ACADEMICS', STUDENTS', EMPLOYERS', AND GRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS
TOWARDS BUSINESS MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION UNDERGRADUATE
EMPLOYABILITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND INDUSTRY IN OMAN

A thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is an exact copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public; therefore, I authorise Brunel University London to make it available electronically to individuals or institutions for the purpose of scholarly research.

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Abstract

Employers are calling upon higher education institutions (HEIs) to enhance graduates' quality of work-related skills and knowledge. The Omani government is trying to strengthen the relationship between higher education (HE) and industry as an effective strategy for promoting a student's employability and expertise; however, the communication is ineffective and not enough.

The purpose of this study is to create new understandings about business management and administration (BMA) undergraduate employability in Oman through exploring the perceptions of students, graduates, employers and academics. It examines: the role of HEIs, the BMA departments and industry in promoting BMA students' employability; students' expectations from their HEIs; skills and knowledge provided by BMA departments and those required by companies in the workplace; the implementation and effectiveness of extra-curricular and academic activities within HEIs; and finally the effectiveness of the HE-industry relationship in developing students' employability. By using the human capital theory, this study aims to explore the impact of formal education and work experience on students' employability. Several employability approaches and frameworks are included in the literature review chapter.

Data were collected from surveys (academics, students, graduates, and employers), and semi-structured interviews with academics within the different public and private HEIs. The data were analysed using numerical (quantitative) and textual (qualitative) techniques.

The collaboration between education professionals and industry practitioners was perceived as one of the most important factors for promoting students' employability. A serious and active commitment from the government, HE decision makers, HEIs, business departments, and employers in developing students' work-related skills and knowledge, and reaching a win-win situation was highly valued. Moreover, results identify certain skills required by employers to assist graduates in implementing their knowledge in the workplace.

Research implications highlighted the significance of the HE-industry relationship in developing BMA undergraduates' employability. The study contributes new knowledge about the issue being investigated particularly in the Gulf and Oman contexts. The study is expected to contribute in addressing the policy gap in the relationship between policy makers, employers, and HEIs leading to the implementation of the necessary approaches of reinforcing students' work-related skills and knowledge.

Key Words: Omani Education System, Perceptions, Employability, Undergraduates, Business and Administration Department (BMA) within Higher Education Institution (HEI), Higher education (HE), industry, education stakeholders.

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List of Abbreviations, Acronyms, and Terms	
AHDR	Arab Human Development Report
AIESEC	The world's largest youth leadership development organisation
ASTD	Association for Talent Development
BMA	Business Management and Administration
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CHE	Council of Higher Education (Oman)
CV	Curriculum Vitae
Eighth Five-Year Plan	2011-2015 (part of vision 2020)
FDTL	A Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning-UK
GCC	Gulf Council Cooperation Countries
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GE	Graduate Employability
GGAs	Generic graduate attributes
GGCs/GCs	Generic Graduate Competencies/Generic Competencies
GIA	Graduate Identity Approach
GPA	Grade Point Average
HCT	Higher College of Technology
HCT	Human Capital Theory
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
IFC	International Finance Corporation
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IT	Information technology
KILM	Key Indicators of the Labour Markets
KSA	Key Skills Approach
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MOE	Ministry of Education (Oman)
MHE	Ministry of Higher Education (Oman)
MMA	Mixed Methods Approach
MMP	Ministry of Manpower (Oman)
MNE	Ministry of National Economy (Oman)
MOH	Ministry of Health (Oman)
MPRF	Mohammed bin Rashid Research Foundation
NCSI	National Centre for Statistics and Information (Oman)
OAAA	Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
OAC	Oman Accreditation Council
OMR	Omani Rial (Oman's currency)
ONA	Oman National News
PDP	Personal development planning
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment

PWC	Price water-house Coopers
SCs	Specific Competencies
SQU	Sultan Qaboos University (Oman)
The Region	Gulf region
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNDP	United Nation Development Programme
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USEM	Understanding, Skilful Practices, Efficacy Beliefs, and Mega-cognition
Vision 2020	A comprehensive 25-year plan (1995-2020) for the economic and social development in Oman
WBL	Work-Based Learning
WEF	World Economic Forum

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Overview

'*We devote great care and attention to the development and reform of education in Oman. Our aims include the raising of standards and updating the curriculum to make it richer and more relevant to the needs of an ever-changing world. These efforts recognise the importance the Sultanate assigns to the development of its human resources, to the fostering of scientific and technological understanding and the creation of an educated population who can make a positive contribution to the development process by dealing confidently with change and new developments*'. (Sultan Qaboos bin Said, the 33rd Session of the UNESCO, Paris, 4th Oct, 2005)

Education is the cornerstone of sustainable development and building knowledge of any nation. Oman's education went through two stages; firstly, between 1970 and 1995, the government looked at enhancing the quantity of education (e.g. building schools and education for all) and secondly, it focused on the quality of education and its graduates since the announcement of Vision 2020 (1996-2020) in 1995. Since the first day as ruler of Oman, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said has considered formal education as one of his primary goals for developing people and being free for all. He promised to work in hand with his government to achieve this objective. It started in the 1970s when his Majesty declared that 'the primary concern is that there should be education, even under the shadow of a tree' (Funsch, 2015). This strategy was a real educational transformation for spreading education across the country.

Since the 1970s, Oman has depended heavily on oil revenues to improve various sectors particularly basic education and HE systems. The Ministry of Education (MOE) supervises pre-university education that is free for all until the end of the secondary school level. It has developed quickly since 1970, when there were three primary schools for males with less than thirty teachers and 1,000 students. Also, there were no textbooks and no Omani curriculum (Al-Harthy, 2011a). By the year 1975, there were 207 schools, and in 1983, the curriculum was Omanised in all the three stages of primary, intermediate and secondary (Al-Hammami, 1999).

Children can now join a private nursery at the age of 5. The general education system has three main stages, which are primary, intermediate/preparatory, and secondary. Primary schooling is provided to children from six years old. Primary school lasts for six years, followed by three years of preparatory and three years of secondary education. In the third year of secondary schooling, programmes are divided into two sections, namely fundamental and selective. According to the criteria of the MOE, all students have to take the basic programmes provided and they have a choice in taking the selective subject(s) or not. The

result of the preparatory schooling determines the type of secondary schooling students will study. Finally, at the age of 19 and according to criteria decided by the Ministry of Higher Education (MHE) for enrolment in the HEIs, a student has to apply online through the Higher Education Admission Centre and select one of the possible places.

Oman's general education expanded quickly during the 1970s and 1980s, and the government focused on the quantity of the education system (e.g. building schools). Statistics indicate that in the academic year 2008-2009, there were 43,149 teachers, of whom 38,398 were nationals, with 540,332 students attending 1047 public schools at primary, intermediate and secondary levels (Ministry of Education, 2009). Latest statistics show that for this year (2015-2016), 551,867 students (278,411 boys, 273,456 girls) are attending 1077 schools across the Sultanate (Muscat Daily, 2015). Similar to other countries in the world, the government guarantees free education for all citizens in the country. Article 13 of the Basic Statute of State, of the Omani Law, (Official Gazette, 101/1996: 8) states that:

- o "Education is a cornerstone of the progress of society, which the state fosters and endeavours to spread and make accessible to all."
- o "Education 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, build a generation that is physically and morally strong that takes pride in its nation, country, and preserves its achievements."
- o "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."

Alongside basic school education, higher education (HE) has always been an important focus of his Majesty and his government since the 1970s. For them, it has been an integral priority and an engine of the social and economic growth of the country. Oman's HE system is quite young. Since 1970 until the opening of the first public university, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in 1986, students were sent internationally to pursue their HE in countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. One reason behind this was the shortage of HE facilities in the country. During that period, the government started to plan and generated strategies to provide HE for students locally and expand the numbers enrolled in HE. In the 1987/1988 academic year, SQU received 1,127 students, of which 678 were males and 449 were females. By 1989/1990, the total number of students enrolled was approximately 1,550 (Al-Marjan, 2004).

Nowadays, the HE system includes many public and private academic institutions which provide different programmes like education, engineering, law, business and administration. The HE system was mainly governed by the Council of HE (CHE) established by the Royal Decree No. 65/1998. A main responsibility of the CHE was to set objectives and plan for the central policies and strategies of both basic and HE (Official Gazette, 1998); whereas, there are different authorities (e.g. ministries) that implement and control the policies, regulations, and strategies approved and decided by the CHE (Al-Harthy, 2011a). According to their individual strategic plans, the market needs, and the needs of the national economy, this situation results in more competition between HEIs for funding their resources and materials (Al-Lamky, 2002).

As a step in development, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos issued a Royal Decree No 48/2012 for the establishment of the Education Council and promulgated its system (Oman Daily Observer, 2012b). It proposed to reform the educational system, rectify the differentiation of the programmes offered, restructure all levels in the education system, manage the quality, differentiate outputs, and raise the capacity in the HEIs to be filled by local secondary school graduates**.** The articles were as follows:

1) Article 1: The Education Council is associated with the Diwan of Royal Court.
2) Article 2: The Council has to have a Secretarial General to manage the Council in practicing its authorities. It has its juristic charter and financial and administrative control.
3) Article 3: The Education Council should take over all assets and allocations of the Higher Education Council.
4) Article 4: It cancels Royal Decree No 65/98, as well as all that may contravene the Royal Decree and attached system and its provisions.

Although the new reform of education system has been built to unify the plans and strategies of Oman's education system, the HE system is still governed by different authorities (**figure 1.1**). Thus, people call for a centralised supervision of HE system to enhance the quality of the secondary school and HE graduates. This integration of HE will help to channel financial resources efficiently, and assist the quality and accessibility of HE. This recommendation is also consistent with the responsibilities of the Ministry of Higher Education (MHE), a supporter of collaboration and coordination between HEIs as it noted in the Royal Decree No. 36/2000, Article 11 (Official Gazette, 2000:18).

The structure of HES
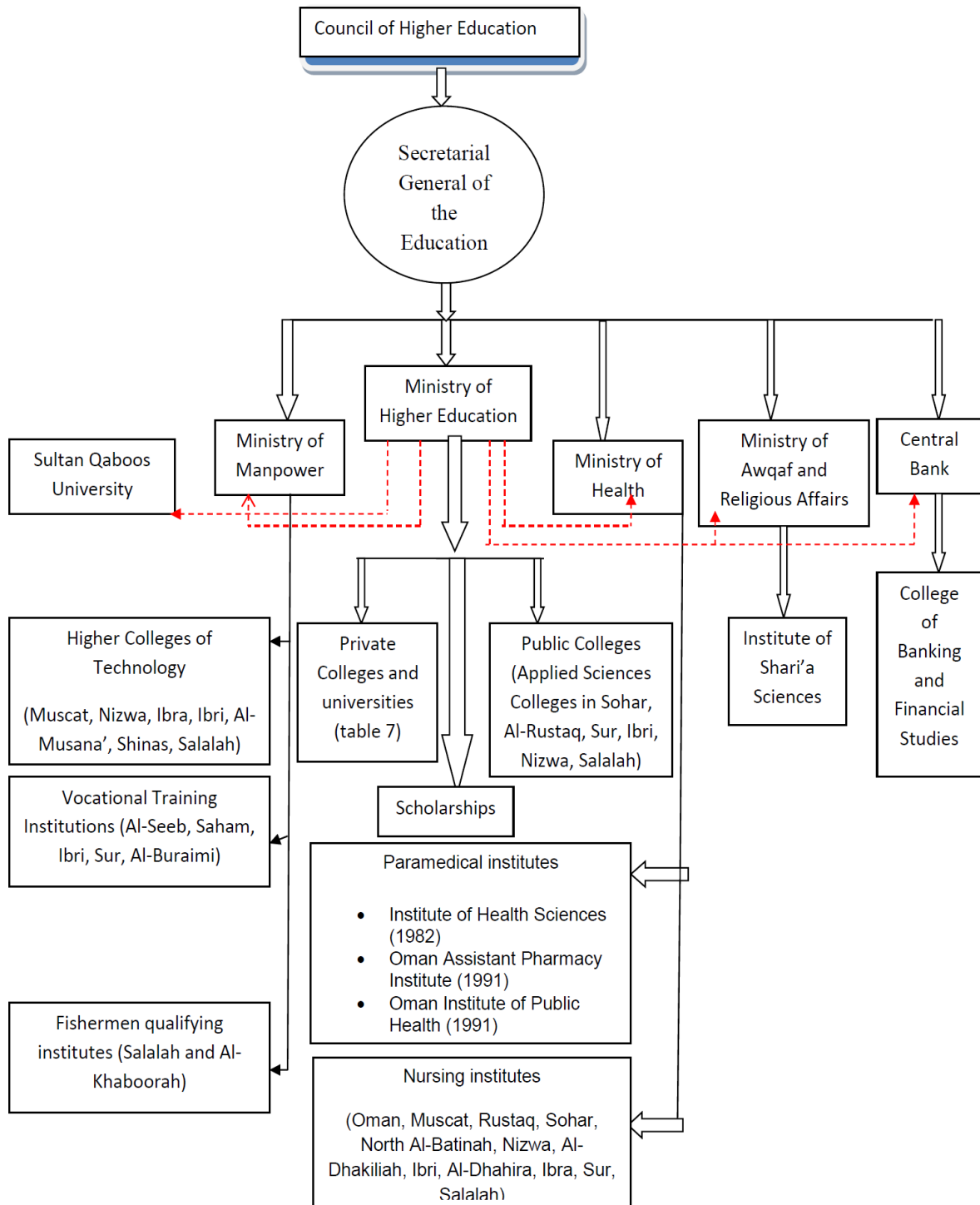
Figure1.1: The structure of HE system in Oman

The Omani HE system includes both public and private HE providers. The public HEIs are funded by the government and are available free for all Omani undergraduate students. A student's academic merit, at secondary education, bases the admission at HE level. **Figure 1.2** illustrates the total number of pupils enrolled in the public HEIs between 2006/2012.

مؤسسات التعليم العالي
Higher Education Institutions

Legend:
- Sultan Qaboos Univ جامعة السلطان قابوس
- Colleges of Applied Sciences كليات العلوم التطبيقية
- Tech. College كليات التقنية
- Students in Health Inst المعاهد الصحية
- Institutes of Shariah Sciences معهد العلوم الشرعية
- Private Universities & College الجامعات والكليات الخاصة
- Univ. Abroad الجامعات والكليات بالخارج

Figure 1.2: *Public HE (Higher Education Admission Centre, 2014).*

In the early 90s and due to the rapidly increasing costs and fast-tracked demand of HE, Oman decided to enlarge its HE system by investing in private HEIs. Both the Royal Decrees numbers 41, 42/99 and the Ministerial Decision number 36/99, an executive bylaw for implementing these two Royal Decrees, regulate the establishment of private HEIs (MHE, 2005). The first private college was established in 1994 and since then the number of private and public HEIs has increased rapidly.

According to Al-Lamky (2006), in response to the inconsistencies between demand and supply of HE, the government initiated the establishment of the private HEIs to play an integral role in adding more and better opportunities for secondary school leavers, enhancing access to the HE system, and providing the labour market with qualified nationals. For Al-Harthy (2011a), the private HE is a recent phenomenon, but it is developing swiftly. The private colleges and universities in Oman are funded, governed and owned by private investors from the private sector. Dr. Rawya, the Minister of Higher Education, stated that, in 1995, there was only one private college whereas nowadays twenty-five private HEIs are enrolling more than 43,000 students. She added that a total of 18 highly ranked British HEIs have undertaken academic affiliation agreements with the private HEIs such as Stirling, Reading, and Leeds (Taha, 2011). **Figure 1.3** highlights the increase in the number of private HEIs from 1975-2009.

The development of private higher education institutions from 1976 to 2009

Series1
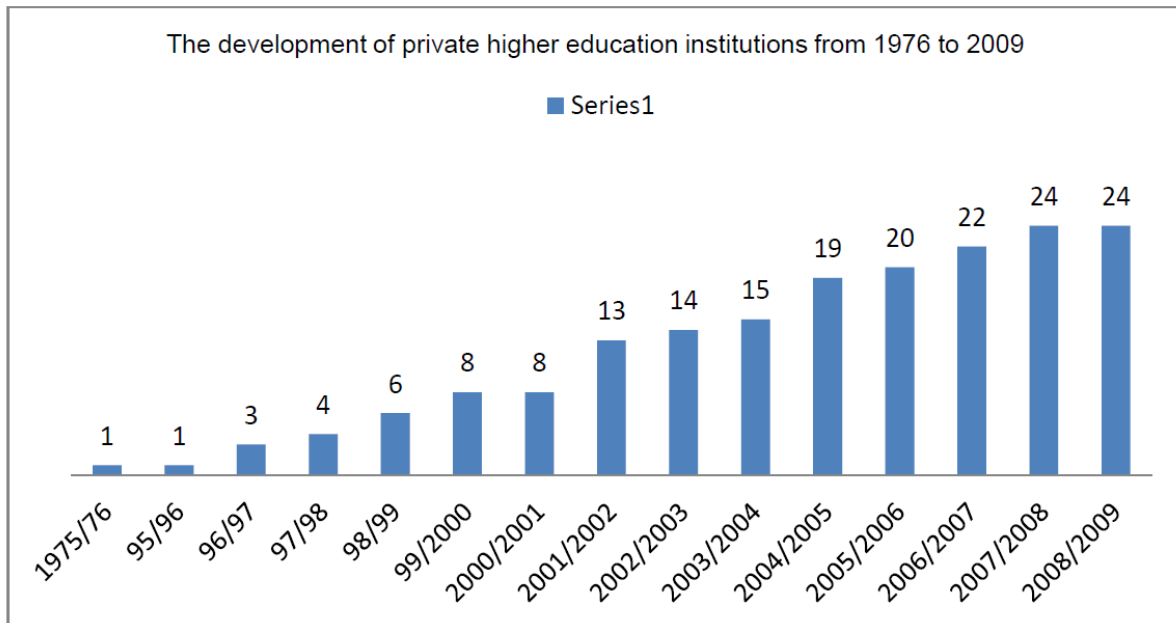
Figure1.3: *The development of private higher education institutions from 1976 to 2009 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009b).*

The MHE motivates the private academic universities/colleges to have mutual educational agreements with other public and private HEIs inside and outside the country to assist in providing skilled and knowledgeable graduates in support of the country's economic development. The agreements aim to preserve high academic quality and standards, share their successful educational experience, review and supervise the academic programmes, ensure high international accreditation standards, allow the graduates to continue their HE externally, and motivate research and innovation. A typical internal agreement is the one between SQU and Al-Buraimi University that aims to monitor the quality of education and differentiates the offered programmes. Externally, academic agreements with European, American and Australian HEIs are quite common.

Nonetheless, there has been pressure on the number of seats provided by SQU and other public HEIs in the country. After the opening of SQU, and towards the end of the 80s, the government has faced a serious problem, which is the demand of secondary school students became higher than the supply of places provided for students. The government wishes to provide free HE for all the students who completed their secondary school; however, HE could not admit more than 31% of all secondary graduates in 2006 (Al-Harthy, 2011a), and in 2008 there were 44,000 secondary school graduates. Therefore, to accommodate the public's staggering demand for HE, the government has requested the participation and assistance of the private sector in developing private HE (Al-Lamki, 2002). Dr. Al-Sarmi, the Undersecretary of the MHE, reported that two private colleges are planning to enter the

private HE market: Muscat University and Toulouse University (Times of Oman, 2010). He added that one public university (Oman University) proposed to open its doors for secondary graduates in 2018 located in South Al-Batinah Region (Times of Oman, 2010). According to Al-Harthy (2011a), the private HEIs have accounted for 43.6% of the 56 HEIs in Oman. Currently, they encompass seven universities and nineteen colleges (MHE, 2016).

In the Council of Ministers' meeting on the 7th October, 2012 in Hisn Al-Shumoukh, his Majesty focused on the continuous development of human resources and called for more efforts to enhance their capabilities. He concentrated on the importance of vocational education and the development of its programmes that trigger job training for students, so that the HE sector can meet the needs of the labour market efficiently and effectively (Times of Oman, 2012). The total investment in educating people reached OMR. 866 million in 2008 (Ministry of National Economy, 2009) As a result of the high and continuous investment in HE, the human resources were developed and, therefore, the economic growth.

> '*These efforts recognise the importance the Sultanate assigns to the development of its human resources, to the fostering of scientific and technological understanding and the creation of an educated population who can make a positive contribution to the development process by dealing confidently with change and new development*' (MHE, 2009a: P.3).

The government plans to have at least 50% of the 18-24 year old age group attending post-secondary (education +18) by 2020, up from about 19% at present (CHE, 2004). With 43% of the population below the age of 15 (2007), the challenge is massive (Al-Barwani *et al.*, 2009). At the same time, the annual number of the HEIs graduates already exceeds the yearly number of job vacancies in Oman. According to Al-Barwani *et al.*, (2009), the HE system will produce three new graduates for every new job opportunity annually in Oman within 6-7 years.

There are strong social pressures to create employment for young Omanis by replacing the foreign workforce; however, to implement this strategy successfully, the government has to expand HE quickly (Gregory, 2001). Through the improvement of the HE sector, Oman can gain the competitive advantage in the global economy by producing skilled, knowledgeable, and highly competent and creative graduates. Dr. Al-Sarmi Undersecretary of the MHE said, "HE is always interwoven with the needs of the labour market.'' Moreover, he stated that, because the job market changes quickly, the Ministry has to train graduates adequately to meet these changes and suit the needs of the rapidly growing and expanded economy. He added one of the goals of the HE sector is to provide a highly skilled workforce and enhance the capacity of HE. Therefore, the ministry is planning to add more universities and colleges with different job-oriented courses and improve research in the country. Common examples

of job-oriented programmes, created by MHE, are; tourism, medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, port management and marine science, design, engineering, management and information technology.

Additionally, every three years, the Ministry develops a survey, to seek feedback from HE graduates with the primary goal of developing the offered programmes and investigating their link to the labour market needs (Times of Oman, 2010). To conclude, the central focus in the early 70s was on building schools and infrastructure while now, and due to the global and dynamic changes in the labour markets, the attention has been shifted to the quality and creativity in designing and delivering content that is relevant to employers' expectations in the workplace. Overall, the Sultanate has built a complete, wide-ranging and future-ready HE system, in just four decades, to provide leaders for building a healthy national economy.

1.2 Research Statement

In Oman, companies have expressed their concern that higher education (HE) graduates are not well prepared with the entry-level skills and knowledge required in the workplace (Coenjaerts *et al.*, 2009 and Swailes *et al.*, 2012). A skills gap exists, among new graduates, between what they learn in HE and the private sector demands affecting their employability and performance in the workplace (Al-Lamki, 1998 and Swailes *et al.,* 2012). Accordingly, this study attempts to identify the core factors that may address the mismatch between what is provided by higher education institutions (HEIs) and the labour market requirements that affect BMA undergraduate employability in Oman.

To the best knowledge of the author, it is the first study that takes into account the main education stakeholders' perceptions (academics, students, graduates, and employers) on the employability of BMA undergraduates, and the demanded skills and knowledge by companies. However, a considerable number of studies have been carried out on Omanisation (e.g. Al-Farsi, 1997; Al-Lamki, 1998, 2000, 2005) hence the motivation for carrying out this study through exploring the perceptions and expanding the understanding of education stakeholders, as mentioned earlier, in the area under study.

An increased young population, unemployment, the low-quality of the education and training system, and the shortage of work capabilities among graduates are the primary challenges facing the Omani government. Statistics showed that, in 2014, more than 50% of the Omani population is in the 0-24 age group (CIA World Factbook, 2015). For Forstenlechner and Rutledge (2010), Oman's youth population has increased with the growing levels of educational attainment.

There is an increase in the number of expatriates and a high level of youth unemployment (Amin, 2012; Swailes *et al.*, 2012; Al Munajjed, 2012). According to the Arab Human Development Report (2010), in Oman, the unemployment rate in the age group 15-24 is 19.6% (Jose, 2011). In 2014, the NCSI indicated that the Omanisation (active Omanis in the private sector) rate reached 14% while it is planned to reach 70% in 2020 (MNE, 1996). Empirical research (see Amin, 2012; Coenjaerts *et al.,* 2009; Joshi and Ghosal, 2009; Thrace, 2013; Jose, 2011; Swailes *et al.,* 2012) claims that the high number of young unemployed graduates is because of the mismatch between the needs of private employers and the supply of HEIs. They affirmed that the HE system does not suit the needs of the private labour market as it fails to produce high-quality outcomes, as organisations do not have time to train new employees leaving HE, while they seek highly skilled workers who are ready for the world of work. According to the World Economic Forum on the Global Competitiveness (2014-2015), the second most challenging factor for doing business in Oman is inadequate employee graduates (Business Today Magazine, 2015).

Private employers have experienced disappointment at the consistent mismatch between the skill set of Omani graduates and the demands of jobs for which they apply (Al-Nasry, 2012). Poor employee motivation and skills mismatch among the national workforce have been the common themes in the literature (e.g. Al-Lamki, 1998; Swailes *et al.*, 2012). A survey, conducted by Ernst and Young (2014) across the Gulf region, found that only a minority of employers (29%) felt that the education system meets the needs of their businesses (Business Today Magazine, 2015). Another graduate survey project, established by Kassel University in 2008 with the collaboration of the Centre for HE Research in Oman, concluded that the main reasons behind the low-quality graduates were irrelevant programmes and skills mismatch with the requirements of the labour market. It aimed to explore the quality of HE graduates on their knowledge, skills, competencies and their ability to shift to different employment sectors, and to appraise the suitability of the disciplines offered by HEIs.

1.3 Research Questions

The current study seeks to create new understandings of an emerging issue of business management and administration (BMA) undergraduate employability in Oman. The term employability refers to the factors (e.g. a set of achievements, skills, and personal traits) that make graduates more likely to be employed and perform in the workplace (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Lees, 2002; Yorke, 2004).The authors argue that employability and employment are different. According to Lees (2002:3), being employed means having a job; while, being employable means having the capabilities to maintain employment and to

perform highly in the workplace. From the perspective of HEIs, she refers the term employability to 'producing graduates who are able and capable through practical delivery of programmes (e.g. co-curricular and extra-curricular activities) (p.3). Throughout this research, the term employability will be used to refer to BMA undergraduates' capabilities that enable them to be employed in the private sector and perform highly in the workplace.

The present research aims to a) explore the main functions of HEIs, business departments, and industry concerning students' employability b) investigate what skills and knowledge are provided by business departments and needed by employers in the workplace c) explore the role of some activities in promoting a student's employability and skills enhancement and d) investigate the relationship between HE and industry and its effect on students' employability.

To achieve the above-mentioned objectives, overarching and operational questions, derived from literature, were designed. As an over-arching question, the current study seeks to answer; **how do academics, students, graduates and employers perceive BMA undergraduates' employability in Oman?** To address this question, the following operational questions were designed:

1) How do academics and graduates perceive the roles of HEIs, BMA departments, and private companies in connection with BMA undergraduate employability? Do they think that these can be improved?

2) What do students and graduates expect from HEIs/BMA departments? Do they think they get what they expected?

3) How do academics, students, graduates, and employers perceive BMA undergraduates' skills and knowledge?

4) How do students, academics, and graduates feel about the provision and effectiveness of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability?

5) How effective do academics and employers believe the relationship between HEIs and the private sector is and does this affect BMA undergraduate employability?

6) How do academics, students, and graduates perceive BMA undergraduate employment in general and in connection with HEIs in particular?

The above research questions are descriptive in nature (what and how), and their formulation is constructed from the national (Oman and Gulf region; **Chapter Two**) and theoretical (**knowledge gap; Chapters Two and Three**) contexts (see Plowright, 2011).

Being aware of these contexts provides knowledge on how the research issues are investigated and reported in other countries and cultures.

1.4 The Significance of the Study

The national/Omani (employment statistics and media) and the theoretical (knowledge gap) contexts (see Plowright, 2011) motivated me to investigate the issue of employability of business management and administration (BMA) undergraduates. This study seeks to contribute to the debate surrounding the issue by investigating the perceptions of education stakeholders, notably; academics, students, graduates, and employers. Globally, several studies have discussed undergraduate employability (e.g. Baharun *et al.*, 2012); but little attention has been given to exploring the business undergraduate skills and knowledge required in the workplace.

In Oman, unlike previous studies that have focused primarily on the attitudes of specific HEI and/or education sectors (see Al-Maskari *et al.*, 2014 and Al-Balushi, 2008), the novelty and uniqueness of this study come from the integration of a wide-ranging sample of respondents and participants. It is the first study that tends to discuss BMA undergraduate employability taking the perceptions of a wide-range of respondents and participants, including academics and students from various public and private HEIs and graduates and employers from the private labour market. Therefore, it is expected to make a crucial contribution to research on skills and knowledge provided by HEIs and required by employers in the workplace.

The research of graduate employability, skills and knowledge needed in the job market, is a relatively new phenomenon in the sphere of the Arab region; notably, Gulf countries. Although youth unemployment is the primary consideration for most of the Middle East and North African (MENA) countries, few studies (e.g. Al-Rasheed *et al.*, 2009; Salehi-Isfahani and Dhillon, 2008) have explored youth perceptions of their employability. Also, Tymon (2013) debates that, internationally, the students' perspective has been viewed as the missing perspective due to the few studies that have explored their opinions on their future employability and to what extent it matters to them. Thus, this study provides a valuable opportunity to expand the knowledge of BMA students' opinions on their employability as well as their expectations of HEI/BMA departments.

A few studies (e.g. Tachibanaki, 1998; Rima, 1981) addressed the impact of education on skills attainment and improving students' employability through providing resources, facilitating education, and offering training programmes in the Arab context (Iqbal and Zenchenkov, 2014). Hence, the findings of this study will make an important contribution to

the field of BMA on the best strategies to embed employability in the core curriculum, and promote skills and knowledge among learner students within the classroom and/or outside academic institutions.

Apart from other studies that have explored employers' perceptions of the skills and knowledge demanded, this study is unique as it asks companies directly to identify their requirements of skills and knowledge in their level of importance for performing job tasks in the workplace. Also, it provides an exciting opportunity to extend our understanding of employers' satisfaction with skills and knowledge possessed by graduates. Last but not least, it offers some recommendations for a productive relationship between HE and industry.

Overall, the current study is expected to provide new insights into BMA undergraduate employability in the Gulf, mainly in Oman. It is supposed to add knowledge and contribute to the limited body of empirical studies on employability of students as it discusses the research literature of three contexts: the West, the Gulf, and Oman. The findings of this study will no doubt be of great importance to all stakeholders among which are: the government and HE policy makers, HE providers, students, businesses, researchers and in general.

For the government and HE policy makers, it may expand their knowledge on the influence of the education-industry relationship in promoting BMA undergraduate employability and, accordingly, implement necessary approaches to reinforce this relationship and plan for improvements (e.g. quality of graduates, the relevance of curriculum and programmes, training, etc.).

For HEIs/BMA departments, strengthening the relationship with industry professionals might help them in designing curriculum and programmes relevant to the needs of the labour market, getting feedback from employers (e.g. graduates' performance, weaknesses, and strengths), enhancing their awareness of employers' expectations (e.g. skills and knowledge demanded), tackling some challenges facing their students (e.g. training), and planning for improving the quality of graduates. Also, the results of this study provide knowledge on the typical BMA graduate required in the workplace with a set of skills that best serve the future labour market and align programmes to meet employers' needs. Moreover, they expand BMA departments' knowledge on students' and graduates' expectations and the activities that may help to promote student's employability to better match the demands of the labour market (e.g. internships, industry visits, and workshops by employers).

For students, the study enhances their awareness of their responsibility for improving their work-related skills and knowledge. Also, it contributes to their knowledge of the best strategies for seeking a job, and activities for developing their skills and capabilities demanded by employers in the labour market. Therefore, the findings guide them in preparing themselves well for a competitive job market.

For businesses, the study may promote their awareness on the importance of their relationship with education practitioners and on the roles of HEIs/BMA departments in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability. In addition, it extends their knowledge of the expectations of HEIs, academics, students and graduates. The implementation of the findings would be expected to supply them with high-skilled and well-prepared graduates leading to minimising their expectations gap of skills and knowledge required in the workplace. Finally, the study may form a useful reference material for the government authorities, students, employers, HEIs, business departments, and researchers.

1.5 Research Process

The current study followed the research process suggested by Polit and Hungler (1995), shown in **figure 1.4**. I started the process by identifying the research issue, setting out the aim and objectives of the study, developing the main and operational questions (**Chapter One**), reviewing the relevant literature (**Chapters Two and Three**), selecting the research methodology and the methods that will be effective in answering the research questions, collecting the data from the field using qualitative and quantitative methods, considering the ethical issues and trustworthiness of data (**Chapter Four**), and finally analysing, interpreting and discussing the data collected (**Chapter Five**) to write conclusions and recommendations for improvement (**Chapter Six**). Hammersley (1992: 184) identified the main four aspects of research design as; 'problem formulation, data collection, data analysis, and reporting the findings'. Punch (2009) simplified Hammersley's design by dividing the research process into two main stages; pre-empirical (deciding research area, selecting a topic and determining research questions) and empirical (deciding design, selecting data collection analysis techniques, and answering research questions).
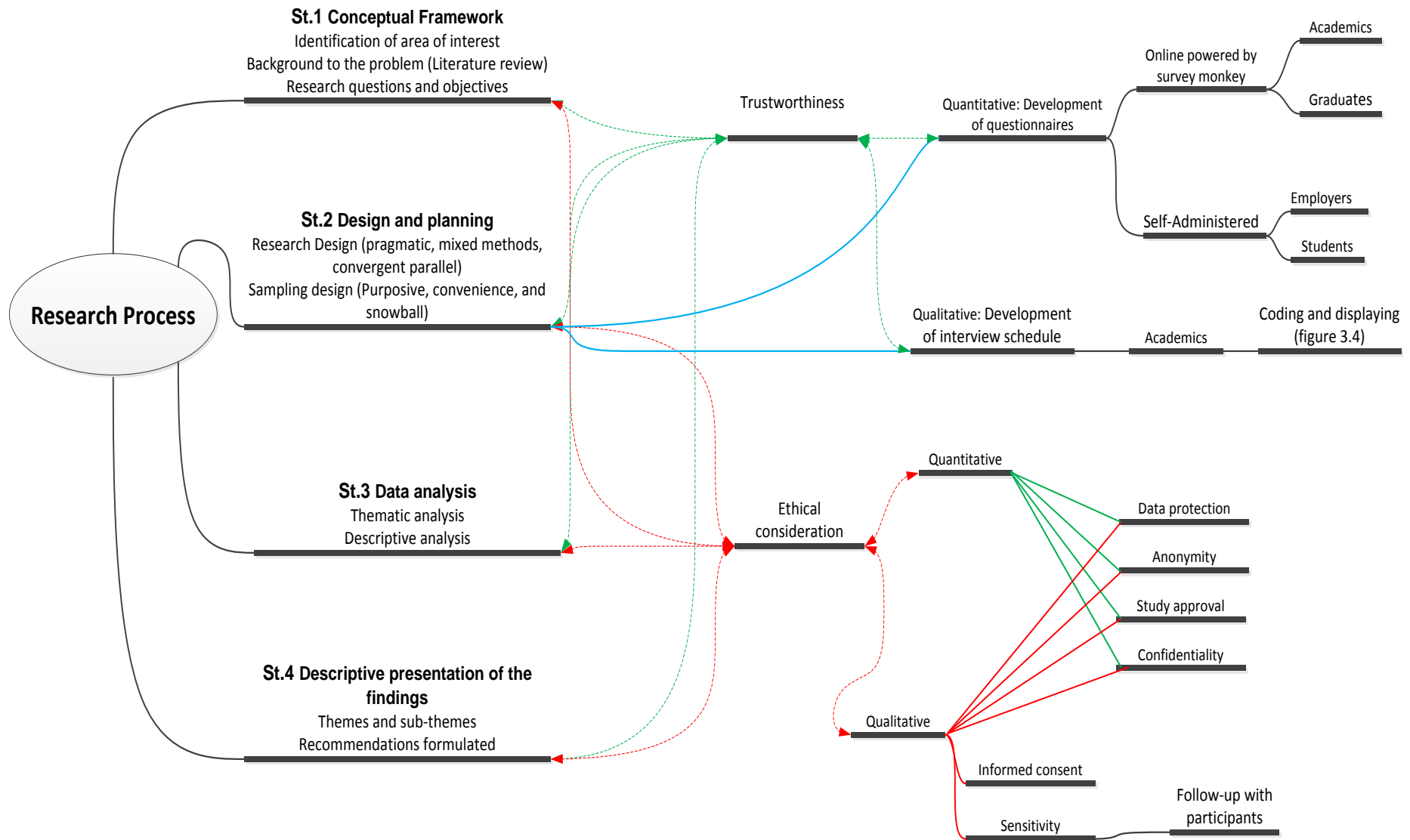
Figure 1.4: Research Process and their interrelations (Polit and Hungler, 1995:p.31-37).

Chapter Two: Education and the Labour Markets of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries

2.1 Introduction

The issue of employability has received critical attention in the West; however, it needs to be given more focus in the Gulf and Oman contexts in particular. Hence, the primary purpose of this study is to understand the issue of employability of Omani BMA undergraduates. This chapter provides the reader with a brief background on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, notably, Oman.

A low-quality education and training system and a high level of unemployment among locals are the main challenges facing the Gulf governments. Business leaders in the region, express their concern about a graduate's capability to perform tasks in the workplace as well as the gap between education and the industry requirements affecting employability of graduates.

This chapter mainly discusses the GCC countries' education systems, especially higher education (HE). Additionally, it provides information on the Gulf's labour markets and their plans to employ locals (nationals). Following this, it provides information about the Sultanate of Oman and its strategies for economic diversification. Then, the chapter discusses the education and training system in the country as well as the employment and unemployment of its locals. The information in this chapter, hopes to give a full picture of the issue under study and its context.

2.2 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) represents six countries: Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Kuwait. The Gulf countries have tiny populations, high numbers of foreign labourers, and high income per capita (Muysken and Nour, 2006). The Gulf region has had a significant national population growth rate in the past decades (Kuwait Financial Centre, 2012). In 2011, the Gulf population totalled approximately 45 million people, of these 54% were below the age of 25 years and more than 20% under the age of 15. The Gulf area is anticipated to grow by about 14 million by 2050 to 57 million. Also, all the six Gulf countries have achieved high human development rate. The Human Development Report (2014) indicated that out of 187 countries; Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE ranked as very high human development countries (34, 44, 46, 31, and 40 respectively) whereas Oman ranked as high human development (56).

Rapid growing youth populations, youth unemployment (employment creation), a weak education system, and a high number of foreign workers are some challenges that face Gulf States (Harry, 2007). Thus, the future of the Gulf countries has been built upon three main strategies, notably: technological development, economic diversification, and restructuring the labour market (Muysken and Nour, 2006). For Al Fakhry (1999) and El Sabba (1997), these strategies are designed to build local capacity and develop their competitiveness globally.

The Gulf States still heavily rely on oil revenues to achieve high social and economic growth. However, the rising dependence on oil revenues sets back building a strong private labour market in all the Gulf countries; consequently, there is slow progress towards efficient economic diversification (AlKhabeer Capital Centre, 2013). To overcome revenue shortages, the Gulf countries have given a serious focus to other industries than oil and gas such as aluminium smelting and petrochemicals. These need highly skilled individuals.

The economic growth and a sustainable development strategy of the GCC depend on the move from oil-based economies to technology and skills-based economies through economic diversification strategy and restructuring of the labour market. Muysken and Nour (2006) contend that the Gulf countries have planned for the implementation of the policies mentioned earlier; however, the inadequate education system and a high number of expatriates challenge these plans. The next sections discuss in detail these challenges.

2.2.1   Education and the Labour Market: Two Perspectives

2.2.1.1   *Education Systems in the Gulf Countries*

Education plays an essential role in developing the skills and knowledge, and for future returns of any nation. Berntson *et al.*, (2006) found that human capital, indicated by education and competence development, has a positive relationship with employability, as potential determinants of employability. They mentioned that this theory 'has its focal point in individual's resources, particularly in the contribution of individuals' investment in education and training' (p. 225). For Kirk (1996), human capital theory (HCT) seeks to explore the economic outcomes accompanied by the investment in an individual's capabilities. It suggests that education is an essential factor for any government, which can enhance individuals' capabilities and their performance in the workplace (**detailed information in Chapter Three; section 3.2.4.1**). According to Karoly (2010), the formation of productive people takes a long time and might be encouraged by investing more in education and training. He argues that governments should work in enhancing students' academic skills

and providing skill-formation activities that help them adapt to the workplace environment and obtain professional experience.

For Karoly (2010), in the 21st century and due to a variety of challenges, notably economic diversification, youth unemployment, skills gap among locals, and the increasing number of cheap and skilled expatriate labourers, all the Gulf States demand a more educated and well-skilled national workforce. Harry (2007) considers that these countries have large numbers of young nationals joining education and seeking jobs in the labour market. Galal, (2007) finds that they have invested heavily in education; however, because of a substantial number of nationals working in the public sector and not for private companies, this investment has not been used correctly to produce high standards of living and to enlarge their economies. Latest statistics, shown by the Human Development Report (2014), indicated that the total education expenditure during 2005-2012 (of GDP) was 5.6% in Saudi Arabia, followed by Oman 4.3%, Kuwait 3.8%, Bahrain 2.9%, and Qatar 2.5%.

Nour (2002) described the Gulf education systems as insufficient and failing to achieve their objectives. According to Karoly (2010), the deficits in the quality of the Gulf education systems, at least through the secondary level, have been highlighted by TIMSS, PIRLS, and PISA. Al Munajjed and Sabbagh (2011) found that the youth nationals around the Gulf are disappointed with the current education systems as they are still not meeting their requirements and expectations. Equally, for Al Sulayti (2002) and Nour (2005), low-quality teachers and the improper teaching and learning techniques are the main reasons for the poor quality of the education system and skills mismatch between students in the Gulf region. Al Dosary and Rahman (2005) and Al Munajjed and Sabbagh (2011) supported this notion and held the view that, in the Gulf region, the education system has not focused on producing the demanded work related skills and attitudes. They summarised the primary factors of inadequate education systems in the Gulf countries as follows:

- o Ineffective teaching techniques that encourage memorisation and repetition. Teachers play a command-and-control function rather than facilitate students towards the development of their academic, personal, and work-related skills and knowledge.
- o The improper teaching of work-related skills and knowledge by HEIs/academics.
- o Outdated learning materials (e.g. curricula, textbooks).
- o Limited and irrelevant programmes to the needs of the labour market.
- o Inappropriate training programme followed by Gulf academic institutions.

For Al Munajjed and Sabbagh (2011), the barriers mentioned above produce uncompetitive graduates for a changing labour market and knowledge-based-economies. They add that, in the long run, these challenges will set back creating more diversified economies that require a highly technical and digitally skilled workforce. In conclusion, provision of a limited training programme, skills mismatch, and ineffective transfer of knowledge are dangerous implications of inadequate education systems in the Gulf that may lead to weak economic growth (Muysken and Nour, 2006).

2.2.2   The Labour Markets in the Gulf region

Unemployment has a significant negative long-term impact on any economy. Changing the regional context and the increasing rate of unemployment among young Gulf nationals are two obstacles that need innovative policies (Matherly and Hodgson, 2014). According to Matherly and Hodgson, the lack of appropriate work experience among graduates, across the Gulf countries, is the main reason behind the increase in unemployment.

It is hard to obtain up-to-date rates on the Gulf youth unemployment because these countries do not publish official statistics on a regular basis (Al Munajjed and Sabbagh, 2011) and due to infrequent and inaccurate demographic statistics prepared by the Gulf governments (Nasir and Tahir, 2011). However, it is believed that the region has a high level of youth unemployment due to the population destination (Harry, 2007) and ineffective education and training system (Dhillon and Yousef, 2009). The World Bank and World Development (2012) indicated that the overall and youth (15-24 years) unemployment rates in percentages in 2012 were; 5.6 and 27.8 in Saudi Arabia, 7.4 and 27.5 in Bahrain, 1.5 and 9.2 in Kuwait, 8.1 and 20.6 in Oman, .6 and 1.7 in Qatar, and 3.8 and 11 in UAE (WEF, 2014). **Table 2.1** illustrates the current and expected unemployment rates (%) in five Gulf countries (ILO, 2014).

Table 2.1: Current and Expected Unemployment Rates in Five Gulf Countries			
Country	2014	2015	2016
Oman	**7.2**	**7.2**	**7.1**
Saudi Arabia	5.6	5.5	5.4
UAE	3.6	3.5	3.4
Kuwait	3.0	2.7	2.6
Qatar	0.3	0.3	0.4

Source: *Unemployment rates in the Gulf countries compared to developed countries and oil producers: http://www.argaam.com/article/articledetail/479114*

The private labour markets of the Gulf countries have undergone a high rate of inactivity due to the lack of work-related skills and attitudes among their nationals (Harry, 2007). According to ILO (2010), the youth inactivity (the percentage of youth not in employment, education or training) rate (%) in the Gulf labour markets was 62.5 in Bahrain, 66.5 in Kuwait, 63 in Oman, 36 in Qatar, 71.1 in Saudi Arabia, and finally 55.5 in UAE.

Al Munajjed and Sabbagh (2011) found that Gulf students valued having a good salary, followed by job satisfaction, reputation of the company and job stability highly while, career growth and skills development were found to be less important. That is because of their preference for secured salaries, flexible working conditions, and 80% of salary after completing 20 years, which are provided in the public sectors (Al Lamki, 1998; Al Waqfi and Forstenlechner, 2012; Forstenlechner & Rutledge, 2010).

For Salehi-Isfahan and Dhillon (2008), graduates preferred not to work in the private sector as they believe that working in a company has a low social status and because they depend highly on parental support. Additionally, they hold the view that graduates are unable to find jobs in the public sector due to its saturation.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) labour markets are unique as they mostly rely on foreign workers. Most of them were recruited in jobs ranging from low-paying, low-skilled to highly professional and specialised jobs. Expatriates are a cheap but skilled workforce (Forstenlechner, 2010). Statistically, Forstenlechner and Rutledge (2010) reported that the expatriates share one-third of the public sector and two-thirds of the private sector. Gulf countries had an average of 53.43% of foreign workers (Kuwait Financial Centre, 2012), which increase the competition with nationals to seek job opportunities in the labour market (Fasano and Goyal, 2004).

The significantly increasing number of foreign workers puts pressure on the Gulf governments to consider the effects and implications of this increase in the region, especially in the private sector, which may lead to the threat of the high rate of youth unemployment among locals. Mellahi and Al Hinai (2000:178) described the challenge as 'a real threat to the social and political stability of the Gulf countries'. Hence, all countries revealed that there is a need to review some policies and regulations related to national employment and to expedite economic diversification and not only focus on expanding the educational system. Replacing expatriates with a local workforce has been one of the major reforms implemented by all the Gulf countries.

2.2.2.1   Localisation in the Gulf Labour Markets

The Gulf governments need to tackle the most crucial human capital issues, which are replacing expatriates with nationals (localisation) and providing more employment opportunities for their locals (Harry, 2007). Harry discussed that these states had a policy to reduce the number of expatriates in the private labour market, however employers have neglected this policy. The IMF (2010) reported that around 4.5 million were employed out of 5 million potentially entering the labour market in 2010, and expected that an additional 2 to 3 million citizens will not be able to find a job. Also, according to the Kuwait Financial Centre (2012), job availability rate estimations show that, around the Gulf countries, 7,072 jobs were created in public and private sectors during 2000 to 2010, with nationals placed in only 25%. It reported that Oman and Bahrain have experienced the lowest job creation for citizens during the period from 2010 to 2015 (around 466,167 respectively). The 2020 estimations, shown in **table 2.2**, indicate that around 100 million jobs would have to be created in Gulf countries to reduce the unemployment level of their locals (World Bank, 2004).

Table 2.2: Overall and National Job Creation to 2015 and 2020, ILO Data (Thousands)						
Country	Overall job creation			Job creation for nationals		
	2010-2015	2015-2020	Total	2010-2015	2015-2020	Total
Oman	**213.8**	**133.6**	**347.4**	**149.9**	**121.8**	**271.7**
Saudi Arabia	744.3	768.5	1,512.8	700	600	1300
UAE	558.9	294	853	100	80	180
Bahrain	76.7	42.6	119.3	35.2	37.3	72.5
Kuwait	139.0	104.3	243.3	70	73	143
Qatar	159.7	57.5	217.2	50	60.2	110.2
Total	1,892.5	1,400.5	3293.0	1105.1	972.3	2077.4

Source: GIC Estimates based on ILO and GIC Estimates based on National data.

Besides the expansion of the secondary and post-secondary education, and employment creation, a localisation or nationalisation policy is another strategy that has been implemented by all the Gulf States. According to Goodliffe (2013) and the Ministry of National Economy 'MNE' (2002), this strategy aims to cut down the substantial number of foreign workers in the private sector and enhance economic growth with less dependence on oil revenues. The term localisation has been used to describe the process of replacing imported labourers with local people (Al Dosary and Rahman, 2005; Banugopan and Fish, 2007; Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2010; Harry, 2007). It is called Saudisation in Saudi Arabia, Kuwaitisation in Kuwait, Bahrainisation in Bahrain, Qatarisation in Qatar, Omanisation in Oman, and Emiratisation in UAE. A quota system, subsidising wages in organisations willing to recruit locals, strict visa application acceptance, and taxing firms when they employ foreigners are some approaches established by the Gulf governments

under a localisation policy to tackle the current and potential unemployment challenge in the region (Forstenlecher, 2010; Girgis, 2002; Harry, 2007).

According to the Kuwait Financial Centre (2012), as a result of the approaches mentioned earlier, five countries, and a part of Qatar (86.5%), reduced the number of the expatriate population in 2010, compared to the period from 2007 to 2009. These are Saudi Arabia (27.8%), UAE (70%), Kuwait (68.8%), Bahrain (39.1%) and Oman (28.4%). In conclusion, the Gulf governments have implemented such schemes and policies to promote nationals' youth employment; however, they fail to identify the underlying concerns of skills gaps and their weak participation in the labour markets (AlKhabeer Capital, 2013).

2.2.2.1.1 Skills Mismatch among Gulf National Graduates

'*Matching graduates with meaningful and value added jobs are more critical to social, economic and political stability. Graduates with no hope of meaningful employment feel they are victims of an educational system that has succeeded in providing them with qualifications that cannot be used and, worst of all, with expectations that cannot be met*' (Ramady, 2011 in Goodliffe, 2013:56).

Skills mismatch among Gulf graduates has been seen as the major barrier to localisation strategies as well as for employers. For Forstenlechner and Rutledge (2010), the Gulf education system has a considerable interest in the development of nationals' skills and capabilities needed by employers although its quality is doubtful. Al Dosary and Rahman (2005) identified the main reason behind skills mismatch and mention that the Gulf education systems have not focused heavily on producing the demanded work-related skills and attitudes. Equally, Al Sulayti (2002) and Nour (2005) have pointed out that the poor education system that provides irrelevant programmes and has weak linkages between the curriculum and the requirements of the labour market is another reason for this mismatch.

In their research, Al Munajjed and Sabbagh (2011) argue that graduates struggle to find suitable jobs due to the lack of possible work experience and the shortage of information on the required knowledge and skills in the labour market. They found that graduates are unsatisfied with the education system because of the improper and inadequate preparedness for the workplace. They added that employers also struggle to find the capable graduates due to the mismatch between their requirements at work and what graduates learned in HE, and the small rate of competition between locals and foreigners.

Enhancing educational attainment through substantial investment, economic diversification and directly intervening in the labour market have been the three policies implemented to increase the youth employment by all the six Gulf countries since the mid-90s onward (Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2010). In the past few years, the Gulf governments have paid

considerable attention to investing heavily in extending and developing their education systems to equip students with skills demanded by employers. For instance, Saudi Arabia, ranked number 40 in the world, allocated 5.6% of the overall budget for education in 2008 while, Oman ranked 108 in 2006 allocated 3.9% of the total spend (Kuwait Financial Centre, 2012; World Bank, 2009).

The contribution of the oil revenues of the Gulf countries has a crucial impact on the development of industries such as chemical, petrochemical and metal petroleum leading to the employment of the local youth. This development will also require a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce. For Muysken and Nour (2006), skills possessed by the domestic workers are weak in the Gulf countries; hence the employability of a skilled national workforce can only be increased through the establishment of adequate incentives and policies. Also, Forstenlechner (2010) suggests that there is a need for a strong incentive that will attract locals in the future so that their education will improve and experience increase. Although several schemes have been implemented to address the challenges and concerns in the Gulf countries, these measures have largely been ineffective in stimulating sustainable economic growth. Therefore there is a need for urgent investigation on why the education system in the Gulf region fails to prepare graduates with the required skills and knowledge needed in the workplace.

2.3 The Sultanate of Oman: An Overview

Among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Oman is the third largest country. It lies on the south-eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula. It has a valued and strategic location at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz, linking the Gulf to the Indian Ocean. It has been an independent country for longer than other countries in the region due to the history of seafaring trade. Since 1970, Oman has been ruled by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said who started to build it as there were only three primary schools for boys, two small hospitals and few kilometres of surfaced roads. Currently, there are over 1,250 schools that provide free education up to the age of eighteen, over 80 hospitals, and 150 free health centres to all Omanis (MNE, 2010). Internally, the administrative division of the country includes eleven governorates, which are Muscat, Musandam, Al Buraymi, Adh Dakhiliyah, Al Batinah North, Al Batinah South, Ash Sharqiyah South, Ash Sharqiyah North, Adh Dhahira, Al Wusta, and Dhofar (**figure 2.1**). Muscat is the capital of Oman and its commercial centre.

Figure 2.1: Map of the Sultanate of Oman (www.mapsofworld.com)

Like the other Gulf countries, Oman still substantially depends on the oil and gas revenues that total 80% of the overall country's budget to build infrastructure and provide essential services for citizens (Goodliffe, 2013). According to Hertog (2010); Nonneman and Youngs (2010) and Rabi (2002), the government's model is described as 'entire' because most of the income comes from government-owned resources (e.g. oil and gas). Compared to other Gulf countries, Oman has low per capita oil reserves and revenues.

Oman has a heterogeneous and rapid growth population due to economic progress and structural developments. Its population includes various ethnic groups like Arab, Asian, and Africans (e.g. Egyptians, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Nepalese, Philippines, Sri-Lankan and Swahili). Muslims are the main population group in the country. According to Girgis (2002), the population in Oman is increasing every year by 7.17%. Latest statistics show that in July 2016, the overall population was 4,413,309; where Omanis represent 55% and non-Omanis were 45% (NCSI, 2016). Arabic is the main language of communication in the country, and others can speak English, Baluchi, and Urdu.

Compared to the other Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries, Oman is experiencing the second highest rate of youth growth (between 15-24 years). Statistics showed that, in 2010, young Omanis under 24 years old, represented 1,175,141 (60% of the overall Omani population, 51% males 49% females) (Statistical Year Book, 2010). Currently, the demographic data, documented by the CIA Factbook (30/06/2015) in **table 2.3**, indicated

that around 50.3% of Omanis are less than 24 years old (Indexmundi, 2015). The youth population has increased with the increasing level of educational attainment (Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2010). These data bring to light that the number of the local workforce joining the job market will grow in the future leading to a need for more employment opportunities and education investment.

Table 2.3: The distribution of the population according to age			
Age group (yrs.)	CIAFact book (2015)		
	Male	Female	Total (%)
0-14	501,352	476,333	977,685 (30.4)
15-24	335,404	304,261	639,665 (19.9)
25-54	801,539	569,187	1,370,726 (42.6)
55-64	67,085	58,254	125,339 (3.9)
65 and above	53,320	53,040	106,360 (3.3)

Resource: http://www.indexmundi.com/oman/age_structure.html, 12/01/2016.

Since the 70s and 80s, Oman has been relying considerably on expatriates to gain a rapid construction of infrastructure and to work in different fields such as oil (Harry, 2007). Therefore, the government should have an essential change in some policies and find the best strategies to recruit Omanis in the private sector. To do so, and like the other Gulf countries, it has focused on reforming policies such as economic diversification, education, and training development, and directly intervenes in controlling the labour market.

2.3.1 Economic Diversification

Geographically, Oman overlooks three seas, The Arabian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and the Arabian Sea. Historically, as a developing country, it has predicated substantially on oil revenues to have sustainable economic development. According to the Times of Oman (2015), the latest statistics show that, at the end of December 2014, Oman's GDP was OMR. 31.45 billion with an increase of 4.6% (OMR. 30.06 billion in 2013).

The World Bank (2011) in Ewers (2013) reported that the Gulf countries have managed to attract foreign investments and expertise, and their economies have grown while improving global competitiveness. Oman's economy is classified as a transition economy from labour market efficiency to business sophistication and innovation (Arab World Competitiveness Report, 2013 in Matherly and Hodgson (2014). For Matherly and Hodgson (2014), Oman

has a proper investment structure and institutional development. Among more than 180 countries, Oman ranked 47th on ease of establishing a business and came in 32nd on international competitiveness (Global Competitiveness Report, 2012-2013). Lately, the World Bank Group (WBG) statistics, in 'Doing Business Index', showed that Oman has a significant change in its business environment as it improved in ranking from 77/183 in 2015 to 70 in 2016 (World Bank group 'WBG', 2016).

Oman's economy has been quietly extending and engaging foreign investments; however, it gives serious consideration to the dwindling oil reserves and the external factors that may affect oil prices. Muysken and Nour (2006) argue that oil is an exhaustible resource meaning oil revenues are uncertain and volatile due to the instability of its prices. The Central Bank of Oman (2013) reported that the oil prices might be affected by the international deteriorating global macroeconomic conditions as well as economic crises (Reuters, 2012). Oman oil revenues have dropped by more than 60%, due to plunging oil prices from $100 to less than $40 per barrel since June 2014 (Oman Daily Magazine, 2015) to reach 26.70% on 12/01/2016 (Azamn Newspaper, 2016). The continued drop in oil prices has a major effect on Oman's total budget as it is expected to have a deficit of $6.5 billion for 2015 (Oman Daily Magazine, 2016). These indications and statistics of oil crises will create an uncertain economy that affects developing nationals and providing them with employment leading to weak economic growth. Therefore, there is even more pressure on the government to take measures and diversify the economy to enhance non-oil revenues.

The vision of Oman's economy 2020 (1996-2020), established by the government in 1995, has noted the diversification of economy (MNE, 2008).The government seeks other sources to enhance its economic growth such as tourism, agriculture and fisheries, foreign investments and the petrochemical industry. To achieve organisational and economic objectives, all the previous mentioned sectors demand highly skilled individuals. Accordingly, in Vision 2020, the government has committed to developing national's skills and abilities as it aims to:

a) Outline how to promote youth employment in the country and cut down the substantial number of expatriates in the private sector.
b) Enhance the youth skills and knowledge through rehabilitating the education system and motivating investments for new private HEIs and training centres.

To achieve the aims reported previously, the government has divided the time frame into stages called five-year development plans. The period from 2011-2015 is the Eighth Five-

Year Plan, and it is the fourth phase of the 2020 strategy (Central Bank of Oman, 2013). The three most planned objectives at this stage were:

a) Enhancing citizens' living conditions, social development, and the development of human resources. The Eighth Five-Year Development Plan 2011–2015 has emphasised the role of education in promoting local's skills and knowledge (AlKhabeer Capital, 2013).

b) Strengthening the private sector.

c) Supporting non-petroleum industries such as water, electricity, construction, mining, quarrying, tourism, agriculture, fisheries, and manufacturing (Mansour, 2013; and Lewin, 2012).

According to Vision 2020, it is expected that the contribution of the non-oil sectors to the overall GDP will increase by 81% and gas industry by 10% while the oil sector contribution will decrease gradually to 9% (MNE, 2010). Mansour (2013) argues that Oman has implemented some strategies of economic diversification; however, non-oil GDP has been steadily decreasing since 1995 reaching 52.9% in 2010. He holds the view that it is doubtful that Oman's government will achieve the goal of GDP 81% in 2020 as Vision 2020 did not indicate precisely the proper indicators and a monitoring and measurement system.

Promoting nationals' employment via economic diversification is one of the schemes planned for achieving the objectives of Vision 2020. For Rassekh (2004) the government provides adequate conditions and promotes the foundation of an active and competitive private sector. Also, it gives a considerable interest in the industrial, tourism, agriculture, and fisheries sectors to enhance the economy. Mansour (2013) disagreed with this argument and debates that the support of the Omani government to the private sector is still weak as the budget did not surpass 9% of the total expenditure in 2010, compared to 4.2% in 2006. According to him, the four main challenges that face the economic diversification strategy in Oman are: the shortage of skilled national workers, Omanisation policies as compulsory to recruit locals, labour legislation (e.g. new minimum wage), and the inadequate education and training system that does not meet employers' needs in the private sector. Mansour (2013) urges that for a crucial improvement in the economic diversification strategy, the government has to:

1) Continue investing more money in educating and training a national workforce as the skills development is a long process.

2) Balance between recruiting nationals and hiring skilled and knowledgeable expatriate workers. That is, the government needs to hire foreigners that have an advantage of

supplying the private sector with the knowledge, skills, and experience to develop competitive sectors in the short and medium terms.

3) Balance between non-oil exports-oriented and an import substitution strategy is vital to attaining substantial support to the private organisations and investments in the country.

4) Set up a particular unit that is responsible for planning, managing, appraising the progress, coordinating the cooperation of all the stakeholders, including government, private employers, and non-government organisations, as they are important in formulating and implementing the strategy that ensures the accomplishment of aims and outcomes planned at the beginning of the process.

5) Encourage nationals to start their businesses by reviewing regulations of entrepreneurial business to help them compete effectively with large organisations. Also, promoting entrepreneurship programmes at HEIs and vocational centres helps to motivate local youth to establish new companies and to strengthen their skills and knowledge like creativity, innovation, problem solving and decision making. Providing financial and administrative support to national investors and making flexible rules and regulations are some solutions that may lead to positive impact.

2.3.2   Education and Training Development

Education and training are most important investments in providing a prepared generation of national human capital (Becker, 1993). According to Valeri (2009:189), the main purpose of Oman's education system is 'Creating a generation strong in body and moral fibre, proud of its nation, country, heritage, and committed to safeguarding its accomplishments'. Oman has the adequate educational infrastructure (Gonzalez *et al.*, 2008), and the government has made good progress in educating young locals (Matherly and Hodgson, 2014). This notion is supported by Al Barwani *et al.*, (2009) who argue that Oman's higher education is one of the fastest-growing systems in the world due to the number of graduates each year exceeding the number of available jobs in the labour market.

Compared to over 180 countries, the Global Competitiveness Report (2012-2013) indicated that Oman ranked 61/144 in HE and training development. Statistics also showed that the government spending has increased significantly since 1970 amounting to 4.6% of the total GDP, to reach 3.9% in 2006 (Kuwait Financial Centre (2012)), 4.3% in 2009 (World Bank, 2009)), 9.5% in 2010 (Statistical Year Book, 2011)), 4.3% in 2012, and 13% in 2013 (NCSI, 2013)). Also, Oman showed its commitment to developing human capital as it ranked in the high human development level (52 out of 188) on the human development index (a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and

healthy life, being knowledgeable and have a decent standard of living) with a value of 0.793 in 2014 (Human Development Report, 2015). This development has substantial effects on sustainable economic and social growth.

As one of the main challenges facing the Omani education system, Al Lamki (2000:77) pointed out that 'Oman faces the challenge of a substantial number of graduates from higher education due to the limited opportunities offered in HEIs.' Around 40% of secondary school leavers continue to pursue various forms of post-secondary education in different HEIs (Lewin, 2012). Statistics show that in 2010/2011, the total intake of the general diploma graduates in both public and private HEIs were 23,387 where 46.1% were females (Statistical Book, 2011). Therefore, it is difficult for those who do not get the opportunity to join HE to seek a job without having a sound education and training programmes. Al Barwany *et al.*, (2009) point out that in 2020, the government aims to have 50% of the secondary school graduates (aged 18-24) enrol in HE, but only 19% joined until now.

Writers and scholars determined the primary concerns of the Oman's HE system, namely an outdated curriculum, ineffective teaching and learning process (e.g. poor teaching quality and standards), and the imbalance between education programmes and the needs of the labour market. For example, a Times of Oman writer (2013a) criticised the current process of teaching and learning in HE, and argued that they are still relying on old teaching materials and using outdated textbooks. He added that the imbalance of the number of students enrolling in HE specialisations is another barrier to Oman's education system and the labour market, in particular, and that is due to the surplus of graduates in specific fields and few numbers in other areas (Times of Oman writer, 2013a). According to Swailes *et al.*, (2012), there is a need for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning by implementing the best techniques that lead to a high quality learning process and develop learners' attitudes toward the workplace.

Omani students and graduates are not self-motivated in seeking a job in the private sector because they depend largely on the government to provide jobs and develop education and training system (Al Barwani *et al.*, 2009; Al Harthi 2011). Hence, providing intensive training programmes to locals is important for their future career. Swailes *et al.*, (2012) found that the process of creating proper training and the development of programmes, related to employers' demands, is slow because of the small investments from companies. They added that the theoretical and practical training programmes were provided to newly joined staff by some organisations in the private sector as they attempt to employ more nationals to achieve a high percentage of Omanisation. They mentioned that a human resource manager in banking remarked that:

'With more time and with the spread of more qualified Omanis through the Ministry's training and education programmes there must be a lot of training to be given first, second, the acquisition of experience by these qualified Omanis, and then Omanisation comes last' (p. 365).

To summarise, HE and training development is still weak and minimal in the country. For Galal (2007), similar to other MENA countries, Oman has invested heavily in educating and training nationals but this investment has not been used effectively due to their recruitment in the public sector, which meant the sub-optimal use of human workforce. Additionally, Buckley and Rynhart (2011) reported that the results of this investment are still disappointing because HEIs produce graduates who lack the work-related skills that lead to success in the workplace. International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2011) noted that in spite of the development of the educational measurements over time, the country has a high rate of young people who are out of work and out of school. The Human Development Report (2015) supported this notion indicating that, during 2008-2014, the primary school dropout rate was 6.4%. Latest indicators showed that Oman failed to improve HE and its training system as it ranked 88/140 in 2015/2016 while ranked 79/144 in 2014-2015 and 61/144 in 2012-2013 (World Economic Forum, 2015).

2.3.3   Oman's Labour Market

Since the 1970s, Oman's labour market has been growing actively (Al Harthi, 2011). According to the Global Competitiveness Report (2012-2013) and compared to more than 180 countries, Oman's labour market efficiency (matching workers with the most suitable jobs for their skillset) ranked 36th. The Omani capital has been the primary key to the accomplishment of a sustainable and a global economy. As a critical factor in achieving its objectives and policies effectively, the government has given serious consideration to the development of youth since the establishment of the long-term development strategy 1970-1995 (MNE, 1996). During this period, headed by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, the government gave a considerable focus to the education sector in order to provide graduates with high qualifications such as the establishment of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in 1986. At that time, compared to the number of graduates, the number of available jobs in both public and private sectors was high.

According to Mashood *et al.*, (2009), since 1970, there has been a need to have a foreign workforce especially in developing the country's infrastructure and construction, and for the professional and technical positions. For Aycan *et al.*, (2007), Oman has relied heavily on foreigners for advanced technical and occupational expertise and manual labour. Although there was a substantial need for expatriates in building the infrastructure and for advanced

technical and professional works, the demand for a skilled national workforce was considered essential (Sultanate of Oman, 1991).

The massive entry of a foreign workforce has had a significant effect on Oman's job market (Matherly and Hodgson, 2014). According to the actual results of the General Census of Population, Housing and Establishment data collected from 12 to the 21st of December, 2010 there has been a significant increase in the number of the foreign workforce from 559,257 in 2003 to 816,143 in 2010. Most of these workers come from India (539,209), Bangladesh (172,365), Pakistan (132,005), Sri Lanka (10,746), Philippines (17,730), Egypt (11,751) and other nationalities (71,824) (Statistical Yearbook, 2011). Latest statistics demonstrate that there is an increase of 2.8% in the number of expats working in 2014, compared to their number at the end of 2013 (NCSI, 2014). The total share of expatriates working in the Sultanate's labour markets was 1,329,952 (11.6% were females) where 1,270,193 were working in the private sector and 59,759 working in the public sector until the end of the year 2014 (NCSI, 2014). 6.7% of the total of expats have university degrees and above, whereas 912,804 have primary, preparatory, and secondary degrees (145,256; 545,535; 222,013 respectively) (NCSI, 2014). Further, of the total number of expats working in the Sultanate's labour market, 15.3% were working in the household sector at the end of 2014. A total share of 42,891 net jobs were added for expatriates to the Sultanate's labour market during the year 2014, where 20,211 were added in the private sector in the first eleven months of 2014 (NCSI, 2014). The statistics, established by the Bank of Kuwait (2012), indicated that compared to 2012, Oman has a population of around one million, where 60% are unskilled, mostly Asian, working in construction, and oil and services industries (AlKhabeer capital, 2013).

The high rates of imported workers have a negative impact on the country. For instance, economically, they send payments overseas (Harry, 2007) and socially, with the cultural differences. Also psychologically, due to the nature of temporary work, and politically as a result of the consideration of payments and incentives to expatriates in both middle and top management levels (Al Dosary and Rahman, 2005). For Swailes *et al.*, (2012), employing non-nationals is critical in supporting stabilised and competitive businesses especially in small and medium size enterprises, however, leads to an unequal competitive market for local graduates. They profess the view that companies still prefer non-nationals because of their high work ethics.

The World Bank (2012) reported that the participation rate of the Omani workforce, in the overall labour market, is 61% (Matherly and Hodgson, 2014). According to the Gulf Investment Corporation (2012), the male youth participation rate was 79.4% in 2000, 78% in

2007, and 77.2% in 2010. The CIA Factbook (2013), the World Bank (2011), the World Economic Forum (2013) and the United Nations (2012) statistics indicate that Oman needs to provide around 350,000 jobs for locals (Matherly and Hodgson, 2014). Muscat Daily Writer (2011) reported that around 45,000 new jobs were added to employ Omanis in the public sector whereas the private labour market has only added 22,500 jobs from 2006-2010. He alleges that if this is the situation, the unemployment rate among national Omanis will increase.

In Oman, around 48% of the total national population are =<19 years old (MNE, 2010). Al Lamki (2000:77) debates that 'as a result of a substantial number of secondary school leavers, there are few available places in the job market'. Similarly, Al Barwani *et al.*, (2009) consider that, due to the fast growing HE system in Oman, the number of graduates each year already transcends the number of jobs available in the labour market. They expected that graduates will be three times the number of positions available in the market each year. On the contrary, the statistics of the Global Competitiveness Report (2014-2015) and (2015-2016) showed that Oman's labour market competitiveness has decreased as it ranked 89th in 2015-2016 and 48th in 2014-2015.

For Matherly and Hodgson (2014), effective manpower planning for both public and private sectors to identify and standardise required skills and knowledge of the labour market, improving private sectors' working conditions and career development opportunities, and encouraging entrepreneurship among locals will have an important impact on the development of locals and enhancing their participation in the country's economic growth. They add that harmonisation of public and private sectors' wages, working hours, rational and convincing incentives, and job security is important to attract locals to work for private companies and reduce the pressure on job creation in the public sector.

2.3.3.1 *Employment and Unemployment of Locals*

Employment of graduates becomes the primary concern of the Omani government because it is no longer working as an employer of the public labour market, while, the private sector still depends largely on cheap and skilled non-nationals (Forstenlechner, 2010). The youth speak survey, established by AIESEC, the world's largest youth leadership development organisation which aims to investigate youth's hopes and the challenges facing them through the journey from education to employment, showed that around 40% of youth Omanis believed the education system and their unemployment are the biggest issues confronting the Omani government (Times of Oman, 2016b). Al Lamki (1998) argues that the government will no longer place and offer jobs to all graduates due to the high growth in the

number of students enrolled in HE, and the avoidance of local young graduates to working in the private sector was shown to have an adverse impact on the government's strategies and overall economic outcomes.

According to the Ministry of National Economy (MNE, 2010), about 70% of HE graduates are employed in the public sector, which meant that the investment in HE has not been used effectively to engage those young Omanis in the private sector. Statistics showed that until the end of 2014, a total of 181,860 Omanis, representing an Omanisation rate of 10.9% (8.6% males, 2.3% females) were working in the private sector where 162,126 received OMR. =<700 (NCSI, 2014). The findings of the Youth Speak Survey indicated that graduates find difficulty in attaining a job relevant to their educational background and work experience (Times of Oman, 2016b).

Unemployment is high among nationals. According to NCSI (2015), an Omani youth graduate spends an average of three and half years to find a job (Times of Oman, 2016a). The results of a recent survey, conducted by the Ministry of Higher Education among 12,551 students, showed that 53% of graduates leaving HE, were still looking for a job in the labour market (Times of Oman, 2016a). The Central Bank of Oman described unemployment as the single most important challenge that faced the country (Reuters, 2012). Jose (2011) reported that the unemployment rate is between 7-19%. She added that 25,000 are registered in the employment system, not all of whom, officials said, are active job seekers. Latest statistics indicated that the number of the active job seekers is 49,000 where 14,980 have a university degree (Oman Daily, 2016). Officials reported that this number of job seekers is expected to be 75,000 by the end of 2016 (Oman Daily, 2016).

The Arab Human Development Report (2010) further stated that the rate of youth unemployment (15-24 yrs.) is 19.6%. According to the 2010 census, the unemployment rate exceeded 24% (Reuters, 2012). A Ministry of Manpower Official said; 'there are currently about 22,000 of the national workforce seeking jobs, out of roughly two million.' The official added that 'around 15,000 graduates are seeking jobs this summer, and the rest, from 22,000 are a backlog of jobless who have not found jobs since the beginning of the year' (Reuters, 2012). Throughout 2000 to 2012, the government has provided 527 jobs, with only 157 jobs for nationals whereas, 481 were provided in the private sector (105 jobs for citizens).

The Gulf Investment Corporation (2012:2) noted that 'for every Omani working in the private sector, there are five foreign workers.' Further, IPR Strategic Business Information Database (2012) in Matherly and Hodgson (2014), indicated that the unemployment rate among locals is 24.4% (expected 367,784 are non-employed). Al Hamadi *et al.* (2007) consider that a

mismatch of skills to employers' requirements in the workplace is the primary factor attributed to the unemployment among nationals. Further, Matherly and Hodgson (2014) reasoned that some national graduates wait for an ideal job opportunity in the government sector.

2.3.3.1.1 Public Labour Market

Omani youth prefer to work for the public (government) sector rather than private companies. Al Hamadi *et al.*, (2007); Al Lamki (1998); Al Waqfi and Forstenlechner (2010); Godwin (2006); Matherly and Hodgson (2014) found that due to the uncomfortable working conditions and environment, nationals avoid work in construction and manual labour occupations and prefer to work in the government sector. They hold the view that public sector is more attractive than the private one because they expect that the government will support them through providing educational and professional development opportunities, securing a permanent job, higher salaries than private employers, better benefits like retirement benefits, and shorter working hours than in the private companies. Forstenlechner (2009) argues that private companies provide higher salaries than the government sector; however, the Omani graduates still prefer to work in the public sector due to better employment conditions, greater job security, shorter working hours, long holidays, and better retirement benefits that cannot be found in most of the private companies. Latest evidence of a survey established by NCSI (2015) on youth employment expectations with 7997 candidates (3607 HE students, 3148 job seekers, 1242 employed) showed that 92% of job seekers, 71% of HE students, and 82% youth employed in public and private sectors preferred to work in the public sector (Oman Daily, 2015).

Due to its saturation, the government faces the challenge of employing nationals in the public sector (Salehi-Isfahan & Dhillon, 2008), which had an Omanisation rate of 85.9% at the end of December 2014 (NCSI, 2014). Also, the government is under pressure to look for other strategies for employing locals in the public sector, especially for secondary school graduates who depend mainly on the government to provide them with job opportunities (Al Ali, 2008). Every year, many students leave their secondary school education to seek a job; however, it is a challenge as they do not have work-related experience, HE qualifications, and lack work-related competencies and knowledge that may help them find a job in the private market.

2.3.3.1.2 Private Labour Market

The private labour market is a powerful vehicle for securing good job opportunities in any economy. As mentioned earlier, due to the dwindling of oil and public sector saturation, the

government could not continue as a primary recruiter for locals; therefore, priority has been given to the private labour market to offer more employment opportunities. The government views this market as a vital sector for the country's economic growth and development (Matherly and Hodgson, 2014), so the opportunity for local employment almost certainly needs to arise (Ghailani and Khan, 2004).

According to Al Barwani *et al.*, (2009); Al Harthi (2011) and Baporikar and Shah (2012), the gradual reduction of oil production and the rapid economic changes, happening all over the world, have made the Omani government encourage locals toward working in the private sector. However, there are some factors affecting the government's plans for recruiting locals in the private sector, which are the unsustainable growth of population, a high percentage of expatriates in the private sector, and the expectations of a limited oil income in the future.

The majority of the workforce in the private sector are non-Omanis. At the end of January 2013, the total population of the non-Omani workforce, working in the Sultanate in different fields, reached 1,330,000 of whom 690,000 were employed in the engineering sector, 265,000 in the service industry, 77,000 in agriculture and fisheries, and 121,000 as technicians in different institutions (Times of Oman, 2013b). As compared to the same month of 2012, there has been an increase of 1.1% of foreigners joining the private sector, which accounts for 172,187 (Times of Oman, 2013b). Statistics from the NCSI (2014) indicated that 89.1% of expatriates are working in the private labour market (79.1% males and 10% females), where the majority are skilled and semi-skilled Indian (38.8%), receive a salary of more than OMR. 900 (12.6%), and have a university degree (6.5%). Latest indications, declared by NCSI (2016), showed that until the end of April 2016, the total number of the expatriates working in the private sector is 1,705,215 (89%), whereas the total number of Omanis reaches 210,074 (11%).

The substantial number of expats in the country has critical implications for the private labour market. For Al Lamki (2000) and Aycan *et al.*, (2007), the considerable number of expatriates is one of the challenges facing locals to work for the private labour market. They described Oman's private market culture as an expatriate-oriented culture and work ethos, and Omani workers need to be flexible with an unfamiliar working environment and different management style and organisational culture.

Although the job market opportunities are available, employers tend to recruit expatriates because they accept lower wages compared to locals who need to be paid a higher salary (Romano and Seeger, 2014). They think that locals through all the educational levels cannot compete with expats due to the differences in skills levels and work-related experience they

possess. The government expected that 77% of the private sector labours will be Omanis (MNE, 1996) while it is 13.5% (NCSI, 2016).

Local employees are stereotyped, and private companies underestimate their professional level. Although 85% of Omani job seekers feel that their education and degree make them fit to enter the job market, managers in senior positions disagree (Times of Oman, 2016a). Barhem *et al.*, (2008) found that employers felt that youth employees are slow in doing their work and lack any self-professional development initiative leading to the failure of a localisation programme in the past. For Matherly and Hodgson (2014), employers perceived that locals are wealthy, hence the shortage of job opportunities for locals. Al Waqfi and Forstenlechner (2010); Forstenlechner *et al.*, (2012) mentioned that employers viewed national employees as lacking punctuality and being prone to absenteeism in the workplace. Further, Swailes *et al.*, (2012) found that employers believe that many of the young employees neglect the rules and regulations of the labour law, established by the Ministry of Manpower, as they are not punctual, irresponsible in performing high-level quality tasks that convince their employers, lack skills and experience to perform productively, and dislike working for long hours. An Operations Manager said,

'*Local workers are frequently absent, particularly during summer time, don't pay enough attention to the company's welfare, neglect labour law, and miss work while they are in charge of critical task assignments*' (Swailes *et al.*, 2012: p. 364).

