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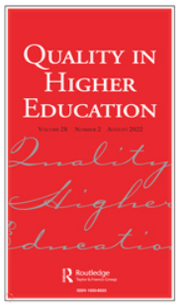

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Ensuring quality of offshore programmes: views and expectations of key stakeholders in Oman

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ABSTRACT

Developing offshore programmes provided by private higher education institutions through affiliation agreements with international university partners is a key strategy to assure the quality of programmes in the Sultanate of Oman. However, there is limited research on these programmes from the perspectives of Ministry of Higher Education officials, managers, academics and students of private higher education institutions. This study uses gap analysis to explore these key stakeholders' expectations and perceptions of the quality of offshore programmes in Oman. It reveals that dependence on International University Partners to monitor their offshore programmes compromises quality because local academics have limited involvement in developing programmes and students get limited feedback on their coursework. Students' lack of English proficiency also makes them struggle with offshore programme requirements. Key stakeholders argue for embedding Omani cultural values in the offshore programmes without compromising their academic qualification credentials and enhancing students' learning experience to become global citizens.

KEYWORDS

Offshore programmes; academic affiliation; international university partner; internationalisation; private higher education institution quality assurance

Introduction

This study explores key stakeholders' understanding and expectations of the quality of offshore programmes offered by private higher education institutions in the Sultanate of Oman. It considers that there are a growing number of offshore programmes in Oman and that quality is not a priority for some private higher education institutions due to pressures of being profitable (Wilkins, 2010). The offshore programme, here, refers to a higher education programme that crosses national borders and takes place in a host country

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through a formal affiliation agreement between an international university partner in the source country and a higher education institution in the host country (Stella & Bhushan, 2011). The key stakeholders selected for the study include managers (deans and heads of departments), academics and MBA students of private higher education institutions, as well as Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) officials who had responsibility for the delivery of offshore programmes in Oman.

This study considers that the assurance of quality in offshore programmes is a complex construct due to the influence of various factors, contextual demands and cultural pressures (Parri, 2006; Westerheijden *et al*., 2007; Ryan, 2015). In particular, language differences, societal mindset and territorial norms present challenges for international university partners. The expectations and demands of key and locally-based stakeholders are essential to assure and assess the quality of offshore programmes (Houston, 2008), as their expectations may run counter to the economic rationale of private higher education institutions to generate revenue for the international university partner (Alsharari, 2018).

Existing studies have mainly focused on student perspectives by measuring student satisfaction and their perception of quality (Lapina *et al*., 2016; Prakash, 2018; Sharabati *et al*., 2019). There are limited studies that explore the views and expectations of key stakeholders about offshore programmes. This may be attributed to market competition, the need for privacy of financial information, the short history of offshore programmes and the lack of information exchanges (Lane, 2011). There is also a paucity of studies on the views of academics about the quality of offshore programmes, whereas most studies focus on their views of quality issues in the higher education sector in general (Nasser & Fresko, 2002). The lack of understanding of key stakeholders' views, together with the rapidly increasing number of offshore programmes in Oman has brought constraints for monitoring their performance and assessing their alignment with policies formulated by the MoHE and Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA). In this context, understanding the perception and expectation of key stakeholders about the quality of offshore programmes by the private higher education institutions in Oman is timely and important.

Offshore programmes in Oman

Privatisation of higher education in Oman is promoted by the state to accommodate the increasing demand for higher education opportunities, given the limited capacity of the few public institutions to accommodate increasing numbers of secondary school graduates (Salerno, 2004; Al Shmeli, 2009; Baporikar & Shah, 2012). The MoHE in Oman was relatively new when

the first private higher education institution was established. The MoHE has developed a quality system that required all private higher education institutions (except private universities) to affiliate with international university partners to ensure that different educational activities are in line with best international practices, for example requiring that all academic programmes are benchmarked with similar programme overseas.

Currently, 28 out of 47 higher education institutions are private in Oman. Most of the private institutions have affiliations with international university partners in the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK). Six private higher education institutions are affiliated with Arab universities (from Lebanon, Egypt, Kuwait and Jordan). Higher education institutions in India and Malaysia are also active collaborators, especially in postgraduate offshore programmes. Private higher education institutions in Oman offer over 350 programmes, which constitute around 43% of the total tertiary programmes (Higher Education Admission Centre, 2020). The programmes provided by private higher education institutions are mostly focused on human resource management, business administration and information technology.

