Higher education policy architecture and policy-making in the Sultanate of Oman:
Towards a critical understanding

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Abstract

The higher education (HE) system in Oman is governed and controlled by the state and is thus a government managed sector in which the state is the chief policy player. The main aim of this study is to provide a critical understanding of the policy architecture and policy-making processes in Omani HE since 1986. More specifically, the study seeks: to describe the Omani HE policy-making architecture and its operation; to analyse the impact of this architecture and its operations on the HE system; and to investigate national, regional and global factors affecting HE policy.

The study employed a qualitative methodology. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were the methods used for generating data. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 43 policy-makers and others involved in Omani HE. The documents included: Royal Decrees, Ministerial decisions, Organizational charts of HEIs, Legislative documents, strategic plans, and meeting minutes. Those documents were from the post 1986 period, aligning with the time frame of the study. These documents are ready for use as they are published for the public. The data generated through interviews and document analysis were analysed thematically according to an inductive approach and through the lens of the theoretical framework.

The study finds that the Omani political system results in a hierarchical approach to policy-making for the HE sector. This architecture has three levels—the top level of government, specialized bodies, and the field—with strong control concentrated at the top level of the government and weaker control available to agencies at the lower levels of the system. The study conceptualizes the policy-making architecture of the entire Omani HE system as a cascade of principal-agent games, showing that the Omani Government is a highly powerful controller of HE policy-making. The relationships between the different policy actors and bodies within this hierarchical architecture are documented and described in terms of four different scenarios: (1) policy development by the Education Council; (2) policies emanating from the Sultan; (3) policies emanating from the Cabinet and the Supreme Council for Planning; and (4) policies proposed by the Oman Council.

A key argument of the study is that the Omani government developed and reformed its HE system in relation to national pressures for development, student demand, and regional and global pressures. The Omani HE system is situated in relation to national, regional and global contexts and thus, its policies were made and implemented in responses to complex intersections of these contexts. Nationally, pressure has been placed on HE policy by the political system of the state, the economy, the labour market, the schooling system, the history of the HE system, and broader social changes. Regionally, the study finds that Oman learned from, and borrowed much HE policy from, neighbouring Arab Gulf States, motivated by dynamics of both competition and cooperation. The
Cooperation Council for Arab States of the Gulf is the key regional actor that plays an indirect role in shaping the HE policies of Arab Gulf States in general and in Oman. The study also considers the effects of global contexts and shows how globalised practices and discourses (e.g. English as medium of instruction, technology, the knowledge economy, global rankings, accreditation, affiliation, international HE providers) have also affected Omani HE policy.

The study concludes that national, regional and global contexts are imbricated in complex ways and thus cannot be easily separated in terms of their impact on Omani HE policy. In response to social, economic and political developments at multiple scales, and the looming decline of oil as the backbone of the Omani economy, numerous policies, reforms and strategic initiatives in HE have been launched by the Omani government. By providing the first detailed mapping of the Omani HE policy architecture, this thesis provides a clear framework for understanding contemporary developments in Omani HE and the contexts in which it must develop to meet future challenges.
Declaration by author

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

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Keywords

globalisation, higher education, Oman, policy, policy architecture, state, sultanate

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ANZSRC code: 130103, Higher Education, 40%

Fields of Research (FoR) Classification

FoR code: 1301, Education Systems, 70%

FoR code: 1605, Policy and Administration, 30%
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>FYP</td>
<td>Five Year Plans</td>
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<tr>
<td>GATS</td>
<td>General Agreement on Trade in Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>GCC</td>
<td>Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf</td>
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<td>HE</td>
<td>higher education</td>
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<tr>
<td>HEAC</td>
<td>Higher Education Admission Centre</td>
</tr>
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<td>HEIs</td>
<td>higher education institutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>IELTS</td>
<td>International English Language Testing System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLA</td>
<td>Ministry of Legal Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>MoHE</td>
<td>Ministry of Higher Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOI</td>
<td>Ministry of Information</td>
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<tr>
<td>MONE</td>
<td>Ministry of National Economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCSI</td>
<td>National Centre for Statistics &amp; Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OAAA</td>
<td>Oman Academic Accreditation Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QS</td>
<td>Quacquarelli Symonds Rankings</td>
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<tr>
<td>SQU</td>
<td>Sultan Qaboos University</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOFEL</td>
<td>Test of English as a Foreign Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRC</td>
<td>The Research Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UQ</td>
<td>The University of Queensland</td>
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<td>WTO</td>
<td>World Trade Organization</td>
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1. Study Introduction

1.1. Study background

Higher education (HE) is recognized by individuals and governments across the globe to be a necessity in a world of rapid changes in communication and interconnectedness, technologies, and economies that are both developing and globalizing (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Knight, 2009; Portnoi, Rust, & Bagley, 2010). For governments, a population of highly educated people can support sustainable development in the economy and contribute to national security. For the individual, a good quality of life is also promised by HE. There is thus agreement about the role of HE and its importance for both nations and individuals. If this is the case, states need to make and implement good HE policies to ensure benefits to their societies and people.

In Oman, which is the focus of this study, the Basic Statute of the State specifies that education (both schooling and HE);

…aims to raise and develop the general cultural standard, promote scientific thought, kindle the spirit of research, respond to the requirements of economic and social plans, and build a generation that is physically and morally strong, which takes pride in its Nation, Country, and heritage and preserves its achievements. (The Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, article 13)

The Omani government works very hard to invest in its people, enhancing their knowledge and skills (Al-Balushi, 2008; Ameen, Chapman & Al-Barwani, 2010; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010) to enable them to live comfortable lives. Great attention has been given to education in general and HE in particular (Al Shmeli, 2009). Before 1970, Oman did not have a formal schooling system; there were only three schools in the Sultanate, which were only for rich, high status people and males, not females. There was also religious education in which children in their early years attended Quranic group classes. When His Majesty, the Sultan Qaboos, became the ruler of Oman in 1970, the modern schooling system was initiated to educate Omani people and lift them from darkness (see Al’Abri, 2011). The new leadership of Oman has seen education as a priority, with the aim of building a developed nation and a strong dynamic state (MOE, 1996). The system has developed very rapidly and witnessed major changes during the last four decades, following the beginning of the Omani renaissance in 1970. Currently there are 1,580 schools in the Sultanate and 679,469 students (NCSI, 2015), compared with 16 schools and 6,941 students in 1970 (Ministry of Education, 2011).

As His Majesty, the Sultan Qaboos, always states in his speeches, the government has recognized the role of HE in the development of modern Oman. As a developing country, there were no HE institutions (HEIs) in the Sultanate before the mid-1980s. Changing rapidly in a short time, today
there are 62 public and private universities and colleges (NCSI, 2012). A whole new HE system has been built from nothing in fewer than 30 years. As acknowledged by international organizations, the HE system in Oman, in terms of its infrastructure, policies and programs, is premature in its development and is competing with other more developed HE systems in the region (the Arab Gulf Countries and the Middle East) and globally (Al Shmeli, 2009). Donn and Al Manthri (2010) state that “certainly, in Oman, HE is viewed as a human right by students and by parents but is also seen, by policy makers, as an important factor in human resource capacity development” (p. 107).

Like all developing and most developed countries, the HE system in Oman is governed and controlled by the state, but there has been recent growth in private HEIs. In Oman, the government creates programs and policies for all state institutions. In other words, HE in Oman is a government controlled sector and the Omani government is the chief policy player. Indeed, the notion of ‘state centrism’ is very applicable to the governance and policy-making of HE in Oman. The government is in charge of setting meta-policies, funding, governing, regulating, planning, evaluating and supervising all state HEIs (Al Shmeli, 2009). There are various actors (ministries, councils, agencies) within the Omani government that are responsible for making HE policies, as well as various ministries and agencies to govern and supervise HEIs. Private HEIs are still under the supervision of the Omani government, but the government has less influence in the private sector.

Overall, the Omani government has developed its HE system and reformed it in response to contemporary local and global issues. Wilkinson and Al Hajry (2007) state that the policies of HE implemented by the Omani government have been directed at enhancing global economic competitiveness and aiming to catch up with developed nations and their educational advancements. As argued by Marginson (forthcoming 2016), HE systems across the globe are situated in both national and global settings, with national governments still playing a continued, central role in planning and developing HE policies. Marginson (forthcoming 2016) also suggests that all HE systems have been affected by three world-wide tendencies in HE, namely, growth in participation towards mass systems, the location of universities within a ‘one-world science system’ and the introduction of business-style organisation and management. Without doubt, HE in Oman plays a significant role in sustaining the economy, building the nation and responding to global challenges (Al Harthy, 2011; Al Shmeli, 2009). In recognition of these multiple challenges, numerous policies, reforms and strategic initiatives have recently been launched by the Omani government.

The Omani government has produced development plans every five years since 1975, which are called Five Year Plans (FYPs), and it has been stated in almost all plans that producing knowledgeable human resources for Oman is the main aim of the HE system, with the government
responsible for providing quality HE. It is important to mention that each of the agencies governing the HEIs has its own policies and directions in each FYP. Nevertheless, as stated by Royal Decree No.65/98, the policy of the HE system should be developed utilizing scientific methods and assuring quality procedures and practices within its institutions “in line with the requirements of the country and the state’s cultural, social, economic and scientific objectives” (MLA, 1998). That said, there is a question regarding whether the Omani HE system has a unified policy approach. This is not clear and understanding the present policy architecture and approach is the focus of this study.

Despite the above description of Omani HE policies and the policy-making system, it is still quite unclear how the Omani government is actually making its HE policy, what the structure of the HE policy-making system is, who participates, and what impacts those policies actually have. This study seeks to address these issues. More specifically, the study provides a critical understanding of the policy architecture and policy-making processes in HE in the Sultanate of Oman since the 1980s. It also considers the relationship between the structure of policy-making and the content and focus of HE policies. In particular, the study focuses on the relationship between organisational arrangements for policy production and governance and the content and impact of HE policy. The broad context of HE policy in Oman is investigated to illustrate its impact on the policy architecture, policy processes and policy content in Omani HE. The latter includes regional and global effects – the results of the new spatialities (Amin, 2002) and new scales of policy making (Brenner, 2004) associated with globalisation. The time frame for the study is the period from 1986, when the first state university was established in Oman (Sultan Qaboos University), to the present.

1.2. Problem statement and gap in the literature

Navigating the cognate literatures shows that the area of policy research is neglected in Oman. This is not only the case in respect of HE policy, but in relation to all public policy. One explanation for this lacunae is that there are concerns when writing about policy in Oman for reasons related to political fears. Talking and writing about policy are sensitive in Oman and may be seen to be a negative critique of the government. Also, conversations with academics, researchers and ordinary people indicate that the meaning of the Arabic word for “policy” is not clear to them. The administrative definition of this term is always mixed with political and state security considerations. There is not a word that means simply policy in Arabic; rather, politics and policy work together in the Arabic language, which is reflective of the nature of the Omani political regime, its structure and policy architecture. In English, the two separate words, ‘politics’ and ‘policy’, allow for a particular meaning of policy, suggesting in a sense that policy is politics mediated by the architecture of policy making and its logics and is overseen by public servants. The
Arabic usage suggests a closer politics/policy relationship than is usually implied in the ideal type Westminster system such as in the UK and in Australia.

While there is some research on HE in Oman (see e.g., Al Harthy, 2011; Al-Lamki, 2002, 2006; Chapman, Al-Barwani & Ameen, 2009; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Wilkinson & Al Hajry, 2007), there is a dearth of specific research on HE policy-making in Oman. No research has been located that evaluates and analyses the overarching HE policy-making architecture in Oman. There is a gap here and this study is the first to deal specifically with policy-making in HE in Oman. That said, it was a challenge for me, but also an opportunity to initiate a new field of research in Oman.

Besides the gap in the literature, this study emerged from a concern about how the HE policy-making system is governed and controlled at the national level in Oman. Looking at the organizational structure, the Omani HE system has a unique policy architecture in which the policy-making system is controlled by different governmental authorities, institutions and regulatory structures, raising issues of alignment and coupling among the component parts. Indeed, the policy-making system of HE is distributed among the jurisdictions of different ministries and other authorities. There is the top level in which the Education Council manages to coordinate, or at least seeks to coordinate, between these governing bodies and has the responsibility of overseeing the system and developing policies for the whole system. At the base, there are the institutions that actually provide HE. This structure and its workings will be clarified in the context of the study and also considered in the literature review.

With regard to this policy-making structure, Al Harthy (2011) and Al-Lamki (2002, 2006) raise concerns about the governance of the system. Both authors argue that the issue of multiple governing bodies in the Omani HE system has created duplication of financial and administrative resources. And there is duplication not only on these matters, but also regarding the roles and responsibilities for policy-making and policy content. In my view, there is a problem with the policy-making architecture that in turn affects the nature of policy-making processes and policy content. Thus, this study arises from recognition of the multi-dimensional complexity of the nature of policy formulation processes in Omani HE and related issues. While it may appear that the policy-making architecture is highly organized, tightly structured and state-centric, it is not like that in reality. Indeed, it is not patently clear which is the body responsible for policy-making (Ministry of HE or the Education Council). There is ambiguity and confusion regarding the policy-making process because of the multiple governing bodies and institutional variation. As noted above, this institutional architecture also raises issues of alignment and coupling.
The state centric character of policy-making in Oman means that the government, through its agencies, has responsibility for steering the HE system. The ‘government’ in this study refers to and includes the Sultan, the Council of Ministers and all Omani governmental organizations that are responsible for supervising and steering Omani HEIs, such as the Education Council, the Ministry of HE, the Ministry of Manpower, and the Ministry of Health. The Omani government is responsible for enrolment policies and quotas, funding, students’ financial assistance, budgets, expansion policies and so on. Decisions about these issues are taken at national government level, as is the case in almost all developing countries. Neave and Vught (1994) state that decisions about HE policies (expansion, budget, enrolment, funding and so on) in most developing nations are “in the hands of government” (p.3) and typically made at the governmental level. This is clearly the case with Omani HE, which is faced with the complexities of various institutions and authorities governing the system and being responsible for their policies. Along with a gap in the literature, these complexities have provoked me to study the nature of policy-making in the Omani HE system. My research aimed to provide a productive critical analysis of HE policy-making. Oman as a developing, youthful country needs such studies to shed light on issues facing its development planning. Further, the research aims to contribute to knowledge about policy making in HE in developing countries and in rapidly expanding systems. So, while the study is in one sense research of policy, it also attempts, in the concluding chapter, to move to a more normative research for policy stance (Gordon et al., 1977).

The Omani HE system has undergone various changes since the system was first established; indeed, it has probably suffered from an excessive amount of reform. Such reforms and policies have been regarded as responses to both the national and the international challenges facing the country (Al Shmeli, 2009). A recent example is that the government increased the number of accepted students from 14,148 in the year 2009/2010 to 16,856 in 2011/2012 (HEAC, 2010; 2011). Following protests by Omani people (the Arab Spring) asking for more HE places, the number rocketed to 32,400 in the 2012/2013 academic year, an increase of 14% compared with the previous year (HEAC, 2012). This is an example of the mixture of regional and national factors affecting HE in Oman. The government looks at HEIs as national organizations that fit within the whole Omani system and that work for the development of the nation. Policies need to be designed to go hand in hand with the objectives of national plans, guaranteeing national development and global economic competitiveness (Al Shmeli, 2009). We see here the coming together of national development imperatives and globalised policy discourses. As noted already, Marginson (forthcoming 2016) describes HEIs as national institutions embedded in the global dimension with cross-border pressures and challenges, such as the spread of the concept of ‘World-Class Universities’, the use of
English in instruction and publications, and the related universalization of research within ‘a one-world science system’.

The Omani government is placed in a critical situation and needs to create effective policies for HE to ensure that the different agencies responsible for HE work together. The example of the increased number of students admitted to institutions raises the following questions: ‘Who made this decision?’ What roles did the institutions play and what coordination was there to distribute the increase in numbers between them? How do these various entities work together in reality in the Omani policy-making architecture to create policies? Relationships (alignment and coupling) and associated power between these institutions and the governing bodies are crucial. My study aims to provide clarifications and analyses of these relationships.

The study also responds to the worries and concerns that academics at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), the only state university in Oman, have about the HE system in general and its policy-making processes in particular. Being an academic at SQU, I observed and heard many academics at the College of Education at SQU critiquing how HE policy was made and delivered to institutions and individuals. They are concerned about the participation of institutions (public or private) in the policy-making process. It was a constant complaint that SQU, through its academics and policy-makers, had not been given a role in the policy-making of the HE system. I shared this concern about the top-down policy-making in HE. At times, I could not find explanations in relation to certain issues and developments, given the policy-making architecture and policy-making processes, and it was difficult for me to answer some questions asked by my students at SQU regarding how policy decisions were made. Such issues had been confronting me and many other academics from when I started as a lecturer at SQU, but over the last two years in particular.

All these issues (research gap, complex policy architecture, ambiguous policy-making relationships between HEIs, concerns of academics about the nature of policy-making) made me curious to undertake this study, through which I hope to improve understanding of the HE policy-making system and to contribute to knowledge in this scholarly field while also making research-based suggestions for change and improvement. Thus, as has already been noted, the research involves both research of and research for policy (Gordon et al., 1977).

1.3. Aims of the study

The above discussion of the HE system in Oman and its policy-making processes illustrates and explains problematic issues with these processes. This study seeks to contribute to the understanding of the Omani HE policy architecture and its operations by investigating these
problematic issues. It presents an in-depth critical analysis and understanding of the effects of the policy architecture of the current HE policy-making processes and policy content. Moreover, it looks at the national, regional and global factors impacting on the policy architecture, processes and policy content. The study does not target a specific policy document, but this does not mean that it does not consider policy documents. Rather, it focuses on what we might see as the metapolicy framing of HE to explain why current policies and reforms had been developed and enacted.

Overall, the study aims to provide a descriptive, documentary and critical understanding of HE policy architecture and policy-making systems in Oman and has the following objectives:

- To describe the architecture of the Omani HE policy-making system;
- To document and analyse the operation of the HE policy making architecture in Oman;
- To analyse the effects of this architecture and its operations on Omani HE;
- To contextualize the policy architecture, policy processes and policy content nationally, regionally and globally.

1.4. Research questions

The research questions guiding this study have been generated from my understanding of Omani HE and from the relevant literature on policy and policy-making in HE systems. These questions are investigated by the study, guided by its theoretical framework and the literature review. The study is designed to address four specific research questions:

1. What is the architecture of the policy-making in the Omani HE system?
2. How does the architecture of HE policy making in Oman operate?
3. What is the impact of this architecture and its operations on the Omani HE system?
4. What factors (national, regional and global) impact on the architecture, policy processes and policy in Omani HE?

In response to the first question, the research looked at the architecture of Omani HE policy. Responding to the second question, it investigated how this architecture operated and the structural organizations of the policy system and the institutional structures of the policy agencies are documented and analysed. Moreover, the relationships between the supreme authorities involved in the governance of the HE system and the governing agencies are addressed in relation to this question, as well as the relationship between the different governing agencies and their individual institutions.
After the policy architecture and the policy-making processes are described, the third question guides analysis of the impact of both on the Omani HE system. To answer this question, it is necessary to explore how the architecture and related policy production processes have led to current policies being developed and enacted.

The fourth question focuses on investigating the social, institutional, cultural, economic and political factors that affected HE policy and policy-making in Oman. This requires a critical analysis of the Omani environment that surrounds the HE policy-making system. This question also prompts analysis of the regional and global antecedents and pressures leading to the formation of the current HE architecture, policy-making processes and content; these are the proximal and distal contexts of Omani HE policy-making (see Taylor et al., 1997). This contextual analysis also recognises that policy has today been affected by the processes associated with globalisation (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010); policy content has been affected by globalisation, while policy documents often seek to construct national, regional and global contexts in particular ways. There is also a need to recognise how today policy discourses, including in HE, have to a considerable extent been globalised (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Marginson, forthcoming 2016). The consideration of regional and global factors in Omani HE policy is also framed by the literature on rescaling in policy-making (Brenner, 2004) and new spatialities associated with globalisation (Amin, 2001). Regional considerations include a focus on The Cooperation Council for the Arab States (GCC), of which Oman is a member.

Overall, these questions are designed to achieve the objectives of the study, guiding analysis that reveals the nature of HE policy and policy-making in Oman and various national, regional and global pressures on the structure, policy production processes and policy content. This is all set within the emergence of a ‘one world science system’ framing of HE globally (Marginson, forthcoming 2016) and other global tendencies in HE. The research questions informed the research design, data collection and fieldwork.

1.5. **Study structure**

To achieve its aims, the study is structured in nine chapters. The first five chapters describe the study context and objectives and outline the literature review, theoretical framework and research methods. The following three chapters then present the data analysis and discussion. The thesis concludes in Chapter nine with a synthesis of the research findings and answers to the research questions that underpin the study. The following provides an overview of each chapter.
Chapter one has introduced the study, providing background about the Omani HE system and its policy-making system. The rationale for the study has also been discussed, the problem that is the focus of the research has been outlined and gaps in the research literature on HE in Oman have been noted. Chapter one has also outlined the research questions, aims and structure of the research.

An overview of Oman and its education systems is proffered in Chapter two. The chapter focuses in depth on the HE system, showing its development, governance structures, funding and administration.

Chapter three provides a literature review. The first part of the chapter deals with previous studies on Omani HE system. The second part deals with policy and policy-making literature. The final part briefly introduces global studies on HE policy and policy-making.

The theoretical framework that guides the study is described in Chapter four. Prior to introducing the specific theoretical framework, the chapter outlines frameworks employed previously in HE policy studies. An eclectic theoretical framework (a ‘tool-box’ approach) is then justified for use in the study.

Chapter five describes the research methods of this study. It opens with the rationale for choosing a qualitative approach to data collection. An elaboration of the data collection tools (semi-structured interviews and document analysis) is then provided. The chapter also outlines the approach to data analysis that is adopted, while also considering ethical issues and issues relating to interviewing policy making elites.

Chapters six, seven and eight are the data analysis chapters and each seeks to answer with empirical evidence the specific questions that frame the study. Chapter six describes and analyses the Omani HE policy architecture. The relationship between the Omani government and the HE system is dealt with, mapping all actors and agencies involved in making policy for the Omani HE system. The chapter documents an architecture of three levels that is responsible for making HE policy.

This chapter addresses the present lack of such a descriptive account of the architecture for making HE policy in Oman.

Chapter seven begins with an analysis and discussion of data relating to the operation of the Omani HE policy-making architecture described in Chapter six. After that, the chapter goes on to analyse the impact of such architecture and its operations on the Omani HE system and on policy production and enactment.

Analysis and discussion of the national, regional and global factors that affect Omani HE policy and the policy-making system are offered in Chapter eight. The chapter discusses the multifarious
pressures on the Omani HE policy produced by contexts at multiple scales, acknowledging the overlapping between these contexts and justifying their separation for analytical purposes. Here the relevant literature on rescaling in policy-making is drawn upon.

**Chapter nine** concludes the study by answering the research questions and noting the contributions of the research, outlining its implications and suggesting foci for further research studies.
2. The Sultanate of Oman and its Education System

2.1. Introduction

This chapter aims to set the context of the study, by looking at Oman and its HE system. The chapter opens with a general overview of the Sultanate, followed by detailed descriptions of its history, geography, economy, political system, and demography. This will help later in analyzing the contextual environments surrounding the HE system in Oman. To be able to understand HE policy and policy-making, I will consider the history and the foundation of the education system, both schooling and HE. The HE system will then be discussed, focusing on its development, structure, governance, and regulations.

2.2. General overview of Oman

The Sultanate of Oman is a youthful developing country, led by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said. It is an oil dependent country, seen as a middle-income state compared with the neighbouring Arab Gulf countries. According to the Basic Law, Oman is a hereditary monarchy, independent state, and completely sovereign Sultanate. Islam is the state’s religion and Arabic is the official language (MOI, 2011). According to Cecil (2006, p.60), Oman is a secure nation, peaceful, “tolerant of other religions and customs, and unthreatened by internal conflicts”. Looking at its history, Oman has been an independent country free from foreign occupation since the mid-1700s, when Portuguese colonists were resisted and sent back (Cecil, 2006).

In 1970, Oman was reborn when his Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said became the ruler. Indeed, the people were ‘living in darkness’, isolated from the outside world before 23 July 1970. There was no formal education, hospitals or any basic services, at least not for people other than the royal family and the rich. Not only Omani people but others from around the globe have called this historic moment the year of the beginning of a renaissance for Oman (Alhaj, 2000; Cecil, 2006; Kéchichian, 2008; Peterson, 2004; Siegfried, 2000). Since then, the new state “Oman”, with the acknowledgment of international organizations, has gone through rapid development and has enjoyed a stable political, social and economic system during the last four decades. Since 1970, Oman has started to see modernization in all its systems and is on the way to becoming a vital, vibrant 21st century nation (MOI, 2011). Regarding development, the government released the first five-year plan in 1975 and since then has continued to develop one every five years. The five-year plans have been in place to promote economic growth and social welfare (MOI, 2011). The production of five year plans is also indicative of Oman’s top-down mode of governance, its state-
centric mode of governance. The Omani government has also taken the responsibility from that time to provide all necessary services to the Omani people free of charge and without any taxes. Two of these main services are education and health, which the government has promised to develop both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Regarding its geography, Oman has a strategic location, situated at the entrance of the Gulf, sharing control of the Hormuz Strait. Through this strait, which is an important transit chokepoint, other Arab Gulf states export their oil to the world. More specifically, Oman is located on the south-eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula. It is bordered by the United Arab Emirates in the North, Saudi Arabia in the west and Yemen in the south-west (Ministry of Information, 2011). The Sultanate is divided into eleven governorates with 61 Wilayats (districts). In terms of its demography, Oman has a small population compared with other Gulf countries and other developing nations. The latest census in 2010 showed that the total population was 2,773,479 people; Omanis (1,957,336) constituted 70.6% and expatriates (816,143) constituted 29.4% of the population (The 2010 Census Administration, 2010). It also showed that the majority of Omani people are young (35.3% were less than 15 years old, 61.2% were between 15 and 64 years old, and 3.5% were 65 years old and over). This demographic reality places pressure on the provision of education at all levels and HE in particular.

As this study also has a focus on the regional settings and contexts of Omani HE policy, it is very important to comment on Oman’s regionalism. Considering geographical location: Oman is situated in various regions which are the Arab Gulf States region, the broader Arab States region, the Middle-East region, the Muslim States region, the Indian Ocean region, the Asian countries region and the African countries region. With each one of these regions, Oman shares one or more of cultural, historical, economic, religious, linguistic (Arabic) or neighbourhood relationships. Indeed, those regions have opened for Oman a way of cooperation and integration with a variety of regional actors facilitating regional links. Though not to devalue and downgrade the importance of other regions, Oman is more connected and regionalized with the neighbouring Arab Gulf States, due to sharing all of the aforementioned relationships above with these states. Thus, this study concentrates more on the Arab Gulf States regional context and settings of Omani HE policy with a consideration of the role of the GCC as a regional policy actor. It is important to note that the membership of GCC includes six states, which are Oman, Emirates, Saudi, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait. The GCC was founded in 1981 with the aim of increasing cooperation and coordination between the six states. Education in general and HE in specific are among other fields that receive priority at the GCC. This is will be discussed further in Chapter eight.
2.3. Political system

Oman has what is called the Basic Law (constitution), published in 1996, to guarantee protection, freedom, dignity and the rights of all individual Omanis, encouraging them as citizens to actively engage and participate in public life supported by emerging democracy (MOI, 2011). Furthermore, the Basic Law with its seven chapters (81 Articles) works as a framework of regulations for the functions of the state and its institutions. Miller (1997) states that the Basic Law is a move in the direction of constitutional monarchy, whereby the Omani people are given opportunities for increased political participation. In this vital document, the system of the state and the guiding principles of policies are clearly illustrated. Indeed, the Omani Basic Law is equivalent to what is called a ‘constitution’ in other countries. It is essential to mention that the Basic Law states that “The Sultanate of Oman is … independent, fully sovereign”, “the Islamic Sharia is the basis of legislation”, “the system of government is Sultani (Royal), hereditary”, and “the sovereignty of the Law shall be the basis of government in the state, and the integrity, impartiality and probity of the judiciary shall be a guarantee of rights and freedoms” (MOI, 2011, p.65&57). More importantly, the Basic Law defines how the Omani political system operates.

Oman and Brunei are the only two existing states having a Sultanate system, which grants the leader sovereign power. As mentioned previously, Oman is a monarchy headed by His Majesty, the Sultan Qaboos bin Said (Head of the State and government), who holds the ultimate authority and power in the country. He is the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and Head of the Council of Ministers (Prime Minister). Further, his Majesty is also the Minister of very critical Ministries, which are Foreign Affairs, Defense and Finance. These Ministries, beside the position of his Majesty, have positions called ‘Minister Responsible For’ each policy area. This can be summarized in a statement by Alhaj (2000) that, “Oman is an autocracy in which the sultan retains the ultimate authority on all important foreign and domestic issues” (p. 98). Compared with Western democratic nations, Alhaj (2000) declares that Oman does not have formal democratic organizations and therefore, there are no means (peacefully and legally) through which Omanis can change their ruler. Moreover, Oman does not have political parties. Overall, Oman is a state centric polity with some gradually emerging democracy, as will be explored later in this research.

Under His Majesty comes the Council of Ministers, comprised of the several Ministers serving the state. According to the Ministry of Information (2011), the Council of Ministers is responsible for assisting the Sultan in formulating, implementing and reviewing general state policy; what we might see as metapolicy. Each Ministry is responsible for setting policies in its areas of specialization. Another important responsibility assigned to the Council is to help his Majesty with
the political, social and economic issues facing the state by giving recommendations, setting policies, overseeing the performance of the state’s organizations and following up the implementation of laws, decisions, statutes, decrees, court rulings and treaty agreements (MOI, 2011). These ministries draft laws, but these laws are not enacted until signed by his Majesty (Cecil, 2006). Related to my study are the Ministry of HE and the Ministry of Education, entities responsible for education. Also, the Ministry of Manpower, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Awqaf ¹ and Religious Affairs are within the boundary of my study because they supervise some specialized HE institutions.

Besides the Council of Ministers, the Omani government has specialized councils, higher committees and public authorities, whose members are appointed by Royal Decrees. Examples of such entities are The Supreme Committee for Town Planning, The Supreme High Committee for the FYPs, The State Financial and Administrative Audit Institution, The Economic Co-ordination Council and The Research Council. At this level of the state’s organizations, the study deals with the Education Council, Sultan Qaboos University Council, and the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority.

2.4. Oman’s parliament

The Omani government has a parliament called The Council of Oman (Majlis Oman). This council has two wings, which are the State Council (Majlis A’Dawla) founded in 1997 and the Consultation Council (Majlis A’Shura) founded in 1991. These two councils started with no legislative powers. It is very important to mention here that during the Arab Spring, Omani people were asking for more power for this Council, as it represented them in the government. As a response to this call, His Majesty, the Sultan, issued a Royal Decree on 13 March 2011, granting some regulatory and legislative powers to the Council (MOI, 2011). It was a significant development in the democratic system of the state, a small step, but a step in this direction nonetheless.

The State Council is a parliamentary body, serving as a link between the state and the people. The actual mission of the Council is to suggest proposals and solutions to the issues facing the state and its people. Furthermore, the State Council works on studying and discussing issues referred to it by his Majesty or the Council of Ministers. Regarding its membership, they are distinguished Omani citizens with qualifications, knowledge, and expertise in different fields and they are appointed by a Royal Decree issued by the Sultan. The Consultation Council (Majlis A’Shura) is the second wing of Oman’s Council, which works as a channel for interaction and communication between the

¹ Awqaf in Arabic means endowment. This ministry is in charge of managing such religious endowment for the whole community.
people and the government (MOI, 2011). The members of this Council are elected by the people, representing an emergent form of democracy. There is a general election every four years in each city to elect its members.

2.5. Economy

Oman relies heavily on oil as the chief source for its economy. Like other neighbouring Arab Gulf countries, Oman also has gas reserves and has started to export gas to the world. According to the Ministry of Information (2011), the greater part of Oman’s general budget revenues is provided by oil and gas. Figure 2.1 illustrates the dependence of the Omani economy on oil and gas for the period between 2003 and 2014. It is clear that the Oil and gas revenue as a % of total Omani government revenue increased from 72.7% in 2003 to 84.3% in 2014 with a larger than 10% increase. In general, the percentage has been fluctuating between 70s % and 80s %, which indicates heavy reliance on oil and gas as the main contributor to total revenue. With oil price fluctuation (2015 significant drop from 120 US$ to under 50 US$ per barrel), there is expected impact on the Omani HE system that is totally funded by the government.

![Figure 2.1. Oil & gas revenue as a % of total Omani government revenue.](image)

In 1996, the government approved a new strategy (1996-2020), called the Vision for Oman’s Economy: Oman 2020. The strategy has been implemented to overcome global challenges and sustain the national economy of the state. Oman 2020 calls for the state to achieve economic diversification through promotion of privatization, foreign investment, and trade industrialization and liberalization. The top leadership of the state hopes that this strategy will lead to sustainable economic stability and fiscal balance (MONE, 2004). Furthermore, “the training of Omani citizens,
promotion of their skills, as well as adoption of policies aiming for the promotion of each citizen’s living standard” are among the top priorities of the strategy (MONE, 2004, p.25). Here, there is a call for developing national human resources through training and HE. This proposal in Oman 2020 will aid in exchanging foreign workers with nationals, fulfilling what is called the ‘Omanisation’ of the economy. Additionally, tourism has been stressed as an industry and source for enriching and enhancing the Omani national economy. There is recognition of the need to diversify the economy in the context of the finite nature of oil and gas supplies. Education policy is set against that recognition. Overall, despite the Omani’s government attempts and desire to diversify the economy, the heavy reliance on oil and gas is still ongoing as shown in Figure 2.1 above. The development of human capital is one longer term strategy in respect of the diversification of the economy.

In 2000, Oman joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), aiming to enter the global economy and compete with other nations. Also, the Omani government, being a member of the WTO, looks to attract foreign investment, along with integrating and participating in the world economy. Indeed, since joining, Oman has seen much foreign investment, while many international companies have competed to open branches in Oman. Joining WTO has implications for the Omani HE system, as will be detailed in Chapter eight.

2.6. Education

Before 1970 there were only three primary schools in the whole Sultanate and no HE. Indeed, a major task and challenge for Qaboos’ government was to build a developed nation that is educated, while having no education system at all. This was a major concern for the new government at the early stages of development and, therefore, it started by building schools around the nation, as well as establishing what were called literacy centres for adults (Al Shmeli, 2009). The Basic Statute of State observes that education is the right of every citizen, mentioning in Article 13 that:

> Education is a cornerstone for the progress of society, which the state fosters and endeavours to spread and make accessible to all and the state provides public education, works to combat illiteracy and encourages the establishment of private schools and institutes under its supervision and according to the provisions of the Law. (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 1996, p. 8)

In Oman, education is provided free of charge, from grade one to university (state institutions). The literature shows that the schooling and HE systems of Oman have gone through rapid developments quantitatively and qualitatively, following global trends and in response to local needs (Al Hinai, 2006). In describing the current schooling system, Al-Lamki (2006) states that the Omani government has succeeded in achieving and providing the ‘education for all’ prescribed by the United Nations and UNESCO for developing countries.
Nowadays, Oman has a complete system of education, including schooling (Basic Education [grade 1-10] and Post Basic Education [grade 11-12]) and HE (Post-Secondary). The first cycle of Basic Education is co-education, taught by female teachers. The number of schools in the academic year 2010/2011 was 1,040 and the number of students was 522,520 (Ministry of Education, 2011). After spreading schools around the Sultanate and achieving ‘education for all’, enhancing the quality of education became a priority that the Omani government has been working on (Ministry of Education, 2004). Besides quality issues, the Ministry of Education, the responsible body for the schooling system, has been enacting policies that enable the education system to compete regionally and globally, focusing on technology and the needs of the knowledge economy (Ministry of Education, 2004), and developing a globalized education policy discourse.

2.7. HE development

Fifteen years after the establishment of the schooling system, Oman launched its first HE experience in 1985 with education institutes that produced teachers for schools. These institutes were established to cover the shortage of teachers in Omani schools, many of whom at this stage came from other Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Jordan. Al Bandary (2005) observes that these institutes provided a two-year program to prepare the first group of school graduates to teach in Omani elementary schools.

Before going further in describing the HE system in Oman, it is worth noting how HE as a system is defined which may differ from definitions in other countries. According to the Ministry of HE (1998, p.2), HE refers to “any form of post-secondary education whether a university or institutions involved in teaching, training or research, and which has been recognized by the competent authorities in the sultanate of Oman”. This definition shows that Oman defines as HE as any degree earned after high school from any institution recognized by the Ministry of HE in Oman. Thus, HE does not cover post-school training or education that is lower than degree level.

With new graduates from the schooling system, the Omani government began directing its public policies toward establishing a HE system that could serve the needs of its socio-economic development by preparing Omani youth with appropriate knowledge and skills. Sultan Qaboos University, the only state university till now, was founded in 1986. This university started with five colleges (Education, Engineering, Science, Medicine, and Agriculture) and 500 students. Today, the university has more than 15,000 students and four additional colleges (Law, Arts and Social Sciences, Economy and Political Sciences, and Nursing). With the increase in demand for access, the HE system has seen the establishment of several new institutions owned by the state and the
private sector. Baporikar and Shah (2012) identify four phases to describe the history of HE in Oman. These are illustrated in Figure 2.2:

Figure 2.2. Four phases of HE in Oman.

Between the 1970s and 1980s, the Omani government established colleges to provide certificates in vocational training and undergraduate diplomas in technical programs, with a focus on teaching and health (Carroll & Palermo, 2006). These colleges are still running with changes to the programs and have advanced to confer bachelor degrees in different programs such as computer science, engineering, information technology and so on. As mentioned above, a most important advancement occurred in the mid-1980s with the establishment of Sultan Qaboos University.

In the 1990s, specifically in 1994, a Royal decree came to establish the Ministry of HE, which was another major development in the HE system. The Ministry started with six colleges of education that have been renamed and transferred to Colleges of Applied Sciences. Furthermore, the Ministry has become responsible for supervising the private HEIs that started in the mid-1990s. The private HE then expanded rapidly to reach 28 HEIs. This raises the question of quality in such a young and rapidly expanding system. At this time, Oman started to import HE programs from the West. Currently, the HE system is undergoing a phase of “establishment of a comprehensive system of quality assurance and quality enhancement” (Carroll & Palermo, 2006, para. 9) to ensure quality provision set against rapid expansion. To do so, the Oman Accreditation Council was created in 2001 by a Royal Decree to work on accrediting institutions and programs in the Omani HE system, including both government and private institutions. The Oman Accreditation Council was upgraded
in 2010 to become the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA). However, this accreditation system is still immature and is in its early stages of development and application.

2.8. The governance of HE

Table 2.1 below shows the various HE providers and the governance structures of the institutions. As is clear, the total 62 HEIs are under the jurisdiction of different bodies, such as the Ministry of HE, the University Council and the Ministry of Health. The private HEIs are under the supervision of the Ministry of HE, but privately owned. These public and private institutions offer degrees ranging from undergraduate diplomas to PhDs, with a mix of programs developed locally and others imported from elsewhere. Most of the imported programs are offered at private institutions.

Table 2.1
Higher education governance relations in Oman

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Body responsible</th>
<th>Institutions</th>
<th>Number of Institutions</th>
<th>Degrees offered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of HE</td>
<td>Colleges of Applied Sciences</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Private Universities and Colleges</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Diploma, Bachelor, Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>34</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University Council (Independent)</td>
<td>Sultan Qaboos University</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Diploma, Bachelor, Masters, PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Health</td>
<td>Nursing Institutes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Diploma, Bachelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health Institutes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Diploma, Bachelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Manpower</td>
<td>Higher College of Technology</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Diploma, Bachelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Colleges of Technology</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Diploma, Bachelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oman Tourism College</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Diploma, Bachelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Aqaf and Religious Affairs</td>
<td>The Institute of Shari'a Sciences</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Diploma, Bachelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Bank of Oman</td>
<td>The College of Banking &amp; Financial Studies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Diploma, Bachelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Oman Police</td>
<td>The Royal Oman Police Academy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Defence</td>
<td>The National Defence College</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>62</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore, Table 2.1 raises some issues about the role of research in Oman and how much focus there is in the HEIs on this particular, significant indicator of the knowledge economy discourse and
competitive economic development. As clear from the Table 2.1, only SQU as a public HEI is currently offering PhDs and, to be specific, PhDs have just recently been developed and offered in some areas of study, but as yet not in all programs. The Other public HEIs are mainly for teaching undergraduate degrees, as can be seen from Table 2.1. In the private HEIs, they are also catering for undergraduate degrees with a few of them in the last ten years offering Master degrees, but not yet offering PhDs. This raises the issue of the classification of HEIs in the Omani HE system: what is the place of research, given that in developed nations research is usually seen as a defining and distinctive characteristic of universities. According to OAAA (n.d.), Omani HEIs are classified into three kinds of institutions which are Universities, University Colleges and Colleges of HE. The first two kinds are distinguished from the third because of their capacity to offer graduate degrees and do research.

A key defining characteristics of *universities* is “substantial engagement in the conduct of research” with “at least three major fields of study” (OAAA, n.d., p.10). They offer degrees ranging from undergraduate diplomas to PhDs. *University Colleges* are “expected to share some of the key characteristics of a University. These characteristics include research activity relevant to local and national needs; appropriate research facilities; and, programmes up to and including the Master’s degree in at least two broad fields of study” (OAAA, n.d., p.10). *Colleges of HE* as a term is “used generically to refer to teaching institutions which offer programmes up to and including the Bachelor’s degree, though such institutions are not always called ‘Colleges’. They may be termed ‘Institutes’ or ‘Academies’ or similar” (p.10-11). Out of the 62 HEIs, Oman has only one public university and seven private universities. As will be seen in later chapters, Oman established The Research Council (TRC) in 2005 as a leader of research development and as a research funding agency. Overall, it can be argued that currently the focus of the Omani HE system is on teaching with a gradual movement towards research. Recently, with various research projects funded by universities and TRC, as well as beginning to offer Masters and PhDs degrees, the place of research is becoming more significant in the Omani HE system with the potential for research to be an important contributor to the development of the country. Yet research does not hold the place in Omani universities that it is does within elite universities in the developed world. As such, HE policy is largely concerned with undergraduate provision.

It is also important to note here that, since the early 1970s, the Omani government has been sending Omanis to study abroad in undergraduate and graduate studies. With undergraduate studies, the government sends in specific areas of study that are not available in Omani HEIs, so the needs of development might be met. In the academic years 2013/2014, 1,395 Omani students received external scholarships to study undergraduate degrees in some European, American, Canadian,
Australian, New Zealand and some well-recognized Arab universities (MoHE, 2012). Moreover, graduate external scholarships are given more attention, recognized by the government as a way to move the country towards a knowledge economy with highly skilled Omanis in research. There were 2,619 Omanis in the 2012/2013 academic year doing Masters and PhDs in the aforementioned Western and Arab countries (MoHE, 2012). The government believes that the provision of these graduate scholarships is a future-oriented strategy to build research capacity for the nation and its HE institutions and to help greatly in creating a research culture in the country. The government sees these scholarships as an investment for moving towards a knowledge economy as part of the diversification of the Omani economy as the oil and gas run out.

2.9. Conclusion

This chapter has provided the context of the study, describing Oman generally and its HE system specifically. The Omani HE system is youthful and built upon a recently introduced mass schooling system. The first HE experience was in 1985 and the system expanded rapidly to reach 62 HEIs today. The Omani government has nurtured this system to serve its development. Overall, like other sub-systems such as health, transport and water in Oman, HE governance and policy development are state-centric in character and the state is fully in charge of its public HEIs, as well as regulating and supervising the private HEIs.

Overall, the context described in this chapter indicates some of the issues and challenges facing the Omani HE system and its policy. The current funding policy of the HE system is a question, projecting that the Omani oil will run out in the coming decades. Also, with that projection and the fluctuations in the price of oil, there is a pressing need to move towards a knowledge economy, giving the HE system this role of developing the skills of the nation. The system has to find a balance between the focus on teaching and research. Another issue raised in this chapter is the rapid expansion of the Omani HE in terms of the number of HEIs and students admitted yearly. The quality and accreditation of these HEIs is a concern, with various private HEIs from around the world crossing the Omani borders. These issues and challenges presented in this context chapter will be dealt with in more detail in the analysis and discussion chapters.
3. Literature Review

This chapter is devoted to reviewing the literature on the HE system in Oman generally, and its policy and policy-making processes more specifically. This will be situated against a consideration of the broader literature on HE policy. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first will deal with the Omani HE system and its policy and policy-making approaches. Since HE is regarded as part of public policy in Oman, as it is elsewhere in the world, there is a need to provide a review of public policy and policy-making processes. Thus, the second part will look at policy and policy-making broadly with the aim of shedding light on how public policy in the literature is defined, theorised and debated. In the last section, a very brief review of HE policy and policy-making from around the globe will be provided. In general, this chapter will enable me to describe the Omani system, document what has been written previously on Omani HE system generally, identify a theoretical framework and study design, and suggest what this study will add to the existing literature through the identification of gaps in the current literature.

3.1. The Omani HE system

3.1.1. Studies on Omani HE system

It has been mentioned previously that HE in Oman is fairly young and there have been few studies that address the system and the issues it faces. However, at the time of writing, there has not been any dedicated study that deals with Omani HE policy and policy-making specifically. With the assistance of a librarian who specialises in education research, I was able to locate nine theses (Masters and PhD), twelve journal articles, six book chapters, two international reports and eight governmental documents (Royal Decrees and Ministerial Designs) that studied and outlined Omani HE. This literature search shows that there is relatively little literature dealing with Omani HE. Furthermore, it confirms that HE policy and policy-making are new areas of research within the HE system of Oman and is seemingly not yet attractive to researchers as a research domain. This area of research is still emergent and needs to be addressed further. For that reason, I am interested in conducting this study to fill this gap in the Omani research literature.

Generally, past studies have explored the Omani HE system from different angles related to development, challenges, achievements, admission, quality, accreditation, financing, privatization, internationalization and human resources. Table 3.1 below shows the major studies (masters and PhD theses) and their focus, organized chronologically.
Table 3.1
*Higher degree studies on Omani HE*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>University/Country</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AL-Rabhi (2004)</td>
<td>Student Loan Scheme as Alternative to Financing HE in the Sultanate of Oman</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>University of Oregon/ the USA</td>
<td>Financing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Harthy (2011)</td>
<td>Private HE in the Sultanate of Oman: Rationales, Development and Challenges</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>the University of Kassel/ Hessen, Germany</td>
<td>Privatization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandenburg (2012)</td>
<td>Bridging the Knowledge Gap: Internationalization and Privatization of HE in the State of Qatar and the Sultanate of Oman</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz, Mainz, Rhineland Palatinate, Germany</td>
<td>Internationalization and Privatization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 3.1 above, it is clear that the foci of these studies include issues and difficulties facing the young Omani HE system at different stages of its development and growth. For example, the first study of Omani HE, completed by Al-Lamky (1992), discussed the importance of HE in addressing unemployment. Al-Lamki’s (1992) study, written at the time of the birth of the Oman HE system, looked at how the Omani government could provide the labour market with appropriately skilled young people through the HE system. Her argument was put forward to the government to quickly establish the system to serve the development of human resources.
As the Omani HE system has been developing, new challenges have arisen and researchers have been trying to respond to these issues through their studies. As in other developing countries, the issues of funding, expansion, privatization and internationalization were the top priorities to be addressed (see Al-Lamki, 1992; AL-Hajri, 2002; Al-Ramadhani, 2003; Al-Bulushi, 2003; Al-Rahbi, 2004; Al-Hashmi, 2005; Al-Balushi, 2008; Al Harthy, 2011; Brandenburg, 2012). Although none of these studies has specifically discussed policy architecture or policy-making issues, they have engaged with some of the state’s HE policies. For instance, Brandenburg (2012) studied internationalization and privatization policy in Omani HE and compared it with the Qatari case. However, there has not been a direct focus on the general policy of the State; rather, the focus has been more on specific issues and specific policies. Overall, my study will try to cover this gap with its focus on HE policy architecture, policy making and policy content in Oman set within interwoven national, regional and global pressures.

As there is no research focused on policy architecture and policy making in Omani higher education, I will start by reviewing the studies done on HE in Oman generally. The chapter will be divided into grouped topics and themes as these appear in the existing literature.

3.1.2. The state and HE

Compared with other countries, the Omani government established its HE system very late (see Al Shmeli, 2009; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Issan & Osman, 2010). It is characterized as a young system, but with significant achievements and rapid expansion. Al-Lamki (2006) points to the dynamic and rapid expansion of the schooling system since 1970, which yielded strong demand for HE in Oman. Overall, the massive number of graduates from the schooling system at the beginning of 1980s drove the new State to spend time and money exploiting all the potentialities to develop a system of HE and catch up with developments in the world generally and the neighbouring Gulf countries specifically (Al-Lamki, 2002, 2006; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Brandenburg, 2012).

The state has recognized HE’s significant role in the development of the nation and hence the system has been a priority in the state’s agenda since the mid-1980s. Indeed, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, in one of his well-known speeches, affirmed that:

Forming and training man [sic] is a laborious process. Yet it is a necessary process. We shall, for our part, spare no effort to provide opportunities for the training of Omanis at all levels of education, particularly HE. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.)

In 2006, His Majesty, through his annual speech to the Oman Council, stressed the notion of quality in HE (Ministry of Information, 2006). Even more significant is the latest call by His Majesty to the Council of Education and policy-makers to review education policies in the Sultanate (Ministry of
Information, 2012). This tangible concern for the system by the top leadership of the State shows how the Omani state has been working hard to build a sustainable and high quality HE system.

According to Wilkinson and Al Hajry (2007), the Omani government has established a modern system through continuous strategies, sound objectives and policies. It has engaged in non-stop reform to the system since 1986, leading to rapid expansion and transformation to suit the needs of the society and to meet global requirements (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010). Indeed, in the existing recent literature, the Omani HE system is always described as fast-growing and dynamic with prodigious aims to create knowledgeable and skilful graduates comparable with those produced by neighbouring states (Al-Lamki, 2006; Baporikar & Shah, 2012; Carroll, Razvi, Goodliffe & Al-Habsi, 2009; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Brandenburg, 2012). Overall, it can be seen from these texts that the Omani government has been committed since 1970 to providing all necessities and services free of charge to the Omani people and HE has been and will remain one of its top concerns.

3.1.3. The current status of modern HE

While some nations around the globe nowadays celebrate the 200th anniversaries of their universities, Oman is proud of having established and developed a competitive system of HE in less than three decades, but one still largely focused on undergraduate teaching. Although the Omani HE system is small and young, some studies indicate that it is diverse, dynamic, fast growing (Al-Lamki, 2002, 2006; Al Shmeli, 2009; Baporikar & Shah, 2012; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Chapman et al., 2009; Gregory, 2001). To clarify, Al-Lamki (2006) and Al Shmeli (2009) write that the diversity of the Omani HE system in less than 30 years has developed both public and private institutions with imported and locally developed programs. The system has grown from no HE institutions before the beginning of 1980s to 62 (34 public and 28 private) in 2012 (National Centre for Statistics and Information, 2012). These institutions are categorized into universities, colleges, and institutes as illustrated below in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2
The number and type of HEIs in Oman

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Private</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Omani HE is not only diverse in terms of its institutions, but also in respect of other academic related matters. Baporikar and Shah (2012) clearly indicate that diversity in Omani HE can also be seen in terms of its Western imported curricula, different programs (diploma, bachelor, masters, PhD), various specializations, recruitment of native English speaking lecturers, and multicultural staff from around the world. Such diversity has played a great role in the growth, development and quality of the system.

In terms of student population, the number of new admitted students to undergraduate degrees rocketed from 14,169 in academic year 2008/2009 to 27,951 in 2011/2012 (HEAC, 2012). As shown in the Figure 3.1 below, the number of new admitted students has increased each academic year. This increased admission has led to a speedy growth in the number of graduates, which in the academic year 2010/2011 reached 5,404. According to statistics in Figure 3.1 below, it is projected that the number of graduates will increase to more than 15,000 in the next five years. Due to numbers increasing each year, the government has to pass effective policies in the coming years, accommodating new HE seekers as well as finding jobs for graduates. This rapid expansion also raises issues of quality. As Figure 3.1 demonstrates, and noted in Chapter two, the focus Of Omani HE system has really been on undergraduate teaching and Bachelor degrees, rather than on research and higher degrees.

![Figure 3.1. The number of undergraduate students in Omani HE institutions (HEAC, 2012).](image)
While the system is still young, such dramatic changes in the number of students and institutions reflects the commitment of the Omani Government to develop and expand the system, as well as to match it with the increased demand of Omani youth for HE and the perceived ‘needs’ of the national and global labour market. Carroll et al. (2009) argue that “Oman is a small HE sector but, through its policy of importing programmes from various countries, as well as developing its own, it serves as an interesting microcosm of the challenges being played out in the broader international HE community” (p. 26).

3.1.4. Public HE

Public institutions or, as they are also called in Oman, ‘governmental institutions,’ are those which are run by the state and operate independently with a fair degree of institutional and academic autonomy. By ‘independent’, it is meant that these institutions are locally established by the government without partnership arrangements with foreign universities (Baporikar & Shah, 2012). All these institutions are funded by the Omani government and provided free to Omani youth (see Al-Lamki, 2002, 2006). High school graduates compete to get access to these institutions depending on their academic merit. According to the Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC) (2011), two thirds of the 62 institutions are public ones, accommodating 52,647 students in the 2010/2011 academic year. Surprisingly, all those students are funded completely by the government. Students receive books for free, a monthly allowance, accommodation (for some) and various other facilities and services. As such, there is great dependence on state expenditure.