On the other hand, Business Middle East (2003) asserts that these types of stereotyping exist due to employers' de-motivation toward Omani locals. Al Lamki (1998) supported this argument when she found that private companies discourage and disqualify local employees because they lack work-related experience and English communication skills. Moreover, Swailes *et al.*, (2012) added that some organisations ignore their commitment towards workers' rights, noted in the labour law, thus indicating a mismatch between workers' and their employers' expectations regarding job performance and responsibility.

Scholars (e.g. Al Waqfi and Forstenlechner 2010; Business Middle East, 2003; Forstenlechner *et al.*, 2012; Swailes *et al.*, 2012) agreed that the previous stereotype of locals' experience and attitudes has made the government establish some rules and regulations that protect locals from firing. However, it is still a challenge for private companies to recruit locals due to the apprehension of inadequate performance in the workplace (Matherly and Hodgson, 2014). In their study, Mourshed *et al.*, (2012) found that around 36% of employers surveyed thought that the lack of skills has an adverse impact regarding cost, performance, quality and time at the workplace. Private organisations reason that they could not find the relevant skills within the current graduates and manpower regulations restrict them from bringing in skilled expatriates from outside the country. These

firms urge that there is a need for supporting students with the generic competencies that help to produce adaptable and flexible workers and specific skills related to a range of industries and positions in the labour market. Al Mahrooqi (2012) concurs with the employers' view and recommends that the education system should be developed to produce a workforce who are capable, confident and possess the skills and knowledge demanded in the labour market.

2.3.3.2   Localisation Policy in Oman's Labour Markets

Besides the expansion of the post-secondary education, Oman has initiated policies to enhance nationals' employment, and regulate and balance the number of expats working in the country. Like other Gulf countries, a localisation policy is one of the schemes, established by the Omani government, to replace non-nationals with a national workforce in the private sector (Goodliffe, 2013; MNE, 2002). The World Bank (2004) declares that, unlike other Gulf countries, Oman has implemented this strategy in both the public and private sectors.

Other studies used the term differently. For instance, Al Lamki (2000) called it 'indigenisation'; whereas, it was noted as 'nationalisation' by Mashood *et al.*, (2009); Omair (2010); Rees *et al.*, (2007) and Ruppert (1999). For Valeri (2009), the appropriate term for localisation is 'Omanisation' as it is more than social-economic policy as it means to enhance the national identity, promote national solidarity, and intends to unite a historically divided tribal society. Omanisation policy has been established to enhance locals' participation in the private sector by reducing the level of dependence on the non-Omani workforce, so offering more job opportunities for nationals (Matherly and Hodgson, 2014). For Al Hamadi *et al.*, (2007), it is a long-term programme that looks at the enhancement of the public and private sectors' effectiveness and efficiency. Also, Rees *et al.*, (2007), in Matherly and Hodgson, 2014), affirms that Omanisation is an appropriate policy to empower and improve locals' living standards and importantly for sustaining long-term economic growth.

The government had started implementing this policy early in 1982 when locals replaced first foreign military officers (Matherly and Hodgson, 2014), and then embarked in both public and private sectors (Aycan *et al.*, 2007) leading to a subsequent success in the banking sector in 2001 when the Omanisation rate reached 90% (Al Lamki, 2005). Statistically, the employment of nationals was substantial in the public sector, 68% in 1995 (Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2010), whereby, in 2010, this figure had risen to around 89% (Statistical Year

Book, 2011). Latest statistics (end of Dec. 2014) demonstrate that 85.9% of employees working in the public sector are locals (NCSI, 2015).

On the other hand, the Omanisation rate was 15% in 1995 in the private sector (Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2010). According to the Statistical Year Book (2011), the share of expats in the private sector was 72% (955,630) in 2010 while 28% (177, 716) were Omanis. Approximately, 53% of Omanis working in the private sector were under the age of 25 and around 93% of the total number earned between OMR.120-500, which indicates that the majority of nationals have limited academic qualifications and skills, and are prepared to work for minimum wages. Latest statistics, established by NCSI (2014), indicated that at the end of 2014, the Omanisation rate was 14.1%. Also, the Statistical Centre of the Supreme Council for Planning reported that 38,207 foreign managers hold the top jobs in the private sector (senior positions), whereas 1,909 Omani managers are employed in high administrative positions (2.2% of the total number of Omanis employed in the private sector) (Oman Daily Observer, 2012a).

There has been a serious consequence of the youth population growth with a considerable number of foreigners in the private sector. Goodliffe (2013) reported that, since 1995, there has been a significant increase in the number of graduates, which creates a more competitive environment for talented job seekers. Thus, through the Omanisation policy, the government had a substantial change in its policies by establishing Oman's economic vision (1996-2020) in 1995 to promote locals' employment and produce competent graduates with proper technical and administrative abilities. Accordingly, the following reforms have been implemented, by the Omani government, to provide job opportunities for non-employed and graduates in both sectors (Matherly and Hodgson, 2014):

a) Design and apply an appropriate manpower plan to seek employers' requirements.
b) Facilitate the recruitment process of locals; particularly, in occupations that can be Omanised.
c) Enhance vocational education, and provide more training and qualification opportunities relevant to the demands of the labour market.
d) Enhance work conditions of the private labour market.
e) Encourage nationals to start their enterprises through the provision of financial and strategic support, and incentives (Al Hamadi *et al.*, 2007).

Forstenlechner and Rutledge (2011) consider that the reforms mentioned above had a positive impact as many home nationals were empowered socially and economically during 2000-2001. They add that there is a continued development of the Omanisation policy during

2008-2011 with an increase of almost 6%. They reported that 48% of Omanis are working in the private sector in 2011, compared to 46% (2010), 44.5% (2009), and 42.2% (2008).

By establishing Vision 2020 in 1996, the government has planned for an Omanisation rate of 77% in 2020 (MNE, 1996); however, to date (end of December 2015), it is 13.5% (NCSI, 2016). Swailes *et al.,* (2012) hold the view that besides the high rate of unemployment and an increase in the youth population, the different rates of payments provided by public and private sectors, particularly in the small and medium enterprises where salaries are lower than big businesses, is one of the barriers to successful Omanisation policy. Also, latest statistics by the NCSI (2015) indicate that, the main reasons for job dissatisfaction among employed youth Omanis (public and private) are not enough salary (53%), uncomfortable working conditions (30%), the nature of the work (27%), few incentives (13%), and improper treatment from supervisors in the workplace (13%). Al Farsi (1994:190) identified the gaps in the Omanisation policy especially in the private sector as follows:

a) Ineffective training provided by expatriates to nationals as they feel that their positions are not secure, so fear losing their jobs.
b) Lack of commitment and work attitudes of the national workforce.
c) Inadequate goals of the Omanisation policy.
d) Lack of cooperation and assistance from expatriate workers.
e) Lack of commitment to the Omanisation policy from employers.
f) Companies fear giving serious responsibilities to domestic workers because they think mostly about profits rather than the development of the youth Omanis as future workers.
g) Little payment and incentives leading to rejection of jobs provided

Matherly and Hodgson (2014) debate that as employers have managed to attract foreign experts with global knowledge, the government should plan for strategies to ensure a high level of knowledge exchange between expats and nationals in the workplace, which may lead to replacing expats successfully. Swailes *et al.,* (2012) found that due to the social and relational barriers (Riusala and Smale, 2007) and their fear of being replaced (Al Lamki, 2000 and Wilkins, 2002), some foreign workers and managers are unwilling and refuse to transfer their job knowledge and expertise to nationals through training or mentoring. Al Lamki (2000) insists that nationals should be trained by expatriates in the private organisations, as part of the employment contract, within a particular period and by setting initiatives for those who develop and teach locals. However, Fryxell *et al.,* (2004) consider that insisting foreigners train locals, who will replace them, can be problematic. The

government has implemented a range of practices, to tackle the previously mentioned barriers, as follows:

- o Under the supervision of the Ministry of Manpower, the government sets up a particular percentage for private employers to hire locals in some sectors. The MNE (2010) reported that the Omanisation policy has been implemented successfully in the oil sector, which rates 70% of the total workforce and the banking industry where over 90% of the staff were nationals. For Matherly and Hodgson (2014), as a strategy, the quota system has been adapted by the government to ensure employers' preference to nationals in employment over non-Omanis, which may lead to a reduction in the unemployment rate among locals.

- o The government decides that certain jobs are filled only by locals ranging from delivery drivers to librarian positions. As a step in activating this decision, the government added that priority of recruiting nationals in companies to the Omani Labour Law (Article 11).

- o The Ministry of Manpower restricted work visas for expats and began levies a forfeit on organisations for non-acquiescence with the labour law. Suspending the recruitment of expatriates in different sectors in the private labour market has been one of the decisions, made by the authorities, to create job opportunities for young nationals (AlKhabeer Capital, 2013).

- o Like UAE, Oman operates a 'Labour Levy rebate scheme', which aims to refund the private companies the salaries and allowances payable to nationals during their period of training. This practice enhances the participation of private employers in job fairs to carry out such interviews for graduates and develop their commitment to on-the-job training (OAC, 2009).

Although the above approaches enhance the employment of youth nationals, they have adverse effects too. According to Galal (2007) and Forstenlechner and Rutledge (2010), enforcing a quota system to ensure employment of nationals has a positive impact; however, it sets back projecting a business friendly environment for those who want to start a business in the country. The World Bank (2005) reported that the shortage of skilled nationals within the quota system, constraints resulting from restriction in hiring expatriates, and the extreme difficulties associated with dismissing nonperforming employees are still some gaps in successfully implementing these practices. Further, the limitation of employment practices such as inflexible hiring and firing has meant that organisations are not ready to employ young Omanis (Fasano and Iqbal, 2003). Evidence also showed that some employers are paying young Omanis (those getting low wages) without them coming to work (Valeri, 2009;

Washington Post, 2008) and others recruit foreigners to get the work done alongside the local staff ie 'job doubling' (Elhussein and Elshahin, 2008). For instance, Valeri (2005:7) mentioned that an Omani employer running a catering business for an oil company said, 'I prefer to pay an Omani and ask him to stay home and keep the Indian worker to do the tasks.'

Although Oman has established these schemes to have a significant reduction in the number of expatriates in the private sector, this policy has been criticised. For instance, Forstenlechner and Rutledge (2010) mentioned that results have been unsatisfactory as employers increasingly depend on the imported workers especially in the advanced and professional vacancies. Further, Budhwar *et al.*, (2002) pointed out that there are policies for national development in Oman while, there is no link to operational strategies to accomplish them due to lack of central planning. Other studies (e.g. Al Lamki, 1998; Salehi-Isfahani and Dhillon, 2008) asserted that, in spite of the government's efforts, graduate employment in the private sector has not been engaged in efforts to promote Omanisation (Goodliffe, 2013).

To conclude, Matherly and Hodgson (2014) consider that, over the last decade, Oman has made important progress in helping locals seek jobs through Omanisation however, it has been challenging. Also, the government has shown its satisfaction from the Omanisation policy as it concluded its success in employing nationals; however, firms were fraught with considerable discontent as they felt that the current educational structures were not appropriately supplying the future local workforce. Ghailani and Khan (2004:164) concluded that, in the long term, the Omanisation policy can be effective when there is a clear relationship between education and the labour market to improve graduates' work-related-skills and knowledge. Further, Swailes *et al.*, (2012:365) stated that 'Omanisation will occur when the skills and attitudes of locals match labour market needs and when locals can take senior posts and develop others by transferring their skills, experience, and leadership.'

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter provided information about the Gulf countries' education systems, particularly, HE. The literature considered that the Gulf governments have invested much money in educating their people; however, companies still are not entirely satisfied due the lack of work-related skills and knowledge among their graduates. It explored that due to the low-quality education and training system, the Gulf countries fail to provide skilled graduates for the labour market leading to the employment of foreigners and high national unemployment. Irrelevant programmes and curricula, offered by HE providers, to the needs of the labour

market, inadequate training, and unprofessional academics were considered as frequent gaps that lead to weak education systems across the Gulf countries.

Although the Gulf governments have planned for a localisation policy to replace expatriates by locals aiming to reduce the unemployment rate of nationals, they fail to identify the underlying concerns of skills gaps and their weak participation in their labour markets. Skills mismatch among Gulf graduates was seen as the critical barrier to localisation strategies as well as for companies.

The literature further discussed the economic diversification, education and training system, and the nature of the labour market in Oman. The government seeks other sources to enhance its economic growth such as tourism, agriculture and fisheries, foreign investments and petrochemical industry to diversify its economy. The literature also showed that similar to other Gulf countries; the Omani government has planned for a localisation policy that aims to replace expatriates with local human capital. It demonstrated that Vision 2020, established in 1996, has focused on providing adequate human capital; however, companies have experienced disappointment at the consistent mismatch between the skill set of the local graduates and the demands of jobs for which they apply. By establishing vision 2020 in 1996, the government has planned for an Omanisation rate of 77% in 2020 although it is currently 11% (April 2016).

The literature determined that due to the low-quality education and training programme, the HE system fails to provide a high-skilled workforce for the labour market. The statistics, shown in the chapter, indicated that unemployment among young graduates is increasing (reached 49,000 until May 2016 where 14,980 have a university degree), and the Omanisation rate is still low in the private labour market (11% until April 2016). Foreign workers have dominated the private sector (89% until April 2016) while locals have tended to work in the public sector.

In conclusion, this study aims to contribute towards enhancing the government's, HEIs' and employers' awareness of the importance of building an active and continuous collaboration between education and industry, which may lead to finding the best strategies that will develop graduate employability. The coming chapter discusses the research literature on employability, including three contexts; the West, Gulf, and Oman.

Chapter Three: Employability and Graduate Employability

3.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the related research literature conducted on undergraduates' employability. Due to the limited amount of literature in Oman's context and to provide a wider understanding of this issue, the chapter encompasses literature relating to three regions: the West, the Gulf, and Oman that is expected to provide some relevant reference points for the objectives of this study.

This chapter covers two main parts. The first part documents employability and graduate employability. It is divided into five subsections. The first subsection presents the origin of the terms and their existing definitions. The next subsection discusses the importance of graduate employability to different education stakeholders, namely governments, students, graduates, employers, and higher education institutions, (HEIs) and their exchangeable expectations. Then, the third subsection reviews the debate as to whether HEIs are the best place to develop graduate employability and the quality of HEIs. The fourth subsection highlights the theoretical framework that includes a discussion about Human Capital, 'HCT' and the main approaches to enhance graduate employability notably the Understanding, Skilful practices, Efficacy beliefs, and Metacognition 'USEM' model, the essential skills, and graduate identity. This section ends by discussing the primary strategies for embedding employability in the HEI curricula and strategies to develop graduate employability after HE.

The second main part of the chapter explores the literature of competencies/skills required in the workplace. It has four subsections. It starts with defining the concept of competency and argues for a comprehensive and inclusive definition of competency. The debate about the role of HEIs in developing students' work-related competencies follows this subsection. Then, it moves to review graduates' competencies and knowledge requirements of employers through investigating academics' and employers' perceptions in different contexts across the world. Employer demands, of skills and knowledge of business graduates, are also included. By reviewing the literature of competency frameworks available, this subsection argues for an inclusive competency framework and profile to conceptualise and understand work-related skills and knowledge required by employers in the workplace. Also, it contends the importance of communication skills as superior skills demanded by employers and in HEIs as it is recognised as the most important shortcoming of recent graduates. Finally, this section highlights the literature on the importance of linking HE

attainment with the labour market outcomes to have a successful transfer of knowledge and skills to the workplace. The concluding section highlights the key points of chapter three.

3.2 Employability and Graduate Employability

Historically, the term 'employability' came into use in 1955 (Versloot *et al.*, 1998). Since the late 90s, it has been empirically discussed from different fields and levels (e.g. individual, organisational, and industrial). The term, employability, has been included in various academic programmes like business and management, human resource management and development, psychology, educational science, and career theory. However, it is still confusing when used in various contexts and periods (Johns, 2006), and few studies have sought to merge these different perspectives of employability (e.g. Fugate *et al.*, 2004; Van Der Heijde & Van Der Heijden, 2006). **Table 3.1** illustrates the employability-related developments across three historical periods**.**

Table 3.1: Employability-related developments across three historical periods.			
Perspectives	**Period**		
	Seventies	**Eighties**	**Nineties**
	Seen as flexibility of a society	Seen as flexibility of a company	Seen as flexibility of workers
Purpose of employability	Full employment and decrease of collective financial burden	Efficient and effective human resource management without a lack or surplus of personnel	Individual opportunity for a job in the internal or external labour market
Interventions at what level	Central or local authorities	Large Public or private companies	Individual employees
Major target groups	School leavers without useful studies and needy people	Large group of personnel in lower and middle ranks of companies under recognition	Everybody, employed or unemployed, who wants employment
Necessary measures and activities	Through government programs, employers are supported in carrying responsibility for employment by increasing the labour market qualifications of the people with a weak position in the labour market	The 'flexible firm' implies the management of intra-organizational staffing problems, assuming both quantitative flexibility (number of periphery workers) and qualitative flexibility (employability or functional flexibility of core workers)	The individual's ability to cope with labour market problems implies career self-management that has to be encouraged by someone's employer. Companies will offer facilities to improve the responsibility and initiative of employees.

(**Source:** *Thijssen et al., 2008*)

The term employability has been widely discussed in the research literature. The definition was first suggested by Hillage and Pollard (1982:2), who saw it as 'the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise the potential through sustainable employment.' According to Speight *et al.*, (2013), two limitations of this description are that it eliminates the realities of the labour market, and it is too individualised. A further definition is given by Dearing (1997), who describes it as an individual's ability to get a job relevant to the area of study.

In their study, Hillage *et al.*, (1998:2) also defined the term employability as 'the use of an individual's skills, knowledge, and attitudes and also the way of marketing them to employers and the context within which they seek work'. In this definition, they determined the three fundamental assets of an individual's employment, which are knowledge, skills, and attitudes relevant to the job he/she wants to seek. They argue that an individual's employment depends on the way an individual uses and deploys the previously mentioned assets, how to present them to potential employers, and the context of the labour market. Hillage and Pollard (1998) identified the primary three elements that might be subsumed under the term of a person's employability as follows:

a) Ability to get the first job.
b) Ability to obtain a position and to meet its requirements through the transition between position and functions in the same organisation.
c) Ability to seek a second job in a different organisation, if needed, after becoming independent in the job market and know how to manage employment transitions between companies.

A similar definition of employability to Hillage and Pollard (1998:2) is provided by Hind and Moss (2011) who said that to be employable, individuals need to have skills, knowledge, and abilities that are linked to a particular job task. By this definition, they argued that to secure a job, it is important for job seekers to market their abilities to employers effectively. Additionally, Fugate *et al.*, (2004), in Imeokparia and Kennedy (2012:245), used the term to refer to 'a form of an active adjustment of individuals towards certain jobs until they could identify and recognise existing career opportunities in the job market.' This definition highlights the significance of being different from other job seekers in classifying employment opportunities available in the job market.

As an umbrella to start with and to cover the vast array of definitions used, Thijssen *et al.*, (2008) define employability as an individual's possibility to survive in the internal or external labour market. This definition emphasises the importance of internationalisation in HE and

suggests that students should be ready for competing domestically and internationally. Employability also was expressed by Kazilan *et al.*, (2009) as an individual's set of capabilities to accomplish work tasks productively. Furthermore, it is used by Belt *et al.*, (2010:1-5) and UKCES (2009:2-3) to refer to 'an individual's ability to secure and sustain employment and progress within the workplace recognising that different types of employment have different requirements'. According to this definition, it is important for job seekers to be aware of and understand the job's requirements in a career path. A current definition of employability that shows the importance of skills required in the labour market, hence a graduate's identity, is provided by the CBI (2011:13):

'*A set of generic softer skills, in particular, personal attributes that can be summed up as a positive attitude are critical to being employable. A positive attitude encapsulates characteristics such as a willingness to take part and openness to new activities and ideas. It underpins and links together the other key capabilities*' (Jackson, 2014a).

The broad use of the term employability is sometimes equated with the concept of graduate employability (GE). GE is defined by Brown and Hesketh (2004) as the relative chances of maintaining different jobs. They argue that employability is not only about the requirements for performing the task of a particular job but how competitive an individual is among other job seekers. A further definition is given by Yorke (2008:8), who describes GE as a set of skills and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in the selected jobs that benefits themselves, the community, and the economy. Cranmer (2006) concurs with those researchers who define GE as the knowledge, skills, and personal attributes, possessed by an individual, to perform tasks successfully in the workplace.

Generally, considering employers' perspectives, the term GE is understood to mean the readiness of graduates to enter the job market, that is, their ownership of the required skills, knowledge, attitudes, and commercial understanding that will help them to accomplish organisational objectives productively after being hired (Mason *et al.*, 2006). Also, it refers to 'aspects of behavioural competence and students' capacities to show a collection of general and specific skills rather than learning theoretical academic knowledge and skills' (Stiwne and Alves, 2010: p36). In the case of a high supply of graduates, this definition determines the importance of graduates' attributes, attitudes, and practical skills and knowledge rather than academic achievement.

It is believed that it is difficult to describe, measure and develop GE because of the various definitions discussed in terms of employability and graduate employability (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Boden and Nedeva, 2010). Cranmer (2006) corresponds to the above argument and reports that this confusion is as a result of the use of different terms of GE in

literature as 'core', 'major', 'common' and/or 'generic and/or transferable skills'. Indeed, some authors underpin using the number of full-time graduates, who are employed for a short period after graduation, as an important indicator of GE (Azevedo *et al.*, 2012); however, others do not. For example, Morley (2001:132) alleged that 'employability overlooks how such variables as gender, race, social status, and disability react to labour market opportunities, so employability has become a performance indicator for HE suppliers.' Perhaps the most critical disadvantages of this method are; it can be used only for scaling graduate success for a short time, and it assesses individual's achievement rather than institutional performance (Cranmer, 2006).

3.2.1 To what extent does graduate employability (GE) matter to governments, employers, students, graduates, and HEIs?

Globally, governments come under pressure to create more jobs and to find strategies to reduce unemployment levels among their nationals, especially graduates. Therefore, it is believed that GE has become a fundamental goal for education decision makers and a performance indicator for the effectiveness of HEIs (Tymon, 2013). In different contexts, government policy urges that employability should be addressed in the HE curricula to foster the valuable skills and abilities needed in the labour market due to the highly competitive job market among graduates themselves and the changes in education market requirements.

Scholars (e.g. Brown *et al.*, 2004; Tomlinson 2008) argue that the change of employers' expectations comes as a result of a high number of students graduating from HEIs, and also their view of a degree as a prerequisite for a position. Employers consider graduates' attributes and work-related skills and knowledge much more valuable than their academic degree (Branine, 2008). According to Melink and Pavlin (2012), companies expect HEIs to prepare students, for short and long term jobs, adequately.

Due to the few studies that have explored their opinions on their future employability and to what extent it matters to them, the students' outlook has been viewed as the missing perspective (Tymon, 2013). Rae (2007) thought that students less than appreciate the development of their employability skills. Also, Rothwell *et al.*, (2008) found that, for business undergraduates, the subject choice is the primary factor in their successful employment while their HEIs had less impact on their future employability. By examining the role of HEIs in shaping the future career outcomes of final year students, Tomlinson (2008) found that students are aware that the academic degree had lost its value in seeking a job in the future and they requested enhancement of their work-related skills, knowledge, and personal characteristics. Also, Melink & Pavlin (2012) argue that students are aware of the importance

of HEIs in supporting them to impart their skills and knowledge and in the transition from education to the world of work. As graduates, students realise that the academic degree is not enough for seeking a job directly after completing their studies (see Chartered Institute of Personal and Development 2006; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Tomlinson 2008) because of:

a) The high number of graduates competing for fewer available jobs in the job market.
b) A high level of graduate unemployment.
c) A high degree of suspicion about graduates' expectations of their HEIs.

There has been an extensive debate on the key function of HEIs in preparing graduates for employment. Tymon (2013) holds the view that HEIs' responsibility changes from providing learners with general knowledge and degree qualifications to preparing them with skills and knowledge needed by employers and enhancing their personal attributes. Baharun *et al*., (2012) argue that the role of HEIs is to improve students' awareness of the job opportunities in the labour market. They argue that academics should be aware of the latest changes in the job market in their context, thus offering a successful transfer of skills and knowledge to students. It has been further reported that the role of HEIs is to develop a graduate's career through the inclusion of programmes and outcomes, aligned with the needs of industry, and to motivate students to enhance their capabilities such as self-confidence, flexibility, and to perform duties actively in the workplace (Dearing, 1997).

3.2.2 Changing Expectations between HE Stakeholders

3.2.2.1 Students' and graduates' expectations from HEIs

Students and graduates are increasingly viewed as customers in HE (Maher and Graves, 2008). It has commonly been assumed that it is vital to understand how students think about their future career and their expectations from the synergy between HE and the job market. Schomburge (2007) and Stokes and Wayn (2007) argue that taking students' perceptions, at this stage, may affect the success of their career later. For Stokes and Wayn (2007), it is the stage where students start expecting job opportunities and dream about a job that fits with their skills.

Most of the students aim to seek jobs that align with their studying domain. In particular, students joining private HEIs expect that the investment in their education will acquire them advantages in their future career. They are much more likely to predict that HEIs can take a lead in providing more chances to speed their progress to the graduate labour market. For

Robst (2007), students understood that they are studying for obtaining employment that can be achieved if HEIs provide them with skills essential for being successful in seeking a particular job. Gush, (1996) concluded that HEIs should focus on equipping students with the valuable job-specific skills and student graduates should prepare themselves to compete effectively in the job market.

Few studies have focused on how students and graduates understand and manage their employability in the modern HE context and changing labour market (Tomlinson, 2007). However, it is argued that many graduates are occupied in jobs that do not require HE or are not aligned with their learning experience (Afonso *et al.*, 2012). This section concludes that students expect their HEIs to enhance their employment through providing good foundation programmes, proper resources, and designing and delivering curricula that impart skills and knowledge relevant to the needs of the labour market.

3.2.2.2 *Employers' expectations from HEIs*

Companies perceived HEIs as the major producer of competent graduates, so continually anticipate that they will supply them with capable and skilled graduates (Baharun *et al.*, 2012). They expect HE to guarantee that the majority of graduates are directly prepared to become competent and work-ready employees (Kruss, 2004). Harvey *et al.*, (1997) found that employers prefer graduates who have remarkable abilities and contribute to their organisation's success. Bok (2006) informs that in the modern knowledge economy, companies look forward to those graduates who can perform their tasks effectively and efficiently. He found that employers believe that HEIs will enhance students' awareness of what the industry needs and what is important to succeed in the workplace. According to Atkins (1999), some organisations expect graduates who can perform highly in the workplace and contribute positively from the first working day. He adds that employers will not spend much money in providing training to the newly joined graduates as they should leave HE with the sufficient skills and knowledge.

For Maher and Graves (2008), employers expect that the role of HEIs in delivering employable graduates seems to be changing, and they are ready to criticise this role when they observed that graduates are ill-equipped with work-related skills and knowledge. They add that employers also expect HE providers and students to be aware of the needs of the labour market and how they can be developed. Atkins (1999) and Maher (2004) support this notion and argue that it is the obligation of HEIs to prepare students for work with the required skills, attributes and capabilities demanded by companies. Further, Cappelli (2008:81) believed that 'employees need to be developed through their career path;

whereas, employers need them with the appropriate skills to be productive in the workplace.' Equally, Raybould and Sheedy (2005) and Nabi (2003) found that employers prefer those graduates who gained a pool of related skills, and are aware of using the best of their abilities at work. Thus, programme development needs to fit well with the requirements of the job market and address the awareness of work reality for both the academics as teaching providers and students as potential employees.

3.2.2.3   Employers' expectations of students and graduates

Throughout the world, what is expected of graduates is similar but with different techniques being implemented to make sure that their expectations are accomplished (Bowers-Brown and Harvey, 2004). According to them, graduates should be able to contribute to their organisations from the first day of employment as employers cannot tolerate the cost of training to develop their skills. Also, Atkins (1999) notes that students need to 'hit the ground running' and learn as much as they can to compete effectively in the job market and perform productively in the workplace.

It is believed that students should expect or, at least, be aware of and understand the skills related to their area of study and those sought by employers at work, and not only focus on the degree as a key to maintaining a job (Baharun *et al.*, 2012). For Harvey *et al.*, (1997), a degree is not enough to get employment and employers importantly consider the applicant's attributes to pull off the job tasks successfully. In the situation of an increasing supply of graduates, the interaction and personal characteristics of graduates matters more than the academic achievements for employers (Brown *et al.*, 2001).

3.2.3   Are HEIs the best place to develop graduate employability 'GE'?

There is a large volume of published studies discussing the roles of HEIs; however, the debate on their role in promoting learners' employability is still doubtful. Governments and employers view HEIs as having an economic objective with a strong belief that their primary function has changed from educating students to training them for employment. Harvey (2000) discussed this opposition and concluded that it is the obligation of HEIs/departments to develop students' employability. He adds that academics should focus more on how to teach a subject and not only focus on what should be taught.

On the contrary, academic institutions have a different perception of what they should be doing. They determined that HE is oriented to the requirements of the labour market and society as well as to the present and future creation of knowledge (Kruss, 2004). It is difficult

for HEIs to concentrate and give great efforts on the development of students' skills and knowledge because of the increasing numbers of students, focus on research, and the shortage of teaching and learning resources (Kreber, 2006). According to Kreber, as a result of changing the policy of developing student's employability; 'HEIs may lose their curiosity-driven research, social criticism, and preparation for civic life values quickly' (p. 7). For Rae (2007), HEIs are independent enterprises looking for a high number of students to get more income, so they are not motivated to consider employers' requirements when they plan for their programmes. Furthermore, by investigating academics' perspectives, Maher and Graves (2008) found that HEIs are mainly responsible for providing knowledge to students, without taking into consideration employment requirements, and the curricula should concentrate on their understanding of a subject with little information on skills such as communication, problem solving and decision making. They also found that academics believe that it is the responsibility of students and/or career centres to develop these skills and attitudes. For them, to maximise their employment opportunities in an increasingly competitive and unsteady job market in the future, students should take part of the responsibility for enhancing their skills and knowledge.

The change of HE stakeholders' expectations has affected the central role of HEIs from education for knowledge to education for employment. De La Harpe *et al.*, (2000) and Heaton *et al.*, (2008) argue that due to the movement towards HE in the last three decades, HE decision makers and employers expect HE providers to implement the best practices of promoting students' employability with work-related skills and knowledge (Bowers-Brown and Harvey, 2004; Wilton, 2011). Consequently, universities and colleges across the world, have addressed students' employability in their core curriculum. According to Wilton (2008), most of the HEIs have made crucial efforts to ascertain employability as one of their priorities. Additionally, Bowers-Brown and Harvey (2004); Harvey (2005) and Fallows and Steven (2000) pointed out that HEIs continue to include employability in their programmes and curricula.

It has been also argued that (see Andrews and Higson 2008; Ng and Feldman 2009; Rae 2007; Yorke 2004) GE can be easily and better developed in HEIs particularly through work-related training. Therefore, the argument about the best place to provide students with the relevant work-related experience exists between HEIs and employers. According to Jackson (2010), organisations provided students with work-related experience in the past; however, due to economic pressures and employers' attitudes towards graduates as having an insufficient work commitment, they become reluctant to spend much money on training programmes for those who will join their organisations.

3.2.3.1 Quality of HE

Besides the above argument, whether HEIs are the right place to build students' employability, the debate about their ability to achieve this objective has also been discussed. For example, Harvey (1999) argues that for the last two decades, the debate about measuring HE quality has been given substantial attention. Teichler (2009:15) pointed out that 'since the 1990s, GE has become an indicator for measuring the quality of general education; particularly, HE'. Since then, HEIs have started to embed employability in the core curriculum and learning activities and given more attention to employers' needs. According to Van Duzer (2006), with its basis in nineteenth-century structure, the educational system is not able to meet today's challenges. Mason *et al.*, (2003) and Wilton (2008) hold the view that, the main reason for graduate unemployment is the mismatch between the competencies attained in HE compared to those necessary for performing work actively and efficiently. Consequently, to enhance graduates' employment, HE undergraduate providers have to concentrate increasingly on assuring student's learning and expected standards of skills. For Hills *et al.*, (2003) and Rubin and Dierdorff (2009), the question continues as, how well do HEIs prepare their students to adapt to the organisational changes in the workplace?

A considerable amount of literature (see Finnie and Usher, 2005; Harvey & Green, 1993; Van Kemenade *et al.*, 2008) has been published on how the quality of education should be measured and defined. Graduate Employability (GE) has been suggested as the principle instrument for measuring the quality and performance of the HE system (HEFCE, 2001; Stiwne and Alves, 2010). Hence, experts (e.g. Cranmer, 2006; De La Harpe et. al, 2000) have focused on studying the quality of programmes and courses provided to undergraduate students, and how they can enhance their employment abilities to be productive in the workplace. For Jackson (2014b), to achieve that, HEIs should co-operate with employers and establish a respective committee for being responsible for massively consolidating a constrictive fit of employability standards to teaching programmes and evaluation.

In Oman, with the rapid acceleration of a knowledge economy and on behalf of the government, the Ministry of Higher Education (MHE) is turning its attention to the quality of the HE system. As a start for ensuring the HE quality, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos issued a Royal Decree in 2001 to establish the Oman Accreditation Council (OAC), followed by a Royal Decree No. 54/2010 that was issued to replace the Oman Accreditation Council with the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) to be a separate government entity. The mission of this unit is to ensure that HEIs' meet national and international quality standards of education.

The OAAA considers graduate employment as one of the institutional standards (Criterion 3.6) to ensure that they accomplish their employment aspirations. Indirectly, it helps to reduce the unemployment rate of youth through evaluating HEIs' competitiveness and ensuring that learning and teaching practices are appropriate for imparting knowledge and skills required by the labour market. Also, it assures the relationship between HEIs and the job market in different domains, namely industry visits, exchange projects, and students' training. Ali (2012) considers that an operational plan/cycle is made to include approach, deployment, results, and improvement (ADRI) to promote the generic graduate attributes among learners.

According to Forstenlechner and Rutledge (2010), although the HE system was designed to develop Omani youth skills and knowledge to be prepared for the labour market, its quality is still doubtful. Dr Al Ajmi, Academic Programmes Adviser, Ministry of Higher Education, reported that besides the standard of English among Omanis and the skills mismatch between graduates' skills and labour market demands, the quality is one of the issues facing the education system (Oman Daily Observer, 2014). This argument is supported by Barhem *et al.*, (2008), who found that 77% of academics believed that the quality of HE is the key challenge.

Al Barwani *et al.*, (2009) summarised the main reasons which lead to a poor and weak education system as: low-quality academics, lack of a research culture among HEIs/academics, confusion in the secondary school curriculum, misguided student admission procedures, poor pre-preparation of students, low student motivation, weak college curriculum, and inadequate facilities. According to Baporikar and Shah (2012), Oman's HE system is well structured; however, there is a shortage of skills and knowledge among graduates due to little background from basic education that has not prepared them for higher studies and work-related attitudes. Barhem *et al.*, (2008) suggest that the administrative, content, and flexible management are some factors that may help to enhance the HE quality in the country.

Oman's education system has 'education logic' rather than 'employing logic' (Raffe, 2008 in Goodliffe, 2013: p.51). It has been described as inadequate, weak, and insufficient (Nour, 2002) because it fails to provide the labour market with the appropriate workforce. According to Al-Barwani *et al.*, (2009), HEIs are happy about Omani graduates' performance in the workplace while employers are not. This argument is supported by Muysken and Nour (2006), who found that employers prefer to recruit expats due to the 'educational deficiency' among national graduates. Supporting this, Swailes *et al.*, (2012) determine that insufficient work-related skills among local graduates, and the poor communication between education

and companies lead to an increase of the number of foreign workers in the private sector. The latest survey, conducted by Ernst and Young (2014), indicated that 58% of Omani graduates were unconvinced by HE provision because they felt that it had not prepared them sufficiently for employment (Business Today Magazine, 2015). Swailes *et al.*, (2012) concluded that the education system should focus on work-related attitudes that will help learners to develop their skills and knowledge and align their expectations with employers' requirements.

3.2.4 The Relationship between Higher Education (HE) and Graduate Employability (GE)

It has commonly been assumed that there is a positive relationship between education and economic competitiveness on a national and global level of a country (Brown, 2003; CIHE, 2003; DIUS, 2008; UUK, 2007). For Little (2006), as the relationship between education and the economy is well established, there is considerable evidence that HE is one of the primary sectors for developing any nation's economy and contributing to its labour market. Maher and Graves (2008) identified the main reasons why employability has become an essential role of HEIs as follows:

a) Continuously changing nature of the graduate labour market.
b) Massive participation in HE.
c) Pressures on student finance.
d) Competition to employ graduates.
e) Changing expectations of students, employers, families, and governments.

On the other hand, Schomburg and Teichler (2007) hold the view that, due to the changing views of education stakeholders on the role of HEIs and uncertain employers' needs, it becomes a challenge for HEIs to develop GE. For instance, Teichler (2009) investigated employers' perspectives and found that they have different views toward graduates with similar educational qualifications and what HEIs should provide.

According to Cai (2013), the relationship between education attainment and labour market outcomes, with reference to either human capital theory 'HCT' (Schultz 1961; Becker, 1964b) and/or signalling 'screening' models (Spence 1973; Arrow 1973; Stiglitz 1975) has been discussed since the 1960s without focusing on the transition process until the 1990s. For him, these two theories assume that there is a positive relationship between education and industry; however, they discuss how educational strategies affect employment differently.

3.2.4.1   Human Capital Theory 'HCT'

The labour economic theory of human capital (Becker, 1993) provides important insights into the nature and determinants of perceived employability. According to Berntson *et al.*, (2006), human capital, indicated by education and competence development has a positive relationship with employability as its potential determinants. They mentioned that this theory 'has its focal point in individual's resources, particularly in the contribution of individuals' investment in education and training' (p. 225). They further argue that HCT primarily represents an individualistic view on how to improve employability (p.226). Judge *et al.*, (1995) suggest that formal education, competence development, and work experience have an influence on one's human capital. The present study is not going to investigate the factors of human capital theory (e.g. education, competence development, and job tenure) but will explore their impact on students' employability.

The study employs Human Capital Theory (HCT) to discuss individuals' employability as there is no fundamental theory addressing employability. The term human capital has been described as the investment in some activities (e.g. formal education, on-the-job training) that build individual's capabilities and increase his/her earnings (Slaughter *et al.*, 2015). Becker (1964 and 1993) and Mincer (1958) refer the term human capital to the stock of knowledge, habits, social and personality attributes, including creativity, embodied in the ability to perform labour so as to produce economic value.

HCT has been established to investigate the relation between higher education (HE) and work since the beginning 1960s by Mincer and Schultz and its development in 1964 by Gary Becker. By establishing HCT, Schultz (1961) argues that the future social and economic prosperity of any nation depends on the skills and knowledge, obtained through formal education and work experience that define the prospects of its human capital (Bouchard, 1998). For Kirk (1966), HCT attempts to investigate the economic outcomes accompanied by the investments in skills and resources of people. This investment in people's skills and resources leads to the highly-skilled workforce who will be prepared for highly-skilled jobs, which may lead to a prosperous and developed economy (see Becker, 1962; Leslie and Brinkman, 1988; McMahon, 2009; Schultz, 1961 in Slaughter *et al.*, 2015).

HCT considers that recruiting employers can differentiate between job seekers' capabilities readily; however, the shortage of an individual's characteristics, uncertainty of education quality, and the lack of future supply and demand conditions make the process of hiring job seekers challenging (Levhari and Weiss, 1974). According to Al-Harthy (2011b), this theory was derived from three broad assumptions, which are:

1) Developing students' skills and knowledge to be ready for the world of work in the future as the primary role of a formal education.

2) Educated workers have to be selected efficiently in the job market.

3) Higher earnings depend on an individual's productivity at work.

HCT was developed by Becker (in 1964a) to discuss the link between the personal level of schooling and earnings received. It assumes that the more highly educated an individual is, the more successful he/she will be in the workplace in terms of salary and job opportunities. That is, because of his/her marketable skills and knowledge developed during the study. For Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964b), education is the primary driver of human capital's productivity and performance in the workplace. For Boni and Walker (2013), it is the critical factor in human development and capabilities expansion.

For Tiwari (2012), HEIs have a great responsibility to overcome challenges facing governments such as GE. Little *et al.*, (2003) and Teichler (2007a) affirm that GE has become a primary objective for governments and has, to some extent, enjoined on the national HE systems. With regards to HCT and as a result of the effective participation of human capital, Ashton and Green (1996) note that investing in HE leads to social and personal returns. Supporting this argument, Nussbaum (2006) in Bozalek (2013) argues that for an individual to be a crucial and skilled worker, education is important.

Accordingly, to obtain the full advantage of graduates' productivity (as employees after graduation), their government should educate and employ them (Erdem and Tugcu, 2012). Throughout the world, governments invest heavily in educating their nationals as the primary variable for high work performance leading to economic prosperity (Panagiotakopoulos, 2012). In 2009, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) indicated that, globally, the number of HEIs and students has increased dramatically as students' enrolment in HE in 2007 reached 132 million (Gurria, 2009 in Erdem and Tugcu, 2012).

Al-Harthy (2011b) noted that Oman has focused on developing its youth by investing much money in education, compared to the budget allocated to the military services, and in having free education for all. In his speech in 2001, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin, the Ruler of Oman, has shown the importance of investing in human capital by stating that,

> '.... *Nations are built solely by the hands of citizens. Progress and prosperity can only be achieved through learning, experience, training and qualifications, etc. The real wealth of any nation is made up of its human resources. They are the power that produces development in all walks of life…*' (Valeri, 2009:204).

Statistics, shown in the Statistical Year Book (2011), indicated that Oman has invested heavily in educating youth to seek social and economic development as it shared 9.5% of the total government expenditures in 2010. Further, Lewin (2012) pointed out that the government showed a substantial increase in the educational investment as it allocated around 5.9 billion OMRs in 2011 and the expenditure in the 8th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015) is expected to represent a 55% increase from the 7th plan (2006-2010). According to Nash (2007:41), 'Oman needs to compete for foreign direct investment in the region through producing well-educated workers'. To achieve this goal, Oman needs to 'develop the link between education, qualification and training, and enhancing human resources skills required in the workplace' (MNE, 2003: p. 8).

Although HCT becomes a standard explanatory method for evaluating the linkage between HE attainment and the labour market outcomes, it has been criticised by some scholars. As an example, Shaw (2001) believes that providing work-related knowledge and skills to students is not the major role of HEIs as they have to enhance learners' understanding of the political, social, and cultural changes in the work environment. Also, Thurow (1975) disagreed with the outcomes of HCT and argues that productivity depends more on the workplace itself than an individual's traits and the level of education. Melink and Pavlin (2012) further criticised this theory and determined that HCT does not examine the existence of a causal relationship between the length of schooling and income as it does not answer to what extent the wage depends on school-based education and formal and informal job training.

As a response to these criticisms, Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964b) clarify that, at the early stage of a career, investment in education and training are characterised by the highest rate of return for both employees and companies. They argue that employees can seek relevant knowledge and skills quickly because they are still young and have a long time to take advantage of the results of the investment in the form of higher expected future income. This is supported by Melink and Pavlin (2012), who hold the view that companies can ascertain a high flow of future benefits resulting from his/her job performance, hence higher profits when investing in a worker's training at the beginning of his/her career.

3.2.5 Approaches to Promote Graduate Employability (GE)

By investigating education stakeholders' views on practical approaches to enhance GE, a variety of theoretical frameworks were addressed in the research literature as there is no particular theory on ways of measuring student's employability. Some of these approaches are; Understanding, Skilfulness, Efficacy beliefs, and Meta-cognition (USEM), Key Skills (KS), and Graduate Identity (GI).

3.2.5.1 The USEM model

The USEM academic model was established by Knight and Yorke (2004). It is believed that this model aims to develop advanced terms of employability that explains more than the limited skills agenda and shows what the degree programmes could bring to employability (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011). For Hinchliffe and Jolly, this model focuses on deeper learning and the broader experience of students correlating with HE providers. As a definition of employability, Knight and Yorke (2002:2) refer to the term as 'the possession of understandings, skills, and personal attributes to complete tasks adequately at the graduate level'. By this definition, they debate that, with the same degree of understanding or skill level, for a graduate to be more employable than others and enhance his/her productivity in the workplace, the following are the main concerns that need to be considered:

a) Understand the subjects in their domain.
b) Learn generic and specific skills to be able to improve their productivity at work. Prokou (2008) and Wilton (2008) concur with this suggestion by emphasising the importance of learning both generic and specific skills.
c) Be aware of behaviours (e.g. How one can act).
d) Be aware of how to appraise their skills' strengths and weaknesses, and how to develop them.

3.2.5.2 The Key Skills Approach (KSA)

The Key Skills (KS) approach explains employability in terms of skills, soft and hard, required to perform tasks productively in the workplace. It is argued that learning work-related skills and understanding how to apply them in the workplace helps students to be employed shortly after graduation (Matin *et al.*, 2003). Hence, HEIs need to equip students with some attributes that are highly valued by employers in the workplace. According to Raybould and Sheedy (2005), the type of required skills depends on the kind of job duty in a

particular position at any stage of a career. Much of the literature on employability skills pays special attention to the types of skills demanded in the workplace (**Section 3.3**).

A major criticism of this approach is that it is a theoretical structure that does not touch any real empirical objects (Holmes, 2001a). For Holmes, skills and context are interrelated, and it has only made sense to those who have the same understanding of circumstances. He argues that the skills approach cannot equalise the complexity of graduate attributes due to the hypothesis that a graduate's skills performance must be measurable and achievable (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011). Holmes (2001b) concluded his argument by suggesting that, in the discussion of GE, practice and identity are two main components required more than skills to form the principle of performance.

The KS approach was developed by Bridges in 1993 and Hinchliffe (2002) to become a skills-led learning and assessment approach. A serious weakness with this development, however, is that it does not fully touch the demand for critical thinking and judgment (Papastephanou and Angeli, 2007). Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) hold the view that both USEM and Key Skills approaches were valid although they are easier to be dismissed as qualitative evidence did not support them. Hence, the graduate identity (GI) was established as a theoretical approach to developing students' skills, thus enhancing their employability (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011).

3.2.5.3   *Graduate Identity (GI) Approach*

The fundamental problem with KS approach is that it is not a convenient analytical framework for examining GE because it does not provide a detailed and contextualised account of employability (Holmes, 2001b). Accordingly, for Holmes, to understand GI approach the construction of graduate identity needs investigating. To defend his argument, Holmes (2001b:10) reported that:

'Rather than taking 'competencies', 'skills', 'attitudes', attributes', 'qualities, etc. whether they are 'transferable', generic', 'key' etc. as objective features and/or characteristics of an individual, the GIA discusses how such attributions arise in relation to the social practices within a particular arena, and the emergent identities of persons whose performance is being considered'.

The Graduate identity 'GI' approach has been expressed differently. For instance, Barrie (2004); Holmes (2001b) and Yorke and Harvey (2005) described the concept as another terminology for graduate skills and attributes while, Glover *et al*., (2002) and Walsh and Kotzee (2010) used the term 'graduateness'. According to Holmes (2001b), this approach explores the transition from the classroom to the labour market and addresses individuals as

a social factor within a structured social world. For Jenkins (1996), a graduate is the one who focusses on enhancing his/her social interaction and not the one who gets a formal degree.

Unlike the USEM model that aims to search the degree programmes to enhance GE, GI approach argues for an individual's ability to engage with others across a range of scenarios, hence involves a setting of values. The GI approach has a dual perspective as some values might be not wanted and/or others are missing (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011). For Hinchliffe and Jolly, GI approach cannot be reduced to a simple rank of values and attributes that are required by employers at work although it should be seen as 'family resemblance' (Wittgenstein, 1953: Para. 67).

It is thought that the traditional practices of HEIs are 'outdated and outmoded' (Holmes, 2001b: p.117). Accordingly, the GI approach has been suggested to provide an over-arching intellectual approach for curriculum design and selection of teaching and evaluation strategies that support developing and practicing skills. The GI approach asserts that, in vocationally-centred programmes (e.g. Business Studies), students need to have work-related experience that helps them to perform actively in the practices of an occupational area. Also, they need to be aware of what it would be like to be employable in related jobs and how they can be ready for the transition from education to work. Thus, this approach debates that it is the responsibility of academic practitioners to prepare and review curricula, and ensure their alignment with the needs of industry in particular positions (e.g. writing reports).

In addition, non-vocational orientation programmes have ways to introduce activities that reflect work practices. HEIs have to ensure that students view the task given to be a rehearsal of a real job practice rather than a process of gaining a skill. Some activities do not have a particular practical reference on how to be applied to work such as communication and problem solving. Accordingly, academics need to represent these activities as examples of practices in that field. For instance, to enhance students' speaking fluency in the use of vocabulary, they have to practice reading and summarising (speaking) in various terms, with ease, in explaining activities they have undertaken and how to relate them to employment. By following this strategy, graduates will be able to communicate with recruiters successfully and to achieve employment (Holmes, 1999). Holmes concluded that carrying out different ways of developing students' graduate identity depend on the nature of HEIs and the allocation of employability obligations to the careers advisory service and its academic provision.

During the recruitment process, Holmes (2001b) believes that employers can examine a current graduate's identity, in terms of graduate skills, and make a decision on his/her ability

to perform a role in relation to practice, identity, and performance. However, this might be difficult as a result of a challenging appraisal of a graduate's actual performance (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011). Thus, the GI approach suggests that employers need to set criteria on how graduates will perform in the future (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011). Hinchliffe and Jolly determine that employers examine applicants in various case studies and scenarios to discover their identity and performance during the recruitment and/ or interviewing processes. To conclude, GI approach ensures the importance of employing the best teaching and learning strategies to link theory with practice in an educational curriculum.

3.2.6   Strategies to Develop Graduate Employability 'GE'

Developing graduate employability (GE) means letting the market be competitive and connect employers' demand and graduates' supply (Tholen, 2014). As discussed earlier, the importance of GE seems to be agreed by HE stakeholders. However, the debate on how best HE can develop students to perform adequately and sufficiently in the workplace and how governments can ensure a successful management of the transition process from education to work exists (Knight and Yorke, 2004). For Bridgstock (2009) and Prokou (2008) continuous learning, seeking job experience, and improving graduate's essential skills and abilities are some factors that should be considered in the development process of GE. A considerable amount of research (see Dunne at al. 2000; Hills *et al.*, 2003; Knight and Yorke, 2003a, 2004; Mason *et al.*, 2003) has been investigated the practical strategies for enhancing and producing qualified graduates by HEIs. Some of the suggested strategies are:

o   Perceiving GE as a key topic, within the HE system (e.g. Bologna process), giving the need to harmonise both graduate and undergraduate programmes (Prokou, 2008).

o   Involving market practitioners to deliver part of teaching at the university and/or college helps to combine theory with practice (Afonso *et al.*, 2012). This notion is supported by Mason *et al.*, (2006), who found that employer's involvement in the process of course design and delivery, and work placements are useful tools for developing graduates' capabilities to fit better with industry requirements.

o   Including skills development within their curriculum, encouraging career support and guidance, providing more work experience opportunities to students (e.g. internship and on-the-job training), focusing more on the professional development programmes, and finally developing progress files for students, which may include items like attribute development, work experience, and academic achievement (Harvey, 2005).

- Motivating students' participation in different educational experiences and invest in their social capital to improve their individual traits (Villar and Albertain, 2010).

- Planning for intensive visits to industry and enhancing student internship programmes. For Afonso *et al.*, (2012), students' participation in an internship programme during their study results in the better development of their abilities; particularly, work attitudes. Moreover, Lowden *et al.*, (2011) determine that work-related-activities and internships are seen, by employers and graduates, as beneficial tools to improve students' skills (e.g. communication and working in groups) leading to high job performance.

- Interacting with practitioners in the labour market, through academics, to understand their needs of skills and behaviours; give speeches to students on the nature of the job market and the demanded skills, and especially from previous year students to ensure that students can equip themselves for graduate careers (Afonso *et al.*, 2012; Lowden *et al.*, 2011). The authors claim that this strategy helps academic institutions to develop practical course contents and avoid skills ambiguity.

- Establishing Corporate Universities and/or Colleges, universities that belong to companies, to contribute to the development of an essential behavioural, methodological, and contextual skill that graduates' lack. According to Holland and Pyman (2004), the prosperity of this type of university/college came as a result of employers' dissatisfaction (Barrie, 2006) with HE quality and content.

Internationally, there are several examples of universities and colleges that follow some of these techniques to develop the quality of their graduates, thus increasing their employment opportunities. For instance, core competencies were embedded in each undergraduate course of study at a British University by designing a template that includes development skill expectations at all levels of undergraduate programmes. Another example is given by Nunan *et al.*, (2000) who argue that an Australian university develops learners' skills (e.g. problem solving, ethics, social responsibility) and lifelong learning through evaluating learning support services for students, diversifying teaching activities, and rehabilitating university's academic programmes. Overall, to date, there is no empirical evidence to prove how effective these methods are for developing GE (Mason *et al.*, 2003).

3.2.6.1 Create Effective Learning Environment

'*The most socially useful learning in the modern world is the learning of the process of learning: a continuing openness to experience and incorporation into oneself of the process of change*' (Rogers, 1969 in Entwistle and Ramsden, 2015).

Faster than in the past, the nature of the labour market is continually evolving, as is the need for preparedness and high performing graduates. For example, the set of skills and capabilities that were required five or ten years ago are different from those demanded at this time, which might be because of the emerging market and rapid expansion of the knowledge economy. Organisations today are looking for those graduates who have greater ownership of their employment skills learned in HE and who can lead change and not only respond to it. Dearing (1997) reported that learning should focus on the development of learners' skills, attitudes, abilities and knowledge widely required and valued by employers.

Crebert *et al.*, (2004) suggest that team working, responsibility and collaborative learning are the highly valued factors that lead to a sufficient and adequate learning process in three contexts, namely; HEI, Internships, and Employment. By his Constructive Alignment Theory, John Biggs (2003), the Australian educationalist, argues that to enhance the quality of HE and graduates alongside the main curriculum; teaching and learning activities, learning objectives, and feedback and assessment mechanisms should be interrelated with each other as well as with the desired learning outcomes. He claims that the primary aim of all of these principles is to create and adopt a deep learning approach, which in turn encounters the desired learning outcomes (Meyers and Nulty, 2009). According to Meyers and Nulty, Biggs proposes that within the classroom, academics should motivate deep learning (e.g. learning for life, critical analysis of new ideas, linking new ideas to existing knowledge on theories and concepts, understanding the application of the new knowledge, and the ability to use new knowledge for problem-solving) and not surface learning (e.g. acceptance of information, memorisation of key facts and information, purpose of retaining information for examinations/assessment, no long-term retention or application, no critical analysis, and no achievements of outcomes). Rogers and Mentkowski's (2004) found that the main factors that lead to a dynamic graduate performance in the workplace are flexible use of disciplinary knowledge, self-appraisal, and collaboration attained during HE study.

3.2.7   Strategies for Embedding Employability in Curriculum

There is some evidence to suggest that subject-specific learning and employability development are interrelated and not oppositional (The Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2004). Thus, governments and academic institutions start to think about how best to include employability within programmes provided to students (Maher and Graves, 2008). For Yorke (2006a), an educational curriculum should focus on supplying experience and embed subject-specific learning. He affirms that considering students' employment needs, both practical and knowledge-based subjects, and students' commitment are important in the curriculum design and review process. Yorke and Knight (2006:14) suggest four idealistic approaches for embedding employability in the curriculum, namely: (a) employability through the whole curriculum, (b) employability in the core curriculum, (c) work-based learning (WBL) incorporated as one or more components within the curriculum, and (d) WBL incorporated as one or more employability-related module(s) within the curriculum. They believe that out of these approaches, there is no better technique of embedding employability into the curriculum.

3.2.7.1   Employability through the whole curriculum

Employability through the entire curriculum is one of the practical approaches for embedding employability into a curriculum and is perhaps the most common practice (Yorke and Knight, 2004). By this strategy, a group of transferable skills are brought together in one complete programme. According to Maher and Graves (2008), some universities have followed this approach. A notable example is the Alverno College in the United States of America, which designs a full curriculum integrating various work-related skills such as communication, problem-solving, analysis, decision making and social interaction.

There is some evidence to suggest that carrying out a Personal Development Planning 'PDP' programme has a positive impact in integrating capabilities across and within courses. As an example, Gough *et al*., (2003) argue that it enhances students' learning and attainment, and their employment opportunities in the labour market. For Clegg (2004), this programme encourages students to learn to know how and why, and to plan for their personal future and career. Also, it is thought that PDP supports students in analysing their skills and investigate skills gaps through discussing their strengths and weaknesses with the course educator (Brennan and Murphy, 2008). Lees (2002) holds the view that PDP is highly valued by organisations as it indicates students' preparation and promotes their learning development. Thus, it can be suggested that students can give evidence to employers on their learning and accomplishments, and can develop the work-related management skills

required (HEA, 2005b in Maher and Graves 2008). It is more likely to produce a proper, active and successful PDP programme through academics' collaboration in consolidating employability development within the curriculum (HEA, 2005a in Maher and Graves 2008).

Although the PDP programme has the mentioned benefits for students it becomes an unpopular aspect of educational policy. One of the key problems with this method is that tutors complain it is additional work to go through an elaborate complex documentation and it is less important than other tasks assigned (Wright *et al.*, 1999). Another weakness of the PDP programme is that students feel it is additional work on top of an already full curriculum (Maher and Graves, 2008).

3.2.7.2   *Employability through the core curriculum*

The recognition of a confined number of modules is required for the inclusion of students' skills through the core curriculum. Yorke and Knight (2004) consider that this strategy is much easier to be implemented than the first strategy and it is relevant to the larger, diversified institutions, and those that provide flexible modular programmes. In the UK, this is evident in the case of the University of Bolton and University of Luton (Maher and Graves, 2008). To them case studies, storytelling, reflecting on training reports, presentations, and assignments and final projects related to businesses are vital activities in developing student's skills and knowledge in HE that can be integrated with the core modules.

3.2.7.3   *WBL as one or more components within curriculum*

There has been much attention given to working with employers approach as a key method to reflect on classroom learning. For Hills *et al.*, (2003), Work Based Learning (WBL) refers to the development of skills and knowledge gained by spending time in the workplace. Also, CIHE (2005) uses the term WBL to refer to the paid and unpaid work undertaken by an individual through training in a particular company. Additionally, it has come to be used to refer to HE-industry collaboration in providing the best strategies for developing students' learning in the workplace (Boud and Solomon, 2003).

WBL modules are useful for enhancing graduates' employability (GE). Surveys such as that conducted by CBI (2008); CIHE (2008); DIUS (2008) have shown that WBL has a potential value to student's learning. Further, some studies have found that academics and students highly appreciate this method as a useful approach to developing learners' work-related skills (Camm *et al.*, 2006; Little and Harvey, 2006). This finding is supported by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011) in Jackson (2014a), which found that

embedding the content of WBL and workshops in core curricula are more efficient strategies for delivery than programmes intended to develop skills enhancement. According to Little and Harvey (2006), WBL has a positive impact on the development of skills and strengthens the ownership of skills and knowledge related to the workplace. Additionally, it is argued that WBL is a strategy that helps learners to be ready for the transition to work and be successful in the workplace (Hills *et al.*, 2003).

WBL can be applied through different techniques. For Moreland (2005) field trips, case studies, employer's engagement in teaching and evaluation, and assignment and projects related to the labour market are some activities of WBL that can be employed by HEIs/departments to develop students' skills and knowledge. Further, Little *et al.*, (2006) suggest the inclusion of work experience as a particular module provided to students in the workplace or mandatory or voluntary work internships as part of a course or national programmes offered by 'career centres' as an external scheme for students. They profess the view that this will help students to have knowledge of the skills and capabilities demanded by employers. Moreover, Wilkinson (2003) holds the view that undertaking part-time work during study is another method that provides graduates with more job opportunities after completing their HE study. According to Knight and Yorke (2004), there is considerable evidence that students, with work-related experience, have a high educational value and their chance to get a job is considerably superior to those without work experience. The literature shows the success of this technique in the development of students' employability although, various challenges make students ill-prepared for employment such as lack of work experience, lack of motivation among learners, and high transportation and life expenses (Maher and Graves, 2008).

3.2.7.4   WBL incorporated as one or more employability-related module(s) within the curriculum

Developing employment and employability modules are further strategies that encourage GE and skills. These modules are necessary to be included in the curriculum as they represent a direct practical technique for developing work-related skills. It is argued that this strategy has a high impact on the possibility of getting more work opportunities for graduates, and it is more attractive to academics (Yorke and Knight, 2004). Globally, several mandatory and voluntary modules (e.g. job search strategies, reflective practice modules, entrepreneurship and enterprise skills, and work-based consultancy or research projects) have been designed by the HE sector to enhance students' capabilities. Notable examples of the UK's HEIs that follow this strategy are:

- ‘Career Planning’ module has been designed by Oxford Brookes University to enhance students' awareness of work-related values and develop their skills and career aspirations. It requires students to be committed to various self-evaluation and diagnostic activities, give an elaborated analysis of the labour market, assess research on the graduate skills, and participate in work-related workshops to improve such key skills as networking, interviewing, CV writing and time management. Additionally, this module incorporates a mock assessment centre held off campus with the cooperation of professional managers from industry.
- ‘Career Management Skills’ module, which is designed by Reading University as a compulsory module for all undergraduate students to provide knowledge on management-related skills. Other courses are personal skills development and career planning.
- ‘Generic Bridging’ module that is designed by Napier University to facilitate students' transition from school to HE and to improve their study and work-related skills (Godfrey, 2005).

3.2.7.4.1 The Importance of Work-Integrated Learning to HE Stakeholders

According to the Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center, Northern Illinois University, learning through experience, action, by doing, and discovery and explanation all describe the term experiential learning. The Association for Experiential Education (para.2) refers experiential learning to 'a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with students in direct experience and focused reflection to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify value'. Dewey (1938:7) stressed the significance of experience in education by stating that 'there is an intimate and necessary relation between the process of actual experience and education.'

It is argued that students and graduates emphasise the importance of skills and knowledge, and recognise the development of these skills during their study when they are involved in practicing reality of work through internships and work placements (Crebert *et al.*, 2004). For Jackson (2010), the work placement is one of the effective strategies that can be implemented to enhance learners' skills and knowledge, and so their employment. It has been reported that there is not much advantage of developing generic skills without practice (Bowden *et al.*, 2000). Further, according to Karoly (2010), training helps to create a productive workforce.

The work experience strategy adds value to HE stakeholders, namely HEIs, students, and employers in the labour market. For HEIs, the establishment of a strong, stable and long-term relationship with industry leads to more training and employment opportunities for their graduates. Through this cooperation, HEIs will also enhance their profiles as their graduates have the appropriate work-related training, hence more chances for employment. For students, applying work experience provides the opportunity for understanding what they have learned in the classroom and contributes heavily to the development of their skills, attributes, and abilities required by employers. Bell and Schmidt (1996) and McMullin (1998) debate that internships help students to practice different soft and hard skills in various areas such as oral and written communication, decision-making, problem-solving, group working, leadership, and planning.

For employers, after graduation and at the stage of screening and recruitment, they can have access to a pool of graduates who are dedicated and can bring fresh ideas in performing job responsibilities. According to Walo (2001), work experience has a positive effect on employers' preference as it gives priority to those graduates who have the work-related experience and understand the needs of the work environment. Further, it has a value in minimising the training costs for preparing graduates for their career.

Globally, it has been found that work-related experience is greatly valued by employers in the recruitment process as they always look for those graduates who have engaged in internships and training programmes (DuPre and Williams, 2011). DuPre and Williams mention that placing students in a field-related work experience through training is one of the hiring criteria. Also, Andrews and Higson (2008) found that there is a consensus among employers in the UK, Australia, Slovenia, and Romania on the importance of prior work experience for graduates as a core competency in seeking a job in the labour market. They urged that HE providers need to embed a reasonable number of practical training hours in their curriculum and build relationships with potential employers.

Undoubtedly work placement enhances various skills and capabilities for students, however they need to be measured (Tas, 1988). The best and useful tools for appraising a student's possession of skills and abilities during work placement are still under debate. There is a lack of empirical research in measuring student's skills and abilities during training either as there is no efficient method, or due to the shortage of financial resources and time management considerations. To have an adequate and accurate evaluation process during internship training, it could be suggested that academic and field supervisors should come together and discuss their performance during a training program. Turning now to competencies required in the workplace, the following is the literature review of the term,

followed by the role of HEIs/departments in developing students' competencies, and the types of competencies required in the workplace.

3.3 Competences/ Skills

There is a degree of uncertainty about the terminology of competencies. For the purpose of enhancing student's employment and learning outcomes among them, the term competency has been considered by various scholars (e.g. Boyatzis and Boyatzis, 2008; Dierdorff & Morgeson, 2009) in different academic domains (e.g. psychology, management, and education). Within psychology, Raelin (2007) proposes that the term competence comes from Bandura's social learning theory (1996) and develops through three main historical phases as noticed by Eraut (1994). First of all, the post-war behaviourist tradition phase (behavioural qualifications through job analysis) that improved in the education domain. Secondly, the generic approach phase, which mainly developed in the management field and concentrated on classifying a set of generic competencies to distinguish the highest and lowest productive staff in an organisation. Lastly, the cognitive tradition phase that aimed to differentiate between competencies and performance of employees under existing work situations (Azevedo *et al.*, 2012). According to Grzeda (2005), there are two main approaches to competency: the American approach and the British approach. As an American approach, Grzeda perceived competency as an independent variable that refers to knowledge, abilities, and skills of an individual whereas, in the British approach, it is a dependent variable that defines work outcomes and individual's performance in completing particular tasks.

Some scholars (see Belasen and Rufer, 2007; Berge et. al. 2002) have used the terms competency and skills interchangeably; however, it is thought that the term competency is broader than just skills (Azevedo *et al.*, 2012). There is no one combined definition of 'competency'; while, several studies have been carried out to try to express the term accurately (Grzeda, 2005) leading to many theoretical contributions. In the European context, the skills, knowledge, and capabilities of HE graduates, applicable in various contexts, have been identified as the 'key', 'core', 'graduate capabilities', 'personal and professional capabilities', or 'transferable' (Barrie, 2007). According to Barrie; key competencies, generic skills, capabilities, and enabling skills are other terms for employability. Throughout this thesis, the terms competencies and skills are used interchangeably to mean graduates' abilities and capabilities required in the workplace.

The first to define competency were Spencer and Spencer (1993), who wrote that it is the personal features that help individuals to perform highly in the workplace. This definition is

supported by Le Deist and Winterton (2005), who referred the term to a person's capacity for completing work objectives. However, the fundamental problem with this definition is that it does not clarify particular personal characteristics required of the graduates. In 2008, Ennis listed the personal skills required to include: mental 'intellectual/cognitive', social 'emotional/attitudinal', and physical 'psychomotor'. According to a definition provided by Hamel and Prahalad (1994:177), it is 'the collective learning in an organisation; especially, how to co-operate different production skills and link multiple streams of technologies'. This definition highlights the importance of learning skills through internships and/or work placements. For Al-Ajmi (2003) and Robinson (2000), competence encompasses proper skills (core skills required of all graduates), attributes (opinions, morals, flexibility and motivation), and knowledge. Similarly, Robinson (2000) identifies three main categories of competencies, which are:

a) Essential academic skills (e.g. writing, reading, oral communication, listening, and science and math).
b) Higher-order thinking skills (e.g. learning, reasoning, thinking creatively, decision-making and problem-solving).
c) Personal qualities and abilities (e.g. responsible, punctual and efficient, self-confidence, self-directed and self-control, and social skills, co-operative).

For Imeokparia and Kennedy (2012), competency represents the skills needed by employers for employees to perform effectively and efficiently in the workplace. In a definition provided by Hodges & Burchell (2003) and Sharma (2013), competency encompasses cognitive (technical knowledge, expertise and abilities), and personal (principles, attitudes, values and motives) or behavioural capabilities (analytical skills, teamwork, organising and managing oneself). Lately, Iqbal and Zenchenkov (2014: 93) described the term as 'the ability to employ personal, academic, and professional knowledge, skills, and behaviours to perform job tasks critically in a given job'. By this definition and besides individual and cognitive skills, they emphasise the importance of academic skills that should be developed through HE.

From the above definitions, it can be argued that to improve their work performance and creativeness, graduates should have a strong individual identity and work behaviours. This argument is supported by Boam and Sparrow (1992); Boyatzis (1982); Page *et al*., (1993) and Spencer and Spencer (1993), who believe that there is a definite positive relationship between an individual's capacity and work performance. Supporting this, Lucia and Lepsinger (1999) in Iqbal and Zenchenkov (2014) argue that, besides the academic knowledge, work-related competence is an important measure of an individual's performance and success at work. According to Jackson (2014b), factors affecting

graduates' performance at work are geographical origin, gender, age, area of study, work experience, engagement with skills agenda, stage of degree studies, scope of life's relationships, activities related to education and work, and the quality of skills development in the curriculum.

Furthermore, it is believed that a graduate's ability to adapt to changing work conditions and to perform job tasks successfully help to enhance organisational competitiveness (Tamkin and Hillage, 1999 in Panagiotakopoulos (2012); Yorke, 2006b). Reports of the National Association of Manufacturers' Skills Gap (2005) and Job Outlook, (2009) indicated that negative business performance comes as a result of the great inadequacy between employers' demands for core competencies and the graduates' supply especially, work-related ethics. These findings are supported by Jackson and Hancock (2010) who argue that graduates' skills gap negatively affects retention, motivation, innovation, efficiency, and productivity within organisations and across the national economy. With regards to graduates' skills gap, it is believed that studies were disagreeing over its existence or how far it extends (Dearing, 1997). According to Wickramasinghe and Perera (2010), this disagreement is due to the failure to maintain a statistical treatment of data, which leads to a limitation in comparing the predominant situation across HEIs and countries.

3.3.1   The Role of HEIs in Competency/Skills Development

Instead of ensuring full employment for their people, it is important for governments to invest in education and training to enable them to become fully employable (Brown and Lauder, 1996). The authors distinguished between the goal of employment and employability. To achieve employment, they suggest that governments need to consider skills that are linked to particular jobs. On the other hand, governments need to focus on formulating the skills that are not linked to specific positions, but develop highly educated people to accomplish employability for their nations.

Besides acquiring higher education, competence development is another factor that could make it easier for a graduate to find a job (**HCT; section 3.2.4.1**) while failing to equip students with the relevant skills demanded by employers has far-reaching consequences (Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010). Longe (1999) holds the view that the proper educational system is the one that accomplishes the society dreams such as full employment level, enhanced productivity, increased levels of income and economic prosperity but when these expectations are not achieved, the government has to find the best solutions. Atkins (1999) and Morley (2001) support this view and argue that HEIs can enhance GE as governments envisage. Valimaa and Hoffman (2008) claim that the social

role of HEIs changes with the growing importance of knowledge, research, and innovation in the global economy.

There is a large volume of published studies discussing the roles of HEIs and the debate about the responsibility of developing students' employability has been ongoing for a long time. It is argued that providing skills for young graduates is an ethical responsibility of HEIs (Bhaerman and Spill, 1988). Leitch (2006) claims that, due to the direct link between education, skills learned, and productivity in the workplace, there is considerable pressure on HEIs, around the globe, to play a key role in equipping students with skills related to employment. Habermas (1989:118) identifies the four primary functions of an HEI, namely: 'knowledge generation, professional preparation, development of cultural knowledge, and the enlightenment of the public sphere'. Boni and Walker (2013) suggest that these functions of HEI can be conceptualised to develop a learner's competencies.

On the contrary, Kurss (2004:683) found that workplace skills and experiential knowledge are pulled 'backwards' and 'downwards' as a core requirement of the university or college degrees, to become integral to the role of HE and a core component of the undergraduate degree programme. He suggests that employers' expect HEIs to prepare graduates with the adequate skills demanded in the workplace even though some of these skills (e.g. management, leadership, and conflict resolution) were developed experientially through processes in the workplace (p.683).

According to Iqbal and Zenchenkov (2014), students join HE expecting to be taught the skills and knowledge required that will make them productive in the workplace. Also, Weisz (1999) found that employers expect graduates to be ready for work, and they need to develop their competencies before joining the workplace. Accordingly, it is thought that it is the responsibility of HE suppliers to clarify, promote, evaluate, report, and benchmark the skills needed by employers (Jackson and Chapman, 2012b; Markwell, 2007; and Starkey and Tempest, 2008).

Skills and knowledge development is well documented in learning, training and development literature (Tymon, 2013). According to Harvey and Bowers (2004), in the past two decades, competency development has become a major concern for HE providers to develop skills in undergraduate programmes. Also, Weisz (1999) found that there is a link between educational programmes offered by HEIs and skills development while there are a few links between graduates' academic achievements and the level of generic skills they hold. To develop student's skills, it is suggested that they should be integrated into the different activities of HE (e.g. Brennan *et al.*, 1996; Dunne, 1999; Gibbs, 2000; Moreland, 2006).

Raymond *et al.*, (1993) found that cooperative education between employers and academics is an effective strategy for promoting skills (e.g. critical thinking and learning skills) among students. Also, Maher and Graves (2008) argue that extra-curricular activities have an impact on the development of students' personal and work-related skills. However, Al Harthi (2011) claims that it is hard to provide graduates with both academic skills and technical training and believe that the skills will develop later as part of individual's natural development.

Besides HEIs/academics, students have the responsibility of enhancing their skills and knowledge (Speight *et al.*, (2013). Barnett (2011) suggests that the lifelong learning concept is important for learners' personal development, employment, and social life as it encourages students to obtain skills (e.g. writing a good resume and market yourself successfully) and keep themselves updated about the required skills in the workplace. For Nussbaum (2010), students should not be ashamed to share their weaknesses at HEIs or in a classroom and should seek support (e.g. academics, friends, etc.) and view them as an opportunity for success.

Different techniques have been employed to ensure and measure skills development among graduates in various contexts. As an example, in New Zealand and by consulting with education and industry practitioners, a National Qualification Framework (NQF)' has been designed to measure GE and seeks the completion of a student's competence profile. In South Africa, the NQF contains both critical and concrete outcomes that aim to enhance graduates' personal development and the social and economic prosperity of the country. In the USA and Canadian universities, the critical competencies are embedded in their academic programmes, and student's skills are evaluated through work-based learning criteria. In Finland and the UK, skills programme development is incorporated into courses and students' personal study plans. The above examples indicate that, although countries may constitute GE variously, they apply common approaches and techniques (Cranmer, 2006).

3.3.2   Graduate Skills and Curriculum

Above and beyond the argument on whether HEIs are responsible for enhancing learners' skills and knowledge is the debate on the practical approaches to achieving this purpose. Maher and Graves (2008) argue that although there have been few common approaches, applied by HEIs, to enhance students' skills and knowledge, it is hard to depend on a single method and a mix of learning and development approaches would be helpful in achieving this goal. One of these approaches is the development of HE curriculum.

According to Maher and Graves (2008), the curriculum should focus on enhancing students' subject knowledge as well as developing their capabilities and knowledge needed by employers in the labour market, as both of these objectives are interrelated. Also, Cox and King (2006), Pool and Sewell (2007) and Rae (2007) emphasised the importance of teaching skills during the degree programme. Wickramasinghe and Perera (2010) concurs with this argument and suggest that skills, required in the workplace, are more likely to be taught at all educational levels and fields, in a particular employability course. They add that establishing this programme will help students to develop their work-related skills at the same level as academic skills. Moreau and Leathwood (2006) mentioned that many HEIs have embedded skills in their curriculum; however, to what extent HE can influence students' development and how best graduates' employment can be included and implemented in HE curriculum remains considerably debated.

Curriculum development is one of the greatest challenges facing curriculum developers. According to Maher and Graves (2008) and Lees (2002), developing a common understanding of planning, delivering, appraising, and implementing the best strategies to develop graduate skills in a curriculum are challenging issues. Yorke and Harvey (2005) concluded that the alignment of the required skills and attributes should be based on precise action by HEIs and education decision makers to be included in the curriculum. Also, Hodges and Burchell, (2003) felt that preparing graduates for the workplace through providing the demanded skills and knowledge is the fundamental role of cooperative education programmes. Hence, as a principal stakeholder, employers' support is crucial in developing HE curriculum because of their awareness of the demanded skills, capabilities, and attitudes, and they can decide on the identity of competent graduates who can perform highly in the workplace. With regards to consolidating student employability in the curriculum, Yorke and Knight (2006) suggest that it is important for HEIs/BMA departments to respond to the following questions:

- How can the best curriculum be designed and delivered?
- What are the best teaching and learning strategies that lead to an active learning process?
- How to include work-related skills and knowledge in a curriculum effectively?
- What are the practical techniques to assess the curriculum, student engagement in the classroom, academics' quality, and students' employability development?

The need for assessing the current curriculum is an essential step before implementing certain strategies or a compound of practices of curriculum development (Maher and Graves, 2008). For Maher and Graves, this will provide more understanding of the

institutional context, into which initiatives will be developed and which will support an elaborated argumentation and development of specific issues. Curriculum evaluation supports curriculum design through interrelating high-quality learning and skills development (Yorke and Knight, 2006). Biggs (1999) views the importance of getting feedback from academics, graduates, and employers on curriculum to accomplish a comprehensive interlink within courses provided by HE. Additionally, Maher and Graves (2008) highlight the need for academics' awareness of the various practices and initiatives in which employability can be included in the curriculum, so they can apply the best for their programmes.

As a useful example of embedding employability development within the curriculum, the HEFCE and FDTL have implemented a curriculum audit to assist their academics in improving courses and programmes, by examining the content and design, to better address employability development for their students in the UK. According to Maher and Graves (2008), this method is effective for HEIs to reflect on their employability initiatives and it is a valuable technique for their staff development. They argue that it requires academics to explore their knowledge on employability outcomes and labour market opportunities, their relations with employers, work-related-management-skills development, whether the overall curriculum outcomes support students' employability after completion of study, and finally review programmes, in detail, to investigate if they encourage employability development. They believe that it helps in designing Personal Development Planning (PDP) programmes for students and evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of work-related learning.

3.3.2.1   Generic or Specific Skills

Skills are divided into two categories, occupation-generic and specific skills. According to Ali (2012), occupation-generic skills have been labelled as graduate attributes, core capabilities, key skills, transferable skills, graduate capabilities, soft skills, essential skills, personal, and professional skills. A well-known example of writers who used the term graduate attributes in HE is Barrie (2005, 2007), who refers to the term as 'core, generic, and qualities' (Boni and Walker, 2013: p70). Throughout this part of the study, the term generic skills is used to refer to generic graduate attributes (GGAs), transferable, and soft skills, while specific skills is used to describe specific graduate attributes (SGAs) and hard skills.

