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## INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN OMAN: THE CAS OF SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSISTY

KHALAF AL' ABRI<sup>a</sup>, OMAR ISMAIL<sup>b</sup> and KHALOUD AL' HINAI<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Department of Educational Foundation & Administration,  
Sultan Qaboos University, Oman  
Email: kabri@squ.edu.om*

<sup>b</sup> *Department of Educational Foundation & Administration,  
Sultan Qaboos University, Oman  
Email: omerhi@squ.edu.om*

<sup>c</sup> *Minstry Of Education, Oman  
Email: S83275@student.squ.edu.om*

### ABSTRACT

This paper aimed at investigating the process and experience of SQU towards internationalization. A qualitative approach was used. In which data was generated from analyzing the strategic plans (2013-2013 & 2016-20140) of SQU and interviews with 13 of SQU leadership staff. The analysis of the strategic plans (2013-2013 & 2016-20140) shows that SQU has given great attention to internationalization in four main areas which are research, teaching and learning, international cooperation and community services. The findings also show that SQU works intensively to align its programs with international standards through international accreditation of these programs. The strategies also have focused on international rankings and competitiveness. Overall, the paper argues that SQU has a rich experience of internationalization that is reflected in its programs, policies and activities.

Keywords: Internationalization, Oman, SQU, Higher Education

Subject area: (Please put a "X" as appropriate)

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| <input type="checkbox"/>            | a) Accreditation (In its broadest sense)  |
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Dr. Khalaf Al' Abri

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KHALAF AL'ABRI<sup>a</sup>, OMAR ISMAIL<sup>b</sup> and KHALOUD AL' HINAI<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Department of Educational Foundation & Administration,  
Sultan Qaboos University, Oman  
Email: [kabri@squ.edu.om](mailto:kabri@squ.edu.om)*

<sup>b</sup> *Department of Educational Foundation & Administration,  
Sultan Qaboos University, Oman  
Email: [omerhi@squ.edu.om](mailto:omerhi@squ.edu.om)*

<sup>c</sup> *Ministry Of Education, Oman  
Email: [S83275@student.squ.edu.om](mailto:S83275@student.squ.edu.om)*

**ABSTRACT**

This paper aimed at investigating the process and experience of SQU towards internationalization. A qualitative approach was used. In which data was generated from analyzing the strategic plans (2013-2013 & 2016-20140) of SQU and interviews with 13 of SQU leadership staff. The analysis of the strategic plans (2013-2013 & 2016-20140) shows that SQU has given great attention to internationalization in four main areas which are research, teaching and learning, international cooperation and community services. The findings also show that SQU works intensively to align its programs with international standards through international accreditation of these programs. The strategies also have focused on international rankings and competitiveness. Overall, the paper argues that SQU has a rich experience of internationalization that is reflected in its programs, policies and activities.

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**1. Introduction**

Higher education literature shows that internationalization is one of the most remarkable trends in almost all of the higher education systems around the world (Knight, 2003). Universities nowadays develop strategic plans and make great efforts for integrating international dimensions in their programs and activities. Indeed, seeking international recognition, accreditation, cooperating with international universities, attracting foreign students and academic staff are some of the key steps taken towards persuasion of internationalization. In Oman, the focus of this paper, the higher education system has been witnessing various modes of internationalization such as international accreditation, affiliation, exporting curriculum, foreign faculty and international students (Al'Abri, 2015, 2016).

This paper aims to focus on Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) as a case study of Omani higher education system. In Specific, the paper intends to investigate the process and experience of SQU towards internationalization. Being a leading university in the Sultanate of Oman and with its successful stories in accreditation and collaboration with internationally well-known universities, the efforts of SQU toward internationalization is worth analyzing and sharing with others.

**2. Brief Background about SQU**

Sultan Qaboos University was established in 1986 to mark the official start of the Omani higher education system. It is the premier the university in Oman, carrying His Majesty's name. The University started with five colleges to serve the development of the modern Oman, reaching to nine colleges nowadays. The number of students is over 15,000 students. Believing in the importance of internationalization, SQU established an office for international cooperation (The International Cooperation Office), aimed at fostering international relations with trans-national organizations and leading international academic institutions. The office is also entrusted to create opportunities for students and faculty to collaborate internationally through exchange programs, joint research and international competitions.

