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**A case study about international students' sponsorships
at Rustaq College of Education in Oman**

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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 Rustaq College of Education and explores the merits of the program. Through group discussions and questionnaires with five 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 Ministry of Higher Education and willing international students, and through Omani delegates as well as friends. Therefore, this paper recommends that OPCSC should brand and have systematic policies and procedures and diversification of international students' portfolio in raising the quality of higher education in Oman.

Keywords:

International students, Omani Program for Cultural and Scientific cooperation (OPCSC), higher education

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

	a) Accreditation (In its broadest sense)
	b) Research (related to Internationalization either linked to students or partnerships with international establishments)
	c) Affiliation (with International partners involved in HE)
X	d) International students and sponsorship

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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 Rustaq College of Education and explores the merits of the program. Through group interview and questionnaires with five 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 Ministry of Higher Education and willing international students, and through Omani delegates as well as friends. Therefore, this paper recommends that OPCSC should be branded and have systematic policies and procedures and diversification of international students' portfolio in order to raise the quality of higher education in Oman.

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1. INTRODUCTION

International students are endorsed as one of the systematic endeavors to quality in higher education internationally and locally. They are defined 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 not uncommon that higher education, in western countries, embrace international students as this undertaking expose these students to other cultures qualifying them to become critical and independent thinkers. Similar wise, locally, this phenomenon has evolved at higher education in the sultanate of Oman since the eve of the millennium. However, it has become systematically substantial and sustainable through 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. Rustaq College of Education, operating under the umbrella of the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), accepts international students with a minimum total score of 75% in the general diploma.

The international student status has been recognized by the Higher Education Council established by the Royal Decree No. (65/98), in its defined strategic goals 2, 3, 4 and 6. Rustaq College of Education in turn, following the strategic goals have recognized the international student status in its strategic plan and adopted the following strategies:

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

The umbrella under which Rustaq College of Education processes its strategies has been realized through the OPCSC, as stated above. Rustaq College of Education has embraced a number of international students over the last two decades. This paper outlines the existence of international students within the OPCSC at Rustaq College of Education and explores 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 is rationalized and explained before describing the research methods used to collect and analyze the data. The research findings are outlined and discussed with an emphasis on the merits of international exchange program domain where the research was conducted. The research concludes 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 in higher education. Put it differently, higher education sector is becoming rapidly aware that in the globalized world we operate in, 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.

At a regional level, international Student in Colleges of Applied Sciences (CAS) under the umbrella of Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) in Oman is defined as “a student who has come to Oman from another country with the sole intention of gaining a higher education qualification in Oman” (OAAA website) admitted to CAS Oman either in Undergraduate / Graduate / Arabic Program for Non-native Speakers, and issued his Omani residence permit under Oman MoHE sponsorship through Scholarships and International Admissions Section. The scholarships and International Admissions Section supports one of CAS approaches in welcoming students from all over the world by adapting different practices that assist applicants from outside Oman to enroll in any of the wide variety of programs at CAS. Additionally, the Section maintains services that support the enrolled international student's personal growth and progress to reach the academic success at CAS; and mentor them to acquire the benefits of MoHE /OPCSC and provides consistent care until they graduate. Thus, international students who are granted scholarships provided by MoHE/Oman should a) come from Islamic world and other countries (External/Internal Scholarship) to study in the Under Graduate level and b) gain short Scholarship to study in the Arabic program for Non-Native Speakers.

At an international level in 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. 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 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. The Erasmus programme has become the European Union's key instrument for cultural diplomacy, helping to create social cohesion

between European countries and a European identity in young people who have crossed borders to study in another Member State. 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, confirming the Union’s strong backing of this form of public diplomacy, which uses academic exchanges to disseminate the values that form the foundations of our common living space. The Erasmus Programme, now known as Erasmus+, which celebrated 30 years of active success in 2017 is an excellent example through which universities endeavour to position themselves in an increasingly competitive globalised world where:

“The greatest challenge they face is the preparation of future generations for an international and internationalised world, for which there is no question about the need to prepare graduates with the best training. In this context, projects for the modernisation of study programmes have already been launched through the internationalisation of the curriculum and the promotion of international employability, developing internationalisation policies at the institutional level (internationalisation at home) to provide all members of the university community (students, teachers and administrative staff) with skills and talents in international matters in line with what has been called comprehensive internationalisation.” (Spanish Service for the Internationalisation of Education, p128).

