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International Students' Sponsorships at University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS), Rustaq, Oman: A Case Study

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Abstract

The flow of knowledge resources among nations is interconnected with global political, economic and cultural relationships. One major component of academic interaction is the international exchange at the level of higher education. This paper outlines the existence of international students within the Omani Program for Cultural and Scientific Cooperation (OPCSC) at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences-AL-rustaq, College of Education and explores the merits of the program. Through group interview with nine international students, the study found that the currently enrolled students are from African states solely and were informed about OPCSC by word of mouth disseminated by the International Istiqama Organization, which liaisons between studying opportunities offered by the Ministry of Higher Education and willing international students, and through Omani delegates as well as friends. Therefore, this paper recommends branding the OPCSC and subjecting it to systematic policies and procedures, on the one hand, as well as diversification of international students' portfolio in order to raise the quality of higher education in Oman.

Keywords: International Students, Omani Program for Cultural and Scientific Cooperation (OPCSC), Higher Education

1.Introduction

International students are endorsed as one of the systematic endeavors to quality in higher education internationally and locally. They are defined by the Institute of International Education website (2022) as "Individuals studying on a non-immigrant, temporary visa that allows for academic study at the post- secondary level." At an international level, it is quite common that higher education, in western countries, embraces international students. It is said that "Typically, a top institution looking to recruit one hundred students a year will encourage applications from prospective graduate students from thirty or more countries." This undertaking exposes these students to other cultures, qualifying them to become critical and independent thinkers. Similar wise, locally, this phenomenon has evolved in higher education in the sultanate of Oman since the eve of the

millennium. However, it has become systematically substantial and sustainable through the Omani Program for Cultural and Scientific Cooperation (hereafter OPCSC). This program grants university level scholarships to the brotherly and friendly countries under certain terms and conditions for acceptance. (OPCSC, 2022). Rustaq College of Education, previously operating under the umbrella of the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) and now under (UTAS), accepts international students with a minimum total score of 75% in the Omani general diploma or its equivalent and has embraced a number of international students over the last two decades.

The international student status has been recognized by the Higher Education Council established by the Royal Decree No. (65/98). Rustaq College of Education, in turn, following UTAS strategic goals has recognized the international student status in its strategic plan and has adopted the following strategies:

- ❖ Achieve international standards
- ❖ Admit international students
- ❖ Initiate fee-paying admission for international students
- ❖ Market itself as a brand

The umbrella under which UTAS-Rustaq College of Education processes its strategies has been realized so far through the OPCSC, as stated above. UTAS policy and procedures are still under development. However, UTAS, in line with its regulations, unfolded in the Royal Decree No. (47/2021), Article 4.7, has clearly identified in its proposed strategic plan, strategic goal 4, objective 4.2.2 the need to “Establish exchange programs with other education providers for faculty and students (national/international)” (UTAS strategic plan proposal, 2022). Hence, the call to revisit this study in order to incorporate its findings into the formulation of international students' future policy and procedures. This study outlined the existence of international students within the OPCSC at Rustaq College of Education and explored the merits of the program. The research into international students with the OPCSC is reported by situating the study in its theoretical context through reviewing the relevant literature. Following this, the case study approach that framed the research was rationalized and explained before describing the research methods used to collect and analyze the data. The research findings were outlined and discussed with an emphasis on the merits of the international exchange program domain where the research was conducted. The research concluded by examining how the results of the study can inform improvements to the OPCSC across Oman.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Internationalization in higher education

Due to globalization, higher education both locally and internationally has massively expanded and within this massive expansion, increasing concerns regarding quality have been coming under focus remarkably. In response to these concerns, internationalization was perceived as providing a solution and helping to improve quality of higher education. Put differently, the higher education sector is becoming rapidly aware that in the globalized world of today, internationalization is fundamental to improve the quality of education and provide students with the skills and competences they need to make a valid contribution to society. According to Van der Wende (1997), internationalization is defined as, “any systematic effort aimed at making higher education responsive to the requirements and challenges related to the globalization of societies, economy, and labor markets” (p.18)

In higher education, there are two pillars of internationalization: at home and cross-border education (Altbach and Knight, 2007). Cross-border education pillar implies mobility of people, programs, providers, projects/services and policy. Home pillar, on the other hand, includes curriculum/teaching/learning, open access education, domestic students/faculty, international students/scholar, extracurricular activity and research (Knight, 2012).