The affiliation system in Oman allows private higher education institutions to affiliate or collaborate with one or more international university partners who are responsible jointly or solely in awarding or validating the final qualification (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015). The affiliation puts emphasis on building a collaborative framework that requires the local institution to follow exactly or partially the partner university's educational system. This requirement is in line with the government's agenda to expedite the maturity of the educational system in Oman and to promote quality education. In addition, the government is striving to improve the quality of education to provide the labour market with competent graduates who can compete in the local and global markets (Al Harthy, 2012).

Research reveals that the actual outcomes achieved by offshore programmes failed partially to meet the planned educational goals and government agenda (Al Shanfari, 2017). Some private higher education institutions prioritise the commercial values gained from offshore programmes by maximising their annual student intake at the expense of education quality and student learning outcomes. Offshore programmes are appealing to many students in Oman. A key reason is that they offer foreign degrees with minimum cost. These students get enrolled in private institutions with minimum entry requirements and thus affect the overall education quality. This hampers the national objectives of capacity building and quality enhancement (Baporikar & Shah, 2012). These concerns suggest a need to explore and understand the challenges that Omani offshore programmes are facing to assure and enhance their quality.

Quality challenges

Quality is a contested concept in higher education. Two main approaches have been used to define it by focusing on outcomes and indicators. One approach involves constructing a broad definition that stresses one central goal or outcome (Scott, 2010; Tam, 2014). The other approach defines quality based on specific indicators that reflect desired inputs and outputs (Tambi *et al*., 2008; Stankevičienė & Vaiciukevičiūtė, 2016). It has become a common practice to establish a threshold for the standards that must be surpassed to meet the 'quality' norms (Westerheijden, 1999; Martin, 2007).

There is a view that quality assurance procedures in offshore programmes take only a partial consideration of the factors and parameters that influence education quality (Lapina *et al*., 2016), with little consideration of the cultural context (Ehlers, 2009; Sursock, 2011). The lack of English resources about local cultural and leadership models coupled with the influence of accreditation requirements hampers the diffusion of cultural components into the higher education system (ElKaleh, 2019). Its dual role as a transnational business and a social service provider also increases the challenges that offshore programmes face in assuring their quality (Healey, 2016). The key challenges include the complexity of the accreditation requirements, the ambiguity of quality assurance processes, difficulties in localising the programme and conflicts between accountability and autonomy within institutions (Srikanthan, 2002; Donn & Al Manthri, 2012; Healey, 2016).

The accreditation of offshore programmes is a major challenge for Private higher education institutions in Oman, as the host institution has to comply with the quality assurance requirements of both home and sending countries, which can take a heavy toll on the human and financial resources of the host institution (Ryan, 2015; Al Abri, 2016; Shams, 2016). There are many different affiliation models operating in Oman: branch campuses, double/joint degree, twinning (localised), franchised programmes, validated programmes, distance or open learning (e-learning), affiliation for quality assurance and affiliate as a consultant (Trevor-Roper *et al*., 2013). This plethora of different affiliation models increases the complexity of accreditation, as each model has its own perspectives on how the education system should be structured, the extent programmes can be adapted to a national setting (programme localisation) and the rigorousness required to award the final degree. Moreover, programme localisation involves the development of curriculum, teaching staff and research (Healey, 2016; Lane, 2011). This complexity also increases the difficulty for Omani authorities to develop a standardised quality assurance framework for private higher education institutions. This is further exacerbated as the

Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) focuses on institutional accreditation activities, while programme accreditation activities are not yet taking place. The OAAA was established in 2001 and is the national quality assurance authority. It accredits all higher education institutions and their programmes in Oman to ensure they are meeting international standards, with a focus on the quality assurance activities at the institutional level. The lack of national programme accreditation has resulted in a heavy reliance on the international university partners to assure the quality of the programmes they offer in Oman. As a result, standards vary depending on the individual partner's requirements (Al Harthy, 2012).

