

**MANAGING QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
A STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVE**

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by

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ABSTRACT

This study proposes a framework for managing quality in higher education based on the key quality values of students, academics and employers. The proposed framework of the stakeholder determinants of quality (SDQ) is unique in that it is the only approach to quality that seeks to address differences in quality values between stakeholder groups while it builds on similarities in their views. The methodology employs sequential methodological triangulation and includes individual interviews and a larger survey. The sample includes students and academic staff on Business and IT undergraduate programmes from six of the largest private sector higher education institutions in Muscat, Oman and some of the largest private and public sector employers.

The findings reveal strong congruence on many criteria between academic staff and employers, including the importance of developing core transferable skills, student transformation and empowerment and high academic standards. Student responses indicate a lack of congruence on those criteria that focus on student input and participation in the learning process, which are highly rated by academic staff and employers. There are a number of criteria in which there is congruence between the three groups, most significantly, the importance of the teaching and learning function. Students' engagement with the learning process through the lecturers' ability to motivate students' interest, facilitate subject knowledge, stimulate thought and develop transferable skills are considered the most critical issues in managing quality by all three groups. The study suggests that an approach to quality that is based on an understanding of key values of the main participants will facilitate shared understanding and quality consciousness within institutions in comparison to current quality assurance regimes that are externally imposed.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The last few decades have witnessed the integration of the world economy as a result of multiple factors, including the deregulation of world capital markets, market liberalisation and most importantly, the explosion of worldwide telecommunications. This has in turn created an intensively competitive and dynamic environment which creates often conflicting pressures on organisations to rapidly adapt and respond to changing scenarios (McGregor, 2002). However, while competition has become more intense, resources have become scarcer. Organisations that employ public funds such as educational institutions are no exception, as they face increasing pressures to demonstrate sufficient value in return for resources employed (Pounder and Coleman, 2002).

With increasing levels of awareness and sophistication of local and international communities, higher education providers (HEPs) have to accommodate and satisfy increasing demands from stakeholders. Furthermore, these institutions that were once protected from free market dynamics are now forced to become much more competitive, in order to attract and retain students and to meet performance demands of the global marketplace. For instance, increasing expectations from stakeholders has resulted in increasing calls for radical improvement in graduate business school education (Grey, 2004). Facing escalating costs, resource constraints and increasing levels of competition, HEPs as a response, borrow strategies from the business sector that are greatly influenced by factors such as quality and price in order to survive (Michael, 1997). Consequently, the issue of service quality in higher education (HE) has risen to the top of the research agenda with the main focus on service satisfaction from the perspective of the student (Wright and O'Neill, 2002). Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) point to the elaborate measures initiated by many governments to regulate standards and improve quality, as an indication of the desperate need to bring about fundamental improvements in the management of quality in HE.

However, despite the vast amount of literature on the topic of quality, there is very little agreement on the fundamental precepts that underpin quality in HE. Most studies on quality focus on students' levels of satisfaction within particular institutions while the views of

other stakeholders have not been adequately examined. It is apparently taken for granted that as the core issues in managing quality have already been identified by experienced educators and relevant bodies such as accreditation agencies, it is not necessary to validate these assumptions by exploring the views of those who are directly involved or affected by the process of HE.

1.1 RATIONALE AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

1.1.1 Conceptual Context

Although a relatively new entrant in management science, the management of quality has gained dominance in organisational practice and forms the basis for evaluating organisational excellence (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003). Experts opine that the most powerful trend currently influencing organisational strategy is service quality (Abdullah, 2006). In the modern context in HE, quality management has implications for a whole range of issues including student numbers, curriculum development, student and staff recruitment and retention, teaching and learning, student performance, resource management and faculty productivity. Nevertheless, there is increasing concern that quality assurance requirements are diverting too much of academics' attention from their primary purposes of teaching, research and community service, particularly at a time when pressure on resources is growing (Yorke, 1999).

The implementation of quality driven strategies has an inherent problem in that quality is an elusive construct which is difficult to define and measure accurately (Sahney et al. 2006). Similar to the abstract nature of most services it is difficult for HEPs to differentiate their offerings, thus making it difficult for consumers to evaluate different provisions until the process is completed or acquired (Hill, 1995). In most countries, HE has evolved from a niche-service to one that caters to a mass market, marked by increasing student numbers and diverse providers which has necessitated more appropriate measures of quality (O'Neill and Palmer, 2004). The range of abilities in the class room is now very extensive and students are more varied in their socioeconomic backgrounds, age and experience. HEPs have the difficult task of proving that they can educate larger numbers of students from diverse backgrounds effectively and at lower unit costs while maintaining their integrity and academic standards.

HE has a range of stakeholders of which students form only one part, albeit a primary group (Chua, 2004). The list of stakeholders can easily be extended to include the government, employers, society, professional bodies and accreditation agencies. The complexity increases at higher levels of study, as students themselves become a part of the academic community as in the case of postgraduate students engaged in research and teaching. Telford and Masson (2005) stress that a better understanding of the quality values of other stakeholders particularly staff who design and deliver the programmes are also extremely vital, because, if nothing else, they have an impact on student participation. Through their interaction with students as teachers and facilitators, an institution's academic community will probably influence students' achievements and experiences within the institution to the greatest extent. For an HEP, the employers of its graduates are also key stakeholders who will ultimately benefit from the knowledge and skills of the individuals they employ. Wright and O'Neill (2002) point out that the role of HE as a vital antecedent to career success has been largely driven by employers' increasing demand for a university education as a necessary prerequisite to employment and many, therefore, consider employers as the real customers in HE.

Senge (2000) emphasises that any model for management can succeed only if it is based on the shared values of all stakeholders, particularly the main participants. However, the management of quality covers a broad area and perceptions of quality differ from person to person (Madu, 1998). While some may consider quality in HE to be associated mainly with the quality of teaching and learning (the process), others may consider the quality of the student intake (input) or the knowledge and skills attained by the graduates (output) to be the main criteria (Chua, 2004; Cheng and Tam, 1997). There is a lack of general consensus on how best to manage quality in HE and, there is as yet, no definitive model to evaluate quality within HE (Becket and Brookes, 2005). Research on educational quality also shows a lack of agreement on the dimensions of quality (Abdullah, 2006) and furthermore, although the literature acknowledges that service quality is a multidimensional phenomenon, there is a lack of research on general service quality that reveals the multiple perspectives and reflects the inherent interactive process of all services (Svensson, 2003). Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007), therefore, call for a fresh approach to developing models for managing quality in HE, as current models are very narrowly focused and based on adapting industry models to HE.

In order to manage quality effectively, an essential first step would involve identifying key quality values of the primary stakeholders, as without some degree of consensus on major quality values, quality management will not be effective in the longer-term. It is entirely possible that perceptions of quality will vary from one group of stakeholder to another. If this is indeed the case, issues on which there are major differences would require further dialogue and discussion. However, as far as the knowledge of the researcher extends, the literature with very few exceptions, has failed to adequately ascertain what staff, students and employers, view as fundamental to quality in HE. Most studies on quality in HE focus on students' expectations and levels of satisfaction within particular institutions, while a few studies explore staff perception on the effectiveness of institutional management and quality. Even among these studies there is very little evidence whether such satisfaction surveys actually measure those aspects or dimensions which are indeed considered relevant by the respondents. One of the few exceptions to this is Telford and Mason (2005) who sought to determine the extent to which students and staff shared the same values within a single institution. Some data is also provided by Hewitt and Clayton (1999) on the expectations of major stakeholders involving a single course of study.

This study, therefore, addresses a gap in the literature by proposing a framework for managing quality that is based on the quality values of students, staff and employers as the core stakeholders who are directly involved in the educational process or are directly affected by the outcome of HE. With the complexities inherent in managing quality in HE and with the increasing pressures on HEPs, this study identifies those quality dimensions on which HEPs must concentrate more efforts on, rather than spreading themselves thinly all around. More importantly, it is argued that identifying the quality values of these stakeholders is critical, as they underpin the motivations, expectations and resultant behaviour of the key participants. A quality framework that addresses the management of key quality values can help develop shared values and quality consciousness within institutions, as opposed to current quality assurance regimes that are imposed by external regulatory bodies.

1.1.2 Physical Context

The study has been conducted in Muscat in the Sultanate of Oman which is located in the south-east region of the Arabian Peninsula. The country has a relatively short history in HE

with the establishment of the first university in 1986, similar to other countries in the Gulf region. However, in a relatively short time span the number of local HEPs has grown rapidly from 8 in 1996 to 36 in 2006, the majority of which are privately funded and managed. This rapid growth has been achieved through the government strategy of encouraging the private sector to set up local institutions having academic affiliations with established international universities. The HE sector is governed by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) which regulates all public and private HEPs in the country. In accordance with the regulations of the MoHE, most HEPs offer only undergraduate programmes.

The very short history of HE in Oman and the rapid growth in the number of private HEPs during this period has created a unique environment in terms of academic management and institutional recognition. Particular features are the relatively large number of private sector HEPs and the prevalence of different models of HE in the country, as partner universities are based mainly in the United Kingdom, U.S.A, Australia and Jordan. This creates problems in adopting a common system for institutional or programme accreditation and quality assurance. The local HEPs have to conform to the requirements of their affiliate partners and overseas quality assurance agencies, meet local student, community and industry needs and expectations, as well as conform to the regulations of the MoHE. Given the different models of HE offered by each, the ensuing differences in curriculum and possibly standards and the lack of a common platform for assessing institutions, it is difficult for students and the external community to assess which institutions best meets their expectations and requirements. Currently the MoHE and the Oman Accreditation Council is in the process of establishing a unified system of accreditation and quality assurance based on best practices in Australia and U.K (Carroll, 2006).

In this context and given the lack of research on HE in Oman, any study on the management of quality, particularly those pertaining to private sector HEPs would provide important insights into local issues in HE. This study by seeking to determine the expectations and quality values of key stakeholder groups, which is an area that has not been explored fully even internationally, provides vital background information on relevant quality issues. Hence, its contribution to knowledge is significant and two fold: it seeks to provide an integrated view of quality values in HE from a combined stakeholder perspective which is

not as yet available in the literature and secondly it explores this in a physical context which has been entirely unexplored in terms of research on quality in HE.

1.2 RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This study aims to identify congruencies and differences in quality values between the three groups of key stakeholders in HE i.e. students, academics and employers, so as to propose a viable framework for managing quality that would address the major expectations of the three groups. The study is located in Muscat, Oman and focuses on a range of undergraduate programmes in Business Studies and Information Technology which are the two most commonly offered subject disciplines in Oman

The key research objectives are:

1. To identify criteria that are considered important to managing quality in higher education by academics, students and employers in Oman;
2. To determine any differences or congruencies in the values and attributes/criteria of quality among the three stakeholder groups;
3. To propose a framework for managing quality based on the stakeholder determinants of quality.

In order to achieve the above objectives, the following research questions have been formulated:

- 1) Which criteria are viewed as specifically relevant to quality in HE by academics, students and employers in Oman?
- 2) What differences or congruencies exist in the quality values and expectations of the three stakeholder groups and what are the implications for HEPs?
- 3) What framework for managing quality can be proposed based on the stakeholder determinants of quality?

1.3 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

Following the introduction, chapter 2 discusses the existing literature on quality in HE. It examines the various issues that comprise the complex, multifaceted concept of quality and its application to the HE sector.

Chapter 3 discusses the research approach that underlines this study and presents the methodology that addresses the research questions that have been raised. It also addresses various issues regarding the validity and rigour of the study.

Chapter 4 presents and discusses the findings from the in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with a sample of each stakeholder group. It identifies the quality values of the three stakeholder groups and their views on what is specifically relevant to the quality of HE.

Chapter 5 presents and discusses the findings from the survey conducted with a larger sample from each stakeholder group and examines the differences and congruencies in quality values and perceptions between the groups.

Chapter 6 sets out the proposed framework of quality based on the stakeholder determinants of HE as identified in Chapters 4 and 5.

The final chapter concludes with the major findings and the contribution to knowledge made by this dissertation. It also outlines the limitations of this study and the scope for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

This chapter discusses the existing literature on the concept of quality in HE and the variables that influence this multifaceted issue. The first section examines the different perspectives and definitions of quality. Section two identifies the various stakeholders of HE and section three explores the relevance of existing models of quality management to HE. Section four discusses the literature on technical and functional quality and examines the various input, process and output variables in HE. Next, the findings from the few studies that have been conducted on quality values are discussed. The chapter ends with a summary.

2.1 DEFINING QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

While quality is recognised as a fundamental issue in management theory and practice, there is considerable variation in how it is perceived by different stakeholders and the ensuing implications for organisational performance (Saad and Siha, 2000). Education is a service and services are described as activities or processes that are differentiated from physical goods by virtue of four essential characteristics, namely intangibility, perishability, heterogeneity and inseparability of production and consumption (Hill, 1995). A particular feature of services is that they are behavioural rather than physical entities. This is particularly pertinent to HE which is often described as a process of transformation involving the analytical and critical development of the student (Harvey and Green, 1993). Furthermore, HE involves a highly subjective and intangible product which is the outcome of complex multifaceted service delivery, post-purchase experience and an accumulation of tangible and intangible offerings (Wright and O'Neill, 2002), all of which involve students, faculty, employers and the community, thus making it extremely difficult to evaluate. The quality of the multi-dimensional educational experience is influenced by a myriad of factors and variables, at the end of which the student achieves a profile of knowledge and skills which the world in general will perceive as the quality of the educational provision (Yorke, 1999).

Although an HEP may be defined by the quality of its educational provision, the measurement and evaluation of quality is subject to many different interpretations and problems. A fundamental issue in quality management is the lack of consensus in defining quality, although most people seem to believe they can intuitively recognise quality when they come across it. The ambiguity arises as people perceive quality differently, making it an elusive concept to define (Sahney et al. 2006). Sallis (1993) suggests that quality is a dynamic idea which exerts an emotional and moral influence which makes it difficult to link it to any one particular meaning. Furthermore, the emphasis in the literature on quality is predominantly product-oriented, while service quality has received considerably less attention (Gupta and Chen, 1999). This is unfortunate as service quality in particular is a multifaceted construct and there is a lack of consensus on the various facets of service quality and their interrelationships (Hung et al., 2003).

The main difference between product and service quality is the fact that unlike products, customers do not evaluate service solely on the outcome but consider the process of offering the service as fundamental (Zeithaml et al., 1990) which also makes it more difficult for the customer to evaluate service quality. Edvardsson (2005) highlights the influence of emotions on customers' perceptions of quality and the importance of knowing the positive and negative drivers of customer emotions as customers may respond in various ways. Initially, quality management in the services sector was seen as improving internal processes without considering the impact or interrelationships between the processes and the ultimate customers (Brigham, 1993). Eventually, the focus shifted to the consumer and now, most definitions of service quality are customer focused (Galloway, 1998), so that if consumer expectations are met, service quality is considered satisfactory (Hill, 1995). Perceptions of service quality are, therefore, based on the difference between consumer expectations about the performance of the service and their assessment of the actual experience of the service. The perceived importance of critical service elements to customers and their subsequent satisfaction on these service elements are the criteria for evaluating service quality (Hung et al., 2003). Parasuraman et al., (1994) identify five dimensions or service elements for evaluating general service quality, namely tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Failure to meet customer expectations on any of these dimensions can result in a satisfaction gap.

In order to have clearly defined systems for quality management, it is important to have a clear statement of what exactly is meant by quality (Doherty, 1997). A main contention in defining quality is whether quality is a desired state, as put forth traditionally or whether it is a process, a view which considers the dynamic nature of the industry, market needs and stakeholder expectations (Saad and Siha, 2000). There are various definitions of quality, reflecting different approaches to quality management and taking into account different aspects and perspectives of quality. For example, quality has been associated with offering distinctive or special products or services from a user-oriented perspective. Accordingly, the ISO 8042 defines quality as the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that helps satisfy particular needs (Yorke, 1999). Although this view of product or service quality focuses on particular needs of users, conflicts may arise in prioritising different needs and wants and in evaluating how they are met. Other related definitions of quality also include: fitness for purpose, conforming to requirements or specifications and achieving excellence (Sahney et al. 2004). Later approaches relate quality as a concept where whole organisations develop the capacity to continually learn and implement customer wants (Harvey and Green, 1993). The emphasis is on quality as a total organisation-wide effort whereby quality should be a way of life which influences the attitude and behaviour of everyone. Quality is thus perceived to be a state of mind and not confined to mere processes or procedures.

When applied to the context of HE, industry based quality concepts present significant limitations and as with other services, are inconclusive (Cheng & Tam, 1997). There is a long-standing debate about the appropriateness of re-defining industrial/business concepts to make them relevant to HE which is perceived as a public good (Harvey and Green, 1993; Campell and Rozsnyani, 2002). There is also a tendency to criticise the emergence of market-led approaches to quality in HE which is held responsible for the increasing emphasis on consumer orientation (Gibbs and Iacovidou, 2004). Perspectives on quality in HE have evolved over the years, ranging from experience to techniques and styles and to process and have been associated with the following definitions (Campell and Rozsnyani, 2002; Watty, 2005):

- being exceptional or distinctive (excellence);
- achieving consistency particularly in process;
- being fit for purpose (conformity to specified objectives or standards);

- being accountable, effective and efficient (providing value for money) and
- being transformative, wherein education is considered an ongoing process of transformation including the empowerment and enhancement of all involved.

From the range of definitions available, it is evident that formulating a single, comprehensive definition is problematic (Sahney et al. 2004). Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003) note that definitions of quality are stakeholder relative. They mapped the different definitions with the differing priorities and perspectives of each stakeholder group and suggest that the consistency, conformity definitions may be associated with academics and administrators, the value for money and excellence definition would be more relevant to students, sponsors and funding bodies, while the fitness for purpose definition would be of relevance to employers.

Most of the definitions have been criticised for different limitations. The ‘consistency in process’ definition is criticised on the grounds that it is an insufficient although necessary goal of quality management, leading to sterile and bureaucratic processes stifling creativity and innovation (Doherty, 1997). The efficiency definition considers that when evaluating the process of achieving desired outcomes, one must also consider the extent to which the desired outcomes are achieved (effectiveness) and the efficiency of converting the input into output. However, in HE measuring efficiency and effectiveness can be difficult as many of the important functional aspects are intangible and can vary considerably from one group of students to another and from one tutor to another. The ‘fitness for purpose: conformity to predetermined objectives or standards’ definition of quality is used extensively in business and has been quite popular in HE as well (Lomas, 2002). Watty (2005) finds that the fitness for purpose definition of quality is the prevailing view of quality amongst accounting academics in Australia. The definition has a strong commercial orientation and assumes that if the product fulfils the purpose for which it is intended its quality is assured. The starting point, therefore, is the purpose for which the product is intended, but for which the definition does not provide any guidance and assumes that any specification would be complete without missing gaps. In reality, where the product or service is complex such as HE, defining the purpose is no simple matter and any assumptions can weaken the product or outcome. This approach to quality is useful if the objectives, standards, specifications and indicators used for judging quality as well as evaluating whether the prescribed objectives

have been attained are clear and accepted by all involved constituencies (Cheng and Tam, 1997). Another view of fitness for purpose is that it can accommodate all other views of quality, where for example, the purpose may be identified as excellence, value for money or transformation (Watty, 2005).