In the literature, the term generic skills has been described as the attributes that can be practiced and transferred to different jobs and life contexts, while specific skills are precisely for a given job or tasks (NCVER, 2003). For Mayer (1992) in Sanguinetti (2004), the term generic skills refer to the core or essential skills that help graduates to perform highly in the workplace. In Australia, the HE Council (HEC, 1992) determines that generic skills are the

transferable attributes, skills, knowledge and abilities acquired to complete any undergraduate degree and are applied in different contexts. Further, Mitchell, (2003) views generic skills as the work-related skills, abilities, and attributes that help employees to perform their tasks successfully. McLean (2010:11) argues that 'generic skills and knowledge include, but go beyond, the disciplinary expertise or technical knowledge that has traditionally formed the core of most HE programmes.' Also, Parsons (2009) in Ntombela (2010) viewed these skills as the attributes that develop human performance and career prospects in the workplace. Barrie (2004), quoted in McLean (2010), identifies the main features of generic skills as follows:

a) Are generic attributes more than generic skills and attitudes.
b) Should be developed by HEIs/departments in different contexts, regardless of field of study or discipline knowledge.
c) Are not additional but important outcomes that should be embedded in programmes and curriculum of any HEI?

Traditionally, with the development of generic skills, HE providers have emphasised the provision of specific skills (Bath *et al.*, 2004). However, generic skills have been recognised as essential in facilitating graduate employability rather than specific. Graduates require more generic skills than discipline knowledge to perform as an agent of social good in society, be ready for the unknown future and able to adapt to unfamiliar and unpredictable situations (Bowden *et al.*, 2000).

For Wiersma and Bradbury (2004), the development of a learner's generic skills helps governments to produce a high-quality workforce as well as develop their work-related values, understanding, knowledge, and competencies required in the labour market. McLean (2010) supports this argument by arguing that specific skills are temporary and will not add value to students' future, while generic skills are permanent and essential for students. Star and Hammer (2008:238) noted that imparting generic skills to learners 'helps to facilitate their mastery of disciplinary knowledge and develop their sense of judgment.' Accordingly, generic graduate attributes or skills 'should represent the central achievements of HE as a process to enable graduates to be receptive to innovation, adaptable to change, and able to manage more flexible culture' (HEC, 1990 in Nguyen *et al.*, 1997: p.3). To achieve that and as they increasingly become a determining factor of success in the employment sector, HEIs/academics should practice generic skills in the classroom (Ali, 2012).

Despite inconclusive evidence, previous studies have summarised that private companies place emphasis on the generic skills to deal successfully with the job's requirements

because they guide graduates in progressing and maintaining their jobs once in the role (AL-Mutairi et. al, 2014). Imel, (1999) in Ong, E. (ND) (2003) concluded that, due to the significant change in the labour market needs, generic skills are crucial to carry out job tasks successfully more than specific skills. According to the human capability approach, the core purpose of HE is to enable students 'to flourish as human beings and be ready for all levels of employment and not for particular jobs' (Bozalek, 2013: p73). That is, from the perspective of employability, discipline-specific knowledge is insufficient for the job market, and graduates need more generic skills and knowledge that can be applied to all employment situations. Drawing on the human capital theory, Wittekind *et al.*, (2010) highlight that through education and work experience, graduates with stronger generic skills have a higher opportunity of getting a job directly after graduation, and it would be easier to apply these skills and knowledge in the workplace.

A vast and growing body of literature has investigated the types of generic skills embedded in different HEIs and contexts. As an example, McLean (2010) determines that, for any HE graduate in any field of study, the core generic skills are teamwork, communication, problem-solving, leadership, and analytical and critical thinking. According to McLean; scholarships, global citizenship, and life-long learning are three main interrelating generic skills developed at the University of Sydney. Also, Bowden and Marton (1998) suggest that, nowadays, graduates need to learn higher-order thinking skills, and to be confident in adapting to the new challenges of a constantly changing and dynamic labour market.

In the Gulf HEIs, the generic skills have been developed by reporting them in HEI's outcomes and advertising on their websites, as a template and/or in their mission and vision statements (McLean, 2010). For example, King Abdul-Aziz University, in Saudi Arabia, employed the university website to identify generic skills that consist of 'knowledge/cognitive domain, cognitive skills, interpersonal skills and responsibility, communication, IT, numerical skills, psychomotor skills' (McLean, 2010: p.21). McLean added that (2010:21-22), in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in order to develop students' attributes and produce educated leaders in community, national, and international contexts, by including generic skills on one or more of the six university's specific learning outcomes and involving stakeholders in designing content and assessment processes, Zaid University (ZU) graduates will be able to:

- o Communicate effectively in English and modern standard Arabic by adopting the appropriate academic and professional conventions of English and Arabic (Language).
- o Learn and use IT practices to motivate productivity and effectiveness (IT).

- Think critically about solving problems and making decisions (Critical thinking and reasoning).
- Find, assess, and use appropriate knowledge from different resources to respond to various situations (Information Literacy).
- Understand and value local and global needs, and perceive and react to differences effectively (Global awareness).
- Lead, effectively interact and equitably distribute roles among others to achieve shared objectives (Leadership).

Similar to other HEIs in the Gulf region, most HE providers in Oman have emphasised generic skills, as key outcomes for their graduates, in their mission and vision statements. A notable example is Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), the only public university, which documented generic skills in its mission statement as follows:

'*To achieve excellence in all areas of teaching and learning, research and community service by promoting the principles of scientific analysis and creative thinking and to participate in the production, development, and dissemination of knowledge, and to interact with national and international communities*' (Report of an audit, 2010a: p. 15).

Also, as a private HEI, Sohar University advertises the generic skills in its mission statement as:

'*To produce talented, knowledgeable and creative graduates who because of their experiences at Sohar University will be known for their employability, leadership, entrepreneurial and ethical attributes and who will improve the economy and society of Oman and the Gulf region and be able to participate in the global economy*' (Report of an audit, 2011: p. 11).

Further, the Higher College of Technology (HCT) designs the key ten generic skills of business graduates **(table 3.2)** to achieve the following:

'*The mission of the Higher College of Technology is to reach and sustain a high reputation for excellence in teaching and learning. The College is dedicated to the delivery of high-quality technical education and aims to produce graduates who have the professional and personal skills to enter employment with confidence, contributing effectively to the Sultanate's ongoing economic development*' (Report of an audit, 2010b: p. 11).

No	Skills
	Table 3.2: The generic skills required by business graduates
1	Are well disciplined and committed to hard work and a high standard of productivity.
2	Can apply the knowledge and skills to a diverse and competitive work environment.
3	Can think critically, analyse and solve problems
4	Have a high degree of competence in using information and communication technology.
5	Are professionally competent and up-to-date in their field of specialization in a changing global environment.
6	Can gather and process knowledge from a variety of sources, and communicate effectively in written and spoken English.
7	Can actively demonstrate and apply good interpersonal skills in teamwork and leadership roles.
8	Are committed to self-development through lifelong learning.
9	Are socially responsible citizens aware of contemporary issues in contributing to national development.
10	Can demonstrate and apply their entrepreneurial skills.

Source: Business School Template, Higher College of Technology, 2013

3.3.2.1.1 Challenges of Implementing Generic Skills and Recommendations for Development

The process of including and implementing generic skills in HEI's curriculum is complicated. Conceptually, teaching and acquiring these skills is harder than teaching and learning discipline knowledge (Ali, 2012). Ali (2012) argues that promoting these skills among learners and assuring their quality is another challenging task. Ali concluded that the biggest challenges of developing generic skills in HEI come under two domains, which are: pedagogies (e.g. language, teaching, and learning) and conceptual (e.g. assessment and ensuring quality).

Jones (2009) in McLean (2010) and Star and Hammer (2008) believe that generic skills are not detailed and de-contextualised. According to Jones (2009), academics lack the skill of successfully imparting these skills to learners within the classroom because they conceptualise, understand, and interpret these skills differently. Varsavsky (2010), in Ali (2012), debates that lecturing is an ineffective teaching and learning method for imparting generic skills to students in the classroom. Also, he found that academics think that they are given more roles, and their primary task is to teach core subjects and not promote and ensure the quality of generic skills. For Star and Hammer (2008), the debate about who is responsible for skill-based teaching and development is another barrier for promoting generic skills through teaching and learning. Equally, by examining the Australian academics' opinions, from different disciplines, on the main challenges of implementing

generic skills in curriculum, Jones (2009) in McLean (2010:16-17) summarised them as follows:

- o They are not considered as part of the curriculum.
- o They are not perceived as the major role of HE providers.
- o They are complex and difficult to describe.
- o There is a lack of the nature of generic skills and practicing the best ways of teaching and learning.
- o The nature of classroom (a large number of students), lack of time, a little research, and employing the best practices in teaching are not supported by academic departments.
- o No, or improper quality assurance process to ensure the implementation of these skills (Barrie, 2003).

In Oman, Ali (2012) argues that while academics appreciate the importance of generic skills they still face several challenges in adopting them in the classroom. By investigating academics' opinions on the challenges and realities of enhancing generic skills at the post-foundation level at the Higher College of Technology, Ali (2012) found that: the lack of best practices to impart general competences to learners, an inadequate evaluation system and teachers' understanding and interpretation of these skills are the greatest challenges in developing learners' generic skills. The reports of the Oman Academic Accreditation Council (OAAC, 2009-2012) concluded that most of the HEIs were unsuccessful in imparting generic skills to students in the classroom leading to poor teaching and evaluation qualities. The following were reported as the primary challenges:

- o There is no specific system, developed for HEIs, to approve and promote generic skills.
- o The generic skills are not filtered down to specific outcomes and objectives.
- o Lack of stakeholders' (e.g. employers, students) awareness of these skills.
- o There is a lack of the best teaching and learning strategies to impart these skills to students leading to the lack of achieving outcomes.
- o Lack of implementing the best assessment method to measure the achievement of programmes' outcomes.
- o Lack of evaluating the effectiveness of students' attributes.

To overcome the challenges of effectively embedding generic skills within the curriculum as mentioned above, the following were proposed:

- o Embedding generic skills within the context of study (e.g. management, sales, accounting, etc.). Including these skills in the core curriculum helps to enhance learners' understanding level of these skills (Bowden *et al.*, 2000).

- o Planning and establishing a curriculum that indicates where and how students can use generic skills at work (e.g. administrators, dealers, sales, marketing, etc.). The process of developing learners' generic skills should be substantially considered in designing the post-foundation curriculum and embedded in core subjects to help students to acquire them and use them purposefully (Ali, 2012).

- o Discussing and involving the best practices of teaching and learning that can impart and develop students' skills and knowledge. For Ali (2012), this can be achieved by improving academics' experience by applying the best practices in teaching and learning, assessing, and in promoting these skills among learners to overcome pedagogical barriers.

- o Appraising the importance, quality, and development of generic skills regularly through the involvement of education stakeholders, namely: students, graduates, employers, who can help in giving feedback on these skills for employment.

- o Building an active collaboration between the core subject teachers and language educators to find strategies that contribute to enhancing the quality of teaching and evaluating these skills (Ali, 2012).

3.3.3   Competency/Skills Requirements in the Workplace

In the last three decades, there has been a dramatic change in the skills required to succeed in the workplace around the globe (Young and Chapman, 2010). According to the authors, an individual's capability to apply skills and knowledge to different contexts and jobs is crucial for businesses' success. Azevedo *et al.*, (2012) argue that graduates' ability, to meet the current and future work requirements, is a continual concern of employers. This argument is supported by Martensen and Gronholdt (2009) who found that, nowadays, companies recognise the importance of skills acquired by graduates in performing highly in the workplace. Also, Azevedo *et al.*, (2012); Guile and Griffiths (2001) and Jackson (2009) hold the view that the successful graduates are those who know how to market their attributes, skills, and knowledge to employers at the earliest stage of seeking a job through writing a curriculum vitae (CV) professionally and attracting recruiters for their first interview. For Nussbaum (2000), it is not enough to focus on literacy and other basic skills for developing the full range of graduates' capabilities. Appendix 1 highlights the skills and knowledge requirements, of different contexts and fields.

In the Gulf region, limited investigations have been conducted on skills requirements and development (e.g. Al-Mutairi *et al.*, 2014 in Kuwait; El-Sakran and Awad, 2012 in the UAE; Iqbal and Zenchenkov, 2014 in Saudi Arabia and Sarea and Al-Rawahi, 2014 in Bahrain). According to Iqbal and Zenchenkov (2014), this is because of the lack of scholarly investigations on employers' and graduates' perspectives on skills, and poor access to journal databases. Al-Barwani *et al.*, (2009); Barhem *et al.*, (2008) and Mourshed *et al.*, (2012) concluded that exploration of skills required by the Gulf's employers, is very generic, with lack of orientation and justification background, raising the need for more studies that provide a clear picture by taking employers' perceptions of their demands for skills.

Al-Barwani *et al.*, (2009); Barhem *et al.*, (2008); Trilling & Fadel (2009) and WBG & IDB (2011) in Radwan (2014) concurred that, in the developing countries, problem-solving and/or critical thinking are seen as highly required skills by employers; however, graduates lack these skills due to irrelevant curriculum that has not included a critical thinking component as compared to the curricula of developed countries. Also, Radwan (2014) found that graduates' flexibility, adaptability, and self-management skills are of concern to employers in the Gulf region while decision making and leadership were stressed in developed countries' curricula. In particular, in Oman, Al Harthi (2011); ALMunajjed and Sabbagh (2011) found that although graduates are aware of the important role of HEIs in developing their work-related skills and knowledge and the skills required by employers, they still cannot get these through HE.

3.3.3.1 *Undergraduate Business Skills Required by Employers*

The objective of business education is to nurture analysing, reasoning, and appraising relevant information to improve students' understanding of practical and theoretical skills (Howieson, 2003). According to the Financial Services Skills Council (2007), in Australia the development of generic skills is treated as a primary domain of the business degree. There is a large volume of published studies (e.g. Andrews & Higson, 2008; Daud *et al.*, 2011; Tanyel *et al.*, 1999) exploring the skills and knowledge required in the labour market by business graduates. They hold the view that possessing appropriate skills can help graduates to practise actively, perform their technical abilities, and accomplish outcomes given in the workplace.

According to Green *et al.*, (2009) in Jackson and Hancock (2010), the education stakeholders (e.g. students, graduates, and employers) expect HE providers to incorporate generic skills into the undergraduate business curriculum. Supporting this argument, Cornule and Hawawini (2005) argue that the typical business school curriculum is designed to impart

students with management skills and techniques. However, this argument contradicts with those of Starkey *et al.*, (2004), who found that some educators challenged this expectation as it distracts them from accomplishing their primary objectives of teaching.

Generic or soft skills are the critical skills required by management graduates (Padmini, 2012). Cornule and Hawawini (2005) found that students and employers focused more on soft skills especially, societal and behavioural skills such as group working, communicating effectively, entrepreneurship and leadership. Also, Jackson and Chapman (2012b) argue that the identification of business undergraduates' skills is uncommon while employers seek those graduates who participate actively and innovatively in the workplace. Andrews and Higson (2008) examined the employers' views on business graduates' quality in the UK, Australia, Slovenia, and Romania and found that there was a consensus among employers, in these four countries, the demand for both core competent specific 'hard' and generic 'soft' knowledge and skills, as well as prior work experience.

Examining business academics' and employers' perspectives on skills required in the workplace **(table 3.3)** it is necessary to identify employers' demands, overcome skills gap, and align the relationship between education outcomes and business requirements of skills (Jackson and Chapman, 2012b). Ting and Ying (2012) found that employers and academics viewed written and oral communication, research, knowledge acquiring, honesty, diligence, resourcefulness, group working, innovation, and computer skills as core skills for business graduates to seek a job in the labour market. Also, through their examination of academics in an Alabama business school on the importance of soft skills in the twenty-first-century workers, Mitchell *et al.*, (2010) found that academics greatly value communication, teamwork, problem-solving, leadership and diversity as necessary skills to be embedded in business curricula.

In the Gulf region, and by discussing the quality of graduates and the skills requirements of the Kuwaiti labour market with employers and academics, AL-Mutairi *et al.*, (2014) found that both stakeholders highly valued soft skills and knowledge while academics attached high importance to the personal abilities of graduates. Also, they pointed out that, in the recruitment process and interview, employers seek local graduates who have proper and adequate soft skills and knowledge such as research, resourcefulness, self-quality and control, computer, work ethics, flexibility and adaptability, initiative, self-confidence, analytical, numerical, dependability, value improving, and group working skills. They concluded that besides cultural and social factors; the background of the employer, the nature of the job, ownership of the firm, and the size of the market are the other main factors that determine graduate employment in the Arab countries and the Gulf in particular.

In Oman, Amin (2012) found that young graduates lack soft skills and employers are unconvinced with their work performance because they are not skilled enough and are unprepared for employment. Subsequently, there is a strong need to link the skills required with the critical success factors in the workplace, which can be accomplished through the inclusion of these skills in the business education system.

Table 3.3: Employers' requirements of skills from business management graduates	
Scholar	Competences required by employers
Hancock *et al.*, (2009); BCA, (2006); BIHECC, (2007); Council for Industry and Higher Education, (2008); and Institute of Directors, (2007)	Oral and written communication, working cooperatively in a team, and problem solving
Hancock *et al.*, (2009); BCA, (2006)	Initiative and enterprise
Association of Graduate recruiters, (2007); CIHE, (2008)	Decision management
Casner-Lotto & Barrington, (2006); Braun, (2004)	Critical thinking
CIHE, (2008); IOD, (2007)	Ethical behaviour
Kavanagh *et al.*, (2009)	Emotional intelligence
Di Meglio, (2008); Nolan *et al.*, (2010)	Work ethic
Al-Alawneh, (2011); Heath & Mills, (2000); Sodhi & Son, (2008); Norwood & Henneberry,(2006); Morley & Aynsley, (2007)	Communication
Schull *et al.*, (2012); Al-Alawneh, (2011); Nolan *et al.*, (2010), Jackling & De Lange, (2009); Morley & Aynsley, (2007)	Team working
Hellier *et al.*, (2004); Husain *et al.*, (2010); Zhu, (2009); Schull *et al.*, (2012); Daud *et al.*, (2011)	Interpersonal
Hernandez-March *et al.*, (2009); Velde, (2009)	Motivation and willingness to learn new skills
Husain *et al.*, (2010); Wickramasinghe & Perera, (2010)	Thinking and problem solving
Husain *et al.*, (2010)	Technology-related skills
Hernandez-March *et al.*, (2009)	Time management
Velde, (2009)	Adaptability
Al-Alawneh, (2011); Nolan *et al.*, (2010)	Working under pressure
Zhu, (2009); Jackling & De Lange, (2009)	Leadership
Morley & Aynsley, (2007)	Previous work experience

To build competitive graduates in the job market, HE providers acknowledge the importance of addressing employability in a curriculum (Jackson and Chapman, 2010); however, the relationship between graduates' attributes and the business education system is still not well-discussed (Tiwari, 2012). Reports (e.g. Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2002; Business Council of Australia, 2006; Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council, 2007) and studies (e.g. Andrews and Higson, 2008; Azevedo *et al.*, 2012; Jackson, 2010; Washer, 2007) have shown that employers were discontented with the level of generic skills of many business undergraduates.

As an example, Crebert (2002) found that business undergraduates gave a poor performance not as expected by employers due to their inability to apply learnt knowledge in the workplace and inadequate soft skills. Other evidence suggested by Hodges and Burchell (2003), found that employers in New Zealand valued the importance of generic skills although they are unconvinced by undergraduates' interpersonal skills due to their unrealistic expectations of workplace environments. They proposed that more cooperative education programmes be provided to enhance students' understanding of the workplace. Further, Jackson and Chapman (2012b) suggest that to have work-ready employees, business students should develop their skills through practical learning given by HEIs. Supporting this suggestion, Jackson (2009) determines that workplace learning/internship initiatives, individual core programmes, and embedding learning outcomes into the content are other strategies that help HE suppliers to enhance generic skills of business undergraduates.

Business schools can play an essential role in developing learners' skills and knowledge required in the labour market through collaborating with private employers to establish a business-skills set and implementing the best teaching and learning strategies in the classroom. According to Iqbal and Zenchenkov (2014), business schools should plan further to provide and determine the essential demands of the labour markets, and embed training programmes in their core curriculum to support students seek proper work experience and understand the reality of the workplace. To enhance learners' skills, they (p: 103) advocated the following strategies for business departments:

- o Technical and Business Knowledge Skills: Implement a mixture of psychometric tests, business simulations, scenario building and case discussions, mock interviews, and group discussion/problem-solving exercises as part of its course content.
- o Interpersonal Skills and Intrapersonal Soft Skills: Introduce specialised courses in the curriculum such as life and learning, time management, change management and conflict management.

The importance of designing an undergraduate business competency profile has been recognised in literature. Paulson (2001) in Ennis (2008) argues that a competency profile is necessary for HEIs to prepare competent undergraduates for a performance-driven labour market. Supporting this, Iqbal and Zenchenkov (2014) mentioned that it works as a guideline for HE providers and training professionals.

Similarly, Jackson and Chapman (2012) emphasise the importance of clearly identifying outcomes related to work practices in developing students' skills and knowledge as it helps to provide valuable input on development strategies and plans. According to them, it assists

academics to impart industry-relevant capabilities in the classroom. Over and above, York and Knight (2004) argue that this profile supports HEIs to design an evaluation framework for their programmes, address the extent of alignment with industry necessities and benchmark and map their efforts to encourage graduate employability. Harvey, (2001) supports this argument and suggests that it provides input for better matching the skills supplied by graduates and those demanded by employers.

For Rosenberg *et al.*, (2012), skills profiles can be applied at all educational levels thus, HE policy makers, HEIs, and academics should work hard to develop skills especially, those linked to personality and work behaviours. In addition, Ennis (2008) believes that a competency profile can help undergraduates to perform well in the workplace as well as educate students by developing their skills and knowledge for a future job.

Due to the difficulty of measuring skills (Teijeiro *et al.*, 2013), there is no consensus among scholars on the set of business skills demanded by employers in the labour market (see Bridgstock, 2009; Iqbal and Zenchenkov, 2014 and Mason *et al.*, 2009). According to Barrie (2004), skills models are supported by various perspectives and approaches while they are not supported by a particular conceptual framework. Supporting this, Raybould and Sheedy (2005) claim that a considerable amount of empirical studies have examined skills; however, the information is theoretical in nature, and provides policy suggestions and perspective advice.

Furthermore, Nabi and Bagley (1998) consider that there have been several case studies that have examined skills; however, the lack of generalisability has obstructed the development of a unified framework for interpreting and framing research applicable to companies. Finally, Iqbal and Zenchenkov (2014) pointed out that the available set was culturally bound, context, and focused on specific fields such as business and management, accounting, agriculture, sales, IT and finance. Jackson and Chapman (2012b) suggest that to determine work-related skills, there should be a clear and common meaning of skills among stakeholders in undergraduate education.

In conclusion, most of the studies, conducted to investigate undergraduates' skills **(table 3.3)** if not all, concurred that communication skills were considered as the key skills by employers. Nevertheless, they were identified as the most important shortcoming of recent undergraduates (Matin *et al.*, 2003). Hence, it is essential to ask why communication skills are essential for students.

3.3.3.1.1   The Importance of Communication Skills

Globally, governments have focused on English language due to the current speedy economic, political, and social changes and needs (Al-Issa, 2006). For Crystal (2002), most countries around the world have recognised the importance of English in their language educational systems as an appropriate tool for acquiring knowledge and technology at all levels of education as well as used widely in peoples' life.

The contemporary literature indicates that there has been consensus among scholars (e.g. Al-Ghamari, 2004; Bose, 2011; Faydi, 2003; Harmer, 1983; McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Oxford, 2001) on the importance of communicative skills for learners in HE and the workplace in particular the four language skills of writing, reading, listening and speaking. Trilling and Fadel (2009) support this argument and stress their importance as an on-going learning mechanism that helps young graduates in their education and career development paths. Tuzlukova and Al-Mahrooqi (2010:41) documented their significance for students, in HEIs, by stating that:

> *'Nowadays, English language functions as a bridge that synchronically and diachronically connects students as individuals with an enormous knowledge base and resource of information. The amount of information stored in English is great, but it is not readily accessible to those who do not know the language'.*

In the workplace, research literature indicates that communication skills are the most important and highly required skills. According to Altbach (2010); Ghasempoor *et al.*, (2011) and Graddol (2006); communication skills, oral and writing, are the most required skills in different fields across any modern economy in the world. For Al Mahrooqi (2012), they are greatly appreciated by many employers more than subjects studied, and grade attained at any degree programme. Further, Bellance and Brandt (2010); Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011); Ioan *et al.*, (2011); Mourshed *et al.*, (2012); Trilling and Fadel (2009) and WBG and IDB (2011) mention that communication skills are the essential skills for businesses today to interact actively and to exchange ideas in the workplace. Myles (2009) holds the view that it is important for graduates to have a high level of English proficiency, and cultural and pragmatic knowledge than knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. This notion is supported by Canagarajah (2006) who argues that concentrating on grammar and vocabulary at the expense of enhancing English proficiency of learners is disadvantageous. Finally, Jackson (2010:52) highlighted their importance for employers by noting that,

> *'A prominent example of a competency attracting a range of defined behaviours by employers is oral communication, comprising public speaking skills, the ability to give and receive feedback, listening skills, telephone skills and the ability to communicate in a clear and sensitive manner, the latter two being threshold competency components'.*

3.3.3.1.1.1 English among Young Omani Undergraduates

English is not the first language in Oman. But, like many other countries, Oman needs English for 'modernisation', 'nationalisation', and the 'acquisition of knowledge and technology' (Al-Issa, 2007: Pp199-200). English becomes necessary and the only official foreign language for Omani society in general, and students and graduates in particular. According to Al Mahrooqi (2012:127), in Oman, 'English communication skills are recognised as having positive effects on one's personality, future opportunities, integration with the world, interaction with speakers of other languages, and social relationships'. Moreover, Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova (2010) argue that developing students' and graduates' communication skills might help the government to interact globally and enhance the Omanisation rate by replacing foreign workers with nationals.

Al Mahrooqi (2012:127) found that the importance of English is recognised by many students in the country, as it equips them with confidence, helps to solve social problems and conflicts, gains more friends, earns respect and saves them from being misunderstood. She added that some participants considered English as a primary key to gain knowledge and seek opportunities. For her, a communicative ability is crucial for students to perform successfully in their higher studies and the labour market in the future (Al Mahrooqi, 2012). However, developing learners' communicative capability is one of the challenges of Oman's education system as, at present, it fails to prepare fluent speaking and writing graduates (Al-Issa, 2011; and Moody, 2009).

The government has invested heavily in teaching communication skills at all levels and degrees of education (Al-Mahrooqi and Asante, 2010), however, this investment has not resulted in expected gains (Al-Isa, 2007; Moody, 2009). Al-Mahrooqi and Asante (2010) and Moody (2009) found that the majority of public HE graduates lack the solid linguistic and communicative skills demanded to achieve academic and professional success in the future. Al Mahrooqi (2012) supported this argument and noted that, in Oman, research has proven that, the majority of secondary school and university graduates are still lacking the adequate communication skills that help them to perform productively in the workplace. Also, by examining students' perceptions of both basic school and HE levels on the development of communication skills, Al Mahrooqi (2012) found that communication skills were not taught enough and discussed neither at school nor HEIs, and students learn the language through their interactions with teachers, friends, and family. She concluded that most students, including those who are going to graduate, thought that their English level was not high enough.

Al-Issa (2006) considers that the process of planning and implementing English within the Omani language education system is not good enough for producing competent graduates; however, it seems to have power as an essential tool that supports multiple purposes and controls Omanisation. In 2011, he mentioned that learners fail to demonstrate any communication skills because the basic education system has considered English as a foreign language for nine years prior enrolling to HEIs; thus, for those who leave secondary school and join post-secondary institutions, there is a need for an English foundation programme, which may last up to two years. In the workplace, it is thought that dealing effectively with complex information and communicating ideas with peers or/and managers is one of the major requirements (Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010). This argument is supported by the findings of Al-Issa (2007), Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova (2010), who found that, in Oman, employers mostly prefer graduates who have solid communication skills.

Besides an unsuitable environment for practicing English (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012), researchers have discussed the factors that lead to the lack of communicative skills and inadequate English proficiency of national graduates. For example, Al-Balushi (2001) argues that in spite of the calls for communicative language, the teaching and learning methodology is inadequate as it is teacher-centred. Additionally, Al-Issa (2011) found that the English curriculum in Oman's education system is inadequate enough to foster learners' communication skills. He argues that the curriculum design process is a top-down and centralised process that seeks to provide students with knowledge and information deemed relevant by HE decision makers and not employers.

To overcome communication barriers among students, Al-Issa (2006) suggests some strategies, which include planning and designing an effective curriculum that would support a positive change in learners' communication skills, analysing and understanding learners' needs, and attaining academics' opinions and attitudes. He added, to ensure the effective and successful transition to economic, social, scientific, and challenged world an active relationship between HEIs, Ministry of Education, students, and the society should be built and facilitated. For Kasper, (1997); Kondo, (2011) and Kasper and Rose, (2001) adopting various speech acts and language functions in the classroom such as disagreeing, interrupting, apologising, requesting, introducing oneself or a client, complementing, and congratulating have a positive impact on promoting learners' involvement and development of language skills. Moreover, Al Mahrooqi, (2012) suggests that implementing some activities in the classroom such as scenarios, sketches, drama, debates, creative storytelling, data collection of real life, interactive video or film viewing, creating conversations and role-play and using literature circles may help in developing students' communication skills. For her and Jiang (2006), to apply these activities efficiently and

successfully in the classroom, English academics should be provided with more development programmes on what and how to employ these activities, which may lead to enhancing students' English proficiency.

Improving learners' communication skills is not the responsibility of academics only. According to Tubtimtong (1993), to enhance their communication skills, students need to use the language actively in the classroom. Al Mahrooqi, (2012) found that learners can practice the language, within the class and/or academic institution, through interacting with peers, professors, group work, presentations, debates, and participation in English clubs. It can be suggested that practicing English is not only limited to HEI/classroom; however, practicing the language outside their institutions is highly valued (e.g. reading news in English, books, chatting with peers in English, reading and listening to stories, etc.). To conclude, as part of the system that makes students confident and aware of the value of English communication in Oman, the collaboration of the basic education and HE is highly valued. Thus, education decision makers and providers need to review English language-related policies and strategies to overcome the language skills gap.

3.4 Higher Education 'HE' Attainment and the Labour Market Outcomes

3.4.1 The Linkage between Higher Education (HE) and Industry

Discussing the relationship between education attainment and industry outcomes is important. Scholars (e.g. Brown, 2003; CIHE, 2003; DIUS, 2008; UUK, 2007) found that there is a positive relationship between education and economic competitiveness on a national and global level of a country. Little (2006) believes that HE is one of the primary factors for developing any nation's economy and contributing to its labour market. Also, Boni and Walker, (2013: Pp.17-18) claim that HE is eligible to integrate 'economic growth and preferable jobs with greater social cohesion, so competitive knowledge-based economies'.

The research literature, on the relationship between HE and industry, indicates that this relationship is far from satisfactory, and there is a scarcity of information on a topic that is so important on the agenda in public debates (Teicher, 2007b in Nagarajan, 2012). Supporting this, Dahlgren *et al.*, (2006) argue that, few studies have explored the relevance and effect of education to work demands. They added that the majority of studies had considered the transition of students from education to employment, while a minority have paid attention to the need for skills and the work experience of recent graduates.

For instance, Dahlgren *et al.*, (2006) investigated the level of alignment between the outcomes of HEIs and the requirements of companies. For Al-Harthy (2011b) internationalisation, technology changes, knowledge-driven economy, and the declining role of education credentials in preparing students for work are the main factors to affect the interrelation between HE and industry. He argues that this relationship can be motivated by the evaluation of the importance of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed by employers. Tomlinson (2012) concurs with Al-Harthy (2011b) and asserts that the shift to a knowledge-driven economy affects the HE-industry relationship as it places the need for a highly skilled workforce. Both of them concluded that the previously mentioned factors have an effect on employability outcomes and the demands of the job markets.

One of the assumptions about this synergy is that students attend university or college in the hope of finding a job after graduating (Robst, 2007). The exploration of how students understand this synergy has been examined in the developed countries. For example, Tomlinson (2007 and 2008) questioned students from different HEIs in the UK about their attitudes towards the labour market and if HE is relevant to their future careers. Also, Taylor and Pick (2008) examined the work orientations of the Australian university students and found that graduates feel it is hard to find a job because of the overcrowded and competitive job market.

3.4.1.1   *Aligning Education Policy to Labour Market Outcomes*

'*The new environment requires that individuals need to be increasingly flexible, innovative, good communicators and team players, contributing to the strategic goals of the company and increase technical/professionally competent. This presents companies, education providers, and development agencies with some significant challenges and the opportunity to be creative'* (McQuade and Lindsay, 2005:p.19).

The demand of HE has grown over the past twenty years to accomplish economic growth and labour market demands (McLean, 2010). Nowadays, HE systems play an important contribution in the economic and social requirements of any nation through preparing qualified people (Barhem *et al.*, 2008). It is thought that in formulating future skills evaluations, HE providers should highly consider employers' requirements of skills and knowledge (Weligamage, 2009). To achieve this, Weligamage (2009) argues that HEIs need to identify the skills profile, which best help the current and future labour market, by ensuring the alignment between educational policies and employment market outcomes. Bowden *et al.*, (2000) support this argument and believe that, as a part of the social responsibility for students, HEIs should offer students a range of opportunities to enhance their work-relevant

skills and knowledge, guide them through career changes, develop their self-learning, and strengthen their personal life skills.

For employers, skills are more important than academic knowledge and qualifications (Akerele and Optola, 2004; and Boateng and Ofori-Sarpong, 2002). According to Brown *et al.* (1997), an academic degree does not convey the full message of a graduate's capability to work in a group and/or his/her social and personal skills to employers. Further, Branine (2008) found that, in the UK, the recruitment and selection process depends mostly on individuals' attitudes, personality, and transferable skills and not on the type and/or level of education. He argues that this process becomes more personal-related than job-oriented because employers are interested in personal, academic, and professional skills and knowledge. This argument is supported by Woods and West (2010, 71) who found that, along with the work-related skills, employers give high importance to individual's traits such as reliability, intelligence, cognitive ability, dependability, ability to work under pressure, creativity and encouragement.

The alignment between education policy and the labour market outcomes has been examined in the west and the Arab contexts. For instance, McLean (2010) remarked that HE systems in the UK and Australia have responded to students' learning of skills through identifying GCs (UK) or GGAs (Australia) and improving their lifelong learning. In the Arab context, few scholars (e.g. Rima, 1981 and Tachibanaki, 1998) have investigated the impact of education on improving students' employability through providing resources, facilitating education and offering training programmes (Iqbal and Zenchenkov, 2014).

In the Gulf, the role of HEIs is important in creating graduates with the relevant skills and knowledge to promote economic and social growth; hence the successful transfer of education-based knowledge to education-based employment (Iqbal and Zenchenkov, 2014). In Saudi Arabia, Al-Ajmi (2003) and Iqbal (2011) found that employers expect HE to produce a competent workforce with the appropriate skills and knowledge that help them to perform their tasks correctly. Swailes *et al.*, (2012) argue that in Oman, HEIs can play a key role in developing learners' skills and knowledge, and in shaping their attitudes and expectations to achieve a successful transfer to work. For them, the alignment between the education system outcomes and employers' requirements will help Omani graduates have the knowledge and experience needed in the workplace. For Matherly and Hodgson (2014) although Oman has made important progress in providing education for locals, there is a need for continued review and update of the relevant skills and knowledge required in the workplace with full collaboration from industry.

To summarise, producing capable graduates and establishing a strong rapport between HE systems and employers continues to present a critical challenge for governments globally (Swailes *et al.*, 2012). Supporting this, AL-Mutairi *et al.*, (2014) argue that the involvement of the labour market practitioners to work together with education decision makers in designing policies and implementing strategies, which help to tackle skills mismatch and match education policy with employers' requirements, is still under debate.

3.4.1.1.1 The Misalignment

The misalignment between education policy and the labour market outcomes has been discussed in various studies and contexts. As an example, by examining employers' needs in Sir Lanka, Weligamage and Siengthai (2003) found that graduates lack work-related skills and knowledge because HEIs lack information on the labour market requirements and graduates do not have enough awareness of the reality of the workplace. Also, Navehebrahim (2009) concluded that the Iranian curriculum needs to be reviewed to include more practical orientation to meet students', graduates', and employers' expectations as well as employers' involvement in curriculum design and development.

In the Gulf, studies (e.g. Al-Barwani *et al.*, 2009; Al Harthi 2011; ALMunajjed and Sabbagh 2011; Baporikar and Shah 2012; WBG&IBD 2011), found that academics lack knowledge of employers' requirements leading to the misalignment between education and industry. According to Mourshed *et al.*, (2012), 72% of the Gulf's academics are convinced by what they offer to students and are optimistic about graduates' readiness and preparedness for the world of work; however, almost 45% of youth and employers disagreed with the academics.

In Oman, the interrelation between education and the labour market is weak (Wilkins, 2002). The writers argue that irrelevant programmes offered by HEIs, inadequate curricula, and lack of the best practices of teaching and learning are the main factors behind this misalignment. For instance, Al-Harthi (2011) found that graduates believed their courses are irrelevant to the labour market demands. Also, it has been reported that the HE curricula is irrelevant to the needs of the labour market (Times of Oman, 2013a). On the other hand, a senior academic contradicts these arguments and states that the problem is not a curriculum or textbooks but the quality of students as they do not have the ability to adapt to the requirements of rigorous coursework (Business Today Magazine, 2015). It is further believed that the process of teaching and learning, in Oman's education system, is weak and ineffective (Times of Oman, 2013a). Al Barwani *et al.*, (2009) shared the same concern and

recommended more be done in practicing the best teaching and learning approaches, designing curriculum, and offering programmes that consider the labour market needs.

Hence, by involving all education stakeholders, the establishment of an open system is crucial for having an active education-industry alignment and enhancing HEIs' quality (Mourshed *et al.*, 2012). For Bowden and Marton (1998), the curriculum should be designed to prepare learners for an unknown and unpredictable future. Swailes *et al.*, (2012) believe that, besides developing the skills and knowledge required by employers, HEIs can help in changing employers' attitudes towards the preparedness and quality of their graduates by shaping their attributes and achieving their expectations for any future job, so as to smoothly transfer them into the workplace. However, according to Shabib Al Maamari, executive director in Injaz Oman, the communication between HEIs and businesses is not enough as employers do not play a proactive role in designing curriculum and providing the needs of skills and knowledge in the labour market (Business Today Magazine, 2015).

It is thought that the primary reason for the skills mismatch among Omani graduates, leaving HEIs, is the misalignment between education policy and the labour market outcomes (Romano and Seeger, 2014). According to them, Oman will not succeed in creating a diversified and sustainable economy without focusing on the skills demanded by different sectors such as language education and entrepreneurship.

3.4.1.1.1.1 *Skills Mismatch among Omani Youth Graduates*

There has been growing theoretical and empirical educational studies that have discussed the alignment between the graduates' quality of skills and the job market needs. ASTD (2009) describes the skills gap is an absolute mismatch between employers' requirements of skills and the current capabilities of their employees. Pitan and Adedeji (2012) understood the skills gap or skills mismatch as an imbalance between the knowledge, skills, and abilities given to students at the university and those wanted by employers.

In Oman, the expansion and diversification of the economy increases the requirement of skilled and knowledgeable graduates. According to Oman's Daily Observer writer (2014), the documented plans of Oman's economic diversification, in Vision 2020, are sound; however, they have not yet been achieved. He added that a steady drop and/or fluctuation of oil prices makes it harder and more challenging to accomplish all the targets planned especially regarding the development of people. However, employers have witnessed this shortage and cite the lack of adequate skills and knowledge of graduates leading to the recruitment of a foreign workforce.

Parallel to other Gulf countries and as a result of the gap between the demands of employers and the supply of HEIs, Oman's economy has been faced with the lack of skilled nationals. Swailes *et al.*, (2012) determine that poor employee motivation and skills mismatch among the national workforce have been the common themes in literature (e.g. Al-Lamki, 1998).

Besides an inadequate education and training system, Mansour (2013) pointed out that the shortage of a skilled workforce has been one of the primary challenges facing the economic diversification strategy in Oman. Dr. Brian Buckley, General Manager, and CEO of Oman LNG suggests that the growing demand for people with better skills is the basis of the expansion of economic growth and set up of new industries. He concluded that the challenge of the skills gap among the graduates is not a problem unique to Oman but that high unemployment coexists with a dearth of skilled and talented people all over the world. This notion is supported by those of Al Barwani *et al.*, (2009); Baporikar and Shah (2012); Barhem *et al.*, (2008); Bellance and Brandt (2010); English *et al.*, (2010); Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011); Jackson and Chapman (2012b); Ioan *et al.*, (2011); Mourshed *et al.*, (2012) and Trilling and Fadel (2009), who found that skills mismatch is not only a local or regional challenge, but an international one.

The lack of skills among graduates is the primary reason behind their low participation in the private sector, compared to the high number of expatriates (Barhem *et al.*, 2008). Al-Nasry (2012) indicated that as a result of the consistent skills mismatch between the skills set of the Omani graduates and the demands of jobs, employers are disappointed. The findings of 'MBRF-PWC, 2003' and 'World Bank Enterprise, 2007' reports*,* quoted in Schwalje (2014), support this argument and indicated that skills and capability mismatch was the main reason for answering why colleges and universities do not compete effectively in the global market. The MBRF-PWC (2003) reported that around 34.6% of Omanis did not have the relevant skills the labour market needs (World Bank, 2010). Equally, the 'Wold Bank Enterprise Survey' (2007) stated that 33% of Omanis lack work-related skills required by companies (World Bank, 2010). In 2013, the inadequate preparedness of nationals was ranked by 21.8% of business owners as the first factor for not doing business in the country, followed by the restricted labour regulation established by the Government (World Economic Forum 'WEF', 2013).

Furthermore, by interviewing managers from the private sector, Swailes *et al.*, (2012) found that young graduates lacked work-related skills and experience that may help them to perform actively in the workplace. According to Mohamed Debouk, CEO, New Metrics Training Institute, which trains and recruits students and employees on behalf of companies,

the lack of work experience, inadequate interview experience and the shortage of work-related skills (e.g. business software, leadership and writing) are common among most fresh Omani graduates (Business Today Magazine, 2015). He suggested that a shortage of work and interview experiences should be covered as they give a direct negative impression to recruiters on a graduate's capabilities, performance, and potential.

In spite of the increased investment in education in the Gulf region, the educational systems have failed to prepare graduates with the proper skills leading to the employment of a skilled and cheap foreign workforce (Al-Shaqsi, 2012; Issan & Gomaa, 2010). Iqbal and Zenchenkov (2014) support this and argue that the Gulf HE providers face increasing demands from employers in the labour market because of the skills mismatch among current graduates. In Oman, the HE system does not suit the needs of the private labour market as it fails to produce a high quality mixed workforce. According to AlKabeer Capital (2013) the government of Oman has invested heavily in the education sector as witnessed by the rapid growth of primary, secondary, and HE; however, the quality of workforce being produced is not adequate and does not match the requirements of the labour market. Al Dosary and Rahman (2005) argue that Oman's education system has not focused heavily on producing the demanded work-related skills and attitudes. Swailes *et al.*, (2012) criticised the educational reforms that have been established to enhance Omani graduates' quality as they do not improve their work-related ethics and values.

According to Al Barwani *et al.*, (2009), business owners, employers, and education decision makers profess the view that the mismatch exists due to the low-quality education system. AL-Balushi (2008); Al-Barwani *et al.*, (2009); Al-Waqfi and Forstenlenchner (2010); Lopez-Claros and Schwab (2005) and the Oxford Business Group (2010) argue that, due to inadequate education preparation, leading to a skills gap and poor work attitudes, is one of the key factors that make Omani undergraduates not attractive to the job market. Supporting this and by examining graduates' perceptions, Al Harthi, (2011) found that, around 50% of them do not know how the skills, learned during HE study, can help them find a job and precede a career path after they graduate. Furthermore, Romano and Seeger (2014:29) determined the main reasons for skills mismatch among graduates that need to be seriously addressed in order to produce skilled graduates are as follows:

o Incomplete information given to secondary students on the most secure disciplines to pursue in HEI.
o Imperfect access to the type of education necessary to perform jobs.
o Wrong selection of certain degree programme or courses by students (e.g. joy or prestige).

It is reported that the lack of new educational resources, provided by HEIs, is another reason for skills mismatch among graduates in Oman (Al Lamky, 1998). Furthermore, the Kuwait Financial Centre (2012) reported that equivalent to the other Gulf States; there is a mismatch between the supply of the local university programmes and the demands of the private labour market in Oman due to inflexibility, low-quality teachers, and lack of courses. A report, Education for Employment: Realising Arab Youth Potential, undertaken by the Washington-based International Finance Group and Saudi Arabia-based Islamic Development Bank in 2011, found that employers thought that the wrong decision of selecting courses by students and inappropriate curricula are the main two reasons for this mismatch (Business Today Magazine, 2015). By taking the academics' perspectives on the Omani graduates' skills mismatch, Baporikar and Shah (2012) found that they thought the skills gap comes as a result of a weak basic education system that has not prepared students' mind-set for higher studies and hard work attitudes. Business Today Magazine (2015) documented that an academic perceived that, due to uncompetitive compensation packages, the government finds difficulty in attracting the highest quality academics. He also noted that industry experience is not considered seriously by most of the HEIs in the country leading to the low flow of practical experience to students in the classroom. For Al Barwani *et al.*, (2009) and Al Harthi (2011), graduates rely on the government to find the best strategies to develop their educational system and to secure jobs for them.

Insufficient graduates provided to the labour market have a long-term influence on the overall economy. According to Weligamage and Siengthai (2003), this mismatch leads to a high number of unemployable graduates in an economy. Empirical research (see Amin, 2012; Coenjaerts *et al.*, 2009; Thrace, 2013; Joshi and Ghosal, 2009; Swailes *et al.*, 2012) found that the high level of unemployment among graduates is due to the mismatch between the needs of private employers and the skills of students emerging from HE. According to McCabe (2010), university graduates cannot ensure their future job unless they possess the appropriate individual and job skills and knowledge to perform tasks successfully. For Audrey Hinchliffe (2007) in Bloomfield and Pinnock (2015), to achieve a highly productive workforce and observe real economic growth, the skills mismatch must be addressed urgently.

3.4.2 Skills Transfer from HE to the Labour Market

'There is no point to education apart from transfer as there is no more important topic in the whole psychology of learning than transferring of knowledge and experience of student'
(Desse, 1958: p. 213).

Transferring skills from education to industry is a major area of interest within the field of graduate employability (GE) in general and the relationship between HE and industry in particular. It is a widely held view that there is a need for promoting graduates' skills to transfer them to the workplace successfully especially, after graduation (see Conner and Shaw, 2008 and Holden and Hamblett, 2007) whilst graduates are still not prepared as they expected, and they recognise the skills mismatch when they join the workplace (Gidley and Inayatullah, 2002). For O'Regan (2010), a graduate's success in seeking a proper job relies on how they were prepared to survive in a competitive labour market.

The research literature has discussed the responsibility of transferring skills from education to the labour market. For Jackson and Hancock (2010), it is the responsibility of HEIs/academics, students, and employers to create the successful transfer. Harvey (2000) holds the view that, as principle roles of academics, they are responsible for developing students' skills, knowledge and attitudes, and dealing with them as lifelong critical and reflective learners. To achieve this, Jackson and Hancock (2010) recognise the importance of balancing between theoretical and practical education by assuring the alignment of programme's content and outcomes with employers' requirements. Supporting this, Ali (2012) argues that the development of generic skills is not isolated only in lecturing theory, but involving students in a social context via real life practices (e.g. industry visits, work placements, and internships) is also highly valued. It is further argued that the development of learners' skills has little meaning unless practiced within the context of the discipline (Bowden *et al.*, 2000). Matin *et al.*, (2003) hold the view that, today, theoretical education without implementation of facts and knowledge is not enough for HE graduates. Therefore, they suggest that HEIs should be aware of the characteristics of the active labour force that can make a crucial contribution towards their employers and the state.

The human capital approach further viewed the importance of building valuable graduates by having a successful transfer process of skills and argues that it is the responsibility of HEIs to provide appropriate and sufficient 'personal, material, and social resources and to appraise the particularity of who needs these resources and in what context' (Bozalek, 2013: Pp74-75). Hence, it can be suggested that academic institutions should start asking the employers' feedback on the fit of graduates' skills learned at HE with their demands and if they apply them successfully in the workplace. For McLean (2010), after identifying skills

required by employers and establishing relevant policies of incorporating them into the curricula, it is the discipline teacher's responsibility to ensure the development of these needs among learners and the achievement of the planned outcomes of a course. Additionally, Crebert (2002) argues that it is the responsibility of HEIs to enhance students' awareness of the importance of skills and knowledge required by employers (expectations). He adds that learners should have a clear picture of professionalism in the workplace to recognise the importance of skills, knowledge, and learning for their future.

For students, it is their responsibility to use well the learning materials provided by their HEIs and improve their understanding of the workplace environment (Jackson and Hancock, 2010). According to the authors, to successfully transfer their skills to the workplace, it is important for students to ask what the job market demands? Employers should strongly cooperate with HE providers by providing them with the current and future requirements of skills and knowledge, discussing the best strategies for transferring skills to the workplace, and supporting academics in designing and delivering programmes at HEIs (Jackson and Hancock, 2010). Melink and Pavlin (2012) concluded that employers' involvement in curricula design, development, and delivery is necessary to impart the required skills to learners. Leberman *et al.*, (2006) identified that communication, critical thinking, team working, and problem-solving are some skills that can be transferred to different scenarios and situations at work.

It is thought that the transfer process of skills from education to industry is challenging (see Austin *et al.*, (2006) and Hakel and Halpern, 2005), however it is important for academics and students to be aware of and understand the effective methods that enhance employers' satisfaction. Some of the methods that can be employed by academics are asking employers about their needs and expectations of skills and knowledge, benchmarking, visiting professional bodies in the private sector, and academic review (Bedingfield, 2005; McDermott *et al.*, 2006; Pool and Sewell, 2007). Furthermore, Cox and King (2006) and Hegarty and Johnston (2008) consider that continuous integration of industry practitioners in curricula design, delivery, and assessment of programmes are important to have a proper transfer process. For students, it is believed that, to document skills required by the job market, students can use personal development portfolios (Brine and Feather, 2002; Feather, 2003; Stephens and Hamblin, 2006). Additionally, for Leberman *et al.*, (2006), having work experience is a primary factor that leads to a successful transfer of a student's skills from education to the labour market.

The process of transferring skills in HE needs to be addressed and evaluated seriously with the collaboration of all stakeholders; importantly, academics, employers and graduates (Al

Harthi, 2011a).This argument is supported by those of Jackson and Chapman (2012b) and Mourshed *et al.*, (2012), who mention that the skills transfer process should be facilitated and monitored by academic experts to help in producing professional graduates. To address that, Robinson and Garton (2008) suggest that providing professional training programmes and arranging workshops for academics can encourage them to address deficiencies in the learning outcomes and implement the best teaching and learning practices that help students to transfer learned skills successfully when joining workplace.

Another mechanism that may contribute to managing the process of transferring students' skills to work and encourage their employment opportunities is designing a database where the current and future jobs and their requirements (e.g. specialisation, skills and knowledge, etc.) are included. To build an active database, an intense collaboration between academics, employers and graduates is required. A well-known example is the Germany's Federal Employment Agency (FEA), a public unit, which helped to reduce the unemployment number of 1.6 million in seven years through collecting data from the labour market, conducting research, and bringing all educational stakeholders together (Radhwan, 2014).

In Oman, there is a shortage of studies that have explored education stakeholders' in the process of transferring a student's skills to the labour market. For Swailes *et al.*, (2012), to better produce a capable workforce and successful transition process in the workplace, the role of the government in developing students' future and the nature of employers' expectations should be shared with students in secondary, vocational and university education.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter critically examines the theoretical arguments of the three key aspects of graduate employability notably: employability and graduate employability, skills required in the workplace, and the relationship between HE attainment and the labour market outcomes.

The first central part explored the concepts of employability and graduate employability. Employability is defined as the ability of an individual to find a job through using his/her skills and attitudes, and the way of marketing them to potential employers. Graduate employability is described as the readiness of a graduate student to enter the job market including his/her capabilities and work-related ethics and behaviours that may help them to perform tasks efficiently in the workplace. Overall, the literature argued the interference of defining employability and graduate employability still exists.

This part of the research further explored to what extent does graduate employability matter to education stakeholders (government, HEIs, employers, and students and graduates) as well as their expectations from each other. It indicated that all education stakeholders considered the importance of graduate employability particularly employers and HEIs. The literature also investigated the debate about whose role it is to enhance graduate employability and found that the discussion still exists. For instance, Maher and Graves (2008) hold the view that it is the role of HEI providers to prepare students for the labour market because of the continuously changing nature of the graduate labour market, massive participation in HE, competition to recruit graduates, and changing expectations of students and their families, employers, and governments. On the contrary, others (e.g. Schomburg and Teichler, 2007) demonstrated that it is challenging for HEIs to enhance graduate employability due to the changing views on the key role of HEIs and uncertain requirements of employers in the workplace. The literature concluded that it is the responsibility of HEIs, academics, students and employers to improve a graduate's employability.

To support its arguments and findings, this study refers to the human capital theory, which considers education and competence development as the most important factors for one's employability. This could be achieved through high investment in educating people and providing proper training and work experience that can enhance their capabilities. This investment is expected to prepare high-quality and productive graduates for the labour market. The literature also discussed the three main practical approaches to enhance graduate employability, which are: USEM, key skills and graduate identity. The strategies of embedding employability in the core curriculum were also examined in this part of the study. In this, the literature determined that there is no best strategy to embed employability in the core curriculum; however, it is crucial to consider context and recruitment criteria during this process.

The second part of literature considered the skills required in the workplace. It explored the concept of competency, which is defined as the personal, academic, and professional capabilities that help graduates to perform highly in the workplace. The literature affirmed that the term competency is uncertain as it has been defined differently. It further argued the need for a clear and comprehensive competency framework as the previous studies discussed them differently and in various contexts.

Similarly, the literature reviewed the debate about the role of enhancing students' skills required in the workplace. Some scholars argued that it is an ethical responsibility of HEIs to prepare students with the proper work-related skills. Others concurred with this argument and referred to the direct link between education, skills learned and productivity in the

workplace. It concluded that HEIs, academics, students, and employers should take part in developing a student's work-related skills and knowledge.

Besides the above, this part of the study considered the importance of including skills into the core curriculum. It determined the difficulty of embedding generic skills in curricula and provided suggestions for development. The skills required by companies, particularly undergraduate business skills, were investigated. The literature showed that employers mostly require generic (soft) skills in the workplace rather than specific (hard) skills. To this end, the literature indicated that communication skills are one of the most necessary skills demanded by employers; however, it is a major weakness among graduates. Accordingly, it is suggested that basic education and HE decision makers need to integrate and work together to find the effective strategies in teaching and learning to overcome this weakness.

The last part of literature, in this chapter, explored the importance of balancing between higher education attainment and the labour market outcomes in enhancing graduate employability. It recognised the significance of aligning education policy to the labour market outcomes. It further argued that, in Oman, the weak communication between education professionals and industry practitioners leads to the misalignment between education policy and employment outcomes. It concluded that it is important to build an active and continuous collaboration between school education, HE, and industry especially in curricula design and delivery, and programmes' planning to ensure their relevance to the needs of the labour market. Finally, the literature showed the significance of applying different practices in the classroom and outside academic institutions that help students to transfer their skills to the workplace efficiently.

To end up with, this research is expected to add knowledge and contribute to the limited body of empirical studies on students' employability in the Gulf region in general and Oman in particular. Having reviewed the relevant literature, the next chapter considers the research methodology of this study. It discusses the research design and methodology employed to ensure the generation of data that would allow the understanding of BMA undergraduates' employability in Oman.

Chapter Four: The Research Methodology

4.1 Overview

This chapter presents the research methodology adopted in this study. Its purpose is to provide a description of the procedures that were followed to accumulate the data required to achieve the primary goals planned for this study (**see section 1.3**). The chapter begins with discussing the research framework employed in the study, followed by defining research and philosophical paradigms, and discussing their roles in social science research, particularly education. This is important to describe the scope and limitations of the research design and explore various research traditions in social science (e.g. education) from which the choice of research design was made. It then moves to a discussion of the research design and methodological assumptions. After that, it proceeds to justify the selection of the research philosophy, research design, and strategic inquiry in this current study. The remaining sections discuss the research implementation, including the research process with a consideration of the pilot study, sampling procedures and administrative arrangements applied for collecting and recording data as well as the strategies for analysing and presenting the data.

4.2 Research Framework employed by the present study and the integration of its methodological components

Research is ''a faithful reflection of the world as the researcher sees it' (Brew, 2001: p. 101) and it is a journey that does not lead to a golden city of complete or certain knowing but, rather, to a belief in research as open to multiple views of the world in which researchers are personally involved'' (Brew, 2001: pp. 138-139). The current study followed the methodological research framework suggested by Plowright (2011) shown in **figure 4.1**. At the first stage and as a result of the national (Oman and GCC; **Chapter Two**) and theoretical (knowledge gap) contexts, the issue of BMA undergraduate employability was identified to be investigated, and the research questions were decided (**section 1.3: 23**). Secondly, the data sources/participants were determined, notably; academics, students, employers, and graduates (**section 4.4.3**). According to Plowright (2011), the selection of participants takes place at two levels: deciding the approaches for managing data sources (asking questions using survey and semi-structured interview techniques (**section 4.6**) and sampling strategy (non-probability sampling; convenience, purposive, and snowballing (**section 4.4**). Thirdly, numerical (quantitative) and textual/ thematic (qualitative) techniques were used to analyse the data collected from respondents and participants (**section 4.6**). At the fourth stage and

after analysing the quantitative and qualitative data separately, they were integrated (convergent parallel strategy; **section 4.2.2.1.1.1**) to provide evidence, and write arguments and conclusions. By reviewing the literature of the mixed methods approach, **figure 4.2** was designed to show the integration between the main methodological components of the current study.
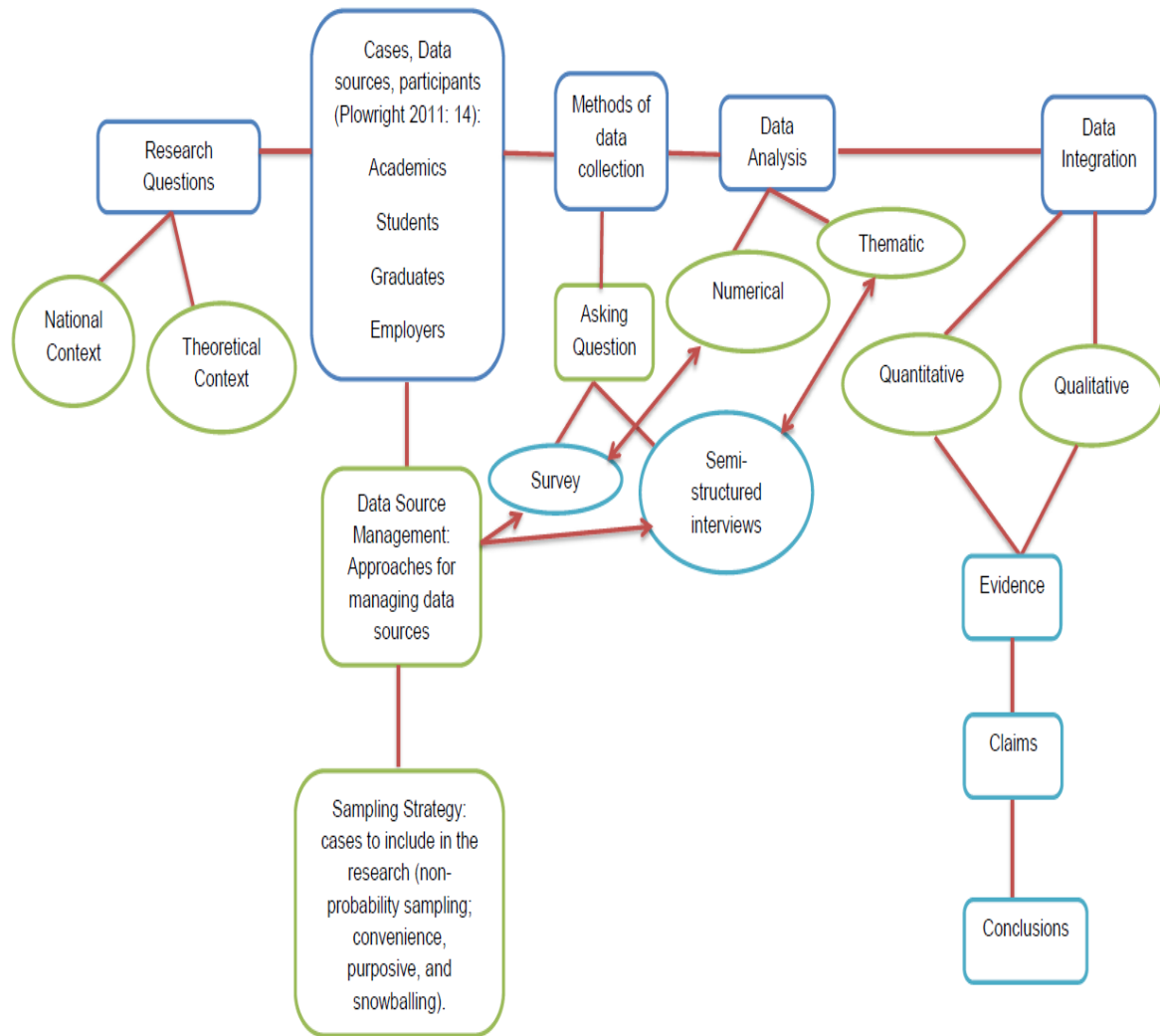
Figure 4.1: Research framework employed by the current study.
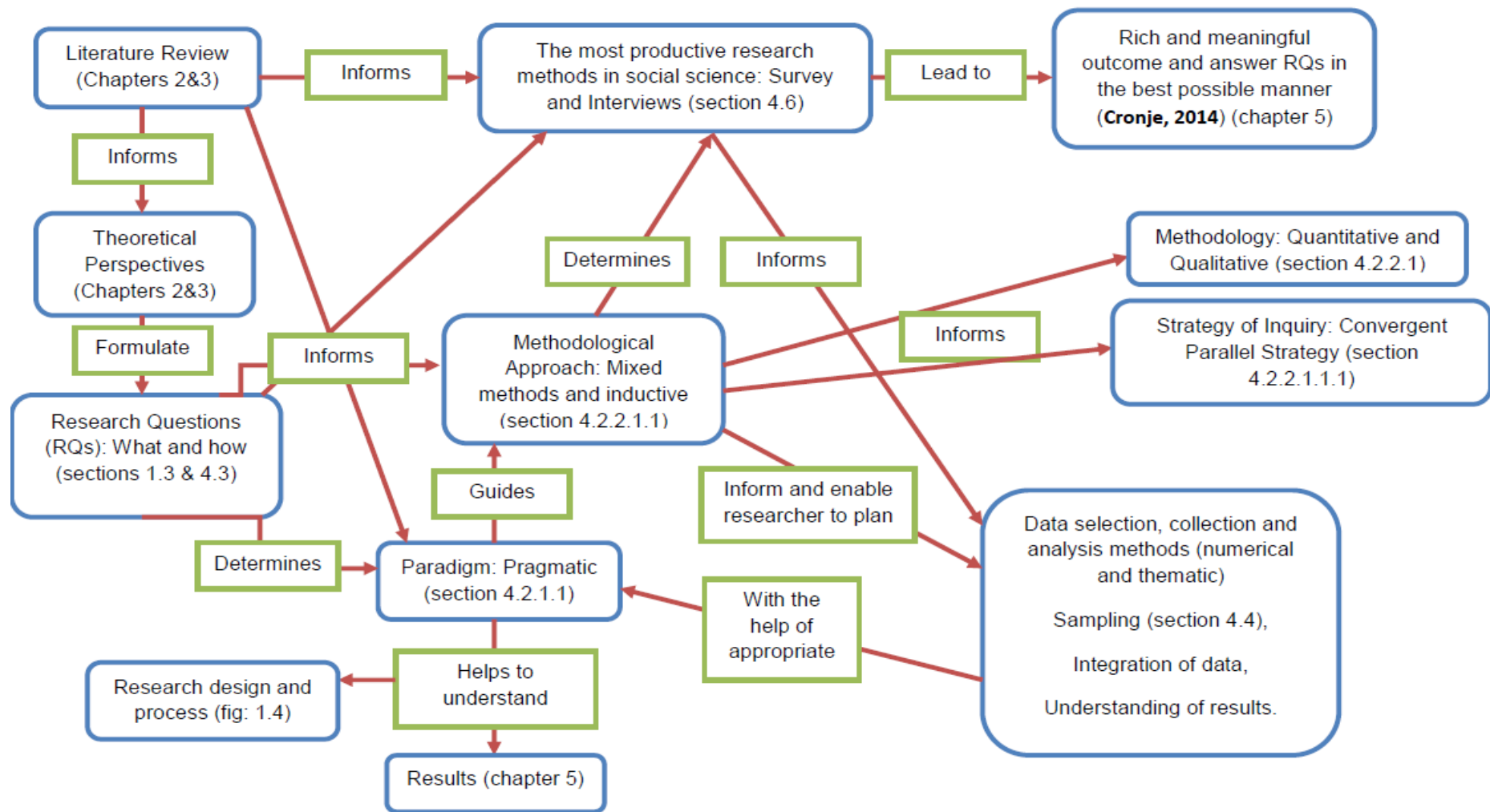
Figure 4.2: The integration between the methodological components of the current study.

There is no specific methodology to cover all aspects of knowledge essential for an educational study; however, to make an appropriate decision on the relevant methodology, researchers should be aware of the various types of research approaches and techniques (Clarke and Yaros, 1998). Clarke and Yaros argue that the awareness of the whole range of research paradigms, assumptions and methods may facilitate informed choice. 'A researcher needs to intimately know the definitions and dynamics of different paradigms and their historical approaches before setting out on the path of answering a research question' (Cronje , 2014: p.1).

4.2.1   Paradigm

A philosophical paradigm refers to the philosophical intent of conducting research (Cohen and Manion, 1994: p. 38). Anderson (2013), Denzin (2000), Khun (1962) and Willis (2007) defined the term paradigm as a harmonised and comprehensive set of belief framework on how a phenomenon should be addressed. For Guba and Lincoln (1994:107), 'the basic belief system of an educational inquiry is based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions'. To produce reliable results, scholars (e.g. Denzin and Lincoln 1998:201; Sale *et al.*, 2002) argue that all these assumptions should be included in research in this logical order. This argument is supported by Hitchcock and Hughes (1995:21), who mentioned that 'ontological beliefs give rise to epistemological assumptions; these, in turn, result in methodological considerations; and these, in turn, lead to instrumentation and data collection'.

Ontology has been discussed (see Creswell, 2003; Delanty and Strydom, 2003; Hitchcock and Hughes, 1989; and Guba and Lincoln, 1994) as a philosophical theory that asks about the nature of reality and truth (what exists and how it appears). It aims to: explore the features of the physical and theoretical world and what it looks like, investigate if reality is a constructed entity, and examine if the relationships among humans are existing (Delanty and Strydom, 2003).

Epistemology tends to be used to refer to the research that examines the structure of knowledge, its truthfulness/validity, limits, origins, possibility, and methods and also how can it be obtained and applied (Delanty and Strydom, 2003 and Wiersma, 2000). It focuses on the very basis of knowledge's nature and forms, methods to collect this knowledge, and how to communicate them with audiences (Burrell and Morgan, 1979 and Walker and Evers, 1988). For Creswell (2003) and Guba & Lincoln (1994), epistemology represents the type of knowledge that can be generated and characteristics for justifying it**.** Hitchcock and Hughes

(1995) argue that this belief has a considerable influence on the selection of the data gathering methods and the methodology in a research process.

The nature of any investigation depends on the researcher's philosophical paradigm (Mertens, 2005).This argument is supported by Mackenzie and Knipe (2006), who argue that there is no basis for appropriate selection of methodology, methods, literature, or research design without the choice of an appropriate paradigm. Four main paradigms have been widely discussed in the social research literature, which are: post-positivism, constructivism, transformative, and pragmatism (Creswell, 2013). According to Hall (2012), these paradigms are familiar and concurred by scholars.

The post-positivism paradigm refers to 'philosophy in which causes probably pinpoint effects or outcomes' (Creswell, 2013: p.7). According to Mertens (2005:8), this paradigm can be conducted in social science research under the belief that 'the social world can be studied as similarly as the natural world by applying a valuable free method that helps to result in a valid explanation for the examined phenomenon'. Unlike constructivists who seek to develop a theory, post-positivist researchers start their research with a theory (Creswell, 2013).

Different arguments have been raised on the appropriate methods for post-positivism. O'Leary (2004:5) debates that 'the inductive and exploratory post-positivist research through observation and measurement, employs qualitative methods to predict, describe, or test a theory or examine a social science phenomenon'. For Mertens (2005), quantitative methods are relevant for post-positivist studies to collect and analyse data. Creswell (2013) and Hirschheim (1992) argue that this paradigm is an inadequate and misleading approach to conducting social science research because it cannot be positive about the knowledge claims when studying humans' actions and behaviours, and it assumes an external objective reality upon which enquiry can converge. Supporting their argument, Pring (2000a:29) criticises the positivist paradigm as an approach of research and argues that 'the practice of education cannot be the object of science'. Conversely, Winfield (1990) expresses that the findings of this paradigm can be replicated in a different study and/or various contexts.

Constructivism has been used to refer to 'the view that all knowledge being constructed in and out of the interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within a social context' (Crotty, 1998:p. 42). Cohen and Manion (1994:36) propose that 'constructive research aims to understand individual's experience in a phenomenon and see the reality as socially constructed'. However, this position has been criticised by transformative scholars as it did not go far enough in advocating for an action agenda to help marginalised humans (Creswell, 2013).

According to Winfield (1990), the constructivist paradigm has the potential to provide deep insights into a particular social situation. Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) hold the view that qualitative and mixed methods of data collection and analysis are the appropriate approaches to be used by constructivists. They claim that, in mixed methods, quantitative data gathering and analysis techniques can be used to support the findings of qualitative methods and/or expand the understanding of a phenomenon being discussed. Denzin (2000) argues that positivists and constructivists explain beliefs as how valid knowledge can be differently generated. Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) propose that constructivists, in qualitative research, view knowledge as socially constructed and may change depending on certain circumstances.

Following this philosophy, Creswell (2013:8) argues that 'researchers aim to understand the world of a particular phenomenon depending extensively on interacting with participants to obtain their opinion, and through cultural and historical norms'. For him, the constructivist is most likely to rely on qualitative data collection methods and analysis to investigate the research's epistemology, the nature of valid knowledge, and the information needed and for whom. The more open-ended the questions, the better the meanings as the participants share their experience with the researcher and, in turn, the researcher listens precisely to their perspectives (Creswell, 2013).

A false dualism has been created between positivists and constructivists (Pring, 2000b). By this view, Pring in Badley (2003:299) argues that the research paradigms, positivism, and constructivism, 'must be seen as competing approaches to research'. Badley (2003: 296) described *false dualism* as the apartheid that divides positivist and constructivist researchers with positivists believing in an objective reality and constructivists arguing that reality is a social construction. Positivists believe that the researcher and the researched are separated from each other and see the truth as correspondence between the research account and the case of study. On the contrary, constructivists think that 'research findings are created rather than discovered and see the truth as a matter of consensus amongst the informed inquirers' (Badley, 2003: P.297).

The transformative Paradigm concentrates on a small range of people within a society (Hall, 2012). According to Creswell (2013), this paradigm is derived from believing that post-positivist assumptions did not consider the marginalised human beings' issues such as power and justice, and discrimination and unfairness in their theories and structural laws. Mertens (2010) suggests that research inquiry is associated with politics and laws that confront such social issues as oppression and support marginalised people in a community. Like constructivists, transformative researchers can employ a single qualitative or

quantitative data collection and analysis technique (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006) or integrate both methods as this may support 'to provide a complete understanding of various values and positions of a social phenomenon' (Somekh and Lewin, 2005; p.275). Creswell (2013) suggests that by applying a transformative paradigm, the knower precedes research to support the voice of participants, and develop and change their lives with their collaboration in designing questions, gathering information, and/or analysing data.

The pragmatic paradigm has been established due to the lack of impact of educational studies in the education system (Anderson, 2013). According to Mackenzie and Knipe (2006), pragmatism is not connected with any philosophy or reality. For Creswell (2013) and Patton (1990), pragmatists concentrate on (what works) and 'how' to provide solutions for the research subject. Powell (2001) and Feilzer (2010) argue that the assumption behind implementing this paradigm is to facilitate humans' problems to find solutions for challenges and not to look at the truth or reality (the nature of knowledge).

4.2.1.1   Deciding Pragmatic Research Paradigm for this Study:

As discussed above, paradigms are compared based on three perspectives, notably: ontology (nature of the reality), epistemology (how we know and what we know), and methodology (the process of research). According to Hall (2012) and Taylor and Medina (2013), there is no preferable research paradigm as each has a particular way to distinguish from others in providing unique knowledge.

There are many debates within pragmatism as a philosophical system (for more details see De Waal, 2005; Rescher, 2000 in Morgan, 2007). In this research, I do not pretend to be an expert in this position, however I concentrate on what works to provide workable (see George Herbert Mead; John Dewey; William James in Morgan, 2007) answers for research questions (**section 1.3**) and solutions for the issue under study. Accordingly, the pragmatic research seems to be the compatible research perspective with the present study because;

- o It is widely accepted to support the study of complex research problems.
- o It is associated with a mixed methods research approach (Cherryholmes, 1992; Creswell, 2013; Hall, 2012; Morgan, 2007; Patton, 1990; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2010), which allows exploration of social science problems using multiple methods of data collection and analysis to obtain better understanding of the issue investigated. By this, the scholars argue that pragmatists can use different approaches to collect and analyse data rather than focusing on one method, which leads to a workable solution for the issue under investigation.

- o It supports improving communication among researchers from different paradigms as they attempt to advance knowledge (Maxcy, 2003; Watson, 1990).
- o It highlights how research approaches can be mixed effectively (Hoshmand, 2003), giving better opportunities to answer the questions adequately (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

After selecting a research paradigm, a researcher has to link it with actual practice (Bryman, 1998). To achieve this, it is important to select the appropriate methods of data collection that accommodate research assumptions, answer research questions, and meet research objectives. Accordingly, having explained the research paradigms and assumptions, the following section is a description of the nature of the research design methods, namely: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods, and then proceeds to discuss the design of enquiry. Having decided on the philosophical approach to be used in this study, the coming is a discussion on aligning the research to appropriate research design.

4.2.2   Methodology and Methods

Although some scholars use the terms methodology and methods interchangeably, others use them as if they are different. According to Mackenzie and Knipe (2006), there is a lack of explanation of both terms in the literature. Macquarie Dictionary (3rd Ed) refers methodology to the study of the principles underlying the organisation of the various sciences and the conduct of scientific inquiry (p.718). Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) argue that, although this definition is general and not for a specific science or discipline, it is consistent with some literature such as Leedy and Ormrod (2005) and Schram (2006).

For Somekh and Lewin (2005) a methodology is the data collection techniques of research, and it is the values, principles and theories of a particular paradigm in an investigated subject. According to Mackenzie and Knipe (2006), the most concerted descriptions suggest that methodology is the overall approach to research connected to the paradigm or theoretical framework while the method refers to systematic rules, procedures or techniques for data collection and analysis. In education, Guba and Lincoln (1998) use the term methodology as the process of investigating an educational phenomenon taking into consideration the goal, concentration, information, and analysis while methods are the techniques followed by a researcher for collecting valid knowledge required for the studied area. Guba and Lincoln, (1994) and Creswell (2003) argue that methodology focuses on the process of obtaining knowledge about the world. They add that it guides the researcher through the appropriate research methods to generate the valid empirical evidence.

4.2.2.1   Research Design

At an early stage of a study, the selection of a proper research design is important. Easterby-Smith *et al.*, (1994: 84) refer the term research design to the 'organisation of the research activity, including the collection of data, in ways that are most likely to achieve the research aims.' By this definition, they argue that it is essential to select the most relevant research design for gathering data required to achieve research objectives. The literature on social research studies (e.g. Velez, 2008) classified three key approaches for data collection and analysis, which are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods.

There are two main methodological approaches within educational research, namely quantitative and qualitative (Boland, 2010). By separating these two approaches into Subjectivist (Qualitative) and Objectivist (quantitative), Neill (2007) illustrates their differences as shown in **table 4.1**.

Table 4.1: Quantitative versus Qualitative Methodological Approaches	
Qualitative	**Quantitative**
"All research ultimately **has a qualitative grounding''** Donald Campbell in Miles & Huberman (1994, p. 40)	"There's no such thing as qualitative data. Everything is either 1 or 0" Fred Kerlinger in Miles & Huberman (1994, p. 40)
The aim is a complete, detailed description.	The aim is to classify features, count them, and construct statistical models in an attempt to explain what is observed.
Researcher may only know roughly in advance what he/she is looking for.	Researcher knows clearly in advance what he/she is looking for.
Recommended during earlier phases of research projects.	Recommended during latter phases of research projects.
The design emerges as the study unfolds.	All aspects of the study are carefully designed before data is collected.
Researcher is the data gathering instrument.	Researcher uses tools, such as questionnaires or equipment to collect numerical data.
Data is in the form of words, pictures or objects.	Data is in the form of numbers and statistics.
Subjective: individuals interpretation of events is important ,e.g., uses participant observation, in-depth interviews etc.	Objective: seeks precise measurement & analysis of target concepts, e.g., uses surveys, questionnaires etc.
Qualitative data is more 'rich', time consuming, and less able to be generalized.	Quantitative data is more efficient, able to test hypotheses, but may miss contextual detail.
Researcher tends to become subjectively immersed in the subject matter.	Researcher tends to remain objectively separated from the subject matter.

Source: *Qualitative versus quantitative research: Key points in a classic debate (Neill, 2007).*

Quantitative and qualitative are frequently seen in opposition because they invoke different paradigms and epistemologies (Pring, 2000b: P.248). According to Pring:

- Quantitative paradigm researchers believe in an objective reality and make true propositions; while, qualitative paradigm researchers deny this and view 'reality' as a 'social construction of the mind', which indicate individual participants.

- By dualistic or objective epistemology in quantitative research, Guba and Lincoln (1989) mean the belief that the researcher or evaluator is quite separate from that being investigated or evaluated such that researcher's beliefs and perceptions do not affect that which is being researched. By subjective epistemology in qualitative research, the research findings are created through the interaction between the researcher and that which is researched.

- In quantitative research 'truth' is referred to as correspondence between the research account and what is the case independently of the researcher whilst qualitative research's 'truth' is a matter of consensus amongst informed and sophisticated constructors, and 'fact' does not exist independently of how the researcher constructs the reality. For the aim of the current research, I aimed to integrate both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide depth information and workable answers to designed research questions (**section 1.3**) and workable solutions to the area investigated.

For Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) and McMillan and Schumacher (2006:12), 'quantitative and qualitative can be understood as two distinguished terms; a) a research paradigm: they explain the aim of a study and how a researcher can understand the world, and b) Methods adopted to collect and analyse data. Variations between qualitative and quantitative approaches are summarised by Blaxter *et al.*, (1996: 60), who state that,

'*Quantitative research is, as the term suggests, concerned with the collection and analysis of data in a numeric form. It tends to emphasise a relatively large-scale and respective set of data and is often, falsely in our view, presented as being about the gathering of 'facts'. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is concerned with collecting and analysing information in as many forms, chiefly non-numeric, as possible, smaller numbers of instance or examples which are seen as being interesting or illuminating, and aims to achieve ' depth' rather than 'breadth'.*'

Also, the advantages of both qualitative and quantitative approaches are documented by Punch (2005: 235) as,

'*Quantitative data enable standardised, objective comparisons to be made, and the measurements of the quantitative research permit overall descriptions of situations or phenomena in a systematic and comparable way… On the other hand, there are significant strengths and advantages to the qualitative approach. Qualitative methods are flexible, more so than quantitative methods. Therefore, they can be used in a broader range of situations and for a wider range of purposes. They can also be more easily modified as a study*

progresses. Because of their great flexibility, they are well suited for studying naturally occurring real-life situations.'

Although the opposition between the quantitative and qualitative methods exists, a third research approach, mixed methods, has emerged that combines methods from both schools of thought. A mixed method approach refers to the integration of both quantitative and qualitative approaches into social research methodologies, sampling strategies, data gathering and data analysis (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Reichardt and Rallis, 1994; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). Integrating these two approaches in research leads to reliable and adequate findings (Gorard and Taylor, 2004). Moreover, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) determine that the mixed method approach can help answering research questions. They (2004:16) state that,

'*Today's research world is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, complex, and dynamic; therefore, many researchers need to complement one method with another, and all researchers need a solid understanding of multiple methods used by other scholars to facilitate communication, to promote collaboration, and to provide superior research. Taking a non-purist or compatibility or mixed position allows researchers to mix and match design components that offer the best chance of answering their specific research questions.*'

Additionally, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods in a particular research project; supports a researcher to end up with relevant research and avoid the shortcomings of knowledge in either approach (Carey, 1993; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998; Sale *et al.*, 2002); can offer various perceptions and compensates for the flaws of one method with the strengths of another (Krathwohl, 1997); and addresses the weaknesses of qualitative and quantitative research approaches when used individually (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Creswell, 2013).

In addition to the above advantages of mixed methods approach, Patton (2002) argues that the inclusion of various lines of evidence result in a crucial study. The process of combining multiple methods called triangulation, is used by Creswell and Miller (2000:126) to refer to 'the validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study'. For Hirschheim (1992) and El Said (2005), to enhance the reliability and validity of research, triangulation is the appropriate approach.

The mixed methods approach also encourages high research accuracy (validity) and rigour (Creswell, 2003). Creswell argues that a pragmatic paradigm can be, to a great extent, generalised to a larger population. Generating the understanding of research findings can also be attained via sampling techniques. Gorard and Taylor (2004) suggest that

researchers following this approach need to have skills such as the ability to select the valid and most appropriate knowledge from the collected data, ability to criticise all types of research, and the capacity to choose the most relevant technique to represent data, so audiences can understand it easily.

4.2.2.1.1 Deciding Mixed Methods Approach for the Current Study:

The involvement of the mixed research methods falls under suspicion among the social research scholars (Bryman, 2006a); however, it has been used widely by education studies (see Creswell, 2005; Johnson and Onwuegbuzi, 2004; Morgan, 2007; Patton, 1990; Plowright, 2011; Reichardt and Cook, 1979; Rudestan and Newton, 2000) to gather and analyse data on a particular research (Burns, 1997).

The current study a) aims to generate a pattern of meanings and complete understanding of the issue undertaken, b) proposes to provide adequate findings and workable answers for the research questions designed; and c) aims to obtain data from a large and significant number of respondents and participants, and d) seeks to address what works, and provide recommendations and solutions to formulate what works to enhance Omani BMA undergraduate employability.

For a broader research, Creswell (2013) argues that research philosophy (paradigm), research design (approach), and research methods are interrelated and contribute to a research approach. At the initial stages of research, it is important to decide the research design approach for collecting data required (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1994). The nature and objective of the phenomenon under study, research questions, and the type of analysis to be applied, have an effect on the selection of the best approach to research design. Verma and Mallick (1999:26) state that,

> '*The choice of a particular perspective has implications for the type of evidence to be collected and the mode of analysis used in the investigation of a research question or issue…The way research questions are formulated and the research agenda specified make it clear what approach is most appropriate.*'

Other than concentrating on the research methods, pragmatists need to focus on the problem under study and take advantage of all approaches available to obtain more understanding (Rossman and Wilson, 1985 in Creswell, 2003). According to Badley (2003), pragmatists would not consider the value of one paradigm or methodology over another but would argue that both positivism and constructivism offer different tools for examining different aspects of the world. Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) argue that the most relevant data collection and analysis methods, for a particular research, rely on the paradigm and the

research question(s). This argument indicates that a researcher can apply mixed data collection and analysis techniques in all paradigms rather than restrict at one method, which will help to have an information-rich and profound understanding of the research area.

This study employs the mixed methods and not a multi-methods approach as it incorporates both quantitative (**survey; section 4.6.1**) and qualitative (**interview; section 4.6.2**) methods to investigate BMA undergraduate employability. Supporting this decision, Creswell (2002: 273) advised that ''Writers in mixed methods are also careful to distinguish 'multi-method studies' in which multiple types of qualitative or quantitative data are collected (see Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007) from 'mixed methods studies' that incorporate collecting both qualitative and quantitative data." The reasons that make the mixed methods approach ideal for the current study are:

- Because of its strength of drawing on both quantitative and qualitative research, and minimising the limitations of both approaches (Creswell, 2013: p. 218; Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005). It provides more than each could separately use to produce adequate research (Morgan, 1998).
- It provides a sophisticated, complex approach to research (Creswell, 2013: p. 218).
- It helps to provide data from a large number of participants (Clarke and Yaros, 1998).
- It supports obtaining a deeper, broader, and a more complete understanding of the phenomenon investigated, and enables workable and adequate solutions for the area being investigated as well as obtains useful answers for the research questions (**section 1.3**) through providing a rich picture on the issue (Creswell, 2013; Johnson and Onwuegbuzi, 2004; Rossman and Wilson, 1985). This leads to more relevant and trustworthy findings (Brannen, 2005).
- I have access to both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2013: p.218).
- It is an appropriate approach for investigating new research issues (Creswell, 1994).

In terms of whether it is inductive or deductive, the current study is shaped using an inductive research approach that aims to develop theoretical contribution to knowledge, not testing a theory, as well as gives the opportunity to have more explanation of what is going on (Saunders *et al.*, 2003). According to Easterby-Smith *et al.*, (2001) and Gray (2004), qualitative research is often influenced by an inductive research approach in which a range of methods are employed to gather the data and investigate the problem from different perspectives. In the current study, I have started the research process by exploring and gathering the data by asking questions using multiple sources of evidence such as surveys and semi-structured interviews. 'The mixed methods approach is important when

researching inductively' (Cronje, 2014: p.5), and 'it can answer research questions that the other methodologies cannot' (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003:p.14 in Bryman, 2006b: p.118).

4.2.2.1.1.1   Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods:

It is important to decide the appropriate strategy of inquiry in social science research (Williams, 2007). According to Creswell (2013) and Denzin and Lincoln (2011), this stage comes after selecting the best research method(s). To respond to their research questions, quantitative researchers typically choose numerical data while qualitative researchers employ textual data, and both types of data are used by the mixed methods approach (Williams, 2007). For Creswell (2013), selecting the type of inquiry guides a researcher to provide a particular direction for procedures in research design.

Different views have been provided, within the mixed methods approach, on how quantitative and qualitative elements of research should be implemented with a research and whether they can be combined, integrated, or used one behind another (Pring, 2000b). Authors differentiate mixed methods approach from the multi-methods. For instance, it is described as 'an emergent methodology of research that advances the systematic integration of quantitative and qualitative designs within a single investigation or sustained programme of inquiry (Wisdom and Creswell, 2013: p. 1). Moreover, Saunders *et al.*, (2012) differentiated between mixed and multi-methods as 'Multimethod research employs more than one data collection technique and is restricted to either a quantitative or qualitative design, unlike the mixed methods research which integrates both qualitative and quantitative designs.' (P: 165).

As a research design of the current study, a convergent mixed methods design (Creswell, 2013) will be used, and not the explanatory (starts with quantitative data collection and analysis and then follows up with qualitative data collection and analysis) or exploratory (first begins with a qualitative data collection and analysis and then builds up with quantitative data collection and analysis) sequential mixed methods. It is a type of design in which qualitative and quantitative data are collected in parallel, analysed separately, and then merged. In this study, the use of quantitative and qualitative data is discussed thoroughly in **section 4.6**.

The reason for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data is; a) to discuss the pre-determined topic inclusively and provide a comprehensive analysis, and collect the relevant and valid knowledge roughly over the same time (**figure 4.3).** After analysing both quantitative and qualitative data separately, I aim to merge the findings with the

interpretation of overall results via statistical and textual analysis. In conclusion, I believe that this study has significance for the employment prospects of BMA population students and graduates, and also it will point to possibilities that may apply to other studies that have the same circumstances.
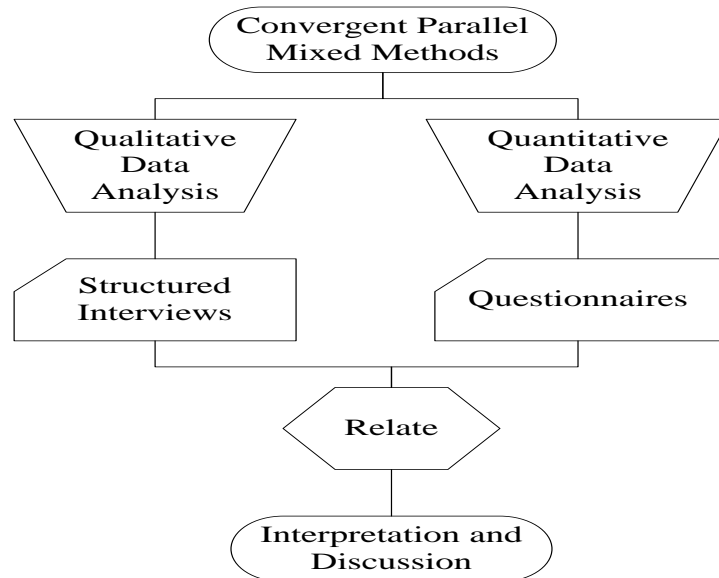
Figure 4.3: Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods Approach (Creswell, 2013).

4.3 Restatement of Research Questions

There is no particular and best way to conduct research (Anderson, 2013). Research mostly consists of at least one central question about a situation or a phenomenon of interest (Williams, 2007). According to Williams, setting and determining research questions assist researchers to concentrate on thoughts related to the research area, manage efforts, and select the relevant research approach from which to make sense of the phenomenon.

As mentioned in **section 1.3**, this study is examining the issue of BMA undergraduate employability in Oman. The formulation of the research questions are descriptive in nature (what and how), and influenced by the national and theoretical contexts. They are designed to allow me to provide in-depth understanding and knowledge on the issue undertaken, and identify better recommendations of improvement.

The main question of the study is: **how do students, academics, graduates and employers perceive business management and administration (BMA) undergraduates' employability in Oman?** It seeks to address the following:

1) How do academics and graduates perceive the roles of HEIs, BMA departments, and private companies in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability? Do they think that these can be improved?

2) What do students and graduates expect from HEIs/BMA departments? Do they think they get what they expected?

3) How do academics, students, graduates, and employers perceive BMA undergraduate's skills and knowledge?

4) How do students, academics, and graduates feel about the provision and effectiveness of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability?

5) How effective do academics and employers believe the relationship between HEIs and the private sector is and does this affect BMA undergraduate employability?

6) How do academics, students, and graduates perceive BMA graduate employment in general and in connection with HEIs in particular?

4.4 Sampling Strategy

Sampling decisions should be made prior to undertaking a particular research (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). The authors argue that a researcher can never reach a whole population; research is based on samples. According to them, a sample is a small group of the overall population that a researcher planned to obtain information from. They determined the main factors of sampling, which are: the sample size, representativeness and parameters of the sample, access to sample, and the sampling strategy to be adopted.

The sample size is very important in the sampling process (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). According to Malhotra and Birks (2003), the varied and wide range of respondents and participants provides sufficient data results. This argument is supported by Cohen *et al.*, (2007: 101), who pointed out that 'there is no specific number for the sample size; the larger the sample size, the better as it provides greater reliability and enables more sophisticated statistics to be adopted'. They added that the sample size relied on the nature of the population and the aim of the research. According to them, to have a broad cross-section of respondents and participants, a researcher should:

o Identify the data collection technique that helps him/her to obtain knowledge via networks and relationships of a selected sample.

o Determine the type of statistical analysis to be applied in the study. It provides a researcher with an indication of the sample size needed for the research. For instance, chi-square statistical test requires a larger sample size**.**

o   Select the style of research or a research method. For example, applying survey instrument needs a large sample.

The second factor that needs to be considered in research is the extent to which a sample represents the entire population. Cohen *et al.*, (2007) suggest that a little sample size may be unsupportive and unrepresentative of the whole population. Accordingly, weighting the responses is a primary factor in a research. Thirdly, ensuring the access of the sample by a researcher is a critical issue that must be decided prior to undertaking research (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). The authors suggest that it is a researcher who ensures that the sample is accessible, permitted and practical. Access to a sample can be denied and prohibited in some situations (e.g. sensitive research subjects and/or places). Also, it might be prevented by respondents or participants due to practical reasons like a teacher or a doctor who do not have time to spend on a survey or an interview.

The fourth important factor in sampling is the selection of the sampling strategy (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). According to the authors, with the appropriate methodology and instrumentation, the suitability of the sampling technique is an important factor for the quality of a research of a particular area. Cohen and Holliday (1996) and Schofield (1996) determined two techniques of sampling, namely: probability (random) and non-probability (purposive) samples. Cohen *et al.*, (2007) distinguish between these two types of the inclusion or exclusion of members in a sample. According to them, in probability sampling, every member of a large population has an equal chance to be included in the sample while in non-probability sampling, members do not have an equal chance to be chosen in a sample. **Figure 4.4** indicates the 'sampling techniques' as discussed by Krathwohl (1997:163).
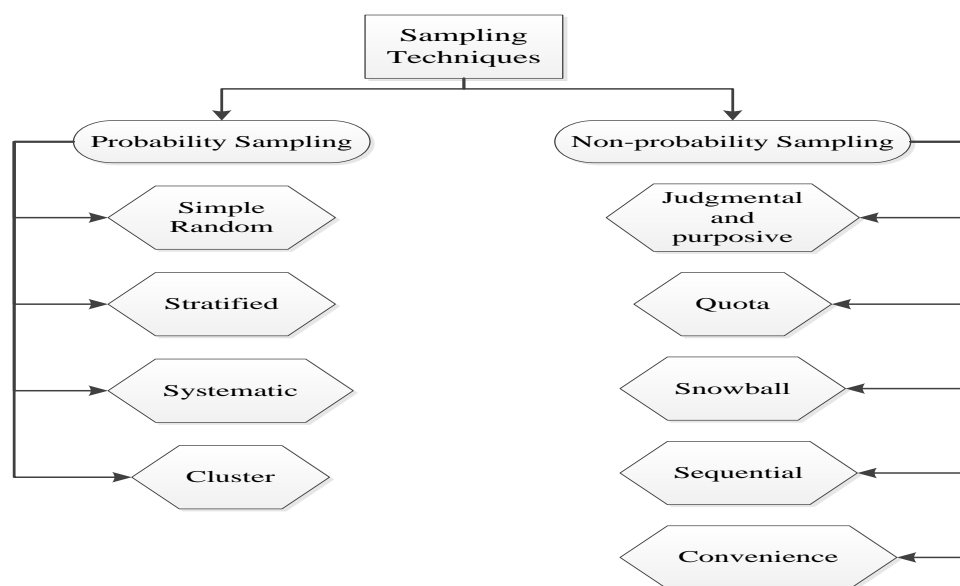
Figure 4.4: Classification of sampling methods (Krathwohl, 1997).

According to Krathwohl (1997), applying the probability sampling strategy in research involves random selection of respondents and participants from a population at some stage in the sampling process. It seeks representativeness of a larger population; therefore, it is an appropriate tool for researchers who aim for generalisations in their studies (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). **Figure 4.4** shows the types of methods under probability sampling. All of these techniques create a sample through random selection of respondents and participants from the entire population, so they have a degree of generalisability. On the other hand, unlike probability sampling, non-probability sampling tools do not apply the random selection of elements from the entire population at some stage of the sampling process, and it avoids representation of a wider population (Cohen *et al.*, 2007).

4.4.1 Justification for adopting the convenience, purposive and snowball sampling techniques in the current study

An essential stage of the method is deciding the target population of the study (Gay and Airasian, 2003). According to De Vaus (1993), the target population indicates all members of a group. Therefore, it refers to the people who will be researched or organisations where the results will be applied. The target population, of the present study, is as follows:

- o Academics and students from BMA departments of various HEIs in Oman.
- o BMA graduates and employers from different sectors operating in Oman's private market.

The singularity of this study comes from the differentiation of its respondents' and participants' background and their ability to address the research questions according to their experience. This study is based on the non-probability sampling strategy using convenience, purposive, and snowball techniques of sampling, which enabled me to achieve the purpose of the study and answer the research questions. The choice and justifications behind selecting these three techniques are as follow:

- o Purposive: I employed this strategy to collect the required data from employers (recruitment specialists or/and human resource managers) using survey instrument as the study seeks to explore the employability of undergraduates. This sample has been chosen as respondents, due to their awareness and depth of knowledge of skills requirements and their recruitment experience. Additionally, I used this strategy to gather the necessary data from BMA academics (interview), and students and graduates (survey).
- o Convenience: I used this strategy to collect data from students (survey) and academics (survey and interview). Due to the impossibility of including the whole

population (students and academics in both public and private HEIs in Oman), the samples were selected according to their convenient accessibility and those easiest to recruit for the study. Also, the strategy was easy, inexpensive, fast, and participants were readily available. According to Cohen *et al.*, (2007), academics and students are examples of participants based on convenience sampling, which is the most common and adopted (Krathwohl, 1997).

o Snowball: I adopted this strategy to collect the necessary data from academic interviewees for this study in that, I identified the head of business departments to meet first, as they have the characteristics in which the research is interested. Then they informed and identified other academics within the department who are qualified for inclusion and so on. At the same time, the availability and easiness to obtain data were considered.

4.4.2   Selection of HEIs

All private and public HEIs were invited to obtain their insights and views concerning BMA undergraduate employability planned by this study. The selection of HEIs was according to their provision of BMA courses as well as the number of HEIs in a place. HEIs visited were accessible, and respondents and participants were helpful and explicit in providing perceptions (**Detailed in section 4.6.2.2**).

4.4.3 Categories of Respondents and Participants

The perceptions of some respondents and participants were not sought in previous studies established in Oman. For instance, BMA academics were not questioned about their perceptions of the role of HEIs and the HE-industry collaboration that help to enhance employability opportunities for students. Also, private employers were not asked for their opinion on the current BMA graduates joining their organisations, their expectations and requirements of HEIs, and the type of skills and knowledge needed for performing managerial roles successfully. Further, BMA student's perspectives were not investigated in the development of skills within HEI and training opportunities during their study and in vacations and how effective they are. Moreover, prior studies (e.g. Al-Maskari *et al.*, 2014 and Al-Balushi, 2008) have not sought BMA graduates' opinions on the core skills needed in the workplace. Therefore, this study aims to investigate respondents' and participants' views as they are crucial for finding such strategies that may enhance BMA undergraduate employability.

The aim of having a varied and extensive sampling strategy is to enrich data via sharing their perceptions, beliefs, and experiences and raise issues that enrich the study's findings. Denzin (1978) suggests that a distinctive type of triangulation in qualitative research is the inclusion of various data sources. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there has been no study investigating the employability of BMA undergraduates and graduates, studying in both public and private HEIs, employing this range of samples.

The respondents and participants involved, in this study, were divided into four categories, namely: BMA academic staff, students, graduates and private employers. **Table 4.2** highlights the number of responses received from these respondents and participants. The expected number of each group, in the table, was chosen to represent the best knowledge of answering the research questions.

Table 4.2: The number of responses received in data collection					
Category #	Category Type	Total			
		Expected	Actual		
			Total	Completed	Non-completed
First: Semi-structured Interviews					
1	BMA academics	30	62	62	0
Second: Questionnaires					
1	BMA academics	50	91	55	36
2	Final year BMA students (Bachelor)	50	130	127	3
3	Private employers	50	67	36	31
4	BMA graduates	50	91	67	24

4.5 Pilot-Test

A pilot-test is an essential element of a good research design. According to Van and Hendley (2002), establishing a pilot study, before starting the main data collection process, enhances the probability of success, adds value to fulfil a range of functions, and provides beneficial insights for studies. Luck and Rubin (1987) argue that a pilot study is helpful in estimating the time required for completing the instrument entirely, exploring any problems,

and assessing the reliability and consistency of items included. The questionnaires, adopted in this study, were tested before embarking on the main research collection process **(figure 4.5)**. The objectives of piloting questionnaires are to:

o Ensure that the methodology yields viable data with good response rate.
o Identifying and readdressing any shortcomings in the design of questionnaires before starting the field data collection.
o Examine the validity, adequacy, and reliability of questions (new forms of thinking and understanding, questions' outlines, to revise paraphrasing, evaluate the quality of answers provided by the respondents, and the content of the questions).
o Explore issues such as the questionnaires' structure and the sequence of the questions (sound right, understandable and clear, routing is understandable, redundancy/unrepeated, too many un-responses, the flow of questions and sections, filtering, completion time).
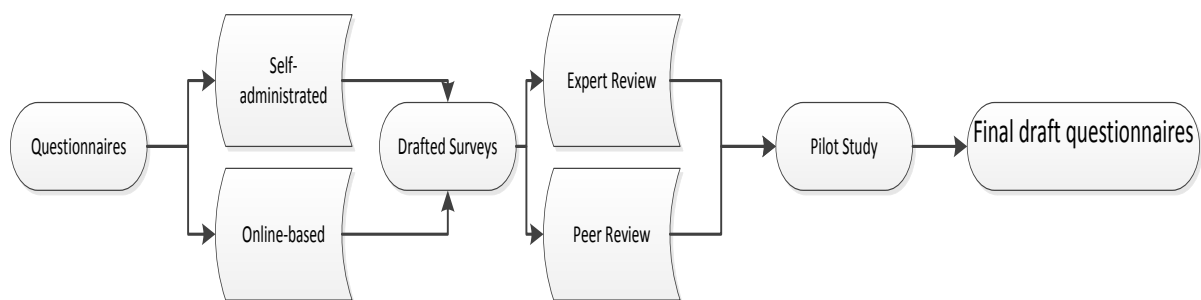
Figure 4.5: Piloting Process for questionnaire.

The questionnaires were pilot tested among fifteen employers and academics, five graduates, and two undergraduate students in January 2013. Respondents were encouraged to provide their feedback on different issues such as the relevance of research objectives, questionnaires' content, the level of understanding, flexibility of questionnaires' design, clarity of instructions included, and time of completion **(Appendix: 2)**. One of the primary challenges of the pilot study was the difficulty of finding respondents, representing the various subgroups within the intended sample, namely students, graduates, and employers. Therefore, I used my personal network to contact as many respondents as possible, but unfortunately, not all of them replied to the email sent. Respondents, involved in the pilot study, consisted of international and local academics, Ph.D. colleagues, my supervisors, local graduates and employers, SPSS expert, and English staff at Brunel University London. **Table 4.3** presents the responses received via the pilot testing.

Table 4.3: Pilot Study Results			
Type	By hand	Through survey monkey	
	Feedback form	Completed	Not Completed
Employers	15	5	1
Academics		4	1
Graduates	5	1	---
FY Students	2	1	1

During the piloting process, most of the respondents (employers, academics, and graduates) observed that the questionnaires were too long to fill all items included. Accordingly, the surveys were shortened. Further, the layout was designed electronically to improve their appearance and to give enough space for open-ended questions. Luck and Rubin (1987) argue that the appearance and physical features of a survey are important because they encourage respondents to complete it thoroughly with high-quality answers.

Additionally, to ensure the instrument's reliability and credibility, their feedback resulted in some adjustments. For example, it was helpful to find out how long it takes to complete the surveys, how relevant the content is, and how easily it can be completed. Further, it supplied feedback on the instructions provided, repetitions, spelling and wording mistakes, clarity and consistency. No major problems were presented, and the questionnaires were progressively simplified and shortened. Based on the responses received from the pilot studies, questionnaires were revised. Interviews were not piloted as access to potential pilot participants could not be arranged. The potential interviewees were in Oman where skype facilities are not available. The following section covers the process of data collection and methods used to obtain as many of the replies as possible from a broad cross-section of respondents.

4.6 Data Generation Strategies

The investigation process of this study aimed to obtain in depth understanding of undergraduate employability. It emphasises both questionnaire and interview instruments for data collection and analysis. **Table 4.4** indicates the advantages and disadvantages (Krathwohl, 1993 and 1997) of the techniques applied to the current study.

Table 4.4: Advantages and disadvantages of data collection methods used in this research			
Measure	Advantages	Disadvantages	Examples
Interviews	Acquire detailed picture on participants' views Allow depth of response Allow researcher to capture non-verbal responses Ensure questions' understandability Flexible and adaptable Allow immediate data	Costly in time and personnel Required skilled and trained personnel Summarizing and analysing challenge Effectiveness of interviews depend on participants' responses	Structure interviews with BMA academics to explore different perceptions on HE-industry relationship seeking to promote BMA employability and skills development
Surveys	Quick and not costly Easy to summarizing and analyse data Allow to gather data from varied participants in different geographical locations	Questions' understandability is not assured Low response rate (e.g. questionnaires collected via email) Completion is not ensured	Pencil-paper based-survey distributed over several students and employers to examine their perceptions on such themes related to BMA employability and skills development Electronic-based survey distributed to academics and graduates to explore such concepts related to BMA employability and skills development

4.6.1   Questionnaires as Method

'*The choice of data collection mode – mail, internet, personal interview or group administration – is related to the sample frame, research topic, characteristics of the sample and available staff and facilities; it has implications for response rates, question form and survey costs*' (Floyd and Fowler 2002: 58).

As previously mentioned, qualitative and quantitative are classified as essential sources of data collection of a research (Creswell, 1994; Bell, 1996 and Punch, 2005). The questionnaire is the common technique used for collecting data in social science research. According to Wilson and McLean (1994) in Cohen *et al.*, (2000:245), 'the questionnaire is a widely used and useful instrument for collecting survey information, providing structured, often numerical data, being able to be administered without the presence of the researcher, and often being comparatively straightforward to analyse'. Punch (2005: 238) summarised the main benefit of using the quantitative methods as;

'*Quantitative data enable standardised, objective comparisons to be made, and the measurements of quantitative research permit overall descriptions of situations or phenomena in a systematic and comparable way.*'

As the main research method, the current research adopted a survey instrument to collect data and meet the research objectives. The surveys (academics, students, graduates, and

employers) were designed under the title of 'Undergraduate Employability and Skills Development'. They were distributed over a large number of individuals from different geographical locations.

There are many reasons for selecting a survey instrument when doing this particular piece of study. First, the study intends to explore a phenomenon by employing a large sample size of respondents. According to Jackson (2013) and Leedy and Ormrod, (2001), paper-pencil questionnaires can be sent to as many respondents as possible in different geographical locations leading to low time and cost. They argue that web-based questionnaires are often quicker and less detailed while respondents are more truthful when answering questions due to anonymity. Equally, Jackson (2013) submits that for a diverse sample, an online survey method is the most efficient tool for collecting data required for a study. For Retna and Cavana (2009) a questionnaire instrument is useful to collect data regarding efficiency and time factors.

4.6.1.1   Selection of Respondents

Besides conducting semi-structured interviews with academics, this study aimed to explore undergraduate employability of BMA, using survey instruments. Four groups were chosen for this investigation, which are:

1. BMA academic lecturers
2. BMA students (Bachelor level)
3. Private employers
4. BMA graduates

Sample selection, for survey instrument, was conducted in four stages. Firstly, academic respondents, who teach BMA courses, were identified. Secondly, the student respondents, who are studying in some of the selected academic institutions, were included. In the third stage, various firms operating in different sectors, registered under Oman's industry, were employed to identify their opinions, views, and experiences of the skills and knowledge required by BMA graduates. The fourth stage was the selection of BMA graduates, who graduated from HEI in the previous four years and who are employed in the private sector. All respondents invited to complete the survey, were selected based on three main factors, which are:

o Respondent's background (BMA).
o Time, availability and willingness of respondents.
o The relevance of study and respondent's interest.

4.6.1.2   Questionnaires' Design and Administration

Having obtained the population and sample for the purpose of the first phase, the issue of the questionnaire design needed to be addressed. Stewart (1997) stated that 'the most common mistake when setting out to collect information is to dive in without thinking of what is required' (p.1). According to Boland (2010:35), the validity and the usefulness of a study rely on 'the skills with which questions are posed, the design of the project and the way the data is analysed'.

Accordingly, for this study, all surveys were designed to be short, clear and understandable, wording to be easy, avoiding sensitive language, using detailed questions and transition sentences between sections to guide respondents toward questions. In the layout, they were designed with appropriate font size, basic instructions in bold to get the attention of the respondents, emphasised the necessary words in a question and added instructions in questions (e.g. tick three answers). Nominal and ordinal variables were employed in all surveys. 'Nominal data provide an opportunity to classify, identify and label information; while, ordinal data aim to identify and order/rank information' (Plowright, 2011: 126).

The survey questions were developed according to the literature study. They were modified from several relevant studies that used a questionnaire instrument for data collection to investigate the perceptions of respondents on students' employability. Looking to these questionnaires helped to know more about how to construct a survey instrument and provide guidance on the response format and the kind of questions that might be used as they have important consequences for the entire study.

The students' and graduates' questionnaires were developed to include 17 skills, with a short description, derived from the previous studies of Alexander and Al Moaibed (2013); Jackson (2010) and Rainsbury *et al.*, (2002). The 17 chosen skills, selected from literature, were more discipline-specific and were applied to business management students and graduates. They incorporated a range of basic work-related skills, personal and academic skills. The students' survey aimed to determine the development of the listed skills during the study; while the graduates' survey targeted to explore the importance of the same listed skills to perform managerial roles in the workplace using a four-point response scale in both surveys. To assess the internal consistency among the 17 variables (items), Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of reliability was undertaken and appeared to be .881. This rate suggests that the items covered in this question have relatively high internal consistency. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or more is considered acceptable in social science research (Bolarinwa, 2015).

The questions, included in all surveys, were designed in a structured and unstructured format. As structured format, the surveys include multiple choices, dichotomous (e.g. yes/no, agree/disagree), filter or contingent (e.g. if yes...), single option variable (rule of thumb), multiple choice variables, and interval/Likert scale questions. Writing text questions were included as an unstructured format of how and what questions (**Appendices; 3, 4, 5 and 6**)**.**

A cover letter was attached to each survey including background information (e.g. the nature and purpose of the study) and informed respondents about the ethical issues such as anonymity (data will be presented without including original names) and confidentiality (protection of the data and responses collected). Also, it pointed out some definitions used in the questionnaire instrument. To evaluate who to survey and how to break down overall response data into meaningful groups of respondents, several categories of demographic items (characteristics of the population) were included in all surveys (e.g. age, gender, level of education, work experience, company size and sector, and the type of HEI). Even rating scale (numbered Likert) was preferred in this study. For Hoft (1996), Likert scales reduce variables that could be created by the misunderstanding of linguistically complicated questions and subsequent responses given. In Likert scale questions; 'Neutral' option was excluded in all surveys due to the following:

- o It will not add value to the findings.
- o Neutral choice ends up with different conclusions as it may affect the distribution of responses (Sauro, 2011).
- o Piloting studies' results show that several respondents selected neutral option.
- o The current research aims to analyse the questionnaires by combining the items such as agreement and/or disagreement together.
- o The inclusion of the neutral choice attracts respondents who are less disposed to express their opinions towards favourable or unfavourable responses. Therefore, respondents particularly students and graduates employed in this study, will tend to use it. Presser and Schuman (1980) argue that between 10-20% of respondents select the neutral option when given.
- o Having a four-point-scale will force the respondents to decide favourably or negatively.
- o According to Penwarden (2014), the consistency of the sample's overall performance will be affected positively by the removal of the neutral option.

As previously mentioned, all surveys were reviewed and regularly edited by taking the feedback from national and international academic staff and employers, research supervisors, SPSS experts, colleagues, and graduates (see **piloting; section 4.5**). To

ensure consistency and clarity in translation, the surveys were revised by English experts from the International Office at Brunel University London as well as my academic supervisors. The students' and graduates' surveys designed in English, but translated into Arabic because English is not their first language as well as to enhance the accuracy of communication and the level of understanding. Employers' and academics' surveys were in English as both groups mainly communicate in English at work.

4.6.1.2.1 Students' Questionnaire

A group administered questionnaire **(Appendix: 3)** was used to collect the data from the final year (bachelor) BMA students of eight HEIs (2 public and 6 private, **table 4.5**). In my presence, each student, who agreed to participate, was handed a questionnaire and asked to complete it while in the class. Also, students were told to raise any concerns, if any (e.g. clarity of meaning, direction, and wording). This helps me to ensure a good response rate as queries and issues were directly answered. This survey instrument had four sections as follows:

1. In the first section, students were asked to give their perceptions on the role of HEIs/departments in promoting employability and their expectations before joining HE.
2. In the second section, respondents were requested to provide their views on the development of the personal and work-related skills that they learned while they were still in college or university.
3. In the third section, they were asked to provide views on internship opportunities given to the students by their educational provider/department during study and holidays like summer and between semesters' break.
4. The last section provided the basic demographic characteristics of age, gender, and the type of HEI.

After getting permission from both the heads of department and tutors, I attended the classes concerned and handed out the survey during a lecture period and collected them afterwards. To ensure full understanding of the questions and to get more accurate results, the aims of the research were discussed, and the questionnaire was explained to students in class. This direct access to students yielded a high response rate.

Table 4.5: The Number of HEIs Visited and the Number of Responses Received.				
No	HEI	Completed	partially	Total
1	HEI1	6	0	6
2	HEI2	14	1	15
3	HEI3	25	0	25
4	HEI4	18	2	20
5	HEI5	10	0	10
6	HEI6	7	0	7
7	HEI7	19	0	19
8	HEI8	28	0	28
Total	8	127	3	130

As can be seen from **Table: 4.5,** of the 130 students, invited and encouraged to participate in the research, a total of 127 responses were completed fully while three were completed partially. The 127 completed surveys yielding a response rate of 97.7% ((127/130)*(100)). The responses obtained were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science).

4.6.1.2.2 Employers' Questionnaire

Due to the access challenges and the nature of work, it was hard to meet the employer respondents for an extended time that allowed them to complete the survey directly. Therefore, after discussing the purpose of the study in the time given by respondents and taking their agreement of participation, I sent the survey **(Appendix: 4)** by email. The survey was distributed to recruitment managers, specialists, and officers working in different private companies in the Omani labour market (**table 4.6**). It consists of four sections as follows:

1. In the first section, employers were asked to list the required skills and knowledge with a short description, to rate each skill's importance (core, support and additional), and to rate their satisfaction with the current recruited BMA graduates.

2. The second section wanted to investigate employers' perceptions of the types of skills that should be embedded in the BMA curriculum. It asked the respondents to select the appropriate (soft or hard) skills including examples of each, for the sake of guiding respondents.

3. The third section purposed to obtain employers' views on the development of the HE-industry cooperation to prepare the future workforce for the labour market. In the form of an open-ended question, the survey asked the employer respondents to provide suggestions on how HEIs can contribute effectively in enhancing employability of BMA students and graduates. Further, the survey allowed for additional comments on any part of the subject and/or the questionnaire.

4. The fourth section included the demographic characteristics of the respondents such as gender, age, nationality, organisational size and sector, and work experience.

During my meetings with companies' recruitment officers, specialists and managers in August 2014, I explained the aims of this research, discussed the survey's sections with respondents, and received their permission for participating in this study. Consequently, I sent it by email as a soft 'Word' copy and gave them enough time to complete it. A total of 67 copies were sent, and 36 were returned with a full completion. As a disadvantage of the mail survey, the completed surveys yielded a response rate of around 54% ((36/67)*(100)). The shortage of the replies might be due to the nature of their work, which makes them busy (e.g. hiring, meetings, visits, etc.). The responses obtained were analysed in the form of numerical data.

Table 4.6: The number of responses received from employers using survey method	
Sector	Number of responses
Oil & gas	eleven
Trading, contracting and manufacturing	Four
Shipping and logistics services, and professional consultancy services	Three from each of them.
Wastewater services, operation and maintenance of power plant, banking and finance, and investment.	Two from each of them.
Information technology, insurance, chemical, telecommunication, food and beverages, utility power and water, and electricity	One from each of them.

4.6.1.2.3 Web-Based Surveys

The web-based survey is the collection of data through a self-administered electronic set of questions on the Web. This type of survey is one of the key advances in the twentieth century (Dillman, 2000). According to Dillman low costs (e.g. printing), time of implementation, can survey as many as possible of respondents, display of responses after completion, easy reminding and follow-up of respondents, and the import of data were the main benefits of implementing this type of survey. However, the low response rate is the main disadvantage. To collect the required data, I developed web-based surveys, powered by Survey Monkey, targeting BMA academic **(Appendix: 5)** and graduate respondents (**Appendix: 6).**

4.6.1.2.3.1   Academics' Questionnaire

This questionnaire aimed to seek information on academics' views on Oman's HE system outcomes and BMA undergraduate employability. The questionnaire was divided into four sections. It started with investigating collected academics' perceptions of the effectiveness of

listed extra-curricular activities, provided from literature, on developing BMA students' learning and skills. The second section examined academics' views on the primary role of HEIs/business departments in promoting graduates' employability. The third section explored their views on the development of HE-industry collaboration in enhancing undergraduates' employability. Finally, the fourth section captured academics' demographic (e.g. nationality, age, gender, work experience, and type of HEI).

To accumulate the data from respondents, an online survey powered by Survey Monkey was carried out in April 2013. Academic staff who taught BMA subjects were invited and encouraged to complete the survey. The survey was accessed using a unique electronic link sent to respondents, after getting their permission and email addresses via an email invitation (EI) and/or web-based link (WBL). I focused more on the email invitation method to maximise the size of the sample of the target population. This approach gives a detailed summary of the number of emails sent, and surveys completed thoroughly and partially with a list of respondents and their response situation. Moreover, by using this technique, I sent reminder emails and followed up with those who did not respond and partially responded. A bi-weekly reminder was sent to respondents who completed the survey partially and those who did not reply to the invitation. This reminder raised the response rate because some of the academics completed the survey after receiving it. For those who completed the survey online and via WBL, I sent an email of appreciation thanking them for their cooperation in completing the survey.

A total of 64 questionnaires were received where 62 responses were obtained using EI and two using WBL. The reason for receiving two responses by WBL was that academics found it difficult as the network they had was too weak to allow them to complete it online. Out of 64 responses, 55 were completed thoroughly, and nine were completed partially during April to July 2014. In total, 55 usable surveys were received, yielding a response rate of 85.9% ((55/64)*(100)).

4.6.1.2.3.2   Graduates' Questionnaire

Like other surveys designed, the last section of the graduates' questionnaire provided the personal and work-related characteristics such as age, gender, work experience, graduation year and type of organisation they work for. Other sections consist of the following:

1. The first section seeks BMA graduates' perceptions on the importance of the 17 listed skills.

2. The second section seeks graduates' views on the role of HEI in promoting their employability.

3. The third section provides graduates' perceptions of internship opportunities provided by their educational provider/department during their study and holidays like summer and between semesters' break.

4. The fourth section provides information on the graduates' journey to get a job in the private sector. The findings will help the current BMA students in HEIs to be prepared accurately and efficiently, and to seek appropriate jobs in the future.

Similar to the data collection method implemented to obtain the data from academics, the data was gathered online. During my meetings with private employers, I discussed this method and got permission to send a Web-Based Link (WBL). Accordingly, a Web-Based Link (WBL) was sent to recruitment officers and/or human resource managers to be then emailed to graduates working in their organisations. With this type of respondent, I mostly focused on this method of collecting data as I could not meet the graduate respondents and take their email addresses during my visits to private companies. During August and September 2014, a total of 91 responses were received (67 were completed entirely and 24 were completed partially). In total, a 73.6% (67/91*100) response rate was achieved.

4.6.1.3   *Data Analysis of Questionnaires*

The findings obtained through a quantitative approach require a numerical analysis (Creswell, 2003). The current study applied questionnaires to collect data from academics, students, graduates, and employers. Additionally, to arrive at a judgment, the data collection tools and reporting findings are in the form of statistical nature. Statistical analysis is appropriate for quantitative research (Mayakut and Morehouse, 1994). Miles and Huberman (1994) concurred with the previous argument and claim that this type of data analysis technique helps researchers to develop an understanding of the subject they are examining. They claim that statistical analysis is the most appropriate and reliable method of data analysis that aims to interpret and derive meanings from surveys. Within the data analysis process, coding is involved.

The surveys were coded before the data entry process. To facilitate the data entry of surveys, each question was given a code and each variable given a unique number. Raw data was entered into the software package for social sciences (SPSS). Responses were analysed via numerical analysis. In addition to descriptive statistics, the frequency distribution of items and the chi-square test (to measure some relationships between variables) was used for the data analysis (**Chapter Five**).

4.6.1.4 Trustworthiness in Quantitative Data

Validity and reliability are the two measurements for assuring the quality of a quantitative instrument. Quantitative studies are measured, in terms of, reliability and validity. Validity refers to what extent does a research purport to measure accurately what it measures (Zeller, 1988). According to Bassey (1999), reliability is the degree to which the results of a particular research can be repeated. To ensure the content validity (whether questions are essential, useful or irrelevant to measuring what they are intended to measure) of the surveys employed in the current research:

- o I had considered the entire content of what is designed to be measured (reflecting on the research questions of the study).
- o Feedback was sought from experts (e.g. academic, industry, and SPSS experts), colleagues, and academic supervisors on the content and relevance of the questions included in all surveys (see piloting).
- o When designing the surveys, I considered the cumulative three-stage approach, suggested by Stewart (1997):

  a) What information do I want?
  b) Why do I want this information?
  c) How will I use this information?

Furthermore, to determine the internal consistency (reliability) of the items (defines the consistency of the results delivered in a test, ensuring that the various items measuring the different constructs deliver consistent scores) included in the surveys, employed in this study:

- o Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of reliability was undertaken to measure the 17 items of skills, included in students' and graduates' surveys, and appeared to be 0.881. This result suggests that the items covered in this question have relatively high internal consistency. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or more is considered acceptable in social science research (Kasim *et al.*, 2014: p.662).
- o I have used survey questions that were conducted and validated in similar studies established in the field of students' employability. The questions were developed to suit the Omani context.

4.6.2   Semi-Structured Interviews

There are various data collection methods to select from each of which indicates something different about the area under study. The decision of choosing an interview technique, to collect data for a particular study, depends on the aims of the research, the definitions of the phenomenon, and the questions planned.

As a supplementary method of data collection and to obtain rich knowledge and views from academics concerning students' employability, I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews. Adaptability was one of the main advantages of interview method over questionnaire in the current study. For Bell (2005:157), 'a skilful interviewer can follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings, which the questionnaire can never do'.

The rationale behind implementing the interview method to generating data is discussed by Patton (2002) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994). Patton (2002) determines that a qualitative approach is appropriate for understanding the meaning of human experiences and opinions. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994:4), researchers who apply a qualitative approach 'stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher, what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry'.

For this study, as discussed previously, the key precondition that supports the selection of the semi-structured interview technique, as a method of data collection, was to collect data from a wide range of participants on the issue undertaken. According to Smith (1995), interviews are the most relevant method to gather data from several participants to understand their perspectives on a particular area. He argues that for obtaining a detailed picture of human's beliefs and opinions on a particular phenomenon, interviews are the most appropriate. Further, Gillham, (2000) and Ritchie and Lewis (2003) suggest that face-to-face interviews are relevant to obtain depth of understanding, insights, and meanings of a particular subject. Leedy and Ormrod (2001) recommended personal interviews because they provide more control and foster accuracy, in terms of better, reliable, immediate data and present immediate opportunities to explain any questions.

Another reason for using the semi-structured interview method was to generate and develop a better understanding and to obtain an information rich and broad range of knowledge about how employers can help HEIs to enhance BMA undergraduates' employability in Oman. For Sechrest and Sidani (1995), the qualitative approach seeks a more comprehensive, indicative and exploratory understanding of a field than quantitative

research. This method of data collection is used to ensure that the information gathered from each interviewee employed in the analysis, is from similar origins. Accordingly, for the current study, the selection of the qualitative research was determined as the best research method that can provide in depth information, which could not be derived from a quantitative approach.

4.6.2.1 Definitions and Types of Interview

A qualitative interview is the 'construction site of knowledge' (Kvale (1996:2), where two or more individuals examine 'a theme of mutual interest' (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: p. 2 in Marshall and Rossman, 2016). For Kvale (1996:5), it is the method that is used in 'obtaining a description of life world of the interviewee on interpreting the meaning of the described area.' Similarly, it is defined as a process of exchanging information between two persons; interviewer and interviewee (Gillham, 2000; and Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). For Kumar (2010) an interview is the face-to-face interaction between two or more persons with a particular aim in mind.

The interview method has been widely used to collect social science data, and it is frequently used as a technique for collecting data (Fasick, 1977 and Halcomb and Davison, 2006). McKernan (1996) argues that because it is conducted face-to-face and engages direct verbal interaction between the interviewer and interviewee, the interview method is one of the effective ways of generating data.

There are three main categories of face-to-face interviews (Wragg, 1994), namely; structured interviews, unstructured interviews, and semi-structured interviews. According to Merriam et, al. (2015: 110), for conducting the structured type of interviews, 'the wording and order of questions are prepared by the interviewer before the interview'. May (2001) concurred with this and stated that 'The theory behind the structured interviews method is that each person is asked the same questions in the same way so that any differences between answers are held to be real ones and not the result of the interview situation itself' (121).

The above definitions indicate that structured interviews might enhance the reliability of the interview conducted, however, Kvale (1996) determined that this type of interview does not support in depth examination of the area under study as the interviewer has limited chance to discuss his/her beliefs. Therefore, due to this limitation, the structured interview method is avoided in the current study.

'An unstructured interview is particularly useful when the researcher does not know enough about a phenomenon to ask relevant questions' (Merriam *et al.*, 2015: p.111). By this definition, Merriam *et al.*, (2015) argue that in this type of interviews, there is no predetermined set of questions and the interview is primarily exploratory. Due to the difficulty in conducting unstructured interviews, less expertise in controlling them, shortage of time, and as they need extensive effort for analysing the data (Bell, 1996), this choice is not preferred for this study.

'*In between the focused and structured methods sits one which utilises techniques from both. Questions are frequently specified; but, the interviewers are more free to probe beyond the answers in a manner which would appear prejudicial to the aims of standardisation and comparability*' (Formosa, 2012: p.44). This statement indicates that the semi-structured interview has mixed features of both structured and unstructured interviews. Unlike structured interviews, semi-structured allows in depth investigation of the issue under study (Kumar, 2010). Also, they allow the interviewer not to ask questions in the same wording or order (Bell, 1996).

For the sake of the current study, I decided to use semi-structured interviews to generate in-depth personal responses from academic stakeholders in the field. This qualitative method supports greater detail that can be collected from interviewees. According to Wragg (1994: 272), this qualitative method 'tends to be the one most favoured by educational researchers as it allows participants to express themselves at some length, but offers enough shape to prevent aimless rambling'*.*

To manage and control interviews successfully, Cohen *et al.*, (2000) identified that the interviewer has to have the ability to conduct a reliable interview, and to assure confidentiality and anonymity of data provided to participants. In this research, I assured the confidentiality (protection of data and responses) and anonymity (not including original names) of data to interviewees at the beginning of each interview with the nature and aims of the current study. Besides the above, Clough and Nutbrown (2007) argue that effective interviews rely on the interviewer's communication skills like the clarity of questions' structure and ability to listen attentively.

4.6.2.2   Selection of Participants

In qualitative research, there is no definite answer concerning the appropriate sample size. According to Patton (2002: 244),

> '*There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what [a researcher] wants to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources.*'

In the process of sample selection, it is essential, as a researcher, to select those that will provide the information required. For the current study, besides the snowballing, purposeful sampling technique was implemented to choose the BMA academic participants. As discussed in sampling, purposive sampling is a non-random method of sampling which is popular in qualitative research. The importance of selecting this type of sampling is summarised by Denzin and Lincoln (1994: 202), who stated that,

> '*Many qualitative researchers employ purposive sampling methods. They seek out groups, settings, and individuals where…the processes being studies are most likely to occur.*'

This research is confined to explore academics' perceptions on the development of HE-businesses collaboration to enhance BMA undergraduates' employability. In this stage, the suitability of the interviewed participants was decided by considering their ability to provide data relevant to the research questions and the capability to contribute further to the overall objectives of the study. The sample consists of academic staff from different private and public HEIs across the country. The sample population for interviews was identified and introduced by Head of Departments (HOD) and/or Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs (ADAA), based on the following:

- o   Teaching background (BMA courses particularly Bachelor level).
- o   Time, availability and willingness of participants.
- o   Snowballing: one participant leading to other interviewees.

Participants, of the current research, were chosen regardless of nationality, work experience, educational level and religion. Some of them have been in Oman for a long time. For instance, I interviewed some faculty members who taught me at the University more than ten years ago. These variations may help to provide different assumptions, views, and experiences. The criteria for selecting the sample and HEIs for interviews were discussed above. Due to the interviewees' concerns, willingness and interests to be involved, the process of interviews was successful. **Figure 4.6** illustrates the number of the interviewed participants and HEIs visited.

Although academics were asked to give their opinions on this collaboration using an online survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted at the same time, as a complementary method to investigate the central themes via asking open-ended questions. To obtain in-depth personal responses from academic stakeholders in the field, the interviews' schedule included the following questions which were intended to be answered at this stage:

a) What could private employers do to contribute to the development of the relationship with higher education suppliers to promote the employability of BMA in Oman?
b) What are the BMA attributes offered by their HEIs?

The decision of selecting the questions mentioned above for conducting interviews with academics was influenced by the key role of the private employers, with the collaboration of HE providers, in enhancing BMA undergraduate employability as well as the debate on the gap between what is provided by HEIs and required in the labour market (**Chapter Three**). Accordingly, these two questions were selected for obtaining in depth knowledge and understanding of the academics' expectations from employers and for minimising, if not, overcoming the skills gap among BMA graduates in Oman.
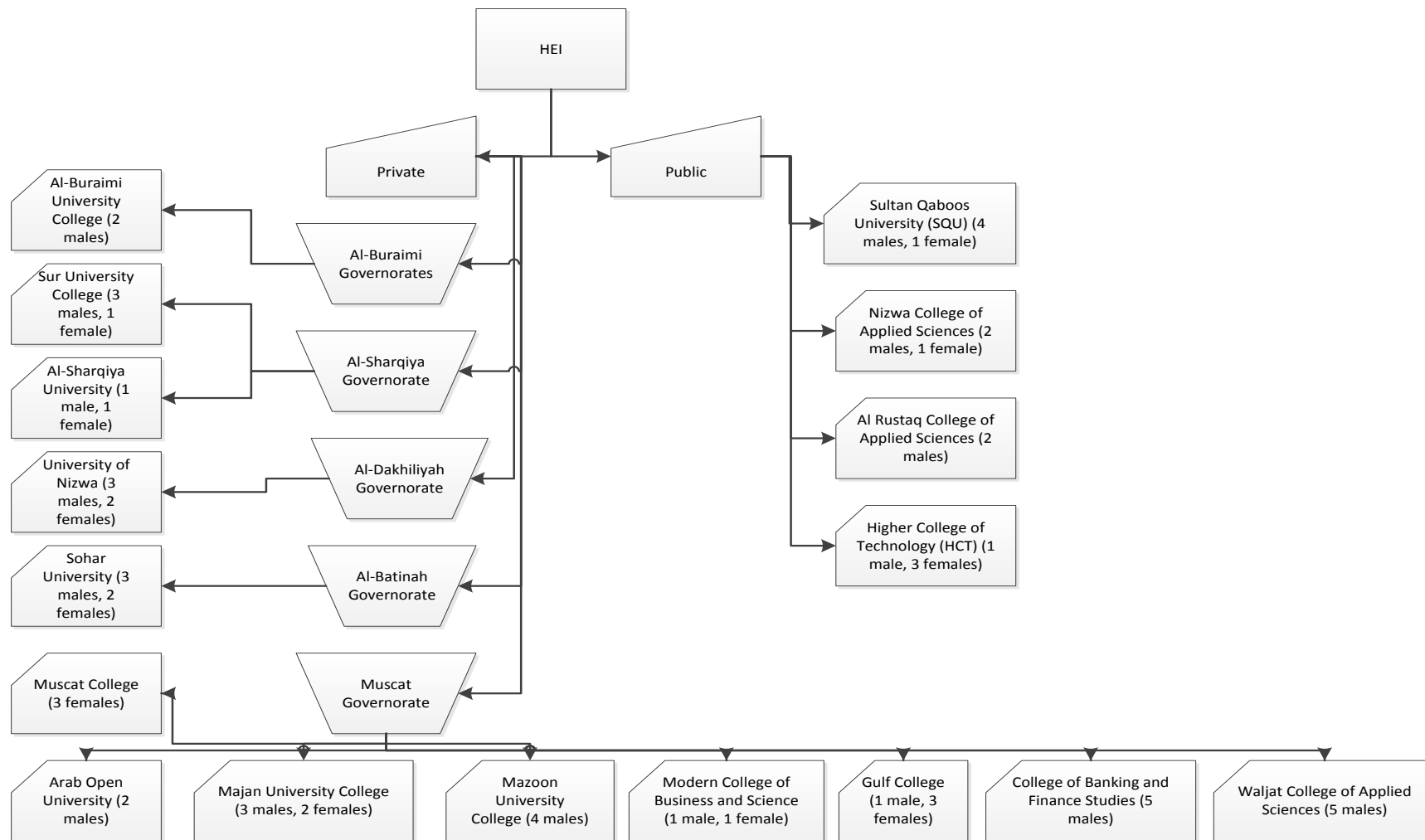
Figure 4.6: Visited HEIs

4.6.2.3 Interviews Procedure and Administration

Several administrative procedures were carried out to conduct interviews for the current study successfully. First of all, a letter from my employer, Ministry of Manpower, and another from the Ministry of Higher Education (as a responsible authority for HE in Oman), were maintained. These two letters (**Appendix: 7)** asked HEIs' principles and/or Head of BMA departments across public and private HEIs to ease my access to academic institutions and participants. Obtaining these letters was very helpful in conducting the interviews and attaining the required data easily. For Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), the process of getting permission is an unavoidable step in gaining access to data.

After meeting and discussing the topic and purpose of the research with the Heads of Departments and/or Assistant Deans of Academics, I started the interviews. At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself, the topic, knowledge collected from the literature and explained the reasons for conducting this study. Giving this information helped to establish a relationship with the interviewees, leading to them discussing their perceptions freely.

At the same time, interviewees were promised anonymity and confidentiality of data, and the protection process. Permission to audio-record the conversation was obtained to which some participants readily agreed. A total number of 17 interviews were recorded. As a mediator, my role was to control the interview process and ask for more information on the given information when needed.

62 interviews were conducted with academic participants selected from seventeen private and public HEIs (**figure 4.6**). All of them were carried out by me, as a researcher, during the month of April 2014 at a maximum time of fifteen minutes. They were held separately with each academic staff member, in their workplace (office), to obtain their unreserved perceptions. All interviews were undertaken in English since English is their mother language or a second language. All the interviews were friendly and open.

Beside their ideas, thoughts, opinions, and experiences associated with the planned central question, interviewees were asked to give further explanation and identification of their responses. For example, they shared their knowledge and expertise on the following themes:

a) Their requirements and expectations from the private organisations to enhance employability of BMA students and graduates.

b) Views on HE-industry relationship (provision of work placements and internships, curriculum design and delivery, industrial visits, exchange knowledge and expectations with HEIs)

c) Perceptions of the basic education and HE system, including views on students, the curriculum offered and the inclusion of skills and knowledge in the core curriculum, BMA programmes' assessment, resources and the strategies that might help to promote their employability.

In addition to the above, many non-Omani interviewees shared their country's experience on such issues related to this relationship, such as the training policy in their origin. Academic faculties were transparent in providing their perceptions and feelings. At the end of each interview, I asked the participants if there was any further information on the research issue, and thanked them for their collaboration, involvement, and interest in the research.

Exploring the skills and knowledge provided by BMA departments was planned to be collected through interviews; however, it is excluded from the interview process, because I was informed that there is documentation of students' characteristics designed by each BMA department across HEIs. Therefore, I asked heads of departments to send the document through email. Knowing this was an advantage as it reduced the time and effort of analysis. The requested document was sent and data collected. The discussion of the qualitative findings and results are discussed in the coming chapter.

4.6.2.4   *Data analysis of Semi-structured Interviews/Thematising*

Analysing data is important for any study and a researcher should make a decision on the strategy that will be used for analysing the data collected before the start of data collection process. Pre-decision of the data analysis method helps me to come up with sensible conclusions and generalisations (Merriam *et al.*, 2015) and improves the quality of the data collected (Patton, 2002).

A qualitative interview is an answer for how to collect data required for a study (Fink, 2000). The process of data analysis is about determining what the data collected are about, why, and what can be discussed about them (Dey, 1993). For a qualitative research analysis, Burgess (1984) determined participant's observation, text analysis, and discourse analysis as other techniques for data analysis. Additionally, Kvale (1996) identified several techniques, notably generating meaning through ad hoc methods, meaning categorisation, meaning condensation, meaning interpretation, and narrative structuring.

Thematic analysis is used, in this study, to analyse the data collected from semi-structured interviews. For Miles and Huberman (1994), this type of data analysis technique helps researchers to develop an understanding of the subject they are examining. They claim that textual analysis is the most appropriate and reliable method of data analysis that aims to interpret and derive meanings from interviews. Thematising aims to answer what is going to be examined, why, and how. According to Fink, (2000), responding to these questions is essential for conducting data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Within the data analysis process, coding is involved. Coding is the first part of data analysis that considers naming and classifying the issue under study by close exploration of data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). According to Coolican (2004), coding is the process that starts with counting the frequency of keywords and phrases taking place in the text of transcribed responses of a survey and/or interviews, which then need to be analysed. This process is vital for any research that applied both qualitative and quantitative methods approach to collect data because it is used to categorise the data, provided by participants, in the form of themes or patterns (El Said, 2005). The coding process, of data collected through interviews, is discussed in **figure 4.7.**

As an initial stage of the data analysis process, tape-recorded interviews and field notes were written and represented comprehensively. The data were made in English, and produced in the form of notes and a summary of participants' interviews. I went through the reviews and identified the discussion areas related to the current study with the consideration of data similarities, differences, and repetitions. Data saturation had occurred, and the sample size was considered to be sufficient as there were no new ideas and perceptions, given by the participants. All notes were then grouped in one file to obtain a thorough picture of the collected data.

To understand well the provided data and identify meaningful categories, a precise reading of responses was done. Irrelevant data were excluded. Crucial perceptions, concepts, and ideas were deduced from the content. The concepts were further examined to be classified into a small number of broader themes and sub-themes that bring and summarise meaning. This classification helps to provide better analysis (Dey, 1993).

Related to the research questions and objectives, and as a result of working with the data, general and specific themes emerged and were categorised (**figure 4.8**). I had created labels to gather all these perceptions, categories and ideas. Data were integrated with the relevant themes, which were derived from the data collected. Finally, various themes were interpreted in an interrelated description of crucial findings. Results, interpretation, and discussion are discussed in the next chapter.

Examples of the specific themes were the relationship between HE and industry and training. On the theme of 'the relationship between HE and industry', many academic participants perceived that 'there is less interaction between HEIs and industry, and the primary reason is no policy in HEIs promoting this relationship, so there is a need for a proper and formal policy for inviting employers to cooperate with the HEIs'. Also, they provided their perceptions on the importance and effectiveness of a student's training programme implemented by their academic institutions. An interviewee said 'practicing the reality of work is the best practice for students to learn and to gain the skills needed in the labour market'. Other statements were:

'Internship programme is not done systemically and appropriately, so it needs to be planned for all HEIs in Oman.'

'Employers are busy, but there is a need for effective training programme aims to prepare high-quality national graduates for the labour market.'
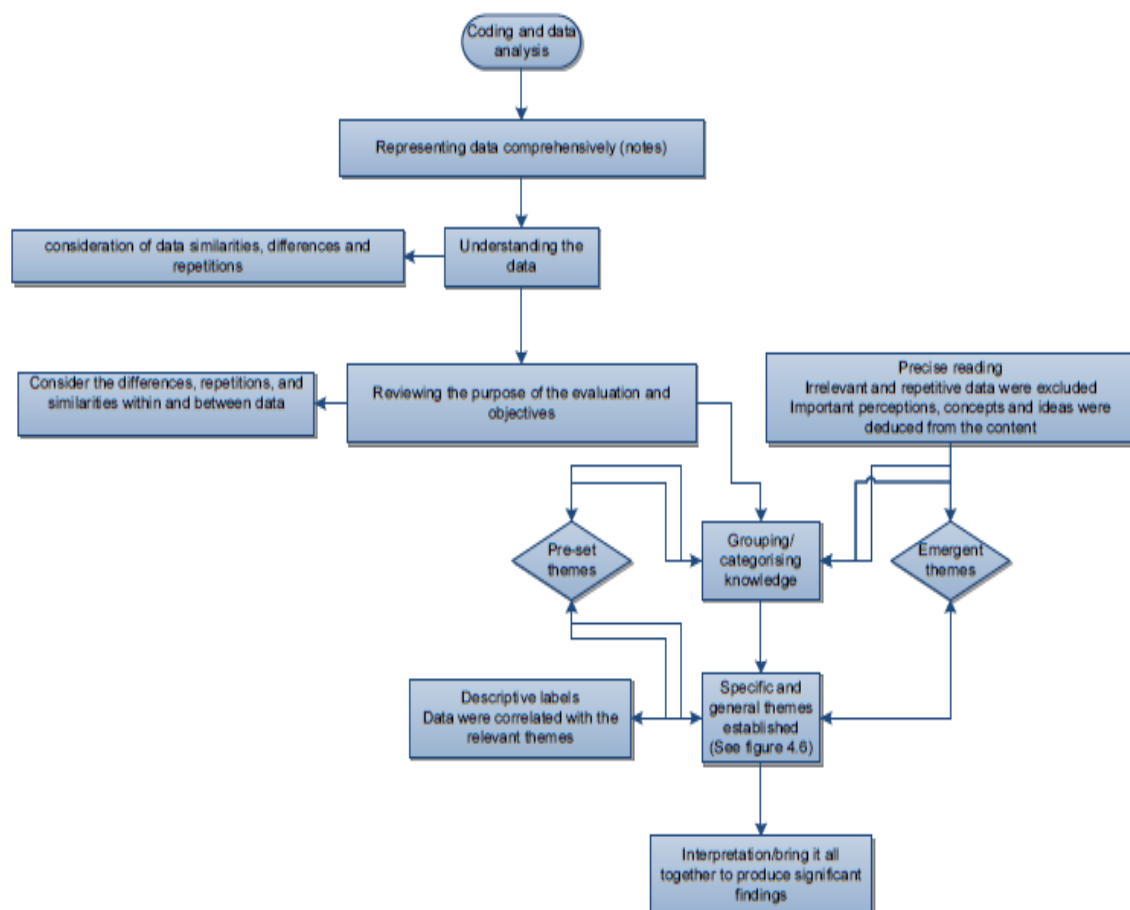
Figure 4.7: Qualitative Analysis Process
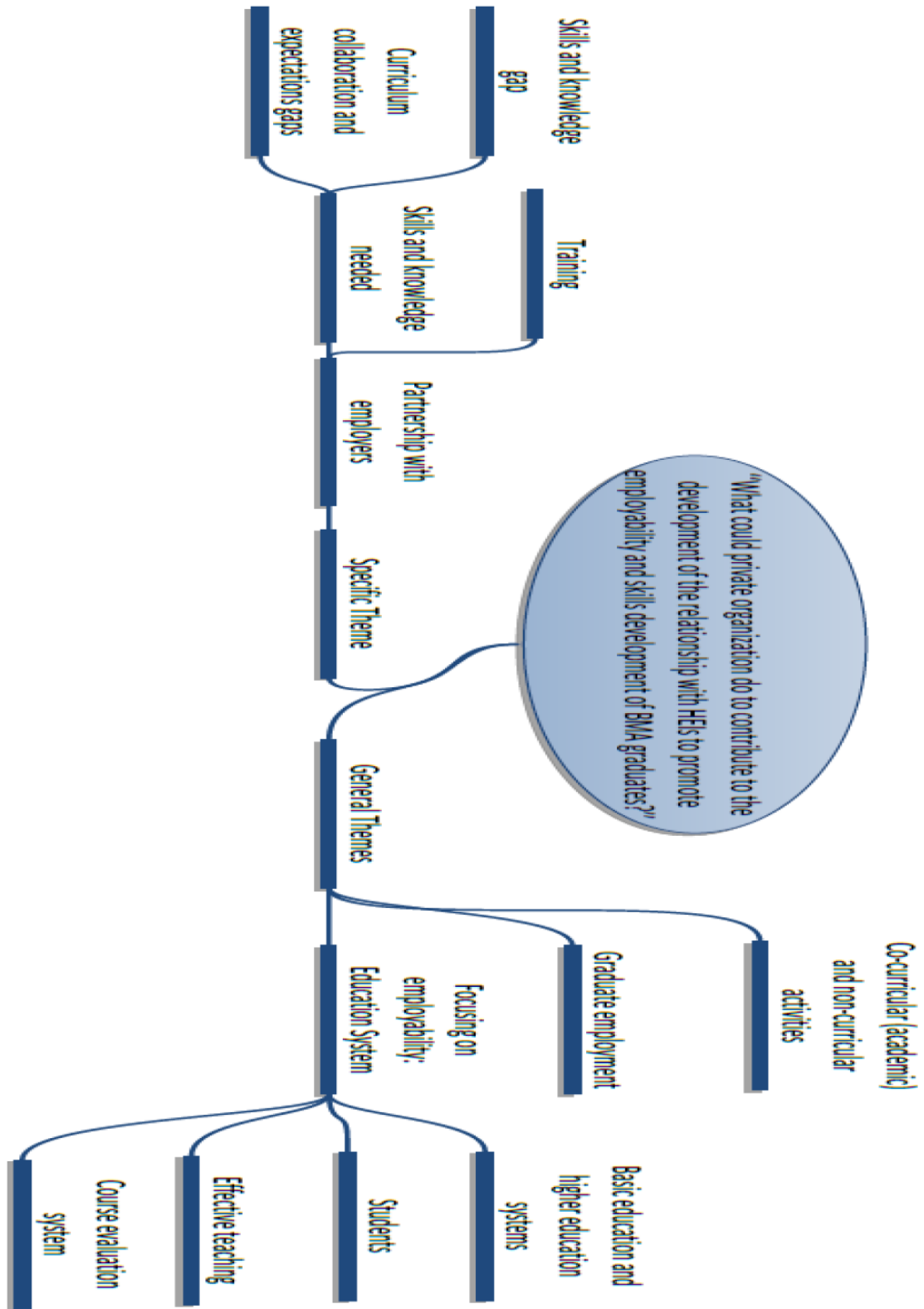
Figure 4.8: Themes integrated from semi-structured interview.

4.6.2.5   *Trustworthiness in Qualitative Data*

There is no best and globally accepted criterion adapted to evaluate the rigour of any qualitative research (Noble and Smith, 2015). Strategies, usually employed to assess the rigour of quantitative data, are not similar to those used to evaluate qualitative data due to different philosophical and methodological assumptions of each approach (Anney, 2014). Also, Krefting (1991:214) stated that 'not all qualitative research can be assessed with the same strategies'. There are various models that have been discussed to determine the trustworthiness of the qualitative data 'reliability and validity or rigour' in literature such as Leininger, (1985) and Kirk and Miller (1986), however, this research has followed Guba's model (1981) because it is relatively well-developed in terms of a concept or abstract idea and has been applied by educational qualitative scholars for a number of years (Krefting, 1991). Guba (1981) identified the main issues that should be considered to evaluate the quality and relevance of the qualitative data and to ensure the rigour/trustworthiness, which are:

- o   Credibility (truth value)
- o   Transferability (Applicability)
- o   Dependability (Consistency)
- o   Confirmability (Neutrality)

Besides the above mentioned criteria, Wallendorf and Belk (1989) said that the integrity is the fifth strategy for ensuring the quality of inquiry (Anney, 2014). This part of the current study briefly explains each of the aforementioned qualitative research trustworthiness criteria and how I employed them during the study. **Table 4.7** provides a summary of strategies, applied in the current research, to ensure trustworthiness of the qualitative data.

Table 4.7: Strategies for enhancing the trustworthiness of qualitative approach	
Strategy	The criteria applied in the current study
Credibility/ truth value	Implementation of similar research methods used in literature and examination of findings
	A detailed description of the problem studied, the methodology followed and data collection and analysis used
	Peer debriefing
	Triangulation via data source
	Respondents validation: follow-up with participants (member checks)
	Interview technique
	Prolonged engagement
	Researcher's qualification, experience and background on the issue
Applicability/ transferability	Sufficient contextual background
	Sufficient representation of data
	Purposive sampling/appropriate sample
	Comparing findings and conclusions to other contexts
Dependability/ consistency	Sufficient description of research methods, analysis and interpretation (thick description)
	Single Audit
	Audit trail
	Examining the process of inquiry (checking research plan and implementation, data collection, data management)
	peer debriefing and examination
Confirmability/Neutrality	The findings are from the participants' experiences, ideas and perceptions
	a single audit
	Inclusive methodological description
	Audit trail
Integrity	Building a trustful relationship with informants
	Ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity to participants
	Interviewing a wide sample of participants

4.6.2.5.1 Credibility (Truth value)

The credibility of a research refers to the researchers' confidence in the findings sought and if it measures what is planned to be measured (Holloway and Wheeler, 2002 and Macnee and McCabe, 2008). It is one of the most important factors for evaluating the rigour of a research project (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The implementation of similar research methods used in the

literature supports the quality of findings of particular research (Shenton, 2004). By reviewing the literature, the investigator found that a mixed method approach is commonly used in social sciences research particularly, in education (studies explored the perceptions of HE stakeholders on employability). The question of the interview, of this research, is derived from prior comparable studies. Moreover, to assess the congruence of the findings of the current study, I had examined them with the body of knowledge of the previous studies and reports (**see next chapter**).

Providing a detailed description of the problem, methodology, and data collection and analysis enhance the quality of qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). Hence, I had described the issue of employability thoroughly and provided a full explanation of the data collection and analysis methods implemented.

One of the factors that can enhance the rigour of qualitative research is peer debriefing (Shenton, 2004). Accordingly, I had obtained support from academic supervisors, a third reader, and proof-reader to provide guidance on the findings sought. Also, I presented my work in front of some academics in the Education Department (2015) and participated in conferences such as the staff-student conference at the department (2015 and 2016) and another with colleagues from Florida Atlantic University in 2014. Furthermore, in the form of a poster, I presented my work at the International Conference for Newer Researchers in Higher Education Research, organised by the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE, UK) in December 2015, and Oman's Open Day and the Research Student Conference held at the university in 2016.

I annually present and discuss my progress with peers as part of the annual review sessions. Moreover, as a reflective commentary of meetings, I always write the minutes of work and progress discussed with my academic supervisors to enhance the effectiveness of the study. I welcomed the feedback given through meetings with academic supervisors, conferences, and annual reviews which enabled me to improve the quality of research methods, findings, and arguments.

Participants' triangulation via data sources is a powerful strategy for strengthening the quality of any research (Anney, 2014; Shenton, 2004). In respect of the present study, data and methodological triangulations had been achieved through collecting the data from different sources and by employing mixed methods. A wide range of interviewees from various public and private HEIs and a range of documents were used in this study (e.g. Quality Audit Reports of various HEIs and BMA graduate attributes records) were employed as source material. The

use of these methods assisted in data triangulation. Data were collected and analysed concurrently. Site triangulation was also used as I had participants from several HEIs located in different areas in Oman.

According to Krefting (1991), the aim of any qualitative research is to describe or understand a situation or a phenomenon of interest from the participant's viewpoint and the participants are the only individuals who can legitimately judge the credibility of the findings. In this statement, Krefting (1991) argues that for a qualitative research, the ability of participants involved in the interviews to recognise their experiences in the research findings is a sound strategy for evaluating the quality of the inquiry findings. Others (see Lincoln and Guba, 1985 and Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007) described member checks criterion as the heart of credibility. To accomplish this, I followed up with some participants involved in this study, to comment on their interview transcript and also a draft of the data analysis and interpretation was submitted to an academic for review.

The interviewing technique is one of the strategies that enhance credibility in research (Krefting, 1991). During the interviews, I reframed the question and expanded it for the participants as well as asked them to share their experiences from their native countries in the situation being investigated. Academics interviewed were given time to express their experiences, ideas, and feelings. Also, a relationship of trust with the participants was established, during the discussions, to make them feel comfortable and secure enough to provide their real experience.

Prolonged engagement between the researcher and the participants was suggested by Erlandson (1993) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) as one of the strategies that enhance the quality of the findings. It helps to create a trustful environment during the interview and to gain a sufficient understanding of the issue. I was familiar with some institutions and have a good relationship with some participants involved in the study (e.g. during piloting, educational 'teacher-student' and 'student-student' friendship and working relationships). This link supports the establishment of the trust relationship and access to the institutions, departments, and participants. Consequently, the candidates freely contribute perceptions, experiences and ideas on the issue under study without fear.

According to Krefting (1991:11), 'the overall credibility of the human instrument depends on familiarity with the subject, interest in theoretical knowledge, ability to work with qualitative data, ability to consider different theoretical viewpoints and developed investigative skills'. I have studied management science at Bachelor and Master Levels and have lived in Oman since

birth. During my masters study and Ph.D. level, I attended several workshops and research programmes in data collection and analysis using qualitative methods. Also, I worked as a business lecturer teaching management, business ethics and human resource subjects. The interaction with colleagues in the department, and with students and graduates helped me to understand the challenges of training during study and employment opportunities after graduation and to have access to academic institutions. I have a good background on how the HE system works in Oman and student's employability.

4.6.2.5.2 Generalisability /Transferability (Applicability)

A transferability criterion refers to the ability to generalise the findings to other contexts, settings or with other participants (Krefting, 1991). Firestone (1993) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that to allow the reader to be confident in transferring the findings and conclusions of a study, a researcher should provide a sufficient contextual background about the fieldwork locations. Within the current study, I have included:

- o A broad knowledge of the context in which the work was carried out.
- o An extensive background of the issue being investigated.
- o Geographical data of field sites and sample (e.g. Number of HEIs, sectors, the number of participants involved, the methods adopted, length and period of data collection.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that the applicability is addressed when the researcher presents sufficient qualitative data to allow comparison and it is the responsibility of the reader wanting to transfer the findings to another context, to measure the transferability rather than the investigator of the original study (Krefting, 1991). A detailed representation of inquiry, participants, methodology and data is provided to enable the reader to evaluate the relevance of the findings and conclusions in his/her context.

Comparing to other non-probability sampling techniques, purposive sampling is the best method for assuring transferability of a research project because it can provide comprehensive findings (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Additionally, to allow readers of this study to know to what extent the results may be relevant to their situation, I had followed the purposive sampling technique (Anney, 2014) through interviewing the appropriate sample (e.g. academics from public and private HEIs and employers from different sectors) who best presents and/or are knowledgeable of the research issue under investigation. Moreover, this chapter provided detailed knowledge

about the research site concerning procedures that were undertaken to achieve the aim and objectives of the study, the research methods adopted along with the data analysis techniques.

Comparing the findings and conclusions of an original study with those of comparable projects, using the same methods, could be a great value for enhancing the applicability of a research project (Shanton, 2004). To have a comprehensive picture of the findings and conclusions, I compared the findings and conclusions of this present study with the ones previously explored in different contexts (**Chapter Five**).

4.6.2.5.3 Dependability (Consistency)

Dependability is 'the stability of findings over time' (Bitsch, 2005: p. 86). It imputes to the consistency of the results of research (Guba, 1981). Krefting (1991) suggests that describing research process, methods, analysis, and interpretation can improve the consistency of the findings. The research design, data gathering process, methods employed in collecting and analysing data, and the interpretation of qualitative data were described thoroughly in this chapter. This will allow future researchers to restudy the situation.

According to Guba and Lincoln (1982, 1985), the dependability can be enhanced through a single audit and audit trail strategies. The academic supervisors reviewed the findings of this study. As an audit trail **(appendix: 8)** and for cross-checking the research process, I had kept documents such as raw data (surveys), analysed data and interview notes and records.

Krefting (1991) argues that checking research design and implementation, by an expert, can enhance the dependability of a qualitative research. The academic supervisors reviewed the research plan and implementation. Data were collected and analysed concurrently.

4.6.2.5.4 Confirmability (Neutrality)

Besides ensuring credibility, peer debriefing and examination strategy helps to ensure the confirmability of a research enquiry (Anney, 2014). The research process, methodology, and findings were discussed in conferences and workshops attended.

The degree to which others can corroborate the findings is called confirmability (Baxter and Eyles, 1997). The current results derived from the participants' experiences, ideas, and perceptions. In addition, a single audit is a primary criterion for establishing confirmability of a qualitative study (Guba, 1981; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The process of the research, data,

findings, interpretations and recommendations of the current research were reviewed by an expert academic. Qualitative data, of this study, were collected and analysed concurrently.

Reporting the rationale for selecting research methods and their weaknesses is also enhancing the degree of confirmability of research (Shenton, 2004). I have discussed the rationality of choosing an interview technique and its weaknesses accordingly in this chapter. To enable the investigation of the results' integrity of the current research, a general description of the methodology (Shenton, 2004) is provided.

Employing diagrams to illustrate data collection and analysis 'audit trail' is another factor to accomplish the confirmability of a study (Guba and Lincoln, 1982). It allows any reader to follow up the research process via decisions made and procedures carried out (Shenton, 2004). A data-oriented approach showed how the knowledge constructed, and recommendations formatted had been designed in this study (**figure 4.3: 130**).

4.6.2.5.5 Integrity of Research Findings

Integrity refers to the originality of the data collected (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). Building a trustful relationship with participants, respecting the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, and interviewing a wide sample of participants are the primary strategies that guarantee the integrity of the current research findings.

In conclusion, besides the above-discussed strategies, the overall study ensures trustworthiness through employing a mixed methods approach (Krefting, 1991). Using this approach helps me to bring strong ideas, depth of understanding of the issue and assures that the weaknesses of one method are compensated by the use of another method.

