

Protectionism vs. Transparency as a Quality Issue in Omani Higher Education

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Abstract. Protectionism comes into sight when an organization ignores or hides necessary improvements or purposely inflates positive aspects and underestimates problems. This work is confined to **protectionism** and **transparency** in the *Omani private higher education sector*. It attempts to disclose the measures quality monitoring organizations take to ensure *transparency* in the sector, whether these measures are adequate or not, the types of protectionary acts exercised by some Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and the ways suggested to avoid protectionism.

This study will explore the aspects of a sensitive issue and will assist HEIs to improve their policies and actions; it will also diagnose areas where the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) and Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) may intervene; it invites researchers to deal with this issue more openly in the future, utilizing other research methodologies; finally, a tentative "Terms of Reference" is offered which may be elaborated into "Guidelines on how to avoid Protectionism in HE Quality" in the future.

It is suggested that many HEIs practice protectionism in different disguises, and that some HE quality policies instigate HEIs' inclination to protectionism.

1 Introduction

Protectionism is a common phenomenon put into practice directly (intentionally) or indirectly, and can be spotted effortlessly in different parts of the world nowadays; as such, it has invited multiple arguments, gained its own proponents and opponents, and been utilized as a propaganda tool to accomplish political, economical and social objectives. *But what is Protectionism?*

According to Wikipedia¹, "**Protectionism** is the economic policy of restraining trade between states, through methods such as tariffs on imported goods, restrictive quotas, and a variety of other government regulations designed to discourage imports, and prevent foreign take-over of native markets and companies". The aim is to protect the national economy with barriers against

external influence and trade. **In economics**, it is contrasted to free-trade, but in education to transparency. As such it has more opponents than proponents.

In **HE**, Protectionism is seen as a HEI's "motivation to omit or conceal areas where improvements are required or, when they cannot be concealed, to present them in a form that deliberately over exaggerates positive aspects and underplays problems. It may even motivate HEIs to ensure that certain people will be unavailable to meet with the Audit Panel during the Audit Visit"².

The MoHE, OAC, and HEIs have their own laws which should be respected, provided that they are well-addressed and made public. Thus, each HEI draws its own internal mechanisms that flows from its own statement of intent, and are in line with those of the other higher local authority, MoHE and OAC. However, to a certain extent the local higher authority must respect those of the HEIs; during audits HEIs are rarely questioned about their own well-set mechanisms (usually commended), and only reminded (affirmations & recommendations) about those that deviate from quality standards. In other words, while HEIs are encouraged to buy their own laws, they should also buy those of the MoHE and OAC. In doing so, they are defined as transparent; otherwise, they are not. It is evident that institutions resort to protectionism when they feel they do not have their own proper consistency, and cannot respond to those of the governing authority.

1.1 Problem

Taking into consideration the OAC's above conception of the protectionary acts, HEIs should opt for transparency. The extent of how HEIs have responded to this concept is still unresolved. Therefore, in order to explore the situation in the HE sector, this work attempts to answer the following questions:

- What measures do quality monitoring organizations take to ensure transparency in Omani Higher Education?
- Are these measures adequate or not?
- What are the types of protectionary acts exercised by some HEIs?
- How to avoid protectionism?

1.2 Methodology

In order to respond to the above questions and other relevant issues, the Observational research method is utilized in this work because of:

- Sensitivity of the research issue

- Size and variability of the HE sector
- Familiarity with the HE sector in Oman
- Continuous monitoring as a result of living in Oman
- Stimulus for other types of future research
- Evaluation with inferences and a judgment

1.3 Limitations

- This work is confined to protectionism and transparency in the private HE sector. Reference to public HEIs is made only to enlighten the issue under consideration.
- It will not attribute protectionary acts mentioned in this work to HEIs by name.
- Issues discussed are directly/indirectly associated with *Quality Audit Manual* (OAC, 2008).