Interestingly, very few of the definitions are really focused on the student, who is arguably the main customer in HE. The 'transformative' definition by Harvey and Knight (1996) which focuses on enhancing the capabilities of participants and ultimately empowering them is one exception. Becket and Brookes (2005) interpret transformation as the critical ability to assess and develop knowledge and observe this is more important to internal stakeholders. A distinctive character of HE is that it is closely aligned with the concept of the learning society, which requires societies to transform themselves in order to prevent decline (Yorke, 1999). The ability to transform learners by enhancing their ability to think for themselves is seen as the highest level of achievement to which HE can aspire (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007). Transformation involves cognitive transcendence and engagement with the meaning of the subject which in turn requires institutional transformation for learning, teaching for transformation and assessment for transformation. In fact, Harvey and Knight (1996) contend that the other characteristics of quality including excellence/high standards, fitness for purpose and efficiency and effectiveness are simply part of the view of quality as transformation. This definition integrates very well with the generally accepted tenet of service quality i.e. customers are active participants of the service delivery process, because although there is considerable debate about students as customers, their transformation does require a very active and joint participation between students and HEPs (Hill, 1995; Williams, 1993).

Another definition which focuses on students is provided by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2004, p.1) which defines academic quality as "*how well the learning opportunities provided to students enables them to achieve their award*". This includes ensuring the appropriateness and effectiveness of teaching, overall support structures, assessments and learning opportunities provided to the students. One criticism of this definition is that it is too general to be readily implemented (Eagle and Brennan, 2007). Cheng's (1995) definition of educational quality in Cheng and Tam (1997) is more comprehensive although still generic and encompasses the whole process of education as well as stakeholders; it states:

the character of the set of elements in the input, process, and output of the education system that provides services that completely satisfy both internal and external strategic constituencies by meeting their explicit and implicit expectations (p.23).

Closely linked to the issue of educational quality is the issue of standards which is another term that is essentially subjective and can have different interpretations (Doherty, 1997). Yorke (1999) makes the distinction that while quality is the totality of all the aspects that influence the students' experience, academic standards refer to the set of expectations about the students' programme of study. Doherty (1997) refers to assessment or output standards i.e. the nature and levels of student attainment required. Lomas and Tomlinson (2000) emphasise that standards are measures of outcome that provides for clear and unambiguous judgments about whether the outcomes are satisfactory. The standards set for a programme of study is inevitably linked to the outcomes and ensure a certain level of knowledge and skills from graduates of that programme. A key characteristic of standards is that they are never static but Morley and Aynsley (2007) note that standards imply standardisation or homogenisation with tacit and explicit understandings of what constitutes desirable graduate qualifications and characteristics. Together with the increasing focus on student satisfaction and massification of HE, there has been increasing assertions of falling academic standards and grade inflation (Clayson and Haley, 2005; Lomas and Tomlinson, 2000). The evidence also indicates that while students consider HE primarily as a route to a career, they are indifferent to whether high standards are maintained (Rolfe, 2002). Instead, it is being increasingly claimed that they now tend to shop around for the easiest courses with the highest grades (Carlson and Fleisher, 2002). However, others such as Marsh and Roche (2000) refute these assertions as they find that students in fact do not rate lecturers who give them lighter work loads positively. They find that although there is a positive correlation between student evaluation of teaching and the grades obtained by students, this is mostly explained by the fact that student perceive they have learned more when they obtain good grades.

Closely linked to the concepts of quality and standards is the purpose of HE. Similar to the problem of defining quality, Doherty (1997) contends that it is impossible to arrive at a single identifiable purpose for any form of education as the needs of the different stakeholders although overlapping in many respects are also different. Generally, the

objective of education may be considered to be the acquisition of knowledge and skills for both intrinsic and instrumental purposes (Eagle and Brennan, 2007). Heyneman (2006) emphasises the role of private and public HE in enhancing societal cohesion and in ensuring that their graduates are able to live up to the expectations of the labour market and provide value to the community in general. He suggests that the more a university exhibits good behaviour and professional standards, the more likely will its students contribute to social capital that is tolerant, understands diversity and is willing to work towards a common good. Wals and Jickling (2002) contend that a university's role is to develop dynamic qualities in students that allow them to be critical and to act with a high degree of autonomy and determination at least in their professional lives. They argue that educators must seek more diversity of thought in order to ensure sustainability and meaningful learning that will enable students to cope with poorly defined situations and conflicting or diverging values and interests. Eagle and Brennan (2007, p.49) suggests that the goal of HE is to develop graduates with the "ability to think critically and laterally, to solve problems creatively, to adapt to change, and to understand the social dynamics of the organisations in which they will work". If the objective of HE is to enable students to engage in effective actions in increasing uncertainty, quality systems have to identify those features which develop this characteristic in all of its programmes (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2002). For the effective management of quality of education, the objective of providing that education would have to be clearly understood, even if there are a range of objectives to fulfil.

The fact that there does not seem to be any agreed definition of quality is taken as indicative of the problems inherent in deciding appropriate measures of assessing quality. However, Garvin (1988) writes that reliance on a single definition for quality can be a source of conflict and can result in communication problems. Indeed, it may be a futile exercise to seek a single best definition of quality as it is not a '*unitary concept*' but must be defined in terms of '*qualities*' (Green 1994, p. 17). Although quality will always be subject to varying interpretations, most of the definitions have various points of similarities between them (Cheng and Tam, 1997). Certainly, the complexity and multi-faceted concept of quality in HE may not be best described by a single, definition and cannot be easily assessed by only one indicator. It would be productive to determine the views of different stakeholders when defining and evaluating quality so as to allow potentially different but legitimate views to be expressed. Meeting such expectations may, nevertheless, be particularly challenging as each

stakeholder group may have contradictory priorities and expectations based on their different modes of interaction with the institution (Mahapatra and Khan, 2007).

2.2 STAKEHOLDERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Stakeholders in HE include students, teaching as well as non-teaching staff, employers, government and other funding agencies, accreditation bodies and the general community, each with their own criteria and perspectives (Telford and Masson, 2005). Amongst these, the more significant stakeholders are those who either have an effect on the process or outcome of the service or are directly affected by it. The primary internal stakeholders, therefore, would invariably be those being educated (students) and the educators (academic and management staff) as they participate in or are responsible for and influence the process of education. Furthermore, employers of graduates are external stakeholders who are ultimately and directly affected by the outcome of HE and, therefore, must be considered as a key stakeholder (Hewitt and Clayton, 1999).

The focus on these three main stakeholder groups in this study is not to understate the importance of other external groups such as the government, families of students and the society who have legitimate interests in HE. As Eagle and Brennan (2007, p. 48) argue, even if both students and employers considered the role of HE was to support the economy by preparing graduates for jobs, this would not be the only legitimate purpose of HE. They write that:

the community which contributes to higher education through general taxation, may reasonably suppose that it is the purpose of higher education to produce well-rounded citizens who are sensitive to the needs of vulnerable groups and who may be prepared to sacrifice some self-interest for the common good.

Government agencies and funding bodies are also extremely relevant as they may often have a direct or indirect effect on funding, licensing and approvals; nevertheless their main role being more regulatory in nature are not in the same category as students, staff and employers.

References to students in the quality assurance literature range from that of customer, consumer, partner, participant and stakeholder and it is now widely acknowledged that

students as stakeholders have an increasingly powerful influence in the process and outcomes of HE (Johnson and Deem, 2003). Definitions of quality in HE consider students as two distinct analogies: one as that of a customer who buys a service in expectation of career benefits and the other as that of raw material that will be transformed by the process of HE into an individual with added skills (Eriksen, 1995). In the latter view, the primary input is the student who is subjected to a transformation process (the value adding process of HE) which in turn produces an output (the student after exposure to a value-added service). A distinctive feature of many services is that customers are also partial employees as they are intensively involved in the production and delivery aspects of the service (Hill, 1995) and this is exemplified by students as processors of information (Williams, 1993) and co-producers (Hill, 1995) particularly in the case of post-graduate students.

The conceptualisation of quality as the difference between students' expectations and their perception of their actual experience is considered by many as a valid and reliable indicator of educational quality (O'Neill and Palmer, 2004). However, while service quality and customer orientation are the focus of the service industry, there are many who question whether students should be considered as customers and indeed whether this can be an appropriate approach (Gibbs and Iacovidou, 2004). Johnson and Deem (2003) find that the concept of the student-consumer is largely resisted by academic managers. They observe that any attempt to present students as customers requires careful articulation of students' needs, which then becomes the terms of reference by which the customer concept is created, defined and asserted. This requires redefining and clarifying students' identity, rights and status in relation to the academic/professional, which results in tensions between management and academic staff.

There are fears that in an environment where student expectations are the focus, learning, curriculum and programme quality would suffer. Barnett (1997) argues that HE is now a large-scale service industry, increasingly embracing the concept of customer care despite the opposition and ongoing debate on the mismatch between the customer-centered approaches and traditional academic values. Eagle and Brennan (2007) point out that while students may consider gaining an advantage in terms of their career as a key indicator of quality, they may not really consider high academic standards as representative of high quality or as essential for career advancement. While emphasising that HEPs must ensure that the implicit and explicit needs of students and other stakeholder groups are met, they

point out that there is some currency in the “notion that students are simply in the HE system to acquire a qualification and that any education picked up along the way is incidental to this primary aim” (p.44). The resistance to the student-customer concept may result from the concern that it legitimises all student demands that HEPs will then have to satisfy. Education cannot be treated as a mere transaction involving the payment of money for a service rendered, even if one ignores all other complexities and considers only the fact that HEPs are required to regulate standards for their awards which involves not rewarding those students who fail to meet these standards.

Arguably, as students bear the larger proportion of the costs of HE in many countries, this gives them the right to be treated as customers (Eagle and Brennan, 2007). This then raises the concern that students as fee paying customers will take less responsibility for their own learning and will place the responsibility for their failure or poor performance on the HEP (Clayson and Haley, 2005) or more precisely their tutors, an expectation which would also have to be managed effectively by HEPs. Nevertheless, there is evidence of a direct link between student satisfaction and retention which suggests that an institution must focus more attention on student satisfaction if it wishes to reduce drop out rates (Wright & O’Neill, 2002). As Basave (1998) argues, if an educational system does not take into account the diversity and the aspirations of those for whom it is designed, it goes against intellectual and cultural values. Thus, discerning and managing student expectations have become an important aspect of managing the quality of the student experience. In fact, Wright & O’Neill, (2002) recommend that students should be involved in all stages of the HE service design process so that their needs can be properly ascertained and provided for. Furthermore, although students’ needs may remain the same, the relative priority of the needs may change over time which requires the delivery process to reflect this change. It is also important to recognise that students are no more homogeneous than any other group of stakeholders and there will be significant differences between them. Undoubtedly, students will have different objectives and sets of expectations from HE, a fact which is under recognised by academics and administrators (Eagle and Brennan, 2007).

However, while students as primary customers have the right to obtain best quality education, the fact is that students may not really be in a position to evaluate or comprehend what constitutes a ‘good’ course or learning experience in terms of content and outcomes in the longer term, in relation to their immediate experience of it. Education may have the

distinction of being the only service where it is difficult for the customer to assess the quality and relevance of the service, as students may not fully comprehend the relevance of a course until later years of study (Dickson et al., 1995). For instance, new students fresh out of secondary school may confine their objective to acquiring a qualification for employment without realising the importance of developing the skills required for personal and professional development. Therefore, Amaral (2006) stresses that students may be considered only as immature consumers who are not in a position to rationally evaluate data on future benefits accruing from a programme of study.

Clearly, the notion that the customer is always right cannot be taken literally in HE as this can corrode the acquisition of necessary knowledge and skills and, therefore, harm the interests of students themselves. It is also necessary that students understand their role in the learning process and the role of academic and administrative staff in facilitating learning opportunities (Lammers et al., 2005). Academics may accept that students are in some sense customers, provided that this is interpreted with a degree of sophistication, as there would be few arguments against an approach to educational delivery in which the learner is the central focus. Hence, while the concept of students being a simple customer purchasing a service offers little relevance to HE, students may be thought of as professional customers of an intangible service having uncertain outcomes and involving a lengthy interactive process which requires their active participation.

Others consider the student as the product while the employer is the real customer of the product (Bailey & Bennett, 1996). The value placed on HE as a vital antecedent to career success has been largely driven by the increasing demand for university qualifications by employers (Wright and O'Neill, 2002). But there are others (e.g. Gibbs and Iacovidou, 2004) who are extremely critical of attempts to include employers and employable skills in the realm of HE. They consider this as unnecessary and even dangerous as it can threaten the academic independence and credibility of HE, which should be grounded only in critical thinking, tolerance and self-development, and not in the needs of others such as employers. This again reflects the traditional view that education is intrinsically different from other services and, therefore, metaphors related to the market place are harmful to the educational process. Macfarlane and Lomas (1995) highlight the growing tendency for large employers to negotiate with HEPs to provide programmes which are tailored to meet their particular needs and demands. They argue that in the pursuit of the financial rewards that such

partnerships offer, concerns about the quality of students' educational experience and fundamental academic values, including academic freedom and the development of students' critical abilities and autonomy are overlooked.

Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that employers can greatly influence the future of HEPs and their graduates through their recruitment policies. Jameson and Holden (2000) emphasise that being a graduate will have little social significance unless employers have an understanding of how graduates can contribute to the workplace. Morley and Aynsley (2007) find that employers in the UK can undermine equity and widening participation initiatives in HE by restricting their recruitment to elite HEPs. They attribute some of the reason for the increasing significance given to league tables to the demand for elite educational credentials by employers. There is also evidence of employers expressing increasing dissatisfaction with the skills displayed by HE graduates (Johnson and Spicer, 2006). Thomas (2007) highlights an article in the *Economist* (2006) which indicates dissatisfaction on the part of employers about the quality of recruits and the time taken to find suitable job candidates. Rhodes and Shiel (2007) observe that in order to address the current knowledge and skill deficit in the UK, establishing links between HEPs and employers is given high priority by the government. As a result of the growing frustration with the quality and content of tertiary education, large organisations now depend on their in-house training facilities (termed corporate universities) to provide for their strategic human resource development needs (Holland and Pyman, 2006). In the current economic climate, it is becomingly increasingly more apparent that what constitutes a graduate job has broadened and that it is probably too ambitious for fresh graduates to aspire to get directly into permanent, professional level employment (Jameson and Holden, 2000). This in turn has a significant impact on what employers seek from HE and HEPs cannot afford to ignore their expectations as probably the most important reason for students seeking HE is enhanced career prospects.

All quality management models stress the commitment and motivation of staff. The role of academic staff as a key stakeholder having a direct influence on the overall process and outcome of HE cannot be over emphasised. In addition to the appropriate blend of factors such as curriculum and classroom infrastructure, the enthusiasm, expertise and teaching style of instructors are vital to learning, as they determine to a great extent the outcome and the overall experiences of students. It is well established that the enthusiasm and motivation

of lecturers translates to high levels of student motivation and learning (Hill et al, 2003). Anderson (2000) emphasises the role of lecturer and student interaction and the passion and enthusiasm conveyed by the lecturer in enhancing students' engagement with the subject. High levels of staff motivation also correlate positively with professional satisfaction and the overall quality of services offered (Konidari and Abernot, 2006). However, Lammers and Murphy (2002) in Hill et al. (2003) find that while lecturers had a role in giving information, they do not necessarily stimulate thought, change attitudes or develop behavioural skills that are necessary for complex interactions essential in HE. Hence, in order to be effective, educators must use their judgement, rationality and decision making abilities rather than rely on routine (Hill et al. 1996).

A shared awareness of common goals allows an organisation to work collectively rather than as multiple separate units and, thus, fosters trust among participants (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007). Such a collective consciousness emerges when different people share awareness of the same issue from a variety of perspectives and are conscious of others' view points and also allows the organisation to be flexible and dynamic, which is a necessary condition in an increasingly dynamic environment. It would be logical that an appropriate model for managing quality in HE considers the perspectives and quality values of students, academic staff and employers as three of the main stakeholder groups.

2.3 RELEVANCE OF EXISTING QUALITY MANAGEMENT MODELS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

The concepts and practices of quality management in HE have only been implemented for just over a decade (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003) and there is still no agreement on a common model for quality in HE (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007). The literature advocates that the management of quality in HE should be handled differently from that of other services (Mizikaci, 2006). While most quality management models originate from and focus on manufacturing and general services, it is generally held that HEPs cannot be compared to business units and any concept derived from commercial enterprises is inappropriate for HE. The central argument revolves around differences in terms of the public sector orientation of most HEPs and the commercial orientation of business organisations (Cuthbert, 1996a). Since HEPs are public sector organisations (traditionally), they are generally considered to have a moral dimension to their service which is to provide a benefit to the society that is not rooted in economic benefits (Drucker, 1994; Roffe 1998).

More recently, Eagle and Brennan (2007) highlight the view that while elementary education has a substantial public good component, HE is to a very large extent a private good with the benefits accruing mainly to students through enhanced earnings. Nevertheless, they do note that HEPs cannot function solely on the premise that HE is a purely private good, as graduates have a vital impact on the wider community and the economy.

Other constraints in applying generic quality management models to HE include, the difficulty of considering students as customers who must be satisfied (Chua, 2004); the interactive, multidimensional, varied and lengthy process of education which is fundamentally different from a commercial process (Tribus, 1996) and too subtle for meaningful measurement (Harvey, 1995); and the difficulty and inappropriateness of reducing variation in educational processes and outcomes (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007). Specific challenges also include problems arising from over-regulation and control of academic freedom. Saunders & Walker (1991) argue that the greatest challenge of applying quality management models to HEPs is the difficulty of identifying an appropriate management structure that would not restrict the diversity, innovation and creativity of academic institutions.