According to Al Shmeli (2009), Oman has been able to create independent HEIs that provide post-secondary degrees (diploma, bachelor, masters and PhDs). Indeed, currently SQU is offering PhDs, but limited to some areas of study. The first PhDs were offered at SQU in 2002. The programs offered by these institutions are locally developed with the assistance of experts from around the world. Academics working in these institutions most often have their higher degrees from universities outside of Oman. With these institutions, Oman has succeeded in providing opportunities for Omanis to study in a wide variety of programmes, such as law, social sciences, humanities, medicine, engineering, agriculture, education etc. (see Al-Lamki, 2002, 2006; Al Shmeli, 2009; Baporikar & Shah, 2012; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Chapman et al., 2009).

3.1.5. The Governance dilemma

As mentioned previously, the governance of the HE system in Oman is complicated and is overseen by different bodies of the Omani government. This argument has been stressed in the existing literature on the Omani HE system (see Al Harthy, 2011; Al-Lamki, 2002, 2006; Al Shmeli, 2009;
Donn & Al Manthri, 2010). These studies observe that such governance is not effective in terms of responsibilities towards policy-making and resource distribution.

Al Harthy (2011) and Al-Lamki (2002, 2006) believe that the presence of several governing bodies within the system has resulted in resources competition. When looking at the Omani financial system, each of these governing bodies has its own budget allocated by the government for its institutions. Al-Lamki (2002) extrapolates and puts forward the argument that national resources are therefore duplicated and not expended efficiently.

Furthermore, Donn and Al Manthri (2010) suggest that the presence of multiple bodies in policy-making regarding some academic issues may result in “some tension in inter-ministerial relationships”, as well as “some conflict in responsibilities” (p.127). Al Harthy (2011) and Al-Lamki (2006) make similar observations about the policy architecture, arguing that this governance system has created limited consensus and disharmony on system-wide approaches to improving performance, quality and accessibility. It is again the duplication and divergence regarding administrative responsibilities and policy-making issues that are of concern.

The discussion above, from the extant literature, shows that policy and policy-making in Omani HE are much affected by its architecture and the administrative apparatuses involved. Acknowledging this situation, previous studies have called for changes in the structure of the system and changes to the policy architecture (Al Harthy, 2011; Al-Lamki, 2002, 2006). In two different studies, Al-Lamki (2002, 2006) suggests a new architecture for the system, proposing that all HEIs should be under the management of the Ministry of HE. She argues that this proposal will “result in a more focused and productive delivery system and allow matters of accountability and transparency to be better addressed and managed” (Al-Lamki, 2002, p. 82). Correspondingly, Al Harthy (2011) agrees and puts his recommendation that governance of the whole system should be under one organization, pointing to the Ministry of HE. He supports his argument, stating that such centralized management, under the Ministry of HE, will result in the production of a unified policy and vision, effective distribution of financial resources, and the improved accessibility and quality of HE. Not only that, Al Harthy also emphasizes that his suggestion is consistent with Royal Decree No. 36/2000, which states that "the Ministry of HE shall follow up coordination and integrating between HEIs with respect to fields of specialization and degree awarded by each of them" (The Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2000,p. 18).
3.1.6. Private HE

Ten years after opening the first public university, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Oman initiated private HE to help the government by sharing the burden of providing HE to meet demand. In 1994, a Royal Decree was issued to set regulations for the private sector to invest in HE. After passing the Royal Decree, the academic year 1995/1996 saw the first private college open. In fewer than twenty years, the number of private HEIs has increased dramatically to reach 28 out of the total 62 HEIs today, constituting more than a third of the total. As described by various studies, it is a fairly recent phenomenon with rapid expansion (Al-Lamki 2006; Al Harthy, 2011; Donn & Al Manthri, 20110; Brandenburg, 2012). The number of students enrolled in these private institutions for the academic year 2011/2012 was 9,941. According to Wilkinson and Al Hajry (2007), the private sector helps in accommodating school graduates who cannot enter the public university because of their grades, thus raising quality issues in relation to this mode of expanding participation in HE. Indeed, admission to these institutions does not rely heavily on academic merit like as is the case with the public ones. As mentioned by Al-Lamki (2006), successful completion of high school is enough for admission. Here, the quality and standards of private HEIs in Oman are questioned. Why do these institutions not have certain high school certificate levels as requirements for admission?

Reviewing the literature shows that there has been an interest among Omanis and non-Omani researchers in studying at private HE institutions in Oman, because it is a relatively new phenomenon and area of research (see for example, Al Harthy, 2011; Al-Lamki, 2006; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010: Brandenburg, 2012). All these studies highlight the role of the private sector in creating more opportunities for Omanis and even non-Omanis to accommodate the increased demand for HE in the Sultanate. It is assumed that private sector investment in HE will help in the development of the sector. Issues of quality, though, have been raised in relation to the expansion of private provision.

These private institutions have some characteristics that differ from public institutions. Regarding language of instruction, English is primarily used, not Arabic (Al-Lamki, 2006). Furthermore, as per the regulations of the Ministry of HE, private institutions must be affiliated to, or have cooperation with, foreign universities which are recognized and accredited (Wilkinson & Al Hajry, 2007). This is “a model of affiliation or/and cooperation with foreign universities” (Al Harthy, 2011, p.53). In fact, however, this is only applicable to local institutions and not to international universities opening branches in Oman. This is about ensuring quality and sustainability of these local institutions. Baporikar and Shah (2012) mention that these institutions are categorized into two types, which are colleges providing local or imported programs and universities running independently.

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The reasons for introducing private HEIs in Oman are questioned in the literature. For instance, in his recent study about privatization policy, using document analysis and interviews with policy-makers, Al Harthy (2011) describes various rationales and objectives for the establishment of such private institutions. He declares that analysing the policy documents shows that the Omani government has approved and legalized the private sector to prepare Omani qualified nationals to serve in the development of the nation, to offer quality HE and to promote scientific research. In a similar way, Al Shmeli (2009) says that the Omani Government has recognized the potentialities of the private HEIs in the advancement of the country’s development. Clearly, the government looks at the private institutions as a way to achieve Oman’s long-term strategy, ‘Vision for Oman Economy 2020’. Al Harthy (2011) elucidates that this strategy’s vision and objectives require skilled and qualified nationals and therefore there is a desperate need for more private institutions to train youth and play a positive role, as well as to meet demand for HE.

Al Harthy’s (2011, p.52) study also reveals that “the lack of capacity of public HE to meet increasing numbers of secondary school graduates, the wish to alleviate the financial burden of government expenditure on HE, promoting the Omanisation policy, and joining international trade agreements such as WTO and GATS” have been the most critical drivers for opening the door for the private sector to invest in HE in the Sultanate. Further, he argues that the commitment of the Omani Government towards the HE sector generally (public and private) has increased since it became a member of the WTO in 2000. In summary, private HE has been established in the context of the modern era of prosperous economic development in Oman, combined with thousands of high school graduates seeking places in Omani HEIs (see Al Shmeli, 2009). There are thus both economic and development rationales for the expansion of private HE in Oman, but also the issue of student demand for places.

Despite being private, these institutions still fall under the government’s regulations and governance. Indeed, the Education Council and the Ministry of HE are the bodies in charge of supervising and making regulations, policies and mechanisms in relation to these institutions. This indicates that the Omani Government still ‘controls’ the private institutions and has power over them. As Al Harthy (2011) argues, the authority of the Government is clear from the first step of lodging the request (application) for licensing, to the follow-up evaluations of the performance of these institutions. Wilkinson and Al Hajry (2007) explain that there is a process of establishing private institutions in Oman, with the Ministry of HE in authority in relation to implementing these procedures. Beside supervision, the Omani Government supports these private institutions directly and indirectly in various ways, helping them to accomplish their mission in the development of the modern State and nation. Such support might be financial or logistical, including tax exemptions.
and duties, and aid in terms of payment of tuition fees for some Omani students (e.g., scholarships for social welfare families, girls finishing high school, and some students with academic merit) (see Al Harthy, 2011; Al-Lamki, 2006; Al Shmeli, 2009). This applies to all private institutions, irrespective of whether they are local or international in character. What is more special for the local ones (Omani-owned institutions), which are the majority, is a 17 million Omani Rial (O.R.) grant package (approximately US$ 44,155,268) for quality improvement directly associated with learning resources and classrooms, 'matching grants' of O.R. 3 million at the time of founding and the incentive of providing free land for construction (Al Shmeli, 2009; Gonzalez et al., 2008). This subsidization demonstrates generosity from the Omani leadership and also the commitment to expanding HE provision, but also the necessity of focusing on quality issues. It also demonstrates the interweaving of both public and private interests in private HE in Oman.

3.1.7. Policy issues

There has been a considerable amount of literature describing how the Omani HE system has undergone substantial changes and reforms since it was established (Al Harthy, 2011; Al-Lamki, 2006; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Brandenburg, 2012). These studies have shown that there have been emerging issues as the system has been developing. Examples of these changes have been reforming the structure and governance of HE, modifying programs, cancelling colleges, and many other changes. Almost all systems of HE in the developing world have been facing such challenges and these are not special to the case of Oman. Here, I will try to focus briefly on some of those critical issues facing Omani policy makers that have been debated in the existing literature. These issues are funding, access, quality and labour market match. I will consider each in turn.

3.1.7.1. Funding

As previously mentioned, the public HE system in Oman is fully financed by the Government. It is offered freely to academically qualified Omani students in relation to all required services and allowances. This is not the case in respect of private institutions, but still the Government plays a role in supporting them financially in an indirect way through land grants, scholarships and tax exemptions. To be clear, the Omani Government has been using oil revenues to finance HE (Council for HE, 2004). With a very fast growing system funded by the government, a policy dilemma is present concerning how to keep the system running. Compelling arguments are presented by Ameen et al. (2010) and Chapman et al. (2009) that the Omani Government is now facing challenges and struggling with financing the system, since oil revenues are the only source used to fund HE. In their argument, supported with official statistics, Chapman et al. (2009) mention that the Omani oil reserve will be decreasing during the coming decades. Indeed, the
The finitude of oil is projected by the Omani Government (Council for HE, 2004). There are important implications here for the future funding of HE and for the development and diversification of the Omani economy, particularly given the impost upon state expenditure of both government and private HE.

In their book chapter, *Expanding Postsecondary Access in Oman: Who Pays*, Chapman et al. (2009) mention three factors that cause policy dilemmas for the Omani Government in terms of funding HE. First, the government has committed itself to expand the rate of Omani youth participating in HE. This is part of the global trend towards massification of HE (Marginson, forthcoming 2016). As articulated by the project of *The Strategy for Education in the Sultanate of Oman, 2006-2020*, the Omani Government aims to increase participation of Omani youth, aged between 18 and 24 years, from 19 percent in 2004 to 50 percent in 2020 (Council for HE, 2004); this thus can be seen as a move to the provision of mass HE. Secondly, Chapman et al. (2009) argue that the dilemma of financing the system will be more visible with thousands of Omani youth graduating from high school each year and seeking to continue their HE. This is the pressing question of how to respond to student demand for HE and how to fund it. The third and final factor is the decline of oil production and finitude of oil resources that are currently used to finance the system. Chapman et al. (2009) ask two challenging questions to make their argument clear: “Who will pay for HE in the future? And what mechanisms might be available to help them to do so?” (p. 20).

Furthermore, the literature indicates that HE policy and policy-making are facing difficult times with the issue of financing as the Government struggles to increase the participation of Omanis in HE and meet demand for places (see Al-Lamki, 2006; Ameen et al., 2010; Chapman et al., 2009; Wilkinson & Al Hajry, 2007). According to Al Shmeli (2009, p. 19), the government is fully responsible because “there is no easily accessed finance facility to assist students in funding their studies; that is, the Sultanate does not have a system of bursaries or loans. Nor are there loan schemes with contingent repayment plans that are activated once the student joins the workforce”. Thus, HE policy-makers in Oman will have to find other ways of financing the system so they can create suitable policies and keep the system running effectively to achieve its aims of creating a mass system of HE.

### 3.1.7.2. Access and equity

Besides funding, HE policy-makers face the challenge of providing enough opportunities for Omani youth in HEIs. Al-Lamki (2006) explains that the rapid expansion and growth of the schooling system during the last two decades has resulted in strong demand for HE (see also Al Shemli, 2009; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010). Indeed, the government through its public institutions has been unable
to match the demand. Almost all studies in the area of HE emphasize and acknowledge that Oman is challenged with issues of a pressing mismatch between supply and demand. This issue has been a national concern and the Omani Government has been trying to overcome it through various policies, including encouragement of private institutions.

Unquestionably, the Omani Government has implemented purposeful long-time strategies and plans to include all Omani youths seeking HE with a goal of fifty percent participation of the age cohort by 2020. The idea of legalizing and approving private HE has been one way of trying to create more places (Al-Lamki, 2006; Al Shemli, 2009; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Wilkinson & Al Hajry, 2007). However, it is not equitable to shift to private HE and make students and their families pay the fees, while there are others who receive their education free. Yet, there is of course the question of academic selectivity in access to university. The Government, with the intention of providing more access, is trying through grants and scholarships to provide education free to some students attending private institutions. Al-Lamki (2006) makes an argument that the Omani Government has to find a system of financial assistance that is accessible and equitable to all Omanis seeking HE, regardless of whether they are enrolled in public or private institutions. However, given different admission criteria, there are significant quality issues here, and questions to do with who will benefit from HE.

3.1.7.3. Quality

Since its foundation, the Omani HE system has been growing very fast to match the growing demand of youth for places. According to Al Shemli (2009), such expansion has been accompanied unavoidably by less attention being paid to quality. He argues that the “rapid growth and the introduction of the profit motive in relatively immature systems of HE inevitably pose a threat to quality” (p.18). Similarly, Al Bandary (2005) and Al-Lamki (2006) argue that HE in Oman is comparatively young and thus has not matured in terms of academic excellence and quality assurance matters. Besides, Carroll et al. (2009) state that the issue of quality in Omani HE is critical and with such a new system expanding rapidly, raising standards and developing frameworks for quality assurance become very important.

Admittedly, the Omani Government has been aware of this issue, trying to boost quality among its public institutions, as well as private ones. As argued by Al Shemli (2009), quality assurance nowadays is a primary concern among policy makers in the Omani HE system. Through new policies, they are hoping to alleviate the imbalance and tensions between increased access and quality. This is an issue facing all HE systems as they move to being mass systems with 50% of the age cohort attending. An example of such efforts is the establishment of the Oman Accreditation
Council by a Royal Decree, No. 74/2001, to declare the importance placed on quality by the top leadership of the Sultanate. This Council is responsible for “accrediting institutions and programmes through the use of standards, information, reviews and quality improvement processes, and with maintaining the national qualifications framework” (Carroll et al., 2009). Indeed, this Council was upgraded in 2010 to become an agency called Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA). Of course, the policy question here is to do with the efficacy of this Authority in relation to quality matters.

In general, studies show that while the Omani Government is trying comprehensively through policies to assure quality, there are still issues and possibly more regulation and review are needed (Al Bandary, 2005; Al-Lamki, 2006; Al Shmeli, 2009; Carroll et al., 2009). However, all these studies agree that Oman is developing swiftly in terms of passing regulations and policies to improve the quality of HE.

3.1.8. Labour market

Supplying the labour market with skilled graduates is one of the major aims of HE globally. This is the human capital function of HE. In Oman, the issue of the match between employment and HE is given special priority by the Omani Government, and has been stressed in some studies (see for example, Al-Balushi, 2008; Al-Lamki, 1992; Al Shmeli, 2009; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010). These studies call for the Government, specifically ministries and organizations responsible for HE, to plan effectively and ‘cooperate’ with the labour market in terms of specifying the needs for the current and future stages of development. There is no doubt that there is cooperation between these organizations and the Five Year Plan always outlines for HEIs the needed specializations and programs (Al Shemeli, 2009). However, such cooperation between policy-makers in HE and interest groups from the labour market needs to be activated successfully. This will help in matching the needs of the labour market with HE graduates. There is, of course, the other issue of the accuracy of projected future labour market needs in a rapidly changing world. Such projections have been notoriously inaccurate.

With the *Vision for Oman’s Economy: Oman 2020* strategy, there has been a call to diversify the economy and HE has to respond effectively to this call by playing a greater role in supplying the required skilled labour force (Ministry of National Economy, 2008). Saying that, however, Wilkinson and Al Hajry (2007) talk about an obvious imbalance between the field of study of students and the practical needs of the labour force. Their study argues that social sciences are more popular as an area of study than medicine, engineering and sciences. However, this is not to say that certain specializations have to be closed or restricted to specific numbers of students, but high
school graduates need to be advised on the current and projected future needs of the labour market, while recognising the contingency of such projections.

3.1.9. Globalisation and Omani HE

According to so many writers already cited above, it appears that the education systems of states around the globe have been affected by globalisation processes. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) argue that globalisation has led to deep changes and shifts in how education policies are developed, implemented and evaluated and in the focus of policy content. Elsewhere, I have argued that the Omani system of education is no exception and obviously it has been reformed to meet the challenges of globalisation (Al’Abri, 2011). In this study, I point to new policy agents (international organizations) such as the United Nations Educational Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), that are playing a greater role in framing Omani national education policies. For instance, the Ministry of Education in Oman has to provide frequent reports on the development of the Basic Education to UNESCO. This shows the powerful impact of UNESCO on Omani education policy. In addition, globalised education policy discourses (life-long learning, knowledge economy, technology, and ESL) have also appeared in the Omani education system and in policy rationales. Global trends in HE are also to some extent being played out in Oman, but in vernacular ways with the national context mediating these global trends.

When talking about the HE system in Oman, some studies have described the effects of globalisation (Al Harthy, 2011; Al Shemli, 2009; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Brandenburg, 2012). For instance, Oman began its membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2000 and since then Oman has worked hard to make certain commitments to HE that are proposed and prescribed by the WTO. Al Harthy (2011) mentions that, as an example of the commitments, “the current practice of private higher education in Oman represents the model of affiliation or/and cooperation with foreign universities” (p.53). Beside the WTO, Oman is also a member of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). Under GATS, Oman has to liberalise its HE (Brandenburg, 2012). It is believed that national HE systems are affected by the commitments toward GATS (Brandenburg, 2012). With liberalization, Oman is committed to opening the door for foreign universities to have campuses inside its borders, running alongside and competing with local institutions. Indeed, as Brandenburg (2012) argues, this will help to attract many foreign institutions to invest in the Omani HE system, offering further access, boosting participation, creating new programs and developing the infrastructure of the system. However, there are challenges resulting from these developments. Without question, the local Omani institutions (public or private) are faced with competition from these foreign universities (Brandenburg, 2012),
which may have been providing HE for a long time when compared with younger local institutions. This is globalisation bringing positive as well as negative effects. These positive and negative effects will be detailed in Chapter eight of this study.

Moreover, Al Shmeli (2009) contends that Oman is affected by globalisation in terms of the obligation toward diversifying the economy and raising the standards to meet the challenges and requirements of the global knowledge-economy. In the Human Development Report of 2003, it has been stated clearly by the Ministry of National Economy that,

development of Human Resources and upgrading the skills of Omani nationals to keep abreast of technological changes, to meet the demands of a knowledge-based economy and of increasing globalisation [have] been and [continue] to be a policy area of highest importance in Oman’s developmental planning. (MONE, 2005, p. 19)

Overall, the declaration made by Al Shmeli (2009) and the statement by MONE (2005) lead us to the argument that this has an impact on HE, as entering the global knowledge-economy requires fully skilled graduates who can compete in the global economy. Indeed, such demand for qualified Omani human resource creates pressure on HEIs. Higher quality human capital and more research are central elements in ensuring that the signifier a ‘knowledge economy’ is not an empty one when applied in Oman.

It is then the mission of the Omani HE system to generate new policies and strategies that will help in supplying the labour market with the skilled graduates. According to Al Shmeli (2009), new programs and specializations need to be offered and standards must be increased to match the needs of the global knowledge economy. However, HEIs have taken some steps toward achieving the production of qualified human resources. Baporikar and Shah (2012) mention some strategies such as,

…imported curricula of western countries, recruitment of native English teachers, recruitment of qualified and experience faculty from all over the word in various disciplines, provision of excellent infrastructure facilities to the students and arrangements of one or two year foundation courses by each HEI including English language, mathematics and IT to build students basis for advanced curricula at university level. (p. 10)

This discussion above shows how the Omani HE system has a great focus on providing the market with skilled graduates, yet less attention has been given to research, which is central to the construction of a ‘knowledge economy’. It is very important to note here that in the Omani literature, there is dearth of studies considering the role and importance of research for moving towards knowledge economy in a post oil-dependent economy. This might be attributed to the limited number of Omani researchers and academics working in this area, and also to the recent development of research degrees. In short, globalisation has impacted the Omani HE system, provoking policy pressures from trade liberalisation and circulating certain policy discourses, both of which will be dealt with in Chapter eight of this study.
3.2. Policy and policy-making

For a better understanding of the policy and policy-making system of HE in Oman, this part of the literature review will explore the conceptualisation of and debate about the terms ‘policy’ and ‘policy-making’ in the public policy and education policy literatures.

Reviewing the policy literature, it is apparent that almost all authors in the field of policy begin by defining the term policy (see e.g., Ball, 1994, 2015; Ozga, 2000; Malone & Cochran, 2005; Hill, 2005; Fischer, 2003; Howlett & Ramesh, 1995; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997). The definitional problem relating to the policy concept is obvious in most policy textbooks (Hill, 2005). As a student of policy, the question of ‘why do we need to begin with a definition for this concept?’ comes to mind. After reading and thinking deeply about this question, it becomes clear that understanding the meanings of policy is necessary to understanding how policy is developed, implemented, and evaluated and to understanding that policy is both text and processes prior to the production of the policy text through to policy enactment of the text. Supporting this view, Ball (1994, 2015) states that understanding the meaning of policy helps frame appropriate ways of doing policy analysis and policy research, including research on policy implementation or enactment. Accordingly, the word ‘policy’ needs to be defined carefully.

Like most writings in the field of policy, this section of the literature review will start with a discussion of a variety of policy definitions derived from well-known authors in the field of public policy. The question “what is policy?” will be addressed in some detail to provide a good understanding of the concept, its emergence, its purposes, and the people involved in policy processes. The section will conclude with a working definition of the word ‘policy’ to be used in this study.

3.2.1. The Emergence of policy science

Before we proceed to define the concept, a close look at the emergence of policy science as a field will be provided. It is anticipated that tracing the emergence of this policy science will help us to understand how globalisation is affecting education policy as part of broader public policy. In this regard, Rizvi and Lingard (2010) write that policy as a science is a rather modern field of academic endeavour. Literature shows that the emergence of the formal study of public policy began in the mid-1960s (Malone & Cochran, 2005; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Taylor et al., 1997), developing in North America and Europe in the fifteen years after the Second World War (Fischer, 2003; Howlett & Ramesh, 1995). Although it is a rather new concern, there has been an increased interest in this field of study so that it has become one of the fastest growing specializations in the social sciences (see Fischer, 2003; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Taylor et al., 1997). Nowadays, it is, unquestionably,
considered an important subfield within the discipline of political sciences and more broadly within the social sciences.

When policy was first established as a field of social scientific study, the main aim was to examine how public policies could be more effectively developed, implemented and evaluated by governments. This was a normative purpose of the field. Speaking generally, public policy study was intended to help governments in the mission of developing policies and programs, assessing their effectiveness, and solving social problems (Taylor et al., 1997). To be clear, both the process and the outcomes of policy-making are hoped to be improved under the umbrella of public policy study. Here, Rizvi and Lingard (2010) affirm that the field of public policy studies links to change processes and reforms to be achieved through a policy focus. Indeed, the study of public policy emphasises the efficiency and effectiveness of governments in achieving their intended goals. For that reason, the practice of policy analysis has evolved and been of interest to policy academics, students, policy-makers, and even government bodies.

Briefly, public policy as a science emerged after the Second World War as a response to how policies were made and implemented by governments and a desire on behalf of governments to improve both policy and policy processes, and to provide better policy outcomes. This also occurred as the policy coverage of governments was enlarged in the context of post war Keynesian policy frameworks. And, of course, in the context of the end of the Cold War and the related move to neo-liberal globalisation, state structures and policy making processes changed considerably (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010, Ball & Junemann, 2012). Oman is interesting here with a state-centric policy approach in an age of market challenges to the dominance of the state in policy processes, particularly in the developed Anglo-American countries.

3.2.2. Definition of policy

As mentioned above, it is important to understand what policies are. However, it is not an easy task to provide a simple definition. Reading the relevant literature shows that policy is a broad, complex concept, which carries different meanings that have been debated since the 1960s. Indeed, great efforts have been made by academics and authors interested in the field of policy to define the term in ways that highlight the nature and complexity of policy and policy processes.

The numerous definitions for the concept ‘policy’ range from quite simple to very complex. Regardless of their variations, there is agreement that public policy results from decisions made by governments to solve a problem or an issue in the society. As stated by Hogwood and Gunn (1984, p. 24), “for a policy to be regarded as a public policy, it must to some degree have been generated
or at least processed within the framework of governmental procedures, influences and organisations”. Although much literature attempts to define policy, these definitions differ significantly (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003). This study argues that there is no single answer to the question: ‘What is policy?’

The first definition to be discussed here is offered by Thomas Dye. It is described as the simplest policy definition (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Taylor et al., 1997). In a short, Dye (1992, p.2) defines policy as “whatever governments choose to do, or not to do”. This definition implies three clear facts about policy. The first is that policy is made on behalf of the state and its agencies. To make it clear, Dye (1992) refers to governments as the agents of public policy making. Similarly, Taylor et al. (1997) emphasise that public policy is the responsibility of the state or is "a state activity". A distinction is also articulated in Dye’s definition between decisions made by a government and others such as private sector institutions, individuals, movements, societies, organizations and so on. The definition suggests that the latter groups do not formulate public policy. However, more recent work in education policy in developed nations documents the enhanced involvement of agencies and actors beyond the state in policy processes (Ball, 2012; Ball & Junemann, 2012).

The second merit of Dye’s definition is that governments, through policies, can choose to do something or to do nothing about a certain issue or problem in the society (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003; Howlett, Ramesh, & Pearl 2009). For instance, a government has the choice to make citizens pay fees for education and health for the purpose of service quality, or not to pay fees. Howlett et al. (2009) offer two other synonyms for this definition which are “negative” and “non-decisions” for the action of governments in the choice of doing nothing. Likewise and equally to the positive decisions, the area of “negative” or “non-decision” making in the policy domain might be deliberate (Howlett et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 1997), that is, a decision can be taken to do nothing.

Dye’s definition also draws attention to the unintended consequences that often result from government actions and decisions as manifest in a policy (see also Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Taylor et al., 1997). In explaining this point, Howlett et al. (2009) note that although public policy is a conscious choice of governments, there are often unplanned activities that result from policy; these are usually referred to as unintended consequences. To exemplify, the Omani government implemented a policy to ban and stop ‘foreigners’ from working on farms in order to make this a job for Omanis only. The policy is strict and restricts non-Omanis from working on farms. However, this results in foreigners working illegally on farms without paying fees for visa and foreign worker cards. Here, the unintended consequence of this policy is harmful to the
government, the economy and security. Yet, such negative results are not always the case. Unplanned results may also sometimes be beneficial (Howlett et al., 2009).

### 3.2.3. Different uses of policy

According to Hogwood and Gunn (1984), the word ‘policy’ is used in a range of diverse ways by academics and policy practitioners. They identify ten common, everyday uses of the term ‘policy’ (see Hogwood and Gunn, 1984, pp. 13-19). Table 3.3 presents these uses and explains each usage briefly.

**Table 3.3**

*The ten uses of the word policy (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The uses of the term ‘policy’</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy as a label for a field of activity</td>
<td>The usage here describes policy as fields of governmental activity and involvement. To illustrate, ‘education policy’ is considered a label for the government activity in regards to the field of education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy as an expression of general purpose or a desired state of affairs</td>
<td>To indicate the intended purposes of a government in a specific field, as well as to describe the attained state of affairs following policy implementation. This might be seen as meta-policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy as a specific proposal</td>
<td>To refer to the specific actions in a policy field as opposed to general purposes, for example the introduction of fees on Australian universities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy as a decision of government</td>
<td>Policy is here used to describe particular governmental decisions; here policy and decisions are synonyms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy as a formal authorization</td>
<td>A policy by a government on a certain issue is often referenced in an Act of Parliament or statutory instrument which gives permission for such activity to be undertaken by the government. Authority carries the connotation of legitimacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy as a program</td>
<td>Policy is expressed here as a program applied by the government. Therefore, it is a specific activity that involves a particular package of regulations, resources and organizations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy as output</td>
<td>To indicate what government really offers or achieves as opposed to its promises through legislation. Outputs mean the activities of governments at the point of delivery. These might not lead to the desired outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy as outcome</td>
<td>Policy can also be seen as what is actually achieved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy as a theory or model</td>
<td>This suggests that policies engage some presuppositions regarding what governments can do and what the results of their actions are.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Policy as a process refers to a series of steps in the policy cycle (e.g., development, implementation, evaluation).

These ten uses of the word policy are very helpful in drawing a clear definition of policy. The words "activity", "purposes", "proposal", "decision", "government", "authorization", "program", "outputs", "model", and "process" are all related to the cycle of policy. At the end of this section, the study will synthesize these to create a working definition of education policy to underpin this study.

Another definition of policy is presented by Considine (1994), who argues that "a public policy is an action which employs governmental authority to commit resources in support of preferred values" (p.3). This definition stresses the authority of the government (legitimate right to exercise power), as well as the significance of money, services (resources) and values. Similarly, Ball (1994) stresses that policy is the "authoritative allocation of values", a definition originally constructed by Easton (1953) in US political science. Here, I would agree with Ball and Considine, arguing that governmental authority is a crucial thing in public policy. Without doubt, governments are regarded as the holders of legitimate power in regard to public policy. I would also argue that in a public policy, the authority of government plays a major role in allocating values in the society among competing interest groups.

Ball (1994) also deals with policy as both texts and processes. He declares that:

Policy is both text and action, words and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended. Policies are always incomplete insofar as they relate to a map onto the wild profusion of local practice. (Ball, 1994, p.10)

Ball (1994) reminds us that the policies do not always achieve their intended goals. There are always complexities in the real practice (or ‘implementation’ or ‘enactment’) context of policies that create barriers to reaching the planned actions and outcomes. The potential gap between the policy text and practice is emphasized by Ball (1994, p.10), who argues that “policies are always incomplete” in mapping onto current practices. Policies do not always achieve all their intended goals and desired future outcomes.

3.2.4. Policy as both process and product

After looking at some definitions of policy, we come to an argument that policy is both process and product (see Taylor et al., 1997; Ball, 1994). Indeed, this argument is opposed to the rational models that look at policy as a process with separate and linear phases (policy development or formulation, implementation and evaluation). Traditional approaches (e.g., the rational approach to
policy making) have been criticized for being too rational, suggesting clear, linear and defined stages (Ball 1990; Cibulka 1994; Taylor et al. 1997). This study agrees with this criticism, yet also acknowledges that the account of the rational models offers a comprehensible view of the policy process and should be seen as a normative frame for actual policy making, rather than as an account of what usually occurs in the reality of policy production and implementation.

In a similar view, Taylor et al. (1997, p. 15), in some general observations about policy, write that policy is more than a text. Arguably, they provide an account of policy as text, but also as a process. To them, policy involves processes before and after text production (context, text and consequences). In contrast to the rational model, Taylor et al. (1997) stress that policy processes are ongoing, dynamic and always political. Thus, policy processes in reality are not linear as proposed by the rational models, but “more complex, interactive and multi-layered” (p. 25). In the same way, Ball (1990, p. 3) describes policy processes as often “unscientific and irrational”. Hence, the phases of the policy process are continuous, interactive and interrelated. Taylor et al. (1997) summarize their approach in the following way:

> [W]e would stress that policy is much more than a specific policy document or text. Rather, policy is both processes and product. In such a conceptualization, policy involves the production of the text, the text itself, ongoing modification to the text and processes of implementation into practice. (Taylor et al., 1997, pp. 24-25)

From Taylor et al.’s (1997) summary, we can see that policy goes through a cycle of processes (agenda setting, text production, text, implementation, evaluation, and modification to the text). These processes take place both prior to the production of a policy text and afterwards during implementation and policy evaluation. It should also be noted that not all policies go through these processes.

In discussing this policy phenomenon, Taylor et al. (1997) also state that policy is a political process that entails compromises and settlements. To them, policies do not emerge in a contextual vacuum, but rather reflect compromises over struggles between competing interests (p. 4). Correspondingly, Ball (1990) talks about the political nature of the policy process and the struggles and conflict between interests in society that are almost inevitably played out in policy processes and policy texts. He goes further saying “only certain influences and agendas are recognised as legitimate, only certain voices are heard” (Ball, 1994, p. 16). This means that domination is present in the policy process and accordingly, justice can be hard to achieve. It is vital at this point to acknowledge the significance of the allocation of values and allocation of resources in the policy process (Ball, 1994; Considine, 1994; Easton, 1953; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Taylor et al. 1997).

Ball (1994) developed a new concept for policy by distinguishing between policy as a text and policy as discourse. Based on literary theory and the work of Foucault, policy as a text refers to
representations which are encoded and decoded in complex ways, suggesting that it is a medium between author and reader. To be clear, policy texts are the products of struggle and compromises. Besides, they are interpreted by actors depending on their skills, history, context and experience. Ball (2006) argues that policy texts are set within the frameworks of discourses, which constitute or limit what can be thought and said in policy texts. In an explicit way, Ball (1994) mentions that any particular text will have a plurality of readings by a plurality of readers, acknowledging that authors of policy texts cannot control the meaning or interpretations of their text.

On the other hand, policy as discourse is an idea that is developed from the Foucault’s approach (see Foucault, 1977) to discourse analysis. Ball (1994) argues that policy as a discourse is a means to signify the importance of power relations in framing readings of policy texts. Indeed, discourses stand for the meaning and use of words and therefore they assign meanings to texts. Policy discourse frames what we can think and say and frames what is said in specific policy texts. Ball talks about the politics of policy text production. Discourse is part of the framing of politics: “Discourses are about what can be said, and thought, about who can speak, when, where and with what authority” (Ball, 2006, p. 48).

3.2.5. Conceptualising policy in this study

Trying to establish a definition of policy, I found that there is no consensus or agreement among authors and arguably there is no single answer for the apparently simple question: ‘What is policy?’ Definitions have developed and changed rapidly since the policy sciences emerged in 1960s. This section has considered the definitional problem of the concept and surveyed some well-known definitions for the concept. There is also the distinction here between normative models of how policy ought to be developed, and analytical models that deal more with how policy is actually developed and enacted.

From the review above, I accept that public policy is the responsibility of the state or a state activity. Moreover, the authority of the government, funding and services (resources) and values are argued to be crucial in the policy process. Indeed, there have been different conceptualizations: policy as both process and product; policy as text but also a process; policy as a text; and policy texts as framed by discourse. Regarding policy as a process, policy has been described as more complex, interactive and multi-layered compared with the conceptualisation of policy in normative rational models. Furthermore, the policy process has been argued to be political in nature and entails compromises and policy settlements. This process in the rational approaches suggests policy should go through a cycle of agenda setting, text production, implementation, evaluation, modification to the text. In terms of their accomplishment, policies do not always achieve their
intended goals when they come to practice. Besides, there are often some unintended consequences from policy.

After reviewing this literature on public policy, I will try to provide a clear definition of policy to frame this study. I believe that policy is a government action (authority) to solve a certain problem a society faces. I acknowledge that often policy constructs this problem in a particular way; that is, a function of policy is problem setting. In the policy, a text is produced that carries decisions full of values attempting to satisfy all the competing, interest groups and policy is thus most often a settlement between competing interests. Policy is thus both text and processes of agenda setting, text production, implementation or enactment and evaluation. Applying this definition in the state-centric system of government in the Sultanate of Oman is a key question in this thesis. Overall, this part of the literature review on public policy frames the study and its focus and the next part will specifically deal with the HE policy.

3.3. **HE policy-making**

This section provides a very brief overview of HE policy-making, in order to help identify an appropriate theoretical framework for this study in the next chapter. The existing literature on HE policy-making shows that this area of research globally has begun recently to gain attention and become more attractive and popular among researchers (Dar, 2012; McLendon, 2003a, b; McLendon & Ness, 2003; McLendon et al., 2005; McLendon et al., 2009; Tandberg, 2006, 2010). According to Bastedo (2009), there has been a significant shift in research toward HE policy-making for the purpose of improving our understanding of its processes and effects. However, McLendon (2003a) writing more than ten years ago mentioned that as an area of research and field of study, HE policy-making “has suffered a history of benign neglect” (p. 186) and therefore the research literature has remained “scant, fragmented, limited in substantive scope, and loosely tethered to disciplinary insights of political science or other cognate fields” (p. 166). His argument is that while there have been some individual studies focusing on national governments’ role in HE policy dating back to the 1970s (e.g., Bailey, 1975; Gladieux & Wolanin, 1976; King, 1975), not enough systematic attention has been given to this field of study. Lane (2007) agrees with McLendon (2003a) and claims that HE policy-making lacked attention from the scholarly community. Compared with schooling policy-making, the study of HE policy-making is relatively underdeveloped (McLendon, 2003a). In short, it has been argued that HE policy-making suffered in the past from a dearth of systemic studies, but this has changed during the last few years and there has been “a welcome re-emergence” of studies in the field (Dar, 2012, p. 787).
McLendon’s (2003a) work is regarded as a fruitful intervention in HE policy-making research. He has ambitiously called for more focused and systemic research in this field of study (see Conner & Rabovsky, 2011). Indeed, he argued that this area of research lacked coherent conceptual and methodological scholarship. Therefore, he sketched a developmental future plan for this area by specifying three needs, which were “a wider range of issue coverage”, “a broadened and enriched theoretical perspective”, and “improved analytic sophistication and rigour” (McLendon, 2003a, p. 166). More recently, Conner and Rabovsky (2011) have suggested that there have been many studies that respond to McLendon’s call and several efforts have been made to develop this area of HE policy research. As will be shown later, a variety of theoretical frameworks have been used and various issues have been covered during the last ten years.

Overall, as pointed out by Bastedo (2007), HE research, during the last few years, has begun to see and consider the study of policy and policy-making to be a central subfield in HE research. Clearly, this shows that HE policy-making is now a fast growing field of study. Conducting an extensive literature search, I discovered that there were a number of studies carried out with the aim of debating some HE policy and policy-making issues (see Cook, 1998; Kauko, 2013; Lane, 2007; Marginson & Mollis, 2001; Martinez, 2002; Mills, 2007; Lowry, 2001; Richardson et al., 1999; Saarinen & Ursin, 2012). The focus of these studies has been varied and these apply the study of public policy and political science to HE. Surprisingly, most of these studies that I came across are American. The study of HE politics is more popular and advanced in the United States than any other developed nation and this could be due to their old and large system. Furthermore, the existence of specialized department for studies in HE in the American universities might be another reason for such advancement. Indeed, this is not to say that there are no studies on HE policy-making from other nations, rather to point to the advancement of American literature. Overall, these studies (American and European) have used several different frameworks and methods which fit with their cases and contexts. Some of the issues and themes covered in these studies are the national politics of HE (Cook, 1998), how the structure of HE systems affects HE policies (Lowry, 2001), political actors and the governance of HE (Richardson et al., 1999), policy development and state governance structures (Leslie & Novak, 2003; Martinez, 2002), the use of political frameworks in analysing policymaking in HE (Kauko, 2013; Lane, 2007; Mills, 2007), the viewpoints of policymakers, and legislators on HE policy (Bastedo, 2006), the analysis of power relations in comparison between HE systems in Australia and Argentina (Marginson & Mollis, 2001) and approaches to study HE policy (Saarinen & Ursin, 2012). These studies informed the selection of an appropriate theoretical framework for this study, as will be shown in the following chapter.
3.4. Conclusion

As this study focuses on Omani HE policy architecture and policy-making, this chapter has illustrated the limited amount of literature specifically focused on policy. It has been confirmed that to date there has not been any study focusing on the policy architecture and policy-making in Omani HE. Most of the Omani studies mentioned above have dealt with policy issues, but not policy-making or policy architecture. With such a gap in the Omani Literature, this study is crucial for providing a critical understanding of Omani HE policy-making and as such will form the basis for future studies in this area.

Moreover, the chapter addressed the definitional issue of the concept of policy and proposed a conceptualisation of policy for this study. Policy is taken to refer to a government action (authority) to solve a certain problem a society faces, acknowledging that often policy constructs this problem in a particular way with a text that carries decisions full of values. Furthermore, policy is both text and processes of agenda setting, text production, implementation and evaluation. While the contemporary educational policy literature in developed nations stresses new approaches to policy development, including the involvement of non-state and international actors (e.g., Ball, 2012, Ball & Junemann, 2012), policy making in Oman is still very much state-centric and top-down.

In the last part of this chapter, the existing literature on HE policy and policy-making was presented briefly. It was stated that the HE policy-making as a field of research was not given enough attention by researchers. Yet, the studies mentioned above on HE policy and policy-making gave me a clear picture about the previously used theoretical frameworks and research methods in researching HE policy. In general, this section of the literature review has helped in developing the theoretical framework adopted in this study (Chapter four) as well as the research methods (Chapter five).
4. An Eclectic Theoretical Framework

The previous three chapters introduced the study, set the context and reviewed the relevant literature. The literature on HE policy and policy-making presented briefly in Chapter three was useful to guide this study in relation to choosing the appropriate theories and methodological frameworks to underpin the study. Thus Chapter four presents the theoretical framework that will be used to guide this research. It will start by briefly outlining the debate in the literature (American and the European) about frequently used and proposed theoretical frameworks in studying HE policy-making. Such review is intended to give an idea about the richness and extensive availability of frameworks for HE policy analysis, then leading to the study framework. The last part of the chapter outlines an eclectic theoretical framework (‘tool-box’ approach) which is found to be the most suitable framework for conducting this research study (see Ball, 1994; 2006). A justification for using the tool-box approach is provided.

4.1. HE policy-making frameworks

The previous research on HE policy mentioned in Chapter three has provided various theoretical frameworks that can help us in understanding, analysing and explaining concepts, relationships and problems within policy processes in HE. These frameworks differ from one study to another, depending on the nature and focus of the study and the specific issues being addressed (Bastedo, 2007; Kauko, 2013; McLendon, 2003a). Bastedo (2007) has examined some frameworks used in HE policy literature and has argued that only some of these frameworks have been found to be useful for application in analysing HE policy-making problems. This argument, I consider, is a challenge and a reminder for HE researchers to be careful when choosing their theoretical framework. HE policy as a field of study needs to consider the specific characteristics of HE including matters such as governance, institutional autonomy, knowledge production, adult teaching, government control and so on. Overall, my point of view is that HE policy-making researchers have to decide on a framework that guides and aids them to design and conduct studies with the purpose of providing answers to the research questions driving the study.

The seminal work done by Bastedo (2007), Kauko (2013), McLendon (2003a) and Saarinen and Ursin (2012) is very helpful in choosing a theoretical framework, as they traverse some of these frameworks and give examples of their usage. Overall, these frameworks are found to be theory-driven approaches, meaning that they are based on theories used in a deductive manner in research. According to Conner and Rabovsky (2011), HE policy studies borrows its theoretical frameworks from theories of public policy, the political science disciplines and sociology, which have contributed enormously to the development of this subfield of HE research (see also Bastedo,
Indeed, HE research is building on the efforts of these disciplines to understand and explain the processes and issues facing the politics of HE. It is worth mentioning here that the nature of research in HE generally and HE policy specifically is considered interdisciplinary in its nature and this imposes a mixture of different theoretical and methodological frames and practical applications (Teichler, 2005; Saarinen & Ursin, 2012).

For instance, McLendon (2003a) and Bastedo (2007) have suggested some theoretical frameworks from political science and public policy that can help in research of HE politics and policy. As stated by Bastedo (2007), these theoretical frameworks include “principal-agent theory, policy process theories, and a family of policy innovation and diffusion theories” (p. 172). However, it is very important to note here that only a few researchers of HE policy have until now used these theories (see Bastedo, 2007; McLendon, 2003a). Moreover, in studying “dominant and emerging approaches in the study of HE policy change”, Saarinen and Ursin (2012) choose 40 articles from three international journals, well-known as leading journals focusing on HE. These 40 articles have concentrated on HE policy research in the European tradition. Ursin (2012) found three approaches that have been used frequently in these three journals to study HE policy, which are: structural approaches, actor approaches and agency approaches. Saarinen and Ursin (2012) have concluded that these approaches overlap to some extent.

Besides public policy and political sciences, HE policy-making studies may also rely on theories of sociology and organizations as guiding frameworks. Bastedo’s (2007) argument is that frameworks derived from theories of sociology and organization could prove to be helpful in understanding the processes of HE policy and their effects. He supports his argument by stating that policy actors (boards, legislatures and agencies) “do not function in a vacuum; they are embedded in organizations” (p. 295). In short, this very brief review of theoretical frameworks shows that HE policy-making studies rely on various disciplines and are often interdisciplinary in character.

4.2. Reflection on the approach of this study

Before presenting my framework for this study, I have found various issues that require attention. As argued by Taylor et al. (1997), there is no recipe approach to policy analysis. Furthermore, Vidovich (2013) asserts that “no single model or framework for policy analysis ought to be privileged over others; the approach adopted should fit the purpose” (p.27). Based on these observations, the above discussion shows that one theoretical underpinning may work for one case, but it may not work for another. The context and the environments surrounding the case have implications for the theoretical underpinnings chosen to frame the study. What is used in the USA may not work in the UK, given their differing histories and state structures, cultures and policy
approaches. It can be the same even within the different states of one nation, when policy is
developed sub-nationally, rather than being a national responsibility.

Looking at the Omani context, the political system is different from that in other countries in the
Arab Gulf and from other developing countries. It is certainly not comparable to systems in
developed nations. Focusing on HE policy, a suitable framework that looks at Oman’s HE system
embedded with other systems in the state is really what is needed here. There also needs to be
acknowledgement of the state-centric approach to HE policy in Oman and acknowledgement of its
rapid expansion and immaturity as a system.

Another issue is that the above mentioned frameworks have been developed to address a specific
issue or part of HE policy. Indeed, the focus differs from one framework to another, with varying
foci on policy development, policy enactment, actors, networks, agencies and dynamic political
systems. In other words, these frameworks provide a particular perspective on a certain policy issue.
As this study is descriptive and analytical at the same time, trying to provide a holistic picture of the
HE policy architecture and policy-making processes in Oman, a broad framework is needed.
Indeed, a framework that is comprehensive in covering the whole picture of the Omani HE policy
(focusing on metapolicy) is what is required to address the research problem and answer the
research questions. By this I mean that single, earlier frameworks will not work for my study
because of their specific focus on particular topics and within particular policy issues and stages
(development, enactment evaluation).

Moreover, I have discovered that the terms “framework”, “module” and “approach” have
sometimes been used interchangeably by researchers. Indeed, this issue was also raised by Kauko
(2013), pointing to the confusion between usage of these terms. For my research, I am going to
speak of the framework of the study.

4.3. The framework for this study

Considering the previous theories and theoretical frameworks, it is really not easy to find a suitable
framework for my case. For my study, I have been concerned to find one that can help me in
understanding Omani HE metapolicy and policy-making as a whole structure with a particular and
idiosyncratic organisational architecture. So, the focus is not on analysing a certain policy
document, rather it aims to explore the nature of the national (overarching) HE policy and policy-
making architecture. As mentioned earlier, Oman has a complex, multilayered and complicated HE
policy architecture and policy-making system, overseen and managed by different governmental
bodies. Indeed, the study framework must pay attention to such complexity and attend to the
various relationships between different institutions and to the overall architecture. In other words,
this study is targeted to the broad system-wide policy of Omani HE. Moreover, this study is not focused on a particular policy document as I am not interested in researching specific policy content. In regards to that, my preliminary plan was to use either Ball’s (1994) framework (contexts of influence, text production, and practice) or Taylor et al.’s (1997) framework (context, text, and consequences) for education policy analysis, but I found that I would need to focus on a certain policy text to effectively utilise either of these frameworks, which is not the focus here.

Based on the above discussion, the research questions and literature on policy and policy-making, the nature of my study cannot rely on one theoretical framework to help in collecting and analysing the data. Thus, an eclectic approach of theoretical concepts, models and frameworks will be used. This is what Ball (1994, 2006) calls a ‘tool-box’ approach to theorizing empirical data in policy research. I found that an eclectic approach of policy analysis would help better to target the broad, overarching Omani HE national policies in the presence of the difficulty of using one single theory for such a context. Indeed, it is the appropriate way to address the research questions and the problematic side of this study. Vidovich (2013) supports this choice of theoretical eclecticism in HE policy research by arguing that “eclectic is good when it comes to theory for guiding HE policy research”, pointing to an extensive menu of theoretical foundations from which to select combinations and permutations that suit the nature of each HE policy study. Eclecticism in framing research is always creative, allowing the researcher to pick what suits their study and its specific nature.

Because of this study’s nature and the complexity of the policy sciences in general, this study combines theories, concepts or models from different disciplines (sociology, public policy, political sciences). This theoretical tool-box for policy analysis is expanded in this study to not only examine the Omani national context, but also the regional and global contexts of Omani HE policy. Nowadays, national policies are not merely state business, but affected by regional and global actors and discourses (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010); on this point Brenner (2004) speaks of the rescaling of state.

After critically perusing the relevant literature and considering the framing research questions, six tools have been selected to guide the study; these are Claus Offe’s (1975, 1984) observations concerning state structure/policy content relationships, the principal-agent theory, the state control/supervisory models, theories of the public policy cycle, loose–coupling and globalisation processes lenses. Each of these will be presented briefly in this chapter, describing them and explaining their use in the study. More details of each will be provided and illustrated in the analysis chapters (six, seven and eight).
4.3.1. Offe’s structure/policy content relationship

The German social theorist, Claus Offe (1974, 1984), argued some time ago that state structures – here policy architecture – mediate both policy processes and the content of policy. Specifically, he observed, “the institutionalized formal mode of political institutions determines what potential issues are, how they are defined, what solutions are proposed, and so on” (1975, p.135). This is acknowledgement of the point that organisational structure affects policy making processes and policy content. We might see ‘organisational structure’ in this doctoral research as the policy-making architecture in the Omani HE system. In this study, the Sultanate political regime, the whole governance system and policy actors within the system are anticipated to take the Omani HE policy in a certain direction, playing a crucial role in all policy stages. Based on Offe’s statement, the unique Omani Sultanate government structure as well as the policy workers are considered as chief shapers and framers of HE policies, from agenda-setting to policy formulation to decision-making, to the text development and finally to delivery and implementation. Overall, Offe’s argument helps in this study to see the relationships between the idiosyncratic Omani governmental structure, its HE policy architecture, its policy-making players, HE policy processes and importantly, policy content.

4.3.2. The principal-agent theory

This theory is based on the idea that an organization has two parties, which are ‘principal’ and ‘agent’. Those two parties could be individuals or organisations. More clearly, a ‘principal’ party delegates tasks to an ‘agent’ party who has to perform the tasks (Kivistö, 2008). In political science, this theory is used to describe the relationship between two parties, explaining the political control of bureaucracy. This relationship is believed to be hierarchical in nature (Lane & Kivistö, 2008). It is argued that principals have the desire of controlling agents. In HE policy, principal-agent theory is useful to describe “how and why elected officials seek control of state HE agencies, how agencies respond to political control, and in what ways agency structure influences policy implementation” (McLendon, 2003a, p174).

Regarding this study, principal-agent theory provides theoretical resources to study the relationship between the Omani Government as a principal and the HEIs as agents. With various agencies within the Omani Government controlling the HEIs, the principal-agent theory can tell more about how such agencies are principals over the HEIs, as well as being at the same time agents of the Omani Government. In general, through the principal-agent theory, the picture will hopefully become clear regarding how the Omani Government, through its cascade of agents (ministries), dominates the HEIs through direct governance, policy and funding.
4.3.3. The state control/supervising models

Neave and van Vught (1994) developed two models to look at how governments around the world regulate and control HE systems. These models are called ‘the state control model’ and ‘the state supervising models’.

The HE literature shows that the ideal typical ‘state control model’ was traditionally present in the European continent and some other parts of developed nations such as in North America, Australia and New Zealand (see for example, Clark, 1983; Van Vught, 1995). Nowadays, this model is clearly seen in HE systems of developing nations. In this model, “the state is the overarching and highly powerful regulator of the system”, that provides full funding (Neave & van Vught, 1994). HEIs have no or very limited autonomy and policies are mainly developed by government to serve its interests. Thus, policy-making is centralised by governments through national ministries of education. Neave and van Vught (1994) state that governments in this model control all aspects of HE (access conditions, the degree requirements, the examinations systems, staff appointment, quality assurance, HEIs licensing, the curriculum etc.).

