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EXPLORING THE READINESS OF OMANI HIGHER EDUCATION FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the readiness of Oman's higher education sector for internationalization by examining implementation practices at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) and the German University of Technology in Oman (GUtech), representing the country's leading public and private institutions, respectively. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with international office staff and surveys of international students (IS). Findings reveal that while both universities demonstrate efforts to accommodate IS, significant structural and operational challenges remain. These include inactive international agreements, fragmented administrative processes, limited staffing, and an unsustainable service model that heavily subsidizes IS support. Furthermore, Oman's limited global visibility as a higher education destination and lack of coordinated national policies constrain internationalization efforts. The study recommends broader institutional representation, unified data collection methods, and a shift towards more entrepreneurial models supported by national-level strategies to ensure sustainable and inclusive internationalization in Oman's higher education landscape.

KEYWORDS: Internationalization, Higher Education, International Students, Institutional Policy, Strategic Planning.

1. INTRODUCTION

The higher education system in Oman is relatively young yet plagued with numerous challenges. However, the nation's education problems can be traced to its history. Prior to the 1970s, higher education in the country was considered a luxury, as many Omanis struggled to meet basic needs and only wealthy and educated families among them could afford to send their children to the three schools operating in the Sultanate at that time. Even after the 1970, policymakers were still hesitant to invest in domestic universities, largely because sending Omani students to foreign universities was much cheaper. However, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos reversed this trend by establishing some higher education institutions (HEIs) in Oman to meet the nation's needs.

While the history of Oman's educational system is fragmented, scholars agree that higher institutions in the Sultanate emerged in the early 1980s. The Banking Institute of Oman, currently referred to as the College of Banking and Financial Studies, was established in 1983 to train personnel for the banking sector. The Colleges of Teachers, now known as the Colleges of Applied Sciences, were established in 1984 to train and supply the Sultanate with diploma-qualified teachers (Education Council, 2022). The first university, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), was established in 1986. The Ministry of Higher Education was later formalized by Royal Decree 42/95 in 1995. Since then, the number of institutions in Oman has grown substantially, exceeding 46 colleges and universities.

Nonetheless, the higher education system served only people living in Oman during this period. All government colleges and universities in Oman, except for SQU, enrolled Omani secondary school students. While SQU admitted only the sons or daughters of non-Omani faculty members who met highly competitive entry requirements, the enrollment of international students (IS) at SQU since then has increased gradually, mainly through exchange programs. However, the situation is different in private HEIs where admission is open to all nationalities.

This paper examines the readiness of Oman's higher education system for internationalization by focusing on SQU, a public institution, and the German University of Technology in Oman (GUTech), a private institution. These universities are among the leading institutions in the nation, and this research aims to explore the internationalization efforts at both universities, including institutional policies, IS enrolment figures, support services, and

the satisfaction levels of IS. This exploration has the potential to provide an in-depth understanding of the IS's experience in Oman.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several definitions of internationalization have been provided in the literature. Knight (2004) defined internationalization as the "process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching institutions." In their study, de Wit and Hunter (2015) referred to internationalization as the "intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society." According to Altbach and Knight (2007), internationalization encompasses a wide range of policies and practices developed by educational systems and institutions to adapt to the global academic environment. Although these definitions reflect different goals of internationalization, they provide a comprehensive understanding of the scope and intent of this term.

This study, which is built on the work of Knight (2007) and de Wit and Hunter (2015), recognizes that internationalization in higher education is a complex and multidimensional process that is influenced by institutional plans as well as national and global justifications. Knight's distinction between the organizational and academic dimensions of internationalization helped in shaping the interview questions which intended to examine institutional practices. The survey questions were inspired by Wit and Hunter's viewpoints to explore the experiences of international students.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study examined the readiness of Oman's higher education system for internationalization by reviewing its implementation at two leading Omani universities. Central to this examination was the desire to answer the following research questions:

- What is the current best-case scenario for internationalization in Oman?
- What the experiences and perceptions are of IS currently enrolled in Omani HEIs?
- How do institutional policies and practices support or hinder internationalization efforts?

