whether it is at a high level, Director General level or Under-secretary level ' (L3gvc4).

These comments from the head of one governmental HEI confirmed the general ignorance of the Vision, and suggested a reason for this situation, that being that perhaps the documentation relating to it is restricted to people in high positions, making it unnecessary for other, less important people to be informed. However, it must be mentioned that amongst those who said they had insufficient knowledge of the Vision, were indeed people in Director General positions. Nonetheless, another interview in a high ranking position expressed the same opinion, saying:

As I told you I just read about it from the journals and newspapers, so I don't have enough idea about it. Thus, I think the vision is a framework distributed only to high ranking government officials in the different sectors. Indeed I do not know if we have been required to implement it or not, I did not receive any instruction about this plan from my superiors (L2d14g).

Clearly, through reviewing the responses of all interviewees as a whole, it can be seen that the position of the Vision is ambiguous and confusing, since some commend it, some criticise it, some know nothing about it, and others learn about parts of it through the media that could be misinformed and consequently spreading inaccurate information. The outcome is a definite lack of understanding, even among high ranking government officials. Hence, a possible interpretation of the situation is that some such officials do not implement elements of the Vision because of the many changes made to it, the absence of an independent organisation to evaluate the implementation process, and the decline of the national oil revenue which suggests further changes might occur. Indeed, some high ranking officials sincerely believe the best strategy is to delay implementation, and until further government discussions are held they are following their own plans, particularly since there is no alternative.

Having noted that many interviewees reported knowing nothing, or little, about the Vision and hence do not rely on it (L2d1g), (L2d4g), (L3prc2), (L1uv3), it must be stressed that whilst some such responses could be understood because they came from heads of private institutions and expatriates, there were others who are Omanis and senior staff. Moreover, one of these key figures refused to respond to the researcher's question and suggested it should be asked of the officials in the Ministry of National Economy, saying:

It is better to present this question to the officials in the Ministry of National Economy, because after we prepared our plans we sent them all to this Ministry to see if they were in accordance with the long-term plans of the country. But they changed them and instructed us to follow the Five Year Plan, so we have to implement the plans directed by the people in the Ministry of National Economy and not those drawn up by our own organisation (L1u2).

As seen, this interviewee places the blame with the Ministry of National Economy, since ultimately it is that Ministry that has made changes to plans that were made in accordance with the Vision.

To conclude the discussion of the responses regarding Vision of '*Oman 2020*', it is clear that shortly after its publication, the implementation efforts slowed down considerably, and that several reasons were advanced for this situation. The majority of interviewees attributed the state of affairs to the instability of the Vision, as demonstrated by the many amendments which were subsequently made to it, while a minority of participants blamed the situation on financial difficulties within the national economy. However, in addition to these influences, it could be said that the absence of any formal evaluation of the implementation process is another factor since there has been no pressure on any organisation to meet its obligations as declared within the Vision document.

However, despite all the opinions and difficulties highlighted by the participants in this study, it can not be denied that the Vision was a serious attempt to organise the most critical stage of Oman's development. Therefore, and because of some success in completing planned industrial projects and implementing financial policies (as mentioned by some interviewees), the Vision should stand as a main foundation for the next period of economic strategic planning in Oman, since there are obviously some extremely important sections and policies contained within it. This said, the HRD plans for the period of 1996-2020, as documented in the Vision, do not form a suitable long-term strategy for the HE sector, and could not represent a foundation for a new process to build a national comprehensive vision for this sector, because of the following reasons:

- A) Many amendments have been made to the Vision, and these reduce the validity of some of its dimensions and policies.
- B) A number of participants from several levels in the hierarchy of their organisations confirmed that their high-ranking superiors had not requested them to implement the recommendations in the Vision.
- C) The development and expansion of the HE sector has not been given enough attention in the Vision.

D) There are several elements and factors (social, educational and professional) that must be taken into account when building any strategy for the HE sector.

Hence, there is a pressing need to formulate a long-term vision and implementation strategy, including specific plans and policies for development and expansion, for the HE sector in Oman.

7.6 The Extent to Which Current Activities and Roles Played by HEIs Link with the Country's Development Plans

As mentioned previously, there are some elements of the Vision document which are connected with HE and which could be beneficial, although in themselves they are not actually sufficient. The question remains therefore, as to what extent these existing recommendations are taken into account by the various organisations that manage Oman's HEIs. Additionally, there are other government plans for the country's overall development, (FYDPs and sectoral plans), which have links with the HE sector, and which has provided qualified people in many fields over the last three decades.

Hence, there is a need to obtain the opinions of interviewees about the extent to which the plans and policies of HE are linked and serve the requirements of the labour market, and there graduates respond to the demands. This issue for discussion with the interviewees, the questions being: *Do you think that the current plans, policies and activities of all organisations in the HE sector link and serve the country's development plans, particularly the last two FYDPs?*

The interviewees' responses fell into four groups. In the first, there were 22 participants who believed that the overall policies, activities and roles were linked and did serve the country's development plans. In contrast, however, 28 participants said there was insufficient linkage, and four of them believed the

plans were not linked at all. Supporting the view of the first group, one interviewee said:

I think they are linked because the outputs of this system, either from the local higher education institutions or by overseas scholarships, do serve the country's development process. So we are proud of what we have achieved during the last decades. This can be evidenced by the high number of Omanis in the governmental sector who have replaced the huge number of expatriates, so that now the number of expatriates is very small, and only a small number of foreign experts remain in different areas in this sector (L1u12)..

A similar answer was produced by (L2d9g), (L2d3g), (L2d1g), and (L1u4) who said:

they are linked, especially during recent years. As evidence of this link, there is the large number of graduates from different higher education institutions who are employed in several governmental bodies as well as in some of the private sector enterprises, and who replaced expatriates.

These two extracts indicate the reality of the workforce in the governmental bodies whose requirements have been mostly met by Omani nationals, through annual cohorts of graduates over the last thirty years. However, this achievement has been at the expense of other sectors, including private enterprises, which are currently suffering from a severe shortage of qualified Omanis, as evidenced by many responses to previous questions reported in the last Chapter. Moreover, not all the requirements of the governmental sector have been met, since as already reported, there is a pressing need for doctors, health assistants, technicians, tutors, HE teaching staff, assistant academic staff, and many other categories of qualified people in most technical fields. This noticeable gap may have been the reason why one interviewee said:

They are linked. However, as I said before, there is a need to review the current specialisations offered by the University and other colleges to ensure that there is enough agreement between these fields of study and the requirements of the labour market (L4sh3).

A similar opinion was expressed by another key figure, who said:

Currently, the link could be much stronger. We requested the private higher education institutions and governmental higher education institutions to provide programmes that will produce for example accounting, for which there is high need, and to produce programmes according to the requirements of the labour market. However, we do not have an accurate data base, and therefore, we do not know how many accountants we need, so that I can say - look this is a priority area for us (L1m2).

So, despite believing that the current HE strategy does show co-ordination between the various institutions, and does assist the achievement of Oman's development plans, these interviewees nevertheless indicated a mismatch between what was currently offered by HEIs and the needs of the national economy. And the reference to the absence of an accurate national data base revealed one reason for inefficient planning in this respect. Another interviewee expressed the view that 'they are linked, but the problem is in the implementation process, also sometimes I feel the problem is in the plans as well' (L4sh2), which again referred to the mismatch between the planning and the implementation, while another interviewee mentioned a different factor, saying 'I think we need a real relationship between the government and the private sector' (L1u11), thus suggesting a weak relationship between the two sectors as another reason for the lack of cohesion. In fact, this was demonstrated by the interviewee (discussed previously) who raised the problem of the private sector's failure to participate in the implementation of the Vision and who said 'some parts were supposed to be implemented by the private sector, but the private agencies refused to invest and to participate as planned' (L1u7).

Although these responses suggested that the overall policies, activities and roles of HE were linked and did serve the country's development plans, they did, however, highlight the lack of symmetry between the current functioning of Oman's HEIs and the national development plans. In fact, 28 interviewees offered several reasons for the problem, one in particular (L1u8), saying:

The co-ordination is really not enough. If it was sufficient we would not see the problem of the outputs of the education system, whereby there is a large number

of graduates without work, and a large number of secondary stage graduates with high grades but who cannot enter higher education.

This interviewee mentions the wastage present in the education system, believing this to be the result of insufficient co-ordination between the HE plans and actual HE provision. Another interviewee attributed the problem to the country's development plans, suggesting the need for these to be reviewed, saying 'there are not enough links, because as I have mentioned earlier, the development plans themselves need to be revised' (L4bs2), and a similar response was given by (L1u10), (L1u7), (L1uv3), (L2d10g) and others. Yet another participant blamed the problem on the absence of a clear vision and strategy for HE, saying:

I do not think it is properly linked with higher education, because as I mentioned there is no clear plan for higher education, and the Vision of Oman 2020 is not a comprehensive plan - higher education has not been given what was deserved. Hence, it does not deal with human resources development in the correct way. Therefore, we still rely heavily on one source, which is oil, and I do not think this is considered in the light of the need for higher education. (L1uv3).

This response further verified the absence of a national vision for HE, as discussed widely in the previous section, and which is cited as the reason for diverse objectives being developed by the different institutions in the sector, and their lack of compatibility with the needs for a qualified national workforce, and indeed as a reason why Oman has fallen behind other countries in progressing its HE provision. Furthermore, the extract indicates that not all institutions became involved in implementing the country's development plans.

In conclusion, the overall feeling among the interviewees was that there were insufficient linkages between the various organisations in Oman's HE sector and the country's development plans, and a few participants believed there was no co-ordination at all. This finding reflects that the fact that improvements are urgently required in this respect. Several reasons were proposed by the interviewees for the lack of co-ordination, these being firstly, the unclear relationship and accordance between the role of HEIs including all its streams and institutions and the

economic plans of the country; secondly, the absence of an accurate data base, which means the manpower needs of the different sectors of the economy are not known with any certainty and therefore planning can not be accurate; thirdly, the design of several plans with over-ambitious targets; fourthly, the need for the country's development plans to be revised; and finally, the absence of a national vision for HE. All these circumstances have led to disharmony between what is delivered by HEIs and what Oman needs in order to nationalise its workforce.

In relation to the workforce, it should be noted that in recent years the government has privatised many large public projects and services, such as electricity, water, sewerage, airports, and others, and this trend has created an extensive range of technical and specialised jobs that have had to be occupied by expatriates. Given this privatisation strategy, Oman now needs another two or even three decades to prepare well-qualified national manpower to replace these expatriates, just as it needed that period of time to replace expatriates in the government organisations already mentioned earlier in this chapter. This situation indeed reflects the gaps in the country's development plans as clarified by the interviewees in their responses to the previous question, and also indicates the lack of planning in HE and other streams and divisions of education and training in the Sultanate.

The pressing need for detailed research involving all the players in the HE sector is clear. Furthermore, it appears that without a new and comprehensive national vision and plan for the HE sector as a whole, the situation may will deteriorate, since as explained in Chapter Five, the demands for HE are increasing, the requirements of the marketplace are going to be more varied and complicated, and globalisation will continue to create more challenges. Moreover, it is possible that without a new co-ordinated plan, the polarisation of certain organisations and ministries involved in HE will also increase, thus widening the difference between them in their missions and objectives.

7.7 The Extent to Which Interested HE Organisations are Participating in Formulating the Country's Development Plans

As explained earlier in the thesis, there are numerous government ministries and agencies involved in delivering and supervising HE in Oman, (see Chapters Three and Five). Each of these agencies has its own plans, policies and activities, which should derive from the FYDPs, and which must be approved by the Ministry of National Economy. This procedure, in turn permits these organisations to obtain the funds for their activities. Theoretically, these plans should deliver the requirements of the country's general economic plans, but practically this is often not the case.

In addition to the various ministries and organisations, the CoHE that consists of a number of the Ministers and some interested specialists, is responsible for formulating the general policy on HE, co-ordinating admission to the universities and other HEIs, and reviewing and proposing amendments to the rules and regulation of HE in the light of developments in government policies, as explained in Chapter Three. The question to be asked is whether the ministries and organisations involved in HE, but not represented in the CoHE actually participate in the preparation of the plans and policies formulated by the CoHE, and if so, how? Also, the issue of whether the private sector is represented in the CoHE or participates in preparing the policies and plans made by this Council or other HE organisations is worthy of discussion.

Moreover, it is necessary to know the extent to which those organisations and institutions represented in the Council have an effective role in policy-making. Furthermore, it will be interesting and valuable to learn what opportunities in this respect are offered to the non-governmental, and semi-governmental agencies such as the Majlis A'Shura (Consultative Council), the HEIs (governmental and private), and the community leaders and experts. Such knowledge in turn, will help to establish the extent to which these organisations are able to implement the general plans and policies of HE, since if they have participated in their

formulation they are likely to be more informed and committed to the aims and objectives which they have ultimately decided upon in the first place. Hence, the next part of question targeted the following categories of interviewees:

- A) People from those ministries and institutions which are represented in the CoHE.
- B) People from the governmental implementation level - heads and directors of a number of governmental HEIs.
- C) People from the governmental organisations and institutions of HE which are not represented in the CoHE.
- D) People from organisations such as the Majles A'Shura, as well as other specialists and academia.
- E) People from private HEIs and other businesspeople who are investing in or have a relationship with HE sector.

Hence, the question asked of the interviewees was: *And have you been involved at any stage in the formulation process of any general HE plan or policy, whether issued by the Council of Higher Education or by another authority?*

The vast difference between the levels of responsibility assumed by the interviewees made the classification process and determination of their contributions (as well as that of their organisations and institutions) complicated, since each participant stated his/her level of participation, which varied according to the particular circumstance, so that on some projects an interviewee would always participate in policy formulation, whereas on others that same person might only participate a few times when his/her special expertise was necessary. Despite the difficulty in arriving at classifications, however, the following categories were derived.

Firstly, ten interviewees from the ministries and institutions which are represented in the CoHE said they were involved in the planning process continuously, and some said they were involved many times, such as (L1m2), (L1pscm1), (L2d7g), (L2d2g), (L1u12), (L1u6), (L1u9), (L2d5g), (L2d9g) and (L2ex2). In addition, another six interviewees said they were involved sometimes, for instance, (L1u4), (L1u8), (L1u10), (L1u11) and (L2d8g), and some of them were Under-secretaries.

On the other hand, 12 participants from these organisations and institutions which are represented in the CoHE showed that despite their high positions in their ministries as Director General or Undersecretaries, they had not been involved in any consultation process regarding HE planning, either by the CoHE or the MoHE, such as (L1u2), (L2d3g), (L2d1g), (L2d4g), (L2d15g), (L1u7) and (L2d12g). Some of these respondents were from the implementation level, being heads of a number of governmental HEIs, such as (L3gvc4), (L3gvc3), (L3gc2), (L3gvc5), (L3gvtc1). However, some said that they had been involved in some planning process within their ministries or institutions. One of these interviewees offered more explanation about his/her position at the implementing level saying:

I did not participate. I want to explain an important point here about the planning process, since after the specialists and interested Directorate prepare the plan of the Ministry and submit to the higher level, half of the plan might not be approved, and therefore, is deleted. Also, after the plan is approved, it will be left with determined people in high positions or in the planning department, and the people who are at the point of implementation do not see this plan or anything about their organisation's policies and plans for the next period. They just implement what they have been directed to implement. So why do they not photocopy the plan or at least the sections that relate to each department and send it to them, thereby enabling them to be familiar with their organisation's targets, policies and procedures? (L3-gc2)

This extract confirms one of the points made earlier, that being that even though the plans are formulated by the appropriate people, the subsequent process of submission to a higher authority often means these plans are changed, so that what a ministry or organisation has to implement is not actually what it is philosophically committed to. A second point is that the policy documentation,

when ratified, does not seem to find its way back into the organisation that it relates to, and people at the point of implementation are uninformed and merely instructed without being allowed to understand the wider picture.

In respect of interviewees from organisations and institutions not represented in the CoHE, 14 said that they had not been involved in the preparation of HE policies and plans. For example, one of them said ‘I only participated within the Ministry’ (L2d14g), and (L3gvc4) had no contribution outside the Ministry, saying ‘we have never participated, we participate within the Ministry only, we have never been involved in anything outside’. A similar response was offered by (L2d13g).

In terms of specialists and community representatives, the responses showed that the interested governmental bodies invited some people from some society organisations such as the Majles A'Shura, and Majles A'Ddawla as well as other specialists and academic people to participate in the symposiums or seminars conducted by these bodies, but not in official meetings or studies which intended to formulate plans or take decisions. For example (L4sh2) said ‘I did not participate at all’, and similar responses were given by (L4sh3), (L4sc4), while other interviewees said they were participating within these organisations. The interviewees from private HEIs and other businessmen produced the same responses, for example, (L3prc1), (L3pru3), (L4sc3), (L4bs1), and (L3prc4) strongly confirmed not having participated, saying ‘I did not see any plans of HE, or participated or was invited to participate in preparation, discussion or making these plans and policies’. It is worth noting that most of these interviewees are businessmen who are investing in the HR sector, deans or directors of private HEIs.

Hence, it seems that the current type and level of participation, whether from society representatives, businessmen, private HEIs or other specialists, in the preparation of educational plans as well as HE plans is not enough. Likewise, the

contribution of people from the level of implementation (such as deans or directors of governmental HEIs) also seems to be insufficient, while those governmental organisations or HEIs which have not been represented in the CoHE are not involved at all in formulating such plans or policies. Hence, these levels of participations of several categories of interested institutions and individuals reflect the extent to which the governmental planning bodies need to improve the process of planning, particularly involving those sectors with which the government wishes to establish strong partnerships.

7.8 Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, most interviewees consider that the current challenges facing Oman's HEIs are the result of the absence of a properly-formulated long-term HE strategy, which should have been developed at least twenty years ago. These participants all agreed on the important need to develop and articulate a new comprehensive national vision and strategy, and provided several reasons for their views. Consequently, many principles, dimensions and ideas were suggested by the interviewees, for inclusion in a proposed future long-term vision for HE.

In this regard, some interviewees referred to the long-term strategy of HRD which is a part of the Vision of Oman Economy '*Oman 2020*', as a long-term strategy for Education including HE. However, most participants made negative comments about the Vision, while others commended it or had insufficient knowledge about it. Hence, twenty participants said that they did not depend on this Vision at all, and indicated many changes and amendments that have been made to it, while eleven said they did refer to it when they formulated and implemented their plans and discharged their duties. The remaining participants said they relied on it in some areas and ignored it elsewhere, and yet others declared the pressing need to build another vision and long-term strategy for the country's development process. The overall feeling among the interviewees was that there were insufficient linkages between the currently-implemented plans of

various HE organisations and the country's development plans, and the participants were able to cite several circumstances causing this situation.

Because of the various reasons offered by the participants, the HRD plans for the period of 1996-2020, as espoused in the Vision, do not form a suitable long-term strategy for the HE sector, and a new comprehensive national policy and plan for Oman's HE system, together with specific implementation strategies to allow the development and expansion of this sector. In terms of the current level of participation in the preparation and formulation process of the state's vision and plans for the education system, including HE, there is feeling among the interviewees from several categories, such as society representatives, businessmen, private HEIs and other specialists, that there is a need to improve the extent of this contribution and promote the number of representatives of these groups in the planning process, as well as in other related procedures. The next chapter will consider the analysis and discussion of the interviews findings regarding administration and management of HE in Oman.

Chapter Eight

Analysis and Discussion of Interview Findings (3)

Administration and Management of Higher Education

8.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the interviewees' responses related to the theme of the administration and management of the Omani HE system, and includes these sub-themes; the plurality of governmental bodies are supervising and managing HEIs, the ability and competency of these organisations given the sector's diversity, and the challenges and difficulties facing the administration of HE. Additionally, other related issues will be discussed.

8.2 Administration and Management of the Omani HE Sector

The organisational structure of HE in Oman was reviewed in Chapter Three, from which it was seen that several ministries and authorities play supervisory and managerial roles in this respect. Through the review of several government documents as well as through the discussions with academic and administrative staff in HEIs and other HE organisations, when preparing the questions for the interview exercise, this issue was prominent, and three main aspects of the management of HE emerged, these being:

1. The plurality of supervisory organisations and institutions. This circumstance preoccupied the thoughts of many people, and therefore it seemed important to pursue this with the interviewees to identify their opinions in this regard, the effect of the situation, and whether any were able to propose alternative arrangements.
2. The ability of these organisations to supervise and manage the current HEIs. Generally, people believed that serious questions should be asked about the competence possessed by these organisations, to actually supervise the HE

sector, for instance whether they had sufficient numbers of qualified and skilled people, either in academic or administrative fields. They wondered whether these organisations should seek help, perhaps through appointing foreign experts or joining professional institutions.

3. Monitoring and evaluation of HEIs and of these organisations themselves as well, since the entire process of how these organisations were themselves evaluated, and of how they evaluate the HEIs, and particularly follow-up mechanisms, was raised, thus leading to an initial question which simply asked interviewees about this.

However it also seemed appropriate to ask the interviewees whether they could identify any other significant challenges facing them in their management of HEIs.

8.2.1 The plurality of organisations administering the Omani HE system

In order to identify the participants' views regarding the above three aspects of this overall management structure, the following question was asked: *What do you think about the plurality of organisations that supervise the different streams and institutions of higher education in Oman? Does the current organisational structure best suit the need of administration of this sector and its institutions in the Sultanate?*

The responses of the interviewees fell into two different categories, the majority who considered the current organisational structure as one of the main difficulties facing this sector, which led to a scattering of efforts and wastage of funds, and a minority who believed that the current arrangement was satisfactory, and who provided several reasons for their views.

Positive view towards current multiplicity of HE supervisory organisations

One of the participants who prided the current situation, indicated an issue, which s/he considered as an advantage of having many supervisory organisations, saying ‘there are some advantages of this plurality, as it leads to competition between these organisations, since each tries to encourage its institution(s) to achieve better results and become more advanced than others, and this is a good thing’ (L2d4g). In this regard another interviewee said:

I think the current situation is the best for our system, and meets the needs of our institutions. We could Omanise some jobs by the graduates of these institutes, since we recognise the needs of our institutions and make every effort to respond. I think if these institutions were under the management of other organisations, we would not reach the current advanced level (L2d14g).

Indeed, it should be appreciated that having various HE supervisory bodies may have advantages, such as quick decision-making, facilitating the provision of services and reducing administrative bureaucracy, as mentioned by the above participant, and by (L1u12) despite disagreeing with the current multiplicity. Another interviewee believed such plurality was common in other countries, saying ‘I know that in some countries the universities are under the supervision of a supreme body, but in other countries the universities are independent and not under the supervision of any organisation’ (L4sh3). Moreover, other key figures offered some reasons for the current structure saying that:

The specialisation of most of these institutions requires them to be supervised by a ministry or authority that has an interest and expertise in these specialisations, and therefore the plurality of supervisory organisations is better than having one organisation (L2d3g).

Likewise, (L4sh3) said ‘It is difficult to create one supervisory organisation, because each organisation or institution has its own specialised nature’, and another key figure explained this in more detail saying:

Most higher education institutions have their own specialised nature, for instance the Ministry of Higher Education is managing the colleges or institutions which

have a university nature, such as Colleges of Education, College of Sharia and Law and the Private University Colleges, while the Ministry of Manpower is supervising the colleges and institutes related directly to the world of work, such as Colleges of Technology and Centres of Vocational Training, and I think this is healthy. Also the Ministry of Health which administers Institutes of Health Sciences and Nursing, employs the graduates of these institutions in its hospitals and medical centres, and sometimes there are doctors and consultants who work in these hospitals and centres and at the same time they are teaching in these institutes, and they are delivering their experiences in the local centres to their students, so I feel this is a suitable structure (L1u11).

This rationale was given by other participants who believed that the current multiplicity of HE authorities and institutions was better than one organisation with overall responsibility. One interviewee said:

Now each ministry or organisation is responsible for particular institutions that are related to the field or specialisation of the organisation, such as the Ministry of Health which is responsible for the medical cadre in the governmental hospitals and centres. This ministry is specialised and has more ability to manage the Institutes of Health Sciences, while the Ministry of Manpower shoulders the responsibility of preparing the national workforce in the technical and vocational fields, so it is better to supervise those institutions which are associated with their roles (L1u9).

This participant also indicated some disadvantages of merging the responsibilities and placing them with one supervisory organisation, saying:

Indeed the current situation is better, since the plurality sometimes has advantages. If all those institutions involved were to be merged into one organisation; the responsibility will be large and will be limited to a certain few people, each of them with much authority (L1u9).

This statement reveals the worry that one supreme supervisory organisation might be lead to greater centralisation, and increased bureaucracy, as was clarified by (L3gvc4) who said:

Sometimes you may think that it might be a good idea to have one big umbrella, but this will be big and it is going to be difficult. It is difficult with professional programmes, because usually you have university accreditation and then you have the programme accredited by a professional organisation. The Accreditation Board is enough, I would not think that to ensure quality there would be a need

for anything else. Funding though is another matter. What we need is co-ordination, and not so much supervision. I think it would be a good idea to co-ordinate.

This response reflects several issues, for example, whether one umbrella organisation would affect the performance of the various HEIs, since the supreme body would be too large and unwieldy. Another concern relates to budgetary mechanisms and whether HEIs might lose out in a change of supervisory arrangements, since currently the sector receives many budgets according to the different organisations which supervise HE, and if the bodies were to merge, the Ministry of Finance might deal with the new body as one unit, which may lead to a budget reduction. However, the point is clearly made by this interviewee that more co-ordination is required, saying:

Co-ordination is important and there should be some kind of council where they look at all the issues of the different ministries, what is the problem, whether they need money and everything like that. I think co-ordination is needed more than supervision (L3gvc4).

Another interviewee referred to some negative aspects of both types of arrangement, suggesting that the implementation was the important factor. In this respect, it was said that:

The plurality of organisations with responsibility for managing higher education institutions could be a good phenomenon and could be bad if it leads to delay and hinders the work. My opinion is that direct supervision which interferes with the educational process or day-to-day work of higher education institutions will cause more bureaucracy so I am not in favour of this option (L2guv2).

This extract indicates the problem of interference by the supervisory organisation, which could lead to increased bureaucracy, but equally, this can occur whether there is a plurality of supervisory organisations or just one. Additionally, some participants who were aware of the active debate amongst interested governmental officials, considered the plurality to be healthy and envisaged that some of the existing organisations could play a supervisory role, one of them saying:

The plurality of organisations and institutions is a healthy phenomenon, it is not bad as many people think, but instead it is healthy; provided there is a body which can ensure quality and organise the system between these institutions. I think the Accreditation Board is just starting to play this role, as well as the Council of Higher Education (L3gu3).

Clearly, the 'health' of the situation depends, according to this interviewee, on there being an organisation with overall responsibility for quality assurance in the HEIs, and the comments reflect the participant's worry about the current structure's ability to assure quality, suggesting that the Accreditation Board should take charge in this respect. Likewise, (L3gvc4) identified the Accreditation Board as having an important role, saying:

I know there is a big debate about all of this, I think if we have an Accreditation Board that works properly that should be enough, because institutions need to say that they are accredited by this Council. So if the Accreditation Board requires high standards that could be used to measure every institute of higher education, this will sort the quality issue.

However, as indicated in Chapter Three, the role of the Accreditation Board is not to ensure the quality, but rather, to consider and approve programmes proposed by the institutions, and the process of ensuring the quality not only relies on the validity of programmes, but it involves the quality of the staff (their academic qualifications and experience), the evaluation methods, the educational environment within the institutions, and other facilities provided to the students. This means that the quality assurance process also requires effective monitoring and evaluation by a body with the power to do so, as confirmed by one of these key figures who said:

We perhaps need an organisation to ensure quality. Yes, we have the Accreditation Board, but I do not know anything about this Board, and even so, the accreditation process is concerned with giving approval for institutions to run their programmes, which is different from assuring the quality of those programmes, which requires there to be some means of following-up how those programmes are implemented (L1u11).

Additionally, the Accreditation Board is newly-established, and consists of a small number of specialists, who are still preparing the foundation, and rules and regulations of the accreditation system, as confirmed by one of its members, who said ‘the accreditation culture itself is new in our region, so there is a need to develop this conception among the interested people and institutions whether governmental or private ... we have spent these first two years in building the structure of programmes, system organisation, internal rules of the Council, the legal framework, and still there is a lot to do’ (L2g7g).

The previously-cited response of (L3gu3) also referred to the role of the CoHE, which was considered by another participant as providing a link between the various supervisory organisations as well as the Council of the SQU, saying ‘yes there is plurality, there are different organisations but they are linked through the high committees, such as the Council of Higher Education and the University Board’ (L4sh3), and another interviewee considered that because of the roles discharged by the CoHE and the MoHE, there really was no plurality because ultimately these two organisations were in overall charge. In this respect, the person concerned said:

I do not think there is plurality, since the main organisations which are the Ministry of Higher Education and the Council of Higher Education are supervising the Colleges of Education, the Sultan Qaboos University and all the private colleges. Only the Ministry of Health is not involved in these organisations, maybe because its institutes are specialised in a specific area (L4-sc4).

However, as mentioned earlier, the Council is not a supervisory organisation, but rather is responsible for preparing and approving the general policies of the HE sector as stated in the Royal Decree of its establishment. This is also verified by the responses of (L2d1g), and (L2d1g) who said that ‘the Council of Higher Education does not supervise the Ministry of Higher Education or other ministries, it draws up and approves plans and policies for this sector, but it does not supervise’. A similar response was given by (L2d10g), who added ‘the Council is responsible for drawing up and formulating the plans and approving the

general policies, but the supervision and following up of the implementation of HE and the performance of the institutions needs another organisation'. The interviewees' suggestions about how or which organisation should administer and monitor HEIs will be discussed widely in the next section of this chapter.

Negative view towards current multiplicity of HE supervisory organisations

In the contrast to the positive opinions offered regarding the plurality of supervisory organisations, a different view was expressed by interviewees who were unhappy with the arrangement. In their responses, these people clarified the size of this issue, and most produced ideas to reform the current structure that mainly focused on the amalgamation of all the different authorities that supervise the current governmental HEIs. In this respect, one of these key figures said 'This [plurality of organisations supervising HEIs] is one of main issues and we are looking at the new plan to sort out it with the other bodies' (L1m2). Another interviewee said: 'I think the most difficult problem facing this sector is the current scattering of the organisations and institutions of higher education' (L2d11g), while a third one indicated the extent of the concern, saying 'you will find all people in this field wanting to sort out the matter of scattered supervision for the higher education institutions, and unifying this under one umbrella and one system' (L2d6g).

Furthermore, similar responses were given by other interviewees from different levels, such as (L3gvc4), (L2d7g), (L4bs1), (L3gc5), (L4bs2), (L2d15g), (L2ex2), (L4sh2), (L1u7), (L1u12) and (L3prc4), and some explained other problems associated with the issue, such as (L1u8) and (L2d13g) who said:

This is one of the main problems of this sector, since each organisation has one or more higher education institution, and it builds and prepares its own plans and policies without co-ordination with other organisations, and without a clear plan which involves all organisations and institutions (L1u8).

Personally, I feel that the seven or eight organisations which now administer higher education are ineffective and unpractical. I am not in favour of the

Ministry of Commerce and Industry establishing an Institute for Financial Studies or for Tourism Studies, the Ministry of Manpower establishing an Institute for Technical Education or Vocational Training, because these ministries are not well prepared and not able to manage educational institutions, thus such institutions should be administered by a specialised organisation (L2d13g).

In this connection, one of the above-mentioned interviewees offered a logical reason for the current situation, saying ‘and even if this was acceptable during the previous period, I do not think it is reasonable to continue this situation’ (L1u8), while another participant gave more detail in this regard, stating:

Of course, there were logical reasons for the previous and the current position, but for the future and particularly under the circumstance of limited funds and exchequers, there is a pressing need to unify the planning bodies for higher education (L1m2).

On the same issue, another interviewee raised other points as follows:

I think there is something missed in this issue. This is maybe because of the absence of a national strategy for this sector as well as the absence of one supervisory organisation which can collect and unify the efforts of all institutions (L1uc1).

Indeed, this factor was discussed in the previous chapter, when it was noted that many negative effects were generated as a result of the absence of a national comprehensive strategy for this field, one being the current scattering and plurality of supervisory organisations for HE, as verified again by this interviewee. In addition, other interviewees stated several disadvantages of this administrative arrangement, one saying ‘the problem with this plurality of organisations which manage higher education institutions is that it leads to scattering efforts and budgets’ (L2d15g), and another participant said ‘this problem leads to a waste of money and effort, for example some of these institutions produced some particular fields of study, and when the organisation's need was covered, they closed that specialisation and built another programme’ (L2d11g).

This interviewee then referred to some advantages of unification of the supervisory institutions of HE, saying ‘it will bring flexibility for students into the system. If they have a problem with continuing their study on a particular course, it will be easy to them to move to other programmes that are available in any of these institutions’ (L2d11g), which indicated that organisations should take account of such needs, and ensure co-ordination with other HEIs, to ensure that programmes are not developed that are going to be short-lived. This problem was echoed by (L2d7g), and (L3gc5). Another participant stated other advantages of merging the supervisory bodies, saying:

Thus, I suggested that it is better to unify these institutions under one supervisory organisation, and this will cost less, it will lead to save money, unify visions and plans, merge attitudes and efforts for serving the sector of human resources development at the national level (L2d15g).

Whilst another participant referred to a different problem, saying that:

This is a wrong structure, which has led to the absence of clear planning in respect of preparing a national workforce whether for the public sector or for the private one. The interested organisations should work to sort it, and I think the Ministry of Higher Education is the best authority which has the ability to manage all institutions of this sector (L1u10).

In this direction, another interviewee noted that the current structure of the HE system resulted in the lack of co-ordination between these organisations, saying ‘unfortunately, each of current organisations is isolated, each of them works individually, but we hope that through the future strategy they will be unified’ (L2d1g). Moreover, in this respect, (L2d10g) also verified such negative influence of the current plurality saying ‘this indeed could be regarded as a scattering of the efforts’ as did (L3gtc1) who said ‘it could be considered as a serious problem or crisis’. Similar sentiments were expressed by (L2d6g) and (L3gc2), the latter also noticing another negative influence as follows:

This plurality of the higher education institutions leads each organisation to be narrowly concerned with only what is in its domain, without linking or co-

ordinating with the needs of any other aspect of HE. Each institution has its own limited vision, provisional and temporary plans and policies which in actual fact means scattering the efforts and finances, as well as more waste. So how can you build a comprehensive strategy for such system? It is too difficult (L3gc2).

Indeed, there are other interviewees, who extended their responses widely by offering some examples and clarifications of these negative effects, such as (L2d8g) who said:

It is important to unify the various visions and supervision organisation. In the current situation for example, the Sultan Qaboos University has no organisational relationship with the Ministry of Higher Education, or the Ministry of Manpower and Colleges of Technology, while if there is one governmental supervisory organisation, definitely the planning and the results will be better. Moreover, from my experience the Ministry of Education does not involve the Ministry of Higher Education in the preparation of its plans. Although there is a committee that consists of a number of officials from the two ministries in order to coordinate some aspects, there is no participation in planning, which leads to gaps between these two sectors of education. Therefore, there is no harmony between the two systems, leading to some scattering in the specialisations and policies. However, I hope to unify the visions, aims and supervision as soon as possible.

Another interviewee with long experience of participation in several national dialogues and symposiums related to the preparation process of plans and policies of HRD, whether through the Consultative Council previously or now through the State Council, gave another example for the current unsuitable position as he/she thought, saying that:

I think the Ministry of Manpower should not interfere in all education matters because its duties are limited to the labour market and the employment sector, such as creating new job opportunities, co-ordinating with private companies and observing work conditions as well as reporting the needs of the job market to the government. Therefore, it is important to have an organisation that can perform its supervision duties upon this sector independently from the government (L4bs2).

This view indeed indicates the feeling that the interference of the Ministry of Manpower in the educational and training field is unreasonable, and the response of (L4sh2) was in agreement, stating clearly: 'the Ministry of Manpower should concern itself only with the world of work, and the issues of labour, and not

interfere in the education field, such as Colleges of Technology and other training institutions'. It seems that this situation was discussed in the Majles A'Shura, and the Council submitted its recommendation regarding this issue, as indicated by (L4sh1) who said that:

We do not agree with the current plurality of higher education organisations and institutions, because this means a duplication and scattering of the efforts, and the Majlis A'Shura [Consultative Council of the Country] has submitted its recommendations about this point.

However, until now no government action has been taken towards changing this situation, although some interviewees expressed the hope that the current structure would undergo the appropriate change during the implementation period of the future vision and strategy for this sector, as mentioned by another participant saying that:

Actually, it seems that the state has recognised this unsuitable position, and the Council of Higher Education and other interested organisations are now discussing this issue, and I hope within the future vision of education and higher education these institutions will amalgamated into one organisation, whereby it could unify the efforts and follow up the performance instead of the current scattering of these institutions' work (L1uv3).

Another key figure also indicated this expectation, saying:

Generally, I think that the Council of Higher Education and the Ministry of Higher Education are working to change this situation through preparing another vision for this sector. Also I do not think such change will affect the current finances of the various sectors negatively as some of these authorities believe, and all of us should be concerned with the country's public interest. However, it could be taken into consideration that some of these institutions are specialised in particular areas, and accordingly they could participate in some ways in the professional supervision of these institutions (L1u8).

In addition to these predictions for change, this extract refers to the worries about budgetary constraints already indicated by other interviewees, since currently the different institutions receive their own, and hence, many budgets. It also raises the issue of some kind of professional monitoring of those institutions

with such specialisations. Hence, in order to explore the alternative proposals from those interviewees who expressed disagreement with the current situation, and indicated a desire for change, the second part of the question attempted to gain ideas regarding a new structure.

8.2.2 Interviewees' suggested organisational structure

All the interviewees who indicated disagreement with the current situation (the majority of the sample), were subsequently asked: *Do you have any views about how or which body should administer and monitor these bodies?*

In their responses, most of these participants produced similar proposals, although a few offered different perspectives. The majority suggested that the supervisory role for most HEIs should lie with one authority, but within this trend, there were several ideas about which authority that should be. Some believed that should be a new supervision system or organisation, some thought it should be the MoHE, other considered it should be the CoHE, and yet others did not state any of these options. And even those people who were satisfied with the current plurality of supervisory organisations at the implementation level, believed that 'the plurality of implementation institutions is good if there is a supreme body for planning and making the policies, and the interested bodies implement what this body says' (L3prc1).

In this regard, (L2d7g), (L4bs1), (L2ex2), (L2guv2), (L3prc2) and (L1u5) produced similar responses, suggesting unification of the supervisory authorities, but they did not identify which of the current organisations should shoulder this responsibility. Specifically, (L1u5) said 'it is better to unify organisations of higher education under one authority with a supervisory role over the governmental institutions', and (L3gc5) said 'the current polarity of organisations which are directing higher education institutions is not suitable and not benefits the system, so it should establish one supervisory organisation for all the governmental institutions'.

This perspective was also indicated by (L4bs2) who, dissatisfied with the current situation, said ‘having many and different organisations, each of them supervising one or more higher education institutions is not the best solution’. However, in that interviewee’s response to the previous part of this main question, a different proposal was made, in the statement:

Therefore, it is important to have an organisation that can perform its supervision duties upon this sector independently from the government and at the same time is able to co-ordinate with international enterprises to benefit from their experience in order to improve and ensure quality assurance for our HE and vocational training programmes (L4bs2).

Then, responding to this particular part of the question, the above participant said:

Another organisation at a higher level should be established, with authority and ability to initiate continuous discussion within society, and to formulate plans and decisions which should be undertaken by other ministries and institutions in this field aiming at building several alternatives to achieve society’s targets and where it wants to be in future, while another organisation should carry out the responsibility of supervisory implementation of these plans and policies through the higher education institutions supervised by this ministry or organisation. Thus, the latter organisation has no mixed responsibilities of planning, implementation, supervision and evaluation, but has clear determined responsibility for managing institutions and implementing the sector plans (L4bs2).