The state supervising model has been used to characterise the American and British HE systems, and also the Australian HE system, where governments have limited and weaker influence over the system (Neave & Van Vught, 1994). The State plays the role of monitoring the quality and sustaining the running of the system though accountability mechanisms. In those systems as well, the universities have become less dependent on state funding and more dependent on private funding sources (e.g., through research, consultancy, student fees etc). More or less, this model of governance works through supervisory mechanisms for steering the system. Van Vught (1994) describes this model by saying:

The state sees its task of supervising the HE system in terms of assuring academic quality and maintaining a certain level of accountability. Government does not intrude into the HE system by means of detailed regulation and strict control. Rather it respects the autonomy of the HEIs and it stimulates the self-regulating capabilities of these institutions. The state sees itself as a supervisor, steering from a distance and using broad terms of regulation. (p. 16)

In general, there have been many subsequent reforms to HE systems globally for increasing the power and autonomy of institutions, while at the same time governments do not want to totally lose their capacity for ‘directing’ their research and teaching work. Governments tend to move from a state control to a state supervisory model of HE governance across time. The two models also work with different definitions of academic freedom. This study will apply these two models to reveal to what extent the Omani Government controls the HE system and how policy-making is affected by that control.


4.3.4. The policy cycle framework

The policy cycle framework is derived from the theories of public policy processes. In this framework, a policy is looked at as a process that goes through a sequence of stages (McLendon, 2003a). These stages are called the ‘the policy cycle’, describing how a policy is developed, implemented and evaluated. Indeed, Howlett et al. (2009, p. 10) state that the public policy-making process is considered “as a set of interrelated stages through which policy issues and deliberations flow in a more or less sequential fashion from ‘inputs’ (problems) to ‘outputs’ (policies). They argue that the idea of breaking policy-making into stages is to simplify the process as well as a means for analytical purposes. The following Figure 4.1 illustrates the stages in this normative-rationalist construction of a policy cycle.

![Figure 4.1. Stages in the policy cycle (Howlett et al., 2009).](image)

It must be noted here that this normative-rationalist model – how to develop policy – utilises a different conception of a policy cycle from that in Ball’s influential work in policy sociology in education dealt with earlier in the literature review of this thesis. Ball is dealing with what actually occurs in his conceptualisation of the policy cycle, while Howlett et al. are dealing with what ought to happen.

By using policy process models, the future of HE policy research will be potentially enriched (McLendon, 2003a), helping in understanding how and why governments develop HE policy by focusing on processes and outcomes. According to McLendon (2003a), political-systems perspectives and policy incrementalism derived from policy process theory are used as frameworks
by researchers to understand the dynamics of policy making in HE. In this study, and for analytical purposes, the operations of the Omani HE policy-making architecture will be analysed using this policy cycle framework. This will help in understanding who participates in each stage of the process.

Again it is very important to note here that the policy cycle approach used in this chapter, prescribed by Howlett et al. (2009), is a normative and a rational one, enabling us to see how Omani HE policy ought to be developed. This normative approach is distinguished from other critical/analytical approaches of the policy cycle offered by Ball (1990, 1994). While such critical approaches provide theoretical understandings of the complexities of policy process and what happens in reality, this study employs the normative-rationalist approach for certain reasons. First, there have not been any studies or official documents that map the intended/ideal policy making processes in the Omani HE system. Thus a documentation of these processes is necessary. This is done in Chapter six, drawing on both statutes and research interviews. It is thus argued that the normative-rationalist approach is appropriate for undertaking this initial examination of how HE policy is developed in Oman. This approach provides a way to map the normative policy-making processes of the Omani HE system. Future studies can rely on the normative analysis of this study to carry out subsequent critical analysis using critical policy cycle approaches as outlined by Ball, concerning the complexities and messiness of actual policy making in Omani HE. Chapter six outlines the way policy is made in Omani HE drawing on analysis of relevant documents and interviews. The interviews move this analysis towards a more critical approach, suggesting a gap between what the statutes outline and what happens in reality.

4.3.5. The concept of loose coupling

The concept of loose coupling is used to describe a resilient system that has autonomous agencies that are unresponsive to each other. The components of a loosely coupled system look as if they are controlled rationally and hierarchically, yet they still preserve their own identity and some evidence of their physical separateness (Weick, 1976). Loose coupling is common because, “The forces for integration—for worrying about the whole, its identity, its integrity and its future—are often weak compared to the forces for specialization” (Gilmore et al., 1999, p. 1).

In this study, the concept of the loosely coupled system will be used to look at the Omani HE system with its embedded agencies and hierarchical policy architecture for developing policy and supervising HEIs. The responsiveness of HEIs to the whole system will be examined using this concept. Moreover, the coordination between these components (worrying about the whole Omani
HE system) will be tested: are they loosely coupled and non-aligned or more tightly coupled and aligned? What is the ideal?

4.3.6. Globalisation processes

‘Globalisation’ is a term that is increasingly used nowadays in academic literature, the media and everyday talk (Mundy, 2005). It is “a highly contested notion”; even its origins and consequences are debated (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p.23). That said, it is difficult to find a consensual definition for this concept among various writers and theorists, as it is both an ambiguous and a very broad concept. Although there is no consensus on a definition, researchers from different fields of study agree that the world in the age of globalisation has become a smaller village through interconnectedness of nations, continents or regions facilitated by new communication technologies (Al’Abri, 2011). For instance, Anthony Giddens (1990, p.64) considers globalisation as "the intensification of the worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa". Globalisation is about time-space compression, facilitated by the advancement of information technologies.

Globalisation is also looked at as a process by some theorists. Held and McGrew (2000, p.55), for example, refer to globalisation as a "process (or set of processes) which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity and impact- generating transcontinental or interregional flows of networks of activity, interaction and the exercise of power". In this definition, power is regarded as critical tool in the processes of globalisation and transnational or global flows are seen as central to it. Here we see the importance of processes working above and across nations. Appadurai (1996) speaks of five dimensions of flows to describe globalisation, which are ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes. He considers globalisation as a process that involves the movement of the world’s people, images, technologies, finance (trade, money, and capital) and ideas (practices concerning states and other institutional policies) with disjunctive relationships between these multiple flows. Overall, I consider globalisation in this study as constituted from processes that facilitate the experience of the world as a small village through time and space compression, with new technologies being an important facilitator of this interconnectivity (see Al’Abri, 2011). This process is marked by speedy movement of people, services, capital, goods, ideas and knowledge across borders. It is a phenomenon that has spawned new practices and discourses within nation-states.

While this study has a focus on the regional and broader global contexts of Omani HE policy, there remains a need to look how the Omani government has dealt with globalisation pressures and
challenges. In other words, how the Omani state-centric system has responded to the global pressures resulting from neo-liberal capitalism needs to be considered. In the global literature, there is a continuous debate among researchers of how globalisation has altered and affected nation-states, their capacity and roles (Rizvi & Lingard, 2004). Some argue that globalisation has almost demolished or at least weakened the role of nation-states and their political structure in which nation-states are seen as outdated organizations (see Albrow, 1997). In this extreme globalist view, it is as if we are talking about the ‘death of the nation-state’, suggesting the end of the nation-state altogether (see Vertovec, 2004). This argument is rejected in this study. Rather, the study accepts that the nation-state functions differently today in this global context and also has to accommodate regional and global pressures. Specifically, as argued to this point, Oman still has a very much a state-centric approach to policy making. Other writers debate that the authority of states is declining in the presences of global processes and flow, resulting in a redefinition of states’ systems (see Castles, 2001). As a globalist, Ohmae (1990) observes that the world is becoming borderless in our age of globalisation. The stance taken here is that this is an overstatement, as nations and their governments remain important, but work in different ways today in the context of global and regional pressures.

In a more novel theorisation, Brenner (2004) conceptualises the rescaling of nation-states and their policy producing apparatuses. He stresses the importance of the state and its key forms of territorialisation in the globalisation age, yet argues the reconfiguration and the transformation of the scalar geographies and power of the state in the contemporary era. In other words, Brenner argues that globalisation has rescaled the nation-state, but not undermined it, resulting in transforming state forms and power, with international and regional organizations entering the arena of national policy-making in various ways. It can be argued that globalisation has reconstituted the role of nation-states in making policies, while not necessarily weakening them or rendering nation-states powerless. With these transformations of the nation-state, “struggles take place at different scales engaging an array of actors and interests, for example, capital, national states, para-state organizations, labour unions, local social movements and supranational organizations” (Robertson, Bonal & Dale, 2006, p.230). This means that national policy-making is stretched by globalisation to include not only the national apparatus, but also regional and global organizations. The nation-state and its policy-making apparatus remain important, but work in different ways in relation to these scalar and spatial changes associated with globalisation. These changes are manifested in different ways in different nations, which have varying capacities to deflect such pressures.

In a similar observation to that of the rescaling argument, Rizvi and Lingard (2010) argue that the processes of globalisation have reconfigured and reconstituted the state's authority structures, which
have been “altered by new patterns of communication, competition, cooperation and coercion across national borders” (p.22). It is the authority of the state that has been transformed with international and global organizations playing a more important role in (re)shaping the policies of nations. According to Rizvi and Lingard (2010), the nation-state does not go away, but it is affected by regional and global agreements, laws, discourses, pressures and so on. Moreover, it is suggested that regionalism is encouraged by the globalisation pressures in which nation-states form cooperation agreements and regional and supranational organizations to face these challenges (Mittelman, 1996). Indeed, globalisation has at one level strengthened bi-lateral and multi-lateral links and ties between nation-states. The Cooperation Council for the Arab States (GCC) in this study is a good example of such regionalism and can be understood as a collective regional cooperation in the Arab Gulf region, which seeks to promote political, economic, social and cultural development of the GCC states. Oman is a member of the GCC, but at the same time is wary of the potential Saudi dominance of the GCC agendas. So the nation and the state fits within these global and regional influences. Overall, a focus on the regional and global contexts of the Omani HE policy necessitates using the rescaling argument, suggesting that the Omani system (a state-centric Sultanate) has been reconstituted in the ways it works. Therefore, this study also adopts and theorizes its argument around Brenner’s thesis of the rescaling of the state and its work in the age of globalisation.

Overall then, I reject the argument of the absolute ‘self-enclosed container’ of nation-states in making HE policy in this age of globalisation, arguing instead that the state’s capacity and power to make HE policy are impacted by globalisation processes, including new regionalisms. Indeed, this study is framed around the argument that globalisation has opened the way for regional (GCC) and international actors (such as the World Bank, UNESCO, WTO) to influence how the Omani government governs and makes its policies for the HE system, with the Omani government the ultimate actor mediating policies initiated by those global players. This is what Appadurai (1996) calls ‘vernacular globalisation’, referring to “the ways in which local sites and their histories, cultures, politics and pedagogies mediate to greater or lesser extents the effects of top-down globalisation” (cited in Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 65). However, we need to acknowledge that different nations have varying capacities to mediate such pressures. Here Appadurai (1996) makes a useful distinction between ‘context productive’ impacts of globalisation and regionalism and ‘context generative’ ones. The latter idea indicates stronger mediation to varying degrees by the nation-state of these other scales of influence. Oman’s reasonably strong economic position allows it a stronger mediating role in relation to these influences than is the case with many developing countries. For example, while Oman is a developing country, it does not have the mendicant relationship to the World Bank or any international organization through loans or structural
adjustment pressures. Furthermore, its state-centric approach to policy processes also mediates to a considerable extent these other influences or at least rearticulates them.

In that sense, the national Omani context mediates the global discourses coming from beyond the nation with choices of either accepting them fully, conditioning them to suit the nation or even resisting them. Thus, I consider the above mentioned global and regional organizations as a ‘transnational organizational apparatus’, working with the Omani government and playing an influential role in policy-making processes in the Omani HE system. I do not accept the idea that these regional and global actors are demolishing the Omani’s government capacity to make HE policies, yet they are contributing to HE policy development and evaluation through certain activities such as providing technical resources, setting standards and instruments, and exchanging information, charters and constitutions (see McNeely & Cha, 1994).

By taking account of globalisation processes and specifically the state’s rescaling, this study intends to analyse the wider context in which Omani HE policy is developed. As mentioned in the literature review (Chapter three), Oman’s education has been affected by globalisation processes, which have led to continuous reforms to policy during the last few decades (see Al’Abri, 2011; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010). Therefore, the global context (antecedents and pressures) that led to the current HE policy in Oman will be looked at (Taylor et al., 1997). This will help in answering the question about how global contexts (regional and more global) affect HE policy and, specifically, how globalisation processes are impacting HE policy in Oman. This is the empirical focus of Chapter eight of this thesis.

4.4. Conclusion

This chapter has succinctly traversed the most commonly used theoretical frameworks in HE policy studies, aiming to find a suitable theoretical lens to frame this study and to answer the research questions that underpin it. It was found that these common frameworks had been developed to address a specific issue or part of the HE policy, while the nature of this doctoral study requires a broader framework for targeting the whole national Omani HE policy and policy architecture. This study focuses on meta-policy, rather than a specific HE policy. Thus, an eclectic theoretical approach (‘tool-box’) was chosen to target the problematic side of the study. This tool-box includes Offe’s observation that state structures – here policy architecture – mediate both policy processes and the content of policy; the principal-agent theory, which explains the relationship between the Omani government and the HE policy and between policy texts and implementation; ‘the state control/supervising’ models to look at the steering of the HE system in Oman and possible changes to it; the normative conception of the policy cycle to look at the operations and functioning of the
architecture; ‘the loosely coupled system’ concept to understand cooperation or misalignments between the components of the Omani HE policy-making system; and globalisation processes to examine the regional and global contexts and their impact on Omani HE policy.

After choosing the suitable theoretical framework, the next chapter focuses on the research methods of this study. The chapter will elaborate on the research design, data collection tools, approach to data analysis and the ethical issues associated this study.
5. Research Methods

In this chapter, the research methods for collecting and analysing data for this study are discussed and explained in detail. The chapter begins with an overview justifying the appropriateness of using a qualitative approach for such a study of policy and policy-making in HE in Oman. Then, the chapter goes on to describe the data collection instruments, which are semi-structured interviews and policy document analysis. Given my research is located in the area of HE policy and I worked with elites as interviewees, my positionality in this study is outlined, as well as providing more details about issues relating to interviewing elites. The ethical issues involved in the study, and considerations such as the information sheet and consent form, are also discussed. Furthermore, the processes of data management and analysis are described and explained.

5.1. Overview

Policy researchers in the USA have tended to use quantitative methods to collect and analyse data, but some time ago Richie and Spencer (1994) argued that there was a growing interest in using qualitative research among policy scholars (see Heck, 2004). This growing interest has gathered pace since that time. Such growing interest has been attributed to the curiosity of researchers to describe, understand and analyse complex systems, political and social relationships, and cultures (Richie & Spencer, 1994). In contrast, in the Anglo traditions, researchers have been using qualitative research widely to study policy. Currently, both approaches (qualitative and quantitative) are used widely in policy studies, either individually or sometimes mixed together. The decision on the approach depends on the nature of each study and the questions framing the research. According to Creswell (2012), “the problem, the questions, and the literature review help to steer the researcher toward either the quantitative or qualitative track” (p.11).

5.2. A qualitative study

Looking back at the literature review, context and research problems outlined in the preceding chapters, there is a strong case to be made that this study is best served by a qualitative approach. All features of the study indicate the appropriateness of using the qualitative approach to investigate the problem. Starting with the aims, the study seeks to contribute to the understanding of the Omani HE policy architecture and its operations. Going in depth, and drawing on Offe’s (1984) insights, it will also present a critical analysis and understanding of the effects of the policy architecture on the current HE policy-making processes and content. According to Heck (2004), qualitative research aims at describing and understanding “a phenomenon in great detail, emphasizing holistic
description of the phenomenon, as opposed to testing hypotheses about relationships” (p.216). Following Heck, the study is an attempt to provide a descriptive, critical understanding of HE policy architecture and policy-making systems in Oman (the phenomenon). Moreover, the study seeks to explore the factors (national, regional and global) impacting the policy architecture, processes and policy content. Overall, this study is intended to study the policy architecture of HE and policy processes in a specific situated context, namely that of contemporary Oman. It has also been noted to this point that there is little prior research in this specific domain to draw upon in the Omani context.

The research questions for this study can best be answered through qualitative data collection methods using semi-structured interviews with policy actors and document analysis of major statutes and decrees. In other words, these methods are intended to develop an “in-depth exploration” of the policy system and policy-making processes in Oman, set against regional and global contexts (see Flick, 2007; Walter, 2013). The questions clearly frame an inquiry into the policy architecture and its operations:

1. What is the architecture of policy-making in the Omani HE system?
2. How does the architecture of HE policy making in Oman operate?
3. What is the impact of this architecture and its operations on the Omani HE system?
4. What factors (national, regional and global) impact on the architecture, policy processes and policy in Omani HE?

Therefore, this study called for a qualitative approach to generating data and utilized qualitative analysis techniques. Next the chapter will move to review qualitative studies and their main characteristics.

Not limited to a specific discipline, qualitative research is an approach that is used in a variety of contexts and disciplines (Flick, 2007). While it is used extensively by researchers in various areas, the research literature does not agree on a specific and precise definition for the term ‘qualitative’. However, there is consensus among researchers about the prominent features of qualitative research. A qualitative approach is often presented as an extreme opposite to a quantitative, numbers or statistically driven approach. According to Flick (2007), qualitative research has its own identity and it is “no longer just simply not quantitative research” (p. ix). In regard to that, Bryman (2012) observes that qualitative research “usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data” (p.380). Besides, Bryman (2012) believes that qualitative research is often described as inductive (theory construction) compared with deductive (theory testing) approaches used in much quantitative research. However, this is not always the case;
qualitative and quantitative studies can be either inductive or deductive, or a mixture of both, depending on the nature of the study.

A more distinctive feature of qualitative research is its naturalistic data collection in which “researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). In this study, the Omani HE policy architecture, processes, content and the factors affecting them were studied in context. The researcher went to the field and collected data from interviewees and documents, trying to investigate and explore the research problem and understand the meanings policy-makers gave based on their experience, beliefs and opinions. Hence, the context of the study is very important in qualitative research that helps the researcher to observe and then interpret the meanings of interviews and document analysis.

In addition, Heck (2004) mentions an essential feature of qualitative studies, which is the wide variety of methods used to investigate the phenomenon, of approaches to conduct the research and of formats for presenting findings (see also Denizen & Lincoln, 1994). Of course, the chosen methods, approaches and presentations are framed by the research questions and context and consideration of what data are necessary to answer these questions in context. Creswell (2012) states that gathering data for qualitative research usually draws on four tools: observations, interviews, questionnaires, documents and audio-visual materials. A researcher may use one or a combination of these, depending on the research aims. My study drew on interviews and documents.

5.3. Data collection

Creswell (2012, p.205) describes five steps in collecting qualitative data for educational research. These are:

1- identifying participants and sites to be investigated;
2- gaining access to participants and sites by getting permission;
3- determining the types of data to collect;
4- developing data collection instruments; and
5- administering the process in an ethical manner.

Next, the way in which Creswell’s (2012) five steps were applied in collecting data in this study will be outlined.
5.3.1. Participants and sites

Bardach (2009) states that “in policy research, almost all likely sources of information, data, and ideas fall into two general types: documents and people” (p. 69). Focused on HE policy, this study adopted Bardach’s (2009) statement and used interviews and document analysis as methods for generating data. Qualitative, face to face interviews were the primary tool used for data collection. Documents were also analysed in conjunction with these interviews.

In qualitative studies, researchers aim at exploring a phenomenon in depth and this may be aided by purposefully selecting the interview participants. As stated by Bryman (2012), purposive sampling is “essentially to do with the selection of units (which may be people, organizations, documents, departments and so on), with direct reference to the research questions being asked” (p.416). This statement points to the research questions as guidance for selecting the units for both data collection and analysis. Such a sampling technique is not used to generalize the results to a population as in quantitative studies, but to describe in detail the phenomena being investigated as a step towards understanding these phenomena (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2012). Generalisation if applicable here is most often to theory.

Being qualitative, this study used a purposive sampling technique, informed by the research questions. As explained above, the study questions were framed around understanding the policy architecture and policy-making in the Omani HE system. To answer the questions of the study, specific officials, who were knowledgeable about the Omani HE system, were interviewed. Hence, the participants in this study, from which a sample was purposively drawn, were significant policy-makers and relevant agencies such as councils, Ministries and universities, where HE policy was made and enacted. This means that policy-makers from the levels of the institutional structures were purposefully selected. These policy actors were intentionally chosen because they hold leadership positions in the relevant institutions of the HE policy architecture, which had direct or indirect effects on policy production and practices of HE in Oman.

5.3.2. Interviews

Bryman (2012) and Walter (2013) observe that interviews are the most popular and prominent method in qualitative research. According to Creswell (2012), interviews are more beneficial than other methods because they provide researchers with opportunities to ask interviewees certain questions that they need to assist in answering the research questions underpinning their studies. Such qualitative interviews allow interviewees to express their answers in their own terms and at their own pace. The interview questions are framed by the broader research questions driving the study. This means that they can shape what types of data are collected. Walliman (2011) describes
interviews as very flexible instruments for collecting data, pointing to their wide range of applications. There are three main kinds of interviews: unstructured, semi-structured and structured interviews. The difference between them relates to whether the interview questions have been set before the interview, and whether limited specific questions are prepared or not. In structured interviews, the researcher asks the interviewees questions that are prepared and set out earlier and all interviewees receive the same questions (Bryman, 2012). The questions here are very fixed. On the other side, unstructured interviews enable researchers to be free with questions and not limited to a specific set of questions (Bryman, 2012). In other words, the interviews here flow freely. The last type, semi-structured interviews, falls in between the first two in terms of the approach taken. Bryman (2012) explains that in semi-structured interviews, there is “a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as an interview guide, but the interviewee has a great deal of leeway in how to reply” (p. 471) and in relation to the direction of the interview. The researcher follows the outlined interview guide, but s/he may ask questions not included in the guide, depending on responses from the interviewee. With semi-structured interviews, there are prepared questions as well as some questions that arise during the interview conversation.

In this study, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method to gather data. Because of the nature of the study, the data required, and the focus of the research questions on understanding the policy architecture and policy-making of Omani HE, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate and practical method for gathering data.

In what follows, the proposed interviews at the beginning of the study will be presented, followed by a discussion of the actual interviews accomplished. This is to demonstrate the issues and challenges that I faced with collecting data from the major policy actors in Omani HE. In some ways this is an issue of interviewing elites.

5.3.2.1. The proposed interviews

Table 5.1 below outlines the proposed set of participants whom I sought to interview at the outset of the data collection phase of the study. From each of the levels of the Omani HE structure, specific officials were chosen for their engagement with HE policy. In addition to that, the type of information they would provide would allow me to have a more thorough, complete insight into the policy-making situation that affects the whole of the Omani HE system. The interviewees were chosen because of their leadership positions in the system.

At the top level, five people from the Education Council (president, members) were selected. At the second level, Ministers, undersecretaries or presidents were selected. From the lower level,
Universities’ vice-chancellors and college deans were invited to participate. Additionally, some officials from institutions that indirectly affect HE policy were targeted. These institutions were the Shoura Council and State Council (Parliament), the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) and the Centre for HE Admission. The proposed number of interviews was approximately 50.

Table 5.1

*Proposed Interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutions</th>
<th>Number of Interviews</th>
<th>Designation of Interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education Council</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>President and members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of HE</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Minister, Undersecretary, Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Minister, Undersecretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sultan Qaboos University</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>President, Vice-president, Deans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Manpower</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Minister, Undersecretary, Deans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Health</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Minister, Undersecretary, Deans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Undersecretary, Dean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Applied Sciences</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Deans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private universities and colleges</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Presidents, Deans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Council</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Presidents, members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoura Council</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Presidents, members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA).</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Director, member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre for HE Admission</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Director, member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Having a close look at the proposed interviewees, it is very clear that they held quite powerful positions (ministers, undersecretaries, general directors, university vice-chancellors, etc.). Without a doubt, interviewing such influential elites raised the issue of what is called in the literature the ‘researcher’s positionality’, particularly in the context of ‘elite interviews’ (see Harvey, 2011; Mikecz, 2012; Welch, Marschan-Piekkari, Penttinen & Tahvanainen, 2002). Elite interviewing also takes on greater salience in a political structure such as that in contemporary Oman, where research of this kind is not common.

5.3.2.2. Elite interviews

Elite interviewing has recently gained popularity and attention among policy researchers and has become a debatable methodological issue. The attention and popularity are due to differences and
issues that such interviews have compared with other types of research interviews. Mikecz (2012) elaborates that elite interviews are dissimilar from most research interviews because of the power and the position of the interviewees, which affects access, getting needed data, and writing about these elites. Various studies have focused on interviewing elites and have concluded that conducting research with elites normally has been full of concerns and considerations at every single phase of the research process, starting from writing the proposal up, to collecting and analysing data, through to publishing the results (Harvey, 2011; Mikecz, 2012; Welch, Marschan-Piekkari et al., 2002).

In the literature, some researchers also refer to elite interviewing as “researching up” (see Smith, 2006). This is due to the researchers’ inferior positionality set against the position of the interviewees. While there is no explicit definition for ‘elite’, most researchers tend to associate a unique superior characteristic within a certain group such as most powerful, richest, privileged, best-educated or most talented. Overall, elites in research are conceptualized according to their social positions that give them superiority over the researcher’s position (Stephens, 2007). In this study, elites are defined as those who occupy policy-making positions in the different authorities, ministries and institutions, which supervise the HE system in Oman or have an impact on its policies. More simply, this indicates their powerful and authoritative positions in the system. The elites in this study shared the same background in regard to cultural context, being both Omani and policy makers in HE. It is essential to mention here that they were not all males and there were some females among them who hold leadership positions ranging from ministers to college deans.

The elites in this study were difficult to access. Generally, with such positions in the Omani government, it is not common to have an opportunity to meet and speak with them. Therefore, and based on my experience, researching elites in Oman is full of difficulties. This is also the case in other places as shown by the literature (Harvey, 2011; Mikecz, 2012; Smith, 2006; Welch et al., 2002). The degree of difficulty for me depended heavily on the position and the institution that the interviewee was in charge of and/or where they worked. It was much harder to reach a minister than an undersecretary, a general director than an institution leader, and an undersecretary than a general director. The closer the interviewee was to government leadership, the more difficult it was for me to first gain access and then to interview him or her.

Admittedly, the powerful positions of interviewees led me, from the beginning of the study, to rethink how to gain access and reach those policy-makers. Overcoming this problem also raised with me the issues of how to convince them of the importance of their participation in this study and indeed of the importance of the study.
5.3.2.3. My positionality

The interviewees in this study have a noteworthy role and major influence in the processes of making policies for the HE system in Oman. Being the interviewer, I was conducting this study in fulfilment for the Doctor of Philosophy in Education, at the University of Queensland, Australia. In Oman, I am working as an academic at the Department of Educational Foundations and Administration, College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). My academic position is a lecturer. This University, as described in Chapter one, is the only state university in Oman and it is named after His Majesty Sultan Qaboos. I considered myself as a researcher in the area of education policy where I strive to find solutions to education policy problems in Oman. I felt that it was my responsibility to study the education policies in Oman and bring improvement to them. My participation and involvement in such studies were needed for the development of education. Yet as a researcher I also understood that I first had to understand the matters that framed this study before I could move to a more normative stance of suggesting reforms.

Contextualizing my position in Oman, academics are respected and their professionalism is valued by the society and the government. However, I was still considered by the interviewees in this study as a student seeking data to accomplish his Ph.D. What might make it much easier was doing this Ph.D. in a developed country, Australia, and in one of its best universities. The elite interviewees appreciated this study due to that and some of them spoke about the reputation of the University of Queensland. Based on my previous research experience, in Oman researchers from developed countries, as well as students doing research higher degrees in developed nations, are greatly appreciated and valued by elites compared with the local researchers and students doing their degrees in Oman.

Although studying abroad gave me some credit, there was the issue of me not belonging to the institutional locations of the interviewees. More clearly, I was not working at the institutions where I was conducting my research, except for my interviews at SQU. Being an outsider to these institutions was a challenge for me to be accepted by the interviewees. It also increased the time and money spent for communication and gaining trust by these elite participants in my study.

Furthermore, my age was 30 at the time of conducting the interviews. I saw myself as too young to be interviewing policy-makers who had been in the system for a long time. The age of the interviewees ranged between forties and seventies. Likewise, researching policy in such political system was an issue. Indeed, studying policy and politics in such a Third World Country is not an easy task, as demonstrated by the paucity of research in the area and policy makers’ unfamiliarity
with such research. Doing policy research with the aforementioned age gap between me and the elites generated some sensitivity.

Overall, the age gap, sensitivity of the topic, and being an outsider to the interviewees made me prepare very thoroughly and try to develop as many skills as I could to make the interviews successful with such a group of people. As Cormode and Hughes (1999) state, "researching the powerful presents very different methodological and ethical challenges from studying 'down'. The characteristics of those studied, the power relations between them and the researchers and the politics of the research process differ considerably between elite and non-elite research" (p.299). In general, I believed that my positionality in this study has played a significant role in ensuring that I prepared very thoroughly for the interviews, as well as helping during the interviews (see Mikecz, 2012). Moreover, being a PhD student at a well-known and a well-ranked Western university (UQ) as well as writing the PhD in English ensured the interviewees valued the study. Indeed, this eased my job with the interviewing.

5.3.2.4. Challenges of gaining access

Several studies confirm that gaining access to research sites and respondents is more difficult with elites than non-elites (Harvey, 2011; Mikecz, 2012; Smith, 2006; Welch et al., 2002). As stated by Herod (1999), elites think of the researcher as getting benefits from the interviews and that they are doing a favour for them. My experience in this study did confirm that and more apparently confirmed that accessing elites for research interviews in a Third World country was very difficult. I struggled to obtain access to interviewees and that was a consideration from the beginning of the study. Besides their powerful positions, it was hard to reach them as they were surrounded by various gatekeepers who had control over accessing them. Mikecz (2012) mentions the same difficulty and he comments that the surrounding, numerous gatekeepers made it hard for him by controlling the access to the respondents. In my case, the issue with multi-level gatekeepers was very evidently present with accessing ministers and undersecretaries. It was not one or two, but sometimes more and I had to move up from one level to another. There were the receptionists, secretaries, office managers and so on. However, this issue was less evident with those with comparatively ‘lower’ positions in the HE system, such as general directors, vice-chancellors and deans. Yet, still it was an issue.

I was also faced with the challenge of the time schedule rigidity of elites. Given their tight time schedules, and sometimes to protect their institutions, “those who are powerful have considerable ability to stop research being conducted on their activities” (Walford, 2012, p.112). This made me more and more understanding of the difficulty of recruiting elites. In regards to that, Stephens
(2007) advises researchers of elites to train themselves to be flexible. Indeed, such flexibility, as Smith (2006) argues, cost me time and money. I tried my best to be flexible, while at the same time taking into consideration the time frame allocated for collecting data.

What made it worse was that data collection started in August and was planned to last for 5 months. August is summer in Oman in which the temperature reaches to 50 degrees and universities, schools and most people are on holiday. Therefore, I was trying to communicate with gatekeepers and was unable to do any interviews. Even though most people went back to work by mid-September, it was hard to meet such elites who came from long holidays. This issue meant that I only conducted the first interview in October and it was with respondents from the ‘lower levels’ of the system, namely, vice-chancellors and deans. Overall, Welch et al. (2002, p. 614) put it clearly and reminded me that the process of gaining access to elites “can therefore be far more time-consuming and costly than making contact with non-elites”. In their studies, Welch et al. (2002) mention that it took them five months from direct acceptance to negotiating access.

5.3.2.5. The process of gaining access

Being aware of the challenges and issues of researching elites, as well as taking into consideration the specific context of Oman, I was able to find the most successful way of accessing those interviewees. As Smith (2006) argues, the nature of research contexts vary from one study to another and thus each context requires a specific technique of negotiating access. With my research context, I realized that reaching elites required special negotiation (Mikecz, 2012) and plenty of careful preparation (Harvey, 2011). To find the suitable technique of getting access to the interviewees, I read extensively in the literature about interviewing elites, as well as talking to the Consulate General of the Sultanate of Oman in Australia, Melbourne. I spoke with the Omani Consul who offered me help and explained the protocol for getting access to elites in Oman. It is important to mention here that the Omani Consulate is the authority in charge of supervising my scholarship and providing any help required, including facilitating the smoothness of my Ph.D. journey.

After interviewees had been selected (see Table 4.1), I followed a process of gaining access and permission for the interviews that was prescribed by the Omani Consul, confirmed by the literature and approved by UQ. A very important issue to be mentioned was that, being a student, I was going to access “powerful politicians, political advisors and senior bureaucrats” at the Omani government and therefore I needed to follow the steps below to obtain access (see Taylor et al., 1997, p.41).
First of all I had to apply for ethical clearance through the School of Education committee at UQ. This step took around four weeks. After getting the ethical clearance approval, a letter from my advisors explaining the aims of study and the need for the interviews was drafted, stating that this study had gone through ethical clearance at UQ (the letter is attached as Appendix One). This letter was then sent to the Omani General Consulate in Australia for the purpose of him writing a cover letter to my sponsor, SQU (the letter is attached as Appendix two). Directly after receiving the letter from the advisors, he sent the cover letter via fax. The next day, I made sure that the Office of the Vice-chancellor received it. Welch et al. (2002, p. 614) mention that “studies on elite interviewing advise researchers to draw attention to their institutional affiliation, use personal connections where possible, and seek to obtain an influential “sponsor” whose endorsement of the project will ensure the cooperation of the rest of the group”.

Because I was going to interview Ministers and senior figures in the Omani government, there were letters (see examples in Appendix three) sent to those interviewees from the Vice-Chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) to obtain permission for me to conduct the interviews. The SQU Vice-chancellor has the position of an undersecretary in the Omani government, which is needed in such a bureaucratic system. To make this process quick, I used my personal network at the Vice-chancellor’s office. Indeed, they were helpful and they sent these letters to the interviewees even before I arrived in Oman on 3rd of August, 2013.

Then it was my turn to negotiate with gatekeepers for a specific date for the interviews. The time frame for conducting the interviews was from August to December 2013 (the first semester of academic year 2013/2014 in Oman). This step took from when I arrived in Oman until I left at the end of December. There were some elites whom I was not able to meet. It was the most challenging period of collecting the data.

While purposive sampling was used to select interviewees, there were two other methods that were also used in sampling and recruiting the interviewees. These were ‘snowballing and cascading’ which happen after the preliminary contact with the main interviewees (see Welch et al., 2002). Snowballing techniques helped me to find additional suitable respondents (not included in the initial proposed list), who were knowledgeable about the HE system and participated in making policy, by asking other interviewees for suggested participants. In the interview guide (attached in Appendix four), the penultimate question was used to find extra information-rich key interviewees (see Welch et al., 2002). The question posed was: ‘Could you please suggest the most significant documents that may help me in my study? And people to interview?’ As it is clear, it was not only for finding
additional interviewees, but also to locate documents that would help in the study. The latter helped me choose which documents to analyse.

The second approach was cascading, in which “each subsidiary was approached for interviews with a letter of support signed by a top manager” (Welch et al., 2002, p. 620). With this top-down process, in some institutions I got in touch first with the top leadership (a minister, general director or university vice-chancellor), who sent letters to the people under their supervision whom I was interested to interview (examples of such letters from a general director are attached in the appendices). This method was certainly effective in getting instant access to interviewees. Both snowball and cascading methods played a huge role in accessing the interviewees and strengthening the purposive sample of interviewees. This is to confirm the importance of using mixed methods of sampling in researching elites (Welch et al., 2002). The following Figure 5.1 shows the process of gaining access.

![Figure 5.1: The process of gaining access.](image)

**5.3.2.6. The participants**

After the time and money consuming process of accessing the participants, I was able to interview 43 people out of the proposed 50 interviewees. The majority of those interviewees had PhDs from well-recognized Western universities from around the world. Noting that, it is interesting how such elites gained knowledge and culture and skills from Western countries and then were working to apply these in the Omani context. Indeed, such Western doctorates influenced how those elites were
making policies, yet their policy making also took account of the Omani context. The following Table 5.2 shows the elites’ position and the number recruited for interviews from each category.

Table 5.2
The actual study interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The elites</th>
<th>The number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ministers</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undersecretaries</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Council members</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman Council members</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Directors and ministers’ Advisors</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University presidents and deans (public &amp; private)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to the challenges mentioned above, it was hard to access all proposed interviewees. For example, one of the interviewees refused to meet me and advised his/her office manager to inform me that because of time schedule rigidity we could not meet. After my insistence to meet him and explanation of the purpose of the study, I received a call from his office manager that the interviewee would meet me just for 15 minutes for the purpose of just getting to know me and my study. I met him/her and started negotiating conditions and things related to the study. At the end, I was unable to convince him/her to do the interview. In fact, it was not the rigid time schedule that prevented a research interview, but the sensitivity of the research problem and its impact on their institution as they argued. Walter (2013) mentions that politically sensitive topics must be considered by the researcher, who has to work to minimise harm and risks to respondents. Also, Smith (2006) observes that some elites are difficult to interview, negotiating conditions and terms as well as stopping access. Taking both arguments of Walter (2013) and Smith (2006) into account, I understood, respected and appreciated their decisions not to participate in the study.

5.3.2.7. Interview guide

To collect data through the semi-structured interviews, a guide was developed that covered the four questions of the study. According to Walter (2013), an interview guide is “just a short list of the main topics or themes you want to address during the interview” (p.238). It is mainly there to make sure that all key areas of the study are covered. Therefore, to answer each question of the research problem, the interview guide (see Appendix five) in this study started with a main question and then followed with clarification and sub-questions to ensure that I was getting enough details. Furthermore, being semi-structured, there was sufficient space for prompting questions for more
clarification and following trails opened by the interviewees. The guide questions were designed to be open-ended rather than closed, making sure that the interviewees were not restricted to certain questions and answers. Indeed, “elites especially – but other highly educated people as well – do not like being put in the straightjacket of close-ended questions. They prefer to articulate their views, explaining why they think what they think” (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002, p. 674).

5.3.2.8. Conducting the interviews

To conduct the interviews, I had to travel (driving) between the governorates of the Sultanate as the interviewees and the organizations were distributed between them. Before that, I visited most of them to negotiate access. The interviews were conducted in the offices of the interviewees (see Mikecz, 2012). While it is recommended to do the interviews in neutral places (see Thomas, 1993), conducting the interviews in their offices gave me an opportunity to have a look at how those people were working and enabled me also to access more documents and resources. In other words, “it provided me with additional insight into the participants’ setting” (Mikecz, 2012, p. 488). Some interviewees offered me from their shelves valuable documents for my study. For the interviewees, it was also more comfortable as they had access to all their facilities. However, there were some issues that disrupted the process. For instance, some of the interviewees received calls on their office phones, which made me pause the recorder. In most cases, employees came in and out of the offices, which caused distraction to the interview. I found myself sometimes losing the place in the interviews.

There was audio recording of the interviews and I also took notes. Walter (2013) states that recording the interviews helps in giving full attention to interviewees, in concentrating on the interview and getting data. Having recorded interviews allows the researcher to go back to them, from time to time, to get deeper insights and understanding of what the interviewee was trying to express. Out of the 43 interviewees, I encountered only two interviewees refused to be audio-recorded. As they argued, it was due to the sensitivity of the research problem and the institutions to which they belonged. Furthermore, only 3 out the 43 interviewees asked for the interview to be done in Arabic, while the rest accepted to do it in English. This is indicative of their educational levels and confidence in English.

Before each interview, I undertook careful preparation as prescribed by Walter (2013). I read extensively about the background of the interviewees, as well as their institutions. Such pre-interview preparation was beneficial, exhibiting to the interviewee my knowledgeability of the area (Mikecz, 2012). I discovered that interviewees tried some times to challenge me with questions, but being knowledgeable and prepared put me in a strong position. Furthermore, as part of my
preparation, all interviewees were provided with information sheets (see the appendices) before their interview. This sheet explained the research; title of the study, aims, participants, right to withdrawal from the study, privacy and confidentiality. Yet, I still began interviews with explaining the purpose of the interview, introducing myself, where I usually work, the study, its importance and how the results will be disseminated. Although almost all of my interviewees had undertaken higher degrees abroad, I still gave this introduction about myself and the study in non-academic jargon. It was for the purpose of clarity and transparency, as well as building a rapport. Besides, this self-introduction assisted me to gain the trust of the interviewees so I got quality data (Harvey, 2011). After giving the information sheet, interviewees were provided with a consent form to sign, agreeing to participate. This form explained to the interviewees the nature of their participation and that they did have the right to withdraw at any time.

Prior to the interview, some interviewees asked me questions about the study, trying to get more clarification. In all cases, I answered the questions confidently. I started all the interviews by showing the policy architecture diagram to the interviewee to make the picture clear. Then the structured questions through the interview guide came and from time to time prompting questions were used. All questions were answered by the interviewees, but there were some occasions where interviewees either answered in diplomatic language or changed the topic slightly. Examples of such questions were: Why was a previous strategy not implemented? Do we have clear policy? And was the Arab Spring behind the current changes in admission policy?

The length of the interviews was around one hour. It was hard to complete one in less than 45 minutes. In the literature of elites interviewing, there is no clear agreement on the appropriate duration of interviews (see Harvey, 2011). In my case, the duration of the interviews was a concern to those elites even before I met them. When I contacted the personal secretaries of some elites (top elites; ministers and undersecretaries) to arrange the interview time and date, they were negotiating the length of the interview. Almost all said that it was difficult to spare one hour for the interview. However, I became able to get more than one hour for the interview, plus some more time for talking and socializing, as those elites became interested in my research and appreciated my efforts to understand and then possibly help develop and improve the HE system in Oman.

5.3.2.9. Post-interview

At the end of each interview, I asked interviewees for feedback on my study and its aims. Some valuable comments were received, which I kept in my mind for modifying the study. Harvey (2011) finds that elites really give significant feedback that helps to focus the research questions and to suggest modifications to interviews. Being interested in the study, some interviewees gave
me their emails for post-interview cooperation and asked me to present the results to their institutions after the study is done (see Mikecz, 2012; Welch et al., 2002). Regarding cooperation, I had four elites who became interested to co-author with me in the area of higher education policy in Oman. Moreover, I was happy to get an invitation from the Minster of Higher Education to give a seminar to all HEIs and policy-makers after finishing the thesis.

5.3.3. Documents

Relevant policy documents were another data source for this study. According to Bryman (2012), the term document refers to various sources such as personal documents, official documents, mass-media outputs, and virtual outputs. In this study, written documents were the focus. Examples of the written documents were reports, policies, archive records, and plans. In this study, I collected written documents from HE agencies in Oman from the different levels mentioned above, as well as from the council and centres. In choosing the documents I was selective, identifying those that would help in answering the questions underpinning the study. Those documents were from the post 1986 period, aligning with the time frame of the study. These documents are ready for use as they are published for the public. In helping to get the suitable documents, interviewees were asked to suggest documents that could help in studying the HE policy architecture and policy-making system. The collected documents included: Royal Decrees, Ministerial decisions, Organizational charts of HEIs, Legislative documents, strategic plans, and meeting minutes.

5.4. Ethical issues and considerations

As mentioned above, the study went through the ethical clearance stage required by the School of Education at UQ. This happened after the interview guide was developed and ready to be used. For ethical considerations, the interviewees then were provided with a consent form to sign to grant their informed consent to participation in a research interview. I made sure that it was signed by every participant before the interview started. I also ensured that each participant understood the nature of the study and of their involvement in it.

Through the information sheet and consent form, the participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the project at any time and without any penalty and their participation was on a voluntary basis. They were also informed that the data already collected prior to their withdrawal of consent would be destroyed at their request. As well, the consent form showed how confidentiality and anonymity of participants would be assured. Yet, Ministers were exempted from confidentiality and their anonymity could not be assured, basically because of the positions they held. Because of this situation, transcripts of these interviews would be returned to the Ministers for their approval for quotation and use in the research and the thesis. However, none of
the interviewed ministers asked for that. Besides, the consent form assured participants that no information gained through interviews with those policy actors would be revealed or shared with other participants and interviewees would be anonymous (see Taylor et al, 1997).

Furthermore, interviewees were given clear explanation of the study and its implications, assuring their privacy, anonymity and protection from any harm that the study could cause. Thus, interviewees were guaranteed that no increased foreseeable risk was anticipated. Also, it was made clear to them that the procedures of data collection would not cause any mental or physical distress for them, as well as not causing any or only limited interference with their work schedule. In order to protect privacy of participants, I made a list of all participants and gave each of them a pseudonym. All their names were removed from the raw data so that all participants and their privacy were kept confidential.

The interview recordings were stored in a space provided by the sponsor (Sultan Qaboos University). I had the raw data stored on my hard-drive protected by password for backup. All raw data were kept in secure place—locked in my office at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman—with access for the researcher only. When coming to Australia, the hard-drive protected by password on my UQ computer was used and data were locked in a cabinet in the researcher’s office.

5.5. Data analysis

After the interviews were completed and documents were selected, it was time to start the analysis process. It is very important to mention that qualitative data are not straightforward for analysis as they are in the “form of large corpus of unstructured textual materials” derived from interviews, observations or documents (Bryman, 2012, p.238). Such data are still raw and analysis is about the process of eliciting findings from them. In qualitative studies, analysis is about meaning-making and, as Walter (2013) explains, researchers must make sense out of their large data set to answer their research questions. Indeed, qualitative research is described as “interpretive” research in which the researchers generate and produce personal assessments and interpretations of the raw data (Creswell, 2012). Overall, analysing qualitative data is a long process that is time consuming. Creswell (2012) speaks about six steps in analysing qualitative data, which are:

1. preparing and organizing the data;
2. exploring and coding the database;
3. describing findings and forming themes;
4. representing and reporting findings;
5. interpreting the meaning of the findings; and
6. validating the accuracy of the findings.

Next, Creswell’s steps, as they applied in this study, will be outlined.

5.5.1. Transcriptions

After organizing the raw data into folders, I entered the phase of transcribing the interviews. According to Creswell (2012, p. 239), transcription is “the process of converting audiotape recordings or field notes into text data”. To make myself familiar with the data as well as for ethical purposes, I decided to transcribe the 45 hours of interviews myself and without using any software. Of course, transcription is a time-consuming and tedious process (Walter, 2013). It took three months of continuous work, January to April 2014. However, undertaking the transcription myself was beneficial to focus my attention on every interview and to pull themes out during the process. This was the “immersion” step that made me more familiar with the data (see Walter, 2013, p. 320). Being cautious of missing anything, I transcribed all interviews from start to finish. I should also note here that analysis of the data actually began at the moment of collection.

Each transcribed interview was also paginated for analysis. For referencing in text and direct quoting from these research interviews, each category of the elites was given a name (see Table 5.3) and each interview in a category was given a number. Thus, the following convention was used: (the elites’ category/the number of the interview/the quotation lines). For instance, (M/I2/60-62) means that the interview is with a minister, interview number 2 in the category of ministers and the quotation lines from 60 to 62.

Table 5.3

Shortcuts for each category of interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The elites’ category</th>
<th>Abbreviated name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ministers</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undersecretaries</td>
<td>U</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Council members</td>
<td>EC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman Council members</td>
<td>SC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Directors and ministers’ advisors</td>
<td>GD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University presidents and deans (public &amp; private)</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With regards to the documents, the study focused more on Royal Decrees, ministerial decision from the various ministries, some by-laws of HEIs, strategic plans, and Human development reports. I was selective in choosing these documents, using whatever documents would help in answering the framing research questions as a complement to the interview data. a. Also, these documents were
sometimes used to compare what was found through the interviews (the reality) to how thing ought to be. The documents were a good source of getting data about laws, structure of power within organizations, who is supposed to perform certain missions and composition/membership of certain critical ministries and councils. It is very important to mention here that not each document chosen was used fully, but I was looking for certain data within each of these documents.

5.5.2. Thematic analysis

Walter (2013) states that the most commonly used approach of analysis in qualitative studies, which involve interviews, is ‘thematic analysis’. Indeed, this study adopted a thematic analysis by identifying the presence of key themes in data produced by the interviews and from the documents. Thematic analysis is about looking for central ideas (Creswell, 2012; Walter, 2013). Thus, “a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). It is about emerging patterns in the data that are clearly providing interpretations to research questions. In this study, there were some initial or a priori themes (deductive analysis) and others that emerged from the data (inductive analysis). Regarding the initial themes, the study used the eclectic framework described in Chapter four (the tool-box of frameworks) to analyse data according to particular themes. More clearly, Offe’s observation was utilised to look for themes on how policy architecture mediates both policy processes and the content of policy. Furthermore, the principal-agent theory provided themes on the relationship between the Omani government and HE policy, as did the idea of loose-coupling. Themes around how the Omani government steers its HE system also were raised by ‘the state control/supervising’ model.

The normative policy cycle concept enabled me to look at themes around the operations of the architecture; it provided a means to get themes that explained how policy was made. Interview data and policy documents were explored for themes around policy processes, agenda setting, policy stages, institutional structure, policy networks and policy formulation. Indeed, these themes were evidently there in each interview and in some documents. The data revealed some emerging themes such as bottom-up policy-making, bureaucracy, fragmented policy, levels of policy-making. With ‘the loosely coupled system’ concept, predetermined themes about the cooperation between the components of the Omani HE policy-making system were offered. In general, these theoretical tools were helpful for finding themes about the relationship between the Omani Government and its HE system, as well as with the operation of the architecture. This was a deductive approach.

At the regional and global levels, data were explored to report patterns around the wider context in which Omani HE policy was made and to consider its effects. The globalisation phenomenon,
global economic restructuring and new technologies were used as guidance to search for *a priori* themes at this level. Here are some examples of these initial themes: global discourses, internationalization, affiliation, accreditation, global ranking, and international organizations. Besides, some themes emerged that explained other issues concerning global and regional impacts on HE policy. Examples of these themes were international agreements, international relations with Oman, regionalism, international investment, foreign universities, global policy convergence, policy import and policy transfer.

5.5.3. Coding

According to Creswell (2012), thematic analysis requires researchers to code the data to be able to develop themes later. Coding is “the marking of segments of data with symbols, descriptive words, or category names” (Walter, 2013, p. 324). Because I transcribed the interviews myself and while doing that, my decision was to code the data by hand. To do so, I read the data line by line many times. I marked them and worked to divide them into categories. I used colourful markers, as well as using Word to cut and paste. As explained above, I began with a set of existing codes, which were developed from my understanding of the literature, as well as being significant in terms of the theoretical framework and the study questions. This is what Walter (2013, p.324) calls “*a priori* codes”. This was deductive analysis. Furthermore, there were the inductive codes that emerge from the data and were not expected (Walter, 2013). The same process described with the interviews here was done for the documents.

After coding, I started to put the codes into categories. These categories then were explored to identify the relationships between them. This phase of categorizations worked to help me understand and interpret the data by seeing the concepts and ideas emerging. According to Walter (2013), these ideas and concepts are the themes. Creswell (2012) makes it very clear by stating that themes are “similar codes aggregated together to form a major idea in the data” (p.248). Having the themes in my hands, interpretations were ongoing to find explanations to my research enquiry.

5.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, the research methods for collecting and analysing data have been outlined. It was stated that the qualitative approach was appropriate for the nature of this study to answer its research questions. Semi-structured interviews and policy documents analysis were used to generate data to answer the research questions. This study used a purposive sampling technique, informed by the research questions to choose interviewees, who had a noteworthy role and major influence in the processes of making policies for the HE system in Oman. Although there were some challenges when accessing the study interviewees (elites), I managed to complete 43 interviews. In doing so, a
certain protocol for getting access to elites in Oman was offered by the Consulate General of the Sultanate of Oman in Australia, Melbourne. This protocol made accessing the elites much easier, yet the challenges were still there. During the interviews, policy documents were also collected. In general, I believed that my positionality in this study has played a significant role in preparing for the interviews, as well as helping during the interviews. This study was valued by the interviewees as being conducted in a Western, high status and well-recognized university. Most of the interviewees were also highly educated.

To this stage, the previous five chapters have outlined the study aims, questions and context, the theoretical framework and the research methods. The next chapters will present the study findings, analysis and discussion. The next chapter will focus on the Omani HE policy architecture.

6.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on the architecture of policymaking and policy actors in the Omani HE system. The aim is to give a descriptive account of the policy making architecture within the Omani HE sector as a whole, as well as providing analysis of this architecture, derived from research interviews and document analyses. The chapter opens with analysis of the role played by the Omani government in making HE policy and the relationships between various agencies in order to provide a holistic picture of the policy architecture. Then, the HE policy making architecture is depicted, showing the various bodies and actors playing a role in making Omani HE policy. In this chapter, all governmental bodies and individual actors that have a relationship of any kind to policy making in Omani HE will be examined. Moreover, the roles of these different agencies, parties and organizations in making policy will be outlined and discussed. Overall, there are two main parts to this chapter, which deal respectively with: (1) the government and HE sector relationships and (2) the architecture of policy-making in HE.

It is important to note that the chapter is not intended to give an evaluation of the architecture, but rather will provide a full description of the hierarchy of the policy making system. The rationale behind this descriptive approach is the absence of any extant literature outlining the policy-making architecture and processes in the Omani HE system. The chapter will thus describe the architecture “as it is” by drawing on interview data and also will try to see how it “should” be, as prescribed by Royal Decrees and other official documents. To this extent, the chapter will involve both data analysis and discussion, analysing the actual situation against the desired situation, which is a necessary step in policy analysis according to Ball (1994) and Ball et al. (2012). Through this chapter, data from the research interviews provide a picture of how the Omani HE policy-making system is actually working, whereas the statutes and Royal decrees provide a model of how it ought to work.