To answer the research questions, both primary and secondary data were employed. Preliminary data were obtained through interviews and a field survey using a single-question questionnaire.

Secondary data were obtained from the literature, including scholarly journals, documents, and official reports.

3.1. Semi-Structured Interviews and Student Surveys

The study's methodology comprised two phases. The first phase involved semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with one international office staff members from each university to obtain an in-depth understanding of the internationalization strategies at their institutions, including the range of services provided to IS. In the second phase, a survey was designed to capture the university experiences and views of international HE students. At SQU, the survey was conducted in collaboration with the International Cooperation Office (ICO). During the survey, ten participants were asked to submit their responses via recorded voice notes. However, IS at GUTech were sent a Google Form link. Ten respondents answered the same set of questions in a written form.

3.2. Research Settings

This study was carried out at SQU and GUTech. The former is considered the best public university in Oman, while the latter is touted as the best private university in the country. Both universities were also chosen to explore the research questions, not only because they have rigorous academic standards but also because they attract high-performing IS.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Internationalization Motivations

Oman has recently started implementing Oman Vision 2040, "Oman: Joining the World's Developed Countries." The long-term plan prioritized education, learning, scientific research, and national capabilities. As part of its strategic vision, Oman aims to boost its global rankings in the education sector. In 2018, one Omani university, SQU was ranked among the top 450-500 universities globally. By 2040, the country plans to have at least one of its universities ranked among the top 300-400 universities in the world.

To achieve Oman Vision 2040, the Omani government established a dedicated department tasked with the responsibility to reorient the education system to be more inclusive of IS. This strategy is in line with QS World University Rankings criteria. Great effort has been invested in increasing the ratio of IS and staff in Omani universities. For instance, during Expo 2020 Dubai,

the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) led a one-week campaign titled "Science and Knowledge Week" in September 2021, with the aim of creating awareness about scientific developments and giving about 17 Omani universities the opportunity to showcase their academic programs. Several Omani higher education students participated in the voyage to Dubai on the Shabab Oman Ship as part of the campaign. The MOHE also conducted a workshop on "Attracting IS" for colleges and universities to discuss the strengths that make Omani colleges and universities an attractive choice for IS. The discussion also included how MOHE and Omani universities can collaborate to attract more IS. As part of these efforts, a website called "Study in Oman" was launched to serve as a central information hub for prospective IS. In the future, similar or even more creative steps will be required to meet the ambitious targets set for 2040.

4.2. IS Administration in the Two Universities?

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) has been engaged in international relations since its establishment in 1986. As the scope of this field has expanded since 2002, the ICO was established under the direct supervision of the Vice Chair of International Cooperation. According to SQU (2023), "The International Cooperation Office (ICO) of the university has assisted the institution in achieving its goals through internationalization. The role of the ICO has advanced over time, and now it engages itself with the agreements signed by international organizations, exchange programs for students and researchers, joint workshops, and memberships. Established with international organizations, global initiatives, etc."

The vision, mission and objectives of ICO are stated as follows:

4.3. Vision

To support SQU in achieving a solid global reputation as an internationally recognized institution.

4.4. Mission

To adopt an internationalization strategy by developing a highly efficient and professional network within both national and international environments, in collaboration with local and international partners.

4.5. Objectives

- To manage and implement the university's overall internationalization at both national

and international levels.

- To promote the university's programs and research opportunities to attract more international researchers, including through exhibitions, visits, and partnerships.
- To support the colleges, administrative units and university's hospital in their internationally targeted promotional activities.
- To provide consultation and information to the university units about SQU's international relations.
- To coordinate arrangements for international visitors in collaboration with relevant SQU units.
- To facilitate incoming and outgoing exchange programs for staff, researchers, and students, including orientation and support.
- To promote joint research, conferences, seminars, and symposiums in coordination with relevant SQU units.

