



“BRIDGING THE ACADEMIA- INDUSTRY GAP IN THE CHANGING ECONOMIC SCENARIO : PERSPECTIVES ON QUALITY, SKILL SETS AND TRAINING IN OMAN”

ShanmugaPria* VenkataVara Prasad B*

**Business Studies Department, Shinas College of Technology Shinas , Al Aqur, Sultanate of Oman.*

Abstract

Education and training have been the focus point for government as well as private sector investment in the Sultanate of Oman. In a short period of few decades, it has resulted in the remarkable success in terms of increasing percentage of educated people from all the regions and social classes in the country.

Both corporates and SMEs in Oman play a pivotal role in the development of its economy. Education provides a pathway in the attainment of the success of this sector. Hence, it becomes imperative to align the objectives of education providers (public and private) and training institutes (in-house, vocational and corporate) to the requirements of the corporate world. In this context, the mismatch between the quality, skill- sets and training offered to the students and the job requirements set by the labour market is a major challenge facing the country's economy.

The gaps are presented and the strategies to reduce the gaps are the outcomes derived from a focused group interview comprising of experts from academic institutions, industry and training centers. To maintain anonymity, the expert's names are not disclosed. The present paper will focus on aspects pertaining to quality, skills, training and craft strategies to reduce the gap between industry expectations and institutions outcome with specific reference to management education.

Keywords— Quality, Skills, Training, Academia-Industry Gap, Strategies To Reduce Gap.

Introduction

Education and training have been the focus point for government as well as private sector investment in the Sultanate of Oman. In a short period of few decades, it has resulted in the remarkable success in terms of increasing percentage of educated people from all the regions and social classes in the country.

Post oil-economy is focused largely on improving quality of education in accordance with international standard. The quality of the education system is the backbone for the ‘Vision 2020’s’ goals—economic diversification, sustainable development, the enhancement of human resources and increasing the role of the private sector to economic growth.

‘Vision 2040’, covers five dimensions for improvement in education and training such as management, quality, research and development (R&D), funding, and differentiated and phased enrolment. Propelling factor for ‘Vision 2040’ is to gear the education system towards producing proficient, industrious and adaptable graduates ready to compete for jobs. In the illuminated words of his majesty.

“It is well understood that education is the basis of development. During the past period, various systems of education and curricula were implemented and different training programmes were executed, but the matter calls for greater attention to be accorded to linking the educational output to the requirements of the labour market.”
His majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said- Council of Oman 2012.

Both corporates and SMEs in Oman play a pivotal role in the development of its economy. Management education provides a pathway in the attainment of the success of this sector. Hence, it becomes imperative to align the objectives of management education providers (public and private) and training institutes (in- house, vocational and corporate) to the requirements of the corporate world. In this context, the mismatch between the

quality, skill- sets and training offered to the students and the job requirements set by the labour market is a major challenge facing the country's economy.

