

165 The Representation of Internationalizing HE in the Omani Policy Documents

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

IHE has been constructed in different ways over time, largely in Western contexts. In the early 2000s the focal point of internationalization efforts moved from student mobility to 'internationalization at home' (Watcher, 2003; Mestenhauser, 2006; Beelan, 2007).

This paper explores how the national, institutional and school policy documents in Oman represent the concept of internationalization. By using two analytical approaches, namely thematic mapping and Bacchi's WPR, the paper unpacks the construction of internationalization. The result reveals that the documents hold a multiple construction of internationalization. Mobility is still low in Oman, but remains at least a rhetorical priority and the benefits of an internationally diverse faculty as regards 'internationalisation at home' compensate the low numbers of incoming exchange students. Yet, Underneath this composite construction of internationalization, drawn from Western institutions, lies a division between a national desire to preserve Omani values and the desire for Western-style "progress".

Full paper

The paper's primary aim is to answer the research question: "How do national and institutional policy documents in Oman represent/construct internationalization, particularly in relation to the curriculum and teaching & learning?". The definition or meaning of internationalization is not addressed directly in any of the documentation. The thematic mapping approach toward the policy document analysis revealed several topic nodes through which the documentation offers glimpses of the representation and construction of internationalization; and it is around those topic nodes that this paper is structured.

Methodology:

Each section of this paper starts with a qualitative thematic analysis of a topic-node identified through thematic mapping to explore the contents of the documents. Through this thematic analysis, the paper will contribute my first understanding of how ideas such as national identity within internationalization, collaboration, quality assurance and student development are presented at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) and specifically within the College of Economic and Political Science (CEPS) in Oman. It will also build on the existing limited understanding of how these themes are understood within Oman at a national level.

The final subsection of each section moves from the analytical discussion of the data within these documents to their broader context to address the research question in the paper regarding how internationalization is represented and constructed. In order to achieve this in a consistent manner, Bacchi's WPR analysis (2012) is drawn upon within each section, drawing on the following question set (Bacchi, 2012, p.21):

- Question 1: What's the problem represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal? (hereafter referred to in this chapter as Q1)
- Question 2: What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the "problem"? (Q2)
- Question 3: How has this representation of the "problem" come about? (Q3)

- Question 4: What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the “problem” be thought about differently? (Q4)
- Question 5: What effects are produced by this representation of the “problem”? (Q5)

Outline:

Section 1.2 explores the tension between a desire to promote and embed Omani values and the process of internationalization in higher education. The study highlights the importance of national pride and core values, religious and social values in the Omani educational system. The Oman Vision 2040 and the Oman Philosophy of Education emphasize the need for preserving Omani identity, culture, and Islamic principles in the face of globalization. However, internationalization requires the adoption of English as the language of instruction and the alignment of Omani higher education with global norms.

Section 1.3 examines the intersection of internationalization, institutional profile, and ranking at SQU. In response to the 2009 UNESCO report, SQU and Oman prioritized providing “quality education”, which involved improving the global perception of the education provided at SQU. The university continues to focus on collaboration with renowned institutions, developing partnerships, exchanges, research collaborations, and participation in international conferences

Section 1.4 turns explicitly to “quality” as discussed in the documents, focusing on quality enhancement and assurance from three perspectives: international accreditation, benchmarking, and faculty diversity.

Section 1.5 examines the centrality of employment in education in Oman. Omani education has shifted towards producing graduates capable of filling senior roles in the private sector, which has traditionally been dominated by Western expatriates. This includes integrating internationalization at the curriculum level. The main goal of higher education institutions like (SQU) is to develop graduates who are academically qualified and ready to meet the challenges of the labour market and society.

Section 1.6 turns to pedagogy as addressed in these strategic documents, particularly at school level with CEPS. International instructional aids and materials are seen as helping students develop the skills and knowledge needed for global employability.

Section 1.7 brings together these thematic threads to discuss the adoption in Oman of a mixture construction of internationalization, drawing together Western discourse around internationalization at home and internationalization of the curriculum.

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