At a regional level, UTAS colleges adopt the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA) definition of international student as the one “....who has come to Oman

from another country with the sole intention of gaining a higher education qualification in Oman " (ISAM, 2016, p.60). These students are admitted to UTAS colleges in Oman, either in Undergraduate / Graduate or Arabic Program for Non-native Speakers, and issued Omani residence permits under UTAS sponsorship through Scholarships and International Admissions Section. (OPCSE, 21-22). The scholarships and International Admissions Section supports one of UTAS approaches, as stated in Article 4.7 of UTAS regulations, in welcoming students from all over the world by adopting different practices that assist applicants from outside Oman to enroll in any of the wide variety of programs at UTAS. Additionally, the Section maintains services that support the enrolled international student's personal growth and progress to reach academic success at UTAS; mentors them to acquire the benefits of OPCSC and provides consistent care until they graduate. These international students who are granted scholarships provided by MoHE/Oman should;

- a) come from Islamic world and other countries (External/Internal Scholarship) to study at the Undergraduate level, and
- b) gain a short Scholarship to study in the Arabic program for Non-Native Speakers.

At an international level, European countries have had a rich history of international exchange contributing to the role of higher education in promoting diversity, equity and inclusion and the responses of universities to related issues and challenges. For example, universities in Europe approach the topic from a strategic point of view, bringing together various smaller scale projects focused on different aspects and dimensions into a comprehensive strategy that becomes an integral part of these institutions' mission to embrace diversity. The Erasmus program (short for the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) is an exemplary initiative run by the European Union (EU). It provides opportunities for students to study or gain work experience in a different European country while completing a degree.

Furthermore, since 2015 the new Erasmus+ programme has also allowed students to carry out mobility schemes in countries from almost all over the world, which is the so-called 'international dimension' of the programme. However, there are some barriers to this mission, such as the preparation of future generations for an internationalized world in terms of providing them with the best training. Thus, there was a need to infuse and promote such concepts in the curriculum and in its policies at the institutional level. Having done that, and according to the Spanish Service for the internationalization of Education (2017), there is a comprehensive internationalization across the institution as all stakeholders including students, teachers and administrative staff become knowledgeable and well-educated.

Having said so, this research is based on Knight's (2004) generic model of internationalization in higher education. This framework is based on four dimensions namely program, rationales, policies and strategies. The first dimension is seen in terms of providing funded programs that facilitate international activities, such as mobility, research and linkages. The second dimension is presented in terms of why it is important that the sector becomes more international. Rationales vary enormously and can include human resource development, strategic alliances, commercial trade, nation-building, and social/cultural development. The third dimension is described in terms of policies that address or emphasize the importance of the international or intercultural dimension in higher education. Policies can come from a variety of sectors, including education, foreign affairs, science, technology, culture, and trade. The fourth and final dimension is considered a key element of a national strategy to achieve a country's goal and priorities, both domestically and internationally.

Therefore, the OPCSC in higher education in Oman has to be examined at the institutional level of internationalization; at home and at the cross-border educational level as well. Thus, the question which guides this research is "What is the current situation regarding the international students' sponsorship at Rustaq College of Education from the international students' perspective?"

3. Methodology

3.1. Case study

The present study adopts qualitative research methods, specifically case study methodology. Since this study explores how international students are sponsored at UTAS-Rustaq, college of Education, it equates with Van Lier's (2005) description of a case study as an influential research method in education as it allows researchers to deeply examine the phenomenon in its educational settings. Thus, this research deeply investigates the phenomenon of current practices regarding internationalization at Rustaq college of Education.

Moreover, this study fits well within the definitions of a case study. One of the definitions of case study presented by Yin (2018), is that 'a case study is an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in depth and within its real context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident' (p.45). In other words, an extensive in-depth description and understanding of a social phenomenon in its real context is likely to involve contextual conditions that are related to the investigated case. In this research, the practices of internationalization have been examined at Rustaq college of Education in Oman where international students have been admitted and pursued their study.