**3. Literature review**

Internationalization of a higher education institutions is considered by Soderqvist (2002, p. 29) as: "a change process from a national higher education institution to an international higher education institution leading to the inclusion of an international dimension in all aspects of its holistic management in order to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and to achieve the desired competencies". It is also defined by Knight (2003, p. 2) as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension in to the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education". It is clear from the above conceptualizations that internationalization pushes higher education institutions to cross the borders, making them considering international dimensions in their academic, research and community services.

According to Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley (2009), globalization has forced governments globally to undertake specific programs, strategies and policies to deal with internationalization in their higher education systems. It is the case at SQU, as it will be showed in the paper, in which all units of the university are putting efforts to create policies and strategies for internationalization. Knight (2007) states that the most important benefits of internationalization for higher education institutions are more internationally oriented staff and students, and improved academic quality. Hayle (2008) also identified benefits of internationalization to either the students and/or to the institution itself as follows: a broadened knowledge and understanding of other nations, cultures, and global issues; networking and development of social and emotional skills; generating revenue; contributing to the reproduction of Western knowledge.

On the other hand, and because of internationalization, higher education sector has become more competitive (Middlehurst & Woodfield, 2007). Higher education institutions compete for international students, staff and funds. They also develop policies, strategies and programs with international scopes. Márquez, Torres and Bondar (2011) state that internationalization through globalization processes drives and is driven by higher education. So this is to say that higher education institutions nowadays have no choice of rather to intergrade internationalization in their activities.

#### **4. The Research Method**

To achieve the aim of this paper, a qualitative approach was used. Qualitative data was generated from analyzing the strategic plans (2013-2013 & 2016-20140) of SQU and Interviews with 13 of policy makers, decision-makers and strategy implementers at SQU. Thematic analysis of these two documents and interview was used to investigate SQU's experience of internationalization.

#### **5. Findings and Discussion**

The analysis of the strategic plans (2013-2013 & 2016-20140) shows that SQU has given great attention to internationalization in four main areas which are research, teaching and learning, international cooperation and community services. Investigating the experience of SQU in internationalization, the primary findings shows that specific terms and wordings referring to internationalization have been found occurring on both plans. In the research activities, the plans have been stressing the sustainability and continuity of moving its faculty across borders to attend workshops, forums, conferences. In terms of innovation, the strategies stress the engagement of SQU faculty with international colleagues and registering the patented internationally. Moreover, there is direct reference to the need for recruiting international faculty researchers, post-docs, postgraduate students in order to reinforce the global movement of research within SQU.

The findings also show that SQU works intensively to align its programs with international standards through international accreditation of these programs. The strategies also have focused on international rankings and competitiveness. Overall, the paper argues that SQU has a rich experience of internationalization that is reflected in its programs, policies and activities.

#### **5.1 ACADIMIC PROGRAMMS**

##### **5.1.1 Alignment of programs with international standards**

Sultan Qaboos University offers number of academic programs: 66 undergraduate degree programs, 62 master's degree programs, and 32 Ph.D. degree programs (SQU, 2017 a). These programs are one of the platforms through which the University seeks to emerge internationally. As stated in in its Strategic Plan (2016-2040) "Ensure that academic programs comply with national standards for academic accreditation and are in line with international best practices" (SQU, 2016a).

According to respondents (EP2, EP4, EP5), both academic programs undergraduate and postgraduate

at SQU are international in character and approval of proposals for new academic programs is granted only after making sure the proposed programs meet international standards and comparable to similar programs offered by internationally recognized institutions.

Respondent (EP2) added that: “Accreditation is an important part of education in medical college because it allows our graduates to go abroad either to work or to complete graduate studies, our courses here are commensurate with international standards by the World Federation of Medical Schools, where there are certain criteria for the nature of the courses content and materials to be available”.

### 5.1.2 International accreditation of academic programs

Strategy (g) in the Strategic Plan (2013-2009) referred to “Commitment to Quality Requirements in Educational processes” (SQU, 2009). Thus, international accreditation of Colleges and academic programs has become a priority for SQU. As (EP1) stated: “Our programs are in line with international standards, and we have a number of programs associated with international professional associations such as science and mathematics, English, teaching and learning technology, and preschool children. Also these programs are periodically reviewed by international arbitrators to evaluate programs and express their views in accordance with international frameworks”. Table 1 below shows some of the accredited academic programs.