4.7 Ethical Considerations in the Current Study

For any research, ethical concerns are important in protecting respondents and participants involved in the research (Rossman and Marshall, 2006). The present study adheres to the ethical principles and values, discussed in Brunel's Ethical Application Form. An ethical approval was sought from the Local Ethics Committee of Sport and Education School, Brunel University London (**Appendix: 9**). It included information on the nature of the research, such as the aims and objectives, project time frame, methods of recruiting respondents and participants, and information letters. To ensure free and transparent flow of data, and the access and

acceptance of respondents and participants, I sought formal letters from the Omani cultural attaché in London, the Ministry of Higher Education and my sponsor.

The whole truth of study to participants and respondents was considered in this study. The main purpose of the study, its importance, objectives, research methods and ethical concerns were explained to respondents and participants. For instance, a brief introduction was provided on the front page of each survey (students, academics, graduates and employers) as well as explained to each participant at the beginning of each interview (academics). Also, respondents and participants were asked if they were interested in getting a copy of the findings and results after completing the study. I had sought the permission of recording interviews from each participant before starting each interview.

Additionally, this study adopted various strategies to assure the protection 'safeguard' of participants and their rights. First, throughout the current study, informed consent was kept a priority. Written consent **(Appendix: 10)** was received from academic participants. Second, in data analysis and reporting, I had considered total anonymity (data presented without including their original names) and confidentiality (protection of the data and responses collected) as crucial ethical concerns. Personal information and responses to questionnaires are entirely anonymous.

In interviews, the interviewer promised participants that the answers would be completely anonymous. As another technique for ensuring the anonymity of participants at any part of data collection and analysis of the current research, I used codes or letters to identify participants and used password protected files strategy to protect participants' identity and their responses. Both respondents and participants were assured that no information would be disseminated without their permission. The data and research-related records are stored and protected by me, and nobody else has access to them. Interviews recorded, and the data collected were only shared with my academic supervisors. Completed questionnaires and interview notes are kept in a safe place, and once research is completed, they will be destroyed. Third, respondents and participants were treated kindly and equally, and they were informed that they could withdraw at any time if they did not want to participate. For instance, some respondent students withdrew as they did not wish to join after the research was explained.

To avoid the sensitivity of data collected and findings of the current research, I positioned myself as a researcher and not a member of academic staff. I had built good rapport and dealt with

respondents and participants as a researcher and not as a friend (e.g. work relationship, colleagues 'student-student relationship' and teacher-student relationship).

Apart from confidentiality and anonymity of data, respondents and participants were assured about the sensitivity of data when it will be made public. During data collection and analysis, I wrote codes and letters to indicate respondents and participants and avoided reporting their original names and their identity characteristics. Also, to ensure the validation of data provided by participants, I sent a follow-up document **(Appendix: 11)** to some interviewees randomly. Finally, I thanked respondents, participants and authorities of the visited institutions for their full cooperation, efforts, and the time given for establishing this study.

In conclusion, it is the responsibility of a researcher to protect respondents and participants and inform them about any ethical concerns in his/her research. There were no dangerous moral actions posed by respondents or participants involved in the current study as I considered myself as an investigator following the research code of conduct. **Table 4.8** highlights a summary of the ethical concerns of the research.

Table 4.8: The Ethical Concerns in the Current Study	
Aim	**Examples of Ethical Concern**
General Purpose of the study	a) An Ethical Approval Form was submitted and approved by the Local Ethics Committee of Sport and Education School, Brunel University London. It included information on the nature of the research, including the aims and objectives, project time frame, methods of recruiting respondents and participants, and information letters. b) Formal letters from the employer and the Ministry of Higher Education were provided to gain the access and acceptance of selected institutions and organizations for this research. c) A special care has been given to avoid any harm or include any sensitive questions to respondents or participants as both methods dealt with humans.
Survey Instrument	A cover letter attached in each survey instrument including: a) Research topic, purpose of the investigation, sections included and the main features of the design. b) Methods applied. c) Ensuring respondents on the privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of data to protect participants'' identity. d) Feedback to respondents involved. e) Completed questionnaires are kept in safe place and once research is completed, they will be destroyed.
Interview Instrument	To promote accuracy and completeness in their responses, participants were informed about: a) Completing consent form. b) The research topic, purpose of the investigation, and procedure. c) Participants promised on anonymity, confidentiality of data and data privacy when conducting interviews. d) They were asked about their permission to record the interview. e) Interviews recorded and data collected were only shared with the researcher's supervisors. f) Interviews' notes are kept in a safe place and once research is completed, they will be destroyed. g) Feedback to participants involved.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the research methodology and methods employed as well as the procedures followed in the field work. It examined the differences and similarities of paradigms, approaches, and methods in a research project. It argued the suitability of selecting the pragmatic paradigm, mixed methods approach, and convergent parallel mixed methods.

Following the pragmatic paradigm can be, to a great extent, generalised to a larger population (Creswell, 2003). Creswell adds that generating the understanding of research findings can also be attained via sampling techniques. He further argues that implementing a mixed methods approach enhances high validity (accuracy) and rigour. A mixed methods approach (survey and interview) had been used to reach the overall aim and objectives of the study and provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being investigated as well as to analyse data collected. The relevance of employing a combination of these two methods has supported me to answer research questions, meet objectives, and generate in-depth understanding of the issue under study. The fieldwork was conducted over a period of five months in various governorates in Oman.

Piloting, sampling techniques and data analysis were other themes of research implementation discussed in this chapter. To arrive at a judgment, the methods of data analysis and reporting findings are in the form of statistical (numeric) and a textual nature. Issues of validity and reliability of both quantitative and qualitative methods were also addressed. This chapter further discussed the ethical considerations in this study. The collected data are presented, interpreted, and discussed in the coming chapter, **Chapter Five**.

Chapter Five: Data Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the main findings of the empirical data collected on the topic of the perceptions of academics, students, graduates and employers on business management and administration (BMA) undergraduates' employability in Oman. Collected data are analysed using quantitative and qualitative approaches to achieve research objectives **(section 1.3: 23).**

As mentioned earlier **(sections 1.3 & 4.3),** the study aims to answer: **how do students, academics, graduates and employers perceive business management and administration (BMA) undergraduates' employability in Oman?** The results are discussed and presented in the form of the operational questions as following:

1) How do academics and graduates perceive the roles of HEIs, BMA departments, and private companies in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability? Do they think that these can be improved?
2) What do students and graduates expect from HEIs/BMA departments? Do they think they get what they expected?
3) How do academics, students, graduates, and employers perceive BMA undergraduate's skills and knowledge?
4) How do students, academics, and graduates feel about the provision and effectiveness of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability?
5) How effective do academics and employers believe the relationship between HEIs and the private sector is and does this affect BMA undergraduate employability?
6) How do academics, students, and graduates perceive BMA graduate employment in general and in connection with HEIs in particular?

During April to December 2014, a total number of 355 questionnaires were distributed among respondents, who were 130 students, 91 academics, 67 graduates, and 67 employers. The academics and student respondents are from the Department of BMA of 17 higher education institutions (HEIs), while the graduate and employer respondents are from different companies operating in various sectors of Oman's labour market. Out of 355 distributed questionnaires,

285 were returned completed resulting in 80.3% usable response rate. The following techniques were employed to circulate the surveys among respondents:

- Online: a total number of 110 (55 graduates and 55 academics).
- Paper-pencil: a total number of 139 (127 students and 12 graduates)
- Email: 36/67 employers

All the questionnaires distributed sought information on the respondents' background (e.g. gender, nationality, age, sector, experience, years of study, and types of employment). **Tables 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3** provide a summary of the background of those who took part in this study**.**

		HEI																
Variables		HEI1	HEI2	HEI3	HEI4	HEI5	HEI6	HEI7	HEI8	HEI9	HEI10	HEI11	HEI12	HEI13	HEI14	HEI15	HEI16	Total
Gender	M	6	4	3	0	2	4	1	1	4	2	2	1	2	1	3	1	37
	F	1	2	2	1	0	1	4	1	0	3	0	2	1	0	0	0	18
Nationality	Omani	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
	Non-Omani	5	6	5	1	2	4	5	2	4	4	2	3	3	1	3	1	51
Department	Business Management	0	3	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	2	0	9
	Business Administration	7	3	4	1	2	5	4	2	4	4	2	3	3	0	1	1	46
Age	21-29	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	30-39	2	3	1	0	0	1	1	0	3	2	2	2	1	0	1	0	19
	>=40	4	3	4	1	2	4	4	2	1	3	0	1	2	1	2	1	35
Sector/Type	Public	7	0	0	1	0	5	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	18
	Private	0	6	5	0	2	0	5	2	4	0	2	3	3	1	3	1	37
Experience	<5 years	5	3	1	1	1	2	3	1	1	1	1	1	2	0	1	1	25
	5-10 years	2	0	2	0	0	1	1	0	2	2	1	1	0	1	2	0	15
	>10 years	0	3	2	0	1	2	1	1	1	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	15

Table 5.1: Academics-Demographic Characteristics

From **table 5.1**, it is evident that the academic respondents cover different backgrounds in nationality, age, work experience, and the education sector. What attracts attention in **table 5.1** is that a high proportion of the academics, who took part in the questionnaire, are non-Omanis and work in private HEIs. Similarly, of those 55 graduates who completed the survey, 37 have worked for more than two years in the labour market (**table 5.3**). These ranges of differences are expected to give credibility to the outcome of the current analysis.

Table 5.2: Students-Demographic Background										
		HEI								
Variables		Sur University College	Nizwa University	Buraimi University College	Al-Rustaq College of Applied Sciences	Sohar University	SQU	Modern College of Business and Sciences	AlZahra College for Women	Total
Gender	M	3	5	1	5	1	19	3	0	37
	F	7	20	5	13	18	9	11	7	90
Department	Business Management	0	25	0	18	19	28	8	7	105
	Business Administration	10	0	6	0	0	0	6	0	22
Age	21-25	7	23	5	18	18	28	12	6	117
	26-30	3	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	6
	>30	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	4
Years of Study	3 Years	6	3	1	0	0	0	2	0	12
	4 Years	4	9	2	7	2	2	5	4	35
	5 Years	0	12	3	10	17	20	6	3	71
	>5 Years	0	1	0	1	0	6	1	0	9
Sector/Type	Public	0	0	0	18	0	28	0	0	46
	Private	10	25	6	0	19	0	14	7	81
Expectation of graduation	At the end of this semester	0	5	5	2	14	22	0	2	50
	Next semester	5	10	1	9	5	3	9	5	47
	Next years	5	10	0	7	0	3	5	0	30

Table 5.2 shows that all completed surveys were received from the bachelor students (final years) from various HEIs, resulting in a 98 % response rate during April 2014. The graduate respondents' background, shown in **table 5.3**, indicates that most of the graduate respondents, that took part in this study, are represented by banking and transportation sectors (16, 15 respectively). Also, the data showed that of 55 graduates who completed the survey, 38 spent between 0 to 6 months getting their first job while 17 spent between six months to a year to join a workplace. The percentage response rate of the graduate respondents was 74% from August to November 2014.

Table 5.3: Demographic Characteristics of Graduates		Frequency
Gender	Males	29
	Females	38
Age Group	<25	18
	25-35	45
	>35	4
Educational Status	Diploma	3
	Higher Diploma	7
	Bachelor	57
Year of Completion	09/10	17
	10/11	9
	11/12	5
	12/13	34
	13/14	2
Years of Experience	<6 months	14
	6M-1Y	7
	1-2Ys	9
	>2Ys	37
Number of contacts before getting the first job	0-4	42
	5-9	8
	10-14	5
	>15	12
Type of employment	Full-time	60
	Part-time	7

By the end of the survey period, data had been collected from thirty-six respondents distributed throughout fifteen sectors (**see table 4.6**). The respondents, involved in this study, mainly work in human resource departments, where most of them are responsible for recruiting candidates for their companies. The male participation rate was 62% while the female's rate was 38%. Around 47% of the respondents were within the age range of 21-30 and 35% were between 31-40 years old. The percentage response rate was around 54%.

Out of the thirty-six responses received by the employer respondents, twenty-nine were completed by Omanis whereas five were obtained from non-Omanis. Most of the responses (71%) were collected from large size companies (have >100 staff), with 24% from medium size companies (have 10-99 staff). From this information, it is evident that the respondents cover different nationalities, age groups, sectors and work experience. This range of differences in the employer respondents' background is expected to give credibility to the outcome of the current analysis. Opinions were sought from various sectors to ensure that skills and knowledge requirements were covered, so avoiding concentration on a particular area or sector. This broad range of sectors covered, in this study, supports the generalisability of the main findings in Oman and possibly similar contexts like the Gulf and Arab regions.

Besides the survey instrument distributed to academics, students, graduates, and employers, this study scheduled separate semi-structured interviews with academics in their workplace. The primary purpose of adopting semi-structured interviews, in this study, was to generate in-depth personal responses from academic stakeholders in the field. Qualitative data could help to persuade government and HE decision makers on recommendations based upon the main findings.

Interviews were conducted from the 4th-27th of April 2014 and scheduled separately with each person in their workplace. All of the interviewees were intended to provide their perceptions on the question asked openly since the area undertaken directly affects their work and the future of the BMA graduates. The following themes, derived from the data collected with participants, were identified:

1. Focusing on employability: Education System
   1.1 Basic education and higher education systems
   1.2 Students
   1.3 Effective teaching
   1.4 Course evaluation system
2. Partnerships with employers (relationships)
   2.1 Training
   2.2 Skills and knowledge needed
       2.2.1   Skills and knowledge gap
       2.2.2   Curriculum collaboration and expectation gaps
3. Graduate employment
4. Co-curricular (academic) and extra-curricular activities.

5.2 How do academics and graduates perceive the roles of HEIs, BMA departments, and private companies in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability? Do they think that these can be improved?

Question one, of the current study, enquired about the functions of HEIs, BMA departments, and the private companies in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability in Oman. To investigate this question, academics and graduates were asked about their perceptions on the main functions, derived from literature, using the survey instruments. Also, opinions and views, in this area, were expressed by the academic participants during semi-structured interviews.

Firstly, the academic and graduate respondents were asked to give their opinions on the major role of HEIs. **Table 5.4** presents the outcome of their responses.

Table 5.4: The major role of HEI		
Role	Percentages*	
	Academics	Graduates
HEIs have a prominent role to play in preparing students for employment and that is their main duty'	80%	70%
HEIs are not employment agencies, and their role is to develop students' knowledge and learning regardless of the need of employers	20%	30%

The percentages represent agreement with the statement

Table 5.4 shows the percentage of respondents attached to each of these statements. It can be clearly seen from the table above that academics and graduates, who took part in this study, concurred in their opinions of the primary function of HEI. Looking especially at the responses to the statement 'HEIs have a prominent role to play in preparing students for employment and that is their main duty' (**table 5.4**), the majority of the academic (80%) and graduate (70%) respondents perceived that the main role of HEIs is to prepare students for employment.

From the analysis of the semi-structured interviews, the interviewee academics concurred on their view on the main responsibility of HEIs, which is preparing and developing students for the labour market. However, they considered family, society, and industry as part of the system (promoting student's employability). This view supports the findings in **table 5.4**. It emphasises

that along with HEIs, the collaboration of family, society, and industry is greatly valued in enhancing BMA undergraduate employability.

Literature (e.g. Rubin and Rubin, 2005) argues that the primary challenge of the employability scheme is the differences in expectations between HE stakeholders (e.g. students, graduates, academics, governments, and employers) on the role of HEIs. The scholars found that academics thought that embedding the skills and abilities into their teaching inhibits the academic independence regarding content while employers believe that it is the role of HEIs to prepare learners with the appropriate skills and knowledge required by the labour market. As discussed in **Chapter Three**, due to the direct link between education, skills learned, and productivity in the workplace it is seen that HEIs play a key role in enhancing and equipping students with skills related employment (Leitch, 2006). This argument is supported by the human capital scholars (e.g. Schultz, 1961 and Becker, 1962), who purport that HE makes individuals employable and a more productive workforce leading to economic growth. On the other hand, it is seen that academic institutions are oriented to the demands of the labour market and society, and to the creation of the present and future knowledge (Kruss, 2004).

The academics' and graduates' views and perceptions, on the key role of HEIs, support the arguments and findings from the literature, in particular with reference to Oman. The results, **in table 5.4**, indicate that academics and graduates are aware of the key role of HEIs. Al-Ajmi (2003); Bhaerman and Spill (1988); Iqbal (2011) and Swailes *et al.*, (2012) equally support this finding. Determining the role of HEIs in Oman, these findings are consistent with those of Swailes *et al.*, (2012), who suggested that it is the role of HEIs to develop learners' skills and knowledge, and shape their attitudes and expectations. Additionally, the findings of Al Harthi (2011a) and ALMunajjed and Sabbagh (2011) supported the view that Omani graduates are aware of the role of HEIs in developing their employability.

Secondly, to explore the respondents' views, whether academics or graduates, on the essential functions of the business department concerning BMA undergraduate employability, they were asked to express the level of importance of some functions, derived from literature, where one is the most important and six is the least important. By calculating the frequency distribution, how many instances there are of each value of a variable, the results of their answers are shown in **table 5.5.**

Table 5.5: Main functions of business schools		
Function	Rank	
	Academics	Graduates
To develop academic staff and curriculum design to ensure learning is current and relevant	5	1
To develop employees who are ethically and morally responsible	6	2
To give access to real life examples and practical experience	4	3
To Prepare students for the workplace through the development of their awareness and understanding of business	2	4
To educate students about business management principles	3	5
To prepare students for the workplace through the development of general and specific knowledge, skills and abilities	1	6

From **table (5.5),** it can be observed that the respondents, whether academics or graduates, perceived the functions differently. The academic respondents attached a high level of importance to enhancing students' skills and knowledge, and their awareness of the workplace. This might be due to the shortage of embedding skills and knowledge in the core curriculum.

However, the graduate respondents perceived the statements of: 'professionalism of academics and curriculum design', and the 'development of work-related ethics' as the two most important functions of business schools. The explanation might be that graduates believed that academics were incompetent in imparting skills and knowledge in the classroom, and also determined the irrelevance of the curriculum to the needs of the labour market when joining the labour market as it did not support them in enhancing their work-related ethics (Al Barwani *et al.*, 2009; Al-Lamki, 1998).

The above responses, in **table 5.5**, may constitute a clear message calling on the HEIs/business departments to consider graduate's feedback, as they join the labour market and acknowledge the weaknesses of the education system, when reviewing a curriculum to make it relevant to the needs of industry by embedding more work-related skills and knowledge.

One unanticipated finding in **table 5.5** is that academics perceived lower importance to the inclusion of real life examples and practices whilst the significance of applying these practices (e.g. industry visits, work placements, and internships) within the context of discipline were greatly emphasised by Ali (2012) and Bowden *et al.*, (2000) in the development of students' skills**.** This might be because of ineffective learning and teaching techniques (Times of Oman writer, 2013a) and/or curriculum does not encourage real life practices and/or examples (Al-Barwani et al., 2009; Barhem et al., 2008; WBG & IDB, 2011).

Also, the results showed that academics viewed their professional development and curriculum design as least important functions; however, prior studies have noted the significance of their professional development in applying the best teaching and learning practices that impart skills and knowledge to students as well as their important role in accomplishing learners' expectations by designing relevant curriculum (e.g. Swailes *et al.*, 2012). Evidence from literature, in Chapter Three, demonstrated that internationally, HE decision makers and employers expect HEI/business departments to prepare competent graduates for the labour market through implementing the best strategies to develop their skills and knowledge (Heaton *et al.*, 2008).

Interviewees expressed their perceptions of the important functions of the business department concerning BMA undergraduate employability. Most participants revealed that it is the role of the department and academics to seek the requirements of skills and abilities from industry. They urged for embedding these skills and knowledge in curricula as well as assessing learners' understanding and skills development in the classroom. This finding indicated the significance of engaging BMA academics in the process of developing students' employability. Academics' views are supported by Harvey (2000) and Iqbal and Zenchenkov (2014), who considered that academics can play a big part and have an impact on students' skills and knowledge development leading to their employment. There was evidence that it is important for business schools to plan further in providing and determining the essential demands of the labour market, and embed practices and examples (e.g. training programmes) in their main curriculum to support students in attaining proper work experience and understanding the reality of the workplace (Iqbal and Zenchenkov, 2014).

On the contrary, some interviewees argued that the role of providing students with the demanded skills, abilities and knowledge is not for HEI/department only, but also the industry. Others go beyond that by reporting that it is not an academic's job to develop students' skills but to expand their knowledge. The following are statements expressed by some interviewees while explaining their arguments in this regard:

'Our job is to teach and not to provide students with the demanded skills'.

'Academic study is not only intended for training for a job, but also for the fulfilment of a person's life'.

'The role of HEIs needs to be more focused on producing shareable knowledge and disseminating free knowledge to students and not practicing'.

'The role of HEIs is to provide theory and companies need to improve their practice and skills'.

These views also show that students have responsibility for developing their skills. An interviewee mentioned that 'students have to take at least 50% of the responsibility to learn how to understand a discipline'. Supporting this perception, Speight *et al.*, (2013) argued that besides the responsibility of HEIs, students can play a key role in developing their skills and knowledge. As mentioned in **Chapter Three**, Maher and Graves (2008) found that academics thought it is the responsibility of students and/or career offices to develop their skills and attitudes, and HEIs are mainly responsible for providing knowledge to students concentrating on their understanding of a subject with little information on skills needed in the workplace. In this argument, they emphasised the key role of career offices in enhancing their employability.

Thirdly, the academic and graduate respondents were asked to assign the level of importance of the core functions of the private companies, derived from literature, in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability. It is interesting to note that the three most important functions (from most to least) of industry perceived by both respondents, to enhance BMA undergraduate employability, are:

1. Providing more training opportunities (workplace experiences) to students.
2. Attending HEIs/departments to conduct talks, seminars, career advice and workshops related to employability.
3. Collaborating more closely with HEIs in curriculum development and delivery.

It seems possible that this result might be because of the:

- Lack of training opportunities provided by the companies (Al Farsi, 1994; Mansour, 2013).
- Weak relationship between HEIs and industry; especially conducting workshops and talks, and in curricula design and delivery (Wilkins, 2002).

The above view is crucial because it indicates the academics' expectations as well as the importance of work-based learning for seeking a job in the future and performing managerial roles effectively in the workplace, which was recognised by the graduate respondents when joining the labour market.

Other results showed that the functions of 'providing resources for HEIs', and 'publishing its materials outlining their needs of skills and knowledge' were perceived as the fourth and fifth tasks respectively by graduates while academics felt that they are less important in promoting undergraduates' employability (**figure 5.1**). In the form of a frequency distribution, academics emphasised the importance of the other roles that could be played by companies in **figure 5.1.**

Apart from the functions, listed in **figure 5.1**, additional responses mentioned by the academic respondents were: 'companies need to involve actively with students' progress from the beginning as a sort of hand-holding exercise till they complete their degree and get absorbed by the industry', 'targeting specific students who are interested in working in industry' and 'co-op programme is a win-win for the students and businesses'.
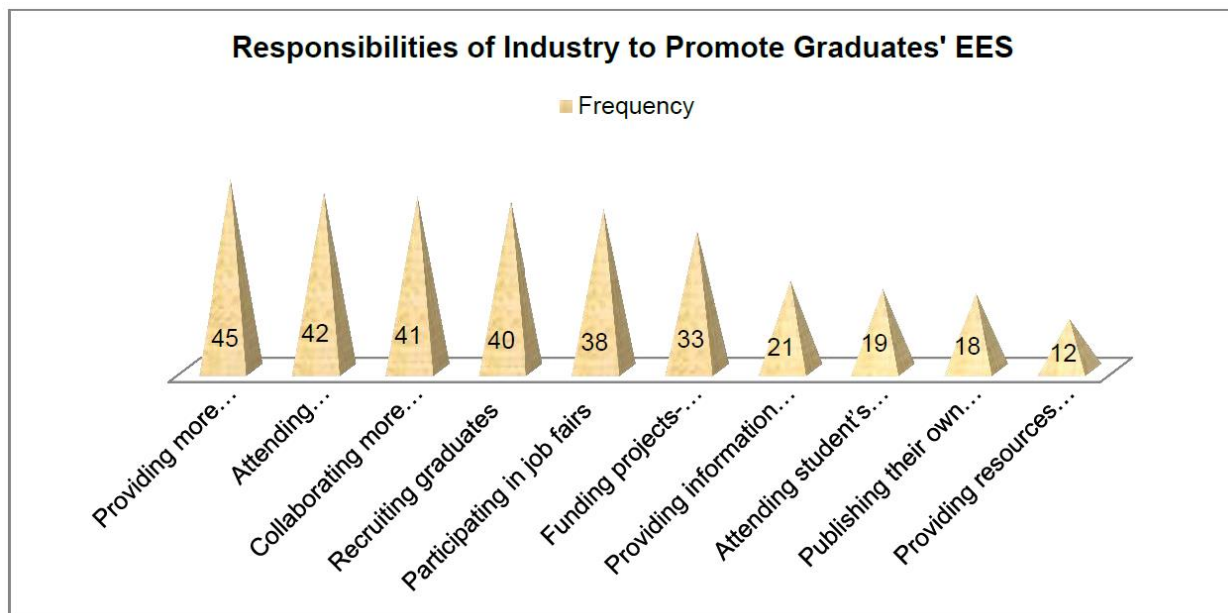
Figure 5.1: Academics' views on the main responsibilities of industry

*Numbers represent frequency.

Several interviewees expressed the importance of changing information, requirements, and expectations of companies with HEIs, academics, and students. Some essential information that need to be exchanged are: the quality of the current graduates, trainees' challenges, rules and regulations in the workplace, present and future demands of skills and knowledge and specialisations and programmes, and code of ethics. Informal meetings and visits, conferences, symposiums, workshops, seminars, and talks were several channels suggested by interviewees to exchange this information with HEIs, academics, and students.

Likewise, participants thought that private employers expect minimum skills, the field of the study, professional knowledge, and the development of students' soft skills (e.g. presenting and expressing ideas, confidence, and teamwork). On the contrary, they reported that HEIs expect the industry to update them with the latest knowledge and skills required in the labour market, provide proper coaching and orientation to students' trainees, allow students to visit their workplaces, and involve them in work-related projects.

The benefits of industry practitioner's collaboration in curriculum design and delivery of their companies, HEIs, and learner students are discussed in the literature by Plewa *et al.*, (2014). This collaboration becomes ever-more important as it is positively affecting the improvement of students' skills and knowledge and leading to high performance in the workplace (Baaken 2007; Plewa *et al.*, 2014; Helmsta¨dter 2007; Storm 2008 and Razvan and Dainora 2009). In conclusion, all stakeholders need to continuously exchange their expectations and requirements with each other (e.g. students from HEIs/departments, HEIs/departments from employers and vice versa).

To answer the second part of the first research question, academics' and graduates' views, on how BMA undergraduates' employability can be improved, were examined. They were asked to express the level of importance of some recommendations, derived from literature, to the government/HE decision makers, students, and BMA departments/academics.

To start with their recommendations to the government/HE decision makers on the reforms that can be made to improve the HE system, academics and graduates gave a fairly even spread of suggestions. Using the frequency distribution of variables, **table 5.6** illustrates the ranking summary of the respondents' answers.

Table 5.6: Suggestions to the government/HE decision makers		
Advice	Rank	
	Academics	Graduates
Improving education through an improved accreditation system	1	3
Employing better qualified, experienced, and committed teachers who can make a difference	2	1
Providing resources to implement the practical part of programmes	3	4
Facilitating better communication between government, HEIs, and private employers	3	2
Increasing investment in HE	4	5

As can be seen from the data, in **table 5.6**, academics perceived the improvement of the current accreditation system and the employment of professional and highly experienced faculty as the two central reforms of the current HE system that may help in enhancing BMA undergraduate employability. Facilitating better communication between government, HEIs and private employers were considered as the third highest important change by academics whereas it was of second highest importance indicated by graduates, after employing professional academics. Strengthen primary education with English, as a primary language, and focus on educational values were other responses provided by academics to this question**.**

The academic interviewees shared their views in connecting with the reforms required to improve the education system. A conventional view, determined by interviewees about the HE system, was that HE is booming and being improved, in terms of quality but it is not entirely established due to the small number of HEIs as well as programmes which are still not achieving the requirements of the labour market.

An interviewee reported that *'HE in Oman is neglected in a time that human capital needs to be developed'*. Similarly, another pointed out that *'competencies provided by HE are disconnected with those required by private organisations'*. A further common statement given by several interviewees was that *'the challenge is about the HE system'*. By stating this argument, they expressed their concern about the different education systems in the country. Some interviewees attributed their greater concentration on this issue and argued that *'there is no centralised HE system in the country due to various systems in different private and public HEIs'*.

Some academics interviewed argued that, unlike public HEIs, private education providers have affiliations with other international colleges and universities, so their content is not entirely linked to labour market demands. They reported that due to these affiliations and with the limiting framework (boundary) for academics to change, private HEIs follow and provide international case studies for students. An interviewee stated that *'there is no unified HE system especially among the private HEIs'*. Equally, another said that *'there are approval restrictions from Ministry of Higher Education (MHE) limiting change to the programmes and/or curriculum by HEIs'*. He claimed that *'some faculties need to make some changes in courses, but they face the challenge of getting their requests approved by the HE decision makers'*.

The field work interviews support those views provided by academics and graduates in **table 5.6.** For instance, there was a sense among interviewees that teaching strategies are

inadequately applied in HEIs due to the recruitment of unqualified and unprofessional faculty and/or assigning staff for teaching another subject which is not in his/her field (e.g. management staff teaches accounting, etc.). They further expressed their views on the teaching techniques followed by HE providers. The findings of the interviews revealed that there was a consensus among several interviewees that using PowerPoint as a teaching method is highly focused on teaching BMA subjects. They criticised this approach as it is not sufficient enough to be employed as it makes students memorise, rather than, understand the content. Several interviewees reported the following statements:

'Students lack practical exposure in HE'.

'Lecture notes are not enough and not useful for students in the future'.

'Slideshows are not practical for students to learn; while, the traditional way of teaching is sufficient for them'.

With regards to the key challenges facing academics in the classroom, interviewees mentioned the low level of English language among students and their involvement. For example, a participant said that 'students lack the communication skills needed in HE'. They argued that these challenges affect the level of understanding in the classroom, which leads to low-quality graduates.

As discussed in the literature review, enhancing the quality of HE is one of the key challenges for a government **(**Barhem *et al.*, 2008); however, establishing an open system through involving all the education stakeholders is crucial for enhancing HEIs' quality and having an active education-industry alignment (Mourshed *et al.*, 2012).

The findings, presented in **table 5.6**, are in line with the arguments and findings from the literature of Omani context. They are consistent with those of Swailes *et al.*, (2012) who suggested that to better improve the education system in Oman, enhance students' learning, and employment opportunities and practices in the job market, the quality of the education system needs to be assured by employing professional external quality assurance agencies that have enough experience in ensuring education systems. Practicing the best strategies for teaching and learning, and designing curriculum and programmes that consider the needs of the labour market help to enhance the quality of education (Barwani *et al.*, 2009).

Furthermore, it is reported that the HE system in Oman is well structured while the lack of skills and knowledge among graduates exists because of inadequate background from basic

education that has not prepared them for higher studies and work-related attitudes (Baporikar and Shah, 2012). Therefore, it is important for basic education decision makers to establish a communication skills framework and focus on applying activities that will promote student's English fluency, which will help them to be ready for HE and labour market in the future.

Next to the reforms, suggested to the government/HE decision makers for improving BMA undergraduate employability, graduates' perceptions about the significance of some changes, derived from literature, to business department/academics were explored. **Figure 5.2** illustrates the results of the frequency distribution of each item.
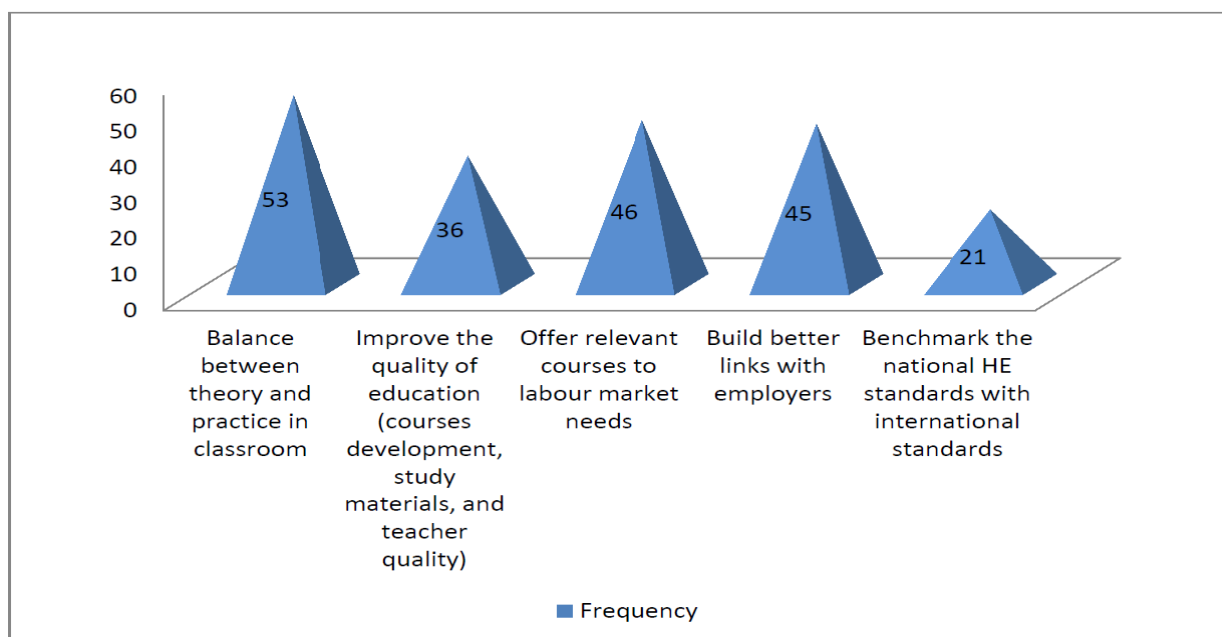
Figure 5.2: Graduates' recommendations to BMA academics

Numbers represent frequency.

As can be seen from **figure 5.2** above, graduates highly valued the need of balancing between theory and practice in the classroom. This view suggests the significance of embedding more practices in curriculum and employing the best strategies for teaching and learning that have a high impact on imparting skills and knowledge to students. The findings, presented in **figure 5.2**, are in line with the responses in **table 5.6** when academics raised their concerns about improving the quality of education.

Next to the need of balancing between theory and practice, in the frequency of responses, graduates indicated the importance of providing programmes that are relevant to the needs of industry and building better linkage with industry practitioners. This argument is supported by

the findings of Al-Harthi, (2011a), who argues that courses and curriculum are irrelevant to the labour market demands.

Interviewees talked about the above concerns. For example, they provided their perceptions on the issues of curriculum and expectations gap. Reviewing and developing a curriculum to include more practice was one of the academics' concerns. A common statement revealed from several interviewees was that 'there is a need to link theory with practice in HEIs'. They described that 'beside theoretical knowledge, students need to learn practically to be well prepared for the workplace'. This perception may indicate the shortage of practice in the current curriculum provided to BMA students. It goes in line with the results in **figure 5.2**.

In regards to the programmes provided, interviewees revealed the importance of assessing these programmes to be relevant to the needs of industry as well as assessing students' learning to ensure their understanding. The academic participants reported the following statements:

'The evaluation of the programme is highly needed and more practical cases should be embedded in programmes'.

'There is a lack of documentation and programmed evidence from HEIs focusing on the process of embedding demanded skills in the curriculum, and there are no methods provided for assessing these skills'.

'Skills assessment is required in the colleges'.

'An assessment of students' skills in the classroom is needed to find the students' strengths and rectify their weaknesses'.

Interviewees further claimed that HE curricula, mainly in the private academic institutions, are established elsewhere in the world, and there is no unity in educational programmes offered by local HEIs. It can thus be suggested that a centralised curriculum and examination system is needed that could be developed via collaboration between both industry practitioners and educational experts. Interviewees argued that all stakeholders, notably employers, HEIs/BMA departments, and students could reach a win-win situation from this relationship.

It is interesting to note that, academics and students are too focused on hand-out materials due to the lack of a particular reference book which ends up with limited knowledge being given to students while academics expect more practice from them. Some interviewees argued that concentrating on hand-outs and other materials encourages students to memorise and not learn, so they do not search for knowledge. For example, a participant reported 'no student

challenges the teacher in the class, but they just take the knowledge and memorise it for the sake of pursuing their exams'.

Interviewees also expressed their views concerning the engagement of the industry practitioners with HEIs in discussing their opinions about the BMA curriculum and its development process. To them, this will help in discovering the suitability of programmes and marketability of business graduates. An interviewee suggested that 'around 50% of the people in the curriculum design and development committee should be from the industry'. A shared view of interviewees was that a standard curriculum must be established by an Independent Board of Studies for all HEIs based on the level of study, and the teachers need to impart the essential knowledge theoretically and practically to students. Adding to that, HEIs can invite industry practitioners to take part in course delivery at least twice a semester as it helps students to learn from real life cases and about how practice turns out in a professional manner.

However, interviewees admitted that it is the responsibility of the HEI/business department to contact private companies to ask for their needs and expectations (e.g. course delivery, in-house recruitment and work placements) and also make private employers aware of courses and programmes provided. Many interviewees expressed that 'there is a skills gap, and it needs to be filled by the active cooperation with industry'. They argued that 'it is the HEIs' responsibility to contact employers and create a platform for finding requirements, needs and expectations to be interchanged with employers'. The quality of skills development in the curriculum, work experience, implementation of education and work-related activities, and engaging in skills agenda are some of the main factors affecting graduates' performance at work (Jackson, 2014b).

The literature highlights the crucial role of academics in focusing more on how to teach a subject and not only focus on what they should teach (Harvey, 2000). To balance between theoretical and practical education, it is the responsibility of BMA departments/academics to ensure the relevance and alignment of content with the needs of the labour market (Jackson & Hancock, 2010). Maher and Graves (2008) conclude that curriculum needs to focus on enhancing students' subject knowledge as well as developing their capabilities and knowledge needed by employers in the labour market, as both of these objectives are interrelated.

Finally, academics and graduates were asked to assign the degree of importance of some factors, derived from literature, in connection with BMA undergraduate employability. Based on the frequency distribution of each item, **table 5.7** highlights the overall ranking of responses.

Table 5.7: Suggestions to BMA students			
No.	Advice	Rank	
		Academics	Graduates
1	Follow self-learning techniques (not only depend on HEI's programmes)	1	3
2	Visit employers to know their demand of skills and knowledge	8	4
3	Practice mock interviews with academic and industry experts	2	3
4	Develop the right personal and work-related skills within classroom	3	2
5	Design appropriate curriculum vitaes (C.V)	4	5
6	Have long internships/on-the-job training during semester and summer vacations	5	1
7	Choose programmes required by private employers	6	5
8	Study overseas and complete degrees	7	6
9	Achieve better academic grade	9	7

From **table 5.7** above, it is clear that encouraging self-learning techniques was highly recognised by academics for enhancing a student's skills and knowledge while applying the training was highly valued by graduates. Also, practicing mock interviews with expert academics and professional industry practitioners, and developing their skills and knowledge were greatly recommended, by both respondents, for students to improve their skills and knowledge, for their employment. Both respondents suggested achieving a university degree as the lowest.

The findings, in **table 5.7**, further showed that visiting companies (factor#2) was not encouraged by academics, while graduates motivate students to visit companies physically and ask employers for their requirements in the workplace. What attracts attention in **table 5.7** is that academics perceived less importance to designing an appropriate C.V and applying the training. This result may be explained by the fact that academics are happy about graduates' performance in the workplace (Al-Barwani *et al*., 2009), as some HEIs motivate their students to apply for training especially public HEIs. These findings support these of Mourshed *et al*., (2012), who found that academics are satisfied with what they offer to students and are optimistic about graduates' readiness and preparedness for the world of work; however, graduates and employers disagreed with academics. Literature further indicated that providing learning resources to students, facilitating education and offering training programmes were the main three impacts of education on enhancing skills attainment and improving student's employability in the Arab context (Rima, 1981 and Tachibanaki 1998).

The findings of Jackson and Hancock (2010) supported the belief that besides HEIs/departments and employers, the success of transferring skills and knowledge from education to the labour market lies with students. Hence, it is part of the responsibility for students to improve their understanding of workplace scenarios and well-used learning materials. As noted in the literature review, to maximise their employment opportunities in an increasingly competitive and unsteady job market in the future, students need to concentrate on developing their skills and knowledge (Maher and Graves, 2008).

To this end, the findings of **table 5.7** with the arguments and findings of the literature review and the findings of semi-structured interviews, discussed **in this section**, a student has an important responsibility towards improving his/her skills and knowledge, which may lead to obtaining employment in the future. To be competitive in the job market, interviewees advised students on the following:

- o Be punctual in attending classes.
- o Be confident in what they are doing.
- o Adhere to schedules and assignment submission.
- o Seek knowledge from different sources and not only depend on the given materials and listen carefully to their instructors.
- o Be aware of the skills and knowledge demanded in the private industry.
- o Stress the high importance of reading (e.g. business magazines and articles-related-to their field).
- o Apply training even if it is encouraged by their HEIs/departments.

Having discussed the main roles of HEI, business department/academics and companies in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability, the **next section** asked if students and graduates got what they expected from their HEIs/business departments.

5.3 What do students and graduates expect from HEIs/departments? Do they think they get what they expected?

Students' and graduates' perceptions on their expectations of HEIs/BMA departments and if they get what expected were also explored using questionnaire instrument. Results revealed that 66% (128/194; 83 students, 45 graduates), of those surveyed, expected to 'be prepared with the relevant skills, knowledge, and abilities related to their field of study'; whilst, 34% (66/194; 44 students, 22 graduates) expected to 'be prepared with knowledge and learning

regardless of the labour market needs'. From this result, it is apparent that students and graduates recognised the importance of the development of work-related skills for seeking a job in the labour market in the future. This result further supports the findings of **section 5.2**, on the role of HEI/departments in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability.

To provide further evidence about the second question, an additional question was asked. The student and graduate respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which their expectations were met. **Table 5.8** presents the summary statistics of respondents' answers.

Table 5.8: The extent to which respondents' expectations were met						
Expectation	Students		Graduates		Total	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Be prepared with the relevant skills, knowledge and abilities related to their field of study	46	37	26	19	72	56
Be prepared with knowledge and learning regardless of the labour market needs	28	16	13	9	41	25
Total	74	53	39	28	113	81

All numbers, in the table, represent frequency.

A closer look at the responses to the statements in **table 5.8**, the majority 58% (113/194) of students and graduates have got what they expected; however, 42% (81) of respondents stated they have not. Looking specifically at the responses to the statement 'be prepared with the relevant skills, knowledge, and abilities related to their field of study', the majority 56% of respondents reported 'Yes'; while 44% stated 'No'. This finding may be deemed worrying given that there is not much difference between those who responded 'they have got what they expected' and those who indicated the lack of preparation.

A Chi-square test was employed to examine the relationship between the HE sector and meeting students' expectations variable. Concerning the expectations, presented in **table 5.9**, 81/127 of student respondents, who took part in the survey, were from private HEIs, while 46 were from public HEIs. The results, shown in **table 5.10**, revealed that there is not enough evidence to suggest that there is any difference between the HE sector and achieving students' expectations (χ^2=.005[a],df=1, p=.941).

Table 5.9: HEI sector * Do you get what you expected? Cross tabulation					
			Do you get what you expected?		Total
			Yes	No	
HEI sector	Public	Count	27	19	46
		Expected Count	26.8	19.2	46.0
	Private	Count	47	34	81
		Expected Count	47.2	33.8	81.0
Total		Count	74	53	127
		Expected Count	74.0	53.0	127.0

Table 5.10: Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.005[a]	1	.941
Continuity Correction[b]	.000	1	1.000
Likelihood Ratio	.005	1	.941
Linear-by-Linear Association	.005	1	.941
N of Valid Cases	127		
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 19.20.			
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table			

The same test was adopted to determine whether there is a significant difference between the gender of the graduate respondents and meeting their expectations variable. As can be seen, from the results in **table 5.11**, most of the graduate respondents were females (38/67) with 29 males. The results, illustrated in **table 5.12**, indicated that the Chi-square test did not show any significant differences between gender and their expectations for any reason other than chance (χ^2=.194[a], df=1, p=.660).

Table 5.11: Did you get what you have expected? * Gender Crosstabulation			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Did you get what you have expected?	Yes	Count	16	23	39
		Expected Count	16.9	22.1	39.0
	No	Count	13	15	28
		Expected Count	12.1	15.9	28.0
Total		Count	29	38	67
		Expected Count	29.0	38.0	67.0

Table 5.12: Chi-Square Tests	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.194[a]	1	.660
Continuity Correction[b]	.036	1	.849
Likelihood Ratio	.194	1	.660
Linear-by-Linear Association	.191	1	.662
N of Valid Cases	67		
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected a count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 12.12.			
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table			

To conclude with, two of the main issues that emerge from these results are:

1. BMA students and graduates expected HEIs to take a lead in providing more opportunities and practices to speed up their progress into the graduate labour market (Robst, 2007) as employers consider graduates' skills and knowledge more than their degree status (Harvey *et al.*, 1997 and Tomlinson, 2008). This result ensures graduates' perceptions provided in **tables 5.4 & 5.5**.

2. The findings demonstrated that it is important for HEIs/departments to be aware of students' and graduates' expectations (**table 5.8**) and to consider them when designing curriculum**.** There was evidence that in order to have a successful transition from university to the labour market, it is essential for HEIs/departments to explore students' and graduates' expectations and then align them with employers' requirements in the workplace (Gush, 1996; Navehebrahim, 2009; Swailes *et al.*, 2012). Literature purports that the changing expectations of HE stakeholders, students and graduates, has affected the central role of HEIs to be from education for knowledge to education for employment (Bowers-Brown and Harvey, 2004 and Wilton, 2011).

5.4 How do academics, students, graduates, and employers perceive BMA undergraduate skills and knowledge?

The results revealed from questions one and two above indicated the important role of HEIs, business departments and companies in improving BMA undergraduate work-related skills and knowledge. As a key expectation, the results showed that students expected their HEIs/business departments to prepare them with the capabilities that will help them to compete effectively in the job market. Therefore, the primary purpose of this question was to investigate the skills and knowledge, provided by HEIs/business departments and demanded by employers in the workplace. To give an overview of this question, the following sub-questions were asked:

a) What are the business undergraduate attributes/skills emphasised by business departments and the main challenges facing their implementation?
b) How do students perceive the development of their skills and knowledge learned during HE study?
c) How do employee graduates see the importance and relevance of skills and knowledge learned during HE to their workplace requirements? Is there a gap? Why?
d) What skills do employers perceive as demanded for BMA graduate employees, how do they recognise their importance and satisfaction from the current BMA graduate employees?

To start with, the identification of the skills and knowledge provided by business departments in Oman was an essential aim of the current study. In Oman's context, the skills and knowledge refer to the graduate attributes (GAs).

As mentioned in **Chapter Three,** the Oman Academic Accreditation Council (OAAC, 2009-2012) reports indicated that most of the HEIs have advertised BMA student's GAs in their plans and mission statements while, others do not. For instance, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) is the only HEI that advertises both generic and specific-discipline GAs for their BMA undergraduates. Decision-making, problem-solving, planning, organising, staffing and control, communication, interpersonal behaviour, team working, motivation, and leadership are examples of the specific-discipline GAs covered by the business school at SQU.

By analysing the reports (2009-2012) established by the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA), it can be argued that HEIs were ineffective in implementing and promoting

GAs of their students, and that was due to the following common weaknesses and challenges observed by OAAA:

- o There is no precise revision, approval, and development approach of graduate attributes.
- o Hard skills were not much considered by HEIs as they mostly focused on the general skills.
- o Lack of including the general and specific-discipline knowledge and skills within the curriculum.
- o Lack of awareness among internal 'e.g. students' and external 'e.g. employers' stakeholders of the GAs.
- o Lack of awareness among students, staff, affiliate partners, and employers of the graduate attributes embedded within academic programmes.
- o Lack of delivering programmes' outcomes and work-related attributes of students within HEIs.
- o Lack of measuring the development of students' attributes and courses outcomes.
- o Lack of assessing students' attributes within classrooms and their effectiveness in relation to labour market needs.

These comments are crucial as they encourage HEIs/business departments to think about and plan for the best strategies to overcome the previous challenges. Some suggestions, provided by Ali (2012) and Bowden *et al.,* (2000) can be found in **Chapter Three**. There was evidence, shown by Matherly and Hodgson (2014), that Oman has made good progress in providing education for locals; however, it is important for HEIs to continuously review and update the skills and knowledge to be relevant to those required in the labour market with full industry collaboration.

From the preliminary analysis of GAs of BMA students designed by most of the HEIs, the results revealed that there is no standard profile of GAs across HEIs as it is different from one institution to another. The difference of profiles is probably because of no centralised HE system, the weak collaboration between BMA departments across the country, and/or HEIs/departments do not have an idea about the exact requirements of work-related skills and knowledge. Accordingly, a typical 'wish list' of BMA undergraduate GAs is gathered from different profiles, provided by HEIs/BMA departments, as shown in **table 5.13**. This common

profile is expected to help business departments to produce high-quality and potential BMA graduates for the labour market, thus minimising employer's expectations.

Table 5.13: The common GAs designed by HEIs with their definitions	
Generic Attribute/Skill	Definition
Academic and professional knowledge	Capacity to discover and retrieve information, use knowledge at national and international workplace and understand the core principles of the field of study.
Knowledge professionalism	Competent in transferring their knowledge and up-to-date about global changing environment in their field.
Life-long learning	Ability to recognise opportunities for further self-development learning for future.
Communication (Language proficiency)	Ability to communicate effectively in written and spoken English.
Study Skills	Ability to use different strategies to learn
Business ethics	Ability to follow the code of conduct at the workplace, distinguish between ethical and unethical actions and responsibilities at work environment.
Working individually and in teams	Ability to work independently and in groups to solve business problem or make decisions.
Working globally and cross culture adaptability	Ability to work globally and to deal with different staff from other cultures.
Information and IT literacy	Ability to use information and communication technology tools.
Creativity	Ability to bring new and imaginative ideas to business problems and share it with your managers at workplace.
Critical and analytical thinking	Ability to critically analyse and solve day-to-day business problems.
Research skills	Ability to find solutions for the given problems: recognise problem, collect data, and analysing and interpreting results.
Leadership	Ability to influence others at work place and have good interpersonal skills.
Entrepreneurial skills	Ability to operate business and to do business plan, capable to display risk taking attitudes.
Social responsibility	Socially responsible citizen and aware of issues in contributing to national development.
Problem solving	Ability to solve problems through finding appropriate solutions.
Numeracy	Ability to handle numbers and to reason using numeric numbers.
Self-management	Ability to self-manage in performing work roles and self-motivation.
Interpersonal skills	Ability to make good relationships through the interactions with others at workplace.
Decision making	Ability to make direct and indirect business decisions.
Motivation	Self-motivated
Flexibility and adaptability	Ability to be flexible with changes and challenges
Planning, organizing, lead and controlling	Ability to deal properly with the managerial functions: plan, organize, lead others and control at the workplace

Referring to table **5.13,** it is noteworthy to find out that, as a whole, most of the skills included were generic/soft and HEIs encourage life-long learning while scholarship/training programme was not highly considered. A possible explanation for this might be that for most of the HEIs, a

scholarship 'training' programme is not part of the core curriculum. Evidence from the literature demonstrated that HE providers need to embed training in their curriculum by including a reasonable number of practical training hours and building relationships with employers (Balaceanu *et al.*, 2013). Rating the importance of the variables, listed in **table 5.13,** by employers might be a possible future investigation.

During the interviews, participants expressed their concern about enhancing and changing skills and knowledge requirements between HEIs and employers. They hold the view that private employers need to be aware of the skills and knowledge provided by HEIs; whereas, HEIs need to know about the demanded skills and knowledge required in the labour market. This will help to meet students' and graduates' expectations of skills and knowledge **(section 5.3**). A common view among interviewees was that soft conceptual, interpersonal, and analytical skills need to be developed within HEI/business departments to enhance BMA students' capabilities such as analytical and critical thinking, time management, team working (through group discussions and work) and presentation skills.

Interviewees further expressed their concern about the main weaknesses of BMA students. They determined the deficiency of communication and public speaking skills, and work ethics and behaviours of BMA students.

5.4.1   Communication and public speaking skills

Interviewees were concerned about the low level of communication skills among BMA students. They argued that written and oral communication skills are the key barriers that face students to understand the curriculum and engage effectively in the classroom. This view is consistent with those of Al-Issa (2011) and Moody (2009), who mentioned that developing learners' communicative capability is one of the challenges of Oman's education system as it fails to prepare fluent speaking and writing graduates. However, the crucial value of English fluency is recognised by Al Mahrooqi (2012) as a major key to gaining knowledge and seeking opportunities.

A concern expressed by interviewees was that most of the students have joined HEIs with very low levels of written and oral communication skills. They further indicated that students cannot express themselves in English. For instance, many interviewees described that *'students are very shy to raise legitimate demands and share their ideas in the classroom'*. An explanation of this might be that students do not have the confidence due to the low level of English skills. The

importance of communication skills in enhancing student's confidence in the classroom is noted by Al Mahrooqi (2012).

Semi-structured interviews indicated that there is a mismatch between the school system and HE. This mismatch was considered as the main reason for the poor language skills. Supporting this argument, interviewees asserted that it is difficult for student learners to exchange knowledge in English as they spent ten years studying in Arabic in the basic education system. The findings of Al-Issa (2011) go in line with this argument. The academic interviewees argued that the government has to spend lots of money for the foundation year (English Language) while this can be developed better during basic education. Improper English curriculum, ineffective teaching and learning approaches (Al-Balushi, 2001), no framework for teaching the English language in the basic schooling and HE and/or little practice of English by students inside and outside their classroom and/or academic institution are other explanations of the shortage of communication skills among students.

Interviewees reported that in the long term and due to the communication gap, BMA graduates will find it difficult to obtain their employment and communicate effectively in the workplace. They felt that there is more to be done to develop these skills due to their importance in the workplace. For example, an interviewee stated that 'students lack communication skills as they cannot interact with tutors in class or understand the content. If you do not have a language, how do you expect to be successful in study and at work?' There was evidence that a skills gap and poor work attitudes lead to the improper preparation of graduates leading to their unemployment (Al-Waqfi and Forstenlenchner, 2010 and Oxford Business Group, 2010).

To overcome the communication gap, interviewees further recommend that to prepare students for HE and the labour market with competent English communication skills, there is a need for a universal and comprehensive English framework, to be applied in basic education with active teaching and learning techniques that help in enhancing students' language fluency. This might reduce the cost of the foundation year and support students' understanding in HE and build good language skills among those who will join the labour market. The collaboration between basic education and HE decision makers is highly valued in designing this framework. Additionally, Al-Issa (2011) suggested that there is a need for an English foundation programme, which may last up to two years. Other strategies for developing learners' communication skills are summarised in **Chapter Three** (**section 3.3.3.1.1**).

5.4.2   Work-related ethics and behaviours

Beside communication skills, interviewees indicated that it is important for business departments to promote students' work-related ethics and behaviours in the classroom and during training such as punctuality, productivity, learning oriented, trusting and being reliable. One interviewee described that '*behavioural skills are provided to students and need to be developed and enhanced practically*'.

Some participants mentioned that work ethics are offered by most of the HEIs theoretically but need to be exposed to and appropriately shared with students practically. They discussed that HEIs are too focused on theory in teaching their curriculum, and this needs to be changed by adding practicality in the classroom through implementing the best and creative strategies for teaching and learning.

To improve students' work ethics (e.g. hard work, teamwork, honesty, respect, etc.), interviewees suggested embedding these behaviours in the basic secondary education's programmes or in the foundation English level for all students joining HE. They also recommended that, after getting proper feedback on students' expectations and with the involvement of industry mentors, Competency Development Programmes need to be embedded in the main BMA curriculum in different levels of HE.

To answer the second sub-question, BMA students' perceptions of their skills and knowledge development during the study were further investigated using the questionnaire instrument. As mentioned in **section 4.6.1.2** a student's skills development during study was examined by including seventeen variables, derived from literature, which are use of technology, problem-solving, decision making and initiative, cultural diversity management, professionalism and work ethics, self-efficacy skills, written communication, oral communication, team working, organisational skills, life-long learning, critical thinking, leading, adapt and change management, emotional intelligence, creativity, and risk assessment. These variables are expected to be possessed by BMA undergraduates after completing their studies and are necessary for performing managerial roles successfully in the future when they join the workplace.

To assess the internal consistency among the 17 variables, mentioned above, a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of reliability was undertaken for the answers of students and graduates and appeared to be 0.881. This suggests that the variables covered have relatively high internal

consistency. 'A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or more is considered acceptable in social science research' (Kasim *et al.*, 2014: p.662).

The student respondents were asked to assign the level of agreement on the development of each of these skills. The results of the frequency distribution of their answers are summarised in **figure 5.3***.
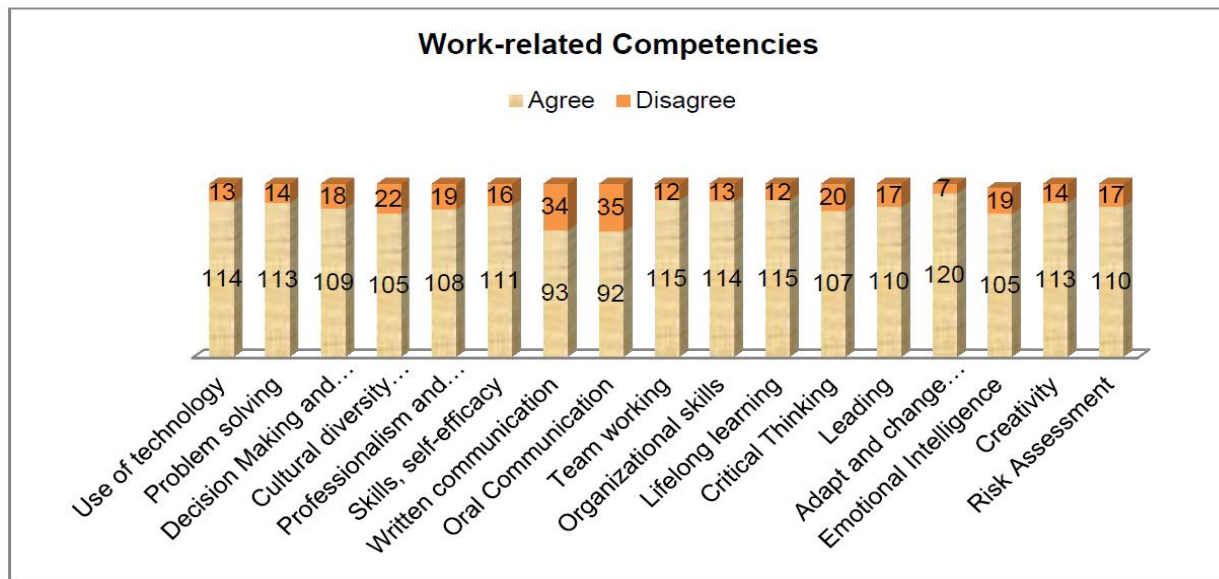
Figure 5.3: Students' perceptions of personal and work-related skills developed during the study.

∗*Numbers represent frequency*

Agree frequency= strongly agree and agree

Disagree frequency= strongly disagree and disagree

What is interesting in the data, shown in **figure 5.3**, is that a majority of students considered themselves reasonably capable in each of the seventeen defined skills. The overall responses to this question were positive, as the respondents felt they have learned the necessary skills knowledge as well as the required attitudes, work habits, and values.

On the contrary, what attracts attention is that a high number of students were dissatisfied with the development of their communication skills (oral and written). This result confirms the academic participants' perception of the poor communication skills among BMA students and graduates, discussed in **section 5.2**. This result indicates that the development of communication skills is still a concern for academics, students, and graduates. Therefore, it

needs to be seriously considered by HEIs/English departments by practicing the effective teaching and learning strategies that will overcome this barrier and lead to high academic and work performance.

Using the same skills, included in **figure 5.3**, the graduate respondents were asked to assign the level of importance to each of these variables. The results of the frequency distribution of their answers are summarised in **figure 5.4**.
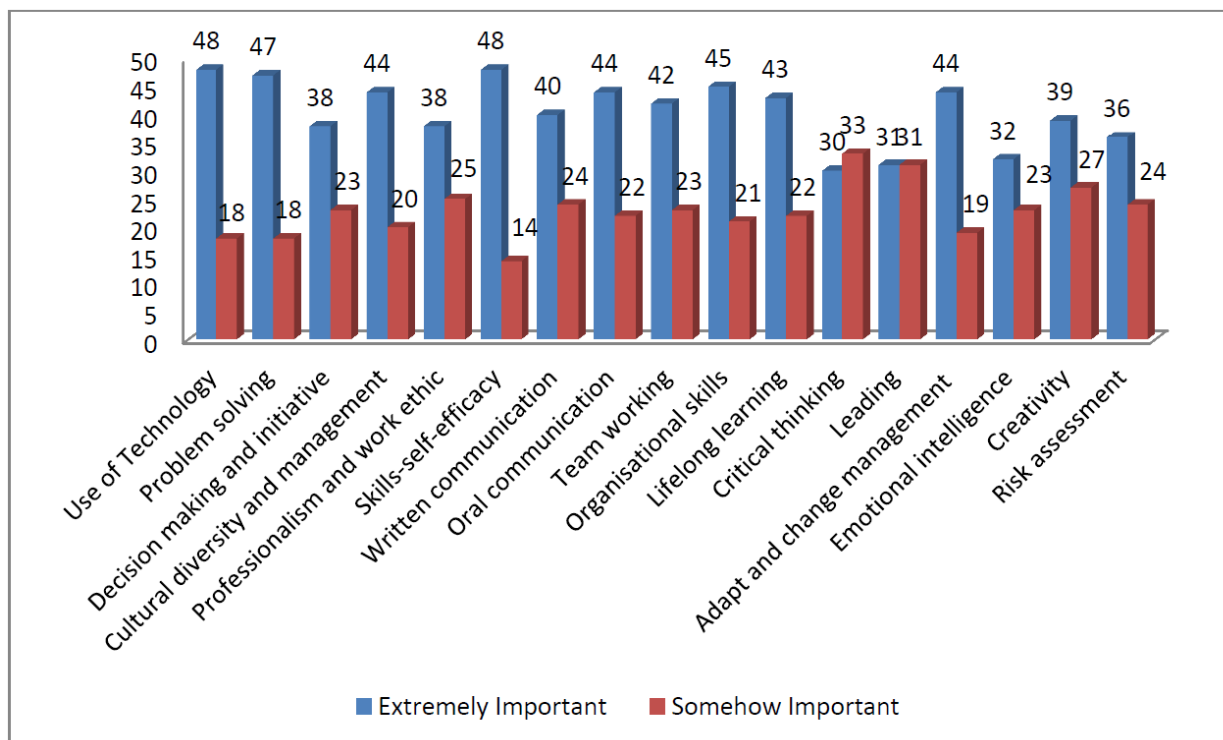
*Figure 5.4: Graduate's perceptions of the importance of work-related skills and knowledge*

*Numbers represent frequency

Referring to the **figure 5.4** above, it can be gleaned that the vast majority of graduate respondents were attached to a relatively high level of importance to all variables listed in this question. Especially for leadership skill, the findings showed that an equal number of respondents (31) perceived this skill as somehow and extremely important for fresh graduates joining a managerial job. In addition, there is no difference between those respondents who believed that critical thinking skill is somehow important (33) to those answered extremely important (30). This difference might reflect their importance in the middle and top management levels and not at the entry level.

Following this, the graduate respondents were asked the question of what specific BMA focused skills do you feel ought to be taught at the university/college? Responses to this question indicated that the majority (52/67) felt that soft skills are greatly valued by employers when recruiting fresh graduates rather than hard skills. These indications show the importance of embedding both soft and hard skills in the BMA curriculum with more focus on practising them.

Interviewees concluded that soft skills are more in demand by the private employers than hard skills. A participant thought 'more skills should be offered to students, I think soft skills are more important than hard skills'. This view is in agreement with the previous perceptions of the graduate respondents. In addition, others felt that private organisations do not actively believe in HEIs and BMA undergraduates' abilities and skills as they are not convinced with their personal capacities. A shared view of several interviewees was that 'private organisations have full faith in high ranked and well-known educational institutions like SQU but not in others'. In their view, they stressed that not all graduates are equal because they have different skills and capabilities that may help them to get a job in the private sector.

To obtain a broader picture on the appropriateness of skills learned during HE, with the current managerial job tasks, graduate employees' perceptions were also explored. Their responses are highlighted in **table 5.14**.

Table 5.14: The relevance of skills and knowledge learned during study with their job		
Statement	Agree	Disagree
I discovered that the skills and knowledge I learned at HEI are **related** to the needs of my employer and the job performing	46%	54%
I discovered that the skills and knowledge I learned at HEI are **a little bit related** to the needs of my employer and the job performing	75%	25%

The most surprising aspect in **table 5.14** is that the observed difference between those who discovered that their learned skills and knowledge during HE are unrelated to the needs of performing job tasks (54%) to those who reported that they are related (46%), was not significant. Similarly, the results indicated that most of the graduates (75%) observed that the skills and knowledge learned during HE are a little bit related to those needed to perform tasks at work. Referring to the results in **table 5.14,** it can be concluded that skills and knowledge

learned during HE are not very relevant to the requirements of performing tasks successfully in the workplace.

The above findings and arguments concluded that due to their importance in performing managerial duties in the workplace, both soft and hard skills should be considered when designing and developing HE curricula and appropriately taught in and out the classroom. The findings are consistent with those of Cornule and Hawawini (2005), who noted that students and employers focused more on soft skills especially societal and behavioural (e.g. group working, communicating effectively, entrepreneurial, and leadership' skills).

The findings also match with the conclusions of those of AL-Mutairi *et al.*, (2014), who said that employers highly valued soft skills and knowledge. One of the issues that emerge from these findings is that it is important for HEIs/business schools to consider both skills in their curriculum and design training programme to be compulsory for all students to gain the professional practice and understand the reality of work.

To deeply investigate the relevance of skills and knowledge learned during HE to the job market requirements, those graduates, who reported that their skills and knowledge are unrelated to the one required in the workplace, were asked to rank the reasons for skills gap, derived from literature, from the most to least important. **Table 5.15** represents their responses.

Table 5.15: Reasons lead to skills gap among graduates		
Rank	Reason	Percentage '%'
1	Focusing on theory more than practice	29
2	Weak relationship between education and industry	27
3	Work-related skills needed by private employers not professionally learned	13
4	Inappropriate on-the-job training and irrelevant programmes provided by HEI	12 respectively
5	Not enough job experience	7

The results in **table 5.15** show that more than half of respondents (56%) indicated that focusing on theory and the weak relationship between education and industry are the main reasons for skills mismatch to the labour market demands. These findings point out that there is a skills

mismatch as graduates thought the knowledge and skills, learned during HE, are not as required at work. They are in line with graduates' perceptions in **figure 5.2**. They also might answer the question of why Omani youth graduates do not compete effectively in the job market and why they are inactive in the private market? A skill mismatch of 33% (2003) and 34.6% (2007) were identified among Omanis.

Moreover, the findings, shown in **table 5.15**, further revealed that graduates recognised the little collaboration between HE and industry as one of the main reasons of skills mismatch. This view is consistent with graduates' perception, in **table 5.6**, when indicated the significance of better facilitating the communication between the government, HE providers, and the private sector. The results, in **table 5.15**, also showed that work experience was determined as the lowest important reason of skills mismatch; however, it is considered as the most in the literature (Andrews and Higson, 2008 and Leberman *et al.*, 2006).

The above findings support those of Swailes *et al.*, (2012) who believed that, in Oman, young graduates lacked work-related skills and experience that may help them to perform actively in the workplace. Supporting these arguments, Al Dosary and Rahman (2005) and Baporikar and Shah (2012) thought that Oman's education system has not focused heavily on producing the demanded work related skills and attitudes. Additionally, the youth speak survey in Oman indicated that 62% of youth thought that, because of the practical skills mismatch, they fail in the labour market (Times of Oman, 2016b).

Interviewees described the BMA curriculum as highly focused on theory, which needs to be reviewed and developed by embedding more practice. This view supports the results in **table 5.15**. Furthermore, the interviewees expressed their concern about the main reasons leading to this skills shortage. For instance, several interviewees felt that the subjects' irrelevance (curriculum is not industry oriented) is a fundamental reason for the existence of this gap while others believed that it is because of the expectations gap between HEIs and companies (unclear expectations with their needs and demands).

A standard view among interviewees was that there is a skills gap between what is offered to students in HE and what is required by the private employers. The following were statements reported by the interviewees in this regard:

'Students are not developed as they need to be prepared.'

'Programmes are up-to-date, but they do not match the demands of industry.'

'HEIs fail to provide students with the exposure due to the ambiguity of employers' expectations from graduates.'

'Industry does not know about the academic's professional and HE providers do not know about the industry requirements.'

Other possible reasons that may lead to this mismatch are:

- No follow-up system, by HEIs/BMA departments with companies on graduates' performance in the workplace.
- Lack of a standard 'wish list' among all HEIs for their BMA graduates.
- Lack the best strategies of learning and teaching to transfer skills to learners in the classroom, and/or low quality 'unprofessional' academic staff (Al-Sulayti, 2002; Nour, 2005).

The above findings and arguments concur with the findings of the report, Education for Employment: Realising Arab Youth Potential (2011), which found that, in Oman, employers thought that improper decision of course choices by students and inappropriate curricula are the main two reasons for graduates' skills mismatch (Business Today Magazine, 2015).

To this end, skills mismatch among national Omani graduates has been a common theme in literature (see Al-Lamki, 1998; MBRF-PWC, 2003' and 'World Bank Enterprise, 2007' reports; Romano and Seeger, 2014; Swailes *et al.*, 2012). The current findings are consistent with those of Al-Lamki (1998), who believed that graduates are incompetent due to not enough work experience, imbalanced theory and practice in the classroom, irrelevant programmes and/or the inappropriate on-the-job training system. Another possible explanation for this mismatch might be that employers did not have an idea of the extent of the skills gap 'shortage of each skill' among graduates. Thus, further work is required to investigate employers' perceptions on the level of the skills gap.

The third sub-question aims to identify the work-related skills acquired by BMA undergraduates and their importance in performing the managerial roles in the workplace. It also seeks to explore the employer's satisfaction with the current BMA graduates joining the workplace. Unlike previous studies that provided a list of skills and knowledge, the present study is unique as it asked employer respondents to identify the skills and knowledge demanded in the workplace. By classifying the work-related skills, knowledge, and attributes 'wish list', the employer respondents identified the main features of a typical BMA graduate as follows:

- Have a minimum essential qualification and good grade point average (GPA).
- Be aware of updated market demands, department and business procedures, how business works, business and labour laws, and quality health and safety environments (QHSE).
- Have solid in core subject and/or specialisation and are knowledgeable of how to organise knowledge and to share it with employers, personal strengths and weaknesses, job requirements, talent management, C.V and interview preparation, and research.
- Have prior work experience.
- Have 'technical' knowledge of computers.
- Be able to write and speak English as a second language.
- Have basic numeracy skills: budgeting, accounting, and financial knowledge.
- Be active in solving problems and making proper decisions, analysing and thinking critically, providing ideas for solutions to situations and challenges, disturbance handling, using sound judgement, and creative and innovative.
- Be effective in collaboration with different groups, and managing and leading them.
- Be effective in interpersonal, written and oral communication, including using a range of media to contact others at different levels of management as well as customers (such as business reports), verbal and non-verbal skills, building and maintaining effective cross-cultural relationships, providing and discussing ideas clearly, and presentation skills.
- Have strong work ethics, and personal and occupational values such as ethics of leadership, being honest, positive attitude towards work and environment, initiative, self-motivated and driven, integrity, good negotiator, good attendance, time management, accept feedback, proactive, engage with others, passion to learn, achiever, suitable physical presentation, hard worker, entrepreneurship, thinking independently, self-supervision, goal setting, agility, enthusiasm, self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses, self-confident, adaptable, and work under pressure.
- Have effective leadership skills such as accountability, influencing and developing others, listening to others, and business acumen.
- Have management and HR skills time management, passionate about HR and administration, deal effectively with conflict, manage cross-culturally, organise, execute decisions, adapt to and cope with different people, motivate others, control resources, clerical competencies, strategic planning, future vision, and management of priorities.

- o Have strong customer orientation skills such as discovering customer expectations, providing high levels of service to customers, responding efficiently to customer's needs, selling, identifying quality and excellence, and building good relations with clients.
- o Be able to create new ideas and have a real performance impact, to draw reasons from information, learn and improve, and willing to accept different points of view.
- o Transparent and assume responsibility, deliver on promises, acknowledge own faults and errors, adhere to personal and organisational values, strive for fairness, and avoid concealing and falsifying information.
- o Be effective in achieving results to meet objectives, clearly define desired outcomes and performance goals, identify and remove obstacles to achieving desired results, prioritise tasks and targets, passionate about delivering results, ensure quality results, and complete tasks on time, on budget and within given resource constraints.

The above-mentioned features revealed that companies give little importance to academic qualification 'grade' while, they importantly focus on personal and work-related capabilities. This finding is consistent with other research findings of Al Mahrooqi (2012); Akerele and Optola (2004) and Boateng and Ofori-Sarpong (2002), who found that employers consider graduate's capabilities more than educational qualifications. This result is important for HEIs/BMA departments as it indicates the main characteristics of a BMA undergraduate needed by private organisations. These features may encourage the alignment between educational policies and labour market outcomes by designing a proper and relevant BMA undergraduate skills and knowledge profile to labour market needs.

For the sake of analysis, this classification of knowledge and skills required by employers was divided into eight major skills, notably specialisation and business awareness, problem-solving and decision making, team working, interpersonal/communication, technical skills, financial skills, leadership skills, work ethics/personal/occupational values, HR and management skills, customer orientation, learning orientation, transparency, and result orientation. To make it relevant to the Omani labour market context and to express the level of importance of each skill and knowledge assigned by the employer respondents (mentioned earlier), this study classified employers' requirements into three broad categories: core/basic, important/supportive and less important/additional skills. The results of their responses are summarised in **table 5.16**.

Table 5.16: The employers' views on the level of importance of skills and knowledge demanded	
Core skills and knowledge	Solid awareness of job requirements, business knowledge, subject and specialization knowledge, C.V writing and interview preparation, multitasking, making ethical decisions, using sound judgement, disturbance handling, critical thinking skills, team effectiveness, financial management and understanding financial statements, being accountable, listening to others, result driven to meet objectives, being confident and able to set goals, knowledge of quality of job performance, entrepreneurship, leading others, motivation to commit extra work, engaging with others, being enthusiastic and honest, good attendance, strong work ethics and behaviours, conflict management, being passionate about HR and administration, project management, organising and executing instructions, adopting and coping, controlling, planning, future vision, strategic planning and thinking, training delivery and coordination, priority management and efficiency to increase work quality, customer service, public relations, marketing and promotion skills, ability to draw reasons from information presented in complex data, eagerness to learn and improve, willingness to accept a different point of view, working systematically with a focus on end results, encourage and appreciates transparency in others, building trusts, adheres to personal and organizational values, strives for fairness to all people, keeping others updated on relevant developments, providing others with complete and accurate information, being transparent, open, and honest, identification of results based on short and long-term organizational goals, prioritizing activities and goals, defining clear desired outcomes and performance, identifying and removing obstacles, and results driven skills.
Supportive skills	Quality knowledge, Health Safety Environment, research knowledge, updated market needs, department procedure and process, specialization knowledge, talent and knowledge management, creativity and experimentation abilities, time management skills, understanding cost implications of actions, leading others, business acumen, motivating, developing, and influencing others, accepting feedback, being adaptable and flexible, proactive and hardworking, interested in personal and professional development with a passion to learn, focus on achievement, human resource management, delivering talent, cultural awareness, motivation, clerical skills, alliance management, securing HR business partnerships, service quality and excellence, ownership of results, delivering results to achieve objectives, and being goal oriented.
Additional skills	Islamic knowledge, business and labour law knowledge, personal strengths and weaknesses knowledge, corporate social responsibility (CSR), a positive outlook towards work and environment 'work ethics', managing across cultures, creating new ideas, having real performance impact, and encouraging and supporting people to learn and develop,
Core and Supportive skills	Problem solving and decision making, innovation, analytical skills, team leading, technical knowledge (windows, office, typing, internet, and email), and presentation skills, individual and collaboration working, self-motivation and drive, time management, thinking and understanding, appearance, integrity, negotiation, working under pressure and emotional intelligence, self-confidence, self-supervision, time and conflict management, customer orientation and focus, and sales skills and knowledge.
Core, supportive, and additional skills	Collaborative or team working, interpersonal skills such as English written and oral communication, presentation, and building relationships.

*Skills and knowledge based on survey feedback received from thirty-six employer respondents in Oman.

Referring to **table 5.16**, it can be noted that employers placed a high value on both hard and soft skills as essential for graduates to perform productively in the workplace. The results indicated that communication, problem-solving, decision-making, teamwork, thinking and analytical and self-skills were considered as core and supportive skills required in performing managerial jobs in the workplace actively. The findings are important because they revealed that, besides soft and hard skills, the personal capabilities and attitudes (e.g. dependability, honesty, self-management, self-confidence, flexible, initiative, etc.) were perceived as valuable and highly demanded. They concluded that personal capabilities, basic knowledge, and work-related skills and abilities are all important in the workplace.

Additionally, the results of **table 5.16** indicated that the skills and knowledge required in the workplace are similar to but more than, those emphasised by BMA departments (**table 5.13**). With the results in **figure 5.3**, this finding might indicate that the challenge is not what is covered by BMA departments in skills and knowledge but more that it is how these skills and knowledge can be transferred to students inside and outside the classroom and what are the best practices to make this process successful? Communications skills, problem-solving and decision making, team working and professional experience were viewed as the most valuable skills that should be possessed by graduates. Moreover, the results in **table 5.16** show that communication skills are one of the most important skills demanded in the workplace; however, the study tells us that it is the most important barrier among BMA undergraduates (**sections 5.2 and 5.4**)

The results in **table 5.16,** are crucial for HEIs/BMA departments, academics and students. For HEIs/BMA departments, they explore the skills profile of BMA graduates, which will best help the current and future labour market through ensuring the alignment between educational policies and employment outcomes. Moreover, this profile will help BMA departments to design and deliver relevant curriculum to meet the needs of the labour market, apply adequate learning and teaching strategies that actually impart these skills and knowledge to learners, and design an appropriate skills-related assessment system.

Like the graduate respondents, employers were asked the question of 'What specific BMA focused skills do you feel ought to be taught at the university/college?' Responses revealed that approximately half of the employer respondents agreed with the graduates' response and indicated that soft skills need to be embedded in the BMA curriculum whereas 35% reported that both soft and hard skills are essential to perform managerial roles in the workplace. Around

3% of the employer respondents did not participate in this question. These results determine the importance of including both soft and hard skills with more concentration on practice.