However, such arguments do not necessarily provide insurmountable reasons for the unsuitability of industry based models to HE, considering that HEPs are defacto business entities although perceived as being established to serve the public. HEPs, despite or because of their moral and social obligations are no exception to the increasing requirements for efficiency and accountability. While most business organisations understand the need for incremental improvement of activities to eliminate waste and create more value, Emiliani (2005) points out that HEPs continue on processes that consume resources but do not create value. There is also enough evidence that HEPs have begun to successfully and constructively apply ideas taken from the business world including manufacturing and service industries (Doherty, 1997). Deem and Brehony (2005) note that the concept of managerialism is now widely prevalent in UK universities and public sector organisations and includes business models such as the efficiency model, decentralisation and the learning organisation. They observe that each model represents management responses to changes in the macro and micro environment of HE and has resulted in various changes including external accountability, wide-spread use of performance indicators,

league tables, target-setting, benchmarking and performance management. The rise of managerialism in higher education is often criticised and Santiago & Carvalho (2003) argue that managerialism is usually justified by the two-fold argument that HEPs are not capable of renewing themselves at the same pace as environmental changes and that traditional collegial decision-making bodies tend to perpetuate the interests of academics which creates irrationalities and inefficiencies. Others such as Trow (1994, p. 11) advocate a role for 'soft' managerialism which still views HE as autonomous and governed by its own norms but with a more effective and rationalised management. However, Kanji & Malek, (1999) contend that academics consistently and without adequate rationale, oppose what they see as the introduction of new management techniques as well as any external interference on the institution. Moreover, ultimately educational institutions just like other modern day organisations are caught in the cross currents of change and have to be innovative in order to meet the challenges of the new information age (Senge, 2000). Although it is without doubt important to understand the specific complexities involved in managing quality in HE, the presence of such complexities should not cloud the fact that many management concepts and strategies essentially underpin the long-term survival of an organisation and hence can be useful to any HEP with a mission to fulfil.

There are numerous industry based models of quality management such as Total Quality Management (TQM), ISO 9000, and the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) excellence model, all of which have been applied to HE with at best, inconclusive results (Sahney et. al., 2006). Some universities have developed TQM based strategies by introducing the concept of quality circles involving academic and non-academic staff in order to build a culture of continuous improvement (Lomas, 2004), while others have applied the EFQM model to achieve institutional excellence (Pupius, 2001). The EFQM excellence model is a non-prescriptive framework which includes a number of fundamental elements such as results orientation, customer focus, process management, people management, continuous learning, innovation, partnerships and public responsibility. The entire process is driven by self-assessment, which should lead to improvement activities aimed at the ultimate goal of excellent results, which are defined as those which show positive trends, sustained good performance or meet appropriate targets (Jackson, 2000).

Doherty (1997) notes that the term TQM is used generally as a carpet bag that refers to more than one particular approach and includes those which may emphasise different

aspects of quality improvement. TQM is a combination of quality control and quality assurance and improvement (Hoyle, 1994). All TQM approaches espouse the philosophy of continuous improvement, which is achieved by relying on a motivated and cooperative workforce who are individually and in groups responsible for achieving excellence in their work by contributing to improvements (Wiklund et al., 2003). The development of a continuous quality culture finds approval with many academics (Doherty, 1997). However, despite its theoretical promise, in practice, TQM benefits are not easily achievable and attempts to implement it are often unsuccessful (Rad, 2005). Aly and Akpovi (2001) note that while many American universities have applied TQM initiatives in an effort to remain competitive in the face of rising costs and increasing public demands for better quality, many have not been able to sustain it. Cruickshank (2003) observes that the application of TQM principles to HE was intended to make HEPs more relevant and responsive to the needs of employers and others including funding agencies. However, the application of TQM in universities is heavily criticised mainly on the grounds that reformation is claimed by focusing only on non-academic support functions such as student admissions, administration and management of funds (Sohail et al., 2003). It is also argued that while models which have their roots in manufacturing can be easily applied to mass services requiring comparatively less contact with customers, it may be more difficult to do so with more complex professional services such as education (Silvestro, 2001). More specifically, the application of TQM in HE is considered inappropriate as it is based on the principle of customer satisfaction, while HEPs are not in the business of delighting students who are their primary customers (Chua, 2004). A practical way of looking at the issue of customers in HE is to treat it as a wider concept involving all relevant stakeholders and ensuring adequate recognition and management of student expectations although this does not necessarily entail meeting all such expectations.

More significantly, attempting to implement industry based quality management across all operations of an HEP is considered by many to be futile, as the teaching and learning function is too complex. A pertinent weakness of industry models is the undue focus on measurement, whereas the subtle process of teaching and learning does not lend itself to meaningful measurement (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007). Yet another criticism is that the focus of such approaches is on a homogenous, zero-defects approach and reducing costs through reducing errors rather than enhancing quality which becomes only a subordinate function. It is a fact that product control, minimising variation and avoidance of error which

are critical aspects of industry based quality management models, cannot be applied literally to HE with its varied products and processes. Nevertheless, what should be considered is whether the application of such models in HE necessarily implies homogeneity and a lack of originality in outcomes, or whether they can help develop a sense of ownership and commitment among employees towards identifying and solving problems before they affect outcomes.

Whether they are derived from industry or elsewhere, practical ideas for managing and improving quality always merits serious analysis (Roffe, 1998). On closer examination, the major criticisms do not really indicate a complete lack of applicability of these models to HE. Yorke (1999) cites the example of ISO 9000, when he argues that although there were expressions of interest in such models in the early 1990s, very little has actually been done to explore how they can be useful to HE. The literature does reveal that TQM approaches offers potential benefits for the core functions in HE including the teaching and learning process, curriculum development and research activities (Vazzana et al., 1997). Eriksen (1995) contends that TQM is especially relevant to HE as it is based on the simple but powerful fundamental belief that it is better all round to ensure that things are done right the first time rather than adopt after-the-fact controls by which time it is too late to rectify problems. As Brigham (1993) recommends, models such as TQM could have major benefits to academic institutions, if HE is not considered as totally unique and isolated from other industries. Indeed, the most persuasive feature of TQM is its role in building a sense of identity and commitment within the organisation where staff realise that the success of an individual contributes to the success of the whole organisation (Williams, 1993). Furthermore, the concept of continuous quality improvement is based on the principle that only those involved in carrying out a process are fully capable of measuring its characteristics (Doherty, 1997). Such an approach has strong parallels with Senge's concept of the learning organisation, which is increasingly being suggested as a positive strategy for implementing growth and change in HE (Konidari and Abernot, 2006). Wu (1996) defined a learning organisation as one that cultivates life-long learning in its members, encourages personal potentiality, accommodates changes and develops continuously (as cited in Hsieh, 2005). In order to develop a learning organisation, members must have a strong willingness to deepen and increase the course of their learning (Hsieh, 2005) and in a HE setting requires collaborative learning opportunities that can benefit students and employees. Collaboration between staff and students, effective communication and cooperation

between managers and those being managed as well as between internal service providers and external scrutineers are vital. However, much of the literature on universities as learning organisations overlooks the critical role of students' participation while others point out that there may be competing views of what constitutes important learning in a university (Gouthro et al., 2006).

Lomas (2004) emphasises that any quality initiative is unlikely to lead to success unless the selected strategy is appropriate for the organisation and its organisational structure and communication channels allow quality initiative(s) to be disseminated effectively. Most importantly the organisational culture must be conducive in that it facilitates the discussion, assimilation and implementation of new ideas. According to Colling and Harvey (1996), TQM approaches require HEPs to adopt key principles for procedure and team approaches which are not endemic across institutions. They note that academic course teams rarely behave as teams and often individual autonomy is prized above all else, often leading to inefficient and ineffective management of the process and outcomes of teaching and learning. Ironically, Aly and Akpovi (2001) find that the main difficulty in applying TQM in American universities is the resistance to change by academics and administrators, followed by the lack of leadership. Interestingly Sitkin et al. (1994) observe that the TQM philosophy which is based on the concept of employee empowerment faces opposition from academics who, as the most empowered of employees find it difficult to reconcile empowerment and control as a means of achieving organisational objectives.

Changing such a scenario and embedding a continuous quality culture and a sense of collective responsibility requires strong commitment from management. However, the lack of vision and top management commitment has often been cited among the main reasons for failure in implementing quality control mechanisms in organisations (Saad and Siha, 2000). Despite the increased importance of the role of academic managers, very few of them actually have the experience and skills required for such positions and this coupled with the turbulent and continuous expansion that HEPs find themselves in, has led to falling levels in morale of lecturers and academic managers (Holmes and McElwee, 1995). Significantly, while managers in other fields, both public and private are more likely to have received extensive training, this is not generally the case with academic managers whose legitimisation is often based on their academic status (Deem and Brehony, 2005).

Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) observe that models for managing and enhancing different aspects of educational quality have either looked at improving the teaching and learning function or at providing more conducive management methodologies. They argue that such models which look at the teaching and learning function alone are flawed in their approach as both the pedagogical and service aspects of HE should be addressed. They propose a “holistic” model for quality management which addresses the service areas as well as the core areas of teaching and learning and has at its core the transformation of learners, proactive collaboration at the learning interface and commitment at all levels, supported by management (p.266). The core elements of their Quality Management in Education (QME) model include transformation of both learners and the institution, synergistic collaboration at the learning interface and significant commitment by all individuals. Therefore, the model is appropriately designed for HE. However, although Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) argue that the shared vision of all stakeholders is very important for any quality model to succeed, there is little evidence that the QME model encompasses different perspectives other than the educational dimensions already present in the literature.

The differing views of quality have also resulted in different evaluation measures and a range of performance indicators (PIs) (Cullen et al. 2003). The prevalence of PIs is common in HE but according to Soutar and McNeil (1996) PIs are more measures of activity rather than true measures of the quality of educational service. The accreditation system in the United States has identified a broad range of PIs including access, productivity and efficiency, student learning, degree completion, and economic returns (Schray, 2006). The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has provided PIs which measures access to HE, non-continuation rates, completion rates and research outputs. According to Purslove and Simpson (2007), PIs are lag indicators which at best reflect outcomes of past activity without indicating the specific causes of any deterioration or what action must be taken by HEPs to achieve desired outcomes. Moreover, the collection of data required for generating PIs has resulted in more administrators, documentation and increased levels of bureaucracy, while stifling innovation and creativity (Bruneau and Savage, 2002).

League tables and rankings also provide a basis of comparison of quality between HEPs for external stakeholders. University rankings generate a lot of interest and while the media feel the rankings have added positive value, academia, on balance, feel the opposite (Policano,

2007). Academics tend to regard such tables as based on statistical indicators which attempt to reduce complex human interaction and experiences into mere numbers (Doherty, 1997). Doherty points out that covert league tables in HE were based on the assumption that the main aim of HE was to provide entry to a research career which is not a viable assumption in the current context of mass HE. Policano (2007) argues that with the proliferation of rankings which is essentially media driven in order to boost circulation of various publications, the value of rankings have diminished, although the overall impact remains significant. The most important role of rankings is the information provided to prospective applicants about HEPs in general; however they do not necessarily provide an accurate indication of the quality of specific programmes nor does it indicate that HEPs not included in the rankings provide poor quality. Yorke (1997) writes that as overall rankings do not represent specific conditions in particular academic units, students will be better served by providing data on what each unit is trying to achieve, and the extent to which it is succeeding. One effect of rankings has been to influence applicants to place more emphasis on variables like “perceived prestige rather than on variables like the quality and relevance of the curriculum” (Policano, 2007, p.43). Rather than rankings, Policano recommends that HEPs should be rated, for example on a 1-5 star basis so that students have an idea of key institutional factors but would also seek more detailed information about the appropriateness of the programmes offered by the institutions within a certain rating scale.

In contrast to the management of quality in industry, HE has largely favoured external monitoring of quality through accreditation and quality audits with the objective of monitoring the institutions’ performance against stated goals and key performance indicators. Telford and Masson (2005) observe that the emergence of the external quality assurance regime based on externally set standards in the UK, is a result of the increasingly competitive landscape and is quite different from the internal evaluation processes prevailing within universities until a few decades ago. In his study on the relevance of quality to institutional performance assessment, Pounder (1999) highlights the difficulty of producing a valid and reliable effectiveness scale for quality as a basis for the comparative assessment of institutional performance. His attempt to develop a unidimensional scale for quality led to a series of behavioural examples which reflected only the specific views of quality held by the providers of the examples, which according to him highlights the ambiguity inherent in the concept of quality. Pounder contends that the challenge for HE is to locate a concept or concepts more appropriate than quality as a basis for comparative

analysis of institutional performance and suggests that other more specific performance variables including information management, planning-goal setting, productivity-efficiency and cohesion, offer a firmer base for a comparative analysis of institutional performance. However, Pounder's differentiation between quality and the 'other' variables is unclear as the concept of managing quality can encompass all the variables he suggests. Moreover, the lack of a unidimensional scale for quality that facilitates comparative analysis of institutional performance should not preclude institutions from evaluating the quality of their provision, if only for their own longer-term success.

Although there is as yet no definitive model for managing or evaluating quality in HE, Becket and Brookes (2005) have identified certain key constituents of an analytical quality framework in order to assess current quality management practice. These constituents include:

- the degree to which inputs, processes and outputs in HE are assessed;
- the degree to which different stakeholder perspectives are considered;
- the extent to which different quality dimensions are considered;
- the balance of quality assurance versus quality enhancement practices and processes.

There are currently two aspects to managing quality in HE: quality assurance and quality enhancement (Lomas, 2004). Quality assurance deals with the monitoring, evaluative and conformance aspects of managing quality that is best aligned with the fitness for purpose definition of quality (West-Burnham and Davies, 1994). Quality assurance has many critics essentially because of its emphasis on detailed documentation and paper trails for audit purposes, and the hard managerialist approach that is required to ensure that these requirements are met (Hargreaves, 1998). It is also criticised on the ground that it fails to give sufficient emphasis to teaching and learning. Furthermore, the transformative role of HE is achieved only if there is sufficient focus on transformational change throughout the institution with the objective of improving quality and adding value, an approach which is categorised as quality enhancement (Middlehurst, 1997). Quality enhancement with its transformative character and longer-term outlook is considered a better approach to help embed a quality culture within institutions (Lomas, 2004). Williams (2002) contends that quality assurance and quality enhancement should not be considered as two distinct functions but as two integral parts to quality management. HEPs are increasingly required to

have quality assurance procedures that are both rigorous and transparent to external stakeholders while also continually enhancing the quality of provision by embedding quality enhancement initiatives (Becket and Brookes, 2005). The emphasis should be on quality enhancement with accountability being a consequence and not vice-versa or two separate aspects (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007); by combining both quality assurance and enhancement the emphasis should be on embedding a quality culture within the institution (Becket and Brookes, 2005).

An effective model of quality would be one that allows HEPs to enhance the quality of their provision, their interactions with and experiences of key stakeholders and achieve their longer term objectives. However, current quality control practices have been seen largely as a means of control on the part of outside funding bodies and place undue emphasis on documentation and evidence for external bodies and the resulting disruption to normal activity threatens the enthusiasm and commitment of staff (Colling and Harvey, 1996; Westerheijden, 2000). The ineffectiveness of the control approach is highlighted when one considers the fundamental principles of quality management, which relates service quality to processes and ultimately to morale and management (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003). Educational institutions are typically complex organisations embedded within even more complex communities, where knowledge is fragmented into specialised areas and educators are engaged in a highly individual activity of teaching (Senge, 2000). Therefore, sufficient leverage is required to make changes in such a complex system. This requires staff and students (as co-participants) to consider quality management as a normal, integral and continuous function of all activities, rather than at particular times where undue emphasis is placed on bureaucracy, special documentation and other requirements.

2.4 FUNCTIONAL QUALITY VERSUS TECHNICAL QUALITY

The literature on service quality distinguishes between functional quality, i.e. the way in which the service has been delivered, and technical quality i.e. the outcome or the product of the service (Lewis, 1991). Hill (1995) describes technical quality in terms of the tangibles, knowledge, solutions, etc. provided during the service, while functional quality refers to how the service is provided including the interpersonal behaviours of the service staff during the process of the service. Customers may be unable to discern the technical quality of the service they receive due to their lack of expertise, and, therefore, are more apt

to judge service quality based on the way the service has been delivered (Mangold and Babakus, 1991). Anderson (1995) advocates that organisational resources should be directed towards improving functional or process quality thereby improving customer perceptions rather than the outcome or technical quality. Furthermore, measuring the characteristics or features of the process will provide leading indicators that will help identify areas for improvement, while measuring outcomes will provide at best lagging indicators which are too late to act upon (Tribus, 1994).

Based on the service quality literature, the focus of managing quality in HE can be directed towards three broad areas: the quality of inputs to the educational process, the quality of the process of education, and the quality of outputs from the process. Given the complexities, time period and the level and depth of interaction involved in HE, the process of education or functional quality could be considered the most critical aspect of quality management. Accordingly, Yorke (1999) argues that the main issues relating to educational quality are process-related, essentially whether the educational process serves as a satisfactory bridge between entrants and the programme's intended outcomes. This requires adequate demonstrable evidence as to whether it is the educational process rather than the inherent ability of the students which has contributed to achieving outcomes. Eriksen (1995) contends that if conformity to predetermined standards is important, the closer the output is to the standard, the higher is the operational or process quality. However, as Cuthbert (1996b) argues, the real outcome of HE is more than just certification which is what can be measured easily, while the deeper benefits may be obvious only some years afterwards and, therefore, cannot be easily measured. Trow (1996, p.52) rightly points out that

Education is a process pretending to be an outcome. That is what makes all measures of educational outcomes spurious. Our impact on our students can never be fully known; it emerges over their whole lifetimes and takes various forms at different points in their lives.

Therefore, there are difficulties in evaluating the quality of both the process and outcome in HE. The ongoing transformative nature of HE does not lend itself to a simple, discernible product or outcome, as the impact of the transformation may be felt years after the experience (Harvey, 1995). Moreover, the intangibility of the educational process and the lack of physical evidence present difficulties in analysing and evaluating perceptions of

process quality (Mahapatra and Khan, 2007) and student perceptions of process quality during the actual process itself may not be valid indicators.

The variables that comprise each of the input, process and output dimensions in HE can be developed as follows (Sahney et al., 2006):

- *Input:* student intake and characteristics, programme and curriculum, experience and qualifications of teaching staff and support staff, physical infrastructure and resources including library and teaching and learning facilities.
- *Process:* The teaching and learning methods and environment, design (class sizes, schedules) research activities, assessment and evaluation activities, extracurricular activities.
- *Output:* academic achievement in terms of marks/degrees awarded, graduation, dropouts, acquisition of transferable skills and employment.

A relevant issue in managing quality would be to identify the appropriate balance between the input, process and outcomes dimensions. Accreditation agencies in the United States have conducted workshops and forums on how to balance the emphasis on input, process and outcomes in accreditation decisions, but implementation has been inconsistent (Schray, 2006). There are further complexities involved because although the desired outcome should dictate the process to be followed, in reality the actual process that is followed determines the achieved outcome (Saad and Siha, 2000). Acceptable levels of quality will not be attained if courses are designed inefficiently or delivered inefficiently or assessed inefficiently (Eriksen, 1995). Students' input provides the raw material that is transformed through the process of HE and, therefore, the quality of the input provided will determine the quality of the process and the output. Students themselves may have important influences on each other (Owlia and Aspinwal, 1996). In a process intensive service such as HE, the degree of close personal interaction between students and between students and lecturers will make the management of functional or process quality even more problematic. Hence, although managing functional or process quality may be the most important aspect of ensuring technical or outcome quality, it may be difficult to assess and evaluate this process effectively and independently of the inputs and achieved outcomes. It is important to realise the interdependent character of input, process and output. Furthermore, the degree of importance that is attached by stakeholders to the input, process and output aspects of HE

may differ. For instance, when judging quality, students may tend to attach more importance to what was provided to them, while overlooking intangible aspects of the process such as the extent to which they were stimulated to think for themselves or to take responsibility for their own learning which are of keen interest to academics (Yorke, 1999). For employers, the attributes and qualities of graduates (output) may take precedence over the totality of the learning experience that is critical to academics and students. Hence, a first step would be to determine the input, process and output aspects that stakeholders value more as this would help to determine the appropriate balance between the three dimensions. These dimensions of HE are discussed further in the following sections.