1.4 Significance

- It explores the aspects of a sensitive and important issue; thus, it will assist HEIs to improve their policies and conduct, and to diagnose areas where MoHE and OAC may intervene.
- It invites researchers to deal with this issue more openly in the future, utilizing other research methodologies.
- It will attempt to draw a tentative "Terms of Reference" which may be elaborated into "Guidelines on how to avoid Protectionism in HE Quality" in the future.

2 Omani Quality Measures

2.1 HE Regulating Authorities

The Omani Higher Education (HE) sector has been expanding vastly. Quantitatively, the number of HE Institutions (HEIs) has grown to more than 60, and the number of functional units, staff and resources has also increased tremendously. In addition, more attention has been laid on quality, professional development, regulating laws and strategic planning.

The major authority in the sector is the *Ministry of Higher Education* (MoHE), established in 1994, whose role is to oversee public and private HEIs for the application of HE standards³. Two General Directorates supervise the HEIs, public and private. On the other hand, *Sultan Qaboos University* (SQU) established in 1986 is the only public university in Oman which is run independently by a university Council chaired by HE the Minister of Higher Education, and Academic Council Chaired by the Vice Chancellor. Also, the *Ministries of Man Power, Health, Justice and Defense* (MoMP, MoH, MoJ, MoD respectively) and *Oman Central Bank* run their own colleges and institutes.

The multiplicity of HEIs' affiliations has its pros and cons. Such diversity allows for more specialized professional monitoring and avails additional resources for HE development. However, this mixture has proven to be difficult to govern by a single regulatory mechanism, with laws, regulations and policies as HEIs have different external affiliations, and varying governing bodies, administrative policies and resources.

To respond to the international, regional and national challenges of quality and accreditation and ensure public accountability, the *Oman Accreditation Council* (OAC) was established in 2001 to assist "in the development of the Omani higher education sector through institutional quality audits, institutional and program accreditation processes. Also, in collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education, it has responsibilities for establishing academic standards, and providing training and networking opportunities"⁴.

The *Oman Quality Network* (OQN) "is a collegial and independent, not-for-profit network of Omani Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), focused on quality enhancement to disseminate quality in the HE sector through different activities" created in 2006⁵. It works in coordination with the MoHE and OAC, and is run by an elected *Executive Committee*.

2.2 Quality Policies

There are two major types of policies set to maintain quality in the sector: Initial or licensing criteria that are normally set and enforced by the relevant authority (e.g., the *Directorate General of Private Universities and Colleges* (DGPUCs)), and accreditation mechanisms set by the OAC. The final approval of all policies is granted by the MoHE.

It must be underlined here that there is no officially recognized manual, criteria or law which regulates the licensing requirements for new HEIs. Instead, there are procedures of licensing that are set (and developed) by the DGPUG. Also, the follow-up routine is maintained by the relevant body based on internal

regulations. Unfortunately, the accreditation process has not been approved. The *Requirements for Oman's System of Quality Assurance (ROSQA)* was developed into a *draft quality plan (v4)*, which awaits final approval. The accreditation process itself was broken off into three repetitive stages: *Institutional Auditing*, *Institutional Accreditation*, and *Programme Accreditation*. There is a formal *Quality Audit Manual* to control ongoing auditing processes which are expected to finalize in 2013. Excluding the *Foundation Programme Standards*, other policies are not officially ratified.

In short, Oman Qualifications Framework (OQF), Oman Standard Classification of Education Framework (OSCED), Oman HEI Classification Framework, Program Standards, Program Licensing Manual, Program Accreditation & Recognition Manual, HEI Licensing Manual, Standards Assessment Manual – Institutional Accreditation: Stage 2, and Appeals Manual are all under development⁶ and are not yet brought into effect by a proper legislation. In other words, quality mechanisms are developed gradually, and introduced in a de facto form. Needless to say the current state is normal considering the short life-span of Oman's adherence to HE quality assurance. In fact, all quality policies (approved & waiting-for-approval) are under continuous scrutiny. Undoubtedly, there are reasons behind current situation whose examination lies beyond the limits of this work.