Besides the level of importance, the employer respondents were asked to assign the degree of satisfaction of each skill and knowledge, provided by them, using a four-point Likert scale, where one denotes extremely satisfied and four extremely dissatisfied. The overall satisfaction level of employers, based on the survey feedback received from thirty-six respondents, is summarised in **table 5.17**. The results of this table, indicated that some employers showed their satisfaction with some skills and knowledge possessed by graduates (e.g. decision making, creativity, innovation, etc.); however, others were dissatisfied with the same skills. They concluded that employers were extremely dissatisfied with some skills, which are business awareness, report writing, preparing a professional C.V, and interview preparation. Having discussed the skills and knowledge provided by business departments and those needed by companies, the aim of the **next section** is to investigate the implementation and effectiveness of some activities followed by business departments to improve students' work-related skills.

Table 5.17: Employers' satisfaction of some skills and knowledge possessed by current BMA

Extremely Satisfied

Awareness of how business works, qualification, decision making, critical thinking, team working, builds and maintains effective relationships, effective communication, language skills, computer skills, business financial skills, ethics of leadership, positive work ethic, positive attitudes, self-motivation, good personal skills to lead projects, planning, organizing, controlling, training delivery and knowledge sharing, training coordination, learning, and thinking/understanding.

Satisfied

Awareness of the law in specific areas, Islamic knowledge, organize knowledge 'knowledge management', solid in core specialization 'subject knowledge', research knowledge, job knowledge/prior experience, quality and health safety environment knowledge, knowledge of business sector, safety focus, updated market needs knowledge, knowledge on department procedure and process, good GPA, problem-solving and decision making skills, analytical ability, creativity and innovation, using sound judgment, multitasking and problem solving, experimentation, analytical Skills, team working and collaboration, team effectiveness, team management skills, communication skills, writing skills, follow/writing reports, body language skills, communication skills with public, fellow employees, supervisors, and customers, proficiency in a foreign language, presentation skills, cross-cultural relationships building skills, using database software, presentation skills, PC skills (windows, Office, typing, internet & email), technical skills, drive to set challenging goals, deliver results, resilient, resourceful, and courageous, leadership, team leader skills, business acumen, developing others, accountability, honesty, positive attitude, accept feedback, work ethics and moral, integrity, values differences, honest, influence and motivates, clear communicator, builds relationships, negotiation skills, time management, acting like team player, self-confidence, confident to handle new task, work under pressure, good attendance, creativity, motivation and drive, initiative, influencing skills, prioritizes personal development, personal and professional development, collaborative and/or independent working, presentation, attitude, adaptability and coping with change, independent thinking, ability to think outside the box, seeking/asking, confident and goal setting, self-supervision, hardworking, human resources, conflict management and resolution, passionate about HR and administration, align HR systems and processes to deliver talent fitting to the culture, future vision, vendors/alliances management, talent management knowledge, HR business partnership, strategic planning, knowledge of quality of job performance, customer service, quality& excellence, public relations and customer focus, Sales, marketing, and promotion, sales, customer orientation and focus, independent learning, transparency, result driven/to meet the objectives on time/balancing cost & quality, goal oriented, achievement focus, and efficiency.

Dissatisfied

Knowledge of the business and labour law, market awareness, problem solving and disturbance handling, innovation, decision Making, corporate social responsibility, creativity, teamwork, written communication, interpersonal and supervisory, interpersonal/communication, building relations and understand other's expectations, English language, Arabic language, intellectual ability, writing skills, presentation skills, computer skills, technical skills 'report writing', budgeting, basic accounting skills, strong work ethics, firm resolve and self-awareness, analyses quickly, identifies critical issues, sees links, manages uncertainty, is knowledgeable, flexibility/adaptability, employee engagement & the impact of it on business performance, self-motivation, Able to work under pressure, emotional intelligence/empathy skills, negotiation skills, passion to learn, entrepreneurship and intra-preneurship, organizing and executing, planning skills, strategic thinking, project management skills, clerical competencies, managing cross cultures, customer selling orientation, learning orientation, ownerships of results, and result orientation.

5.5 How do students, academics, and graduates feel about the implementation and effectiveness of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability?

Previous studies have noted the significance of the extra-curricular and co-curricular activities for enhancing a student's skills marketability in the job market, hence their employment. For instance, Blasko (2002); CBI (2011), Ming (2005); Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) and Tchibozo (2007) highlighted the fact that, students' competition for better jobs and their attractiveness to recruiters, in the job market, can be improved through the enhancement of their 'personal capital' (Brown and Hesketh, 2004, p.34), which includes both soft competencies (e.g. skills, values and personality abilities) and hard (e.g. evidence of curricular and extra-curricular activities). In addition, Harvey *et al.*, (2002); Hsien-Hsien Lau *et al.*, (2014); Kuh (1995); Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and Tchibozo (2007) considered the significance of these activities to students' employability. Also, a recent research study of Hsien-Hsien Lau *et al.*, (2014) found that students, who engaged in these activities and being core members, were more likely to assess their skills than those not participating.

The key objective of this question is to provide a broad picture of the implementation and effectiveness of some extra-curricular and co-curricular activities that promote BMA graduate employability. This will enable me to provide informed suggestions on the best strategies to improve student's skills inside and outside the classroom.

To begin with, the respondents, whether students or graduates, were asked to indicate the implementation of some of the extra-curricular activities, derived from literature, by their HEI/business department. The results of the frequency distribution of each item are illustrated in **tables 5.18 and 5.19***.

Table 5.18: Student's perception on the implementation of extra-curricular activities in HEI/department				
#	Extra-curricular Activity	Students		
		Implemented	Unimplemented.	
1	Providing practical C.V and interview sessions	79	48	
2	Practicing mock interviews, inside and/or outside the academic institution	24	103	
3	Gaining professional work experience through on-the-job training and/or internships	68	59	
4	Conducting evaluations of employability skills needed in the labour market	39	88	
5	Inviting employers as guest speakers	83	44	
6	Providing high-quality career services and advice	80	47	

Table 5.19: Graduate's perceptions on the implementation of extra-curricular activities in HEI/department				
#	Extra-curricular Activity	Graduates		
		Implemented	Unimplemented	
1	Providing practical C.V and interview sessions	41	26	
2	Practicing mock interviews, inside and/or outside the academic institution	25	42	
3	Gaining professional work experience through on-the-job training and/or internships	59	8	
4	Conducting evaluations of employability skills needed in the labour market	31	36	
5	Inviting employers as guest speakers	34	33	
6	Providing high-quality career services and advice	41	26	

*Numbers represent frequency.

What attracts attention, in **tables 5.18 and 5.19**, is that most of the student and graduate respondents perceived the shortage of practicing mock interviews (#2) and evaluating their skills in the classroom (#4). This finding reflects the need of the skills-based system in HEIs/BMA departments, which is consistent with academics' view on the reforms required for improving the HE system (**section 5.2**). Additionally, the results of frequency distribution, in **table 5.19**, revealed that there is very little difference between those graduates who indicated that their department does not invite employers as guest speakers (#6) with those who reported it does.

Similarly, to obtain a broader picture of the effectiveness of the extra-curricular activities (**stated in tables 5.18 & 5.19),** the academics' perceptions were investigated. **Table 5.20** shows an overview of their responses.

Table 5.20: Academic's perceptions on the effectiveness of extra-curricular activities in HEI/department			
#	Extra-curricular Activity	Academics	
		Effective	Ineffective
1	Providing practical C.V and interview sessions	53	2
2	Organising job fairs with the help of industry	53	2
3	Practicing mock interviews, inside and/or outside the academic institution	52	3
4	Gaining professional work experience through on-the-job training and/or internships	53	2
5	Conducting evaluations of employability skills needed in the labour market	51	4
6	Inviting employers as guest speakers	52	3
7	Providing high-quality career services and advice	52	3

Numbers represent frequency.

Taking a closer look at **table 5.20**, it is evident that the majority of respondents indicated that all these activities are crucial in promoting learners' capabilities. The results of the analysis in **tables 5.18, 5.19** and **5.20**, concluded that BMA academics were aware of the effectiveness of these activities to students in the future; however, some of them are still unimplemented.

A series of Chi-square test was employed to determine whether there is a significant difference between the HE sector and 'the effectiveness of providing high-quality career services and advice' particularly for the final year students. As in **table 5.22**, a significant difference was found between both variables (χ^2=6.522[a], df=1, p=.011).

Overall, the results of Chi-square test revealed that most (95%) of academics, working in public and private HEIs, reported the significance of the career services office in providing high-quality career services and advice to students (**table 5.21**) particularly to those in the final year to promote their employability. This result confirms the importance of career services and guidance departments for students' employability, so encourage their availability across all the HEIs in the country.

Table 5.21: Providing high-quality career services and advice, particularly for final year students * Type Cross tabulation				
Count				
		Type		Total (%)
		Public HEI	Private HEI	
Providing high quality career services and advice, particularly for final year students	Effective (%)	15 (83)	37 (100)	52 (95)
	Ineffective (%)	3 (17)	0 (0)	3 (5)
Total		18 (100)	37 (100)	55 (100)

Table 5.22: Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.522[a]	1	.011
Continuity Correction[b]	3.691	1	.055
Likelihood Ratio	7.065	1	.008
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.404	1	.011
N of Valid Cases	55		
a. 2 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .98.			
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table			

During interviews, the academic interviewees indicated the significance of these activities in the development of a student's work-related skills and knowledge, and to their employment. Overall, they viewed that due to the support of some employers, there is a lot of change in students' development in HE while more is required. To effectively implement these activities in the classroom, many interviewees argued the government intervention in motivating private organisations to collaborate effectively with HE providers (e.g. providing physical and financial resources). They suggested 'an Industry Interaction Platform' to bring together both academic professionals and private practitioners to discuss BMA undergraduate employability.

Extra-curricular activities

Discussing extra-curricular activities, interviewees concluded that providing these activities supports students to enhance their employability but HEIs do not often provide them. They stressed the importance of the involvement of all stakeholders, namely: industry, HEIs, and academics in motivating students to engage in these activities (e.g. providing rewards). An interviewee noted that 'it is not only the fault of students that they cannot participate and ask,

but all stakeholders also need to join'. Similarly, others reported 'there is a need for encouraging students' participation in these activities'.

The results of the interviews revealed that industry visits (field trips), institutions' and colleges' career fairs and open days, students' club or business committee and in-house and external competitions are some practical extra-curricular activities that may help to promote BMA undergraduate employability.

Interviewees argued that visits contribute in bridging the gap between the classroom and practice. They felt that industrial visits provide students with knowledge of the workplace environment, skills and knowledge demanded in the workplace, the reality of the workplace, rules and regulations, work ethics and types of processes at work. However, this activity is not active, and it does not achieve the expectations of both students and their academic supervisors. An interviewee described the nature of industry visits in Oman like '*looking from a window*'. A common view was that some companies restrict visits and do not give a reply to their requests. Interviewees suggested that industry visits need to be once a semester to overcome the expectations' gap between HEIs, students, and the industry.

Additionally, interviewees expressed the importance of institutions' and colleges' career fairs and open days as productive activities to enhance students' employment and their skills. They described that some employers attend and only present their materials to visitors especially, academics and students. Accordingly, they suggested that to monitor and manage career fairs and open days effectively, some extra activities can be included such as workshops, conference, seminars, talks, speeches, and informal meetings between private employers, HEIs, and students to discuss issues like graduates' recruitment process, needs of skills and knowledge and expectations, and the graduate's challenges in the workplace.

Interviewees also determined a students' club or business committee as one of the important activities for HEIs, business departments, and students. Some of the interviewed academics expressed the belief that students prefer to manage themselves under the supervision of an academic and the support of members of the labour market. They commented that students can organise 'Special Pastoral Meetings' with their tutors to discuss study-related issues and challenges with academics in the department (e.g. teaching process, training, and curriculum). Equally a students' committee can organise skills-related industry workshops (e.g. seminars, mock interviews, and C.V writing sessions), industry visits, and presentation competitions. Interviewees concluded that all these activities are necessary to enhance learners' personal and job-related capabilities.

In-house and external competitions (e.g. presentation and projects-related competitions) among students at different levels and institutions by HEIs, with the support of companies, are also encouraged by the interviewed academics. Some of them indicated that many private organisations support these activities among students by rewarding the winners but more needs to be done.

Establishing competitions between students in different HEIs such as: writing and reading, speeches and presentations, quizzes, debates and playing games were further activities recommended by the academic interviewees, to change students' culture and mentality towards their engagement. They thought that these activities are important for students as they improve their personal and work-related skills especially soft skills (e.g. communication, problem-solving, and decision-making skills) as well as supporting them to strengthen their innate potential. They expressed the importance of embedding these activities in the core curriculum and being part of their assessment system. They concluded that the government needs to support academics in contacting private practitioners and getting direct responses. An interviewee stated that 'industry should directly respond to HEIs whenever approached by them'.

Co-curricular/academic activities

The academic participants believed that students' mentality needs to be changed because they feel that students think finding a job is easy, so do not think about skills' improvement, learning, and motivation. Some interviewees argued that students were greatly concerned about marks and getting certificates, regardless of developing their skills and knowledge. An interviewee stated that 'some students' attitude toward education is weak'. Assignments, final projects, case studies, and scenarios were some academic practices suggested by interviewees to be considered in the classroom.

Several interviewees thought that final projects and assignments help students to obtain skills and build a network with private employers. Some participants expressed the belief that these projects can be given to BMA students at all levels of HE, and they could hook up to the industry's challenges such as employability and recruitment. Many academics claimed that companies make restrictions as they do not allow students to seek knowledge required for their projects directly from the workplace supervisors and do not show any interest in their projects. They suggested that inviting industry practitioners to attend students' final project presentations and rewarding the best projects, by giving a certificate, were other techniques that may influence students' skills and knowledge.

Furthermore, interviewees believed that work-related case studies and scenarios of the particular problems are useful techniques to enhance graduate employability. A shared view among some of the participants was that case-based methods encourage the development of soft skills (e.g. creativity, critical thinking and problem solving) as they encourage students to look at the same problem from different perspectives. Some of those interviewed argued that these activities are missing in HEIs. For instance, an interviewee stated *practical case studies are missing in HE management curriculum, so there is a need for more detailed questions*. Others expressed their concerns about the shortage of local and regional reports and studies that may offer better connectivity to students, and the limitation access to these reports as the main barriers facing them to connect with the topic. Interviewees perceived that it is important that these cases are linked to the local and regional labour markets. They suggested embedding these activities in the BMA core curriculum.

Training programme as an extra-curricular activity

One of the key roles of HEIs/BMA departments is to motivate students to apply for training (Iqbal and Zenchenkov, 2014). Evidence from the literature, **Chapter Three,** demonstrated that attaining work experience through training has been emphasised as a valuable strategy for enhancing students' skills and knowledge to their employment in the future (Andrews and Higson (2008); Karoly (2010); Knight and Yorke (2004); Ng and Feldman (2009); Rae (2007); Sarea and Al Rawahi (2014); Swailes *et al.*, (2012); Yorke (2004)). The findings of Al Munajjed and Sabbagh (2011) and DuPre and Williams (2011) support the belief that employers, in the recruitment process greatly value work and, without work experience, they struggle to find the best graduates, as well as graduates struggling to find a job. The main advantages of a training programme were determined by different studies as follows:

- o Enhance student's academic performance (Dundes and Marx, 2006/2007).
- o Acquisition of career-related skills (Kim and Alvarez, 1995 and Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).
- o Have professional networks (Bottner, 2010).
- o Enhance soft skills such as communication and professional etiquette (Walgran, 2010).

The nature and effectiveness of the training programme followed by HEIs, was investigated in the current study. The student and graduate respondents were asked to give their opinions on the training opportunities they got during the study (while they are still at the university/college) and/or holidays (semester and/or summer). **Table 5.23** provides the summary statistics for the respondents' answers.

Table 5.23: Training Opportunities				
Participants	During Study		Holidays	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Students	40	87	74	53
Graduates	41	26	62	5
Total	81	113	136	58

From **table 5.23,** it is clear that most (113/194) of respondents were not involved in training during their study however, over half were involved during the holidays; particularly, in summer. Also, these results indicated that some academic institutions encourage their students to apply training during the holidays while it is not motivated during their study.

To investigate more intensively the nature of training, those respondents, whether students or graduates who applied for training, were asked about the type of training adopted (internal; within the HEI, or/and external; outside their HEI), overall experience, and if responsibilities are related to their field of study. The results concluded that the majority had external training with some appropriate experience and responsibilities were somewhat relevant to their specialisation. In regards to the duration of training undertaken, the majority (34/40) of the student respondents, who applied training, indicated that the training period was between one to three months whilst, more than half (39/67) of the graduate respondents reported that to obtain the full advantage and the best work experience, the training duration should be between 4-6 months.

Conversely, those students, who responded as 'they did not apply for training', were asked to state reasons answering: why? The summary of their responses were as follows:

- o Shortage of training opportunities available in the labour market and no training announcements.
- o Study during summer.
- o Not enough time between semesters and summer study (education system).
- o Student's thinking (e.g. I will do training after completing the study).
- o Cultural issues (e.g. family).
- o Training is not encouraged by some of the HEIs.
- o Transportation and accommodation barriers.
- o Family intervention (the idea of taking training before employment is not accepted by some families).

When asking student respondents about training during the study (**table 5.24**), 90/127 responses were received by females and 37/127 by males. The majority (68/87) of those

who responded as 'did not apply' were females. This result may answer why males take less time (average of two years) to find a job than females (an average of four and half years) (Times of Oman, 2016a). Also, it may be explained by the fact that females face cultural challenges to apply for training such as family resistance. With the family factor, an expert at Human Resources supported this belief (Times of Oman, 2016a).

A series of Chi-square tests examined the relationship between the gender of student respondents and their training during the study. The Chi-square test results, shown in **table 5.25**, indicated that there is a significant difference among gender and training during the study (χ^2= 7.120[a], df=1, p=.008). Many more males (49%) than females (24%) reported that they had acquired training opportunities during their study.

Table 5.24: Did you acquire any Training opportunity/s during your study? * gender Crosstab		gender-		
		Male	Female	Total
Did you acquire any Training opportunity/s during your study?	Yes (%)	18 (49)	22 (24)	40 (31)
	No (%)	19 (51)	68 (76)	87 (69)
Total		37 (100)	90 (100)	127 (100)

Table 5.25: Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.120[a]	1	.008
Continuity Correction[b]	6.042	1	.014
Likelihood Ratio	6.872	1	.009
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.063	1	.008
N of Valid Cases	127		
a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.65.			
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table			

The same test was adopted to examine whether there is a relationship between the gender of student respondents and their training during the holidays. Similar to the findings in **table 5.24**, the majority, who reported 'did not apply', were females (**table 5.26**). The Chi-square test did not show (**table 5.27**) any significant differences between gender and training (χ^2=3.093[a], df=1, p=.079).

Table 5.26: Did you apply for training between semesters or in summer holidays? * Gender-		gender-		Total
		Male	Female	
Did you apply for training between semesters or in summer holidays?	Yes (%)	26 (70)	48 (53)	74 (58)
	No (%)	11 (30)	42 (47)	53 (42)
Total		37 (100)	90 (100)	127 (100)

Table 5.27: Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.093[a]	1	.079
Continuity Correction[b]	2.436	1	.119
Likelihood Ratio	3.172	1	.075
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.069	1	.080
N of Valid Cases	127		
a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 15.44.			
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table			

When the student respondents were asked to indicate their training opportunities during holidays, a total of 46/127 responses were received from students studying at public HEIs while 81/127 were completed by students from private HEIs. **Table 2.28** presents an overview of the results.

A chi-square test was used to examine whether there is a significant difference between HE sector of student respondents and training. The result, shown in **table 5.29**, is significant at p=.000 (χ^2=17.573[a], df=1, p=.000). Of the HEI public sector students, 15% indicated that they have not applied for training between semesters or in summer holidays, as compared to 85% in private HEIs. This result may suggest that training during holidays and/or summer is not encouraged in the private sector. It ensures the results of students' and graduates' perceptions in **table 5.23**.

Table 5.28: HEI sector * Did you apply for training between semesters or in summer holidays? Cross tabulation					
			Did you apply for training between semesters or in summer holidays?		Total
			Yes	No	
HEI sector	Public	Count (%)	38 (51)	8 (15)	46 (36)
	Private		36 (49)	45 (85)	81 (64)
Total			74 (100)	53 (100)	127 (100)

Table 5.29: Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	17.573[a]	1	.000
Continuity Correction[b]	16.039	1	.000
Likelihood Ratio	18.776	1	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	17.435	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	127		
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 19.20.			
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table			

During interviews, the student training programme (e.g. internships, work placements, on-the-job training and work-based learning) was one of the main concerns discussed by interviewees. Participants viewed that the training programme has an impact on the development of work-related skills and knowledge among students. An interviewee said 'practicing the reality of work is the best practice for students to learn and to gain the skills needed in the labour market'.

A common perception amongst interviewees was that training programmes were intended to provide BMA students with work-based-experience and enhance their practical understanding of the skills taught theoretically in the classroom. An interviewee reported 'if students learn both theory and practice correctly, then they will have better prospects to be hired by industry'. They viewed the fact that most of the management programmes focus on the theory that needs to be practiced. Their perception assures the results in **table 5.15**.

Some participants further recognised the importance of promoting 'life-learning situations' in the classroom as this will help them to enhance their understanding level and develop work-related skills (e.g. critical thinking, decision making, personnel and problem-solving skills), and work-related ethical attributes and behaviours (e.g. punctuality, commitment, honesty and respecting others at work).

A recurrent concern discovered during interviews was that training quality is one of the HE system gaps. Results revealed that academics argued that this gap exists due to the following:

- No common and formal training policy for all HEIs.
- Shortage of training opportunities in the labour market and the access to work placements which are still not up to the standard of trainees' expectations.
- Lack of resources (human, financial and physical).
- Irrelevant and low-quality training programmes offered by some private organisations.
- Inadequate training evaluation system.
- The increasing number of students eligible for training.
- The type of training.
- Inappropriate training duration.

Firstly, to enhance the level of graduates' quality and their preparedness for the world of work, most interviewees stressed the significance of establishing a standard, systematic and formal training policy for all HEIs, to be facilitated by a particular unit (e.g. Ministry of Higher Education). They described the current training programmes as voluntary in some HEIs particularly private HEIs, and compulsory in other institutions. One said, 'when a student does not get an internship opportunity, he/she becomes a 'theory supervisor' and will not perform the assigned job properly'.

A second concern expressed by interviewees was that the number of training opportunities provided by private organisations is not as expected by HEIs and students. They concurred that employers expect graduates to be job-ready from day one, so they do not want to spend time and money on their training at the time of joining a company. Many interviewees felt ignored by private employers in providing training opportunities for their students because of the shortage and availability of training opportunities offered especially in the more remote areas.

Talking about this concern the current study found that there was a sense of agreement amongst some interviewees that most of the top and medium private businesses, across the country, are not run by Omanis, which affects the number of training opportunities offered to students. They argued that it is the responsibility of private companies towards the educational society to provide more effective and efficient training opportunities to national students. The following statements were reported:

'Training opportunities are not enough for students, which affects their level of practical understanding of the curriculum.'

'Some employers offer practical help to some HE providers, but more is needed to provide the maximum number of opportunities.'

'Experience does not come from a supermarket. It has to be offered by industry.'

Thirdly, a number of participants pointed out that due to the lack of human, financial and physical resources within HEIs, some students engage in internship programmes while others do not. They claimed that the shortage of resources leads to poor management and ineffective training programme. For example, they expressed that there is a lack of staff to follow up with industry and the training programme is not part of their core curriculum. Due to this shortage, the findings reveal that some HEIs focus well and provide training opportunities for their students while others do not especially the private academic institutions.

On this regard, many of the private HE interviewees argued that public HE providers are supported financially by the government, so they can provide human and physical resources that help them to improve their students' training while private HE providers do not. For instance, they described that some academic institutions have a 'career service centre'; while others do not. In those institutions that do not have a 'career centre', academics claimed that there is still no active link between their institutions and industry. This view may be deemed worrying given that for those HEIs that do not have career services and guidance centre, students will not get enough advice on the jobs available on the job market, will not be aware of the workplace environment and requirements, and will have a shortage of workshops related to employability that may lead to low quality.

Fourthly, a general perspective discussed by interviewees was that the current way of applying internship training, followed by some HEIs, is still ineffective and not seriously implemented by companies hence, there is a need for both employers and HEIs commitment to this issue. They thought that the main reasons for the ineffective training could be that employers are not aware of the training expectations of HEIs and students. Many interviewees argued that trainee students do not get support from companies because of staff shortages, no plan and no mentor assigned to them in the workplace. They believed that students have no exposure to the market environment and its challenges because they do not get hands-on or realistic practice at work. An interviewee said, 'some organisations, in the private sector, are not ready to give training and do not understand the philosophy of training, which includes that students need to impart their skills and capabilities during the

training period'. Different statements were raised by some of those interviewed about the nature of the current training programmes and its quality as follows:

'Filing and copying responsibilities are the reality of the current training form for students in the labour market'.

'Internship programme is not done systemically and appropriately, so it needs to be planned for all HEIs in Oman'.

'Employers are busy, but there is a need for effective training programme aims to prepare high-quality national graduates for the labour market'.

'Students do nothing, and learn nothing as nobody bothers about them at work during training'.

Academics' concerns on the main reasons that mean students do not get the expected benefits of the training programme and do not understand the reality of working life were also examined in this study. While explaining the practice of their institution in this regard, two interviewees, working for many years as lecturers and as training supervisors at one of the business departments, responded with the following:

- The training programme is not related to a student's specialisation, so there is no exposure in his/her area of study.
- Lack of knowledge of training expectations between HEIs, students and industry practitioners. Student's expectations are not met, and the training has no use for the HEI, the student as a potential employee, or the industry.
- No solid plan designed for trainees, so the training happens rather randomly.
- Improper training evaluation system from both HEIs and industry practitioners.
- Trainees are not paid. Paying trainees lead to more feelings of accomplishment of tasks and high levels of productivity, so the achievement of outcomes given by employer increase. Also, it makes both the trainee and the company feel more accountable towards each other.
- No position and personal space is provided to trainees within training place.
- Students are not supervised accurately. No supervisor assigned to trainees for check or supports their new learning experience.
- Some companies accept trainees to account them for Omanisation purposes only.

Another concern related to the theme of training quality was that many HEIs send their students to do their training in public institutions (e.g. ministries, etc.) and not in private companies. Interviewees argued that having training in a public institution does not add any value to students' practical learning and will not achieve their expectations and objectives as they are given responsibilities like copying, filing, and printing. An explanation of this was

that some institutions send their students to obtain training in public organisations due to the high number of students and the shortage of opportunities provided by companies.

Fifthly, some interviewees showed their dissatisfaction with the current training assessment system provided by their academic institutions to trainee students. Some participants expressed the belief that there is no active and cohesive assessment system for evaluating the student's training performance within HEIs. An interviewee suggested that the training evaluation pattern needs to be reviewed and developed to be unified in all HE levels with the collaboration of private businesses.

Sixthly, interviewees stressed their concern about the number of students eligible for training as it exceeds the number of available training opportunities. A conventional view among some of the academics was that this makes it a real challenge for HEIs to search for proper training places. On the other side, it would be difficult for companies to offer training opportunities for all students in different HEIs. Thus, it can be suggested that the government and HE decision makers can intervene and cooperate with businesses to find the best strategies for resolving this problem and training opportunities could be provided to students at any time of the year and not just a particular time (e.g. summer time).

Seventhly, there was a sense amongst most of the interviewees that the focus of training should be in both internal (within the country) and external (outside the country) contexts. They argued that internal training programmes can be encouraged by companies through increasing training opportunities and enhancing the quality of training in the workplace. On the contrary, enrolment in external training programmes can be motivated through sending top HE students to other countries to have their internship externally to access expertise as a reward for their educational accomplishments.

Finally, as an essential factor in the usefulness of work experience, the duration of training programmes was another concern discussed by the academic participants. Some interviewees expressed the belief that not all HEIs follow the same period of training for their students. For example, Sultan Qaboos University 'SQU' allows their students to apply for training internships in summer, for three months; whereas, others allow only one to two months after completing a certain level. Interviewees argued that it is inadequate for students to get two months training because they end-up with no experience. They stressed that for students to rely on knowledge and to acquire full advantage of this type of experience, the duration needs to be more than three months. This view is consistent with the graduates' perception, in **this section**, on the length of training when reported that to obtain the full advantage and the best work experience, the training duration should be between 4-6 months.

To this end, the findings of this study indicated that the quality of training programme, provided by HEIs, is low and minimal. They urged that not all students studying in HEIs, are encouraged to apply for their training programmes in Oman. Further, they determined that it is still ineffective and weak. The findings of Al-Lamki (1998) supported the belief that the training programme provided by HEIs, is still inadequate hence improper work-experience and a high rate of unemployment among graduates. These results are consistent with the argument of Dhillon and Yosuef (2009) in Al Munajjed and Sabbagh (2011), who argued that besides ineffective education system, the training system in the Gulf is inadequate, as there is a low level of graduates' employment, thus skills mismatch. For them, besides education development, training is another strategy that encourages students to develop their work-related skills and knowledge and understand the reality of the workplace.

The previous results indicated that training is one of the initial expectations of HEIs/departments from private employers (**section 5.2**). Also, the findings of **this section** showed that BMA current graduates lack work experience; however, it is one of the main criteria for employers in the private sector. The shortage of professional experience among BMA graduates leads to a skills mismatch among BMA undergraduates (Al-Lamki, 1998) and weak graduate performance at work (Jackson, 2012b), thus the difficulty to compete effectively with the expatriate workforce and seek a job in the private sector. Work experience is the critical factor that leads to a successful transfer from education to work (Leberman *et al.*, 2006). The findings of ILO (2011) supported the thought that training investment is still disappointing due to the lack of graduate's work-related skills.

5.6 How effective do academics and employers believe the relationship between HEIs and the private sector is and does this affect BMA undergraduate employability?

The importance of the collaboration between education and industry has been considered in the literature in **Chapter Three**. Concerning human capital theory, this relationship promotes the preparation of productive graduates for the labour market and possibility of economic growth (Cai, 2013). Additionally, evidence from the present study, **the previous sections,** indicates the significance of the education-industry relationship in connecting with the BMA undergraduate employability.

To measure the strength of this relationship between HEIs and the industry, the academic respondents were asked about their views on this regard. **Table 5.30** shows the summary of their answers.

Table 5.30: The amount of collaboration between your academic institution and industry on enhancing students' employability is * Type Cross tabulation				
Count				
		Type		Total
		Public HEI	Private HEI	
The amount of collaboration between your academic institution and industry on enhancing students' employability and skills development is	Strong (%)	7 (39)	26 (70)	33 (60)
	Weak (%)	11 (61)	11 (30)	22 (40)
Total		18 (100)	37 (100)	55 (100)

The results, in **table 5.30**, showed that more than half (60%) of those who responded to this item, felt that the collaboration is 'strong'; while 40% indicated it is 'weak'. Looking specifically at the responses in **table 5.30**, the value of 40% suggests that there is much more to be done to make this relation active.

The Chi-square test, in **table 5.31**, showed a significant difference between HE sector and the level of collaboration (χ^2=4.969[a], df=1, p=.026). Of the HEI private academics, 70% indicated that the relationship is 'strong', compared to, 39% in public HEIs.

Table 5.31: Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.969[a]	1	.026
Continuity Correction[b]	3.747	1	.053
Likelihood Ratio	4.941	1	.026
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.878	1	.027
N of Valid Cases	55		
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 7.20.			
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table			

To make the picture clear, the academic respondents were asked about their contact with the private sector in the last two years. Results are summarised in **table 5.32**.

Table 5.32: In the last two years, have/has any of private employers contacted you to give knowledge about BMA undergraduate skills and knowledge needed in the labour market * Type Cross-tabulation				
		Type		Total
		Public HEI	Private HEI	
In the last two years, have/has any of private employers contacted you to give knowledge about BMA undergraduate skills and knowledge needed in the labour market	Yes (%)	11 (61)	21 (57)	32 (58)
	No (%)	7 (39)	16 (43)	23 (42)
Total		18 (100)	37 (100)	55 (100)

Following that, academics were asked about their opinions on the change in their relationship with the private companies since 2010. Results showed that just over half (30/55) of those who answered this question reported that it has 'stayed the same', 22 responded that there is an improvement in this relationship, and three replied that the relationship was decreased.

The findings of Chi-square test, in **table 5.33**, indicated that there is no difference between the HE sector and their contact with private companies (χ^2=.094[a], df=1, p=.759).

Table 5.33: Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.094[a]	1	.759
Continuity Correction[b]	.000	1	.987
Likelihood Ratio	.095	1	.758
Linear-by-Linear Association	.093	1	.761
N of Valid Cases	55		
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 7.53.			
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table			

Discussing the HE-industry relationship during interviews, this research found that there was a variation in the extent to which HEIs had dynamic links with companies in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability. Several interviewees described the relationship as disregarded, ineffective, inadequate and inconstant. They believed that the current collaboration is vital in promoting BMA undergraduate employability; however, it is still low, if any, and it is not up-to-the-standard, unsatisfactory, and below their expectations. This view is consistent with that of Wilkins (2002), who argued that the linkage between education and the labour market in Oman is weak. The participants reported the following statements:

'There is a huge gap between HEIs and industry due to weak interaction'.

'HEIs missed opportunities whenever approached by the industry'.

'There is a communication gap between HEIs and industry'.

'HEIs and industry are not divided but integrated'.

'This relationship is still very weak due to no particular unit to facilitate this collaboration'.

'There is less interaction between HEIs and industry, and the primary reason is no policy in HEIs promoting this relationship, so there is a need for a proper and formal policy for inviting employers to cooperate with the HEIs'.

'There is a total disconnect between HEIs and industry'.

The results also showed that the little communication between education and the private sector is an international barrier and does not only exist in Oman. An interviewee argued that

'this important problem does not only exist in Oman; but, also in other developing and developed countries'. Additionally, the debate over who should start initiating this relationship was discussed during interviews. Interviewees suggested that it is preferred that HEIs be the initiators of this cooperation with the private labour market. An academic described that 'it is the obligation of HEIs to contact employers and create a platform for requirements, and expectations to be integrated with private organisations'. A second argued that 'HE providers should lead the industry and not be led by the industry'. An interviewee, who has been in the country for a long time, explained the fact that 'HEIs are not doing enough to interact more with private companies'.

Academics' perceptions of the main barriers to this relationship, derived from literature, were explored in the survey instrument. The findings revealed that the major three challenges are: 1) the differences in mind-sets, expectations, and priorities concerning graduate employability, 2) the difficulties in engaging with academic programmes, and 3) the lack of guidance and support on how to make the work-related experience worthwhile for young graduates. Matherly and Hodgson (2014) suggested that there is a need for a continued review and update for the relevant skills and knowledge required in the workplace with full industry collaboration. Other responses were ranked as follows:

4. The difficulties in fitting with the academic institutions' timetables.
5. Employers are not sure how to make contact with academic institutions.
6. Lack of employee interest in working with educational institutions.
7. Academic institutions are not interested.
8. Health and safety requirements are too strict in the organisation.

Finally, using survey instrument, the employer participants were asked to give information on 'what could HEIs do to contribute to the development of BMA undergraduates' employability?' Many interesting themes were deduced from the preliminary analysis of the employers' responses (**table 5.34)**, namely;

- o Improve schooling and HE systems.
- o Encourage training/ Work Integrated Learning (WIL) programmes.
- o Support curricular and extra-curricular activities.
- o Design, review curricula and establish relevant programmes.
- o Provide resources (e.g. providing academic staff with relevant support and resources).
- o Enhance HEIs linkage with other parties.
- o Develop skills and knowledge related to the labour market needs.
- o Promote work attitudes and ethics.

Table 5.34: Employers' perceptions on how HEIs could contribute to the development of BMA undergraduates' employability

Improve Schooling and HE Systems

- Need to improve the quality of education/ Perseverance on the arrival of improving the level of education.
- Main emphasis should be given to secondary school education as it is the base of any individual to learn basics and improve the concepts rather than learning for the sake of completing and passing examinations.
- Students coming out of college need to be ready to work in an organization.
- Eliminate shallow knowledge education.
- Focus on students' induction programmes.
- It is very important that decision makers in HEIs to cope with the dynamic environment with respect to knowledge and competencies required at work and the disciplines required in future.
- The HE sector is characterised by diversity. Course and student profiles are different and universities aim to develop students with distinct characteristics or attributes.

Encourage Training/ Work Integrated Learning (WIL) Programmes

- Arrange in-plant training during study to actually apply the skills.
- Involve graduates in real projects handled by private companies.
- Increase internship duration from 2 to 4 months including coaching sessions.
- Assign academic advisor (mentor) who takes care of the student during training.
- They should ensure that students are exposed to professional work settings through work placements, fieldwork, industry-based learning, and internships; with expected report to outcomes.
- Encourage part-time employment, volunteer work and community participation.
- Stimulate work on campus.
- Advice student to take up training.
- Colleges should provide structured internship opportunities to students to gain first-hand practical experience.
- Seriousness of the internship programme with great impact on the structured programme.
- On Job training plays a big role in giving the students practical experience. Colleges and universities can establish the on job training (probably during summer) and make it a credit subject (e.g. Students who undergo summer training can have more credits).

Encourage Curricular Activities

- Compulsory project work for a minimum of six months during the last semester.
- Encourage assignments and research.
- The practices and business procedures from reputed organization should be taken as case studies. Case studies should be part of curriculum as it will improve the understanding decision making, empowerment and accountability.
- Improve process of research, development and innovation.
- Advice students to speak only English in college at HEI.
- Courses with practical case studies in fields of behavioural impacts can definitely go a long way in making sure that the students are ready to take the next jump from academic to professional careers.
- Assign students to practical projects as a compulsory course. That can be achieved through being an internship in companies and ministries.
- Colleges should embark on work related research projects that directly link real-life situations to classroom theoretical and best practices.
- Assign student tougher tasks/projects in their first year where their research towards completing these tasks are not limited to books and the internet.
- New methods of teaching should be introduced such as debates, presentations, and online courses to encourage the building of soft skills.

Encourage Extra-Curricular Activities

- HEIs need to invite guests from various industries to offer lectures so that the students are aware of the best practices in the industries. Colleges should invite guest speakers/leaders from business to make relevant presentations to be embedded in the curriculum.
- HE needs to take students on site/field tour to get them exposed to the activities in the company, etc., and arrange interactions with the department heads and so on.
- Career guidance: should be starting from 11th grade and HEIs should enhance students' awareness on the labour market sectors, industries, and the local economy and markets to plan their careers and map out when they want to be in 5-10 years. Provide advice and guidance through career services.
- Incorporate the education face to face learning interactions with CEOs, managers, HR professionals.
- Raise awareness of public related to the business management and administration.
- Offer students opportunities for developing themselves through participation in clubs and societies and university life.
- Provide such free programme that related to their business management/administration to develop their skills.
- Career ambition as example / where do you see yourself in five years in the future?
- Invite employers to speak and network in the class.
- Provide consultancy.

Design Curriculum & Establish Relevant Programmes

- Establish practical programmes.
- The HE needs to review the courses/curriculum periodically and ensure that they are relevant to the needs of the industry/market, changing paradigms, etc.
- Build academic curriculums related to HR functions not only management areas where it takes time from graduates to practice.
- Sign a Memorandum of Understanding 'MOU' with different reputed multinational agencies or companies.
- Introduce a subject which gets the student ready to join the work.
- Apply cooperative education.
- Involve employers in course design and delivery.

o Presentation should be mandatory for business Management students throughout the studies.
o Assiduity in study process.
o Using of modern techniques of learning.
o Do some additional professional courses to help the students learn about the work place and teach them practical as well as theoretical aspects.
o It is a good idea to teach students background of all skills and abilities that the market requires them to understand.
o Provide different courses related to Management and/or Administration before and after graduating to improving their skills to get the right job that suits their skills.
o Give more priority to projects rather than exams.
o Prepare students for the market by providing them with the specific major.
o Be up-to-date with all markets trends to understand all new concepts.
o More soft skills should be added in all semesters.
o Courses shouldn't be completely taught to students, highlights and significant points should be explained by the lecturer, but students should be able to catch up and study the rest by themselves. The concept of "You didn't explain this in class" should not be an acceptable excuse given by students.
o Link the text-book materials with the local context as most of the textbooks talk about western examples.
o Colleges and universities should give more practical job skills to students.
o Colleges and universities should stop (spoon feeding systems).
o Integrating skills into curriculum and course design.

Enhance HEIs Linkage with Other Parties
o There should be a link between the Ministry of Manpower and HEIs to analyse job needs in the labour market (database).
o HEIs need to visit the industries (carry out field visits) regularly, to interact with the various departments, viz. operations, marketing, quality control, etc. and get them-selves updated.
o Regular industry/academia interface also portrays technical requirements as well enhances the technical knowledge of the students.
o HEIs need to market their students to companies.
o Build strong communication channels with all types of companies.

Develop Skills& Knowledge Relevant to the Labour Market Needs
o Their communication skills should be good, as of now a lot of them do not use English effectively and in an international company it becomes a must to speak languages other than Arabic.
o Students need to be made confident to compete in this world.
o HE must offer/facilitate soft skill courses viz., Interpersonal skills, communication skills, presentation skills, etc.
o Language skills: companies are looking for students with good communication in English language including but not limited to (grammar, punctuation and speech …etc.).
o Independent thinking and transfer of knowledge.
o Find out what skills are required (technical and soft skills) in the first two years of work and apply that/integrate in the curriculum
o Problems with leadership: not everyone is a leader. They come out of university with the notion that in 2 years they should be a manager. This kind of thinking disrupts their development and learning curve in a company.
o HEIs should focus on developing Knowledge, Skills and Abilities at practical levels.
o Give students a chance to perform and understand the managerial skills through practice in the early stages of college courses.
o Soft skills (strong communication skills, oral and writing; Microsoft skills; problem solving; and time and tasks management).
o Hard skills: (IT skills 'how to deal with new technology'; dealing with different types of people; work under stress; multiple tasks; and willingness to adapt to the new company environment).
o They should invest in developing 'real' technical skills that are wanted by the 21st century workplace.
o Focus on Islamic and Arabic culture.
o Sharing knowledge.
o HEIs should focus on and ensure that students develop more skills: interpersonal skills, presentations, selling, influencing, working effectively with others, self-awareness, analysing data and using technology, good planning and organizing to reach goals, decision making, time management, communicating effectively, thinking critically, professional leadership, customer oriented, self-management, self-motivation, problem solving, social responsibility, and developing initiative and enterprise.

Promote Work Attitudes and Ethics
o Stress on attitude should be the focus area.
o Work on developing the right attitudes needed for the graduates to fit in well in the work environment.
o Focus on academic achievement alone is not enough, and the organisations need people who are ready to take up challenges in the work place.
o Work attitude is very important.
o Schools, Colleges and Universities influence the students' attitude, behaviour and ethics.
o Encourage work commitment, meeting deadlines and integrity.

What attracts attention in **table 5.34** is that the listed themes reflect the potential expectations and requirements of employers in the labour market that might be raised as a result of their dissatisfaction with the quality of HE, so the preparedness of graduates. It is worth noting that academics' perception on the training period is consistent with the

graduates' perspective when indicated that the duration of one to three months is inadequate to get the best of work experience (**section 5.5**). These findings are important because they provide guidance on how HEIs/departments can develop students' skills and knowledge leading to the adequate preparedness for work and employment.

From the results, it can be argued that the collaboration between education providers and industry practitioners is highly valued in promoting BMA undergraduate employability and without this collaboration, it would be difficult for HE providers to improve the quality of education and prepare competent graduates for the labour market. Supporting this, Swailes *et al.*, (2012) reported that the gap between education and the labour market leads to education deficiency, which lead to incapable graduates and a high number of foreign workers in the labour market. Moreover, Ezzine (2010), Mansour (2013) and Wilkins (2002) argued that due to the low interrelation between education and the labour market, it is hard for undergraduate students to find a job in the private sector. Accordingly, it is thought that the more substantial and serious is the relationship, the higher quality of education and graduates for the labour market are produced. The primary functions of private companies were addressed in this chapter (e.g. **section 5.2)**.

5.7 How do academics, students, and graduates perceive BMA graduate employment in general and in connection with HEIs?

Employability of BMA graduates was one of the concerns identified by the academic interviewees. Several academics described Oman's labour market as booming due to foreign and local investments; however, it still depends on expatriates mainly in managerial jobs. This argument is supported by the statistics reported by the Information and Statistics Centre of Supreme Council for Planning, which indicated that a total number of 38,000 expatriates have senior management positions in the private industry (Oman Daily Observer, 2013).

Interviewees concurred that there is an opportunity for national BMA graduates to find jobs in the private sector. An academic commented that *'graduates have options in the job market'*. The statistics of the Ministry of Manpower (2015) confirms this interviewee's view by indicating that until the end of December 2015, 79% of those working in top administrative positions in the private sector are non-Omanis with the remaining 21% placed by Omanis.

Interviewees also stressed that the lack of skills among current graduates has led private employers to hire expatriates to work in their organisations. One participant said that *'there is a gap between graduates and the market'*. Another thought is that the level of talented graduates is still minimal, which makes it hard for private recruiters to find well-prepared

graduates. He stated that 'it is tough to get people to work in the private sector due to the shortage of skilled graduates (not enough for industry demands)'. This view agrees with the graduate respondents' perception in **table 5.15**.

On-campus interviewing and recruitment were two suggested strategies for promoting graduates' employability in this study. Interviewees concluded that industry should motivate these activities in different HEIs. They added that companies do contact HEIs for attending and hiring graduates but more is needed. An academic noted that 'some employers are always asking for graduates'. Others argued that 'social restrictions and cultural barriers limit female graduates, so they do not agree to work in any job and at any place'.

Using survey instrument, the graduate respondents were asked to express the level of importance of some strategies, derived from literature, expected to help them to market their skills to employers successfully. **Table 5.35** summarises the results of their responses.

Table 5.35: Graduate perceptions of strategies for marketing learners' skills and knowledge		
Rank	Strategy	Percentage '%'
1	Designing a proper curriculum vitae 'C.V.'	42
2	Visiting companies physically	18
3	Attending job fairs and registering with manpower centres and authorities	16 respectively
4	Presenting final project in the attendance of employers	8

Some interesting insights may be deduced from the findings in **table 5.35**. Firstly, graduates perceived a considerable degree of impact on writing a proper C.V. and visiting companies. This result reveals the importance of writing a professional C.V. that attracts recruiters by reflecting a student's identity, skills and knowledge learned during HE.

The results in the **table (5.35)** further indicated that graduates also perceived an essential extent of the impact of visiting companies, attending job fairs, and registering with job centres and authorities while they considered presenting their final projects as the least important factor for imparting skills to employers. This view is consistent with academics' opinion in **table 5.7** and it is in agreement with their views in **section 5.5** when they considered it as one of the extra-curricular activities that have a high impact on enhancing student's skills and their employment. The importance of employers' involvement in job fairs

to provide employment opportunities, carry out interviews with graduates and mock interviews for final year students, and enhance their commitment in offering more training opportunities was highlighted in the research literature (OAC, 2009).

There was evidence from Azevedo *et al.*, (2012); Guile & Griffiths (2001) and Jackson (2009), who highlighted the fact that successful graduates are those who know how to market their attributes, skills, and knowledge to employers at the earliest stage of seeking a job through writing a professional curriculum vitae -C.V. and attracting recruiters in their first time interview. The findings of **section 5.4** showed that employers at Omani labour market are dissatisfied with the current graduates' C.V. writing skills. Hence, it can be suggested that it is important for HEIs/departments to find and employ the best teaching and learning techniques to develop skills of writing professional C.Vs. and interview preparation, and encouraging visits to private companies.

Students' and graduates' perceptions of the job that they wish to have after completing their HE study were also explored in questionnaires. A closer look at the data in **table 5.36** shows more than 50% of the total students and graduates reported that they have some idea but were still not sure about a demanding job. A possible explanation for this might be that HEIs/ BMA departments do not encourage awareness of the nature of the work environment and the available jobs in the labour market. Also, it might be that, due to the limited communication with employers, BMA academics do not have an idea about the current and future job opportunities available in the job market. Other responses received by the student and graduate respondents are illustrated in **table 5.36**. To this end, these results urge that to enhance students' awareness of the labour market requirements and expectations, academics should have knowledge of the nature of work and the future needs at work. From this, students can plan and prepare themselves for the future jobs related to their field of study, thus achieving high performance.

Table 5.36: Future Job		Students (%)	Graduates (%)
	Do you have a specific job/s in mind?	Students (%)	Graduates (%)
Valid	Definitely, I know the type of job that I want to get, and I feel I have picked the more specialized option	51 (40)	28 (42)
	Some idea but still not sure about which direction I want to go	69 (54)	34 (51)
	No idea at all	7 (6)	5 (7)
	Total	127 (100)	67 (100)

The respondents, whether students or graduates, were asked to give their perceptions about the effective sources for seeking a job in the private sector. The results indicated that both respondents agreed that a job announcement in newspapers, magazines, and websites is the best source, followed by registering with the manpower authority. Statistics of NCSI (2015) indicated that 66% of job-seekers look at newspaper's advertisements for careers (Times of Oman, 2016a). It is worth noting that besides registering with the manpower authority, graduates gave the same level of importance to job fairs and HEIs career offices whereas personal networks and visiting companies were reported as the least important. On the other hand, students perceived a personal network as a third important source for seeking a job than job fairs and visiting companies.

This study also asked the student and graduate respondents to indicate the level of importance of some incentives, derived from literature, which may attract them to seek a position in the private sector. **Table 5.37** shows an overview of the student and graduate respondents' answers.

Table 5.37: Industry incentives*Sector Cross tabulation		Respondents (Ranking)	
		Students	Graduates
Industry incentives	Being paid a good salary	1	
	More skills development opportunities	2	
	More promotion opportunities	3	6
	Giving chance to pursue higher studies	4	5
	Having a job where my efforts will be appreciated	5	4
	Job security	6	9
	Being close to home	7	10
	Friendly work environment	8	
	Shorter working hours	9	11
	Having good retirement benefits	10	12
	Having longer holidays	11	
	Challenging work environment	12	3
	Having regular performance assessment	13	7

Looking specifically at the responses in **table 5.37**, it seemed that there was a common agreement among the respondents, whether students or graduates, that having a good salary and providing skills development opportunities are the top two factors that attract them to work for a private company. Having a good salary was seen to be a primary factor and a major reason for preferring to seek a job in the private sector (ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller, 2012). In Oman, the findings of Al Lamki (1998) and Al Waqfi and Forstenlechner

(2012) supported this belief and found that, besides status and working conditions, salary is a strong motivational factor for graduates to work in the public sector.

From the results, **in table 5.37**, it is further interesting to note that a challenging work environment was perceived as the third motivational factor by graduates while it was seen as one of the lowest factors by students. Also, the findings are consistent with those of Goodliffe (2013), who found that regular performance assessment was one of the least factors for respondents; however, it is inconsistent with her findings which found that job security was the second highest motivating factor for respondents to join the private sector.

During interviews, the academic participants argued that graduates prefer to work in the government sector as it is more secure, comfortable and reliable than the private sector. An academic stated that 'graduates need to obtain their future, so they expect to find a job regardless of the sector and their field of study, therefore working in the government sector'. Students' first choice of employment is to seek a job in the public sector (Al Lamki, 1996; ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller, 2012; Al Waqfi and Forstenlechner, 2012; Boudarbat, 2008). As noted in **Chapter Two**, if the pay and working conditions were equal as in the public sector, graduates would be willing to join the private sector (Al Lamki, 1998).

The Omani government, with the collaboration of industry practitioners, has worked in increasing the minimum salary of staff working in the private companies; however, it is still lower than those in the public sector. Accordingly, it can be thus suggested that to enhance the employability of local graduates in the private industry and make them productive, there is more to be done in improving and balancing the payments and working conditions with those provided in the government sector.

Graduates' perceptions of the importance of some factors, derived from literature, which are expected to help BMA undergraduates to secure a job in the future, were investigated using questionnaire instrument. The outcome of their answers is presented in **table 5.38**.

Table 5.38: Graduate perceptions of the factors for securing a future job	
Factors	Rank
Professional Experience (Work-related Experience)	1
Written and oral communication skills	2
Educational background (knowledge, qualification, academic grade)	3
Personal factors such as personality	4
Family factors (social networks and wasta)	5

From **table 5.38**, it is apparent that the graduate respondents attached a relatively high level of importance to prior work experience, communication skills, and educational background as the three most important factors for securing a job in the private sector while personal and family were perceived as the lowest factors. Also, the data in **table 5.38** can be compared with the data in **table 5.14**, which reported that employers' substantially consider communication skills as core, supportive, and additional skills while they had a little concern about the academic grade. Communication skills are greatly appreciated by many employers more than subjects studied, and grade attained in a degree programme (Al Mahrooqi, 2012). Evidence from the literature showed that communication skills were identified as one of the key criteria for recruiting graduates and most needed in the labour market (see Al-Ghamari, 2004; and Al Mahrooqi, 2012; Bose, 2003; Faydi, 2003; Harmer, 1983; McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Oxford, 2001). Furthermore, the results **in table 5.38** showed that the respondents rated personal factors as the fourth factor for securing a job. This result is inconsistent with those of Boam & Sparrow (1992); Boyatzis (1982); Ennis (2008); Spencer & Spencer (1993) and Page *et al.*, (1993), who found that, to perform successfully in the workplace, it is important for graduates to have a strong individual personality and real behavioural characters.

Finally, the graduate respondents were asked about their opinions on their current positions and their relevance to the field of HE study. The results indicated that around 46% reported that their position is slightly relevant, 33% thought it is very relevant and related; while, 21% answered irrelevant. Also, 70% of graduates felt that the position is as per the education qualification level needed by the organisation, 25% believed it is greater than the needed qualification, and 5% responded it is less than the required qualification. In addition, the largest majority, 94% of graduates, showed their satisfaction on the given responsibilities (42% were extremely satisfied, and 52% were satisfied).

For deeply investigating the issue of BMA undergraduate employability, some statements were included in academics', graduates' and students' surveys. All respondents were asked to assign the level of agreement with each item. To start with graduates, the results of their answers are summarised in **table 5.39**.

Table 5.39: Graduates' opinions		Frequency	
#	Statement	Agree	Disagree
1	Having a 'competency profile' including the demanded skills and capabilities by the labour market is highly recommended for HEIs	64	3
2	HEI and/or department prepared me to be ready for facing the challenges at work	44	23
3	During HE study, I knew which skills and experience are valued by employers in the private sector (related to my field of study)	42	25
4	Private employers looking for skills rather than a good GPA	45	22
5	My specific and general skills were assessed during the course	32	35
6	The skills gap of BMA graduates is a leading reason for current graduates' unemployment	58	9
7	Work-related ethics are valued by employers	61	6
8	More interesting jobs to the BMA graduates can be found in the private sector	64	3
9	I feel the programmes and courses provided by the academic department helped me to develop my work-related-skills, to secure job and perform well at work.	50	17
10	I believe, my previous HEI did good job in teaching theoretical content but it was weak in providing the actual experience necessary in the labour market to acquire a wider knowledge of my employability skills and attributes	60	7
11	Practical-based learning helps develop skills needed for future careers such as critical thinking, problem solving and collaboration and it is valued by employers	50	17
12	BMA programmes should focus on the industry needs and expectations with more practical practices	64	3

It is worth noting from a closer look at table **5.39** that more than half of graduates agreed with each statement, except that asked about their skills assessment in the classroom (#5), where more than half felt that their skills were not evaluated in HEI. This finding is consistent with those found in **table 5.18**. Literature, in **Chapter Three**, speculated that measuring learners' skills is challenging (Sanguinetti, 2004); however, trial and error (Sanguinetti, 2004), graduate skills assessment tests (Star & Hammer, 2008), and self-report surveys (Ginns *et al*, 2007; Kuh, 2004; and Webster *et al.*, 2009, in Chan, 2010) were some methods suggested to assess student's skills in the classroom. Also, from the data in **table 5.39**, one could glean that graduates perceived that work-related ethics (#7) are important and greatly valued by employers in the labour market. This result is consistent with academics' perceptions in **section 5.4**. Accordingly, HE providers should highly consider business ethics in their curriculum, which can be achieved with the collaboration with industry practitioners.

Similarly, the academics were asked to assign the level of agreement to each of the items (**table 5.40**). Overall, the findings indicated that the majority of academics agreed with each statement except #13, where 60% (33/55) disagreed. The explanation might be that academics believe that their role is expanding student's knowledge while it is the role of companies to provide students with the demanded skills, abilities, and knowledge (see

section 5.2). Furthermore, the finding showed that training is encouraged during the holidays by HEIs (#5). This finding is in agreement with those in **table 5.23**, as most of graduates and student applied for training during the holidays.

#	Statement	Frequency	
		Agree	Disagree
1	Having a 'COMPETENCY PROFILE' including the demanded skills and capabilities by the labour market is highly advisable for HEIs.	54	1
2	The physical and electronic resources that may help BMA students to develop their work-related skills and knowledge are available in this academic institution	54	1
3	The courses and programmes related to BMA are relevant to the needs of private employers	51	4
4	BMA curriculum focuses more on working practice than theory	40	15
5	Work-related experience encouraged by institution/department during holidays	51	4
6	BMA students' specific and general skills are assessed during the course	52	3
7	The skills gap of BMA undergraduates is a leading reason for recent undergraduate unemployment	46	9
8	Work-related ethics are included in the BMA courses and programmes	49	6
9	This HEI is reluctant to focus on developing students' employability; instead it seeks to develop students' capacity to think and be independent	36	19
10	A focus of employability skills is now more important than before and the partnerships continue to be essential	51	4
11	Academic staff are participating in the formulation of programmes and courses related to BMA	46	9
12	There is too much project-based learning (such as critical thinking, problem solving and collaboration) in BMA curriculum	30	25
13	BMA programmes should focus more on learning theory instead of practical-based learning	22	33
14	BMA programmes are assessed and updated to be relevant to the industry requirements	46	9
15	Academic studies and work experience have complementary roles to play in the development of students' work-related skills and abilities	52	3

Table 5.40: Academics' opinions

Another important finding, from **table 5.40**, is that there is almost no difference between those agreeing and disagreeing with the statement of 'BMA curriculum embeds more practice' #12. This result indicates that more practical-based learning could be integrated throughout the curriculum and not only depends on the theory when designing BMA programmes. What attracts attention in **table 5.40** also is that 46/55 of the academics indicated that the skills gap is the primary reason for unemployment of BMA graduates (#7). This view ensures the skills mismatch among graduates.

Finally, students were also asked to give their perceptions on general statements related to their employability (**table 5.41**). The results showed that students agreed with most of the statements provided. However, 55% (70/127) indicated that need for skills assessment within HEIs as the results showed student's skills were not assessed in the classroom (#7). This finding supports the findings of **table 5.39**.

#	Table 5.41: Students' opinions Statement	Frequency	
		Agree	Disagree
1	Having a 'KNOWLEDGE BANK' such as electronic library and/or website is one of the effective tools that my help me to find a job and develop my skills	107	20
2	The physical and electronic resources that may help me to develop my work-related skills and knowledge are available in the academic institution	100	27
3	I am aware about the private market culture	83	44
4	I am aware of where you can obtain the knowledge on graduate destinations in employment	92	35
5	I have knowledge about the skills and experience valued by employers in the private sector	95	32
6	I have learned work-related ethics in my study courses	105	22
7	My specific and general skills are assessed during the course	57	70
8	I feel confident enough for making successful applications to future employers	102	25
9	More interesting jobs to the BMA graduates can be found in the private sector	96	31
10	I feel the programmes and courses provided by the academic department help me to develop my work-related-skills, secure job and perform well in the future	81	46
11	There is too much project-based learning in BMA subjects	95	32
12	BMA courses should focus more on academic learning over practical-based learning	69	58

From the table **(5.41),** it can be seen that there is little difference between those who agreed and disagreed with the statement of BMA curriculum embeds more practice (#12). This result indicates that academics should not only focus on theory but they need to encourage practice in the classroom to expose practicality to students. This finding is similar to those received by graduates (**table 5.39:#12**) and academics (**table 5.40:#13**).

5.8 Summary/Overview

This chapter highlighted and discussed the main results of the data obtained through both quantitative and qualitative methods used in this study. In particular, it aims to answer the operational questions mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

The findings **in section 5.2,** examined the roles of HEIs, business departments (within HEIs), and industry practitioners in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability. They indicated that these three parties play important roles in the development of students' skills and employment. They determined that it is crucial for HEIs/BMA departments to consider work-related skills and knowledge in their curriculum, seek requirements of the labour market, enhance practical experience in the classroom, apply active learning and teaching methods, exchange expectations of academics, graduates and students with employers and provide more professional programmes to academics (e.g. teaching and learning, skills-assessment, etc.).

The findings further reported views about the important role of private companies in influencing the opportunities of BMA graduate employment by strongly collaborating with HEIs/departments particularly in curriculum design and delivery, attending academic institutions to give work-related talks as well as providing more training opportunities to students. The findings also emphasised that students have a role in improving their skills and knowledge to compete effectively in the job market. The results argued that HEIs, business departments, employers, and families are all parts of the system of improving BMA undergraduate employability.

In regards to the reforms that may help in enhancing BMA undergraduate employability, the findings revealed views about the need for developing the quality assurance system, better facilitating the relationship between HE and industry, and the recruitment of professional and experienced academics who can make a difference in improving students' skills and knowledge.

For HEIs/business departments the results determined views about the need of embedding more practical cases and not only focusing on theory, offering relevant programmes and courses to the needs of the labour market, and building better collaboration with employers in the private sector. The results argued that it is the responsibility of business departments/academics to start this relationship and ask for the employers' requirements, in particular, work-related skills. For the current BMA students, the findings recommended the

development of their personal and work-related skills. To do so, the findings suggested self-learning, work-experience, and practicing mock interviews with academics and employers.

To conclude, strengthening the relationship between education professionals and industry practitioners is the key factor for achieving BMA employment. Without this collaboration, students will find it difficult to seek employment in the future as much as employers will struggle to find highly-qualified and skilled graduates.

In relation to a learner's expectations of their HEIs/business departments, the findings of **section 5.3**, revealed that students believed that HEIs/business departments prepare them well with work-related skills and knowledge demanded by companies. The findings of this question are in line with the academics' perceptions on the main role of HEIs. Also, the findings revealed the slight difference between undergraduates and graduates who responded 'they have got what expected' and those who indicated the lack of preparation. Literature suggests that it is important for HEIs/business departments to consider these expectations when designing curriculum (Swailes *et al.*, 2012).

Concerning the skills and knowledge provided by HE providers and those required in the workplace, the findings, **of section 5.4**, concluded that HEIs, in Oman, have covered some of the BMA skills and knowledge in their plans and/or outcomes. However, there is no common BMA skills' profile followed by HEIs in Oman. Jackson and Chapman (2012b) argue that to determine industry-relevant skills and attributes, it is crucial to have a clear and shared meaning of skills and knowledge among stakeholders (HEIs and employers) in undergraduate education. Accordingly, a common BMA undergraduate profile of skills was designed in the current study. This profile will enhance employers' awareness of the skills provided by business departments. The findings further argued that HEIs/business departments ask for the skills and knowledge required by private organisations. Through this, they can have a common and relevant BMA undergraduate skills-set to design and deliver adequate curriculum to the needs of the labour market. Communication skills and work-related ethics and behaviours were mentioned as the main challenges facing graduates in education as well as in the workplace.

Although students showed development of most of their skills (**figure 5.3**), the results emphasised the lack of communication skills. The findings also revealed the importance of skills, listed in **figure 5.4**, for performing managerial tasks in the workplace. Additionally, the findings indicated the mismatch between the skills learned during the study and those required in the workplace. This is mainly because of the shortage of practice in the

classroom, the weak relationship between HE and industry, improper teaching and learning, and the effectiveness of the training programmes provided by HEIs/business departments.

Evidence from literature indicates that the identification of skills and knowledge plays a major role in aligning education policy and the labour market outcomes (Mayer, 1992; Jackson and Chapman, 2012b; McLean, 2010). The findings identified the characteristics of the typical BMA undergraduate required by companies as well as the necessary skills and knowledge (**table 5.16**) demanded to perform managerial tasks. This profile will enhance HEIs/business departments on the personal and professional capabilities needed in the workplace, to be considered when deciding on designing a particular programme for all levels of BMA undergraduates or embedding them in each course of study (Fallows and Steven, 2000).

This profile will help business schools to match better the skills supplied by graduates and those needed by employers (Harvey, 2001), and apply the best learning and teaching strategies that help develop these skills among their learners (Iqbal and Zenchenkov, 2014); and Jackson and Chapman, (2012b). Also, it will help HEIs to design an evaluation framework for the business and management programmes to address the extent of alignment with industry necessities, and thus benchmark and map their efforts to encourage graduate employability (York and Knight, 2004). Finally, linking skills sets by the demands of employers in the labour market will help to minimise employers' expectations and enhance their satisfaction with current BMA undergraduates.

In accordance with the prior studies (e.g. Harvey *et al.*, 1997) that greatly valued skills (e.g. communication, decision-making and problem-solving, working in groups, business and market knowledge, work experience, self-skills, and work ethics), the current study explored the importance of skills and knowledge demanded by the labour market, and their satisfaction with skills and knowledge possessed by graduates. This will help the BMA department to embed these skills and knowledge in curriculum and impart them to students accurately. For students, it will enhance their awareness of the most required skills and knowledge, which may lead to preparing themselves for a competitive job market to seek employment.

English becomes the language of HE and the labour market in Oman. The results are in agreement with the findings of Altbach (2010); Ghasempoor *et al.*, (2011) and Graddol (2006), who argued that communication skills, oral and writing, are the most required skills in different fields across any modern economy. The results also support the argument of Al Mahrooqi (2012), who believed that employers highly appreciated communication skills in Oman's labour market. In addition, the present findings seem to be consistent with other

studies (see Al-Ghamari, 2004; Al Mahrooqi, 2012; Bose, 2003; Faydi, 2003; Harmer, 1983; McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Oxford, 2001), which stressed the importance of communication skills for students in their education and in the workplace in future.

They also approved the argument of Al-Issa (2011) and Moody (2009), who reported that developing learners' communicative capability is one of the challenges for the education system as it fails to prepare fluent speaking and writing graduates. The results seem to support the findings of Al-Issa (2011), who found that the English curriculum in Oman's education system is not suitable and is inadequate in fostering learners' communication skills due to employers' dissatisfaction with graduates' communication skills (oral and written). Thus, it can be suggested that encouraging extra-curricular activities will help students to strengthen their personal and interpersonal skills as they interact with their colleagues, academics, and other external stakeholders. A further study with more focus on the potential factors influencing the development of students' competency and their employability is therefore suggested.

The results, **of section 5.5**, indicated that extra-curricular activities are effective; but, more focus is required in practicing these activities in the classroom and within the academic institution. Interviewees' perceptions of the effectiveness of these activities are consistent with those of Bennett *et al.*, (2000); Hills *et al.*, (2003); Iqbal and Zenchenkov, (2014); Knight and Yorke, (2003b & 2004) and Mason *et al.*, (2003), who recognised their importance as the best strategies that can be followed in the classroom. They determined that these activities have an influence on the development of learners' academic, personal and work-related skills, thus their employment. Maher and Graves (2008) believe that these activities have a positive impact on the development of students' personal and work-related skills and knowledge.

The findings also indicated that industry visits (field trips), institutions' and colleges' career fairs and open days, students' club or business committee and in-house and external competitions are extra-curricular activities whilst work-related final projects, assignments, case studies and scenarios of particular problems are co-curricular/academic activities that might be implemented in the classroom to impart skills and knowledge required in the workplace successfully. They demonstrated that the responsibility of enhancing students' skills and knowledge through the implementation of these activities within and outside the academic institution is not only for HEIs/BMA departments but also the government, students, and employers as they are part of this process.

The findings also determined that it is important for the BMA department to establish curriculum-based curricular and extra-curricular activities, and a skills-based evaluation system. To achieve this, BMA department/academics can ask employers directly for work-related skills and knowledge, and case studies and scenarios to be embedded in the core curriculum and included in their employment-related outcomes and evaluation system (e.g. exams policy). It is also argued that it is important for HEIs/BMA academics to seek employers' support in implementing these activities. The importance of establishing and/or activating career offices within HEIs, with an active collaboration of companies, is greatly valued in a successful implementation of these activities. This finding ensures the importance of the findings in **table 5.21**. Government's support at this stage is highly appreciated to enhance the collaboration between HE providers and industry practitioners.

A substantial collaboration of employers toward the implementation of these activities is important as they are the best who know the skills required in the workplace and how to impart these skills to students successfully. Examples of this collaboration can be through sharing information and expectations of the current and future requirements of skills and knowledge, encouraging student visits to their organisations, providing financial and administrative support to HEIs/BMA departments, and delivering curriculum and/or giving talks on work-related issues.

The findings also indicated that students' involvement in these activities is seen as very important for the development of their work-related skills and knowledge. As mentioned earlier, it is believed that students' engagement in these activities within and/or outside classroom will help them to enhance different personal, academic and professional skills such as planning, organisation, confidence, social networking, creativity, punctuality, productivity, identity, time management, influencing, team working, decision making and leading (Maher and Graves, 2008).

In regards to the training programmes, the findings determined the shortage of work-experience among BMA undergraduates as well as its low-quality. They revealed that there is no standard training policy followed by all HEIs across the country. Similar to the findings and arguments in literature and the findings of **section 5.4**, the current findings argued that, nowadays, prior work experience is crucial for employers; however, the training programme provided by HEIs/business departments is ineffective. The main reasons that lead to poor work-experience among students were discussed thoroughly. Therefore, it can be suggested that with the collaboration of the private companies, it is important for HEIs/business departments to discuss the solutions and strategies for enhancing training programme's quality leading to well-prepared, skilled graduates.

The findings, of **section 5.6**, revealed the weak collaboration between education professionals and industry practitioners in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability. The differences between academics' and employers' expectations, interests, priorities, and the way of thinking about graduate employability were perceived as the main reasons behind this weak collaboration. The findings argued that these differences have an important effect on the effectiveness and success of an HE-industry relationship, and so graduate's employment. The findings of Iqbal and Zenchenkov (2014) recognised the importance of this collaboration to discuss their current and future expectations and needs, and build research interaction.

Evidence from literature showed that establishing continuous, active, and strong relationships between education and industry is one of the main challenges for the Omani government, HE decision makers, and HEIs. For instance, Swailes *et al.*, (2012) states that producing qualified and capable graduates for the labour markets and establishing a strong rapport between HE systems and employers continues to present the key challenges for governments over the entire world. There was evidence suggested by AL-Mutairi *et al.*, (2014), that the involvement of businesses to work together with education decision makers to find strategies and design policies for tackling skills mismatch, and matching educational system with employers' requirements is still arguable.

As a facilitator, the government's intervention can be seen as one of the key solutions to bring education and industry together to find solutions and overcome challenges, particularly the quality of HE and graduates. Previous literature (e.g. Al-Issa, 2006; Jackson and Chapman, 2012a; Mourshed *et al.*, 2012), has noted the importance of addressing, facilitating, monitoring and evaluating this collaboration seriously in preparing active and skilled graduates (Al Harthi, 2011a) as well as for economic diversification and growth (Al Munajjed and Sabbagh, 2011). Interviewees perceived that it is the responsibility of HEIs/departments to start this collaboration and draw employers' attention and support towards the importance of developing students' employability and their relationship with academic institutions.

Finally, the findings, of **section 5.7**, highlighted that there is an opportunity for national BMA graduates to find jobs in the private sector; however, skills mismatch makes it difficult for employers to find the best graduates, hence the employment of expatriates. Designing a professional C.V. for employers, visiting companies, and proper preparation for interviews are some techniques that can be used to market BMA undergraduates' skills and knowledge to employers, and hence to employment.

The findings further considered that work experience and communication skills are crucial factors for graduates as they mostly secure their future job. The findings, of **section 5.5**, confirmed the shortage of professional experience among students while **table 5.34** showed it is one of the most important expectations of employers in the workplace. The findings encourage HEIs/BMA departments to focus highly on these two factors in the curriculum, and also in their plans and outcomes.

These findings are essential because they reflect the graduates' expectations of HEIs/BMA departments such as enhancing their awareness of the work environment and the requirements and expectations of employers in the job market. They further suggest that the government can intervene to balance the incentives of those who are working in the private sector with those in the public sector as well as encourage employers to consider graduates' development in the workplace. As a result, graduates will be attractive to work for private companies, thus increasing the high rate of Omanisation and decreasing the low unemployment among nationals.

5.9 Conclusion

Survey and interview instruments were employed to collect the data required for the current study. A total of 355 surveys were received from respondents, namely: BMA students, graduates and academics, and employers. Besides that, a total of 62 interviews were conducted with academic lecturers at various public and private HEIs in Oman. This chapter has analysed and discussed the results of surveys and interviews concerning the research questions, listed at the beginning of this chapter, and with the link to the **second and third chapters** of the present study.

The findings of the present study suggest that to tackle the issue of student's employability through providing a competent workforce as well as to have a successful transition from education to the job market, the collaboration between HE and industry is important in enhancing students' employability. The findings, of this chapter further indicate that it is crucial for HEIs/business departments to give attention to the following:

o Review their programmes and courses, and their outcomes to be relevant to the needs of the labour market.

o Develop student's work-related skills and knowledge as well as work-related ethics and behaviours.

o Decide on designing a particular programme of work-related skills and knowledge or include them in the different courses provided to students.

- Embed more practice in the core curriculum.
- Contact employers to ask for their requirements, expectations, work-related case studies and projects, and invite them to course design and development, delivery, and workshops and seminars.
- Ask about the students' and graduates' expectations.
- Implement the best practices of teaching and learning to better transfer the skills and knowledge to students.
- Encourage training programmes in the core curriculum to be compulsory for all students and in different levels of education and plan efficiently with the collaboration of field supervisors.

Private organisations' support in developing BMA undergraduate employability through building an active relationship with basic schools and HE providers is valued. Examples of the main areas, discussed in this chapter, were:

- Participate in the process of curriculum design, development, and delivery.
- Share their thoughts with the HE providers on the relevance of programmes and if businesses still need these programmes.
- Provide HEIs with the future plans of requirements and expectations; particularly, skills and knowledge, specialisations and programmes.
- Discuss their feedback on the graduate's quality and which gaps need to be improved.
- Exchange their requirements with HEIs/business departments, and students.
- Encourage efficient training programmes to student trainees and planning with their academic supervisors.
- Supply HEIs with the resources that will have an impact on student's development.
- Provide the government with a comprehensive recruitment plan (e.g. five years).

In conclusion, the findings, of this chapter, are important because they provide new insights into the current literature on the specific context, HEIs, and industry in Oman. The coming chapter, **Chapter Six**, will present a) the conclusions of this study, b) a summary of the main findings, c) recommendations based on the outcome of this study, and finally d) future research areas based on the results of this study.

Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

The study set out to explore the perceptions of education stakeholders, namely BMA academics, students, graduates, and employers in business management and administration (BMA) undergraduate employability in Oman. It sought to achieve research objectives (**section 1.3**) and answer the following questions:

1) How do academics and graduates perceive the roles of HEIs, BMA departments, and private companies in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability? Do they think that these can be improved?

2) What do students and graduates expect from HEIs/BMA departments? Do they think they get what they expected?

3) How do academics, students, graduates, and employers perceive BMA undergraduate's skills and knowledge?

4) How do students, academics, and graduates feel about the provision and effectiveness of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability?

5) How effective do academics and employers believe the relationship between HEIs and the private sector is and does this affect BMA undergraduate employability?

6) How do academics, students, and graduates perceive BMA graduate employment in general and in connection with HEIs in particular?

These questions were addressed using:

i. Questionnaires: 127 out of 130 responses received from BMA undergraduate students from different public and private HEIs, 36 out of 67 received from the employer respondents, 67 received from graduates working in various sectors operating in the private labour market (12 through paper-pencil and 55 by web-based), and 55 responses received from academics (web-based) working within multiple public and private HEIs.

ii. Semi-structured interviews: 62 with academic participants from different public and private HEIs in the country.

This chapter will provide a summary of the main findings from both qualitative and quantitative techniques applied in data collection and analysis process, followed by their implications. Next, recommendations for the development of BMA undergraduate

employability will be presented. The chapter will conclude with research limitations and some suggested ideas for future research and practice.

6.2 Summary of the main research findings and their future implications

This study has sought to respond to some of the research questions concerning the perceptions of academics, students, graduates, and employers on BMA undergraduate employability in Oman. Overall, the findings seem to support the various assertions and arguments of some scholars in **the second and third chapters** of the present study. There is an important alignment of the findings and arguments, of this study, with the existing literature. It is hoped that the findings of the present study, will contribute further to the understanding of how HEIs/BMA departments, with the collaboration of companies, can improve BMA undergraduates' work-readiness and performance.

According to human capital theory (HCT), it is important for the Omani government to continually and actively invest in education and competence development (training and work experience) of undergraduates as they have a positive effect on students' employability. The findings of this study, propose that some improvements need to be implemented to develop the link between educational attainment and the labour market outcomes. The results further indicated that the collaboration between education providers themselves, and/or with industry practitioners is one of the most important factors leading to students' employability. The main findings and their implications are summarised as follows:

6.2.1 The role of HE providers, business departments and industry practitioners in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability with some suggestions to improve their employment and enhance their skills and knowledge.

From the analysis of the data collated for the first research question, it is seen that while the development of students' work-related skills and knowledge is the responsibility of HEIs, BMA department/academics; students and their families, and industry practitioners are also part of the system of promoting students' employability. The findings further identified the key roles of HEIs, business departments, and private employers in connecting with BMA undergraduate employability. They indicated the importance of working hand in hand to improve the quality of HE, thus minimising the gap between what is offered by HEIs and what is required in the workplace. Also, it may help in overcoming the expectations gap between HEIs/BMA departments, employers, and students as well as the skills gap among BMA graduates.

The second part, of the first question, discussed the importance of some reforms needed for improving BMA undergraduate employability. Examples of these reforms are; building an active and continues collaboration with industry practitioners, improving education through an improved accreditation system, encouraging practice in the classroom, reviewing programmes to be relevant to the needs of the labour market, building and facilitating better collaboration with other HEIs/BMA departments across the country, and employing professional and experienced academics. The study argues that these reforms will have an impact on BMA undergraduates' employability in Oman.

Beside the role of HEIs, BMA departments, and companies the study provides some support for the conceptual premise that students are also part of the system of developing their employability. The findings confirmed their responsibility of improving their personal and professional capabilities. The findings advised students to not depend on the academic materials provided by tutors. They recognised the importance of some strategies that may help them to seek employment and be competitive in the job market (**table 5.7**).

The findings mentioned above have multiple implications for the government, HEIs, BMA departments, students, and industry practitioners. An implication is a possibility that by involving all the education stakeholders, the HE quality will be improved, and alignment between education and industry will be active. Accordingly, the current study suggests that it is the responsibility of the government and HE decision makers to seriously and urgently address the policy gap in the relationship between education professionals and industry practitioners, and implement essential approaches to reinforce the quality of HE as well as students' skills and knowledge required in the workplace. Achieving this, the unemployment rate of local graduates will decrease, and the Omanisation rate will increase.