Table 1. Accredited academic programs of the college of Arts and Social Sciences during the academic year (2017/2016) with the validity period of accreditation

| college                             | Bachelor Programs                       | International Accreditation Agency  | Time period |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|-------------|
| college of Arts and Social Sciences | Sociology social work                   | Accreditation Agency for Health and Social (AHPGS)                          | 2017-2022   |
|                                     | Music and musical sciences<br>Geography | Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programs (AQAS) | 2017-2022   |
|                                     | Information Studies                     | Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professional (CILP)          | 2017-2022   |
|                                     | media                                   | Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programs (AQAS) | 2019-2025   |

The above table shows examples of some of the internationally accredited academic programs at the college of Arts and Social Sciences, in addition, the rest of the departments in the various colleges of the university have also achieved international accreditation for some of their programs.

### 5.1.3 Teaching in English Language

English is one of the products of globalization. It is no longer associated with a particular people or country, but has become a universal language of communication (Altbach, 2013), and in order to communicate with the international community and benefit from developments in various fields of science, higher education institutions in the Arab countries have used English as another language to teach beside Arabic, including SQU, which is mentioned on the strategy (e) in the strategic plan (2009-2013) which refers to "raising the level of students and developing their skills in English" (SQU, 3009, 26).

Moreover, English language is used as a medium of instruction in a number of colleges at SQU, namely: College of Science, College of Agricultural and Marine Sciences, College of Engineering, College of Medicine and Health Sciences, and college of Nursing. For the humanities college such as college of Arts and Social Sciences and College of Education, some disciplines are taught bilingual, except College of Economics and Political Science, the language of instruction is English, While the language of teaching in the college of Law is Arabic and there is currently a plan to convert the

teaching of some courses in English in order to acquire a global character and attract international students, this was confirmed by one respondent (EP3) that the programs taught in English were designed to attract students from different countries of the world.

## **5.2 TEACHING STAFF AND RESEARCH**

### **5.2.1 Recruitment of International Faculty Members**

Educational institutions compete to recruit outstanding international academics as this trend will increase the institution's international reputation (Jang, 2009; Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009), adding important and contemporary learning outcomes to student experiences and diversification into research groups (Hénard, Diamond & Roseveare, 2012). SQU has sought to attract international academics and maintained the global presence and created an opportunity for cultural diversity among faculty members. In its various colleges, the university includes academics from more than 60 nationalities from around the world, which reach to 52% during the academic year (SQU, 2017a). One respondent noted: "The university was based on international academics, and we have a good proportion of international academics, which mean that the university has a 30% insurance rate at the college level, where the university provides international academics from different countries of the world which is a very large percentage that gives the university an international character"(EP3).

One respondent, (EP2), explained that the cultural diversity witnessed by the college has contributed significantly to the development and improvement of teaching methods, this is through utilizing the teaching experience brought by academics from the international universities to which they belonged previously. In addition, cultural diversity has contributed to the diversity of experiences that students receive (EP1), which will prepares them to complete graduate studies in prestigious foreign universities. Knowing that some students are admitted to graduate studies at foreign universities on the recommendation of the international faculty members (EP5).

### **5.2.2 International research activities**

SQU encourages all of its staff to take part in conducting research in collaboration with international institutions; and to participate in international conferences. As a respondent commented: "there are clear management efforts in scientific research, but there is also a lot of effort on the part of researchers. For example, some researchers have prior research collaboration with the Karolinska Institute in Sweden which is one of the largest in Europe. Also, we have also sent our students to this institute for training, and some researchers have collaborated with universities in Austria "(SR2)

This cooperation was reflected in the number of scientific awards which professors get it, also some professors have also received fellowships from prestigious international scientific institutions. In addition, a number of faculty members' supervised postgraduate studies from outside the Sultanate, for example, one respondent (EP1) explained that there are some faculty who supervise graduate students from international universities, including students from Malaysia.

As stated in Strategy (A) in the strategic plan (2013-2009), "the establishment of strong relations with outstanding universities, and a framework for joint work in the field of joint supervision of doctoral programs" (SQU, 2009, 40). However, the issue of joint international supervision at the University remains one of the gaps that need to be addressed further. Rrespondents (EP1, EP5) argue that the University's fellowship program is not clearly framed and it represents one of the individual efforts of faculty members to achieve international visibility.

