Stakeholders’ perspectives on quality monitoring mechanisms instituted by international university affiliates in Omani Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs)

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ABSTRACT
With increased impetus on internationalization of higher education, academic interest on this theme has witnessed a marked increment over the years. Parallel to the growing trend of internationalization of higher education, higher educational institutions have been emphatic upon maintaining rigorous quality standards in line with internationally-acclaimed standards. However, while internationalization of higher education has paced quite rapidly, emphasis upon upholding quality standards remains grim (Castle & Kelly, 2004). In this regard, my thesis purports to combine these twin concepts; viz. the issue of internationalization of higher education juxtaposed with the theme of quality in higher education, in the context of Omani higher education where privatization and internationalization of higher education have gained currency post-1995 with recent emphasis upon maintaining of high-quality standards at the same time. Conceding that international university partners are significant “external” stakeholders in the Omani Private Higher Educational Institutions (PHEIs), my research seeks to explore the effectiveness of the ongoing quality monitoring mechanisms in Omani PHEIs. Quality mechanisms in higher education have been trending globally for over a decade (Stensaker, 2003) which help in enhancing quality in HEIs besides setting international benchmarks for comparisons (Brennan & Shah, 2000). In the agreements attested by the international university partners and the local PHEIs, the former have instituted a number of quality monitoring mechanisms to be implemented in the PHEIs; my research pertains to ascertaining the gap between the formulation and implementation of these quality monitoring mechanisms from the perspective of different stakeholders.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION
In this research, we are treating international university partners as the “key” role-players in deciding how and in what forms “internal” quality will be ensured in the Omani PHEIs. In Oman’s higher education, quality parameters are well-defined by the regulatory authorities like Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) and Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA); my research shall invoke such quality parameters to buttress the secondary sources for the present purpose. The research will focus on 9 PHEIs wherein questionnaires will be conducted with the faculty and
program heads. Further, interviews shall be held with the senior public officials from MoHE and OAAA and management representatives of PHEIs to ascertain their views. Overall, around 200-250 respondents shall be tapped from PHEIs and 20-25 respondents shall be tapped from the public bodies (MoHE & OAAA). Both quantitative and qualitative analysis shall inform the present research wherein multiple regression analysis shall be used in the first part and interviews’ responses shall be analyzed in the second part of the study. Being associated with the MoHE, I have been able to relate with the issues and perspectives linked with the quality standards and international affiliation in Omani PHEIs. Therefore, it is hoped that my research shall have significance in terms of offering apt suggestions for effecting improvements in the ongoing quality management frameworks governing the PHEIs. Besides, my research will evaluate the nature, breadth and scope of collaborative arrangement between the local PHEIs and their international university partners. Implicitly, I shall be able to understand the perceptions of the representatives from the Omani PHEIs regarding the variance between the formulation and implementation of quality monitoring mechanisms by the international university affiliates in Omani PHEIs. To the best of my knowledge, such a study has not been conducted in the Omani context so far and therefore this research shall contribute to the higher education literature. Finally, the study shall leave trails of future research directions.

The Rationale of my research question
With the realization that quality assurance mechanisms need to be strengthened in internationalization of higher education (Stella, 2006), the present study extends further the scope of the research question posed in an Australia-based study (Lim, 2008: 127) as to “what is the understanding between importer and exporter of an offshore degree in terms of quality assurance?” In this study, it was probed how an Australian university and its offshore partner institution shared concerns regarding quality assurance in the former. This research question holds relevance vis-à-vis my research because my study seeks to probe the relationship between the Omani PHEIs and their international university affiliates in terms of ensuring the upkeep of international quality standards. Specifically, my study seeks to capture how the representatives of the Omani PHEIs perceive the effectiveness of the quality monitoring mechanisms instituted by the international university partners. Besides, this study attempts to ascertain the veracity of the observation: “Western institutions are prepared to consider major investment in outposts in developing countries, to offer vacation courses by their own staff, to underwrite assessment and quality assurance, and provide consultancies and participation in projects for reform” (Shaw, 2005: 461). This observation holds relevance for my research in the sense that I seek to explore the extent to which the international university affiliates are willing to expend their wherewithal in maintaining quality standards in Omani PHEIs and how do these international university affiliates monitor the quality of their programs delivered in the Omani PHEIs. This is underlined by the fact that the roles and responsibilities of the awarding higher education institution and their international university partner may need to be explicitly clarified (Smith, 2010). Further, my research seeks to probe the effectiveness of such monitoring mechanisms of quality standards vis-à-vis the offshore programs run by the international university affiliates. Besides, the study seeks to ascertain the extent to which affiliation agreements in terms of program quality are being followed in letter and spirit.