The findings are expected to assist HEIs/BMA departments in ensuring the direct link between education, skills learned, and productivity in the workplace that may lead to enhancing student's employment. They further help them to build BMA graduate identity, required in the workplace, through precise planning for the development of students' skills and knowledge and the best teaching and learning practices. The study reaffirms the importance of educational authorities to work together with the private sector to employ the best learning strategies that help to tackle the skills gap and match HE inputs with their needs. Results will also contribute to interlink between education attainments with the labour market outcomes.

For students, the findings extended their understanding and awareness of some strategies that may help them to be competitive in the job market. They are further expected to

minimise employers' expectations of BMA graduate skills and knowledge and enhance their awareness on what is provided by HEIs and hence their satisfaction with graduates.

6.2.2   Students' and graduates' expectations

The current study perceived that it is important to exchange expectations and requirements among HEIs/departments, students, graduates, and companies. Students and graduates believe that HEIs/BMA departments should prepare them for a competitive job market through improving their personal, academic, and professional abilities. The results indicated that there is not much difference between those who got what expected and those who reported a lack of preparation. Knowing this, it is essential for HEIs/BMA departments to consider their expectations in the process of designing and developing a curriculum, and setting outcomes.

Evidence from literature determined that aligning these expectations with employers' requirements in the workplace will help to have a successful transition from education to work (Gush, 1996) and Swailes *et al.*, 2012). An implication of these findings might be that a survey can be designed, by HEIs/BMA departments, to ask for a student's expectations before and after study.

6.2.3   BMA undergraduates' skills and knowledge

This part is expected to be one of the most valued findings of this study. It discussed the skills and knowledge provided by the BMA departments and needed in the workplace, their development and importance, and the employers' satisfaction with the current BMA undergraduates' skills and knowledge.

To start with the skills and knowledge (graduate attributes as called by HEIs in Oman) considered by HE providers, the study concludes that although the academic institutions have created BMA undergraduate's skills profiles, there is no standard profile followed by all HEIs in the country. By integrating the skills sets, a common set of skills was developed in this study (**table 5.13**). As mentioned in **Chapter Five**, HEIs/BMA departments find it a challenge to transfer work-related skills efficiently in the classroom. **Chapter Three** of this study, discussed the possible strategies that may overcome this problem in detail. These strategies are expected to expand HEIs and BMA department/academics' knowledge on how skills and knowledge can be effectively taught in the classroom leading to a successful transfer to the labour market.

Equally, the study argues the lack of communication and public speaking skills as well as work-related ethics and behaviours of BMA undergraduates. The results determined them as two main reasons leading to the skills gap among BMA students. They suggested that there is more to be done to develop them due to their importance in the labour market.

In regards to the skills and knowledge obtained during the study, students felt that they have developed, however they indicated the shortage of their oral and written communication and leadership skills (**figure 5.3**). Importantly, the results recognised the importance of communication skills in HE as well as in the labour market; however, it is one of the most important barriers among BMA graduates. The evidence is that an expert in Human Resources quoted 'During my interviews with fresh graduates, I noticed that many struggle with speaking English' (Times of Oman, 2016a). Concerning the importance of skills and knowledge, listed in **figure 5.4,** graduates thought that they are essential in performing the managerial duties in the workplace efficiently; while, the results determined the existence of skills mismatch between the skills learned during HE and those required in the workplace as one of the key barriers to student's employability. The current work concludes that the main reasons for a skills gap among BMA undergraduates are the lack of practice in the core curriculum, the weak relationship between education and industry, and improper teaching and learning techniques.

The study identifies the typical BMA graduate for employers in the private sector. A mix of personal, academic and professional skills and knowledge were highlighted (**section 5.4**). Also, the essential skills and knowledge demanded by the private sector were identified, and their level of importance was classified (**table 5.16**). The findings marked that some of the skills and knowledge required by employers were considered by BMA departments (**table 5.13**) while most of them not. They highlighted the importance of soft conceptual, interpersonal and analytical skills in enhancing student's employability. In particular, collaborative or team working, interpersonal (e.g. written and oral communication), presentation, and building relationships were identified as core, supportive and additional skills and knowledge. The results further highlighted that employers were extremely dissatisfied with the current BMA undergraduates' communication (oral and written), business awareness, report writing, CV writing and interview preparation skills (**table 5.17**).

Graduates believed that besides work experience, soft skills are highly valued by employers at work, while employers felt that both soft and hard skills have a high value for graduates to perform productively in the workplace. Accordingly, the study suggests that in designing and delivering BMA curriculum, it is important to consider both soft and hard skills.

The findings mentioned above have several practical implications for the government/HE decision makers, HEIs/BMA departments, students, and employers. Overall, the skills-sets, identified in this study, will help to enhance the awareness of other stakeholders' expectations and requirements (BMA departments, students, and employers) on the skills provided by BMA departments as well as those demanded by companies.

Nowadays, the responsibility of educating youth and preparing high-quality graduates in a rapid and changing economy is not only for HEIs, but the involvement of government, parents, and the private sector is important (**Chapter Five; question one**). Therefore, the key stakeholders - the government, HE decision makers, and private sector practitioners have to come together to discuss and plan for strategies that help to tackle this gap and ensure a high level of knowledge-based human resources. An implication is that the government may reinforce educational and employment policies to emphasise active collaboration among both industry and HEIs. Comprehensive measures need be implemented to solve the mismatch between the skills required and jobs to avoid the excessive supply of graduates.

For HEIs/BMA departments, the current results will motivate them to put more effort into aligning these skills with labour market needs. Establishing a standard system for all HEIs to review, approve, develop, and embed, both generic and discipline-specific graduate attributes and knowledge, within the context of the BMA discipline and ensure their relevance to the labour market needs is highly recommended. The present results may further expand the awareness of HEIs/BMA departments on the common weaknesses of successfully imparting the skills and knowledge in the classroom, thus to look at the best strategies to overcome these challenges.

By recognising the weaknesses of students' communication, and ethical and behavioural knowledge, this study will encourage HEIs/BMA departments to consider them when designing and delivering a curriculum and to think about the best learning techniques that will enhance students' awareness of their importance in the workplace, so overcoming the skills gap. Results revealed that to overcome a skills gap, disciplinary knowledge alone is not enough and there a need to link theory with practice in the classroom through giving examples, case studies, workplace learning, and encouraging students to reflect on their learning. Closing the skills deficit needs prompt action by the government and HE decision makers. Educators cannot overcome the skills gap by themselves, and an active collaboration among all stakeholders is urgently needed.

Additionally, the study recommends the collaboration of basic schools and HE providers in developing students' English communication skills, so as to be ready to join HE and the

labour market. To overcome this gap, establishing an adequate English framework, to be applied in the basic education levels, is highly valued. Designing this framework will contribute towards improving school curriculum, developing students' communication skills and their level of understanding as well as reducing the tuition fees of the foundation stage in HE. Similarly, the findings indicate that it is important for HEIs to start working together with industry practitioners to embed skills and knowledge needed in the curriculum as they are acknowledgeable about their needs. Companies also may provide more research, consultancy and visits to academic experts and more trips to students, BMA related projects and case studies, adequate training and work placement opportunities for students and graduates. Serious implementation of these strategies will help to bridge the gap effectively.

The implication that emerges from the investigation of employers' requirements of skills and knowledge is the possibility that it will help HE decision makers and/or HEIs to decide on whether to design an inclusive disciplinary approach of skills development or more specific learning outcomes related to specific skills. Identifying a standard and relevant set of skills for BMA undergraduates will help BMA departments to decide adequate programmes and design a proper employability-related curriculum and outcomes. These findings will provide indications to HEIs/BMA departments on the demanded skills and knowledge through contributing towards the integration of skills and knowledge with proper and relevant BMA academic curriculum to the needs of the labour market. More practice could be embedded in the core curriculum and provided to students in the classroom. This will contribute to the engagement with learning goals, so achieving practical outcomes (Tymon, 2013).

For BMA academics, it could encourage them to discuss the best techniques to impart these skills and knowledge to students in the classroom, which may lead to an active teaching and learning process. Without knowing the required skills and knowledge in the workplace, HEIs/BMA departments would not establish appropriate BMA curricula that may enhance learners' abilities and knowledge. Also, failing to impart these skills and knowledge to BMA undergraduates will affect their performance in the workplace, so to become an expensive asset for companies as they affect their operations and profits.

The identification of the ideal BMA undergraduate and skills profile can help BMA departments to design adequate and suitable BMA courses and programmes to the needs of the labour market, which may lead to successful transfer from education to the workplace. This profile will help HEIs/departments to practice a skills-based learning approach. Moreover, the classification of the importance of skills and knowledge by employers and their satisfaction of the current BMA graduates may support HEIs/departments to plan and

decide on employability-related outcomes as well as overcome the skills gap identified, therefore minimising the employers' expectations gap of BMA undergraduates' skills.

Another implication of these results is that HEIs/departments can design a proper skills evaluation system. The importance of establishing a standard skills-evaluation system was addressed in the findings (Chapter Five). Weligamage (2009) suggests that, in formulating future skills evaluations, it is crucial for HE providers to consider employers' demands and the enhancement of learners' skills. Due to their importance in performing managerial roles, the results further inform that it is important, for HEIs/BMA departments, to include soft, hard and personal capabilities to be taught and focused on in BMA curriculum. Besides soft and hard skills, the individual abilities and attitudes were perceived as in high demand. Establishing a system for following-up with alumni and employers (e.g. survey and/or needs analysis) to get their feedback on the skills and knowledge required in the workplace and the relevance of the programmes studied during HE to the needs of the labour market/job is vital.

For the current BMA students, these results will expand their awareness on the valuable skills and knowledge required. The evidence is that an expert of Human Resources stated that 'During my interviews with fresh graduates, I found that they are not aware of the latest updates and news about their profession, which shows a lack of interest" (Times of Oman, 2016a). He added that unemployed people could be encouraged to 'utilise their waiting period to invest in self-development'. The findings also might help them to prepare themselves for a competitive job market adequately, and enhance their work performance in the future. Additionally, for them, practicing these skills within and/or outside the classroom (e.g. English language, planning, team working, etc.) will help to develop their thinking process in a comprehensive manner, so to think more efficiently.

In conclusion, with regards to skills enhancement, Skills for Trade and Economic Diversification Methodology was developed by the ILO (2011, P.7) in Mansour (2013) determines that to provide Oman with proper strategic guidance in integrating skills development into sectoral practices, especially in those that enhance exports, contribute effectively to the diversification process and create more jobs, it is important to:

- o Identify the sectors that will improve the market competitiveness internally and externally.
- o Describe the business capability requirements like marketing, product, logistics and so on, and then identify the supply and demand of the required skills.
- o Produce competent national workforce through matching the skills offered by HE and required by the labour market by investing more in education and training

o Evaluate these requirements to get critical feedback from the employers regarding the skills gaps if any.

6.2.4 Extra-curricular and co-curricular activities

The present study determines the perceived importance of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities as they have a positive effect on students' academic performance and his/her personal and work-related skills and knowledge, and so their employment. In regards to the extracurricular activities, the findings of this study showed that students' and graduates' believe that HEIs/BMA departments encourage the implementation of most of these activities; however, more is needed for practicing mock interviews and inviting employers as guest speakers. The findings revealed the value of designing a skills-based evaluation system to ensure student's quality and possession of skills required in the workplace.

The findings further highlighted the importance of motivating industry visits (field trips), career fairs and open days, students' club or business committee, and in-house and external competitions by HEIs/BMA departments. They suggested that academics can encourage students to engage in these activities due to their influence on skills development. Evidence from the literature review demonstrated the significance of these activities to students' employability e.g. Hsien-Hsien Lau *et al.*, (2014); Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and Tchibozo (2007).

The findings informed the significance of the government's support and the collaboration between academic professionals and industry practitioners for practical implementation and successful transfer of skills and knowledge to students using these activities. Writing a professional C.V, practicing mock interviews, rewarding the best students, attending workshops (e.g. professional marketing of skills and knowledge to employers, recruitment process, the nature of the workplace, etc.), and providing training and work placement opportunities were some activities that need a strong rapport with businesses. As discussed in the literature, the exchangeable transfer between academics and industry professionals will help to understand better the requirements and expectations of each other (Smith and Kruger, 2008).

The research highly recommends the inclusion of such a plan, by HEI/BMA departments, for providing some 'supportive programmes' to students. These sessions will help students obtain some skills such as time management, stress management, team working, problem-solving and decision making, brainstorming, etc. Evidence from literature showed that

professional speaking sessions, and industry-partnered events and competitions are other initiatives that may enhance student's skills and knowledge (Papadopoulos *et al.*, 2010).

Beside the extra-curricular activities; final projects, assignments, case studies and problem-based scenarios were some academic activities highlighted in this study. The findings determined the significance of including these activities in the core curriculum as well as student's examinations. Evidence from literature showed that authentic learning, projects, and assignments related to real workplace situations, were also suggested by Meredith and Burkle (2008).

Encouraging these activities may contribute to the development of students' identity and capabilities, thus the successful transition to the labour market. Academics may select and prioritise the activities that have a high impact on improving student's skills and knowledge. Curriculum designers could regularly review the inclusion of these activities in the core curriculum and/or department plans and outcomes due to their importance in the development of student's skills and experience.

Previous studies have confirmed the importance of the training programme for students as a key player for enhancing their skills and seeking a job in the future. For Mason *et al.*, (2009), to match between graduates and their first employer in the labour market, the BMA undergraduate students can be exposed to organisation's priorities and decision making during their study. Engaging real work context (internships, on-the-job training) is one of the major factors in producing competent undergraduates for entry into the workplace as it helps students to integrate theory with practice in their selected profession and practice real job responsibilities (Jackson, 2015; Smith *et al.*, 2010); however, it is a challenge for HEIs/BMA departments in Oman.

Based on the findings of the current study, the training programme is implemented improperly, and its evaluation system is inadequate. The lack of training opportunities and the effectiveness of the programme are thought to be the main reasons that lead to the lack of practical experience and skills mismatch among undergraduates, leading to employer's dissatisfaction. They indicated that a training programme is run by some of HEIs/BMA departments across the country while it is not by others. They further showed that HEIs/BMA departments were dissatisfied with the training programme provided by companies to obtain the best work experience in the workplace. The possible reason for this might be because there is no standard training programme followed by all HE providers in the country. The findings declared the primary concerns regarding the training programmes within HEIs/departments (**Chapter Five, section 5.5**).

These findings further suggest that it is important for companies to strengthen their collaboration with HEIs in providing more training opportunities that may contribute to the development of student's workplace learning. Field supervisors could directly inform the leading professional development centre 'PDC' (**Recommendation #2**) on their annual training plan of BMA students, so HEIs/departments can plan effectively. To provide an effective training programme that helps trainees to obtain the full advantage of work experience, it is important for the field supervisors to encourage their involvement in professional responsibilities and perform careers specific skills and tasks as well as allow them to practice their creativity in solving problems, decision making, and give critical solutions and ideas for a situation.

Engaging trainees in professional development seminars and workshops, and formal meetings will add value to targeted skills and knowledge (Jackson, 2015). As a result student trainees can build more confidence, develop their work-related skills and enhance the sense of responsibility and accountability (Jackson, 2015). In addition to that, companies need to provide direct access to academic supervisors, learning support and orientation programmes for trainees in the workplace (Smith C, 2012).

The current study remarks that the training duration should be considered highly by HEIs/business schools and discussed with employers in the labour market. The findings revealed that the length of training, provided by HEIs/BMA departments, is not enough to obtain the appropriate work experience. Academics suggested that the period could be between four to six months. In reviewing the literature, no research was found on the appropriate training duration for students to get the best advantage of work experience; however, it can be argued that the more time students spend in training, the more benefits they will get.

The above-discussed findings and arguments have implications for the government/HE decision makers, HEIs/BMA departments, students, and companies. The findings could contribute in designing a standard training policy for all HEIs in the country, and encourage HE decision makers to investigate the effectiveness of training programmes provided to learners in the private sector. To establish adequate and proper training programmes, and with the collaboration of the government the HE decision makers can build an ongoing rapport between all stakeholders, notably government, HEIs, and businesses. The government, through a centralised organisation (**Recommendation #1**), can intervene in making pressure and encourage companies to provide more training opportunities for HE students. Also, HEIs/departments and industry practitioners may come together to discuss this policy and to work together to ensure its effectiveness for students.

Another implication of these findings for HEIs/BMA departments might be embedding a training programme within the core curriculum to help students to obtain the practice and understand the reality of the workplace. Additionally, a report might be designed to collect trainees' feedback on their training programme. The current study suggests that trainees could be asked to reflect on their roles and tasks given during training, and what they have learned by writing a report and/or giving a presentation. Identification of strengths, weaknesses, and future training needs are also crucial (Boud, 2000). The advantages of integrating reflection on training have been recognised by Smith *et al.*, (2010), as it helps to align theory with practice (Bransford and Schwartz 1999), and adds sense and meaning of knowledge and skills acquisition leading to graduate's ability to transfer them across various contexts (Clarke, 2002; Yashin-Shaw *et al.*, 2004). Another report can be required from the field supervisor that may include trainee's performance (Patrick *et al.*, 2008), the effectiveness of training design (Hundley, 2010) and work requirements of skills and knowledge. An implication of the feedback could help HEIs/departments to develop and plan an effective training programme and to identify areas of improvements for all students. Further, it will help students to assess their strengths and weaknesses, and performance and to develop them.

For students, the present findings will enhance their awareness of the importance of the extra-curricular and co-curricular activities as they are expected to develop their academic performance and work-related skills and knowledge, thus, their employment in the future. Accordingly, students could be self-motivated to engage in these activities within and out of their academic institution or department. Finally, these findings may contribute to providing employers with competent graduates who have sufficient work experience. Therefore, their collaboration is highly valued, particularly in providing undergraduates with effective training opportunities.

To conclude, the findings, **of this section,** are essential because they revealed the important role of the professional development centres, within HEIs, in arranging seminars, workshops and talks, and providing the required career information for students' on their future job opportunities and requirements. There was evidence of the influence of these activities on student development (Muldoon, 2009); however, their implementation may be challenging due to funding restraints. Therefore, HE-industry collaboration is highly recommended to practice these activities, which may lead to better transfer of skills and knowledge to the labour market. Direct interactions with industry practitioners by academics and students will improve this relationship.

6.2.5 The effective HE-industry relationship in connecting with BMA undergraduates' employability.

The present study finds that there is an interaction between some HEIs and businesses; however, it is evident that this linkage is perceived as still weak. That is, there is an improvement of the relationship between HEIs and industry in Oman although there is much to be done to make this relationship stronger. The weak relationship was emphasised in this study.

The study further addressed the critical barriers facing the effectiveness of this interrelation, which need to be discussed seriously by education stakeholders particularly HEIs and industry to make it stronger. Evidence in the literature showed that 'HE and work are not always contradictory; however, they are different and separated' (Marginson, 2015: 9). Accordingly, to bring them together, Foucault (2008) in Marginson (2015: p.8), considered 'strategic logic' as appropriate. He added that 'the function of this logic is to establish possible connections between various terms which remain disparate' (p.8). The analysis of these data also highlighted employers' primary concerns and expectations of HEIs/departments to contribute effectively in connecting with BMA undergraduates' employability (**table 5.34**), which surprisingly, are the central themes investigated in the current study.

One of the issues that emerge from these findings is that, in order to have a successful transfer process from education to the labour market, it is essential for the government/HE decision makers to establish a precise mechanism and/or policy to strengthen the involvement of industry practitioners with HEIs, especially in:

- o Providing constant feedback on the quality of the HE system, quality of graduates, and the relevance of curricula and programmes to the labour market demands.
- o Designing, reviewing, developing, and delivering curriculum as they better know their needs.
- o Exchanging their requirements, interests, and expectations with HE providers, academics, and students through formal and informal meetings, workshops, events (e.g. networking), talks, and conferences.
- o Encouraging extra-curricular activities among students such as providing rewards and/or scholarships to the best students.
- o Establishing a clear, serious, and active training policy that can help students to seek the appropriate professional experience and develop their work-related skills and knowledge.

o   Providing more training, and part and full-time work opportunities to graduates.

This collaboration is expected to address the barriers, and find the appropriate solutions and strategies. The results may also contribute to enhancing the awareness of companies on the importance of this relationship. They revealed that the establishment of an active and ongoing relationship could lead to the interrelation between HE attainment and the labour market outcomes. For students, this relationship will have an effect on their skills development and future employment.

6.2.6   Enhancement of BMA students' employment

In regards to BMA graduate employment, the study suggests that there are lots of job opportunities in the private sector for the BMA undergraduates; however, they are not attractive to employers due to skills mismatch. Al-Lamki (1998); MBRF-PWC (2003); Romano and Seeger (2014); Swailes *et al.*, (2012) and World Bank Enterprise, (2007) equally support this finding.

The findings suggested on-campus interviewing and recruitment as one of the strategies to enhance their employment. The results also remarked on the significance of possessing work-related skills and knowledge for students while, proving their outstanding credentials to recruiting employers is imperative. In this regards, the findings showed that students perceive designing a professional CV and visiting companies as the two key strategies to market their learned skills and knowledge to employers professionally, thus seeking a job in a competitive job market. Azevedo *et al.*, (2012) and Jackson (2009) equally uphold this finding.

The findings further indicated that having a good salary and skills development opportunities are the top two factors that attract BMA undergraduates to work for a company. They highly recommended a balance of incentives between public and private sectors. Further, besides the importance of the academic degree, professional work experience and good communication skills were advised as the main factors for students to secure employment in the future.

Some implications derive from this investigation. For the government and with the collaboration of companies, these findings have implications for readdressing the incentives of the private sector with those provided in the public sector. Examples of these incentives that could attract BMA undergraduates to work for companies are paying a good salary and providing professional skills development programmes. An implication of these findings

might be the decrease in the number of non-Omanis in the private sector, so the decrease of the unemployment rate and the increase of the Omanisation rate.

For HEIs/business departments, these findings present the best strategies that can be implemented to overcome the skills gap among BMA graduates, thus to achieve students' expectations. The results can further help BMA departments to employ the effective strategies of teaching and learning to develop learner's skills, and aid their future employment (e.g. how to prepare a professional C.V for employers and how to seek a job at the earliest stages). Encouraging professional workplace training and visits for students, planning for active job fairs, and identifying the practical techniques for enhancing the communication skills among students to be seriously focused on by HEIs/departments as core activities for securing employment in the future. The current study further suggests that HEIs/departments can consider these strategies in the core BMA curriculum.

The full collaboration of companies is greatly valued in implementing these strategies efficiently and successfully. Therefore, it is important for industry practitioners to acknowledge the importance of their cooperation to work in hand with education providers to implement these strategies. An advantage of this partnership will be getting the competent and capable graduates who can perform actively in the workplace.

For the current BMA undergraduates, these findings are important as they enrich their knowledge on how can they develop their skills and knowledge by seeking various resources (e.g. visiting companies, job fairs, and training). The findings will expand students' knowledge on how to market their skills, obtained during the study, to companies effectively, so leading to their employment. Additionally, they will inform students on the essential factors of securing a job in the future. The findings suggested that it is important for the current BMA students, particularly those in the last year, to seek information about the available employment opportunities in the private market. Another implication of these findings is the possibility that students will be motivated to implement effective training programmes/work placements and develop their communication skills as the most important recruitment criteria for employers.

To conclude with, the main implications that emerge from the current work, may help the government to identify relevant policies and strategies for strengthening the relationship between industry and basic schooling on one side and with HE in another. A unified system is needed to re-imagine the linkage between academia and businesses to work together in promoting BMA undergraduate employability. Also, to guide both HEIs and BMA departments, the overall findings suggest that:

- Reshape their relationship with industry: best strategies to enhance this relationship, designing and teaching curricula, and getting feedback on programme's relevance, and graduates' performance, weaknesses, and strengths to plan for tackling weaknesses in 'training'.
- Reshape, review and develop their curricula and programmes (identify skill sets that will best serve the future labour market and align programmes to meet their needs).
- Enhance teaching and learning process 'strategies that help in promoting their employability' to better match the labour market demands like work placements, industry visits, and employers' workshops.
- Extend their knowledge to students' expectations, and graduates' and employers' expectations in the workplace.

For BMA students, the findings perceived that it is important for academics to motivate students with self-development that may develop their productivity and critical thinking. The findings will contribute to their knowledge of the demanded skills and knowledge, hence to compete efficiently and ensure their work-readiness in the job market. Equally, they will help them to enhance their academic progress.

For employers, the results may assist in providing them with qualified and adequate BMA undergraduates and extend their knowledge of HEIs/BMA departments' expectations. Additionally, they will contribute in minimising the expectations gap of BMA undergraduate skills and knowledge. Overall, the results will form useful reference material for the government authorities, students, employers, HEIs, business departments, public people, and researchers.

6.3 Recommendations for Practice

Business Management and Administration (BMA) undergraduate employability is one of the major concerns for all stakeholders in Oman, namely government, HE decision makers and HEIs, students and graduates, and industry practitioners. According to human capital theory (HCT), by implementing the reforms, discussed in the present study, it is expected that the quality of the HE system will be enhanced so that competent and capable BMA undergraduates will be produced, and the goals planned for the country (Vision 2020) will be accomplished leading to high economic growth. Based on the findings presented in this research, the following recommendations are recommended for enhancing BMA undergraduate employability:

1) Create a centralised organisation to bring all HEIs under one umbrella:

There was evidence, suggested by the Youth Speak Survey in Oman, that the education system is considered to be the top priority for the government in the next five years (Times of Oman, 2016b). **Figure 1.1** illustrated that Oman's HE system is supervised by several organisations such as the Ministry of Higher Education (MHE) and Ministry of Manpower (MMP), etc. This structure creates contradictions in policies and strategies related to education such as no standard training programme and examination system, various credit systems, different syllabus, several recruitment processes of academics, different policies, several visions and missions under one education system.

Also, it creates competition between academic institutions themselves to obtain educational (e.g. materials, books, e-learning, etc.), financial, and administrative resources giving a shortage of resources in one HEI and duplication in another. This imbalance could be an explanation for the establishment of some academic institutions without a complete infrastructure in the country. The inequality of allocating resources (e.g. career office, students' services, and administrative and academic professional faculty) may also lead to weak education quality and poor student's academic performance, so fail to produce capable graduates for the labour market leading to weak economic growth (human capital theory).

Consequently, it becomes a priority for the government and HE decision makers to establish a centralised organisation that integrates all HEIs under one umbrella, which might be MHE or the Education Council, and leads to convergence in policy, placement, and programmes provided. A centralised organisation that is merely responsible for supervision of all HE system will support in enhancing the quality and accessibility of basic and higher education (HE) in the country. The local control of the education system could lead to successful reforms such as:

o   Enhance accountability of the HE system in connecting to BMA undergraduate employability.
o   Establish a mechanism to standardise educational vision, policy, plans (e.g. career fairs, training programmes, professional development centres 'PDCs', credits, relevance of the awarded degrees to the labour market needs, etc.), procedures (e.g. recruiting professional administrative staff and academics), and regulations (e.g. exams, rules for staff and students, etc.).
o   Review courses and programmes to be relevant to the demands of the private sector.

- Bring society, academia and industry practitioners to work together in reviewing educational policies and exchanging their requirements and expectations, so to overcome educational barriers.
- Initiate and lead education-industry collaboration to make it happen, strongly, and actively.
- Establish a common skills-based evaluation system that may assess student's skills such as presenting, discussion, assignments, case studies, group work activities. It should be discussed and shared with academics and students before the implementation process.
- Ensure that academic institutions' requirements are provided fairly and efficiently.
- Better achieve students' educational needs.
- Ensure better and successful transfer from education to the labour market.
- Establish a policy for collecting and allocating financial funds provided by companies for education.

2) **Building an active linkage between academia (basic and HE) and the private sector organisations (figure 6.1):**

Beside society, academics, students, and graduates expect a lot from companies as they are part of the system of enhancing BMA undergraduate employability. The findings of this study concluded that there is little communication between education professionals and industry practitioners. The evidence is that the key reason for reasonable job opportunities, provided to young graduates, is the miscommunication between organisations and HE providers (Times of Oman, 2016a). Accordingly, it is suggested that an active collaboration between education and industry is the key solution for overcoming challenges facing the HE system and the quality of BMA graduates in the country.

With the cooperation of the government, establishing and facilitating a strong linkage between academia and industry practitioners will be one of the priorities and primary responsibilities of the centralised organisation (**Recommendation #1**). The establishment of this relationship plays a core key for improving the quality of education leading to producing competent and capable graduates for the labour market. It will help to create high-performers of jobs and not only theory learners, and build an active HE system. Without this relationship, it would be difficult for education providers to adapt successfully to the changing roles and requirements of the labour market. Evidence from literature showed that building a holistic commitment to the whole society, including parents, students, authorities, educators, and private sector, is an effective strategy for providing solutions for education and employment (Al Munajjed and Sabbagh, 2011).

This relationship could be expanded to include basic education especially, secondary levels. This expansion will help to better advise secondary school decision makers and students on the demanded skills, attitudes and knowledge, and specialisations required in the workplace (e.g. communication, teamwork, problem-solving and decision making, motivation, building confidence, etc.). In addition, it will enhance students' awareness of the requirements to join HE. Overall, there is a need for collective action plans, policies, and strategies that will bring basic education, HE, and industry altogether (**figure 6.1**). To achieve an effective and strong interlink, the government may encourage events between basic education, HE, and industry like public engagement network events, curriculum-related seminars and discussions, conferences, committees, research and development.
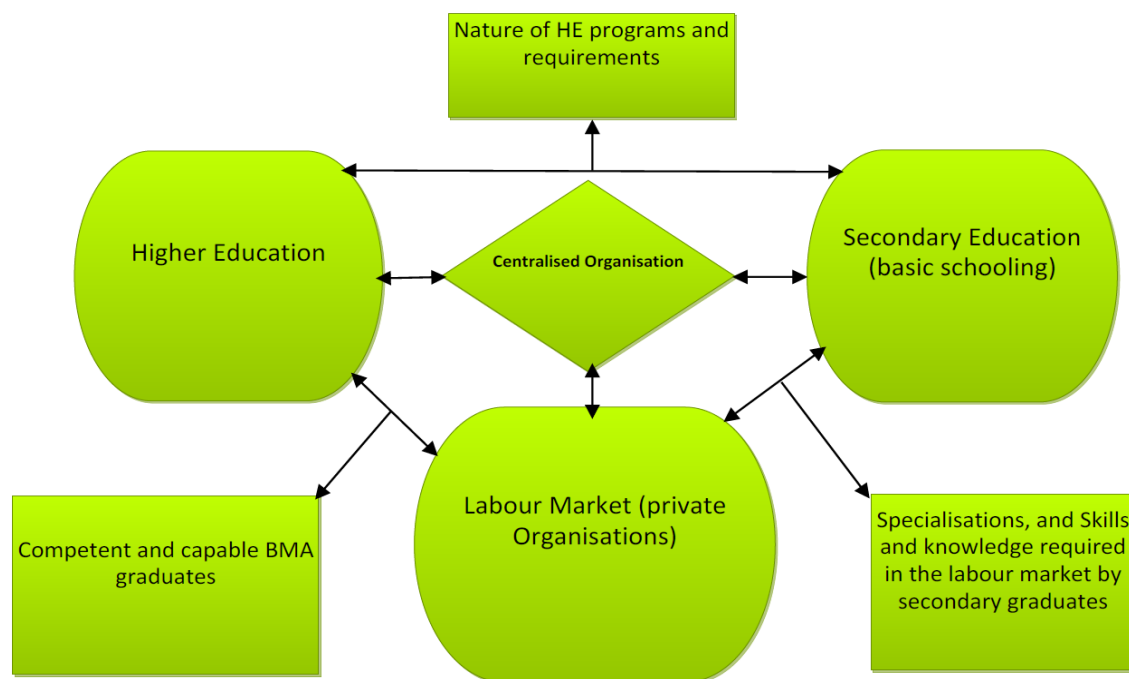
Figure 6.1: The interrelation between basic education, HE, and industry.

For building better and active cooperation between HE and industry, this study suggests creating Oman's education-industry interaction platform. This platform may include two phases. **The first phase** can be designed to manage the link between academia and companies. The establishment of this system will contribute towards bringing both parties to work together in different aspects. For instance, it will help to invite industry practitioners for designing, developing and delivering curriculum, reviewing programmes, providing more training and work opportunities for students, exchanging visits, organising talks, workshops, job fairs, formal and informal meetings, and seminars and conferences related to the workplace, reflecting on student's training and graduate's quality, providing career guidance

to students, exchanging expectations and requirements, and discussing the main challenges and planning for solutions.

Moreover, a classification of full and part-time undergraduate jobs, as well as, training opportunities demanded in the labour market is highly recommended to be included in this platform. This classification will help the government to enhance the Omanisation rate in the private sector and to create more jobs for national undergraduates. It will further increase the awareness of education providers about the number of training positions and their nature, so designing an effective plan of specialisations. Finally, this platform can collect all research papers established in investigating Oman's HE and labour market, to be a reference for students and researchers for further studies for improvement and development.

Including all of these aspects and activities will bridge the gap between what is provided by HEIs and the needs in the workplace. Also, having knowledge of the private sectors' requirements (recruitment plan for five years or more with the job description and specifications) will help the education decision makers to plan for new programmes and address the required skills and knowledge in their core curriculum. Seeking this knowledge will contribute towards producing capable graduates, so economic growth (HCT).

A second phase can be designed to collect and store the data related to students and graduates across the country. The need for a standard statistical platform for basic and HE students comes as a result of no centralised statistical system. The evidence is that until date, there are no statistics on the number of students who graduated from HEIs in 2014 and 2015 (Times of Oman, 2016a). The system may include data such as the number of students enrolled in each academic institution, dropout rates, the number of graduates, the number of students who should take a training programme, and the number of employed and non-employed undergraduates and their specialisations. Designing surveys to collect students' feedback on different areas (e.g. teaching and learning, services, educational learning, facilities, material, etc.) and graduates on their employment can be designed in this phase. Access might be given to an administrator or a department that has similar responsibilities in each HEI.

More information about graduate employment and the requirements of skills and knowledge by the labour market will help all education stakeholders such as policy makers, education providers, employers, graduates, and students. Having this platform will help the government to plan in advance for recruiting nationals in the private sector leading to an active Omanisation policy. Also, it will provide accurate figures and data about the transition to the labour market (e.g. students' recruited, their specialisations and academic institutions).

For education decision makers (basic and HE), this platform will contribute to planning and designing effective policies such as employment and training, changing programmes, and developing the quality of the education system. In addition, it might help them to evaluate HE success through graduate productivity and effectiveness in the labour market. Overall, this platform will help the government and HEIs decision makers to make proper decisions, policies, and strategies related to education and the job market.

For the current BMA students, this information will expand their awareness of the needs of skills and knowledge in the labour market, so to consider them and be ready to compete in the job market. For employers, the platform will enhance their awareness of the programmes and curricula provided by HEIs leading to minimising their expectations. For researchers, the data will help in investigating issues related to education and the labour market and providing solutions.

A separate department (e.g. Department of Education and Skills in the UK), within the centralised organisation (**Recommendation #1**) named Professional Development Centre (PDC), can manage the above-suggested platform. The establishment of the PDC within the centralised organisation will contribute in facilitating the distribution of resources among HEIs and will influence BMA undergraduate employability (**figure 6.2**). People with the proper labour market intelligence need to lead this centre to:

- o Work with industry and other ministries closely to identify workforce, qualifications, and the requirements of skills and knowledge of the current and future investments. This partnership will help HEIs to design an effective and appropriate curriculum, so producing capable BMA graduates. A committee including academic professionals, industry practitioners, and government authorities is recommended for reviewing and designing curriculum and programmes. Also, arranging conferences and workshops that gather these stakeholders to discuss their current and future requirements are further valued.
- o Design a comprehensive policy for integrating BMA students in the job market.
- o Seek employment information, and long and short-term requirements (e.g. what employment and training opportunities are available currently? What will be available after five years? Their needs of skills and knowledge and educational level?). This data will be included in the platform suggested above.
- o Facilitate and provide employment needs and services to other PDCs within HEIs.
- o Manage 'Oman's education-industry interaction platform' suggested.

- Coordinate with other PDCs across HEIs to collect and update data related to students, graduates, and companies on their requirements and expectations. Direct contact with employers in the labour market is highly valued.

- Design a regular 'needs analysis survey' for the job market to investigate companies' requirements.

- Arrange 'Skills match scheme' that may target career advisors and planners, HE policy makers, employers, and HE providers. This scheme might help to bridge the skills gap among BMA undergraduates and better meet employers' requirements.

- Encourage a culture of employment by arranging employability-related activities for all HEIs (e.g. two days job fair, transition day/week each semester, national BMA graduate recruitment fair, skills-mismatch discussions and seminars with employers, students, academics, training supervisors, and graduates).

- Arrange industry visits for other training centres across HEIs.

- Collect job advertisements and make other PDCs aware about jobs advertised in the private sector.

- Organise workshops and seminars for those unemployed BMA undergraduates who also need to be motivated by self-development. The collaboration with the other PDCs in HEIs and with industry practitioners is highly valuable to achieve this aim.

- Design and conduct regular online feedback from BMA current students 'e.g. national student survey' and graduates 'e.g. graduate destination survey'. Conduct regular feedback (e.g. surveys) from employers and graduates on the required skills and knowledge and their expectations in the workplace. These surveys will provide an indication of the quality of services offered by HEIs and will help to identify the strengths and weaknesses of HEIs' outcomes in the workplace.

- Encourage companies in awarding top academic performers across HEIs. Student excellence awards (e.g. employment opportunities and internship) are some initiatives that may assist students to develop their academic performance and work-related skills and knowledge. A well-known example is the 'Student Award in Business Management' provided by Ernst and Young (EY) to recognise BMA Omani students who have achieved the highest academic results in Oman.

- Organise effective networking events between academics, professionals and industry practitioners. The networking strategy will help to change each one's expectations and needs.

The education-industry interaction platform, suggested previously, should be linked to all PDCs across HEIs that can be managed by professional counselling and guidance advisors (**figure 6.2**). The PDC, within the academic institution, will be responsible for:

- Direct collaboration with the main PDC (discussed above) for their employability-related requirements.
- Coordinate with other academic departments for the training needs and then to coordinate with the main PDC.
- Collect and store data related to students and graduates to be shared with the central platform.
- Provide employment services and guidance to students, particularly those in the final years of study.
- Seek information on training required by departments within an academic institution and ensure that trainees carry out their training in industries related to their fields.
- Encourage employability development workshops, seminars, and work-related events within the BMA department with the collaboration of the professional academics and industry practitioners (e.g. marketing your work experience, expand your network applying social media networks, skills development workshops, skills enhancement sessions, and speaking and writing English effectively, etc.).
- Arrange industry visits for students with the collaboration of academic departments across HEIs.
- Organise effective networking events (e.g. between academics and students, students and graduates, and students and industry practitioners).
- Spread the awareness of the advertised jobs in the private sector among BMA students particularly, for those in their final year.
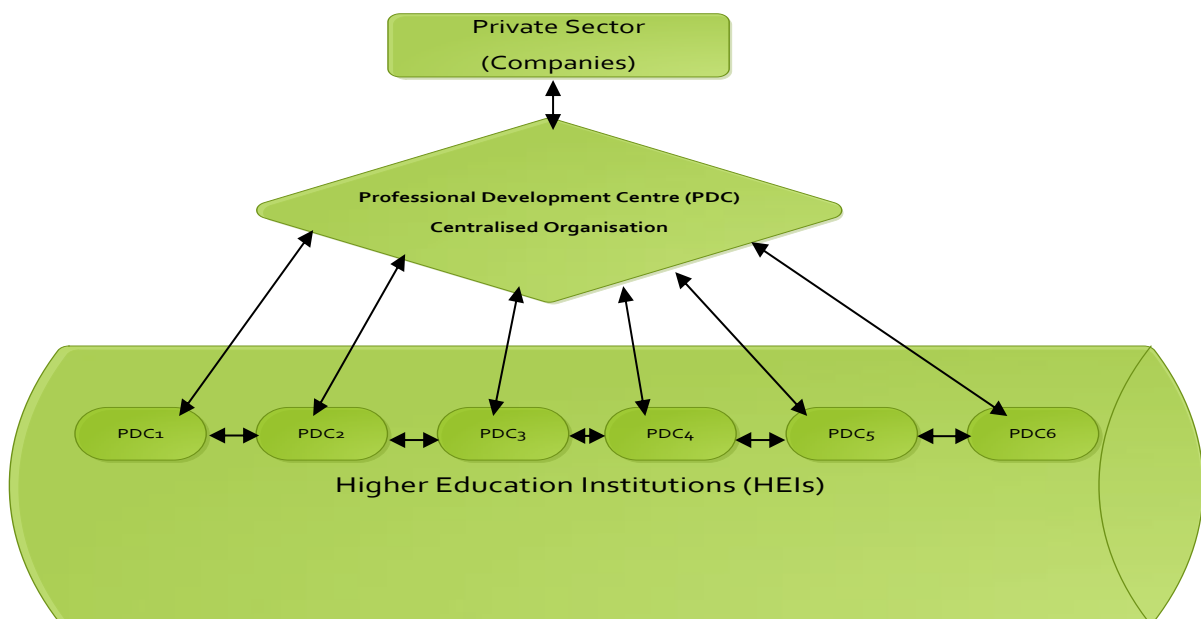
Figure 6.2: The nature of the relationship between PDC within a centralised organisation and labour market, and other centres within HEIs as well as the relationship among PDCs within HEIs.

3) **Shaping, reviewing, developing and delivering curriculum and programmes that are relevant to the demands of the labour market leading to enhancing BMA undergraduates' marketability to employers**:

Ensuring learning that is current and pertinent to the needs of the workplace is important for BMA undergraduate employability. The present study concludes that students and graduates expect HEIs/BMA departments to develop their work-related skills and knowledge. However, evidence from the interviews demonstrated that students are not yet effectively gaining the relevant skills due to the ambiguous industry needs and HEIs failure to provide them with exposure. Hence, the findings suggested that HEIs/BMA departments should consider student-related issues (e.g. curriculum-related issues, assessment system, and active training programme) on their agenda.

Associated with the present results, previous studies remarked that irrelevant curriculum, to the needs of the labour market, is one of the reasons for the inadequate education system. The evidence is that Oman's HE curricula is irrelevant to the needs of the labour market, so there is a need to design a curriculum that is embedded with the unique requirements of the job market (Times of Oman, 2013). Developing a relevant and updated curriculum, that could reflect on employers' demand for skills and prepares learners for unknown and unpredictable future, has been recognised in the literature review (e.g. Bowden & Marton, 1998). Evidence was that evaluating the curriculum and programmes to include more work-related activities and workshops (e.g. problem solving, seeking information, practicing the reality of work) as well as applying the best teaching and learning techniques help students to improve their work-related skills and knowledge (Al Munajjed and Sabbagh, 2011).

Due to the dynamic industry environment, it is important for HEIs/BMA departments to develop and expand a reliable BMA curriculum to national standards with an active collaboration with the academic professionals across all HEIs as well as with the industry leaders, as they know what is needed in the workplace. In addition, it is believed that a core BMA curriculum should focus on the specific entry-level skills and abilities required by the job market. Understanding employers', students' and graduates' needs and expectations are essential at this stage. Hence, it is recommended that the principles of BMA departments and academics should oblige themselves towards enhancing skills initiatives of their students and should work toward skills-based curriculum and assessment that will help to prepare students with marketable skills and knowledge. To achieve this goal, the current study suggests the following responsibilities:

- o Encourage bottom-up curricula review and development approach **(Appendix: 12)**.

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- Align core curriculum with work-related skills and ethics. The BMA curriculum should stress skills and knowledge required by employers (**table 5.16**). Sufficient provision of necessary skills is one of the main factors leading to successful careers (Panagiotakopoulos, 2012). HEIs/departments should further seek the support and guidance of industry practitioners on the relevance of curricula content and programmes to evaluate their suitability to the labour market needs. Formal and informal meetings, feedback, seminars and workshops with industry practitioners as well as establishing regular 'Needs Analysis Survey' are valuable to achieve this aim.

- Seek feedback from students, graduates, and employers on the relevance of the core curriculum and programmes provided by BMA departments.

- Establish a 'programme advisory committee', which may consist of professional academics and industry practitioners. This committee may contribute to the development and relevance of programmes to the needs of the labour market. Integrating employer in curriculum design and delivery supports graduate's employment in graduate-level jobs (Mason *et al.*, 2009).

- Design employability-related outcomes. Organising professional seminars and workshops between academics for discussing what and how employability–based learning outcomes are highly valued. The outcomes, then, can be discussed with industry practitioners.

- Benchmark programmes and outcomes for more improvement.

- Encourage academics actively to develop skills and knowledge in the classroom by deciding on skills-related disciplines or embedding them throughout the curriculum and then discuss how they can be taught.

- Ensure the efficiency of delivering theoretical and practical curriculum to students by establishing an 'Active Learning Policy' that highly depends on applying more application-oriented activities in the classroom. Some of the practical learning approaches are embedding case studies, examples, and projects related to work, videoing, and assignments. All of these activities will help BMA undergraduates to be prepared for similar roles in the workplace and enhance their skills (e.g. writing and reading, problem-solving and teamwork skills).

- Design a 'reflective form' to collect reports and feedback from students on their skills and knowledge development in the classroom. This process will require the creation of a skills-based evaluation system.

- Integrate general development programmes into the curriculum to prepare students for employment. This can be delivered by those academics who have industry experience and relevant background of personal skills development.

- o Encourage professional development activities for academics (e.g. best strategies for teaching and learning, designing outcomes, developing an active assessment system, etc.). A programme of staff development workshops and seminars, provided by essential skills experts from the labour market, is important to provide teaching staff with the core skills and knowledge required in the workplace and how they might be developed and evaluated.
- o Encourage conferences, workshops and seminars between HEIs/departments across the country (e.g. discussing the appropriate skills-based evaluation system and the best strategies for teaching and learning these skills and knowledge across different educational levels).
- o Encourage case study and scenarios-examination style and not only focus on asking students theoretical aspects. Making students aware of this method of evaluation will motivate them to think and search for knowledge other than memorising them.

On the other hand, industry practitioners should seriously and more efficiently work with HEIs/BMA departments and ensure their commitment to the process of designing, reviewing and developing the core curriculum and programmes through:

- o Updating HEIs/departments on their requirements (training, work placements, skills and knowledge, etc.) and replying to HEIs/departments requirements when they asked (e.g. needs analysis, feedback, etc.).
- o Providing HEIs/departments with issues related to the workplace to be used as case studies, assignment or projects. This will encourage practical learning in the classroom.
- o Attending workshops, seminars, and conferences that aim to develop national curriculum to be relevant to their needs in the workplace.
- o Supporting HEIs/departments in curriculum delivery. This will encourage work-related practices in the classroom, hence the development of student's skills and knowledge.
- o Supporting academics in the design and development of employability-related outcomes.

4) **Skillisation Policy**

To increase the Omanisation rate (11% until April 2016; NCSI) in the private sector and improve students' skills and knowledge within academic institutions, the present study suggests a skillisation policy. I refer the term skillisation to a policy that primarily considers improving nationals' professional and personal skills for the labour market. Evidence from the literature determined that educational qualifications do not convey the full message of a graduate's capability to work in a group, and market his/her social and personal skills to employers (Brown *et al.*, 1997). Also, the findings in **section 5.4** showed that graduate employees believe that their skills and knowledge learned during HE are not much related to what is needed in the workplace, which is mainly because of the shortage of practice within the classroom/HEI and the weak relationship between education and industry **(table 5.15)**.

Hence, as a policy, the government and HE decision makers, with the collaboration of the private industry leaders and academic professionals, should work seriously towards deciding a standard skills-set (**see table 5.16**) for BMA undergraduates in different levels of HE, to be followed by all HE providers across the country. Having a common set of skills and knowledge will guide students through an adequate preparation towards their employment in the future. Additionally, it will help HEIs/BMA departments to provide an effective curriculum relevant to the labour market needs, design skills-based training system, discuss the best strategies to impart these skills to students in the classroom, design proper skills-based assessment systems, and integrate real work-related case studies, scenarios, and examples in the core curriculum.

Moreover, this policy can be considered in the training programme, provided by HEIs, during the study and holidays. A list of work-related skills and knowledge, relevant to the field of study, should be made available to the field supervisors, so as to plan for an active and appropriate training programme. This policy is believed to contribute in supporting HEIs/BMA departments to produce the identical graduates for the labour market, thus minimising an employer's expectations of skills. Additionally, a skillisation policy may be implemented to enhance unemployed graduates, who have left HEIs and are seeking a job in the labour market.

Companies' support is highly valued in achieving an effective skillisation strategy. This support might be in the form of providing administrative and financial resources (e.g. workshops and seminars, and funding), and constant feedback on their needs and expectations of skills and knowledge required to perform the managerial roles in the workplace. This feedback is essential due to an uncertain work environment and

globalisation. To sum up, besides the Omanisation policy that aims at increasing the number of local workforce in the labour market (quantity), the government should consider skillisation as it may help to plan towards the future building of a skilled national workforce and enhance their quality.

5) **Develop BMA undergraduates' communication skills:**

The development of English proficiency encourages innovation amongst students (Harvard Business Review, 2015). According to one of the most and well-known world's internet entrepreneurs, Ali Baba, it is one of the essential skills required in the 21st century as it enhances an individual's and team's access to global ideas and knowledge (Harvard Business Review, 2015). For Morley-Warner (2010), the development of critical thinking and writing skills allow students to convey appropriate academic tone to their assignments and engage in academic debate.

English is the primary language in HE (e.g. curriculum content, networking with academics, examinations, etc.) and in the workplace in Oman. It is one of the core skills demanded by employers in the private sector; however, it is one of the major drawbacks among BMA undergraduates. The study reveals that students lack good communication in the classroom as well as employers' are being troubled by undergraduate's communication skills in the workplace. Without practicing the English language (oral and written) within and outside the classroom, students will not be able to communicate effectively in the future in HE and the workplace. Evidence from the literature **(Chapter Three)** remarked that there is a positive relationship between the development of students' communication skills, and their academic performance during HE and their work performance after graduation. Accordingly, to achieve continuity of the education system, and build grounded young students in HE and workplace, the Omani government can start focusing on basic education (at least with the last six levels).

The study suggests that the development of communication skills and work-related behaviours should start from basic education. Developing basic education and embedding necessary work-related skills in the core curriculum are crucial to produce a talented youth, who will have the ability to participate in life-long learning, and lead to successful transition to HE and the labour market. Thus, more consideration can be seriously given for improving students' communication skills. In this case, the collaboration between school education and HE is greatly valued to overcome the lack of English proficiency of the secondary school graduates. Thinking about and designing a particular English Language framework for school education is highly recommended.

Basic education could provide intensive English courses in all preparatory (intermediate) and secondary education (pre-university) levels. Formal and informal meetings and workshops are recommended to discuss a particular communication curriculum, activities, and teaching and learning approaches that will develop learners' communication skills. Developing students' communication skills will help those secondary graduates, who do not get the chance to join HE to communicate successfully with employers and seek a position in the private sector. Equally, it will help those who join HE to communicate effectively in the classroom, adapt to the HE environment quickly, understand HE curriculum, and achieve high academic performance. Preparing secondary students, from the early stages, has an implication of reducing costs of the foundation programmes provided to those students who lack English proficiency when joining HE as well as those who will study on their account in the private HEIs. Consequently, it is the time to do some reforms in the basic education system like embedding programmes that include key work attributes and behaviours to produce highly talented secondary graduates. These programmes may help students with planting some skills (e.g. entrepreneurship, business ethics, and other technical courses) from early school stages, and enhancing their creativity.

Beside secondary education, HEIs/English departments could think about an adequate framework that encourages practical learning activities in the classroom. A common example is the Australian English Language and Employability Framework **(Appendix: 13).** It is important for the English academics to encourage discussions, brainstorming sessions, seminars, and workshops as effective strategies for teaching and learning in the classroom. Developing student's communication skills in HE is urgently required to overcome the communication skills gap among BMA undergraduates as they are greatly valued by employers in the private sector.

Companies should not blame HEIs for the lack of undergraduate's communication (oral and written) skills. However, as a part of the system of enhancing students' employment and skills enhancement, their engagement with basic and HE institutions is very important in overcoming the skills gap. They can contribute to the development of communication skills (oral and written) among those currently hired undergraduates, who have poor communication skills in the workplace. Providing in-house extensive English training or signing them into language courses and having access to networks of ideas (e.g. e-articles, international libraries) are some strategies that will improve their communication. The primary benefit of this development is that employees will be motivated to communicate with others across the organisation and share great ideas with their managers.

6) **Encourage more extra-curricular and co-curricular activities within and/or outside HEIs/departments:**

Literature indicates the effect of these activities on a student's academic performance as well as the development of some skills and knowledge related to work. For instance, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and Pomerantz (2006) suggest that enhancing personal abilities and developing learning experience are two main advantages of extra and co-curricular activities. The findings, of the current study, indicated their effectiveness in improving learners' skills and knowledge while some of them were not implemented in the classroom.

As part of the learning process for BMA students, mock interviews, writing professional CVs for employers, case studies and scenarios related to workplace, industry visits (field trips), institutions' and colleges' career fairs and open days, students' club or business committee and in-house and external competitions are some activities suggested in this study. The interaction with the industry practitioners is highly valued when implementing the activities as mentioned earlier within and outside their academic institutions. The evidence demonstrated that academic's words and actions, and connections with businesses during training and research or/and recruitment process help to understand their requirements, hence achieve graduates' job expectations (Swailes *et al.*, 2012).

To enhance students' awareness on how to play the game of employment through the development of their work-related skills and knowledge, BMA departments should:

- Plan and encourage individual and group work activities. The tutor should credit the outcomes and process.
- Encourage assignments, research, case-based problem solving, final projects, and scenarios relevant to work. Academics may seek cases from industry by asking industry practitioners.
- Motivate and encourage students to talk, and share knowledge and ideas creatively within the classroom. Active participation will help in breaking the barriers of shyness and give more confidence to students.
- Encourage case studies examination styles and not only focus on asking students theoretical aspects. Implanting this form of tests will encourage creative thinking, problem-solving, team-working, leading, managing group, and decision-making skills.
- Presentation skills should be one of the assessment criteria for various management and administration programmes.

- o Practice activities like writing professional (marketable) CVs and mock interviews in the classroom with the cooperation of by the industry practitioners. These activities are crucial as they give the first impression about BMA undergraduates' capabilities to employers.
- o Plan for workplace visits in advance.
- o Encourage open and networking days between students and academics in a department.
- o Encourage BMA undergraduate conferences across all HEIs (e.g. their final projects).

Outside the classroom, HEIs/BMA departments (HE level and/or department) should focus on the following activities:

- o Encourage 'The Best of the Best competitions' between BMA students across all HEIs (presenting, business idea, etc.).
- o Reward high academic performers and those students participating effectively in extra-curricular activities.
- o Encourage student committees and activities (clubs and societies), and motivate their involvement. Students, who are involved in committees, will learn capabilities (e.g. teamwork, confidence, planning, management and leadership, writing meeting minutes, and problem-solving and decision-making) that may contribute to high academic performance and employment in the future. Skills development of students will increase their rate of acceptance by employers when including them in a marketable CV. Another benefit of participating in committees is that students will expand their network inside and outside the institution by interacting with several people from different organisations.
- o Encourage guest speakers and talks; especially, work-related issues for those in the final year.
- o Support open and networking days with industry practitioners. Academics, students, graduates, and employers should be invited. Meeting industry professionals and leaders may develop networking skills and confidence of students and graduates. Also, it may promote their awareness of the requirements and expectations of education and the labour market.

HE decision makers can play a key role in encouraging activities among HEIs/BMA departments across the country such as:

- o At least, twice a year, promote 'A National BMA Undergraduate Recruitment Fair' for all BMA current students and graduates mainly for those in the last year of the study. Besides the primary purpose of having this fair, which is hiring, and making it useful

and active, the agenda of this event should include activities, workshops, and seminars related to work such as mock interviews and/or who is the potential BMA graduate.

o Reward those students who achieve high academic performance at different educational levels from all HE.

o Encourage employment-based talks and speeches with HEIs/departments.

o Plan for a professional and active student's training programme with the collaboration of industry practitioners (**Recommendation #4**).

o Allow and encourage appropriate and lively student's workplace visits.

7) **Encourage a serious and meaningful training system for all HE students:**

Seeking work experience through training and other activities of competency development is one of the most important variables leading to one's employability, higher earnings and better opportunities for promotion at work (**Human Capital Theory; section 3.2.4.1**). Accordingly, motivating students to apply for a training programme becomes an essential strategy of better-developing students' skills and knowledge, enhancing their understanding of the reality of the work environment, linking between theory and practice, and building their confidence in the various skills required in the workplace. Evidence from literature showed that without work experience, the academic degree alone is not enough for BMA undergraduates to market themselves to employers (Koc, 2010) and Koc and Koncz, 2009).

The discussion in **Chapter Five** indicated that undergraduates' skills are not up to the employers' expectations due to the lack of work experience. Furthermore, the results found that not all HEIs encourage their students to apply for a training programme. The study suggests that it is important for BMA undergraduates to carry out professional roles and tasks in the workplace, and HEIs/departments should ensure that student trainees take full advantage of their training programme.

The study suggests that training should be recognised by HEIs, with the collaboration of companies, as a practical technique for attaining the exposure of professionalism (skills-based training). An ideal and structured training programme, provided by the 'Occidental Oman', was recommended by an interviewee in this study. Therefore, the government and HE decision makers may look at this system to be followed by companies with the help of HEIs across the country. Furthermore, to encourage companies to provide more training and job opportunities, the government may award those who provide more opportunities, and have an ongoing and active relationship with HE providers. This strategy may motivate other

companies to participate and cooperate with HEIs in providing more training and job opportunities to students.

HE decision makers should also work in establishing a formal and suitable implementation policy for student's traineeship that makes the training programme compulsory for all HE students. The success or failure of this policy depends on the extent of the interaction between the government, businesses, and HE providers. Accordingly, HEIs/BMA departments should:

- o Design an appropriate training programme that is directly linked with the skills requirements in the workplace. The current study suggests that HEIs should plan for inculcating these skills that are highly demanded by companies within the core BMA undergraduate curriculum. To achieve this, HEIs with the collaboration of the private sector should place greater emphasis on practical work experience and real-life scenarios more than theory.
- o Allow more training period for students to help them take full advantage of the training programme. Some of the training programmes, for an extended period, suggested in this study, are:
  - One to two years training programme to be applied for all HEIs. It proposes to provide training to those students who completed their HE at each level before applying for any job in both public and private sectors. For instance, diploma students can apply for a one-year training programme after completing their diploma level. The same can be implemented to higher diploma and bachelor graduates.
  - Cooperative training programme between industry and HEIs aims to provide three months in industry after spending three months at the university or college.
  - 'Whole Summer Off' training programme. It is a four month training programme during summer break for all students in HEIs.
- o Seek professional training from professional companies.
- o Ensure that trainees show their interest and commitment in performing tasks assigned by the field supervisor. Being serious, punctual and following an organisation's rules and regulations are important. In the workplace, students should watch, observe, learn and apply theory learned in the classroom.
- o Encourage students to seek training in the private sector using social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.).
- o A serious evaluation framework should be discussed and followed by both academic and field advisors. Training should be credited and assessed as it is the responsibility of student trainees to do their best and ask for work.

- Acknowledge student's training expectations.
- Discuss training plan and requirements with field supervisors and vice versa (e.g. orientation programme, skills and knowledge expectations, suitable work environment, effective learning plan, students to meet performance standards set by the field supervisor, regular performance meetings, etc.).
- Seek a direct contact with trainee students and their field supervisors at the beginning of the programme, in the middle of the process, and after completing the programme to acknowledge their needs, expectations, and performance in the workplace.
- Survey trainees after completing their training on its effectiveness and relevance to the field of study (Online Training Survey).
- Ask students to reflect on their training programme, in the classroom, by writing a report and/or presentation (guidance of the content and criteria of writing and presenting should be specified previously). Designing a 'training reflection form' for students to reflect on their experience and development of skills and knowledge, and the challenges that face them during the training programme. Reflecting on work experience is crucial (Wilson, 2012:p.39). For Cooper *et al.*, (2010:62) in Helyer and Lee (2014), 'learning is the product of student's efforts to interpret and translate what they experience to make meaning of it'.

In addition, to provide themselves with competent and capable BMA graduates with proper and adequate work-related experience, industry leaders should ensure an instructed, committed, and useful training programme is offered to students by:

- Understanding student's and his/her academic supervisor's expectations of training.
- Changing the nature of training programme from simple routine tasks (printing, copying, etc.) to professional duties in the workplace through providing trainees with professional job roles and responsibilities, work accountability and work reflectivity (professional credibility). Applying this, students will discover new ideas, and participate in challenges that allow them to build upon previously learned skills (Bruner, 1960).
- Providing the academic supervisor with a 'Workplace Report' that assesses trainees' productivity, work-related behaviours, and skills and knowledge development. A copy of this report might be given to trainees, so to prove their learning to employers in the future. A certificate might be issued for the best performers.
- Allowing students to implement a training programme during the whole year and not limit the time for training (e.g. in summer).

- o Rewarding trainees for their performance in training by both academic department and the company. To assess their performance, a reflection report can be written by student trainees on what they have learned and type of skills and knowledge developed during the training programme.
- o Paying trainees for their outcomes, which may help trainees to perform creatively and productively leading to great outcomes.

A structured training programme helps graduates to seek employment within six months of graduation and secure a job in graduate-level careers **(**Mason *et al.*, 2009). **Appendix 14** illustrates a training model that suggests the central roles of academic and field supervisors in the development of skills and knowledge through the training process. This model suggests a way to end up with a win-win situation for all stakeholders, namely academics, field supervisors and students.

8) Learning resources and materials:

It is important for the government and companies to supply more infrastructural facilities and teaching materials to education providers. Provision of suitable and easy access education resources will help students to enhance their academic performance and develop their skills, and so their employment. Evidence from the literature showed that having open access to the latest collaborative technologies and providing a rich learning environment that allows them to seek updated knowledge of their field has an effect on student's academic and work performance (Al Munajjed and Sabbagh, 2011).The findings of semi-structured interviews in the present study, declared the shortage of resources and revealed that HEIs need to allocate a considerable amount of additional funds on providing resources (e.g. reference books, e-articles, business magazines and electronic references) to enhance students' learning and develop their personal and work-related skills and so their employment.

Due to the shortage of financial resources and/or imbalanced allocation of resources among HEIs, HE providers/BMA departments are unable to provide all resources required for achieving effective learning therefore the support of companies to bridge the gap and other educational barriers among students is highly valued. Books, references, e-books, e-learning materials, access to articles and studies, academic and career services (e.g. academic consultancy and career guidance), and a library that has various learning materials are some of the many resources that could contribute towards enhancing students' academic performance and the quality of education. National and international open access articles and books should be encouraged by academics in the learning process. Taking advantage of these educational resources will have a positive effect on students' interaction in the

classroom. On the other hand, students can take the role of developing their skills and knowledge by seeking updated information on their field of study using the internet as the most accessible resource and taking the responsibility of enhancing their language and life-long learning skills.

As a strategy to enhance HE students' academic and life-long learning, the current study suggests that it is time for the government to think about establishing a national library to serve as the superior repository of information for Oman by providing education and research services to students, academics, researchers, and local people. Having this library may reduce the government spending and costs (e.g. access to journals that may be a cost for each HEI). For HEIs/departments, it would be worthy to use some related articles that impart skills and knowledge to students, and not only depend on theory in the classroom. Also, it might help them to arrange education-industry related conferences, and seminars and workshops. For students and graduates, it could encourage them to seek valuable and important resources to update knowledge and develop skills related to their field of study. This establishment might further have implications for academics, researchers, and overall community (e.g. borrow books, open access to wider range of e-journals).

The present research further suggests that, at national (in Oman) and/or international contexts (Arab or Gulf region), a comprehensive e-publication database could be created to collect and include all publications established on education and the labour market (e.g. HE and Employability). Open access is to be given to all academics and students across all HEIs in the Arab or Gulf countries. This database will contribute by:

- o Expanding student's knowledge on the areas taught in the classroom, thus academic performance.
- o Encouraging practice in the classroom (e.g. work-related case studies and scenarios).
- o Motivating research and development.
- o Developing students' skills (e.g. summarising an article, critiquing, team-working, etc.), so producing competent and knowledgeable graduates in their fields.

9) **Develop the HE system through improving quality assurance scheme**:

Human capital theory (HCT) suggests that there is a positive relationship between high education, employability, and performance in the workplace. That is, education has a great impact on a graduate's personal, academic and professional capabilities that will help him/her to perform highly in the workplace in the future. Consequently, governments should not underestimate the value of good quality education for their local students.

One of the highest ranked reforms identified by the present study, that needs more consideration by the government and the education decision makers, was improving the quality of HE system that should contribute in preparing competent and skilled graduates. This suggests that authorities (e.g. Education Council, Ministry of HE, OAAA, other institutions responsible for education (**figure 1.1**), and HE providers) should work in improving the standards of the education system. On-going assessment of the education, both basic and HE, may contribute to a high-quality education system and developing student's skills thus creating competent and skilled graduates for the labour market. For the government to improve the education system and with collaboration of the quality assurance unit (OAAA) and HE providers, the following should be considered:

o Making employment-related strategies and policies by brainstorming the high quality governing bodies around the world to ensure the national and international quality standards.

o Recruiting more experienced quality staff and/or exchanging quality experts with professional international agencies.

o Determining a mechanism to strengthen the collaboration between HE providers and businesses with a clear policy of ensuring active and ongoing cooperation (**Recommendation #2**). This policy may ensure that the HE system serves the demands of the labour market and the long-term development plans, so the economic growth (HCT).

o Establishing or activating internal quality centres within all HEIs, with a comprehensive quality system and quality professional staff. Quality centres should be responsible for ensuring an in-house check on the programmes provided and curriculum's design, review and development, and delivery process. This could contribute in designing programmes relevant to the needs of the labour market and imparting students with work-related skills and knowledge. A continuous assessment of these centres, by the central quality assurance unit, is highly valued.

o Ensuring work-based modules and high-quality learning environment within HEIs. The evidence is that establishing student-centred teaching and learning strategies are crucial in enhancing learners' quality leading to the development of their knowledge and skills (Business Today Magazine, 2015).

o Emphasising extensively on industry training and students-related issues and embedding work-related skills and ethics in the core curriculum.

o Collecting feedback on the relevance of BMA programmes provided by HEIs. This feedback can be gathered from industry practitioners and/or BMA graduates, who spend time in the labour market, as they are the best to know what businesses need.

- o Ensuring the recruitment of better qualified, capable, professional academics by HEIs. Recruiting tutors, with academic and work experience, provide value to students' learning and their level of preparedness for work (Times of Oman, 2013a).
- o Reviewing BMA programmes periodically and their relevance to the needs of industry.
- o Ensuring the professional academic development activities by BMA departments, which might be through seminars, discussions and conferences (e.g. teaching and learning, curriculum design, review and development, planning appropriate curriculum outcomes). Evidence from the literature demonstrated that inadequate preparation of academics leads to weak students' performance, and educational development depends heavily on a teacher's skills, knowledge, and experience (Sawchuk, 2014).

10) **Enhance incentives for the private market employees:**

It has been reported that there are 49,000 active job seekers where 14,980 have a university degree (Oman Daily, 2016). According to an official, this number is expected to be 75,000 by the end of 2016 (Oman Daily, 2016). Moreover, statistics indicated in April 2016 that 11% of those working in the private sector are Omanis while 89% are non-Omanis (NCSI, 2016).

The key reason for the low Omanisation rate in the private sector might be the imbalance between the incentives provided in the public and private sector. This could explain why graduates prefer to work in the public sector, and why national employees, who work in companies, resign and wait for a job in the public sector. The findings of the present study, revealed that improving salary, focusing on employees' professional development, appreciating their efforts, providing more promotion opportunities, and a challenging work environment were the most highlighted incentives that may attract graduates to work for companies. The latest evidence, The Oman Employment Report-Insight for 2016, published by Oxford Strategy Consulting, found that money is the highest motivator when focusing on taking a job (Times of Oman, 2016). Therefore, the government, with the collaboration of companies, needs to work more in promoting incentives of those working in the private sector. This may contribute in attracting the current graduates to work for companies and enhance their loyalty to organisations, thus giving an increase in the Omanisation rate and decreasing the level of unemployment.

11) Invest more in the technical and vocational training and education:

Seriously considering, upgrading, and expanding vocational education will have a positive effect on linking theory 'classroom' with practice 'workplace' (Al Munajjed and Sabbagh, 2011). Enhancing this type of education and training will contribute to providing a capable workforce for the labour market. Moreover, it is believed that it is important to exchange the nature of employers' expectations with students at secondary, vocational and university education to produce a competent workforce and successful transition process to the workplace (Swailes *et al.*, 2012**)**. Consequently, the government should invest more in this type of education and encourage companies to exchange their expectations with students and academics in HEIs.

6.4 Limitations of this Research

There were several limitations to the overall scope of the present study. One of the major obstacles to this study was the amount of published statistical data. Unpublished unemployment and employment rates of BMA undergraduates, in particular, make it challenging to provide complete quantitative support for the analysis of the current research. If this data were published, this study would precisely specify the size of the employment and/or unemployment challenge of BMA graduates in Oman. Another barrier was that, while the employer respondents did represent a cross-section of sectors, a larger sample size would support greater generalisability.

Also, specific limitations to the research approach followed in this study. For instance, it is worth noting that while structured interviews generated a useful amount of data on the investigated issue, the implementation of software to analyse these data may provide more insight into the validity and range of the findings of this study. Additionally, as a result of using nominal and ordinal variables in all the four surveys (students, academics, graduates and employers), most of the tests that need scale data, were not used in this study. Having scaled data can support examining the crucial differences between skills development and importance.

A further methodological limitation was that BMA undergraduates, working in private companies, were approached by their organisations due to the difficulty I faced in approaching them personally. It would be useful to have focus groups with students to seek in depth knowledge of some issues raised in the survey (e.g. the development of their skills and knowledge learned in the classroom and internship programme) as well as with graduates who work in the private sector to seek more information about the importance of

these skills and knowledge in the workplace and how satisfied they are with the HEI they graduated from.

Finally, the short time frame for conducting field research was another limitation of this work. If this research was to be expanded in the future, focus group methods could be included to gather information thoroughly from BMA students, graduates, and academics from both public and private HEIs on the issues which arose in the conducted surveys.

6.5 Recommendations for Further Research

This study aimed to explore the educational stakeholders' (BMA academics, students and graduates, and employers) views on BMA graduates' employability. Several issues, which need to be investigated in the future, came across during the analysis of data.

Firstly, there is abundant room for further progress in investigating the perceptions of students, graduates, and/or academics on the role and impact of specific curricular and extra-curricular activities on students' development of skills and knowledge and graduate employment. Another might be, investigating the challenges and factors that influence students not to participate in these activities and the strategies to overcome these barriers. This investigation might be done through interviews and/or focus groups with academics, students, and/or graduates.

The research has asked employers about the skills and knowledge required by BMA undergraduates in the workplace and taken their views on their importance; however, there is a need for deeper understanding of BMA undergraduates' skills gap - how big the gap is? Therefore, to precisely ascertain what gaps companies perceive in the skills of newly hired BMA graduates and to what extent they (companies) take responsibility for providing professional programmes to shorten such gaps, a wise and logic future initiative might be designed to develop BMA undergraduate skills in HE curriculum. A further study, with more focus on rating the significance of skills and knowledge in **table 5.13**, might be possible for future research. Also, it might be interesting to investigate thoroughly the factors that affect the development of skills and knowledge, discovered in the study, through BMA academics and employers in the labour market. Moreover, to develop skills, found in the current study, it seems urgent to compare these findings with other countries mainly in the Gulf.

After discovering the skills and knowledge that may help in preparing a proper curriculum, further investigation may be on what are the best learning and teaching approaches for transferring these skills and knowledge to students in the classroom. There is no particular skills development approach that fits with the entire HE (Panagiotakopoulos, 2012); while,

lessons can be learned from different case studies established to investigate the best strategies to address skills requirements in the classroom. Gender variable is one of the factors affected by the measurement of the importance and quality of skills that they learned and developed during the study (Nabi and Bagley, 1998). Therefore, a future study could explore the significant difference between skills development and importance of gender using the skills and knowledge provided in this study.

The study further found that the academic participants perceived that BMA curriculum is not particularly relevant to the needs of the labour market; therefore, it would be interesting to investigate in depth the effectiveness and appropriateness of BMA curriculum to the private market demands. A comprehensive graduates' survey of working life and conditions would provide evidence to add to basic schooling and HE policy, and to shape and design the best strategies for teaching and learning these work-related skills and knowledge.

Due to its limitation and its significance in enhancing their work-related skills, it would be genuinely important to investigate why young Omani students do not undertake internships in future employability research. Another particular study on students' behaviours, the challenges facing them in the workplace, and the effectiveness of the training programme provided in developing their skills and knowledge is highly recommended. It would be a good idea also to investigate the opinions of employers on their relationships with academic institutions (e.g. how strong it is, what it looks like, and the main challenges that make it difficult to interact continuously with HEIs). A further study would be interesting to focus on the availability of professional development centres (career service offices) at HEIs and their effectiveness.

The study showed the impact of better qualified and experienced academics in imparting skills in the classroom; further research could thus shed light on the effectiveness of professional development programmes provided to academics across HEIs in Oman particularly, in implementing the best techniques of teaching and learning skills and knowledge required in the workplace, and designing employment-related outcomes and a skills-related evaluation system.

Poor communication skills are one of the barriers in HE while it is the most valued set of skills in the workplace. This could be attributed to the low practice of English outside their classroom and/or academic institution. Practicing the English language everywhere is one of the strategies that leads to high English proficiency. Therefore, further study could investigate how much students (both in secondary and HE levels) speak English outside their classroom (e.g. at home, with friends outside HEI, etc.) which will be important to provide more knowledge on why student graduates have poor communication skills. This

investigation will help to produce fluent secondary and HE graduates who will be able to communicate effectively in HE or the workplace.

6.6 Concluding Remarks

This concluding chapter has offered an overview of this study, summarised the essential findings, and evaluated the policy and practical implications connected with the employability of business management and administration (BMA) undergraduates in Oman. Limitations and potential future research areas were also discussed in this chapter.

It is wished that the findings and their implications, and recommendations provided in this chapter, will add value to the formation of proper education and industry policies, improvements, and strategies that will contribute towards producing talented and qualified BMA undergraduates and promote their employability. I believe that the continued implementation of similar questions for this research would allow comparisons to be made across other fields of study.

Also, it is worth noting that although the recommendations of this study apply to the case of BMA undergraduates' employability in Oman, they can be attributed to other fields of study. The broad range of sectors, covered in this study, may support the generalisability of the main findings in an Omani context. In addition, the recommendations might be transferred to the Gulf and Arab contexts, which share similar settings of HE systems and industry to Oman.

As noted at the beginning of the study, the present research aimed to create new understandings of an emerging issue of employability of business management and administration (BMA) undergraduates in Oman through investigating academics', students', graduates', and employers' perceptions on BMA undergraduate employability. It provided brief information about GCC and the Omani contexts. It reviewed the relevant literature of employability in three regions; the West, the Gulf, and Oman. The literature is expected to expand knowledge and contribute to the limited body of empirical studies investigating students' employability especially in the Arab and Gulf regions. It also outlined the adopted methodological approach, presented and discussed the findings and concluded with the implications for practitioners. Overall, this research contributes to the development of BMA undergraduates' employability and graduates' employment in Oman.

The study has provided the first opportunity to explore skills required by BMA undergraduates in the labour market. It expands the literature on BMA undergraduate's employability. In particular, it adds value to the status of BMA undergraduate employability in

the Omani HE context. The findings of the study identified several domains, which require review and improvement to produce qualified BMA undergraduates for the private sector.

Investing in individuals' education and competency development (e.g. work experience through training) would be important factors for the Omani government to consider as they lead to the employability of graduates (HCT). It can be concluded that although the education system has developed, there is a need for considering some areas related to BMA undergraduate employability. The findings and their implications, of the current study, seem to be important to all stakeholders among which are the government, basic and HE decision makers, HE providers, students, employers, researchers and general people. They are expected to assist in employing highly-skilled BMA graduates leading to decreasing the number of non-Omanis working in managerial positions, decreasing the unemployment level among nationals, and increasing the Omanisation rate in the private sector.

It is important to ensure that HEIs, BMA departments/academics, students and their families, and the private sector have a responsibility in promoting BMA employment and their skills related to the workplace. That is, HE is the primary root of a prosperous life for students, graduates, and the economy. It can serve the needs of industry and address skills shortages and build the economy. This study, therefore, provides an important contribution to form an initial and valuable stage in investigating the bigger picture of what makes a BMA graduate competent and work-ready, and therefore productive in the workplace.

The study further addressed different challenges that need an active collaboration and urgent consideration by the government/education decision makers, HE providers/academics, and companies. The main challenges, discussed in this study as well as the literature review, were the mismatch between course contents to market requirements, weak communication between education and industry, shortage of physical and financial resources, lack of adequate interchanges with other academic institutions, insufficient practical programmes within the classroom, and poor training programmes. Graduate skills mismatch might be attributed to these challenges. The importance of some of these activities to student's employment has been recognised by Mason *et al.*, (2009), who argue that skills-based teaching and evaluation, employer engagement in curriculum design and delivery as well as a student's involvement in work experience are the main factors for improving undergraduate skills, thus high job performance in the future. Hence, having an open system that involves all education stakeholders is valued in establishing an active education-industry alignment and enhances the quality of the HE system.

Developing an ongoing and active relationship between education professionals and industry practitioners is the key factor in improving BMA undergraduate employability.

Evidence from the literature indicated that creating an open system through involving all education stakeholders becomes important and a priority for having a high-quality education and productive partnership between education experts and industry professionals, hence competent and ideal graduates (Mourshed *et al.*, 2012). In addition, Al Munajjed and Sabbagh (2011) argue that the active collaboration between education and industry is essential for adequate economic diversification and growth. It may contribute towards linking HE experience with industry experience, so overcoming the skills gap among graduates and successful transfer from education to the labour market. Therefore, the government's intervention in finding a policy to reinvigorate this relationship is highly valued.

HEIs/BMA departments need to understand the rules of the employment game to enhance BMA undergraduate employability. They should respond to the needs of employers at work and provide them with marketable skills and knowledge that will help graduates to perform their tasks efficiently in the future. They should ask for the job market requirements, discuss the relevance of curriculum with industry practitioners, promote extra-curricular and co-curricular activities that help students develop academic and professional skills, become involved in research with companies, and seek employers' needs, expectations, and their feedback on graduate performance and the skills gap in the workplace. Teacher-student and teacher-teacher relationships were also recognised as important in a student's development. Evidence from the literature showed that 'Microteaching, following best teaching and learning strategies, teachers-students interactive relationship, professional development of educators have great value in students' understanding within HEI' (Hattie, 2009; p.125).In addition companies can further play an active role in setting up HEI/BMA departments employability-related policies and strategies. They should support HEIs/BMA departments in providing training and job opportunities, delivering and mentoring workshops, providing regular feedback on the relevance of the programmes provided by BMA departments to the labour market and another about the performance of trainees and graduates in the workplace and how much extent is the skills gap, strengthen employment-related research and development among professional academics, providing HEIs/BMA departments with their current and future expectations and needs, and engaging in the process of designing, reviewing, and developing curriculum.