2.4.1 Input

In HE students are considered the main input undergoing transformation, although the student plays three roles: that of input, consumer and processor (Williams, 1993). In any educational system the learner is at the centre and must be the major focus of the educational process (Muller and Funnell, 1992). According to Eriksen (1995, p.15) the primary input in HE is:

the student (before exposure to a value-added service) who is subjected to a transformation (the application of a value-added service) which in turn produces an output (the student after exposure to a value-added service).

Therefore, the quality of student intake is considered by many to be a necessary condition for institutional success (Cheng and Tam, 1997). Admissions criteria are believed to play a critical role in ensuring the quality of academic programmes as they ensure that students admitted onto programmes have a higher probability of succeeding in comparison to students who do not fulfill the admission criteria (Lawrence and Pharr, 2003). They argue that weak students contribute less to the learning of their peers and can cause lecturers to lower expectations. Pursglove and Simpson (2007) find a positive correlation between entry requirements of universities and the class of degree awarded, while there is a negative correlation between entry requirements and the degree of participation by students from non-traditional backgrounds (i.e. from generally poorer areas where it is unusual for school leavers to enter university). They find that entrants with lower achievements at entry level were more likely to drop out and if they did proceed onto graduate, achieved lower classes of degrees. Hence, admissions standards have a significant quality control role through its

impact on the quality of the student intake which in turn, may significantly influence the quality of the overall educational outcomes. As a result, the quality of student intake affects the institution's rating, thus fuelling a fierce competition for students with high marks (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007).

Others, however, regard the quality of student intake as immaterial, as it is easier for HEPs to demonstrate better outcomes with higher quality intake. Instead the degree to which the institution has aided the enhancement of students' knowledge and skills or the value added, irrespective of the quality of the intake, should be considered the critical factor. This view considers that the quality of the educational process rather than the inherent ability of the students, should contribute to the excellence of outcomes by providing a satisfactory bridge between entrants to the programme and its intended outcomes (Yorke, 1999). Measuring the value added in terms of relating the entry and exit qualifications can be problematic (Yorke, 1997) and entails measuring the additional progress students have made over and above what they would 'normally' be expected to achieve given their prior attainment (Gorard, 2006). This evaluation is carried out in schools in the UK and is considered a potentially fairer way to measure the impact of educational provision as it takes into account the abilities of students when they arrive at the school by measuring progress made rather than simply raw outcomes (Welsh Assembly Government: Consultation Paper, 2007). Lawrence and Pharr (2003) argue that with the comprehensive changes that have been made to the traditional curriculum of most programmes over the last decade, the validity of admissions criteria has to be re-examined. Hence, irrespective of the quality of intake what would be more relevant to evaluating quality is whether the curriculum, teaching, assessment, support and guidance are the most appropriate with respect to the student profile in order to achieve defined objectives.

Other key inputs include the curriculum that greatly influences the process and outcome of HE. In fact, the curriculum can encourage or discourage the development of subject and practical knowledge, the development of core transferable skills, the choice of teaching and learning methods and assessment strategies (Nabi and Bagley, 1998). The increasing diversity in students' backgrounds and range of abilities in the classroom has brought pressure on academics to design, develop and deliver curriculum that is accessible and which acknowledges such diversity (Stefani, 2005). Thomas (2007) remarks on the impact that economic and demographic changes have had on business schools, including the need

for more flexible curricula, greater emphasis on lifelong learning and the changing characteristics and skills required from graduates. Over the last decade many business schools have radically redesigned their curricula, in particular by emphasising integration across functional areas and developing effective team work and communication skills (Lawrence and Pharr, 2003). Middlehurst (2001) contends that the content and curriculum must be fit for the purpose for which it is designed and must offer value for money, either for the direct customer (student) or the indirect purchaser (state or employer). A critical issue is whether curriculum developers are able to determine whether the curriculum they design is able to meet the ever changing needs of both students and potential employers (Anon, 2006).

In terms of discipline-specific knowledge, Baruch and Leeming (1996) find that in the early stages of a graduate's working career, more specialized or focused knowledge may be needed, whereas later, more generalization is necessary. Given the importance of curricula, there are arguments for standardising or offering part-common curriculum across disciplines, but according to Yorke (1999) this would discourage academic growth and creativity and may be detrimental in the long term. The importance of practical skills in understanding theoretical concepts is emphasised by Paloniemi (2006) who stresses that students must be aware of how to adapt their formal education in practical work situations. The challenge for HEPs lies in developing curricula that provides adequate scope for students to enhance complex interactive skills involving a critical mind-set. Research evidence clearly suggests that curriculum can influence tutors to focus on the subject matter rather than on the development of critical thinking (Kember, 1997). Developing students for employment requires a balance between professional and subject/discipline based knowledge (Bowden and Marton, 1998). Stefani (2005) argues that if a key role of HE is to support the development of critical thinking and reflection, then curriculum should be built around the needs and aspirations of the learner, where learners can learn to challenge and be challenged. The context in which the content is learned is vital and curriculum is instrumental in providing this balance between content and context. When designing curricula, sufficient opportunities must be provided to develop key skills by ensuring that students repeatedly come across similar advice and assessment in a range of courses. However, Dillon and Hodgkinson (2000) find that some students find this repetition irritating and demotivating and, therefore, recommend that curriculum designers could use

courses as a context for skills development while seeing the overall programme as the context for skills assessment.

The fitness for purpose of learning resources and the extent to which they are effectively used by the HEP will greatly impact on the overall learning experience and as a result may influence perceptions and the outcomes achieved. The inputs available to the learner that form the overall support systems are also critical aspects of quality management (Middlehurst, 2001). He notes that technological advances have extended the range of media that can be used in the delivery and support of HE and this can alter the requirements that underpin qualifications. Student expectations of curriculum and other input criteria may also vary; for instance, because of their busy life style and needs, mature working students expect HEPs to offer a variety of courses, campus and delivery options that are easily accessible and user friendly (Wright and O'Neill, 2002). Chadwick (1995) observes that with the pressures of the economic environment, students look for more flexibility in course structures enabling them to opt in or out of modules and even institutions. The increasing popularity of online degree programmes indicates that a large proportion of students, particularly part-time working professionals, are giving more importance to flexible modes of delivery over traditional classroom style HE (Emiliani, 2005).

Without any doubt, teaching faculty is a key input in the HE process as they influence to a large extent the delivery of the curriculum and most importantly, the overall learning experience of students. However, as with other aspects of the HE process there is difficulty in defining the ideal profile of an effective lecturer. Although effectiveness in the classroom comes in many forms, Gilbert et al. (1993) writes that the most significant characteristics of effective lecturers include a rich understanding of the subject, ability to provide constructive feedback and realistic evaluation, insightful planning, organising, effective communication with students, strong interpersonal skills, and taking responsibility for the quality of aesthetics and tangibles. There is considerable support in the literature that the quality of the student experience is most greatly influenced by the expertise, teaching styles, commitment and enthusiasm of the teaching staff (Hill et al, 2003). Cook (1997) also finds that students consider academic staff factors as having the most impact on their success and among such factors the approachability of academic staff is a key factor. Therefore, in terms of inputs, the effectiveness of HE would depend on the appropriate blend of teaching and learning

resources and facilities, curriculum factors, as well academic staff factors including approachability, enthusiasm and teaching styles.

2.4.2 Process

Cheng et al. (1994) identifies three categories of services: *pure* services in which the customer must be present or is the most critical aspect of the service, *mixed* services in which there is both face-to-face as well as back-office contact with the customer and *quasi-manufacturing* services where there may be no real face-to-face contact with the customer. They categorise education as a pure service, considering the degree of interaction involved between students and the education provider and particularly because learning does not materialise without some participation by the student. In such contexts, customer satisfaction is most often determined by the quality of personal contacts. Therefore, much of the research on the service quality aspects of HE deals with the process aspects, for instance, on the effectiveness of course delivery mechanisms, the quality of courses and teaching and learning (Oldfield and Baron, 2000). The educational process is normally divided into two distinct areas: the administrative and academic support areas (library, enrolment, etc.) and the teaching and learning function (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007).

A key determinant of the quality of the educational process is whether it is appropriate for the entrants to the programme to achieve the intended learning outcomes (Yorke, 1999). There is then the assumption that an excellent educational process would be followed by excellent outcomes; however this need not necessarily be the case. The debate on stronger intake leading to excellent outcomes versus an educational process which provides opportunities for a weaker intake to achieve at least threshold outcomes has to be considered. Is the quality of the educational process better in the first case because the outcomes are better? In the latter case, can efficiency of the educational process be accurately evaluated i.e. how much of value must be added and can achievement of threshold learning outcomes by weaker students be considered as indicative of good quality? Gorard (2006) notes that UK schools have been dealing with the concept of 'value-added' for many years and currently there are many measures in use. Fischer Family trust data, for example, predicts what grades students should get at different ages based upon their prior achievement and on the postcode of their homes and their schools. However, there is nothing comparable for HEPs.

Obviously, excellent teaching is not always followed by good learning and good student performance is not necessarily an indicator of good teaching; however, there is ample evidence that learning happens as a consequence of good teaching (Yorke, 1999). Researchers point out the need for rewarding and recognising good quality teaching in an environment where there is inadequate emphasis placed on the teaching function (Lomas, 2004). However, as Cuthbert (1996) points out, the relationship between student learning and teaching is neither simple nor direct, and the approach to learning adopted by the student has a significant influence on the teaching and learning process and outcomes. Other factors that must be considered include personal interaction between student and staff in the form of pastoral support and sensitivity to student needs (Hill, 1995). The complexity increases as service quality can be heterogeneous and the quality of interaction can also differ within the same institution.

While HE was traditionally more concerned with the transmission of knowledge, the explosion of information in today's knowledge economy requires tutors to develop a different skill set that involves seeking, analysing and evaluating information (Stefani, 2005). To enhance students' capacity for critical thinking, tutors must be able to offer clear guidance about what is required and provide feedback in order to improve the ability for critical reflection throughout the courses they teach (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Collaborative, transformative and critical learning that values and encourages diversity is crucial in developing critical skills (Hill et. al. 2003). In this respect, while quality of student intake may not necessarily be a major focus of quality management as discussed earlier, the quality of input provided by students during their learning experience is no doubt critical to the quality of the process and outcomes. Student learning depends to a very large extent on the student's own approach to learning, thereby rendering any simple assumptions about the relationship between teaching and learning meaningless (Cuthbert, 1996-a). Students can be considered as co-producers of their own learning (Hennig-Thrau et al., 2001) and, therefore, unless they participate to the fullest possible extent, the learning outcomes or objectives may not be met satisfactorily. The transformative aspect of HE wherein students' analytical and critical skills are developed will be realised only by the joint participation of students and academic staff in achieving the programme objectives (Harvey and Knight, 1996). The critical factors internal to the student that influence the transformative process of HE are motivation, maturity and talent or capability (Eriksen, 1995). However, undergraduate students, in particular, may not be prepared for a learning

environment which involves self-directed participation and may consider themselves as merely inputs or raw material in the educational process to be transformed without putting in the effort required for that transformation to take place effectively. The difficulty for the lecturer is in convincing the student of the need to put in the necessary effort required in order to benefit effectively and completely from their experience (Hewitt and Clayton, 1999). Mattick and Knight's (2007) findings show that students find the process of self-directed learning and participation daunting, as they are uncertain about the appropriate amount of individual study, what to cover and how its success could be evaluated.

It follows that managing student participation, expectations, motivations, values and aspirations so that they are actively involved in and effectively contributing to the learning process are an extremely critical aspect of quality management. The service sector equivalent of this is called 'customer organisational socialization' whereby customers are supported in acquiring the service skills and knowledge required to interact effectively with the organisation's employees in order to achieve the planned outcomes (Telford and Masson, 2005, p.108). Most consumers will have a set of expectations when they enter a service encounter but while their expectations will be well-defined if they are familiar with the service, expectations may be ill-defined in unfamiliar service contexts (Hill, 1995). Other factors which can influence student expectations include word-of-mouth communications, students' personal needs and their past experience of education. Undergraduate students in particular do not have any comparative frame of reference with regards to expectations in HE other than that of their schooling system and hence unrealistic expectations may negatively influence their perceptions of quality (Hill, 1995). Therefore, while undergraduate students may expect close relationships with tutors, postgraduate students may base their expectations on their previous undergraduate experiences. There is also the possibility that student expectations and needs may change over the period of time that the student is in the institution. There is also some evidence that student perceptions and expectations of quality are influenced by their cultural orientation (Tan and Kek, 2004) but there is room for more investigation. In a study on UK university lecturers Rolfe (2002) finds that students tend to adopt passive learning approaches and expect all information to be provided to them as a result of their secondary school experiences and time and societal constraints. Comparatively, part-time or mature age students tend to view education just as any other commercial activity and will, therefore, have the same expectations from HEPs, such as convenience, high quality and low costs and service (Haworth and Conrad, 1997).

In one of the very few studies to be conducted on learning behaviours of students (of nursing) in the Arabian Gulf region, Bridger (2007), writes that students tend to be passive learners who exhibit poor learning tendencies including learning by rote, inability to integrate concepts and ideas within a subject area, not taking any initiative to resolve issues prior to asking for help, and inability to use prior learning. Similarly, Goodliffe (2004) writes that the majority of Omani students enter higher education with a background of teacher-centred instruction and rote learning. Therefore, these students may expect tutor-centred approaches from their schooling experience to continue on into HE, and attempts by HEPs to move to student-centred teaching and assessment methods may not be appreciated.

Student learning is influenced by three contextual factors namely, course organisation and resources, teaching and learning activities and assessment (Struyver et al., 2002). How the student uses the context depends on four student-centred factors: students' self-management, students' motivation and needs, students' understanding and students' need for support. Telford and Masson (2005) find that student values and expectations and thereby positive perceptions of quality are associated with their ability to contribute and participate, role clarity, positive perceptions of the organisational climate in which the service takes place and the extent of student satisfaction. This then brings us to the issue of how HEPs can manage student perceptions and expectations over time, which is a fundamental requirement of managing service quality as per the literature. Student expectations over the lengthy process of HE will definitely impact on their motivations and behaviours and ignoring such expectations and needs may not only negatively impact on students' perceptions of quality but may also detract them from contributing positively to the learning process. Managing such expectations may entail managing superficialities that may not actually have a major bearing on the outcome of HE. Hill (1995) advocates using existing students on school visits and open days in order to shape the expectations of prospective undergraduates and make them as realistic as possible. Students should also be encouraged to reflect on their past learning experiences so that they can build on positive approaches and unlearn negative ones (Hill et al, 1996). Nevertheless, it must be noted that the literature on this very important aspect of managing educational quality is limited.

Educationalists also advocate a deep approach to learning which is fostered by appropriate teaching and assessment methods that promote active engagement with tasks and provide opportunities for independent studying. Once again, the ability of the lecturer to

demonstrate his/her personal commitment and enthusiasm for the subject and thereby stimulate students' interest and commitment is vital in shaping deep approaches to learning (Pennington and O'Neil, 1994). Good teaching integrates three aspects of competence: practice, disciplinary knowledge and generic skills through structured, explicit goals, curriculum balance between content and understanding, and a range of assessment methods (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007). In order to achieve this, the academic role should be student centred and will include lecturing, facilitating, empathising, coaching and designing customised learning experiences which stimulate learning. Unfortunately, the intense pressure to achieve qualifications for a competitive job market can result in students trying to avoid the more complex demands of autonomous or critical learning; hence, they are tempted to focus on learning for assessments or surface rather than deep learning (Chadwick, 1995).

Additional factors that add to the complexity of the educational process include the differing perspectives of staff and the need for synergistic involvement and collaboration among the programme team. Narasimhan (1997) highlights that the complex process of teaching and learning has been complicated further by a number of factors including:

- increase in class sizes due to expansion in student numbers;
- mixed ability students in the same classes due to the diversity of student intake;
- increasing demands of students who are better informed and have thus become more aware of their rights;
- pressure from regulatory authorities;
- emphasis on innovation in teaching and learning and student-centred approaches.

The integration between research and teaching, the two core activities of universities also has many critics. While many studies indicate that research can enhance the relevancy and currency of the researcher's teaching (Andresen, 2000) others such as Rowland et al. (1998) reject the premise that there is an automatic synergistic relationship between teaching and research. The pro-research groups point out that research can create learning communities where there is a collaborative relationship between lecturers and students (Lomas, 2004). While teaching has always been important in HE, research has generally been held in higher regard (Stefani, 2005). Johnson and Deem (2003) note that in the UK, the emphasis on research activity and income through the Research Assessment Exercise forces academics to

focus on research rather than teaching. They observe that while creativity in research is rewarded, excellence and innovation in teaching are largely ignored. Elton (1998) argues that the emphasis on research at the expense of teaching is not healthy, as in order to improve quality HEPs must concentrate more on improving their core activity of teaching. Fortunately, the balance between the privileged status of discipline-based research and facilitation of student learning is now being redressed by an increasing pressure on academics to provide effective teaching and learning environments, leading to a rediscovery of the scholarship of teaching (Stefani, 2005). Deem and Brehony (2005) also note that a feature of 'new managerialism' in UK universities is the increasing pressure on academic staff to carry out both research and teaching to a high standard. In Oman, most HEPs focus on teaching rather than research particularly in the early years of their establishment. Recently, however, there has been increased emphasis by the MoHE on research activities with the establishment of the National Research Council and all HEPs are now required to demonstrate evidence of research and scholarly activity.

The re-emphasis on the teaching function can also be attributed in part to the problems associated with the massification of HE and the corresponding implications in terms of resources and student demographics. The focus on efficiency and effectiveness together with the decline of economic resources and student numbers force academics to be innovative in teaching, learning and recruitment strategies, often without the core skills required to do so. There is the danger that a superficial understanding of popular definitions of the scholarship of teaching will pass for a real understanding of what is involved at different levels of teaching and assessment (Stefani, 2005). She recommends taking a further proactive step where all staff engaged in supporting student learning reflect on and interrogate the terms of reference for the scholarship of teaching by applying the principles to their own classroom teaching. Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) argue that universities should move from the rituals of teaching to commitment to learning, and this requires a fundamental paradigm shift in the notion of teaching as a routine and subsidiary task to a key performance indicator. This as Farrugia (1996) recommends requires the continuous professional development of teaching staff leading to the acquisition of key professional traits that help staff to adapt to changes such that their prestige and material rewards depend more on the quality of teaching and guidance they provide rather than solely on research.