Research reveals that the demand for accountability by local authorities and the desire for autonomy by academics can create tensions between the higher education institutions and the Omani authorities (Srikanthan, 2002). For example, hosting private higher education institutions desire the freedom to govern and manage the development of a sustainable programme, while Omani authorities seek to align the institution's performance with national objectives, social goals and economic directions.

Demands for programme localisation by a host country can create tensions in the design and development of curriculum, as it is difficult to develop a programme that is responsive to international needs while observing local social norms and values (Knight, 2007). Offshore higher education institutions may not provide the same level of education in an overseas setting as they require in the parent campus (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2014). This is because operating offshore programmes in host countries can face a range of challenges such as language barriers, different academic requirement and different societal mindsets and territorial norms (Knight, 2007).

Private higher education institutions can also face challenges to localise offshore programmes to meet the host country's needs and objectives (Healey, 2016; Lane, 2011). They are expected to manage the conflicting demands and interests of other stakeholders concerning localising curriculum and teaching staff, funding research, being profitable, enhancing accountability and assuring quality. Such pressures may manifest when international university partners desire to reduce the cost of programmes delivery to maximise profit whilst taking the lead in developing curriculum and assuring quality.

Methodology

This study aims to identify the understanding and expectations of key stakeholders on the quality of offshore programmes offered by private higher

education institutions in the Sultanate of Oman. It is developed around two main research questions:

1. What are key stakeholders' perceptions and expectations of quality for Oman's offshore programmes?
2. What improvements are needed to enhance the quality of offshore programmes from the perspectives of key stakeholders?

Face-to-face interviews, focus groups and online questionnaires were used as the primary methods for data collection. MoHE officials and managers of private higher education institutions were interviewed, while focus groups were conducted with students. An online questionnaire was used to collect the views of private higher education institution academics about the quality of offshore programmes.

There were two stages of data collection. In the first stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three officials from the MoHE and six top managers from private higher education institutions to explore their expectations and perceptions of the quality of offshore programmes. A semi-structured interview was used because it enables participants to express their opinions and insights (Smith & Osborn, 2008) through open-ended discussion (Yin, 2011). Officials from the MoHE were chosen for this study because they represent the main regulatory body of higher education and are responsible for licensing and approving different offshore programmes. The private higher education institutions managers are responsible for managing the academic affiliation agreements and monitoring the delivery of offshore programmes in their institutions. They were selected due to leadership position and ability to influence their institutions. Their perspectives are crucial for understanding the practices and challenges in assuring the quality of offshore programmes.

The second stage involved six focus groups with 41 MBA students and an online questionnaire completed by 24 lecturers to explore their experiences and expectations of offshore programmes. Academics were chosen as they teach offshore programmes and are responsible for the quality of teaching and learning practices. Students are selected as they are the direct recipients and the end-user of offshore programmes. This wide range of participation of multiple groups increases the confidence and reliability of data collected and supports findings with multiple pieces of evidence (Merriam, 2009). These participants were selected from three private higher education institutions in Oman that deliver postgraduate programmes. The names of these institutions were anonymised for confidentiality. They were named according to their affiliation model: Franchised, Validation and Branch Campus.

Postgraduate programmes are selected for this study for three key reasons: limited enrolment in postgraduate programmes; limited studies on postgraduate students in Oman; and students' maturity level in age and working experience as most of the postgraduate students are working employees. MBA in Business studies is the focus of the study because it is the most popular subject in Omani private higher education institutions (HEAC, 2020). For the academic sample, all academics involved in teaching MBA students in the three institutions were invited to take the online questionnaire. A total of 24 responses were received, representing 71% of the total population. The online questionnaire was used as it allows privacy and anonymity for the academics to provide honest views of the quality of offshore programmes (Vogl, 2013).

Topical and analytical coding was undertaken to catalogue the key themes emerging from the data. The data was analysed to find patterns due to frequency, resemblance, variance, causality and order and identify the emergence of outlines and categories (Saldaňa, 2009). These categories were reflexively analysed to segregate and catalogue the concepts and themes emerging from this categorisation of data. Analysis of these themes identifies meanings from data and categorises them to find trends in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis allowed researchers to move from data records to themes and ideas. The ideas generated from the data were reviewed inductively to generate insights from existing knowledge and experience and to address the research questions (Guest *et al*., 2012).