6.2. The government and HE system relationship

To map the HE policy-making architecture in Oman, we need to consider the whole governance system of the Sultanate and how it works. That is to say, understanding the type of governance will help in clarifying the relationship between the government and the HE institutions and thus, will enable the HE policy making architecture to be clearly described and understood. The need for this approach is prescribed by the literature and the study interviews. For instance, one of the Education
Council members started his response to answering how policy is made by saying, “you need to draw the HE policy-making picture in the context of the whole country system” (EC/I1/1). Likewise, the Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs mentioned that “each country has its own unique system and its policy architecture. Each country specifies its structure depending on its needs and heritage” (M/I3/41-42).

It is argued across the world that there is variation in how HE systems are governed and controlled by governments (Clark, 1983; Neave & Vught, 1994). The comparative education literature shows that across one region, different models of State steering of HE systems are present and this is due to numerous and specific factors within each country (see Lane & Kivisto, 2008). Fabbrini and Sicurelli (2008) believe that a political system has a great impact on the state’s policy and how policy is made and implemented. Undeniably, the type of system (federal or unitary government) influences public policy and its hierarchy (Howlett et al., 2009).

In Oman, as is clear from the context chapter, being a Sultanate (a Royal Monarchy) means there is a unique character to the Omani national system, which implies certain characteristics in its subsystems, as will be seen when describing the hierarchy of the HE system. While in federal systems “governing power is shared between the provincial and federal levels of government” (Shanahan & Jones, 2007), Oman has a single nationwide government. According to the Basic Statute of the State, power is absolutely in the hands of one national government (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011). Given that, the Government is also assisted in making the policies of the state by the Oman Council (a bicameral parliament), which gives advice to the Government. This Council, and its functions in making polices, will be discussed later in the chapter. With that in mind, it is worth mentioning that the Omani Government does not permit political parties, which are found in western democratic countries, and this affects how policies are made. All this is to argue that the power of making policies in Oman is not shared by parties, parliament or state/province governments; rather, it is absolute for the Omani government.

To achieve its goals, the Omani government has established various subsystems that are deemed to work in harmony, serving the state’s development and the welfare of the people (Ministry of Information, 2013). It is seen as one national political system surrounded with service sub-systems, working across the Sultanate. Examples of such sub-systems are health, transport, civil service, manpower, housing and so on. In this study, the HE system is looked at as one of those vital sub-systems that the Omani government has taken responsibility for providing and delivering to Omani people as a national service.
This obligation of the state to manage the HE system has been recognized as a priority by almost all governments around the world; it “has been high on the agenda of governments and central to the fortune of nations” (Neave & Vught, 1994). Without state support and intervention, HE systems globally would not be surviving and expanding in the ways they have been (Varghese, 2012). It is often argued that “the appropriate management of the relationship between the state and HEIs is vital to a strong and dynamic future for these institutions” (George, 2006, p.589). In Oman, the government created the HE system in the mid-1980s and has been nurturing it since. In the Basic Statute, it is written that, “education is a cornerstone for the progress of the Society which the State fosters and endeavours to disseminate and make accessible to all” (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, article 13). ‘Accessible to all’ is interesting in terms of admissions policy.

In supporting this account, the Minister of HE mentioned that “the HE system is regarded as a vital governmental sub-system embedded within a comprehensive superior system that works in harmony for the advancement of the country” (M/11/1-3). It was illustrated in the first three chapters of this study that the Omani government is in charge of funding, governing, regulating, planning, evaluating and supervising all state HE institutions. The available evidence seems to suggest that the HE system in Oman is steered and regulated fully by the national government.

6.2.1. A state controlled system

The government is the ‘owner’ of the HE system and, accordingly, it has the power to steer the system and make policies. In light of that, this study puts forward the claim that HE institutions do not enjoy a level of self-regulation and policy-making as is the case in many such systems elsewhere, because the government has tight regulatory control over these institutions. Although Sultan Qaboos University is in a stronger position than other institutions in making some of its policies, it is still found not to have the full right to decide on its direction (the SQU case will be looked at in the following chapter). According to Neave and Van Vught (1994), government regulation means “the efforts of government to steer the decisions and actions of specific societal actors according to the objectives the government has set and by using instruments government has at its disposal ” (p. 4). An institution rector pointed out that,

Most, if not all of our HE institutions in Oman cannot take a decision without having permission from above, the ministry. Here, I am not talking about the daily business of our institutions such as courses, tabling, students’ activities and so on. It is those decisions about the funding, budget, staff appointment, number of admitted students, and infrastructure. You can say that we are like a school manager, receiving instructions from the top. (I/I5/I5-20)

The sole control over the HE system was questioned by the interviewees, mainly from the institutional level. The majority of interviewees felt that the government was extremely controlling in terms of the system. As quoted above, institution leaders saw themselves as working in
departments (the institutions) under a ministry. The way the institution rector expressed himself as a school manager shows that decisions about policies are not in their hands, but rather are in the hands of the ministries. When a national ministry regulates the curriculum, staff appointments, entry conditions, funding, and so on of institutions, Van Vught (1995) claims that it is a policy model in HE called ‘the state control model’ (see also Neave & Van Vught, 1994; Van Vught, 1988). Such a policy model was traditionally present in HE systems of the European continent, where states created university institutions and fully financed them (see Clark, 1983; Van Vught, 1995).

In this present study, it is argued that the Omani HE system is a very good example of the ‘state control model’. The data generated from the interviews and the documents suggest that power is strong at the top level (the government) and weak at the lower levels (the institutions). It was mentioned in the context chapter that the Omani government, via its various apparatuses (ministries, the Education Council, OAAA), is regulating and coordinating the HE system. In other words, through the various governing bodies, the government is determining the directions of the HE institutions and designing their policies to serve the government’s intentions. This assumption is clear from the Royal Decrees and Ministerial decisions that determine the policies for the institutions. It is also worth mentioning here that the institutions’ leaders are appointed by the government; a Royal Decree by the Sultan is issued to decide the University vice-chancellor and ministerial decisions are made to decide on the college deans. Being appointed by the government, it can be deduced that those institution leaders are no different from other bureaucratic officials in the government, performing typical coordination and administration roles and implementing policy.

6.2.2. **HE institutions as bureaucratic organizations**

In such powerful state control situations, Boateng (2010) argues that “the state exerts its authority on HE using its bureaucratic and political powers of integration” (p.21). Through various forms of legislation (Royal Decrees, Ministerial decisions) and state policy actors (Ministers, undersecretaries, general directors, institutions vice-chancellors, deans), the Omani government controls the HE system by passing laws, regulations and bylaws. Being ‘state controlled’, the present study appears to validate the view that there is “a strong centralisation of decision-making processes and a large amount of control over the decision-making processes as well as over the implementation of the chosen policy” (Neave and van Vught 1994, p.17). Relating this statement to research question one (what is the architecture of the policy-making in the Omani HE system?), it is believed that the Omani government, through its bureaucratic officials, controls policy-making and plays a great role in the HE system with a unique hierarchical architecture. This is *par excellence* a mode of top-down policy making.
When asking the institutions leaders about their policies, excluding SQU, they all mentioned that ministerial approval had to be granted for any policy they favoured for their institutions. There is a hierarchical administrative process for approving their institutional plans and strategies. In essence, some policies may require approval only by a general director and some may require approval from the undersecretary and maybe the minister. The level of approval “depends on the scope, impact and importance of the policy” (I/17/15), as a college dean explained. This process will be detailed in the following chapter when talking about how policies are made. Yet, it was presented here to exemplify the government control over the policies of the institutions and how the bureaucratic officials (institution leaders) are utilized as a tool in the hands of the government to achieve its interests. The following figure shows the hierarchical administrative process for approving policies.

Figure 6.1. The hierarchical administrative process of seeking approval for policies.

Lane and Kivisto (2008) argue that “public colleges and universities operate as public bureaucracies, at least in part responsible to the governments that fund them and endow them with the power to grant degrees” (p.142). The argument expressed in the quotation illustrates that HE institutions might be regarded as public bureaucracies when steered and funded by governments. Taking this point of view, the evidence introduced above confirms that public HE institutions in Oman are government organizations, functioning as units of the state bureaucracy within hierarchical control structures.

In general, the characteristics of Omani Government relations with the HE system mentioned above entail a ‘state-centric approach’ to making policy. According to George (2006), for a HE system to fall under the ‘state-centric approach’ it has to be principally state funded or receive state directed funding and to have its policy directions set by the government. To make it clear, George (2006) mentions that such funding has to be allocated according to the state development priorities and its
needs. Moreover, in the state-centric approach, the state plays an “important or deciding role in areas such as appointing teachers, deciding curriculum, awarding degrees, enrolment” (George, 2006, p.601). This characterization of the “state centric model” can be seen to apply within Omani HE. As a result, such a “HE system will typically exhibit various manifestations of the curtailment of academic freedom and institutional autonomy” (Sirat & Kaur, 2010, p.191).

The discussion above illustrates that the Omani government is dominant in making HE policy and, therefore, HE institutions are somehow submissive agents, lacking institutional autonomy. With a powerful government and subservient institutions, the HE literature proposes using the principal-agent model to explain such relations (Kivistö, 2008; Lane & Kivisto, 2008; McLendon, 2003a; Ortmann & Squire, 1996; Schiller & Liefner, 2007; Sirat & Kaur, 2010). Indeed, the Omani Government can be viewed as the one principal actor delegating the tasks of teaching and research to its various agents, which are the HE institutions. According to Schiller and Liefner (2007), the principal (the state) has power and domination over the agents (HE institutions) by supplying the necessary funds. The proponents of this theory believe that such a relationship is hierarchical in nature and the principals have the desire of controlling agents. Illustrating this position, a general director stated that “the public HE institutions in Oman are owned by the government. Funds only come from the government and therefore institutions have to go in the way favoured by the government” (I/13/7-9). This might be seen as a funding-compliance trade-off and indicative of a tight principal/agent relationship.

6.3. A Policy architecture of three levels

While interviewees revealed much in regard to the national political system, it is important also to look at the Royal Decree No. 99/2011, Amendment to Some Provisions of the Basic Statute of the State. This Royal Decree was promulgated in the year 2011 to amend the Royal Decree No. 101/96, Promulgating the Basic Statute of the State. Indeed, the 1996 Royal Decree made a very remarkable development for the Sultanate because it was a clear document specifying the principles of the state’s policy and detailing the roles, functions and responsibilities of its policymaking system. In other words, this Royal Decree defined how the Sultanate of Oman is governed, detailing the functions of its institutions. The amendment made in 2011 has been found to be due to the protest by Omani youth in the context of the so-called Arab Spring. It is argued that the protest was to “show Omanis’ dissatisfaction with their country’s politics, economy, and labour market” (Romano & Seeger, 2014, p. 4). It is very important to mention here, as was also mentioned in the previous chapters, that the 2011 happenings in Oman followed the wave of the Arab Spring that stormed through most Arab countries at the time. How such incidents affected the policy system of the HE in Oman will be detailed later. The impact of the Arab Spring is also indicative of the impact today
of regional and indeed global developments within Omani HE policy. These matters will be dealt with in Chapter eight.

At this point, the Basic Statute of the State, in addition to some important documents from the various institutions surrounding the HE system, will be examined to describe the architecture of HE policy making. Most interviewees in this study spoke about a sole governmental hierarchy of the policymaking system in the Omani HE. This hierarchy of policymaking is defined in this study as ‘the architecture of policymaking’, which is the focus of research question one. According to the State Council Chairman, there are three levels of policy making in the HE system in Oman, which are “sovereign or political decisions, the specialized councils and the field” (M/I2/3).

Correspondingly, when looking closely at the Royal Decree No. 99/2011, Amendment to Some Provisions of the Basic Statute of the State, it is clear from its articles that the flow of the national policymaking system is from the top leadership of the state to the individual unit of institutions (subsystem). This means that a national policymaking system is evident and somehow similar in all subsystems such as welfare, health, transport, etc. What makes it different for the HE system compared to other sub-systems is the complexity of multi-governing bodies regulating the system.

In his statement, the Chairman of the State Council indicated that,

If we take education in general (schooling and higher), we have to understand three basic stages in making policy. The first stage is the sovereign or political decisions that are taken for the education philosophy in Oman. And this is derived from the Country’s president (His Majesty) and through the Ministers’ Council and also from the national strategy, Oman Vision 2020. (M/I2/3-6)

He also noted,

After that (second stage), we have specialized councils. In this area, we have the Education Council, SQU Council, and the Research Council. The main is the Education Council which plays the role of policy making. The education Council has its members from all those who are taking care of education from the system. (M/I2/9-12)

And he then went on to say,

The third stage is the field. In this current time, to me, the field is making the policies in an indirect way, taking into considerations the needs of the Omani society from the graduates. (M/I2/13-14)

Given this declaration, it can be understood that policy in the HE system is made in three different locations and in each of these locations there are various policymakers (principals).

Generally speaking, in HE systems globally, Lane and Kivisto (2008) talk about the involvement of multiple and collective principals in a hierarchal structure. They argue that “HE governance structures contain an array of principals and agents”, describing three sets of principals in HE systems which are “single, multiple, and collective” (p.157). Based on the principal-agent framework, intermediary principals as well as agents can be found between the chief principal and
the agents at lower levels of the hierarchy, forming a collection of principals and agents (Moe, 1990). We mentioned previously that the Omani Government is the primary single principal and the HE institutions are the various agents. Under the Omani government, there are the specialized councils and the multiple regulating ministries working as intermediary agents and principals. They are agents of the government and at the same time principals controlling the institutions. Each ministry (principal) has a collective of agents which are their HE institutions.

In this current study, an argument is presented based on analyses of both research interviews and pertinent policy documents that the Omani HE policy-making architecture can be seen as a cascade of complex principal-agent games. In a similar figuration, Ortmann and Squire (1996) suggested that HE institutions specifically can be conceptualized as a cascade of principal-agent games. While Ortmann and Squire (1996) designed their model of the cascade to understand four levels of policy actors within institutions (student/alumnus, overseer, administrator, and professor), this study conceptualizes the policy-making architecture of the entire Omani HE system as a cascade of principal-agent games. It is important to recall here that the present study did not consider the principal-agent games within institutions, but rather focused on the whole HE system. Figure 6.2 shows the overall architecture of policy-making in the Omani HE system with its three levels. The following sections will describe and analyse each of these levels and explore their functions and roles, drawing on data generated and analysed for this research.

Figure 6.2. The overall architecture of policymaking.
6.3.1. The top-level of government

At this level, the HE system receives guidance and policy directions from the highest point in the Omani government. As explained by the Chairman of the State Council, “sovereign or political decisions are taken here either by the Sultan or the Council of Ministers (cabinet)” (M/I2/3-6). Without doubt, a policy coming from this level has to be implemented by the two lower levels without discussion or resistance. Such policies appear in two forms. The first is in the form of legal documents passed to the field as Royal Decrees, laws, strategic plans or oral guidance through Royal Speeches or Orders by His Majesty, the Sultan. Such policy is mandated.

A general director commented on this approach,

Like any one in the country, we sometimes hear Royal orders from His Majesty that bring changes to our policies. From my experience, it is always for improving the system and solving emerging issues that need urgent decision. Talking about Royal Decrees, we do participate by giving our opinions and sometimes we send proposals through our minister. (GD/I2/9-12)

An undersecretary also pointed to the role of the Cabinet. He said that,

The Ministers’ Council play a role in making the HE policy. Our Ministry many times has changed its directions because of a decision made in the Cabinet or even sometimes because of a discussion that happened under the Council’s roof. (U/I5/5-8)

Both declarations, by the general director and the Undersecretary, affirm the role that the Head of the State and its Council of Ministers play in making the policy of the HE system. Gittell and Kleiman (2000) argue that political leaders in nations around the globe play an influential role in HE policy and significantly affect its content, “often dominating design and implementation and sometimes frustrating policy reforms” (p. 1088). This is particularly the case in state-centric systems of HE such as that in Oman. In this study, the Sultan and Council of Ministers are considered to be those political leaders who can influence the direction of HE. As the general director mentioned above, there was some participation by ministry level officials in such sovereign policies by sending their proposals and recommendations to the Council through their Minister. Such participation will be looked at when talking about the role of ministries in policy making.

6.3.1.1. The Sultan

Articles 1 and 5 of chapter 1 (The State and the System of Governance) of the Basic Statute clearly define Oman as an independent Sultanate, a “State with full sovereignty” and “the system of governance is Sultani” (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, ch.1). As explained by the Royal Decree, Sultani means royal. In such a Royal system, being the head of the state gives the Sultan the full authority, that is in Weberian terms, the legitimate right to exercise power, in regard to the armed forces, planning, finance, policies and whatever he envisions to be important to the state. It is argued in this study that the Basic Statute gives the Sultan the ultimate and exclusive power to make
policies for the state. He has to be obeyed in all matters, with respect paid to him by all of the state’s people. Above that, criticizing him negatively is not accepted. He is a symbol of national unity as declared by the Basic Statute.

His Majesty the Sultan is the Head of State and the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, his person is inviolable, respect of him is a duty, and his command is obeyed. He is the symbol of national unity and the guardian of the preservation and the protection thereof. (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, ch.4, article, 41)

In the Basic Statute, chapter four describes the head of the state and his functions. For the purpose of this study, not all his duties mentioned in the chapter will be outlined and discussed here. I will only deal with those functions related to policy making. On the whole, chapter four of the Basic Statute stresses that the Head of the State has the complete, ultimate power in making policies for the state in all areas and sectors. This is applicable to all policies starting from foreign policies and defence policies to public policies. Article 42 elucidates that the Sultan is responsible for “ensuring the rule of law and directing the general policy of the state” (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, ch.4, article, 42). Allen and Rigsbee (2000), in their book Oman Under Qaboos: From Coup to Constitution, 1970-1996, write that,

Oman remained one of the few absolute monarchies in the world. The Sultan could pass laws by decrees without reference to any other individual or body in the government and had absolute veto over any decision of the cabinet. (p.41)

Alhaj (2000) considers Oman as an autocracy in which the Sultan has the ultimate power in all foreign and domestic policies. Similarly, Siegfried (2000) argues that the Omani Basic Statute provides the Sultan with full legitimacy and power to make various policies and regulations for the state. In general, the literature on the Oman political system suggests that the Sultan is the top and very powerful policy actor in the Sultanate.

Not different from other policies and policy domains, HE institutions and their regulators have to follow the guidance of the Sultan and implement what he plans for the system. “His command is obeyed” and that comes through Royal Decrees (documents), Royal Speeches (oral) and Royal Orders (oral). As admitted by all interviewees, the Sultan frames the overall direction and guidance for the HE system. A member of the Education Council observed that “the Sultan always brings new directions to the HE system and it is up to us how we work to put it in practice” (EC/I4/10-11).

In an analogous opinion, a college dean considered the policies the Sultan forwards to the system as “a wide blueprint that HE institutions and agents have to consider when making their policies” (I/I5/3-4). Similarly, a general director stated that “His Majesty is the highest figure that set the policies and laws and these policies write the guidelines and how we can guide the HE sector” (GD/I11/7-8).
As can be seen from the above discussion, the Sultan’s general directions for HE policies come from his visionary leadership, which sets overall proposals and then the system has to reflect this in its policies through its institutions. As explained by two interviewees, this vision is never too narrow that it may interfere with the day to day business of institutions. Therefore, it might be argued here that these general policies work as what Dror (1971) calls ‘mega-policies’, those policies coming from the top policy-maker of the government. Dror (1971) indicates that mega-policies are the master policies that can include overall goals, strategies, basic assumptions, policy instruments, conceptual frameworks and inter-policy directives. The findings from the study interviews and documents suggest that the Sultan’s input to the HE policies come as master policies or mega-policies, to which the whole system must respond and comply.

Some interviewees revealed that such mega-policies came in three forms, namely: Royal Decrees, Speeches and Royal Orders. Depending on their focus, these forms may address certain institutions or be system-wide. Overall, these mega-policies are seen as flexible enough that HE agencies can choose how to achieve these policies in alignment with their institutions’ vision and mission. This is to say that polices coming from the Sultan are often not interfering with the day-to-day business of institutions as we will see in the coming examples. In brief, an argument is developed in this study that the Sultan is the main supreme policy actor in the Omani HE system. While this is the stance articulated in statutes, research interviews confirmed that this was the way policy was actually framed at the mega-level.

**Royal Decrees**

Royal decrees are issued solely by the Sultan, in his name, and they are published in the Official Gazette. In Oman, Royal Decrees are regarded as the most powerful policy document and every Decree starts with “We Qaboos bin Said, the Sultan of Oman”. In fact, this statement makes the content of the Decree enforceable upon specific individuals or institutions. In regard to the HE system, Royal Decrees are a window for his Majesty to promulgate and ratify laws; establish universities, ministries, councils; and appoint top policy makers of HE ministries, SQU, OAAA and the HE specialized councils. Such appointments are another way the Sultan’s authority is exercised within the HE system.

To give some examples, Royal Decree No. 41 in 1999 was issued to establish the private universities system (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 1999). This Royal Decree constituted a mega-policy document that put forward a broad policy, giving the Council of HE (previously) and the Ministry of HE the mandate to regulate the establishment of private HE institutions. The Decree sets the vision, goals and general structure of these institutions, while giving the Council of HE the power to
decide on the number of private institutions to be established. In the same way, the Minister of HE was granted the authority to promulgate laws regulating private institutions. A general director explained that,

All of those Royal Decrees also come specific to a certain area of HE. For example, my area is private HE. We have a systematic Royal Decree talking about how we can supervise the sector. What are the main guidelines for that? But the detailed regulations come later on through the minister and who is going to make those regulations? It is us. (GD/I5/30-35)

Looking at this Royal Decree, it is claimed that the Sultan has not interfered with the business of the Ministry of HE and the Education Council in terms of their role in making the specific policies for the private HE institutions. The Royal Decree has only been a master, meta or mega-policy for authorizing the establishment of private HE institutions, with the Council and the ministry having much to do in detailing the specific regulations and policies.

**Royal Speeches**

As Kéchichian (2008) wrote, “Qaboos bin Said is the only Arab leader to have created a written record through his annual “State of the Sultanate” orations to his nation” (p. 112). In his speeches, the Sultan Qaboos always tries to address major issues, nationally and internationally, that are of concern to the public. From 1970, the Sultan gave his speeches on the National day, 18th November each year. With the establishment of the Oman Council in 2000, the speech has moved from the National Day to the day of the opening ceremony of the Oman Council.

In analysing the speeches of the Sultan, Kéchichian (2008) found that Sultan Qaboos has used his speeches effectively in “defining his vision, presenting policies to the nation and setting the course for internal stability” (p.112). Importantly here, the policies that His Majesty passes to the nation through his speeches always carry implications for change and reform in relation to the issues touched upon. Talking about HE, the Minister of HE explained that,

The speeches of His Majesty are one of the major sources for developing policies for the HE system. A single word in his speech may direct the policy towards reforms and quality education. We take his presentations into consideration and work collectively to implement his guidance. For example, in 2012, His Majesty, in the opening ceremony of Oman Council, stressed the issue of reviewing the education policies. We have taken that and we are now working in restructuring the system, developing the law and rewriting the strategy. (M/I1/15-23)

We see here an ecumenical definition of policy as suggested by Ozga (2000): specifically a ‘single word’ might be taken as a policy.

The above discussion presented how the Sultan has been guiding HE policies through His annual speeches. Interestingly, the Minister of HE admitted that these speeches were always directing the policy towards quality, taking into consideration both global trends and national concerns. For
instance, His Majesty gave a speech at the opening of the Oman Council in 2012, where He spoke about many issues nationally and internationally. In regards to HE, he said that,

During the past period, various systems of education and curricula were implemented and different training programmes were executed, but the matter calls for greater attention to be accorded to linking the educational output to the requirements of the labour market. Hence one of the priorities of the current stage of development and the next stage, which we prepare for, is to revise the educational policies, its plans and its programmes, which need to be developed to keep pace with the changes that the country is going through. More attention should be accorded to the requirements imposed by scientific and cultural development towards the evolution of a generation armed with awareness, knowledge and the abilities required for worthwhile work. (Oman Observer, 2012, p.6)

This part of the 2012 Royal Speech initiated a reform era for the HE system regulators, as the HE Minister mentioned above. The speech called for aligning HE policies with Omani labour market requirements; another indication of a state-centric approach to policy development. Furthermore, there was a focus on the need to evaluate the current policies to keep pace with rapid changes globally and locally. Overall, it seems that the Royal Speeches have been playing a key role in formulating, implementing and even evaluating policies. Again, these Royal Speeches are broad in nature and work as master-, meta- or mega-policies, guiding the system to cope with challenges and new trends.

**Royal Orders**

Royal Orders are decisions made by his Majesty through the giving of directions. Ordinarily, Royal Orders can be issued at any time addressing an issue or a problem emerging in the State. Such orders usually appear in the media as Royal Orders by His Majesty, yet the Sultan does not appear in the media or in the Oman Council to announce them. The concerned agencies have to respond to these orders and implement them, and, of course, are provided with all needed resources. This role has been granted to the Sultan by the Basic Statute. In article 42 of chapter four (the Basic Statute), it is indicated that the Sultan is responsible and has the right to

…[take] prompt measures to counter any danger threatening the safety of the Sultanate, its territorial integrity, or the security and the interests of its people, or hindering the institutions of the state from performing their functions. (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, ch.4, article, 42)

The HE system, since its establishment, has been receiving Royal Orders that have brought new policies to the system. A general Director commented on this, saying “Royal Orders are always there to correct the direction of the system or to respond to the social needs of the people” (GD/I6/6-7). In general, it is worth mentioning that these Royal Orders emerge from time to time spontaneously by the Sultan when he sees a need for them. An example of these recent Royal Orders mentioned by an interviewee is the recent introduction of 1000 external scholarships (abroad) for Master and PhD degrees over the course of five years. The interviewee confirmed that
“this policy reform came to respond to the requests of youths in the Arab Spring protests in 2011” (I/18/10-11). Another frequently mentioned Royal Order was the significant increase in the number of admitted students to the HE system, which was also a response to 2011 events. The events of 2011 and the impact on the HE policies are discussed later in the thesis in Chapter eight.

Being the most influential policy actor, it goes without saying that His Majesty has been keen with his strong-willed, wise leadership to lead the system towards prosperity and sustainability. It is very clear from his direction through Royal Decrees, Speeches and Orders that HE policy has been undergoing improvement and development responding to international changes and challenges and national requirements. It is clearly argued above that the Sultan either approves the HE policies (Royal Decrees) or gives directions for developing new policies (Royal Speeches and Orders). What has been emphasised by the interviews is that any major policy initiative (mega-policy) for the HE system has to be approved by the Sultan through Royal Decrees. At the same time, specific policies of institutions or the day-to-day policy of the system are normally in the hands of lower levels of the policy-making architecture, which includes the specialized councils, ministries or even HE institutions themselves, depending on the weight of the policy decisions and their focus. While dealing with major policies and sometimes touching on specific polices, it could be argued that the Royal Speeches and Orders work as a space for the Sultan to make policies when needed, responding to both local and maybe global issues. The following Table 6.1 summarizes the Sultan’s role in HE policy in Oman.

Table 6.1
The Sultan’s role in HE policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Royal Decrees</th>
<th>Royal Speeches</th>
<th>Royal Orders</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>When</strong></td>
<td>At anytime</td>
<td>Annually</td>
<td>As needed/anytime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Why</strong></td>
<td>To promulgate and ratify laws</td>
<td>To address the major issues</td>
<td>To address an issue emerging in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples</strong></td>
<td>Royal Decree 62/2007 (Applied Science Colleges establishment)</td>
<td>Reviewing the education policy and its quality</td>
<td>Increasing the number of admitted students to HE institutions after 2011</td>
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6.3.1.2. The Council of Ministers

Given this reality of mega-policies guiding the HE system, the Sultan is supported by the Cabinet or what is called the Council of Ministers. It is worth pointing out here that Ministers in the Omani
Government are appointed by the Sultan, as are the Undersecretaries of each ministry. Their appointments come in a Royal Decree. His Majesty relies heavily on and trusts this body to advise him in the process of designing and making the policies of the state. This is made clear in the Basic Statute:

> His Majesty the Sultan shall be assisted in formulating and implementing the general policy of the State by a council of ministers and specialised councils. (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, ch.4, article 43)

The above article suggests that the Ministers’ Council is responsible for assisting the Sultan in making the public policies of Oman. This involves not only policy formulation, but also following and ensuring the implementation of these policies, talking about the whole policy process from formation to implementation. According to a State Council Member, “the Council of Ministers is in charge of proposing policies to His Majesty in the various areas; political, administrative, economic, executive and social” (SC, I2/10-11). In the Basic Statute, the role of the Ministers’ Council in the policy process is outlined and prescribed. At this point, the roles related to the policy process will be analysed.

Article 44 of the Basic Statute describes the Ministers’ Council as “the authority entrusted with the implementation of the general policies of the State” (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, ch.4, article 44). The description of the Council in this article confirms that it is an executive body, which is working under the Sultan to make sure that the policies are implemented. The usage of implemented here is significant. The Minister of Awqaf asserted that “we are working in the Council collectively and each in his/her ministry to formulate strategies and plans to serve the development of the State as directed by His Majesty” (M/I3/7-9). While it is defined as an executive body, the Council is also entrusted for making the overall policies of the State and is responsible under the Sultan for formulating them. The Minister of HE also mentioned that “the Cabinet discusses HE general policies when they are above the interest of a single ministry” (M/I1/27). The Council normally will not interfere with the specific HE policies of a ministry unless it is affecting the whole system and is also of a great impact on the state and the interests of the people.

In listing the functions of the Council, article 44 puts forward seven missions for the Council in relation to making policies, which are listed in the following table.
Table 6.2
_The Ministers’ Council functions_ (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, ch. 4, article 44)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tasks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “Submitting recommendations to His Majesty the Sultan in economic, political, social,</td>
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<td>executive, and administrative matters of concern to the Government including proposing</td>
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<tr>
<td>draft laws and decrees.”</td>
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<td>2. Determining the objectives and the general policies for economic, social, and</td>
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<td>administrative development and proposing the necessary means and measures for their</td>
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<td>implementation which ensure the best utilisation of the financial, economic and human</td>
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<tr>
<td>resources.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Discussing development plans prepared by competent authorities after presenting them</td>
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<td>to Majlis Oman, submitting these plans to His Majesty the Sultan for approval, and</td>
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<tr>
<td>following up their implementation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Discussing proposals of ministries relevant to the implementation of their respective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>competencies and taking appropriate recommendations and decisions in this regard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Supervising the functioning of the administrative apparatus of the State, following</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>up the performance of its duties and coordinating among its units.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Supervising generally the implementation of the Laws, decrees, regulations, decisions,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>treaties, agreements and judgements of the courts in a manner that ensures adherence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thereto.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Discharging any other competence delegated by His Majesty the Sultan or vested by the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provisions of the Law.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Table 6.2 above shows that the Ministers’ Council is a key player in the policy processes of the state. According to task 1, the Council is delegated to look after all public policies of the state (economic, political, social, executive, or administrative). This indicates that the Cabinet is anticipated to provide their feedback, opinions and views on all day-to-day issues and concerns of the public. Focusing on HE policy, the Sultan receives recommendations from the Council in terms of mega-policies of the HE system. The Minister of HE indicated that “issues regarding HE are sometimes raised by the different ministries in the Council meeting, ending up with recommendations to His Majesty” (M/I1/17-18). Furthermore, the Council, through its various ministers, is in charge of drafting HE laws and decrees, which are issued later as Royal Decrees. As was emphasised by some interviewees, as well as the Basic Statute, the Sultan relies on the Council to give recommendations to Him and for writing the preliminary drafts of HE policies. The Council of Ministers can be seen as another source of mega policies.

With regard to the State’s development plans, the Council plays the role of discussing them after receiving proposals from the expert ministries in each area. After debating these development plans, the Council forwards these plans to His Majesty for approval. A general director mentioned that
“each ministry has its own development plan for its HE institutions, which need to be approved by the Council of Ministers” (GD/15/7-8). The HE development plans will be discussed later. From the Basic Statute, it is also specified that the Council of Ministers should draw up the general aims of the HE system in light of the State’s development requirements. Such broad aims are described as “the maps for the ministries to design their plans and strategies” (GD/13/10). Overall, it can be said that the Council of Ministers is a vital actor in proposing policies, approving them and following their implementation. Under the Council, policy ideas and proposals are negotiated, decisions on HE issues are made, and policy initiatives are both sent up to the Sultan and down to the ministries.

From the above discussion, it can be summarized that the Council of Ministers works as a critical mediator (principal) between the individual ministries and the Sultan in making HE policies (agent). It is very important to mention that it is only these mega-policies of the HE system that are dealt with, not the daily business of each ministry. This is to say that the Council specifies the priorities of the HE system, while ministries create the guidelines for their policies. Being appointed by the Sultan, it can also be argued that the Ministers’ critical role in making HE policy reinforces the idea of the ‘state controlled’ system and the domination of the Government in achieving its interest. The study also concludes that the top-level government (the Sultan and the Cabinet) is designing the master policies of the HE system by receiving recommendations and proposals from the ministries and their HE institutions. More or less, the top-level Government signs the law, regulations and decrees after these have been sent to them from the field.

In this study, the Sultan and the Cabinet are also seen as the primary and official policy makers’ in the Omani HE system. According to Anderson (2011), “primary policy-makers have the direct constitutional authority to act” (p.48). As shown above, the Basic Statute of the State has granted such authority to the Sultan and the Ministers’ Council. It is likely that those primary policy-makers rely on supplementary policy-makers from the administrative agencies of the HE system, such as the Education Council, Institutions and so on, in drafting the HE policies and receiving the proposals. This is more of a “dependency relationship” in shaping HE policies (Anderson, 2011). Overall, this study concurs with Anderson’s (2011) argument, where he states that in “some countries, such as Oman and Saudi Arabia, public policies are executive or monarchic products handed down to the people” (p. 51).

6.3.2. Specialized bodies

As quoted above, the Ministers’ Council, as well as specialized councils, assist the Sultan in drawing up and implementing the general policy of the State (see Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, article 43). The specialized councils can be described as a state apparatus created to supervise,
manage or take care of a specific sector within the government. Where relevant and necessary, these specialized councils are also expected to communicate/liaise between the different bodies within a specific sector, playing the role of the coordinating authority. It can be argued that the specialized councils are responsible for ensuring the efficiency of the state’s bodies in a certain sector. According to the Ministry of Information (2013), the specialized councils are named as higher committees, councils, boards, institutions or public authorities. Examples of such labelling are the Supreme High Committee for the FYPs, the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority, the State Financial and Administrative Audit Institution, the Research Council and the Tender Board.

Article 56 of the Basic Statute of the state puts forward that,

The Specialised Councils shall be established, their powers specified, and their members appointed by virtue of Royal Decrees. The said Councils shall be associated with the Council of Ministers unless their establishing Decrees state otherwise. (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, article 56)

This article indicates that those specialized councils are formed by Royal Decrees and therefore their members are also appointed by His Majesty via a Royal Decree. Examining some of the Royal Decrees of establishing specialized councils shows that the members of those councils can be ministers, undersecretaries, private sector representatives or even public figures interested/involved in specific related sector. In terms of their association, the Basic Statute specifies that these councils should be under the Council of Ministers if their establishment Decree does not specify another governmental body. It is quite clear that these specialized councils are not different from other government bodies in terms of their regulations and in being government-controlled. Allen and Rigsbee (2000) viewed the specialized councils in the Omani Government as bureaucratic structures that often overlapped with existing ministries in the specific sector. This issue will be looked in the following chapter.

Being focused on the HE sector, this study will look at the specialized councils responsible for overseeing and managing the HE sector. Based on the interviews and documents, the study found six specialized councils within the HE system, which are the Education Council, the Research Council, the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority, the HE Admission Centre, Oman Medical Speciality Board and the SQU Council. The following brief sections will map the roles of each one and will explain how it is related to Omani HE policy.

6.3.2.1. The Education Council

It is important to mention that when this study started in July 2012, the current Education Council had not yet been established. It was then called the HE Council, which changed to be the Education Council just two months after the commencement of the study in September 2012. At the same
time, a Royal Decree was issued to appoint a new Secretary-General for the Education Council. That said, when the interviews were conducted, the Council was only one year old.

The Education Council was established in September 2012 by the Royal Decree 48/2012, replacing the previous HE Council. According to the establishment Decree, it was created to,

Promote education in its different forms, levels and outcomes and to ensure its quality in keeping with the state’s overall policy, national development plans, and the demands of the labour market. (The Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2012a, Article 2)

It is stated that the Education Council has the mission of and responsibility for looking after all education forms (schooling, HE, technical, health, religious), as well as all education levels and outcomes (graduate and post-graduate) across the Sultanate. Apparently, the new Education Council does not only oversee the HE system but also schooling and other forms of education, which can be contrasted with the previous Council that was only responsible for the HE sector. A member of the Education Council mentioned that “it is about putting the whole education sector (schooling and HE) under one umbrella”. As is clear from the Royal Decree, “this was the main reason behind the finding of the Council” (EC/I4/3-4). Indeed, article 5 of the Royal Decree 48/2012 clearly declares the cancellation of the Royal Decree 65/1998 of Establishing the HE Council (The Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2012, Article 5). With regards to HE, the Council of Education is currently the supreme body, under his Majesty and Council of Ministers, responsible for promoting the HE sector, assuring its quality and making its policies.

Based on the Royal Decree, article 3 of The System of the Education Council, there are 27 jurisdictions that are mandated to the Council in all levels of education. The following figure summarizes the ones that are related to making policies for the HE system.
Looking at Figure 6.3, the Education Council is considered the highest-mandated body in the Omani government under the Sultan and the Council of Ministers to oversee the HE sector and make its policies. According to article 3 (2), the Council is entitled to set the general policies (mega) for the HE sector in collaboration with other specialized councils in the Omani Government such as the Supreme Council for Planning, the Oman Council and the Research Council. It is also stressed that the Council is responsible for making sure that these policies are in “compliance with
the State's overall policies and requirements for comprehensive development - in order to accomplish the Sultanate's cultural, social, economic and scientific goals” (The Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2012a, Article 3/2).

More specifically, the Council, through the Royal Decree (article 3), is clearly requested to: set a strategy for the system; evaluate the quality and ensure it; develop plans and programs; organize admission to HE institutions and decide roll numbers; approve establishment of HE institutions; approve the strategies of HE institutions; evaluate polices, curricula, programs and management modes of HE institutions; investigate education problems and difficulties; propose draft laws; study annual reports on institutional performance; and follow up with implementation of policies. All these duties prescribed by the Royal Decree suggest that the Education Council must be involved in the HE policy making processes, from creation through to evaluation. Furthermore, it is compelled to ensure the quality outcomes of the HE institutions and follow quality assurance processes. In regards to the match between the HE graduates and the labour market, the Education Council is deemed to “link the Sultanate's education programs and specializations to the demands of the labour market” (The Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2012, Article 3/7).

Among the 27 jurisdictions stated by the Royal Decree, the Council also is required to,

- study proposed international agreements relating to education and review agreements currently in force,
- study all issues relating to Council referred by His Majesty the Sultan, the Cabinet, and the education authorities,
- prepare an annual report on all the different forms and levels of education and submit it to the Cabinet. (The Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2012, Article 3/7)

These three jurisdictions above show that the Council is considered the overarching authority under the Sultan and the Cabinet in making the policies for the Omani HE system. The Council is entrusted to look at the HE issues transferred to it by the Sultan, the Minsters’ Council, related ministries and authorities. This demonstrates the enormous burden that the Council must carry in terms of HE policy-making. The Council is also required to prepare an annual report to the Cabinet on the performance of the HE sector. Being also in charge of studying proposed international agreements and reviewing the current ones related to the HE system puts the Council in a highly significant position in the Omani Government in terms of working to reflect global trends in the Omani HE policies. Mentioning all the above mandates suggests that according to the principal-agent conceptualization, the Education Council acts as both a principal and agent, concurrently. It is an agent reporting to the top-level government with several ministries and their HE institutions as its agents. More clearly, the Education Council is a principal over the ministries and the HE institutions.

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Interestingly, the Royal Decree lays out all the mentioned tasks of the Council, stressing and pointing out that this role should be “within the framework of State policy” in order to “cope with continuous social change” and should “reflect overall State policy” (The Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2012a, Article 3). The Decree also states that the Council must be assisted by the concerned authorities, ministries and specialized councils. The Council cannot stand by itself without the collaboration of the relevant authorities.

It is also worth mentioning that according to the Royal Decree, the Education Council is affiliated to the Diwan of Royal Court, which is a powerful body in the Omani government directly working under His Majesty (The Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2012a). This means that the Council is reporting to the Diwan directly. The Council is supported by a secretariat to assist the Council in its jurisdictions and the secretariat has been granted the financial and administrative autonomy as stated by the Royal Decree.

Being so important to policy-making in the Omani Government, the Royal Decree specifies that the Council is chaired by the Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court and deputy-chaired by the Minister of HE. In its membership, the Council includes the Minister of Education, Minister of Manpower, Minister of Civil Service, Secretary General of the Supreme Council for Planning, Secretary General Research Council, Chief Executive Officer of Oman Academic Accreditation Authority, General Secretary of the Education Council, vice-chancellor of a public university, a vice-chancellor of a private university, three members of a highly academic and respected status and, finally, two members from the private sector (The Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2012a). It is very important to mention here that the Royal Decree does not specify individual names, but rather positions and statuses. Thus, the current Minister of Diwan in the Omani Government must be the chair of the Council and the same with deputy-chair and other members.

As can be seen, these attributes of the Education Council derive from the Royal Decree 48/2012 (policy document) establishing the Council. This was the desired situation of the Omani Government when creating the Council. However, the reality is somewhat different, as indicated by the interview data. Interviewees from the different levels of the HE sector showed some variations in their statements concerning the roles, purposes and membership of the Council in regards to making HE policy. The next section illustrates this in more detail.

The Role of the Council

To investigate the policy architecture, interviewees were asked about the chief body in the Omani Government that makes policies for the HE sector. Not surprisingly, all interviewees pointed to the
Education Council, referencing the 2012 Royal Decree mentioned above. A university rector stated that,

What is apparent from the Royal Decree, that was issued a year ago, is that the Education Council is supposed to come out with such policy. (I/I8/5-6)

The Minister of HE said that,

The Council of Education is now the highest authority under His Majesty of course, which is supposed to either propose policies or approve policies submitted to the council for approval. (M/I1/11-12)

In the same way, a State Council member clarified that,

I believe that policies should be made at the Education Council where proposals are discussed and decisions are made, and then implementation is followed and assessed to a certain extent. (SC/I2/2-5)

Such statements were frequently mentioned by almost all interviewees in different wordings when asked about the top related policy-making body for the HE sector. It is quite clear that all interviewees were literate about the 2012 Royal Decree and that making policies in the HE sector was mainly designated to the Education Council.

To investigate the role of the Council, interviewees were asked about the purpose of having the Education Council replace the previous HE Council. Below are some quotes from different interviewees, commenting on the purpose of establishing the Council:

The purpose of creating Education Council is to have all these ministries and all the education institutions to come under one umbrella. So we have one vision and different implementers. (EC/I1/33-35)

The name of the Council changed to give it a broader and more comprehensive role in making policies for the whole education system. (SC/I2/8-9)

The Education Council was established to avoid having different institutions making different policies while you need a body that connects all these policies together. (U/I5/22-24)

It was only for HE policy, now it is for all education sectors. (SC/I3/4-5)

The reason was that there was a belief that there has to be a close relationship between schooling and HE. (SC/I4/8-11)

These extracts above represent the opinion of the majority of interviewees from the three levels of the policy-making system. This group of interviewees were aware of the government’s aim in establish the Education Council. Clearly, all agreed that the Council was established by the government to be an umbrella organisation for all education institutions, overseeing and making policies for the broad education sector. Those interviewees were able to see that the Council was found to have one vision for the system, yet different implementers for specific policies. Furthermore, the majority of interviewees explained that the Council was reformed to bridge the gap between the schooling system and the HE system. It is very important again to mention that the
interviewees were talking about the intention of the Omani Government in creating the Education Council.

In a different way, four respondents from the institutional level and three bureaucrats from the ministerial level mentioned that the replacement of the HE Council with the Education Council was due to the failure of the HE Council to fulfil its mission in making policies for the whole sector. For example, an institution rector claimed that,

Previously the HE Council was supposed to supervise, approve strategies of all HEIs. Unfortunately, it didn’t function. We haven’t seen any role for it. (I/I1/14-16)

When asked about justifying their judgment of the Council, this group of interviewees pointed to issues such as the inability of the HE Council to have a unified national strategy and law for the whole HE sector, matching the national demands of the labour market and providing autonomy to HE institutions. In fact, the majority of interviewees from both institutional levels and ministerial levels were not satisfied with the role played by the previous HE Council. However, they did not attribute the replacement of the previous Council to a failure in achieving its role.

The idea of failure was not accepted by the Minister of HE (Deputy-chair of the previous HE Council and the current Education Council), stating that the reason for the new Council was to bridge the gap between the schooling system and the HE sector, not because there was a failure of the previous Council. The Minister disagreed totally with this view. To exemplify, she mentioned that the previous HE Council succeeded in “many initiatives such as establishing the central HE Admission Centre, finding scholarships for social security families and establishing the National Career Guidance Centre” (M/I1/ 81-82). The Minister noted that these were only a few significant examples of successful initiatives out of many others. Supporting this observation by the HE minister, Wilkinson and Al Hajry (2007) mentioned that the HE Council had held many fruitful meetings from its formation in 1998, and various promising policies had been discussed and approved for the HE sector. Yet, the Minister of HE and the two other interviewed ministers admitted that the HE Council was not able (i.e., failed) to have a unified national strategy for the whole HE sector. This will be looked at in the following chapter.

Despite this, one of the interesting interview outcomes was that almost all interviewees were optimistic about the Royal Decree establishing the new Education Council. From the top policymakers (minister) to the lower levels (institutions’ leaders), it was stressed that the government was right in reforming the previous Council and mandating to it oversee the jurisdictions above. The Minister of HE described the establishment of the Council as “a positive movement and initiative, it is going to give a very good impact on the HE in the future” (M/I1/24-25). Similarly, the Chairman of the State Council indicated that “the establishment of the new Education Council, and if is
activated effectively in its new version, will solve many problems” (M/I2/26-27). Overall, despite the various opinions, it can be concluded that there was a consensus among all respondents regarding the importance of replacing the previous HE Council with the new Education Council as the new Council includes all education levels.

Interviews also revealed that the reformed Council is more powerful than the previous HE Council, because the new one reports to His Majesty directly. The Minister of HE stated that “the Council of HE used to report to the Council of Ministers but the new Council is to the Sultan” (M/I1/5). An undersecretary also mentioned that “in terms of power, the Education Council reports directly to his Majesty via the Minister of Diwan but it does not report to the Ministers’ Council” (U/I6/61-62). This is to say that the Education Council has the power and mandate under his Majesty to decide on HE policies in the Sultanate; it is more powerful because it reports to the Sultan without having the cabinet as a mediating channel.

**Concerns about the New Council**

Some interviewees did express concern about the ability of the reformed Council to achieve its intended roles in making HE policy. The semi-structured nature of the interviews helped in revealing these concerns by allowing follow-up sub-questions about the actual role, power, potentiality and resources of the Council in making HE policies. The data showed slight variations in the answers to these questions. Still, the overall position of most interviewees is exemplified in the following statement by an undersecretary, indicating that,

> We must always differentiate between the reality and what is supposed to be. The Royal Decree gave the Education Council the mandate of setting the policies. But, the reality is contradicting sometimes. (U/I1/12-13)

Most interview respondents were able to identify a difference between what is set by the Royal Decree for the Council and the reality of achieving these tasks. It was found that some institutions’ rectors and ministry officials had doubts about the ability of the new Council to establish itself in such huge systems of education, scattered between different ministries. An undersecretary believed that the Education Council would not be able to play the role assigned to it. He asked, “How come such a tiny Council will be able to meet 27 jurisdictions in all forms of education” (U/I4/30)? In a similar way, a university president argued that “in my point of view, the Council was delegated a lot of responsibilities that made its task of making policies more difficult” (I/I9/35). Of course, it is a huge job to make policies for all forms of education across the entire Sultanate.

However, the top elites interviewed in this study (e.g., ministers) still had faith that the Council was powerful enough to do a great deal in terms of making HE policies. The Minister of HE affirmed that “the Council does have the authority as defined by the Royal Decree and I think that it has a lot
of authorities stronger than the previous council” (M/I1/89-90). The Minister had confidence that the Council will be doing so successfully in the future. The Chairman of the State Council shared the same opinion and confidence in the ability of the Education Council to lead the HE sector. He said that “I am happy with the new Council and I have no doubt that it will work successfully in the coming days” (M/I2/19-20).

The study was also able to identify some other reasons behind the distrust of those policy-makers who held concerns about the Education Council. To mention one, a member of the Education Council questioned the capacity of the Council to make policies. He said that,

The Council does not have ‘a kitchen for cooking policies’ for the HE system. It doesn’t have the capacity to do that yet and we are relying on the agencies directorates. (EC/I3/16-18)

He elucidated that the Council had a shortage of expertise, staff and resources. The issue of capacity was also raised by several interviewees. The Minister of HE herself pointed to this issue, saying that “the Council doesn’t have the cadre yet” (M/I1/91). Likewise, the State Council Chairman acknowledged the issue and hoped that “the Council will have skilful, knowledgeable staff in the coming future” (M/I2/45). Indeed, the story of lacking expertise and staff (consultants, experts, admin staff etc.) and the culture of work were present in many interviews in all the three levels of policy-makers. In validating this, during my visits to the Education Council to conduct my interviews, I spoke with some staff and they confirmed this problem and I was asked to raise it in my study as one of the major obstacles to the Council achieving its mission. Briefly, this suggests that policy makers from the top of government, as well as from the ministerial and intuitional levels, recognized the difficulty of the lack of manpower and relevant expertise.

Aligning with this finding, three previous studies confirmed the lack of staff at the previous HE Council and this was found to hinder its mission (see Al-Hajry, 2002; Alyahmadi, 2006; Wilkinson & Al Hajry, 2007). Wilkinson and Al Hajry (2007) stated that,

However, it would seem possible that the achievements of the Council could be further enhanced by supporting the technical secretariat of the Council with experts and professionals in the field of education policy, planning, management, and other matters related to education in general, and HE in particular. The secretariat will provide the technical support for the Council in terms of studying and evaluating the issues proposed by other institutions and by the Council itself in a technical and professional manner. This in turn will support the members of the Council on the decisions to be taken. (p. 143)

As can be seen from the interviews and the literature, the lack of staff has been an obstacle in the way of both the old and the reformed Council fulfilling their mandates. An argument is presented in this study based on the research evidence that if the new Council is not equipped with enough appropriately trained and skilled cadre, this body will not be able to achieve its mission of HE
policy-making properly. Under these conditions, it is likely that the newly reformed Council will perform similarly to the previous Council.

Surprisingly, five interviewees from the institutional level indicated that they had no idea about how the Education Council was working. This showed a complete disjunction with the views of other interviewees. The following statements illustrate the vagueness and unfamiliarity of those institutions’ leaders regarding the role played by the Education Council:

PersonalI don’t have really much information. Also, I don’t have any contact till now with the Education Council. (I/I5/16-17)

I, honestly speaking, I don’t have in-depth information. I know that the Minister of HE is the deputy chair of the Council. She is one of the important people in that Council in terms of decision making. (I/I4/10-12)

To be honest, I don’t know how they are making the policies. (I/I2/3)

I have no idea about how the Council is working. I haven’t been involved. (I/I10/10)

I can’t tell. I don’t know how policy is made nationally. (I/I8/7)

These quotes indicate that some policy-makers at the institutional level were not familiar with the role of the Education Council. It could be argued that the reason behind such uncertainty was that those policy-makers had not been involved with any policy made by the Council. This reading was verified by a follow-up question asked to those policy-makers about whether they were consulted by their top leadership in the ministries when making any policy at the national level. Their response was ‘not at all’. This illustrated some issues about involving stakeholders in making policies and these will be looked at in more detail in the coming chapter. Moreover, unfamiliarity with the role of the Council can be also attributed to the absence of marketization and advertisement of the Council regarding its tasks. Three interviewees from the institutional level complained that the Council had no channel of communicating with institutions directly. Elaborating further, they said also that the Council had no webpage to advertise its work and involve institutions directly or indirectly with the processes of policy making.

**Still a new Council**

Some interviewees pointed out that the Education Council was still establishing itself and they could not see a major role for it in terms of making policies for the HE system at the moment. They argued that it was unfair to judge the Council after one year of its existence. The following extracts show their opinion:

The Council is not playing a big role currently. Till now, they are still looking for their role. (U/I2/77)

“I hope that there will be a role for the council. Unfortunately, the Education Council was reformed last year and they didn’t publish their new vision. So we are not sure where they are going. (I/I1/13-16)
The education Council is a newborn experience as we can call it. (GD/I1/10-11)

The current council is much better in terms of the clarity of responsibilities. However, the Council is only one year old and I didn’t think that they conducted more than two meetings. (U/I4/24-26)

I believe that the new Council can’t be judged at this stage. (GD/I3/27-28)

Anyway, if we look at the current one, it is still in the process of developing itself. (U/I5/9)

Some interviewees believed that there was nothing unique about the new Council of Education. As they indicated, it was only a change of name with more responsibilities and coverage of all forms and levels of education. It was suggested that the new Council would continue in the same direction and with the same achievements as the previous HE Council. An interviewee from the institutional level described the Education Council as “a similar version of the previous HE Council, expanded to work with all levels of education” (I/I5/70-71). Sharing the same point of view, an undersecretary questioned the role of the Education Council by stating that “I do not see any further development from the old HE Council and I do not think that the new Council will be more successful with such a big huge scattered system” (U/I3/56-58). It could be argued that due to the numerous mandates, the reformed Council will face difficulties in making policies not only for the HE system, but also for other education systems. It is a huge job that must be achieved with a shortage of labour power.