Through using multiple sources of evidence, the investigated phenomenon under its complex social settings will be revealed. In relation to this study, the social phenomenon of the international students' sponsorship at Rustaq College of Education is investigated from various perspectives. First, it has been studied from the literature review through examining the practices that international and regional countries are involved in. Second, the phenomenon has been investigated through international students' perspectives. In this regard, the research has employed semi-structured interviews to uncover the examined phenomenon.

3.2. Participants and instruments

The research participants were international students studying at Rustaq College of Education. Purposive sampling has been utilized by selecting only those participants who had an experience of internationalization and sponsorship. The nine participants were all from West Africa and in their final year of International Business Administration (IBA) and IT majors program.

Semi-structured interviews with the participants is the main set of data used in this study. It is an interaction between the interviewer and the participants to gather perceptions, attitudes and feelings towards the investigated social phenomenon in a non-threatening environment. So, it involves the interviewer asking questions and getting answers from the participants of the study. It is a relatively cost effective and efficient data collection method because it involves collecting data from a group of people at the same time. It is also flexible as it allows the researchers to explore unpredictable topics that might arise during the process of interviewing. The group interview was analyzed using the thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There are six phases of thematic analysis starting from familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and finally producing the report.

4. Findings and Discussion

In response to the research question "What is the current situation regarding the international students' sponsorship at Rustaq College of Education from the international students' perspective?". The following sections will present the findings and discussion.

4.1. Lack of clear marketing for OPCSC

All the interviewed international students confirmed that they heard about the OPCSC only through the International Istiqama organization in their countries. It seems that the Istiqama organization under the umbrella of The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs works as a liaison between the Ministry of Higher Education in Oman and abroad. However, the Istiqama organization seemed to target the Islamic countries in West Africa as all the interviewed international students were from Tanzania, Republic of Benin and Kenya. Moreover, there is no systematic process of how the Istiqama organization disseminates the information of the program. It is more like a word of mouth. One of the interviewed international students said that "the ambassador of my country

talked about the Omani sponsorship in the mosque and it happened that I heard about it.” Another international student mentioned that she heard about the Omani sponsorship from her friend and another from his relative through the mosque. This intensifies the need that the OPCSC should clearly indicate in its electronic booklet 2021/2022 how the international students will know about the OPCSC. Plus, there should be a clear mechanism for marketing the program to international students, for instance delegates can visit international schools in Oman and abroad to introduce the program to students, Omani cultural attaches can popularize and market the program too. Moreover, there should be an updated link on the MOHE and/or UTAS websites which leads to further details about the program.

4.2. Lack of systematic procedures for international students' rights

All the interviewed international students seemed to have encountered negative experiences upon arrival to the Sultanate due to their misunderstanding of the mechanisms of their rights. One of the ambiguous procedures is the unavailability of accommodation for them upon arrival to Oman. One of the international students expressed his disappointment upon arrival to Oman. He mentioned that he took a taxi to the Rustaq College of Education for an hour and half and upon arrival, the college gate guard asked him to return back as there was no male accommodation available. Another student mentioned that she was received by a family member working in Oman, at the airport. A third student stated that one of his relatives worked in the Istiqama organization and he helped him with the accommodation. A fourth student had a network connection with a previous international student who assisted him to find a place to live in.

Another unclear procedure is the visa renewal. The international students mentioned that they had to renew the visa every two years instead of being validated till graduation and surprisingly they had to pay by themselves for the renewal of their visa. Thus, it is highly important for the OPCSC to assist international students throughout their academic career by facilitating all the processes such as their visas and accommodation. They need, for instance, to validate their visa till graduation and provide or suggest accommodation nearby the selected college so that the students psychologically feel stable and their academic performance would improve accordingly.

Furthermore, funding was an obstacle for those international students as they mentioned that their previous international colleagues had advised them on how to get a loan from the college until the funding was resolved after four months of their arrival to the Sultanate. It is of significance that the international students' allowances are given on a monthly basis since the OPCSC is a funded program. The personnel in charge of program implementation should be responsible that all the details of international students including their bank information are given promptly and updated to facilitate receiving allowance smoothly.