For instance, Omani PHEIs have contracted with international universities for providing services in areas of academic program development and evaluation; reviewing and benchmarking curriculums
or knowledge sharing, e-learning and open learning seminars. Thus, it would be a worthwhile exploration into the extent to which such a collaborative arrangement has been promising from the perspective of the management of PHEIs as well as the public officials.

In line with the aforesaid, my research question is “What are the stakeholders’ perspectives regarding the effectiveness of quality monitoring mechanisms instituted or supported by the international university partners in the Omani PHEIs and what is the gap, if any, between formulation and implementation of such quality monitoring checks in the Omani PHEIs?”

Sub-research questions for the present study are:
1. As per the agreements attested by the international university partners and the Omani PHEIs, what are the ways in which international university affiliates monitor quality of offshore programs in Omani PHEIs?
2. What are the perceptions of the different stakeholders (PHEI teaching faculty, program heads, management, public officials from MoHE and OAAA) on the effectiveness of the quality monitoring mechanisms currently being used in Omani PHEIs?
3. In line with the observations made by the stakeholders identified in (2), is there a gap between the formulation and implementation of quality monitoring mechanisms instituted by the international university affiliates in the Omani PHEIs?

Literature review
3.1 Quality management and Internationalization of higher education
Internationalization of higher education has been defined as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight, 2003: 2). Internationalization of higher education facilitates pedagogical improvisation besides furthering cross-cultural dialogue (Burdett & Crossman, 2012). There are opportunities and challenges associated with internationalization of higher education. There has been ample emphasis upon maintaining quality standards by the stakeholders in the process of internationalizing higher education (UNESCO, 2005). Hong Kong follows a "Deep Collaboration Model" where the local institutions of higher education forge strategic alliances and collaborative arrangements with overseas institutions (Mok, 2005). At the same time, however, with internationalization of higher education in Africa, three challenges have surfaced over time: “local control, local focus and local benefit” (Singh, 2010). For instance, in East Africa, issues of quality assurance, access and equity surface because new forms of provision of higher education may not have the relevant content to suit the local context (Ogachi, 2009). Besides, internationalization of higher education, inclusion of private parties in running tertiary education has been rampant, of late. For instance, privatization of higher education has been a call for absorbing demand for higher education in China and this has been attested in the increase of overall enrollment over the years (Cao & Li, 2014). The essence of privatization in education is to limit state participation in the provision, financing and/or control of educational services to improve its quality, efficiency and effectiveness (Cuellar-Marchelli, 2003). However, privatization has its challenges in terms of being lax in maintaining quality standards in some countries like India and South Africa (Harvey, 2002). Given the near simultaneity of the internationalization and privatization trends in higher education, for the success and growth of internationalization and privatization in higher education, it is important that a robust quality assurance system be instituted and a pertinent question which
governs this aspect is “What is the understanding between importer and exporter of an offshore degree in terms of quality assurance?” (Choon & Lim, 2008: 127). This research question constitutes the bedrock for the present research as well.