The current study extends information on the skills and knowledge provided in other contexts and investigates the core work-related skills required by companies in Oman. The identification of a BMA skills profile will help the government to enhance economic growth and to plan for the future, BMA department/academics to review curriculum, and design and plan the best teaching and learning practices to impart them in the classroom, students to develop their academic and professional capabilities and graduates to seek appropriate jobs.

Accordingly, like '**OMANISATION**', the present study suggests a national policy for enhancing the essential skills and abilities among students called '**SKILLISATION**' to be established systematically. To develop this policy, a proper manpower planning and an active relationship between HE providers and industry are highly critical, and without them, the outcomes will be weak.

To this end, it is hoped this study will serve as a reminder for the Omani government, HEIs and companies to remember BMA undergraduates' desire to be prepared for employment. Investing in education and competency development (e.g. training and work experience) are important factors of graduate employability (HCT). The findings and implications, and recommendations, presented in this study, are expected to help in linking the outcomes of education (competent and capable graduates) with the needs of the labour market in Oman.

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Appendices

Appendix (1): Skills and knowledge required by employers in various contexts and fields.

Country	Scholar	Highly demanded competencies
Australia	**Lowden et al. (2011)**	Working in groups, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving, and managerial capabilities
	Jackson (2010)	Skills required by graduates to perform job tasks and Individual characteristics employers want to see in graduates
UK & Australia	**Archer & Davison (2008)**	**Top:** communication, team working, integrity, intellectual ability, confidence, personality, planning and organizing, writing 'literacy', numeracy, and analysing and decision making **Least:** IT, post-graduate qualification, good degree classification, qualification from an institution with a good reputation, relevant course of study, and cultural fit with the company
	Jackson and Chapman (2012)	**Top:** problem solving, decision management, business principles, profession responsibilities, professional communication, team working, and leadership **Least:** critical thinking, core business skills and personal ethics
UK, US, Australia	**Jackson (2010)**	Have broad intellectual skills (e.g. Critical thinking and problem solving); interpersonal (e.g. Communication and working in groups); and personal skills like appreciation of diversity, and work ethic
New Zealand	**Hodges and Burchell (2003),**	**Top:** literacy, customer and client service (e.g. Customer service orientation, order, quality, and accuracy), interpersonal communication, and problem solving skills, willingness to learn, ability to work as a part of a team, flexibility, and initiative
World Wide Employers	**(Mourshed et al., 2013)**	**Top:** Work ethics, team working, professional communication, hands on training discipline, and problem solving **Least:** Leadership, and English proficiency
Romania	**(Ioan et al., 2011)**	Business principles, political skills, formal communication, and working with others
Mexico	**(World Bank group (WBG) & Islamic Development Bank (IDB), 2011)**	**Top:** Critical thinking, Oral & Written communication, (Life skills) Political skills, and (Life skills) Team work Skills **Least:** Technology Proficiency

USA	(Jackson and Chapman 2012, and English et al., 2010)	Communication skills, Professional writing, Realistic Expectation, Working with others, and Appreciate Diversity
Texas	(English et al., 2010)	Top: Integrity / Honesty, Work ethics, Self-motivated, Working with others, Positive attitude, and Common sense Least: Strong written skills, Cultural fit, and Knowledge of second language
Arab context	(World Bank group (WBG) & Islamic Development Bank (IDB), 2011)	Top: foreign language, computer literacy, time management, and discipline specific training are the top skills acquired from youth graduates Least: motivation, people management, and personal communication
UAE	Berhem, Salih & Yousef (2008)	Top: Lead change, Core business skills, Think critically, Political skills, Leadership skills, and Professional & Oral communication skills Least: Teamwork, Lead others and Think and act strategically
	Berhem, Younies, & Smith (2011)	Computer skills, communication skills, knowledge of worldwide networks and contacts, knowledge of home culture, and the ability to understand cultural dynamics
Oman	Swailes et al., (2012)	Communication, computer, and willingness to work in groups
Saudi Arabia	Iqbal and Zenchenkov (2014)	Technical (e.g. problem solving, IT, and computer literacy), Interpersonal (e.g. ability to cope with uncertainty, working under pressure, ability to change, teamwork), Intrapersonal (e.g. self-confidence, self-discipline, readiness to explore unknown), Business Knowledge (e.g. cultural awareness and adaptability, value chain).

Appendix (2): Survey Piloting (Feedback Form)

Pilot Test Evaluation Questionnaire

'1'= Strongly Agree	'2'= Agree	'3'= Disagree	'4'= Strongly Disagree

1. The Objective of the questionnaire is **stated clearly**:

    1   2   3   **4**

2. The objective of the questionnaire is relevant to **organizational practices**

    1   2   **3**   **4**

3. The questionnaire content is **clear**

    1   2   **3**   4

4. The content of the questionnaire is **easy and understandable**

    1   2   3   **4**

5. The **questionnaire content** covers very important areas of promoting Omani undergraduate employability and skills development

    1   2   3   **4**

6. The **questionnaire's design** is flexible enough for you to go back to where you left

    1   2   **3**   4

7. The sequence of questionnaire is **well-organized**

    1   2   3   **4**

8. The instructions in the questionnaire **are easy to follow**

    1   2   3   **4**

9. What additional content would you like **to see developed** in this questionnaire?

Overall, I think in regards to content-wise the questionnaire seems to cover all related areas.

Abdallah Al-Azri   Brunel University/PhD Education   012/016

10. What other **comments and suggestions** would you like to rise regarding this questionnaire?

- The clarity and consistency may be improved through rephrasing some questions.

- Regarding the use of a 4-likert scale (my opinion "<mark>**Neutral**</mark>" (or "<mark>**Not sure**</mark>") may be added to have a 5-lekert scale).

<u>Thank you very much for the given time</u>

استمارة التغذية الراجعه

أرجو التكرم بتعبئة استمارة التغذية الراجعة أدناه ليتسنى لي تطوير وتحسين محتوى الاستبيان

غير موافق تماما	غير موافق لحد ما	موافق لحد ما	موافق تماما	البيان
			■■■	كانت أهداف الدراسة واضحة
			■■■	محتوى الاستبيان كان ذات صلة مع ما درست
			■■■	محتوى الاستبيان كان واضحا جدا
			■■■	محتوى الاستبيان كان سهلا ومفهوما
		■■■		محتوى الاستبيان غطى معظم المجالات الهامة جدا لتعزيز التوظيف وتنمية المهارات للطلاب
			■■■	كان تصميم الاستبيان مرنا بما فيه الكفاية للرجوع الى ما بدأت
		■■■		تسلسل الأسئلة كان منظما بصورة جيدة
			■■■	التعليمات بالاستبيان كانت واضحة وسهلة
		بالدقيقة		كم من الوقت أستفرقت في تعبئة الاستبيان تقريبا
	الاسبيان غطى جوانب كثيرة لدراسة العلاقة الحالية بين سوق العمل والدراسة الاكاديمية.			**هل تود أضافة أي محتوى أو سؤال وذلك لغرض تحسين محتوى الاستبيان؟**
	ضرورة عرض الاستبيان على ارباب العمل لمعرفة ملاحظاتهم للحصول على تغذية راجعة ونظرة حقيقية عن مستوى **التعليم الاكاديمي** وليس التطبيقي او المهني.			**هل من مقتراحات أخرى تود التوصية بها للباحث بما يخص هذا الاستبيان؟**

شكرا جزيلا للمشاركة في تعبئة استمارة التغذية الراجعة متمنيا لك كل التوفيق

Suggestions for questionnaire:

<u>p.1</u>

Be assured that all data will be processed on an ANONYMOUS basis and responses will be treated as STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL. No details related to any individual or organization will be available to any other party. This survey ~~may look like will take long to be completed as it is divided into more sections but I have tried to make it as would have~~should take 30-35 minutes to complete.

To monitor the overall success of the project, I would like to ask for your agreement to participate in the current study as it is divided into more sections.

<u>p.2</u>

Q1: Please indicate whether or not the following extra-curricular activities are being IMPLEMENTED within the institution and/or classroom and their EFFECTIVENESS ~~level of the following extra-curricular activities and whether or not being IMPLEMENTED within the institution and/or classroom to~~ in imparting and promoting business management/administration graduate employability and skills development.

Providing more CV and interview sessions

<u>p.3</u>

Q3:Briefly outline what you perceive to be the THREE MOST IMPORTANT ~~THREE~~ FUNCTIONS of higher education Business Schools? (Please tick only THREE):

It's really difficult to just select three of these!

Q4: typo in second option (delivery) and seventh (required)

Q5: should the first option be two separate options? Option seven has a typo (overseas)

Q7:Please indicate the degree of importance of the following general statements in relation ~~which relate specifically to~~ business management/administration graduate employment:

<u>p.4</u>

Some of the options in Q 10 are worded a little awkwardly, i.e.:

There ~~is~~ are different mind-sets, expectations and~~,~~ priorities concerning graduate employability

~~There is too difficult, h~~Health and safety requirements are too onerous in the organization

There is not enough employee interest in working with academic institutions

I like that Q11 requires an answer to move on!

<u>My NOTE; Abdallah you need to check spelling systematically for both academics and employers surveys.</u>

1 response

Summary

The Objective of the questionnaire is stated clearly:
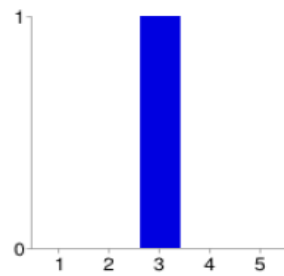
1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	1	100%
4	0	0%
5	0	0%

The objective of the questionnaire is relevant to organizational practicies
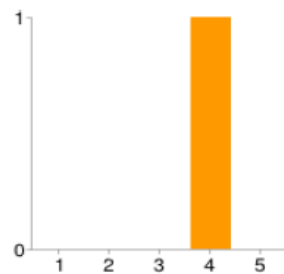
1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	1	100%
5	0	0%

The questionnaire content is clear
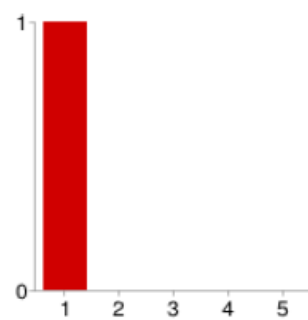
1	1	100%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	0	0%
5	0	0%

The content of the questionnaire is easy and understandable
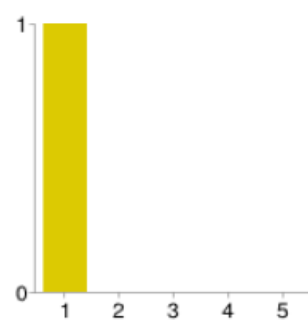
1	1	100%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	0	0%
5	0	0%

The questionnaire content covers very important areas of promoting Omani undergraduate employability and skills development
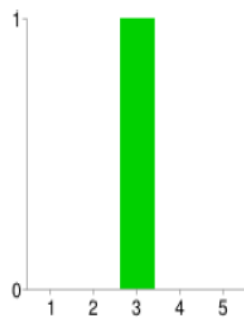
1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	1	100%
4	0	0%
5	0	0%

The questionnaire's design is flexible enough for you to go back to where you left
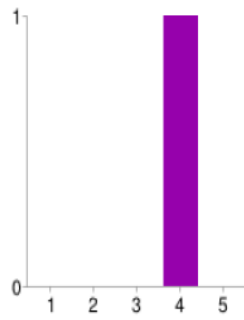
1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	1	100%
5	0	0%

The sequence of questionnaire is well-organized
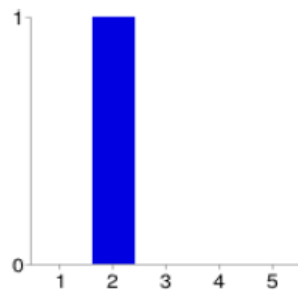
1	0	0%
2	1	100%
3	0	0%
4	0	0%
5	0	0%

The instructions in the questionnaire are easy to follow
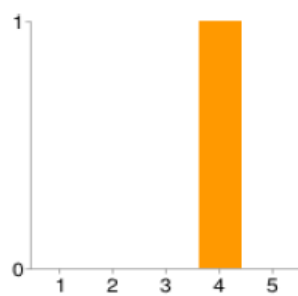
1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	1	100%
5	0	0%

what additional content would you like to see developed in this questionnaire?

wording of questions needs improvement if in the question, you mention A and then B, the box for response should have A first and then Bsome spelling mistakesgive instructions consistently - you do sometimes and you don't sometimes - so always say things like 'tick one response below'

what other comments and suggestions you would like to raise regarding this questionnaire?

it took me about 12 minutes to do - not bad!

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Appendix (3): Student's Survey (Arabic Version)

Undergraduate Employability and Skills development-FY students-V3

عزيزي الطالب

شكرا لك على الموافقة لاكمال هذا الاستبيان الخاص بالتوظيف وتطوير المهارات والقدرات العملية والشخصية المطلوبة بسوق العمل بالقطاع الخاص للطلاب السنة الأخيرة من المرحلة الجامعية من طلبة الادارة (دبلوم حتى البكالوريوس) بالسلطنة

هذا المسح سوف يوفر معلومات موثوقة عن اعداد مؤسسات التعليم العالي العامة والخاصة للطلاب وتهيئتهم لسوق العمل في ظل المناخ الاقتصادي الصعب والمناقصة الشريفة بين الطلاب. مشاركتكم ثمينة في اثراء المخرجات التي يطمح اليها المسح ومنها أولويات التوظيف للخريجين

جميع البيانات والمعلومات سيتم التعامل معها بسرية تامة وستتم معالجتها على أساس مجهول وبدون ذكر أسماء. وأيضا سوف يتم الاحتفاظ بالتفاصيل المتعلقة بأي فرد أو منظمة الشريفة مع الباحث فقط وأن تكون متاحة لأي طرف آخر. هذا الاستبيان سيستغرق من 20-25 دقيقة تقريبا لانهائه

شكرا مرة أخرى على المشاركة بهذه الدراسة الاستقصائية وللمزيد من المعلومات يمكنكم التواصل على هاتف رقم: 99473318 أو على البريد الالكتروني Abdallah.al-azri@brunel.ac.uk

ملاحظة: نرجو التكرم بالاجابة على جميع الأسئلة وذلك للخروج بتوصيات ثمينة ولأكمال المشروع بنجاح.

مخلصكم
عبدالله العزري
دكتوراة تربية
جامعة برونيل

القسم الأول: دور القسم والمؤسسة في تعزيز فرص التوظيف لديك

في هذا القسم من الدراسة الاستقصائية، أود الحصول على آرائكم المتعلقة بالدور الرئيسي الذي يلعبه القسم الأكاديمي في تعزيز فرص التوظيف وتطوير المهارات والقدرات العملية والشخصية والمرتبطة بسوق العمل الخاص وكذلك ارائكم الخاصة بالوظيفة المستقبلية.

س1-أ:قبل الانضمام للمؤسسة التعليمية التي تدرس بها، كنت تتوقع في الغالب *

◯ أن تكون ستحا بالمهارات والمعارف والقدرات المتصلة بالعمل

◯ التطوير المعرفي فقط بغض النظر عن المهارات والقدرات المطلوبة بسوق العمل في القطاع الخاص

س1-ب:هل حصلت على ما توقعت *

◯ نعم

◯ لا

س2:هل تعرف اذا كانت المؤسسة التي تدرس بها لديها "مركز خدمة التوظيف" لارشادك الى احتياجات التوظيف بالقطاع *
الخاص بالمستقبل

◯ نعم، ولقد زرته سابقا

◯ نعم، ولكني لم تتاح لي زيارته

◯ لا اعرف

س3:هل تفكر في وظيفة معينة للحصول عليها بعد أنهاء دراستك؟ *

◯ بالتأكيد، وأنا على علم بفروع الوظيفة التي أود الحصول عليها وأشعر أني أخترت الوظيفة والتي تناسب التخصص الذي درسته

◯ بعض الأفكار عنها، ولكني لست متأكدا من الاتجاه الذي أريد أن أسلكه

◯ ليس لدي أي فكرة عنها

س4:في اعتقادي أن المصدر المناسب للبحث عن فرص وظيفية مناسبة لمجال دراستي هو *

◯ الاعلانات الوظيفية عن طريق المؤسسات بالجرائد والمجلات او مواقع الشركات

◯ المعارف الشخصية

◯ مكتب التربية الوظيفي بالمؤسسة الأكاديمية

◯ مؤسسات التوظيف الخاصة

◯ سجل القوى العاملة

◯ معرض الوظائف

◯ زيارة الشركات

◯ اخرى

س5:يرتب أهم خمسة حوافز والتي قد تشدك للعمل بالقطاع الخاص من الأكثر الى الأقل أهمية للخيارات أدناه وذلك بوضع *
الأرقام على يسار كل بيان

	الحصول على راتب جيد
	يتم فيها تأمين وظيفتي
	تكون قريبة من سكني
	الحصول على المزايات أكثر
	ساعات عمل قصيرة
	بها استحقاقات تقاعد جيدة
	فيها المزيد من الفرص للترقيات
	وجود بيئة عمل ودية
	وجود تحديات بيئة العمل
	بيئة عمل يتم فيها تقدير الجهود المبذولة
	وجود تقييم أداء عمل عادي ومناسب
	وجود فرص عديدة للتدريب والتطوير
	اعطاء فرص لمواصلة الدراسات العليا بالمستقبل

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س6: ما مدى تنفيذ الأنشطة والمعايير اللاصفية من قبل المؤسسة الأكاديمية أو القسم الذي تدرس به في سبيل تعزيز فرص * العمل وتنمية المهارات المتصلة بالعمل بالقطاع الخاص لديك

	تم التنفيذ	لم يتم التنفيذ
اعطاء العديد من الورش في كتابة السيرة الذاتية ومقابلات العمل	◯	◯
ممارسة مقابلات العمل الوهمية داخل وخارج المؤسسة التعليمية وبمساعدة أرباب العمل بالقطاع الخاص	◯	◯
اكتساب الخبرة المهنية من خلال التدريب على رأس العمل والتدريب خلال الفترة الصيفية	◯	◯
اجراء تقييم للمهارات المطلوبة بسوق العمل والمتصلة بالتخصص	◯	◯
دعوة أرباب العمل ومسؤولي القطاع الخاص كلقاء محاضرة او ورشة عمل حول المهارات المطلوبة بسوق العمل بالقطاع الخاص وذات الصلة بالتخصص	◯	◯
تقديم النصائح والارشادات والخدمات المهنية للطلاب المقبلين على أنهاء دراستهم	◯	◯

س7:ما مدى توافقك مع البيانات التالية والتي تتعلق بتعزيز التوظيف وتحسين المهارات الوظيفية للطالب بأستخدام المقياس أدناه *

البيان	أوافق بشدة	أوافق لحد ما	لأوافق	لا أوافق بشدة
وجود مرجع خاص عن "الكفاءات والمهارات المطلوبة في سوق العمل" سوف يساعد الطلاب في تعزيز الفرص الوظيفية وعند البحث عن عمل وكذلك في معرفة المهارات والقدرات التي يرغب فيها أرباب العمل بالقطاع الخاص	○	○	○	○
المسادر الإلكترونية والمادية والتي قد تساعد في تعزيز فرص العمل وتحسين مهارات العمل متوفرة وكافية بالمؤسسة التعليمية وكافية	○	○	○	○
القسم الذي أدرس فيه أطلعني وعرفني بثقافة العمل بالقطاع الخاص	○	○	○	○
أنا على معرفة وإطلاع بكيفية الحصول على معلومات عن الوظائف والفرص بسوق العمل	○	○	○	○
أنا على علم ومعرفة بالمهارات والقدرات المعرفية وذات أهمية لأرباب العمل والمرتبطة بالتخصص الذي أدرسه	○	○	○	○
لقد تعلمت أخلاق العمل أثناء دراستي	○	○	○	○
تم تقييم مهاراتي المرتبطة بالعمل من قبل المحاضر أثناء الدراسة	○	○	○	○
أشعر بالثقة التامة لعمل السيرة الذاتية الناجمة للحصول على وظيفة بعد انهاء دراستي	○	○	○	○
الوظائف الأكثر جاذبية لخريجي طلاب الإدارة توجد بالقطاع الخاص	○	○	○	○
أشعر ان البرامج الأكاديمية التي يقدمها القسم الأكاديمي ساعدتني في تطوير المهارات المرتبطة بالعمل وفرصة الحصول على وظيفة آمنة وأقيم بأداء جيد في وظيفتي المستقبلية	○	○	○	○
البرامج المتعلقة بتخصصي تحتوي على الكثير من الأمثلة التي تلامس واقع سوق العمل	○	○	○	○
البرامج الأكاديمية في تخصصي ركزت أكثر على ما يتم طلبه من أرباب العمل بالقطاع الخاص من مهارات ومعارف واحتوت على الكثير من التطبيقات العملية	○	○	○	○

القسم الثاني: تطوير المهارات العملية والشخصية المطلوبة بسوق العمل

في هذا القسم من الدراسة أود التعرف على ما تم أكتسابه من مهارات وقدرات ومعارف ذات الصلة بالعمل الاداري بسوق العمل

س8:المدرجة أدناه هي مجموعة متنوعة من المهارات والقدرات والمعارف العملية والشخصية التي ينطوي عليها العمل *
الإداري والتي يتوقع منك امتلاكها لتعزيز فرصك الوظيفية بالمستقبل. يرجى الإشارة إلى أي مدى توافق أو لا توافق على كل عبارة
أدناه. ليس هناك أي اجابة خاطئة أوصحيحة. ما هو مهم هو أنك ترد بصراحة تامة على كل البيانات أدناه

الى أي مدى ترى تطور مهاراتك الشخصية والعملية المتصلة بالعمل بالقطاع الخاص

	أوافق تمام	أوافق لحد ما	لا أوافق	لا أوافق تماما
لدي القدرة على استخدام التكنولوجيا بشكل إيجابي (استخدام التكنولوجيا)	○	○	○	○
لدي القدرة على التعرف على المشكلة وتشخيصها ومحاولة ايجاد الحلول المناسبة لها (حل المشكلة)	○	○	○	○
لدي القدرة على اتخاذ القرارات و اتخاذ الاجراءات المناسبة مباشرة (اتخاذ القرارات والمبادرة)	○	○	○	○
لدي القدرة على التعلم من، والعمل مع القوى العاملة الأجنبية رغم وجهات النظر المختلفة والملائمة سريعا مع ثقافة المؤسسة (العمل مع ثقافات مختلفة)	○	○	○	○
لدي القدرة على أداء أكثر من مهمة بوقت واحد، والقدرة على تحمل المسؤولية تامة والتعامل بمرونة مع الآخرين ومساعدتهم على التعلم والمراعاتي، وجاهز لتطوير وتحسين أداء عملي (الاحترافية واخلاقيات العمل)	○	○	○	○
لدي القدرة على الوعي والتنظيم الذاتي، القدرة على العمل في سياق أكبر، القدرة على فهم قدراتي الشخصية والحفاظ على أداء عمل عالي مستمر في وظيفتي (مهارات الكفاءة الذاتية)	○	○	○	○
لدي القدرة على كتابة المذكرات، وتقارير الاجتماعات، والرسائل وتقارير العمل (بوضوح وفعالية والتواصل الكتابي)	○	○	○	○
لدي القدرة على التواصل شفهيا وخاصة باللغة الانجليزية مع الآخرين وبشكل فعال وكذلك ابداء الآراء وتبادل المعلومات والتفاصيل بطريقة مؤثرة (التواصل الشفهي)	○	○	○	○
لدي القدرة على العمل كفريق لتحقيق الأهداف العالية وتطوير مناخ داعم للعمل كفريق وكذلك مساعدتهم على (التعلم والعمل كفريق)	○	○	○	○
لدي القدرة على التخطيط الجيد والالتزام بجدول زمني واقعي وتحديد الأولويات والأهداف لاتمام مهام عملي واستخدام موارد المؤسسة بشكل فعال (المهارات التنظيمية)	○	○	○	○
لدي طموح لمواصلة العلم والمعرفة (التعلم مدى الحياة)	○	○	○	○
لدي القدرة على معرفة وتحليل نقاط القوى والضعف للمشاكل والتحديات والتعبير بوجهات نظر وحلول وتمييز الحقائق ذات الصلة بهذه المشاكل (والتحديات (التفكير النقدي	○	○	○	○

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	○	○	○	○
لدي القدرة على تقديم رؤية وأهداف لعملي ومسايرة التغيرات الداخلية والخارجية والتي قد تؤثر على المؤسسة ، وتحفيز ومساعدة الأخرين وكذلك مراقبة أدائهم العملي (القيادة)	○	○	○	○
لدي القدرة على قبول الأراء الجديدة، التعلم والتغيير، والتصدي للتحديات التي قد تواجهني في عملي بمرونة (القدرة على التكيف وإدارة التغيير)	○	○	○	○
لدي القدرة على مراقبة عواطفي في إمكان العمل (الذكاء العاطفي)	○	○	○	○
أنا قادر على اعطاء الأفكار بطريقة مبتكرة وبخلاقة وكذلك دمج الخبرة العلمية في مختلف مجالات العمل الأخرى (الابداع)	○	○	○	○
لدي القدرة على تقييم أثار المشاكل والتحديات السلبية المختلفة واقتراح الحلول المناسبة لها للحد من المخاطر (الكامنة (إدارة تقييم المخاطر	○	○	○	○

أخرى: يرجى التحديد

☒
☒

القسم الثالث: التدريب والتطوير وفرص التوظيف المستقبلية

في هذا القسم من الدراسة، أود الحصول على البيانات الخاصة بفرص التدريب والتطوير التي تقدمها مؤسسة التعليم العالي (التعليم العالي) و / أو القسم لتعزيز فرص العمل المستقبلية لديكم

س9: هل تقدمت الى أي فرصة تدريب أثناء الاجازات أو فترة الصيف؟ *

○ نعم
○ لا

اذا كان خيارك "لا"، فما هي الأسباب وراء ذلك؟

☒
☒

س10: هل حصلت على فرصة تدريب أثناء دراستك بالمؤسسة التعليمية؟ *

○ نعم
○ لا

اذا كويت ينم السؤل السابق، فأجب على الأسئلة التالية وان أجبت ب "لا" فأنتقل الى الجزء الخامس بالبيانات الشخصية

س10-أ:ما نوع التدريب الذي عملته؟

◯ داخلي (داخل المؤسسة التعليمية)

◯ (خارجي (خارج المؤسسة التعليمية

◯ الاثنين معا

س10-ب:فترة التدريب الكاملة كانت

◯ أقل من شهر

◯ من شهر الى 3 أشهر

◯ اكثر من 3 أشهر

س10-ج:الخبرة التي حصلت عليها بشكل عام هي

◯ مناسبة ومفيدة تماما

◯ مناسبة ومفيدة لحد ما

◯ غير مناسبة وغير مفيدة تماما

س10-ح:مدى أرتباطها بتخصصك

◯ مرتبطة تماما

◯ مرتبطة لحد ما

◯ غير مرتبطة أبدا

س10-خ:المسؤوليات التي أوكلت اليك

◯ مرتبطة تماما بتخصصي

◯ مرتبطة لحد ما بتخصصي

◯ غير مرتبطة تماما بتخصصي

البيانات الشخصية

الاسم *

[   ]

الجنس *

◯ ذكر

◯ أنثى

الفئة العمرية *

◯ أقل من 20 سنة

◯ من 21-25

◯ من 26-30

◯ أكثر من 30 سنة

التخصص الدراسي والمستوى التعليمي *

[ ]

المؤسسة التي تدرس بها *

[ ]

موقع المؤسسة *

[ ]

القسم الذي تنتمي اليه *

[ ]

المؤسسة التعليمية التي تدرس بها تنتمي الى القطاع *

◯ العام

◯ الخاص

كم سنة وانت تدرس بالمؤسسة التعليمية *

◯ 3 سنوات

◯ 4 سنوات

◯ 5 سنوات

◯ أكثر من 5 سنوات

متى تتوقع أنهاء دراستك الجامعية *

◯ في نهاية هذا الفصل

◯ في الفصل القادم

◯ في السنة القادمة

هنا نهاية المسح، ولكم جزيل الشكر والاحترام

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Appendix (4): Employer's Survey

Undergraduate Employability and Skills Development in Oman	012/016

Dear Employer:

Thank you for agreeing to complete this short interview on promoting employability and skills development with business management and administration undergraduates.

It seeks reliable information on employers' views regarding Oman's higher education (HE) system's outcomes and undergraduate skills development. In the context of the challenging economic climate, your participation will be valuable in ensuring the study clearly puts forward business priorities. Business management/administration undergraduates from both public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) are to be included in the analysis.

Be assured that all data will be processed ANONYMOUSLY and responses will be treated with STRICT CONFIDENTIALITY. No details related to any individual or organization will be available to any other party. This interview should take 20-25 minutes to complete.

I am grateful for your help in this matter. If you require any further information or have questions about the survey, please call me on 99473318 or send an email to: Abdallah.alazri@brunel.ac.uk

Note 1: UNDERGRADUATES: are those who have completed their HE study and have an educational qualification above SECONDARY Diploma and BACHELOR degree.

Note 2: PLEASE COMPLETE THE SURVEY FULLY FOR THE SAKE OF RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY.

Note 3: Copies of the research detailing the full results of the study will be sent free of charge to participants. Should you like such a copy, please send your email address to the email mentioned above.

Yours sincerely;
Abdallah AlAzri
PhD Education
Brunel University

Q1: Undergraduates' work-related skills and capabilities: please identify/state the work-related skills and personal capabilities that you demand/seek in business management/administration (as current undergraduates) and indicate their level of **IMPORTANCE in accomplishing managerial roles**:

Note: You can write them in Arabic and if you are going to list more than 12 skills, feel free to add columns.

	Skills and Competencies Profile							
	As the highly successful graduate of the management/administration undergraduate programs at the college/university for performing managerial roles (In the first stage joining the company to four years							
No	**Importance** of business management/administration skills and knowledge in performing managerial roles			Skills and Competencies Profile (Name with a short explanation of skills)	**Satisfaction** of current business management/administration student's skills and knowledge			
	Very Important (Core/Basic skills)	Important (Support skills)	Less Important (Additional skills)		Extremely Satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Extremely Dissatisfied
1								
2								
3								
4								

No								
5								
6								
7								
8								
9								
10								
11								
12								

Q2: What 'specific' business management/administration **focused skills** do you feel ought to be taught at the university (college)?

☐ Soft skills (such as decision making, communication, problem solving…)
☐ Hard skills (such as IT and written communication skills)

Q3: What could **HEIs** do to contribute in the development of business management/administration undergraduate employability and skills development?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Any Other
Comments:_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Your First Name	
Your Current Position	
Name of the organization you work for	
Type of Business/Sector	
Where is your main office located?	

Gender:

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

Which category below includes your age?

- ☐ 20 or younger
- ☐ 21-30
- ☐ 31-40
- ☐ 40-49
- ☐ More than 50

Nationality: -

- ☐ Omani
- ☐ Non-Omani   (Please specify):_____
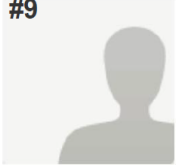
How big is your company (according to the number of employees)?

- ☐ Small (5-9)
- ☐ Medium (10-99)
- ☐ Large (<=100)

THANKS for donating your time to answer questions

Appendix (5): Academic's Survey

Undergraduate Employability and Skills Development (Academics)

PAGE 2: Section One: Undergraduates' work-related skills and capabilities

Q1: **Q1:How effective are the following extra-curricular activities in imparting and promoting the employability and skills development of business management and/or administration graduates.**

Providing practical CV and interview sessions	Extremely Effective
Organizing job fairs with the help of industry participation	Extremely Effective
Practising mock interviews, inside or outside the academic institution, with the support of industry	Extremely Effective
Gaining professional work experience through on-the-job training or internships	Extremely Effective
Conducting evaluations of employability skills needed in the labour market	Extremely Effective
Inviting employers as guest speakers to give a seminar or workshop regarding employability and work-related skills	Extremely Effective
Providing high quality career services and career advice, particularly for final year students	Extremely Effective

PAGE 3: Section Two: The role of HEIs and the Undergraduates Employability

Q2: **Q2:Your believe concerning HEIs is that:** | HEIs are not employment agencies and their role is to develop students' knowledge and learning regardless of the needs of employers

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Q3: **Q3:Rank the following functions of higher education BUSINESS SCHOOLS from MOST to LEAST IMPORTANT by dragging and dropping the choices:**

To prepare students for the workplace through the development of general and specific knowledge, skills and abilities	2
To prepare students for the workplace through the development of their awareness and understanding of business and its operating environment	5
To educate students about business management principles	3
To give access to real life examples and practical experience	4
To develop staff and curriculum design to ensure learning is current and relevant	1
To develop employees who are ethically and morally responsible	6

Q4: **Q4:Which of the following statements best reflect your view of the role that industry has to play in shaping how business management/administration students are taught in higher education in Oman? (tick ALL responses that apply):**

Providing workplace experiences to students in business management subjects

,

Collaborating more closely with HEIs in curriculum development and delivery

,

Conducting talks, seminars, career advice and workshops related to employability and skills development at HEIs

,

Publishing its own materials concerns business management outlining their needs of skills and knowledge

,

recruiting graduates and provide more student work-based experience opportunities (such as internships and on-the-job training) for students

,

Participating in job fairs,

Attending students' final year project presentations

,

Other (please specify)
Industry needs to actively involve with students progress from the beginning a sort of hand holding exercise till they complete the degree and get absorbed by the industry

Q5: **Q5:Rank the following RECOMMENDATIONS that might assist business management/administration students to be EFFECTIVELY PREPARED for the world of work from MOST to LEAST IMPORTANT by dragging and dropping the choices:**

Follow self-learning techniques (not only depend on HEI's programs)	9
Practice mock interviews with experts	5
Visit employers to know their demand for skills and knowledge	3
Develop the right personal and work-related skills in the classroom	1
Design appropriate curriculum vitaes (C.V.)	6
Have long internships/on-the-job training during semester and summer vacations	2
Choose programs required by private employers	4
Study overseas and complete degrees	8
Achieve better academic grades	7

Q6: **Q6:Please indicate the most important RECOMMENDATIONS that might assist higher education decision makers to develop business management/administration graduate employability and skills development:**

Improve education through an improved accreditation system

,

Facilitate better communication between government, HEIs and private employers

,

Provide better qualified and experienced teachers,

Provide resources to implement the practical part of programs

Undergraduate Employability and Skills Development (Academics)

Q7: **Q7:Please indicate your level of AGREEMENT with the following statements in relation to business management/administration graduate employment:**

Having a 'COMPETENCY PROFILE' including the demanded skills and capabilities by the labour market is highly advisable for HEIs.	Strongly Agree
The physical and electronic resources that may help business management/administration students to develop their work-related skills and knowledge are available in this academic institution	Strongly Agree
The courses and programs related to business management/administration are relevant to the needs of private employers	Strongly Agree
Management/administration curriculum focuses more on working practice than theory	Disagree
Work-related experience encouraged by institution/department during holidays	Agree
Business management/administration students' specific and general skills are assessed during the course	Agree
The skills gap of business management/administration undergraduates is a leading reason for recent undergraduate unemployment	Strongly Disagree
Work-related ethics are included in the business management/administration courses and programs	Agree
This HEI is reluctant to focus on developing students' employability; instead it seeks to develop students' capacity to think and be independent	Disagree
A focus of employability skills is now more important than before and the partnerships continue to be essential	Strongly Agree
Academic staff are participating in the formulation of programs and courses related to business management/administration	Strongly Agree
There is too much project-based learning (such as critical thinking, problem solving and collaboration) in business management/administration curriculum	Disagree
Business management/administration programs should focus more on learning theory instead of practical-based learning	Disagree
Business management/administration programs are assessed and updated to be relevant to the industry requirements	Agree
Academic studies and work experience have complementary roles to play in the development of students' work-related skills and abilities	Agree

Q8: **Q8:The amount of collaboration between your academic institution and industry on enhancing students' employability and skills development is (tick ONE response below)**	Strong
Q9: **In the LAST TWO YEARS, have/has any of private employers contacted you to give knowledge about business management/administration undergraduate skills and knowledge needed in the labour market?**	Yes
Q10: **Q9:How has your (as an institution or/and department) relationship with private employers changed since 2010?**	Increased
Q11: **Q10:The FIVE main barriers and challenges that might lead to ineffective collaboration are (tick FIVE responses below):**	Differences in mind-sets, expectations and priorities concerning graduate employability , Health and safety requirements are too strict in the organization , Lack of employee interest in working with academic institutions , Lack of guidance and support on how to make work-related experience worthwhile for young Omanis , Difficulties in engaging with academic programs

Q12: **Q11:What could private employers do to contribute to the development of the relationship with HEIs to promote employability and skills development of business management/administration graduates?**

Private employers of concern city must be in touch with local HEIs if they are looking to absorb the graduates from those institutions. However, private employers may not have such policy, therefore, it may not be working. Therefore, it is the policy change from the private employers at the higher level, that HEIs should be used a recruiting place such as selecting students through campus interviews, rather looking for external options. It is a policy level change required, and I believe HEIs will definitely be interested to working with the companies.

PAGE 5: Demographic and background characteristics

Q13: **Your first name:**	############
Q14: **Gender:**	#########
Q15: **Nationality:**	########i
Q16: **Department:**	#########

Undergraduate Employability and Skills Development (Academics)

Q17: Your current position: ######

Q18: Which category below includes your age? ########

Q19: Name of HEI: #########

Q20: Type of HEI: #########

Q21: Location: ########

Q22: Work experience in your present organization: ########

Appendix (6): Graduate's Survey (Arabic Version)

Undergraduate Employability and Skills Development–Graduates V2–

عزيزي الخريج/الموظف

شكرا لك على الموافقة لاكمال هذا الاستبيان الخاص بالتوظيف و بتطوير المهارات والقدرات العملية والشخصية المطلوبة بسوق العمل بالسلطنة لخريجي المرحلة الجامعية من طلبة الادارة (من الدبلوم وحتى البكالوريوس

هذا المسح سوف يوفر معلومات موثوقة عن اعداد مؤسسات التعليم العالي العام والخاص للطلاب وتهيئتهم لسوق العمل في ظل المناخ الاقتصادي الصعب والمنافسة الشريفة بين الطلاب. مشاركتكم ثمينة في اثراء المخرجات التي يطمح اليها المسح ومنها أولويات التوظيف للخريجين.

جميع البيانات والمعلومات سيتم التعامل معها بسرية تامة وستم معالجتها على أساس مجهول وبدون ذكر أسماء. وأيضا سوف يتم الاحتفاظ بالتفاصيل المتعلقة بأي فرد أو منظمة مع الباحث فقط ولن تكون متاحة لأي طرف آخر. هذا الاستبيان سيستغرق 20-25 دقيقة تقريبا لانهائه.

أنا ممتن لمساعدتكم ومشاركتكم بهذه الدراسة الاستقصائية وللمزيد من المعلومات يمكنكم التواصل على هاتف رقم: 99473318 أو على البريد الالكتروني abdallah.al-azri@brunel.ac.uk

اذا كنت ترغب على الحصول على نتائج المشروع بعد اعداده، التكرم بارسال البريد الالكتروني الخاص بك الى البريد الالكتروني أعلاه.

ملاحظة: نرجو التكرم بالاجابة على جميع الأسئلة وذلك للخروج بتوصيات ثمينة ولأكمال المشروع بنجاح.

مخلصكم:
عبدالله العزري
دكتوراة تربية
جامعة برونيل

القسم الأول: المهارات والقدرات والمعارف المطلوبة بسوق العمل

في هذا القسم من الاستبيان أود أخذ آرائكم المتعلقة بالمهارات والقدرات والمعارف المختلفة والمطلوبة بسوق العمل.

س1:المدرجة أدناه هي مجموعة متنوعة من المهارات والقدرات والمعارف العملية والشخصية التي ينطوي عليها العمل ✱ الإداري. يرجى الإشارة إلى أي مدى توافق أو لا توافق على كل عبارة. ليس هناك أي اجابة خاطئة أوصحيحة, ما هو مهم هو أنك ترد بصراحة تامة على كل البيانات أدناه

ما مدى "أهمية" المهارات والمعارف والقدرات العملية والعلمية التي اكتسبتها خلال دراستك بمؤسسة التعليم العالي في اتمام مسؤولياتك الوظيفية بالشكل الصحيح

	مهمة للغاية	مهمة لحد ما	غير مهمة لحد ما	غير مهمة للغاية
القدره على استخدام التكنولوجيا بشكل نقدي (استخدام التكنولوجيا)	◯	◯	◯	◯
القدره على التعرف على المشكلة وتشخيصها ومحاولة ايجاد الحلول المناسبة لها (حل المشكلة)	◯	◯	◯	◯
القدره على اتخاذ القرارات و اتخاذ الاجراءات المناسبة مباشرة (اتخاذ القرارات والمبادرة)	◯	◯	◯	◯
القدره على التعلم من، والعمل مع القوى العاملة الأجنبية وفهم وجهات النظر المختلفة والملائمة سريعا مع ثقافة المؤسسة (العمل مع ثقافات مختلفة)	◯	◯	◯	◯
القدره على أداء اكثر من مهمة بوقت واحد، وكذلك على تحمل المسؤولية تامة، والتعامل بمرونة مع الأخرين ومساعدتهم على التعلم، وارادة وثبي، وجاهز لتطوير وتحسين آداء عملي (الاحترافية وانضباطيات العمل)	◯	◯	◯	◯
القدره على الوعي والتنظيم الذاتي، القدره على العمل في سياق اكبر، القدره على فهم قدراتي الشخصية والحفاظ على آداء عمل عالي مستمر في وظيفتي(مهارات الكفاءه الذاتية)	◯	◯	◯	◯
القدره على كتابة المذكرات، وتقارير الإجتماعات، والرسائل، وتقارير العمل (بوضوح وفعالية (التواصل الكتابي	◯	◯	◯	◯
القدره على التواصل شفهيا وخاصة باللغة الانجليزية مع الأخرين وبشكل فعال وكذلك ابداء الأراء وتبادل المعلومات والتفاصيل بطريقة مؤثرة (التواصل الشفهي)	◯	◯	◯	◯
القدره على العمل كفريق لتحقيق الأهداف العملية وتطوير مناخ دائم للعمل كفريق وكذلك مساعدتهم على التعلم (العمل كفريق)	◯	◯	◯	◯
القدره على التخطيط السليم والالتزام بجدول زمني واقعي وتحديد الأولويات والأهداف لاتمام مهم عملي واستخدام موارد المؤسسة بشكل فعال (المهارات التنظيمية)	◯	◯	◯	◯
طموح لمواصلة العلم والمعرفة (التعلم مدى الحياة)	◯	◯	◯	◯
القدره على معرفة وتحليل نقاط القوى والضعف للمشاكل والتحديات والتعبير بوجهات نظر وحلول وتمييز الحقائق ذات	◯	◯	◯	◯

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الصلة بهذه المشاكل والتحديات (التفكير النقدي)				
القدرة على تقديم رؤية وأهداف لعملي وبلورة التغيرات الداخلية والخارجية والتي قد تؤثر على المؤسسة ، وتحفيز ومساعدة الآخرين وكذلك مراقبة أدائهم (العملي (القيادة	○	○	○	○
القدرة على تقبل الآراء الجديدة التعلم والتغير، والتصدي للتحديات التي قد تواجهني في عملي بمرونة (القدرة على (التكيف وادارة التغيير	○	○	○	○
القدرة على مراقبة عواطفي في مكان (العمل (الذكاء العاطفي	○	○	○	○
القدرة على اعطاء الأفكار بطريقة مبتكرة وخلاقة وكذلك دمج المعرفة العلمية في مختلف مجالات العمل (الأخرى (الابداع	○	○	○	○
القدرة على تقيم أكثر المشاكل والتحديات العملية المحتملة واقتراح الحلول المناسبة لها للحد من المخاطر الكامنة (ادارة تقيم (المخاطر	○	○	○	○

س 2:ما نوع المهارات والقدرات التي تقترح ان يتم التركيز عليها أكثر من غيرها من قبل كليات وأقسام ادارة الأعمال * بمؤسسات التعليم العالي في عمان؟

○ المهارات الملموسة أو الفنية:كمهارات الكمبيوتر ومهارة الكتابة...الخ

○ المهارات غير الملموسة أو غير الفنية: كمهارة القيادة وعمل القرارات وحل المشكلات....الخ

س3:أهم الاستراتيجيات التي أتبعتها لنقل وتقديم أدلة عن المهارات والقدرات والمعارف التي تمتلكها والمرتبطة للعمل بالقطاع * الخاص (الرجاء أختيار أثنين أدناه):

☐ اعداد السيرة الذاتية بالشكل الصحيح وأبراز أهم المهارات والمعارف التي تعلمتها

☐ معرض الوظئف بالمؤسسة التعليمية والمؤسسات الأخرى

☐ التسجيل بسجل القوى العاملة

☐ زيارة الشركات بمواقعها

☐ عن طريق اشراك أرباب العمل أثناء أداء للمشروع النهائي

☐ (أخرى)ورجى التحديد

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س4:اي من العبارات أدناه تعكس دور قطاع العمل الخاص في المساهمة بتنمية مهارات وقدرات ومعارف الطلاب المتصلة ✱
بالعمل وما ينبغي على المؤسسات التعليمية التركيز عليه: (الرجاء أختيار كل ما هو مناسب):

☐ المساهمة في تعزيز الواقع العملي في برامج الإدارة

☐ المساهمة في صناعة البرامج والمناهج الدراسية وابداء الآراء والأفكار لما يتطلبه قطاع العمل من مهارات ومعارف

☐ المشاركة في عمل المزيد من ورش العمل والمحاضرات وخاصة لطلاب السنة الأخيرة

☐ توفير المعدات والمستلزمات الخاصة بالواقع العملي للمؤسسات التعليمية لإبراز الجانب التطبيقي

☐ عمل منشورات وكتيبات خاصة لهم بما يحتاجونه من مهارات ومعارف في سوق العمل وتسليط الضوء على ما ينبغي ان يتعلمه الطالب كأخلاقيات العمل

☐ أخرى: يرجى التحديد

س5:ما مدى تنفيذ الأنشطة والمعايير اللاصفية التالية من قبل المؤسسة الأكاديمية أو القسم الذي تدرس به في سبيل تعزيز ✱
فرص العمل وتنمية المهارات والقدرات العملية والشخصية المتصلة بالعمل بالقطاع الخاص لديك

	لم يتم التنفيذ	تم التنفيذ
اعطاء العديد من الورش في كتابة السيرة الذاتية ومقابلات العمل	◯	◯
ممارسة مقابلات العمل الوهمية داخل وخارج المؤسسة التعليمية بمساعدة أرباب العمل بالقطاع الخاص	◯	◯
اكتساب الخبرة المهنية من خلال التدريب على رأس العمل او بالفترة الصيفية	◯	◯
اجراء تقييم للمهارات المطلوبة بسوق العمل والمتصلة بالتخصص	◯	◯
دعوة أرباب العمل ومسؤولي القطاع الخاص لإلقاء محاضرة أو ورشة عمل حول المهارات المطلوبة بسوق العمل بالقطاع الخاص وذات الصلة بالتخصص	◯	◯
تقديم النصائح والارشادات والخدمات المهنية للطلاب المقبلين على أنهاء دراستهم	◯	◯

س6:أ:يرجى توضيح ما اذا كنت تتفق مع العبارات التالية*

نعم اتفق	لا اتفق
○	○

بعد التحاقي بالعمل بالقطاع الخاص اكتشفت أن المهارات والقدرات والمعارف التي درستها وتعلمتها بالمؤسسة التعليمية متصلة تماما بالحاجات سوق العمل والوظيفة التي أعمل بها

○	○

بعد التحاقي بالعمل بالقطاع الخاص اكتشفت أن المهارات والقدرات والمعارف التي درستها وتعلمتها بالمؤسسة التعليمية متصلة لحد ما بالحاجات سوق العمل والوظيفة التي أعمل بها

○	○

بعد التحاقي بالعمل بالقطاع الخاص اكتشفت أن المهارات والقدرات والمعارف التي درستها وتعلمتها بالمؤسسة التعليمية غير متصلة تماما بالحاجات سوق العمل والوظيفة التي أعمل بها

س6:ب:وإذا أجبت ب "نعم" على العبارات الثانية أو الثالثة للسؤال السابق، الرجاء أختيار ثلاثة أسباب كانت سببا في وجود هذه الفجوة في المهارات والمعارف المطلوبة بالعمل (الرجاء أختيار ثلاثة فقط):

☐ العلاقة الضعيفة بين مؤسسات التعليم العالي وسوق العمل

☐ التدريب غير المناسب ولا فائدة منه

☐ البرامج التعليمية التي درستها بمجال تخصصي غير مناسبة

☐ الاهتمام بالجانب النظري أكثر من العملي أثناء التدريس

☐ خبرة عمل غير كافية

☐ المهارات والمعارف المطلوبة بسوق العمل لم اعطها بالشكل المطلوب

☐ أخرى: نرجى التحديد

... القسم الثاني: تصوراتكم عن دور مؤسسات التعليم العالي والأقسام الأكاديمية في

في هذا القسم أود معرفة تصوراتكم عن دور المؤسسة التعليمية أو القسم الذي أنتحقتم به أثناء الدراسة بالتعليم العالي وتوقعاتكم قبل الالتحاق بالدراسة بها

س7: أعتقد أن *

○ مؤسسات التعليم العالي لها دور بارز في اعداد الطلاب للعمل وهذا هو واجبها الرئيسي

○ مؤسسات التعليم العالي ليست جهات للتوظيف ودورها الرئيسي هو تطوير مهارات الطلاب ومعارفهم بغض النظر عن ما يحتاجه اصحاب العمل بالقطاع الخاص

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س8:الرجاء ترتيب الوظائف التالية لمؤسسات التعليم العالي وأقسام الادارة من الأكثر الى الأقل أهمية حيث ان 1=الأكثر *
أهمية و6=أقل أهمية:

	اعداد الطلاب لسوق العمل من خلال تطوير وتحسين معارفهم ومهاراتهم الخاصة والعامة المتصلة بسوق العمل
	اعداد الطلاب من خلال مطابقتهم ببيئة العمل المناسبة بالقطاع الخاص
	تثقيف الطلاب بمبادئ الادارة الرئيسية
	الاهتمام بالجانبين النظري والعملي من خلال اعطاء المزيد من الأمثلة الواقعية والخبرة العملية
	تطوير وتأهيل المحاضرين وتصميم المناهج بحسب متطلبات سوق العمل
	انتاج موظفين لديهم المسؤولية والأخلاق المتصلة بالعمل

س9ـأ:قبل الانضمام للمؤسسة التعليمية التي تدرس بها، كنت تتوقع في الغالب *

○ أن تكون متحنا بالمهارات والمعارف والقدرات العملية والشخصية المتصلة بالعمل

○ التطوير المعرفي فقط بغض النظر عن المهارات والقدرات العملية والشخصية المطلوبة بسوق العمل في القطاع الخاص

س9ـب:هل حصلت على ما توقعت *

○ نعم

○ لا

س10:هل كنت تعرف اذا كانت المؤسسة التي تدرس بها لديها "مركز خدمة التوظيف" لارشادك الى احتياجات التوظيف *
بالقطاع الخاص بالمستقبل

○ نعم، ولقد زرته سابقا

○ نعم، ولكنني لم أذهب لزيارته

○ لا أعرف

Undergraduate Employability and Skills Development-Graduates V2-

س11:يرجى الاشارة الى درجة التوافق مع البيانات التالية والتي تتعلق بتعزيزالتوظيف وتحسين المهارات الوظيفية للطالب *
بأستخدام المقياس أدناه

البيان	أوافق بشدة	أوافق لحد ما	لا أوافق لحد ما	لا أوافق بشدة
وجود مرجع خاص عن "الكفاءات والمهارات المطلوبة في سوق العمل" سوف يساعد الطلاب في تعزيز الفرص الوظيفية عند البحث عن عمل وكذلك في معرفة المهارات التي يرغب فيها أرباب العمل بالقطاع الخاص	○	○	○	○
تم اعدادي جيدا من قبل القسم الأكاديمي لمواجهة تحديات العمل المختلفة	○	○	○	○
عند دراستي، كنت على علم ودراية بالمهارات والمعارف المطلوبة بسوق العمل	○	○	○	○
أرباب العمل بالقطاع الخاص يركزون على المهارات والمعارف أكثر من الحصول على معدل أكاديمي عالي (GPA)	○	○	○	○
تم تقييم المهارات والمعارف والمرتبطة بالعمل عن طرق المحاضرين بالغرفة الصفية أثناء دراستي	○	○	○	○
فجوة (عدم تطبيق) المهارات والمعارف عند الخريجين تعبر من أهم الأسباب لعدم توظيفهم بسوق العمل الخاص	○	○	○	○
أخلاقيات العمل من أهم الصفات القيمة التي يقدرها أرباب العمل في سوق العمل الخاص	○	○	○	○
الوظائف بالقطاع الخاص والمرتبطة بقطاع الادارة أفضل بكثر وأكثر جاذبية للخريجين	○	○	○	○
أشعر ان البرامج الأكاديمية التي يقدمها القسم الأكاديمي ساعدني في تطوير المهارات المرتبطة بالعمل وفرصة الحصول على وظيفة امنة والقيام بـأداء جيد في وظيفتي المستقبلية	○	○	○	○
أشعر بأن القسم الأكاديمي والمؤسسة التعليمية التي ألتحقت بها عمل جيداً في تقديم الجانب النظري ولكن كان ضعيفا في تقديم الجانب العملي لتوفر الخبرة العملية المناسبة لسوق العمل	○	○	○	○
البرامج المتعلقة بتخصصي تحوي على الكثير من الأمثلة التي تعكس واقع سوق العمل كالتفكير السليم وحل المشكلات وعمل القرارت المناسبة	○	○	○	○
البرامج الأكاديمية في تخصصي يجب ان تركز أكثر على ما يتم طلبه من أرباب العمل بالقطاع الخاص من مهارات ومعارف وان تحوي على مزيد من التطبيقات العملية	○	○	○	○

...القسم الثالث: فرص التدريب والتطوير التي حصلت عليها أثناء الدراسة بمؤسسة الت

س12:للحصول على الفوائد الكاملة وأكتساب الخبرة العملية من التدريب أثناء الدراسة، أقترح أن تكون فترة التدريب من *

◯ من 3-0 اشهر

◯ من 4-6 اشهر

◯ من 7 اشهر الى سنة

◯ اكثر من سنة واحدة

س13:هل تقدمت الى أي فرصة تدريب أثناء الاجازات أو فترة الصيف؟ *

◯ نعم

◯ لا

اذا كان خيارك "لا". فما هي الأسباب وراء ذلك؟

◯

س14:هل حصلت على فرصة تدريب أثناء دراستك بالمؤسسة التعليمية؟ *

◯ نعم

◯ لا

اذا أجبت ب "نعم" السؤال السابق، فالرجاء الاجابة على الأسئلة التالية:

اما اذا أجبت ب "لا" فاذهب مباشرة الى القسم الرابع

س14-أ:ما نوع التدريب الذي قمت به أثناء دراستك

◯ داخلي (داخل المؤسسة التعليمية)

◯ خارجي (خارج المؤسسة التعليمية)

◯ الأثنين معا

س14-ب:الخبرة التي حصلت عليها بشكل عام هي

◯ مناسبة ومفيدة تماما

◯ مناسبة ومفيدة لحد ما

◯ غير مناسبة وغير مفيدة تماما

س14-ج:المسؤوليات التي أوكلت اليك

◯ مرتبطة تماما بتخصصي

◯ مرتبطة لحد ما بتخصصي

◯ غير مرتبطة تماما بتخصصي

القسم الرابع: رحلة البحث عن عمل والتوظيف

في هذا القسم من الدراسة، أود الحصول على خبرتك المتعلقة في مرحلة البحث عن عمل. النتائج ستساعد أخوانك وأخواتك على مقاعد الدراسة بتخصص الادارة لتطوير مهاراتهم ومعارفهم العملية وتجعلهم على أستعداد لتلبية احتياجات سوق العمل بالقطاع الخاص

س15:الرجاء ترتيب العوامل التالية والتي من الممكن كان لها الأثر الأكبر في تأمين وظيفة مستقبلية لك من الأكثر الى الأقل *
أهمية حيث أن 1=الأكثر أهمية و 5=الأقل أهمية

	العوامل الشخصية كالهيئة والشخصية المتزنة
	الخلفية التعليمية كالمعرفة والمهارات والنتائج الأكاديمية
	مهارات الاتصال كالكتابة والتحدث بلباقة وطلاقة
	الخبرة العملية كالخبرة ذات الصلة بالعمل والوعي بالعمل
	العوامل العائلية والاجتماعية كالمعرفة بمسؤول التوظيف

س17:رتب أهم خمسة حوافز شدتك للعمل بالقطاع الخاص من الأكثر الى الأقل أهمية حيث أن 1=الأكثر أهمية و 5=الأقل *
أهميه

	الحصول على راتب جيد
	يتم فيها تأمين وظيفتي
	تكون قريبة من سكني
	الحصول على اجازات أكثر
	ساعات عمل قصيرة
	بها استحقاقات تقاعد جيدة
	فيها المزيد من الفرص للترقيات
	وجود بيئة عمل ودية
	وجود التحديات بيئة العمل
	بيئة عمل يتم فيها تقدير الجهود المبذولة
	وجود قيم أداء عمل عادل ومناسب
	وجود فرص عديدة للتدريب والتطوير
	اعطاء فرص لمواصلة الدراسات العليا بالمستقبل

(س18:في اعتقادي أن المصدر المناسب للبحث عن فرص وظيفية مناسبة وفي مجال دراستي هو (أختر اجابة واحدة فقط*

○ الاعلانات الوظيفية عن طريق المؤسسات بالجرائد والمجلات او مواقع الشركات

○ المعارف الشخصية

○ مكتب التوجيه الوظيفي بالمؤسسة الأكاديمية

○ مؤسسات التوظيف الخاصة

○ سجل القوى العاملة

○ معرض الوظائف

○ زيارة الشركات

○ أخرى: يرجى التحديد

س19:قبل أن تتوظف وبعد أنتهاء الدراسة بالمرحلة الجامعية، هل فكرت في وظيفة معينة للحصول عليها؟*

○ بالتأكيد، وكنت على علم بنوع الوظيفة التي أود الحصول عليها وأشعر أنني أخترت الوظيفة والتي تناسب التخصص الذي درسته

○ بعض الأفكار عنها، ولكنني لست متأكدا من الاتجاه الذي أريد أن أسلكه

○ ليست لدي أي فكرة عنها في ذلك الوقت

س20:وظيفتي الحالية التي أشغلها*

○ متناسبة تماما مع تخصصي الأكاديمي الذي درسته

○ متناسبة الى حد ما مع تخصصي الأكاديمي الذي درسته

○ غير متناسبة تماما مع تخصصي الأكاديمي الذي درسته

س21:وظيفتي الحالية التي أشغلها*

○ تتناسب مع المؤهل الأكاديمي المطلوب لشغلها

○ المؤهل الأكاديمي الذي أمتلكه أعلى من المؤهل الأكاديمي المطلوب لشغلها

○ المؤهل الأكاديمي الذي أمتلكه أقل من المؤهل الأكاديمي المطلوب لشغلها

س22:فيما يتعلق بتلبية مسؤوليات وظيفتي الحالية، أنا*

○ راضي تماما

○ راضي لحد ما

○ غير راضي لحد ما

○ غير راضي تماما

س23:أهم ثلاثة مقترحات لأصحاب القرار بالتعليم العالي لتأهيل المهارات والمعارف للطلاب والمتصلة بسوق العمل *

☐ تسهيل التواصل بين مؤسسات التعليم وسوق العمل

☐ تحسين جودة التعليم العالي عن طريق الاعتماد الأكاديمي

☐ توفير المحاضرين ذو الكفاءة العالية وأصحاب الخبرة المهنية العالية

☐ زيادة الاستثمار في التعليم العالي

☐ توفير المواد اللازمة لتنفيذ العمل التطبيقي في الغرف الصفية والمختبرات

س24:أهم ثلاثة مقترحات التالية للأقسام الادارة بالمؤسسات الأكاديمية والموظفي الأكاديميين لغرض تأهيل المهارات *
والمعارف للطلاب و المتصلة بسوق العمل

☐ الموازنة بين الجانب النظري والتطبيقي أثناء المحاضرات الصفية

☐ (تطوير وتحديث جودة التعليم (تحديث البرامج المتصلة بالإدارة واستخدام الطريقة الحديثة للتدريس والاستفادة من المرافق المتوفرة بالمؤسسة التعليمية

☐ توفير البرامج الأكاديمية المناسبة واحتياجات سوق العمل من مهارات ومعارف مختلفة

☐ توطيد العلاقة مع مؤسسات القطاع الخاص واشراكهم في تطوير البرامج وإعطاء الورش والمحاضرات للطلاب

☐ النظر بالمعايير الأكاديمية الخاصة بالبرامج المقدمة ومقارنتها بالمعايير الدولية الأخرى

س25:أهم ثلاثة مقترحات لطلاب السنوات الأخيرة في مجال الادارة والمتوزعين بمختلف المؤسسات الأكاديمية لغرض تأهيل *
المهارات والمعارف المتصلة بسوق العمل:

☐ القيام بعمل مقابلات وخاصة مع أرباب العمل بسوق العمل الخاص أو مع من لديهم الخبرة بالمقابلات الناجحة للتوظيف اتباع أسلوب التعلم الذاتي وعدم الاعتماد على البرامج الأكاديمية التي يقدمها القسم الأكاديمي فقط

☐ تنمية المهارات الشخصية والأخرى المتعلقة بالعمل في الفصل الدراسي

☐ زيارة الشركات لمعرفة ما يتم احتياجه من مهارات ومعارف متصلة ومطلوبة بتخصص الإدارة والوظائف التابعة له

☐ استغلال فرص التدريب سواء أكانت التدريب على رأس العمل أو التدريب الصيفي أو التدريب خلال العطل لكسب المزيد من الخبرة العملية المناسبة والمتصلة بالتخصص

☐ تصميم السيرة الذاتية الناجحة والمناسبة للوظيفة التي تقدم اليها

☐ متابعة الدراسة العليا كالماجستير

☐ اختيار البرامج والتخصصات المطلوبة بسوق العمل

☐ الحصول على معدل أكاديمي عالي

البيانات الشخصية

الاسم *

[_____]

الوظيفة الحالية *

[_____]

الجنس *

◯ ذكر

◯ أنثى

الفئة العمرية *

◯ اقل من 25 سنة

◯ من 25-35 سنة

◯ اكثر من 35 سنة

المستوى التعليمي *

◯ الدبلوم

◯ دبلوم عالي

◯ بكالوريوس

(أخرى (توضح التحديد

المستطيل

سنة انهاء الدراسة الجامعية *

◯ 2009/2010

◯ 2010/2011

◯ 2011/2012

◯ 2012/2013

اسم المؤسسة التي تعمل لديها *

نوع نشاط المؤسسة التجاري *

موقع الشركة الرئيسي *

سنوات الخبرة لديك بالعمل بالمؤسسة التي تعمل بها *

◯ اقل من 6 اشهر

◯ من 7 اشهر الى سنة

◯ من سنة الى سنتين

◯ اكثر من سنتين

المدة التي قضيتها بين الانتهاء من الدراسة وحتى حصولك على الوظيفة الأولى بالقطاع الخاص *

◯ اقل من 6 اشهر

◯ من 6 اشهر الى سنة

◯ من سنة الى سنتين

◯ اكثر من سنتين

كم عدد المحاولات التي أجريتها للتواصل مع مؤسسات القطاع الخاص لتقديم طلب الحصول على وظيفة ✱

⭕ 0-4

⭕ 5-9

⭕ 10-14

⭕ أكثر من 15

أنت ✱

⭕ موظف بدوام جزئي

⭕ موظف بدوام كامل

⭕ (أخرى (يرجى التحديد

هنا نهاية المسح، ولكم خزيل الشكر والاحترام

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Sultanate of Oman

Ministry of Manpower

Directorate General of Planning and
Development

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

سلطنة عمان
وزارة القوى العاملة
المديرية العامة للتخطيط والتطوير

Ref. No. : ١٤٩١

Date : 31/07/2013

الرقم :
التاريخ :
الموافق :

To Whom It May Concern

This is to inform you that, Abdallah Khalfan Hamood Al-Azri-
(P.No: 02666780 is a PhD student attending Brunel University, West
London, UK; for his program in Education Research under the title
"Skills and attributes does Business and Management undergraduate
need: Evidence from student perceptions, academic perspective and
employer expectations in Oman".

Due to the importance of enriching the field of education locally, the
researcher requests you to provide him the necessary assistance in
collecting the needed data to complete his research.

Thank you for your cooperation and ongoing support.

Yours sincerely,

Issa Hamdan Al-Amri
Deputy Head of Human resource Dept
Ministry of Manpower

Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Higher Education
Directorate General of Scholarships
Department of Postgraduate Studies

سلطنة عُمان
وزارة التعليم العالي
المديرية العامة للبعثات
دائرة الدراسات العليا

No.e : ....

Date : .... No: D.P.S / 275   /2013
Date: 27/05/2013

الرقم : د.ع/......................
التاريخ : ....
الموافق : ....
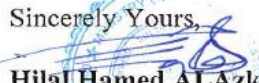
To Whom It May Concern

After compliments,

I would like to inform you that **Abdallah Khalfan Hamood AL-Azri (P.No.: 02666780)** is a Student attendant Brunel University in United Kingdom for his PhD program in Education Research under the title(**Skills and attributes does Business and Management undergraduate need: Evidence from student perceptions, academic perspective and employer expectations in Oman**) so please provide him the necessary help and assistant needed to complete his research.

Sincerely Yours,

Hilal Hamed ALAzki
Director of Postgraduate Studies
Ministry of Higher Education

Appendix (8): Audit Trail (What could private employers do to contribute to the development of the relationship with higher education suppliers to promote the employability of BMA in Oman?)

HEI	
General comments from all interviews	- HEIs role is to give theory and industry need to improve their practice and skills - HEIS are too focused on theory in their curriculum and this need to be changed by adding practicality in the classroom (changing the way of teaching) - Students do not fight for jobs and not performing well as the jobs available in the market (students thinking and mentality), so not focusing on learning and developing their skills but learning theory only - Students should be dependable on themselves in doing their work and seeking the knowledge and listen to teacher's instructions in the classroom - Academics are too focused on hand-outs material (no particular references such as a book for bot academics and students) that end up to limited knowledge given to students as the academics expect more practice from their students - HE system need to be changed in involving more practice than focusing on theory (change becomes gradually and not at once) - Grading system should be linked to practice and not only theory - Staff should not be limited in the material in the classroom - Training should not be allowed in public sector (with some exceptions) - Students need to be evaluated during their training - Training period should be graded - HE system should be unified by MOHE (exact topic to be provided by all staff within a department to all students) 'HEIs recruit anybody to teach students as some staff are not qualified and relevant to teach managerial subjects (criteria of selecting expatriate staff should be reviewed) - Hand-outs should be replaced by as an updated reference book - Students do not search for knowledge and depend on hand-outs only (memorizing not learning) - There is a need for common rules and regulations for preparing students for the labour market by government - Academic staff make it easy for students, so they do not search for knowledge and when they go to work, employers do not make it easy for them as they are not physically prepared.

	➤ Language is one of the main challenges for staff to make it understandable for students ➤ HEIs rules are not applied equally to all students, so by this it's not a learning environment by marks and grades environment. 'It is not student's mistake to have these behaviours due to rules flexibility and not equal for all. ➤ Quality assurance system should focus extensively on industry and training of students. ➤ Academics need to make pressure and motivate students to make their best and do whatever requested by them in the classroom ➤ 'There is very less interaction between HEIs and industry and the major reason is no policy in HEIs regarding this'. There is a need for a proper policy for inviting employers by HEIs. ➤ The quality of some academic staff is low as the neighbour countries increase the salary to bring the best of them such as UAE ➤ HE should have a policy of proper training shared with industry ➤ No limits and competition of seats in HE specialization' ➤ Extra-curricular activities almost null due to the time of semesters, different clubs such as business and accounting should be linked to classroom teaching issues. It should be controlled and managed as specific plans and dates for it ➤ Students and teachers need to become together to contribute in different activities ➤ Academics are doing other tasks and not the main task (teaching) such as registering, assigning students in OJT as the government pay much of money for not implementing the main task of hiring academics (staff cannot review curriculum, update courses, no do research, and not focusing on the primary role of as teachers). ➤ More of interaction is needed between industry and HEIs in programs, exchanging visits, workshops in proper system ➤ Students should be familiar with employers' needs by interacting them at the workplace ➤ High load on teachers due to other administrative works assigned for them such as advisory roles, registration and OJT works and shortage of staff ➤ Training officers should be motivated by Omani staff as they know employers ➤ HE should think of a policy to effectively review the curriculum in HEIs ➤ Students need to be exposed to industry environment to learn practice ➤ Seminars, examples, case studies are good techniques to develop student's skills ➤ 'Project related industry' should be motivated and enhanced by HEIs in corporation with industry

	➢ Colleges and universities need to promote competitions among students to enhance their abilities and talents ➢ Students should learn the sufficient knowledge and not only focusing on grades and marks. ➢ The teaching style should be changed to focus more on practice ➢ More grades for practical knowledge ➢ More exposure to the outside world should be offered to students
Interview 1 (Q3)	➢ Industry should provide more internship training opportunities to students and should show their interest in doing it seriously and effectively ➢ Industry should show their interest in curriculum revision and development (adding, cancelling and developing). HEIs just got few feedback from some companies ➢ Industry should contact HEIs for discussing their needs of skills and knowledge ➢ Industry should provide proper training relevant to students specialization and should accept high number of students (setting policy or plan for training) ➢ 'Companies are not ready to give training and do not understand its philosophy and students need to impart their skills

Interview 2 (Q3)	➢ Industry need to provide more effective training and internship opportunities to learn real life examples and cases
	   ✓ Not give training in student's specialization
	   ✓ No fixed plan just random plan for training
	   ✓ Evaluation is general
	   ✓ No payment for training (if they pay, so they need outcomes from trainees and to have high quality training)
	   ✓ Not effective and actual training
	   ✓ No exposure in student's area
	   ✓ No specific positions
	   ✓ Not supervised properly
	   ✓ Expectations are not met
	   ✓ Employers just count students for Omanization objectives
	➢ Industry need to discuss the skills shortages/gaps with HEIs
	➢ Industry should give enough time for HEIs and students to discuss different issues such as needs, expectations and training

Interview 3 (Q3)	➤ Industry need to help HEIs to review and develop their curriculum
	➤ Industry should break the rules in visits and providing help to students and HEIs.
Interview 4 (Q3)	➤ Industry should take part in curriculum delivery and development
	➤ Industry try to participate effectively in career fairs and open days in HEIs
	➤ Industry should promote and facilitate the 'industry related projects' done by students
	➤ Industry should exchange knowledge with HEIs and students
	➤ Industry need to provide more training opportunities during study and summer relevant to student's area
	➤ Industry should accept the invitation of HEIs to have a conference discussing different issues with students and academics
	➤ Industry need to have interest in HE students
	➤ Industry should orient the students at the workplace
	➤ Industry should participate in HEIs' committees
	➤ Students need to take initiative to look for information and knowledge
	➤ The insider skills need to be taken out from students by different extra-curricular activities (personality, communication, soft skills)
Required	➤ Send online survey
	➤ Ask for 'graduate attributes and profile

Appendix (9): Ethics Approval Letter

Head of School of Sport & Education
Professor Ian Rivers

Brunel
UNIVERSITY
L O N D O N

Mr Abdallah AlAzri
PhD (Education) Research Student
School of Sport and Education
Brunel University

9th September 2013

Dear Abdallah

RE44-12 Skills and Attributes does business and management undergraduates need: evidence from student perceptions, academic perspective and employer expectations in Oman

I am writing to confirm the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Sport and Education received your application connected to the above mentioned research study. Your application has been independently reviewed to ensure it complies with the University/School Research Ethics requirements and guidelines.

The Chair, acting under delegated authority, is satisfied with the decision reached by the independent reviewers and is pleased to confirm there is no objection on ethical grounds to grant ethics approval to the proposed study.

Any changes to the protocol contained within your application and any unforeseen ethical issues which arise during the conduct of your study must be notified to the Research Ethics Committee for review.

On behalf of the Research Ethics Committee for the School of Sport and Education, I wish you every success with your study.

Yours sincerely

Bradslaw.
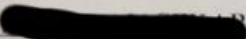
PP Dr Richard J Godfrey
Chair of Research Ethics Committee
School Of Sport and Education

THE QUEEN'S
ANNIVERSARY PRIZES
FOR HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION
2011

Appendix (10): Consent Form (Interviews)

Participant Consent Form

I, ████████████ give consent to my participation in the following research project.

Title: **Employability and Employability Skills of Business Management and Administration Undergraduates in Oman: Academics', Students', Graduates', and Employers' Perceptions**

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

1. The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s.

3. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without prejudice and without affecting my relationship with the researcher.

4. I understand that my involvement is strictly confidential and no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity.

5. I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary – I am not under any obligation to consent.

6. I understand that I can withdraw my consent at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that any audio visual/ recording will be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study.

7. I consent to: (please highlight/tick)

	Yes	No
Audio-taping	✓	
Receiving Feedback	✓	

If you answered YES to the "Receiving Feedback Question (iii)", please provide your details i.e. email address.

Email: ████████████████████

Date: Signed: ████████████

| 1 | May 24, 2012 | Abdallah Khalfan Al-Azri | School of Education |

| Brunel University, UK

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Appendix (11): Follow-up with interviewees

<u>**Follow-up with Participants (Interviews)**</u>

<u>Interviewer 2</u> ⬛

- HEIs role is to give theory and industry need to improve their practice and skills
- HEIS are too focused on theory in their curriculum and this need to be changed by adding practicality in the classroom (changing the way of teaching)
- Students do not fight for jobs and not performing well as the jobs available in the market (students thinking and mentality), so not focusing on learning and developing their skills but learning theory only
- Students should be dependable on themselves in doing their work and seeking the knowledge and listen to teacher's instructions in the classroom
- Academics are too focused on hand-outs material (no particular references such as a book for bot academics and students) that end up to limited knowledge given to students as the academics expect more practice from their students
- HE system need to be changed in involving more practice than focusing on theory (change becomes gradually and not at once)
- Grading system should be linked to practice and not only theory
- Staff should not be limited in the material in the classroom
- Training should not be allowed in public sector (with some exceptions)
- Students need to be evaluated during their training
- Training period should be graded
- Industry should provide more internship training opportunities to students and should show their interest in doing it seriously and effectively
- Industry should show their interest in curriculum revision and development (adding, cancelling and developing). HEIs just got few feedback from some companies
- Industry should contact HEIs for discussing their needs of skills and knowledge
- Industry should provide proper training relevant to students specialization and should accept high number of students (setting policy or plan for training)
- 'Companies are not ready to give training and do not understand its philosophy and students need to impart their skills

By giving the above information, do you feel distressed by being a part of my study?

- ○ Yes
- ✓ ○ No

Signature: ⬛

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Appendix (12): The stages of embedding skills and knowledge in a curriculum with the collaboration of businesses.

HEIs

Stage One: Knowledge of general and specific graduate attributes demanded by the labour market through the cooperation with the private sector practitioners (external stakeholder) in the country.

Through surveys, informal meetings, and research

Industry

HEIs

Industry

Stage Two: Ensuring both of general and specific-discipline competencies are embedded throughout the curriculum in different levels of education. Industry should play a big role.

Stage Three: Ensure these skills are the main outcomes for course offered courses' outcomes, and set assessment criteria for these skills

HEIs

Stage Four: Train academics on teaching, assessing and encouraging these skills to students

Workshops

Meetings

Visiting

Classes

Appendix (13): English Language and Employability Framework (Australia)

ELP and Employability Framework

ELP developmental continuum	Upon entry Transition to higher education study ELP as general, entry-level academic and social communication language ability	During study Continued engagement with disciplinary teaching, learning and assessment tasks ELP as disciplinary academic, workplace and social communicative language ability	Upon Exit Readiness to enter professional workplace ELP as professional and social communicative language ability
ELP for learning *Curricula*	First year orientation and transition programs for ELP Foundation subjects in first year	Subject curriculum integrating ELP and disciplinary learning and assessment Subject curriculum design for fostering interaction between local and international students Units of study focusing on ELP	Capstone experiences
Co-curricula	Student advising First year orientation and transition support programs for ELP	Various academic language and learning programs and workshops Individual tutoring/mentoring	
ELP for employability *Curricula*	Units of study focusing on ELP for the workplace	Whole of program design for professional ELP Units of study focusing on ELP for the workplace Work Integrated Learning	Capstone projects/subject Hurdle Assessment on ELP for employability
Co-curricula	First year orientation and transition activities for ELP and or employment/careers	Workshops and activities on improving ELP for employability	
Other career support	First year orientation programs to raise awareness of activities to enhance employability	Volunteer programs Mentoring programs Workshops on improving employability Social peer mentoring programs Career mentor programs Work experience within the institution	CV writing and interview preparation Careers and employment support

Resource: English Language Proficiency and Employability Framework for Australian Higher Education Institutions. *Centre for the Study of Higher Education.*

Appendix (14): Effective Training Model, Learner Focused in Oman.

Effective Training Model: Learner Focused

Before

Academic Supervisor

o Design an effective student file (including trainee information, academic institution's contacts, training objectives and needs, skills and knowledge embedded in curriculum, daily assessment and adequate final evaluation system) to be given to the field supervisor.
o Discuss the student's file with the field supervisor.
o Develop action plan.
o Design visits schedule and write meeting minutes.
o Assess trainee needs and expectations and discuss them with the field supervisor at the early days of training.
o Assign students to companies and take companies' contacts.

Field Supervisor/mentor

o Set-up a fixed action plan.
o Discuss expectations with the academic supervisor.
o Assess trainee's needs and expectations of skills and knowledge.
o Assign sub-supervisor, if needed.

Between

Academic Supervisor

o Continuously and effectively communicate with field supervisor (e.g. visits, calls...etc.).
o Communicate effectively with trainee to ensure that he/she attain the best advantage of training opportunity.
o Ensure the relevance of training to trainee.
o Report the problems facing trainees to the top authorities (e.g. head of department or college's top management...etc) such as: improper supervision, no work plan and place provided, improper follow-up by field supervisor.

Field Supervisor/mentor

o Assess trainee's weaknesses and strengths and objectives.
o Develop action plan including orientation program, place and assigned responsibilities
o Assess trainee's needs and expectations of skills and knowledge.
o Assign professional tasks to trainee.
o Daily evaluation of trainee 'student file'.
o Observe trainee and report problems to the academic supervisor such as trainee's attendance, bad behaviours and not following the rules, leaving company before time, unmotivated to learn, wasting time...etc.

After

Academic Supervisor

o Assess and discuss the feedback or a report on student's training for improvements (student's file).
o Ensure the outcomes and objectives are achieved, if not; why?
o Survey student trainees on their training.
o Request a reflective report or a poster from student (Need guidelines).
o Celebrate individual and group training accomplishments with the collaboration of private companies.

Field Supervisor/mentor

o Submit a report to the academic supervisor.
o Celebrate trainee achievements.