This study used gap analysis to explore key stakeholders' perspectives and expectations for the quality of offshore programmes and key factors to improving quality. Gap analysis is a commonly used outcome assessment tool to measure service quality (Rouse, 2014). It has been used in the educational field to examine issues related to quality management, service quality, curriculum development and teaching and learning (Jackson *et al*., 2011). A gap is a divergence between either an expected service and a perceived service from a customer's point of view, or the difference between a service provider's specified level of service and the service delivered as per the Parasuraman and Berry model (Chui, *et al.,* 2016). Gap analysis enables the researcher to understand key stakeholders' perceptions and expectations for offshore programmes and the cause of the complexity of their views, as well as to identify areas for improvements.

Findings

This study reveals that the stakeholder participants differ in their perspectives on the quality of offshore programmes. The finding is in alignment with the observation by Lapina *et al*. (2016) and Sahney *et al*. (2008) that

stakeholders' view of quality varies with their role, knowledge and interest in the programmes. However, there is a consensus among the participants that teaching quality, localisation of the programme, programme management, student support and building institutional capacity are the key dimensions that establish the quality of offshore programmes in Oman.

Teaching quality

Most stakeholder participants believed that teaching quality is a vital factor in ensuring the quality of offshore programmes. However, their understandings of teaching quality varied, depending on their role, involvement with offshore programmes and expectations by their affiliation models. For example, those from a branch model argued for the provision of the comparable student experience for the programmes in both the host country and the international university partner campus. In contrast, managers from validation and franchised models put more emphasis on teaching attributes. Teaching attributes refer to the experience of the teacher, educational qualifications, subject-specific certification and pedagogic approach (Coe *et al*., 2014). For example, a dean from a branch campus stressed that the qualifications and expertise of the academics need to match those of the international university partner. In a similar vein, a dean from a franchised model highlighted the importance of selecting academics who could use advanced teaching methods and could improve students' attitude towards learning:

> For me, faculty are the dynamo of teaching quality. They can make a big difference in shaping students' attitude towards learning and the way the student sees the world. … It is not the qualification alone that makes a good teacher. It is the expertise of the teacher to move the student's knowledge from one level to another. (Management interviewee 2, Franchised model)

The importance of teaching attributes was shared by the MBA student participants but their expectations for the attributes varied with their affiliation models. For example, most student participants from the branch campus prioritised academics' ability to transform students into independent learners and improve their critical thinking. They regarded academics' qualifications and years of teaching experience as less important. This view might be linked to the fact that 75% of this MBA programme was delivered online and only 25% was conducted face-to-face.

Based on focus group responses, a majority of student participants expressed their need for greater involvement from local academics to deliver teaching offshore courses. For example, students from the franchise model expected local academics to undertake more responsibility in developing the course and relevant assessment. Students found that their local academics were constrained by the international university partner, as they had to

comply with the course outline designed by the international university partner and they were not allowed to make any decisions about course assessment. A majority of the students in franchised and branch campuses said that the international university partner was dominating all teaching aspects and that local academics had little freedom in the course delivery and thus affected the quality of teaching. Students from franchised and branch campus programmes argued that local academics should be given more autonomy in teaching strategies and work assessments. In contrast, students from the validation model were satisfied with the quality of teaching. They demanded more sessions by visiting practitioners (industry experts and business owners) as these practitioners could provide them with practical knowledge and connect them with international business perspectives.

Most (79%) of the academics who participated in the study were satisfied with the international university partners' support, as it provided them with the teaching materials and guidelines on how to teach offshore curricula they required. However, 30% of academics expressed the need for more meetings and open communication with their counterparts in partner universities. Overall, academics were positive about the training provided by their international partner and 80% indicated that there was a sufficient amount of training. However, 41% of academics felt that the available training was not very effective or only partially effective. This indicates that the international university partners need to prioritise effective training.