In the words of H.H. Dr Mona bint Fahad Al-Said Assistant Vice Chancellor for International Cooperation, "Internationalization is an issue that the university aims to strengthen to raise its profile and promote international collaboration. In pursuance of this aim, the inception of the Office of External Cooperation, now called the ICO in 2002, was the first step in that regard. Furthermore, SQU vigorously pursues collaboration with various institutions to promote and strengthen teaching and research and enrich the experiences of its staff and students. Much of this collaboration takes the form of international cooperation at various levels. Internationalization is a hallmark of all top universities today and is an essential strategy for any institution wishing to compete on the cutting edge of academia in a globalizing world."

Established in 2007, GUTech has maintained open enrollments for all students since its inception. Yet, emphasis on the recruitment of IS started in 2017 after the establishment of the international office. According to Albahri, an international office was established to address the demand caused by the growing number of IS. The office's primary role is to facilitate the academic experience of IS from admission to graduation. GUTech has intensified its commitment to invest in student diversity, attracting more IS. The office has also created global exposure opportunities for Omani students through participation in exchange programs. Prior to the establishment of this office, such responsibilities were handled by the Professional Development and Partnerships (PDP) department, which was primarily focused on marketing. Albahri (2023)

provided insight into the International Office's plans:

"We aim to build a truly international university. We don't want the university to be viewed as solely Omani or local. Instead, we seek to provide an international academic experience for all students, including Omanis. Education is a life-changing journey, and we want to bring the world to the university. The QS ranking is important to us, and we are already well-ranked, but our ambition goes far beyond rankings. GUTech is committed to internationalization and welcomes new members into our growing international community of students, faculty, and staff representing around 30 countries."

Albahri (2023) also confirmed that GUTech is currently updating the vision, mission, and strategic objectives of the International Office to align more closely with the university's evolving ambitions and Oman's broader Vision 2040. This strategic update reflects both internal growth and the strong external support for internationalization offered by the MOHE.

4.6. Agreements and Partnerships

The research was carried out at SQU and GUTech. Established in 1986, SQU was the first public university in the Sultanate. As of 2020, the university has nine colleges, comprising five in the sciences and four in the humanities. The university's staff population is currently 5870. The student population, which is currently 18366, comprises 16,353 undergraduate and 2,013 postgraduate students. So far, SQU has signed a total of 160 agreements and 15 Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with such countries as Kuwait, UAE, India, Brunei, Pakistan, Japan, the UK, Australia, Netherlands and Germany. These agreements cover various domains such as joint research, academic exchange, and institutional cooperation. The purpose of the partnership is to foster academic collaboration, faculty and student exchange, joint research initiatives, and participation in global academic networks, reflecting SQU's commitment to internationalization.

Although GUTech is a relatively new university, it has partnered with many reputable institutions across the globe. The university maintains a strong affiliation with RWTH Aachen University, the German Academic Exchange Service, the WU Executive Academy, Siemens, and Takatuf Oman. GUTech has signed several MOUs student/staff exchange agreements, with a particular concentration on partnerships with German institutions due to its academic roots. The university also has agreements with institutions in Italy,

Belgium, India, and Portugal. Most of these agreements are initiated by academic departments based on active collaboration in research or academic projects. Only after demonstrable collaboration is underway does the university formalize the partnership through a signed agreement. This approach demonstrates GUTech's pragmatic approach to maintaining active and meaningful agreements and avoiding the accumulation of dormant or inactive partnerships.

4.7. Is Enrollment

Oman has established a robust higher education system with priority given to Omani citizens. This strategy is evident in its free tuition policy for undergraduate students at public universities. As of today, more than 70% of Omani secondary school graduates join higher education in public and private universities with governmental grants. According to the National Centre of Statistics and Information, the number of non-Omani students has been around 3000 since 2014. It peaked at 4,015 students in 2018, declined to 3,044 in 2019, and then gradually increased to 3,502 in 2020. This demographic currently represents about 3% of the total student population in Oman, with over 98% of non-Omani students enrolled in private colleges and universities.