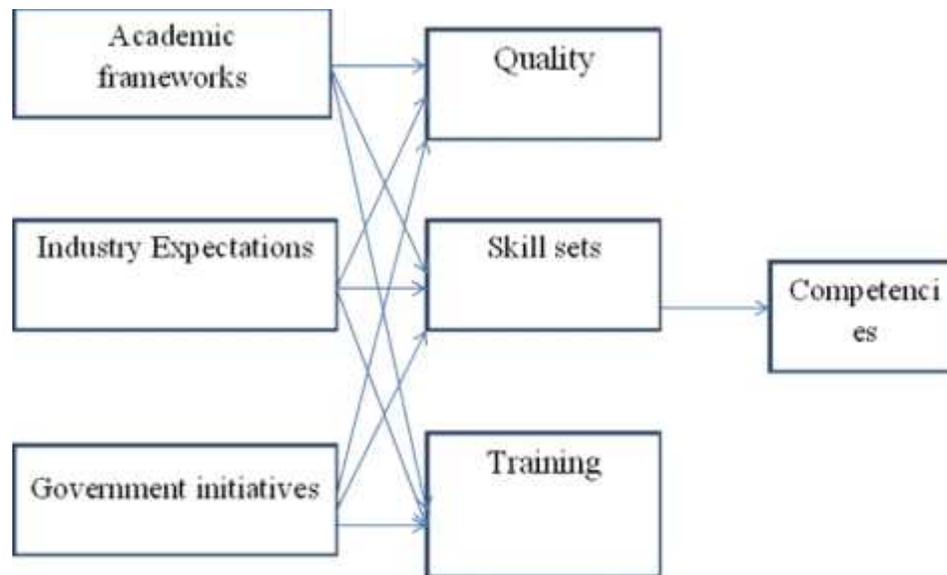


Fig. 1 A model Depicting Academia- Industry Gap

Quality of Education

Remarkable achievements are witnessed in the education sector– enrolment in the HEIs reach 84.3% (National Strategy for Education in the Sultanate of Oman 2040). However the challenges faced by educational sector range from issues of quantitative expansion vs. issue of quality, the need for improving the quality of the outcomes of the education system, work opportunities to graduates, shortage of highly qualified researchers and high level of dependence on government funds. Universities and colleges are adopting numerous teaching methodologies in order to improve the learning environment. The curriculum standards are benchmarked and academic affiliations are in place. Student performance evaluations are rigorously practiced with various benchmarking standards. The pedagogical framework and course delivery and assessment undergo national quality audit with the country adopting a Nationwide OAAA framework. With many foreign investments and partnership tie-ups in educational sector, wide array of teaching philosophies and styles are being implemented. Smart classrooms, digital library, e-learning systems, use of moodle etc reflect the use of technology in classroom teaching.

Gaps

Beyond these developments, linking the educational system to the requirements of the labour force is a dominant theme of the educational sector. Hence it becomes imperative to dwell on the challenges such as does the current curriculum meet the labour market requirements? How to adjust education to meet the needs of labour market? How to tailor make and customize the curriculum? Academia and industry are inherently different, and there is currently no mechanism to harmonize the two sectors. Is there a need to harmonize it? If there is a need, then how do we do it? How to manage the knowledge transfer from education sector to industry? As a means of improving quality in higher education and benchmarking standards against overseas institutions, the MOHE encourages private HEIs to choose reputable universities as partners in academic affiliation agreements. How far has the affiliations led to improvement in quality of teaching and learning? And finally, with the low oil price, many companies and government institutions are cutting back on education and training. How much impact does the cost cut have on quality of education?



Strategies

Once the graduates enter a career, after few years qualifications don't matter. It is the skills sets which become more important than mere academic degrees. Skill sets are changing because our global markets are changing. The 21st century skills need critical thinking, creative, communication skills and integrated business management skills. Around the world, we witness many corporate meltdowns because of poor leadership. The business schools should equip students with moral courage, ethics and integrity.

In great era of connectivity, now colleges can no more be like 'gurukuls' where teachers teach from text books and students write. Average attention span of students is 8 seconds and 79% of students feel emotional distress when they are away from their mobiles phones. Googling has become the trusted partner in acquiring knowledge than the learned professors and experienced academicians. Text book prices are increasing at an increasing alarming rate and most of text book publishing companies are making losses and in schools of tomorrow, the students are their own instructors. Hence, the institutes need academic process re-engineering says a professor from Shias College of Technology, Business Studies Department. More focus on digital delivery, problem based skill development and hands-on training methods need to be adopted. Management Lab is one such initiative. In Management lab, the focus is on creating employability, what students will be able to do after graduation. The lab trains students on soft skills and skill developing attributes. Case analysis, role plays, seminar, video analysis, group decision making tools, analytics, mobile apps, simulated board rooms, video labs, observation rooms and video conferencing are the components of Management Lab activities.

Quality doesn't happen by accident. We have to design it. The need of the hour is to update the content of curriculum with relevant exposes to practitioners and professionals. Tutorials and workshops are to be arranged on a continuous basis to get to work with professionals and engaging outside speakers. Academic institutions also need to rethink placements and alumni enhancement. Schools need to recruit industry trained or industry experienced faculty members. At the same time, institutions must sort out not only employment challenges but individual challenges by innovative methods of generating own income by starting their own business.

Professor from Sohar University opines that the Government also needs to support by removing the rigidity in the specialisation offered by removing the bureaucracy in implementing new changes, revisions and updates in curriculum. A continuous dialogue is needed with industry in removing intellectual barrier when transferring knowledge from academic intuitions to workplace.