Localisation of offshore programme

Adaptation of offshore programmes to suit the Omani context was considered essential by university managers and the officials from the MoHE. The majority interviewed stressed that the programme contents needed to reflect local market needs and cultural values. For example, one dean stated that:

> The programme has to be in line with local needs and cultural values. Using case studies, scenarios, examples, and stories related to students' context make learning more relevant. (Management interviewee 5, Branch model)

The majority of the interviewees proposed that a joint academic committee between the international university partner and the local private higher education institution could be created in order to align curriculum and courses materials with the local context. In a similar vein, the officials from the MoHE requested that offshore programmes should consider local needs and work to preserve cultural and social values in their delivery, whilst maintaining international standards in student learning outcomes. For example,

an official emphasised that offshore programmes needed to meet the expectations of Oman in preserving the social and cultural identity:

> Curricula of the offshore programmes are developed across the borders, but through contextualisation, it reflects the need of the country. (Interviewee 2, MoHE staff)

Despite the government's expectation for localisation, the majority of the academic participants had not got the opportunities to contribute to the development of offshore programmes. This accounted for the gap between the expectations and the implementation of the 12 international offshore programmes in Oman. This gap can be further evidenced by students' dissatisfaction with coursework feedback due to heavy reliance on international university partners for the delivery of teaching and assessment. Student participants pointed out that their local lecturers were constrained in course content and work assessment, due to the restrictions by the international university partners. For example, a student participant expressed his concern that not allowing local lecturers to assess student work could negatively affect student learning:

> The local teachers give no details and no useful feedback on class work as all students' work is marked and assessed by the foreign university counterpart. Also, students are given very brief feedback and sometimes none. (FG 2, Franchised model)

The student participants proposed that local lecturers need to have more autonomy in developing teaching strategies and giving students assessment feedback. The desire for more autonomy suggests that private higher education institutions face challenges in localising offshore programmes to meet the host country's needs and objectives (Lane, 2011; Healey, 2016). In other words, heavy reliance on the international partner can easily cause issues in the practices of teaching and learning, which as a result reduces the quality of offshore programmes.

Programme management

Effective collaboration, improvement of programme delivery and better management of the facilitation agreement are identified as the three key approaches to improve the quality of offshore programmes. Research participants suggested that the local private institutions and the international university partners need to reach a clear understanding in assuring the quality of offshore programmes to construct effective collaborations. This perception is in alignment with Kahn (2014) that collaboration and continuous improvement to close performance gaps is essential for the success of a transnational enterprise. Commitment to improving actual performance by both partners is considered as a foundation for effective collaboration. For

example, a university manager participant is explicit about such expectations:

> Commitments of both parties in delivering the best experience to local students, clear communication; a clear mandate for each partner and clear roles and responsibilities for each party are important aspects to ensure proper implementation of offshore programmes. (Management interviewee, Validation model)

Three key approaches were proposed to improve the delivery of offshore programmes. The MoHE participants proposed enhancing the assessment process for the degree award. Students put priority on training and monitoring of academics; and academics favoured continuously improving teaching design. Participants also associated different affiliation models with different priorities. MoHE and private institutions management study participants emphasised that a franchised model should focus on developing a strategy of training and monitoring of academics. A branch campus model was seen as the control of course design, assessment, awarding certificates and access to materials for study by the affiliate universities. In contrast, a validation model was seen to stress the regulation of module materials design, staff development programmes, curriculum development, assessment of examinations and quality assurance.

The management of affiliation agreement is considered as an area to be improved. For example, the officials from the MoHE, who are the policymakers for the affiliation and approval of offshore programmes, express their concern in interviews regarding poor-quality offshore programmes in Oman. This lack of effectiveness in quality monitoring may be due to the presence of different affiliation models in Oman that have different quality assurance arrangements and different commitments levels toward monitoring the implementation of offshore programmes. MoHE officials pointed out that the international partners need to develop and implement effective quality monitoring strategies in close collaboration with the local institutions. This clearly shows the pressure from the local government on improving quality (Lane & Kinser, 2011).