The full accreditation process (all three stages) may take no less than (12) years for a HEI to be licensed, provided it had met all requirements of these three stages. Hence, it sounds reasonable that HEIs be trained on repetitive checks (and all accompanying requirements- portfolio writing, visit interviews, panel reports, etc.)⁷ shown in Figure (1):

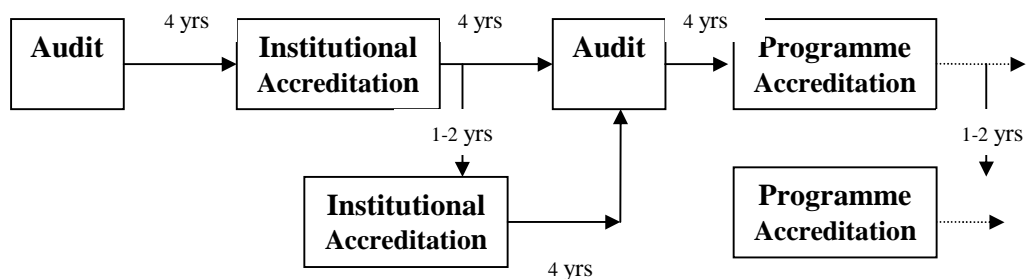


Figure 1: The Accreditation Process Cycle

3 Types of Protectionism

Protectionism is handled differently. As an economical issue, Levy (2009) identifies three types of protectionism: "*Intentional protectionism* encompasses measures that are explicitly intended to favor domestic industry over imports. *Incidental protectionism* occurs when measures can be readily justified on other grounds but also have the effect of obstructing import competition. *Instrumental protectionism* describes a burgeoning set of policies in which trade actions are used as a lever to change another country's policies"⁸.

However, protectionism is classified into two different types for this work; the first is associated with the route and intensity of the protectionary act, the second with its legality.

3.1 Route and Intensity

Protectionary acts are undertaken to protect the HEI against (an)other stakeholder(s); stakeholders are of different ranks: governing (regulatory authorities), governed (students, parents, and other beneficiaries), or equal (other HEIs and competitors). Figure (2) shows the course and intensity of relation.

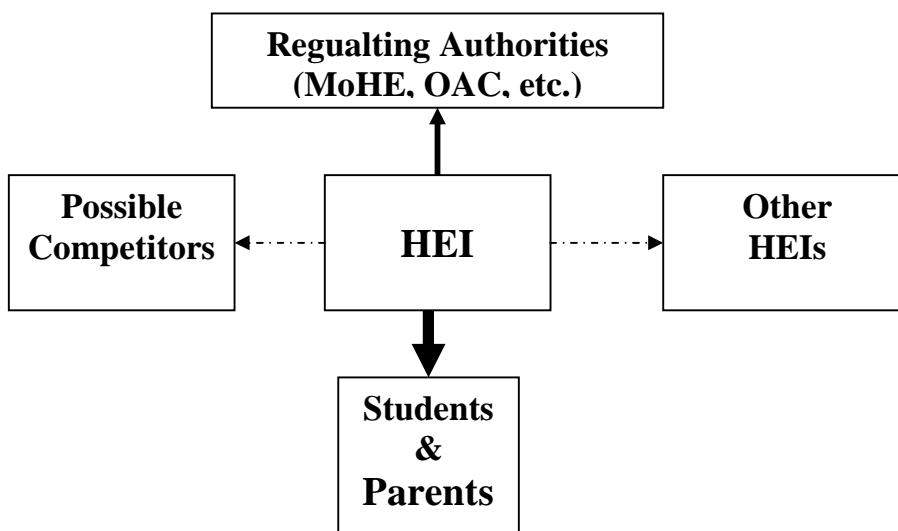


Figure 2: Protectionism Course and Intensity

Figure (2) shows that HEIs may exercise minimum intensity level (indicated by the *upper normal arrow*) when they protect themselves against governing (regulatory) authorities who have the power of the legislation; it is minimum because it is made (ought to be made) difficult to locate (hidden). Mutual protectionism might be practiced by similar HEIs (referred to by a *dotted horizontal arrow*) where peer institutions tend to hide facts from one another to win the consumers. Another type of protectionism is characterized with a maximum intensity level (marked with the *bold normal arrow*), and practiced when a HEI attempts to woo its students or their sponsors by misinforming them in order to join the institution, or to flatter them so that they do not complain to higher authorities or leave the HEI; it is maximum because HEIs' senior managers think that students (and their sponsors) are less threatening to them.