According to expert from Jusoor, with the current economic downturn due to oil price crisis, budget is not a problem as far as spending on education initiatives is concerned in Oman. However, educational intuitions have to address the financial challenge within their internal systems, enhancing the public relations, opening up and engaging more with industry to find sources of income. Sources of income are available in the form donations and sponsorships by major corporates in Oman. Colleges also need to discuss with Government in trying to liberate the norms and regulations with respect to financial support.

Skill sets

With the increasing number of graduates joining the workforce, academic institutions are trying to ensure that the graduates are fully equipped with the right skills to work in the dynamic working environment. The focus is not only to produce qualified candidates but to produce flexible and open minded graduates willing to adopt life-long learning.

The '21st century skills' or 'Work readiness skills', lays emphasis on professional communication, political skills, which include negotiation skills and conflict management, adaptive skills which are main driving forces in today's economy growth. Employers all over the world and employers in gulf region as well; placed these skills on top of their priority list,. Moreover, the lack of such skills will affect the graduates' development on the personal and social levels as well; missing those skills have huge impact on the 'life-long' or 'on-going' learning process.

In 2011 the World Bank found that only 45% of the HR managers think that graduates have enough skills for the labor market (WBG & IDB 2011), there is a slight progress in the employers' perspective, yet, they are still not satisfied about the graduates' skills. In the gulf region "36% of employers reported a lack of skills caused significant problems in terms of cost, quality, and time" (Mourshed et al., 2013).

According to Employment for Education (WB study), Academician's are over-confident of the skills imparted, while students are not confident of the skills acquired. On the other hand Employer's perspective is that the students are lacking essential work competencies. The study showed that work ethics come first from both academicians and employers' perspectives, whereas, team work comes on the second for both, employers' emphasis different communication skills, oral & written, and computer literacy as well on the second place, followed by core business knowledge and problem solving. Soft skills, entrepreneurial attitude, global intelligence, real world skills, talent management, innovation skills, research and development skills and the adaptability level of graduates are to be addressed.

Gaps

We need to explore issues on what is the current level of the graduates' competencies? How do we improve the current level of work readiness skills? Which skills are mostly needed and how do we address them in the academic system? How far does partnership between government organisations, training providers and employers in the private sector improve the skills required of graduates? Logistics, tourism and industrial manufacturing have been identified as potential future economic drivers, and will be the focus of development under 'Vision 2040'. Are our colleges and universities prepared enough to providing the necessary inputs especially in logistics? What special requirements are there to boost the skill sets needed in logistics? How to build R&D capacity further, both through academic exchanges and collaborative research, help in preparing graduates for the real world?

Strategies

Oman is witnessing progress in academic and industry. However, both need to move together. Going in the other direction doesn't catch other, Skill gap difference between employer looking for and what job seeker have. What employer looking for moves very fast, with global benchmarks, improvement in practices and systems and the academics are not informed with all the progress. This makes a huge impact on the way academia reacts, industry react and the market reacts. The market makes a lot of reaction. This is critical in having jobs. While plethora of jobs available especially for Omanis with increasing omanization targets, the issue is having suitable people for the choice. It is very critical that fresh graduates are aware of assessment methods which are currently adopted. For example, selection processes have changed by the HR specialists. Companies are now adopting assessment centers, psycho-metric tests etc.

As per the opinion of the industrialists, there is no dearth of qualified people. Biggest factor in success of graduate is the communication skill. As in management, there is no right or wrong. Management decisions are taken in a collective manner. When the management graduates go to the board room they should not be mute spectators. Communication skill is most important, apart from negotiation skills and basic technical skills.

The entrepreneurial attitude is something to be imbibed in the students from the scratch. The government envisions graduates to be employers rather than employees. Government is looking toward the national agenda as diversification of economy which includes the new generation of youth to be a source of value generation, wealth generation, creating employment opportunities rather than seeking employment. Starting joint ventures, being SMEs, developing entrepreneurial skills, ensure that diversification happens in a holistic manner. This leads to sorting out not only economic challenges but individual challenges by new way of generating own income by starting their own business.