This person did not mention the CoHE or MoHE, thereby indicating a demand for re-structuring the sector’s organisational structure. Indeed, another interviewee argued for a complete re-structuring, saying ‘it is important to totally re-structure this sector, and if all the organisations agreed about the structure which should be formulated to manage this field, this will be one of the significant achievements in this area’ (L2d13g). Another interviewee compared the situation with education at the school level, suggesting one ministry should take responsibility, saying:

It should be like the Ministry of Education, which is managing all kinds of the school education. So the responsibility of this ministry covered the general education in all schools in the country, which makes it easy for this ministry to

organise and co-ordinate its plans and activities, as well as following up the performance of each type within one organisational system (L2d15g).

Indeed, one particular group of interviewees gave a clearer picture about the required unification, suggesting that a supreme policy-making body should be established. Some suggested this to be the role of the CoHE, and argued that the MoHE should shoulder the executive academic and administrative supervision. At the same time some of them believed that the HEIs should be given almost full independence and freedom in administrative, financial and academic matters. Hence, along with these directions, one participant suggested that the MoHE should perform the overall function of policy-making, (L1u7) saying: ‘I think these organisations should be merged under one umbrella which is the Ministry of Higher Education’, and (L1m2) arguing:

There is a pressing need to unify the planning bodies for higher education. I think those ministries and other bodies have to be clients, not owners or sponsors. This means that the Ministry of Higher Education should manage and administer this field, which includes all or most higher education institutions (L1m2).

In this respect, (L4sh1) also said:

We believe that all these institutions of higher education should be supervised by one body, which can make plans and administer this sector with its divisions and institutions, and we suggest that the Ministry of Higher Education should be staffed with sufficient experts, professional people and administrative staff to do this.

Clearly, the above lobby is for the responsibility to lie with the MoHE but the point is strongly made that with its present capacity this Ministry can not actually perform that function, and that suitable resources must be provided to enable this. Other interviewees suggested that the CoHE should shoulder this responsibility, one saying:

I hope that the Council of Higher Education will carry out its responsibilities regarding this issue and undertake some steps in order to re-structure the organisational system of this field, and if there is a need to ask help from

overseas experts or institutions it should be done, together with co-ordination and co-operation with interested people, organisations, and representatives from society at large, with reference to the studies and research in this area (L1uc1).

Other interviewees believed that each of these two organisations should play a certain role. One of these interviewees said:

I think all organisations should be merged under one umbrella which is the Ministry of Higher Education. This Ministry should be responsible for the implementation supervisory duties, while the Council of Higher Education should shoulder the responsibility of planning for the whole sector (L3-gvu4).

In this direction, another interviewee who expressed a similar view, gave more explanation saying that:

I believe the responsibility of supervision for all these higher education institutions should be shouldered by the Ministry of Higher Education, while the Council of Higher Education could be regarded as the planning organisation, not as the supervision authority. However, there should be no restriction on the ability of any specialised ministry to participate in the supervision, and they should address their requirements and criteria for the programmes and courses produced by these institutions (L2d7g).

This interviewee indicated the importance of the specialised role to be undertaken by those organisations, which have links to the fields of study offered by some HEIs, which will be discussed later. Yet another interviewee suggested extending the role of the CoHE to cover GE/BE, and accordingly recommended a name change to the 'Council of Education', saying:

I think the current Council of Higher Education, should become the Council for Education, with the authority to plan for the entire education sector, and the ability to co-ordinate educational policies of all types and at all levels, and link them with marketplace requirements and with other sectors. But this Council must be provided with sufficient professional experts and administrative staff as well as by enough funds. Such a solution will enable the education system to meet the demands and to bridge the gaps (L2d12g).

As with the previous suggestion of placing the responsibility with the MoHE, the point was made that in its current form, the CoHE does not have the resources

to discharge the responsibilities which would be placed upon it as a supreme body. Hence, appointments in the form of academic and administrative staff, international experts, and specialists, would be required. This view indirectly comments on the lack of professional and academic staff in the Council as mentioned elsewhere in this study, which limits its role and activity. For example, (L3prc1) said:

The plurality of implementation institutions is good if there is a supreme body for planning and making the policies, and the interested bodies implement what this body says, but the Council of Higher Education is not able to carry out such a role.

Clearly, this interviewee frankly stated that the CoHE was unable to play the role of supreme authority, thus confirming the need for a new organisation, suitably resourced to plan and direct the HE sector. This was also verified by the interviewee (L4bs2) who proposed two supervisory organisations, one responsible for formulating plans and decision-making, and the other to undertake the implementation of the plans and policies through the HEIs. Since this person did not mention the CoHE, a supplementary question was asked about this body, to which s/he responded that ‘such an organisation needs to be staffed with full-time officials, experts and specialists in this field, who can plan for the future of this sector and deal with its issues’ (L4bs2), thereby reflecting the common opinion that this Council is inappropriately staffed for such a large and comprehensive task. However, this participant declared that “this issue needs more attention and investigation’.

This lack of infrastructure within any one organisation was also referred to by one interviewee who indicated satisfaction with the current situation and disagreement with the proposal to unify the supervision under one organisation, saying ‘maybe after some time it could be unified under one umbrella, but now we are not well prepared for such structure, do not forget other countries were developed and have preceded us a long time’ (L4sh3). It is perhaps worth noting that the extract from (L1uc1) mentioned above, indicated the importance of not

restricting inputs to the process, when s/he suggested involving a wide range of interested people and organisations, including people from society at large, and those with international experience in order to get a more advanced approach to planning.

As part of the general move towards unification, one key figure expressed the feeling that ‘we hope that the government will take some steps to integrate the bodies of higher education administration at least at the level of functions, such as planning for the implementation and its management’ (L1m2), suggesting that if there is no possibility to merge at the policy-making level, this could be done at the level of implementation in order to achieve some amount of co-ordination. However, it seems that the difficulty lies not only in finding a body that could effectively undertake high level planning because as indicated earlier, this could be done by the current CoHE with a suitable injection of resources. Rather, the problem rests in the fact that none of the current supervisory authorities wants to lose its control over the HEIs, especially those with specialised outputs. This was mentioned previously, and verified by another participant who said:

I am aware that there is disagreement in some organisations that supervise higher education institutions with the idea of being involved under one umbrella. This is because they believe that they are preparing qualified people for their institutions' needs, so they are familiar with what they need and know how to meet their requirements. Also they do not want to lose their control over the institutions which qualify people for their needs (L3gc2).

However, this interviewee saw these situations as inappropriate excuses, since there were mechanisms that could be implemented to ensure the quality of the HE output. In this respect, s/he said:

I believe that since there is the Council of Higher Education, the Accreditation Board and the Ministry of Higher Education, there is no reason for the objection and for the fear of other organisations that they will lose their control over the institutions which qualify people for their needs, because they can follow up the preparation process and training programmes through specialised committees established for this purpose (L3gc2).

And such feelings were held by another interviewee who advised these organisations to abandon their attitudes of self-preservation in the national interests, saying ‘I wish that all organisations and institutions would unify their efforts in order to achieve the national targets as we see in other parts of the world’ (L1uv3). However, other interviewees agreed that professional supervision should continue to be undertaken by those organisations which had long been established for this purpose, one such participant saying that ‘it should not be ignored that some organisations have the same nature as some educational institutions, such as the Ministry of Health, and they should be involved in the supervision process’ (L3prc2).

Another interviewee who expressed earlier that both the MoHE and CoHE should play a certain role, also emphasised the professional role to be undertaken by those organisations which have links to the fields of study offered by some HEIs, saying: ‘however, there should be no restriction on the ability of any specialised ministry to participate in the supervision, and they should address their requirements and criteria for the programmes and courses produced by these institutions’ (L2d7g). And also (L1u7) gave more explanation of the specialised role of these organisations saying that:

However, we should not avoid the role of the interested ministry which will employ the outputs of these institutions, therefore, if we take the Institutes of Health Sciences as an example, I have to say these institutes should adhere to the system of higher education in Oman, and their staff whether administrative or academic and other affairs should be supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education, but regarding the curricula and programmes and other issues related to the educational process, a committee should be established to include specialists and interested people from both the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Health, and similarly this should be done with the Colleges of Technology and other streams and divisions of higher education. (L1u7).

Reflecting the high concern of the interviewees, the following extract offered some details of how these organisations which have particular specialised roles relevant to the field of study of some of the HEIs could be involved:

We believe that the other bodies should participate in this process through for instance, the allocation and determination of the programmes, course description, and training features, because we believe that these bodies will employ the graduates of those HE institutions. However, I think it is improper for those bodies or ministries employing the outputs of these institutions to be isolated in producing and developing programmes, managing institutions, preparing students and then evaluating themselves. Currently when these organisations have covered their need in some areas, they close down programmes and produce others. And because they have not enough funds and sufficient capacity of specialists to enable them make any major changes, they are narrow in approach (L1m2).

Hence, in addition to the demand for a unified supervisory system, this extract indicates the areas of professional supervision which should be carried out by the interested ministries and organisations. It also raises the importance of avoiding mixed responsibilities, an issue that was pinpointed by another interviewee who said ‘one organisation could not be regarded as judge and at the same time as lawyer or as accused’ (L2d10g), and a similar response was produced by (L4bs2). Moreover, the above mentioned participant drew attention to the wastage generated by some ministries currently supervising some HEIs, and the fact that they end up closing down their programmes when their short-term needs have been met, while the needs of other sectors (including the private sector) remain uncovered. This reality is affecting other sectors, such as the private hospitals and medical centres which suffer from the lack of national manpower, as well as the other governmental bodies which have their own medical centres. A similar situation exists in the private schools and training centres.

However, a number of participants explained the nature of a preferred type of unified supervision (L1m2) suggesting ‘indeed, we believe that the internal management of those institutions and day-to-day activities should be left to the administrations of these institutions’. This extract indicates the belief that the supervisory organisation should not interfere in routine operational activities, as verified also by (L2d13g) who said:

Such institutions should be administered by a specialised organisation, like an umbrella, but this supervisory body will not interfere in all activities, academic affairs or day-to-day work of these institutions, but will be responsible for

example for planning, unifying the efforts, organising and enabling reciprocity of facilities, laboratories and academic staff..

Moreover, one interviewee (L1u5) clarified another aspect of the suggested supervision arrangement saying:

The Ministry of Higher Education is also expected to organise academic fairs and propose a unified academic system for government institutions. For instance, an Omani lecturer in a Technical College should have the same advantages as the lecturers in Sultan Qaboos University, particularly in terms of academic features, pay scale and allowances. These should be standard for all academic staff who work in government higher education institutions. While in the private universities, the system should be different, they can adopt a more competitive approach in terms of pay scale and facilities in order to attract more students as well highly-qualified academics.

Additionally, a number of interviewees offered another proposal emphasising more freedom and independence to the HEIs, as expressed by (L3gc2) who said ‘it is supposed that higher education institutions should be independent under the system of the country’. And another explained the approach, saying:

I think a system could be establishing giving the institutions independence but at the same time providing professional supervision by a higher organisation. Nowadays, in some parts of the world the schools are given freedom and independence which enables them to govern their own affairs, and these are at a lower level than university or colleges (L4bs1).

Indeed, the SQU is a clear case for such an approach as indicated by another participant, since as it is known that the University is an independent organisation, and this perhaps is what led another participant to say ‘if the decision was mine, I would put all these institutions under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education, except the Sultan Qaboos University which needs more investigation before such a step is undertaken’ (L4sh2). Also another interviewee said:

I think each of the higher education institutions should be considered as an independent organisation, with authority over their own financial responsibilities, such as is the current position of the Sultan Qaboos University, and then all of these institutions should be involved under one umbrella, whether the Ministry of Higher Education or the Council of Higher Education (L2d6g).

Hence, this view actually reflects a feeling among these high ranking officials in the field of general education and HE, that there is need to give the HEIs in the Sultanate more independence and freedom over their administrative, financial and academic affairs.

Furthermore, and in relation to the interviewees' suggestions about the administration and the supervisory structure of HE, a number of interviewees mentioned the relative absence of the private sector in the planning and management process, despite it now occupying a significant role in the provision of HE through three private universities and 17 higher colleges. It was felt that the private institutions had not been given a proper chance to participate in the management of the sector, including in policy-making. One interviewee drew attention to this issue by saying:

The private sector does participate in some councils and committees, but it is represented only by one or two persons among 20 governmental members. What can this member alone do to affect the decision making? Nothing because he/she has the right of one vote only (L3prc4).

This interviewee also raised the problem that such isolation promoted poor communication with other agencies in the HE sector, saying:

This representative [who represent the private sector] who knows him? We do not see that in one day this person came to us and ask about our visions, problems, aims and ambitions. He/she should come to us and meet all interested people in this field to be able to represent them (L3prc4).

It worth noting here, that the representatives of the private sector either in the CoHE or in the SQU Board, are appointed by the government, and not elected by the private sector agencies that participate in HE. However, it should be recalled that many interviewees criticised the sector itself, as explained in Chapter Seven. A number of them regarded that this sector as 'a difficulty, it is an obstacle itself' (L3gu3), and it is too limited and narrow as stated by one of this sector's members, saying 'it came to this field by coincidence not as a self-initiative. The private sector is too limited and narrow' (L4bs2), while another one who is a head

of a private HEI observed that the people investing in this field have insufficient knowledge, and claiming the ‘the people who invest in the higher education sector should have a high knowledge about the field, because HE is not a commodity to be sold and that you get your returns from tomorrow. Investment in this field means long-term investment so they should have long-term vision’ (L3prc4).

Hence, there is disagreement about whether the government is satisfied with the private sector role, and whether the time is right to increase its representation in the governmental councils, or to extend its participation in the management of this field. However, it is hoped that regardless of the level of satisfaction with the private sector contribution so far, this effort will improve as a result of the recent efforts to further promote its role of this field.

To conclude this section, it could be understood that the responses of the interviewees indicated on the one hand (and from the majority), that the current organisational structure represented a main difficulty facing this sector, leading to scattering the efforts and fund wasting, and on the other hand (and from a minority), the current structure best suits the country’s needs because it is decentralised and allows for more finance to be obtained, and has allowed the demand of the governmental bodies in several areas over the previous decade, to be met.

Consequently, the majority of these key figures recommended that the supervisory role in respect of all (or most) HEIs should be unified and one umbrella organisation should be responsible. Several ideas were proposed in relation to shaping the supervision system, some favouring the MoHE as the supreme authority, and others believing the CoHE should adopt this role. Another suggestion was a system of dual control, whereby the CoHE assumes the planning and policy-making responsibilities together with monitoring and evaluation roles, while the MoHE adopts the executive supervisory role, with responsibility for supervising the implementation of all plans, policies and programmes in all governmental HEIs, and general supervision of the private institutions. Others

suggested that the HEIs should be given more freedom to become independent bodies.

However, and to complete the whole picture of this dimension, it was recognised that an investigation should take place to establish the extent to which the current supervisory organisations are equipped to discharge their roles effectively, and the interviewees' opinions in this respect will now be discussed.

8.2.3 The extent to which the current supervisory organisations in the HE sector are equipped to discharge their duties

The capabilities of the current supervisory organisations was a main issue raised by interviewees, and it was, therefore, important to pursue this matter, and to identify precisely where any resource shortfalls might be. Accordingly, interviewees were asked: *Do you think the current organisations that administer the different streams and institutions of higher education, are prepared for planning and management of this sector? Do they have sufficient numbers of specialists and well-qualified Omanis to achieve their tasks?*

Different perspectives and views were produced by the interviewees, which fell into the following groups:

Table 8.1
Participants' Perspectives Regarding the Extent to Which the Current Supervisory Organisations of HE are Prepared to Administrate the HEIs

Group	Participants Number
All ministries and institutions are well prepared and qualified	2
All ministries and institutions are sufficiently prepared and qualified	8
Some ministries and institutions are well prepared, while others are prepared to some extent/or not enough prepared	26
Most ministries and institutions are prepared to some extent/or not enough while others are not prepared	4
They are not well prepared	2
The response did not directly answer the question and produced other issues related to the theme	5
Unclear/do not know	3

As Table 8.1 indicates, ten of the interviewees believed that all the ministries and institutions were either well, or sufficiently prepared to manage and supervise the HE system and its different institutions. This was in contrast to only two interviewees who felt they were not well prepared, and another four who believed that although they had some preparation, they were still not prepared enough. Five interviewees gave obscure answers, and another three were unclear in their responses or did not have an opinion. Hence, it is obvious that the majority of interviewees (26 out of 50) felt that some of these organisations and institutions were well prepared, while others were not prepared enough. The reason given for organisations being incapable was mainly the shortage in the number of experts, and their lack of expertise.

On the other hand, one interviewee who believed that the current supervisory organisations were well qualified to discharge this role said:

After 30 years of experience, with the other experiences of national institutions and international experts and institutions, I think that these national organisations and their officials have gained the ability and knowledge as well as good experience that enables them to administrate higher education and its institutions (L1u2).

The above view must be understood within the context of the last three decades during which the system has been established from zero, and the developmental stages have enabled the officials to develop at the same time. Moreover, the MoHE as well as others, gained help from many overseas experts as another interviewee verified, saying ‘they [the governmental supervisory organisations] are slightly good qualified, particularly they brought many foreign experts whereby they obtained experience from other countries’ (L3prc1). This also indicates the Omani officials' attitude and their open mind to gain and share knowledge with others. In addition, this led to ‘most of these ministries and organisations having specialists and people with different experience, but the Ministry of Higher Education has better than others’ (L2d7g). It is understandable that the MoHE has become more qualified and capable, since it is at the heart of

the HE system, and during the last decade, the Minister and other key figures in this institution have worked to attract many qualified Omanis from other institutions as well as foreign experts to fulfil the different responsibilities of the Ministry.

Moreover, other ministries and organisations have also worked to improve the capability of their staff, for example one such organisation sent a number of its officials abroad to gain high qualifications, such as Masters' degrees and PhDs, as explained by (L1u6) who said 'in our ministry we are trying, we have a plan to qualify administrators and academic staff. Last year we sent around 44 people to study for higher qualifications, the majority of them are lecturers for colleges of, and this year I think we sent around 35 or 50 people'. According to the researcher's knowledge, it is not easy for any ministry in Oman to send such a number of officials abroad in one year, as this is expensive and creates pressure on the ministry to cover their unoccupied positions. In the same context, (L1u7) mentioned some achievements of other organisations in this field, 'such as the Ministry of Health, and the Central Bank which supervises the College of Banking and Financial Studies'. Consequently, such initiatives made other officials and academic staff at the implementation level feel that their superior officials were working seriously to develop this sector and their country. For example, one of these interviewees said:

Well I think it is not only about qualifications. Sometimes you know, experience is important in administering and planning for HE. I believe that. I have no doubt that the people that were chosen because of their qualification and their knowledge in their field and in the position can do a good thing, but sometimes even though that is all there, if you have never done something before then you will try your best but it does not mean that it is going to be the right way (L3gvc4).

The above extract indicates that ability is not only indicated by qualifications, but includes experience, and that requires sufficient time and a suitable work environment. These conditions, in turn, depend on several factors that affect the reality and the journey of the development process. Nonetheless, such situation

perhaps did not exist in all organisations or institutions, since other interviewees expressed negative opinions about their organisations as will be seen later.

Consequently, it could be understood that the administration of any sector depends on several other factors, such as the vision and strategy of the organisation, funding and the finance situation, work environment, internal and external stress, the number and qualifications of the workforce, and other influences. Thus it was noticeable that in offering their opinions, some interviewees referred to some of the relevant issues rather than giving a direct response to the question posed.

Hence, because of the high position of the CoHE, and in the light of the expectations of most interested officials in this field, a number of participants indicated the small number of experts and specialists in the Council, as well as other shortages in the professional and administrative staff in its Secretarial General (L4sh1), (L2d15g), (L2d6g). Together with others already mentioned in the previous section, they recommended the Council be provided with sufficient professional staff. In this respect (L2d15g) stated ‘the Council of Higher Education should be supported by a number of specialists and it should be given a more effective role, which enables it to promote this sector’, and (L2d6g) explained this in more detail, saying:

The Council as you know, consists of some ministers and undersecretaries, who have their main duties and responsibilities in their ministries and organisations, so their role in this Council is a secondary one, and according to my knowledge the Secretarial General of the Council does not have enough experts and administrative staff to enable it to play the role that is now played by the Ministry of Higher Education, which is preparing the plans, policies and other requirements.

However, given the relative youth of Oman’s Renaissance, the lack of well-qualified national workforce can be seen in most specialised organisations and institutions in the Sultanate, and particularly in those relating to HE. It is obvious that this lack of expertise has affected the performance and the ability of these

institutions in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities effectively. Thus, it is not only in the CoHE that such shortages occur, but also in other organisations, as indicated by (L2d13g) who said ‘most of these institutions need to be provided with professional support, specialists, experts and sufficient administrative staff’, and as mentioned by (L1u7) who stated ‘not all of these organisations are well prepared to manage this kind and this level of education, maybe some of them have capabilities and specialists, but I think others do not’.

It seems also that this shortage influenced the interviewees, leading several to say that many of these organisations are not well prepared, mostly because of this reason, and some other factors, as verified by (L4-sh3) who said ‘the national well-qualified manpower in these organisations is still not enough, we are still not well prepared’. Moreover, according to this lack of professional, academic and administrative staff, it could be appreciated that there is no suggestion of failure or inefficacy of the CoHE members, or current staff of other organisations, but rather the problems are attributed to external factors (such as financial constraints) reducing the ability of these institutions.

Another issue indicated by some interviewees was the absence of a national comprehensive vision for this sector, which was discussed widely in the previous chapter, and which was regarded by several participants as one of the main obstacles to the effective management of this sector. For instance, (L2guv2) said ‘if there is a clear vision and strategy for the future of this sector, it will be better’. The outcomes of the absence of such a national strategy were discussed earlier, but a relevant one in this particular discussion, is that this absence limits the efforts and activities of the supervisory organisations, since each organisation or institution will plan and work within its environment and context, managing its activities in this setting with insufficient knowledge, links and co-ordination with other elements of the system. As mentioned by (L3gvu4)

These organisations can plan only for their own human resource needs. They cannot plan to cover the needs of other sectors from the same outputs, and

therefore when they have enough outputs to cover their demand in some particular area, they close that programme, and open another.

This comment confirms the wastage generated by such limited management capabilities and planning. Another indication of such influences was given by (L3gtc1), who explained the extent to which the supervisory organisations operate in an unstable environment, saying:

There are no principles or bases for our work, I feel we have no well-founded principles or bases. Every time there is a change in the high level of administrative staff, our programmes are influenced. Many times the high ranking official responsible for these institutions is changed, for a few years we had worked through a certain academic programme, and when the [high position official] was changed, that programme was also cancelled, and replaced by another programme which we implemented for a short period, when the new appointed, just after two years, it was decided to stop that programme and run the current one.

This extract demonstrates the lack of a long-term vision for curriculum design, and the preparation of young Omanis. In addition, it indicates the extent to which educational institutions suffer from a lack of independence in managing their own affairs, and the power of administrative staff to interfere in the academic dimensions. Furthermore, the absence of one supervisory organisation for this sector was regarded, here again, as another factor affecting the current supervisory organisations' abilities to manage HE. In this respect, (L1u8) said 'some of these institutions are sufficiently qualified, and some are not. However, if all these institutions and organisations were collected under one organisation, the situation will be better', while another participant explained this point by saying:

The reason is that there is no central specialised organisation in these multi-supervisory bodies that is devoted to broad and comprehensive planning as well as management of HE. As a consequence, every single organisation manages itself and makes its own planning and policies which are not well joined with other sectors in the Country, so its activities are based on its needs (L1u12).

It can be seen that the multiplicity of supervisory organisations has led to the duplication of effort and financing, since each institution must sustain its own

administration system, staff, equipment and other physical provision. Furthermore, with poor co-ordination and co-operation with other organisations, as mentioned earlier, the cost is high, and it is eventually at the expense of the graduates of these HEIs. In this respect, (L2d5g) raised another example, saying 'do you know that until now there are some organisations and institutions with no planning unit, such as a division or directorate of planning'. As is well understood, planning is an essential element of administration in any sector, which means that the lack of it will lead to undesirable results as happened in some organisations mentioned by (L3gvu4) and (L3gtc1). Furthermore, it could be said that most HEIs in Oman have no planning unit to even consider a future vision and policies for these institutions, either individually or collectively, which means most of them rely heavily on the temporary or provisional plans made by their supervisory organisations, and if these in turn have no planning units, the guidance is non-existent.

8.2.4 Is there is a need to seek help from international experts and institutions?

From the discussion of interviewees' responses it can be seen that the majority believed most of the current supervisory organisations of HE are not sufficiently capable of administering the HEIs, but the reasons they gave seemed to be external to the organisations, rather than internal failures attributable to the abilities of the staff. However, this should not be interpreted as indicating no inadequacy among all these institutions' members. And clearly, there was an issue raised among the interviewees regarding the need to enlist expertise.

It was thus important to establish whether these high ranking officials believed there was a need to seek knowledge, experience or help from international experts, either individually or institutionally, and to what extent they felt they might benefit from, or rely on, other countries' experiences and foreign experts. Likewise it was also important to discover whether they considered the capability and experience of the national experts and specialists to be sufficient. Therefore, the following question was presented to all the interviewees, whether they

believed the organisations were well prepared or otherwise: *Is there is need to seek help from the international specialised institutions or to bring expatriates [or foreign experts] to help the country in developing the management of sector?*

The response of 30 participants was that the country should benefit from other countries' experiences, and should co-ordinate and co-operate with international institutions and experts, irrespective of the existence of national specialists or experience, while 14 believed the state should first consider the Omani experts and co-ordinate with international experts and institutions. Only one interviewee did not believe that the state should consult with overseas experts, and the remaining provided unclear responses, or had no views.

Hence, the majority of interviews supported the promotion of co-ordination and communication with other countries and with international experts and institutions as a general way of development, to benefit from their experience, knowledge and technology, in which respect, (L4sc4) said 'without a doubt we need this'. A similar response was produced by (L2d4g), while (L2d10g) said 'there is a pressing need, even the developed countries sometimes need other experience, why shouldn't we?' In addition, other participants, such as (L1u10), (L1u2) and (L1u8), answered similarly, the latter saying 'yes, there is a need, since there are many countries that are more advanced than Oman and they have valuable experiences whether in this field or in others, so we should benefit from them'. Yet, other interviewees drew attention to some benefits to be obtained from such communication and co-ordination, one saying:

I think through those foreign experts we can gain the experiences of other countries in this field, since they are from different educational and economic environments and most of them with long experience, and so it is good to build such relations because they will benefit the country (L3gc2).

In this direction, another participant gave a little more clarification saying:

Definitely, we need this, since the experiences of other countries and international institutions are necessary to update our systems and information. The international market is changing, the aims and policies have been changed whether in European Union countries, USA and other parts of the world, so we need to be in touch with these components and international groups (L1pscm1).

The above extract identified some particular benefits, such as in updating systems, information, aims and policies, while (L4bs2) noted other advantages, saying 'being able to co-ordinate with international enterprises to benefit from their experience in order to improve and ensure quality assurance for our HE and vocational training programmes'. Again, the issue of quality assurance, which was given much attention by the interviewees in answers to other questions, emerged. Thus, it could be suggested that this is one particular area that would benefit by international collaboration. In addition, the evaluation of programmes and HEIs' performance was cited as another area that would benefit from the expertise gained from relationships with international experts and institutions, as (L2d8g) said 'we need their help in some areas, such as evaluation of our programmes'. In the same direction, another interviewee suggested other possible benefits, saying:

To benefit from other experiences is very important, we should communicate with them to gain the knowledge and experience of their countries and systems in the field of building a philosophy and plans for this sector, we are still in the growing stage so we need more knowledge and experiences (L3gvu4).

This reference to the dimension of philosophy generation and planning coincided with responses to other questions as detailed in the last chapter. In agreeing with the need to reap the benefits of international collaboration, other interviewees were also keen to emphasise the role of Omani experts and specialists (some from the above-mentioned category) and in this respect, (L2d8g) added to his/her previous response, 'but we are familiar with our needs and aims more than others', indicating that Oman should not be told what to do by international experts, but that such experts should simply be consulted. Likewise (L2d5g) said 'we have to benefit first from Omani experts, and now there are many Omanis with good qualifications and experience', while (L3gvu4) explained this, by adding to his/her previous response, saying:

However, those foreign experts are not familiar with many things about the social circumstances, national economy, educational and cultural issues of the society, so it is equally important to accord a suitable role to the national experts in the building of plans and policies for this sector, and others, and to allow them to ~~activate~~ the system through their initiatives (L3gvu4).

Such a view was confirmed by another interviewee who further explained the situation, saying:

To benefit from others who have old and successful experience is a good and useful thing in order to know what are the strengths you have and what are the weaknesses, but we should not ignore the national specialists, who became able to develop several sectors in the country, and know about the problems, gaps in the particular fields, and they know the real abilities and finances of their country as they said, the residents of Mecca know its roads well. [A common phrase in the Arab Countries] (L4sc3).

Similar to this response, were others that came from (L1uc1), (L4sh3), and (L3gu3), who said:

We do need to benefit from the international experiences and experts, but we should not depend on them only. It was reasonable to do so for 15 years, but now there are many Omani full professors in the Sultan Qaboos University, many national specialists and experts, so we have to use our capabilities, particularly the national specialists who are very familiar with our society and its needs (L3-gu3).

Likewise, (L1uc1) expresses a similar sentiment, saying:

Firstly, we should see the national experts, what we have and in which field, since the country now, after around 35 years, has many Omani experts in different areas, and then if we do not have experts in some areas, we must work to look for foreign experts and seek help through international organisations as well as through communication with other experts from different countries and backgrounds (L1uc1).

These responses confirmed the noticeable educational development in Oman over the last three decades which have produced an acceptable number of Omani specialists in different sectors and institutions, enabling these people to play professional roles in their fields of expertise according to their particular

knowledge about their society and its requirements, components and circumstances. This case should lead the interested governmental bodies to benefit firstly from these national experts, and look overseas where support is required.

In contrast to all the previous views, (L4sh1) expressed a quite different viewpoint, saying:

I do not think we need to ask help in this field, because after 35 years of the country's new age, I think there is good experience and capabilities particularly in the educational field, which started at the beginning of the country's renaissance. We simply need to take stock, review, and assess what we have done and what we are going to do and then involve all interested people in the formulation of the future plans.

Clearly, this position was not adopted or supported by any other interviewee's response. Indeed, in addition to the reasons already given for seeking overseas assistance, some interviewees mentioned other imperatives. For instance, (L4bs2) said 'we should not be inhibited to seek assistance from international educational institutions. It is a tradition in our Islamic nation, to seek knowledge from others, and benefit from the success of other nations', and another participant also strongly supported this trend, saying 'I think each Directorate General needs an expert who can help in the preparation of higher education' (L2d6g), although there was no reference to where this expert might come from. However, it could be deduced that the interviewee was referring to a foreign expert because the question asked about seeking help from this category. Furthermore, in line with this sentiment, (L2d11g) suggested that the state will always have a need for international collaboration and foreign experts, saying:

I believe that the need to benefit from others' experience will remain for all time. We can not say that in any time we will not need to learn more from others, and can dispense with the benefits to be obtained from others, and just be content with what we have.

Clearly, this interviewee expressed a long-term vision in which good communication and co-ordination with the international community has a

permanent place, and that is not at odds with the aim of working to be able to depend on its national manpower to replace expatriates. It is simply that the nature of what expatriates do will change from them being instructors, to being collaborators.

Moreover, another interviewee clarified that the system in Oman has already benefited from many foreign experts and is continually collaborating with other international specialised institutions. This person said ‘we already have foreign experts in most of our projects, and I am convinced that we should benefit from other experiences’ (L2d1g), while another expert clarified how HE institutions work to benefit from more wide experiences, saying ‘we do not rely on one particular experience, but we try to benefit from more than one experience and system through communicating with and bringing many experts from different countries’ (L2ex2).

Nonetheless, the problem is that several ministries and organisations appoint many experts and pay high consultancy fees to international agencies to undertake projects and studies, only to fail to implement the proposed solutions, and hence do not benefit from the investment. This trend is mentioned in several studies in different parts of the world, and was documented in this research by one interviewee who said ‘I think the problem is that we do not benefit from those international experts and their studies, since according to my knowledge we have brought many of them, but where is the result?’ (L1u6). And on the same theme, another key figure said ‘I think we have many of these experts from different backgrounds, as well as Omani experts, but from now we should arrange this in association with international organisations as institutions, not individually’ (L1u7). However, in the researcher's personal experience, this is not the situation in all institutions, and the most important thing that interviewees seemed to want to occur was for the organisation to benefit from these experiences and expertise and use the results in promoting the performance of the institution.

8.2.5 Evaluation system of HEIs

In addition to the various challenges already identified, others are evident, these being either generated from those already discussed, or quite different. For example in reviewing all documentation prior to conducting the fieldwork, the researcher was unable to find any document, report or indication of an evaluation process conducted by any of the HE supervisory authorities. Hence, it was appropriate to ask the interviewees whether any such assessment process occurred in their institutions, and if so, what actions followed such evaluation. Consequently, the question was: *What evaluation process exists in respect of the HEIs for which your authority is responsible?*

In their responses the majority of interviewees indicated the absence of an evaluation system with clear assessment criteria and mechanisms, which could be used to monitor the performance of HEIs, although a few participants mentioned the existence of internal evaluation undertaken by and within the institution itself. Additionally, some interviewees were able to identify other challenges to the administration of the HE system. In respect of the lack of evaluation, most interviewees expressed similar views, some offering more detail than others, and a sample of their responses is now provided as follows:

I do not see any evaluation, and I do not know about anything relating to the assessment process in this sector (L4sh2).

It is supposed to exist, but I do not know if there is or isn't (L3prc4).

Evaluation is an important element, but I do not think there is any real review or evaluation (L2d13g).

We do not have any system or mechanisms to evaluate the performance of our institutions, but I think within the next period there will be something like this every five years. Currently each institution undertakes some kind of self-evaluation (L3gvu4).

We do not have any clear and determined mechanism to evaluate our plans and assess the performance of the different sectors of this field (L1u12).

These extracts testified to the absence of a comprehensive evaluation process, which was confirmed by other participants, such as (L3gvc4), (L3prc1), (L1u5),

(L2d5g) and (L2guv2). Some of these interviewees as mentioned above, indicated the importance of evaluation, others mentioned the current mode of self-evaluation undertaken by each institution, and some insisted that there were no evaluatory mechanisms to assess the performance of these institutions. In addition to those interviewees, other participants felt the need to speak in rather more detail about this issue, for instance (L1uc1) said:

First, we should think and review our achievements, our faults within the last 34 years, and where we are going in the future, then as I said there is a pressing need to establish a system which enables us to undertake accurate and comprehensive evaluation, and another system for annual evaluation. The evaluation should be with credibility, determined criteria, clear, accurate and objective.

This extract indicates a strong belief in the need for structured evaluation, and it is clear that the interviewee has thought through what such a system would consist of since s/he refers to comprehensive evaluation, which could be undertaken for example, every three or five years, and an annual evaluation. This type of evaluation is being undertaken by the Ministry of National Economy, as (L1u4) indicated as follows:

There is an annual review and evaluation in respect of the implementation of the five year plans through reports prepared by each ministry or organisation and the Ministry of National Economy reviews these reports and evaluates the implementation process of the plan's projects, and the final report is submitted to the Council of the Ministers. So through this process, the higher education sector is evaluated, but it is the financial process rather than professional or academic evaluation, since there are no experts or special officials in the Ministry of National Economy for such purposes (L1u4).

However, as the interviewee comments, this evaluation process is concerned with financial matters. It is merely a report prepared by the organisation itself about its achievements and the difficulties it faces, mostly in term of funding, and thus it does not represent a comprehensive professional evaluation. This latter kind of evaluation should be concerned with the assessment of the extent to which all objectives, plans and policies are properly implemented, and with assessing the performance of the HEIs either in academic or in administrative dimensions, as

well as paying attention to whether the educational outputs (the graduates) are at the required level. This requires monitoring of the quality level of these outputs in order to determine what must be done after the evaluation, and to be ready to undertake action. This kind of evaluation which most interviewees perceived to be absent, was explained by (L3gc2) who said:

We have the matter of the absence of an organisation which can follow up and evaluate the performance of higher education institutions. It is not enough what happens now through temporary assessment mechanisms, either by each ministry or by the Ministry of National Economy which assesses only the projects which are supposed to be implemented by the interested institutions and focuses on the financial dimension. There is an absence of an accurate professional evaluation system with modern criteria, which could compare the performance of all these institutions along several dimensions, so there should be a system created for annual or seasonal evaluation by an important professional organisation.

Hence, the presence of some form of internal assessment carried out by each institution, is indicated in this extract, and also was confirmed by other participants, such as (L2d13g) who complained about the absence of comprehensive evaluation, then commented that ‘mostly it is internal evaluation, but it is not enough’, and (L2guv2) who said ‘I do not see any evaluation carried out by any organisation, and I think such role should be undertaken by the Council of Higher Education. However, we have internal evaluation in our institution’. Another participant who also complained about the lack of an overarching system of evaluation, said:

There is no committee or organisation which evaluates the performance, for example, of the Sultan Qaboos University, the colleges supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education, and other institutions, and which attempts to assess the programmes or the outputs of the University and these colleges and their performance. Yes, the University is undertaking this process through co-ordination with international specialised groups which visit the University seasonally and assess all the elements of the educational process in the University, but what about others? (L1uv3).

Clearly, the internal evaluation undertaken by the SQU and other institutions is a self-initiated event, and not a comprehensive system or requirement that applies to all institutions. Moreover, it is not imposed by a higher authority, and

followed by certain revising actions. Hence, there is a question about the extent to which an institution that conducts its own evaluation of its performance, can actually produce a realistic and reliable assessment of its activities. Indeed the absence of an approved comprehensive evaluation system might be the reason why so many curriculum changes (opening and closing of courses) occur. Although some key figures recognised that this situation was not helpful in promoting the HE sector, no attempt has been made by any authority to create an evaluation system, as confirmed by (L1u6) who expressed his/her views in English saying:

We are in the , we are struggling to get things going now. We know which direction we want to go, but we can not focus as much as necessary because we have a lot to do. We do not have time to think about these difficulties, we are trying to think about the current difficulties we have, to accommodate these and these. We know that there are difficulties ahead of us, we ignore that, we are trying to solve what we have now. We are not proactive, we are reactive with day-to-day cases. It is bad, I told you it is bad.

This extract reflect the extent to which the current supervisory institutions of HE struggle to implement their action plans, irrespective of any faults or wastages that might happen during this process. In fact, it verifies that there is no assessment process undertaken by such authority, which might help in preventing any possible difficulty or wastage.

However, several interviewees believed that such an evaluation system for HEIs would be forthcoming, as mentioned by (L3gvu4) who said ‘but I think within the next period there will be evaluation every five years’ while another key figure indicated that an evaluation system would be included as an element of their future plan, and in this regard (L1u12) said ‘but we work to create a system of evaluation through the future strategy’. And another key figure offered slightly more explanation by saying: ‘I think through the future plan which we are going to prepare, there will be a mechanism to evaluate the performance of this field, but we have to see how it is going to be’ (L1u5).

In the same direction, some interviewees alluded to the fact that the Majles A'Shura (Consultative Council of the Country) as well as the Majles A'Ddawla are (The State Council) are playing a role in reviewing some plans and activities of this sector and submitting recommendations to the government. One said 'I hope Majles A'Shura plays some role in reviewing and evaluating some plans, however, what they brought to the Council we study it and we submit our notes and recommendations, but not all things are presented to the Council' (L4sh3), while another one said 'Majlis A'Ddawla has just established a committee to evaluate the implementation of the five year plans' (L4bs1). Indeed, this extract does not mean that this Council is going to create a system of evaluation for HEIs, but that was the response of the interviewee to the researcher's question, and could be regarded as a signal from such key figure of a wish to be given such duties. However, another member of this Council indicated that such a process was not easy and possibly faces some difficulties, saying:

The Majles A'Ddawah [The State Council] has just established a committee to evaluate the implementation of the five year plans, but the evaluation of such plans, needs capabilities, finances, experience, accurate data and credibility, so do we have all these resources? I do not think so. Also you need to know what you are going to do after the evaluation (L4sc3).