3.2 Legality

Protectionism can occur in these forms:

- a. *Legal protectionism* where a HEI can follow its own laws, i.e., it can draw its own protectionary mechanism, supported by all stakeholders (including the regulatory authority). This type may amount to transparency.
- b. *Rationalized protectionism* is observed when a number of stakeholders, not all, legislate (and make public) certain acts to protect their own entity. Such acts usually raise criticism and/or refusal by other stakeholders. These acts are of relative transparency.
- c. *Protectionism per se* occurs when a HEI conceals facts from some or all stakeholders. This is a totally rejected non-transparent action.

4 Factors Triggering Protectionism

Protectionism is handled differently in different contexts; it is sometimes legalized by a good portion of the nation, e.g., the Americans (and people of other G20 nations) have decided on measures that contradict with free trade agreements they have already created and enforced worldwide, in order to ease down the burden of the recent financial crackdown. However, they were attacked by both fellow Americans and foreigners.

In our situation protectionism (namely *Legalized* and *per se*) is seen as an unlawful exercise attempted to polish the grim reality of an institution. It is ethically rejected because it is not true, and is aiming to stick a false label to the organization. However, people generally tend to act transparently in the absence of circumstances holding them back. The drive to protectionism is chosen due to many factors:

4.1 Flexibility of Current Policies

With the many policies pending for ratification, and with numerous "under-review" documents, the efforts to ensure quality can be questioned. In order to transparently have the sector to respond to a policy, it must be issued as an official legislation in the form a *Royal Decree*, or as a *Ministerial Bylaw*. It is unfavorable to state that the quality process is run in accordance with the INQAAHE standards in the absence of a national regulating system. INQAAHE and other quality agencies require that endorsed policies must have been demonstrated relevant legally and practically⁹. Of course, such a requirement would confuse all participants in the process, not only the HEIs. A holistic approach to the formation of the quality management system is a prerequisite.

Also, the quality policies adopted must be non-discriminatory and unambiguous. They must stop all local HEIs from seeking quality checks outside the national system, since double checks might lead to incongruous results that harm either the HEI or the quality local system, in addition to its deterrent impact on the other HEIs.

4.2 Safe Investment

The profitability and concessions of the HE sector have attracted a diverse society of private investors. The notion of HEIs as "non-profit" organizations was severely disputed in many forms. The result is that many HEIs are run by *Board of Directors (BoDs)*, not by actual appointed *CEOs* (Chancellors, Deans, and their staff), i.e., the overall intention of HEIs has been diverted from academia. As a result, the motivations of the governing body have collided with those of the administration, and ended up with many HEIs resisting development. Even when they take steps towards that goal they are influenced by the volume of the expected profit.

The MoHE has mitigated the negative influence of investors through the establishment of the *Board of Trustees (BoTs)*, which is the governing authority in HE worldwide. But BoTs remain dummy structures because they themselves are appointed by *BoDs*, without sabbatical members to contribute to daily business.

The BoDs' intervention amounts to manipulation in many cases, and takes many forms, not only in Oman, but in the Arab world. The Jordanian regulations, for instance, have been very tough and forbidden investors from entering into the university campuses. The scarcity of resources available provided by BoDs has deterred the progress of HEIs in all walks of life, including quality. Anyhow, HEIs governance remains one of the sensitive issues in the private HE sector.

4.3 Foreign Affiliation Leniency

Excluding a small number of foreign affiliates, the majority do not practice real influence on the affiliated local HEIs for many reasons. Affiliation agreements are not activated or applied, and the fixed periodic visits are insignificant if they happen at all. While the absence of effective mutual relationship restricts the local HEIs' experience in the different aspects of HE quality process, excessive interferences are damaging as well.