The total number of non-Omani students at SQU has grown steadily over the years. In 2002, only 72 non-Omani students were enrolled, but the population grew to 188 by 2020. Nonetheless, this population constitutes only 0.01% of the total number of students. This small proportion is not unexpected given that SQU primarily serves Omani nationals. According to Mr Humood AlQasmi, HOD, the ICO at SQU, the current non-Omani students at SQU are either the children of non-Omani staff who fulfilled the entry requirements or students who received grants from the cooperation programs in GCC countries. Some other students joined the institution based on a cultural cooperation agreement, which involves students from low-income countries like Syria, Comoros, Tanzania and Djibouti.

Student admission is coordinated with the embassies of these countries. International postgraduate students at SQU pay the same fees as Omani students. All SQU undergraduate students receive free education except for the international faculty children under certain conditions. However, there are three other categories of IS at SQU. The first category includes visiting student who comes without signing an agreement with the university. The visiting student usually covers their own tuition

and living expenses, and they are often referred through personal recommendations or prior visits. Occasionally, visiting students are accepted as a preliminary step before formalizing an institutional agreement.

The second category consists of exchange students, who are divided into two groups: single-course students and trainers. The two most active faculties in this category are the College of Medicine and the College of Engineering. Many students enroll in summer courses, while medicine students train in SQU hospitals. Many SQU students are sent abroad to acquire contemporary knowledge in cutting-edge fields. The last category includes postgraduate students or academics on sabbatical leave who conduct research at SQU. Their stay can range from a few months to two years.

On the other hand, GUTech is a new university with about 2000 students. The institution maintains a highly competitive admission policy and receives 150 governmental grants for Omani students annually. MOHE requested the number of grants to be increased, yet GUTech declined the request to preserve academic quality and maintain room for IS. GUTech has shown over the years to prioritize quality rather than quantity in attracting IS. The university offers ten undergraduate and five postgraduate programs in engineering and technology disciplines and IS apply by contacting the university directly or via the university's website.

Currently, IS make up a small but growing percentage of the student body. However, the number has been growing yearly, even during the pandemic. Most of these students are long-term residents of Oman, although a few come specifically to study at GUTech. The majority of IS at GUTech are from India, and this trend is not a surprise, as Indians have the highest number of Omani residents, according to the last census. Students can enroll in any academic program they desire, but most Indian students have shown preferences for disciplines such as artificial intelligence and cybersecurity.

4.8. Academic Programs For IS

International students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs follow the same path as other SQU students. The language of instruction is English for most specializations. As for exchange programs, some universities send their students to SQU to learn Arabic. In fact, some universities have introduced Arabic as a Foreign Language course specifically tailored for IS. Exchange students at SQU have the autonomy to choose the number of courses, and the minimum credit hours system does not apply

to them. According to Alqasmi, SQU plans to admit IS on a self-funded basis into all eligible academic programs. However, in addition to their plan to elevate the university's ranking, the university will prioritize Omani students while upholding its academic admission standards without compromise. The university management also plans to launch a one-year diploma program in Arabic as a foreign language course starting in the 2023/2024 academic year. In addition, a specialized task force, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor of SQU, has been formed to ensure that SQU is working to increase its ranking as part of achieving Oman Vision 2040.

4.9. Facilities and Services

At SQU, students are provided with visa services. IS receive their visas without applying individually, and airport pickup services are provided upon students' arrival. The school also provides fully furnished accommodation with extra benefits, including Wi-Fi and gas, regular free shuttle services and other housing benefits. The ICO oversees campus management for two reasons. One, IS come from different cultures and may have a special requirement. Hence, they are exempt from campus students' rules like exit permits and others. While most students are assigned single rooms, the increasing number of students has led to double occupancy for exchange students. Typically, 100 to 140 students reside in university-managed accommodation. Others opt to live with family or secure private housing independently. Complementary meals are also provided either on campus or off campus. Dinner is delivered every day to IS's hostels. Before the main preparation, a chef consults with students to discuss their dietary requirements and preferences, and they are provided food according to their taste.