Furthermore, the Committee of Evaluation, which is the committee referred to in the above extract, and which was established by the State Council, will not be concerned with HE in particular, but rather with assessing the implementation of the FYDPs, which as one interviewee remarked, are dominated by economic or financial functions, meaning the committee's role will be similar to that of the Ministry of National Economy.

However, some participants suggested that one of the current organisations administering HE could perform the evaluation, one interviewee saying 'well I know that the Accreditation Board is set up, it is focusing first on the private colleges and then maybe in the future, it will focus on the governmental institutions', but according to the this Board's responsibilities as mentioned in

Chapter Three of this study, it has no current responsibility in this regard, and its limited resources would not allow it to discharge such a duty. Another participant indicated that the evaluation process should be carried out by the CoHE. In this respect, (L2guv2) said ‘such role should be undertaken by the Council of Higher Education’. Indeed, since this Council has been regarded as the highest authority in this sector, it is supposed that it can shoulder this role, but because it is responsible for formulating and approving general plans and policies for the sector, its staffing compliment is restricted to a limited professional cadre and a small number of administrative staff, so it could not be imagined that this Council could play this role.

8.2.6 Other difficulties facing the administration of HE

The following question provided an opportunity to explore any other challenges or difficulties that were being encountered in this respect, hence, the interviewees were asked: *Do you face other challenges in the administration of the HE sector/ or institution?*

The bureaucracy in some institutions

Many interviewees indicated other difficulties facing them, and that affect their work. (L2d6g) referred to the bureaucracy which they met in his/her institution, saying:

We are facing other challenges, for example, the bureaucratic structure which creates some difficulties in the work, and the people who are in the administration are very authoritative and try to increase their power, thus hindering the academic people in their work (L2d6g).

Closely related to this issue, was the problem of interference, raised by another interviewee, who said ‘we are facing a big challenge generated from our supervisory organisation, the most difficult thing is the interference of outside bodies in our work, they are supervising our institution without any determined

system or vision' (L3gtc1). This interviewee then offered more clarification about his/her experience, saying:

Our work now is done by trial and error, the people here are not well qualified and have not enough experience to administer higher education institutions. I feel now it is reasonable to work in an experimental manner, but not by trial and error. We must be affiliated with an overseas university, college or any higher education institutions in this field which can help us and guide our work. Now, there is large wastage, because we have no bases for our work or determined responsibilities for each person through a clear system of administrating this institution, therefore there are many haphazard decisions, taken and implemented the same day which cost much.

This extract reflects the extent to which some institutions suffer from the interference of the administrative department, and the approach of trial and error which leads to large wastage. The suggestion that these educational institutions should develop academic affiliations with overseas HE institutions with a long successful history and experience in their particular areas, as is happening with the private institutions in Oman, was also supported by (L3gc2) who said 'I think there is a need to affiliate with a suitable overseas university or college'. In addition the interviewee (L1gtc1) recommended the creation of a system or organisational structure which determines the responsibilities of people at various levels and authorities.

However, according to the researcher's experience in the educational sector in Oman, during a period of more than fifteen years, all ministries and institutions in Oman have well organised structures that determine the levels and responsibilities, as documented in Chapters Three and Five. This is also supported by the response of (L3gc2) who said 'we do not face any significant administrative problem with our supervisory organisation; instead, our institutions have been given most authorities needed to play their role'. Hence, the case of (L3gtc1) could be regarded as an individual one, or as a problem that an HEI could face if it were under such a supervisory system. However, (L3gtc1) continued by proposing a management structure for the HEIs, saying:

Therefore, I suggest that any college or higher education institution should be managed by the College Board, not by the administrative organisation from the Ministry. The decision-making in higher education institutions starts from the Department/Division Board, and is then approved from the College/or University Board, not from outside.

Thus, this extract suggests the need to give HEIs more freedom in decision-making and implementing their plans and duties, a feeling that was supported by the head of an HEI (L3gc2).

The delay of training programmes and higher studies to upgrade Omanis' qualifications

One of those difficulties facing this sector is the delay in educational programmes and training initiatives to assist the qualification process of Omanis wanting to become academics, and the limited number of scholarships available, to enable their development and chances of gaining a better job. In this regard (L3gc2) said 'there is the matter of delays in training programmes and scholarships for Omani cadre, since as you know there is a pressing need for national academic staff, and the scholarships for Omanis to qualify them for this area are very little' (L3gc2).

Indeed, this problem of limited numbers of scholarships and programmes, as mentioned elsewhere in this study, occurs because most HEIs are supervised by ministries which are under the system of Civil Services (An Administrative System in Oman which contains all ministries of Civil Services), and the system deals with these ministries and organisations in an equal way, providing to each ministry, a determined number of scholarships and programmes, which could be regarded as very limited.

The lack of well-qualified academic Staff

The above mentioned system of Civil Service places other restrictions, such as preferment of academic staff, and the salary level, and this in turn creates pressure upon the ministries which supervise HEIs because it leads to the problem that

these institutions can not attract well-qualified academic staff and other specialists because of low salaries. This circumstances leads to a lack of academic staff at the start of every academic year, as verified by the response of the same interviewee who said:

In fact, there is another matter related to the joining of the higher education institutions with the system of the Civil Service, which involves most of the ministries of the government. This link leads to the situation whereby these institutions suffer from the administrative routine particularly in terms of preferment of academic staff, providing scholarships to Omanis who these institutions need to qualify urgently. Therefore, as I mentioned the academic institutions should be independent and given more freedom (L3gc2).

Another head of another HEI also confirmed the serious challenge caused by the lack of academic staff, stating ‘also the lack of national manpower in the higher education institutions is another serious challenge’ (L2d6g). Moreover, it was evidenced that not only the governmental institutions are suffering from this difficulty, but also the private institutions are facing this problem as verified by (L3prc2) who said:

We are facing serious difficulties in finding well-qualified academic staff, either from Oman or from other countries. It is too difficult to get full academically qualified people, and if we find them they ask for a high salary, which we are unable to pay, and if we pay such high salaries we must increase the tuition fees which may affect the enrolment of the students to the college, so we are in a difficult equation (L3prc2).

Indeed, this extract, in addition to confirming the lack of academic staff, also indicates the consequences of the potential fall in student numbers, particularly in the private HEIs as explained in Chapter Eight, and was also referred to by another head of one of the HEIs who offered more clarification, saying:

It is very difficult to get staff, and staff are important. Equipment you can buy, classrooms you can build, every thing you can, but if you do not have the good faculty then you could not have a good programme. So staffing is a problem, it is a problem for us here, it is a problem for the university, it is a problem even for private colleges. Because not everybody wants to come into our institutions, and the reason is still that our institutions are not the high academic level for people,

like top professors, Also, salaries are a problem, salaries are not attractive, even in our disciplines... Most expert faculty are either very young and they want to use this a step to get in teaching, or retired and finished their academic career. So you do not get people at mid-career, so faculty is difficult (L3gvc4).

This extract explains clearly the reason why attracting academic staff in Oman's HEIs is difficult, and the problem is laid at the door of the supervising ministries or agencies which operate within the Civil Service System, and thus control salaries. The salaries of academic staff in the SQU on the other hand, are different as explained previously. And the second reason is because most colleges or institutes are new or small and hence, are not attractive to people with high academic qualifications. It is worth noting here that all these factors can negatively influence the quality of these institutions and possibly deter student enrolment.

Deficiency of the documentation process of the sector's activities

Another interviewee indicated that little attention was paid to the documentation process of the sector's activities and this comprised an additional difficulty since 'the matter of the absence of documentation means there is no official mechanism to document all plans of the sector, activities and studies or research, and so no review or evaluation process can be conducted without accurate documentation' (L3gc5). Indeed, it was mentioned earlier that the researcher has faced such matter, when he tried to obtain more documents related to the study, particularly about evaluation process of HE and other certain issues. However, it was indicated that this lack affects several aspects of relevant activities, whether in the administrative dimension or in the academic one.

The absence of the clear decision for the future role of the HEIs

Returning to other difficulties facing the administration of HE, one interviewee stated 'the absence of the clear decision for the future role of these institutions' (L3gc2), while another indicated the weak co-ordination between the components of this sector and its institutions, saying 'the lack of co-ordination

between the interested higher education institutions, sometimes even between those authorities or institutions which are close together and they share specialisation areas and interests, you will see many differences' (L2d1g). Clearly, these issues related to the issue of the absence of a national comprehensive vision and strategy for this sector, and the and the multiplicity of the supervisory organisations upon HEIs, both of which have been discussed in the previous chapters, and earlier in this chapter, respectively.

8.3 Conclusion

Concluding the theme of the administration of the HE sector, it has become obvious that the majority of the key figures interviewed considered the current organisational structure as a main challenge, since it leads to a duplication and scattering of efforts, and the wastage of funds. Hence, most of these participants recommended that all or most of the HEIs should be supervised by one authority. The extent to which the current ministries and institutions are capable of managing and supervising the HE sector, was another issue discussed in this Chapter, and the consensus amongst the interviewees was that some are well prepared, while others are not prepared enough. This situation is brought about by several external factors which limit the ability of these authorities to supervise all of HEIs, such as the shortage of experts, specialists and well-qualified administrative staff, as well as other factors. Therefore the response of most participants were that the country should collaborate with overseas institutions and the international community to benefit from other countries' experiences and foreign experts, and should simultaneously capitalise upon the skills and abilities of national experts and specialists.

In addition to the above-mentioned main challenges, the chapter also discussed the interviewees' responses regarding other challenges facing the administration of HE. It was obvious that the absence of a comprehensive evaluation system was a significant problem, and various possibilities to deal with this issue were discussed. Other problems were the shortage of scholarships

dedicated to preparing Omanis to become academic staff in the HEIs, low salaries for academic staff, deficiency of the documentation process of the sector's activities, the absence of the clear decision for the future role of the HEIs, were attributed to the absence of a national comprehensive strategy for this sector, and some of which were budget-related or occurred because of supervision by agencies with diverse responsibility and which had to apportion funds.

Chapter Nine

Analysis and Discussion of Interview Findings (4)

Financing of Higher Education in Oman

9.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the interview findings regarding the theme of HE financing. Within this overall theme the participants were asked questions relating to the challenge of funding HE in Oman, the privatisation of HE, the role played by the private sector in this field, the ability of Omani families to underwrite their children's study in the private HEIs, the proposed student loan scheme, and other funding strategies as suggested by the interviewees.

9.2 Financing Higher Education

It is well understood from all the interviewees, and in the light of the many documents reviewed in Chapter Five, that HE costs are high, and the state is unable to fund all those who wish to continue their studies after the secondary school stage. It was mentioned that, this is not a situation that applies only in Oman, but many other countries worldwide face this challenge as explained earlier. Therefore, the questions presented to the interviewees related to their opinions regarding the best ways to deal with the current situation and what future proposals they may have in relation to alternative funding streams.

9.2.1 The reality of governmental funding of HE

Hence, although the first question asked of interviewees concerned their views on state funding for HE, the aim of this question was not to learn whether they believed the government could afford to fund HE for all Omani students who wished to progress, but to establish the extent to which the current state financing for HE was responding to the current and known future demand, and whether the government had any plans to increase the HE budget, or otherwise. Clearly, the

capacity of current governmental HEIs (discussed in Chapter Six) is insufficient to meet the demand. And it is equally obvious that even if the government were to increase the overall HE budget, it would not necessarily follow that this would meet the demand either. Therefore in both cases, the interested bodies whether governmental or non-governmental should work towards identifying and developing other funding sources. Hence, the interviewees were asked: *How do you see the reality of HE financing? Does the state funding match the increasing demand for higher education?*

Most interviewees gave similar responses, and many gave long explanations that often contained repetitions of what they had said previously. One such respondent emphasised the serious financial challenge facing the entire educational system in the country, saying:

As we mentioned, the Sultanate is facing the matter of an increasing number of newborns, which causes an increase the number of students entering General Education and Higher Education, and this naturally creates high cost. So, even if the state increases the fund it still cannot afford to pay for all the students, but there is a need for the state to increase higher education funds (L2d2g).

This extract indicates the real challenge as being the high rate of population growth which has inevitable impacts on the national educational system whether GE/BE or HE. It also indicates this participant's belief that the state should indeed increase the funding for the HE sector to allow for the natural population growth, but simultaneously it alludes to the possibility that not all students can expect their HE to be underwritten by the government. Other interviewees such as (L1m2), (L1u9), and (L2d7g) gave similar responses, while (L2d9g) who also expressed the same opinion, strongly emphasised that 'the most serious problem facing this sector is the funding'.

Another participant said 'the governmental finance of higher education is low and insufficient, and therefore the government has worked to reduce the pressure upon itself by continuing to encourage the private sector to take a part in this

field' (L2d6g). Clearly, the budget for this sector is perceived to be below requirements and the private sector involvement is seen as a welcome lifeline that reduces the pressure upon the governmental HEIs as stated by (Murphy, 2004), and as verified by another interviewee in response to the previous question (L1psem1).

This critical under-funding can be understood within the context of the financial difficulties faced by Oman and other Gulf Countries during the past two decades because of the two Gulf wars, and other regional political events, in addition to the decline of oil prices during the late 1990s, and the fact that oil is the mainstay of the national economy. For Oman in particular, the financial situation deteriorated during the turn of the century owing to the decline in oil production (MoNE, 2003b), as explained in Chapter Two. Under all these circumstances the state invited private sector participation in several social and economic fields, as mentioned elsewhere in this study. The above extract from (L2d6g) indicates this reality. However, within the last three years, oil prices have been gradually increasing and in 2006, the price rose sharply to a new high at \$70 per barrel <http://www.omandaily.com/> (24/04/2006). Even so, in this improving economic climate, there has been no declared intention to increase the budget for HE.

The overwhelming majority (42 of 50 interviewees) believed the state fund for HE to be insufficient and recommended governmental increases in support to this sector. Five people gave different explanations, while just three interviewees considered the state financial involvement to be enough. In their responses, these particular interviewees raised other issues rather than supporting their claims that funding was sufficient, one interviewee, for example, saying:

I think the Omani family should understand that the current life is different than before, so they should accept the programmes of the Ministry of Health and other organisations to reduce the high rate of childbirth which has led to the current high population growth (L1u9).

In fact, there has already been a sharp decline from 3.5% in 1993 to 1.8% in 2003 National Census figures, and as verified the participants, such as (L2d4g) when responding to the question concerning the Vision of 'Oman 2020' saying: "the Vision was formulated according to the population growth rate of 3.4% while the last census showed that this had declined to 1.8%".

In the same direction, another interviewee who believed the public funding to be sufficient said: 'I think the budget allocated for the education sector including higher education and training is sufficient. The problem is with the plurality of organisations' (L2d15g), thus suggesting the shortage of HE funding to be a result of inefficient management. Indeed, this was mentioned earlier as a main issue facing the HE sector in Oman, and the ongoing debate between interested bodies on this, will be considered in more detail in the next sections of this chapter. Certainly, the current arrangements do lead to the scattering of funds, and the duplication of efforts in some respect, but they could not be regarded as the sole cause of the current shortage of HE funds for this field. However, another view considers that the current plurality of supervisory organisations actually secures a particular level of financing for the sector, since they all require certain resources, and it is felt that if administration were to be concentrated in one body, funding would actually decrease, since it would be dealt with as one governmental unit, as will be explained in the next section.

On the other hand, several points were raised by those participants who said that the public fund for HE was not enough. For example (L1u12) said:

In the light of the growing number of outputs from the Secondary Stage, and with the same limited capacity of places for study in the higher education institutions and limited financial support, it could said that we are wasting our national human resources. However, even though the state recognises this situation, the public finances for higher education are as before with very little difference, which is unsuitable given the increasing demand.

Although this interviewee provided a rational argument for increasing the HE budget, indicating the loss to the nation of educated manpower, s/he was not able

to identify a clear governmental proposal to deal with this matter. Furthermore, (L3gu3) supported this lack of action, saying: ‘up to now the financial policy is not clear - yes it is clear within each institution in terms of how their allocated budgets should be spent, but how to finance this sector in the future, or when there is a shortfall, is not clear’.

Thus, it could be said that this ambiguous position regarding HEIs’ funding is a contributor towards to the current shortage, since the annual changes in the total number of students registered in the governmental HEIs and those receiving scholarships, as explained in Chapter Five, demonstrate the budget to fluctuate within and among the various components of the HE sector. It is worth noticing that this number is not changing positively, ie, it is not increasing annually, but rather might increase for one or two years, and then decrease for the next three or four years. Such instability means that while one or two institutions do not experience financial problems as expressed by (L3gu3) who said ‘actually, we do not face serious financial problems in ... only sometimes when we want additional funding for some projects or research, but this does not hinder our plans as we go to alternative sources’, many other HEIs are suffering and facing financial difficulties as verified by (L2d6g), (L2d8g), (L3gvc3) and (L3gvc4) who complained, saying:

we are facing financial problems, in relation to everything, yes, most things we want to do, we cannot, because of the financial constraints. Yes it does, it is affecting us. I mean we are not in the stage where we do not have basic things, but for development we need to have a bit more funding (L3gvc4).

Moreover, the deficit in the budget allocated for this sector is one of the main reasons why the high increasing number of SSGs cannot be absorbed by the governmental HEIs, as discussed in Chapter Six, and as highlighted by the interviewees, the majority of whom regarded lack of funding as the prime cause of that situation {see for instance, (L2d2g) and (L2d1g), and the World Bank Report (2001)}.

We face the challenge of delivering concepts of higher education to the people in the financial institutions, who cannot discern the difference between higher studies or postgraduate studies and scientific research, or between accreditation and certificate equivalence.

Such misunderstand between financial bodies and HE's specialists would lead to reduce the finances that should be located to the HE sector. This overall lack of resources was heavily blamed by another key figure who said:

To consider a way forward is one thing, but to implement it is another issue. So people talk loud, we want this, this and this, but when it comes to implementation and the issues of funding - resources are not easy to get. We want a lot, but we can not get a lot. So there is consideration, but the implementation process is not good because of lack of resources (L1u6).

This extract draws attention to the sharp difference between the rhetoric of the aims and ambitions of the country's development plans, and the tools to implement these, and the view was also shared by the Majles A'Shura and the Majles A'Ddhawla as indicated by (L4sc3) who said:

There is not enough funding for the HE sector, and there are many studies, and policies suggested by Majles A'Shura, and some are in Majles A'Ddhawla and most of them are unimplemented, and the government produced several reasons for not implementing these suggestions such as the lack of general budget, the international changes and the oil prices, thus they did not implement these plans (L4sc3).

These views verified the gaps in the planning process as well as at the level of implementation, as mentioned several times in this study, and which should stimulate serious scientific research in the field to discover the gaps and provide the necessary evidence and realistic recommendations to the government in order to contribute towards reforming the situation. This could include seeking help from international specialised institutions and other experts and experiences as suggested by (L1u5) who said:

I think we need to seek help from other international experts and organisations. So we should get consultants to study this issue and discover where we are going wrong or where the gaps are in our planning, and then they produce their

recommendations, which we should in turn study and then decide what we have to implement and what we don't (L1u5).

Consequently, this extract suggests the need for the State not to be insular but to reach out for other inputs from the international community and try to identify a better planning and implementation mechanism. The next few questions presented to the interviewees aimed to reveal their ideas regarding options to improve the current situation.

9.2.2 Privatisation of HE or partnership in HE

It was clear that the vast majority of interviewees considered public funding for HE to be insufficient for the demand, and that the state is facing a serious challenge in this respect. And it was well-understood that the invitation to the private sector to participate in HE and the various encouragements offered, have been direct outcomes of this anxiety. In response, the private sector has been proactive, and several private HEIs have been established, particularly during the last five years, which have begun to absorb a number of SSGs and play some role in this field as explained in Chapters Three and Five.

However, several questions have been raised during this period of private sector involvement, such as: what is the nature of the private sector role? To what extent is the state willing to allow this sector to play this role? Does it want privatisation of the sector or to be in partnership with it? What type of these two private sector roles does the country actually need? What is the nature of the state role now that the private sector has entered the field? These are the initial questions posed to the interviewees, although it is recognised that other areas and issues related to this dimension also exist. However, the first question regarding this theme presented to them was: *It is obvious that the state faces difficulty in financing the study of all students in higher education. What is your opinion about the privatisation of education in general and HE in particular?*

In their responses, the majority of the interviewees differentiated between the concept of privatisation, and the partnership between the government and the private sector in this field. Most rejected the idea of privatising the entire field and giving the private sector the sole responsibility for managing HEI without any superintendence from government, but the majority agreed with the notion of a partnership between the government and the private sector in HE provision. Some were happy with privatisation and did not see the need for any restriction on its development, while in contrast, others disagreed completely with privatisation even in a partnership. Yet others did not indicate a position in this respect, but instead raised supplementary points for consideration.

In fact, the majority of interviewees' responses on these issues were very similar, and hence a sample of their contributions will be offered to represent their ideas, as follows:

Privatisation is a global trend, and my view is that we need privatisation but that means a partnership with the private sector, not to privatise this field as a whole (L1pscm1).

If privatisation means that the private university or college should be like any profit-making business agency, I do not agree with it. The private university or college that obtains governmental support should be sponsored by both the government and the private sector (L2d1g).

I am with privatisation in higher education provided that the higher education institutions are under state supervision (L2ex2).

I support privatisation - yes, in the Sultanate there is a need for a kind of participation from the private sector, but I believe that the government has to be the major player (L3gvc4).

The two sectors - governmental and private - should play a role in this field, thus the state should establish higher education institutions and at the same time open the chance to invest in this area (L1u10).

I am not with privatisation if it means to privatise higher education as a whole, because this means that the citizen will shoulder the major burden, and the Omani citizen does not have enough income (L3gvc3).

Frankly, I do not like this word 'Privatisation' in this field, because I do believe that it should be pure privatisation, since this is a great responsibility, and privatisation in the economic world means a different thing, so it should not be used in the education field as it used in the economic sector. The state should not renounce its responsibilities, therefore, the governmental education should not be privatised, but the government and the private sector should work together as it is possible to provide education in general and higher education in particular, for any student who wish and has ability to continue his study, and the government should also play the supervision and superintendent role upon these institutions (L4bs1).

I do not believe in complete privatisation because this will be at the expense of quality, so the state should continue to shoulder some role and at the same time play a supervisory role (L1u7).

We do not need to privatise the governmental higher education institutions, but at the same time the government should encourage and support the private sector to take part in this area (L1u2).

I support the privatisation of this field, provided it is under governmental supervision and in accordance with the requirements of the labour market (L2d12g).

I reject the whole privatisation. The state should play the role in this sector, because education should not be left to the private sector, which as is well known, is concerned with the profit. The education as I understand is a sacred task like worship, and such a duty should be managed by the state (L3gc5).

These are some extracts from those interviewees who agree with the conception of privatisation as being a partnership between the government and the private sector. The responses of the other participants who verified this perspective are similar to those above. Moreover, these extracts indicate that these interviewees believe that they do not want HEIs to become like private profit-making organisations, as stated frankly by (L2d1g), (L3gc5) and (L4bs1), and as confirmed by another participant who said: 'if there will be private higher education institutions, these institutions should not be concerned only with profit like business companies' (L3gvu4). Another participant regarded the provision of education as a sacred task (L3gc5), while another one considered it a responsibility of the state (L4bs1), and some expressed concerns about quality (L1u7), which led most of them to suggest that the private HEIs should be under strong governmental supervision, as will be illustrated in the next section.

Hence, these interviewees suggested that the government should have two roles, the first being that of the main provider of this level of education, as the main or key partner with the private sector in this field, implying that it should continue to shoulder the biggest burden, through establishing other HEIs and enrolling a larger number of SSGs, providing scholarships internally and externally. Additionally, it should support the private sector, since HE is costly, and even though the private sector offers HE opportunities, it can not provide these free of charge. Thus, Omani citizens will ultimately bear the cost of their children's HE, despite the fact that they have insufficient income, as confirmed by a number on the interviewees. The second role to be assumed by the government is that of monitoring the private HEIs through a newly-established superintendent system as well as a well-qualified supervisory authority to conduct this role effectively, in order to ensure high quality HE.

However, other interviewees produced slightly different views, for instance, (L3gvu4) said 'if you mean the private universities or colleges are owned by the state, and the government supports them as well as the students, I accept that, but if you mean the private universities or colleges as private profitable agencies I do not agree with this kind of privatisation'. This extract indicates that this participant disagreed with privatisation if it is driven by business considerations, and suggested that the government should sponsor all HEIs and have some role in sponsoring those of the private sector.

9.2.3 Does the country need privatisation in HE?

As already mentioned, the majority of interviewees made a distinction between the idea of total privatisation in HE and the notion of a partnership between the government and the private sector in this field, and among this large majority, it was generally agreed that a public-private sector partnership was desirable. However, the interviewees were asked: *And to what extent does the country need it? And why?* Within this overall group, various sub-groups emerged, the first one comprising the majority, encompassing those who believed

there was a strong need for private sector participation, for instance, (L1pscm1), (L1u9), (L2d6g), (L1u8), (L1u12), (L3gu3), (L3prc1), (L4bs2), (L2d5g), and those who saw that the country needed this type of arrangement, for example (L1m2), (L1u10), (L4sc3), (L3gc2) and (L2d15g). In addition, there were other participants who did not differentiate between the concept of total privatisation and the idea of a partnership between the government and the private sector in this field. One such interviewee stated clearly that ‘the country needs privatisation’ (L4sc4), and (L2d3g) agreed, without imposing any restriction about its nature.

Hence, most of these interviewees who agreed with the idea of privatisation if it is seen as a partnership with government, and if the government role as main provider and as supervisory authority is continued, believed that Oman needed this kind of participation. As an example of their responses, (L3gvu4) said ‘I think we need private higher education’, a similar response was produced by (L2ex2) who said ‘I am with privatisation in higher education provided there is state supervision’, and (L3gvc4) said ‘I think the Sultanate needs participation from the private sector’, while other interviewees offered a rationale for their opinions, some of which appear below:

We strongly need a partnership with the private sector in this field, since as you know higher education is very expensive, and the government cannot expand this sector more than what it is now, but by encouraging the private sector to invest in this field, it could be expanded (L1pscm1).

We strongly need privatisation, because there is a high number of graduates from the Secondary Stage and the governmental institutions cannot absorb all of them, so we should have privatisation to open more institutions but we should also keep our governmental institutions. Privatisation is now very common throughout the world (L1u9).

In the light of the increasing number of students who graduate from Secondary School, it is the time for the private sector to invest in this field, so there is pressing need for the privatisation (L1u8).

In higher education, because of the low funding available; we need privatisation, since the state cannot afford to pay for all students to study in higher education (L1u10).

Because we are in a difficult financial position and we cannot provide a university education for all our children, we should accept private education (L4bs2).

This sample of extracts offered the most important reasons for the beliefs that Oman needs an HE system in which the public and private sector work in partnership. The most important rationales were: the high cost of HE studies; the high and increasing number of SSGs in Oman; and the limited capacity of government HEIs to fund all students who are eligible to progress to HE. Many other interviewees, such as (L3ex2), (L3gvc4), (L1u4), (L1u12), (L1u5) and (L4sh3), echoed the views expressed in these extracts, while another participant offered an explanation about why the private sector should participate in providing HE, saying:

The private sector should participate, and why the private sector? Because this sector will benefit from those graduates who will work in the private agencies and replace the expatriates who are paid much more by these companies, which means that the company will save a lot of money by employing national manpower. Also by qualifying a national workforce, production will rise, and so all these come from the Country or the State providing education for the private companies, so it is for their benefit they should share, first to ensure quality products come up, to ensure or to get new creations to develop their factories, devices/instruments etc (L1u5).

Furthermore, other participants suggested that if the government wants the private sector to participate, it is not enough to give the opportunity, but the State should also support this sector financially and professionally as indicated by (L1u2) and (L3gvu4), by providing basic needs to enable them to participate effectively. In this respect (L4sh2) said ‘we need privatisation, but the private sector needs more support and encouragement to participate in this field’, and another interviewee said:

Privatisation is good, but it is not enough to give a chance to the private sector to invest in this field, it should be able to provide the basic thing to this sector to invest, I mean the state should give loans to enable them to establish universities and colleges, or to build these institutions totally, and then open the field to them under some restrictions and guidance (L4sc4).

The issue of state incentives will be explained in the light of the interviewees' responses to another question concerned with this issue. Furthermore, in their explanations, some participants mentioned the advantages of the public/private partnership in HE, one of them saying:

It will serve the education sector, because a competitive environment will be generated between institutions, and this will promote the performance of these institutions. Also this will lead society to develop the habit of paying for education and not depending only on the government (L3gu3).

This response indicates two beneficial issues, these being: the inevitable competition between HEIs with the result that they become attractive to students and motivated to perform well; and secondly, the development of a different culture in which more families come to accept that they have a responsibility to pay for education, as was noted by (L1m2) who said 'in the very near future the citizens should participate in financing their children's higher education'.

Two further potential benefits were also identified, the first that with the option to pay for good quality education in Oman, many families who reluctantly send their children overseas to study either because they are not eligible to enter governmental HEIs, or because governmental HEIs do not offer the particular specialisms which their children wish to study, would no longer have to do that. In this respect (L3gvc3) said:

And the citizen who wants a certain qualification or particular specialisation for his children and who has enough money, or whose children do not achieve the grade required for entering the governmental higher education institutions, can find other private institutions to register them (L3gvc3).

Indeed, the existence of private HEIs also provides flexibility for those students who want to change their specialisations during their study period, since this opportunity is either not currently available in the state institutions, or not easy to obtain. Moreover, another advantage was mentioned by (L3prc4) who said: 'Privatisation could be regarded as a source of national and international

experience, it leads to avoid bureaucracy and generates specialists with wide vision and creative thinking, so it is good but we should be vigilant'. Although this interviewee predicted a less centralised HE system as a result of privatisation, and the generation of specialists and people with the ability to innovate, it was not indicated how such outcomes might be achieved. Nevertheless, it be could imagined that the competitive environment would promote more challenges and motivate institutions to develop in niche areas.

Furthermore, another participant also suggested similar benefits of a public/private partnership, not only for HE but also for GE/BE, saying: 'I think we need privatisation in both General/Basic Education and Higher Education, because this opens the door to more advancement' (L2d3g), whereas there were contrasting opinions on the issue of private sector involvement at the GE/BE level, (L1u10) commenting 'we do not need privatisation at all in the General Education, because education and health are some of the most important responsibilities of the state', and (L2d12g) adding:

I am not with privatisation of General/Basic Education, because this is one of the government duties towards its citizens, and it is a shared right for all citizens, and the state should guarantee that all citizens receive this, and this can not be achieved through private education.

The second category, contains those interviewees who perceived the demand for a public/private HE partnership to be not very pressing, (L4sh1) for instance, saying: 'we slightly need it', and (L2d14g) observing that 'if there is a need, it is only slight, and there should be strong control and follow up by the government to ensure quality'.

while another participant was undecided, saying: 'we need it, but to what extent; this depends on the political decision of the government which should

decide to which level it should provide free education' (L2d15g), and also another participant believed that 'this issue needs more thought and study' (L2d4g).

In fact, there were many participants, who offered more opinions concerning the public/private partnership, mostly stipulating the need for private HEIs to be under a strong governmental supervisory system. (L3prc2) and (L2d13g) for instance, gave very similar responses, the latter saying: 'the country needs privatisation [the partnership], but must provide a strong control system in order to ensure quality', while another participant said 'I encourage privatisation in higher education, but only if it is under state supervision' (L2d8g), and (L3prc1) produced a similar answer.

Indeed, most of these interviewees were anxious about quality, for example (L3gvc4) said 'we have to be very careful to ensure quality', and similar sentiments were expressed by (L3gvu4), (L3gu3) and (L2d14g), while others favoured continued government supervision to ensure quality in the private HEIs. (L1pscm1) for instance, said 'the government should continue its control of this sector to ensure quality' and another demand for a stronger governmental role came from (L1u8) who said 'I think the state should play the most important role to ensure quality within these institutions', whereas another participant believed the private HEIs themselves should consider their quality assurance mechanisms, saying 'the private higher education institutions should pay high attention to ensure quality' (L3gvu4). In line with these opinions, another interviewee admitted that privatisation could bring benefits, but only if the quality could be guaranteed:

Privatisation is a double-edged sword. It could be highly beneficial for the country if the quality is ensured, but it could also be bad if it reduces the quality of higher education. Therefore, I reject this approach and I think the country does not need it (L2d10g).

Clearly, the quality issue is appreciated, and it appears that there is scepticism about the ability of any organisation, governmental or otherwise, to assure the

quality of private HEIs. Moreover, even those who were in favour of the partnership arrangement expressed concerns about quality assurance, one saying: 'it should be noted that the private sector is only concerned with profit, so there is a question about the quality, and to what extent the state can ensure quality in these private institutions' (L2d6g). Hence, although this participant, as mentioned earlier is one of these who agreed with the government/private partnership, he/she still seemed anxious about quality.

Another participant raised the absence of a clear and comprehensive philosophy for HE, saying: 'the privatisation of education or higher education, if not based on a clear philosophy, will lead to poor quality education, but if it is built on a strong and clear base it will serve the education sector' (L3-gu3). This view was supported also by (L3-prc4) who said 'privatisation is good concept provided that the principles, bases and a superintendent system are established by the government'.

In contrast to the general opinion that some degree of privatisation was required in Oman's HE sector, some interviewees were entirely negative towards any suggestion of private sector involvement, and others raised different issues for consideration. For instance, (L3gtc1), (L2d14g) and (L4sh1) disagreed with the notion of privatisation even in a partnership with the public sector. One of them said 'The state would not need to ask for help from the private sector if its planning was perfect, so if our educational services are well planned and our finances are realistic and used well, why should we ask for help from the private agencies?' (L4sh1). Clearly, according to this interviewee, the blame for the current difficulties lies in poor educational planning, which should be remedied rather than encouraging private sector participation. In line with these directions, other interviewees gave more justifications for their disagreement with the trend towards a public/private partnership, one of them saying:

I believe that education is a sovereign issue and a government responsibility, and if the government decided to privatise this sector, it must retain the

administration of it. However, what is happening now in Oman, I am personally not in agreement with, because there is governmental support going to the private sector (L2d9g).

This response clearly indicates the belief that the private sector is involving itself in HE purely for financial gain, which is ultimately at the expense of the state. The interviewee noticed that the private sector appeared in the HE field only after the government set a range of encouragements, saying:

before the government declared that it would give the private sector different encouragements, there was no any private agency or businessman wanting to invest in this field. So there was no participation from this sector until the government declared that it would support it by several encouragements (L2d9g).

This opinion was also given by (L2d12g) who believed the Omani private sector to be greedy, with most businesspeople thinking only of their profit and benefits. Interestingly, (L4bs2) produced a similar response, despite actually being a businessman. Consequently, in the above-mentioned response of (L2d9g), it was suggested that the state should save the money spent on encouraging the private sector and use it to support more students to enrol in the governmental institutions, saying:

I hope the government spends all this money in expanding the capacity of higher education directly by absorbing more students. I hope to see another university with the name the University of Oman, fully funded by the government, like in Britain, all the universities are funded by the government or churches, I do not hear that there are private universities in Britain (L2d9g).

The idea of establishing a second governmental university to partner SQU, as was discussed in Chapter Six, was soundly raised by this interviewee and others mentioned elsewhere in the study. Hence, in returning to other responses from participants who disagreed with the private sector's participation, another interviewee stated:

We should understand that we live in a country which depends on one main income source which is oil revenue, like other countries in the region, and

according to this rich source we are living a good life with all services provided by the state. This situation is going to change within the current decade and the next one, and the Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020' suggested some policies which make Omani citizens pay taxes for many things while their income is low and will remain the same (L1u10).

The change in the Omani people's living standards is highlighted in this extract, which reflects on the good fortunes of Omanis within the first 25 years of the country's Renaissance, and that began to decline from the mid-1990s according to oil market fluctuations and other international and regional circumstances as mentioned earlier. In fact, the Vision of '*Oman 2020*' considered several remedial policies in this respect, most of which depend on a growing and vibrant private sector, while others rely on the people taking some responsibilities for their own lives. Actually, some of these ideas have already been changed due to objections from Omani citizens who still wish to be provided for by the state in all respects. However, in support of a fairer system, the interviewee in question continued, saying:

So if the state wishes the citizen to participate through paying taxes, it should at the same time work to increase his income, as happens in other countries. This is regarding those employed, while for other people such as fishermen, cultivators/farmers and other low income background people, the situation is worse. This means that there is some ignorance of the human condition of these people's categories (L1u10).

Thus, the interviewee drew attention to the need for government to ensure that if the Omani people have to fund their children's HE, the people should also be provided with opportunities for employment that allow such amounts of disposable income to be obtained. Without such efforts, more social problems will occur and the gap between the small category of wealthy people and the majority of the population will increase. Indeed, large numbers would suffer from the imposition of such proposals, as mentioned by other interviewees elsewhere in the study, and by this participant who raised the issue of ignorance of the majority of Omanis' living conditions.

A separate issue regarding privatisation was raised by one interviewee who, when asked the question, immediately said ‘the privatisation of higher education – when, now?’ (L3gtq1), and continued, saying:

I believe that it should not be allowed at this early stage of higher education in Oman. It needs knowledge and experience. The private sector in this country wants to get profit from the first term or first year, privatisation is now very dangerous for higher education in Oman in this stage. Let the field grow and gain enough knowledge and experience (L3gtc1).

A similar response was produced by (L2d14g), who wondered why the country was hurrying in undertaking such a step, and who said:

We are still at the beginning of our higher education, while in developed countries the situation is different. They started their higher education a long time ago, and they privatised most sectors except for education and higher education, although some of these countries have privatised this sector. They have large projects and sectors, why should we start with privatising higher education, the quality will be damaged. I am not with those who open private universities, this is my personal view (L2d14g).

However, the interviewee ended by saying ‘if there is a need, it is only a small need for partnership, and it should be under strong control and follow up by the government to ensure quality’ (L2d14g). In line with this approach, another interviewee said:

I believe that education is a responsibility of the state and morally it should deliver this duty. Even those countries which have the conceptions of privatisation and globalisation do not have private universities or very few. The entry of the private sector as investors in this field is not comfortable, because this means that the state is abandoning its authority (L2d2g).

Indeed another interviewee (L4bs1), who has been mentioned earlier, also indicated this factor, despite agreeing with the notion of public/private partnership, saying: ‘this is a great responsibility ... the state should not renounce these responsibilities’, and continued to emphasise the need for private sector participation to be under the government superintendent system.

However, the government has already opened the door to the private sector, and as has already been discussed elsewhere in this thesis, there are several private universities and colleges, as verified by (L2ex3) who said 'it is already there; there are so many private colleges'. Nonetheless, such discussion with the interviewees was extremely important, since it clarified several dimensions and drew attention to issues such as: the importance of formulating a clear vision and policy for the participation of the private sector in this field, which determines objectives, bases, rules, and all other relevant dimensions; discussing the ability of Omani people to afford their children's HE; identifying the difficulties and challenges facing the role of the private sector in HE; building the system of administering and supervising this sector; and developing the system of quality assurance and the evaluation process in the private HEIs.

9.2.4 The extent to which the private HEIs participate in reducing the pressure

A number of participants indicated the private HEIs as one of the main sources of help in funding HE and reducing the pressure created by the high demand for HE. As was explained earlier, the country has planned the participation of private HE to be a cornerstone in the HE expansion process, and several policies have been formulated to attract the private sector to invest in this field. These have led to the establishment of the recent three new private universities, while there is only one governmental university in the country. In addition, the country has made every effort to encourage people to accept their responsibilities in affording their children's study in HE, particularly those who did not gain high marks in their GCSE examination.

However, and despite the establishment of 20 private HEIs within the last ten years, including the three private universities, it was noted that these institutions attract only a small number of SSGs, in 2004 one of these private universities enrolling only 245 students, 185 of whom were actually in receipt of government funding (L3pru3). Indeed, throughout Chapter Six, the interviewees' responses to a previous question in this connection were discussed. The question was

concerned with the reasons and factors that stand behind the low participation of the private HEIs in absorbing high number of SSGs, despite a number of institutions existed, and despite several encouragements that offered by the government to these institutions.