Emphasis upon quality monitoring in higher education has been extensively covered in literature. For instance, monitoring-cum-management of quality in higher education is being discussed to ensure more accountability in higher education management (Cullen et al., 2003). Likewise, quality assessment has been considered as important for development of higher education (Nenadal, 2015). Quality monitoring in higher education should be adapted to institutional context so that higher education is better equipped in responding to national needs (Yorke, 1999). For instance, and as we read below in this proposal, Omani PHEIs have been very much emphatic upon establishing themselves in expanding the opportunities of higher education for Omani students, therefore, maintenance of quality standards in these PHEIs is important. Similarly and extending the argument further, all the stakeholders of the PHEIs should be engaged in quality management (Sahney, Banwet & Karunes, 2004). For instance, in the case of the Omani PHEIs, the international university partners must ensure that quality standards at the host PHEIs are adequate for meeting the national needs. In fact, these international university partners have been in the forefront as far as instituting the quality monitoring mechanisms in the Omani PHEIs are concerned, and this is well-evident in the published sources as well. What is more intriguing to probe is the formulation-implementation gap of these quality monitoring mechanisms, and this is precisely the concern of this research here.

There are three perspectives regarding monitoring of education: education monitoring may be considered as an instrument of education management (Sallis, 2002); education monitoring has been conceived as an instrument of education qualimetry (Avanesov, 2007) and education monitoring has been explored in terms of assessment of the effectivness of education quality management (Seymour, 1993). We would adapt Seymour’s interpretation in this proposed research to probe into the quality monitoring mechanisms instituted by the international university partners from the lens of the stakeholders. Quality monitoring is defined as "the broad set of quality-related activities or evaluations that occur either external or internal to an organization" (Horsburgh, 1999: 9). Quality monitoring in higher education has been discussed, inter alia, in terms of approval of individual degree and related qualifications to be offered outside a university, approval of individual programmes and/or external examination of students by some professional bodies prior to admittance of graduates to a profession, academic audit within the university sector for improving quality according to their own academic requirements, monitoring of performance agreements by funding agencies, moderation of student assessment processes and tasks in respect of national qualifications, use of external examiners in degree and related programs in universities and in non-university degree programmes and use of external moderators and monitors in degree and related qualifications outside the universities (Horsburgh, 1997). One of the elements of quality monitoring is related to institutional self-evaluation (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). Since such a self-evaluation is a responsibility of all the relevant stakeholders in higher education, for the present study, we are focusing on the international university partners as the key stakeholders who are entrusted with formulation and implementation of quality monitoring mechanisms in the local PHEIs. Besides, academic programmes are approved and regulated by the international university partners; therefore, they chalk out strategies and plans for quality assurance in the local PHEIs. Such strategies and plans are mutually agreed upon by the affiliating parties and they are linked with designing measures for quality maintenance in the local PHEIs.
For the theoretical framework of the present study, stakeholder theory shall be adopted. Stakeholder theory has been amply used in management sciences. This theory establishes the relationship among the stakeholders of an organization. Stakeholders are defined as "those groups without whose support the organization would cease or exist" (Freeman, 1984). The five stakeholder groups identified in management theory (Friedman & Miles, 2002; Argandona, 1998) are the firm’s suppliers, consumers, employees, competitors and government/regulatory agencies. Likewise, in the context of the Omani PHEIs, the stakeholders are international university partners, students, academic and administrative staff, other PHEIs and regulatory authorities. Since my research seeks to underscore the effectiveness of cross-border cooperation in terms of maintaining quality in the Omani PHEIs.

3.2 Internationalization in Omani higher education

PHEIs in Oman were introduced in 1995-96 with the expectation that these institutions will help in absorbing the increasing demand for HE from citizen and to boost the efficiency and the quality of higher education delivery. PHEIs, as per the Ministerial Decision 34/2000, are required to have international collaborations with universities abroad. In fact, the prime reason for this requirement was to ensure better quality in higher education that meets international standards (Donn & Manthri, 2010:126; Goodliffe & Razvi, 2008). It behooves upon the affiliating partners to ensure quality maintenance and enhancement (Stella & Bhushan, 2011). Besides ensuring “quality of contents of programs and courses…the issues are how these programs are delivered, and whether these (international affiliates) institutions assure the provision of adequate resources for delivering these courses” (Al Harthy, 2011).