The professional development of staff in terms of appropriate curriculum development, innovative teaching methods, student motivation and the development of core skills is critical if academic staff are to effectively fulfil their role in an increasingly demanding workplace. Obviously, the overall quality of the process in such an inter-personal and interactive environment such as HE will depend, as Lomas (2004) puts it, on the level of commitment throughout the organisation to quality and its continuous improvement. Transformative leadership which stimulates staff to question and alter basic assumptions and behaviours while encouraging innovation and change can help develop an organisational culture that can sustain the quest for constant improvements (Fullan, 2001). Furthermore, the management's commitment to quality must be visible, permanent and present at all levels and must translate into clear values that are disseminated throughout the institution (Calvo-Mora et al. 2006). Hence, leadership and management are very vital aspects of providing the right direction and initiative for establishing and sustaining the required commitment within the institution.

2.4.3 Output

Notwithstanding the argument for focusing on functional or process quality, there has been a shift in the focus of quality management in HE from process to outcome, the fundamental concern being that quality should be demonstrable. Emery et al. (2001) argue for an output oriented approach where the focus is on developing students' capabilities, knowledge and skills in accordance with the expectations of the industry. The most important evidence of quality in HE is considered to be performance, especially student achievement of learning outcomes that is represented by a broad range of performance indicators including access, productivity and efficiency, student learning, degree completion, and economic returns from HE (Schray, 2006). HE, particularly in the United Kingdom has been involved in an outcome based approach to quality whereby success is measured and evaluated in terms of the extent to which the predefined learning outcomes have been achieved (Lomas, 2004). The touchstone of quality for the Higher Education Funding Council of England is the output of the system in terms of what graduates can do at the end of the programme (Hewitt and Clayton, 1999). In the United States as well, there has been a fundamental shift in the focus of quality assurance and accreditation agencies towards student learning outcomes (Welsh and Dey, 2002). Schray (2006), however, notes that current accreditation procedures

have a long way to go in assuring standards in student learning outcomes, as attention has always been focused on resources and process standards.

The emphasis on outcomes or output essentially arises from the necessity of having an objective measure for assessing the quality of provision (i.e. the inputs and the process). Williams (1997) contends that it is also closely aligned with increased levels of managerialism resulting from demands for more efficiency and accountability, as outcomes can be more easily measured against established targets or standards. If student perception of the process of education is not the best reliable indicator of quality, then arguably the outcome of that education would be a more appropriate and objective measure of the process. In this respect, the role of learning assessment is to measure the value added by the instructional process towards developing the specific learning competencies that are identified by the institution (Amin and Amin, 2003).

However, there are doubts whether the complex nature of learning can be easily reduced to a set of competencies and learning outcomes and for some, attempts to do so imply an unwelcome shift towards utilitarianism (Barnett, 1994). Considering the complex multidimensional nature of HE, Hewitt and Clayton (1999) question the notion that the output of HE is a more appropriate measure of quality than the process. They find that academic staff consider the quality and integrity of the learning environment (process) which requires students to be proactive partners in the overall experience rather than the outcome to be the most critical factor. In industry, the quality of output is measured by the extent to which it conforms to some predetermined standard: the closer the output is to the predetermined standard, the higher is the operationally defined quality (Eriksen, 1995). In HE, the composition of the desired portfolio of outcomes, attributes, skills and qualities is debatable and the question of which outcomes are more important than others must be considered. Furthermore, some outputs or outcomes are more easily measured than others (Lomas, 2004). The number of first class degrees or distinctions would be the easiest to measure but a high proportion of 'firsts' need not necessarily indicate a high level of quality and there can be justified variation according to the subject (Yorke, 1997). The influence and outcome of HE should (if it is effective) continue long after the formal programme of study has been completed and hence, it is doubtful whether HE can be reduced to a simple, measurable end-product.

Graduates' success in gaining employment or access to higher qualifications/ research is an important measure of the quality of educational provision. HE has a key role to play in developing skills for lifelong learning so that graduates can be more effective in their work place, can process knowledge effectively as well as apply skills and knowledge in different contexts (Yorke, 1999). The most critical function of HE is considered to be the development of skills that enable learners to learn or find out for themselves rather than imparting subject knowledge (Bourner, 1998). For this to happen, the focus of curriculum and teaching and learning must be on helping students to learn how to find out for themselves and assessments in turn should be more about testing the ability of the student to find out. There is no doubt that preparing graduates for entry to the world of work requires much more than the passive reproduction of subject knowledge (Eagle and Brennan, 2007).

In a labour market which is marked by uncertainties, rapid change and competitiveness and where companies are downsizing and delayering in order to remain competitive (Jameson and Holden, 2000), graduates' preparedness to adapt to the world of work may be their key distinguishing factor. Harvey and Green (1994) report five broad areas of graduate attributes which are important to employers including knowledge, intellectual ability, the ability to work in modern organisations, interpersonal skills and communication. While subject specific knowledge is one aspect, preparing students for employment is not as straightforward as one may consider and a key difficulty is identifying criteria relating to transferable skills that are particularly relevant for employment (Yorke, 1999). Employer satisfaction surveys across various fields give low ratings for academic subject knowledge while transferable skills e.g. problem solving, team interaction, communication etc., are very highly prized as these are skills learnt in one domain which can be transferred into other domains (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2004). Such attributes or qualities are generic in nature rather than specific, a fact which underscores the changing nature of organisations. However, Morley and Aynsley (2007) do find that employers' perception about what constituted quality in HE differed across sectors with scientific and technical employers placing greater emphasis on graduates' subject knowledge.

Employers observe that technical and organisational changes have resulted in increased expectations from new recruits, making qualities such as creativity, willingness to learn, team skills and group leadership abilities more important. A survey on global business capabilities identified the skills of flexibility, cultural sensitivity and integrity as the most

preferred list of managerial attributes from a list of 40 capabilities (Thomas, 2007). He finds that recruiters of business school graduates look for candidates who possess complex interactive skills and higher level evaluative abilities including the ability to link things together and frame complex problems. Employers of business graduates, alumni and even students are also increasingly demanding behavioral and societal skills as well as critical skills (Hawawini, 2005). Behavioral skills include entrepreneurial and leadership qualities, the ability to work with others, to communicate effectively and to demonstrate multicultural awareness. Societal values include the ability to make ethical decisions which take into account corporate social responsibility. However, developing behavioural and social values in their students may not be possible for HEPs as students may already have developed certain behavioural values by the time they are of college going age. Peronne & Vickers (2003) emphasise the impact of the transition that graduates have to make from tertiary education to the workplace in the current competitive economic climate. They note that this transition most often produces feelings of anxiety, stress, depression and of low self worth, which are not widely appreciated by employers and HEPs nor are they anticipated by students themselves. In order to better prepare graduates to adapt to the workplace HEPs and academics would need to put in greater effort to enhance student awareness of the importance of core transferable skills and personal and behavioural development.

Research on student learning indicates that assessment is integral to student learning and that it essentially drives the curriculum (Stefani, 2005). Assessment of student learning is considered to be the most significant factor affecting transformation (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007). However, it is often found that tutors encourage a surface approach to learning by assessing those aspects which require memorisation of facts rather than focusing on how students use, evaluate and interpret information (Struyven et al. 2002). Stefani (2005) warns that assessment is often considered as a separate entity from teaching and learning and is usually considered after the course content has been decided on. She recommends an integrated view of the scholarship of teaching, learning and assessment where it is recognised that all three are complementary and directly related.

Feedback on assessments which provides students with closure and constructive ideas for improvement is also an integral part of an effective assessment strategy. Assessment methods which are perceived to be inappropriate by students also render the learning experience less satisfactory (Struyven et al., 2002). In their study on assessments in

relation to industry needs, McHardy and Allen (2000) find that although students understand the relevance of non-traditional innovative methods of assessment (e.g. role-plays) they are not comfortable with such methods and prefer prescriptive methods of learning and assessment. Gibbs and Simpson (2005) observe that quality assurance agencies and HEPs focus on assessments in terms of what they measure rather than in terms of how they support worthwhile learning. They contend that standards are improved when assessments improve student learning rather than simply measuring limited learning. They also note that the quality of student learning has been shown to be higher in assignment-based courses than exam-based courses. Struyven et al. (2002) find that multiple-choice formats or questions that emphasise detailed factual answers encourage a surface approach, while open, essay- type questions encourage a deep approach to learning. They find that students with good learning skills and low test anxiety rates favour essay type exams, while students with poor learning skills and low test anxiety favour the multiple choice format. Most importantly, they emphasise that students seek information and form opinions about what is expected by the teacher and then tailor study strategies that fit the task. Mattick and Knight (2007) find that anxiety associated with poor performance can drive students to focus on assessments in a way that is incompatible with high-quality learning and without reconsidering their learning approaches. Hence, if the assessment strategy is not well designed or comprehensive it may become comparatively easier for students to provide the teacher with whatever s/he expects without really going through a transformative process or enhancing their capabilities.

2.5 STUDIES ON QUALITY VALUES

Most studies on quality in HE seek to determine the extent of student satisfaction with the quality of teaching and learning, facilities and other related aspects of the HE experience (Joseph and Joseph, 1997) while Hill et al. (2003) note that there is very little empirical research into student perceptions of quality in HE. In line with studies measuring service quality in other sectors, the majority of the more detailed quantitative studies on HE quality seek to explore the differences between students' pre-purchase expectations and their perceptions of actual service performance (Wright and O'Neill, 2002). Such models like the SERVQUAL are based on the 'disconfirmation paradigm' (O'Neill, 2003, p.310) as they seek to explore the relationship between students' pre and post-service experience, based on the premise that satisfaction results will indicate how well the actual service performance

matches expectations. The five service dimensions that are included in the SERVQUAL include tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988). An important criticism of the SERVQUAL is that customer expectations may not actually exist or be clear enough in the respondents' minds to serve as effective benchmarks against which their perception of the actual quality of the service can be measured (Iacobucci et al., 1994). A modification of the SERVQUAL is the SERVPERF which measures only the actual perception of customers about service quality and does not compare it to pre service expectations.

The use of these disconfirmation models in HE has been criticised, particularly as they have been constructed for defining customer values and expectations in the general service sector and, hence, overlook a number of key areas specific to HE (Telfrod and Masson, 2005). Subsequently the HEdPERF was developed which is a more comprehensive, performance based scale of quality constructs within HE (Abdullah, 2006). However, although all the service quality measurement models are supposed to be very comprehensive, there is very little evidence that the service elements that are evaluated by these models including HEdPERF, measure what students really consider as relevant. Accordingly, Wright and O'Neill (2002) recommend that HEPs undertake extensive research in order to identify those factors deemed most important by students in their evaluations of service experiences, so that they can then be used to target specific improvements. Cuthbert (1996a) observes that numerous studies have also been conducted on student learning using well-validated instruments such as the classroom environment scale (CES), the individualized classroom environment questionnaire (ICEQ) and the student experiences questionnaire (CSEQ). However, after evaluating these instruments, he concludes that there is considerable diversity in the range of constructs used and that none of these instruments would provide an appropriate tool for evaluation as part of a quality assurance system. Nevertheless, such studies can aid HEPs in monitoring student perceptions of the teaching and learning process, which is an important step in managing their expectations and needs.

Hewitt and Clayton (1999) investigated the quality perceptions of students and staff on the BSc Optometry programme in Aston University, UK, using semi-structured interviews. Their findings reveal that while students share the staff's view of the paramount importance of learning resources, they are less inclined to accept responsibility for making proper use of these resources. The emphasis for students is on being taught rather than learning pro-

actively and accordingly six of the students' top ten requirements relate to direct support from staff. Academic staff consider the process and the quality and integrity of the learning environment rather than the outcomes as being most important. Hewitt and Clayton (1999) nevertheless suggests that the differences are reconcilable so as to support a quality model that focuses on education as an interactive process and allows multiplicity of purpose with the possibility of individual actors simultaneously playing multiple roles.

Using focus groups Hill et al. (2003) examined perceptions of quality in HE among students on nursing, management and education programmes. They found that the majority of the students' comments related to the 'quality of the lecturer' and 'student engagement with learning' as influenced by the expertise of lecturers who could facilitate debate and discussion and were supportive. Other areas that were identified included among others the student support unit and the need for shared experiences with other motivated students. They note that students felt the need for a positive atmosphere that go beyond a well-structured lesson and pleasant learning environment where the quality of the interaction between student/student and student/faculty determines the quality of the learning experience

Lagrosen et al. (2004) examined the dimensions that constitute quality in HE, from the student perspective and compared these with the dimensions of quality that have been developed in general service quality research. They developed a 32 statement questionnaire after carrying out 29 in-depth interviews with business students from Austria, Sweden and the UK, following which the questionnaire was delivered to students at two universities in Austria and Sweden. They find the interpretation of quality as excellence best matches student's view of quality, while specific quality dimensions include among others, library resources, information and responsiveness, corporate collaboration, courses offered, teaching practices and campus facilities. They find reasonable correspondence with the general service dimensions, but also find several differences as general service elements such as access, courtesy, security, attitudes and behaviour and service recovery not considered relevant by students. They conclude that as a single stakeholder perspective provides only a limited view, such studies must be complemented with other perspectives.

Chua (2004) conducted a survey in order to investigate how quality is perceived by different stakeholder groups including students, parents, faculty members and employers. Her

categorisation of quality characteristics was based on the IPO framework i.e. Input, Process, and Output criteria. 'Input' criteria included in the study were entry requirements and students selection, 'Process' considered the overall teaching and learning process and 'Output' included employability and academic standing; however an adequate rationale for the inclusion of only these particular criteria under the IPO framework was not provided. The questionnaire was based on the SERVQUAL dimensions of Parasuraman et al. (1988), therefore, rendering the study more of an extension of other studies that investigates student perceptions of quality. The main difference offered by Chua's study is that it is one of the few studies that explore quality attributes of HE from various stakeholder perspectives. Her findings indicate that both students and employers perceive the process and output to be the most important categories relating to quality, while the faculty's perspective of quality is wider in view than the others, and indicates that the focus should be on all aspects of their activities (i.e. input, process and output). Chua emphasises that her findings support the view that different groups of customers have different perspectives of quality and, therefore, recommends an integrated quality model that addresses these different perspectives.

Lomas (2004) investigated the views of a sample of senior managers and academics on the most influential factors in effectively embedding quality in an HEP. Using semi-structured in-depth interviews, he finds that respondents' consider the need for a quality culture, training for newly appointed lecturers and continuing professional development and peer review as the most important. Respondents also highlighted the importance of transformational leadership in implementing effective change management strategies.

Morley and Aynsley (2007) explored employers' needs for information on HE quality and standards in the UK. Their interviews revealed that employer recruitment practices seem to reinforce the notion of a graduate elite that could undermine equity and widening participation initiatives. While employers reported in their initial interviews, that they placed least emphasis on information about quality and standards and most emphasis on graduates' interpersonal and communication skills, the majority cited the importance of institutional reputation and the league tables in decision making. The factors that influenced institutional reputation included real or imagined league tables, personal, regional and professional networks, performance of past graduates and prejudice against new universities. They also find that employers equated high standards with rigorous entry criteria.

The one study which focuses on whether or not academics and students share the same quality values was conducted by Telford and Masson (2005), who note that it is very important to understand the quality values of students and academics as they have an impact on various aspects of student participation in the educational process including clarity of the students' role in educational delivery, their motivation and their ability to contribute effectively to the educational experience. Considering the specific nature, duration, level of interaction and complexities involved in HE, the values and expectations of academic staff will undoubtedly play a key role in moulding student participation and motivation. On this premise, Telford and Masson's (2005) investigated the effect of congruence in views on quality values between students and staff on student satisfaction on a single learning programme in Napier University. They used focus groups in the initial stage to generate data for the construction of the survey questionnaire. They found that although lack of congruence in views between staff and students does not necessarily lead to student dissatisfaction, a shared understanding of values is important in order to manage the quality of provision. It was also noted that the majority of issues on which staff and students shared the same values and yet students were dissatisfied, were those associated with lack of resources or factors external to the actual learning experience e.g. how the value of the University's degree awards are perceived by the wider community. The key values of students and academics were found to be those "associated with what the courses are designed to achieve, the manner in which they are delivered and supported, and the commitment required of the different participants" (p.115). Students were found to be primarily interested in vocational courses that will help their career and they considered the commitment of academic staff more important than their actual experience in the classroom. In contrast, academic staff rated commitment of staff as most important, followed by commitment of students as well as the vocational impact of the course. However as the researchers note, these results are not surprising as this study was confined to Napier University which is vocationally oriented and was focused on the specific discipline of optometry which is more technically oriented. Hence, the applicability of the findings is generally limited to that particular programme. Interestingly students did not consider their own commitment to learning as important even though, it is fundamental to the learning process as discussed earlier.

The above studies provide some evidence that different stakeholders may understand the concept of quality with regards to HE in different ways. The literature also lends support to

the premise that any model for managing quality would be ineffective unless it is based on an understanding of how to address the expectations of key stakeholders. However, in order to meet the needs of key groups HEPs may have to focus on different aspects of the education system, an approach which may not really be effective unless there is more understanding of how these expectations and quality values differ.

2.6 CONCLUSION

The literature establishes the inherent difficulty in describing and evaluating quality dimensions in HE despite the growing demands for greater accountability and increasing stakeholder expectations. There is clearly a lack of conceptual models of quality management that can be applied effectively to HE. There is also evidence that external assessments of quality through accreditation and quality audits are considered to be far from satisfactory and are seen as bureaucratic and deflecting important time and resources away from the core activities of HEPs. Such approaches will not be effective in contributing to developing and embedding a sustainable culture of quality enhancement since this requires empowerment and mutual recognition, not external control. Furthermore, most studies on quality in HE focus only on students' expectations and levels of satisfaction with a particular institution. While student expectations as direct customers and co-participants are vital, it is surprising that the views of academics as a main participant in the process of HE and that of employers as a key external stakeholder are not sufficiently explored in the literature. It must also be noted that virtually no studies on quality in HE have been conducted in the Middle-Eastern or Arab countries and, therefore, the applicability of the available literature to HEPs in the region may be limited.

While quality in HE is a multifaceted concept with a host of different variables that underpin the input, process and output dimensions, there are no models which seek to manage differences in perceptions among stakeholders regarding the key variables. If HEPs are to manage the quality of their provision effectively in the long term, it is important that a quality culture is embedded within the institution and quality is accepted as a normal academic function. Such an approach to quality is possible only if the key values and expectations of those who are intensively involved in the HE process (i.e. academic staff and students) are identified and addressed. As an external point of reference, employers' quality values and expectations of HE are vital in providing external validity to the outcome

of HE. Although such values and expectations may be in conflict with each other, it is argued that the success of any model for quality management will rest fundamentally on how it acknowledges and manages such differences and builds on the similarities.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the research methods that address the specific research questions that have been raised. The methodological issues regarding the rigour of this study are also examined.