Moreover, many Omani HEIs have miscellaneous foreign affiliation contracts at the same time, a phenomenon that may have a negative impact on the HEIs' final resort to attain to quality standards, as different HEIs have different quality mechanisms. The understaffing of Quality office and absence of rigorous internal quality procedures in the majority of the local HEIs would impose more risks on their progress and burden academic staff with extra tasks as well.

4.4 Insubstantial Statement of Intent

The HEI's vision, mission and objectives and relevant strategies distinguish it from other HEIs. The statement of intent has a far-reaching influence; it triggers everything within the institution, affects roles and functions of departments and individuals, and sketches a proper quality path for the institution.

Unfortunately, the generality of our organizations do not have thorough statements of intent. On the other hand, a number of these institutions have drawn their vision and mission statements to the minimal so as not to provide for additional requirements.

5 HEIs' Protectionary Practices

Relatively speaking, these acts of protectionism are practiced in the HE sector as well as all the other sectors across the globe; some of these practices are *legal* whereas others are not. The former are set by the HEI to comply with quality standards in operation (the Buy-One's-Laws principle) and made known to all stakeholders, and the latter are those adhered to in order to rationalize/hide away an unlawful situation.

In this work, protectionary acts shall generally be identified first, and then an inventory of these acts will be suggested. An endeavour will be made to allocate these acts within the HEI's life span or relevant stage/phase of quality check:

5.1 Identification of Unlawful Practices

5.1.1 Unfulfilled promises

They are noticed when the HEI makes hollow promises accompanied with propaganda coverage, e.g., new campuses, more facilities, enrolment concessions, etc.

5.1.2 Unsolicited actions

These are claimed to be done to satisfy higher monitoring authorities, e.g., requirements of performance indicators (staff numbers, Omanization rates, new posts, etc.), benchmarking, etc.

5.1.3 Latent incompetence

This is practiced in the absence of efficient staff and/or effective administrative mechanisms and academic policies, e.g., practicing plagiarism, unreal statistics, etc.

5.1.4 Voracity

This is exercised when the HEI minimizes its statement of intent to generate more profits, e.g., indulgence in non-academic investments, creating false settings, mismanagement of (financial) resources, etc.

5.2 Inventory of Protectionary Acts

5.2.1 During Normal Times

The phrase "normal times" here is used to mean "during the period with no quality checks at all, i.e., before the enforcement of quality standards, or where no quality check is expected or in progress". In the absence of effective monitoring and the presence of a growing number of HEIs of the same or relatively similar offerings, a HEI tends to perform these practices to survive the competition in the market (with other HEIs).

5.2.1.1 Self -Promotion or Bragging

Internationally, there are certain bragging rights a HEI is allowed to practice to reflect upon their own academic excellence; a HEI is entitled to bragging, if and only if the bragging points are really existent, e.g., issues regarding notable size of staff (percentage of PhD, Masters, Assistants to other staff and to students), number of students, diversity, programmes, facilities, research, etc.

But bragging is undesirable if it rests on no solid grounds, for instance, overstatement of multiple foreign affiliation (usually mono-

directional in nature), e.g., one HEI reiterates pompously it has had ties with 8 foreign affiliates (!!). In doing so, these HEIs aim to attract more "consumers" to their institutions. To have more than one affiliate may have negative consequences (even if the foreign affiliates operate in terms of their contracts) because of its additional obligations (and cost) that would bring up more confusion to the HEI itself. It must be emphasized that HEIs are encouraged to have as many as they can of bilateral cultural, scientific, or research agreements with other foreign HEIs since such agreements are different from affiliation contracts.

5.2.1.2 Propaganda

Many HEIs have good marketing policies (which is commended), whereas some exaggerate and act irrationally; during new enrolment peaks, they try to attract consumers with flyers, ads in newspapers, shopping centres, e-messaging (e-mails and SMS), and many other sponsored activities. In these advertisements, they do not refer to academic facilities, future prospects, etc., they rather mislead fresh school-leaving students: just register and get a "parchment/diploma" from a reputed foreign university!! Other HEIs advertise ornamented campus architectural designs, claiming they cost millions, but they do not exist in reality.