At present, there are 27 PHEIs in Oman which have partnerships/affiliations with more than 50 international universities or institutions representing different countries such as UK, USA, Australia, India, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and others. The programmes offered by these PHEIs range from diploma to graduate degrees across diverse disciplines. Access to these programs has increased tremendously since 2011 when the government decided to increase the provision of internal scholarship scheme per year to cover around 9600 students in place of hitherto-funded 1,600 students. This step was taken to meet the increasing demand of access in higher education given that public institutions of higher education were already saturated with admissions. With an overall increase in enrolment to 60,000 in Omani PHEIs, there was a need to ensure high quality standards and effective management system in place. In Oman, institutions of higher education are classified into three categories based on the level of programs and research requirements; these are: Universities, University Colleges and Colleges. Both university colleges and colleges are required - by law- to affiliate with international university partners whereas universities are exempted from this requirement. According to Trevor-Roper, Razvi and Goodliffe (2013), transnational education (TNE) assumes different forms in Oman like branch campus, double/joint degree, validated program, franchised program, etc.

It is significant to note that maintaining a standard of high quality demands substantial investment in time and money, and this requires a concerted cooperation of major stakeholders (Lim, 2009). It is mandatory that offshore programs be offered in PHEIs in line with the affiliate universities standards as well as the requirements mandated by the public authorities. University colleges and colleges are left free to choose the suitable form of affiliation with a condition that the foreign
affiliate will be the awarding body for the degree certificate (solely or jointly). Currently, the responsibilities of international university partners towards monitoring their offshore programs varies from one PHEI to another and such monitoring mechanisms take different forms such as:

a. Periodic annual visits,
b. Program review and program assessments,
c. Reviewing students’ records and samples of students work,
d. Staff appointment approval,
e. Exam design,
f. Setting entry requirements of the program,
g. Staff exchange and staff development,
h. Sharing library resources,
i. Sharing technologies, etc.

Thus, it would be worthwhile to probe the breadth and scope of these responsibilities in different PHEIs and what is the extent of commitment of these international university partners towards implementing these quality monitoring forms.

3.3 Policy-making bodies associated with Omani higher education

Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) is the overseeing authority of the PHEIs and ensures that all regulations regarding programme licensing, programme delivery, staffing, buildings and safety are being followed by the PHEIs (Royal Decree, 1996). The MoHE counts maintenance of quality standards as one of its strategic objective (Source: http://www.mohe.gov.om/InnerPage.aspx?id=D8D3FCA8-0E81-429E-BF4C-3272D891DF95&culture=en). It is posited that since affiliation agreements are counter-signed and authorized by the MoHE, therefore, its role in governing the relationship between the contracting parties assumes significance. Implicitly, the MoHE screens the nature and scope of affiliation terms between the contracting parties and this includes the assessment of the quality standards as well. As an official of MoHE, I would be better able to understand the diverse methods of quality monitoring in Omani PHEIs and to what extent are the norms governing the association between the affiliating partners being monitored and managed. Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) is the principal quality assurance and accreditation public authority in Oman. Set up as Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) in 2001 (Royal Decree No. 74, 2001) and restructured as OAAA in 2010, it is entrusted with the responsibility of programme and institutional accreditation and maintenance of quality standards in all HEIs in Oman including PHEIs. Further, the MoHE and through the Directorate General of Private Universities and Colleges (DGPUC), is responsible for overseeing and monitoring the overall performance of PHEIs right from the licensing stage until its becoming a complete functioning establishment. DGPUC plays a crucial role in ensuring that PHEIs are functioning in compliance with the government rules and regulations and in-line with strategic directions in HE.