3.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary objective of this study is to develop a framework for managing quality in HE based on the key quality values of three of the main stakeholder groups. The importance of developing a shared vision, commitment and collective understanding of key participants for the successful implementation of a quality culture is stressed in the literature and, hence, any model for managing quality can only succeed if it addresses the values of key stakeholders. By taking into consideration the similarities and differences in the quality values and expectations of the stakeholder groups, the proposed framework of quality management can ensure that similarities are used to maximum benefit while differences are addressed and managed effectively.

This study focused on three groups of stakeholders in HE whose views are considered fundamental to the objectives of HE and include:

- Internal stakeholders primarily responsible for the quality and delivery of programmes, namely academic staff.
- External stakeholders: employers of graduates from HE.
- Students as co-participants, co-producers and customers of HE.

Based on the research objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Which criteria are viewed as specifically relevant to quality in HE by academics, students and employers in Oman?
2. What differences or congruencies exist in the quality values and expectations of the three stakeholder groups and what are the implications for HEPs?

3. What framework for managing quality can be proposed based on the stakeholder determinants of quality?

In addition, differences in quality values between academics on the basis of the subject discipline i.e. Business Studies and IT, as well as between students were explored.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design included three phases:

1. A review of the literature on the key quality models, criteria, expectations and values in HE;
2. A series of interviews with a sample of all three key stakeholder groups that provided the data on stakeholder expectations and quality values to be included in the next stage;
3. A survey involving the three stakeholders using a questionnaire developed on the basis of the criteria identified from the first two phases. The survey sought to determine the differences and congruencies in quality values among the wider population.

Most studies on quality in HE are essentially quantitative in nature, aimed at measuring levels of satisfaction and service quality. The majority of studies on service quality including those on HE, are carried out through surveys using questionnaires aimed at measuring customer satisfaction, levels of service quality, quality dimensions, etc. (Madu, 1998). Studies on various other aspects in HE frequently use quantitative surveys or a combination of interviews, focus groups and quantitative surveys. Many studies employ the above methods within a case-study approach focused on particular institutions, for example Chua (2004), Hewitt and Clayton (1999) and Telford and Masson (2005).

This study uses a two-stage research design utilising both quantitative and qualitative methods which is considered ideal for exploring the complexities and contrasting values of the different stakeholders' groups on a multi-dimensional issue such as the management of quality. The ontological underpinning is based on the belief that the three stakeholder groups may not share common perspectives on quality in HE and that in all probability even members of the same group may have differing priorities and expectations. It was therefore concluded that the study should use the interpretative paradigm and qualitative methods in

the first instance to gain an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of stakeholder perspectives. In the second stage, this understanding was further validated by exploring the extent to which similar values are shared by the larger population. This was done through a quantitative survey using a closed, structured questionnaire, which is normally associated with the positivist paradigm.

A multi-faceted methodology that combines the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods can greatly enhance the quality of knowledge created, allowing corroboration through triangulation and richer and elaborate analysis. When findings from different sources or via different methods can be corroborated, confidence is enhanced; even if the findings are in conflict, the enhanced knowledge enables the researcher to interpret the results accordingly (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). By combining the most appropriate methods, inferences can then be drawn and conclusions reached which otherwise may not have been possible. Reichardt & Rallis (1994) terms such an approach as the pragmatist position, which calls for using the most appropriate methodological approach for the particular research problem. The researcher, however, must be very clear about how the combined methods interact with each other with reference to the phenomenon under study, as he/she may have to consider possibly contradictory results (LeBlanc, 1995). The disadvantages of such a combination include mainly practical constraints such as time and the much wider scope of the study (Yin, 1994). Saunders et al. (2003) observe that research is qualified as inductive when the researcher develops theory from the data collected and Hyde (2000) describes inductive reasoning as a theory building process which starts with observations of specific instances thereby seeking to establish generalisations about the phenomenon under investigation. Therefore, this study is inductive as the qualitative methods informed the quantitative methods, and on the basis of the details obtained from both, the researcher developed the framework for managing quality.

The study sought to first identify key quality criteria as they emerged from the study and to explore the reasons for their importance through interviews with the three groups of stakeholders. Using inductive logic, the categories, variables and explanations that help explain the different stakeholders' views of quality in HE emerge from the study rather than being identified by the researcher beforehand. Any differences and similarities in views among a larger population were explored through a quantitative survey. The findings from

both the qualitative and quantitative data then formed the basis for a framework for managing quality.

3.3 RESEARCH METHODS

3.3.1 Qualitative data: Semi-Structured interviews

An important step prior to the construction of a research instrument is to establish the theoretical foundation or the conceptual framework so that all concepts, attributes etc., that may be part of the subject under study are identified. Constructs, variables and expected relationships are identified based on the theory which guides the further investigation of such relationships. Careful construction of theory, therefore, becomes an essential first step in the actual design of an instrument and ensures an acceptable level of content validity. This can be carried out in various ways depending on the paradigmatic underpinning adopted by the researcher.

An extensive literature review, according to Madu (1998), can ensure that all the major issues/variables are included in a study. Positivist researchers claim the advantages of objectivity and neutrality in values by systematically and objectively reviewing the theoretical base and detaching themselves from the subjects under study (De Rada, 2005). However, qualitative researchers argue that in reality this detachment can ultimately result in researcher bias as the researchers themselves determine the direction of the enquiry, thus greatly influencing the questions/issues included in the instrument (Amartunga et al, 2002). While positivists claim to be detached and value-neutral and hence objective in their approach, the researchers and not the subjects under study determine the content or questions to be asked in the interview or on the survey. Instead, qualitative data with its potential for revealing complexity is often stated to be the best strategy for discovering and exploring new areas and for developing hypotheses (Amartunga et al, 2002). There is thus a strong rationale for combining the theoretical review with the use of qualitative methods so that the research subjects can provide the researcher with the relevant dimensions to be further explored by the study.

The review of literature helped identify the various dimensions and criteria of service quality considered critical to quality management in HE. However, as highlighted in earlier

chapters there is limited research evidence on whether the generally used criteria are indeed important to all stakeholders. Hence, although the literature review provided the fundamental theoretical background, the variables identified were further validated by in-depth semi-structured interviews with a sample from each of the three stakeholder groups.

The intention at this stage was to elicit a range of issues that the members of the three stakeholder groups felt were especially relevant to quality in HE, and the contexts and reasons why such criteria become particularly influential. The interviews consisted of open-ended conversational type questions designed to allow sufficient opportunity for respondents to provide the researcher with their own views, thereby ensuring that they were not influenced by a predetermined list of factors. The descriptive analysis thus generated informed the survey which followed, and reduced the degree of researcher's bias when identifying relevant criteria, which is a major limitation of many previous studies on quality management. In doing so, the criticism that large sample studies using pre-structured questionnaires only include the researchers' own decisions as to what is important and do not allow respondents to voice their opinions on what is to be included, was overcome.

Focus groups were not considered appropriate for this study, as it was felt that Omani students particularly given their social and cultural upbringing may feel inhibited in a larger group setting and may not accurately report what is important to them. Morgan (1997) defines a focus group as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher. As Stokes and Bergin (2006) observe, the process of group dynamics which is responsible for many of the advantages of focus groups can be a double-edged sword, as it may inhibit participants in a group situation. For instance, social pressures may cause over-claiming or can influence some participants to publicly agree with others' views while privately disagreeing. They find that such group pressures can obscure the identification of a range of beliefs, attitudes and motivations thus producing a consensus view which lacks validity.

In comparison, individual depth interviews although semi-structured to an extent, allowed the researcher sufficient opportunity to get respondents from the three stakeholder groups to express their feelings on what is important to them in HE, more freely and in detail and to explore why this was so. Stokes and Bergin (2006) also find that focus groups were unable to match the depth and detail relating to issues that individual interviews were able to

provide. However, individual depth interviews have been criticised as being more difficult to interpret because of the sequential nature of data gathering which may cover up any consensus view (Greenbaum, 1998). Since the objective at this stage of the study was not to obtain a consensus view, this was not considered a limitation.

3.3.2 Qualitative Data: Sample

A total of 35 participants from the three stakeholder groups were interviewed from the HEPs and largest employers located in Muscat. The sample included 15 students, 10 academic staff and 10 employers and was considered sufficient to generate the descriptive analysis required to identify relevant quality criteria for each group. Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest that decisions regarding the number of interviews and observations depend upon access, resources, research objectives and the available time and original decisions regarding sample size may also be modified as the theory evolves. The quality and range of information gathered, rather than the number of interviews was considered more important, and after 35 in-depth interviews it was felt that enough data which gave an adequately extensive reflection of the views of the three groups had been collected. The sample included students and lecturers as well as 3 Heads of Faculty/department so as to include the views of academics with leadership responsibilities. The 10 employers selected were from among the larger organisations in terms of staff, out of which, 6 were from private companies and 4 from government organisations and included senior managers, human resource and training managers. Reflecting the existing trends, the student sample included 13 Omanis and 2 expatriates, 9 academic staff were expatriates and 1 was Omani, while 6 employers were Omani and 4 were expatriates.

The focus of the study was further narrowed down to the most common undergraduate disciplines available in Oman which are Business Studies and Information Technology. Business studies programmes included the various business subject disciplines such as accounting, marketing, human resource, finance etc while IT programmes included all computing related undergraduate programmes. 14 of the interviews with students and academic staff were conducted during the three-day Gulf Higher Education Exhibition held in Muscat from the 16th to 19th of April, 2007. HE exhibitions in Oman are represented by institutions from all over Oman as well as international institutions and attract a large number of people. The exhibition provided a valuable opportunity to interview a wider

sample of staff and students than would otherwise have been possible. Second or final year students and academic staff from the two subject disciplines were selected from the stalls of the different HEPs in Oman that offer these undergraduate programmes. After being given an overview of the research and the purpose of the interview, the respondents were asked whether they would like to participate in the interviews. Care was taken to ensure that the interviews were conducted during quieter periods of the exhibition and ample time was given to each interview. The remaining interviews with students and staff were conducted later at 3 private sector HE institutions in Muscat. The interviews with employers were conducted at their offices after prior appointments were made.

3.3.3 Qualitative Data: Data Collection and Analysis

All interviews with the respondents were conducted in English, which was not an issue as they were either teaching, studying or working in environments where English was the main medium of communication or instruction.

The interviews started with a general introduction to reinforce the purpose of the interview. During the interviews, the key criteria, expectations and issues that significantly influenced the respondents' view of quality in HE were elucidated. The interviews were semi-structured in that certain primary questions were identified initially, but the conversations were conducted in an open-ended manner designed to promote a free flow of discussion so as to access the perspectives of the interviewee in depth. The interviews, as recommended by Ratcliffe (2002), were not just used as a means of data gathering but involved active interactions aimed at arriving at contextually-based findings by examining the 'why' as well as the 'what'. Such an emergent approach is typical of qualitative research, as it seeks to observe and interpret meanings in context and, therefore, it is neither possible nor appropriate to finalise questions before data collection has begun (Hoepfl, 1997). To an extent convergent interviewing was adopted so as to allow the researcher to refine the questions after each interview. In convergent interviewing, the researcher asks questions about issues raised in previous interviews, to find agreements or disagreements between the interviewees with explanations for any disagreements (Rao and Perry, 2003). Hence, a few probe questions identified in each interview were developed for subsequent interviews so that agreements and disagreements among the interviewees and the reasons were examined.

The probe questions were introduced only towards the end of the interviews so as not to lead the interviewees. Some of the questions were intended to clarify understanding and perceptions of each group regarding the different criteria and variables and the reasons behind such perceptions.

The researcher was an active participant in the interviews by seeking clarifications or asking for further amplification; however care was taken to be non-directive and to not use leading questions. The respondents were encouraged to be reflective and thus helped to shape the actual research from the very beginning. The main themes put forward by the interviewees were explored and the semi-structured nature of the interviews provided latitude in further exploring the range of issues identified by the interviewees, which allowed their own perspectives and reasons to emerge. Questions such as “Can you give an example?” and “Can you elaborate?” were used in the course of the interviews. The rich qualitative data from the interviews helped to gain deeper insights into the input, process and output dimensions of quality in HE and also helped to further refine the components of quality identified from the literature. Another objective of the interviews was to help identify commonly used terminology and particularly complex issues and differences in interpretation and perception among the three sample groups. Potential areas of misunderstanding and misperception due to different cultural backgrounds and experiences were explored. The general understanding of all groups in terms of the expressions and terminology was closely monitored and helped identify the areas/terms which had to be dealt with carefully in the questionnaire so as to avoid ambiguity.

Given the complexities of social phenomenon, it is indeed dangerous to assume that the meaning of such phenomenon is unambiguous. What has to be carefully considered is whether or not the majority of individuals would ascribe the same meanings to those topics as intended by the researcher. Four interviews were first conducted as a pilot study with two students and one with each of the other groups which were not included in the sample and allowed the researcher to refine and develop a relevant line of questioning.

Following Yin’s (1994) recommendations, an interview protocol was used to ensure consistency in analysing the interview data and improve reliability. The protocol consisted of the interview schedule (Appendix 2) which recorded details of the respondents and several loosely structured interview questions that served as a means for gently probing for

information around the objectives of the study. The interview data was written down in the interview schedule provided with spaces for notes. Consistent abbreviations of certain typical words were used to reduce the time taken. As soon as an interview was completed, the transcription was checked to ensure that all points had been completed coherently while details were still fresh in the researcher's memory. The schedule helped to structure the information i.e. from neutral demographical facts to more detailed and subjective information and provided a sound foundation for thematic analysis, which was considered appropriate as it is more exploratory than content analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

Creswell (1994) advocates that there is no single correct method of qualitative data analysis. He suggests that researchers first identify themes and categories, a process called decontextualisation, through data reduction and interpretation. The researcher can then interpret the data to bring out the larger picture, which is called recontextualisation. As a first step, the cases in this study were divided on the basis of the stakeholder groups. The transcriptions were then reviewed several times so that data could be categorised according to basic themes that surfaced from each stakeholder group. Labels were assigned to each theme, without making connections among them in the first instance.

Four main themes or dimensions initially surfaced from the data: teaching and learning, curriculum, resources and outcomes. Next, the data was organised as sub-themes (referred later to as quality criteria) under these main themes. The sub-themes were categorised using the criterion of best fit. However, due to the complexity and interrelatedness of HE there were many variables that could be categorized under more than one theme. For instance, subject knowledge could be categorized under curriculum, teaching and learning and assessments. Here, the responses to probe questions helped to clarify which aspects were of relevance to the respondent. Cases which did not seem to belong anywhere in the first instance were placed separately. This category was again carefully scrutinised at the end and several of these variables were then placed under the first four main themes. Most of the variables that did not fit under the main themes identified so far, dealt mainly with broader generic institutional issues and were placed under a new theme labeled 'institutional factors'. The last theme to be identified from the data was 'admission criteria' under which two sub-themes, student aptitude and commitment, was placed. All the variables that were identified were then analysed further so as to locate key patterns, similarities and differences particularly within and between each stakeholder group.

A content analysis of the data also focused on differentiating between actual experiences, expectations, values, and practices which could be used for later stages of the study. This process also allowed the information to be compared and contrasted with the secondary data from the literature review. The organisation and analysis of the information enabled the confirmation of known general criteria (deductive) as well as provided evidence from which to infer new criteria (inductive). The key issues thus revealed by each group were then organised for integration into the survey questionnaire.

3.3.4 Quantitative Data: Survey questionnaire

The second research question seeks to explore the differences or similarities in the perceptions of the three stakeholder groups about key quality criteria in HE. This was accomplished through a quantitative survey including a wider sample of the population using structured questionnaires. The intention was not to find what percentage of respondents in the population responds in a particular way so as to establish a law like regularity which is often a main criticism of the use of quantitative methods in the study of social phenomenon (Maggs-Rapport, 2001). Instead, the objective was to find whether the findings from the interviews are likely to be true of the larger population and, hence, retains the essentially interpretative nature of the study. A case study methodology was not considered appropriate as the objective was to identify similarities and differences between the stakeholder groups which are not biased by institutional factors. Focusing on a particular institution would provide the views of only that institution's stakeholders and not the wider population, and hence any proposed framework of quality management based on these views would have limited validity.

The weakness of a highly structured survey method involving a large sample is that although it may provide the required breadth to the study, it may not provide the necessary depth and understanding of all the issues involved. Although the emphasis in large scale surveys is generally on quantitative data, the possibility of designing the questionnaire to collect only quantitative data or a mix of both qualitative and quantitative data was considered. The limitation of using closed-ended or fixed response items is that they may oversimplify the complexity of some opinions and limit the choices to the pre-determined

frame of reference. Further, closed-ended questions tend to over exaggerate the satisfaction or positive reactions of the respondents (Batchelor et al., 1994). Nevertheless, they are generally easier for respondents to answer and have fewer missing data than open-ended questions (Fowler, 2002). Furthermore, as the issues involved in this particular study are multifaceted and complex, it was felt that it may be over ambitious to ask a large sample of respondents to construct their own individual reflections. Although descriptive data could have been obtained from a larger sample, the analysis of the data and its interpretation would have been problematic given the complexity of the phenomenon under study. Data from open-ended questions also would not provide the necessary evaluative information nor provide adequate consistency in responses which is necessary for identifying differences and similarities in values between the three groups.

The main advantage provided by using questionnaires in the second stage of this study, was the standardisation and uniformity in the data-gathering process which was considered important in order to be able to interpret and contrast the findings between the different groups. The danger of limiting the depth and breadth of the study was overcome by the exploratory interviews in the first stage thus providing depth to the survey instrument as well as helping to understand and interpret the overall results of the survey. Therefore, a detailed questionnaire consisting of fixed-response items based on the various criteria that underpin each quality dimension, all of which were identified from the interviews was considered to be ideal and in line with the objectives of the study. The challenge was in creating a standardised questionnaire that did not oversimplify the complexities and interdependencies of the concept of quality and was at the same time respondent friendly.

The questionnaire was designed to be self-administered and was structured so that all aspects of the questionnaire were clearly specified and undisguised. i.e. the purpose of each question was made clear to the respondent. The draft questionnaire was piloted with 15 staff, 6 employers and 30 students who were not part of the final survey. The student and employer questionnaires were prepared in both English and Arabic taking into account the local context, as many students and employers in Oman may be more comfortable with Arabic. Hence, any tendency to misinterpret any of the terms or statements due to language problems was minimised. The pilot study provided valuable feedback on whether the respondents will ascribe the same meanings to those topics as intended by the researcher. The respondents were asked to comment on any perceived ambiguities, omissions or errors

concerning the draft questionnaire. Based on the feedback received some changes were made, for instance, three statements were rephrased so that the meaning of the sentence and their context was more clear. The revised questionnaire (Appendix 3) was then submitted to two senior academics for feedback before being administered for the full-scale survey.

A total of 64 items divided into 8 sections were compiled for inclusion in the final version of the questionnaire. As Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) note it is very unlikely that single-items can measure any complex theoretical concept and, therefore, as a number of related items were included under each section the likelihood for getting consistent answers and reducing random answers was improved.