Several factors and challenges were mentioned by the interviewees as hindering the role of the private HEIs and reducing their participation in absorbing a significant number of SSGs, most of which reasons were discussed in Chapter Six. Other reasons and challenges, which are strongly related to the theme of financing of HE and relevant issues will be discussed now, according to their degree of commonality amongst the interviewee population. The most frequently identified problems will be discussed first.

The impact of Omani families' low income

The income of Omani families is one of the main economic issues concerning the government, since it is one among several factors could affect people's living standards. Obviously, there is a need to conduct a specialised economic study of many variables related to Oman's income and expenditure, as well as that of individuals, but asking 52 key figures in the Omani government about this issue provides a good chance to establish government perspectives, particularly since some are from economic bodies. Hence, it was possible to gain educated opinions about the level of income of most Omani people and accordingly, their standard of living.

Consequently, it was indicated that the low number of SSGs admitted to private HEIs is a reflection of the inability of Omani families to pay the tuition fees, and not a fault of the HEIs setting entry standards that are too high. In fact, 36 of the 50 interviewees from different levels gave this reason, some, such as (L1u10), (L1u12) and (L2d3g), citing it as the main obstacle, while others addressed it among others. Comments were made, for example, like:

Private HE has a lot of capacity, but the problem is that the people have no capability to pay fees ... So the problem as I said, is paying fees (L1m2).

One reason is because the income of Omani citizens is still modest and accordingly the number of people who are able to pay to educate their children is small and limited to certain categories in society. The biggest category in the country is naturally the low income families (L1u8).

.... also, the financial ability of the Omani family is low and weak, and they cannot afford their children's study (L3gu3).

The monthly income of the Omani citizen is low, which does not enable him to afford his children's study in higher education (L3gvc3).

Another participant expressed the opinion that even fairly well-paid Omanis are unable to pay such fees, saying: 'even the high officials, if they have enough money to spend for educating one child, they cannot afford the study of three or five children. So we should think about other sources to finance the students' (L3gvu4). This extract draws attention to another relevant issue, this being the usual size of Omani families, which as noted in Chapter Five, is about 8.5 person (MoHE, 2002c). Indeed, it is common to find families with more than ten children, so even people in comparatively good financial positions, do not find it possible to fund all their children in private HEIs, as clarified also by another interviewee who said:

Not a lot of people can afford to pay tuition fees, and people feel they need options where they can get it free, especially because of the number of the children in the family. If you have six children and then they start every year or two years in higher education, it will be very difficult to pay for them (L3gvc4).

And another participant verified this situation by saying:

You know the income of Omani citizens is low. What I mean to say is, that if you compare this with the cost of living of the people they can not afford to send their children to the private colleges, and normally, the parent has not only one child; they have so many children, it is impossible (L2ex3).

Hence, the family size was clearly raised as a problem. Moreover, another participant (L2d1g) indicated additional circumstances that cause difficulties for some families in particular, as follows:

the most important thing here is that there are many students whose families cannot afford their study even if they wished to enter private institutions, because many of them are living far away from these institutions, so how can they pay for study and residence and other expenditures?

On the same theme, (L3prc2) offered more explanation about such circumstances, saying:

You should remember that many of these students are from small villages and rural areas and their families are unable to afford the study expenses; it is not only the tuition fees; it is money for their hostels, food, transport and other expenditures, so how can they afford these expenses? (L3prc2).

Obviously, such expenditure overwhelms most Omani families, and even if it were lower, it may still be prohibitive, as mentioned by (L1u10) who said 'even if the tuition fees in the local private higher education institutions were below the current level, most Omani students could not enter private institutions because it is beyond the ability of most parents to pay'. Accordingly, the researcher thought this type of response offered a chance to pose another question relating to the thousands of Omani students who study in the UAE and are self-funded. Having asked the question of how parents are able to send their children to the UAE or to other countries, but not to fund them to remain at home in Oman to study in the private HEIs, which theoretically should be much less expensive, one interviewee responded:

Do not forget that most of those students studied education because most Omani people regarded a job in the education sector as almost guaranteed, and therefore, believing their children would get jobs as teachers, most parents took loans on the understanding that when their children had graduated they would be able to repay them since they would be employed by the Ministry of Education. But just from this year this situation is going to change because this type of job is nearly all covered by Omanis in most of the school subjects, so it is not going to be possible for a parent to get loans to educate their children, because it will not be

easy to get a job in most areas in the governmental sector, and hence they will not be able to pay back the loans (L1u10).

In fact, the majority of students who study abroad are aiming to become teachers, but as the teaching field has become almost fully Omanised, the opportunities for such students to find employment are declining. Some interviewees moved on to the wider implications of privatisation and the inability of most Omanis family to enrol their children in the HEIs. One such implication was indicated by (L3gc2) who said:

We should think carefully about the matter of the Omani family's inability to fund its children's higher education study, since this situation will lead to the country educating the children from rich backgrounds, while those children from low income families will not be able to receive good education, which means they will go to vocational training and become employed in low income jobs.

Such influence could indeed lead to an 'elite education', which restricts entry to children from average or low social classes, and steers them into vocational courses and low paid employment, thereby increasing the gap between the rich and poorer people, and creating other social problems. Moreover, the low participation by SSGs in the private HEIs has a detrimental effect on those institutions, since they are unable to plan effectively, as one of these institution's members volunteered:

The most important problem facing private higher education institutions is the inability to plan before the start of the academic year, since we do not know how many students will be registered, so we do not know how many new staff we need, places for study, or laboratories, as well as the arrangement of other services and facilities which should be provided (L3pru3).

This extract indicates the knock-on effect of unpredictable student numbers, that lead to various problems in the private HEIs, which will ultimately witness unwanted fluctuations, and possibly closure. This predicted position is perhaps the reason why (L2ex3) said: 'the number of current private higher education institutions is enough now, I am afraid that maybe in future some of these colleges will be closed as happened in some countries'. Indeed, this pessimistic future

picture was also mentioned by other participants who drew attention to this possibility if the situation continues as it is now, particularly ‘with the absence of any financial mechanisms to support the citizen’ as mentioned by (L3-gvu4). Indeed, (L1uv3) also alluded to this expectation, saying:

However, I am afraid that in future, according to the limited finances and income of the country, the government cannot continue supporting the private higher education institutions, and because these institutions are relying on government support, if that happens they will face critical financial problems, but we do not wish that.

A similar response came from (L1u6) who said: ‘they are facing serious difficulty in term of resources, they do not have the resources to run the current universities, and I think if the government does not come in and help them, they are creating problems, disaster’. Clearly, if the Omani people were able to finance their children’s HE in the private HEIs, the position of these institutions would be different. Hence, this indicates a pressing need to review the policy regarding the establishment of these private institutions, particularly in view of the apparent over-provision and the similarity in the fields of study and specialisations. Furthermore, there is a need to review the system of governmental encouragement and the method of financing the sector.

The tuition fees

Sixteen (16) interviewees mentioned this factor as one reason that deters students who wish to join the private HEIs. One such participant said ‘the tuition fees is one of the main reasons’ (L2d6g), and similar responses were produced by (L1uc1), (L1u4), (L1uv3), (L2ex3), (L4sc4), (L2d10g), (L2d9g), (L4bs1), (L2d4g), while (L2d2g) believed there was a ‘need to review the tuition fees and study the extent to which they are convenient to the citizens’ ability’.

Other interviewees made a comparison with other countries. For instance, (L2guv2) said ‘parents prefer to send their children to the universities and colleges in the UAE, since the tuition there are less, and they cannot afford them here,

while the study in some colleges in UAE is free', and another participant gave a similar response, noting that in Oman 'the tuition fees are indeed high' (L2d8g). Another interviewee gave slightly more explanation, saying:

One of the main points here is that the tuition fees of the colleges in Oman are slightly higher than those in some other universities, such as in the UAE and Malaysia. Thus, the citizens prefer to send their children to overseas universities than register them here since the tuition fees are less, as long as the facilities of private universities overseas universities are the same as in the private colleges in Oman (L3prc1).

This statement was actually given by one of the heads of a private HEI. However, this view was not shared by other participants from the private sector, such as (L3pru3) who said: 'our tuition fees are now between OR. 2,200 and 2,400 - do you think this is high? Indeed, this level of fees now equals the fees of any private school in Muscat'. In fact, it is correct that there are some high quality schools in Muscat that do charge such fees (between OR. 1,600 and 1,800) but not all private schools ask this amount. Nevertheless it seems that such a figure as mentioned by this interviewee is reasonable in view of the comments of other interviewees who are not in the private sector. For example, (L1u10) said 'maybe the tuition fees are not very high but they are beyond the ability of the citizens', and another key governmental figure said:

The citizens always ask to reduce the tuition fees, but if we compare the fees in Oman with those in other Gulf countries, there is no difference, the average is OR. 2,000, which is almost the same as the cost of tuition fees in a private school, so how can we ask the private higher education institutions to reduce their fees? (L1pscm1).

Actually, the tuition fees in HEIs whether in the Gulf Countries or others depend on the level, field of study and the quality of the institutions, since it is true that some institutions are asking less than these fees (between OR. 1,600 and 1,800), but most of these establishments are offering social science specialisations, while the tuition fees of other institutions, which provide practical sciences (such as engineering and medicine), are much higher. The issue of

academic input was raised by another interviewee, also from a private HEI, who drew attention to the link between the level of tuition fees and the quality of education, saying:

One of the challenges we are facing is the difficulty of obtaining academic staff, and this matter is related to another issue, which is that the high professional academic staff ask for high salaries, which we cannot offer, since if we are going to offer high salaries, this means we should increase the tuition fees and the cost of other facilities and this will deter students from enrolling with us. On the other hand, maybe we can get low qualified academic staff who do not ask for high salaries, which might enable us to reduce the tuition fees, but this will affect the quality negatively. Not only that, but the level of facilities, laboratories, learning resources centres and other services could affect the quality of education, and at the same time affect the level of tuition fees (L3prc2).

This interviewee indicates the administrative, financial and academic difficulties, some of which will be discussed later in related issues, but it is obvious that the contribution clarifies the strong relation between these dimensions in any educational institution, showing that a shortage or deficiency in one, will influence the others.

The financial position of private HEIs

Throughout all the previous discussion, the issue of HE funding is represented as a cornerstone for the sector, and consequently a shortage of finance impacts on all HEIs whether governmental (leading to limit the capacity of enrolment), or private (leading to the need to charge higher fees for higher quality). In fact, this issue underlies most of the challenges, as indicated in several discussions either within this study or within other similar studies that have been reviewed.

Hence, the inability of Omani families to finance their children's education in the private HEIs, the need to raise tuition fees, and the need to ensure quality, all of which were mentioned by most interviewees, are all attributable to the matter of funding shortages. This awareness was clarified through the responses of many interviewees who regarded the funding situation as one of the principal difficulties

facing the private HEIs. For instance (L2d6g) said: ‘they are facing a financial problem which limits their progress in developing their institutions and promoting quality’, and similar responses were given by (L4sc4), (L3gc2), (L3prc2), (L2d5g), (L2guv2) and (L3gvu4). Another participant predicted a very worrying picture for the future, saying: ‘they are facing serious difficulties in terms of resources, they do not have the resources to run the current the universities, and I think if the government does not come in and help them; they are creating problems, disaster’ (L1u6).

It seems that this financial position of most private institutions has led them to be heavily reliant on governmental internal scholarships, which are offered to students from low income backgrounds, and this strategy is regarded as one of the government's supportive mechanisms to these institutions. Indeed the number of these scholarships as mentioned earlier, includes 1,000 supervised by the Ministry of Manpower and 500 offered by the MoHE, all of which are divided between all the current private HEIs according to the specialisations available and what is wanted by the students.

Actually, despite the small number of these scholarships which are allocated to each institution, this funding comprises the main financial resources for the private HEIs, and any change in government policy would inevitably mean their closure, as stated by the head of one of the largest of these institutions, who said: ‘I think without the government's support there will not be private higher education ... and I can say that without the annual number of internal governmental scholarships, maybe our institution will be closed’ (L3pru3). Likewise (L3prc1) and (L3prc2) echoed the same feelings.

Nonetheless, the above-mentioned participants and others, also regarded this dependency on these governmental scholarships as one of the factors which leads to hindering the role of these institutions, and as one cause of their financial difficulties, since they direct their development as stated by a number of

interviewees. For instance, (L3gvu4) said: ‘naturally, these institutions are depending on the governmental scholarships, and these are too limited’, while another participant said ‘because these institutions depend on the internal scholarships which are sent by the government, and these scholarships are restricted to students from low income backgrounds’ (L2d6g).

In line with this direction, another interviewee said: ‘also, these institutions depend on the governmental internal scholarships, whereas they should build their plans depending on themselves’ (L2ex2), and another interviewee produced a similar response, saying: ‘because these institutions also depend on the governmental scholarships, this leads them to be less motivated in marketing themselves in the market and this is one main reason’ (L1u12), which means that this reliance on the government has prevented the private HEIs from being as proactive as they could be. Another participant offered more explanation by saying:

However, the state provides high encouragement to the private higher education institutions. Unfortunately, although the private sector was not supposed to establish any institution without a feasibility study which should enable them to know whether they could be successful without governmental support, what I have seen from my experience is that if the government stopped its internal scholarships and its support, these private institutions will be closed (L2d8g).

It seems that these governmental officials blame the sponsors of these institutions, believing that they should be more proactive and depend on their own ability to attract students, even though they know the high cost of HE, and appreciate that even in the developed countries most universities depend on governmental funding, research projects financed by private agencies, dedications and endowments offered by churches, and other community institutions.

Lack of support and encouragement for private HEIs

Despite the incentives offered by the government to the private HEIs as mentioned above, aimed at increasing their participation and encouraging them to

play a more effective role in this field, a number of interviewees indicated that these institutions do not receive enough encouragement, either from the state or from the community, as observed by (L2d6g) who said ‘these institutions have not been able to find others to encourage them, I mean some benefactors who can afford to sponsor some students' studies, because the government's support is not enough’. Clearly, this participant believes the community should dedicate some monies through charities. Indeed, 21 interviewees mentioned that this situation contributed towards weakening the ability of these institutions to promote their educational facilities and to persuade more students to enrol.

Currently, the government’s incentive scheme allows private universities to obtain RO. 3,000,000 and other subsidiary incentives. So it becomes appropriate to establish to what extent these encouragements help the private HEIs to transcend those difficulties and challenges identified. This is the subject of the discussion with certain interested interviewees through the following question, which asked of them: *How do you see the government incentives to the private HEIs, such as the RO. 3 million scheme, some tax exemptions, and a certain number of annual scholarships?*

Most of the interviewees produced long explanations in order to clarify the current financial difficulties facing these institutions, although a number gave a short statement that such encouragement was simply ‘not enough’ (L2d5g), (L4sh2), (L3gc2), (L3prc1), (L3prc2), (L2d1g), while (L2guv2) said ‘this support is too small, even for buildings it is not enough’. Another participant said ‘I think the government gives too little to this sector, it is parsimony, it does not provide enough incentives’ (L3gvu4), indicating the problem as being worse than insufficient encouragement, and verging on the parsimonious. Moreover, in his/her response (L3gvu4) produced more information saying:

It is very low, it is parsimonious, what use is RO. 3 million to establish a new university? If this amount is sufficient for establishing a university, you will find 7 universities have been established and opened their doors to attract a high number of students with a good level of education quality. Moreover, most of the

incentives are for the private universities, which means that most colleges do not benefit from them.

A similar response was given by (L3gvc3), who said: ‘such support by three million Riyal Omani is not enough, we have just now used more than one million in adding another floor to our college building. An amount such as this is taken up entirely by the college annual expenditures’, while (L3d2g) produced more information, saying:

Those encouragements are not enough for the universities, what can three million Riyal Omani do in establishing a university? We established the Sultan Qaboos University with 100 million and that was started with only four colleges. Therefore, these encouragements can not achieve the targets.

Likewise, the same view was expressed by another interviewee who said:

We should follow His Majesty’s core value when he said “the Omani citizen is the target of the development process”. Therefore, what shall three million Riyal Omani do to achieve this principle? Moreover, there is a long bureaucratic procedure to follow and many difficulties facing the private university in trying to obtain this limited support (L3gu3).

So, not only is it believed that the amount is insufficient, but it is also indicated that procedural requirements cause long delays, and the grant from government is by no means automatic. Furthermore, other interviewees produced more negative opinions towards the state’s stance, such as (L3prc4) who said ‘the government does not give enough encouragement, rather it creates some obstacles and difficulties’, and another participant clarified these obstacles by saying:

The government takes high taxes from the private universities instead of exempting them, for example, do you believe that if the state gives the private university a plot of land, the university must pay every year RO. 30,000 and for period of four years the university should pay a total of RO. 120,000 and if the university does not build on it within a certain year it must pay a high amount to the state (L3pru3).

In response, the researcher pointed out to (L3prc4), that the government has to be wary of private agencies that simply want to accumulate land without building on it, and that it has to be sure valuable land is not being wasted, but this interviewee was quick to add:

But the private university, from where can it bring sufficient money to build new buildings or expand its facilities, if it enrolls only between 250 and 300 students in a year, and most of them are on scholarships from the government, and some of these scholarships are only partial?

This response indeed indicates the small number of students who enrol in some of these institutions, and reflects the extent of the private HEIs' financial problems, and their susceptibility to low annual enrolments. However, the response of (L1uc1) verified the point raised by the researcher with the above interviewee regarding the need for the government to keep a check on the incentives, as follows:

The government should ensure that any incentive which is given to any of these private institutions will be properly used and invested in this field, since these are private agencies, and maybe they use some of the government encouragements as personal property, for example they may sell the large plot of land given to them for educational purposes by the government.

Indeed, a number of the interviewees ended their responses to this question by suggesting some strategies to motivate the private sector to invest more in HE, while others stressed the importance of continued government support. For example, (L2x3) emphasised that:

The government should encourage them, because the government will make savings in future if these institutions take part in this field, and there are so many ways to encourage them, so what the government should do is pay the fees for those students, because there are so many people who can not afford to pay their own fees (L2x3).

Hence, this interviewee believed that there are several ways to support private HE, one being the payment of all student fees by the government. In addition, the

notion of investment for the future arises in this extract, since with appropriate state encouragement, the private sector will be able to absorb much greater numbers of SSGs, and hence play a more effective role in qualifying young Omanis. Another interviewee suggested that:

the state should encourage the private sector more by providing them for example with a plot of land, sending them scholarship students, giving them exemption from taxes and reducing the prices of electricity and water provided to the private higher education institutions (L4sh2).

In fact, some of these incentives are offered by the state, so it would seem that the interviewee believes these allowances should all be increased. Another interviewee confirmed the importance of governmental support to these institutions saying: ‘as I mentioned before, without continuous help from the government I do not think there will be a private sector in this field. And if the government stops its support these institutions will be closed’ (L3pru3). This person then suggested that:

It should be understood that support for this field should not only be by giving a plot or buildings, because the education will not end or stop by some particular time, this process will continue for ever, so it should also be supported continuously (L3pru3).

Continuous, rather than temporary support, was clearly the key for this participant, and indeed for (L1u5), who said: ‘the state should continue supporting these private institutions, and also should work to ensure the quality of their education, there is no other way’. A similar suggestion was produced by another interviewee who offered more clarification about the types of encouragements which the state should offer to this sector as follows:

Therefore, the state should increase its financial support to this sector, whether through supporting the students, universities, or private sector. Moreover, I think the state also should offer these private institutions what could be called a national inheritance, I mean the state should build the main campus of the private university with all of its buildings, and physical and provision required.

Moreover, I suggest that the state also should offer these private institutions a large amount of money which can not be divided between the investors at any time. Therefore, I prefer to call these institutions domestic institutions rather than private (L3gu3).

The idea of this interviewee to provide national endowments to private HEIs which are beyond the personal reach of any of the individual investors was supported by a recommendation to give a government grant as suggested by another interviewee who said: 'I think each university needs to be given not less than RO. 50 million over a five-year period until the university is able to stand alone and run well. This amount is the budget of the Sultan Qaboos University for one year only' (L3-gvc3). A similar response was produced by (L4sc4) who offered more information, saying:

The state should provide enough money to support this field, this is most important. The state spends tens of millions in some tourism projects, and this field is more important, each university needs between 20 to 30 million Omani Riyal, and Oman needs four independent universities, and if we said that each university needs around RO. 25 million. Thus, there is a need to provide RO. 100 million if the country wants real private universities of good quality, and I am sure by such solution the problem of this sector will be sorted. This is the real investment which will benefit and return much to the country rather than other projects.

Clearly, the last two extracts indicate the importance of increasing governmental support, particularly in the form of money, since the estimates of need range from RO. 50 million to RO. 25 million for each university, while the actual grant currently offered is RO. 3 million and as indicated previously, it is not a straightforward matter to actually obtain this. Another interesting point emerged from (L3gu3) who noted the absence of any official national encouragement system to motivate the private sector to participate, saying:

Also, in Oman there is no system which encourages the private sector to participate in this sector, such as in some countries whereby there is a tax deletion system. Although this is supposed to exist, the sector does not feel it is enough or that there is really any support for it, and hence the government should pay more attention to developing national initiatives (L3gu3).

Other participants (L4sc3), (L3pru3), (L4sc4), (L3prc2), (L2d5g) and (L2guv2), produced similar opinions, all believing the current levels of governmental support to private HEIs were completely inadequate.

Private HEIs poor marketing strategies

Eight interviewees commented that the private HEIs do not seem to demonstrate enough insight with regard to marketing themselves. One said ‘these private institutions do not know how and have no suitable mechanisms to market themselves’ (L2d2g), and similar responses were produced by (L1pscm1), (L1u5), (L3gc2), (L2d5g), (L2d11g) and (L2d1g), while another interviewee (already mentioned above) observed that because most private HEIs rely heavily on governmental scholarships, they do not pay enough attention to marketing themselves. In this regard (L1u12) said ‘because these institutions are fed by governmental scholarships, they are less motivated towards putting in the effort to market themselves’. On the other hand, when the researcher put this argument to one of the heads of a private HEI, the interviewee rejected it, saying:

I do not agree with this point, because according to the law the institution should employ Omanis in the administrative jobs in the institution, yet there is a lack of well-qualified national manpower in the country, so from where can we bring well-qualified Omani people, in business, marketing and other related areas? Most of them are in the governmental bodies or in big companies, and if the institution wants to attract them it should pay more, and this is another challenge as already mentioned (L3pru3)

Whilst the problem of needing to pay good salaries for well-qualified staff has been aired already, the legal framework pertaining to the private HEIs’ employment of Omanis, amongst whom there are no unemployed experts in marketing or other business disciplines, was a newly-raised issue of substance.

The character of the private sector

Six of the interviewees attributed the matter of low student numbers in private HEIs to the nature of the sector, which they considered made its own difficulties, as clarified by (L3-gu3) who said that:

The private sector in Oman is a difficulty in itself, it is an obstacle itself. What kind of participation is paid by this sector to the national economy, to what extent does it bring some of its profits to help the country in the area of human resources development. We know that in many countries around the world this sector allocates some of its companies' profits to be used for educating people, as endowments for colleges and universities, and to finance some research projects or as scholarships. In the case of Oman, the private sector limits itself and does not play any significant role in these matters, the national feeling with the sponsors of this sector is very narrow and too limited, despite its large wealth.

It is obvious that this participant blames the reputation of the private sector as being selfish and geared towards profit, for the poor uptake by students. However, in reality, there are some Omani businessmen who are now offering a reasonable number of such endowments or scholarships. Another participant, who is a member of the private sector (a businessman), also commented on the greed of the private sector, saying:

Because as I mentioned, the private sector in Oman in general is avaricious, it came to this field by coincidence not as a self-initiative. The private sector is too limited and narrow; it wants to take only, and to give nothing. The real private sector is that which plays a complementary role to the state role (L4bs2).

Moreover, other participants gave a similar view, such as (L2d13g) and (L2d12g) who said 'the private sector in Oman in general is greedy, and most people in it have no national feeling, they think only of their profit and benefits'. In contrast, one interviewee had a totally different view, saying: 'I think most of the investors who enter this kind of business are aware that this area is not as profitable as business in other fields, and they entered this sector only because of their national feeling and motivation' (L1u2). However, there is no other view to support this opinion.

In addition, there were other interviewees who believed the sector to be ill-prepared when it started its participation in the educational field [(L1u7) and (L1uv3)], and (L4-bs2) highlighted the chance entry into HE, saying 'it came to this field by coincidence'. Another interviewee, who is a head of one of these private HEIs and chief of its Board, said:

The people who invest in the higher education sector should have a high knowledge about the field, because HE is not a commodity to be sold and that you get your returns from tomorrow. Investment in this field means long-term investment so they should have long-term vision, not only for five or ten years but for longer than that. In addition, they should know that their participation in this field means they put their names to the establishment board of one of these educational institutions as one of the main sponsors of the higher education institutions. This is not some silly thing; if you see other overseas universities, such as Oxford and others, the key figures and businessmen hang on to record their names as one of these prestigious institutions' sponsors (L3-prc4).

Indeed, this advanced perception reflects the extent to which some of the private institutions' sponsors are open-minded and modern in their thinking, and indicates the difference between investors in the field. The issue of investing for the future in the nation's HRD appears in this extract, and would seem to be one to take into account when considering the role of the private sector in supporting the efforts of the public sector in this respect.

In conclusion, against most challenges mentioned in their responses, most interviewees offered some suggestions and recommendations that hoped to help in promoting the role of the private HEIs. For example, a number suggested the government be requested to increase its financial and technical support to the private HEIs, as well as to create effective financial mechanisms to support the students directly to enable them to join these institutions. The community and benefactors are also requested to participate in this field, as are students' parents who should change their priorities and make their children's study their first concern. Indeed, a number of these interviewees required the private HEIs mainly to improve many of their rooms. For instance, some of them suggested that these institutions should reduce their tuition fees, while others recommended them to

build their financial independently from the government support. They should have national feeling towards their society and its people, and provide enough funds and money to be able to run for a long time and attract more students.

9.2.5 Alternative resourcing

The issue of funding every student in HE is a problem worldwide, and as indicated, Oman's strategy has been to involve the private sector in satisfying the demand from young people, and to encourage it to increase its investment in this field, in order to reduce the pressure upon the governmental HEIs. So far, these efforts have resulted in the establishment of three private universities and 17 private higher colleges.

However, the main challenges now, as highlighted in the above discussion, fall in two areas, these being: firstly, how the government should support the private HEIs to enable them to continue and promote their role in this field and to absorb more students in these institutions; and secondly, how to finance the high and increasing number of SSGs who want to study in HE, since in reality, the private HEIs are now in existence to enrol them, but the need to pay tuition fees prevents this, and hence the private institutions are under-recruiting.

Consequently, it was necessary to explore options, in which respect the following question was asked: *In light of the difficulty facing the State regarding the funding of all students in HE, what options might be used to finance those students, or to expand the capacity of HE in Oman?*

In their responses, the interviewees produced several views and suggestions, which fell into five categories. The first was the suggestion that the government should increase its annual budget for this sector. The second was the recommendation that the government should revise its enrolment plans, and take steps to remove the extra expenses and allowances given to students. The third was a belief that the participation of the private sector and the development of an

expectation among parents that they should be prepared to pay for their children's HE, could be regarded as another source which will help in the absorption of a significant number of SSGs. The fourth was the idea that society in general should develop the culture of providing educational endowments and dedications to help the state, and the fifth suggestion was for the introduction of a student loan scheme. In fact, although five definite options emerged, most interviewees suggested more than one option, each of which will now be discussed in turn.

Increased government investment in the sector

Twenty-two (22) interviewees supported this approach, including (L2d2g), (L1u12), (L1u6), (L2d7g), (L3gvc4), (L1u4), (L3gu3), (L4sc4) and others. One interviewee said: 'there is a need to increase the state funding' (L2d2g), and similar responses were produced by, for instance, (L1u12), (L1u6), (L2d7g). In addition, (L3gvc4), (L2d7g) advised the reprioritisation of the country's needs, with the first priority being given to this field, the latter interviewee saying 'we should reprioritise our needs and manage our finances according to that'. Another interviewee clearly stated that priority should be given to HE, saying 'funding higher education should be given priority if they want to develop and expand the capacity of this field' (L2d6g). Similar positions were adopted by (L1u4) and (L4sc4), who said 'the state should work to reprioritise the needs of the country, and it should put the higher education field at the top of the list, and it should create investment opportunities'.

Moreover, other interviewees offered more explanations, clarifying that the investment in education including HE was regarded as a great capital investment, for instance:

Personally I feel that if the government wants to develop this nation it has to invest in human capital, so if you invest in Secondary School then you must be committed at the higher level, but it has to be very carefully done, because it is a very lot of money and if it is goes into the wrong area, people will come up (L3gvc4).

The state should increase its financial support to this sector, and should recognise that this is the real investment for the country, since by this investment it could qualify and promote its most important national income and also promote the scientific and cultural position of the nation (L3gvc3).

It is supposed that the state works to provide enough funds to finance this field, this is the main capital resource of the country. This is the real investment which will bring benefit and return much more to the country than other projects (L4sh1).

As I said before, we should follow His Majesty's core value when he said the "Omani citizen is the target of the development process". Therefore, the state should increase its financial support to this sector, whether through supporting the students, the universities, or the private sector (L3gu3).

This sample of extracts clarifies this approach, clearly calling the state to increase the allocation of finances to this sector. And in addition, one interviewee mentioned in a previous section, actually suggested a figure, saying:

The state should provide enough money to support this field. The state spends tens of millions in tourism projects. This field is more important, therefore the government should offer each private university at least 25 million Riyal Omani (L4sc4).

Likewise, another previously-mentioned interviewee believed the only solution to be increased state funding, saying: 'The state should increase the funds for higher education; there is no other option in front of the government' (L2d8g). Thereafter, this interviewee gave an example for how the government could expand some of the current HEIs' capacity, as follows:

In this direction, it should work to expand the capacity of governmental institutions, for example in the Sultan Qaboos University, there are many professors who have been brought with special additions to their salary and other allowances, but who teach only 20-30 students in one lecture, whereas they can teach double this number, so by just promoting some facilities it could increase the number of students every year in the university. So there is no big problem with increasing the capacity of several current higher education institutions, the main problem is to increase the governmental finances (L2d8g).

Clearly, the above extracts confirm the view of this group of interviewees that the state should increase its financial commitment to HE, through direct student

support, supporting the private sector via various mechanisms, and expanding the existing capacity of HE by the introduction of new teaching techniques. However, the underlying feeling of all the interviewees was that the state should recognise the HE sector as the country's most important, and that it should be prioritised in the country's economic planning.

Revised enrolment plans and removal of additional expenses and allowances

Some interviewees believed the government should reconsider its HE plans, one such participant being (L2ex3) who said 'I am saying that not all students should proceed to university education or seek university studies; rather they should be trained to develop skills'. This person felt that the state should make every effort to change the attitude of young people, and indeed their parents, since society generally does not value TE or VT. In this respect, (L3prc2) said:

Also, the state should work to establish intermediate institutes for Technical Education and Vocational Training to prepare technicians who are needed more by several sectors of the country in its development. Such jobs do not require high professional qualifications or HE, they only need some technical training courses and vocational training which enable people to enter the labour market (L3prc2).

As mentioned in Chapter Five, whilst the attitude towards TE is undergoing some change, VT is still seen by most potential students and their families, as of low prestige. Furthermore, some interviewees suggested that the government should review and revise the system of expenditure of some of the public HEIs. In this respect, one key figure said:

We need to cut the extra expenses, for example, allowances, text books, and any other unnecessary services, and we should provide tuition fees only, but what we have is a situation now, where we provide a lot of things to a few people and many people do not get a chance at higher education. Therefore, perhaps we have to cut out some of the non-educational services so we can use that money to make more places available. In addition we need to look at delivering more cost-effective methods of providing HE as I mentioned earlier (L1m2).

A similar view was expressed by (L4bs2), in mentioning the expenditure of the SQU, saying: ‘the budget of the University, how much is the unit cost, how much do they spend for the education process, how much do they spend for decoration, for providing each student with free meals, is this a basic need of the educational process?’ Likewise, another participant agreed with the report of the World Bank (2001) which recommended reviewing the unit cost in the governmental HEIs, and removing the allowances for some non-educational expenditures, saying that the government should:

Remedy the significant difference in the unit cost between the governmental institutions, for example as I mentioned previously, the unit cost in the Sultan Qaboos University is much higher than in the Colleges of Education, and other colleges. This is unfairness between the students in the same system. Therefore, the finances which are given to the higher education institutions should match with the number of enrolled students, this will lead to save large amounts which could be used to promote the capacity of all institutions (L2d6g).

Likewise, another participant alluded to such differences in the unit cost of SQU and that of other students, and recommended reviewing the financial policy in these institutions, saying: ‘we should study the current budget allocated for some institutions, for example, the budget of the University, how much is the unit cost’ (L4bs2). Indeed, the variation between HEIs in expenditure is a result of the plurality of supervisory organisations, and of some policies whereby the state provides certain allowances and/or facilities in some HEIs and not in others.

The participation of the private sector and the parents

Clearly, this dimension was discussed in detail in the previous sections of this Chapter, whereby the need for a public/private partnership in HE, and the reality of its participation and the difficulties and challenges facing this process, were identified and discussed. Therefore, this issue will not be revisited here, but rather, a few examples of responses which clarify the interviewees’ belief that such participation by the sector could serve as another resource, will be given. Hence, in this regard (L3prc2) said ‘the partnership with the private sector could be

regarded as another source of expansion in this field'. Many interviewees who stated other options produced a similar response, such as (L1pscm1), (L2d15g), (L3gu3), (L3gvc3), (L3gtc1) and others.

However, most raised some points related to the participation of this sector, as already discussed in the previous sections, for example ensuring quality, the state's supervision of the private HEIs, and the link between the goals and the incentives given to this sector. Other interviewees suggested a greater degree of participation by the private sector, such as (L3-prc4) who said:

The private enterprises and the banks should support this field, and the government should put pressure on the private companies to give free loans to students as their contribution to the country's development as happens in other countries, particularly where those students will pay back the loans when they are employed.

The foreground for loans, and particularly interest-free loans from banks, is laid in this extract, which goes on to make comparisons with other countries, and a similar view was produced by (L2ex2) and (L2d1g). However, as mentioned earlier, there are few Omani banks which can afford this, and even if they could provide some interest-free loans, there would be a limit, so some deciding criteria would have to be imposed. Another participant suggested taxation of the private sector, saying:

There are many alternative sources, for example the government should require the private companies to pay for example 1% as tax from their profit and this amount could go to a special fund to support this field. The student should pay something, let us say RO. 100, the additional allowances should be cut, which cost the state millions a year, and these procedures could be imposed gradually. Also the institution should be allowed to do business and invest in some profitable areas (L3gtc1).

As well as suggesting taxation, this extract supported other views already reported about the removal of additional allowances and non-educational services, and highlighted the need to allow private HEIs to engage in other income-generating activities. Indeed, these are reasonable options that prevail in many

other countries, and need to be studied in order to discover what might be suitable for Oman. Nonetheless, it should be recognised that private sector participation in HE, undoubtedly does not mean that the students are not requested to pay the tuition fees, but rather that the tuition fees must be paid for, and for those without government scholarships, there is no alternative but for parents to pay for their children's study.

It seems that the state is working towards preparing the general public for this inevitable occurrence, as suggested by a number of interviewees, for example (L1-u5) said 'people should participate', (L2-d11-g) said 'the citizens will participate in the future', and (L2ex2) and (L2d1g) produced similar responses, while another key figure heralded this policy, saying:

The most important thing that we should do now is to inform the people of the fact that the state is not committed to providing free higher education. The citizens should recognise and understand this fact. We, as the state and the government, are committed to provide General/Basic Education only (L1u12).

This extract clearly highlights the government position, showing that its commitment finishes after level 12, as confirmed in the continuation of this person's response as follows:

Therefore, the state has worked and is still working with the private sector to establish private higher education institutions in most regions of the country to encourage the parents to invest in educating their children. Indeed, this is logical because parents previously did not think to invest in the education of their children since they believe that higher education could be provided free by the state, so they spent their money on building big and deluxe houses and buying themselves excellent cars, while now they should understand that they must change their priorities (L1u12).

Hence, the government is working to change society's attitudes towards paying for their children's higher education. Nevertheless, as explained by most interviewees, this option is problematic in the face of the low income levels of Omani families. Furthermore, as mentioned by Al-Rahbi (2004), family income is

variable and inequitable, and the current students' earnings might help but in a small way as indicated by the report of the World Bank (2001:36).

People and community participation, dedications and endowments

A number of participants indicated other options, which depend upon the participation of individuals and the community at large. In this respect, one interviewee said:

We should encourage people to dedicate some of their money in this field to form educational charities, such as in Europe and Christian societies. We know that there are some philanthropic people in Oman, and most of their charities as you know are going to build mosques, and to help needy people; but it is also very important to support this sector by such charities (L2d6g).

Indeed, charitable donations are an important educational resource in some countries particularly in the West, whereby the church as well as businesspeople play a significant role in supporting universities, colleges and other institutions. However, in the Eastern Countries, especially Arab and Islamic Countries, and Oman being one, most charities and endowments are directed to building mosques and to help poor people. However, the sentiment in this extract was also expressed by (L3gvu4), who said: 'we should encourage the businessmen to dedicate some of their capital to this field, particularly our religion calls and encourages us to undertake such charitable work'.

In the same direction, one interviewee who suggested that the State should revise its policies on student support, and reduce allowances and non-educational facilities, so that a more equitable situation could be achieved for all young people, indicated the moral duty upon the government to avoid the suffering of needy people, and recommended that the state should create a system to support this category of student, saying: 'if there are needy students that is another issue - we should support this category through establishing a clear system to support the students who are from low income backgrounds' (Labs2). This extract indicates that if the reduction of student allowances places some students in a poor position

relative to others, clear policies should exist to support them. Moreover, this person indicated another way to support this field, saying:

In addition, there is another source we should consider, that being the dedications and charities which made benefactors and charitable people for the sake of Allah [The God], so why should the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs [which administers these dedications] not build schools for renting to the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Higher Education instead of building only shops? (L4bs2).

This extract mentions the dedications and endowments given by the people for the sake and satisfaction of Allah (The God), which is the most important target of Muslim people's beliefs, since this is the main and the end aim of the Muslim person's life. In order to encourage other people to donate and participate in projects, it is permitted for a Muslim person to identify his/her preferred charity, and since the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs is the body which administers this aspect of Omani life, there were several questions that could be posed to the interviewees from that Ministry and other religious institutions, before recommending this resource to the educational or economic bodies, such as the MoHE, the CoHE or the Ministry of National Economy. Consequently, the researcher presented certain questions to the Grand Mufti of the Sultanate of Oman, His Eminence the Grand Mufti A'Shake Ahmed bin Hamad Alkhalily, while other questions were asked of the Directorate General of Awqaf and Baitulmal in the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs in Oman.

The first question which I asked His Eminence the Grand Mufti was: *Does Islam allow Muslims to give the 'A'Zakah' to support students who want to study beyond the Secondary level, such as at university or college?* His response was long and clear, but only the relevant extracts are presented here. Essentially, he replied:

In the Holy Qura'an there are designated people or fields that could be given 'A'Zakah',one of these fields is the sake for Allah [or for the sake of satisfaction of Allah] which general conception includes many areas and fields which could be benefited from 'A'Zakah'. However it is common that this

general conception means to spend this charity in Aljihad; it does not mean that Aljihad only fighting the enemies with weapons; it also includes all areas of Aljihad, such as call others to Islam, guide people to do what Allah accept to do, spread education, build the strong nation ... Which means that if those students are from poor or needy families, it is very reasonable for them to benefit from 'A'Zakah', but if they are from families which can afford to pay for their study, their families should finance them, unless the parent has many children, family burdens or social responsibilities in which he cannot afford the study of all his children, thus it is acceptable that he can benefit from 'A'Zakah' to pay for his children's study, because this [Education] is one of what Allah likes and satisfied (The Grand Mufti of Oman).