For the purpose of my research, I will solicit views from the MoHE and OAAA officials. MoHE is the overseeing body of higher education in the country and has acknowledged its commitment towards maintaining internationally-benchmarked quality standards in higher education. OAAA remains the key accreditation authority and its periodic audits are emphatic upon maintaining
quality standards in the higher educational institutions. Since both the regulatory bodies are actively involved in quality management in PHEIs, perspectives shared by their representatives shall constitute a valid source of ascertaining the extent of commitment of the international university partners towards quality management in the PHEIs.

Data sources
Both primary and secondary sources shall be used for the study. Primary data is sourced from information such as personal interviews, questionnaires or surveys with the active involvement of the researcher. Secondary data is constituted by the pre-existing information in the form of online resources, published documents, etc. In my research, interviews and questionnaires shall inform the primary data. Therefore, for my study, primary sources shall base the qualitative and quantitative parts of the study while secondary sources of data shall be driven through a perusal of published and unpublished sources like Quality Audit Reports, academic affiliation agreements, etc.

Methodology
For the present study, mixed methodology shall be adopted wherein quantitative and qualitative approaches shall be adopted. I am deploying mixed methodology in the study because of its relevance for my purpose of interviewing seniors and adopting a survey questionnaire method for the rest. Seniors may not have the time to fill the questionnaire while they may possess a lot of information about the ground realities. Others may be more comfortable in answering straightforward questions. Mixed methodologies employing both quantitative and qualitative methods have been endorsed in literature (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989; Creswell & Clark, 2010). Mixed methods research has been defined as "an approach to knowledge (theory and practice) that attempts to consider multiple viewpoints, perspectives, positions, and standpoints (always including the standpoints of qualitative and quantitative research)" (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007: 113). Both qualitative and quantitative means shall be deployed to substantiate the purport of the study in the two sub-sections of the thesis.

For qualitative part of the study, face-to-face interviews shall be conducted with policy-makers in MoHE and OAAA as well as with key management personnel of PHEIs; this is needed as views from these stakeholders will help me understand the pros and cons of the current practices adopted by international university partners for quality monitoring in Omani PHEIs. Tentatively, 20-25 respondents shall be requested to voice their opinion. While I know a number of officials from the MoHE and OAAA, therefore, it would not be a herculean task to request them for their time. For contacting the PHEI management personnel, I have a good rapport with some of them and for the rest, I hope to forge ties in due course of time. Quantitative component of the study shall be informed through administration and subsequent analysis of structured questionnaire to the faculty and program heads in PHEIs. Around 200-250 respondents shall be contacted for conducting the quantitative part of my study. Presumably, I shall be adopting convenience sampling and snowball sampling for conducting my study. For the present purpose, 9 institutions will be covered where business studies are being offered in diverse specializations. Undergraduate programs shall remain the main focus of my study since post-graduate program follow a different scheme of hosting offshore programs and an independent research in future might probe them appropriately.
Qualitative evidence
Secondary data sources shall comprise the available documentary evidence from unpublished and published resources. Some of these sources are:

\textbf{\textit{a. Terms of agreement}} governing the relationship between the affiliating partners include the following dimensions:

1. Providing academic support and program specifications to establish new academic programmes including laboratory, curricula, computer equipments and library requirements.
2. Identification of appropriate faculty resources and advising on the latest pedagogical tools and techniques, establishing faculty standards and credentials for recruitment, student learning assessments, and the identification of adequate educational and academic resources.
3. Assisting the local PHEI in developing and maintaining a curriculum that meets the academic requirements required to place students amidst a competitive job market.
4. Advising on the admission criteria of students in terms of merit.
5. Arranging external examiners to evaluate and compare the course delivery mechanisms and assessments of outcomes.
6. Provision of workshops, on-site training and other professional development activities by the staff of international university partner in the local PHEIs.
7. Sharing expertise on e-Learning and providing open online seminars.
8. Collaborating in setting up and promoting joint research initiatives.
9. Visits/exchanges of academic and administrative personnel of international university partner in local PHEIs.
10. Awarding certificates, diploma and other degrees.