Moreover, IS at SQU have access to the university library, sports facilities, and free medical treatment, including surgeries if needed. They are provided with an orientation program in which they are introduced to the university system and campus. Several volunteers work with the ICO and are requested to be with IS for a whole week for many reasons, such as helping them finish their course registration, showing them how and where to get their meals, transporting them to meet their teachers, and fulfilling other requirements according to a checklist provided by the ICO. After the first week, volunteers contact IS and provide all the supported required. Those volunteers are provided with volunteer identity cards issued by ICO to help facilitate their role around SQU. There is also a

WhatsApp group for all IS with an ICO supervisor.

Furthermore, two gatherings are organized each semester. The first meeting enables students to get to know one another and learn about the various events and activities the school has to offer. In the second meeting, IS's experiences are evaluated. According to Mr. Al Qasmi, a key criterion for ICO staff selection is their availability and commitment, even outside working hours. For example, staff may be required to travel to the airport at any time. Any emergency could occur inside or outside campus, and staff should visit the place immediately.

At GUTECH, IS receive support that emphasizes both integration and autonomy. According to Mr. Albahri, services begin with assistance in the arrival process, as outlined in the IS handbook. These services include cultural orientation to Oman, visa facilitation by the Public Relations Department, and coordination of airport pickup and accommodation. Therefore, students are expected to inform the university about their day of arrival. They usually have a person to meet them at the airport and address their accommodation needs. Upon arrival, IS are expected to report to the university within three days to complete administrative processes such as issuing residence cards, acquiring health insurance, opening bank accounts, and securing long-term housing. A dedicated orientation session, which is delivered in English, focuses on Omani culture, educating students about the school.

Once students arrive at the school, there is no real distinction in services between Omani and IS. The university has adopted this approach to prevent discrimination and foster unity among students from diverse backgrounds. While IS pay higher tuition fees, scholarship opportunities are available for them. Besides, all undergraduate IS may apply for a 20% tuition discount. After their first year, they can apply for the DA Scholarship, which comes with a 50% tuition discount. These two funding lines can be combined for eligible students.

IS are also encouraged to actively participate in the IS club. The club offers a variety of social and cultural events, such as International Day, beach barbecues, excursions to tourist destinations, and the Oman Outbound Challenge. These events are open to all students to promote cross-cultural engagement further.

4.10. Benefits to Universities

There are several benefits of internationalization at SQU. According to Alqasmi, the major benefit is cultural enrichment. The university provides a healthy environment where diverse students can

thrive. Anecdotal evidence shows that after IS return to their home institutions, SQU typically receives more applications from the same universities. This effort reveals Oman's welcoming culture and the hospitality of its people.

The first and most crucial benefit is the positive cultural impact of having a diverse student environment. Internalization provides SQU students with the opportunity to engage with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Besides, when an IS leaves SQU, the university receives more applications from the same university, indicating that the Omani culture is well-appreciated and well-regarded. The internationalization program at SQU has been successful in promoting Oman and showcasing its welcoming and hospitable society. From a financial perspective, visiting students contribute to the university's revenues through tuition and accommodation fees. IS spend money when exploring Oman, thereby supporting the nation's economy.

At GUTECH, internationalization is considered essential for the university's ranking. However, the ranking is not the university's ultimate goal since GUTECH holds a strong position in QS rankings (Albahri, 2023). The university has established itself as a culturally diverse institution, and it has remained committed to creating an international environment where both international and Omani students can thrive. While IS initially experienced some isolation in earlier years, this experience has improved significantly over time. Today, exchange students can build friendships with Omani students within just a few days of arrival. Overall, the diverse-oriented environment created by GUTECH contributes significantly to students' personal development, fostering creativity and preparing them to become responsible global citizens.