4.3. International students' views of the college services

The findings show that the international students are nearly satisfied with the services provided for them, except for the following pivotal services namely: recreational services, psychological counseling, academic and social advisory services. Surprisingly enough, these services are not available for local students too. This entails the necessity of initiating such services for all students in order to promote their lifestyle and enhance their academic performance. Accordingly, they suggested some ideas to foster their satisfaction regarding the general services provided in the college. One of the international students mentioned that “the college should enhance the network and connection between it and my country so that it can receive new students.” A second student commented, “the college should help male students to find accommodation close to college in order to minimize cost of transportation.” Another student suggested that the college should conduct weekly meetings with them in order to discuss their needs within the academic context. These comments clearly highlight the need for the abovementioned services.

The above entails the absence of a clear approach to address the results of deploying the OPCSC in Omani Higher Education. At the national and Sectoral levels, Knight (2004) has emphasized approaches that highlight some of the emerging trends, issues, and questions important for internationalization. This section revisits these approaches with their description and how these align with OPCSC at Omani higher educational level.

Approach	Description	OPCSC at Omani higher educational level
Program	Internationalization of higher education is seen in terms of providing funded programs that facilitate international activities, such as mobility, research and linkages.	OPCSC is a funded program from the ministry of Higher Education. Thus, international students' allowance should be given on a monthly basis.
Rationales	Internationalization of higher education is presented in terms of why it is important that the sector becomes more international. Rationales vary enormously and can include human resource development, strategic alliances, commercial trade, nation-building, and social/cultural development.	OPCSC is a commercial trade where Oman can market its education internationally. Thus, it should be marketed globally not only through the international Istiqama association.
Policies	Internationalization of higher education is described in terms of policies that address or emphasize the importance of the international or intercultural dimension in higher education. Policies can come from a variety of sectors, including education, foreign affairs, science and technology, culture, and trade.	OPCSC's policy is absent, thus Higher education should design a clear policy for OPCSC. This research proposes a policy suitable to the exchange program.
Strategies	Internationalization is considered a key element of a national strategy to achieve a country's goal and priorities, both domestically and internationally.	Oman is working hard to boost output in education. Its vision 2020 is designed to steer the Sultanate towards a more sustainable and diversified economy by using oil revenues to boost education. Thus, OPCSC should be given a priority to support the Sultanate achieving its goal.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The research investigates the current situation of internationalization at UTAS-Rustaq, College of Education in Oman. From international students' perceptions and attitudes, the research found that there is lack of clear marketing for OPCSC, as well as lack of systematic procedures for their rights. International students indicated that they undergo absence of psychological counseling, shortage of recreational services as well as academic and social advisory services. Therefore, this research proposes a policy for the Scholarships and International Admission Section which will grant a systematic process to ensure international students' rights and obligations. Having said so, the research proposes a policy for the Scholarships and International Admission Section [The section, hereafter]. This "Proposed" Policy includes two parts.

Part 1 entails rules and regulations for the students who obtain a student visa under UTAS residency sponsorship. They are as follows:-

A) Tickets: The following rules are applied for the international students who have a scholarship with a student visa and are eligible for an annual airline ticket.

1. The section would issue a one-way ticket for the student who gets admission and is willing to enroll at one of UTAS colleges.
2. Issuing the return ticket to the student to travel to the destination the student came from to UTAS/Oman for the first time. Changing destination requires approval of the Section.
3. The section issues the ticket upon student's confirmation

4. The ticket is provided only when the student is willing to travel after final exams in every spring or summer semester.
5. A Graduating student deserves only a one-way ticket to the destination the student came from to UTAS for the first time, and a 50 KG cargo letter. Both are provided only when the student cancels the residence permit and leaves Oman.
6. Short scholarship students have to bear all expenses including the airline ticket when the student withdraws or leaves the program at any time without any acceptable reason and without the approval of the A&R center's director.