Aforementioned are the different means governing the affiliation arrangements between the local PHEIs and the international university partners. My study seeks to ascertain how the Omani PHEI representatives assess and evaluate these quality monitoring mechanisms which are instituted by the international university partners.

\textbf{\textit{b. Quality Audit Reports}} which showcase the main parameters on which quality of Omani PHEIs is being assessed are determined as per stipulations in the OAAA Quality Audit Manual (OAC, 2008) like:

1. Student learning by coursework programs: This includes an assessment of the curriculum, teaching, assessment methods, student retention, employability, etc.
2. Student learning by research programs: This dimension pertains to supervision, research support, retention and employability.
3. Staff research and consultancy: This parameter includes research planning and management, consultancy activities, ethics, intellectual property, professional development, research-teaching nexus and research commercialization.
4. Industry and community engagement: This includes building relationships with industry and employers, professionals, education providers, alumni and community at large.
5. Academic support services: This includes academic support services planning and management, registry (enrolment and student records), library, information and learning technology services, academic advising, student learning support, teaching resources.
6. Students and student support services: This includes aspects such as student support services
7. Staff and staff support services: This includes human resources planning and management, staff profile, recruitment and selection, induction, professional development, performance planning and review, promotion and other incentives, severance, staff organizational climate and retention and Omanization (number of resident Omanis versus expatriates in an HEI).

8. General support services and facilities: This includes public relations and marketing, communication services and facilities management.

The Quality Audit Reports released by the OAAA provide a lot of information regarding the indices on which quality in PHEIs shall be judged. Excerpts from these reports are provided in the following table which is indicative of the need for accountability of the international university partners for maintaining programme standards.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audit Report No./Year</th>
<th>Observation of OAAA</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>41 (2014)</td>
<td>Library resources were not being shared between the contracting parties; Curriculum was not being revised with mutual understanding of the contracting parties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 (2013)</td>
<td>Mutual responsibilities of the contracting parties were left uncovered in the affiliation agreements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 (2012)</td>
<td>Cooperation of the international university partner in research, teaching and consultation was visibly lacking which could be instrumental in furthering the quality standards at the host PHEIs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 (2013)</td>
<td>Visiting professors from the international university partners were needed to transfuse their learning in the host PHEIs and lend a more academically-robust environment in the latter.</td>
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</table>

Table 1: Excerpts from OAAA Quality Audit Reports

c. Program Standards published recently by OAAA (OAAA, 2016) which deliberate upon the quality monitoring mechanisms in the PHEIs:

Criterion 1.4 (Institutional affiliations for the program and quality assurance) of Draft Program Standards (available at [www.oaaa.gov.om](http://www.oaaa.gov.om)) mentions clearly, "In the case of an affiliation agreement governing the program, the agreement is formally approved by both the local HEI and the affiliate HEI. The agreement is clearly defined and effectively implemented and managed to maintain academic standards and quality; and to promote quality improvement..." Likewise, program standards vis-à-vis quality maintenance are being enshrined explicitly which have a strong bearing on quality metrics including pedagogical styles, curriculum nature and scope, institutional infrastructure, e-learning, administrative procedures, faculty qualifications and achievements, etc.

In line with the aforesaid, structured interview questions shall be framed for the study regarding the effectiveness of collaborative arrangements between the international university partners and the local PHEIs. These evidences are the main bases for association between the local PHEIs and the international university partners as far as monitoring the quality of the former are concerned. In this
In vein, my study shall seek to explore the perceptions of the stakeholders (MoHE and OAAA officials, PHEIs’ management) regarding the effectiveness of quality monitoring mechanisms instituted by the international university partners in the PHEIs. It is proposed that I shall be interviewing 20-25 officials from MoHE and OAAA each and all deans/deputy deans (management representatives) in the selected PHEI.