The criteria from the qualitative data were grouped under the following six dimensions, each with a range of pertinent statements that asked respondents to rate the importance they attach to various criteria on a five-point Likert scale anchored at: least important (1) to most important (5).

1. Admission criteria
2. Institutional factors
3. Curriculum and content
4. Resources
5. Teaching and learning
6. Outcomes and assessment

Sections 7 included a few general statements from the literature with the purpose of cross-verifying and further analysing stakeholder responses on issues identified from the interviews. Sections 8 was aimed at determining the extent of the respondents' agreement with various definitions of quality in HE and the purpose of HE as identified from the literature on a five point scale ranging from (1) strongly agree to strongly disagree (5).

A three on the five point scale was considered as the middle ground of opinion, representing neutrality. An introductory section requesting for limited organisational and personal demographics was also included. This section differed slightly for each stakeholder group and furnished the researcher with the respondents' gender, organisation, level of study (students), programme of study/ teaching (students and academics), designation and

working experience (academics and employers) while the core part of the questionnaire was identical.

3.3.5 Quantitative Data: Sample

The survey focused on private sector HEPs located in Muscat which is the capital of Oman. Muscat offers the advantage of having the largest number of HEPs, students and employers in comparison to all other cities/regions in Oman. Moreover, the majority of HEPs in Oman offering undergraduate programmes for at least 5 years are located in Muscat. It is considered necessary to consider the minimum limit of 5 years for HEPs in order to ensure that the institutions are relatively mature and have had sufficient exposure to the local environment in terms of institutional policies, student needs as well as market trends. The focus on private HEPs is based on the importance given by the MoHE on developing the HE sector in Oman through the strategy of increased private sector participation. Out of the total 36 HEPs in Oman as on December 2006 offering undergraduate degrees, 22 are private HEPs while 14 are government institutions (Guidebook for Universities and Colleges, MoHE, 2006). The government HEPs includes the one university and regional institutions such as the technical and educational colleges having centralised programmes and management. Very few of the 14 government owned HEPs offer an extensive range of academic courses as most are designated for specific disciplines namely education and health and vocational diplomas.

Although the private sector HEPs are affiliated to international universities, they are strictly regulated by the MoHE both in terms of the number and the range of programmes they offer. Most of these institutions offer undergraduate degree programmes in at least three broad disciplines such as business, IT, engineering, arts etc. Very few of the HEPs in Oman offer post graduate programmes.

Out of the total 36 HEPs, 27 have been in existence for at least 5 years, out of which 13 are in the private sector. Furthermore, 12 of the 13 private HEPs established before the 5 year period are located in Muscat. Out of the 7 HEPs offering programmes in Business Studies and Information Technology questionnaires were distributed to 5 institutions which agreed to take part in the study.

1. College A: (offering both IT and Business programmes)
2. College B: (offering only Business programmes)
3. College C: (offering both IT and Business programmes)
4. College D: (offering only IT programmes)
5. College E: (offering both IT and Business programmes)

In addition to the students and academic staff of the above HEPs, 30 of the largest employers of graduates in the two disciplines in Muscat were included in the survey. The employers belonged to various sectors including banking, oil and gas, government ministries, telecommunications and other services.

Sampling technique for the survey was two-tiered and non-random: first the institutions were deliberately selected and then individuals within the institution were selected on the following basis:

- **Students:** All students on the final year of degree programmes in Business and IT disciplines in the 5 institutions were included in the study. A total of 290 questionnaires were distributed based on the student numbers reported by the institutions and 204 completed questionnaires were returned
- **Academics:** All academic staff teaching on the undergraduate programmes in the two disciplines in the selected institutions were included. 95 questionnaires were distributed and 74 completed questionnaires were returned.
- **Employers:** The study focused on senior line managers and human resource managers of the 20 largest companies in Oman in terms of staff, representing a cross section of both government and private sector organisations in Oman. 60 questionnaires were distributed to the 20 organisations, out of which 48 were returned.

3.3.6 Quantitative Data: Data Collection and Analysis

The possibility of email and mail survey was not considered a viable option in Oman particularly for gaining access to students who are resident in different areas in Oman and may not have access to an efficient email or mailing system. Letters and e-mails were first sent to all institutions for permission to distribute the questionnaires. The questionnaire was handed personally to contact persons in each HEP who in turn distributed it to the

appropriate students and staff within their respective institutions. The completed questionnaires were collected back by the researcher within a week. The questionnaires for employers were personally handed over to the human resource department in each organisation by the researcher, and collected back within 1-2 days. In some cases the employer questionnaires were faxed back to the researcher.

In a quantitative survey a large proportion of non-responses will reduce the sample size thereby considerably increasing sampling error. Substantial non-response can also result in bias if the non-respondents are not a random sub-set of the entire sample, in which case the results will not be representative of the entire population (De Rada, 2005). A total of 445 questionnaires were distributed to academics, students and employers. Of these, 323 were returned and nine discarded due to incomplete responses, thus giving an overall response rate of 70.6 %. A small number of missing data points were replaced with scale-average scores.

The response rate for each stakeholder group was as follows:

- Academics: 75.8%
- Students: 66.9%
- Employers: 80%

The data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 14. In the first step, the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of stakeholder group, gender, subject area, designation and organisation were analysed. Further analysis was carried out as outlined below:

3.3.6.1 Consistency estimates

In order to determine reliability, the survey data was statistically analysed to establish internal consistency of the instrument, by estimating how consistently individuals respond to the items within a scale. Cronbach's Alpha is a measure of internal consistency and measures how well a set of items measure a single construct. If the inter-correlations are high, then this indicates that the items are indeed measuring the same underlying construct. The minimum standard for these measures in the social sciences is 0.71 (Bryman & Cramer,

1995). Cronbach's alpha across all 64 items was found to be 0.945 which meets the standard for internal reliability. The internal consistency of the measurement scales within the questionnaire was assessed for the 6 quality dimensions which were also found to be above the recommended standards (Table 1).

Table 1: Internal consistency of scales

Dimension/ Scale	Cronbach's alpha
Admission	0.713
Institutional Factors	0.779
Curriculum	0.841
Resources	0.829
Teaching & Learning	0.925
Outcomes & Assessments	0.857

3.3.6.2 Kruskal Wallis Test

Means were calculated for the 42 criteria for each stakeholder group which were then ranked with 1 being the highest rank and 42 the lowest. However, although the means of ordinal data are used by many researchers, it must be noted that means from ordinal data may not be precise or accurate since the intervals between points on the Likert scale do not have a consistent meaning (Jamieson, 2004). Therefore, percentages of responses above and below the mid point of the scale (i.e. 3/average/neutral) were also examined for each criterion.

Given the ordinal level of measurement of Likert scales, non-parametric statistical techniques were employed to further examine the data for patterns and concordance between the three stakeholder groups and between the two subject disciplines. Congruence of quality values or the extent to which students, academic staff and employers considered the various quality criteria to be important was examined using the Kruskal Wallis test for n independent samples. The Kruskal Wallis one-way analysis of variance by ranks is a non-parametric method to determine if n samples are from the same population i.e. if significant differences exist between n groups. Where the probability of the stakeholders sharing the

same value was less than 5 per cent, this was considered an indication of significant difference or lack of congruence ($p < .05$). The chi-square critical value for 2 degrees of freedom and the 0.05 level of risk is 5.991, below which it can be accepted that there are no differences between the samples (Lind et al. 2005). However, when we reject the hypothesis that the populations are identical using the Kruskal Wallis test, it cannot be stated how they differ. Therefore, the percentages of respondents who rated each statement below and above the midpoint/neutral (3) and the simple means of each criterion helped determine the importance/agreement attributed by each group.

3.3.6.3 Mann Whitney Test

In order to examine if any differences existed on the basis of subject areas, the responses of students and academics was analysed using the Mann Whitney test for 2 independent samples. The Mann-Whitney test is a non-parametric method to determine if two samples are from the same population, similar to its parametric counterpart, the two-sample t-test. Where the probability of the respondents in each subject area sharing the same value was less than 5 per cent, this was considered an indication of significant difference or lack of congruence ($p < 0.05$).

3.4 VALIDITY, RELIABILITY, GENERALISABILITY AND ETHICAL ISSUES

The concept of validity refers to the fit between the solution provided by the research and the reality (Amartunga et al, 2002). In other words, validity refers to the basic trustworthiness of the whole research process: the instruments, the data collected and ultimately the findings (Bernard, 2000). Validity is concerned with establishing correct measures for the concepts under study (construct validity), the accuracy of the findings (internal validity) and the extent to which the findings can be generalized (external validity) (Miles and Huberman, 1994). There is a cycle here with the validity of the data entirely dependent upon validity of the instruments used for collecting the data. Both being valid, the findings and conclusions must naturally arise from the data. All surveys require the researcher to decide on a range of critical issues concerning sampling, non-response, questionnaire design and administration that influence the ultimate accuracy of the results (Fowler, 1993). The validity of an account or measure depends on the accuracy with which it represents those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or

theorise (Hammersley, 1987). Internal validity is concerned with two issues, the accuracy of the measure or instrument and whether it actually measures what it is intended to measure. For this particular study, it was essential that a questionnaire dealing with the multidimensional concept of quality captured all relevant dimensions, complexity and interdependence. Content validity was enhanced by further investigating the preliminary concepts that were initially identified from the theoretical literature through in-depth qualitative exploration. The interview data helped to build the various constructs in the questionnaire, providing a balance between breadth and depth of the relevant issues and also helped to frame the variables and concepts in the right context.

The design of the questionnaire presents one of the most critical and preventable threats to survey validity as poorly designed instruments lead to erroneous conclusions being drawn. Positivist research emphasise reliability wherein the instrument or technique consistently produces the same result when applied repeatedly to the same subject. Reliability however indicates that the results are reproducible but does not in any way indicate that the results are correct. The extent to which the results are correct/true depends on the extent to which the instrument or technique satisfies the requirements of construct validity. It is important that respondents' answers not reflect differences resulting from the design of the questionnaire itself but should indicate actual differences in respondents' views, attitudes, perceptions etc. (Fowler, 2002). A key factor that influences generalisability and reliability of a survey is the wording of the questions (Madu, 1998); given the complexities of social phenomenon, it is dangerous to assume that the meaning of such phenomenon is unambiguous. Díaz-Martínez and Navarro (1997) argue that the transparency and generality postulates of positivism make the assumption that words or linguistic expressions used in a study have unambiguous meanings that denote objective realities and that these meanings are known by all the subjects of that study or at least the overwhelming majority of subjects. Of particular concern in the larger survey in this study was the possibility of differences in understanding of terminology between the different stakeholder groups. As all stakeholder groups with the possible exception of students the majority of whom are Omani nationals come from a diverse multicultural background, this was identified as a potential problem. Furthermore, while academics may have common interpretations of a particular term in education, it is possible that students or employers may not have the same interpretation. Differences in perception may also exist between members of the same

stakeholder group. As these issues were particularly explored during the interviews, this helped the researcher to treat these concepts carefully so that the statements framed in the questionnaire were clear as possible to all groups. Triangulation of questionnaire statements was established in the instrument design through two or more carefully worded questions that facilitated relationship constructs of the criteria from different angles.

Vital issues that were given due emphasis by the researcher especially when piloting the questionnaire include clarity and consistency so that questions were clear and conveyed the same meaning as far as possible to respondents, particularly in this case, to each stakeholder group. The use of Arabic and English questionnaires also ensured that the chances of misinterpretation of statements due to language problems was minimised. During the pilot study, the questionnaire (both Arabic and English) was discussed with some of the respondents after they had completed it in order to determine their interpretation of the key terms and statements. As the researcher does not speak Arabic, an Arabic speaking academic who also helped translate the questionnaire was present during this discussion.

Consistency of response or the lack thereof, is also an important factor in determining internal validity. In a self-administered anonymous questionnaire there is no opportunity to question inconsistencies in response from one question to another. Such inconsistencies may arise because of a lack of seriousness on the part of the respondent towards the survey itself. Concerns that key variables or particular dimensions may be prone to measurement error in self-administered questionnaires owing to respondents' haste or lack of understanding can be alleviated to an extent by the repetition of key variables in different ways thus reducing random answers. Hence, multiple items were incorporated in the questionnaire for each dimension and some of the statements in the last two sections of the questionnaire re-emphasised key findings from the interviews.

Sample triangulation was achieved by conducting multiple interviews with each stakeholder group and an extensive survey. Methodological and data triangulation which refers to the use of 'complementary, symmetrical parallel' methods so as to get alternative views (LeBlanc, 1995, p. 6.) was achieved through the use of both interviews and quantitative surveys. Furthermore, the research design provides for sequential triangulation which refers

to the use of both methods in sequence such that the data set from one approach (interviews) feeds into the planning of the next approach (survey). The underlying assumption in such a combination is that the respective weaknesses of the two methods will be counter-balanced by their respective strengths. In using triangulation, however, it is stressed that combining qualitative and quantitative methods is not necessarily to validate the findings from either method, particularly the use of quantitative methods to validate qualitative findings. Such qualitative or quantitative findings should be valid on their own. The objective of a combined methodology does not entail combining methods that yield comparable data but must include alternative methods that provide complementary data.

In order to achieve external validity, surveys are often used so as to arrive at widely applicable statistical generalisations while a smaller qualitative study such as a case study may try to generalise the findings to a particular theory (Reige, 2003). Interpretation of findings in any study has to be based on a total view of the sampling frame. External validity refers to the extent to which findings of a particular study are applicable beyond the immediate sample or outside the specific research setting in which the study was carried out (Reige, 2003). This requires the sample to be representative of the entire population being researched (Stenbacka, 2001). Accordingly, the selected sample for the survey included final year students and academic staff of five out of the seven private HEPs in Muscat which offer the selected subject disciplines, so the findings are applicable to private sector HEPs in Oman that offer the relevant programmes. As the sample of employers included many of the larger private and public sector organisations their responses can be considered applicable generally to employers in Oman. However, as argued by Bernard (2000, p.52) the whole concept of validity is never completely resolved when considering the view that the “truth is never final” and that validity itself depends on the “collective opinion of researchers” and can never be proven absolutely. The breadth of the sample in this study has been a deliberate choice in order to enhance the external validity and generalisability of the findings to Oman in general within similar subject disciplines. Depth of understanding and knowledge of the nuances involved is vital in order to provide a theoretical explanation of a general phenomenon (Hyde, 2000).

Stenbacka (2001) argues that the issue of validity in qualitative research is useless as the purpose in qualitative research never is to measure anything. She contends that validity refers to the extent to which the qualitative researcher has understood the respondents’

reality on the specified area of study. The interaction between the respondent and the interviewer must provide for improved possibilities for collecting 'good' data, where those aspects which are important to the respondent can be pursued in depth (p.551). Indeed, in-depth exploration of quality values and criteria that are specially considered relevant to managing quality in HE by each stakeholder group was given careful attention by the researcher during the initial exploratory interviews. The nature of the particular concept under study may also have its own potential issues of concern. For instance, according to Madu (1998) most studies on quality deal with perceptions rather than the actual experience which makes it difficult to translate these perceptions to actual feelings and can potentially further aggravate the issue of misperceptions. In this study, however, as the objective is to identify the views of respondents on what they consider is most important to managing quality rather than determining the respondents' perceptions of their actual experiences within a particular institution, the potential problem of equating perceptions to actual experience does not arise.

Qualitative researchers debate the applicability of the notions of validity and reality to interpretative research as these terms refer to the evaluation of positivist research. Guba and Lincoln (1994) offer that the interpretative tradition must instead aim for 'credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability' (p. 105). Credibility deals with the problem of reality being interpreted differently by different individuals and is parallel to the concept of internal validity. It involves the approval of the research findings by peers or other interviewees i.e. gaining credibility from others. Transferability is similar to external validity and Riege (2003) argues that if research findings are to satisfy the notion of transferability, adequate descriptions must be provided for readers to determine whether the findings are applicable or transferable to their own settings. By its very nature, the small size and inductive approach of qualitative research is criticised for its lack of external validity (Sykes, 1991 cited in Stenbacka, 2001). Creswell (1994) argues that repetitiveness of results or external validity has no place in inductive research as the objective is not to generalise findings but to form a unique interpretation of events. The solution is for qualitative researchers to be most careful, systematic and reflective in making the research process clear for themselves in order to describe it for others who can then judge its applicability to their needs. This requires the researcher to be explicit about the methods used so that the reader obtains a complete picture of the context and processes involved. Dependability is analogous to reliability and considers whether the procedures and

techniques used in the inquiry process are consistent and requires compatibility between the research question and the research design. Confirmability is similar to objectivity in positivism and refers to whether the interpretation of the data is logical and unprejudiced i.e. whether the conclusions drawn are appropriate to the data. By interweaving quotes by respondents under each stakeholder group and differentiating the conclusions that can be drawn from the actual findings as supported by the data, careful consideration has been given to provide a clear and accurate description of the context and processes followed.

A qualitative researcher becomes the instrument of data collection and thus results may vary greatly depending on who conducts the research. Strauss and Corbin (1990) emphasises the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher which refers to the researchers' personal trait whereby s/he is aware of subtleties in data, has the capacity to understand and give meaning to data and is able to separate the pertinent from that which isn't. The qualitative researcher requires a great degree of accuracy in reporting events, points of view and interpretations that are attributed to the people who they study (Richards, 2003). Therefore, qualitative researchers must go beyond description in order to arrive at the meanings and concepts that are understood by the participants (Gregory, 2005). Richards (2003) asserts that contrary to the general perception "qualitative inquiry demands rigour, precision, systematicity and careful attention to detail" (p. 6). This becomes even more complicated given the fact that people are often not sure of exact meanings and may provide at best vague, inconsistent interpretations and may frequently change their minds. It would be difficult to converge all such interpretations into one consistent picture (Riege, 2003). The researcher's task then, is to report the indecisions of the subjects involved rather than implying a stability not provided by the subjects.

Researchers are ethically responsible to ensure that their research methods and instruments are of the highest quality and as unobtrusive and inoffensive as possible (Fogelman, 2002). All researchers have the ethical responsibility of reporting the findings of their study as accurately and truthfully as possible and they should satisfy themselves that the techniques proposed are appropriate. They are also morally obliged to safeguard the interests of the subjects of their study or those who are affected by their work. Fogelman (2002) also highlights the concept of informed consent of respondents which is tied in with anonymity and confidentiality. He observes that many surveys which do not require respondents to state their names are termed as anonymous while in actual fact the researcher may have

devised a means for identifying respondents using some sort of numbering system. Researchers, therefore, have the moral obligation to ensure that what they have indicated as the objective and process of the study is indeed what actually happens. The names of all interviewees, respondents and institutions that took part in this study have, therefore, been kept completely confidential. A preamble to the self-administered questionnaires explicitly stated the purpose of the survey and the anonymity and confidentiality of respondents' views was stressed. Anonymity was important in encouraging respondents (particularly students and academic staff) to be truthful about their opinions, thus reducing the potential bias that may result when respondents try to conform to what is professionally or socially desirable or expected. Respondents were informed that the objective of the survey and interviews was to determine their views on generic quality management rather than their views on a particular institution, a fact which was clear from the nature of the questions.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: QUALITATIVE DATA

The focus of the first research question was on identifying criteria considered important to quality in HE by academics, students and employers in Oman. This chapter presents and discusses the findings of the interviews with each stakeholder group which informed the construction of the questionnaire for the next stage. Six main themes or dimensions (i.e. teaching and learning, curriculum, resources, outcomes, admissions policies and institutional criteria) with various sub-themes were identified which are discussed individually in this chapter.