Regular follow-up of the affiliation's terms of references and scope of services and close communication between local and international partners are approaches that are stressed by the university managers to ensure quality. For example, two deans make this view explicit:

> It is vital to have a periodic check-up across different agreements [and] terms of reference. (Management interviewee 2, Franchised model)

> Commitments of both parties in delivering the best experience to local students, clear communication; a clear mandate for each partner and clear roles and responsibilities for each party are important aspects to ensure proper implementation of offshore programmes. (Management interviewee 4, Validation model)

University managers' emphasis on improving the quality of offshore programmes may be related to their close involvement and expertise in managing these programmes. In contrast, student and academic participants played little role in managing and developing the programmes, which accounts for their limited comments.

Student support

This study reveals that the level of student support given by the private higher education institutions was perceived as another key element affecting the quality of offshore programmes by students and academic participants. Students from all affiliation models expressed the importance of local institutions' support regarding learning resources, engagement with local industry, learning enhancement and language support. MBA student and academic participants put more emphasis on good student support than their institutions' managers and MoHE officials. For example, academic participants argued for increasing the support available for students for better quality provision. They regarded English language support, the library and learning resources as the key elements to achieving quality offshore programmes. In particular, English language proficiency is described as vital in improving student learning experiences.

Similarly, student participants argued for the importance of language support and the need for more student exchange programmes. This is partially because language barriers could affect students' confidence and limit their opportunities to reach their full potential (Banjong, 2015). For example, English language barrier was raised as a major constraint for students to excel in offshore programmes, especially at the MBA level. This dilemma was highlighted by an MBA student:

> I was accepted in the programme although my English is not up to the required standard. I think the affiliate should have greater responsibilities in the student selection process and not depend on the local provider who sometimes compromises the language aspect for the sake of increasing the number of students in the programme. (FG 1, Franchised model)

Building institutional capacity

Private higher education institutions' managers and the MoHE officials shared a similar view that offshore programmes would enable the local private higher education institutions to reach international standards. They proposed that the exchange of expertise between the international partners and the local institutions regarding programme development, technical support and professional development of staff was essential to build local institution's

capacity. This view is in line with Knight (2011) that offshore programmes enhance host institutions' capability in teaching programmes with international standards.

The localisation of the curriculum was proposed as another key approach to building local institution's capacity. Such expectations were expressed explicitly by a MoHE official:

> Teaching offshore programmes need to focus on enriching local staff experience in terms of curriculum development, assessment methods, infrastructure improvements, wider exposure to learning resources, and enhancing the student learning experience and boosting their language skills. (Interviewee, MoHE staff)

About 80% of university managers who participated in the study highlighted the importance of collaboration in building local teaching capacity, embedding quality culture through regular workshops, visits and quality audits. Officials from the MoHE also expressed their hope that offshore programmes operating in Oman would enable the local private higher education institutions to develop multiculturalism and embed cultural competencies in the programmes. According to Ehlers (2009), a focus of multicultural competencies will enable students to identify and acknowledge within-group differences and examine self-identity that is shaped across contexts and time by influences of culture and social values, gender, economic and social status.

Implications for assuring the quality of offshore programmes

This study reveals that there are contrasting expectations across various key stakeholder groups with regard to obtaining experiences from transnational offshore programmes while localising the programmes in Oman. These competing objectives have created tensions and challenges in assuring the quality of offshore programmes in a range of ways.

First, the heavy reliance on the international university partners to assure the quality of offshore programmes could cause challenges to the adaptation and harmonisation for external and internal quality assurance as the requirements and standards of each partner can vary (Al Harthy, 2012). The demand for accountability by authorities and the desire for autonomy by academics could also lead to tensions in private institutions. For example, restrictions from the international partner have limited the opportunities for the local academics to get involved with the development of offshore programmes in Oman. The international partner did not want to dilute the curriculum of the home campus nor did they permit the substitution of teachers from the home campus by local staff.

These restrictions from an international partner could relate to perceptions of a risk to their credibility and profitability (Healey, 2016). However, student

participants perceived the impact of these restrictions differently: they expressed concerns that these policies had caused limited feedback on their coursework. They argued for giving more autonomy to the local academics to develop teaching strategies and give students assessment feedback. This suggests a need to increase the involvement of the local academics in the teaching, assessment and feedback of offshore programmes. Increasing local private institutions' autonomy in assessments and programme development could be a step towards improving the outcomes of these programmes.