The second question presented to the Grand Mufti was: *And does Islam allow Muslims to give or to support those students from Awqaf?* His response to this question was:

Without a doubt it is acceptable if it is from the Awqaf that is dedicated for this purpose, but if the Awqaf is dedicated for other fields, such as serving the hospitals, mosques, poor people or any other side, so it should be spent first on these fields, because Allah did not permit to change the dedication from the determined side dedicated by the benefactor to the other side, except when the nominated recipient is covered, and there is a surplus, so in that case it could be used to benefit other fields, and the education field is one from these fields which could benefit since it is one of those which Allah likes (The Grand Mufti of Oman).

The third question was prepared in case there was agreement to the first two questions, and since it was understood that support from these sources was acceptable in most cases with some restrictions, this last question was asked, which was: *Does that mean the support can only be for students who study Islamic or Arabic Sciences, or is it acceptable to give this to those students who study other subjects and specialisations?* His Eminence the Grand Mufti said:

For any science that benefits the nation, such as medicine which leads to treating people, and other sciences which promote the nation's power and develops its experience, it is acceptable to give support to the students who study these subjects and specialisations. And also other fields of life that could be regarded as those works and actions which Allah likes and calls us to do, all Muslims who are able are called to donate some of their money and properties in these fields (The Grand Mufti of Oman).

The above responses of His Eminence the Grand Mufti were clear and indicate many interesting ideas, the most important being regarded as good news for the Muslim governments as well as HEIs, since:

- A) From a religious viewpoint, it is acceptable in Islam for the money and properties of 'A'Zakah' to be used to support needy students whose families cannot afford their higher education.
- B) From a religious viewpoint, it is acceptable in Islam for the money and properties of Awqaf that are dedicated to students in general, to be used to support students who wish to continue their higher study, and it is not a condition that those students should be from poor families. However, although students from wealthy families can benefit from this kind of Awqaf, it is preferred that those students be financed by their families, in order to save funds for more needy students.
- C) From a religious viewpoint, it is clear that not only students who study Islamic or Arabic Sciences can benefit from the money and properties of 'A'Zakah' and Awqaf, but those who study other subjects and fields of study that benefit the nation and promote its position, can also benefit from these resources.
- D) Such responses which are called in Islamic tradition Fatawa, [the singular: Fatwa], are not to be applied only in Oman, but in any Muslim country. Moreover, any Muslim in any part of the world may regard these Fatawa as guidance for any Zakah, donation or dedication that he/she wants to dedicate, since His Eminence the Grand Mufti, A'Shake Ahmed bin Hamad Alkhalily is one of the most popular Islamic scholars in the Islamic World, and is the representative of Oman in all common Islamic conferences, organisations and institutions, such as The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and in The Islamic Fiqh Academy (IFA).

Moreover, His Eminence the Grand Mufti, ended his response by calling rich Muslims whether in Oman or in other countries saying:

The Muslims whether in Oman or in other countries should pay high attention to support education and science, so all elements which encourage this field should be attended to; and we call on society to donate in this philanthropic cause and to praise Allah who is giving them all these properties and money; through donations to this field, and others whereby they can benefit the nation.

It worth noting that to be more official, and after transcribing His Eminence the Grand Mufti's responses from the tape cassette, the written responses were presented to His Eminence and he signed them, and the researcher has retained these Fatawa (responses) safely.

Consequently, and regarding the case of Oman, it seemed important to ascertain the opinion of a high ranking official with responsibility to respond to such crucial questions, and accordingly, I posed the following questions to the Director General of Awqaf and Biatulmal in the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. The first question I asked this key figure was: *If it is acceptable in Islam [which it is the responsibility of The Grand Mufti to say] that the money and properties of 'A'Zakah' and Awqaf could be used in financing and supporting students in higher education, do the administrative and financial rules allow such steps to be undertaken, or are there restrictions which prevent the application of such support? And do you need to obtain religious fatwa [acceptance] from the Grand Mufti to implement such a decision?*

The Director General gave a clear response differentiating between the Awqaf and the 'Zakah', saying:

The Awqaf system in Islam is accepting to support all kinds of philanthropic behaviours and actions, which include supporting needy students. However, that should be done according to the finances available and according to the religious fatwa [acceptance] for each case because the Awqafs have a special rule which make it different from the governmental or public budget and funds. Regarding the Fund of Zakah; it also has its special rules and instructions which govern how

to spend from it, and also it needs the religious fatwa [acceptance]. However, nowadays, although the Fund of A'Zakah as well as some returns of Awqaf's properties are very small, the Ministry is making every effort to develop the investments of these funds which enable the support of philanthropic projects. And the Ministry is now funding some Quranic Schools, and it is intending to support all educational activities (Director General of Awqaf and Baitulmal, Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs).

The second question which was asked of this participant was: *If supporting students is acceptable in Islam, is the Ministry going to support only those students who study Islamic or Arabic Sciences, or will it support those students who study other subjects and specialisations?* His response was that:

If the case is acceptable according to the religious fatwa [acceptance], and in the light of the student's financial position, there is no difference between students in terms of their fields of study or levels, unless the benefactor has stated that certain property or an amount of money is to be used only to serve or to support students of certain specialisation/s so we cannot change that unless there is a surplus; and if there is surplus; then it could be used to support the most needed field and after religious fatwa [acceptance] (Director General of Awqaf and Baitulmal, Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs).

Hence, there is no financial or administrative rule or restriction which prevents Muslims from supporting needy students at any level or in any specialisation or field of study. It is understood that whilst this applies in Oman because its administrative and financial system facilitates this arrangement, it might be the same in other Muslim countries, and it could be confirmed that in general such a case could exist in such places, particularly the Gulf and Arab countries, because most of them have a similar administrative system. Since this issue, as mentioned, depends on a religious fatwa [acceptance], so as long as there is such acceptance from a popular Islamic scholar from any country that is a most important base for all Muslim countries, which in general work in accordance with Islamic guidance.

However, it should be understood that there are some differences between countries in their administrative and financial system, but in this case and according to the aforementioned dimensions; such differences would not be significant particularly for Muslims as individuals, since any Muslim can donate

without acceptance from any scholar. It depends on his/her faith, and whereas the religious acceptance is only needed regarding how to spend some types of these donations and dedications, it is not necessary to gain religious or governmental acceptance when deciding how to spend most other kinds of donations and dedications. Consequently, if the large number of wealthy Muslims in many countries around the world are made aware of such religious conceptions and encouragements, a difference could be made to the financing of HE for needy students.

Student loan schemes

In addition to the previous categories of suggested options, was the final possibility of student loan schemes, which as was explained in Chapter Five, are now common in many countries. Therefore, the question was: *And particularly what is your opinion about a student loan scheme?*

In their response, although most interviewees mentioned this option, there were several who referred to the obstacles to implementation of such a scheme, and many of these people proposed different procedural mechanisms in this respect. In fact, 26 participants, for example (L2ex3), (L4sc4), (L3prc4), (L3-prc1), (L3-prc2), (L2d5-g), (L2guv2), (L2d8g), (L2d13g) and (L2ex2), indicated a student loan scheme as a viable proposition. Several views and suggestions were offered by the interviewees about how and who should establish such a scheme, and manage the special fund, as well as how to supply such resources, which could be estimated at hundreds of millions of Omani Riyals annually, and be required for a long time.

It seems that this difficulty caused doubt amongst some participants about the ability of the state to fund such a scheme. (L3gvc4) said: 'I do not know how realistic that is'. However, in this regard, most interviewees suggested that the government should be responsible, one of them saying:

The government should offer free loans to the country's students, and it should be free of interest, because it has now some money but in future when the oil is finished what shall it do? If the government has not now enough money it should co-ordinate with the banks, the state should undertake this step because after some time the majority of Omanis will not be able to pay for their children's study (L2d13g).

This extract drew attention to the future post-oil age, when it is expected that the county will face serious challenges, and thus through the provision of a highly qualified national workforce and well educated public that will be able to cope with the predicted challenge, invest to prepare the country's economy for diversification, and help in supplying the national economy with alternative resources. However, the interviewee suggested that the government should co-ordinate with the private banks in this field. In the same direction, another participant considered that the government should implement a student loan scheme as follows:

We should adopt such mechanism. Because suppose the state gives a free interest loan to the student, maybe RO. 15,000 divided into the period of the study like four or five years, and after he/she is employed the state takes back the amount in a convenient manner, such as low monthly installments over a period of ten or twenty years like retired salaries (L3gvu4).

This response prompted the following question from the researcher: *Do you think the state has enough money to undertake such a scheme?* The response was:

It is investment, and this time is a good chance for the state to carry out this mechanism, because now we have oil, but in future it will be difficult. It is worth noting that such a fund after 20 years, for example, will be growing and it will become self-funding. So, if we said that the government will pay now around RO. 400 million not to give the students as gifts, but as loans to be refunded within some time, this means that there is money but it is moving between the citizens and creating development, and the end it will be returned back, and with a very valuable benefit, which is a well qualified national workforce (L3gvu4).

These high expectations may be too difficult to realise because of the large amount of money required, as mentioned by several participants which led them to suggest other sources to help the government in providing the funds for such a

scheme. Moreover, and in the same direction, (L4bs2) offered another potential solution, saying:

The state should establish special banks to support people who want to enter their children in higher education, similar to the Bank of Al'Eskan (Bank of Housing), which help people to build their houses. Such a bank will enable students to gain loans to study anywhere they want, and then repay them when they get a job and the installments should be appropriate for the salary earned, and if any of them are unable to work or to continue for some reason such as illness, the installments should be stopped. And the country should encourage benefactors to make donations to this fund, as this is one that our religion calls us to support (L4bs2).

The idea of a special bank for student loans, operating as the special bank for housing was raised by this interviewee, on the basis that the latter has been successful in its endeavours for the past 25 years. Moreover, s/he also referred to the need for charitable donations to support the fund and the need for the government to be proactive in encouraging such donations. In line with this direction, another participant produced another strategy, saying:

The loan scheme could be implemented, but the state should finance the excellent student who achieves the highest grades at the end of Secondary Stage, while other students support themselves by loans which they will pay back after becoming employed, and if they cannot find a job easily, the social security should cover them at that period (L3gc5).

This extract seeks to preserve the government role in supporting exceptional students, but in fact such students are already all well-supported by the state, and have HE places either domestically or overseas. However, it does also touch on an important issue which relates to the possibility that a student may not be able to repay the loan because s/he is unable to find employment. The suggestion that the social security system should then be responsible for the loan repayment seems rather strange, given its current weak capacity, and the question of whether students should be able to secure a loan to study in fields or specialisations that the country no longer needs, is not addressed by this interviewee despite the fact that s/he acknowledged that even after the university education, the graduate may remain unemployed.

As another method, a national fund created through a taxation system, was suggested by a number of interviewees, (L4sh2) arguing that 'it should be established as a special fund to help and support students to continue their studies, and be supplied by taxes from several services which are provided to the companies and citizens', although no particular kind of services were mentioned. However, another interviewee also suggested that the state should establish a tax system to support this field, and added more information, saying:

There are many alternative sources, for example the government should require the private companies to provide for example 1% as tax from their profit and this will go to a special fund to support this field, although the student should pay something, let us say OR. 100 (L3gtc1).

Thus, in addition to the tax system, which was indicated at 1%, the expectation is also that the student should bear some responsibility. Hence, it is apparent that although most interviewees believed the government had a key role in establishing a student loan scheme, there was also clear recognition that this would not be easy for the state, and that the issue of how the scheme could be funded would need serious consideration, as noted by another interviewee who said: 'the student loan system, which maybe you will find some people suggested, is one of the important issues which needs to be studied by all interested governmental and private agencies' (L4bs1), and in which respect, the private sector, the private banks, and charitable trusts were all mentioned as potential sources of revenue.

Indeed, other participants confirmed the need for such participation and co-operation, for example (L2ex2) said 'there is a need to offer easy loans to the students, also the citizens and the private sector should participate in this fund'. When asked to clarify what was meant by the word 'easy', the interviewee responded that loans should be 'free or low interest, and there should be easy instalments when the student has to pay back the loan'. A similar idea was given by (L2d1g). Ultimately, these extracts reflect how much of a challenge this option would present, since the annual requirement would be enormous and this money

would need to be provided every year, and over a long period, since it would be possibly 15 or 20 years before each cohort of students could completely repay their loans.

Other participants indicated that the private banks should offer such loans, as expressed by (L1u4), who said: 'I think, the banks can offer the students loans, and in some countries there are special funds to finance those students', while (L3gvc4) indicates that some banks are already doing this, saying: 'some of the banks have been trying to produce loans, which is good, where the students start paying back the loans when they get a job. Maybe that could be an option for us'. Along with this direction, another participant thought the government should place some pressure upon the private sector enterprises and banks to persuade them to offer student loans, saying:

The private enterprises, the banks should support this field, and the government should pressurise the private companies to give free loans to students as a contribution to the country's development as happens in other countries, particularly as those students will pay back the loans when they are employed (L3prc4).

This extract reflects the interviewee's feeling about the difficulties of financing such a scheme that would apply not only to the government, but also to the private banks as well, since the involvement of private enterprise in the matter is suggested. Likewise, one interviewee who is a member of a bank board explained the inability of the private banks in financing a student loan scheme, saying: 'I am a member of a Bank's Board, and I am aware that the banks are facing financial problems, so how can they give loans to the huge number of students without any guarantee?' (L2d5g). Clearly, this participant was harbouring worries about the ability of students to repay the loans and the fact that the banks would be incurring some bad debts.

The whole issue of the banks' role in the provision of student loans was viewed with some scepticism, (L3gvc4) saying: 'some of the banks have been

trying to produce loans ... maybe that could be an option for us, but I do not know to which extent it is going to be achieved', and (L4bs1) saying: 'I know that there are some banks in the country thinking to offer such loans, but the projects need more study'. Moreover, a few interviewees mentioned the difficulty presented to low income families, since they would be regarded as high risk. In this respect, (L1u8) said: 'I am not sure if the student loan system will work, because the biggest category in the country naturally is the low income families', which means that the question of how the loans would be repaid would have to be properly answered. A similar response was offered by (L2d9g), while another participant said 'however, at the moment it is hard for these people to fund themselves, and I think very few can afford to fund their children in HE' (L3gvc4).

However, it seems that despite the worries of these few interviewees concerning the low income families, it was still believed that an interest-free student loan scheme was worth considering, although the emphasis clearly was on 'interest free' rather than on loans with interest, since any amount of interest may result in the final amount being paid being more than the actual loan itself. Clearly, an enormous fund would be needed to implement a student loan scheme, as each cohort of SSGs amounts to between 15,000-20,000 students annually, so for about 15 years the State would need to provide billions. Consequently, the task is too great not only for the State, but also for the private sector, and the banks, unless there is some arrangement between the government and these sectors as well as with the community institutions, religious bodies and international institutions, to adopt a partnership in the provision of loans.

Indeed, one interviewee suggested the need to seek international expertise in studying this issue, saying:

I think we need to seek help from the international experts and organisations, we need to communicate with consultative institutions to study this issue and discover what we have to do and take recommendations, which we should in turn study and decide what to implement and what not to introduce (L1u5).

Furthermore, the proposal to adopt a student loan scheme needs much more research and participation at the exploratory stage of many other parties. It demands an enormous feasibility study to be conducted in the light of the country's current and future economic circumstance, as well as in the context of other social requirements.

9.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the issue of HE funding is one of the major challenges facing HE systems in Oman. However, this is not a case of Oman only, but many other countries around the world facing this problem. Most interviewees considered public funding for HE to be insufficient for the demand. The majority of the interviewees believe that the country needs the privatisation if it seen as a partnership between the state and the private sector in HE provision, and they rejected it if it seen the private universities and colleges as private profitable agencies. However, there were few participants who were satisfied with unrestricted privatisation, and others rejected regardless of any restrictions. Nevertheless, all participants in these categories emphasised that the state should play two key roles, the first being that of the main provider of HE, and the second being that of monitoring the private HEIs through an effective superintendent system conducted by a well-qualified supervisory authority in order to ensure high quality of HE.

Regarding the participation of private HEIs in reducing the pressure upon the public budget, although there are a number of private HEIs, the number of annual enrolments to these institutions is still low. Several factors for this situation were discussed, and many suggestions were offered by the interviewees to remedy this gap. Generally, the participants offered different recommendations, in which most of them suggested that the state investment in this field should be increased. Additionally, other interviewees indicated other alternatives, such as dedications, endowments of people, community, private companies, and student contribution through a soft student lone scheme.

Indeed, such an important issue needs to be studied from several perspectives, and by more than one interested institution. It requires strong co-operation and co-ordination between all involved people and organisations, and substantial attention to the requirements of the country's development process, in the context of the social and economic circumstances of the country as well as other elements. It worth noting that some of the key figures told the researcher that they were currently considering this issue in a new project of a strategy for development of education. For example (L1m2), (L1pscm1), (L2d7g) and (L2ex2), indicated this, saying they were aware that this challenge was not easily resolved and required a long range of subsidiary plans, continuous effort and initiatives. However, they emphasised on the co-ordination and co-operation between the interested ministries and institutions as well as with international expert institutions.

Part III

Chapter Ten

Part III

Introduction:

Part III of the thesis consists of Chapter Ten, the last chapter of the thesis. This chapter concentrates on the main themes of the study and related on issues. It discusses several ways to deal with the current situation within HE, and to face the future challenges. It ends by proposing a number of recommendations and suggestions that could help in building a future vision and strategy for HE in Oman, and in similar countries, particularly the Gulf countries.

Chapter Ten

Discussions, Conclusion and Recommendations

10.1 Introduction

This final chapter will conclude and concentrate on the most important interview findings related to the main themes of the study. It begins with a discussion about the challenge associated with the demand for HE in Oman, presented by social pressures, the high and increasing number of SSGs, and the economic requirements of the marketplace. Additionally, the chapter concludes on the vision, objectives and plans for HE, the development and expansion process of HE, the challenge of financing of HE, and the administration and management of HE.

The chapter then proceeds to conclude how those challenges might be met, offers insights regarding the themes of the study, and ends by making a number of recommendations drawn from the research.

10.2 The Challenge of the Demand for HE

Clearly, social developments and economic changes have generated new requirements in human capital terms, one of the most important being the demand for HE. Socially, the notion that 'Higher Education is primarily a citizen's right and a social investment' (Torres and Schugurensky, 2002:429), has gained popularity, while in the economic field, reflecting the major role played by education in general in the current life, the former President of the United States, Bill Clinton said: 'we are living in a world where what you earn is a function of what you can learn' (US Department of Education, 1997 in Al Barwani, 2002:1). In addition, there are several studies that focus on the returns of high qualifications for both individuals and institutions, which reflect the increasing benefits of HE in relation to work opportunities (Teichler, and Sanyal, 1982). Indeed, any researcher only has to spend a few minutes searching via the internet

to find an extensive range of studies that attempt to relate HE qualifications with employment, in countries throughout the world, and in both the public and private sectors.

In the case of Oman, the expansion of all sectors during the socio-economic development of the country brought an urgent requirement for more educated, well-qualified, and well-trained people. For example, promoting health services requires 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.

The government, and non-governmental documents reviewed in the previous chapters, clearly demonstrated the high demand for HE in Oman. However, it is apparent that the key policy-makers and other government officers merely allude to such demand, rather than discussing it as a major issue, and consequently there are no unambiguous statements made about this serious problem (see Al Manthri, 2001; and MoHE, 2002c). And although there are attempts to respond to the demand, there has been no scientific research, official study, nor symposium, which has addressed and determined its nature and/or its causes. Through this study and the semi-structured interviews with fifty key figures in Omani HE, industry and society in large, it is evidenced that the demand for HE in Oman is high, some interviewees believing it to be very high.

From the interviewees' responses when questioned on the reasons and factors which led to this high demand (detailed in Chapter Six), most participants in this study consider these to be both social and economic, the economic reason being stronger than the social one. Nonetheless, some participants believed the demands to be also characterised by a combination of personal wishes as well as economic and social influences.

10.2.1 Dealing with the social demand

As is well-understood by all interested specialists in different sectors, education including HE, is a cornerstone of any socio-economic development process. It is crucial for the advancement of any society, and the development of human beings is considered as the most important element of social demand for HE. Indeed, as witnessed personally by the researcher, the development of citizens as individuals is a social demand, since society can benefit from such personal development not only economically, but also in other social realms, such as health, social services, art and culture. General evidence for this position is provided by Sanyal et al (1981:2):

To all countries, and to all regions within a country, an institution of HE was regarded as a symbol of national or regional prestige. Economic criteria played but a small role in the establishment of many of the institutions of HE, and the employability of the output often played no role at all.

Hence, obtaining more knowledge and qualifications has become a natural requirement of individuals, especially as most jobs in the modern world demand more qualifications and professionalism, meaning that people without such qualifications cannot obtain suitable jobs, and in turn cannot earn sufficient income to fund their lives. This reality is demonstrated by the huge number of university and college graduates around the world who can not get suitable jobs and live in difficult financial positions, while those with higher qualifications or specific professional specialisations easily gain employment and earn more. Accordingly, in order to achieve equal rights and justice, it could be said that improving access to HE is an important human right.

From the interviewees' responses when questioned on the social demand for HE (detailed in Chapter Six), there were a number of factors and dimensions perceived as contributors to the increasing demands experienced in the Sultanate, and these need to be discussed in the light of international events. It can be concluded that the most important of these are as follows:

The growth rate of the population and the increasing number of SSGs

The youthfulness of Omani society is regarded by some officials as one of the major contributors of pressure and high demand for HE as well as for other services. In fact, in discussing this challenge in Chapters Three and Five, it was pointed out that in the census of 2003, 34% of the total population were under 15 years, while around 11% were between 16 and 19 years old, which means that 45% of the total population are at the age of entry to undergraduate study. However, it was also noted that predictions for the near future show a decline, since this was beginning to occur during the period between the first national census in 1993, and the second national census (2003), from 3.7% to 1.8%. Nonetheless, during at least the next 10 years, the pressure upon HE will remain at the same level or may become stronger according to the current high number of young people in school at the moment.

Through participants' responses, it is obvious that this youthfulness of Omani society, led to the increased demand for all types of education, ranging from GE/BE, Secondary Education through to HE. However, it was mentioned that 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).

In Oman, currently over a half million students in Omani schools, meaning that more than a quarter of the Omani population will soon become SSGs, and according to the 2003 figures mentioned above, showing that 45% of the population is comprised of children under 19 years of age, it can be appreciated that around 1.5 million of the total population are yet to present themselves for entry to undergraduate study during the period between 2003 and 2020. Such a situation 'has proved a great challenge for development on all fronts ... including Higher Education' (MoHE, 2004b:25). The scale of the problem can be

appreciated by considering the statistics produced by the MoE in 2006, clarifying that in 1995 the number of SSGs was 14,460, whereas by 2005, it had tripled, to reach 43,705.

However, it seems that the current HE plans show that the demand is not going to be met, and instead, the gap will increase, generating a high number of young people annually, who are unable to continue their study and, unprepared to join world of work. Thus, it could be said that the problem lies not with the high population growth rate, which could be regarded as a benefit for Omani society, but rather occurs because of other factors, such as the inefficient planning of HE and insufficient funds to support it.

The new trends and social beliefs

It can be observed that the approach of directing people to HE, was inspired mainly by the promise of economic benefit only, a situation which is not out of keeping with that elsewhere in the world. For example, a report about The White Paper, concerned with The Future of UK Higher Education stated that ‘the government sees universities and colleges principally as economic agents; there is very little in the document about intellectual or cultural life in higher education, or the broader development of the individual’ (House of Commons, 2003:71). Although, the report recognised the significant economic role of the universities, it stated that it is wrong to perceive the benefit of HE for society or for individuals, as purely economic.

In relation to the evidence on citizenship and values, the benefits may be seen as even more relevant to society [than] to that of individual gain. In terms of a political agenda that sees social cohesion as a primary goal, the expansion of higher education to produce more graduates can only be seen as beneficial (Bedford Group for Lifecourse and Statistical Studies, 2003 in House of Commons, 2003:71).

Hence, it is true that some consider the domain of HRD to be underpinned by an economic rationale, but it can be argued that this dimension is not restricted to the economic field, as noted also by a report of the CCHE (CF 1973:74-75):

What has gone wrong, both with cost-benefit analysis and with the manpower approach [to public policy concerning higher education], is that we have been led up blind alleys by the economist and have forgotten the real purpose of higher education ... We have damaged the cause of civilization and culture by trying to convince people that are 'good business' and that education has a yield as good as that of a jam factory (CCHE, CF 1973:74-75 in Al-Rahbi, 2004:18).

On the other hand, the rapid advancements in knowledge and technology and the challenges of globalisation have imposed on individuals, as well as the countries to search for a new and quicker ways to develop their capabilities and provision to respond to the requirements of this age and to face the future challenges. This new reality strongly demands individuals with a high level of qualification and skills that could be provided by the different streams of HE, and which in turn, generates more pressure upon HE. A report of the World Bank highlights that:

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 the case of Oman, it can be seen that there is a social trend to become educated purely for economic gain as delivered by a better job and income. In this respect, a number of interviewees believe that the pressing financial needs of the Omani people caused them to continue their studies, and this is reflected by the extent to which Omani families need to educate their children in order to improve their incomes, while some interviewees, especially (L4sh4) feared that such a trend would lead society to emphasise and value only the job dimension, and be unconcerned with the preparation of scholars, authors and researchers with the ability for creative thinking.

In addition, such a trend has led Omanis to value university studies much higher than TE, VT and other training programmes. Furthermore the trend has also affected society's attitudes towards preserving cultural and social dimensions, since only a minority of people are really interested in promoting their knowledge for intrinsic reasons, as noted by the interviewees.

Accordingly, the future vision and plans of education and HE should take all these dimensions into account in order to sustain the rich civilisation and cultural heritage of Oman, as well as the intellectual life of the Omani people. It should ensure that young Omanis become well-qualified and well-skilled individuals, able to meet the different future challenges, and prepare scholars, creators, researchers and thinkers who can participate in modern life.

Moreover, another social factor seems to contribute to the intensification of the demand for HE in Oman, that being that people who gain higher qualifications in whatever area, are generally guaranteed a higher social position. Hence, in Oman's status-conscious society, HE is a very desirable commodity. Additionally, some interviewee responses reflect certain social aspects of this demand, for example one interviewee noted that: 'females in our society are more likely to want HE than males' (L4sc3) and supported this assertion, saying that 'the number of female students who graduate from secondary school and gain high marks is much higher than male students'. This case indeed calls for more investigation, and poses several serious questions concerning the effect of gender in this issue, and the social factor which leads male students to be less motivated in obtaining higher grades in the Secondary Stage, and to enter HE.

10.2.2 Dealing with the economic demand

It was clarified earlier that the interview findings showed that most participants in this study viewed the economic factor as being stronger than the social one. These views indicate these key figures' recognition that the Omani people have a pressing economic need to continue their studies, reflecting the

extent to which Omani families must educate their children in order to improve their financial situations. Hence, they believe that Omanis pursue HE opportunities simply to obtain well-paid employment, or to increase their incomes through promotion in their current jobs, rather than because they are interested in improving their intellectual ability. Indeed, many authors and researchers have clarified the relationship between income and qualification level worldwide, as for example, Sanyal et al (1981:2), who said:

Once children had received some education, they understood the benefits and demanded more ... the special economic incentives, and prestige and power attached to the jobs obtained by graduates with HE, attracted more and more students.

Al Barwani (2002) also confirms this fact, saying:

no longer is the world debating on the importance of education as a pre-requisite for social and economic development, and nobody now questions the relationship between high academic attainment and economic rewards that accrue as a result of the attainment (Al Barwani, 2002:1).

Hence, the link between people's qualifications and earnings is well-understood, and the desire of most people to increase their income through improving their education levels is a popular trend around the world that could be regarded as a natural response, since it leads to the satisfaction of one of the basic requirements to promote human life. However, as explained above, this trend should not occur at the expense of the cultural needs, whether of the individuals or of the nation, and the pursuit of more education, including HE, should not be purely for economic need, but instead, should be undertaken to promote the intellectual life of people, and the nation's culture.

On the other hand, and unquestionably, a country's economy plays the key role in determining what might be possible in its overall societal development, but this in turn must depend on education, and the development of a country's economic sector and its resources, thus requires continual progression of its

education system and the supply of well-qualified personnel. According to David Milliband, the main reason for expanding the United Kingdom HE system, especially since 1987, has been perceived economic need, and the unending move up-market among countries determined to maintain competitive advantage (Finegold et al, 1992). As an example of the return and contribution of advanced HE in a country's economy and development process, by 1999/2000 the UK universities generated directly and indirectly, over £34.8 billion outputs and over 562,000 full-time equivalent jobs throughout the economy, equivalent to 2.7% of the UK workforce in employment (Department for Education and Skills, 2003:10). This indeed, is a strong reflection of the role of HE in supporting a country's economic growth (Boediono and McMahon, 1992).

In Oman, the pressing needs of the local market for a well-qualified national workforce is one of the factors that place pressure upon the HE sector, since most jobs in different sectors of the market require high qualifications, as revealed by the interviews' findings and documents reviewed earlier (see, for example, Al-Hashmi, 1999; Al-Moamari, 2000), and the study conducted by the SQU, which verified that a workforce with a wide range of knowledge and skill in several specialisations is needed for the private sector enterprises, and this demands university, or at least college, qualifications (Al-Mamri, 2002).

Indeed, most professional jobs in specific areas in the Omani labour market are currently occupied by expatriates, who are better qualified and able to meet the requirements of those posts. This situation was recognised as an important dimension from the early 1990s, confirmed by its appearance as one of the main and pivotal axes of '*Oman 2020*'. However, despite the substantial concern about this situation and the various policies intended to prepare a well-qualified nation to replace these expatriates, the situation does not seem to have improved particularly, and there is, therefore, a high responsibility upon the Omani HE system and other training streams to address this issue. This may require further research in an attempt to reach a solution.

10.2.3 How to improve the situation of the national workforce in the private sector's enterprises

It is worth noting that that no interviewee referred to the expatriate domination of the labour market or said that the high number of expatriates in comparison with the low number of Omani nationals in the workforce was attributed to the relatively short period of the country's modernisation. This perhaps reflects the fact that these participants believe that the period of 35 years, having produced several plans, policies and programmes of education and training, has been long enough to qualify and prepare a national workforce which responds to the labour market demand.

Consequently, several questions have been raised regarding this situation, such as, what reasons exist for it, and why, despite an acceptable amount of Omanisation in several governmental bodies, the private sector enterprises in Oman continue to rely heavily on expatriates despite three decades of persuasion to the contrary. Is this because these companies actively avoid recruiting Omanis, or do well-qualified Omanis reject opportunities in the private sector in favour of government posts? From the interviewees' responses to such questions, which were discussed in Chapter Six, and order to improve the participation level of Omani workforce; the main factors are discussed below.

Dealing with the low remuneration of most private sector jobs

The low remuneration of most private sector jobs discourages Omani workers from seeking employment in private enterprise. This confirms the findings of Al Barwani (2002) and others, regarding the relationship between salary and qualification level in Oman, and elsewhere in the world. As noted by (L3gvc4), 'the qualification and experience is the fact', suggesting that if the Omani employee is sufficiently qualified and can fulfil the requirements of the job, the salary should reflect that.

This could be evidenced by the fact that salaries of most employees who hold university or college qualifications and who work in banks or financial investment companies in Oman, are between RO. 700 and RO. 1,000 [\$1,822 and \$2,600], while in PDO and similar agencies most of these employees are paid between RO. 1,000 and RO. 1,500 monthly [$\$ \approx .384$ RO.]. It is worth noting that although the researcher has attempted to obtain some specific references or studies to confirm this reality in the Omani private sector, he was unable to find any such information, since as already mentioned, it is rare to find research in Oman in such specific field. Nonetheless, the salary levels are a well-known reality and the researcher knows many of these employees, and is aware that some are paid RO. 2,000 [\$5,208] or more monthly. Consequently, the qualification and experience is the fact as indicated by some participants, whereby if the preparation of young Omanis was improved; their positions and remunerations in the private enterprises will be promoted, so it is the responsibility of the educational system including BE, HE and other training streams.

Improving the qualification of Omanis in professional jobs and specific areas

In the Omani labour market, expatriates occupy three kinds of jobs, the first including professional and high specialised employment requiring highly qualified personnel, with long experience, such as consultants, advisors and experts in different areas. This level includes also others well-qualified workforce in most fields, for instance, academic staff, financial jobs, different medical specialisations, etc. The second is the vocational and technical field, for example mechanics, blacksmiths, carpenters, etc. The third is the low-status jobs with little pay, such building workers, helpers, cleaners, housemaid and similar services workers.

The low qualification of most Omani employees is the second reason noted by the interviewees for the existence of the large number of expatriates in the private sector, since the number of qualified Omanis with long experience is very small and the majority of them are less qualified than expatriates in these areas,

while the expatriates in the professional and specialised employment are meeting the requirements of these jobs in private agencies, thus leading to private companies' unwillingness to employ Omanis, or to their tendency to employ them in lower status jobs that do not require high qualifications or professional skills, and therefore, only attract low pay.

This status was clearly stated by some participants such as (L1u4) who said 'so far we have not qualified Omanis to occupy many types of jobs in this sector', and (L3gvu4) who said 'the expatriates are better qualified and have more experience than Omanis', and (L3gvc4) who stressed the importance of experience, saying: 'because it is difficult to get people with experience in specific areas. So, the qualification and experience is the fact'.

Hence, even though Omanis are hard workers, the system has failed them from an early stage by not providing them with the particular skills and knowledge required for many jobs. Again, this observation indicates the responsibility of the education system, in preparing the national workforce in terms of number, type of specialisation, and quality of the training and qualifications required by the marketplace.

Preparing Omani technicians in the various work fields

Associated with this situation is the absence of Omani technicians and professionals in specific technical areas. (eg, mechanical engineers, designers, electronic engineers, computer engineers, etc.) Indeed, most technicians in both the governmental and private sector are expatriates as mentioned by (Al-Mamari, 2000), a situation previously attributed to the poor national planning for HRD, and the curricula produced by HEIs and other training institutions, which are mostly inadequate for the requirements of the labour market. The country's HRD planning process is once again, responsible for such a position, since it has failed to prepare the required national manpower in these particular areas, opting instead for short-term solutions in a confused manner, as noted by a number of

interviewees, such as (L2g13g), (L2d12g), (L4sh1) and others, which has led to shortages in some areas and surpluses in others, such that some interviewees, (L2d12g) in particular, recorded a 'pressing need to prepare or bring specialists in planning'.

However, the negative attitude in Omani society towards vocational education, should also be acknowledged within previous period as explained in Chapter Three, since until the mid-1990s, Omani students were not interested in undertaking such types of education as mentioned earlier. Although this reality is one of the main challenges still facing the Gulf Countries, and affecting their manpower plans, such that technicians' jobs and other specialised work in the industrial and services sectors are overwhelmingly occupied by expatriates (Al Shurah, 2002), in Oman this attitude is gradually changing (Al-Ramadhani, 2003), since several social and economic factors have led young Omanis and their children to change their priorities and traditions, simultaneous with other steps that were taken to encourage the private agencies to employ these graduates.

Nevertheless, it could be expected that the low participation of Omanis in this area will continue at least for the next decade, until it become settled, provided that the government continues its campaign to motivate young people to choose vocational education. Clearly, this is an important area that needs further study from an economic perspective.

Improving English language level among young Omanis

The poor quality of English language among young Omanis does not equip them to work in the majority of private sector agencies since English is the language used in such places. Consequently, good English is a key qualification to join the labour market. This indicates another area of responsibility of education in general and HE in particular, that being to elevate the importance of the English language and provide instruction that will allow students to develop this skill.

Indeed, most HEIs (public and private), are now providing their students with a foundation year of study, dedicated to the teaching of English, but this situation is not favoured by all key figures in the HE sector as discussed in Chapter Six and Nine, since some interviewees, such as (L1m2) believed this should be stopped. This suggestion was suggested also by The World Bank (2001) aimed at saving the fund of that year to be used to increase the enrolment. Whereas others such as (L1u9), (L3gu3), (L3prc1) and (L3prc4) regarded it as an important stage that should be passed by those who are not already fluent in English.

In reality, since the school year 1997/1998 and the implementation of BE, the state has worked to improve the nation's English by including it from the first level of Basic Education, and regarding it as a main subject that all students must pass throughout their entire school career. However, despite these efforts, all indicators still reveal that most students need this foundation year before entering HE, and the researcher's personal view is that the abolition of this initiative without a suitable alternative, would negatively affect the quality of education in all levels of tertiary education. Thus, in-depth research should be undertaken before any attempts to remove such provision.

From the above discussion as well as from previous chapters, it could be concluded that, that most of these factors can be attributed to two major reasons, both related to the important role of education in general and HE in particular. These being the lack of strategic planning for human development, and the failure of the current educational and training system (from BE through to HE) to create a well-qualified workforce that meets the requirements of the current labour market. The first one is the lack of preparation of young people from the early stages of education, since the educational system in all its aspects, has failed the young by not equipping them with the particular skills, knowledge and work ethics required for many jobs. Moreover, it has not acknowledged the crucial importance of the need to communicate effectively in the English language, as required to join the labour market.

The second major reason concerns planning for HRD, and qualifying sufficient numbers of young Omanis in the right specialisms, through HE, to meet the needs of the economy. The current HE planning is not rigorously undertaken, nor is it diverse enough to underpin the country's development, with the result that 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, require less pay, and are loyal to their employers.

Much evidence can be produced to support this conclusion. For example, most interviewees noted that the lack of a national workforce in the private sector is mainly in the small companies, while in the big companies such as Petroleum Development of Oman (PDO), Liquid National Gas (LNG), and Banks and other financial companies, there are suitable numbers of Omanis. This is attributed to the fact that these companies bring together the most qualified Omanis in different areas, which means that if there were enough well-qualified Omanis, the private sector companies would employ them and the matter of low salaries and other issues would be remedied, since a well-qualified workforce promotes profit for the private agencies, which in turn should lead to increases in salaries and other rewards. As mentioned by most interviewees, the low salaries paid by small companies reflect the employment of poorly-qualified people, while in the big companies the salary of highly-qualified employees, whether Omanis or expatriates, are high.

Consequently, if there were to be an advanced and modern planning process and well structured educational system, in which all dimensions and elements of the preparation of a national workforce were taken into account and resolutely implemented, a suitable national workforce would be assured, and the balance between Omanis and expatriates would dramatically change.

It is worth noting here that, many jobs within private companies are low-status positions, attracting little pay, such as building workers, carpenters, plumbers, helpers, farmers, cleaners, housemaid and similar jobs in the vocational field, which is also dominated by expatriates, despite such occupations being highly demanded by private sector enterprises in particular, and the country's development in general. Although it was mentioned that the Omani marketplace is small and has limited capacity, around 80% of the existed companies, from the majority of Omani private enterprises, are doing vocational business work and employ high number of expatriates in this field. Indeed, most Omani were not interested in doing such jobs because of two reasons; firstly, most expatriates are from countries where living costs are cheaper, they are satisfied with employment in these jobs, while the high cost of living in Oman imposes Omani people to avoid employment in these jobs because they do not provide enough income that meet the basic requirements of their life. Secondly, society perceived employment in this area as inferior and leading to a low social position, so they avoid employment in these jobs.

Therefore, dealing with such status requires many actions that should be carried out by several bodies and in different areas, as explained in the previous chapters. Nevertheless, it is expected that the current situation will remain and there is no proposed solution to increase the numbers of Omanis in this area, unless some social or financial circumstances arise within future that impose people to choose such jobs.

However, in addition to above reasons for the current domination of expatriates and migrant workers in the Omani labour market, other factors were conclude from the interviews, the most important of which are; first, existence of a cheap and better qualified labour force from Oman neighbouring Asian countries with large populations which lead business people prefer to import labour from these countries; second, the low growth rate of the national economy of the country, regarded another reason, since it is not creating new opportunities for investment and in turn leads to limit work opportunities. Third, the differences

in the work environment between the private companies and the public sector; fourth, limited capacity and business of Oman's market; fifth, poor administrative and marketing planning in most private enterprise and character of the business people; sixth, 'Hidden business companies' which established by Omanis, but under full supervision of expatriates who develop these enterprises and bring people from their own countries; seventh, the absence of comprehensive intelligence to assist planners and decision-makers to build and fulfil required plans, policies, decisions and activities; eighth, the general culture of Oman, as in other Arab countries also regarded as factor that affects the take-up of employment in the private sector, because many families do not allow their daughters to work in this environment at all, while others permit them to do so but only in certain circumstances.