B) Residence and Exit Permits:

1. UTAS has no objection to receiving a student visa application only from newly admitted international students when the student complies with the requirements and the assigned timeline. However, UTAS would not receive student visa applications from current students with accumulative GPA less than 2.5 or re-instated or re-enrolled or re-admission students.
2. Students are obliged to abide by the regulations in the Sultanate of Oman and CAS; including, newly admitted students should not leave Oman before completing the procedures of getting the residence permit.
3. Students are required to apply for an Exit Permit to travel for each trip outside Oman.
4. To be eligible to apply for services related to residence permit, Exit Permit or to receive any official letter from UTAS, etc., the student is required to settle the entire outstanding fee.
5. Female students traveling by road must submit written consent of her guardian enclosed with a copy of the guardian's ID card to the Scholarships and International Admissions Section, which requests for issuing the exit permit to travel by road.
6. In the condition of termination under any reason (academic dismissal, final withdrawal, freeze enrollment, etc.) or the visiting student completed studying in CAS, the student is required to complete the compulsory procedures and submit the original passport and ID card to the section. Consequently, the section would cancel the residence permit; and the student should leave the country within 5 days from the date of terminating the permit.
7. The student is obliged to bear any penalty fee when withdrawing during the semester.
8. Graduated students are required to cancel the residence permit to leave Oman within five days after getting the graduation certificate or attending the graduation ceremony.
9. The student, who stays out of Oman for more than six months, has to submit an official request clarifying the reason for the delay and his desire to return to the Sultanate of Oman for the completion of the study. In case of approval on request, students will be responsible for all fees and fines that may have to complete this transaction.
10. In all cases, the scholarship rules will be applicable for the Omani Cultural Exchange Program students.
11. Students will be subject to the scholarship conditions when not fulfilling scholarship regulations. When the scholarship gets canceled because the student failed to achieve the conditions to continue as the beneficiary of this scholarship, the student will be given a one-way ticket to leave Oman within five days after canceling the resident permit.
12. The student is responsible to contact the Scholarships and International Admissions Section and bring the original passport and ID card to renew the residence permit or to update the information at the Ministry of Interior systems when the student renews his passport. The student will be responsible for all consequences due to the delay in passport submission.
13. UTAS has the right to claim all or part of any expenses due to a student's failure to meet deadlines.
14. Current students in UTAS may submit a "transfer residence permit" application from the current sponsor to UTAS sponsorship due to any reason; for example, father leaves Oman; students should satisfy the conditions and submit the documents that prove the reasons for the transfer application to the section.
15. Upon completing the final exams immediately, graduated students should contact the section to settle the residence permit, either to cancel it or transfer it, with the importance of the availability of the required criteria. Leaving Oman is prohibited before completing this process. This regulation is not valid for students in the Arabic Program for Non-Native Speakers.

Part 2 includes rules and regulations for the pay-free students who got a student visa under UTAS/Oman residence sponsorship. The following are the conditions of continuing study in UTAS

1. International students who enroll in the General Foundation Program are required to complete the Foundation Program in 2 semesters. Otherwise, the students should withdraw from UTAS, cancel the residence permit and leave the Sultanate of Oman.
2. The laws of residence and exit permits for the students who are sponsored by UTAS and have a scholarship are all applicable. All the expenses for issuing entry visa, residence permit, health insurance (if available), and any other obligatory fees and expenses are paid by UTAS.
3. A student continues to be eligible for a scholarship when s/he fulfills the following conditions:
 - o Must be enrolled in UTAS/ Oman as a full-time student.
 - o Must have completed UTAS General Foundation Program.
 - o Must have completed at least 24 credit hours in a UTAS college.
 - o Must have a minimum cumulative GPA 2.5 out of 4.

Student who are granted a scholarship under the umbrella of the Omani Cultural Exchange Program should fulfill the following scholarship conditions:

- o Must finish 15 credit hours in each semester.
- o Must maintain a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.50 out of 4.

6. Limitations and contribution

Every study has a limitation. This study merely focused on the international students at Rustaq College of Education, UTAS. Future research could conduct interviews with international students across UTAS to deeply investigate the practices and process of internationalization, including, but not limited to, self-funded international students and GCC students. Policy makers and personnel in charge of program implementation must also be interviewed to trace the multi-dimensions of the phenomenon. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could be conducted to trace international students from their arrival till their graduation, following intensively their academic routes. Despite its limitations, the study contributes to shedding light on the issue of international students in higher education and proposes a policy to regulate their life during their academic perusal. Internationally, this study reveals the need for the OPSCS to be professionally branded and marketed to attract increasing numbers of competitive international students from around the globe.

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