4.11. Student Impression

To find international students' overall impressions of their academic and social experiences, as well as the challenges they faced during their stay in Oman, semi-structured interviews conducted with international students at both SQU and GUTECH. Participants were recruited with the assistance of international student representatives at each university, who facilitated contact with other international students. Interviews were conducted remotely, with responses submitted either as written texts or voice notes or in Google Form link. Data was analyzed into four common themes: Academic Experience, Cultural and Social Adjustment, Support Service and University Environment, Living

Conditions and Practical Challenges.

Regarding Academic Experience, at both universities, international students generally reported positive academic experiences. At SQU, students described the teaching quality as high and praised the supportive nature of faculty. For instance, one student remarked that although the coursework was "a little difficult," the professors were "helpful and kind." Others emphasized the value of applied learning, particularly in medical fields, where students gained practical exposure through hospital placements. At GUTECH, international students emphasized academic independence and strong institutional links to RWTH Aachen University in Germany. One former student noted, "GUTECH prepared me for postgraduate studies by encouraging independent thinking and supporting student-led projects". However, a few students expressed concerns about outdated content in some courses and a lack of engagement in campus activities.

In terms of Cultural and Social Adjustment, students at both universities encountered cultural adjustments. At SQU, most students were positively surprised by the hospitality of Omani students and staff. Several mentioned initial concerns about gender segregation or conservative dress codes, but they adapted over time. One student shared, "I expected a bigger culture shock, but I didn't feel like a stranger at all." At GUTECH, some students reported challenges related to integration with local students, citing language barriers and limited interaction. One respondent noted that "not all Omani students would speak in English," making participation in class discussions more difficult. Some students shared experiences that suggested they felt treated differently based on their background, which affected their sense of belonging.

With regards to Support Services and University Environment, SQU was praised for its well-organized support services, especially through the International Cooperation Office (ICO). Students described assistance from arrival e.g., visa help, dorm arrangements to cultural orientation and semester-end feedback sessions. These services were viewed as instrumental in making students feel welcomed and valued. By contrast, GUTECH international student services were seen as less structured. While alumni described faculty as approachable and committed, they mentioned a lack of mechanisms for feedback or events for international students. Some noted that while the academic environment was supportive, social and institutional support could be improved.

As for Living Conditions and Practical Challenges, both groups of students encountered challenges related to transport and cost of living in Oman. Students at SQU commonly mentioned the limited public transportation in Muscat, especially for those without access to private vehicles. One student explained, "To get from Seeb to Qurum by bus, you have to change three times – sometimes it takes two hours." Food and weather were also recurring topics. Some SQU students found the food options limited or unfamiliar, and a few struggled with the extreme heat at the beginning. However, these were generally seen as minor compared to the positive experience. At GUTech, students similarly raised concerns about the cost of living and lack of public transportation. One respondent stated, "Living expenses are comparable to Europe, which I didn't expect, and it's hard to get around without a car."

Overall, nearly all participants at SQU described their time in Oman as transformative. Students mentioned exposure to new cultures, opportunities to travel across the country, and deep cultural understanding. A student from New Zealand noted, "I learnt more in two weeks in Oman than I could have from years of reading books about the region." At GUTech, students reported a more mixed but still generally positive impression. Some respondents mentioned that despite challenges, the university's affiliation with European institutions and the academic structure helped them transition to postgraduate studies or professional work abroad. Others felt that their identity and background shaped how they were treated, suggesting room for improvement in inclusivity.