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 and 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 comprehensive level as well. Thus, the research question that guides this research is “What is the current situation as regards the internationalisation of Omani Higher Government, in CAS, in Rustaq College of Education in particular?”.

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 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 has been examined in Rustaq college of Education in Oman where international students had been admitted and therefore pursue 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 involved in. Second, the phenomenon has been investigated through international students' perspectives. In this regard, the research has employed group interview, questionnaires and literature review 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 participants were all from West Africa and in their final year of International Business Administration (IBA) and accounting majors program.

There are two sets of data in this study namely a group interview and questionnaires. The first set of data was collected by having a group interview with the participants. It is an interaction between the interviewer and the participants to gather perceptions, attitude and feeling 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 analysed using the thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There are six phases of thematic analysis starting from familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and finally producing the report.

The second set of data was distributing questionnaires to the international students regarding their evaluation of the general support services provided at Rustaq college of Education. The questionnaires consists of three parts: the first part collected demographic data, the second part contained declarative statements and respondents were asked to choose one option using a five point likert scale. The ten statements related to the general support services and the respondents' evaluation towards them. The third part is an open-ended question where the respondents can write down their suggestions to increase their satisfaction regarding the general support services at Rustaq College of Education. Questionnaires can be used as an additional source of evidence to enhance research findings and complete the qualitative data.

4. RESULTS

In response to the research question "What is the current situation as regards the internationalization of Omani Higher Government, in CAS, in Rustaq College of Education in particular?" The following sections will present first the qualitative findings and then the quantitative findings.

4.1 Qualitative data findings

A. Not clear marketing for OPCSC

All the interviewed international students confirmed that they heard about the OPCSC only through the International Istiqama organization in their country. 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 international students were from Tanzania, Republic of Benin and Kenya. Moreover, there is no systematic process of how the Istiqama organization disseminate 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.

B. No systematic procedures for international students’ rights

All the interviewed international students seemed to have unclear and unsystematic mechanisms of their rights. One of the ambiguous procedures is the unavailable 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 guard asked him to return back as there is no male accommodation available. Another student mentioned that she had someone from her family to receive her in the airport as her father was permanently working in Oman. 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 renewal of visa. The international students mentioned that they had to renew the visa every two years instead of being validated till the graduation and surprisingly they had to pay by themselves for the renewal. 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.

4.2 Quantitative data Findings

The findings of the statements presented in the questionnaire are classified from the strongly agreed to the strongly disagreed as shown in the table, see appendix 1.

In general, the findings show that international students are nearly satisfied about the services provided for them, except two main services namely the recreational services and psychological, academic and social guidance services. They also wrote down some of the suggestions to foster their satisfactions regarding the general services provided in the college. One of the international students wrote, “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 the boys to find accommodation close to college in order to minimize cost of transportation”. Another student suggested that the college contact them for weekly meetings in order to discuss their needs within the academic context.

5. DISCUSSIONS

The current situation of internationalization at Rustaq College of Education in Oman reveals that there are no clear marketing for OPCSC, and no systematic procedures for international students’ rights. Also, international students at Rustaq College of Education undergo shortage of and/or no recreational services as well as psychological, academic and social guidance services. This entails the absence of 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. Appendix 2 revisits these approaches with their description and how these align with OPCSC at Omani Government level.

Having said so, the research proposes a policy for the Scholarships and International Admissions Section. This “Proposed” Policy includes two parts. See Appendix 3.