5.2 Quantitative framework
Structured questionnaires shall comprise items that measure the impact of each quality mechanism used by the affiliates to monitor the quality of offshore programs such as the impact of the periodical visits, external assessment, visiting staff, student exchange programs, etc. Here, overall satisfaction with quality monitoring mechanisms is a function of these parameters and the former shall be considered as a dependent variable while the parameters shall be regarded as dependent variables. Indicatively, multiple regression analysis shall inform the present study for the quantitative analysis of the study. I am targeting a sample of 200-250 faculty and program heads for the present study.

Perspectives of inquiry
In terms of inquiry, I shall be invoking a judicious mix of constructivist paradigm (Guba, 1979) and scientific inquiry. For the quantitative portion of the study, scientific inquiry shall inform the base wherein surveys conducted on the respondents shall aid in objectively assessing and drawing inferences (King, Keohane & Verba, 1994) regarding the nature and scope of external monitoring mechanisms in private higher education in Omani context. As far as qualitative component of the study is concerned, constructivist approach deals with deriving meanings from social constructions. Such social constructions develop in the course of interactions among the individuals and their responses and reactions regarding the interactions, situations, events, and the other phenomena.

Knowledge construction shall happen based on my interactions and observations in the past with the present. This implies that I shall be validating my previous experiences of working in the higher education sector with my prospective research as to how quality management is accomplished in the PHEIs. Therefore, with the field-study conducted on . From a naturalistic perspective, there exist multiple realities and my inquiry may lead to multiple yet inter-related pieces of synthesizing assertions. The relevance of the previously-held knowledge and experience about the Omani higher education system and the internationalized HE has made me realize that quality standards in Omani PHEIs may be managed through a collaborative understanding of all stakeholders. I shall be deriving my understanding of the research question with the help of various actors in the Omani higher education system, such as the MoHE, OAAA, PHEI management, program heads and faculty. Further, my research is value-laden, as I delve further in the realm of constructivist-naturalistic paradigm; I understand that I may arrive at deducing divergent conclusions about my research question. For instance, the perception of the faculty, program heads and PHEI management may be different from that held by the State bodies, like MoHE and OAAA. Further, my research is throwing light on the ethical dimension of internationalization of HE in the sense “why” and how “should” the international university partners contribute towards improving the educational quality standards at local PHEIs through their monitoring mechanisms. Finally, as an action researcher, I shall be employing inclusional methodologies (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005: 25) wherein inquiry is conducted with and among others by including the different stakeholders which comprise the Omani
higher education system.

Professional and personal background
I have been associated with the Ministry of Higher Education for over 15 years now and my close encounters with the ever-puzzling, yet gripping, issues of PHEIs have brought me face-to-face with the dilemmas faced by these institutions in terms of their association with the international university partners. My research, hopefully, shall bring to light such dilemmas wherein the effectiveness of the international university partners in monitoring the overall quality assurance of the Omani PHEIs may be gauged. Through my experience and with inputs from my colleagues in the MoHE and senior management in PHEIs, I hope that I would be able to lend a critical perspective to my research question. From a personal perspective, this research holds prominence for me because of my interest in internationalization and cross-border education in Oman and how such trends are being impacted by extraneous forces. I ought to confess that I am still in the embryonic stage of the learning curve as far as applying rigorous statistical techniques is concerned. Still, I hope that by and by, I shall be able to attain mastery over quantitative techniques, especially SEM and factor analysis to arrive at logical findings for my research objectives.

Ethical considerations pertaining to the study
As a researcher, it behoves to adopt ethical standards while conducting research. There are concerns pertaining to anonymity, privacy and confidentiality as well as prior consent of the respondents while conducting research (Johnson, 2014). Further, research ethics has a significant role in ensuring professionalism of the researcher during the process of data collection besides ensuring honesty, confidentiality, openness and legality in all dealings (Bajpai, 2011).