According to an expert from Munanoor Manufacturing & Trading L.L.C., knowledge and skills are different. Industries cannot teach concepts and impart knowledge. When recruiting, especially fresher's, the focus is in skills not in knowledge. After recruiting fresh graduates, in the process of induction, they face difficulty in



understanding the expectations of the employer. The companies have to now take the baton forward from the academics. While improvement is the key, skills can still be developed better in real life situations. In house training is undertaken by many companies to develop skills for business.

Expert from Oman Oil Marketing Company feels that, companies cannot invest from scratch in the basic common skills. It is experienced by employers that many students specialize in a particular major but have a different skills-set and perform better in different specialization. So, it is wasting resources of educational intuitions, and students' time and efforts in developing themselves. Hence right assessment of skills become an important factor in the success of a graduate in meeting the requirements of industry.

While Omanization in the public and private sector have helped bring many Omanis into the work force, the expectation on the result is that productivity may fall. But as per employers, if the right opportunities are given everybody will be productive. National Training Institute, Oman, one of the leading training institute, creates tailor made programs prepared on 360 degree kind of alignment with all the stake holders perspectives. Mustafa Sultan Exchange group adopted the tailor made courses and found that graduates undergoing such tailor made programs to be very successful. Government's stake, training centers and industry collaboration has created the success formula. Education gives a placement. The degree is awarded, grades are good but if the learning stops, the progress stops. Hence, the willingness to learn and need for seeking knowledge attitude is to be developed in students.

The companies have to come forward to tell the problems faced. An active academia –industry interfaces helps to share the problems in industry which in turn can be shared with the students. Real time, live problems when shared leads to better problem solving skills among students. This also would aid in honing the research skills of the graduates.

Training

The government emphasizes on practical knowledge and hands on training for the students through training institutes, adopting training methods and system in to the academic system. Technical colleges are adopting the On the Job Training (OJT) model as mandatory. OJT is a 12 week training to be undergone by all graduates at any level of study completion. Private institutions have their own arrangements like bilateral training, co-op placements, industrial research project etc. All these systems and models are aimed at making the graduates work ready. Hence, the importance of work placements, on the job trainings and its effectiveness, different forms of active collaboration from industry, readiness of industry for bilateral training are areas of concern to be addressed. Comprehensive vocational training is offered by Vocational Training Centers run by the government. Many private vocation training centers also contribute to preparing the graduates work ready boosting the Omanization levels. They offer host of programmes adhering to international quality standards.

Gaps

Hence, with many players in the training sector: government run, private and in- house, we need to explore on issues like: are the training institutes programs better at preparing work ready graduates? Are the on the job trainings and work placements effective? Does comprehensive vocational training provide a solution, giving students more specialized, tailored skills and helping professionalize trade work? What are the different forms of active collaboration that can be had from industry on strategic requirements? The current scenario in Oman is the transition of the vocational institute into academic institutes (popularly called as a hybrid model that deliver academic programmes, and also provide vocational and professional training opportunities) for a reason of social stigma. This stigmatization arose as a result of a need to have a more prestigious degrees per se. How far does this hybrid models work? Will the vocational training institute's transition into academic institutes provide a better solution?

Strategies

Sohar Aluminium is a case in point which is planning training projects in Batinah region to help the youth. Summer student training program are opened once in a year. About 70 students are trained in it every year mainly



from Batinah region. Not just training is imparted, but a regular follow up is also undertaken. The feedback was good in terms of good positions occupied by the trainees in Sohar Aluminum and outside.

An expert from Oman's leading training institute opines that graduates are not ready for work. It is true in Oman and elsewhere in the world. Why it is much talked about in Oman? Because, we hear it all the time. Graduates are not ready everywhere. The gap will always be there. Graduates cannot perform like experienced employees. Hence, this perception must change.

Looking at it from three angles, firstly, the employer, the recruitment of a new graduate is seen as the replacement of expatriate. For him, replacing an expatriate with 10 to 15 years of experience with a fresh graduate is seen as an unfruitful venture. Every country has different ways of on boarding the fresh graduates. Various forms are used like graduates development program, management training, internship etc. The highly successful and recommended way of on-boarding – Internship is not practiced in Oman. Employer must take the responsibility of training and developing fresh graduates. Secondly, the fresh graduates themselves must come out of the wrong expectation that he is entitled to a job position and a good salary. Employee must take responsibility of learning and developing. Thirdly, the government must help to develop framework that articulates the employers to employ fresh graduate as apprentice, put them in internship for a year or two, pay them stipend and then on successful completion give them full time jobs entitled to full salary. Hence, all the three parties should come together to make it work.