**The Council’s Composition**

Previously, the chairman, deputy chair and membership of the Council were described according to the Royal Decree. Some interviewees showed dissatisfaction about the composition of the membership, as well as its leadership. Starting with the Chairman of the Council, the interviews revealed positive and negative sides of the Council being chaired by the Minister of Diwan. Starting with the positive views, here are some extracts from the interviews:

The Minister of Diwan is the president of education council to give it more importance and strength. (U/I1/5)

Let us look at it positively; the Minister of Diwan is the closest person to His Majesty. So whatever HE system needs, it can be transmitted easily to His Majesty. It is also policy channels. Things can be done quickly. Approvals can be got quickly. This is the positive part. (SC/I4/55-63)

Positive to be one of the closest people to His Majesty and one of the great policy players in the Government. (SC/I3/19-20)

Frankly speaking I think that being chaired by the Minister of Diwan, it gives the issue an importance. It gives it a boost particularly when it comes to resources and power. It needs that at least in this phase. I don’t see that it is a problem. The success of the Council will depend on the members. (I/I4/108-110)

Summarizing the sentiments expressed in the quotes above, the interviewees considered the Minister of Diwan as a positive impact on the Council because it gave the Council more importance and strength. As the interviewees mentioned, the Diwan Minister was seen as the closest person to the Sultan. To them, this made everything easy in terms of getting resources needed, power, and
approvals for policies. In other words, the Council can get things done quickly. In line with this argument, Wilkinson and Al Hajry (2007) noted that “‘the delegation of the councils’ presidency to the Minister of the Diwan of the Royal Court, who is a very high-ranking minister, was meant to strengthen and empower its institutional status and authority” (p 41).

On the other side, some of the interviewees spoke about the Diwan Minister being so busy with tens of very important committees in different areas in the Government. The interviewees doubted that he had enough time to read proposed policy documents of hundreds of pages. With huge responsibilities, they thought that the Minister could not give his time and energy to policy-making in the HE sector. An interviewee from one of the institutions also commented that the Council needed to be chaired by a specialist on education who had expert knowledge and sufficient time. Here are their opinions:

Unfortunately this comes with the job. Being the Minister of Diwan, it is one of the jobs that he does. He does millions of many other important jobs. He is so busy. He doesn’t even have the time to read documents. He read minutes. It is a huge job. It a huge responsibility. He has millions of other things, very demanding that he has to do. Such a man can’t give his time and energy and focus on policies of HE. (I/I7/72-79)

In Oman, the problem sometimes you find people busy and yet they are put into these councils. So becoming busier. The minister of Diwan is the chair. We need to put the right people in the right place. I am not saying that he is not the right person. He is very busy. He has more than 10 committees to chair. How much can he do? He is a human being at the end. Beside he is looking after Diwan. I am not saying in that he should be removed from there, who am I to say that? What I am saying that if we want to develop this, we need someone who is dedicated only looking after education. You need somebody who is an educationalist. Someone who is professional in his area. (U/I2/63-169)

The negative is that the Minister of Diwan is too busy. (SC/I4/55-63)

These statements were by policy-makers from the ministerial and institutional levels, meaning the lower two levels of the interviewees in this study. This is to show that none of the interviewed ministers commented on the chair of the Council. Also, two of those who mentioned the negative side reminded me to keep them anonymous, which in fact was assured to them from the beginning of each interview. However, they felt insecure talking frankly about the Minister of Diwan.

The Members

Regarding the membership of the Council, I had two groups of interviewees with contrasting views. The first group included the three ministers, all Education Council members, two State Council members and a few from the ministerial and institutional level. When asked about the membership of the Council, this group believed that the Council was composed of enough quantity and quality of members to do the job properly. For example, the Chairperson of the State Council stated that “now I think that the new formation of members is better as they are from those who specialized in education and work in the sector” (M/I2/31-33). An education member similarly said that “the
Council is much stronger than before because of great composition that we have got” (EC/I2/60-62). As it can be seen, this group had faith in the success of the Council with the membership allocated by the Royal Decree.

The second group was the majority of the interviewees from the institutional and ministerial level, as well as two State Council members. For this group, the composition of the Education Council members had some issues and there was dissatisfaction about the number and representation of agencies and institutions in the Council’s membership. The following extracts illustrate the concerns of this group.

Two institution rectors complained that the majority of the Council’s members were not from the field:

Those representatives are not dealing with day to day business. None of those guys are. How come they influence the decision if they are not educationalists? You have people who are not in the field and making decisions. (I/I2/27-29)

If you read the names, I have seen their CVs, only one out of the total has relation with education. The others have nothing to do with education and they are taking decisions about education. This is the future of the country, how to be in hands of some people that they have to be honest and say that it is not their business. If it is only for show and propaganda, this is another story. Actually it should not be in education. The only way for our country to go forward and to be in high ranked countries is to look at education carefully, to address the gaps, to address the problems trying to find solutions. But this should be by people who are expert. This is not because people are representative from ministers. I call them stakeholders. I can listen to their opinions. But to make the skeleton or the backbone, it should be done by professionals. (I/I7/28-36)

A state Council member questioned members’ expertise by saying,

Those who make the policy are not specialized. This is why efforts are scattered. Why to have ministers in the education Council. We need specialists. All are not specialists except the Education and the HE Ministers. Also, other ministries need to be represented in the Council. (SC/I3/11-13)

An undersecretary and a State Council member commented that those members, because of being ministers, did not have enough time for the Council:

They don’t have the time, they don’t have the capacity, they don’t know exactly what the sector would need in detail. (U/I4/108-109)

The Council is made up of ministers. They are not the thinkers. They have their ministries and the responsibilities in mind as it fits in the whole setup of the Council. Their intervention will be how it affects them rather than the national agenda… They don’t come to discuss where do we want HE to go, which direction should we take, what does HE needs to look like ten years, twenty years, thirty years from now. They don’t come for that. (SC/I4/35-41)

Furthermore, there was a complaint by interviewees from the ministries and institutions that they were not represented in the membership of the Council. Indeed, the Ministry of Health, the College of Sharia Studies, and The College of Banking and Financial Studies are not represented in the Council. To these institutions, we could also add the colleges under the Ministry of Defence and
Royal Oman Police, which were not included in this study. The following quotes demonstrate this issue:

Other ministries that have institutions have to be represented. The role of the minister is to transfer and follow up with policies. There should be others who nurture those ministers with ideas. The council has various members from all stakeholders. (GD/I3/35-37)

We should be represented in the Council. It is unfair that our ministry is not represented. (U/I3/70-72)

The Council will be more successful if all stakeholders are represented in the Council. (I/I9/54)

As it is seen, there was a kind of dissatisfaction with the composition of the membership of the Council. Each individual of this group of interviewees had a reason behind their dissatisfaction. This may be considered as a sign of the need to review the membership of the Council. It can be argued that the Council is more powerful when having ministers in its membership; they are the highest policy-makers in the government under the Sultan. Such non-minister members can add their experience and be the movers of the Council. The final chapter will give a clear recommendation regarding the Council’s membership based on analysis of the research data.

This section has discussed and analysed the role of the Education Council as the supreme HE policymaking body under His Majesty. In the following section, other specialized councils affecting HE sector indirectly will be briefly outlined.

6.3.2.2. Other HE specialized councils

Table 6.3 describes these bodies in terms of their different missions, establishing Royal Decree, representation in the Education Council and independence from other upper agencies in the Omani Government.
Table 6.3

Other HE specialized councils

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Specialized Body</th>
<th>Mission/Focus</th>
<th>Establishment year and Royal Decree</th>
<th>Represented in the Education Council</th>
<th>Independency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 SQU Council</td>
<td>Formulating general policy of SQU</td>
<td>1986 9/1986</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 The Research Council (TRC)</td>
<td>Research funding and policy-making body across Oman</td>
<td>2005 54/2005</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 HE Admission Centre (HEAC)</td>
<td>Regulating admission of general certificate students at all Omani HE institutions</td>
<td>2005 104/2005</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>A Directorate General level centre affiliated to the Ministry of HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Oman Medical Speciality Board (OMCB)</td>
<td>Supervising, designing and approving postgraduate medical specialty programs for doctors and other health professionals</td>
<td>2006 13/2006</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA)</td>
<td>Regulating the quality and accreditation of HE institutions and their programs.</td>
<td>2010 54/2010</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Supervised by the Education Council</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Education Council is surrounded by five other specialized bodies that have an impact on HE policy. In the second column of Table 6.3, the variation of the mission assigned to each of these bodies is compared. If we look at the SQU Council, it has been established to look after SQU specifically, not the whole sector. Correspondingly, OMSB is focused on postgraduate medical specialty programs for doctors and other health professionals. In contrast, the TRC, the HEAC and the OAAA, each individually in its area, are impacting on the whole HE sector policy; respectively in research, admission and quality assurance policies.

Regarding the establishment year and the Royal Decree, the table illustrates that all these bodies were established by a Royal Decree, indicating their agency to the Omani Government as well as their importance as institutions. Not surprisingly, all of these bodies, except the SQU Council, were established quite recently from 2005. These newly established bodies are proof of the Omani government’s efforts to look at the current major issues affecting not only the Omani HE sector but HE globally. Saying that, it can be argued that the Omani Government established these bodies to create a culture of quality in the HE sector, following the considerable expansion of both public and private HE institutions in less than twenty years of the system’s existence.
The table also demonstrates the independence of these specialized bodies from other higher institutions in the Omani government. Overall, being independent does not mean that these institutions are autonomous in their policies and decisions from the Omani government, but only financially and administratively independent from other upper ministries and bodies. It was also found that all these bodies were represented on the Education Council, the supreme body for HE policy-making, except for the OMSB. Indeed, the table shows that the HEAC is not represented at the Education Council, but in reality, being a general directorate at the Ministry of HE, which is represented in the Education Council, the HEAC is represented indirectly by the Minister of HE. When representation at the Education Council is considered, it can be argued that these specialized bodies help in shaping HE policies, each in its speciality areas.

In this section, all specialized bodies are brought together and briefly considered as policy players in the HE sector. However, their roles will be discussed and analysed in more detail in the coming two chapters.

6.3.3. The field

The field of HE is perceived as the lowermost level of the policy-making architecture in the Omani system. It is where institutions are supposed to have the space to participate in making the policies of the sector. However, at this level the Omani HE system has a line of sublevel agencies between the specialized councils and the HE institutions. These agencies are the different ministries and authorities that manage the institutions academically, financially and administratively at a broader level. Saying it differently, these authorities are the responsible bodies for the administration and supervision of HE in the Sultanate. All these authorities were described in Chapter two (see Table 2.1 in chapter 2).

The data from the interviews and the documents suggest that these authorities and ministries are agents of the Education Council and the other HE specialized councils. Besides, these bodies are themselves principals over the HE institutions (see Figure 6.4). It was mentioned previously, though, that not all these authorities were represented in the Education Council. For those agencies which were represented, the Royal Decree of the Education Council assigned the ministers or the top individual policy makers of these authorities as members of the Council. Those appointed members are supposed to carry the policy issues of their HE institutions to the Education Council. This process will be detailed in the next chapter.
Through their representatives in the Council, each HE institution is considered to have a hand in the policy-making process of the whole sector. Through the principal-agent theoretical lens, the HE institutions are seen as agents of their administrative authorities. That said, the interviews revealed that the HE institutions reported to and received instructions from departments within the authorities. In each ministry or authority, there is what is called a general directorate that is responsible for supervising and following up with the HE institutions. How this aspect of the policy architecture flows and operates will be detailed in the next chapter.

6.3.4. Other bodies

The study interviews and documents showed that the Omani HE policy was affected by two other governmental bodies. It was found that these bodies were non-education authorities, which played a significant, indirect role in all areas of policies in Oman: the Oman Council and the Supreme Council for Planning. In what follows, each one of these bodies is described in brief to establish their position in the overall HE policy architecture.

6.3.4.1. The Council of Oman

Chapter two described the Council of Oman when outlining the context of this study. Here, the roles of the Council and its impact on the HE policy will be described according to the Basic Statute of the State. Its actual role, as described by the interviewees, will be detailed when describing the operations of the HE policy architecture.
It is very important to recall that the Oman Council consists of twin arms, which are the elected Consultation Council and the appointed State Council. This Council is regarded as the ‘Oman Parliament,’ which has been seen as a gradual step by the Royal will to introduce democracy in the Sultanate (Jones & Ridout, 2005; Rabi, 2002). It is also argued that “the establishment of the Oman Council has been a turning point in the history of the country” (The Ministry of information, 2013, p.101).

After the Arab Spring in 2011, there was a significant reform to the roles of the Council of Oman. In that year, the Omani people requested to have a tangible and more powerful role for the Oman Council. Therefore, the Council was granted more legislative and regulatory powers as described clearly by the Royal Decree, 2011 amendments to the Basic Statute of the State. According to the Ministry of Information (2011), the twin Councils are “now fully-fledged parliamentary institutions and can exercise their role more effectively, and with complete transparency, within the framework of a modern state” (p.78). With such legislative and regulatory powers, the Omani Government aims to give the Omani people a vital role in drawing the directions of the country and making its policy. It is regarded as a platform for the Omani nation to participate in making different policies of the state.

In the Basic Statute, chapter five describes the roles, candidature and membership of each of the two councils. In the context chapter of this study, the candidature and membership were discussed. Overall, the Basic Statute mentions that the Council of Oman works in two ways to impact policies and laws. The first approach is through approving or amending drafted policies by the government. Article (58) (bis 35) states that,

Draft laws prepared by the Government shall be referred to Majlis Oman for approval or amendment, and then they shall be directly submitted to His Majesty the Sultan to be promulgated. In case of any amendments by Majlis Oman on the draft law, His Majesty the Sultan may refer it back to the Majlis for reconsideration of the amendments and then resubmission to His Majesty the Sultan. (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, Article, 58, bis 35)

The extract above suggests that every drafted law or national policy to be promulgated has to go to the two Councils for approval or modification. After the Councils make an assessment, the proposal then goes to the Sultan to issue a Royal Decree. This step, if followed, guarantees the participation and contribution of all Omanis (theoretically) in making the policies, because the Oman Council is considered the channel or the voice of the people in the government. It is seen as a national partnership between all the stakeholders of the country.

Secondly, the Council is granted the power to propose policies and send them to the government. Article (58) (bis 36) reads that,
Majlis Oman may propose draft laws and refer them to the Government for review, and then the Government shall return the same to the Majlis. The procedures stipulated in Article (58) (bis 35) shall be followed in approving, amending or promulgating the said draft laws. (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, Article, 58, bis 36)

It is clear that the Council has the right to come up with new policies and to send them to the government for review, amendment or direct approval, which then ends up with promulgation. This empowerment indicates that the Council has a great responsibility towards state policies and is therefore a vital partner with the Government in the policy-making process.

Beside approving and proposing policies, the Council is empowered to discuss the annual budget of the State and the draft development plans referred to it by the Council of Ministers. The Council of Oman has the right to recommend changes. With recommendations, “the Council of Ministers shall inform the two Majlis of the recommendations that were not adopted in this respect along with the reasons therefor” (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, Article, 58, bis 40). Furthermore, the Basic Statute pointed out that the Council should receive a draft of the economic and social agreements that the Government intends to conclude or accede. It is also mentioned that Council should receive a copy of the annual report of the State Financial and Administrative Audit Institution. This enables the Council to examine the report and question any corruption or deficiency in the roles of the government service ministers. Further, the “services Ministers shall provide an annual report to Majlis Al Shura on the implementation stages of the projects related to their Ministries”. Upon that report, the Al Shura Council is granted the power to invite any of those service ministers and discuss any matters within the report. (See Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, Article, 58, bis 44).

A more critical role that came with the amendment of the Basic Statute is the ability of the Al Shura Council to interpellate any service minister. It is stated that,

Upon a request signed by at least fifteen members of Majlis Al Shura, any of the Services Ministers may be subject to interpellation on matters related to them exceeding their competences in violation of the Law. The Majlis shall discuss the same and submit its findings in this regard to His Majesty the Sultan. (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, Article, 58, bis 43)

Overall, the above discussion suggests that the Council of Oman with its two wings is a national partnership as well as dynamic participation with the government in making policies and evaluating them. Regarding HE policies, it is anticipated that the Council of Oman may play a great role in directing the policies of the sector as the articles of the Basic Statute suggests. It is argued that the Council can propose draft HE policies to the government and also have a word on the drafted policies by the government. Besides, the Council can question any of the ministers supervising the HE institutions and submit any findings to His Majesty, the Sultan. What has been discussed here is according to the Basic Statute and the actual functioning will be discussed with regard to the
operations of the policy architecture in the next chapter. In essence, it is quite clear that if the role of the Council described in the Basic Statute is activated and implemented effectively, the Council can be considered as one of the most influential actors in Omani HE policy.

6.3.4.2. The Supreme Council for Planning (SCP)

This Council was established in May 2012 by the Royal Decree 30/2012. It is intended to make the overall national strategies and policies that can achieve sustainable development and find the appropriate mechanisms for implementing these policies and strategies. With such policies and strategies, the Council is deemed to attain economic diversification and the optimal exploitation of resources (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2012b). To achieve its aims, the Royal Decree assigned the following ten jurisdictions to the SCP, as shown in Table 6.4.

Table 6.4
The roles of the SCP (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2012b, article 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jurisdictions</th>
<th>HE policy matters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Putting a comprehensive, long-term national strategy for development in the light of natural and human resources available and the sustainable development requirements.</td>
<td>HE policy is part of the national long-term strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Specifying the national future vision, the general trends, and mechanisms required for implementation of strategies to achieve sustainable development goals.</td>
<td>HE should be considered in the future vision for sustainable development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Putting real estate strategy for the Sultanate and approving the general policy of urban planning in the light of the approved development plans and in accordance with economic, social and environmental status.</td>
<td>Not related to HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Putting a national strategy for statistics and information.</td>
<td>HE statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Making standards for the priorities of development projects and methods of development planning, ensuring a balance between economic and social aspects of development.</td>
<td>HE sector should be considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Approving annual development budget.</td>
<td>HE sector annual budget</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Approving the draft of FYPs and financial allocations for it.</td>
<td>Approving the HE sector FYPs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Carrying out a periodic evaluation of strategies, future visions, public policies and the FYPs, taking into consideration the economic, social and other developments.</td>
<td>Reviewing HE national policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Setting the basis of the Sultanate’s economic cooperation with states, regional and international organisations.</td>
<td>HE could be included in the international cooperation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 What is referred by His Majesty the Sultan to be studied</td>
<td>The Sultan may refer HE policies and planning issues to the Council</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6.4 shows that the SCP is a very important body in the Omani government that should direct and lead the national planning through long-term policies to achieve sustainable development in all sectors. Thus, a long-term HE policy and a future vision for the sector are situated within the responsibility of the SCP. It is also the mission of the Council to approve the drafts of FYPs of all agencies that supervise HE institutions, implying an influential role in the alignment of the various policies of the sector. It can be argued that the Royal Decree clearly suggests the SCP is the supreme body for bringing all single HE policies in the Sultanate into line through approving the FYPs. With such a body, it is argued that the Omani Government should guarantee that the all HE institutions work in harmony to achieve the sustainable development of the state.

**Policy Actors at SCP**

The 30/2012 Royal Decree specified the main individual actors of the SCP. Being such an important body, it is stated that the Council is chaired by His Majesty, the Sultan. This shows the character of the top-down hierarchical architecture of the policy-making system in the Sultanate when it comes to chairing a very critical body in the development of the state. The Minister of Commerce and Industry is the deputy chair. In its membership, the SCP includes the Minister of Interior, Minister Responsible for Financial Affairs, Minister of HE, Minister of Housing, Minister of Transport and Communications, and Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries (see Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2012b, article 4). Considering those members, it can be argued that the SCP has policy-making actors from the different sectors of the state. Importantly to HE policy, the Minister of HE is a member of the SCP. Moreover, according to the Royal Decree, the SCP can request experts to attend the meetings and participate in its deliberations whenever it is needed (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2012b, article 4).

**6.4. Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter drawing on research interviews and document analysis, I have described the architecture of the policy-making system in the Omani HE sector, outlining the important bodies and actors involved the relationships between them. It has been argued that the Omani political system has created a hierarchical policy-making system for the HE sector, suggesting an architecture of three levels with strong control at the top level of the government and somehow weaker influence at the lower level of the HE system (see Figure 6.5 below). Moreover, this study conceptualized the policy-making architecture of the entire Omani HE system as a cascade of principal-agent games, making evident that the Omani Government is a highly powerful controller of HE policy-making. While ‘the state control model’ of policy-making was found to be the dominant in the Omani HE system, such a model was clearly not favoured by all interviewees,
especially those at the institutional level. The question of expertise in HE policy development within Oman’s hierarchical structure was also an issue. This shows the need for a transformation to the ‘state supervising model’, which is a globally adopted trend by almost all developed HE systems, as suggested by Neave and Van Vught (1994).

In this chapter, the study also detected that the policy documents were successfully presenting the HE apparatus and their roles, but not clearly showing the overall interconnected architecture of the Omani HE system. To bridge this gap, the research interviews illustrated the hierarchy of the HE policy-making architecture. Although there were some variations in the statements and disagreement between the interviewees regarding some issues in the roles of the system’s bodies and actors, the whole picture of the architecture can be clearly seen as represented diagrammatically in Figure 6.5. Such differences in the statements indicated and reflected the opinions of the interviewees, their career position in the system (minister, undersecretary, general director, university vice-chancellor, college dean) and their understanding of the HE policy-making system. Each interviewee described his/her position in Oman’s hierarchical HE system from his/her perspective. Indeed, interviewees revealed how the system is working in reality, compared to the documents that specify how it ought to operate.

In the next chapter, the operations of this HE policy-making architecture will be described. Moreover, the next chapter will analyse the impact of this architecture and its operations on the HE system.
Figure 6.5. The hierarchical architecture of HE policy-making in Oman.
7. The Impact of the Operation of the Policy Architecture on the Higher Education System

7.1. Introduction

The previous chapter thoroughly mapped the HE policy-making architecture in Oman. In this chapter, the aim is to describe how this architecture operates in a Sultanate political system and what impacts it has on the entire HE system. Hence, this chapter will have two parts, which deal respectively with: (1) the operations of the policy-making architecture; and (2) the architecture and its operational impact on the HE system.

The chapter will draw a clear picture of the relationships between the various entities in the Omani HE system in terms of policy-making, drawing from analysis of the data, both interviews and document analysis. Examples of how certain policies were made and delivered will be provided to illustrate the actual processes of making policy in the system. It is worth mentioning that the chapter aims to explore the national policy-making system (thus mega-policies) of the HE sector, rather than any specific processes at the institutional level. The second section of the chapter will address the issues and challenges raised by the interviewees regarding the impact of the architecture and its operations on the whole Omani HE system.

7.2. The operation of Oman’s policy architecture in HE

It has been argued earlier that the Omani HE system and its policies constitute part of the state’s public policies. This is to suggest that somehow the different Omani sub-systems have similar policy-making operations, taking into consideration their different governance structures. When searching the literature, I have detected a paucity of research related to the way in which public policies are generally made in Oman. Indeed, even the policy documents such as Royal Decrees and laws do not show the interactions between the different entities in the Omani Government in terms of actual policy making. Thus to date, being part of public policy, the operation of the HE policy architecture has not been described in any way by documents or research. Saying that, this study relies on data obtained from research interviews to describe and analyse the operations of the policy architecture. As there is very limited literature on HE policy and public policy in Oman, the chapter uses global literature to make sense of the data, but also understands the necessity of critically reflecting on the applicability of this literature to a different kind of political system and policy architecture (Appadurai, 2001).
The previous chapter described how the Omani government, with its specific political organizations and various administrative bodies, ‘controls’ the HE system, exhibiting a state-centric approach within a very complicated, multi-institutional policy making architecture. While the hierarchy of such architecture is clearly seen and defined by the Basic Status and some Royal Decrees, it is hard to see and figure out how it is working in reality. It was found that the documents merely talked about the responsibilities of the system apparatuses, but not their interrelationships and collaborations, networking and ways of actually making national policy. It is those matters that this chapter is concerned with.

To unveil the mystery of the mediating function of the HE policy-making architecture (Offe, 1975, 1984), all interviewees were asked to explain how policy was developed and delivered in the HE system. Surprisingly, the findings suggest that there is no single way or scenario in which national HE policies are made. A member of the Education Council stressed that “I cannot describe to you easily how policy is done at the system. We have different ways of doing it” (EC/I3/31-32). Likewise, the Chairman of the State Council mentioned that, with various bodies in the system, the HE policy can come from any level of the whole system. It can come from the lower level of the system or the extreme opposite, the top-down. Being not from the system, the Oman Council has also the right to propose policies.

These are merely two examples of many interviewees from the different levels of the system who pointed directly or indirectly to a multiplicity of ways of doing and producing HE policy. Based on that, my analysis of the relevant data suggests that there were various ways in which the policy architecture was operating depending on policy type, sources or origins of policy, policy goals, policy targets and who generated the policy (which policy makers were involved). The next section will clearly illustrate how the architecture of HE policy-making operates, describing four different scenarios that illustrate the relationships between the different policy actors and bodies. These scenarios will be presented according to the most frequently occurring themes in the data obtained from the interviewees.

### 7.2.1. Scenario one: policy development by the Education Council

In this scenario, I look at the role of the Education Council as the mandated final determiner and overseer (under His Majesity) for education policy-making in the Sultanate. The interviews indicated that this scenario was the norm and the most commonly occurring way of developing policies in the Omani HE system. Indeed, most interviewees from the different levels of the system were able to describe this scenario, each one from his/her point of view and position in the system. The following Figure 7.1 illustrates how HE policies come from and are mandated by the Education Council.
Figure 7.1. Policy development by the Education Council Promulgation process.
Figure 7.1 demonstrates that the Education Council is surrounded by various governmental bodies and individual actors in the processes of policy development. Such bodies and actors produce policy ideas that go to the Council. In other words, they work as a generator of policy ideas. According to the interviewed policy makers from the Education Council, policy ideas and proposals might come from one or more of the following bodies: the supervising ministries, the HE institutions (public or private), the SCP or the OAAA. A member of the Education Council mentioned that,

There are too many ways of policy development at the Council. Sometimes, the proposal for a policy or for implementing a project, which can affect an existing policy or change it a bit, can come from the different ministries or even it can come from a college to the ministries and then to the Education Council. The proposal then is studied here in the secretariat or in the executive committee which is headed by the General Secretary and then sent to the Education Council members. In a meeting, they discuss it and come up with a decision and then the secretariat follows up the implementation. (EC/I1/5-13)

This extract, which was reinforced by all Education Council members interviewed in this study, gives a full picture of one important way policies are developed by the Council. If the policy-making process model is considered here, the quotation above can be illustrated via the stages of the normative-rationalist policy cycle: agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, policy implementation and policy evaluation and feedback (see Howlett et al., 2009). Yet, it is important to mention here that the policy evaluation stage was never mentioned by any interviewees. The policy literature also shows that most often in policy processes much more energy is expended on producing the policy text than in supporting implementation and evaluation of the success or otherwise of the policy (Taylor et al., 1997). While it was not a focus in this study, interviewees were asked about the evaluation stage of policy processes or the policy cycle. Generally speaking, the data from interviews showed that there was an absence of systemic policy evaluation undertaken by the Education Council. However, a member of the Council stated that “we do evaluation when it is requested by higher authorities in the government or when we see that there is a need for doing it” (EC/I3/22-23). Moreover, “evaluation sometimes is done as studies or projects by a committee appointed by the Education Council” (EC/I3/16). Overall, with regard to policy evaluation or its absence, some recommendations are made in the concluding chapter of the study.

For the purpose of describing policy development processes and who participates in them, the study uses the normative policy cycle framework as defined by Howlett et al. (2009) to look at the interactions between the policy actors in the policy-making process. As argued by Howlett et al. (2009, p.13), this framework “facilitates an understanding of a multi-dimensional process by disaggregating the complexity of the process into any numbers of stages and sub-stages, each of which can be investigated alone or in terms of its relationship to any or all the other stages of the cycle”. Using this framework does not mean that the operations of the policy-making process are systemic, straightforward and linear. Here I note Ball’s (1994, 2015) different usage of the concept
of a policy cycle. Ball uses the concept to actually critique the linear and rational stages approach to policy that is implicit in Howlett and colleagues’ construction of the policy cycle. To reiterate, I am using Howlett and colleagues’ construction of the policy cycle in an analytical way to describe policy-making processes as derived from research interviews. I will return to Ball’s non-linear conception of the policy cycle, when providing a concluding analysis of the data in the final section of this chapter.

7.2.1.1. Agenda-setting

Considering the normative-rationalist policy cycle model, the process of policy development in this scenario is as follows. First, a ministry, a HE institution or any stakeholder from the lower levels of the system may raise a policy idea or proposal to the Council. This is what is called in the policy cycle literature the agenda-setting stage, described as the most critical stage in the process because it brings policy ideas to the attention of the powerful policy makers (Anderson, 2011). According to Howlett et al. (2009), agenda-setting “is concerned with the way problems emerge, or not, as candidates for government’s attention” (p. 92). In this scenario, the bodies mentioned above identify a subject of concern that needs further attention by the Education Council. Routinely, these problems or policy issues are brought up in Council meetings, where the members decide on the need or otherwise for further action. Chapter eight will indicate that sometimes as well these policy pressures and ideas come from regional and international organisations.

A member of Education Council commented that “a proposal submitted to the Council does not always mean that it will be accepted and policy will be developed for sure” (EC/I3/42). This comment is supported by the argument outlined by Howlett et al. (2009) in relation to processes of agenda setting:

This does not in any way guarantee that the problem will ultimately be addressed, or resolved, by further government activity, but merely that it has been singled out for the government’s consideration from among the mass of problems existing in a society at any given time. (p.93)

The Education Council may not consider the issues raised, resulting in what Anderson (2011) called agenda denial. Thus, the policy process in such a case stops at this stage and no further policy action is taken by the Council. In that event, Anderson (2011) talks about the disappearance of issues from the agenda as policy-makers may decide not to act and not to produce a policy. A policy maker from the Education Council argued that “various factors may lead to policy issues not to be considered” (EC/I5/32). There were no more details of these factors provided by any interviewee from the Council, despite probing about them in the research interviews.
7.2.1.2. Policy formulation

Another option is policy issues may come from the Council itself. Indeed, such policy issues will be considered and become policy proposals that need further consideration and attention by the Education Council. In this situation, the Council through its secretariat, will form a committee from both inside and outside the Council to study the policy ideas and ultimately undertake policy formulation. Anderson (2011, p. 107) explained that this stage “involves developing pertinent and acceptable proposed courses of action (often called alternatives, proposals or options) for dealing with public problems”. Thus, this stage is actually about suggesting some solutions for addressing the policy problems evoked in the agenda-setting stage (Howlett et al., 2009).

With regard to who gets involved in such committees, a member of the Council mentioned that “they can be academics from HE institutions (public and private), foreign consultants, local experts, interest groups from the private sector and general directors from the various ministries” (EC/I1/52-53). Another member stated that “the Council may rely on any competent individual or organization domestically and maybe globally to help in the policy formulation” (EC/I3/27-29). As revealed by the interviews, the committee so constituted ends up suggesting several policy options that address the issues raised by the agents, those attempting to get ideas onto the policy agenda. An argument can be presented here that the policy problems and ideas in the agenda stage raised by those at the lower levels of the system will be mediated in this stage by policy actors either on the Education Council or commissioned by them. With that in mind, it can also be argued such resulting policy cannot be defined as ‘bottom-up’ policy but rather as ‘mediated policy’, or perhaps as a ‘mediated top-down/bottom-up policy’, where the bottom-up policy pressure is mediated through the lens of the Education Council.

To see who participated in policy formulation, all the interviewees in this study were questioned about whether they had a role in formulating any HE policies. Some interviewees confirmed that they had been engaged at least once in developing a policy. As they explained, their participation and contribution depended on their expertise and their positions in their institutions. On the other hand, there was a group of interviewees who had never been on a committee of policy formulation. An institution dean complained that “although I am the top policy-maker in this college, I had never been contacted by the Education Council to help in drafting a policy” (I/I7/39-41). A general director also expressed his dissatisfaction saying that “the Council always relies on people that they know to make policies” (GD/I3/92-93). Given this two opposed groups’ involvement, it is quite clear that not all the HE elites interviewed in this study had a role in the policy formulation stage.
The issue of not involving all HE policy makers was brought up in research interviews with some of the Education Council members. They replied that it was impossible to include all HE policy-makers in the process. A member commented that “it would be a bazaar not a policy formulation if we bring all policy-makers to the process” (EC/I4/105-106). Such reply seems to be logical in order to make the process more concentrated and to enable it to be carried out by the experts in the area. Making a similar point, Anderson (2011) argues that all policy-makers in a system cannot be involved in each and every policy-making process. Acknowledging that, I argue that depending on expertise, specialization, career position and how the resulting policy is closely related to one specific area, particular individuals should be called upon to participate in the formulation stage of such policy. This ought to be an issue of expertise and capacity.

7.2.1.3. Policy decision-making

Once various proposals have been developed, the Council members meet and discuss the options. In the public policy literature, this is called the policy decision-making stage, in which the policy makers decide on a policy direction (Anderson, 2011; Howlett et al., 2009). According to the Minister of HE, “a decision has to be taken after the proposals have been debated and studied under the roof of the Council; one alternative to be chosen or it can be none” (M/I1/76). This statement concurs with the writing of Howlett et al. (2009, p. 139) stating that the decision-making stage “is where one or more, or none, of the many options that have been debated and examined during the previous two stages of the policy cycle is approved as an official course of action”. Regarding the actors in the decision-making stage, it was found that they were the fifteen members of the Council, as mentioned in the Royal Decree 48/2012 (The Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2012a). The Royal Decree states that a Council meeting shall not be valid unless the majority of the members are present and the chairman or his deputy must be among them. Decisions on policy direction are voted upon by the Council using the principal of majority rules (The Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2012a). In the event of a tie, the Royal Decree declares that the decision will be taken from the side aligned with the Chairman’s vote.

7.2.1.4. The legislative process (political approval)

Figure 7.1 reveals that after the Council decide on a policy option, there are two possible paths for the policy process to follow: either a policy can be ready to implement by the HE institutions and their agencies or it may undergo the legislative/promulgation process. A member of the Council explained that “the decided policy will be approved within the Council if it is in its power and mandates; this is to say that the policy is implemented directly without any more upper influence”
In other words, the HE institutions receive the policies from the Education Council without any mediation from any upper level in the Omani government.

Otherwise, the policy option approved by the Council has to go to the Oman Council to approve it or to make recommendations for amendment. Then, it goes to the Sultan for approval or amendment, ending up with promulgated policy for implementation. According to the Basic Status, “draft laws prepared by the Government shall be referred to Majlis Oman for approval or amendment, and then they shall be directly submitted to His Majesty the Sultan to be promulgated” (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, Article 58, bis 35). This is to say that the Council of Oman gives its recommended amendment or direct approval and then sends it to the Sultan for issuing a Royal Decree that promulgates the policy. As shown in Figure 7.1, after being promulgated, the HE institutions and their supervising ministries have to implement the policies.

Such promulgated policies tend to appear in Royal Decrees by His Majesty, the Sultan. Overall, it can be argued that depending on the importance of the policy, its impact on the whole HE system and also the power of the Education Council to approve it or not, the decided option goes through one of the aforementioned two processes. Moreover, it is quite clear that policy approved by the Education Council may end up altered somehow by the process. This is to argue that the top leadership of the government may also mediate the policy decision taken by the Education Council. This is also Offe’s (1984) point that the organisational structures and processes of policy making mediate the actual content of policies or at least have an impact upon them.

7.2.1.5. Policy ideas from the Education Council

Above I have described how policy ideas can come to the Education Council from various agents. With regard to policy ideas, the interviews also showed that the policy ideas may emerge within the Education Council setting itself. A member of the Council said that,

In some cases, the Education Council with its arms (executive committee, the OAAA) develop a policy or a plan. It starts with a proposed project for a policy till it is approved by the members of the Council. Sometimes, it needs promulgation. (EC/I2/24-27)

Similarly, another member mentioned that,

Ideally the secretariat of the Education Council will be gathering information from the sector, getting reports about the health of the sector and then eventually will be proposing strategy. They will be gathering reports from all the excursive sectors, being Ministry of HE, Ministry of Education, SQU and so on. Then, they suggest policy direction that can be adopted by the Council, debated then adopted and then implemented through the units that report to the Council. (EC/I3/3-7)

The two quotations above suggest the Council, through its members and sometimes its secretariat, develop policy ideas and proposals. When such ideas are developed, then it follows the same
process illustrated in Figure 7.4 discussed above. It can be argued that such policies developed within the Council can be both proactive and sometimes events driven policies. The latter occur in response to some large societal change, event or pressure, such as with the Arab Spring. In proactive policies, the Council tries to bring reforms to the system, resulting in new policies being produced and implemented. With regard to event driven policies, the Council is forced to respond to issues happening in the system and even in the broader society and region. However, it was found that such policies coming from within Council were rare. One of the Council’s members stressed that “right now, most of the policies and the executive resolutions are coming through suggestions from the units themselves, from the Ministries” (EC/I3/8-14). This accords with the argument presented in the previous chapter that the Education Council had a shortage of expertise, staff and resources for developing policies. Currently, its involvement is more as a mediator of policy ideas from elsewhere and it mandates policies approved by the Council or other parts of the political system.

### 7.2.2. Scenario two: policies coming from the Sultan

With this scenario, the way policies come from the Sultan will be discussed. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the Sultan is the chief policy maker in the Omani HE system. The interviews showed that the Sultan passed policies to the system in two different ways. The first is what will be called ‘event’s driven policies’, where the Sultan responds to issues and sometimes a crisis in the system. Such issues might have triggers from local or global issues. For example, the 2011 Arab Spring crisis shaped the expansion of the HE admission policy. The Sultan responded by urging the system to double the number of students entering the HE system.

However, not all policies coming from the Sultan are events driven. The interviews indicated that the Sultan from time to time passed mega-policies and reforms to the system based on data provided to him from the government apparatuses. Some interviewees mentioned that the data go to the Sultan in the form of reports. Such reports can be annual reports or may be reports that the Sultan himself asked for on a certain issue.
Figure 7.2. Policies coming from the Sultan.

Figure 7.2 shows how top down policies come from the Sultan. It is clear that the Sultan relies on the Cabinet, personal advisers, the SCP, the Oman Council, the Education Council or even the different ministries to get policy ideas and initiatives. It was found that these bodies were the main drivers for policy proposals and putting ideas to the Sultan. It is important to mention here that the Sultan has some personal advisers in different affairs (experts in their area) such as the economy, culture, and environment. It is important to mention that the Sultan has no single adviser for education generally and HE specifically; this is assumed within the responsibility of both the Cultural Affairs adviser and Economic Planning Affairs Adviser. Three interviewees mentioned that the Sultan might rely on those advisers, but the interviewees were not sure enough of the exact relationships between the Sultan and the advisers. Correspondingly, the Basic Status also does not declare anything in terms of this relationship.

In this scenario, the interviewees were unable to describe exactly how policies were made by the Sultan and what relationships the Sultan had with the government bodies when it came to making HE policies. The operations of policy development were not clear enough to the interviewees. An undersecretary stated that “I can’t answer you how policies are made by the Sultan. We just receive them and implement them” (U/I3/56). With regard to the top elites in this study who were assumed to have a direct, close relationship with the Sultan (the Ministers), they also showed merely one
aspect of how the Sultan was making or suggesting the need for policies. The Ministers described how their organizational bodies were contributing to the agenda-setting stage of the policy process.

It can be argued that almost all interviewees in this study did not have direct relationship with the Sultan in terms of policy-making for the HE system and, therefore, they were not able to elaborate how the Sultan was making policy. Based on that, this study was unable or unsuccessful in seeking to describe the relationship between the Sultan and the aforementioned bodies in Figure 7.2. All that can be argued is that the Sultan makes HE policies, but how is not clear. It can also be stressed that the HE institutions (universities and colleges) are not engaged at all in making such policies coming from the Sultan. Indeed, “the institutions are more of implementing the policies without participating in any way in making them”, a college dean commented (I/17/71-72). This situation and lack of knowledge and understanding reflects the character of the Sultanate as a political system. It also suggests how important the advice going to the Sultan is in terms of HE policy making and as noted above he does not have specialist HE advisers.

7.2.3. Scenario three: policies coming from the Cabinet and the SCP

While Figure 7.2 above shows the Sultan’s role in making policies, the same Figure can be used to describe the top-down policies coming from the Cabinet and the SCP. It was mentioned above that the relationship between the Sultan and the other lower-level aspects of the policy apparatus were not described by the interviewees. Yet, with regard to the Cabinet’s role, three interviewees showed how such policy development could happen. It was the three Ministers who spoke in a general way about the role of the Cabinet in affecting HE policies. Other interviewees from the institutional and ministerial level were unable to comment on how policies were made by the Cabinet, as those interviewees had not been engaged in Cabinet’s process of making policies. A ministry undersecretary said that “I can’t describe how the Cabinet is affecting the process as I am not a member of the Ministers’ Council” (U/I2/39). Such response to the role played by the Cabinet was frequent by all interviewees from the ministerial and institutional level.

Figure 7.3 explains the policy-making operation, as well as the relationships between the Cabinet and the other governmental bodies as described generally and somewhat superficially by the three ministers. The three ministers showed how the Council got policy ideas and from whom. Also, they explained the process of making the policies and how they were legalized. Yet, the ministers did not give in-depth description of the relationships between the Council and the other bodies in making HE policies. While doing the interviews with the ministers, I tried my best to get as much information as I could from them in regard to Cabinet’s policy-making processes. It was really difficult to obtain certain information from them. It is very important to mention here that the
Minister of HE and the Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, were both accompanied by one of their Consultants/advisers in the research interviews. They also relied on them in answering some of the questions.

Figure 7.3. Policies coming from the Cabinet.

As can be clearly seen from the Figure 7.3, the Cabinet relies on the Education Council and the various ministries for supervising the HE institutions in generating policy ideas. Considering the lowest-levels of the system, the HE institutions were not found to be active participants in the policies coming from the Cabinet. Figure 7.2 shows, with the dotted line, that the HE institutions might be indirectly involved in agenda-setting stage when consulted by their supervising ministries. This finding was suggested by the Minister of HE. However, some interviewees from the institutions gave statements that they had never been consulted by any means to give their feedback on any policy initiated by the Cabinet.

Overall, when the Cabinet receives policy ideas, the policies are drafted and formulated by committees constituted by the Cabinet. Then, as showed by Figure 7.3, there are two ways for the drafted policies to proceed. The first one is to be approved by the Cabinet and sent directly to the institutions and their supervising ministries for implementation. In this way, such policies are more like decisions that do not need legislative ratification. Examples of such policies are increasing the
number of admitted students and creating new specializations needed for the country’s economic and social development.

Moreover, Figure 7.3 documents a second direction in which HE policies may be developed when drafted by the Cabinet. In this way, a drafted policy has to be passed to the Oman Council for amendment or approval. The Shura Council first gives its recommendations and desired changes and then it goes to the State Council to follow the same process. Policies then go to the Sultan to be promulgated as described above.

### 7.2.4. Scenario four: policies suggested by the Oman Council

Scenario four describes the role of the Omani parliament (the Oman Council) in developing HE policies, as well as its relationships with the system. In terms of policy-making, the State Council chairman mentioned that,

> The State Council in the previous time before the new legislative amendments was only doing studies. In fact, you can have a look at these studies submitted to the secretariat of the HE Council. This was made in the past and the Council contributed on many policies. In this stage, we only gave suggestions through studies and recommendations. However, after the legislative rights given to the Council in 2011, we are now having a strong hand. We can have our intention in having new laws or amending current laws. (M/I2/45-54)

In the quotation above, the State Council chairman confirmed that the Oman Council does have a strong position currently in proposing policies compared to the time before 2011. Indeed, both arms of the Oman Council (State and Shura) are powerful enough to present proposals of new policies to the government. According to the Basic Status, “Majlis Oman may propose draft laws and refer them to the Government for review, and then the Government shall return the same to the Majlis Oman” (The Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2011, article 58, bis 36).

Based on the above discussion, the Oman Council is mandated to propose policies to the government which can be described as agenda-setting. However, that does not mean that it is guaranteed that such proposals will end up as policies. The government may take no action by rejecting the proposed policy idea. Alternatively, the policy ideas may be taken into consideration by the government and go through the same process of policy-making described in Figure 7.1.

Through visiting both the State Council and the Shura Council to do the interviews, I found that both Councils had a specialist committee on education. In the State Council (the appointed members), most of the members of these committees were specialized in education and had higher degrees from western universities. Yet, it was not the same in the Shura Council (members chosen by the people); most of them did not have any education beyond schooling. Overall, the interviewees from the Oman Council explained that these education committees aimed to deal with
education issues. To illustrate the role of the Education committee in making HE policies, a State Council member mentioned that “we study current policies, comment on drafted policies and also propose new policies to the government” (SC/I3/65). As I observed, the Oman Council has been working on a proposed education law for both schooling and HE systems.

However, some interviewees from the Education Council, the ministries and some HE institutions expressed dissatisfaction about the role played by the Shura Council in making HE policies. An undersecretary in one of the ministries complained that “the Shura Council does not have qualified members who can contribute and help in the policy-making process” (U/I3/85-86). A university leader pointed to the same issues, stating that “we need highly educated people in the Shura Council who can make laws and policies. Most of the current members are not competent and they had been elected because of tribal strength” (U/I5/73-75). With regard to the State Council, almost all interviewees had satisfaction with their role. Nevertheless, there was one interviewee from the HE institution who said that “I see the State Council as a government but not a parliament body as they are appointed by the Sultan” (I/I2/47-48). His argument was that the State Council is still part of the government and its role in making policies desired by the government.

It is suggested that the Oman Council has not functioned well in terms of making policies for the HE system. While the Council has been mandated since 2011 to propose policies, such a mandate does not mean that the Oman Council has the ability to pass policies to the HE system. Its role involves suggesting policies that may or may not get approved by the government.

7.2.5. Observations and reflections

Based on the discussion above, the study found some general characteristics about the nature of the HE policy-making architecture and its operations. The reflections here have also involved a mediation of the data collected for this research and reported here by the public policy literature. However, the need for care here is acknowledged, given that the Sultanate is a unique form of governance and there is basically no literature on policy making in the Sultanate of Oman.

7.2.5.1. Multi-level process

It was observed that each of the interviewees tried to explain how policy was made from his/her background and the position of his/her organization in the overall policy architecture. This is acknowledgement that the ‘positionality’ of the interviewees was a factor in how they viewed the relationship between the policy architecture and actual policy processes in the policy cycle. For instance, a ministry bureaucrat would emphasise the role of the ministry in creating ideas for an admissions policy. It is the same with an institution rector, who would stress how his institution
participated in making the policy in terms of quality assurance. This shows the multi-dimensional characteristic of policies that Taylor et al. (1997) write about in their book on policy making in education systems. Their argument is that policy players from the different levels of the education system, in one way or another, contribute to the policy-making processes (Taylor et al., 1997), including through what some have called ‘policy enactment’ (Ball et al., 2012) in an attempt to recognise that policy can be mediated and changed in processes of implementation. Therefore, the policy making operations can be understood from the point of view of different policy makers from different levels of the system; each contributes in a way in describing the full picture of the policy development process in Omani HE. We can conclude that the policy-making operation is multi-level and multi-layered and shared by various policy makers in the HE system.

7.2.5.2. Multi-sourced processes

Another observation was that the policy ideas could come from different sources. This is to argue that the HE policy in Oman is multi-sourced, meaning that the generators of the policy ideas can be any of the system entities, individuals, interest groups or the Omani society more generally. As shown above, the lower level of the HE system (institutions) does play a role in agenda-setting for policy. Similarly, the source can be a protest by the Omani youth to get employment quickly in the government sector, pushing the policy-makers in the system to find ways to respond by creating new policies. Another example for policy sources can be the private HE institutions. A general director mentioned that “the Ministry of HE created laws, regulations and bylaws responding to the expansion of the private HE sector with various programs and specializations” (GD/I2/90-92). According to Howlett et al. (2009), policy issues originate in various ways from various policy actors (domestically and globally) and governments have to take an action. It can be argued that there are several sources for policy ideas in the Omani HE system.

7.2.5.3. No single way of making policy

The four scenarios mentioned above indicate that HE policy-making architecture does not follow a single recipe or approach in developing policies; rather, policies are developed in different ways by different actors and bodies. Indeed, a policy may come from the Sultan, the Cabinet, the Education Council, the SCP or be proposed by the Oman Council. Depending on its position in the architecture and its mandates, each body interacts with other bodies in the system in a complex interactive process. While the relationships between the bodies in the architecture are set as suggested by the Basic Status and Royal Decrees, how policy is actually developed in a network between the various bodies remains quite ambiguous and opaque. The data from the interviews
were reasonably successful in uncovering these policy processes in Omani HE and offer some explanations of the various different ways of making policies in the HE system.

7.2.5.4. Specific actors in the decision-making stage

In the four scenarios, it is clear how various bodies and actors may participate in the agenda-setting and policy formulations stages. These participants can be any body or individual from inside or outside the Omani HE system. Then, when it comes to the decision-making stage, there is a set of legitimate policy actors, namely, the Sultan, the Cabinet, and the Education Council. According to Howlett et al. (2009), “when it comes time to decide on adopting a particular option, the relevant group of policy actors is almost invariably restricted to those with authority to make binding public decisions” (p.140). This is the case in the Sultanate of Oman where various actors and bodies contribute differently to the whole process of making policies, but a few specific actors make the final decision.

7.2.5.5. Policy stages

While the rational policy cycle model is not favoured and is criticised by many scholars (see Ball, 1994; Ball et al., 2012; Anderson, 2011: Hill, 2013; Howlett et al., 2009; Lindblom & Woodhouse, 1993; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Taylor et al., 1997), I found it very useful and the best approach in this study for looking at the interactions between the policy actors in the policy-making process as framed by a particular policy making architecture. Indeed, with many policy actors and bodies in a complicated policy-making architecture, it was important for descriptive and analytical purposes to distinguish between discrete stages of the policy cycle and consider who has a role in each stage. I acknowledge that the rational/critical distinction is akin to the distinction perhaps between how policy ought to be produced and how it is actually produced. As seen above, the interactions between the policy bodies in the system became much clearer when we looked at policy development in such a step-by-step, rational, normative model. Yet, I confirm here that the policy stages model is not really reflecting the reality of policy-making with its claim about discrete sequential steps. This concurs with the argument presented by Taylor et al. (1997) that policy processes are complex, multi-layered and interactive and two-way, rather than straightforward and linear. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) also criticize such traditional policy process model for being too rational and linear in character. Ball’s (1994) critical policy sociology in education suggests a policy cycle approach consisting of non-linear, two way relationships between contexts of policy influence, contexts of policy text production and contexts of policy practice. Overall, I used the rational approach (Howlett et al’s policy cycle) here in an analytical fashion to examine the interactions in the policy-making process and illustration purposes. This also seemed appropriate
given the nature of the Sultanate system of government and the hierarchical policy architecture in HE adumbrated in some detail in the previous data analysis chapter, Chapter six.

7.3. The impact on the HE system

The previous section of this chapter outlined and described the operations of the HE policy-making architecture in Oman. This section aims to study the impact of the HE policy-making architecture and its operations across the entire HE system. It is intended to address question three of this research study: what is the impact of this architecture and its operations on the Omani HE system? To answer this question, some issues with the policy-making processes and policy content raised by the interviewees will be analysed. Further, relevant policy documents have also been scanned to locate such issues and then analyse them. Overall, an argument is made that the HE policy-making architecture and the relationships between its agents affect the process of making the policies as well as their content (Offe, 1974, 1984).

7.3.1. A highly centralized process

We argued previously that the architecture was hierarchical in nature, reflecting the structure of the political regime of the Sultanate. With regards to the hierarchy, all study interviewees indicated clearly that making policies for the HE system was mainly the business of the Omani government, passed either through the top level of the government or the Education Council. A HE institution rector said that “the process of making national policies is in the hands of the Education Council and other upper levels of the government; it is so centralised” (I/15/120-121). In a similar account, a member of the Education Council stated that,

I want to tell you something that may nobody will tell you. Even the Education Council doesn’t make all policy decisions regarding HE in Oman. There were times when we sit in the Council and we get instruction by the Cabinet of things that needs to happen in a certain way which sometime not parallel to our thinking. (EC/I3/95-101)

This shows that the policy-making processes were always happening in the top government apparatus, but not in the HEIs – they were recipients of policy. It was described previously that the processes of making policies can take place at the Sultan’s office, the Cabinet or the Education Council. This provides confirmatory evidence that policy-making processes are highly centralised in the Omani HE system; it is merely the top level of the government making the policies, while the lower level of the system (HEIs) are subject to approval of policies by the top level and become sites of policy implementation or enactment.

In the Royal Decree for establishing the Education Council, it is affirmed that the Council is authorized to make all education policies, ensuring “compliance with the state’s overall policies and requirements for comprehensive development and thus, accomplishing the Sultanate’s cultural,
social, economic and scientific goals” (The Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2012a, Article 3). Putting it differently, centralising the policy-making process is deemed to ensure “quality in keeping with the state’s overall policy, national development plans, and the demands of the labour market” (The Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2012a, Article 2). The State Council Chairperson pointed to that, saying, “the Education Council through policies is responsible to ensure the quality and the accountability of the HE system” (M/12/83). Based on the principal-agent theory, the Omani Government (the principal) regulates the policy-making processes of the HE system to ensure the HEIs (agents) fulfil their commitments towards the development of the country. Sirat and Kaur (2010) suggest that “the state (principal) will monitor the university (agent) to ensure that the latter fulfils all its obligations to the former” (p.191).