Finally, some interviewees stated that social duties, such as caring for one's parents, visiting sick relatives and friends in hospital, and that obligations take priority over formal paid employment, and hence it is not possible to combine the two. These duties do not apply to most expatriates, since they are migrant workers, normally away from their families, and consequently, they are the preferred employees. It could be observed that none of the interviewees indicated any negative influence resulting from these Omani traditions, except the preference of the private sector companies to employ expatriates who come to their jobs without such social restrictions or obligations.

Clearly, in all societies there are some social, religious or national duties and activities that require citizens' attention. Oman is one such society, and its citizens have these commitments which they can not avoid, regardless of whether they affect their work. In other parts of the world, this situation has been accommodated by employing people in part-time jobs that enable employees to fulfil such social obligations outside of the formal working time, but this trend has not yet happened in Oman, and it would seem that there is an increasing demand for this system. This is not only necessary to allow the continuation of the traditions, but also because the modern lifestyle creates the need for self-

development, by for example, participation in civic activities, such as attendance at courses related to self/personal development, important symposiums and cultural activities, election at organisations such as sport clubs, community societies, child care, and especially for female employees to enable them to carry out their children's care duties and to monitor their children's study progress in their schools.

10.2.4 Filling the gaps in the Omani marketplace

It can be understood that strong links exist between the labour market, employment and HE. So, in considering the nature of this relationship, the HE system should be built to respond to the requirements of the current labour market, in accordance with other elements.

As the global shift from a manufacturing to a knowledge economy continues, those nations with the best-educated citizenry will enjoy a decisive competitive advantage. Countries across the globe are making rapid gains in educational and technological attainment, improving their productivity. In this new world, market share is moving to countries best able to deliver skilled workers, particularly in the areas of science and technology (p.2). From: www.highereducation.org/reports/blg/growing.shtml (19/11/03).

However, external inefficiency is a concern in some countries where there is a mismatch between the characteristics of graduates and the job-market. In Indonesia, for example, job markets at the junior secondary level are very tight with low levels of unemployment at all ages, short job-search times, and high real rates of return. Unemployment, however, among the senior secondary vocational and senior secondary general school graduates is high, even though the real rates of return are also high. The same is true for college and university graduates, suggesting the need for continuous improvements in the external and internal efficiency of education and preparation for jobs (Boediono, and McMahon 1992).

In addition, it was mentioned previously that the World Bank (1994) has also indicated the importance of the private institutions' role in achieving the goals of

greater efficiency, quality, and equity in HE through offering opportunities for diversification, and making systems more responsive to changing labour market needs. Research concerned with the relationship between HE planning and employment, is not uncommon. In Britain, for instance, the government believed that ‘enhancing the employability of graduates is a key task for higher education, and that work experience can be very valuable in helping students to develop’ (Department for Education and Employment, 1998:36).

In Oman, the issue of expatriate workers is a pressing one that has been discussed several times in this thesis, as it testifies to the unpreparedness of the Omani population for the developing economy, and as mentioned previously, 530,000 expatriates were working in the private sector, as opposed to only 60,487 Omanis in 2002 (MoNE, 2002c). While it was expected that over 80,000 Omanis would be unemployed during the 1990s (Al-Lamky, 1992), the statistics show that this number is actually increasing significantly. According to Al Barwani (2002) only 41.6% students who passed GCSE exams (almost 34,000) entered HE, which means that less than half of those graduates gain admission to HEIs including TE and VT training programmes (Al Barwani, 2002:7), while around 60% of them were left as unemployed. This means that during all previous years there were accumulations of thousands of these graduates unable either to enter HE or to gain a suitable job.

Regarding the level of education of those Omanis employed in the private sector, it was noted that 69.8% possessed preparatory or lower educational qualifications (MoNE, 2000), indicating the low paid and low status nature of the jobs they are occupying. Similarly, since most private companies are small business agencies, they offer low-status positions with little pay, while the statistics show that the majority of expatriates who work in these small enterprises have not achieved Secondary Stage Certificates (Al-Mamari, 2000:14; Al Barwani, 2002:10).

Nevertheless, one cannot assume that the current labour market requires a lowly-qualified workforce, but rather, these numbers can be seen to reflect several matters. Firstly, there is the situation of the size of the Omani marketplace, which is comprised of small agencies engaged in basic and limited income business, employing only a few people, as mentioned previously. It was mentioned that most jobs in the service sector, such as in carpentry, smithery, plumbing, and gardening are dominated by expatriates, and similarly in the field of construction and building, it is very rare to find Omanis. Secondly, these statistics reveal the low performance of the national economy and the low participation of the investment sector in activating the marketplace. Thirdly, they reflect the effect of the 'hidden business companies' which precipitate the entry of large numbers of migrant workers.

Moreover, the statistics relating to migrant workers with their low levels of education, and their preparedness to occupy low-status jobs, reflects a social trend in which Omanis have come to rely on expatriates to perform most service jobs, especially in households where it is easy to find a large number of families throughout the country that have one or more housemaid, helpers and perhaps drivers, even though these families have many sons or daughters who could shoulder some of these domestic responsibilities. For example, in April 2006 there were more than 60,000 domestic servants, and around 5,000 workers in community and personal services, mostly involved in the same area http://www.moneoman.gov.om/publications/monthly_bulletin/T14.pdf (7/6/2006). Hence, the high number of expatriate workers who do not hold high qualifications does not suggest that the labour market necessarily requires highly-qualified manpower.

Nonetheless, the majority of senior consultants, experts, academic staff, general physicians and other specialists in most professional jobs and in both the governmental and private sector are, in fact, expatriates. And the MoHE statistics show that more than twenty years after the establishment of the six Colleges of Education, expatriates still represent the vast majority of the academic staff in

these HE institutions. This is despite the 6th FYDP (2001-2005) figures determining the progress of Omanisation of the teaching staff of these colleges as being from 7.6% at the beginning of the plan to 40% by the end of the plan period, and the rate of the supporting academic occupations from 67.9% to 90% (MoNE, 2002b:58). The reality is very far from the plan targets, since statistics for the academic year 2004/2005, show that in these six colleges there were 80 Omanis representing around 13.6% while there were 472 expatriates, representing 86.4% of the total academic staff in these colleges (MoHE, 2005).

Excepting only the SQU, the extent of Omanisation in other governmental HEIs is similar or worse, and the same situation prevails in the private institutions. According to the last published statistics, which include information about 16 private colleges and three private universities, there are 158 Omanis representing 17.7% of the total number of academic staff (892), while the number of expatriates is 734, representing 82.3% of the total number of academic personnel. Moreover, among 158 academic Omani staff, not one held a PhD, while those holding Masters' degrees amounted to only 13, with the remainder having lower qualifications. In contrast, among 734 expatriate academic personnel, there were 130 with PhDs, 333 with Masters' degrees, and the rest holding different lower degrees, which indicates the level of academic staff quality in these universities and colleges (MoHE, 2005).

In general, the SQU study, mentioned earlier, has made a start on estimating the future qualification needs of the national workforce, predicting that Oman will require 153,200 university-qualified employees by the year 2020, 104,900 of whom should be in science and social specialisations, 5,600 requiring masters' degrees and doctorates, and 42,700 of whom should be teachers (Al-Mamari, 2000). Unquestionably, these figures confirm what has been discussed above, and show the extent to which the structure of the Omani labour market needs to be reformed, and the size of the gap between the country's HRD plans and policies, and the actual requirements of the Omani economy.

10.2.5 Most needed specialisations and fields of work

Through the interviewees' responses it was clear that Oman's development process has a pressing need for many specialists and a well-skilled workforce in many specific areas. Indeed, most of these specialisations which were mentioned in Chapter Six, coincide with those listed in a short document published by an important symposium held in Muscat in March 2004, entitled '*Higher Education and the Labour Market: Opportunities and Options*', which indicated more than 50 general or main fields of study and specialisations listed as being required by the Omani labour market. This document provide details about needed specialisations, the vocations, and fields of work and agencies that require such specialists, and the HEIs and training institutions which offer appropriate courses, both governmental and private.

Nonetheless, there remains a gap in the information that is needed to fully plan, since no comprehensive intelligence system exists, and although the required specialisations have been identified, it is equally important to know the numbers of qualified people required in each of these fields, and what level of educational provision will lead to the optimum output, so that surpluses and deficits do not occur. Therefore, although a comprehensive intelligence system will demand substantial effort, money, co-ordination and co-operation between the interested institutions in different sectors and levels, a crucial decision should be taken to establish a national data base, supported by in-depth studies and research that provides the intelligence needed for effective HE and training planning. Such an advanced and accurate system of gathering, monitoring and mining information, will enable the HEIs and other training institutions to know what is required, and hence produce courses that are suitable to the needs of the economy, and which will qualify people to move into jobs. It is worth noting that several interviewees mentioned the importance of establishing such a national database, such as (L1m2), (L1u12) and (L2d7g) and others.

Overall, it could be seen that the public sector still needs consultants, advisors, and experts in most specific areas, engineering specialisations, medicine (with higher qualifications), nursing (with university qualifications), academic staff, and specific technical areas, while 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. Moreover, the industry sector in particular, 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.

From the discussion so far, it seems strange that few interviewees mentioned the pressing urgent need of academic staff, while no participant noted the pressing need of cultural institutions, tourism, heritage and Islamic fields. However, although no interviewees introduced this issue in their responses to the question about the requirements of the labour market, they did raise the difficulty of finding well-qualified academic staff for both the governmental and private HEIs, in their responses related to the theme of administration and management of HE. This particular issue, which has been discussed above in detail, was perceived as one of the main challenges facing the Omani HE system, as stated by (L3gc2), (L2d6g) and (L3prc2) and others, who highlighted a chronic lack of qualified national academic staff, since most such staff are expatriates. The second is the need to prepare people in heritage, tourism, cultural and Islamic sciences fields, since there are over a thousand mosques and Islamic institutes, heritage sites and cultural centres, which all need qualified staff.

With respect to the second issue, which was not mentioned by the interviewees, this being the need of the cultural, heritage, and Islamic institutions, as mentioned in Chapter Two there are around 13,000 mosques throughout the country, the biggest of which (at least 3,000) are administered by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. These mosques need imams and other relevant

personnel, as also do the various fields of the Ministry, for example, personnel of the Alifita Department, Quranic schools and those dealing with treasury and properties of Awqaf, Zakat and Bait Al Mal [means dedications and endowments made by the people in the sake for God, as worship, the definition mentioned in Chapter Two].

Moreover, other cultural and heritage centres, also require qualified Omanis, these being public libraries, museums and the socio-cultural field of manuscripts and documents, administered by the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture, which also publishes books on a variety of subjects and various cultural activities organised to promote culture and arts in Omani society. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, Oman has numerous important archaeological sites, very old forts and castles, and over 100 historic forts and castles recorded as international historical sites, have been restored and are now open to the public as some of Oman's foremost tourist attractions. The Ministry of National Heritage recorded around 300,000 visitors annually to these forts and castles, which all present other opportunities to raise awareness of Omani civilisation, in addition to contributing towards the national, and individuals' income. This reality reflects the extent to which the Sultanate has consolidated and supported its rich and valuable culture, but this whole effort could not be achieved without preparing and qualifying Omani specialists in such fields and enabling them to obtain higher and specific qualifications.

Unfortunately, there are not qualified Omanis to meet the requirements of these various fields, institutions and sites. Additionally, there have been no scientific studies about the ancient and historic roles of such sites in order to preserve and promote these valuable heritage sites. Yet there are numerous SSGs without the opportunity to enrol in HEIs, and others with arts qualifications and no jobs. Moreover, as Al Barwani (2002) pointed out, young Omanis have been directed into poorly-paid jobs that provide no economic security or opportunity for personal development, and in which they become trapped. Such a situation clearly reflects the gaps in the planning for HE and employment structures.

Nevertheless, it is appreciated that not all young Omanis should enter universities or colleges, and that there is an important need to qualify Omanis to cover gaps in other sectors, such as in construction and the service sectors, but it should be recognised that the priority should be to Omanise the most important fields which involve high ranking and professional jobs, such as in medicine, academia, management and specialists in different areas. Such jobs attract high pay, and if Omanis are employed in such positions, this will lead to improvements in Omani families' income, and promote the national economy in general, whereas currently the salaries paid to the large number of expatriates employed in these posts, often leave the country in one way or another. Moreover, it would seem to be against social and economic interests for the state to qualify its young population purely for the lower income fields, when there are pressing and urgent needs in the higher income fields, particularly because of the imbalance in the population, being predominantly under 20 years old, as mentioned earlier.

Accordingly, it could be understood that it is extremely important for Oman to keep pace with such changes and other social and economic developments, through reforming its educational system, including HE and training programmes. It is crucial for the decision-makers and planners to know the specialisations, jobs and fields of work, qualification levels, and the number of qualified personnel needed to support all sectors of the country's development, in order to achieve comprehensive human development and prepare a well-qualified national workforce able to work either in the public or private sector, nationally or internationally.

10.3 Enhancing the Vision, Objectives and Policies of HE

From reviewing governmental documents and related literature, as well as from the interview findings of the study, it is clear that the Omani HE system is facing several challenges, these being: the need to enhance the vision and objectives of HE in accordance with the cultural, social and economic

environment locally and internationally, the need to expand its capacity and provision to meet the high and increasing demand from SSGs, the need to improve the administration and management of HE; and the need to promote HE funding to underpin all these improvements. This section will summarise the discussions of these issues with the aim of drawing the attention of all interested institutions, policy-makers and other researchers in Oman's HE sector, to some important issues that should be taken into account in the development and expansion process of HE to meet the future challenges.

It is evident that in Oman there has been little opportunity to accumulate a body of literature relating to the philosophy of education in general, and HE in particular. During the last three decades, all activities undertaken throughout Oman have been aligned to His Majesty's views instructions and decrees, including the Basic Law of the State, which have been regarded as national regulations and enactments, in addition to the government's plans and policies.

Within the HE field, however, as clarified in Chapter Five, there are now several provisional policies and plans for each division and stream of HE, included their visions and objectives and strategies. Some of these visions and plans are included in the Vision of '*Oman 2020*' while others are covered in the country's FYDPs, which are regarded as provisional financial action plans rather than as a theoretical framework for the country's HE system based on some national philosophy, vision and objectives. Consequently, and through the responses from the majority of interviewees, the lack of official published documentation regarding the philosophy, vision, objectives or general plans for HE in Oman, was confirmed.

However, some interviewees considered the vision of HRD for the period between 1996-2020 (referred to in the Vision of '*Oman 2020*'), as representing the comprehensive long-term vision and strategy for HE as well as for other

educational streams. Nevertheless, there were long comments produced by many interviewees about the '*Oman 2020*' and they emphasised several weaknesses of this vision. Some commented that the vision established certain policies and plans that were rejected by Omani citizens who requested His Majesty to amend some terms and policies, which he did. Another group commented on the preparation process of the Vision, considering it to be dominated by economic and financial targets, while other heads of HEIs argued that the HE sector had received low consideration, and this omission had led to the current difficulties.

Moreover, it was commented that the many changes to the Vision detracted from its seriousness, causing confusion, and accordingly, the most important comment made by most participants was that they did not consider this Vision as their blueprint for the future, and that it was used merely as a reference when they needed some guidance. They confirmed that they had not been directed by their institutions to depend on it or indeed, to build their practice around it. These views have been detailed in Chapter Seven.

Nevertheless, and despite the ambiguous situation of the Vision of '*Oman 2020*', in the absence of any other alternative, it could be suggested that the Vision should be dealt with as an official document, and its ideas be followed at least until the state undertakes some action in this respect or decides to formulate another long-term strategy. Indeed, this Vision does have much to commend it, especially in the economic dimension, as observed by a number of interviewees, and it has cost the country much effort and money in its preparation, so it could be regarded as a base on which to build another strategy. However, it could not be regarded as a comprehensive vision for HE, as confirmed by the interviewees.

Principles and objectives for a vision and strategy of HE

Being dominated by an economic framework and targets, the Vision '*Oman 2020*' could be seen as not giving enough consideration to the HE field, as clarified above, and the country's FYDPs were regarded as financial and provisional or

action plans, also dominated by economic needs. Moreover, these plans and policies were conceived according to the current organisational structure of HE with its multiplicity of organisations. Accordingly, they are characterised by separateness, rather than cohesion, and this situation has clearly led to the absence of a national comprehensive vision and strategy for HE, leading to ambiguities and a duplication and waste of effort, as verified by several interviewees. The lack of a documented formal plan for HE has clearly caused the problems facing HE currently.

In addition, these did not give the cultural, intellectual, or social needs and trends, the careful consideration that they deserved. Although it can be noted in several parts of the world that the equity, accessibility, autonomy, and the contribution of HE to social transformation have been overshadowed by concerns about excellence, efficiency, expenditures and rates of return, as observed by Torres and Schugurensky (2002), it could be observed that many other countries place these cultural, intellectual and social needs of the nation as core aims and targets. Such visions and plans reflect the comprehensive conception among the HEIs of the mission and crucial role of HE in national society as well as in the international context. For example in the UK, the Robbins Report defined the purposes of higher education as including the 'promotion of the powers of the mind 'to develop the intellect of the person'; the advancement of learning 'to develop knowledge'; and the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship 'to develop society'' (Committee on Higher Education, 1963 in Trowler, 1998:13).

Another example, is the Irish Universities Act of 1997, from which it is obvious that several cultural and social values are involved. The values and conception of knowledge advancement, cultural environment, individuals' needs, and societal development, are apparent in this Act. Similarly, the efficiency and quality of the Israeli HE system, rely on its intrinsic and extrinsic roles, as noted by Geva-May (2001); 'The intrinsic role refers to the values and goals at the heart of HE, namely the pursuit of truth and knowledge. The extrinsic role refers to

HE's ability to respond to the changing needs of the society' (p.266). As a result of a combination of these roles in the Israeli HE system, HEIs have been able to retain their exclusive position in society. Geva-May (2001) cited from a number of authors and researchers (eg Ball, 1985; Williams, 1991) that the quality of HE is 'bound up with values and fundamental aims'.

Hence, a new vision, plans and policies for HE should be balanced in promoting these dimensions according to the several facets of individuals and communal life, including their needs for development of their capabilities. Moreover, it should appreciate people's intrinsic desire to increase knowledge and understanding, and recognise the other dimensions of HE in shaping a civilised, inclusive society, in addition to the nation's economic needs and the requirements of the marketplace nationally and internationally.

Returning to the interview findings, it was mentioned that given the status of most of the contributors, it was likely that they had some personal involvement in the current activities in this respect, and an attempt was thus made to discover the fundamental principles and objectives that are being established. Many objectives, dimensions and ideas were suggested by most participants, as listed in Table 7.1, although a number of these ideas could not be regarded as principles or aims for such a vision or strategy as mentioned earlier in Chapter Seven. Thus, after analysing all these suggestions, the most important can be documented as follows:

1. Adopting the fundamental principle of 'education for the sake of education', and supporting this approach through all levels of education.
2. Taking into account the requirements of the current advanced marketplace, either the local market or the international one, which means the new visions and plans of BE, HE and other training streams should be built in accordance with these two dimensions/domains, and accordingly prepare Omanis to be able to work abroad, either in Arab countries or in others.
3. Paying more attention to the high and increasing number of SSGs, whereby the development plans should work seriously to expand the capacity of the HEIs aiming at providing HE opportunities for every eligible student.
4. Making every effort to ensuring quality of education in Omani HEIs.

5. Focusing on developing applied Sciences rather than Arts or Social Sciences.
6. Taking into account the accelerating developments of modern technology and communication, and hence new knowledge.
7. Promoting education and training in a continuous way, developing curricula at all levels of study, and improving the performance of the education system.
8. Taking into consideration the economic situation of the citizens when the state builds the plans, so it should not posed other financial burdens upon the citizens and consider the financial difficulties of most Omani families.

It could be observed that some of these suggestions could be understood as fundamental principles, while others could be regarded as matters that should be taken into account when the state builds its future plans. However, although the cultural and intellectual dimensions could be seen in these ideas, the social values of society and individual human needs, as mentioned earlier, are relatively absent, except the following ideas that mentioned only by one or two interviewees, and they were short comments, such as:

1. Taking into the account the social dimension.
2. Education should ensure the country's identity, and establish the prime values of the country, and at same time be open to other perspectives and cultures in order to benefit from them and to benefit others.
3. We should participate in the modern civilisation to gain benefit.
4. It is a tradition and the ambition of people to obtain education and knowledge.

In fact, this reflecting the overall economic influence that pervades most of Oman's development sectors. However, it is hoped that a future national vision will consider these dimensions. Furthermore, other interviewees offered other short or very general ideas that seemed to support the above suggestions, such as:

1. Provide useful education as a service for everyone.
2. His Majesty's vision and the government thoughts should be taken into high consideration.
3. Interaction with globalisation.
4. The plans for HE should be linked with the country's development plan.
5. More cost-effective methods of providing HE should be used.

6. The funding for HE and training should be increased and other resources should be sought.
7. Partnerships with the private sector should be established to shoulder some of the responsibilities for HE.
8. Students' attitudes should be changed and they should be directed to enter the specialisations required by the labour market.
9. The pressure made by some big countries as well as by some international organisations upon the small, undeveloped and weak countries which threaten these countries' culture, social, political and economic components.
10. Benefit from other countries' experiences in this field.
11. Education in Oman should be stronger and more concentrated.
12. In-service training should be provided for young Omanis.
13. The need for other technicians for vocational jobs should be considered.
14. The needs of industrial projects and for human resources generally should be considered.

Most of these elements were indicated by one or two participants. Some reflect cultural trends, society's ambitions and individuals' needs, while others could be regarded as issues or thoughts to be considered in a future plan. It should be appreciated that these elements need more discussion and may provide the basis for future research. However, it can be concluded that certainly all of these issues should be considered by HE policy-makers whether in Oman or in other countries, and that at the same time, lessons from other countries' educational development and experience, as suggested by a number of participants, should be learned in order to avoid their pitfalls and more waste.

10.4 Expanding the capacity of HE and meeting the demand

It is obvious that, the low capacity of the state HEIs limits enrolment of SSGs, and the increasing number of these young people, who are left without further educational opportunities is regarded as one of the main national dilemmas, which causes much discontent in Omani society. Indeed, as highlighted by Al-Hasmi (1999), the Sultanate has been facing this challenge since the second half of the 1990s, and now the number of SSGs has increased significantly, reaching over 52,000 graduates in 2006 (MoE, 2006), so that now most Omani families have

experience of the failure of HE planning and are suffering as a result. As noted earlier, this issue has been raised by various people in the Majles A'Shura, Majles A'Ddawla, and other bodies.

It is common for any country's human resources to be regarded as the core of that nation's capital. Hence, the failure to qualify and absorb this high number of young Omanis every year means failure in other sectors and fields, since the current situation has led to increased numbers of expatriates who now total more than half a million at different levels and in various jobs across all sectors in the Omani labour market. This prevails while thousands of young Omanis have no hope of gaining the qualifications to allow them to enter the job market and who, therefore, remain unemployed.

Different View towards the main reason

Despite the state's plans and efforts within the last ten years to expand the capacity of HE, this remains greatly under-achieved, and the gap seems to be increasing. Most interviewees gave several important reasons for this situation, which were widely discussed throughout previous chapters. However, the youthfulness of Omani society was regarded as the main factor that led to further increases in the numbers at all levels of education and relevant matters. This should be seen positively and will be discussed through out the following paragraphs.

Given, as indicated earlier, that 41.2% of the Omani population was under 19 years of age in 2002 (MoNE, 2003a), the current pressure of increasing numbers of SSGs will remain at the same level at least for the next fifteen years. Bearing these problems of increased population in mind, the country's development plans, particularly the 5th FYDP, 6th FYDP and the Vision of 'Oman 2020' regarded the high growth rate of the Omani population as one of those serious challenges facing the country, that required urgent attention. Accordingly, one of the prime aims of the HRD strategy for 1996-2020 as mentioned early, is to reduce the

population growth rate from 3.7% to less than 3% by the end of the strategy of 'Oman 2020', which is in keeping with the international standard of population growth which lies between 2.5% and 3% (MoD, 1995a).

Because of various governmental policies enacted by the Ministry of Health and other organisations, the 'campaign of birth spacing', under the slogan of 'towards improving the family and women's health', the population growth rate has declined sharply to 1.8% as indicated by data from the second national census in 2003, and as mentioned by some interviewees, such as (L2d4g) and others, which means that the decline is much sharper and quicker than planned. It could be argued, therefore, that a policy of reducing the population growth is unsuitable for a country like Oman, and that the previous rate of growth should not be regarded as a crisis. Instead, in a country such as Oman, still in its infancy with its several natural resources, and in the case of heavily reliant on expatriate labour, a strategy to increase the national population would be appropriate, and indeed this has occurred in the past.

The youthfulness of the country's population could be regarded as a good feature and a rich resource in which the country should invest in order to qualify a national workforce that can meet the urgent needs of different sectors. The development of human capital is one of the most important demands of a nation's economy and social development process. Undeniably, HE is a pivotal axis of HRD in the current developed countries, since it leads to more interaction and contributions of people's knowledge, habits and their behaviours toward themselves, the environment, society's organisations, social services and other civil activities as indicated by many interested studies in this field, such as Sanyal et al., 1981).

Moreover, as an oil-producing country, Oman must consider how to diversify its economy when the oil runs out, and this consideration should involve HRD planning at the same time. For example, Oman has a coastline of more than 1,700

kilometres with many types of fish, and a future fishing industry which now the state plans to be developed, would require a well-qualified workforce to sustain it. It is worth noting that there are several countries around the world suffering from the low growth rate of their population, and the matter of population growth is regarded as one of the strategic and political issues of these countries. Hence, it is supposed that Oman that with such a large proportion of young people making up the national population, this moment in the history of the nation offers a unique opportunity to mould the young Omani people to enable them to meet the significant challenges of the future.

Furthermore, SSGs numbering 50,000, should not be regarded as a serious challenge, since compared with other Arab countries and other societies in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan, Iraq, this figure is small, and could easily be absorbed if the SSGs were properly qualified to take over just a small fraction of the positions occupied by expatriates. In this respect, this unfortunate situation of Omani HE capacity has led several educational researchers (Al Rahbi, 2004; Al Ramadhani, 2003; Al Hashmi, 1999) and the World Bank (2001), which has an international voice, have urged the Omani government to find an immediate urgent solution to the problems of under-capacity in Oman's HE sector.

Regarding the role of civil organisations in this issue, it worth mentioning that the Majles A'Shura (Consultative Council) regarded this matter as one of its main issues which it has discussed continuously with the government. In fact, there is some improvement in the expansion of the capacity of the state HEIs, but this is still far from the required level. Despite the lobbying of MPs by the Majles A'Shura for the establishment of a second governmental university, in a meeting of the Majles with the Minister of HE, in January 2005, the Minister confirmed that no plan exists to proceed in this way.

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

Working to enhance the capacity of HEIs and filling the gap

As clarified early that, the 2004 statistics demonstrate that 32,000 SSGs, representing more than 72% of the total number of these graduates, were unable to join HE, while the number of enrolled students in all streams and institutions of HE was 12,089, representing only 27.3% of the total number of SSGs (MoHE, 2005). These statistics show the great divergence from the target of 52% documented in the 6th FYDP, and hence demonstrate the deficiencies in both the planning and implementation process. And it is the matter of the planning process and the resulting educational provision, that is the cause of this discrepancy, as the majority of the interviewees were quick to confirm.

Since all the interviewees emphasised that the provision of sufficient capacity was not a matter for which they were responsible, even as decision-makers, and that the limited budget available for HE was the cause of this imbalance between the expectation (the demand for HE) and the resources to enable this (the budget), it can be concluded that additional funding for the sector is imperative. Indeed, even those interviewees who proposed alternative methods to expand the capacity of HE, nonetheless agreed that some increase of HE funding was imperative.

Furthermore, expansion of student intake through increased scholarships to assist students from low income families, has also helped in a small way. In addition, the entry of the private sector to HE, which has produced three new universities and a number of colleges in the last five years, is certainly one measure to deal with the gap between HE places required and those available. However, there is need to support the local private HEIs in order to keep those facing financial difficulties in existence, by providing them with scholarship students, since even after the current government support, some such institutions were still facing difficulties. From this it can be concluded that the general feeling amongst the Omani population is that HE should be an entitlement, rather than something that people opt to purchase.

However, it must be remembered that as discussed earlier, the multiplicity of supervisory organisations in respect of HE organisations also contributes to the ineffective use of resources, and to duplication of efforts, which together affect the ability to properly plan. Accordingly, it should be understood that the expansion of HE can not be seen in isolation from other dimensions of the HE development process, and that it is actually subsumed within the need to reformulate the HE vision. From such a reformulation, new HE objectives and implementation strategies should follow, and within these, issues concerning the improvement of the HE system's administration and management, and a consideration of the overall HE budget and its appropriate use, should be attended to. Clearly, a new vision and strategy for HE would result in a new prioritisation for HE. With this respect, following, some strategies that would be considered in a future development and expansion of this sector.

Promoting the capacity of the current key state HEIs

Between them, the current state HEIs, as indicated earlier, provide 12,000 places annually, whereas the numbers required are more than 30,000. Consequently, only those students who gain high marks in their GCSE examinations enter these institutions, and in the case of female students, some years the SQU has not been able to accept any who obtained less than 90%. Obviously, this is more serious than at first sight, since it is clear from GCSE examination results that the capabilities of Omani women are high, yet they are being doubly penalised – once by there not being enough places, and again because they are women. Effectively, to be admitted into SQU, females have to perform better at GCSE than males. This is a significant loss to the future workforce of Oman.

However, the current HE infrastructure would seem to be sufficient for the Omani population, and with appropriate developments, the combined capacity of all HEIs could be expanded. For example, currently the SQU accepts around 2,500 students annually, yet its budget is high, as indicated elsewhere in the thesis

(World Bank, 2001; interviewees). Moreover, the College of Laws accepts only 160 to 185 students annually (MoHE, 2005), the fifteen institutes of Health Sciences accept around only 700 students annually, and the Colleges of Banking and Financial Studies accepted only 121 students at the beginning of the 2004-2005 academic year.

According to the World Bank (2001:22), economies of scale can be realised by increasing student numbers, since 'as the number of students rise, costs rise more slowly, making the unit cost lower at larger institutions'. Hence, even a small budgetary increase to allow the appointment of more academic staff, would allow a proportionately larger number of enrolments. Furthermore, with more effective deployment of those resources, more students could be taught. Instead of professors delivering lectures to groups of 20/30 students, they could just as easily give lectures to bigger groups (40/50 students) as suggested by some interviewees, and given the current international trend towards self-study with internet support, the number of hours teaching input on each course could be greatly reduced. Such combined measures could at least double the number of students in the state HEIs.

The issue of establishment of another governmental university

Having suggested ways of expanding the current state HE provision, it would nevertheless appear from the empirical work and media reports generally in Oman, that society at large supports the idea of establishing a another state university, and consequently, this would seem to be the preferred way forward. However, if public funds are not available to proceed in this way, it is imperative that an alternative solution, such as that mentioned in the previous paragraphs, be implemented, otherwise the situation will deteriorate even further. It is perhaps worth noting here that, given the establishment of three private universities, the creation of a new governmental university might be regarded as a rival that would weaken their role and position.

Hence, it could be suggested that a merger of several existing institutions with the same specialisation, such the six Colleges of Technology supervised by the Ministry of Manpower, and the six Specialised Colleges supervised by the MoHE, provides the potential for creating additional state universities, and might even reduce the current budget, since each of these establishments has its own administration, administrative staff, physical provision and other necessary equipment. Accordingly, it could be suggested that each of these two groups of colleges could be unified, potentially forming another two governmental universities, bringing several benefits, such as the following:

- The performance of the current, scattered and dispersed colleges and institutes, would be improved, since the prevailing arrangements of individual administrations, physical provision and equipment, dilute their efficiency and effectiveness, in both academic and financial terms.
- Unification of these establishments under the umbrella of a university structure will consolidate their positions as HEIs, and lead to improvements in quality and reputation, both of which were indicated as essential by several interviewees.
- Unification will assist in the recruitment of well-qualified academic staff, who currently are not attracted to these establishments because they are small and weak institutions and offer poor terms and conditions (See L2d6g) and (L3pru3). Improved salaries will also mean a better standard of living for those employed as academics.
- The country would save money on overseas scholarships. Currently, many Omanis are given scholarships to study abroad according to the limit specialisations and fields of study that offered by the current colleges.
- This will respond to a societal preference to study in institutions bearing the title of ‘university’ (See interviewees (L4sh1) (L1pscm1) and (L3prc1)).

- Unification will reduce the social pressure over the government to establish a new governmental university, which would cost more money.

Hence, the first groups of institutions could combine to form, for example, The University of Muscat for Science and Technology, and the second to form The University of Oman, which could retain its campuses in the different regions of the country.

Restructuring and promoting the other state HEIs

There are other possibilities for merger, for example, the fifteen Institutes of Health and Nursing Sciences supervised by the Ministry of Health, are spread across the regions, with six being based in Muscat, located in one area 'Alwatayah'. Again, there is a duplication of administration and other provision. Nevertheless, despite this broad infrastructure, the annual number of these enrolments remains too small (see Al Ramadhain, 2003), at the same time as the state hospitals and health services have expanded, creating more demand for a national qualified workforce in this field.

Indeed, the current situation of the Health Sciences Institutes is similar to the previous position of the Colleges of Technology, since from the 1980s until the end of the 1990s, these colleges were at lower level, called Institutes of Technical Education and Vocational Training, with very limited facilities and capacity. They were not attractive to students or parents, and the numbers enrolling were below the enrolment targets, as noted by AlKharusi (1991), and as verified by the interested participants of this study, such as (L1u16), (L1u2), (L2d10g) and (L3gvc5). However, during the last seven years, since those institutes have been promoted to become the 'Colleges of Technology', their attractiveness has increased and the annual enrolments have been totally changed, with the numbers of students wishing to enter these colleges increasing gradually, as confirmed by (L3gvtc1), (L2d10g) and (L3gvc5).

Thus, the possibility exists for unification of the Health Sciences Institutes into one or two colleges. Certainly, those in Muscat could combine their efforts and capabilities, and with this could come a rationalisation of titles, since at the moment there is confusion (Health Sciences Institute, Oman Institute of Assistant Pharmacy, Oman Institute of Public Health, Oman Institute of Medical Records Technology, Oman Nursing Institute, and Muscat Nursing Institute). One title, for example the Oman College of Health and Nursing Sciences, will lead to the same benefits indicated previously, but in particular, the larger number of enrolments that could be handled would result in helping to meet the demand for healthcare workers, especially in the private sector. As mentioned earlier, the private healthcare sector in Oman is staffed predominantly by expatriates. Hence, unification would have these additional benefits of contributing to a reduction in overseas workers.

Furthermore, there is room for promoting the current Institute of Islamic and Arabic Science, that provides Oman with a high number of qualified Shari'ah (Islamic) Law Judges, and specialises in Islamic and Arabic Sciences, to become the College of Islamic and Arabic Sciences. Such a step will lead to increase the enrolled number of SSGs in this institution. Particularly, since the College of Shari'ah and Law that included a Department of Islamic Science, has recently been renamed (2005) to become the College of Laws, devoted only to general law studies, there is currently no higher college in Oman dedicated to the teaching of Islamic Studies and Culture at the university level, despite the common and rich cultural and heritage of the country in this field. Hence, it is suggested that the college could assume the role of the previous department in the College of Shari'ah and Law. In addition, such a move would coincide with the building of a new campus for this institute in Al Khuwair, a good suburb in Muscat.

Additionally, a similar establishment should be created for female students, since they should have the same opportunities as male students, and at the moment females are going to Dubai or other Emirates in the UAE, as indicated. Particularly, as mentioned by some interviewees, female students are keener than

male students to enter HE, and their GCSE examination marks are higher than those of male students, as verified by (L4sc3) who said ‘the number of female students who graduate from Secondary Stage and gain high marks is much higher than male students’. As mentioned earlier, this lack of opportunity is a loss to the nation in several ways. A high number of female students who cannot gain access to SQU or other public colleges, remain at their homes with no jobs or any form of study, whereas male students are mobile and can travel away from their homes for both work and study. This social tradition that prevents females from travelling in most Middle Eastern societies, as mentioned earlier, causes many psychological and life difficulties, sometimes leading a number to accept early marriage even though they are not completely happy with that, but because they have no other choice. Hence, the provision of HE opportunities for females in a single-sex institution would benefit the country in that their skills and potential would not be wasted.

Moreover, since Omani women normally wish to work in education, social or charity institutions, opening such an institute would help them to obtain valuable knowledge about their culture and religious heritage that would benefit them in their activities, and also in their general lives, even if they do not enter the world of employment, since they would be able to properly raise their children. Unenlightened and uneducated parents, unfortunately, do not bring their children up with a balanced outlook on life, and the possession of lucid knowledge about Islam and Eastern culture, is essential for good parenting.

Working towards filling the gap also requires other types of post-compulsory education provision to be introduced and strengthened, and as confirmed by some interviewees, many students’ marks in the GCSE examinations preclude them from entering HE, and many others cannot enter HE because their financial or social circumstances force them to work early. Hence, better Vocational Training provision, would assist such SSGs, and help to develop societal attitudes that are more favourable towards VT, and that in the long term would encourage the Omanisation of the workforce in this type of work, thereby reducing the numbers

of expatriates. Therefore, as the few existing VT centres do not meet such demand (see: L2d2g, L2d10g) consisting of the need for carpenters, plumbers, electricians, blacksmiths, automobile mechanics, etc., the state should establish a number of VT centres, with advanced training programmes and modern facilities and instruments. These centres should be established in most regions and cities across the country to improve their accessibility and attractiveness to students.

Enhancing the role of the private HEIs

Essentially, the obstacles in this respect, relate to the funding difficulties facing potential students, the nature of the private sector itself, and the shortage of state support for these institutions. It is felt that the government should work to increase the financial and technical support provided to the private HEIs, in order to enhance their standing, and to assist students by means of scholarships, and other funding means, such as providing land that makes HEIs accessible to large sections of the population, that would make the private HEIs more attractive. Clearly, some would argue that such a step is against the public interests since state funds would be given to private enterprises, but the need to support the nation's young is the prime objective, and could be achieved by this means.

Moreover, increased state support, in various ways for the private HEIs would raise confidence within society of the quality of these establishments, which currently is a concern. And if quality were assured, the numbers of parents who fund their children's education overseas because they have no confidence in the quality of local private HEIs, would fall, thereby keeping more money in the country and boosting the national economy. Hence, the state and private HEIs in partnership should:

- Provide a quality education, by improving curricula, pedagogies and other activities.
- Employ well-qualified academic staff, and other assistant personnel.

- Provide advanced facilities and services, and good physical provision, which lead to a suitable educational environment.
- Adopt effective evaluation systems that ensure and support the educational process and relevant activities.
- Develop laboratories, learning resources centres, computing facilities and other technological instruments.
- Keep pace with the newest and advanced achievements in all elements and dimensions of the education field and related areas.
- Establish academic partnerships with HEIs that have successful track records, and benefit from their experience.
- Improve administrative systems, and provide well-qualified administrators.
- Enhance relations and partnerships with the community and society organisations.
- Provide enough funds, to enable the provision of quality assurance mechanisms that will inspire the market's trust and attract more students.
- Merge small and weak colleges and institutes in order to achieve economies of scale and create stronger HEIs that able to attract students.
- Ensure a proper range of course provision and avoid undue duplication
- Promote the HEIs through effective marketing in Oman and abroad.

Clearly, it is not enough to establish private HEIs. Rather, it is equally important to develop their roles, ensure quality, improve facilities and services, and promote their educational provision. Furthermore, there is a role for the government in assisting the private HEIs with their policy-making and planning, in order to produce graduates as required by the economy, and in providing other technical support, since some of these institutions have no planning expertise, and their sponsors manage them as business enterprises, rather than educational establishments. Thus, these private institutions should be patient and work hard to develop their services in order to ensure their quality and improve their reputation,

since this will be a major factor that will encourage Omani parents to enrol their children in these institutions, as indicated by many interviewees.