Transition of training institutes to academics is opined to be a wrong move by the trainers. Society is after getting academic qualifications. But the skills are lacking when it comes to actual job working conditions. Taking the example of financial professionals, to become a professional in chartered accountancy, three years of experience is mandatory. Hence, academics should be separate and focus must be on acquiring and developing professional skills. Hence hybrid models should be balanced with both academic inputs and emphasis on hands-on training. Right now, the direction is more of move to academics than practical.

The OJT is not effective in the sense that the students are given menial jobs, just assisting the employees. If placed as an apprentice they become a part of workforce where they would get in depth rigorous training .

Conclusion

Among the outcomes from the discussion, the most significant was that the experts feel that 30-40 per cent of graduates are work ready which was supported by audience poll. Among the skills predominantly lacked are good communication skills, especially written, followed by analytical skills, innovation, creativity and leadership skills. Graduates are found to have good computer skills, especially networking. Omani graduates have good work behaviour and high safety awareness. They are hardworking and powerful with social media. Academicians find the graduates are ready to learn new things. Employers were willing to partner to take students for long term-internship program from 6 months to one year where the students stay in organisations with flexible work hours. Sohar Aluminum is launching this internship programme in 2018. Expert from Muna Noor Manufacturing & Trading L.L.C. provided a solution to study first year in college, second year, one day in company and spending the third and fourth year in company for a longer duration.

Fresh graduates development plan is an initiative suggested which normally goes for two years, within the company.

Another area pinpointed by experts as is adopting bilateral training. Oman Oil Marketing Company expert said, they are ready for a bilateral training where the students spend the last two years of study in a company.

Ensuring that academic inputs reach specific areas of requirement by the industry, supported by government initiatives is one of many challenges the government faces in its bid to bridge gaps across the education system. Hence a collaborative effort by all the stakeholders, academicians, industry and government is bound to build a successful youth led nation.



Acknowledgment

The authors wish to acknowledge the Management of Shinas College of Technology for providing the opportunity and infrastructure to conduct interviews for the topic. A great deal of gratitude goes to the expert speakers from various organisations like Sohar University, Oman Oil Marketing Co. SAOG, Muna Noor Manufacturing & Trading L.L.C. National Training Institute LLC, Jusoor, Sohar Aluminium, Technical & Administrative Training Institute and Mustafa Sultan Electronics Co. L.L.C for their valuable contributions.

References

1. Al-Barwani, T., Chapman, D.W. & Ameen, H., 2009. Strategic Brain Drain: Implications for Higher Education in Oman. *Higher Education Policy*, 22(4), pp.415–432.
2. ALMunajjed, M. & Sabbagh, K., 2011. *Youth in GCC Countries Meeting the Challenge*, Chicago.
3. Mourshed, M., Farrell, D. & Barton, D., 2013. *Education to Employment: Designing a System that Works*
4. Silva, E., 2008. *Measuring Skills FOR THE 21st Century*, Washington , D.C.
5. Trilling, B. & Fadel, C., 2009. *21st Century Skills: learning for life in our times* 1st ed., San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
6. UNESCO, 2013. *Conceptual Relationship of Information Literacy and Media Literacy in Knowledge Societies Series of Research Papers*, Paris.
7. World Bank Group, I.F.C. & Islamic Development Bank, 2011. *Education for Employment: Realizing arab youth potential*.
8. *National Strategy of Education in the Sultanate of Oman 2040*.
9. www.p21.org.
10. <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/oman-2017>.
11. <http://www.tanfeedh.gov.om/>.
12. <https://www.scp.gov.om>.
13. <http://www.omanobserver.om/>.
14. <http://timesofoman.com/>.
15. <http://www.oea-oman.org> S. M. Metev and V. P. Veiko, *Laser Assisted Microtechnology*, 2nd ed., R. M. Osgood, Jr., Ed. Berlin, Germany: Springer-Verlag, 1998.