## **2.3 Students**

Admission of students from all over the world is one of the strategies of internationalization (Zolfaghari, Sabran, & Zolfaghari, 2009). The international diversity of graduate students enriches the educational experience and increases research capacity within programs (Antelo, 2012). Respondent (SR2) agrees that the presence of international students in graduate programs will enhance scientific research and raise the University's rankings, because the greater the number of international graduate students, the greater the diversity and productivity of scientific researches. Therefore, the University opens its doors to students from different backgrounds.

SQU seeks to have the number of students admitted to graduate studies equal to the number of

students admitted to the first university studies (EP3). In order to achieve this trend, the University has international marketing of these programs in various international groups, and this is indicated in mechanism (5) of the Strategic Plan (2016-2040) “Promoting Postgraduate Programs locally and internationally” (SQU, 2016a).

For marketing methods, the university has varied between attending international conferences and exhibitions of higher education held in the Sultanate or exhibitions of higher education held outside the Sultanate, such as:

Table 2. International higher education fairs to market for graduate programs

| Exhibitions                                       | year |
|---|------|
| Higher Education Exhibition - Abu Dhabi           | 2011 |
| Higher Education Exhibition - Abu Dhabi           | 2012 |
| Higher Education Exhibition - Abu Dhabi           | 2013 |
| Bridge Exhibition – Germany                       | 2013 |
| Bridge Exhibition - Germany                       | 2014 |
| Study World Exhibition _ Germany                  | 2015 |
| International Exhibition for Graduate QX8_ Kuwait | 2018 |

Through the international marketing of these programs, SQU has not yet achieved its goal in attracting students from different countries of the world, and the number of international students who graduated from the University from 2008 to 2016 is (100) students from various scientific and humanitarian faculties. Also, the University is looking to achieve diversity by attracting external examiner for its masters and PhD students (EP1, EP3). Medical students in fourth and final year are examined by external examiner from outside Oman (EP2, EP5). Some students at the College of Engineering are sent abroad for training and receives international students as well, by virtue of its membership with the International Engineers Association (IAESTE) (IC1, EP5).

### 5.3 INTERNATIONAL COOPERATIONS

Cooperation with educational institutions around the world is a strategic step that enhances international interaction between them. Since SQU inception, it has realized the importance of international cooperation. SQU strategic plan (2009-2013) Focused to increase the signing of a number of memoranda and letters of understanding and agreements with many institutions and universities in various countries of the world. These memorandums, letters of understanding, and agreements aim to enhance the university's interaction with international institutions in the field of scientific research, and to benefit from international expertise to develop and improve academic fields. In addition to the exchange of students and professor and joint supervision of postgraduate studies, and these agreements aim to support the process of scientific training for its students.

#### 5.3.1 Foreign relations

SQU has signed several memorandums of understanding and agreements with various educational institutions with the aim of improving scientific research and educational process, which was emphasized in Strategy (B) in the Strategic Plan (2016-2040) “Developing cooperative relations and partnerships with universities and global institutions ” (SQU, 2016a, 110), and mechanism (2) referred to it in the Strategic Plan (2013-2009) “Review Memoranda of Understanding and nominate high reputable universities with which universities wish to sign Memoranda of Understanding” (SQU, 2009, 40).

The Office of International Cooperation plays an important role in promoting the University and its services globally, and has therefore sought to cooperate with universities and international organizations, particularly those with a clear reputation in the international community. The number of memoranda, agreements, letters of understanding and cooperation during the period from (2008 to 2018) amounted to 112 memorandums of understanding signed at the local level, and on the countries of Asia, America, Europe, Arab countries and international organizations (SQU, 2018a). During the last ten years, the University has witnessed a clear expansion in the field of student exchange, as

indicated in Strategy (C) in the strategic plan (2040-2016) "Expanding the field of student exchange with international universities and partner institutions" (SQU, 2016a, 111).

#### 5.4 COMMUNITY SERVICE

Interaction with the community is one of the fundamental functions of educational institutions, as it aims to strengthen the relationship between the two parties, the university and the community. Recognizing the importance of interaction with the various segments of society, the University has established a center for community service and continuing education. The University its strategic objective is to "expand the role of the University in the economic and social development of society through effective partnerships" (SQU, 2016a, 85).

The Center for Community Service and Continuing Education has two departments working on continuing education and community service programs. During the ten years since 2008-2017, the number of programs implemented increased from 16 training courses in 2008 to 61 training courses in 2017 (SQU, 2018a). This expansion included not only the number of programs, but also a significant increase in the number of beneficiaries and the diversity of nationalities.

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