Furthermore, it would seem appropriate for the state to guide students and their parents in their choice of HE study, in accordance with their capabilities and to change their attitudes towards some specialisations that they try to avoid, such as nursing, tourism, hospitality, marketing, decoration, biology, and other required specialisations. Moreover, the state also needs to work with Omani families to change their priorities and consider the HE needs of their children before their own needs for material belongings. Within the next section, the means of governmental financial support for private HE, which is another dimension that has an influence on enrolments, will be discussed

10.5 The Challenge of Financing HE

It is clear from the literature review on the financing of HE that the costs associated with this type of education are high in all countries. However, the capacity of some countries to fund their HE sectors is greater than in others, and in Oman the state is facing substantial problems in this respect. This difficulty, as verified by the World Bank (2000), is not peculiar to Oman, and many countries around the world are meeting the same obstacle (Al Hijri, 2000). The World Bank report (2000:31) stated that 'many of the problems involving higher education are rooted in a lack of resources', and this dramatic and continuing growth in student numbers is a root cause (Ziderman and Albrecht, 1995), since the public HE budget in most developing countries is limited and unable to respond to that growth. To worsen the situation, most of these countries are unlikely to be successful in attracting other non-governmental sources of HE funding (The World Bank, 2000; Ziderman and Albrecht, 1995). Many researchers have highlighted the worldwide debates about financing HE, which have emerged because of the escalating demand for HE, caused primarily by an increasing number of school leavers, and limited and continually reducing, HE funding (Al Hijri, 2000).

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). 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, and increasing demand for HE and pressures on government to increase its funding for BE and Secondary Education (Preddey, 2004). It is noted also the inability of HE to absorb the increasing number of SSGs who wish to pursue HE, and the resultant exodus of many students to overseas HEIs, many funded at their own expense.

Furthermore, The World Bank (2001) recorded the financial problem as a serious challenge facing Oman's HE development, 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). Indeed, from the documents reviewed previously, and from interviewees' responses, it can be concluded that there is a pressing need to increase the state funds for the HE sector, and to create effective mechanisms to support its development and expansion process. The possible ways in which this can be achieved will now be discussed.

10.5.1 The state role in HE funding in Oman

A wide range of arguments about this issue are presented by scholars. According to Satler (1994) 'State pressure on the universities, and on higher education in general, is a fact of life'. Satler stated that in Britain 'after decades of incremental progress, of prod and nudge politics, of wait and see, the state has acquired powers which mark a qualitative shift in its relationship with the institutions of higher education', until the position of its role became 'to

orchestrate change on a scale and in a manner which knows no precedent' (Satler, 1994:1).

Several reasons have been given why the government should be the main financier of HE, the most important of which, are as follows: firstly there is the matter of social justice, in which the 'society owes every individual at least a minimum chance to develop his own capacities' (Rivlin, 1961:131). That would seem to coincide with the philosophy held in Oman concerning the development of individuals. However, what level of education can the state reasonably be expected to provide for all its citizens? Most countries have accepted an obligation to provide free education for all its citizens up to High School, while others, such as Germany, Britain, and France, go beyond that. Rivlin (1961:132) argues that the extent of a society's members' right to a free education depends on the 'philosophical differences on the desirable role of the state in a free society'.

Secondly, there are benefits to be gained by society from a nation educated to a higher level. Browning and Browning (1994) cited some of these advantages, such as knowledge of a common language, law, and customs that facilitate interaction with others, and the acceptance of a common set of social and political values that improve the stability and understanding of social processes that leads to a better informed political environment and decisions. Thirdly, the high cost of HE means that the private market is not capable of providing enough HE opportunities in an efficient manner (Wigger and Weizsacker, 2001 in Al Rahbi, 2004:25), and in the developing countries particularly; this perhaps leads the private sector to hesitate to invest in this field. Fourthly, the inability of most qualified students in many developing countries to pay for study in the private HEIs means that much potential in terms of human capital is lost to those countries. And finally, individuals often perceive personal investment in HE to be a risk, since there is no guarantee of being successful in their studies, nor of employment, or of future earnings (Wigger and Weizsacker, 2001 in Al Rahbi, 2004:27).

The combination of these factors would seem to give weight to the argument that the state should shoulder the biggest burden of HE funding. However, such recommendation is not meant to suggest that other bodies should be discharged of their responsibilities in this respect, and the private sector, corporate benefactors, and individuals themselves, should be encouraged, since they all benefit from the HE system.

Higher education creates benefits that transcend the individual-benefit in terms of growth, social cohesion, and the transmission of values. Thus, taxpayer subsidies are rightly part of the landscape. However, students also receive significant [often substantial] private benefits. It is therefore both efficient and fair that they bear some of costs (Barr,2005). From:
<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2005/06/barr.htm> (20/01/2206)

Indeed as Al Rahbi (2004) observes, in most countries, the engagement of the role of state comes in the form of providing the financial resources to HEIs and setting policies (AlRahbi, 2004). The role of state also includes controlling, and managing this sector, and instituting proper mechanisms to check the performance of HEIs in order to ensure quality provision, and to achieve the country's aims. This aspect of the state's role can be seen to relate directly to funding, since by appropriate supervision, the proper use of resources allocated to the sector can be assured. Of course, if the state does not provide the majority of the funding for HE, then it can not claim the privilege of planning for it, and supervising it.

However, as seen from the research, it is not sensible to adopt the position that HE funding should be limited to the public purse (World Bank, 2000), and there is much room for contributions from non-governmental organisations, private bodies, or a combination of both. As noted by the World Bank 'given that a purely public system is ill-positioned to satisfy the demands for excellence and access, and a purely private system does not adequately safeguard the public interest, hybrid systems deserve serious consideration' (2000:78). Hence, it would seem important to encourage partners in the HE enterprise, and reduce the pressure upon the public budget. Indeed, such a situation requires an in-depth study in

order to research the extent to which these other partners should participate in financing this level of education in Oman.

Referring to the literature review regarding the funding of HE, it can be seen that UK educational policy-makers accept the principle that the costs of HE should be shared by those who benefit from it, with the individual, the state and employers as key beneficiaries (House of Commons, 2003:65). A contribution towards the tuition fees from all students, and the student loan system represent the two major vehicles for assisting HE, although there is still debate about the prospect of 'encouraging a more, sustainable contribution from business and individuals through the taxation system ... if the government believe that higher education is important, then it should grasp the nettle and fund it entirely through taxation' (House of Commons, 2003:65).

From the empirical work with key figures in Oman's HE sector, it seems that all these key personnel stated the underlying problem was finance, as expressed by (L2d2g) who said: 'if there is quite enough funding all problems will be solved', and (L4sc4) who commented that 'the State should provide study places 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 creating investments'. Moreover, the argument that the state should work to increase the budget and funds allocated to this field, was documented previously by The World Bank (2001:36) in the statement that 'there is need to increase spending on higher education' (p.36).

One way of doing this is, as has happened before in Oman, is to offer full or partial scholarships to students to enable them to study at the private HEIs, another is to establish a national fund to underpin a student interest-free loan scheme, and yet another is to come to special arrangements with banks that decide to grant low-interest loans to students who may not be eligible for a loan from the national scheme. Another possibility is to dispense with some of the allowances

given to students on full scholarships, as recommended by Preddey (2004) and the World Bank (2001), although it is necessary that the state continues to provide some of these allowances according to some social circumstances and financial difficulties of many Omani students, as will be discussed later.

Preddey's important governmental paper (2004) suggested five phases of HE funding as follows: a student contribution, integrating the current funding framework, normative ownership-neutral funding, devolution and autonomy, and finally, output funding. This five-phase proposal should be applied successively since each stage is based on applying the previous one. However, it could be understood that most these stages also depend on the state role, whether in terms of financial support, management or in terms of the implementation process as well as other related procedures. As an example, regarding the student contribution, and student-loan scheme, the state should be the major supplier of the money for this scheme, in partnership with other bodies as will be explained widely later. In this regard, it is worth noting that in New Zealand, the government introduced tuition fees for HE in the early 1990s, sharply reduced access to living allowances for students, and progressively reduced the level of subsidies per student. As a new measure, the New Zealand government introduced an income-contingent student loans scheme that allowed the students to borrow to pay both tuition fees and living allowances (The World Bank, 2001:32).

Furthermore, the aforementioned phases and other related procedures that suggested by the governmental paper indicate the need to gain an overview of the allocation of resources to HE, since different institutions that are 'subject to different funding arrangements, with staffing, enrolment and funding system being controlled by not less than ten different ministries and agencies' (Preddey, 2004:20), will lead to scatter the finances located all these different institutions and systems. Moreover, the current budgeting, funding and financial reporting process used for HE as well as other forms of public expenditure in Oman based on the negotiated funding system, affect the HE system as a whole. as verified by some interviewees. Hence, another major role should be played by the state in

restructuring the current HE system, including management and funding system of this sector, which without a doubt will help in saving money which is deployed by several different organisations.

A lesson could be learned from the New Zealand experiences, which saw the establishment in 2001, of a new Tertiary Education Commission to undertake a strategic planning role, and to operate an integrated funding system for the entire HE system including all public and many private HEIs and industry-based training. According to the limited population of both countries (Oman and New Zealand), and other similarities it could be suggested that such management and funding system of HE sector would lead to an important transformation of the Omani HE. Additionally, however, a more widespread review of spending policies in HE, such as the budget allowed for the 'luxuries' and decorative features in many institutions, might reveal the opportunity to economise in these areas and redirect the associated expenses to the expansion of the service.

Alongside such government efforts to increase funding, it could be suggested that the state should also work to persuade people to face the future difficulties by providing their own advanced higher education, since even though the government has agreed to accept the burden of many students in HE, this is not a situation that can be guaranteed for ever, and Oman's future circumstances in the post-oil age are not known. Particularly, the current financial difficulties facing many Omani families are attributed to their educational condition, and by educating most Omani people it is hoped that the financial position of these families will be improved, which will allow some parents to be able to afford their children's studies, or at least be able to fund some of their children. Hence, such a recommendation could be used as long-term guidance for inclusion in a new HE strategy, rather than for immediate action.

Furthermore, it would be beneficial if the state could work to help bring about an attitude and priority change among Omani society, since the prevailing outlook

of many people is that work is a part of their lives that enables them to satisfy some social needs and to provide material wealth for their families, to the detriment of their children's education which has been considered the responsibility of someone else (ie, the state). In fact, some shift in this attitude is emerging now, since many people do monitor their children's studies, support them and afford their educational requirements, and as already discussed, some fund overseas study by taking loans or even selling their properties, but this trend should be actively encouraged by the government, since it will develop the expectation among society that it is necessary for parents and individuals to significantly participate in the funding of HE, and reduce the pressure upon the state.

10.5.2 Student contribution and student loan scheme

Many interviewees, while accepting a trend towards some form of student contribution, did nevertheless argue that if the state wished to impose the burden of HE funding on citizens, it should simultaneously adopt other economic policies that would increase people's income, to enable that personal investment. Moreover, it can be argued that the removal of so-called untargeted allowances might deprive the students in receipt of them of certain rights enjoyed by other students, since it is well known in the country that such expenses serve only those students who live 100 km away from the university, which means they are going to students who come from far regions and villages, such as Salalah which is located 1,000 km from Muscat, Ibri 500 km, and Al Buraimi 500 km, and there is no government university in these regions, so they should be provided with transportation costs in order to give them the same opportunities as those who live near the university.

However, student participation for their own HE is also one of the options suggested in other relevant documents. Several justifications have been offered for this suggestion, and different models of student contribution have been recommended according to the social and economic circumstance of the country.

Moreover, this proposal has also been made by the World Bank (2001) who recommended the Omani government to recover some of the costs of HE from families and students who can afford to pay, in addition to investigating other ways to promote finance for education including HE. However, from the interviewees' responses, it is believed that the financial position of most Omani families, as illustrated elsewhere in this study, would preclude their ability to pay for their children's HE studies, and accordingly, there is an important remaining question, that being, how could such a proposal be implemented, and to what extent will it actually produce the monies to cover the costs involved.

It was declared in Preddey's report that the target of 52.4% of the total number of the SSGs who should enter HE (stated in the 6th FYDP), would not be achieved until 2010. To achieve this target in that year, and in order to 'enhance the equity and rekindle the spirit of the Omani people' (Preddey, 2004:36), the document recommended that the student should pay a certain ratio as a contribution to the tuition fees according to his/her parent's income, whereby those whose income less than RO. 6,000 pa would be exempt, those whose income fell between RO. 6,000 and 9,600 pa should pay half the tuition fees, and those students from affluent families should pay the full tuition fees. However, such policy also posed the question about how equity and justice might prevail in such a proposal, because if those students work hard and achieve good marks in their GCSE examinations, they have the right to enter the state HEIs on the same conditions as other students (ie free of charge).

Nevertheless, it was suggested that this proposal should be informed by an attitudinal survey of school leavers to GE/BE, HE, employment and other elements. In addition, the above mentioned governmental document mentioned that there are sustainable equity arguments against the students' contribution, reflecting some worry or doubt of implementing such policy, and therefore the study suggested that an effective communication strategy with society would be required 'to minimise the inevitable negative initial response from students and their families ... and to ensure that the students continue to make rational

decisions about their participation in tertiary education' (Preddey, 2003:36, 46). In fact, such treatment reflects the extent to which such a policy will face societal rejection and other implementation problems. Currently, the parents of children who do not achieve the required marks to enter the governmental HEIs, already pay for their education if they can afford it either in the local private HEIs or overseas institutions, but if their children's achievements in the GCSE examinations make them eligible to enter Oman's governmental HEIs, they will see themselves as being unfairly treated if they are asked to pay for something which is an entitlement for poorer families. Indeed, the World Bank (2001) declared that 'relying on family resources is inequitable' (p.36).

Clearly, this recommendation will not be very helpful in solving the matter, especially when as the World Bank indicated, rich householders in Oman comprise 20% of the population, leaving 80% of the population at the low and middle income levels. Moreover, according to the MoHE (2002c:15), the average Omani family is large, having 8.5 children, which means that even wealthy parents will face difficulty in financing their children's studies. However, there is a feeling amongst the key personnel interviewed, that the time is not too far away when some contribution will be required. As (L1m2) said: 'in the very near future the citizens should participate in financing their children's higher education', and another participant stressed that 'the most important thing that we should do now is to inform the people of the fact that the state is not committed to providing free higher education. The citizens should recognise and understand this fact' (L1u12).

Hence, the inevitable alternative of student contribution is the student-loan stream. Indeed, the literature reviewed as well as some interviewee responses lead to a situation where the idea of student loans must be seriously considered, since such measures are common in many countries, for example, USA, Canada, New Zealand, Singapore, Australia, Sweden and others (Al Rahbi, 2004; World Bank, 2001). In the UK a student loans scheme has been in operation for well over a decade now, and as indicated in the previous section, when the New Zealand

government sharply reduced access to living allowances for students (World Bank, 2001), it compensated by introducing an income-contingent student loan scheme that allowed students to borrow monies to pay both tuition fees and living allowances. The benefits of the scheme were (World Bank, 2001:32):

- It mitigated any negative impact on student enrolments generated from reducing their access to living allowances.
- It continued to pay living allowances for students on low incomes.
- It protected students who could not find a job after graduation.

Such loans, without a doubt, will serve people in need and facilitate HE entry for those who are unable to afford their studies. The World Bank (2001) regards the student loan as one of those very high future earnings, since it is a system that relies on future earning. 'Properly designed loan schemes, coupled with targeted grants to students from limited-income householders, can be used to generate resources for expanded and equitable access to higher education' (World Bank, 2001:36). Such a scheme is another way of shaping the student contribution, but the state still has a major role to play in the establishment and maintenance of the scheme.

The ability of the state to underwrite a student loan scheme, is essential, since private banks are unable to fund the large number of students who are likely to apply for such financial assistance. This statement was clarified by one of the representatives of the private banks who said 'I am a member of a Bank's Board, and I am aware that the banks are facing financial problems, so how can they give loans to the huge number of students without any guarantee?' (L2d5g). Furthermore, the state's management of a student loan scheme ensures that all students are treated equally, with no variations in interest rates or terms and conditions. However, it may be possible for the Omani government to establish a partnership with different private agencies including banks, whereby both sides participate in the scheme and adhere to a strict set of regulations. The World Bank (2001) indicated that there are two broad types of student-loan schemes.

The first type is the mortgage-type loan scheme, which is similar to mortgages and other loans, whereby the period of the loan is defined and there is a fixed schedule of repayments. This type of student-loan scheme exists in over 40 countries around the world as the World Bank stated. Secondly, there is the income-contingent loan scheme, which is linked to the individual's income, so the repayments period will vary instead of being fixed as in mortgage-type loan scheme. Accordingly, borrowers can make repayments equal to a fixed percentage of their income in the years after graduation, and thus, if they have loans of a similar size but are earning different amounts, their repayment periods will be different (World Bank, 2001).

Each of the countries that apply this scheme has its own practice, according to its social, political and economic circumstances. The differences include the public-private mix of resources that fund the scheme, criteria for eligibility, size of possible loans, repayment rates, interest on the loan versus no interest, and other elements (Al-Rahbi, 2004). The World Bank (2001) indicated some of these countries' experiences. For instance, since high repayments can lead students to default, Sweden minimises this risk by limiting repayments to 4% of income after graduation. As mentioned that the suitable and sufficient resources representing the key issue of this scheme as well as other alternatives. However, many countries adapted several programmes to deal with this issue and to provide the resources required. For example, Ghana and Namibia have adopted a system in which they collect payments through the national social-security systems, while in Singapore the National Social Security and Pension Fund offers educational loans to parents, who can repay them while making their regular salary contributions to the Fund. In Australia, the income-tax system covers loan payments, while the rate of repayment is 2, 3, or 4% of taxable income, depending on how much a graduate earns (World Bank, 2001:37).

A scheme that tailor's repayments to the borrower's ability to pay, and that includes some insurance in case students do not secure employment after graduation, would seem to be appropriate for Omani society, since such schemes

‘have an insurance policy built into them, so that the students who do not have a high income after graduation need not repay their loans. In addition, when income falls (for some reasons) repayments fall in parallel’ (World Bank, 2001:36), hence, there may be many instances when Omani graduates will meet fluctuations in their income, especially females who may leave employment altogether when they begin families of their own, and who not have repaid the loan by this time.

Nevertheless, several interviewees mentioned the obstacles that Oman might face in attempting to implement such a scheme, the most important being:

- The perceived inability of the state and private sector to be individually responsible for mounting a loans scheme, and the need for some kind of partnership.
- The low income of most Omani families, and the average (large) number of children in each family. However, this could not be regarded as an issue, since each student takes out a loan on his/her own account. The repayment becomes his/her responsibility (not that of the parents) when he/she gets employment.
- The interest attached to the loans, which is not part of Omani culture, and which causes most participants who have come to agree with such a scheme in principal, to impose the condition that the loans should be free of interest.
- The lack of insurance to guarantee these loans, since the social security system in Oman is weak and it cannot compensate people for being unemployed.
- The student-loan scheme is not common in the Gulf Countries Region, since most citizens in these countries are generally offered free HE. and such policies might lead to discontent among Omani people who share many things with the citizens of these neighbouring countries, particularly considering the relatively small population and the size of the country.

However, an Interest-free and Income-Contingent Student Loan scheme with some adaptations to suit local circumstances, surely has some place in Oman. Such a proposed scheme could be underwritten and managed by a partnership established between the state and the private banks and enterprises, whereby the state, drawing on funds from various governmental agencies, and the banks, jointly provide the required finances. It might operate by the government guaranteeing these loans, and the private banks reducing the interest to the lowest possible level. For the students, the loans should be free of interest, since the government could be responsible for paying the interest to the private banks, while the students would repay the capital over a period of years, after graduation according to their employment circumstances. As a response to the high number of SSGs wanting HE, and to the economic needs of the country, and in addition to other solutions suggested earlier, this suggestion also has the spin off that the private HEIs, many of which are struggling to survive with few students, will become full and vibrant, thereby raising the profile of Oman's HE sector nationally and internationally, and ultimately not only retaining Omani students, but potentially becoming attractive options for overseas students in the region, and as such becoming involved in the export of HE.

Furthermore, a move towards a student loan scheme will be useful for the country as a future development process, since as well as the significant participation of the private sector that will be obtained through the implementation of this proposal, it will develop a new social attitude towards citizens' contributions in this field, and will be a national preservation project because these loans will be repaid into the country's budget after some time, possibly in the post-oil age when the country is in most need. But the most important advantage is that a loan scheme would be a major investment in the country, leading to the existence of a high number of well-qualified nationals who could replace the huge number of expatriates, and also participate in the international marketplace. This, in turn, and without a doubt, will generate more income for the country, and at the same time prevent substantial amounts of the

country's finances from leaving the country, which currently happens as expatriates redirect their income.

Nonetheless, despite its potential advantages, the introduction of a student loan scheme would be a departure from tradition in Oman, and in-depth research will be needed to ensure its proper application and attractiveness to the population.

10.5.3 Participation of other private companies and businesspeople in HE funding

From the data presented, it can be seen that the number of endowments and grants offered by local private companies for HE students, is very limited and not guaranteed. Although, as indicated earlier in this thesis, since the 1990s there have been a number of grants offered by certain organisations and benefactors, these are few. For example, it could be seen that in 1999 there were more than 50 grants, while in 2001 there were less than this number and in other years more than 100 grants were offered by Omani companies and some prominent Omani businessmen. It is clear from the empirical work that there is difficulty in obtaining accurate statistics in this respect since the names of certain benefactors can not be revealed, nor can the exact numbers of grants. Furthermore, although some organisations, for example the Petroleum Development Oman Company (PDO) offer endowments, because these are actually mostly owned by the government, it is not strictly true to say that their grants are from the private sector.

Consequently, it can be concluded that the contribution of the private sector in this respect is very limited and makes no real difference to the essential problem. Several reasons were suggested by the data (the interviewees' responses), mainly the greed of private businesspeople, and their lack of patriotism. Therefore, it would seem that a re-education of the private sector is required, and that the state

should consider ways of involving private companies in the funding of HE through some kind of taxation, earmarked for the country's development.

In fact, the low participation of Oman's private companies in supporting the HE sector, may be accounted for by the fact that most companies in Oman are small (80% according to L4bs2) and have no proper infrastructure, thus not being able to accept trainees from HE or offer grants, but the remaining 20% have no reason for withholding participation in this vital activity. It worth noting that, currently in Oman, there is a tax imposed by the Ministry of Manpower on all companies that use foreign workers, but whilst it has long been declared that this revenue is used to train the national workforce and support the training sector, the contribution is regarded as a low contribution that does not offset the difficulties caused by these companies use of expatriate labour. Clearly, there is a possibility that the application of compulsory taxes on commercial enterprises to properly fund HE, as occurs in many countries worldwide, may be necessary, especially since these companies will be the first to benefit from Omani graduates. However, the voluntary establishment of a partnership with these private agencies and their owners as suggested previously is one of the most important ways of encouraging them to develop a commitment to society in general, and to increase their contribution in this field.

10.5.4 Public and community participation, dedications and endowments

The possibility of encouraging charitable donations to underwrite HE is also worthy of consideration. Indeed in the Arab countries there are many charities but these mainly direct their endowments to serve mosques, religious institutions and poorer people. It was mentioned that in many parts of the world, particularly in the West, charitable donations are an important resource for educational institutions, whereby the churches and charitable organisations participating in this field significantly.

Actually, there are other promising sources that could make a difference in supporting HE, since there are large numbers of very wealthy people in Oman, who can fund entire educational institutions, but who have not been encouraged to do so. Of course, it is appreciated that such a trend is not easy to build and that time is required to develop this type of participation until it becomes enough to make a difference. However, with the backing of a national religious campaign, supported by several interested bodies, particularly religious scholars, society leaders and community organisations, the message that dedications and endowments in this field is an important way to satisfy Allah (The God), and to gain and win grants and awards from Allah (The God) at Judgement Day, may filter through and be accepted.

Using different ways and means, it should be explained that such participation will lead to more educated people who can help their families, which is an aim of Islam. Moreover, it should be emphasised that such philanthropic behaviour will promote the development of both society and the nation. It would seem that identifying the Islamic perspective on supporting education is worthy of consideration, since it has emerged that Awqaf and Baitulmall can be used to support young Omanis to gain more education and to improve their life if it is acceptable from a religious viewpoint.

Indeed, it is acceptable in Islam for the money and properties of 'A'Zakah' to be used to support needy students whose families cannot afford their HE and other certain categories, and it is not restricted to serve only students who study Islamic or Arabic Sciences but can extend to those studying other subjects and fields of study that benefit the nation and promote its position. In addition it is acceptable also for the money and properties of Awqaf that are dedicated to students in general, to be used for student support and it is not a condition that those students should be from poor families or should study Islamic or Arabic Sciences as normally understood in Arab countries, which means that those students who are from moderate income families, or even those unneeded students, who are studying other subjects and fields of study can be served by the money of Awqaf

as well as from other endowments. However, it is preferred that students from wealthy backgrounds should be financed by their families in order to save funds for more needy students.

It would, therefore, seem appropriate for the responses from His Eminence the Grand Mufti in Oman, which have validity for all Muslims in any part of the world, to be publicised, especially to Omani businesspeople and other potential benefactors, of which there many), and it should be made clear that in Islam, donations and charitable endowments are not restricted to mosques, hospitals, Quranic schools and poorer people, but may also be directed towards supporting educational institutions, helping students, printing books, and providing the necessary facilities required by students. If followed, this line of action should make a significant difference in the absorption of a number of graduates who wish to continue their higher studies.

Indeed, if the state works hard in this direction with suitable co-ordination between the interested bodies and other community people, a noticeable amount and provision will be available in different regions in the country. However, the most important step that should be carried out is to co-operate with religious scholars who can call, persuade and convince people to direct their donations to the field of HE. His Eminence the Grand Mufti did this when he called on Muslims whether in Oman or in other countries to:

pay high attention to support education and science, so all elements which encourage this field should be attended to; and we call on society to donate in this philanthropic cause and to praise Allah who is giving them all these properties and money; through giving donations for this field, and others whereby they can benefit the nation.

Moreover, as shown in the interview findings, the Directorate General of Awqaf and Biatulmal in the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs supported this trend and expressed that when the religious fatwa accepts such donations, there is no regulation in Oman that prevents people from contributing to this field.

Consequently, the Ministry should call on people and benefactors to put their charity in this area as well as other dimensions. In addition, he verified also that 'there is no difference between students in terms of their fields of study or levels, unless the benefactor has stated that certain property or an amount of money is to be used only to serve or to support students of certain specialisation/s'. However, also in this case there is a way to support students in other study areas when there is a surplus of money, since this could be re-directed to them, rather than being frozen.

Accordingly, it can be definitely concluded that there is no religious, financial or administrative restriction which prevents Muslims from supporting needy students at any level or in any specialisation or field of study, and it could be confirmed that in general such a position and perception could, and indeed does, exist in other Muslim countries. Hence, as one of the mechanisms available to the Omani state for enhancing HE funding, this clear understanding of Islamic principles, which has been declared by the country's highest religious authority, and the associated ministry, should be used to encourage people to donate to support this pivotal sector. It worth noting that, very recently, in November 2006, Majles Alommah (The Perelman) in Kuwait authorised a 'Tax Law' that imposes a tax of 1% as the 'Zakah' on the gross profit of all private companies in Kuwait. <http://www.majlesalommah.net/searchresult.asp?dismode=article&apage=3&artid=3750> (07/11/2006). This tax (the Zakah) supports the country's general budget and is not devoted exclusively to the education sector. Although the rate of the Zakah on such business company's profit should be 5% not 1%, as traditional in Islam, it could be seen a useful starting point.

10.6 Administration and Management of HE

As already indicated, before 1994 there was no independent organisation to supervise and manage the variety of HEIs in existence at that time, and their administration was conducted by several governmental bodies. With the establishment of the MoHE in 1994, some co-ordination was achieved in respect

of a number of these HEIs, but many others remained under the supervision of other monitoring bodies, and yet additional supervisory organisations were established, such as the CoHE and Accreditation Board.

From the literature review and the empirical work with key personnel, it can be concluded that three main problems arise regarding the administration and management of HE, the first relating to the multiplicity of organisations with supervisory and managerial roles, the second concerning the ability of these organisations to effectively discharge their given duties, and the third relating to the lack of evaluation and follow-up of the HEIs under their supervision, and the lack of self-evaluation.

10.6.1 Multiplicity of supervisory organisations of HEIs

Regarding the first major problem, this is clearly regarded as one of the serious challenges facing the sector, since it has resulted in the absence of a clear vision and comprehensive plan for HE in the Sultanate, and has additionally led to a scattering of efforts, wastage of money and other recent difficulties.

However, there is clear opposition to the proposal to dispense with this pluralistic system, despite its disadvantages, since it is felt by some influential people that the current multiplicity which is common in other countries, is a healthy phenomenon that reduces administrative bureaucracy. Furthermore, the argument is put forward that because most state HEIs are specialised and responding to particular needs in the labour market, they should retain their supervisory arrangements, since those ministries in charge (eg, Ministry of Manpower, Ministry of Health, Central Bank of Oman, Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs) are best placed to understand the type of graduate required, and who they will actually employ. Against this position it can be said that, there are three main arguments, as follows:

Firstly, there are several state HEIs of a specialised nature, but which are not supervised by relevant specialised authorities. For example, the College of Shari'ah and Law whose outputs serve the needs of the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Legal Affairs, is supervised by the MoHE and not by one of these ministries. Similarly, the six Colleges of Education, which have been recently converted to six different specialised colleges, also come under the jurisdiction of the MoHE.

Secondly, the different specialised outputs of the SQU serve the needs of various governmental bodies and private enterprises, and they also operate in the fields of medicine and health science, agriculture, journalism and others, yet the university is not supervised by any of the interested ministries of these areas.

Thirdly, there are now some private HEIs and in future there will be more, which also are specialised in nature, and these institutions are not administered by any interested governmental body, although they are under the general supervision of the MoHE, but in actuality they are supervised by the private sector enterprises, for instance, the Oman Medical College, the Fire and Safety Engineering College, and the Oman Academy of Hospitality and Tourism. Again the graduates from these institutions serve the needs of different enterprises across all sectors governmentally and privately.

Hence, the main argument for retaining such a diversity of supervisory institutions is not sound. And the main reason why this seems to be the case, is that this multiplicity of organisations does not appear to have been able to guarantee either a quality educational experience for all its students, a quality output, or places for more students.

10.6.2 Solutions to the problem

From the empirical work of this research, it would seem that some degree of unification is imperative in this regard, either through the establishment of one supreme organisation, or by expanding the role of the MoHE, which would appear

to coincide with the position put forward by the previously-mentioned governmental report prepared by Preddey (2004). In this it was suggested that 'overall strategic planning given effect through public funding by an umbrella funding agency – a reconfigured MoHE - should be regarded to be the balance between different types of higher education providers and different types of course' (p.21). On the other hand, although many people knew that the CoHE now has the responsibility of preparing overall plans and policies for the sector, and were aware that it has no managerial or supervisory role upon the HEIs, they suggested, and some strongly recommend, that the Council should have the supervision role over all Oman's HEIs, since it includes representatives of most streams of HE and links between the current institutions.

However, the CoHE's ability to assume this role was called into question by many of the interviewees in the study, since the Council does not have the appropriate staffing structure as it is currently configured, to take on this enormous task. In fact, neither the CoHE nor the MoHE is currently in a position to discharge such increased responsibilities and a complete re-structuring together with an overhaul of the staffing in both organisations would be required for such a proposal to be effectively implemented. As an alternative to a re-structuring and re-staffing of the CoHE and the MoHE, an entirely new, and independent organisation could be established, but the funding for such an establishment would be substantial, and since it would take on part of the function of the CoHE and MoHE, there would still need to be a re-structuring of those organisations to avoid duplication, and a suitable deduction in their resources to reflect that. This may not be a popular way forward.

Consequently, a system of dual control might be suggested, in which the CoHE shoulders the responsibility for planning and policy-making, and adopts the general supervisory and evaluative role of all HEIs, while the MoHE becomes the executive supervisor not only for state HEIs but also for private ones, and takes on responsibility for ensuring that the entire sector adopts a co-ordinated approach to HE provision. Moreover, the change in the CoHE's role should reflect the entire

educational process and ensure planning throughout the education sector from Basic through to Higher Education, in order to be in full and complete harmony with the needs of the workplace, and hence national development. Specifically, this would involve:

- 1- Designating the CoHE as the supreme supervision organisation for the whole HE sector, responsible for general planning, policy-making, and supervision and evaluation of all HEIs. This would be reached through:
 - a) Increasing the number of its members, to all HE streams and institutions to be represented in the Council.
 - b) Expanding its role through greater empowerment and responsibilities, to place it as the supreme authority over the entire HE sector.
 - c) Providing it with full-time professional, specialist, academic and administrative staff.
 - d) Reforming the organisational structure of the Secretarial General of the Council, to include the necessary directorates and divisions which can build plans and policies, assume surveys and studies; preparing the necessary arrangements and reports for different occasions and activities of the Council and carrying out other required procedures.
 - e) Ensuring the provision of an adequate budget and physical facilities for the Council.
 - f) Enhancing the legal framework of the HE sector, providing laws and regulations that define the responsibilities and authorities of each organisation, within the overall vision, mission and objectives of the HE system, and the ways and means to achieve them.

- 2- Establishing an independent committee or authority devoted to evaluating and monitoring the performance of the HE system and its institutions in order to follow up the implementation of approved plans and their implementation process, to achieve the general aims and targets of the country's developmental

strategy and to ensure quality. This committee could be comprised of a number of society representatives, such as some members of Majles A'Ddawla and the Majles A'Shura, a number of Omani educational leaders or experts who have long experience in this field even if they are retired, members from private sector enterprises and from industry and other economic sectors. It should be under the direct supervision of, or have a direct link with, the Head of the CoHE, or with the Council of the Ministers.

- 3- Enabling the MoHE to perform its functions as the executive supervisory organisation, whereby it can supervise the implementation process of approved plans, policies and programmes in all governmental HEIs, with general supervision of the private institutions. For instance, the Ministry should organise the admission of the HEIs, including the conditions and requirements of the institutions, build up the academic standards for academic staff, follow-up the quality level of the institutions and provide periodic reports to the CoHE and the higher proposed Committee, in addition to activating the co-ordination between the institutions themselves, and other long range executive tasks, procedures and activities.

- 4- Allowing HEIs to be independently managed, so they feel free to develop their resources, to create investment plans and policies, to promote their enrolment capacity, manage their academic programmes, their academic personnel and their administration. Naturally this freedom should not be against the national plans and policies for the sector. This requires that the whole system of HE and its legal framework should be flexible and provide enough freedom for the HEIs to implement their visions and targets.

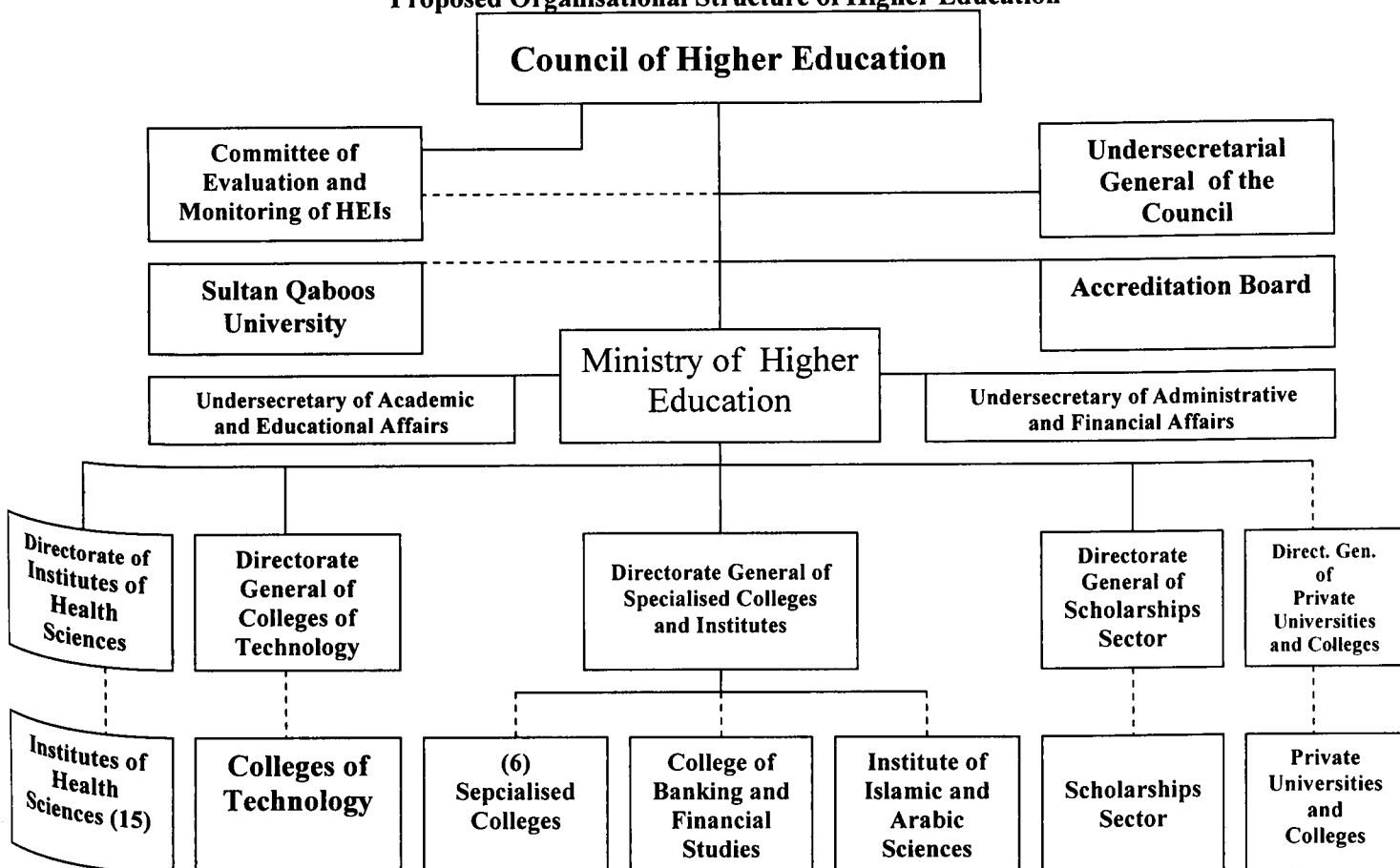
Figure 10.1 gives more details of other components of this proposed organisational structure. It could be asked where the role of the ministries and authorities that currently supervise particular HEIs, has gone. In this respect, except for the SQU which has its own authority, most of these institutions are now

supervised by the Directorate General of their associated ministries, and in the proposed structure these institutions would be supervised by the same level of Directorate General, meaning that the professional staff and specialists currently in the Directorates General in each of the interested ministries, would be transferred to the same Directorate General in the MoHE.

In addition, specialist committees for each of these streams and types of education could be established, each ministry that has a certain specialised nature should participate in the relevant specialist committee with members from the MoHE, and/or CoHE and any other interested people. These committees should be responsible for reviewing the programmes produced by the institutions. The interested authority or ministry or even the private sector enterprises should participate with a sufficient number of experts and specialists in the committee related to their field. Such arrangements should lead to account being taken of the expert role of the interested ministries or enterprises in the preparation process of qualified people, and the requirements of the different sectors being met by high quality outputs.

Additionally, until the national expertise in all these areas is fully developed, and perhaps even beyond that time, help should be sought from international institutions and experts, as a move to get ahead of the current difficulties facing the administration of HE. This perhaps would include establishing an academic affiliation between some of the local HEIs and other common overseas HEIs which have a long successful history and experience in their particular areas. Such a strategy would create greater objectivity as it would link Omani HE with other advanced HE systems in developed countries, and thus bring benefit from those countries' experiences, and enable Oman to keep pace with the newest developments in this field, which would enable the Omani HE system to avoid becoming trapped in backward-looking policies.