5.2.1.3 Community Service Exploitation

HEIs are obliged as non-profit organizations to support the local society freely; it is true that some HEIs have taken initiative towards that end, but the majority are turning their campuses into "training institutes" in order to generate additional income. For instance, 75% of a HEI's enrolment is in vocational/professional training courses, and only 25% of its population are regular academic students!! Other HEIs have been offering training courses for the public and taking up the roles assigned to the MoMP-licensed training institutes. This paid-for service is, HEIs claim, a community service.

5.2.1.4 Improper Labels

A number of inviting labels are occasionally utilized by some HEIs in order to attract more consumers, e.g., the label "University College" recurrently appears in many occasions (ads, celebrations, correspondence, promotion, etc.). In fact, a HEI is only entitled to use the label if it offers a postgraduate programme¹⁰.

5.2.1.5 Ineffective Practices

HEIs have many ineffective practices, departments and posts to respond to common requirements, e.g., participating in some local, regional or international events without effective contribution, and then tending to inflate this participation. Also some HEIs have as part of their Organizational Structures many dummy nodes (departments, offices, etc.), with a single employee or with many ill-informed/trained employees.

5.2.2 Post-Normal Times (during Quality Checks)

HEIs are alerted during quality checks and many staff are pressured by administration to do additional work in addition to their normal obligations (particularly daily academic activities). Therefore, many undesirable actions (including protectionism) result. These acts are practiced when the concerned person does not find satisfactory answers to the pending issues. Different types of protectionary practices occur during the different stages of the quality check.

5.2.2.1 Before

Since all HEIs know their next scheduled quality check at present, their endeavours to satisfy the process requirements start early before the writing of the self-study portfolio itself. As we have just mentioned, in their attempt to satisfy quality standards, they may endorse both accepted and non-accepted measures; such tendency is regarded as "understandable", though the OAC has also reminded HEIs to act untransparently. The common practice, however, is that HEIs are inclined to "protect their reputation", and prove credible¹¹.

The protectionary practices observed during this stage are as follows:

1. Exaggeration in all aspects of work, particularly media coverage where the audited HEI is exceptionally present everywhere in an attempt to stage itself as pioneering. However, it must be underlined here that such practices are encouraged if they occur normally; but if they are intended to attract the attention of the monitoring authority, individuals and institutions, e.g., in anticipation of MoHE visits or OAC checks, they are protectionary.
2. Befriending all stakeholders by settling all pending or unresolved issues in order to avoid unexpected complaints or submissions.
3. Imposing its "own laws", e.g., one HEI has created for itself two CEOs in order to suggest that it is fully prepared for a

higher status or accreditation. On the other hands, some HEIs do not appoint PhD staff, assistant CEOs, etc. claiming they (actual CEOs) can run business themselves alone, or with the help of the BoDs.

4. Some HEIs resort to hiring external consultants/teams to prepare the floor for the quality check, including the portfolio writing, claiming that such expertise will benefit the whole institution. Other HEIs trust one/two experienced staff to control the process. Both cases undermine the goal behind quality checks, which must be the collaborative effort of all stakeholders.

5.2.2.2 During Portfolio Writing

1. Exaggerating the number of quality (sub)committees formulated and meetings held. A HEI has announced in local newspapers that it has discussed quality and nominated many committees to accomplish the task, though the same HEI is understaffed and thus cannot accommodate for the proper work of this number of committees. Another HEI has held more than 100 meetings for the Steering Committee (SC) alone.
2. Overemphasizing portfolio writing tasks or vice versa, with many/fewer assumptions and less outcome.
3. Producing descriptive portfolio/evidence which is full of pompous style.
4. Resorting to plagiarism deliberately or accidentally.
5. Submitting excessive number of positive results and less negative ones and OFIs (Opportunities for Improvement).
6. Extensive communication with the Contact Person (of the OAC) to tell they care.
7. Exceptional attention to superficial matters such as the over-decorated editing of the self-study portfolio, e.g., cover pages, binding, CDs, paper quality, etc.
8. Exaggerating the number of (Additional) Supporting Materials attached.
9. Utilizing a professional editing company.