It is quite clear that the study documents suggest that such a centralised process of making the HE policies is effective for the Omani Government so that the focus of the development movement in the country is attained. It is anticipated that the Omani HE system would be more efficient, accountable and competitive with a centralised policy-making system totally controlled by the Government. As argued by Lane and Kivistö (2008), nowadays governments globally urge and demand HEIs to fulfil their agendas and be productive in such global competition. Overall, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the Omani Government through the centralised structure of HE policy-making is hoping to impact the nation advantageously by creating policy outcomes that are deemed satisfactory to the needs of the country. Using the principal-agent framework, the principals (the Omani Government) “strive to maximise their preferences that are ordered according to their priorities” (Braun & Guston, 2003, p.303). HE is thus believed to be the engine of the Omani Government to drive the country towards social, economic, human and scientific development. This is the intention of the Omani government concerning centralising the HE policy-making architecture; the government seeks to utilise HE policy for national development purposes in a very state directed approach.

7.3.2. Top-down policies

The study interviews found that the centralised policy-making structure most often worked top-down, meaning that the policy was made by an upper level ‘principal’ passed to the lower levels (‘agents’) for implementation (see Sirat & Kaur, 2010). This is, indeed, the 'state control model' described by Neave and van Vught (1994) in which they argued that such control over the HE system brings about a very strong centralisation of decision-making by the state and therefore the production of top-down polices. With such top-down policies, the Omani HEIs were found to be submissive in the process of making policies; they were conceived in the processes of policy production largely as implementers of policy, rather than instigators and agenda setters. This can be
seen as the disadvantageous side of the centralised structure of the process, where it is not the environment for the Omani HEIs to achieve their own agendas by participating in making the policies.

Thus, according to some interviewees from the HE institutions, their role in the policy-making processes normally came at the implementation stage. A college dean pointed out that,

We always receive national policies from our ministry either coming from the Education Council or from above. Sometime, we received drafted policies to give our feedback but Allah knows if it was considered. In our internal policies, we do make them ourselves here or at the ministry level. (I/I2/60-63)

When talking about national HE policies, some interviewees from the institutional level believed that policies were always made by the higher level governmental bodies such as the Sultan, the Cabinet or the Education Council. As the dean explained above, it is suggested that the internal policies of HE institutions are made at the institutional level or sometimes at the ministry level, but not at the higher levels of the government. This means that the internal policies of HE institutions are done within the institutions’ governing context. Based on this suggestion, the interviewees at the institutional level were able to differentiate between the overarching national policies and the specific institutions or ministerial levels. Also, it can be seen how such policy actors at the institutional level thought of themselves as not being part of the policy development stage; they believed that policy development was top-down, not ever from the bottom-up. Based on the principal-agent theoretical framework, the HEIs in Oman can be seen as ‘subservient agents’ in policy-making processes (see Sirat & Kaur, 2010).

One interviewee from the institutional level, who was a member in the Education Council, confirmed that “I participated in the policy-making processes and I had somehow specific role in the policy creation” (I/I3/20-22). This institution rector justified his participation in terms of being a member of the Education Council. However, he claimed that he never went to the Education Council meeting with a proposed policy. He explained: “it was more of just discussing proposals coming from other ministries” (I/I3/24). It can be argued that those HE institution’s rectors, who are members of the Education Council, only have the right to discuss the proposed policy drafts, which come from agencies and other places not from the HEIs. It seems that his participation was more or less attending the Council’s meetings and participating in the final stage, which is the policy-decision-making stage, but was not involved in proposing policies or agenda-setting.

On the other side, the ministers, undersecretaries and the Education Council members mentioned in their illustration of the policy development that the policy-making was shared between all stakeholders of the system. The Minister of HE stated that “when policies are developed, all HE institutions and bodies are included in the processes” (M/I1/41-42). Interestingly, this was not the
perception of those interviewed from the HE institutions. The State Council Chairman shared the same view that the HE institutions and their agencies did have a role to play in the making of the Omani national HE policies. Based on the discussion above, the top policy makers believed that HE policies could come from anybody and anywhere in the system. Yet, it can be argued that the top elite interviewees in this study described ‘what should be’ rather than ‘what is’ in reality.

In short, while the Omani government is trying to make the HE system more competitive, productive and accountable via a centralised policy-making architecture, there is the issue of top-down policies. We know infidelity arises in the implementation of top-down policies. It is observed that HEIs were detached from the process of making policies in a HE system in which there were rarely bottom-up policies generated from the institution level.

7.3.3. Non-governmental bodies and actors

Chapter six of this study clearly showed that all actors and bodies described in the policy-making architecture were governmental. This is to argue that “policy-making is a state activity” (Taylor et al., 1997) in Oman. Yet, the public policy literature speaks about non-governmental bodies and actors that impact the policy-making process (see Anderson, 2011; Hill, 2013; Howlett et al., 2009) within liberal democracies with well-developed civil societies and a media fourth estate. Examples of such groups are interest groups, research organizations, parents, students, unions, the private sector and the media. In this study, none of the interviewees spoke about the role of such non-governmental participants. This is not to say that these groups have no role to play in the Omani HE policy-making process. They could have role in pushing for certain policy ideas, in agenda-setting, but these have not been visible to me, nor to the research interviewees. This probably reflects the development level of Omani civil society, policy making processes and the lack of presence of an independent and investigative media. As Anderson (2011) argues, non-governmental participants “provide information, they exert pressure, they seek to persuade, but they do not decide” (p.59). Overall, while the non-governmental group may affect in one way or another the process, they are not formally constituted and they have no legitimate role currently in making policies.

7.3.4. Coordination and coherence

Although the HE policy-making is found to be hierarchical and highly centralised, the study interviews indicated there was a degree of incoherence and disorganization between the various agents of the system in terms of making policies. There relationships we loose coupled. We saw previously that the policy documents, mainly Royal Decrees, clearly stated that the Education Council is the responsible body for coordinating and planning the process of making policies, creating an effective network among HEIs’s agents. The Minister of HE affirmed this role of the
Education Council declaring that “there should be policy-making network encouraged by the Education Council which is represented by most education sector leaders” (M/I1/98-99). Yet, as suggested by the interviewees, this role was not played successfully by the Education Council, resulting in an incoherent policy-making system.

The majority of the study interviewees indicated that the policy-making architecture was facing some cooperation and coordination challenges at the ministerial and institutional levels because of their loosely coupled relationships. According to the State Council Chairman, “there is no problem with the higher level of the system; it is with lower levels that govern and implement the policy” (M/I2/100-101). The Minister here criticized the governance structure of the HE system in Oman as a hindrance to the harmony of the policy-making architecture. To illustrate the disharmony, the State Council Chairman referred to the various agents governing the system as “scattered islands” that each had its own sovereignty in directing its HEIs (M/I2/67). This is the concept of ‘loose-coupling’ expressed in a vernacular or colloquial way (Weick, 1976, 1982). In an analogy, a member of the Education Council also expressed himself saying that, “I felt like that we were in a federal system and each ministry was a state by itself with no coordination with the others” (EC/I2/73).

It is very important to mention that the governance structure of the HE system represents the lower level of the HE policy-making architecture described in Chapter six of this study. It was argued there that the governance of the HE system has been found to be scattered and stretched between different bodies and agents at the ministerial level—the third level of the HE policy-making architecture. In this study, the focus is not on the management and governance of the HE system, but on policy-making.

Furthermore, interviewees from the ministerial and institutional levels also complained about the multiplicity of agents managing the HEIs as a negative contribution to the policy-making process. A general director argued that “each agent is working by itself. There is no coordination between them in terms of policy-making. Each one is working in its institutions, putting what is suitable for its institution” (GD/I5/85-87). We see here again the idea of loose coupling. Admitting this issue, a college dean emphasised that “there is no relationship in terms of policy-making; it is more of cooperating in other subject matters but we are not forced to do that” (I/I6/142-143). These two quotations are representative of almost all interviewees’ belief about the (lack of) harmony and alignment in the HE policy-making architecture between the various principals and agents. In that sense, it is clear that HEIs and their agents were not having clear cut relationships in terms of making national HE policies.

Previous studies also described this issue of plurality of organisations supervising HEIs as a challenge facing the governance and management of the HE system (see Al Harthy, 2011; AL-
Lamki, 2002, 2006; Alyahmadi, 2006). Overall, these studies pointed out that the multiplicity of principals and agents caused scattered efforts, wastage of funds and lack of coordination and alignment between the agents generally. However, how such a governance structure impacts the policy and policy-making process has not been dealt with. Moreover, in the 2012 Human Development Report, it is mentioned that “one of the prominent challenges of HE is the multiplicity of bodies that oversee HEIs, resulting in disintegration of the efforts and resources, and poor strategic planning” (The Supreme Council for Planning, 2013, p. 121). This report prepared by the SCP, which is chaired by His Majesty, the Sultan, acknowledges poor strategic planning as a result of the multiplicity of agents governing the system.

The above discussion, drawing from the interview data, document analysis, previous studies and a governmental report, indicates that there is a lack of cooperation and harmony at the ministerial level of the policy-making architecture, as a result of having various governmental agents managing HEIs in Oman. It seems that this issue is recognized by the top level of the Omani Government, ministers, policy actors, bureaucrats, HEIs leaders, and academics. Yet, it is defined as more of a governance challenge, rather than a policy-making issue. Although this situation has been known since 2003, it has not been resolved as yet. Subsequently, this study will go on to look at how such a multiplicity of bodies affects HE policy and policy-making processes.

7.3.5. Conflict of agents’ interest

As a result of this multiplicity of agents at the ministerial level, the interviews showed a kind of a interest conflict among those HEI agents. The complicated HE policy-making architecture at the ministerial level has been found to allow competing ministerial interests to come into play. This conflict was found to impact the policy agendas and the policy decisions of the HE system. In the first part of this chapter, the process of developing policies at the Education Council was generally described, showing how a policy initiative reached the Education Council and how it reaches the HEIs for implementation. The questions of who brings policy agendas to the Education Council, how these agendas are negotiated and who decides at the end are crucial to understand the conflict that can arise.

According to a member of the Education Council, “each ministry through its representative member of the Council carries to the Council issues and policy initiatives that are of concern to its HEIs but not the national level” (EC/I2/152-153). Another member questioned the agenda-setting stage saying that “each ministry develops agendas towards its needs and brings them to the Council so the question here who cares about the whole national HE system?”(EC/I3/113-114). Furthermore, another member of the Council mentioned,
We have a big problem that we have a lot of efforts but scattered. We don’t have a unified vision. We have different visions. Every entity has its own interests and they are competing instead of collaborating or working together. (EC/I1/30-32)

It seems that the Council’s members representing the HEIs are in a way bringing issues that are specific to their HEIs to the Council for consideration. Putting it differently, the national HE policies were somehow neglected, as every member was merely concerned about their core business and specific issues within their own HEIs.

At the same time, a group of three interviewed members of the Education Council mentioned that they had never brought policy issues to the Council. To them, it was more about attending meetings and approving policies already drafted. Those interviewees were posed the question: ‘who then brings policy agendas to the Council if you do not?’ All of them answered that it was the Ministry of HE. In an ironic language, one of the three interviewees replied that “it is the beloved baby of the Council that brings policy agendas”, referring to the Ministry of HE (EC/I2/98). It can be suggested that the Ministry of HE is the chief actor in the policy-making process and this role will be looked at later in this chapter. One interviewee mentioned that the Ministry of Manpower on some occasions had policy initiatives that were related to their Colleges of Technology. Overall, it is apparent that the Education Council has been relying on the Ministry of HE as a policy ideas developer, whereas other members rarely participated in the process.

With regard to the conflict of ministerial interest, the Minster of HE, who is the deputy chairman of the Education Council, confirmed that “there is fragmentation of governance and obviously with such fragmentation also comes fragmentation of policy” (M/11/146-148). This statement of the minister can be read as a sign of a conflict of ministerial interest causing incoherence in the policy. Yet, the Minister of HE rejected the idea of the beloved baby, affirming that “the door is open for all members to bring issues to the Council; it is not limited to our ministry” (M/11/127-128). Nonetheless, the Minister admitted that the Ministry of HE had been the most active policy actor in the Education Council.

Donn and Al Manthri (2010) raise the issue of interest conflicts and competing views between ministries in the Omani HE system. According to Donn and Al Manthri (2010), there were competing views between the Ministry of HE and Ministry of Manpower on some HE policy directions regarding which sectors to be supported for development (e.g., IT, business, tourism, teacher education). They also argue that competing views “generated some tension in inter-ministerial relationships” (p. 127). Indeed, such competing views at the ministerial level of the policy-making architecture may affect the direction of HE policies.
Given such conflict, this study found that the lower agents (HEIs) were somewhat separated from the policy-making process, while for effective policy-making they should be the core of the process or at least consulted and involved in policy processes. They are central to policy implementation. For instance, a college dean stated that “in our colleges, we follow the direction of our ministry and we do not participate in the policy-making process unless asked” (I/17/86-87). Another institution rector pointed out that “the national HE policy is not our business and our internal strategies and plans are centralised by our ministry” (I/15/47-48). These two statements show that the HEIs are more than units simply following the direction set by their agents, fulfilling their agendas. Donn and Al Manthri (2010) affirm that the tension between the HEIs’ agents results in challenges for the Omani government generally and the HEIs specifically. This is to confirm that the HEIs are disadvantaged in the policy-making process; they do not have much to do with making national policies. Overall, this disadvantage is attributed to being the lowest agents of the cascade of principal-agent games, described in Chapter six.

7.3.6. **Who steers policy processes?**

Some interviewees from the ministerial (not including the Ministry of HE) and institutional levels indicated uncertainty about who steered the HE policy-making process in the Sultanate. There were four interviewees who spoke about overlapping in the roles of the Education Council and the Ministry of HE in producing HE policies. A general director mentioned that, “I am not sure who is in charge of making policies; I am really confused between the functions of the Ministry of HE and the Education Council” (GD/I3/59-61). A HEI rector said that “the Ministry and the Council are to me doing the same job of making the HE policies. I always see the Ministry making the HE policies” (I/I3/200-201).

Indeed, two interviewees even observed that there was interference from the side of the HE Ministry in the responsibilities of the Education Council in making policies. An undersecretary noted that “the Ministry of HE plays the role mandated to the Education Council. There are many policies that have been developed by the ministry not the Council; to me it is interference” (U/I7/138-140). A HE institution dean also believed that “the Education Council is not yet playing its actual desired role of policy making and providing future guidance as described in that Royal Decree. Thus, the Ministry of HE is interfering with this role” (I/I6/164-165). This dean assumed that the Council was not functioning well as yet, so the Ministry had copied this role and played a parallel function.
However, the impression given by those interviewees about the overlapping and interference was rejected by officials from the Ministry of HE and the Education Council. A general director argued that,

There is no interference. This misunderstanding of the roles is by people from outside the system. People see that the Ministry of HE is taking decisions for certain policy but in fact the Ministry should have communicated with Council previously. The role that I see is not contradictory. The ministry initiate proposals and send them to the council and then the council approve or disapprove. People think about the role of executing the policy as the role of making it. (GD/I2/205-212)

Similarly, a member of the Education Council affirmed that,

The ministry now sets the proposals for the policies required for the HE system. The Ministry will send them through the secretariat of the council for approval so the council has the role of debating and revising and then approving those policies. However, those policies are generated from the units themselves. And the ministry has the role of executing those policies. (EC/I3/39-42)

I also asked the Minister of HE about such interference and overlapping. The Minister replied that “definitely we are the executive arm of HE government policy but we are not authorized to make it. Yes, we propose policies for the HE system more than anybody else” (M/I1/22-25). It is clear from the Minister’s response that the Ministry of HE might propose policies for the HE system and execute the decided policies, but nonetheless do not make policies.

In this discussion of who steers the HE policy-making process, it seems that the Council is authorized to make policies and the Ministry of HE is mandated to execute these policies and follow up with their implementation (see The Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2002; 2012 a). There was misunderstanding by some few interviewees, due to the active role played by the Ministry of HE in proposing the policies of HE. Also, this misunderstanding can be attributed to the position of the Minister of HE as the deputy-chairperson of the Education Council. Indeed, carrying the name of ‘the Ministry of HE’ can also be a reason to make people think that the Ministry of HE is in charge of making policies for the whole national HE system. Indeed, the Ministry of HE is mandated to look after its Applied Science Colleges, internal and external scholarship, regulating admission to HE and supervising the private HEIs.

7.3.7. Fragmentation of policy

The study interviews suggest that the HE system in Oman has been running since it was established without a unified policy for the whole system, despite a view that the Sultan sets the mega-policy framing the system. All interviewees agreed that there was no single policy document that could be described as Omani HE policy, law, strategy or any specific document. The State Council Chairperson revealed clearly that “the HE system has been growing up without any nationwide plan or unified guidelines” (M/I2/170). An undersecretary also observed that “the HE system in Oman
lacks a policy document that can make all HEIs work in harmony for the development of the country” (U/I5/205-206). These are only two quotations presented here to argue that the Omani HE system has been functioning with scattered policies among each agent, yet there has been no mutual, linking document to guide the system.

However, we cannot say that the HE agents and their HEIs do not have policies. The study documents, as well as the interviews, demonstrated that each agent had specific policies that regulated its HEIs, planned their future and helped in running their daily business. During the interviews, I visited all HE agents and many HEIs institutions, collecting hundreds of policy documents ranging from department policies to strategic plans and laws. This collection of documents affirmed that the ministries and the authorities governing the HEIs have their own internal policies.

7.3.7.1. The Five-Year Development Plans

Besides these specific documents, the interviewees also spoke about FYPs and the Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020' as policy documents used by agents to guide their HEIs. In the FYPs, each ministry individually develops its plan for the next five years and sends it to the SCP. A general director at one of the ministries said that,

> We have the five year plans that are policies. Each ministry has its own five years plans and these should be harmonized with the State’s plan. Previously, we sent our plans to the Ministry of national Economy and now to the Supreme Council for Planning. Each ministry makes its plan and sends it to the Council. The Supreme Council discusses these plans. (GD/I5/30-33)

Moreover, an undersecretary explained that,

> The FYPs are the main and general direction of each ministry. We need a long term one. If we have the strategy, we will have a clear policy and clear direction for the system for the some coming years. The FYPs will be guided by the strategy. (U/I7/134-137)

It is clear that each ministry or authority governing HEI has its specific FYP developed by the ministry itself. Those specific FYPs are sent to the SCP for approval.

When conducting his study, Alyahmadi (2006) confirmed that Oman had no specific HE national policy, confirming “the lack of official published documentation regarding the philosophy, vision, objectives or general plans for HE in Oman” (p. 496). He stated that each HE agent had several provisional plans, which included a variety of objectives and procedures for its HEI. More clearly, Alyahmadi argued that,

> There are now several provisional policies and plans for each division and stream of HE, included their visions and objectives and strategies. Some of these visions and plans are included in the Vision of 'Oman 2020' while others are covered in the country's FYPs, which are regarded as provisional financial action plans rather than as a theoretical framework for the country's HE system based on some national philosophy, vision and objectives. (Alyahmadi, 2006, p. 496)
Summarising what Alyahmadi argued, the FYPs are financial action plans and they cannot replace a nationwide strategy, as they are developed by the agents and merely include the business of each ministry individually without synchronization across ministries. Alyahmadi found that the FYPs are “characterised by separateness, rather than cohesion” with regards to the HE system (p. 498). This study also concurs with this finding and argues that the FYPs are not harmonized between the HE agents. Accordingly, they cannot be regarded as a national document that can lead the whole HE system towards the development of the country.

7.3.7.2. Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020'

With regards to the Vision of ‘Oman 2020’, some interviewees from the agents supervising the HEIs mentioned that they used the ‘Oman 2020’ vision as guidance for their HEIs. A general director mentioned that “our ministry always try its best to develop its strategies and plans in accordance with ‘Oman 2020’. I assume all other ministries and authorities do the same” (GD/16/230-232). Similarly, an undersecretary indicated that the Vision of ‘Oman 2020’ is considered as a framework for creating policies for their HEIs. Overall, it is very important to mention here that the ‘Oman 2020’ is not owned by the HE system, but provides a comprehensive economic vision for the country begun in 1996, planning to boost the Omani economy till 2020. In this vision, there is the goal of human resource development and the upgrade of Omani youths’ skills and competencies (The Ministry of Development, 1995). That goal is specifically linked to the HE system, where there should be an important contribution from the HE system to the economic development of the country.

According to Alyahmadi (2006), the Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020' can be used in a way as an official policy document by HE agents in the absence of any other alternative. He mentioned that the HEIs could use ‘Oman 2020’ as a national policy till a comprehensive, unified one is created. Therefore, Alyahmadi urged the Omani Government to accelerate the process of developing a unified vision and strategy for the HE system. Yet, unfortunately the HE system is still lacking such an official, amalgamated document for the whole HE system.

7.3.7.3. A national document

In this study, the majority of interviewees were wondering about a national policy (a law and strategy) for the HE system, so that the various agents could align their plans to it. The interviewees warned about the absence of a national policy document that carries a vision, objectives and a law, and how such absence could impact the performance of the whole system in the country’s development. A member of the Education Council argued that,
Right now, the HE policies are coming out in the form of Royal Decrees or council decisions. So there is a suite of policies and decisions but they are not necessarily combined in one single document. We don’t have single policy document rather the policy is a collection of decisions and Royal Decrees. With no national document, relationships are not clear between HE agents as well as HEIs. (EC/I3/18-25)

Henceforth, this study posed the question to the top elites of this study (ministers); does the system have a national policy?

The State Council Chairperson admitted that there was a need for a unified HE policy. Yet, the Chairperson did not agree that the HE system had no clear direction or guidance to contribute to the development of the country. The Chairperson believed that there were various policies from each HE agent that needed to be aligned. His observation was,

The system does have scattered policies. Policies are there. Yes, the system needs a unified policy. The establishment of the new Education Council, and if is activated effectively in its new version, will solve this problem. Oman is now at a stage of development that doesn’t accept individual efforts from people or institutions. Such policies should be comprehensive. (M/I2/26-29)

The Minister of HE also shared the same opinion as that expressed by the State Council Chairperson that the HE system did have policies but scattered. However, the Minister rejected the idea that the HE system had no policy and she pointed to the FYPs and the Vision for ‘Oman 2020. Saying that, the Minister admitted the lack of a national policy document that could cohere the HE system together and make it work in harmony for the development of the country. The HE Minister defended this situation,

So I don’t know when people say that we don’t have policy of the HE system or it is not clear. It is partly true in the sense that there isn’t a document that they can be called a policy. But all the ministers and all the people and officials working in Ministries know what are the important challenges and how we are addressing them and how we plan to address them in the future. Definitely through meetings, through workshops, through the FYPs and ‘Oman 2020’, the HE system has clear goals and direction. (M/I1/47-52)

Based on what the minister mentioned, it can be argued that till now the HE system lacks a national policy, acknowledging the scattered policies owned by HEI agents. There was an urgent call by all interviewees, including ministers, for a national document (law and strategy) for the HE system as an overarching mega-policy.

7.3.7.4. The story of the Strategy for Education in the Sultanate of Oman, 2006-2020

Several interviewees from different levels of the system pointed to a strategy that was drafted for all education systems of the Sultanate. It has been referred to as ‘The Strategy for Education in the Sultanate of Oman 2006-2020’ (Council for HE, 2004). Unfortunately, this strategy was not approved by the highest authority in the Sultanate, namely the Cabinet. According to the interviewees, this strategy could have played the role of a national document that would solve many
issues in respect of harmony and coherence in policy-making in the HE system. For instance, a general director believed that “the HE system does not have general directions or strategies from the Education Council that can guide our policies. If the strategy was approved, then all the system issues will be fixed” (GD/I5/81-83).

To see the context of the strategy, let us first look at the antecedents of this policy. A member of the Education Council explained that,

The previous HE Council suggested to the Cabinet in 2003 a project of preparing the framework for a strategy for the HE system that would run from 2006 to 2020. The Cabinet approved the request with a modification that the strategy covers all levels of education in the Sultanate, a comprehensive strategy. Then, the Ministry of HE was mandated to develop the strategy. (EC/I3/177-182)

The State Council Chairperson declared that,

We know that the strategy was made in 2003 when I was the Minister of HE. It was studied by the specialists and it was postponed first in 2007, second in 2010. Now, the new Council is working on it again. There wasn’t enough motivation by the previous HE Council to execute this strategy. Recently, we have seen that the new Education Council has independency even from other systems in taking decisions. The strategy and the law are now in their hands. I can see that they are serious to have them as soon as possible. (M/I2/37-42)

The above shows that the ‘Strategy for Education in the Sultanate of Oman, 2006-2020’ has been an ongoing project since 2003, which still has not been approved today. It was an initiative by the previous HE Council to remake it for HE. As illustrated in the quotation above, the Cabinet approved the request to develop the strategy for all levels of education in Oman, rather than solely for the HE system. Thus, the Cabinet mandated the Ministry of HE to develop the strategy, which was completed by 2005. Yet, the strategy was suspended twice as the ex-minister of HE mentioned. Indeed, during the conduct of research interviews, I got to know from interviewees that the Education Council had formed a committee recently to rewrite the strategy, hoping it would be approved soon. Also, the Council is working on two other projects of a law and restructuring for the education systems in the Sultanate. The question is why was this strategy not approved when it was first developed?

The Minister of HE mentioned that the strategy was never approved by the Cabinet, stating at the beginning that she could not tell what the reasons were. Then, the Minister explained that the strategy was extremely expensive. Her explanation was that with various agents, it was difficult to allocate funds for each agent to implement the strategy so the strategy was not approved. This was her reply:

The strategy went through several processes of approval and so forth. But somehow or rather I can’t tell you exactly what the reason because never we knew ourselves. It was never officially approved by the Government, meaning the Council of Ministers for implementation. One of the major reasons was the cost. At that time, it was seen extremely expensive; you know several
millions or billions to implement it over a 15 years period (2006 to 2020). But it was seen to be very expensive and therefore we were told that each ministry should implement what it can within its budget. There would not be extra funds given. (M/I1/33-40)

As was discovered from other interviewees that competing interests between agents was a reason for it not being approved, I followed up with this question to the Minister of HE: ‘Was the competing interest between the ministries and institutions behind not approving the 2006 strategy?’

The Minister tried to avoid and deflect the question, but then she replied that,

Yes it was, it was also a reason that there was no consensus. And as you know Oman was a small country with small population, I remember when first the panel of experts were appointed to do, the first thing they said, why do you have HE spread out through four or five ministries with such a small country. If you are planning to develop a policy, policy should be formulated by one ministry, as it is now you know every ministry has its own. (M/I1/56-62)

From the HE Minister’s response, it is quite clear that competing interests between the HE agents was one of the major reasons behind the failure of the strategy to gain approval. The HE Minister confirmed that it was problematic to develop one national document that would be agreed by the various HE agents. Although the HE Minister confirmed that the strategy has never been approved, the Minister argued and emphasised that “many policies were implemented without an official approval of this document called ‘the Strategy for Education in the Sultanate of Oman, 2006-2020’.

In other words, the Minister believed that most of the main motivations of the strategy had been implemented even without the strategy being officially approved.

Similarly, some interviewees revealed that there was no consensus among the agents, but rather disagreement over some of the strategy’s proposals. The State Council Chairperson also argued that ‘the scattered islands’, meaning the various agents supervising the HEIs, with their ministerial interest versus national interest, had contributed to the disappearance of the strategy. Overall, the study found that the strategy proposed a restructuring of the HE system in which some HEIs (for example Colleges of Technology and Health Institutes) would be released from the management and governance of specific ministries. It was also proposed that the whole HE system should come under one umbrella, which could be the Ministry of HE. These proposals were rejected by ex-ministers of the Ministry of Manpower and the ex-Minister of Health under the Cabinet’s auspices. This prevented the strategy from being approved by the Cabinet.

It can be argued here that policy actors at the top level (ministers), who were members of the Cabinet, through intransigent competing interests, were behind the failure to approve *The Strategy for Education in the Sultanate of Oman 2006-2020*. However, it was confirmed that the power of these actors and their interests had influenced the direction of HE policies and their content. Each minister was looking out for the personal interest of his ministry. Overall, it can be concluded here
that the HE policy-making architecture has led to fragmented, scattered HE policies and not a unified, national approach.

7.3.8. A final thought about impact

Although the policy-making architecture is described as highly centralised, the HE system, ironically, has been found to be ‘loosely coupled’ at the ministerial and institutional levels. With such a large, complex system of various agents and tens of HEIs, the centralised structure does not really reflect harmonised arrangements. The relations between the various parts of the system, as indicated throughout, have remained unclear to many participants and observers. In ‘loosely coupled’ systems, Weick (1967, p.1) suggests that elements of a system “are often tied together frequently and loosely”. Weick (167, 1982) explains that components of such systems are hierarchically controlled, yet unresponsive to each other and retain their own identity and physical separateness. This is, indeed, the case of the Omani HE system, where the relationships and coordination between the HE principals and agents are weak and arbitrary. It is quite clear then that the HE system in Oman is a classic example of a ‘loosely coupled’ system, despite its cascade of various principal/agent relationships.

The study also showed that the HE agents in the Omani HE system had a certain degree of autonomy (but not the HEIs) from the principal (the Education Council) in terms of making their policies. The relationship between the Education Council and the HE agents was loosely coupled. According to Gilmore, Hirschhorn, and Kelly (1999, p.1), in a loosely coupled system, “individual elements have high autonomy relative to the larger system in which they are imbedded, often creating a federated character”. We saw previously how the HE agents in the system were described as ‘scattered islands’ and ‘federal states’ by the interviewees – colloquial expressions of loose coupling. Each agent has been concerned about their own institution more than thinking about the whole, national HE system. Nonetheless, it seems that the Education Council was powerless to bring harmony to the loosely coupled HE system.

Gilmore et al. (1999, p.1) suggest that in a loosely coupled system, “the forces for integration- for worrying about the whole, its identity, its integrity and its future- are often weak compared to the forces for specialization”. Furthermore, Ingersoll (1991) wrote that loosely coupled systems are characterised by a number of forms such as “the absence of regulations, the failure of superordinates to influence subordinates, decentralization of power leading to employee autonomy, disconnections of structures from tasks, planned unresponsiveness and a lack of goal consensus” (p.85). As the majority of the interviewees indicated, the Omani HE system has been lacking clear goals, national strategic planning, harmony between agents, and unified policies as the system
components has been competing for their own individual benefits. Thus, it can be argued that the looseness of the HE system has been an obstacle for the Education Council (the principal) to develop a national HE policy. As result of such fragmented HE policy, the study assumes that there is a mismatch between the HE system and needs of the state and its development and a gap between policy intentions and enactment.

7.4. Conclusion

This chapter has documented and analysed the operations of the Omani HE policy-making architecture and its impact on the entire HE system. It has been argued that there was no single way or scenario in which national HE policies were made. The chapter outlined four different scenarios that showed the relationships between the different policy actors and bodies. While all interviewees pointed out that the Education Council was the mandated, chief body to develop policies for the HE system, it was also suggested that sometimes there are supreme or political decisions that were taken by the Country’s president (His Majesty) and also through the Ministers’ Council (Cabinet). As confirmed by the top elites in this study, these decisions sometimes change the direction of HE policy. In such cases, the Education Council gets directions from the top of government to adopt certain policies and go in certain directions.

Furthermore, after the 2011 Arab Spring, the study revealed that the Oman Council composed of the State Council and the Shura Council (like a parliament in other countries) influenced policies made for the HE system. Such political and policy influence for the broader society is not very tangible, but it is there. Throughout the chapter, it was argued that ‘positionality’ of the interviewees was found to be a factor in how they viewed the relationship between the policy architecture and actual policy processes in the HE policy cycle. Each interviewee tried to explain how policy was made from his/her background and the position of his/her organization in the overall policy architecture.

Based on Offe’s (1974, 1984) argument that state structures mediate policy, the second part of the chapter argued that Omani HE policy architecture mediated both policy processes and the content of policy, impacting the entire HE system. The centralised HE policy architecture was found to encourage and insist on top-down policies in which the HEIs were detached from the processes of policy making. In addition, almost all interviewees observed that the governance of HE (the third level of HE policy-making architecture) impacted the HE policies negatively through weak coordination between HE agents and conflict of agents’ interests. Each agent (ministries or institution) has been making its policy alone, in isolation from others. Indeed, this indicates that there is no harmony or alignment in policy content and policy making processes. This is a loosely
coupled system. All this has led to the failure of the Omani HE system to develop a unified HE policy as a law or strategy. Based on that, the study shows that the Omani HE system is ‘loosely coupled’ at present and the HE institutions are not well incorporated into the policy architecture with possible implications for policy implementation.
8. Multiple Factors Affecting Policy Architecture, Processes and Content

8.1. Introduction

In the previous two chapters, the study described the Omani HE policy-making architecture and its operations, as well as analysing their impact on the Omani HE system. This chapter aims to answer the fourth question underpinning this research study: What factors (national, regional and global) impact on the architecture, policy processes and policy content in Omani HE? The analysis here is an exploratory attempt to investigate these factors by outlining and documenting their impact on the Omani HE policy and its policy-making system. Examining and analysing in depth the multiple (national, regional and global) factors that impact Omani HE policy is beyond the scope of this chapter and, indeed, beyond the scope of this study. In this chapter, the perceptions of the study interviewees and indications of some selected documents will form the basis of a circumscribed analysis and documentation of various national, regional and global factors affecting Omani HE.

Overall, the social, institutional, cultural, economic and political factors that affect HE policy and policy-making in Oman will be investigated. This will involve a critical analysis of the Omani environment that provides the context for the HE policy-making system. Furthermore, this chapter seeks to investigate the regional and global antecedents and pressures leading to the formation of the current HE architecture, policy-making processes and content. These might be seen as the proximal and distal contexts of Omani HE policy making (see Taylor et al., 1997). The chapter will be framed around Brenner’s (2004) notion of the rescaling of the nation-state in the age of globalisation, as outlined in the literature review chapter. If a nation is a state-centric society (the Omani case), Brenner argues that globalisation sees a rescaling of the state, but the state within the nation remains very important in policy work, working in different ways. Indeed, the state is pulled into relationships at the regional level (here the GCC), as well as affected by international actors and organisations such as the UN. All of these regional and global relationships help the state to frame and set the agendas and make their policies, but they do not underplay the continuing relevance of the nation or its own policy making apparatus as outlined in the previous two chapters.

In Oman, with hierarchical, top-down and state-centric policy making, I demonstrate in this chapter that the Omani government still plays a critical role in making its national HE policies, yet it is at the same time affected by regional and global issues, pressures and trends. The chapter also makes use of the concept of ‘vernacular’ globalisation to examine how the Omani system and national context mediate the effects of top-down globalisation (see Appadurai, 1996). It will be shown that
the state-centrism of policy making in Omani HE leads to a context generative (Appadurai, 1996) response to global and regional pressures.

On the basis of empirical analysis, the chapter argues that the Omani HE system is affected by national, regional and global contexts and, thus, its policies are made and implemented in response to blended national, regional and global contexts and effects. The latter description is important: the local, national, regional and global layer over each other and impact each other in multiple ways in education policy. The point here is about relationships across these scales and spaces more than boundaries between them. This is consistent with the argument of Donn and Al Manthri (2010), in which they observe and argue that HE systems of the Arab Gulf States (including Oman) have been increasingly affected by global contexts, yet at the same time the national and regional circumstances and priorities remain important. The chapter is divided into three main parts, which deal with national, regional and global factors respectively.

Before elaborating in-depth, it is very important to discuss the issue of using geographical scales (national, regional and global) in describing the contexts of Omani HE policy in this age of globalisation. With regards to this issue, Brenner (2004) argues that it is hard to separate territorial scales straightforwardly, describing the use of such a scalar imaginary as problematic. As mentioned in Chapter four, Brenner talks of the rescaled state and the multiple scales of policy-making in which national approaches are located. Thus, I acknowledge the complexity of the concepts of geographical scales, which intersect and overlap, for analysing the contexts of the Omani HE policy and policy-making in this contemporary age. This is not to deny that the Omani HE policy is not embedded in these scales (national, regional and global), but to admit the co-existence and co-presence of these scales in which Omani HE policy and policy-making are located, as well as to conceive of new scalar and new spatial relations that affect policy. The issue of the co-existence and co-presence of these factors makes the separation of these various effects problematic. Yet, with caution and for the sake of clarity, as well as for pragmatic and analytical purposes, I am separating each of them, using these levels as useful organisers for the empirical analysis proffered in this chapter. I emphasise that these scales are used in this study to structure the analysis for “stylistic convenience” rather than thinking of them “[as] fixed, pre-given or static entities” (Brenner, 2004, p.32). Further, reflection on these issues will be presented throughout the chapter, as well as in the conclusion. The following sections will deal with each of these contexts in more detail to highlight how they affect both policy content and policy-making processes in Omani HE. This theoretical digression has been necessary to demonstrate that I understand that the separation of scales is not reflective of lived reality, but rather provides a tool for analysing the data.
8.2. The national context

HE systems everywhere have national issues and considerations evolving from their specific contexts, cultures, political histories, politics and state structures (Marginson, 2006; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). HEIs are embedded in a national setting as well as a global setting, confirming a certain level of pressure and force on HE policies from both inside and outside the nation. Although HE systems are challenged by globalisation, Vaira (2004) argues that HEIs “are also embedded in a national political, regulative and governance system which shapes their structural and organizational features” (p.458). This section will look at what is special at the national level of Oman in terms of affecting its HE policy, which may not be found within nations elsewhere. Throughout this section, it is argued that national context largely shapes the Omani HE policy, yet the regional and global contexts have also reshaped this policy.

All study interviewees were asked about the specific national factors impacting the HE policy and policy-making in Omani HE. Answers to this question varied from one interviewee to another, depending on their expertise and position. This study does not aim to compare and contrast opinions and views of those interviewees, but rather seeks to deal generally with all the relevant factors that were raised in interviews. Thus, the study presents an overall picture of those factors by putting the narratives together to construct a whole picture. Overall, the study interviewees spoke of various interrelated and overlapping local issues that had somehow impacted the Oman national HE policy and policy-making.

8.2.1. Demography

The demography of Oman places real pressure on the HE system generally and its policies specifically. An undersecretary asserted that “the effects of the Omani population features on the HE policy are stronger than the effects on any other public policies” (U/16/220-221). The interviewee here was referring to the large numbers of Omani youth searching for HE opportunities compared with the limited places offered without charge by the Omani Government. To show the impact and the pressure of the demography, it is very important to reiterate the facts about the demography of Oman, which were presented in Chapter two of this study, using recent statistics released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

One of the features of the Omani population is that it has been increasing dramatically in the last 20 years due to the quality services (health, education, welfare, etc.) provided by the Omani government (Ministry of Information, 2014). Table 8.1 shows the population increases from 1993 to 2014.
Table 8.1
*Increases in the Omani population from 1993 to 2014 (NCSI, 2014)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Population (millions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>2.341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2.773</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>3.295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>3.623</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>3.855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>3.992</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.1 indicates that there was an increase in population of 17% between 1993 and 2003. This was followed by an increase of 18% between 2003 and 2010. Furthermore, Table 8.1 shows that by mid-2014, Oman reached 3.99 million people; Omanis constitute 56.6% of the population and expatriates 43.3% (NCSI, 2014). Overall, there has been a doubling (approximately) of the population in the last two decades. This steep increase in the Omani population is found to have direct impact on the HE policies as confirmed by the interviewees. There has been huge demand on HE, especially as more students stayed until the completion of schooling. Numerous previous studies have confirmed this immense demand facing the Omani government due to the huge population increase (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Brandenburg, 2013; Gonzalez et al. 2008; Chapman et al. 2009). In this study, the massive increase in the Omani population is considered to be a challenge for HE policy, contributing to the current gap of the unmet demand for HE access by Omani youth. With such remarkable increase in the population, it is argued that there will be unmet demand in the Omani HE system into the foreseeable future.

The Omani population is categorized as youthful, a feature that is always linked and attributed to the large increases recently in the Omani population. Indeed, Common (2008) pointed out that the youthfulness of the Omani population presented further dilemmas for the government (p.188). Brandenburg (2013) argues that the demographic development of Oman and its youthfulness have created challenges for the Omani regime by forcing it to diversify and expand the HE system. According to the NCSI (2014), by mid-2014, 22% of the population was under 15 years of age, 47% were between 15 and 34 years, 28% were between 35 and 64 years old and only 3% were above 65 years (NCSI, 2014). Table 8.2 summarizes the age categorization of the Omani population.
Table 8.2
The age categorizations and its percentages of Omani population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 15</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-34</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-64</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 65</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With 69% of the total population under the age of 34, the study interviewees pointed out the ongoing pressures on the HE system. The number of students finishing grade 12 and seeking HE is huge every year compared with the available places at HEIs. A university rector mentioned that “there is continuous reforms and changes to the HE admission policy and increase in the allocated budget to HEIs every year due to the youthfulness of the Omani population and their high demands for post-schooling education” (I/I3/240-241).

Thus, the Omani government, in response to high demand, has initiated some specific policies. One of the policies has been to increase participation of Omani youth aged between 18 and 24 years in HE, from 19% in 2004 to a target of 50% in 2020 (Council for HE, 2004). This would entail a mass system of HE and this policy has resulted in a significant increase in the number of admitted students annually. Furthermore, Brandenburg (2013, p. 301) argues that, “Oman’s government used the privatization and internationalization of HE to set a specific framework that focuses primarily on the expansion of admission capacities”. Due to these policies, the number of HEIs has reached 62 by 2012, and the number of admitted students increased from 14,148 in academic year 2009/2010 to 28,774 in 2012/2013 (Ministry of HE, 2012). That said, I argue here that the youthfulness of the Omani population, as well as the visible increase in the population size, impacts HE policy. This presents challenges for the Omani government to create opportunities (supply) to meet the high demand of Omani youth for HE and thus to allocate more funds for the HE system. This demand is also situated against issues about Oman’s economy and reliance on oil and gas, as discussed in Chapter two.

8.2.2. The political system

With regards to politics and the political system, there was no interviewee in this study who did not point to the effects of the Omani political system on HE policy and policy-making. Indeed, the policy-makers regarded the Omani political system as a major factor in directing the HE policies and policy-making architecture. As argued in Chapter six of this study, understanding the political system of the Sultanate is very important to the interpretation of the impact of political factors on
Omani HE policy. According to the Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, “the current Omani HE policy-making architecture is a result of the unique Sultani system that we have in Oman” (M/I3/109-110). Referring to some current admission policies and postgraduate scholarship policies, an undersecretary mentioned that “these policies have been introduced and carried out due to some issues that top leader of the Omani regime decided to respond to” (U/I5/163-164). This is to observe and illustrate that the Omani HE policies do get affected and reformed by the structure of the political regime and by political actors in Oman who operate outside the HE system. This argument concurs with scholars who have argued that the political systems of nations are a determinant of HE policies and funding (see Conner & Rabovsky, 2011; Dar, 2012; McLendon, 2003a, McLendon et al. 2009; Tandberg, 2010), but also that regional politics today also have policy impacts. Here, with the admission policy, pressures from the GCC region also played a role in the move towards massification of HE, as did the political pressure for more HE seats encouraged by the Arab Spring. This is one example where it is hard to separate the national context of Omani HE policy from related regional and global contexts. We also see here a global education policy discourse; massification of HE is a global trend and governments around the world are working hard to reach this goal (Marginson, forthcoming 2016).

The Omani political system was discussed and analysed in Chapter seven of this study and some mention of its indirect impacts on HE policy and policy-making were noted. For the purpose of being focused and not repeating the analysis proffered elsewhere in this thesis, the study will outline here these effects in dot points, summarizing the previously mentioned issues and presenting some new ones.

- The Sultani political system has prescribed the current HE policy-making architecture. It was clear in Chapter seven how the Basic Status of the State framed the Omani government apparatus, as well as the actions of policy actors.
- The HE system exhibited a ‘state control’ model of steering. The role of the Omani government dominated HE policy-making, which was attributed to the strong centralisation and hierarchy in the Omani political system.
- HE policy development was found to be top-down in character due to the hierarchical nature of the Omani system. Thus, HEIs are submissive agents, yet detached to some extent from the process of making policies; there is loose coupling across the elements of the policy architecture.
- Due to the nature of the Sultanate political system, several bodies and actors from inside and outside the HE system participated in making HE policies. This is why there is no single way for developing HE policy, but multiple scenarios.
The study found that there were sometimes supreme political decisions that came from above (the Sultan) to the HE system. For example, the Arab Spring resulted in doubling the HE student admission numbers, which can also be regarded as a regional impact. In such decisions, the HE system has no hand in them and to some extent does not participate in making them. These decisions are sovereign and made by the Sultan.

8.2.3. Social and cultural factors

It is the case that the characteristics of a society and the culture of its people play a role in determining its policies. Indeed, the cultural context of nations frames their political agendas and policy discourses. According to Lenschow et al. (2005),

Policy-specific political discourses – the ideas and narratives behind policies and policy change – are set within the broader culture of a country. Thus, culture offers an important key to understanding how policy-specific discourses are developed, interpreted and eventually integrated into the domestic policy-making context. (p.801)

With regards to HE, Clark (1983) mentions that specific cultural factors can be used to analyse HE systems and measure their performance. Specific to Oman, there has not been any study to investigate such cultural orientations and their impact on any domestic policy. However, in this study, several interviewees pointed generally to some socio-cultural aspects of the Omani people as factors that influence the Omani HE policy outputs and reform. An undersecretary mentioned that “the local culture of Omanis has been impacting the HE policy” (U/I/220). The undersecretary explained that “in Oman, like other rich developing countries, people believe that the state has to provide everything free of charge and such services have to be for everybody” (U/I/221-222). This a state-centric policy orientation and a policy expectation of universal and ‘free’ provision of public services, a concept that has been seriously challenged in the rich developed nations of the globe under neo-liberal policy pressures. On the latter, Australia is a good case in point where student fees were introduced and ‘free’ university abolished so as to expand student numbers and cover costs and reduce the financial impost upon the government.

It has been mentioned previously that schooling, HE, health and many other services are provided for Omani people free of charge. In the quotation above, the undersecretary believed that such a culture affected and pressurized the HE system, encouraging large numbers of HEIs in Oman. In Chapter two of the study, it was mentioned that Oman currently has 62 HEIs. The real question here is not about quantity, but the quality of such a large number of institutions, established in a short period of time in a small state with a small population. (Australia, by comparison, with a population of 23 million people has 36 public universities). A general director confirmed this situation, saying that “there is huge social pressure with the society asking for more seats even if it is in the account of quality” (GD/I5/207-208). The study by Al-Hajri (2002) highlighted this huge pressure,
proposing expanding the Omani HE system and increasing participation rates to meet the socio-economic demands. The expansion of HE across the globe – the move to mass provision of HE – has everywhere raised issues of quality, even in the rich developed nations. This has also been an issue in Oman.

A member of the State Council observed that “the Omani government has been trying hard to develop and reform the HE system, satisfying the need of people through policies” (SC/I3/167-168). It seems that the Omani government has been responding to people’s perceived needs and conditioning its policies to suit this social pressure. A college dean commented on this social pressure and gave some examples. The dean stated that,

Societal pressure can’t be avoided. The society sometimes makes certain institutions to take decisions or establish institutions to satisfy their needs. You can refer that to establishing college of education and the argument about it. They argue that their daughters should be there. (I/I9/196-199)

To illustrate, the dean gave the example of establishing a college of education in the Sultanate at the time of the beginning of the HE system. The people wanted young women to be in these colleges as teaching jobs were thought to be most suitable for them. The Omani government opened six colleges of education to satisfy the needs of development and these perceived needs of the people. But then subsequently, these colleges were closed and reopened as applied science colleges. Recently, in May 2015, the Education Council again issued a policy decision of transforming one of the six Applied Science Colleges (Rustaq College) to a college of education again, covering the current needs for and of school teachers. It is clear how such social pressure has driven the Omani government to make changes to its policies. The State Council Chairman also pointed to such cultural issues, stating that “all Omani people want HE and the graduates want jobs in the government or big companies” (M/I2/280-281).

Clearly, there is social pressure on the government and its policies, with all young people looking for HE and seeking highly-paid jobs in the governmental sector or with the big companies. I believe such pressure is created from HE being offered free of charge to some Omanis (high achievers in grade 12). Like other services in the country that are provided free, Omani youth think it is a right for everyone to get HE. It is a question of equity in cultures when a service is provided free of charge for some but not all. And of course there is then the related issue of quality as Oman moves very rapidly to mass HE provision.

8.2.4. **The admissions policy**

With regards to choosing areas of study, it is very important here also to consider the admissions policy and how specializations are chosen for students. To some extent, interview data showed that
specializations and areas of study were decided for some Omani students because of the current HE admission policy criteria. Thus, some interviewees argued that such admission policy had affected the entire HE system and all its policies and led to some practices and issues within HEIs. In developed nations as well as in some developing nations, the situation is totally different in regard to how specializations are chosen by students.

In 2006, Oman created a centre to admit students to all public and private HEIs. The centre is called the ‘HE Admission Centre (HEAC)’, established by the Royal Decree No. 104/2005. As illustrated in the Royal Decree, the Centre is affiliated to the Ministry of HE with the purpose of coordinating and regulating the procedures of admitting students who completed the general education diploma (grade 12) for entry to HEIs. Article 1 of the Royal Decree suggests that students are admitted to HEIs according to three standards; their wishes, marks obtained in the general education diploma and the admission conditions specified by HEIs (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2005). The HEAC utilises an electronic system that allows students to apply to all HEIs at one time from anywhere in the world using the internet. Each student has to select up to 40 choices of programs and rank those choices according to his/her preferences (HEAC, 2015). Based on academic merit and the available seats for each program, the electronic system of the HEAC ranks the students in order. According to HEAC (2015, p.7),

The applicant with the highest “score” or grades will automatically be placed (by the system) at the top of the list followed by the one with the second highest score and so on. Applicants who are eligible to apply for a specific program are ranked according to their competitive scores from the highest to the lowest. This list is called “Order of Academic Merit”. In other words, admission offers will be made to a (limited) number of applicants who are on the top of this list for the program based on the allocated number of seats per code (subject area).

This indicates that many students do not get enrolled in their study area of interest. For example, a student may register his or her interest in the first three choices, but he or she may get what comes after these three choices. It is very likely that students are admitted to areas of study that they have no interest in. Commenting on the admission policy before and after 2006, a general director stated that “the Omani HE admission policy has not changed much in terms of its main criterion, which has been academic merit” (GD/I6/167-168). The general director argued that “yes, it is now much easier and comfortable for students to submit their application electronically, but still not fair for them to get specializations that they are not wishing to undertake” (GD/I6/169-170).

An undersecretary expressed his view on the admissions policy and its impact on the HE policy by stating that,

I think that one fundamental challenge facing the HEIs is that there is another agency deciding for students what they should study. We have on one side the students’ request and what they prefer to study. On the other side, we have the priority and the demand of the economy of the government and what they want students to study. But I think that it is time to come to a middle
ground between the two sides. The issue is that we have students who are really interested in
some majors but they do not get them. Thus, you find students attending HE only for the degree
and not to stay home. (U/I9/289-297)

It is clear from the quotation above that the Omani government plays a role in deciding what majors
and specializations students have to choose from (see Brandenburg, 2012). This is to confirm that,
beside parents’ interest in what their children study, the Omani government also has an interest in
determining the study areas and eventual career directions for students. Indeed, this is a way of the
Omani government attempting to do human resource planning. It seems that the majority of
students do not get places in courses they are interested in studying. As interviewees believed, the
current admissions policy, which is based on academic merit and limited to a specific number of
seats for each program, is affecting students, HEIs and, thus, HE policies. In short, three
interviewees mentioned the following impacts:

- Some students may fail to finish their studies and end up dropping out. I argue that this issue
  impacts the HEIs and their policy as well as the overall Omani HE policy.
- HEIs may have students requesting to change majors. Here, the government plans to have
certain specializations that serve the state development are affected.
- With students’ failure, dropping out or changing major, HEIs are spending time and money
  on creating career guidance centres and students counselling centres to help students.

From the evidence, this research argues that the current HE admissions policy confronts the overall
HE policy with many challenges and issues. Indeed, such admissions policy may lead students into
undesirable areas of study and thus they may change study areas or even fail and drop out. This
leads to financial wastage, with HEIs trying to find solutions to these issues caused by the
admissions policy.