Figure 10.1
Proposed Organisational Structure of Higher Education



The Council of Higher Education would include representatives of:

- Diwan of Royal Court
- Ministry of Higher Education
- Ministry of National Economy
- Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Social Development
- Ministry of Civil Service
- Ministry of Manpower
- Ministry of Health
- Sultan Qaboos University
- Royal Oman Police
- Secretary General of the Council of Higher Education
- Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Governmental Position)
- Members of State Council
- Members of Consultative Council
- A number of Experts and specialists in different areas, such as educational planning, economic planning, academic field ... etc.
- Members of private higher education institutions
- Members from Scientific Research Council
- Members from industry sector
- Members from other private enterprises

10.7 Recommendations

Having drawn conclusions from the detailed literature review and the empirical work with 50 key figures Omani HE, HRD, and society at large, it is possible to offer a number of recommendations as follows.

Promoting the vision, objectives and planning process of HE

- According to the ambiguous situation of the Vision of '*Oman 2020*' which included the vision of HRD for the period between 1996-2020, as reported and explained widely by most of the interviewees, it is strongly recommended that the Vision of '*Oman 2020*' should be reviewed to clarify its position, particularly the parts that relate to HRD including GE/BE, HE and other training streams, and that if it is necessary to formulate another national long-term vision for the development process of the country, the state should consider this issue as the most important target that all interested bodies should work to achieve as soon as possible.
- It is important to carry out all the required steps and necessary procedures as soon as possible to remedy the gaps of Vision of '*Oman 2020*' in order to avoid more difficulties resulting from its weak dimensions. It is important also for such a process to involve, through active participation, societal organisations, scholars, interested experts and specialists in different relevant areas and any bodies or institutions that could benefit this field if there is a serious desire to avoid many of the current difficulties and to prepare young Omanis to meet the future challenges.
- Because of the absence of a national vision and long-term strategy for HE, it is extremely important to build a comprehensive strategy for HE, that includes the aims and objectives of HE, different levels and natures of plans, and that is created as part of a national long-term strategy of human development for all sectors of the country's development process.

- The new vision and strategy of HE should not be dominated by poor economic and financial restrictions and dimensions, but should include cultural trends of the nation, individuals' intellectual needs, religious and social values and attitudes and society's needs, and should take into consideration the new requirements of the knowledge and technology age, international trends and the challenges of globalisation.
- The principle of 'education for the sake of education' adopted recently by the government, should be strengthened, in the context of the requirements of the country's development process, and the needs of different sectors of the labour market.
- Strong consideration should be paid to the economic dimension and every effort should be made to respond to the requirements of the modern marketplace locally, in order to reduce the number of expatriate workers, and internationally in order to keep Omani nationals abreast of developments overseas.
- The state should work to reduce the current social trend of perceiving a strong link between HE and subsequent income, which has led society to believe that high qualifications lead to the best jobs, and to downgrade the value of TE, VT and other training programmes. In addition, the current approach of directing people to HE simply for later economic benefit, should be minimised in order to raise the importance of cultural, social and individual development.
- The planning process relating to HRD should be overhauled, and the plans in the current FYDP, resulting from the multiplicity of organisations supervising HE, should be reformed.
- The necessity to involve some international institutions and experts should be acknowledged in order to maintain an objective approach and avail Omani policymakers of the experiences of other countries in this sector.

- The policy of reducing the Omani birth rate should be reviewed, since the target predicted for 2020, was achieved in 2003, showing a sharp and unusual decline, which will negatively affect the youthfulness of Omani society. In turn, this will lead to unfavourable social and economic influences.
- Society at large should be offered more opportunity to play an effective role in the planning for, and monitoring of the country's development, including the education sector.

Working to meet the most important requirements of the marketplace

- Economic bodies should work to expand the capacity of the Omani marketplace, by encouraging more foreign investments, establishing large economic projects and creating a better work environment that in itself is more attractive to investors, and that would thus create more job opportunities.
- A proper and comprehensive intelligence system should be established to assist decision-makers and planners in the formulation of plans of different sectors. Such a system would identify the exact need of each economic area, and the kinds and levels of qualification that are required, in order to avoid future surpluses (and unemployment) and shortages.
- Both the interested educational institutions and economic bodies should work to achieve satisfactory co-ordination and co-operation in enhancing the preparation process of young Omanis to enable them to respond to the requirements of modern life as well as to marketplace needs, since the most important educational targets are to educate young Omanis to become creative thinkers and proactive people.
- A concerted effort should be made to prepare Omani technicians as this is possibly one of the most important areas of need in the labour market. This includes a serious effort in order to change social attitudes towards vocational and technical jobs.

- Although it is recommended that vocational and technical jobs should be paid high attention, this attitude should not be at the expense of the Omanisation process in the other pivotal areas. In this respect, it should be remembered that it is not logical for the state to prepare national manpower at lower levels and for low income jobs such fuel station attendants, security man, barbers, plumbers ...etc, while the majority of engineers, academic staff in HEIs, experts and other specialists either in governmental or the private sector are expatriates, who obtain high incomes. Hence, a concerted effort should be made to accelerate the Omanisation process in professional areas of the economy and society. This requires the preparation of Omani academic staff for the HEIs, different specialised engineers for most private companies, school teaching staff for work in private schools and institutes, doctors and medical specialists in different areas for the governmental hospitals and centres as well as for the private institutions, and other specialists and qualified personnel for other needy fields. Indeed, these fields should be given priority, since most jobs, and in some areas all jobs, are occupied now by expatriates, which means that most of the salaries paid in this direction are transferred out of the country.

- Jobs in cultural, heritage and religious institutions, which still lack well-qualified people, should receive more attention through provided them by a well-qualified national workforce, especially as tourism has the potential to help the economy to diversify from oil. In this respect, the information regarding the specialisations and jobs required nationally in different sectors that is contained in the document published by the symposium entitled '*Higher Education and Labour Market: Opportunities and Options*', held in Muscat in March 2004, and other documents could be regarded as essential data and a base for a new intelligent system that would help in this regard.

- International experts should be consulted but not without contribution from the national experts and specialists.

Enhancing the position of the national workforce in private enterprise

- The remuneration of Omani employees in the private sector should be improved, in order to encourage them to better themselves and strive to secure jobs with private enterprises.
- The state should re-consider the position of certain sciences, mathematics and English in the compulsory school curriculum, since these are all required in Oman's private sector, and currently the lack of ability in these fundamental skills means that private enterprises invariably employ expatriates who are better skilled in these areas.
- Efforts should be made to reduce the gap between the work environments of the private and the governmental sectors, since the perceived advantages in the governmental sector, such as job safety, flexibility of work, length of holiday periods etc, are factors that dissuade young Omanis from exploring the possibilities of work in private enterprises.
- The private sector should be encouraged to improve its marketing activities to enhance its potential as a recruiter of young Omanis.

Working to develop and expand State's HEIs

- The current situation of 40,000-50,000 SSGs should be seen as an opportunity rather than a crisis, and a challenge that the country can rise to.
- The youthfulness of the country's population should be publicised as a rich resource that with proper training and education, can replace the expatriate workforce.
- The current HE budget should be increased. It is appreciated that there are several pressures upon the public budget, but the priority, as the majority of participants indicated, and as other studies have suggested, should be given to the expansion and development of HE.

- The capacity of the current governmental HEIs should be increased by restructuring the funding and budgeting system in accordance with a new organisational structure, by reducing the unit cost through changed teaching methods, by redirecting some resources or allowances now allocated for low priorities, and by rationalising provision so that savings can be made.
- A second governmental university is desirable and if this cannot be funded then the amalgamation of similar colleges and other HE provision should occur to create new universities from existing provision.
- Unification of scattered institutes that are resource intensive should occur to create new colleges, thereby attracting better qualified staff and becoming more attractive to students. In this regard, as an example, the six institutes of Health and Nursing Sciences located in Muscat and supervised by the Ministry of Health could be unified under one College of Health and Nursing Sciences, which will attract more students and satisfy their parents, save money that could be used to increase enrolments and improve their reputation which in turn will attract more academic faculty, in addition to bringing other advantages.
- The Institute of Shari'ah (Islamic) Sciences should be re-titled as the College of Shari'ah or College of Islamic and Arabic Sciences, since there is no longer a higher college for this type of study.
- A similar institute for young Omani women should be established in order to provide them with equal rights as their male counterparts, and ensure their development as well-balanced people.
- The number of VT centres should be expanded since not all SSGs are eligible to enter university by virtue of their GCSE examination marks, or because they have an immediate need to find paid employment.

- The civil society organisations should be proactive in their role, and make every effort to become involved in this process.

Promoting the role of the private HEIs

- The government should work to increase its financial and technical support to the private HEIs. This should take the form of providing suitable locations, and increasing the number of scholarships, in order to make enrolment at these institutions attractive to potential students by not forcing them to travel long distances, and by funding their study. This assistance should also include tax breaks, and assistance with planning, policy-making, and marketing, in order to make the institutions attractive to potential academic staff.
- The private HEIs must develop their own reputations in order to gain trust in the marketplace. This will require the private HEIs to:
 - provide a quality education, through improving their educational process including curricula, pedagogies and other activities;
 - employ well-qualified academic staff, and other assistant personnel;
 - provide advanced facilities and services, with good physical provision, leading to a suitable educational environment;
 - adopt an effective evaluation system, which ensures and supports the validity of the educational process and relevant activities;
 - develop their laboratories, learning resources centres, computing facilities and other technological instruments;
 - keep pace with the newest and advanced achievements in all elements and dimensions of the education field and related areas;
 - establish academic partnerships with popular overseas HEIs which have long successful histories, and benefit from their experience;
 - improve their administrative systems;
 - promote the funds and financial support of these institutions;
 - enhance their relationships with the community and civic organisations.

- The smaller and weaker colleges and institutes should be encouraged to amalgamate with other institutions, in order to create strong HEIs with a more attractive image.
- There should be greater variety in the programmes of studies offered.
- The private HEIs must develop their marketing procedures and activities in Oman and elsewhere, particularly in the Gulf and Middle East Countries market.

Enhancing HE funds and financial support

- The current funding framework should be overhauled since this leads to inefficient use of the current resources. The plurality of supervisory organisations results in duplication of effort (and associated expenses) that need not occur.
- The state should initiate a student loan scheme, either by itself, or in partnership with the private banks and with other financial institutions and private companies. This should be an Interest Free scheme, or a Semi Interest-Free scheme, and an Income-contingent scheme with very low interest. It should offer guarantees to private banks that decide to give students very low-interest loans.
- The attitude that students should contribute towards their HE should be fostered by the government.
- The private sector should be expected to contribute towards funding the student loan scheme, and to offer grants and endowments to needy students. In this regard, a partnership between the government and private enterprise, including banks and other financial companies, should be established, which would encourage more private sector agency participation in the effective planning process of HRD, including planning for education and HE.
- Research should be conducted to establish whether a taxation system imposed on the private sector as a contribution towards the education and training of the personnel it eventually benefits from, is viable.

- HEIs should be given more autonomy in accordance with state regulations, to manage their financial affairs as well as other affairs and have the expectation placed upon them that they develop income generating streams alongside their regular provision of HE.
- The government should encourage public and community participation in the dedication and donation of private wealth, which is currently directed to mosques, religious institutions and poorer people, to HE, either to institutions and/or to needy students.
- The government, acting with religious organisations and scholars, should publicise the fact that Muslims are called upon to make donations through A'Zakah and Awqaf and that these can be directed to HE in any beneficial field of study. This fact was evidenced by the religious fatwa identified by this study through interviewing the Grand Mufti of the Sultanate of Oman. The interested Director General in the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs declared that there is no financial or administrative regulation that precludes them from implementing this fatwa.
- The state should persuade people to reprioritise their needs, and prepare them to accept a variety of educational opportunities to enable them to improve their future income which will ultimately allow them to contribute towards their own children's HE
- Ongoing efforts should be made by interested HE bodies to consult with international institutions and experts in this field, to benefit from their experiences in developing possible alternative resources and funding mechanisms for this sector.

Reforming the organisational structure of HE

- The current multiple supervisory arrangements pertaining to HEIs should be reformed along the lines indicated in Figure 10.1 and as explained previously.

- The CoHE and MoHE, in any reformation, should be properly staffed with sufficient numbers of full-time senior staff, experts, specialists and well-qualified people in the full range of specialised areas, and enough resources should be at their disposal to enable them to discharge the responsibilities, which would be placed upon each of them as a supreme body.
- An independent body (committee or authority) should be established with the remit of evaluating and monitoring HEIs. Such a body should be well-qualified and equipped, and devoted only to monitoring an effective evaluation system, in respect of the extent to which the implementation process is in accordance with the approved plans.
- HEIs should be allowed to manage themselves independently under the umbrella of the state HE system, in order to avoid the current difficulties associated with bureaucracy, and to more effectively manage and develop their resources, their enrolment policies, their programmes, their personnel and administrative affairs.
- HEIs should be provided with sufficient national or expatriate staff, whether academic or otherwise, and enough technical and physical resources to enable them to accept more SSGs, and to meet their educational mission, ensure quality, develop scientific research, and improve their outputs.
- Other developed countries should be approached to assist in building the organisational structure of Oman's HE system, in order for it to be among the most advanced in the world, and capable of meeting the challenges implicit in the national aims and objectives.

10.8 Conclusion

The final chapter has drawn conclusions about the most important discussions regarding the study's prime themes. It started with a concentration on the challenges of high demand, socially and economically, for HE in Oman. This included discussion about how to deal seriously with several social factors in the

light of the new trends and social beliefs. The discussion touched also on how to respond to the urgent needs of the Omani marketplace and of other developmental sectors of the country. It was clarified that, in order to meet these demands, a comprehensive process should be undertaken, with full co-ordination and strong co-operation between the interested sectors and bodies.

The chapter suggested a number of principles, aims and ideas to be included in a future vision of HE, several ways to expand the capacity of the state HEIs, different alternatives to finance HE and to assist the SSGs and others to join HE, and provided a number of suggestions to reform the administration and management structure of the sector. Within this dimension, an organisational structure and several procedures were proposed in order to reform the administration of the sector and the supervisory system of HEIs. Regarding the financing of HE, the chapter detailed the role of the private HEIs and the difficulties facing these institutions, and suggested how to rise to these. Additionally, although it was put forward that the state should increase the annual budget allocated to this sector, the contribution of other interested parties focused on, for instance, students, parents, private sector companies, the general public and the community. The participation of civil organisations, international institutions and experts, and other interested bodies, was also considered. However, it was mentioned that several issues require in-depth investigation, and should be the subject of future research. Finally, the chapter ended by offering a number of recommendations and suggestions to help in the development process of this vital sector, whether in Oman or in other countries that have similarities to the Omani context.

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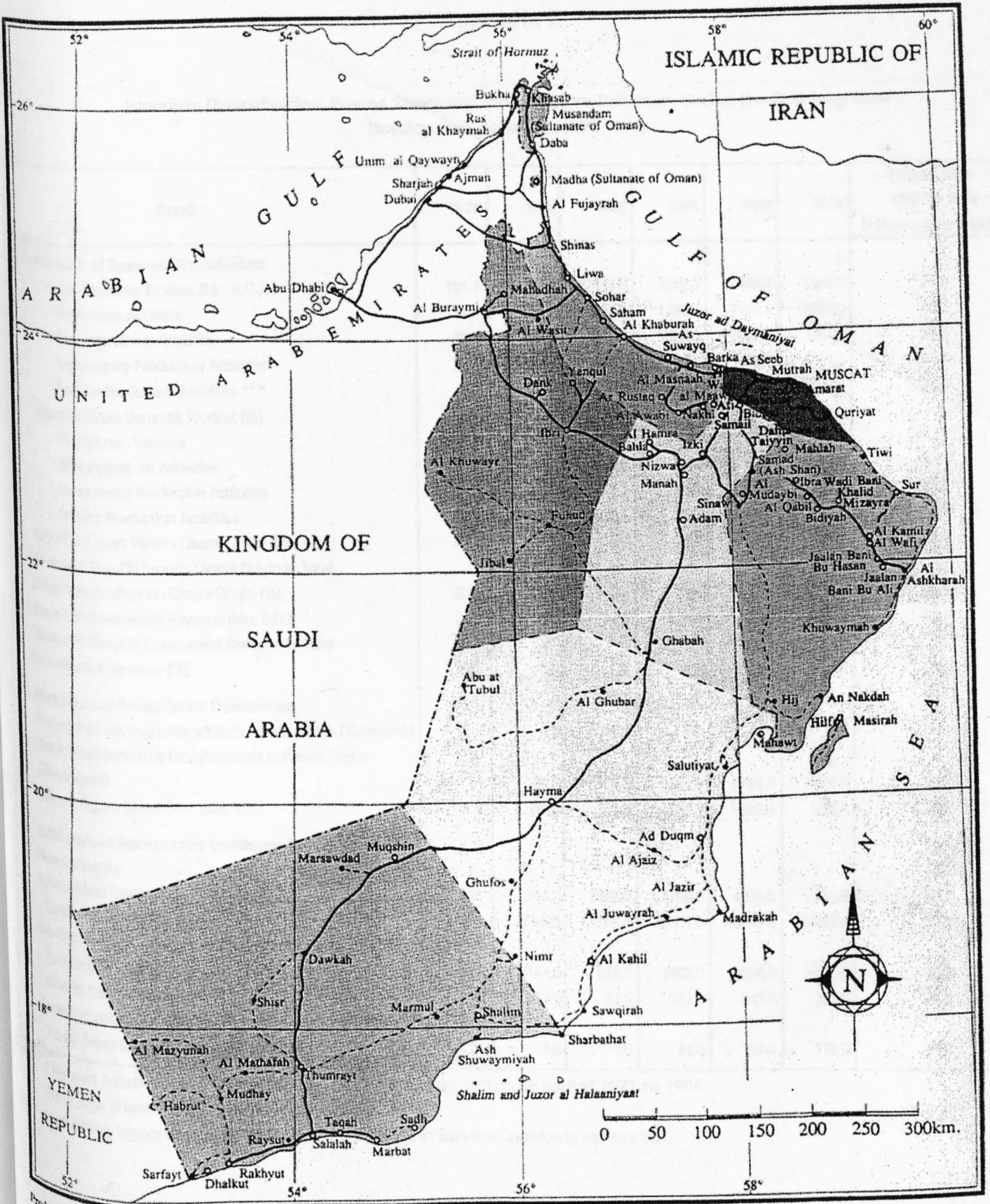
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Appendices

SULTANATE OF OMAN



Produced by the Ministry of Information, September 1994
 Based on National Survey Authority OR 1, edition 6 dated June 1994
 This map is not an authority on international boundaries

- Wilayat
- Village / Town
- Graded Road
- ===== Metalled Road
- International Boundary

Appendix 2

**Economic Diversification, Private Sector and Infrastructure Indicators during the First long term
Development Strategy (1970-1995)**

Detail	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	Growth Rate: 1970 to 1995 (Percent per year)
A- Indicators of Economic Diversification							
1. Gross Domestic Product (Mn. R.O.)	104.7	724.2	2185.0	3590.6	4493.0	5307.2	17.0
- Petroleum Activities	71.6	486.8	1322.7	1780.7	2144.4	2020.0	14.3
- Non Petroleum Activities	33.1	237.4	862.2	1809.9	2348.6	3287.0	20.2
- Commodity Production Activities	25.4	94.9	198.3	419.6	402.2	594.2	13.4
- Service Production Activities ***	7.7	142.5	663.9	1390.2	1946.4	2692.8	26.4
2. Share in Gross Domestic Product (%)							
- Petroleum Activities	68.4	67.2	60.5	49.6	47.7	38.1	47.7**
- Non Petroleum Activities	31.6	32.8	39.5	50.4	52.3	61.9	52.3**
- Commodity Production Activities	24.3	13.1	9.1	11.7	9.0	11.2	10.6**
- Service Production Activities	7.4	19.7	30.4	38.7	43.3	50.7	41.7**
3. Non-Oil Export Value - Omani Origin (Mn. R.O.)	0.4*	1.1	4.6	22.9	68.8	182.0	29.0
4. Share of Non Oil Exports-Omani Origin in Total Merchandise Exports-Omani Origin (%)	0.5*	0.2	0.4	1.4	3.4	9.0	12.8
5. Non Oil Government Revenue (Mn. R.O.)	2.2*	14.6	78.3	229.4	288.0	418.3	24.4
6. Share of Non-Oil Government Revenue in Total Government Revenue (%)	4.4*	3.8	8.5	14.6	15.3	22.6	7.1
B- Indicators of Private Sector Development							
7. Registered Trading Enterprises in Private Sector (Thousands)	-	2.2	1.3	3.0	44.4	74.3	19.2
8. Registered Industrial Establishments in Private Sector (Thousands)	-	10.0	195.0	2334.0	3484.0	1514.0	28.5
9. Private Sector Investment (Mn. R.O.)	11.4	50.0	126.9	181.5	226.4	276.4	13.6
C- Indicators of Infrastructure Development							
10. Road Lengths							
- Asphalted Carriageway (Kilometer)	27*	714.0	2192.0	3768.0	4976.0	6257.0	25.5
- Graded (Kilometer)	2168*	5495.0	9169.0	13501.0	18689.0	24287.0	10.6
11. Electricity							
- Production (GWH)	13*	154.0	818.0	2498.0	4504.0	6500.0	29.6
- Connection (Thousands)	2*	13.0	53.0	157.0	241.0	335.0	23.8
12. Communication							
- Fixed Telephone (Per Thousand Persons)	1*	4.0	15.0	41.0	107.0	170.0	23.9

* Figures relate to 1971. Accordingly, the growth rate is for the period 1971 to 1995.

** Average share for the period 1970 to 1995.

*** Including import tax and financial intermediation services indirectly measured.

Appendix 3

Specialisms offered by the seven colleges of SQU For Undergraduate degrees

College	Specialisms
College of Engineering	Electrical and Electronics Petroleum and Mineral Resources Civil Mechanical
College of Sciences	Bio-Environmental Science Medical Laboratory Science Computer Science Chemistry Mathematics Statistics Health Statistics Bio-Technology Geography Earth Science
College of Arts	Arabic Language and Literature English Language and Literature Journalism and Information Document and Library Archaeology Geography History Sociology Theatre Arts
College of Agricultural & Marine Sciences	Agronomy and Horticulture Animal Science Bioresources and Agriculture Fisheries Science Fisheries Technology Food Science Soils and Water Management Water Technology
College of Commerce and Economics	Accounting Economics Finance Information System Management Marketing Production andnd Management. Operational. Statistics
College of Medicine & Health Sciences	Doctor of Medicine
College of Education	Physical Education Geography English Language Art Education Arabic Language Science and Mathematics Islamic Education Home Economics History Psychology

Source: Adapted from <http://www.squ.edu.om> (25/07/2005)

Appendix 4

Postgraduate Programmes offered at SQU in 2004/05

College	Programmes
College of Engineering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * MSc in Civil Engineering, with the following specialisations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Structural Engineering - Transportation Engineering - Geotechnical Engineering - Environmental Engineering - Water Resources * MSc in Electrical Engineering, with the following specialisations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Computer - Communication - Energy & Power Systems - Industrial & Electronical Control * MSc in Industrial Engineering * MSc in Mechanical Engineering * MSc in Petroleum & Natural Gas Engineering
College of Arts and Social Sciences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * MSc in Arts with the following specialisations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Arabic Language and Literature - History - Library & Information - Social Science & Social work
College of Agricultural & Marine Sciences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - MSc in Agricultural Economics and Rural Studies - MSc in Animal Science and Health - MSc in Bioresource and Agricultural Engineering - MSc in Crop Production - MSc in Crop Protection - MSc in Food Science and Nutrition - MSc in Marine Science and Fisheries . - MSc in Soil and Water Sciences
College of Commerce and Economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Business Administration (MBA)
College of Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * PhD in Carbonate Studies * MSc in Biology * MSc in Environmental Science * MSc in Chemistry * MSc in Computer Science * MSc in Geology , with the following specializations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Carbonate Studies - Hydrogeology * MSc in Applied Mathematics * MSc in Pure Mathematics * MSc in Statistics * MSc in Physics

Continue Appendix 4

Postgraduate Programmes offered at SQU in 2004/05

College	Programmes
College of Medicine & Health Sciences	* MSc in Biomedical Sciences, with the following specialisations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Human & Clinical Anatomy - Biochemistry & Molecular Biology
College of Education	* MSc in Education, with the following specialisations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Curriculum and Method of Teaching Arabic Language. - Curriculum and Method of Teaching English Language - Curriculum and Method of Teaching Islamic Education. - Curriculum and Method of Teaching Science. - Curriculum and Method of Teaching Mathematics. - Curriculum and Method of Teaching Social Studies (History and Geography only). - Educational Administration. - Educational Psychology (Part-time).

Source: Adapted from <http://www.squ.edu.om/dpr/Programs.htm> (25/07/2005)

Appendix 5

Approval of Private HEIs Between 1994–2005

College	Location	Provisional Approval	Started Acad. Year	Programmes	Affiliation
Majan College Former Name: College of Administrative Science	Muscat Darsaite	24/09/1994	1995/96	Business Administration, Accounting, Finance, Computing, Communications, Marketing, Travel & Tourism	Luton University, UK
Modern College of Business Science	Muscat AlKhuwair	02/06/1996	1996/97	Business Administration, Accounting, Computing, Banking, Economics, Management & Information Systems	Missouri Univ., St Louis, USA
Caledonian College of Engineering	Muscat Aseeb	17/09/1996	1996/97	Civil, Electronic and Mechanical Engineering, Engineering Management	Caledonian Univ., UK
Sohar College of Applied Sciences	Sohar	03/06/1996	1997/98	Engineering, Computing, Business Administration, Business Studies	Lincolnshire Univ., UK Humberside Univ., UK
Muscat College of Management Science and Technology	Muscat	03/06/1996	1997/98	Communications, Computing, Business Administration, Engineering	Perth College, UK
National College for Science and Technology	Salalah	16/09/1997	1998/99	Business Administration, Accounting, Computing,	Westminster University London UK
Fire Safety Engineering College	Muscat A'seeb	14/04/1998	1998/99	Courses in Fire Safety, Drilling and Safety	Central Lancashire University., UK
Mazoon College of Management and Applied Science	Muscat	16/09/1997	1999/00	Business Administration, Accounting, Computing, Information System Management, English Language	Missouri Univ., St Louis, USA
Al-Zahra College for Girls	Muscat	16/03/1999	1999/00	Business Administration, Finance and Banking Management, Computing, English Language	Amman National Univ., Jordan

Continue Appendix 5

Approved of Private HEIs Between 1994 – 2005

College	Location	Provisional Approval	Started Acad. Year	Programmes	Affiliation
Oman Medical College	Muscat/ Sohar	07/06/2000	2001/02	Doctor of Medicine, Bachelor of Science	West Virginia University- USA
Sur University College	Sur	20/05/2001	2001/02	Management and Marketing, Accounting, Finance and Banking, Business Information System, Information Technology, Hotel Management and Tourism	Melbourne University Private- Australia
Waljat Colleges of Applied Sciences	Muscat	22/07/2001	2001/02	Computer Science & Engineering, Electronics and Communication Eng., Biotechnology Eng., Business Admin- Information Technology Management	Birla Institute of Technology - India
Oman Academy for Tourism and Hospitality	Muscat	10/09/2001	2001/02	Tourism and Hospitality Management	University of Applied Management Science+ Institute of Tourism and Management- Austria
Sohar University	Sohar	11/09/2001	2001/02		The University of Queensland in Australia
Middle East College of Information Technology	Muscat	29/12/2001	2002/03	Software Technology, Hardware Technology & Networking, Internet Technology	Manipal Academy of higher Education - India
Al Buraimi College	AlBuraimi	31/10/2001	2003/04	Info. Tech., Eng. And Literature, Business Admins., and UPP. (Undergrad. Prepar. Prog.).	California University- USA
Nizwa University	Nizwa	10/11/1999	2004/05	Arts and Sciences, Economics, Administration, Info. Systems, Nursing and Pharmacy, Engineering and Architecture	

Continue Appendix 5

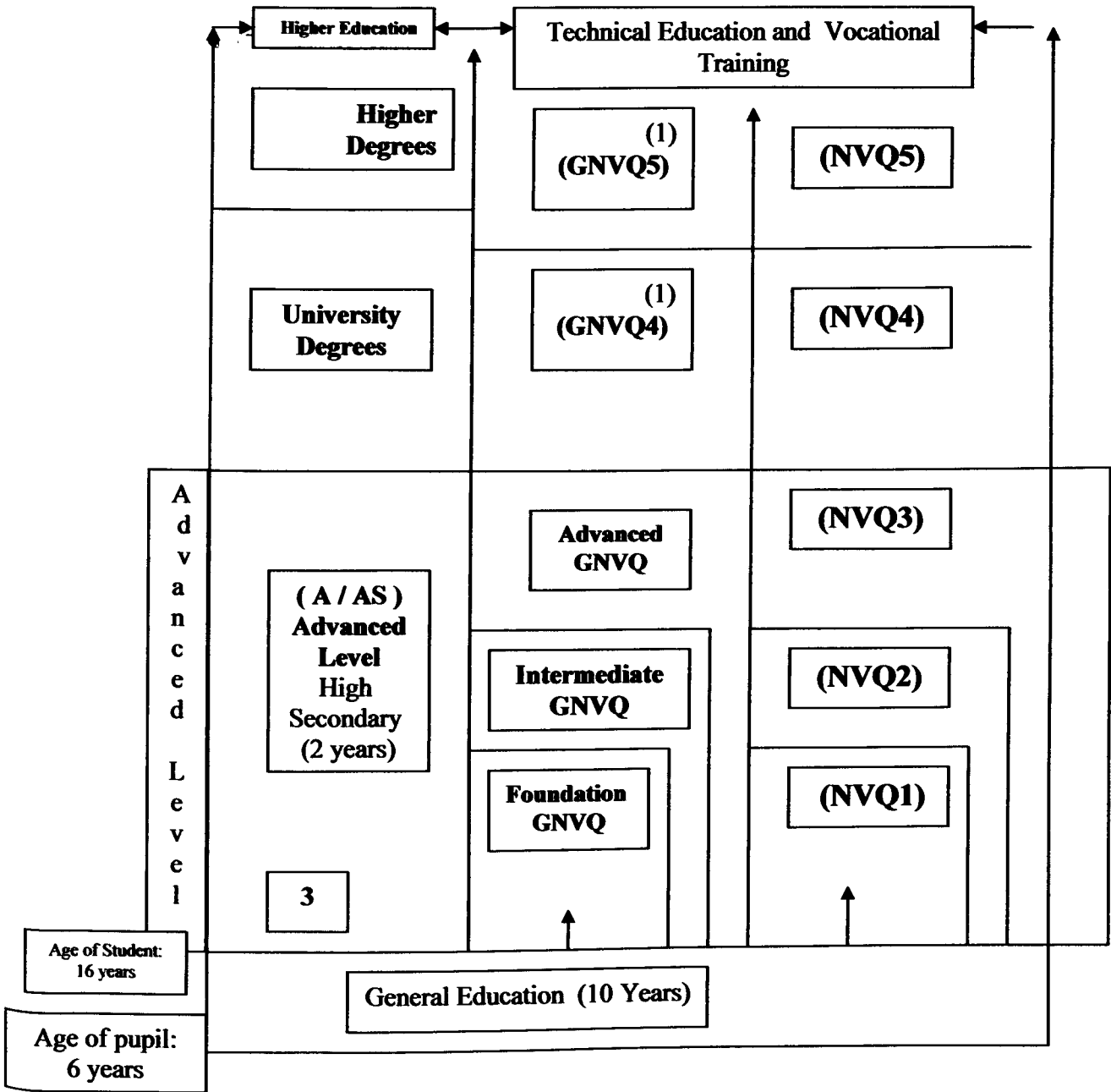
Approved of Private HEIs Between 1994 – 2005

College	Location	Provisional Approval	Started Acad. Year	Programmes	Affiliation
Dhofar University	Salalah	10/11/1999	2004/05	Applied Sciences, Education, Commerce and Busin. Administr.. Engineering	American University-Beirut
Gulf College	Muscat	17/12/2003	2004/05		Staffordshire UK
Scientific College for Design	Muscat	17/12/2003	2004/05	Graphic Design, Interior Design	Lebanese and American University
Oman College for Administration and Technology	Barka	17/12/2003	2004/05	IT, Business Admins., English,	University of AlYarmouk - Jordan

Ministry of Higher Education (2004). www.buc.edu.om And Websites of these institutions.

Appendix 6

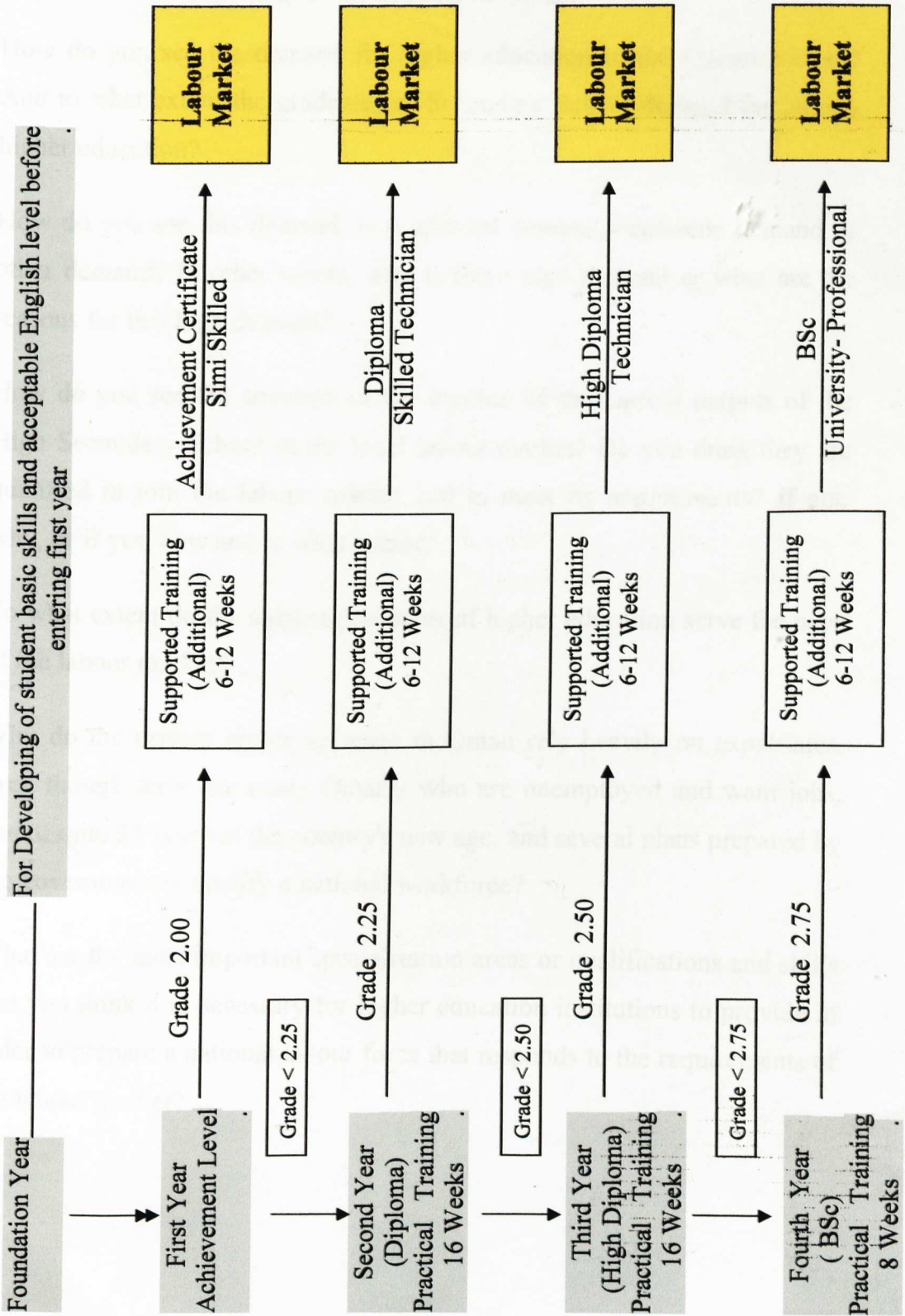
**'Oman 2020' Educational Trends Approved for the Coming Phase
Which has been changed recently**



(1) 4th and 5th Levels have not yet been applied

Appendix 7

New Program Design For Technical Edu. and Vocational Train.



Appendix 8

Schedule of Interview questions

Theme 1: Demands for Higher Education in Oman

- 1- 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?
- 2- 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?
- 3- 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?
- 4- To what extent do the current graduates of higher education serve the need of the labour market?
- 5- 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?
- 6- 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?

Theme 2: The Capacity of Higher Education

- 7- 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 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?
- 8- 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?
- 9- 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/requirement? Why?
- 10- 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?

Theme 3: Vision, objectives and policies of Higher Education

- 11- In your opinion why has there been no official national vision or comprehensive strategy for higher education in Oman during the last 35 years?
- 12- And if you have been given a role in preparing and formulating such vision or strategy for higher education, what are the fundamental principles, objectives and dimensions that you are going to suggest?
- 13- Ten years after the publication of the Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020' do you see this as a suitable, comprehensive and effective strategy for human resource development, and particularly for the expansion and development of the higher education sector?

- 14- And to what extent do you relate to this Vision when you formulate your organisation's strategies or when you implement its duties? Does it serve as your road map?
- 15- Do you think that the current plans, policies and activities of all organisations in the HE sector link and serve the country's development plans, particularly the last two FYDPs?
- 16- And have you been involved at any stage in the formulation process of any general HE plan or policy, whether issued by the Council of Higher Education or by another authority?

Theme 4: Administration and Management of Higher Education

- 17- What do you think about the plurality of organisations that supervise the different streams and institutions of higher education in Oman? Does the current organisational structure best suit the need of administration of this sector and its institutions in the Sultanate?
- 18- Do you have any views about how or which body should administer and monitor these bodies?
- 19- Do you think the current organisations that administer the different streams and institutions of higher education, are prepared for planning and management of this sector? Do they have sufficient numbers of specialists and experts and well-qualified Omanis to achieve their tasks?
- 20- Is there is need to seek help from the international specialised institutions or to bring expatriates [or foreign experts] to help the country in developing the management of sector?
- 21- What evaluation process exists in respect of the HEIs for which your authority is responsible?
- 22- Do you face other challenges in the administration of the HE sector/ or institution?

Theme 5: Financing of Higher Education

- 23- How do you see the reality of HE financing? Does the state funding match the increasing demand for higher education?
- 24- It is obvious that the state faces difficulty in financing the study of all students in higher education. What is your opinion about the privatisation of education in general and HE in particular?
- 25- And to what extent does the country need it? And why?
- 26- In light of the difficulty facing the State regarding the funding of all students in HE, what options might be used to finance those students, or to expand the capacity of HE in Oman?
- 27- And particularly what is your opinion about a student loan scheme?

Questions presented to particular interviewees

- You are one of the policy or decision-makers, and you said it is not enough, so why do you do not to work with others to expand and develop the capacity of HE in the country and to develop its efficiency?
- How do you see the government incentives to the private HEIs, such as the OR 3 million scheme, some tax exemptions, and a certain number of annual scholarships?
- Do you think the state has enough money to undertake such a scheme?'

Questions presented to His Eminence the Grand Mufti of the Sultanate of Oman

- Does Islam allow Muslims to give the 'A'Zakah' to support students who want to study beyond the Secondary level, such as at university or college?
- And does Islam allow Muslims to give or to support those students from Awqaf?
- Does that mean the support can only be for students who study Islamic or Arabic Sciences, or it is acceptable to give this to those students who study other subjects and specialisations?

Questions presented to Director General of Awqaf and Biatulmal in the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.

- If it is acceptable in Islam [which it is the responsibility of The Grand Mufti to say] that the money and properties of 'A'Zakah' and Awqaf could be used in financing and supporting students in higher education, do the administrative and financial rules allow such steps to be undertaken, or are there restrictions which prevent the application of such support? And do you need to obtain religious fatwa [acceptance] from the Grand Mufti to implement such a decision?
- If supporting students is acceptable in Islam, is the Ministry going to support only those students who study Islamic or Arabic Sciences, or will it support those students who study other subjects and specialisations?