5. LIMITATIONS

- According to Alqasmi, many of SQU's international agreements are not actively maintained. In some cases, the ICO receives communication from partner universities only after a decade or more since the original agreement was signed. Because of this, SQU keeps receiving students from the same nationalities, mainly from Turkey and Brunei. This outcome limits the diversity of its internationalization effort
- Developing new procedures or updating existing ones related to international students requires coordination across multiple departments at SQU. Each department has its own internal processes and service responsibilities. This multi-departmental involvement significantly slows down decision-making and implementation.
- The ICO has limited staff relative to the workload. Because of this staff shortage, it can only respond to incoming requests from partner universities. As the top-ranked university in Oman and 8th in the Arab region, SQU receives numerous inquiries and agreement proposals weekly. However, due to staffing constraints, the office cannot proactively seek new partnerships or launch new programs. Without structural changes, the university will likely continue offering repetitive international experience.
- SQU has been providing most of its services for free. In most of the agreements, tuition fees and accommodation fees are waived. The university covers all fees related to visa, transportation, meals, and medical services. Accommodation is arranged in rented off-campus buildings, and SQU continues to pay rent even when the facilities are underutilized or students do not contribute. This generous model places financial pressure on the university, which relies primarily on government funding. It also restricts the number of international students that can be accepted. This model contrasts with global trends where universities treat internationalization as a revenue-generating opportunity. While many institutions worldwide are criticized for the high fees charged to international students, these fees do support sustainable, high-quality programs. SQU, known for its exceptional services, must consider evolving from a service provider to a more entrepreneurial model to sustain and enhance its offerings.
- Attracting foreign students who prefer to travel to Oman only for education purposes is challenging. This is because Oman is not widely recognized as a destination for higher education. Therefore, marketing educational programs alone is unlikely to yield significant results.
- Albahri also emphasized that meaningful progress in internationalization must happen at a national level. Currently, Oman lacks strategic and well-coordinated policies and regulations needed to establish a strong foundation for internationalization across the country. These challenges need to be addressed for successful and sustainable internationalization.

6. STUDY LIMITATIONS AND

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The study focused only on SQU and GUTech and assumed that both universities represent the views of all IS in Oman. However, this assumption is not accurate. While SQU and GUTech attract high-achieving students and offer competitive academic programs, some smaller colleges and universities in the country also offer strong academic programs and attract talented IS. This study, however, failed to consider the views of IS in such universities. Future research should, therefore, consider other schools in Oman that provide a personalized and supportive academic environment for IS.
- Future research should adopt IS-based criteria when selecting institutions. However, this adoption is complicated by the limited availability of such data. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) provides accreditation outcomes, but it does not publish detailed IS data. Future studies should, therefore, expand the research scope to include more institutions using consistent and transparent criterion.
- Different methods were used to collect student feedback from the two universities. Participants at SQU were allowed to send voice notes, but an electronic survey was used at GUTech due to winter vacation and slow response rates. Because of this, the responses were shorter and lacked emotional or experiential detail. This study recommends that future research use the same feedback method, perhaps a face-to-face interview,

across institutions to obtain more expressive contributions.

- This study recruited all the participants from GUTech from one country, Bangladesh. In the future, studies should include participants from a broader range of national and cultural backgrounds to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the IS experience in Oman.

7. CONCLUSION

The internationalization of higher education in Oman remains young, the country's first university was established only in the 1970s. The situation has been improving on a very slow base until the launch of Oman vision 2040, which sparked many initiatives and caused the ball to roll faster bringing renewed attention to internationalization as a strategic priority. Findings from this study indicate that universities like SQU and GUTech have made tangible efforts to welcome international students. However, there are several structural and operational limitations that hinder broader and diverse enrolment. This includes outdated agreements, decentralized administrative processes, limited staff and a heavily subsidized service model especially at SQU. Moreover, Oman has limited visibility as a higher education destination at a global level. For internationalization to advance, institutional efforts must be supported by coordinated national policies, strategic marketing, and sustainable entrepreneurial approaches. With deliberate action, Oman's higher education sector can transition to become more integrated and even globally competitive in future.

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