8.2.5. The Omani economy

There is no doubt that the Omani economy has played a role in the development of the Omani HE
system over the last three decades. This is not unusual where a system is totally funded by the
national government, which itself relies mainly on oil revenues to sustain development. Indeed,
most of the study interviewees ranked the economy as one of the most significant and influential
factors impacting HE policies and keeping the Omani HE system running. An undersecretary
mentioned that “our HE policies are shaped by the economy as all our state HEIs are financed 100%
by the government” (U/I4/152-153). Through this section, I argue that several HE policies (funding,
access, privatization, research, quality etc.) are made giving careful consideration to the Omani
economy and its changing trends.
Like other Arab Gulf countries, Oman is an oil dependent country where both oil and gas are the backbone of the economy. Since 1970, the Omani government has been using oil revenues to feed growth and development in the state. According to the NCSI (2015), oil and gas contributed 86.1% of total government revenue in 2013. The average daily production of oil was 942,000 barrels in 2013 (NCSI, 2015). Yet, judged by Middle Eastern standards, Oman is considered as a middle-income state with modest oil production (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014). Furthermore, the Omani oil reserves were projected by the government to deplete in the coming decade; that is, Oman has quickly disappearing reserves (Al-Barwani et al., 2009; Chapman et al., 2009; Council for HE, 2004; Gonzalez et al., 2008; the Ministry of National Economy, 1999). According to Gonzalez et al., (2008), “Oman is dealing with a less than certain economic future because its oil reserves—its major source of revenue since oil was discovered here in 1964—are quickly being depleted” (p.147). Set against that threat, the Omani government launched the Vision of Oman Economy ‘Oman 2020’ with the main purpose of diversifying the economy and creating alternative sources such as tourism, industry, agriculture and global transport. At the same time, the Government has also recognized the role of the private sector, supporting it and promoting foreign investment. All these policies have been introduced with the hope of decreasing the over-reliance on oil revenues for government expenditure on development.

It is quite clear that the above mentioned economic context has serious implications for Omani HE policy into the future, particularly when set against expansion and public expectations of ‘free’ provision. The study interviewees were concerned about the sustainability of such a huge HE system that has expanded rapidly in just less than two decades. A member of the State Council believed that “the Omani government has to think of ways to sustain the growth of its HE system; our economy cannot be trusted” (SC/I2/234-235). This statement concurs with Chapman et al.’s (2009) question about the ability of the Omani government to keep paying generously for the HE system into the future. According to Chapman et al. (2009), the financing policy of the Omani HE system is confronted with three issues and challenges: (1) the commitment of the Omani government to increase the participation rate in HE; (2) the increasing number of grade 12 students seeking HE opportunities; and (3) the threats of decline of both oil reserves and revenues. It is argued that these three challenges have recently pressurized the government to think of restructuring its HE system and to usher in some new reforms to its policy. Indeed, I would argue this is perhaps the most pressing issue facing Omani HE.

The State Council Chairman affirmed that this financial challenge facing the HE system was crucial, stating that “the Omani government is aware of this issue that cannot be ignored anymore” (M/I2/246-247). In his interview, the Chairman pointed to ongoing national committees formed by
the Education Council to restructure the system and bring new policies of hope to sustain the system. Similarly, other interviewees also commented on the government initiatives to address the economic context, referring to the introduction of the privatization policy of the HE system. A general director noted that “the government has responded to the economic challenge and the motivated expansion policy by promoting and encouraging the private sector to share the burden of the HE system” (GD/14/269-270). In agreement with this argument, several studies have found that rationale behind legalizing private HE in 1995 was due to the financial situation and great demand for HE (Al Harthy, 2011; Al-Lamki, 2006; Ameen et al. 2010; Chapman et al. 2009). This response, of course, also raises quality issues.

As seen above, the national HE policy is impacted heavily by the economy, shaping its reforms and development. The study also asserts that the HE policy is not only impacted by economic trends and changes, but also accompanied by the commitment of the Omani government to increase participation of Omani youth and the larger numbers of school graduates seeking HE. These national factors are overlapping and taken together shape admissions and overall HE policy. In short, this study raises these questions with regard to the economic context: Are we going to see new mechanisms for financing the system? Is the government going to introduce student loan schemes to share the cost? Is the cost going to be shared with the private sector? Such questions are rapidly coming to the fore with the oil price dropping down strikingly in 2015 to $40 USD per barrel from $105 USD on average in 2013 (NCIS, 2015). The buoyancy of the Omani economy relying heavily on oil depends on the international price of oil. It is quite clear then that the Omani HE policy here is affected by the global context. This is a clear example where the national context cannot be detached from the global context. Furthermore, Oman recognises the pressing need to diversify its economy, given the finite nature of oil and gas reserves, and perhaps recognises the need for alternative funding of the mass HE system in the longer term. These are important matters for Omani HE.

8.2.6. The labour market

The context of the Omani labour market cannot be analysed without considering the economy. These two contexts have a recursive influence upon each other. Saying that, this study also found that the Omani HE policy was situated in the tension between the economy and the labour market; HE is affected by both and at the same time also impacts on them. All interviewed policy-makers and study documents indicated that the Oman HE system is responsible for developing human resources and upgrading the skills of Omanis so that the economy might be diversified and so that the diversified economy has an appropriately skilled workforce. This is the taken for granted human capital framing of Omani HE and also a globalised educational policy discourse (Rizvi & Lingard,
There is thus a need to paint a picture of the labour market in Oman and its relationship with the HE policy.

It is important to mention that Oman has been relying aggressively on expatriate workers to help in its development since the renaissance, which has been characterised by noticeable economic development. By the end of 2014, there were 1,570,132 expatriate employees in the Omani private sector, serving the expansion and the development of the Omani economy (NCIS, 2015). This number is huge compared with the total Omani population (2,310,685). The Minister of HE explained that “it was necessary for Oman to have non-Omani workers when the national labours were not ready to participate” (M/I1/234-235). Yet, some study interviewees pointed out that the Omani government has recognized the challenges facing the state with the growth in numbers of expatriates in the labour market. As a result, the ‘Omanisation policy’ was introduced at the end of 1980s and targeted in The Vision for Oman’s Economy: Oman 2020; a policy that is aimed to substitute expatriate workers with Omani nationals, in order to shrink the state’s overreliance on foreign labour. Swailes et al. (2012) regard Omanisation as a localization strategy that strives to replace foreign workers with skilled and qualified local Omani labour. Overall, despite the government’s initiative, Al-Barwani et al. (2009) argued that the Omanisation policy was faced with the situation of a lack of Omanis equipped with knowledge and skills to replace the expatriates.

The above mentioned labour market context, along with economic diversification strategies, necessitates that the Omani HE system play a role by creating polices that help to achieve the state’s localization target. The duty of the HE system is then to produce national, qualified, skilled workers who can contribute to current economic development in the Sultanate. The Minister of HE in interview said that “our HE policies have to match the needs of the market” (M/I1/306-307). This is an indication of how the labour market frames HE policy; influencing the Omani government to take certain paths with its HE system. Gonzalez et al. (2008) confirmed that the Omani HE system has gone through several changes and reforms to accommodate the rising needs of the labour market.

The interviewees pointed to some recent initiatives by the government trying to match the HE system production of graduates with the requirements of the labour market. For example, an undersecretary noted that “there are currently several national projects led by SQU, the Ministry of HE, the Diwan of Royal Court and the Ministry of Manpower that are aimed to bring solutions to the mismatch between the labour market and the HE system” (U/I5/196-197). It seems that the Omani government, through its bodies responsible for the HE system, has recognized the mismatch and the still large numbers of expatriate workers.
Furthermore, the study interviews revealed that the Omani HE policy has gone through reforms since the 1990s that have been framed by perceived labour market needs. For instance, the State Council Chairman confirmed that “the policy of transferring the six Colleges of Education to Applied Science Colleges was a response to the labour market and the new advancements in the Omani economy” (M/I2/276-277). In respect of this policy, in 2007 the Omani government closed the Colleges of Education, as it was thought that there was no more demand for school teachers in Oman when large numbers of them were searching for jobs. Therefore, with the diversification of the economic vision and the new requirements of the job market, the government decided to replace these education colleges with Applied Science Colleges, offering a variety of programs such as international business administration, information technology, communication studies and design. Each of these programs then is divided into many specializations. It is believed that these specializations will feed the needs of the labour market that serve the diversified economy of the Sultanate.

This was not only the case with the Applied Science Colleges, but almost with all public and private colleges. An undersecretary suggested that their ministry always assesses the needs of the labour market and based on that, some programs are closed, new programs are opened and sometimes programs are updated (U/I2/178-179). At SQU, the interviewed policy-makers also confirmed the presence of this policy of closing and opening programs, reflecting the changing job market. Additionally, while previously only offering diploma programs, interviewees from the Ministry of Manpower mentioned that the College of Technology started graduating students with bachelor degrees to cover the shortages of skilled Omani Labour needed in the new economic projects and in the private sectors.

Yet, as raised by some of the study interviewees (M/I2; GD/I2, I3, I4; SC/I1; I/I2, 3, 4,6), the private sector employers started doubting the quality of some of these private HEIs and, therefore, preferred to hire expatriates. An interviewee from the Manpower Ministry pointed out that the private sector was dissatisfied with the graduates’ skills. This again has resulted in unemployment amongst some Omani nationals who hold HE qualifications. A member of the Education Council said that this issue “has led the Omani government to start quality assurance policies” (EC/I2/312). In 2001, the Oman Accreditation Council was established to look after quality in both public and private HEIs. According to Carroll et al. (2009), the establishment of the Accreditation Council was a clear message to the HE system about the importance of institutional and program quality. In 2010, the Oman Accreditation Council was upgraded to an authority under the Education Council, now called the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA). By accrediting programs and seeking to ensure quality, the OAAA is believed to “enable Omani graduates to compete in the job
market and to contribute effectively to the sustainable development of the country” (OAAA, n.d.). This statement by OAAA indicates that quality assurance policies are a result of labour market issues.

These examples of reforms and policies have responded to the demands of the Omani labour market. In other words, this study argues that the context of the Omani labour market has given rise to certain HE policies and reforms in the Sultanate. This view is supported by several studies (see Al-Barwani et al., 2009; Ameen et al., 2010; Chapman et al., 2009; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Gonzalez et al., 2008), indicating that the Omani HE system recently has experienced several changes and reforms to its structure, programs and curriculum with the purpose of focusing on and developing national human capital for its labour market demands and also on ensuring quality. Yet, there is evidence to suggest that labour market planning is a notoriously inaccurate ‘science’, but nonetheless common in state-centric polities. Overall, it is argued here that the Omani HE policies are shaped and framed profoundly by the labour market and its perceived current and future needs. However, a question arises regarding whether future labour market planning possible and/or accurate? How often do we need to change in trying to get this match right? There are deeper issues here about what is called labour market planning. This also raises issues of generic as opposed to specialist skills, but these are matters beyond the scope of this study.

8.3. Globalisation and HE in Oman

It has been argued above and demonstrated in the previous two chapters that that the Omani HE system is ‘controlled’ by the Omani Government, exhibiting a clear example of Neave and van Vught’s (1994) ‘state control’ model. Brandenburg (2013) argues that the Omani government deals with HE as “a public commodity” (p. 190). However, both of these arguments do not in any way mean that the Omani HE policy is merely produced within the authority of the Omani government. On the contrary, the study interviews and documents have indicated and suggested that the Omani HE policy and policy-making have also been affected seriously by regional and global contexts. Since the Omani HE system began officially in 1986, the policy architecture and policy content have been changing dynamically and dramatically, responding to various national, regional and global forces and mixtures of these pressures.

With regard to the above argument, the Minister of HE mentioned that “our HE system has been undergoing reforms and changes, responding to national needs and global trends” (M/II/198-200). To elaborate, the HE Minister mentioned the expansion of the system, privatization and quality concerns, as well as how such trends have been located within the national, regional and global contexts. Furthermore, the State Council Chairman pointed out that “if we want to compete, we
cannot just formulate our HE policies by only considering our national settings; we are part of the whole world” (M/I2/270-271). It seems that the Omani HE policy is not only affected by local and national affairs, but there are pressures amongst policy makers to include regional and the broader global contexts and related policy ideas. The literature supports this argument by implying that nowadays the development of successful HE policies demands not only consideration of national affairs, but also a consideration of the wider global political economy and its policy effects (Dale, 1999; 2000; 2005). Marginson, Kaur and Sawir (2011, p.5) argue that “HE is at one and the same time global, national and local”, while Marginson et al. (2011) argue that universities are in essence rooted in national settings, yet they are linked to a wider global field of knowledge. Marginson (2006, p. 1) argues that “HE is now situated in an open information environment in which national borders are routinely crossed and identities are continually made and self-made in encounters with diverse others”.

Almost all interviewees from the ministerial and institutional levels spoke directly or indirectly about the above three mentioned contexts. Like the top level elites in this study (e.g., ministers), those interviewees from the ministries and HEIs believed that the Omani HE system could not compete internationally if only national concerns were considered. For instance, a HEI president compared the current stage with the early years when the institution was established. The HEI president mentioned that,

When this institution started, policies were catered to serve the Sultanate’s development without much thinking of the external contexts. Nowadays, besides the national needs and changes, there is no single policy that does not look at international trends and include them. (I/I4/270-272)

Overall, it almost goes without saying that the policy-makers from the different levels of the policy-making architecture in the Omani HE system have recognized the necessity to reflect on the national, regional and global contexts in making Omani HE polices.

Some of the selected policy documents confirm that the national HE policies and reforms are tailored to respond to national and international changes and orientations. There was almost no policy document that did not take into consideration directly or indirectly international concerns in addition to the national requirements and directions. Looking at SQU Strategic Plan 2009-2013 as an example, it was found that three words—‘national’, ‘regional’ and ‘international’—were used frequently (what Fairclough (2001) calls ‘overwording’), suggesting that the three contexts were examined, considered and dealt with when developing the strategic plan. In its vision, the SQU Strategic Plan clearly stated that “SQU aspires to become one of the three best universities in the region by the year 2013 and to achieve an international reputation that is a source of Omani pride” (SQU, 2009, p. 13). With regards to the Strategic Plan objectives, the three contexts were targeted generally with a strong emphasis on cultural and Islamic heritage, and promotion of academic links.
and exchange of expertise with universities and academic institutions overseas and within the GCC countries. Overall, it is an indication that there is thus discursive policy recognition of other contexts (regional and global) framing, and needing to be responded to, by HE policy in Oman. This is an element of global comparisons and metrics linked to a one world science system (see Marginson, forthcoming 2016).

In the above discussion, I have presented the argument and evidence that the Omani HE policy and policy-making have been affected not only by national environments, but also regional and global contexts. Indeed, the regional and global impacts on the Omani HE policy are driven by globalisation processes. Knight (2013) supports this argument, stating that “HE has shifted to give greater predominance to regional and international level HE policies and strategies” as a response to globalisation (p. 374).

The next two sub-sections will elaborate on the regional and global issues impacting the Omani HE policy. Again, it is important to note that there is no clear cut way to draw a firm distinction between global and regional forces.

8.3.1. The Regional Context

Chapter two of this study introduced Oman’s strategic location in the region. Oman is located in the Arabian Peninsula, bordering with the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Most importantly, Oman inhabits a strategic location at the entrance of the Arabian Gulf, sharing control of the Hormuz Strait with Iran. Oman is geo-politically situated in four different regions, which are the Arab Gulf states, the broader Arab states, the Middle East and Asia. This location is clearly illustrated in Figure 8.1, situating Oman within the map of the region.
Given Oman’s geographical location, the study interviewees were asked about the impact of regional context on Omani HE policy. Interestingly, the interviewees revealed that Oman was affected a great deal by the neighboring Arab Gulf region, but not by other regions. Previous studies have confirmed the impact of Arab Gulf States on each other’s HE policies, arguing that globalisation processes have been the motive for such impact (Davidson & Smith, 2008; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010). With regard to the broader Arab states, Middle East, and Asia regions, only two interviewees suggested that these regions contributed to the Omani HE system by providing human capital in the form of lecturers in the HEIs. The majority of the interviewees did not mention any impact. According to a member of the Education Council, “although Oman is situated in various broader areas, it is much affected by the Arab Gulf States region”.

Being bordered by some of the world’s most globalised economies in the Arab Gulf, the study argues that the development of the HE systems in the Gulf countries and new trends in policy have had profound effects on Omani HE policies. As there was no evidence found in the study
documents regarding the broader regional context, nor in the interviewees’ statements, the chapter only focuses on the effects of the Arab Gulf region. Of course, this is not to deny any possible impact of the broader regional context of Oman on its HE policies.

8.3.1.1. How are Omani HE policies impacted by the Gulf region?

The study interviewees described the impact of the Arab Gulf region on the Omani HE policies as an indirect and weak force shaping the HE policies of all the states in the region. This view among the interviewees was due to the inactive and unsatisfactory role played by the Cooperation Council for Arab States of the Gulf (known as the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC)) in the HE policies of the region’s states. It is very important to mention here, as outlined in Chapter two, that the GCC is a regional cooperation council of six Arab Gulf states (Oman, Saudi, Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait), excluding Iraq and Yemen. This Council was established in 1981 to promote integration, coordination and inter-connection between its members. One of its main objectives is to “formulate similar regulations in various fields including the following: economic, financial affairs, commerce, customs, communications, education and culture” (GCC, n.d). The GCC is entrusted to play a great role in the education policies of its members. In other words, the GCC is supposed to be the regional organization supporting the development of HE systems and their policies in the region. Yet, the study interviewees confirmed that this role was not significant, when compared with other intergovernmental and supranational organizations in other parts of the world such as the European Union and Asia-Pacific Region.

For instance, a State Council member believed that “with the GCC, unfortunately we don’t have a body that is powerful like the European Union; this Council aimed only for cooperation and advice” (SC/I3/372-374). Similarly, a number of the study interviewees showed a kind of dissatisfaction about the role of the GCC in driving the HE policies of the region toward quality and efficiency. A member of the Education Council pointed out that,

The GCC has not functioned well. A good example is the accreditation body. Long time ago, there were a lot of talks about having a regional body for quality assurance and accreditation. They have been talking about creating this body but it didn’t happen. They did meetings. That is why we have no alternative rather than going out to get accreditation from other international bodies outside the region. Our own regional body doesn’t function. This body could have produce standards that the Gulf HEIs should obey them. (EC/I2/364-371)

This interviewee was skeptical about the functioning of the GCC in affecting the HE policies of its member states effectively. His argument was that the GCC had failed to establish an authority for the region that could take care of accrediting and quality assurance of the member states’ HEIs. Indeed, this is quite clear as each country has its own quality assurance and accreditation body, with each of them following different standards borrowed from the West. This view is supported by al-
Hamoud (2008), who raises the concern of not having a regional quality assurance agency in the GCC countries. Based on her research and expertise, al-Hamoud proposes the establishment of an agency that would help raise the quality of both the public and private HEIs in the region.

Although the Omani policy makers were not satisfied with the role of the GCC, this study found that Omani HE policy was affected by the GCC in three ways, which were attributed to the shared background of the six states, as well the indirect role played by the GCC. Such impact of the GCC on HE policy can be summarized as occurring through the following: policy cooperation, policy copying/learning and competition. I argue here that the Gulf regional context has brought a degree of convergence between HE policies across GCC states through policy learning and borrowing, as well as creating regional competition between its states. Yet, it can be argued that the impact of the GCC on the HE policies of its states is not comparable to the role played by other regional and supranational organizations elsewhere in the world, as with the impact of the Bologna process for HEIs in the EU, for example.

8.3.1.2. Cooperation

As a regional organization, the GCC is, as its name implies, a cooperation body between the six Arab Gulf states. The interviewees confirmed that this Council has played a role in terms of creating a culture of collaboration and teamwork between the agencies of the region. It was suggested that there were meetings between HE policy makers (ministers, undersecretaries, HEIs rectors) on a regular basis to discuss new trends and issues affecting HE in the Gulf. With regard to these meetings, the Minster of HE stated that,

I think that our HE policy is not affected directly. The GCC is helpful in a sense. For example, we have a meeting with ministers of HE in the region. We do participate but I call it as eye opener for us to see what is going on in the region and build some cooperation relationships. (M/I1/386-388)

A general director similarly reported that,

We have official meeting, seminars, conferences, symposium that Omani policy makers attend. There is not much affecting us. We discuss issues related to HE. When they discuss, there are guidelines which affect us in a positive way. They put their recommendation. At the end, there are recommendations and guidelines in which we have the power to do it or not. (GD/I1/420-425)

The above extracts illustrate that policy makers attend cooperation meetings and decide on policy, but these policies are not necessarily enforced in the Omani HE system. These cooperation meetings do not directly frame national Omani HE policy. Again, this can be contrasted with the situation of the Bologna process in the EU. However, these meetings do provide a platform for the GCC members to exchange and discuss ideas and knowledge regarding some HE issues in the Gulf. While there is some cooperation, the general director in the above quotation stressed the need for overarching HE policies in the region.
A member of the Education Council also pointed to the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS) as a promotor of cooperation between the states in terms of HE policies. The member declared that,

The Gulf Education Bureau has its own policy but doesn’t interfere directly in your own policy. There is no enforcement. They make certain proposals and these proposals are discussed in the Ministerial meeting, approving it but they don’t enforce them to implement it. It is optional. It is a kind of collaboration. (EC/I3/315/317)

The ABEGS is considered a regional, educational organization within the GCC. It “seeks to support cooperation, coordination and integration between its Member States, providing help and consultation, and conveying its distinct educational practices and experiences to meet the needs of the knowledge society and to develop citizenship values in its Member States” (ABEGS, n.d.). It is based in Riyadh (the capital city of Saudi) and was established in 1981. Given the mission of the ABEGS, the study interviewees were also not satisfied with the role it played in the region. Stressing the need for more active regional efforts, the interviewees hoped that this organization would eventually contribute to strengthening the HE systems of the Gulf States. André Mazawi (2008) demonstrates that the current shape and role played of regional organizations (GCC and its ABEGS) in the HE of their members is of high concern. In relation to these Gulf agencies, Mazawi observes that there is a lack of regional HE policy, arguing that,

Regional educational agencies do not enjoy a binding role at this time, and a concerted and pro-active regional policy on HE remains largely lacking. Existing policies and agreements are only loosely-coupled with GCC regional dynamics and labour market. (Mazawi, 2008, p.68)

What can be summarised from the study interviews and documents is that the Omani HE policies do respond to the overall policies of the GCC and the ABEGS, by trying to work according to the proposals, recommendations and agreements of these organizations. However, such initiatives are seen as coordination and learning from each other, rather than as the enforcement of binding policy decisions in Omani HE. The relationships are loosely coupled, as Mazawi (2008) suggests. At the same time, interviewees also suggested that they wanted more from these regional bodies in terms of quality assurance and quality issues. Mazawi (2008) confirms that the GCC has failed to play a significant role in regional HE. In summary, it seems that the size of the GCC and the effectiveness of its role are not substantial when compared with the desired situation by the Omani policy-makers. It should also be noted that Oman is cautiously wary of the potential domination of the GCC by Saudi Arabia.

8.3.1.3. **Policy learning and copying**

Beside cooperation, the study interviewees indicated that the regional impact could be understood as functioning through policy learning and copying. An undersecretary expressed his opinion about the impact of the Arab Gulf region on Omani HE policies in the following way,
I think that since we are part of six countries that share the same background, the same culture and the same religion and even sometimes the same attitude, we are affected by each other indirectly. Usually people in each of these countries compare themselves to each other. So, I am sure the culture and the practices and policies of the neighbouring countries affect our policy. I believe that each country learns something from the others and sometimes do copy. (U/I6/315-321)

A general director similarly stated that “we do learn, we do consider, we do look at HE policies in the region but we don’t consider them as obligatory to follow” (GD/I6/276-278). Learning from each other was frequently described in the interviews, suggesting an indirect way of impacting each other’s policies. In such learning, interviewees believed that it is beneficial to learn about the neighbours’ best practices and policies in the area of HE. Narrating his experience, a HEI rector mentioned that,

We do attend for example annual conferences in the GCC region. We learn about each other’s best practices. We modify accordingly. We also visit universities. We visited some universities in Qatar and Saudi to learn about their experiences in quality assurance. Based, on that, we make changes to our policies. (I/I6/345-348)

The above extracts affirm that HE policies in the Arab Gulf region take some account of what is happening in other states, with each affecting the others. This is not unusual in a region that has, to some extent, a similar background (culture, language, religion, wealth, demography, labour market, etc.). Arguably, such similar backgrounds have led these countries to develop similar HE policies by learning and copying from each other. This is a clear example of convergence of HE policies, strategies and reforms in the GCC states, where policies are transferred from one state to another. Donn and Al Manthri (2010) argue that GCC states have responded in a similar way to globalisation, resulting in similarities of HE policies across the region. Their argument suggests a broader impact of the context of globalisation. Accordingly, it can be argued that there is a significant degree of HE policy convergence in the region ‘driven’ by globalisation. Examples of such policy learning and copying are massification of access, privatization of HE, creating accreditation and affiliation policies, and focusing on quality. Indeed, it is quite clear that the GCC states have borrowed some of these policies from the West and global trends in HE (Marginson, forthcoming 2016). Most importantly for this study is that Omani HE policies have been learned, borrowed and copied from the HE policies of its neighbours.

8.3.1.4. Competition

There is no doubt that states in one region are most likely to have competitive relationships in various areas and fields. This was confirmed by the interviewees and documents with regards to HE policies in the region. The interviewed policy makers stressed that one of the impacts of the Gulf region on the Omani HE system was the heavy competition between the members, each trying to make its HE more competitive and appealing by importing contemporary global reforms and
policies. The impact of this competition comes in various guises, such as efforts to improve the quality of HE, introducing international programs and HEIs, providing the best salary packages (mobility of staff) and attaining the best global ranking in the region. The State Council Chairperson admitted that,

In the region, we have severe competition. So Oman should play a role. Our HEIs can do it and they have proved it recently. We are different from other neighbours because of our history, strategic location and our historical role. (M/I2/361363)

Furthermore, a college dean spoke about the brain drain of lecturing staff and how good salaries in some neighbouring countries affected Omani HE recruitment in HEIs. He stated that,

We face problems to get good staff for the HE. We are paying the lowest salaries in the region. The best go to Dubai and Qatar. Sometimes, we recruit people and then they go to Dubai. We have high turnover of the staff. It is what they call it brain drain. (I/I4/389-392)

Al Shmeli (2009) believes that Oman, with the lowest HE salary scales in the GCC countries, is facing the challenge of attracting highly qualified and credentialed academic staff. Recruiting academics in the Omani HE system, Al Shmeli argues, “is a highly competitive business and a serious challenge for the Sultanate” (p. 21). With the Omani HE system relying heavily on expatriates, academic recruitment policy and salary packages have a serious impact on the Omani HE policy and ultimately the performance of its HE system. To be competitive and highly-ranked in the region, the Omani HE system needs to find ways of attracting international staff in light of the weak participation to date of Omanis in academic positions in HEIs. The large numbers of government scholarships for Omanis to do research higher degrees abroad must be seen in this light as long term capacity building for Omani HE.

Another HEI rector pointed to the attractiveness of HEIs in the region for Omani students, as well as for the children of expatriates in Oman. This has impact on the Omani HE policy, pushing for more quality programs. The rector explained such competition by saying that,

Dubai has established a great HE. There are hundreds of institutions (local and international) working there, providing more competitive programs. They are doing wonderful. We have competition. There are students leaving Oman daily to go and study in Dubai. We are affected by what is going in Dubai. (I/I2/271-273)

It seems from the above quotations that the GCC states have strong competition that creates pressure on their HE policies and institutions. As the interviewees indicated, Omani HE policy is impacted seriously by competition with HE systems in the region. To survive, Omani HE must introduce policies that can keep its HE system competitive with those in the region. There is brain drain of staff, as well as students leaving to the neighbouring nations to undertake their studies in more competitive HEIs. As argued by one of the policy makers, this state of staff and student movement creates instability in the Omani HE system. Moreover, global rankings have deepened
this HE competition between the Gulf States. Like its neighbours, Oman is trying to raise its position in university rankings, which implies rethinking its HE policy, as well as considering what is happening in HEIs in the Gulf region. This will also require a greater focus on research in Oman’s HEIs. Again here, the trend towards rankings of HEIs is a global issue, which will be discussed in the following section.

8.3.2. The Global Context

It was mentioned above that the interviewees and documents had confirmed the impact of the broader global context in Omani HE policy. The aim of this section is to present how the Omani HE policy has been affected by the globalisation phenomenon and the responses of the Omani government. As conceptualized in Chapter four of this study (the theoretical framework), HE systems worldwide must now be considered as part of the global context with globalisation processes helping to reshape their policies and create similar practices and discourses within many nation-states. What are some of these visible global practices and discourses in the Omani HE system, as observed by the study interviewees and suggested by the study documents?

8.3.2.1. Global policy actors

Chapter six and seven of this study have shown how the Omani Government steers and controls the HE system through a ‘state control’ model that has been derived from the political system of the Sultanate. However, the HE literature demonstrates that HE policy is not strictly in the hands of nation-states; to some extent global actors are driving and shaping education policy agendas, as well as sharing the process of policy-making. HE has become a key issue for multilateral organisations that advocate and promote policies such as quality, access and equity for national HE systems. According to Bassett and Maldonado-Maldonado (2009, p. x), “all national systems are subject to global pressures with international organizations impacting directly upon the trajectory of policy in many countries”. The study found that Omani HE policy was also affected by global actors such as UNESCO and the World Trade Organization (WT). Donn and Al Manthri (2013) confirmed the impact of such key global players on the education systems of the Gulf States, “transforming their education systems from historical and indigenous to current and global” (p.8).

This finding was affirmed by the study interviewees and documents, confirming the impact of these multilateral organizations on Omani HE policy. A member of the Education Council mentioned that,

Since the Renaissance (1970), the Omani Government has been engaging in international activities, becoming a member of global organizations. This has made Oman to commit itself to international standards and agreements. Talking about HE, our policies are much affected by international organizations such as the WTO and the UNESCO. (EC/I3/379-384)
As with the above statement by the Education Council member, most interviewees pointed out Oman’s membership of international organizations, which had some consequences for the Omani HE system. Oman has been a member of the UN and the World Bank since 1971, as well as of the WTO since 2000. It is evident from the quotation above that the Omani HE system is influenced by international organizations through following the international standards put by these global actors, as well as through signing agreements like the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). If this is the case, how has Omani HE policy been affected by these global actors?

Oman has been immersing itself in the activities of these global actors in all policy areas and sectors. Related to HE, the study interviewees elaborated this engagement by indicating that Oman has been actively participating in almost all events, regular meetings, conferences and activities of these international organizations. The Minister of HE declared that,

To be internationally competitive, we do align our HE policies to the prescriptions and instructions of the international organization. Various policies in our HE system have been enacted to respond to the standards published by the UNESCO and other international organizations. (M/I1/394-397)

To give examples of the standards advocated by international organizations, mention is made here of the access and research policies of the Omani HE system. The interviews showed that the HE access and admission policy in Oman was also reformed to match the criteria of UNESCO. A general director said that “in the education strategy, Oman has aimed to reach the UNESCO standard by increasing the participation of Omani youth, aged between 18 and 24 years, in 2020 to reach 50%” (GD/I2/186-187). Moreover, the 2012 Oman Human Development Report compared the percentage of Oman’s spending on scientific research to the standard set by UNESCO. The report states that,

The UNESCO recommended that developing countries allocate about 1% of its GDP to spend on research and development. The estimated percentage of subsidy offered for scientific research in the Sultanate is approximately 0.17% of total GDP, which is very modest, especially when compared to the average subsidy for research in many other world countries and even in comparison with some countries in the region. (The SCP, 2013, p.120)

It is clear that the Omani authorities link expenditure on research to the UNESCO standard. It is also evident from the figure how far below the UNESCO recommendation the current expenditure on research in Omani HE is currently. This also links to the question of quality HE and the place of research in HE. There are also important comparative figures for these kinds of HE expenditure, internationally and regionally. As No’voa and Yariv-Mashal (2003) argue, comparisons are today central to educational governance and such comparisons are stretched regionally and globally. It is particularly significant for the Omani HE system to target, engage with and implement the standards developed by these powerful international players. This will be important in respect of the quality agenda. There is no doubt that achieving what is prescribed by the international
organizations is important for the Omani HE system, raising its quality, improving its performance and competing regionally and globally.

Additionally, some interviewees pointed to reports that Oman submitted on a regular basis to these international organizations regarding the policies, quality and performance of the Omani HE system. A general director stated that these reports reflected the standards and requirements prescribed by international organizations (GD/I4/236). It is believed that Oman, through such reports to international organizations, is under pressure and competition to meet the global standards and demonstrate its improvement trajectory. While such reports are made annually, they are good checklists to see how much has been achieved by the Omani HE system and what is lacking in relation to other standards, as well as knowing the comparative attainment position and level among other countries. The competition and comparisons with other nations triggered by these reports are drivers towards making new policies, evaluating current ones or maybe rewriting certain policies.

While the interviewees argued that the Omani HE system was not forced to fulfil the international organizations standards in regard to HE, they believed that it was essential to the Omani HE system in such a globally competitive domain. The State Council Chairman made it clear by saying that “compared to other countries, it is not compulsory for Oman to follow these HE standards as Oman has no loans coming from these international organizations” (M/I2/364-365). Thus, in respect of Oman there is no possibility of a funding-compliance trade-off in relation to structural reforms demanded of many developing countries by agencies such as the World Bank. This places the Omani HE system in a unique position amongst developing nations. This is to say that Oman has no forced policies through loans or what is called ‘conditionalities through loans’ (Dale & Robertson, 2002). In general, this study suggests that Omani HE policy has been guided indirectly by the standards set by the multilateral organizations through frequent, international meetings, conferences, publications, declarations and studies. Oman HE policy is thus framed and shaped by the principles and criteria developed by these global actors for the advancement of HE systems globally.

Another way that international organizations play a role in the national policies of states is through agreements (Knight, 2006). The interviewees referred to the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) as the most influential agreement with an impact on Omani HE policy, which Oman had signed in 2002. In particular, the GATS agreement was introduced first in 1994 by the WTO, with the aim of liberalizing and promoting international trade in services. Importantly, GATS considers education sectors of member nations as one of these services to be liberalized and regulated by international trade rules. Robertson et al. (2006) argue that “the WTO, through the
GATS process, has the potential to establish a new set of global rules of the game for the governance of education within national territories, in the process transforming state’s power and therefore the processes of development within and across nation-states” (p.238). In respect of HE, Knight (2006) argues that GATS has significantly encouraged the growth of different modes of cross-border HE. Furthermore, Brandenburg (2012, p. 75) mentions that “liberalization commitments according to GATS will affect HE in terms of privatization and internationalization”.

As a response to GATS, policy documents and interviewees demonstrated that Oman had introduced privatisation of HE, as well as affilication (a form of cross-border HE as will be explained below). Previous studies have signalled the impact of GATS on Omani HE policy. Donn and Issan (2007) observe that Oman, with its commitment to GATS, has undergone reforms and taken crucial advancements with its HE (privatisation and affilication) to cope with market and economic changes globally. Al Harthy (2011) and Brandenburg (2012) also mention that joining GATS has driven Oman towards privatization of HE and cross-border HE.

It was mentioned that meeting the standards of and submitting reports to international organizations does not have direct impact, yet signing agreements such as GATS means Oman has to meet the conditions and regulations set by these agreements. Oman cannot resist opening its borders for HE trade under GATS and thus the signing of such international agreements has real policy impact, including in HE.

8.3.2.2. Cross-border HE

Within HE systems globally, scholars have identified an aspect of HE internationalization referred to as ‘transnational’, ‘off-shore’ or ‘cross-border’ education (see Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2006, 2013). These terms are used interchangeably to convey the meaning that HE in the current global era crosses national borders (Altbach & Knight, 2007). According to Knight (2013, p.171), cross-border HE means “the movement of people, knowledge, programs, providers, policies, ideas, curricula, projects, and services across national or regional jurisdictional borders”. In this study, the documents and the interviews indicated that the Omani HE system was experiencing such a state of globalised HE. This finding concurs with Knight’s (2013) description of three generations of cross-border HE in the GCC states, which are a first generation in which people move to other countries to get HE education; a second generation in which foreign programs and providers move to Gulf states; and a third in which Gulf states attract foreign students, workers, researchers, providers and programs to their nation (education hubs).

The study data confirmed the existence of the first (foreign scholarships) and second (affiliation) generations of cross-border education within the Omani HE system. However, the Omani case has
not yet reached the third generation (education hubs). This can be contrasted with other neighbouring states such as the UAE and Qatar, which have attempted to create HE educational hubs. So, how have these two waves of cross-border HE affected the Omani HE system and policies?

8.3.2.3. Foreign scholarships

In Omani HE, foreign scholarships refer to sending Omani students to study abroad for undergraduate and postgraduate studies. This enables the movement of Omani students to other countries to gain knowledge and experience through studying for a university degree. Tracing its origins, the Omani Government started such scholarships in the early days of modern Oman (after 1970), as there was no HE system nationally. Even nowadays with an expanded HE system, the Omani government is still sending Omani youth to study abroad in greater numbers. The interviewed policy makers believed that foreign scholarship had been very beneficial for Oman’s development by helping graduates to gain knowledge and experience from different parts of the world. It is about ‘brain gain’ investment in the Omani youth, not only in terms of getting degrees, but also learning about other cultures and ways of life. This study argues that supporting students to study in the North and South diversifies Oman’s development, leading to better systems and services.

With regard to the impact on HE, the foreign scholarships have provided the system with highly educated academics (with postgraduate research degrees) serving in the Omani HEIs. As a result, most of the Omanis teaching at these HEIs have been educated abroad through these scholarships. Although some few Omani HEIs have started recently to offer postgraduate degrees, the policy-makers consider it more rewarding and advantageous to have Omani academics study abroad in the best world universities. As mentioned by two HEI rectors, those academics bring new global trends, ideas and experiences of international HEIs to Omani HEIs. It is argued that with many academics trained abroad, Omani HEIs are guaranteed to have diverse expertise. This is a capacity building exercise for the nation.

8.3.2.4. Affiliation

The study found that academic affiliations between Omani HEIs and foreign universities were one of the international goods that were spreading in the Arab Gulf region. Almost all study interviewees identified affiliation as the most significant impact of the interaction between the Omani and regional/global contexts with regard to HE policy. The Omani affiliation experience is a type of cross-border HE. Providing its background, affiliation as a policy in the Omani HE system started with the introduction of the private HEIs, pushing all private universities and colleges in
Oman to be affiliated to an international HEI as a requirement for establishment and licensing. With such affiliation policy, the Oman Government has aimed to expand the HE system, but also to ensure quality, supported by imported programs and curricula from well-recognized international HEIs. Trevor-Roper, Razvi and Goodliffe (2013) argue that the international affiliation policy in the Omani HE system is intended to work as a quality assurance mechanism. Similarly, Wilkinson and Al Hajry, (2007) illustrated that the “links with foreign academic institutions were imposed by the government to ensure quality and to safeguard the interests of students and parents against low-quality programmes of education and unrecognized degrees and qualifications” (p.154).

Looking at the private HEIs operating in Oman, it is noticeable that these HEIs have sending countries (affiliates) from different parts of the world such as Australia, USA, UK, Austria, Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland, Lebanon, India, Egypt, Malaysia and Portugal. To be clear, ‘sending countries’ here refers to where the foreign HE providers are based. Notably, these sending countries in Oman are a mixture of the West and East, yet the affiliate HEIs are regarded as well-established and well-recognized in the specializations of the hosting Omani HEIs. Oman, by drawing various programs and providers from around the globe inside its borders, has been successful in increasing participation of Omani students in well-recognized foreign HEIs. In other words, Omani students, through affiliation, have great opportunities to get access to foreign HE inside Oman. It can be seen that the affiliation policy is helping Omani HE to reach its aims of increasing access to HE and reaching massification, while also trying to ensure quality provision. Knight (2013) argues that cross-border HE is advantageous to, and has great impact on, the hosting country in terms of increasing the number of students who could access foreign HE without leaving their countries. Indeed, this is the case with large numbers of Omanis studying programs and gaining qualifications from foreign countries while inside Omani borders.

Table 8.3 shows these sending countries with their affiliated Omani HEIs. As is clear from the table, some universities and colleges (ex. University of Nizwa) have more than one foreign affiliate, because these HEIs offer different programs in different specializations and thus are targeting the best universities in these disciplinary areas from the around the world.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Omani HEIs</th>
<th>Foreign HEI affiliate/ country</th>
<th>Medium of instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>German University of Technology in Oman</td>
<td>RWTH Aachen University/ Germany</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Nizwa</td>
<td>SQU/Oman; Oregon State University, Wisconsin University/ USA; Liz Berg University, University of Castle/ Germany; University of Porto, University of Al Garve/ Portugal; Aberystwith University, Robert Gordon University, University of Sunderland/ UK; University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland; La Trobe University/ Australia; University of Putra/ Malaysia</td>
<td>English and Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sohar University</td>
<td>The University of Queensland/ Australia</td>
<td>English and Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhofar University</td>
<td>American University of Beirut/ Lebanon</td>
<td>English and Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab Open University</td>
<td>Open University/ UK</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AL’Sharqiyah University</td>
<td>Oklahoma State university, Texas Tech University/ USA</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Buraimi</td>
<td>Vienna University of Technology, Campus University of Vienna, The IMC University of Applied Sciences Krems/ Austria; University of Bradford/ UK</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majan College</td>
<td>University of Glasgow, University of Bedfordshire, University of Leeds/ UK</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caledonian College of Engineering</td>
<td>Glasgow Caledonian University/ UK; University Vellore Institute of Technology/ India</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East College</td>
<td>Coventry University/ UK</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern College of Business and Science</td>
<td>University of Missouri, St Louis, Franklin University/ USA</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAZOON College</td>
<td>Missouri University of Science and Technology/ USA</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Zahra College</td>
<td>Al Ahliyya Amman University/ Jordan</td>
<td>English and Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waljat College</td>
<td>Birla Institute of Technology/ India</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman Dental College</td>
<td>AB Shetty Memorial Institute of Dental Sciences/ India</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific College of Design</td>
<td>Lebanese American University/ Lebanon; Arab Community College/ Jordan</td>
<td>English and Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman Medical College</td>
<td>The University of West Virginia/ USA</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman College of Management and Technology</td>
<td>Yarmuk University/ Jordan</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscat College</td>
<td>University of Stirling, The Scottish Qualification Authority/ UK</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Drawing on Bashir (2007) and Knight (2006), Trevor-Roper et al. (2013) outline various modes of delivery of foreign HE in Oman through affiliation agreements signed by the Omani HEIs. These main modes can be summarized in the following way (see Trevor-Roper et al., 2013, p. 4-6):

- **Branch Campuses**: Foreign institution establishes a subsidiary, jointly with an Omani provider, and delivery is entirely by the foreign university, leading to a degree from Oman. There is only one Omani HEI with that model, which is The Open Arab University- Oman Branch.

- **Double/Joint Degree**: Omani students pursue a program jointly offered by institutions in two countries. The qualification(s) can be either a degree that is jointly awarded or two separate degrees awarded by each partner institution.

- **Twinning (localised)**: a variation on the twinning model with the part delivered in Oman developed for the local context and validated by the affiliate with articulation to the foreign institution program; the degree is awarded by the affiliate.

- **Franchised Program**: learning programs designed by the foreign provider (franchiser) and delivered in Omani HEIs (franchisee). The Omani students receive the qualification of the franchiser institution.

These forms of cross-border HE have allowed an additional benefit to the Omani HE system with curriculum, staff and program movement from the sending countries to Oman in order to offer, to some extent, similar HE experiences in the affiliate HEI. All of these affiliation modes are found to be collaborative arrangements, rather than international HEIs autonomously managing campuses and branches inside the Omani borders. According to Brandenburg (2012, p.128), “by establishing
comprehensive commitments to GATS, the Omani government actively promotes trade in educational services – but primarily on the basis of collaborative arrangements”. Indeed, the affiliation policy in the Omani HE system has made a condition that there must be an Omani investor involved in the affiliation agreements: “Foreign providers cannot enter Oman’s (subsidized) education market without a local partner” (Brandenburg, 2012, p. 128). Compared to other Gulf States, Knight (2013) considers the Omani HE system experience in affiliation to be a different model, because Oman does not host any foreign HE branch without an Omani investor. It is not surprising, therefore, that Oman has been able to have its national needs met with the affiliation policy without opening fully the door for foreign HEIs to open branches. Considering the Omani experience, the study argues that although HE now is seen as global in nature, there is still a space where national governments can have regulations and control over such global discourses of cross-border HE.

Interestingly and surprisingly, the study interviewees and policy documents suggested that while public HEIs are not required to have such affiliations, a number of them had decided to pursue international collaboration anyway. Interviewees from the Ministry of HE indicated that the Applied Science Colleges, supervised by the HE Ministry, had affiliations with four New Zealand universities: Otago University, the University of Waikato, Auckland University of Technology and Victoria University of Wellington. It was mentioned in previous chapters that these Applied Science Colleges were established in 2006, replacing the previous Colleges of Education. Rather than creating its own programs, the Omani Ministry of HE signed a contract with the New Zealand Tertiary Education Consortium to allow the above four New Zealand universities to offer their pre-existing degrees in the Omani Colleges of Applied Sciences. According to O’Rourke and Al Bulushi (2010, p.198), “the New Zealand Tertiary Education Consortium has sold the intellectual property forming these degrees as a package to be delivered in the five host colleges of applied sciences (COAS) in Oman”. O’Rourke and Al Bulushi mention that while learning materials (lecture notes, courses modules, assignments, exams) are prepared by New Zealand universities, the degrees are awarded by the Omani colleges, not the New Zealand universities. And of course, the programs are offered in English.

Transferring the previous Colleges of Education to Applied Science Colleges would not be easy and quick, I argue, without this importing of ready-made programs from New Zealand. The transfer happened very quickly in 2006 and now these Applied Science colleges are planning to start running the programs without the affiliate New Zealand universities, as confirmed by the policymakers from the Ministry of HE. In this case, the affiliation arrangement has enabled the Omani Applied Science Colleges to stand on their own, learning and copying programs from the New
Zealand universities. Oman has thus taken advantage of the cross-border HE to enable its colleges to start running smoothly with imported programs for a certain period, rather than embarking on developing national programs that cannot be ‘trusted’ from the beginning.

Besides, the study found that there were two other public Oman HEIs that had chosen to have affiliations. The first was the College of Banking and Financial Studies, supervised by the Central Bank of Oman, offering programs through UK universities (the University of Strathclyde and the University of Bradford) and the Arab Academy of Banking and Financial Sciences (Jordan). The interviewee from this college affirmed that such affiliation would serve as a means of quality assurance with internationally recognized qualifications. The other case is the Institute of Health Sciences, which is supervised by the Ministry of Health. Since 2010, this Institute has offered Bachelor of Science (Hons) degrees in diagnostic radiography, physiotherapy and medical laboratory work in affiliation with the Glasgow Caledonian University in the UK. In these two cases, it is argued that affiliation serves as a quality assurance strategy, strengthening the quality of the program offered locally.

Overall, it can be argued that the compulsory affiliation policy in private HE, as well as decisions by public HEIs to allow the movement of foreign programs and awarding degrees into Omani jurisdictional borders, has been successful. With such global collaboration, the Omani Government seeks another way to guarantee the quality of its private HEIs, as well as creating more access in response to the demand of Omani youth for HE. The overall form and rationale of the affiliation policy in Omani HE seems to be most appropriate for serving the needs of the Omani context; yet, this study raises some concern about the quality of these international programs offered locally. Are they really identical to the originals in their sending countries? What roles have the Omani OAAA to play in relation to the quality of these programs? If somebody argues that the quality of these programs is assured by their affiliate foreign HEIs, why then does the Omani labour market complain about graduates’ skills and knowledge? Does the issue of entrance scores mentioned previously have an influence? And are we in Oman consuming a “baroque arsenal” of imported programs, meaning outdated programs in the sending countries (see Donn & Al Manthri, 2010, 2013)? These questions and others are emerging in relation to the quality of these programs. There is a desperate need for the government to activate the role of the OAAA in terms of quality assurance. Of course, the OAAA is there, yet it is not performing its roles and functions as prescribed by its establishing Royal decree.
8.3.2.5. International Accreditation

In addition to affiliation, the data showed another global practice of assuring quality in the Omani HE system; that is, international accreditation. Although Oman has its own national accreditation authority (OAAA), some Omani HEIs have decided to assure the quality of their programs through international accreditation. For example, one Omani HEI, SQU, is working to have its programs recognized and then accredited by a foreign (international) organization that sets quality standards to be met; this is referred to as ‘off-shore accreditation’ (see Altbach, 2003). In the website of the SQU Quality Assurance Office, an accreditation road-map is presented for all 9 colleges of the university, which indicates the will of SQU and its administration to have international accreditation for all its colleges (SQU, n.d.b). Some of the SQU colleges have already attained accreditation from international authorities. I interviewed six policy-makers from SQU who affirmed that international accreditation of programs would help enhance the quality and excellence of HE. Those policy-makers also indicated that international accreditation had been introduced to SQU as a response to national requirements, as well as the competition happening regionally and globally. It seems that the rationale behind off-shore accreditation is the global competition driven by global rankings that SQU has participated in recently, pushing SQU to have its programs accredited by international organizations.

Looking in depth at the accreditation process at SQU, each college chooses an international organization to seek accreditation from. Sending countries are mainly Western developed countries such as the USA, Canada, the UK, and Australia. Further, accreditation does not come from a foreign HEI, but rather from a foreign organization specialized in accrediting programs in a specific area. Examples of such organizations that SQU has dealt with are the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) for programs at the College of Education, the Agriculture Institute of Canada (AIC) for programs at the College of Agriculture and Marine Sciences, the Australian Library and Information Association for the program of Information Studies at the College of Arts and Social Sciences and the Accreditation Board of Engineering and Technology (ABET) for the Engineering College. Indeed, the interviews showed that the process of accreditation is lengthy and may take more than five years, as well as being expensive. After the long process and large expenditure, a program may end up not being accredited. So, do local programs really need this mode of accreditation?

The local accredited programs have to align program requirements, courses, syllabus, assessment tools, teaching methods and so on to the standards specified by the foreign accrediting organization. This is a clear example of international accreditors (agencies) ‘dictating’ certain policies and tools to SQU, placing pressure on SQU to conform to sending countries standards. The question is then
about the ability of SQU to implement these imported standards that are specifically designed and developed for the sending countries’ HEIs. It is likely that there would be a kind of unsuitability, I believe, for SQU programs to implement these fixed standards without being recontextualised. What works for the sending Western countries may not always work for the Omani context. Moreover, the issue of time and money spent on the accreditation process is also a question. Does SQU really need such accreditation with such lengthy and expensive processes? An evaluation of the international accreditation plan that SQU is currently undergoing is important to answer these questions.

The study finds accreditation to be one of the international practices brought about by globalisation that has implications for the local Omani HEIs. It can be argued that for the purpose of international competition, global recognition as well as quality assurance, some Omani HEIs have chosen to seek international accreditation. At SQU, the quality and excellence of HE is believed to be enhanced by such practices, as well as contributing to raising its global ranking. However, the Omani HEIs seeking accreditation have to rethink the appropriateness of implementing international standards that are, or may be, more workable for the foreign HEIs of sending countries and their contexts.

8.3.2.6. Global Ranking

In the current age of globalisation, HE scholars around the world have described HEIs as global entities that function nationally (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2006; Marginson, 2006, forthcoming 2016; Marginson & Van der Wenderef, 2007). Indeed, such a global environment has been found to create a competitive culture between HEIs around the World and regionally. According to Bagley and Portnoi (2014), this has resulted in the emergence of what is called ‘global ranking schemes’, which end up becoming drivers for further competition and are important to the argument here because they act as global drivers of reform. Ordorika and Lloyd (2015, p.385) mention that global rankings “have become dominant measures of institutional performance for policy-makers worldwide”. While the proponents of such rankings consider them as evidence for improving institutional quality, there are others who resist, oppose and question the hegemonic impact of elites, specifically Anglo-Saxon universities, in a global HE space (Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015). The most well-known schemes are the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, Shanghai Jiao Tong University’s Academic Ranking of World Universities, and The Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) Rankings. This study has found that the global ranking race has an impact on the Omani HE system, with its premier university (SQU) entering the race.

SQU is the only Omani HEI participating in such global rankings, because it is the only state university in Oman, is the oldest in the system, it offers research higher degrees and it also carries
the Sultan’s name. Some interviewees mentioned that the other Omani universities had not been participating in such schemes as they were private, very young in age (starting in the late 1990s), and not engaged in research. Overall, according to policy-makers from the university, SQU has entered the global ranking terrain to enhance its international reputation, as well as competing to be one of the best universities in the Arab Gulf region. Entering the global ranking contest is perceived as a necessity for improving the quality and performance of SQU. Indeed, this is the advantageous side of the ranking contest. Yet, it is believed that the global ranking system has brought challenges and burdens nationally, regionally and globally to universities. Marginson (2014) argues that global ranking has placed very real pressure on universities, shaping their practical behaviours. New practices, reforms and plans are developed specifically by HEIs in developed and developing countries to raise their ranking. The global race has pushed HEIs to undertake certain policies.

At the national level, the public, the parliament (the Oman Council), the media and even some governmental organizations have questioned the low rank of SQU. For example, in the QS ranking, the position of SQU deteriorated from 377 in 2011 to 401-450 in 2012 and to 501-550 in 2013. That stimulated debate nationally about the quality of the university, resulting in the questioning of SQU policy-makers by media and parliament. There was a debate about the failure of SQU’s policies and how that led to the deterioration of SQU’s position. Ordorika and Lloyd (2015) talk about how such national reactions and conflict, especially in developing countries, place more pressure on HEIs. Regionally, SQU was trying to become one of the best three universities as declared in its Strategic Plan 2009-2013, placing more and more pressure on SQU to achieve this aim. And of course, the international competition and reputation of SQU will be affected by such global rankings. As Marginson (2014) argues, although global ranking is irresistible for emerging universities, it is unfair and unequal for both the leading and the emerging universities.