6. Conclusion

In closing, the research investigates the current situation of internationalization at Rustaq College of Education in Oman. From international students’ perceptions and attitudes, the research found that there are no clear marketing for OPCSC, and no systematic procedures for their rights. Also, they indicated that they have shortage of and no recreational services as well as lacking psychological, academic and social guidance services. Therefore, this research proposes a policy for the Scholarships and International Admissions Section which will ensure international students’ rights.

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Appendix 1

Statements	Classification
The infrastructure available at the college is suitable for international students	1 strongly agree 3 agree 1 neutral
The college communication systems are suitable for international students	2 agree 1 neutral
The college provides all appropriate financial services for international students	1 strongly agree 1 agree 1 neutral
The college provides recreational services suitable for international students	2 disagree 3 strongly disagree
The college provides a suitable educational environment suitable for international students	1 strongly agree 3 agree 1 neutral
The college provides adequate opportunities to engage international students in the college various activities	1 strongly agree 3 agree 1 disagree
The college provides sufficient opportunities for international students to express their views on various aspects of development in the college	1 agree 1 neutral 3 disagree
The college supports systems are suitable for international students	1 strongly agree 1 agree 3 neutral
The college provides appropriate psychological, academic and social guidance services for international students	1 neutral 4 disagree
I am satisfied with the level of public services provided by the college.	2 agree 3 neutral

Appendix 2

Approach Description

OPCSC at Omani Government 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 in 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 market in a global wise 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 similar 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 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 so the Sultanate achieve its goal.

Appendix 3

Part 1

Rules and regulations for the students who obtain a student visa under MoHE/CAS residency sponsorship and having a scholarship:

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 get admission and willing to enroll at one of CAS colleges.
2. Issuing the return ticket to the student to travel to destination the student came from to CAS/Oman in 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 semesters.
5. Graduated student deserves only one-way ticket to the destination the student came from to CAS in the first time, and 50 KG cargo letter. Both are provided only when the student cancel the residence permit and leave Oman.
6. Short scholarship student has to bear all expenses including the airline ticket when the student withdraw or leave the program in any time without any acceptable reason and without the approval of the A&R center's director.

B) Residence and Exit Permits:

1. CAS has no objection to receive a student visa application only from newly admitted international student when the student comply with the requirements and the assigned timeline. However, CAS would not receive student visa application from current student with accumulative GPA less than 2.5 or re-instated or re-enrolled or re-admission student.
2. Student is obliged to abide to the regulations in the Sultanate of Oman and CAS; including, newly admitted student should not leave Oman before completing the procedures of getting the residence permit.
3. Student is 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 apply to receive any official letter from CAS, 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 withdraw, 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 withdraw during the semester.
8. Graduated student is 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 of the delay and his desire to return to the Sultanate of Oman to the completion of the study. In case of approval on request, student 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. Student will be subject to the scholarships conditions when not fulfill scholarship regulations. When the scholarship gets canceled because the student failed to achieve the conditions to continue as the beneficiary of this scholarship, 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 renew his passport. The student will be responsible for all consequences due to the delay in passport submission.

13. CAS has the right to claim all or part of any expenses due to student's failure to meet deadlines.

14. Current student in CAS may submit "transfer residence permit" application from the current sponsor to CAS sponsorship due to any reason; for example, father leaves Oman; student should satisfy the conditions and submit the documents that proof the reasons of 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 Arabic Program for Non-Native Speakers.

Part 2

Rules and regulations for the pay-free students who got a student visa under CAS/ MoHE/Oman residence sponsorship. The following are the conditions of continuing study in CAS:

1. International students who enroll in the General Foundation Program is required to complete the Foundation Program in 2 semesters. Otherwise, the students should withdraw from CAS, 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 CAS 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 CAS.
3. A student continues to be eligible for a scholarship when s/he fulfills the following conditions:
 - o Must be enrolled in CAS/MoHE/ Oman as a full time student.
 - o Must have completed CAS General Foundation Program.
 - o Must have completed at least 24 credit hours in CAS.
 - o Must have 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.