5.2.2.3 Before Panel Visit

HEIs have full relief after the submission of their self-study portfolios, but those who realize that the portfolio submission is only the beginning of a long race act differently. As far as protectionary acts are concerned these are some of the practices observed:

1. Continuing intensive media coverage.
2. Preparing lists of interviewees on a non-random scale.
3. Coercing interviewees, particularly internal interviewees, using different styles.

5.2.2.4 During Panel Visit

1. Attempting to have a good impact on the Panel members directly/indirectly in different ways¹².
2. Forcing some "trouble-making" stakeholders, e.g., incompetent, challenging, etc., not to attend during the panel visit.
3. Striving to recognize how the Panel members work, or the interviewees respond, etc.

5.2.2.5 After Panel Visit

5.2.2.5.1 Before Panel Report

1. Complaining about the work of the panel, or the process itself.
2. Releasing positive news about the outcome of the Audit, misinterpreting the feedback got from the Panel Chair at the end of the visit.
3. Keeping everyone in the dark about the results or the process.
4. Collecting false evidences and excuses about the pitfalls uncovered by the panel.

5.2.2.5.2 In Reply to Panel Report

5. Attempting to prove that recommendations of the report are baseless.
6. Disagreeing with Panel members, their course of work, and conclusions.
7. Appealing against the Panel Report.

5.2.2.5.3 After Panel Report

8. Undermining the recommendations and inflating the commendations in public (by interviews with CEOs, newspaper press releases, etc.).
9. Terminating tasks to improve, postponing them until next quality check.

5. Tentative Terms of Reference

Table (1) shows tentative terms of reference, which can be elaborated by the work of the different HE organizations, to act as guidelines to the HEIs:

Table 1. Tentative Terms of Reference

#	Question	Answer	Action to Avoid Protectionism
1	What is Protectionism?	Protectionism is an undesirable act aimed to conceal facts from the HEI's stakeholders, by providing false/distorted information about the institution in order to distance itself from possible harmful measures. In other words, it is an unethical, unlawful action.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To accomplish transparency, a HEI must: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Identify itself clearly by drawing a sound statement of intent (vision, mission, goals and objectives) and applies them via realistic strategic planning. b. Maintain a delicate Resource management process. c. Communicate honestly with its stakeholders. d. Act as a non-profit organization. 2. To serve the interests of ALL stakeholders, and respect the requirements of the regulatory authorities through a legal (and even legalized) protectionary framework.
2	Who practices it?	It is intentionally practiced by the HEI's owners and senior managers who know the real irregularities of the organization, and inadvertently by other stakeholders who are unaware they are protecting an offensive practice.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To set clear roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder, and sustain them in everyday transactions. 2. To ensure that the people responsible for governance (BoDs & BoTs) and administration (Chancellors, Deans, HoDs, etc.) act independently in terms of their roles and responsibilities and in line with the HEI's statement of intent. 3. To avoid all acts of coercing, threatening, etc. practiced to misinform regulatory bodies or their representatives. 4. To enroll professional cadre and sustain honest community, adopt rigid criteria of selection, procedures of orientation, and appeal/complaint mechanism to be checked by regulatory authorities periodically.
3	How is it practiced?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Unfulfilled promises 2. Unsolicited actions 3. Latent incompetence 4. Indifference 5. Voracity 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To act rationally in line with a HEI's own realistic statement of intent. 2. To satisfy international performance indicators and cooperate with other peer HEIs. 3. To provide learners with reputed human resources and reliable facilities. 4. To avoid all ungrounded allegations.