Educational research needs to observe certain ethical considerations (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) and I shall ensure that:

a. Informed consent is solicited from the respondents: For this purpose, I would ensure that all the prospective respondents peruse and sign the agreement form which details the nature and scope of my research and its objectives. This would facilitate in ice-breaking and warding off initial inhibitions.

b. Gaining access to and acceptance in research setting is ensured as smoothly as possible: Since my research is targeting public officials based in the OAAA and MoHE and the representatives (management, program heads and faculty) of the PHEIs, I shall endeavor to forge ties with them through proper channel and following the desired protocol. I understand that I would be requesting the prospective respondents to lend some time for fruitful interaction. While OAAA and MoHE are well-conversant with my identity and it would not be difficult to develop a rapport with the officials there, I might encounter challenges in effecting a dialogue with the representatives in the PHEIs. There are possibilities that the responses may be biased to give a bright picture of the affiliation arrangements. However, with the large sample, it is hoped that such biasness may stand neutralized to some extent. Gaining opinion from MoHE and OAAA officials shall be far easier than that from the PHEI management and staff representatives. Nevertheless, I hope that I shall be able to impress upon both the sets of respondents my academic pursuits with the desired impact.

c. Ensuring the nature of ethics in social research generally: I would ensure that the respondents are comfortable with my request for discussion and they would be given assurance of anonymization of their identities while they are exchanging their perspectives with me.
d. I would ensure that my research is conducted while upholding professional ethics and respect for human dignity.
e. All dilemmas of the respondents pertaining to privacy, confidentiality, betrayal and deception shall be warded off while interacting with the respondents. I would ensure that full respect to their privacy is accorded while recording their responses. For conducting the interviews, I propose to take down notes and record views through audio recorder. However, if the respondents are not comfortable with my recording their perspectives via audio device, the same shall be discarded. For conducting empirical study, I would be emailing the questionnaires to the respondents and their personal details would not be solicited mandatorily. Respondents are welcome to contact me to solicit a copy of the research findings and a detailed report on my thesis.
f. Regulatory ethical norms shall be followed because I need approval from MoHE as well to conduct my study among the other employees here as well as at OAAA. Besides, I would ensure that I have an attested copy of the approval for conducting my research among the PHEIs' management personnel, and faculty. This would lend credibility to my research and put a stamp on my credentials, aims and objectives.
g. My research is self-sponsored and no external funding arrangements have been possible to undertake the EdD programme. This aspect shall be clearly mentioned in my authorization letter duly approved by the MoHE.
h. Finally, I understand my responsibility to the wider academic community. While I would be churning out a couple of research articles during and post-completion of my research, I would ensure that my study observes rigorous standards and respondents' identity is anonymized at all costs.

Concluding remarks
This research proposal aims at gauging the perception of the public officials and representatives of Omani PHEIs regarding the quality monitoring mechanisms formulated and implemented by the international university partners. Veering around the maze of internationalization across the globe and in Oman, in particular, the proposal drew extensively from the theoretical literature and qualitative reviews of published and unpublished sources. I hope that policy-makers and educationists as well as other stakeholders in Omani higher education shall benefit from my study. My study is limited in its scope in so far as it delves into the quality monitoring mechanisms instituted by the international university partners while discounting the role of physical, regulatory and technological resources required to upkeep quality in Omani PHEIs. The study is exploratory in nature and further study is required which might ascertain the views of other stakeholders like students as well. Conceding that all errors and omissions shall remain entirely mine, I hope that my study shall be a significant contribution to the extant body of knowledge and to the higher education sector in my country. The study leaves significant research pointers for further probe:

a. How do quality monitoring mechanisms vary in state-run public HEIs in contrast with the private HEIs in Oman?
b. To what extent are quality mechanisms in Omani PHEIs impacting students’ employability?
c. Is there any implication of internationalization of higher education for “Omanization” of academic content and human resources?
d. How is privatization of higher education similar or different across the constituents of GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council), i.e. Oman, Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain? How are the
quality parameters being implemented and monitored across the GCC?

References