To improve its position in the QS ranking, interviewees from SQU stated that the university had introduced and undergone some changes and reforms, created new practices and adopted global discourses. Among these, but not limited to them, are strategies for encouraging academics by allocating a financial reward for each published paper (specifically in English journals), establishing a Quality Assurance Office for the university, targeting international students, cooperating with international HEIs and specialized organizations, seeking accreditation for its programs and encouraging students to engage in research. This is seen as the dominance of English in the one world science system as an effect of globalisation (Marginson, forthcoming 2016). That said, the study argues that the global ranking schemes have impacted the Omani HE system positively, as is clear in the SQU case, with new policies and practices put in place in relation to quality and productivity. Yet, it may also be seen as having a negative impact for SQU, given the difficulty of
competing with leading international universities, as well as the pressure to adopt new practices and policies that are beyond its capacities and potentially in conflict with Oman’s national priorities. Ordorika and Lloyd (2015) argue that international ranking serves the hegemonic influence of Anglo-American universities, which are projected as the ideal model to be followed by the rest of HEIs in the world. Indeed, the hegemony of the elite Anglo-American model is much encouraged by the measures of research production (biased towards English publications) used in almost all global rankings (Ordorika and Lloyd, 2015). This issue is reflected by SQU pushing its academics to publish in English (not the mother-tongue) and in highly-ranked journals, including those listed in Elsevier’s Scopus, Thomson-Reuters Web of Science and other journals listed in well-known citation and journal impact databases. While it is important for SQU to push for creating a culture of scientific research, this may lead to divergence from the national priorities. It also raises the issue of the place and standing of research vis-à-vis teaching: human capital production versus knowledge production.

With pressure from inside and outside, SQU policy-makers decided to question QS regarding the ranking deterioration of SQU, requesting a statement to explain the reasons. It is obvious that the drop in the position has consequences and poses challenges for SQU and so the request was sent to QS to clarify if this was a genuine deterioration in performance. QS replied to SQU that the reasons for the drop in ranking were three-fold:

1. “A decline in performance in our academic reputation measure – a trend shared by many institutions in the region,”
2. The inclusion of over 100 additional institutions in 2013, which whilst most are ranked lower than SQU has had an effect since many perform better in some areas thus reducing SQU’s relative score,
3. A genuine data error in our 2011 data collection exercise where total staff were taken instead of academic staff, placing SQU in a higher than deserved position in our faculty student indicator and consequently overall”. (QS Intelligence Unit, 2013)

The QS people made it clear that the main reason for deterioration in rank was an error in the gathered information in the 2011 ranking regarding the faculty student ratio, which made SQU drop position in 2012 and 2013. Also, QS mentioned the new 100 universities entering the ranking as well as referring to decline as a regional issue. This story has been raised here to show how the global ranking impacts universities nationally and regionally, possibly creating more pressure than benefits. It can be argued that global ranking schemes are valuable and necessary to create a culture of global competition, with much done by HEIs towards quality and high performance, yet there are risks involved.
8.3.2.7. Using English

English has become a global *lingua franca*, with English used as the tool for communication between speakers of different mother tongues (Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Gu, Patkin & Kirkpatrick, 2014; House, 2013). English is now an international language used dominantly over other languages in business and in HE, facilitating worldwide interconnectedness in the age of globalisation. Oman is no exception and English is recognized and stressed by the Omani Government as an effective tool for modernization, as well as the language of technology and science (Al-Issa, 2006). Marginson (forthcoming 2016) argues that universities globally are being pulled into a one world, English language based science system, evident in citation indices and the like and a central component of world university rankings. Beside Arabic, English is considered an official language in Oman, used in hospitals, banks, trade, schools, universities, factories, hotels, and so on. English dominates over Arabic as the language of instruction in Omani HEIs. Almost all public and private Omani HEIs are using English as medium of instruction with only a few social sciences programs in various HEIs using Arabic (see Table 8.3 above).

Interviewees and policy documents confirmed this role played by English in Oman and demonstrated the importance of it for HEIs. A university rector stated that “using English in Omani HEIs is not a choice, rather it is a must” (I/I2/267). Indeed, interviewees believed that it would be difficult to use Arabic because of the lack of Arabic references (books, journals, science publications, research literature etc.) in almost all academic and disciplinary areas and specializations. Furthermore, other interviewees stressed the importance and the functionality of English for graduates to get jobs in the public or private sector. This perhaps places too much emphasis on the significance and need of Omani students to master English and gain proficiency in reading, writing and speaking in that language. Seen as such an important and non-optional choice, the question is how using English has affected the Omani HE policy? And what implications has it brought to the Omani HE system?

In an Arabic speaking country, using a foreign language (English) appears to be a challenge and an issue for all, starting from the HEIs, to academics and students. The Omani Government has recently introduced teaching English from grade one in schools compared to grade four previously, with aim of making Omanis competent in English when leaving school (see Al’Abri, 2011). With regard to HE, the findings of this study indicate that using English as the language of instruction has forced the Omani HE system to embark on certain policies for both public and private HEIs. All HEIs have now created English departments/units/centres to help in preparing students with a certain level of English that is required to start their post-secondary academic programs. Indeed, the HE policy makers have initiated the idea of a General Foundation Programs (GFP) out of the
necessity to improve the English language competencies of students entering HE. This foundation program includes four learning areas; English language, IT, mathematics and study skills (OAC, 2008). Unless the program is taught in Arabic, students have to undertake these courses, depending on the level and requirements of their programs.

It is very important to mention here that the Omani GFP is different from what is found in other countries, because they are non-credit programs with the aim of helping students to transition from the schooling system to HE. Carroll, Razvi and Goodliffe (2009, p.2) mention that the Omani model of GFP is “different from another common usage of the term foundation referring to a credit-bearing first year of a degree program that comprises core subjects designed to provide a basis for the rest of the program”. With English as the main focus and purpose of GFP, this has provoked the OAAA, I argue, to pursue a policy called *Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programs*, which is to be adopted by all Omani HEIs (see OAC, 2008). Starting from 2009/2010, this policy, with its set of academic standards in four subjects (English language; mathematics; computing skills and information technology), as well as general academic skills, was approved by the HEC and a Ministerial Decision was issued to legislate the policy as national standards (Carroll et al., 2009). It is clear that using English as medium of instruction has provoked the introduction of these national standards.

The use of English in teaching has also had other implications for the policies of Omani HEIs. It was mentioned by some interviewees that with the huge reliance on English in teaching, HEIs were faced with the challenges of English teacher recruitment, as well as with curriculum development. The majority of English teachers in these HEIs are non-Omanis, with a good number who are native speakers. Based on the findings, it is argued that it is challenging for the Omani HE system in the region to recruit large numbers of English teachers for all its 62 HEIs. While it is favoured by HEIs to employ native speakers, it is hard to get the required number. As a result, there is no other alternative other than employing teachers with English being their second language. Indeed, some respondents mentioned that their HEIs relied on international companies to help in recruiting those teachers from around the world. A college dean mentioned that “our ministry nowadays hires a company that not only brings native speaker teachers but also teachers from India, South America, Africa and other non-native English countries” (I/I6/356-357). It is possible to hypothesise that using English in HEIs has contributed negatively to the increase of foreign expatriates to the Sultanate, which the Omani Government has been trying to decrease.

Besides recruitment, importing English language teaching curriculum and materials is another factor for these HEIs, because it is hard for them to develop their own. With SQU, the premier and largest university in Oman, it is still the case that the curriculum is imported from English native
speaking countries, with recent superficial attempts to develop its own on campus. The study documents and interviewees also indicated that English was not only dominating teaching, but also some other practices, including pushing for certain regulations within HEIs. Some HEIs have requested that academic employees have higher degrees from native English countries and from the top 20 universities in these countries. This is the case of SQU, with academics there graduating from the UK, the USA, Australia, and Canada, and applies not only to academics’ postgraduate degrees done in English, but also to publications. This is what Marginson (forthcoming 2016) refers to as the one world science system. For example, SQU did not promote some of the academic faculty because their publications were mainly in Arabic. Academics are forced to publish in English to be promoted, as Arabic journals are not ranked or found among top ranking journals globally. The study strongly argues that SQU, with such regulation, aims to raise its global ranking, as well as enable its staff to become competent in the international language of English.

In brief, the above arguments add to our understanding of the impact of the global trend towards English domination in HE policies of nation-states. In Oman, this study confirms that HE policies have been altered and reshaped by the use of English language in HEIs.

8.3.2.8. Standardised international tests

One of the interesting findings of this study is that the increased adoption of English in HEIs has resulted in the spread of standardized international tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) (partly owned by Australian universities) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Internationally, these tests are utilized by HEIs to check the English language proficiency of non-English-speaking students. Where English is the medium of instruction, HEIs often use these international tests to measure the English language proficiency of students and use their scores as evidence of their ability to start academic programs in English (Oliver, Vanderford & Grote, 2012). In Oman, with the intensive spread of English in HEIs, standardised English language proficiency tests have become popular, finding a market in Oman and encouraging the opening of centres that administer these tests.

It was mentioned earlier that almost all Omani HEIs have a foundation year in which, depending on their proficiency, students have to undertake an English program for one or more semesters. The study discovered that although some Omani HEIs had their own English proficiency test (institution-based test) for entry, IELTS and TOFEL were also used to check proficiency and readiness of students. SQU, for instance, requires either IELTS or TOFEL scores for entry to most of its postgraduate English-based programs. Surprisingly, the Colleges of Technology administer a contextualized version of TOFEL for entry to undergraduate programs. Indeed, private Omani HEIs

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are no different with increasing use of these international tests as a basis for entry to their imported/affiliated programs. Examining the criteria by these Omani HEIs, different scores on these international tests are required for each specialization.

In the Omani case, this study notes that the expanded use of international English proficiency tests has encouraged Oman to open its borderers for international English centres to administer the tests. If we take IELTS, this test is jointly owned by IDP: IELTS Australia, British Council and Cambridge English Language Assessment and these organisations have 1,000 test centres, located in more than 140 countries (IELTS, n.d). These international organizations have opened centres (the British Council: Oman, IDP: IELTS Muscat, Hawthorn Muscat) in Oman to run these tests. The American test (TOFEL) also has its own sites in Oman to administer the test. Saying that, some Omani HEIs (SQU, Sohar University) have recently decided to enter this business by running these tests in cooperation with, and with the permission of, the test owners. At SQU, an IELTS examination centre was established at the university by the British Council Language Centre, with the aim of serving its students, faculty and the wider community. Besides administering the tests, private English teaching institutes have started offering training courses in taking the IELTS and TOFEL tests. It seems that administering these international tests and delivering training has become a profitable business with a huge number of Omanis required to take the tests.

The popularity of these tests is not only related to entry to academic programs in Omani HEIs, but also has become compulsory for prospective Omani English language teaching graduates seeking teaching jobs at the Ministry of Education. The Omani Ministry of Education enforced those graduates who will become English teachers to take IELTS and score in the 6.5 band. The Ministry of Education interviewees believed that this test could measure the English proficiency of those graduates and the Ministry could thus ensure the quality of its English teachers. In addition, the Ministry of HE has recently requested all applicants for the scholarships abroad (undergraduates and postgraduates) to undertake IELTS or TOFEL before submitting their applications. It is quite clear that there is huge demand for taking these international tests, as they have become conditions for entry to Omani HEIs and scholarships abroad, as well as getting an English teaching job in Oman for education graduates.

Overall, the spread in use of English in the Omani HE system has compelled the Omani Government to engage in policies and regulations that increase the usage of English proficiency tests. It seems that there have been no other alternatives, opening the door for global organizations to run their standardised tests in Oman.
8.3.2.9. Knowledge-based economy

The term ‘knowledge-economy’ was frequently present in almost all of the study interviews, as well as being clearly referred to in the various study documents. As confirmed by the study data, this usage is about the movement of the Omani economy from the reliance on oil and gas to becoming a knowledge-based economy. The OECD (1996) defines this term as indicating “the role of knowledge and technology in economic growth. Knowledge, as embodied in human beings (as “human capital”) and in technology, has always been central to economic development” (p.9). In the age of global competition, the knowledge-economy has become a global discourse, promoted by powerful international organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, OECD and the European Union (Sum & Jessop, 2013). Thus, Al-Rahbi (2008) writes about the need and urgency of the Sultanate to take concrete steps and to embark on determined initiatives towards developing a knowledge-based economy so that it is more than an empty signifier when applied in Omani policy.

In the Oman Human Development Report 2012, it is clearly indicated that the Omani Government has recognized the growing importance of the transition from traditional modes of economic development to the knowledge-based economy (SCP, 2013). Besides being a global discourse, the Omani government envisions the knowledge economy discourse as the solution to sustain economic development when Omani oil is forecasted to deplete in the coming two decades. Thus, it is observed that various reforms to different sectors have been recently introduced to assist this shift to a knowledge economy, aiming “to expedite the placement of the Sultanate among the knowledge developed-nations” (SCP, 2013, p. 104). It was found that the Omani Government had positioned these reforms and policies following the four pillars of knowledge economies prescribed by the World Bank, which are: innovation systems, information and infrastructures, education and training for lifelong learning, and economic incentive and institutional regime (World Bank, 2003). Al-Rahbi (2008) has confirmed the desire and persistence of the Omani Government to do well in all of the four pillars. The question then is how has the discourse of knowledge-economy shaped the Omani HE system and its policies?

The study interviews and documents stressed that Omani HE is central to a knowledge economy. A member of the Education Council mentioned that “assisted by other sectors, the HE system with its main focus on developing human capital plays the greatest role in promoting the knowledge economy” (EC/II/ 336-337). According to the SCP (2013), Oman has given special focus to HE, placing it at the forefront of tools aiding the path to a knowledge economy and related development. As promoted by the international organizations, Oman considers HE as the gate towards participation in the knowledge economy. Indeed, a positive outcome of this emphasis on the knowledge economy, this study argues, is the substantial investment of the Omani Government in
HE. The knowledge economy discourse has had some implications for the Omani HE system, significantly shaping its policies of access, size, direction, quality, research and funding. Although the focus of Omani HE is more on teaching than research, the government, through the Research Council and research funds allocated to SQU and other private universities, is trying hard to invest on research as a way to move towards a knowledge economy. Yet, the expenditure on research is still, as mentioned previously, considered to be very small and not comparable to the global standard prescribed by the UNESCO.

Major changes and restructuring have been happening around Omani HE system in this area, justifying the desire of the Sultanate to engage in the global competition and be ready to compete within the knowledge economy. One of the concrete steps taken by the government is the considerable increase of public expenditure on education (both schooling and HE) in the previous ten years. According to SCP (2013), the expenditure on education in 2010 was 16.3% of the total government expenditure which was around 4.6% of GDP. The State Council Chairman believed that “the remarkable increase of expenditure on education was due to the recognition of the Government of the role that education had to play in the passage towards the knowledge-based economy” (M/I2/382-383). With that expenditure, the HE enrolment has increased dramatically in recent years, reaching mass HE enrolment based on the HE literature and the international standards (see Figure 8.2). For example, out of the total school graduates each year, the percentage of admitted students to HEIs increased from 31.4% in 2009/2010 to reach 72.8% in the academic year 2012/2013 (Ministry of HE, 2012). That increase in the number of students has been the driver for the increase in the number of HEIs and vice versa. Yet, it is important to mention here that these are undergraduate student numbers, which signifies the centrality of teaching rather research in Omani HEIs. Indeed, while there is much talk about a knowledge economy by the policy-makers as well as in documents, I believe research in HEIs is not given enough attention at the moment as a contributor to the move to a knowledge economy society. As mentioned in Chapter two, out of the 62 HEIs only SQU now offers PhDs and only in certain areas of study. A few other HEIs have just started recently to offer Masters degrees. This can be considered as the gradual movement of the young and rapidly expanding Omani HE system towards the global discourse of research central to the definition of quality HE.
Another major initiative of Oman in this respect is the establishment of The Research Council (TRC) in 2005, which has the mission of moving towards an effective national innovation system. This Council aims to advance research and innovation, leading Oman to “be a regional hub for innovation, and a leader in producing new ideas, products and services” (TRC, n.d.). The study interviewees indicated that the TRC has participated heavily in building greater research capacity and encouraging creativity and innovation, which are among the main pillars of knowledge-based economies as articulated by the World Bank. Nowadays, the TRC is running several programs, grants, awards and projects in research and innovation. Although it was mentioned previously that the percentage of subsidy offered for scientific research is still very modest in Oman according to international standards, this study considers the recent establishment of the TRC with its appealing programs as evidence of serious efforts to move towards a knowledge economy. The creation of the TRC, I argue, is critical to building a research and innovation culture within the Omani community. However, there is an urgent need for the TRC to play that role and translate its mission into reality.

Additionally, in 1996, the Oman Government created the Oman Vision 2020, mainly aiming to achieve sustainable development through diversifying the Omani economy, privatization and replacing foreign labour with Omani labour. In this socio-economic vision, there is a focus on human capital development, which can be considered a very substantial policy leading to the knowledge economy. Indeed, some of the interviewed policy-makers believed that Oman vision 2020, with its strong emphasis on education and training, was a translation of the commitment and determination of the Omani Government to build an economy that relies on knowledge. Specific to
HE, the *Oman 2020* team developed some polices and mechanisms that would be essential for the development of human resources by 2020. Some of these policies and mechanisms are as follows:

- Creating advanced technical education for two to three years;
- Approaching international organizations to evaluate HE according to international standards;
- Encouraging the private sector to take a role in HE through financial grants, providing free land and easy term loans;
- Reviewing specializations and areas of study to reflect the national needs and international trends;
- Increasing the number of foreign scholarships;
- Including purposeful and life-long learning in HE; and
- Encouraging research and innovation.

Although some of these policies and initiatives have been considered previously as a result of national pressures and issues, they can be looked at also from the perspective of the knowledge-economy. In general, the above ambitions and planning seems to be apposite for supporting the transfer of Oman to a knowledge-based economy. As confirmed by the study findings, the Oman Government has succeeded in implementing some of these initiatives, such as increasing participation, enrolment, privatization of HE, establishing new areas of study and encouraging research. Yet, this study raises concerns about the quality of implementing these policies, aligning them and unifying the efforts between the authorities supervising the HE system. It seems that there is recognition from the Omani policy-makers regarding the importance of Oman learning from advanced knowledge-economies, as well as taking obvious planning efforts towards establishing a knowledge economy. However, there remain questions about how much has and can actually been done in reality.

### 8.4. Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the national, regional and global contexts surrounding the Omani HE system, focusing on how these contexts have impacted HE policy. What is clear is that Omani HE policy is more, or indeed most, responsive and reactive to Omani national issues, pressures and forces, yet at the same time accepts and responds to the regional and global contexts and their impact. More clearly, Omani HE policy is shaped by these three contexts, with the national level playing the major role and mediating to varying extents the policy pressures coming from the regional and global contexts (vernacular globalisation). The study presents an argument, with regard to these contexts, that there is an overlap in the influence from multiple scales that is not easy to
discern discretely. If a policy is considered within the Omani HE system, there will most likely be a national component to it, as well as regional and global factors. Take admissions policy as an example: mass HE is a global phenomenon, including social pressure from the Omani society for more access. This is also a Gulf regional issue stemming from the Arab Spring and provoked by all states converging towards mass HE systems.

Moreover, this chapter has illustrated that the Omani HE system and its policies are no longer only framed nationally and merely under the control and influence of the Omani government. Rather, in the age of globalisation, emerging regional (GCC) and global actors (the World Bank, the UNESCO, WTO), and discourses now share with the Omani government the role of shaping the HE system and its policies. We see the impact also from international globalized education policy discourses. Indeed, education policy “can increasingly be seen as a global commodity” in which national governments are forced to develop their policies, according not only to what they see as important to their nations, but also considering global trends and forces (Green, 2002, p. 611). This is Brenner’s (2004) argument that in the contemporary era, the scalar geographies and power of the state are reconfigured and transformed, resulting in transforming state forms and power, with international and regional organizations entering the arena of national policy-making in various ways. Based on Brenner’s view and as illustrated in this chapter, it is quite clear then that globalisation has reconstituted the role of the Omani government in making its HE policies.

In the chapter, it has been argued that the Omani HE policy at the national level has been framed around multiple and intersecting economic, social, cultural and political challenges, issues, pressures and priorities. With much focus on the national side, the Omani Government has, I argue, worked very hard to implement policies and adopt reforms that suit its specific context. Regionally, Oman has learned and copied various HE polices from its neighbours, with competition mediating such policy convergence. As discussed above with the affiliation example, Oman has been able, to some extent, to maintain space with its HE policy learning from its Gulf region, while at the same time choosing what suits its nation. In relation to globalisation, Oman is no different from others with regard to the power of global actors and discourses, finding its HE policy impacted seriously. Although it seems that there are challenges and pressures created by globalisation in relation to Omani HE policy, the Omani Government has responded and utilized some of these challenges to serve its national development. The cross-border HE, knowledge-economy, international accreditation, global ranking, standardised international tests discourses are clear examples of such discourses that the Omani government seeks to benefit from.
9. Conclusion

9.1. Introduction

This study set out to reveal the nature of the broad policy-making architecture of the Omani HE system, in order to provide a critical understanding of its effects on HE policy in Oman. Throughout, the study has described and analysed the HE policy-making architecture and its operations, the impact of such architecture on the policy-making processes and policy content, and the interwoven factors (local, regional and global) impacting on the policy. To conduct this research, I drew upon (1) the relevant and limited existing literature from Oman, (2) the more developed global literature on HE and policy, (3) an eclectic theoretical approach, and (4) qualitative research methods (interviews and document analysis) to generate pertinent data to answer the following four research questions:

1. What is the architecture of the policy-making in the Omani HE system?

2. How does the architecture of HE policy-making in Oman operate?

3. What is the impact of this architecture and its operations on the Omani HE system?

4. What factors (national, regional and global) impact on the architecture, policy processes and policy content in Omani HE?

The previous eight chapters have presented the study context, aims, literature review, theoretical framework, research methodology and data collection methods, and the analysis and discussion of the data. This chapter concludes the study, presenting my main arguments in response to the framing research questions, reflecting on the findings as well as restating their significance and contribution to the field of HE studies in Oman and more broadly. The chapter opens by outlining the empirical findings and their contribution, answering directly, synoptically and briefly the four research questions that framed the study. Furthermore, the implications will be detailed to elaborate the contributions of the study. Based on the study findings, the chapter will also make some evidence-based policy recommendations for Omani HE and suggest some necessary future research. Finally, the chapter concludes by outlining some limitations and issues that were encountered during the study.
9.2. The empirical findings and contributions to knowledge

This section is aimed at presenting the main findings of the study through summarising the data analysis chapters. To do so, I will synthesize the findings to answer the four research questions that underpinned the study.

9.2.1. Question one

What is the architecture of the policy-making in the Omani HE system?

In answering this question, Chapter six of the study was devoted specifically to describing and analysing the policy-making architecture of the Omani HE system. It was argued that the Omani HE system has a hierarchical architecture for policy-making, consisting of three levels of governmental bodies and actors, notably, the top level of the government, the specialized bodies and the field (see Figure 6.4). This is a multi-layered hierarchical architecture; reflecting the ‘absolute’ power of the national government, overseen by the Sultan (a Royal Monarchy). The ‘government’ in this study refers to and includes the Sultan, the Council of Ministers and all Omani governmental organizations that are responsible for supervising and steering the Omani HEIs, such as the Education Council, the Ministry of HE, the Ministry of Manpower, and the Ministry of Health. The study revealed that HE policy-making was driven by the top level of the government and the degree of participation decreased as it reached to the lower levels of the architecture (HEIs). This is very much a top-down approach to HE policy making, reflective of the current form of government and the character of the Sultanate as a monarchy. Based on the data, I argued that the hierarchy of power evident in the policy-making architecture demonstrated that the Omani government appears to control the HE system fully, exhibiting a clear ‘state control model’ of policy-making, as well as exhibiting a cascade of complex ‘principal-agent’ games.

Although the Omani HE policies are state-centric and might be understood as the business of the Omani government, globalisation with its transnational interconnectivities and new spatialities has brought to Omani HE other players to share in and affect the processes of making policies. Since the end of the Cold War we have seen a strengthening of the role of global policy-making institutions and actors in education that impact on the production of these national policies and therefore the practices of education (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Under the multiple and complex effects of globalisation, the policy and politics of Omani HE are being reshaped. As has argued in Chapter eight of this study, regional (e.g., GCC) and supranational (e.g., UNESCO and the World Bank) organizations have been critical shapers and influencers of the Omani HE policy, as they have been in other nations. However, it should be noted that Oman, unlike most developing nations, is not a recipient of aid from international agencies such as the World Bank and thus not subject to
their more direct pressures through funding/compliance trade-offs and demands for structural adjustment. Nonetheless, these organisations still have impact on HE policy making in Oman, particularly at a discursive level. Thus, it is necessary to recognize those international players at a macro level in the Omani HE policy-making architecture. Of course, these multilateral organizations do not exist as agencies in the governance systems of nations as articulated in constitutions or basic statutes, yet they play a huge role in the process of making HE policy through globalised policy discourses and contributing to agenda-setting, providing policy options and sometime developing policies. Taking account of the complex and mediated effects of globalisation, this study thus considers international organizations to be an almost ‘invisible component’ of the Omani HE policy-making architecture surrounding all the three levels of the architecture. Overall, while in the nations of the Global North neo-liberalism has seen a move away from a state-centric approaches to policy productions towards a less state-centric, networked governance approach (Ball & Junemann, 2012), it is interesting that the Omani government still operates a state-centric approach, though at the same time responding to global neo-liberal policy pressures and discourses.

9.2.2. Question two

How does the architecture of HE policy-making in Oman operate?

While the hierarchy of the architecture is clearly defined by the Basic Statute and some Royal Decrees, it is more difficult to see how it is works in reality; the networks and relationships between the various bodies remains quite ambiguous and opaque. Thus, based on the study interviews, the first part of Chapter seven illustrated how the policy-making architecture of Omani HE works in reality. It is argued that the architecture does not follow a single recipe in developing policies; rather, policies are developed in different ways by different actors and agencies. The study discovered that there were four different scenarios relating to how the architecture operates in making policies. These are: (1) policy development by the Education Council; (2) policies coming directly from the Sultan; (3) policies coming from the cabinet and the SCP; and (4) policies suggested by the Oman Council. These operations of Omani HE policy-making architecture are more complicated than a straightforward diagrammatic representation of the architecture might suggest, and as might be implied by the statutes, with the afore-mentioned agencies and actors in the multi-layered architecture sharing the policy-making process. I argue that what we have is actually a complex, interactive process of policy making.

In the four scenarios, HE policy is found to be multi-sourced, meaning that the generators of the policy ideas can be any of the system entities, individuals or the Omani society more generally. In relation to the latter, and has been noted earlier, there are small shoots of democracy appearing in
Oman, but as yet not a strong critical media presence. Strikingly, the main components of the HE system (HEIs) do play a role in the agenda-setting for policy, yet they are not involved in the final decision-making stage. Indeed, there are legitimate policy actors who are authorized to take policy decisions namely the Sultan, the Cabinet, and the Education Council. Making policies for the HE system is mainly the business of the Omani government, passed either through the top level of the government or the Education Council. Regarding the role of the Omani parliament (the Oman Council), it is mandated only to propose policies that may or may not get approved by the government. The Oman Council does not have the ability to pass policies to the HE system. Overall, the HEIs are passive in the policy-making process and the Omani parliament has only the role of suggesting or proposing policies. Thus, it is strongly argued that HE policy-making is basically a political tool, firmly in the hands of the government and as such heavily dependent upon the quality of advice to the government.

9.2.3. Question three

What is the impact of this architecture and its operations on the Omani HE system?

On the basis of the data collected, I argue that the structure of the HE policy architecture has contributed to a highly centralised policy-making approach in the Omani HE system; it largely occurs at the top level of the government, while the lower levels of the system (HEIs) are subject to approval of their policies by the top level and framed as sites of policy implementation or enactment. The centrality of the policy-making process at the top level of government is found to be based on the governance system of the Sultanate, reflecting the structure of the political regime. This has led inexorably to top-down policies in which the lower agents (HEIs) are somewhat separated from the policy-making process, while for effective policy-making and enactment they need to be more closely involved in the process. It seems that the Omani HEIs are weak in relation to developing HE policies, covered by a layer of supervising administrative authorities (e.g., ministries) that are more engaged with policy-making than their agents (HEIs).

Additionally, my data analysis would suggest that the architecture and its operations result in a policy-making system lacking coherence, as the HE system has been found to be scattered and stretched between different bodies and agents at the ministerial level, the third level of the HE policy-making architecture. With such incoherence and disorganization, I argue that the governance structure of the HE system in Oman has negatively impacted on HE policy and policy-making. The current architecture actually hinders coherence and harmony in HE policy. The data analysis demonstrated a HE system that is loosely coupled with effects on policy implementation. There were conflicting interests among those HEI agents reported by this study and also by other previous
studies. With several agents supervising the HEIs, each agent has been trying to accomplish its targets and interests without considering the overarching national direction. Indeed, there is no overarching national HE policy frame. Thus, this study argues that the complicated HE policy-making architecture at the ministerial level has been found to allow such ministerial competing interests to come into play. This conflict in turn was found to impact on the policy agendas and the policy decisions of the HE system.

The study has demonstrated that the HE policy-making architecture has led to fragmented, scattered HE policies, rather than a unified, national approach. Although there are general national policies functioning across all systems, such as the Five-Year Development Plans and the Vision of Oman Economy 'Oman 2020', they cannot be considered as a national HE policy. I strongly argue here that the Omani HE system has been functioning with scattered policies among each agent with no mutual, linking or cohering mega-policy document to guide the system. Hence, the Omani HE system has been lacking clear goals, national strategic planning, harmony between principals and agents, and unified policies as the system components have been competing for their own individual benefits. This is a classic loosely coupled system. The overall impact of the architecture and its operations on the Omani HE system can be seen in the study, confirming the centralization of the policy-making at one point and at the same time describing the HE system as ‘loosely coupled’, suggesting that the centralised structure does not really reflect harmonised arrangements.

9.2.4. Question four

What factors (national, regional and global) impact on the architecture, policy processes and policy in Omani HE?

The territorial vocabulary of ‘national’, ‘regional’ and ‘global’ was used in this study for stylistic convenience and analytical purposes. At the same time, it is acknowledged that these three contexts are overlapping, interwoven and intersecting; it is problematic to think of the local (and its practices) as separable from regional and global contexts and effects. This is Brenner’s (2004) point about the rescaling of statehood under the conditions of globalisation. Nevertheless, this study acknowledges that the Omani HE policy is more, or indeed most, responsive and reactive to Omani national issues, pressures and forces outlined in some detail in Chapter eight, yet at the same time accepts the regional and global contexts and their impact. Of course, some apparently Omani national issues have their gestation globally and regionally; think here of the so-called Arab Spring and its impact on HE policy in Oman, especially its impact on admissions policy. This implies that the Omani HE policy has been directed to serve the social, economic, cultural and political development of the Sultanate framed by the globalisation context and to a considerable extent
framed by globalised HE policy discourses. As Chapter eight clearly demonstrated, global factors have had considerable impact in Omani HE, but so too have regional developments, some of which have been linked to the GCC. For example, think of Omani concerns with university rankings (in this case regional rankings) and the way a one world science system requiring publications in the English language frames the regional and global status and standing of universities. This is also to argue that the Omani HE policy has had greater focus on the national issues and pressures, mediating the global discourses and practices with the aim of achieving national development plans and targets. Yet human capital discourses concerning the contribution of HE to economic development are of course globalised policy discourses emanating from many international organisations and flowing across the globe. What we see in Omani HE is a manifestation of what Appadurai (1996) calls ‘vernacular globalisation’; that is global discourses mediated by path dependent local cultures, histories and politics.

The study also found that the Omani national context had pushed the HE system to undergo certain policies and reforms that were in essence global discourses and standards. Indeed, Oman is known for its youthful population (69% of the total population are under the age of 34), a unique Sultani system, an oil-based and oil-dependent economy, the universal provision and free of charge public services (HE included), and the huge number of expatriates in the labour market. That specific context, I argue on the basis of the evidence, has had great implications and challenges for the Omani HE system, impacting heavily on its policies and thus shaping its reforms and development.

To satisfy some of these national needs and pressures, the Omani Government has adopted regional and global practices and standards such as massification of HE, privatization, affiliations with international universities and knowledge-economy discourse. This study has shown that such global discourses have been mediated by the Omani Government to serve its national development purposes, as well as to respond to the several national challenges and pressures. Omani HE policy has been reshaped by these global discourses.

Yet, at the same time, there are other global discourses that have been adopted by the Omani HE system as a response to the imperatives of globalisation. This is still a mode of globalisation from above, with the Omani government seeking to compete globally and to be among developed nations. The study found that, besides adopting global discourses to serve specific national necessities, there are other HE global discourses that are not specifically nation-based. This is to say that the Omani Government has realigned and reformed its HE system and its policies with some global trends. For example, the study demonstrated the impact of English as a global lingua franca, within a one world science system, as the language of scientific publication and medium of instruction in Omani HE policy. This is a clear case of the domination of the global discourse of
English within HE policies of nation-states. Omani HE is just a specific case of this phenomenon. This study confirms that HE policies have been altered and reshaped by the use of English in HEIs. Here, the discourses of the global ranking schemes, international accreditation and standardised English tests can be seen as mediated effects of globalisation on Omani HE policy.

Additionally, the study found that regional and supra national organizations have played a role in shaping the current Omani HE policy. In the Arab Gulf region, although the interviewed policy-makers were not satisfied with the role played by the GCC in regional HE systems, the study confirmed that the GCC promoted policy learning and borrowing, as well as creating regional competition between its states and their HE institutions. Regarding international organizations, Oman’s HE policy has been affected by international standards created by these global actors, as well as through signing agreements, but there have been no loans taken as conditions to implement any policy. The study indicated that Oman has been actively participating in almost all events, regular meetings, conferences and activities of these international and regional organizations, which always bring new experiences and learning to the Omani HE policy. Overall, engaging with these international and regional organizations is believed to be very important and essential to the Omani HE system in such a globally competitive domain.

9.2.5. Overall contribution of the research

This study is considered the first of its type in Oman to touch on the area of HE policy and policy-making. By addressing and answering the research questions, it adds to knowledge about the nature of Omani HE policy architecture, its operation and policy context, and its impact on actual policy. Indeed, the study was able to describe how HE policy was developed in Oman, who played the major roles in policy-making and the relationships among the relevant actors. Moreover, the contexts surrounding the Omani HE policy and their impact were revealed by the study. This bridges the identified gap in the Omani literature and clearly provides answers to those questioning the architecture and processes of HE policy-making and the roles of its major policy actors. GCC states have somewhat similar experiences, as do some other developing countries, and this study thus significantly contributes to the HE policy literature on Oman and the Gulf, and for HE policy in developing countries in general. The research has also demonstrated how HE policy is made in a particular form of government, namely a Sultanate, and has shown how there are shoots of a more western style democracy appearing in Oman with potential long term consequences for policy making processes. Clearly, with further development, the issue of academic freedom and university autonomy will come more to the fore in Oman and will have future impacts on policy making. It also needs to be acknowledged that, at this stage in their development, universities in Oman are much more teaching than research focused.
9.3. **Implications of the study**

Besides describing and analysing the Omani HE policy architecture and its operation, the study provides some practical and theoretical implications for Omani HE policy specifically and for global HE policy in general. They are helpful to inform future HE policy-making, as well as for future studies to be conducted in the area of HE policy. The issues dealt with are: the ‘state supervising model’ of policy-making, Education Council membership, the Council of Oman’s participation in the HE policy-making, non-state participants in policy-making, cooperation and coordination challenges at the ministerial level, a unified and coherent policy, funding policy, research policy, the labour market, regional cooperation and global discourses.

The study found that the Omani HE policy-making architecture is upside down in terms of making policies. There is a strong centralisation where policy-making is mainly located at the top level of government, the Education Council and agencies supervising HEIs, while the role of HEIs is minimal and superficial. The ‘state control model’ is not favoured nowadays globally as it places restrictions on the performance of HEIs and limits their autonomy. It is time for the Omani Government to start delegating some responsibilities to the institutions to make their own policies and decide on their priorities. This study stresses that there is a need to move gradually towards what is called the ‘state supervising model’ of policy-making. The State should play the role of monitoring the quality and sustaining the running of the system through accountability mechanisms. In those systems as well, universities have become less dependent on state funding and more dependent on private funding sources (e.g., research, consultancy, student fees, etc). More or less, this model of governance works through supervisory mechanisms for steering the system. The policy-making can then be shared between the Government and the HEIs. Thus, there can be policy coming from the bottom of the system (bottom-up policies), as well as from the top. This would see the emergence in Omani HE of a combined top-down/bottom-up approach to policy making.

Moreover, this study commented on the membership of the Education Council, which is the chief agency for making national HE policy. It was mentioned that more than half of the members were ministers and elites with undersecretary positions. Such a large representation of elites from the government often leads the HE policies to be political in nature. The membership of the Education Council should be altered by increasing the number of members from HEIs. It is not enough to have one president of a state university and one president of a private university to represent 62 HEIs. The study suggests that the Council needs more members from the HEIs. This would bring practical, on-the-ground knowledge to the policy table. The research has also shown the need for more staff members and more expertise to advise and assist in the work of the Education Council.
With regard to the parliament, the Council of Oman, with its two arms, was found to be inactive in the processes of making HE policies. The Council has enough power after the 2011 events, but these need to be activated. What is mandated in the Royal Decree for the Oman Council is not what occurs in reality. Moving toward democracy requires more participation from such a Council, reflecting the needs of the nation. In the coming stage of Oman’s development (politically and economically), there is a great need to create that culture of the nation as an active and joint partner with the government in creating policies.

There is no doubt that policy-making in HE in Oman is state activity. Yet it is believed that HE policies are more productive if interest groups, research organizations, parents, students, unions, the private sector and the media are included in policy making. Of course, it is not logical to have all mentioned groups involved at the policy decision stage. They are good influencers, contributors and shapers at the early stages before policy decisions are made. Thus, such groups are vital in making successful policies. Processes of consultation then need to be established at the stage of agenda setting and policy text production, as well as broader representation on the relevant policy making bodies.

It was argued that the Omani HE policy-making architecture was facing some cooperation and coordination challenges at the ministerial and institutional levels. Furthermore, there was conflict of interest among HEI agents. This was found to be a consequence of the multiple bodies governing the HEIs. To help to solve this issue and for the purpose of national advancement, the study argues that there is now no more need for agencies to ‘supervise’ the HEIs. This kind of structure was necessary at the early stages of the Omani HE system development. I believe that it is more productive now to give autonomy and self-regulation to the HEIs and to free them from the agencies above, at least in relation to policy-making and financial administration. The SQU case can be taken as an example with no governmental agent above supervising it, except a university council, and framing quality processes and national mega-policy for HE.

Another issue is how the HE system can function without a unified and coherent policy. The study found that each agent of HEIs had its own specific policies and plans, detached from others. That again has been due to the multiplicity of authorities ‘controlling’ and ‘overseeing’ the HEIs. For Oman to have a successful HE system it must develop a unified policy for its HE. Also, the Supreme Council for Planning needs to work out a strategic long-term plan for HE, with all HEIs geared to reaching the stated goals and targets. With one unified policy and strategic plan, it is more likely that all HEIs will work in alignment and to serve the country’s development interests. I argue that a mutual unified policy focusing on different HE policy domains (e.g., quality assurance,
funding, regulations, autonomy and so on) for the whole Omani HE system can reduce the issue of incoherence.

Also, there is no doubt that the policy of increasing access to Omani HE has resulted from national pressures that have in turn resulted from regional and global pressures that is, the so-called Arab Spring. The Omani HE system has made progress towards the massification of HE. Yet there is an issue of sustainability, when admitting such huge numbers of students to HE, while relying totally on oil to fund it. This issue was discussed in Chapter eight of this study. It is recommended that the Omani Government pursue other ways of funding the system in a post-oil dependent economy. This might be through student loan schemes or any other community engagement arrangements. Oman can learn from the experience of other countries that have already gone through such issues. Again, it is a reminder that introducing any new reforms that engage the people in payment has to be taken gradually in enactment, as the Omani people have been always served freely by the government. There is a huge cultural change required in this respect and thus change in this direction, to be effective, will need to be incremental.

Regarding the labour market, there are many issues for the Omani government, particularly in relation to labour market planning. More than half of the current workforce are expatriates; the Omani Government has been working hard to replace expatriates with Omanis. Aligning HE graduates to the needs of the labour market is a necessity, but also not an exact science, as all labour market planning has clearly demonstrated. This stresses the need for a strategic plan and more harmonized efforts among all HEIs. Moreover, the quality of programs and thus of their graduates is very important so that employers trust the graduates and thus will employ them. Although there are noticeable efforts in this direction by the OAAA and the Ministry of HE, there is still more to be done to guarantee the quality of HEIs and their programs.

The study also raised the issue of research in Omani HEIs. The findings of this study confirm that scientific research plays a role in the advancement of nations. Oman has to direct its HE system towards more research and not focus only on teaching. A research roadmap (policy) is vital. All HEIs (public and private) should be encouraged and given opportunities to engage in research. Furthermore, the Government has to increase its expenditure on research and to be generous with that very important sector. Currently, Oman spends around 0.17% of total GDP in research (SCP, 2013), which is a very low percentage.

The data also showed that there was more collaboration needed in the GCC region. The interviewees in this study were not satisfied with the role played by the GCC in the HE system. I believe that there is a need for mutual policies in quality assurance, research and program
accreditation across the region. Rather than relying on policies imported from others with different contexts, joint policies and agencies can be effective for the region’s HE systems.

Another implication derived from the research is that HE systems face many challenges in the age of globalisation, as well as at the same time gaining many advantages. Each nation differs in the way of responding to these challenges and benefiting from its fruits, depending on the specific national context of each nation. Through absorption and sometimes modification of global trends and discourses, the Omani HE system has in a way exploited the global context to serve the nation's development and benefit the society. It is therefore always encouraging that the Omani HE system chooses what suits its culture, society, religion, economy and so on to attain the best possible outcome for the nation and its people. Additionally, it should not be an issue to resist a global discourse, if such a discourse is not appropriate for the Omani context. This of course raises the question of how to define what is considered to be appropriate and thus beneficial to Oman and of course the question of who should make this decision.

International organizations are increasingly influential on nations, particularly on developing nations, and therefore have impact on their HE systems. Chapter eight has outlined how these global actors have reshaped the policies of HE systems around the world. Being a wealthy nation, Oman is not influenced by any loan conditionalities to follow certain directions from these international organizations. That said, the Omani HE system could well benefit from the technical resources, knowledge and skills provided by these agencies, as well as learning from and adopting the standards and instruments prescribed by them.

9.4. Further studies

This study is considered the basis for further studies in the area of Omani HE policy and policy-making. It provides a starting point for understanding how policy is made, who makes it and what are its impacts. Based on the findings, this study recommends the following future research areas: analysis of specific policies of the Omani HE system, how certain policies are made, how to fund the HE system after the oil runs out, what strategies are needed to empower HEIs, the appropriateness of the current governance system and its impact on policy-making, and examining the impact of globalisation on the HE system and policies.

First, this study outlined and analysed the broad HE policy-making architecture and its operations. Further research is needed to target certain policies (e.g., funding, research, admissions and so on) within the HE system and to analyse their context, specific texts and enactment. Further research is also needed to examine how certain policy-decisions are made within the four scenarios provided in
this study. This study did not go in depth to examine who actually has the power to make the final decision in each scenario and how policy-decisions are negotiated.

Research is needed concerning how Omani HE might be funded in a post-oil economy. Such a study can be based on global experiences and might make recommendations for the Omani Government regarding how to fund mass HE. Empowering the HEIs in the policy-making process is another area for investigation. The current situation was revealed in this study to be disadvantageous to the HEIs. What possible empowerment strategies can be used to make these institutions active in policy-making processes? Further research should examine this issue.

This study found that the current governance system (multi-governing agencies) of Omani HE has affected negatively HE policy and the HE system. Further research is crucial to look at how the Omani HE system can overcome this challenge and be able to align its policies so that they serve and contribute to the nation’s development. Further research is also needed to study in detail the impact of regional, sub- and supranational organisations on the Omani HE policy. This study has begun to look at this topic, but a full study focused on their impact would be beneficial. Additionally, the broader global context was also investigated in this study with the aim of looking at the global discourses that have influenced Omani HE policy. This study recommends that future research examine in greater detail the impact of globalisation on Omani HE policy.

9.5. A final comment

HE systems globally do not have similar policy-making architectures. Furthermore, pressures from outside the nation affect them and are mediated in varying ways. Each nation has its own specific context that frames the HE policy architecture, its operations and what influences it. Of course, we cannot deny the global context and its converging impact on HE systems, but still the national context does play a significant role in accepting partially or fully its influence or even resisting such global flows and pressures. This is particularly so in Oman. Overall, it can be argued that each HE system varies in its response to globalisation. The Omani HE system is a unique case that has built upon a mass schooling system developed only in the 1970s. This system is merely thirty years old and yet very large in terms of the number of institutions. Indeed, Oman has very rapidly moved to a mass system of HE, a development that raises quality issues. The Omani Government has nurtured this system to serve the nation's development after the discovery of oil. So it is not surprising to find its policy much affected and directed by the will of the government, taking into consideration that it is a monarchy.

This study has revealed that policy-making in Omani HE has been evolving since its establishment with changes happening in response to national, regional and global trends and issues. It is expected
that the hierarchy of the architecture will change in the near future with, HEIs playing a more central role in making HE policy. This is a global trend that will no doubt affect the Omani HE system and over time cannot be resisted. This will most likely be situated alongside moves to incorporate more elements of democracy within the Omani political system and a greater stress on research in Omani HE. Overall, there are emerging questions in this study about the future policy-making architecture of the Omani HE system, while moving towards democracy and the future well-being of this very rapidly developing HE system in a post-oil period for Oman.
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Appendix 1: Letter from advisors to the Omani Consul

6 July 2013

Dr Hamed Al Alawi
The Consul-General of the Sultanate of Oman – Australia
Level 4 Suite 2
493 St Kilda Road
Melbourne 3004
Australia

Dear Dr Alawi

I am writing as principal advisor about Khalaf Al'Abri’s PhD research that he is conducting here in the School of Education at The University of Queensland. His thesis is currently entitled, Higher Education Policy Architecture and Policy-Making in the Sultanate of Oman: Towards a critical understanding.

Khalaf has recently been confirmed as a PhD candidate after one year of full-time study. This entailed the preparation of a 10,000 word confirmation document that outlined his research questions, theoretical framework, methodology and time frame for the conduct of the research. Khalaf did a public presentation on this document and a panel of experts provided feedback and confirmed his candidature. The research study has now received ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee here at The University of Queensland. He is thus now ready to return to Oman to collect data for his study. This data collection entails two sources, namely, interviews with relevant personnel and document analysis.

In this context, I am thus writing to ask that you write to Sultan Qaboos University on Khalaf’s behalf to request that the University communicate with the interview personnel seeking permission for Khalaf to conduct his research interviews with them. A list of interviewees is attached to this letter.

I thank you very much in advance for your assistance and cooperation in relation to this matter. If you need any further information, I would be very happy to provide it. My email address and phone numbers are below.

In closing, I would note that I am certain that Khalaf will complete a high quality PhD with relevance to policy making in higher education in Oman. His research will also make a contribution to the relevant academic literature.
Yours faithfully

[Signature]

Professor Robert Lingard PhD FASSA FACEL ACSS
Professorial Research Fellow
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The University of Queensland 4069
Brisbane Australia
Email: r.lingard@uq.edu.au Ph: 0422893186
Appendix 2: Letter from the Omani Consul to SQU Vice-chancellor
Appendix 3: An example of a letter from SQU Vice-chancellor to the interviewees

Subject: Simplification Request

Dear Professor Zainab Bint Saud Al-Busaidi, Minister of Higher Education and Quality of Education,

Greetings from Sultan Qaboos University Office of the Vice Chancellor.

I am writing to simplify the process of obtaining your approval for a visit to Australia to conduct research at the University of British Columbia. This research, titled "Higher Education Policy Architecture and Policy-Making in the Sultanate of Oman: Towards a Critical Understanding," is crucial for our university.

Please consider this request and notify us of your decision. I would be grateful for your early response.

Best regards,

[Signature]

Director, Sultan Qaboos University Office of the Vice Chancellor

Date: 21 June 2012

[Stamp]
Appendix 4: An example of snowballing and cascading letters
السلطنة عمان
وزارة التعليم العالي
المديرية العامة للتعليم العالي وücيلات العلوم التطبيقية

الموضوع/تسهيل مهمة البحثية

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته وبعد...

بالإشارة إلى خطاب الدكتور/ علي بن سعود السباعي رئيس جامعة السلطان قابوس (مشرفي) حول البحث العلمي للفاضل/ خلف بن مرمد العمري يعنى:


عليه يرجى التكرم بتسهيل مهمة البحثية للفاضل المذكور أعلاه من خلال إجراء المقابلات مع العلينين باللكليات، ويمكن التواصل مع المذكور على هاتف 99378896 للتنسيق حول موعد المقابلات.

وتفضلوا بقبول فائق الاحترام

د. عبدالله بن علي الفي ال
مدير عام كلية العلوم التطبيقية

233
## Appendix 5: Interview guide

### Interview Guide

<table>
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<tr>
<th>The Focus</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The structure and functioning of higher education policy architecture</strong></td>
<td>I show the policy architecture diagram to the interviewee and ask the following questions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Could you explain to me how higher education policy is made in Oman?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- What is the role of the Education Council in coordinating the policy-making and policy development?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Who else participates in the policy-making processes? Take the current admission policy as an example.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Who are the key ‘players’ involved in establishing the current admission policy? And why?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- How have competing interests been negotiated in relation to the current admission agenda?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Where did the current admissions policy come from? What was the impetus for it?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- What policy networks have been involved in the process of admission policy production?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How do you see the relationships between the various agents and organisations when it comes to policy-making?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How do these various entities work together in reality in the Omani policy-making architecture to create effective policies?</td>
</tr>
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</table>

| **The impact of this architecture on policy making processes** | |
| - In your opinion, do you see any difficulties with such an architecture in the policy-making process? Is there any negative impact on the policy-making processes? |
| - Overall, do you think that the current higher education policy architecture is complex in nature? If so: what difficulties result from this? Ambiguous structure? |
| - What would you see as an ideal structure for policy making in higher education in Oman? |

<p>| <strong>The impact of this architecture and these processes on the content of metapolicy</strong> | |
| - What roles does each institution play in the development of admissions policy and what coordination was there to in terms of increasing student numbers? |
| - Is there an evaluation strategy for the current policies and their implementation? If yes, who does that? |</p>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors (national, regional and global) impact on the architecture, policy processes and metapolicy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- What national issues and factors affect the current policies? And policy-making processes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How are some policy issues (e.g. admission) aligned with the national policies and the authority of different governmental bodies, institutions and regulatory structures?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How does/has the regional context (e.g. GCC Council) affect the current policies? Policy-making? Have there been any GCC regional policy agreements? If so, what are they and why have they been developed?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- How do you see globalisation affecting higher education policy? Are there any global discourses affecting higher education policy in Oman?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Has globalisation been invoked as a rationale for the current admission policy?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggestion for significant documents and interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Are there any more issues with the higher education policy architecture and policy-making that I haven’t touched on?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could you please suggest the most significant documents that may help me in my study? People to interview?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is there anything more you would like to add?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 6: Information sheet to vice-chancellors, deans, directors and presidents

Information sheet to vice-chancellors, deans, directors and presidents

My name is Khalaf Al’Abri and I am studying for a PhD in the School of Education at the University of Queensland. I am carrying out a study about the higher education policy architecture and policy-making in Oman. This study seeks to contribute to the understanding of the Omani higher education policy architecture and its operations. Furthermore, the study investigates the effects of the policy architecture on the current higher education policy-making processes and content. The factors (national, regional and global) impacting the policy architecture, processes and content are also explored.

You are invited to participate in this research study.

Title of the study:
Higher education policy architecture and policy-making in the Sultanate of Oman: Towards a critical understanding.

Participants:
The study will involve approximately 50 policy-makers and others involved in Omani higher education.

Procedure:
Data will be collected during the interview by note-taking and digital audio recording.

Risks to participants
There are no foreseeable physical or psychological risks greater than that ordinarily encountered in daily life for you if you participate in the research project.

Withdrawal
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time and without penalty. This also includes the withdrawal of any information that you have provided during your participation.

Privacy and Confidentiality
Your privacy will be maintained strictly. There is no risk of being identified, as all information relating to your participation in this study will be treated confidentially and reported anonymously. Data will be stored securely in a de-identified format. The data and participants’
names will be stored separately in a computer hard-drive whose password is only known to me. The interview recording as well as interview transcriptions will be kept in a locked cabinet.

Contacts and ethical approval

Should you have any questions or concerns about participating, please either phone me on 99358976, or send me an email: khalaf.alabri@uqconnect.edu.au.

This study has been cleared in accordance with the ethical review guidelines and processes of The University of Queensland. These guidelines are endorsed by the University's principal human ethics committee, the Human Experimentation Ethical Review Committee, and registered with the Australian Health Ethics Committee as complying with the National Statement. You are free to discuss your participation in this study with my academic advisors (Prof. Bob Lingard, r.lingard@uq.edu.au; Dr. Sam Sellar, sam.sellar@uq.edu.au). If you would like to speak to an officer of the University not involved in the study, you may contact the School Ethics Officer on 3365 6502.

If you would like to learn the outcome of the study in which you are participating, please feel free to contact me at the email above and I will send you an abstract of the study and details of the findings.

I thank you for your consideration and hope you will agree to participate in this research project.

Yours sincerely,

Khalaf Al’Abri

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