4	When is it most practiced?	Protectionism is adhered to in: 1. Self-reports to a regulatory authority (during quality checks) 2. Reports to a governing body (in annual reports) 3. Peaks of student enrolment (before regular study commencement)	1. To provide self-informative manuals and guidelines concerning all types of reports required. 2. To organize explanatory workshops, meetings and gatherings to simplify the tasks and exchange experience. 3. To produce evaluative reports relying on accurate data, and relevant performance indicators and benchmarking tools. 4. To endorse an obvious reward policy, reflecting dedication on the part of the governing and regulatory stakeholders. 5. To facilitate cooperation, not competition, between HEIs. This is the role of the regulatory authorities who must manage annual fairs, control programme licensing policy, and assure existence of manuals.
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6 Conclusion

Thomas (2002) asserts that "Human society requires universities – they are not an added extra, they are an essential part of the fabric of our civilization, our educational provision, our search for new knowledge and our civic life"; among other things, HEIs are characterized with organisational structures that collocate "decision making, financial control, administration and accountability", and considered as acknowledged contributors "economically, socially and culturally to the city and region"¹³.

In 2004, Southon claims that "Universities are neglecting their role as the intellectual engines and guardians of society"; thus "they have lost their integrity and become creatures of student whim and short-term corporate interests", with "Many academic leaders are more pre-occupied with ensuring financial viability than advancing and integrating their disciplines. In the process they are alienating their colleagues by overloading them with teaching and cutting support services. The situation is exacerbated by the reporting demands of government in an illusory attempt at transparency. The result is decline in genuine independent thought and co-operative collegiality"¹⁴.

The increasing gap between the planned role and the actual practice has been under controversial debate. Protectionism is one of the actions exercised by the "corporate" senior managers to protect their interests; in other words, the failure

of a HEI to respond to effective quality standards is concomitant with protectionary acts.

Therefore, a HEI must adopt a clear policy which enables students, parents and other stakeholders to know about its real status in order for them to make proper decisions regarding their enrolment in this HEI. This has been a hot issue in the western world, particularly in the USA, whereby HEIs are requested (by the regulating authorities) to initiate an *Office of Consumer Protection*. This initiative stems from the need for education to obtain a meaningful credential since current policies are crafted by the professionals' voice of HEIs, not the students' voice. Hence, there must be existent a kind of "user-friendly 'truth-in-education' information", which is based on a Consumer "Bill of Rights" where data must be geared towards providing information to students purchasing HE services¹⁵.

HEIs thus become inherently self-protected when they endorse such policies as students and other stakeholders (including the public officials) are well-aware of the HEI's statement of intent which rests upon students' "quality, flexibility and fit for life styles"¹⁶. The Omani MoHE has demanded that transparent information should be available for fresh students in both languages, Arabic and English, and published to the public on the HEIs' websites, brochures and booklets in order to enable them choose appropriately and know their rights fully.

A protectionary act may be accepted if it aims to save the interests of ALL stakeholders, not some of them only, particularly, investors and/or senior managers. Irrespective of the counter arguments, protectionism may be hailed by a HEI's society when it defends its interests, provided that the HEI itself acts within the framework of the effective regulations as well, that is, the regulations legislated by the country's regulating authorities, the MoHE and OAC in the Sultanate of Oman.

Notes

1. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protectionism>)
2. **The Quality Audit Manual**, Oman Accreditation Council. 2008, p. 45.
3. (<http://mohe.gov.om/>)
4. (<http://www.oac.gov.om/>)
5. (<http://www.oac.gov.om/oqn/guidelines/>)
6. **The Quality Audit Manual** , op. cit., pp.12-13
7. Ibid, pp. 10-12
8. Levy, op. cit., 2009.
9. See *The INQAAHE Policy Statement* (2004)
10. A university college must offer post graduate studies and implement a thorough research development plan. For more information, see *Guides for Institutional and Programme Accreditation. ROSQA. MoHE.* p. 21
11. **The Quality Audit Manual**, op. cit., p. 45
12. In § 10.2 entitled **Undue Influence**, the OAC lists possible forms of influence practiced on the Panel Members. For more information, see **The Quality Audit Manual**, op. cit., p. 44.
13. Thomas, Eric. (2002). Roles of Universities.
http://www.bris.ac.uk/university/vc/role_of_universities.html
14. **Southon, Gray. (2004).** The intellectual role of universities?
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15. (http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/11/consumer_protection.html).
16. Ibid