Second, localising offshore programmes to meet the host country's needs and objectives whilst matching the international standard of the sending country can be challenging. The demand for localisation has in some cases increased the tensions between international university partners' design and development of offshore programmes and the local academics' need for autonomy in teaching and learning. English language barriers and different academic requirements were identified as key issues to be addressed from the perspectives of student and lecturer participants. Differing standards of the international partner on academic requirements for entry into higher education such as general knowledge, English language proficiency, mathematics ability, study skills and information technology clash with localisation requirements. Localisation could take place through embedding elements of Omani culture and national needs related to citizenship and skill development.

There is a gap between key stakeholders' expectations for an offshore programme and their perceived quality. The differences between these perspectives of quality can be explained as that stakeholders' perception of quality depends on their role, interest and involvement with offshore programmes and the expectations of different affiliation models. For example, university managers from a validation model stressed student international experience and other managers from branch campus and franchised models put an emphasis on teaching attributes. Similarly, most student participants from the branch campus emphasised the need for a lecturer to enable students to become independent learners, as their offshore programmes were conducted mainly online, requiring independent learning.

The quality gap also suggests a need to negotiate and clarify the key objectives and leadership role of managing offshore programmes between relevant stakeholders. As proposed by research participants, effective collaboration between a local private institution and an international partner could improve teaching quality and student support. Establishing clear roles and mandates for each partner with clear communication channels is proposed to improve such collaboration. It is noticed that the implementation of cognitive coaching in an Omani higher education institution was successful in improving the behaviour and attitudes of employees holding leadership

positions in various departments (Hakro & Mathew, 2020). Such a programme can be implemented to support constructive discussion between stakeholders for the improvement of collaboration.

However, how to implement the policies of localisation and internationalisation will depend on the continuous improvement efforts shared by all the key stakeholders. According to Kahn (2014), continuous improvement is critical to close the gap between intended and actual performance and increase the international stature of both partners in offshore programmes. The tensions arise from the proposed improvement efforts such as international standards *versus* local needs and social norms. Participants in this study have explicitly expressed a need to support Omani students to become global citizens and increase their employment mobility and professional success. This cannot happen if the local Omani education system becomes isolated and closed off to international education developments. There is a need to balance Omani values and norms with internationalisation in developing appropriate offshore programmes. Based on the research findings, one proposal is that the Omani government could make provisions in the licensing process to stress the balance between localisation and internationalisation in the early stages of the regulatory reviews of an offshore programme.

It is also important for policymakers to note how economic considerations have significantly influenced stakeholders' views and expectations of offshore programmes. For example, the Omani strategy to establish private higher education institutions reflects the prohibitive cost of establishing and operating more public institutions (Baporikar & Shah, 2012). The Omani government's decision to impose academic affiliation on all local private higher education institutions enables the development of programmes that meet international standards. However, it also enables the state to reduce the costs associated with monitoring quality.

Seeking to align offshore programmes with national objectives, social goals and economic directions can conflict with the pressure for private higher education institutions to reduce the cost of programme delivery to maximise profit. This tension will increase the challenges they face in assuring the quality of offshore programmes. In this situation, meeting international standards can only be feasible if the Omani institution and the parent international institution develop programmes simultaneously and put quality as the ultimate and unified target.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the four stakeholder groups who participated in this research (university managers, MBA students and academics in the private higher education institutions and MoHE officials) have different expectations

and views for the quality of offshore programmes in Oman. Manager participants and MoHE officials expect the programmes to provide international standards but also to respect and reflect the social and cultural values of Oman. Student and lecturer participants express their need for more support from the international university partner to improve learning and teaching.

The quality gap suggests that localisation of offshore programmes will remain a big project in Oman. Improving the quality of offshore programmes will need collaboration from all key stakeholders. Apart from meeting national needs and values, policymakers need to consider that private institutions fundamentally are driven by a profit motive and there is a need to improve students' experience and programme quality. This presents challenges for offshore programmes in supporting students to match the international standards and to become global citizens as expected by the government. There is a need to conduct further research to collect longitudinal data on key quality factors from the perception of various stakeholders, to improve offshore programmes by matching the expectations of key stakeholders.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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