4.1 EMERGING THEMES

All interviews started with the question, “*what do you think of first when I say the words: quality of higher education?*”

Students’ responses essentially included:

- “*reputation of the institution*”,
- “*good teaching*”,
- “*teachers’ ability to make students understand the subject*”
- “*faculty who are interesting and enthusiastic*”,
- “*the currentness and content of the programmes,*”
- “*programme clarity,*”
- “*well-structured programmes that are relevant for employment*”, and
- “*the extent of knowledge and skills gained*”.

Responses of academic staff focused particularly on:

- “*the academic standards of programmes*”,
- “*relevancy of the curriculum towards workplace related skills*”,
- “*the content of the curriculum,*”
- “*the delivery and implementation of the curriculum*”,
- “*the enthusiasm and commitment of teaching staff and students towards the learning process*”, and

- *“the value added to the student in terms of knowledge, skills and personal development”.*

Employer responses identified the following:

- *“a challenging process which raises the general awareness and overall exposure of graduates”*,
- *“facilitating the development of self-management, commitment and adaptability to work”*,
- *“instilling the desire for continuous personal development”*
- *“the overall development of the individual in terms of knowledge and skills”*, and
- *“soft skills”* as fundamental to quality.

Students identified key indicators ranging from faculty, programme and outcome related factors with the strongest emphasis on faculty related factors and the manner in which they deliver the courses, institutional reputation and relevance of programmes to employment. This emphasis is supported by Telford and Masson (2005) who identify the key values of students to be those associated with what the courses are designed to achieve and the manner in which they are delivered and supported. Academic staff emphasised the academic standards of programmes, curriculum content and the process of delivery, while a few acknowledged the role of faculty and student commitment and the extent of value added to the student in terms of knowledge and skills as synonymous with quality of HE. The responses of academic staff are strongly consistent with Chua (2004) who find that the faculty’s perspective of quality is wider in view in that they consider the focus should be on all aspects of HE. The main focus for employers was the HE process which they felt should be challenging enough to enable students to acquire relevant skills and knowledge. They particularly valued general awareness, personal development and core transferable skills as key outcomes of HE which is consistent with Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2004) and Hawawini (2005) who stress that employers value generic and behavioural skills more than the acquisition of subject knowledge.

The data relating to the key quality related criteria were categorised on the basis of the six main dimensions as discussed below:

4.1.1 Teaching and Learning

Not surprisingly, the teaching and learning function emerged as a key theme identified by almost all students, many academic staff as well as employers. Students tended to place more responsibility on the teaching and learning process and by default the lecturer for stimulating their interest in the subject and “*providing them with adequate knowledge*”. This is consistent with Cook (1997) who finds that students consider academic staff factors as most critical to their success. A Business Administration student felt that “*one of the most important issues in college education is ...the way the programme and the subjects are taught should be interesting to motivate students and also should provide good knowledge about important topics and subjects*”.

Academic staff emphasised the importance of the teaching and learning process in ensuring appropriate delivery of programmes and in stimulating interest and enhancing knowledge, while ensuring that specified academic standards are met. A lecturer of Strategic Management put it thus “*The delivery of the programmes, particularly the whole approach to teaching must be appropriate so that ultimately standards are met*” while a Head of Department noted “*In order to get students involved it is very important that the process of teaching and learning is stimulating and interesting*”.

Employers also stressed the necessity of ensuring rigour and challenge within the teaching and learning process so as to ensure important outcomes. As one employer emphasised “*the process of learning during the students’ time in the college/university should challenge and engage the student enough so that students develop themselves and they become mature and responsible. If this happens satisfactorily then everything else will fall into place*”.

The various criteria or sub-themes that emerged from the data under teaching and learning included:

4.1.1.a Faculty: Under this sub-theme, several related factors were identified. Almost all students and many academic staff identified the lecturer as the main actor in the students’ learning experience.

One student noted that faculty “*represents the institution and greatly influences students’ opinion of the college*”. Five students, four academic staff and one employer emphasised that lecturers must have “*impressive/strong communication skills, warm/confident personality, empathy with or understand students’ needs*” in order to positively influence students’ attitude and interest in a subject and in learning. The lecturers’ personality and teaching style were considered important in that they can “*inspire and motivate students*” in general and can “*influence students to move in the right direction*”. In addition, two students stated that lecturers should have “*interesting/impressive*” personalities in that they inspire “*students’ confidence in the tutor*” and “*a pleasant appearance*” which in turn influences students’ “*interest in the subject*”. When questioned further about the role of tutor’s appearance, the same Business student answered that “*the way the tutors present themselves affects our views about them, as it tells us if the tutor is really interested in students’ opinions*”. Clearly appearance, personality and tutors’ personal efforts were linked together in this student’s mind, a factor which is not mentioned in the literature.

While academics felt that their qualifications and experience have a significant impact on their performance and capability, a few students indicated that qualifications are secondary to lecturers’ ability to teach. Four business students noted that the ability of teaching staff to make complex concepts accessible and “*easier to understand*” was more important than their qualifications. However, students also stressed that the tutors’ knowledge of the subject area and their ability to make theories relevant through “*real life examples*” was very important. Students appreciated lecturers who constantly updated their teaching, teaching materials and content by using the latest examples and applications. Students expected lecturers to be stimulating and interesting and to use teaching methods that “*break the routine and make us think differently*”. One statement was that “*some lecturers did not take the trouble to make the subject matter interesting*” and another student noted “*we did not even understand why we had to study some topics or subjects*”. As students did not understand the relevance of many topics they were not motivated to develop their knowledge or understanding further. This underlines the role of the lecturer as enthusiastic teachers and facilitators who display sufficient empathy with students’ learning needs and motivate them to enhance their knowledge as noted by Hill et al. (2003).

Academic staff and employers expected lecturers to be “*good role models for students*” and regarded their input as vital in shaping student attitudes, making them think and developing

and enhancing behavioural skills. The role of academic staff in “*focusing and developing students’ attention, enthusiasm and interest*” in the subject was emphasised by many academic staff and is consistent with students’ response. One lecturer put it thus: “*the success of lecturers’ lie in whether they can make students enthusiastic about the module*” and whether “*they provide students with strategic direction in the classroom and outside with regards to all matters related to that module*”. The expertise and subject knowledge of the lecturer, their qualifications and breadth and depth of knowledge of the subject are key characteristics that were identified as having a significant bearing on the effectiveness and quality of the teaching and learning process. However, similar to students, academic staff also stressed that effective communication and presentation skills were probably the most important characteristics of effective lecturers, as from their experience there are many highly qualified and knowledgeable academics who have unimpressive communication skills and hence are ineffective in the classroom. Two lecturers highlighted the ability of lecturers to plan, organise and present the subject as important.

One employer and a Head of Department noted that faculty members are generally hired based on qualifications and not necessarily industry experience. Such lecturers tended to be very theoretical without using relevant industry examples which was considered important both for IT and Business disciplines. Furthermore, it was felt that some academic staff tended to have weak skills of creativity, presentation and leadership. Strong academic credentials and subject knowledge often do not necessarily guarantee strong personal skills profile and as pointed out by the Head of Department such lecturers tend to be poor at encouraging skills development in students. Academics, particularly those with managerial responsibilities emphasised the lecturers’ ability to structure, organise and integrate teaching, assessments and deliver modules in a way that enhances learning clarity and accessibility to students.

Employers repeatedly stressed the role of teaching staff in encouraging and shaping students’ personal values and development, rather than only subject understanding. Hence, employer’s focus was on the lecturers’ role in ensuring outcomes in terms of learners’ overall personal development, general awareness and skills; the importance of this outcome was repeatedly highlighted by employers. These findings are consistent with Hawawini (2005) who find that employers of business graduates are increasingly demanding behavioral and societal skills as well as critical skills. As the Managing Director of an IT

company put it: “*although HE may not be as critical as the schooling years in laying the foundation for students’ development, a university student is still developing himself. The input from professors and lecturers will determine his values towards work, knowledge and the society and also influence his behavioral skills*”.

Most of the desirable characteristics of lecturers on this wish list and the significance of the lecturers’ role in the teaching and learning process find strong support from the literature (e.g. Gilbert et al. 1993; Hill et al, 2003). These researchers identify key characteristics of effective lecturers to include enthusiasm, rich understanding of the subject, insightful planning, organising, strong interpersonal skills, presentation, effective communication and empathy with students. Hence, the faculty is, one, if not the most significant input that influences the quality of HE as viewed by all three stakeholders.

4.1.1.b Teaching methods: The teaching function and use of “*interesting*” teaching methods was a key criterion for many students, however, their interpretation of ‘interesting’ was ambiguous and varied. Many students were unable to elaborate when asked for examples of particular teaching methods and most students did not respond very enthusiastically when asked whether they would like to be more involved in the classroom. Students seemed to link interesting teaching methods merely with the lecturers’ ability to explain the subject in a way that is not boring. A few (three) business students highlighted the role of student presentations and class discussions and expressed their satisfaction with the more interactive teaching methods used by some lecturers as they felt that it improved “*their overall understanding of the topic*” and “*forced them to think about concepts rather than just listen to the lecture*”. In contrast, IT students did not seem to have any strong views about teaching methods. They tended to place more importance on handouts and teaching materials and on practical aspects of the course in particular. There was more emphasis on learning by “*lecturer demonstration*’ in the first instance, “*followed by practice*”.

An Accounting student stated that she expected lecturers to use similar or consistent teaching approaches/styles. She did not appreciate wide differences in teaching approaches among staff as she found it difficult to adjust to them. This preference is broadly supported by Pennington and O’Neil (1994) who recommend that students, irrespective of modules, or

programme of study must have a broadly similar experience of teaching and learning which may be achieved by establishing a set of operational principles across different curriculum.

Some of the most critical aspects contributing to high quality education have been identified as relating to particular teaching and learning styles (Hill et al. 2003). The relationship between the use of appropriate teaching methods and deeper approaches to learning is also emphasised by Pennington and O'Neil (1994). However, not all lecturers seemed to be aware of this relationship. The lack of any particular views on the part of IT students regarding teaching methods was consistent with the responses of IT lecturers who did not emphasise or mention the importance of teaching methods as such. What they did emphasise was the importance of making students understand the subject matter and ensuring clarity of explanation. This together with the fact that IT lecturers exhibited a marked lack of awareness of the importance of using different teaching methods on probe questions seemed to imply a tendency to rely on traditional tutor-centred approaches to teaching. In comparison, five business lecturers stressed the role of non-traditional and interactive teaching methods in enhancing students' interest in the subject, depth of understanding and in generating discussion around the topic. However, consistent with the lack of enthusiasm displayed by many students towards a more participatory role in the classroom, these lecturers felt that the majority of students tended to be very conservative in their teaching preferences and are most motivated when concepts were straightforward and focused, rather than complex and application oriented. Moving students away from tutor-centred learning was considered a major problem and lecturers remarked that some students were "*extremely negative towards student-centred learning approaches*" and even considered that "*lecturers were not doing their jobs*" or "*did not know how to teach if they moved away from the traditional lecturer-centred teaching approaches*". The fact that many students were not enthusiastic about non-traditional teaching methods indicates a gap between some of the more innovative Business lecturers and the expectations of the majority of students. Students' reluctance to be more interactive and their resistance to student-centred approaches is consistent with Hewitt and Clayton (1999) who also find that for students, the emphasis is on being taught rather than learning pro-actively. One frequent observation among teaching staff was that students, particularly towards the end-of the semester, wanted lecturers to focus on preparing them for assessments and were not really interested in learning for its own sake.

4.1.1.c. Focus of lecturers on subject knowledge: Without exception, students and many academic staff placed the onus on the lecturer for enhancing students' subject knowledge. Many students also did not see the necessity for wider or independent reading and seemed to place the entire responsibility for ensuring understanding of the subject on lecturers. In comparison, lecturers emphasised their role in drawing attention to fundamental theories and concepts and making complex concepts more accessible but expected more participation from students in taking responsibility for their learning.

When the issue of student responsibility was explored further, seven students indicated that it was their responsibility to prepare themselves for assessments and learn the subject matter. However, as one of them put it, they felt that the responsibility for “*making them understand*” was fully the lecturers'. Moreover, only one student acknowledged the importance of developing independent learning or thinking skills and the relevance of these skills for performance, both for employment and HE. Academics were very clearly aware of these student expectations but accepted that they were responsible for developing students' knowledge and awareness but only up to a point. They stated that there was considerable resistance from students about accepting responsibility for independent learning even among the best students and expressed certain helplessness in overcoming this. The main issues were centred on the difficulties of motivating and supporting students who were used to traditional teaching and assessment methods in the secondary school system, and the difficulties of learning in a second language. Academic staff seemed to be in dilemma; although many recognised the importance of student responsibility, they did not seem to have any idea of what they could do to enhance it. Some of them placed this responsibility on the management of HEPs, the MoHE and the general community so that the student community is made aware of the importance of participation and learning to learn. This helplessness on the part of academic staff could also be based on the fact that most of them are expatriates while the majority of the student population are Omanis and they, therefore, cannot handle an issue which may have cultural and social implications. In comparison, employers were more emphatic that HEPs and academics should make it “*clear to students that unless they acquire effective skills for learning, thinking and doing for themselves, they would not be successful both in HE and outside of it*”.

The findings indicate a lack of awareness of the concept of students as co-participants in HE among student respondents and a few academic staff. The majority of students did not seem

to realise that HE is not merely about understanding what was taught in the classroom, but that they would have to go beyond this process and start thinking and learning for themselves. These findings are consistent with Hewitt and Clayton (1999) who suggest that students may consider themselves merely as inputs in the educational process to be transformed without putting in the required effort. The challenge for the lecturer is to convince the student to put in the necessary effort required for effective learning. However, the researcher did notice that such awareness could be developed by exploring this issue further with students and by linking the benefits of student participation to personal development and employer expectations.

4.1.1.d. Focus of lecturers on developing skills: There was consensus among all three stakeholder groups that developing and preparing students for the workplace by focusing on skills and subject knowledge was very important. Clearly, theory and subject knowledge for its own sake do not have much value which is strongly consistent with Stefani (2005) who observes that although HE was traditionally more concerned with the transmission of knowledge, today's knowledge economy requires tutors to develop a different skills set that involves seeking, analysing and using information.

While students emphasised the importance of enhancing subject and practical knowledge, most were emphatic that the role of HE is to prepare them for the workplace. However, students' interpretation of what this preparation entailed was less clear. Furthermore, students' interpretation of skills varied; some seemed to equate practical understanding of the subject with the skills appropriate for the workplace while others were not very sure about what employers required. An IT student said, "*Most students go to college so that they can get jobs.it is important that a graduate is able to do his work properly and this requires practical knowledge of the subject*". When questioned further about generic skills required for success, his response was thus, "*I think practical understanding of the topics and having the knowledge to complete tasks is what is required from a College degree. If you are able to do this, then you will develop the communication and self management skills on the job through work experience*".

Students also did not seem aware of the distinction between skills, knowledge and learning to learn. When the different skills sets were explained to students, the majority felt that soft skills such as communication, presentation, people and team skills, time and self

management were important but most did not seem to place much value on the higher level cognitive skills such as analysis and application. While many business students were aware of the need to develop skills of presentation, communication and dealing effectively with people, none of the students seemed to realise that developing such skills could be a core part of the overall learning process in HE and that the success of this required them to be effective participants.

While academics as a group were the most emphatic about the role of HE in preparing students for the workplace, there was lack of clarity about how these skills could be developed and who was responsible for this process. Academics (mostly business) emphasised the importance of “*effective skills of communication, critical thinking, team work and innovation*” as critical to the workplace, which was echoed to an extent by business students. They also noted the importance of instilling in students a desire for continuous learning. Similar to some of the students’ responses, a few of the IT lecturers seemed to relate practical aspects of the discipline to the workplace and did not seem to be realise the need to develop other skills in their students.

However, employers bemoaned the lack of IT graduates with soft skills. An IT manager stated “*IT graduates do not even seem interested in presenting themselves well in job interviews; there seems to be a total lack of awareness of the importance of making a good impression on people or on developing soft skills*”. Another stated, “*we need IT graduates who can understand the problems and issues and can communicate well with other staff and departments*”. Hence, while IT managers valued soft skills, IT lecturers seemed to be unaware of the importance of enhancing these skills.

The literature indicates that teaching staff have a vital role in developing critical skills by offering guidance about what is required, setting structured, explicit goals, facilitating, coaching and designing customised learning experiences and providing feedback for improvement (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007). However, academics did not seem to be very clear on the lecturers’ role in developing generic transferable related skills. Although they stressed the importance of skills, there was less clarity on the actual process of skills development. Their responses seemed to indicate that while their role was to develop subject knowledge, the assessment strategy and the overall learning process would place the onus on students to further develop transferable skills. On being asked whether the students

will be able to successfully acquire such skills on their own just because the assessment strategy demands it, academic staff did respond that “*a large majority could not*”, essentially because of the “*weaknesses of the secondary school system*”. The responses clearly lend support to Lammers and Murphy (2002) who find that lecturers do not necessarily stimulate thought, change attitudes or develop behavioural skills that are essential in HE. The lack of clarity among lecturers regarding their role in skills development could be a main reason for the lack of awareness among students regarding skills. Given the inherent weaknesses in the secondary school education, the role of lecturers in skills development in HE becomes even more critical.

However, employers stressed the role of lecturers and curriculum in developing transferable skills and awareness. They considered the key objective of HE to be the “*overall development of students into mature individuals*” who have acquired (at least) “*the minimum level of skills and abilities to learn and develop*” himself/ herself further, in essence, transforming students. Thus, equipping students with “*the skills of learning, communication, self-management, thinking for themselves, team and people skills and adaptability*” was vital for employers. This is consistent with Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2004) who state that employers placed greater value on generic skills, including the ability to think laterally and general awareness as opposed to discipline-specific skills and knowledge. Although employers did state that subject-specific knowledge was considered very important particularly for more ‘technical’ jobs such as accounting and IT, which is consistent with Morley and Aynsley (2007) who find that scientific and technical employers placed greater emphasis on graduates' subject knowledge, they nevertheless emphasised that such knowledge lost value if they are not accompanied by generic skills. They stressed that subject knowledge should not be at the expense of relevant skills. These skills closely match what is considered important by academics with the exception of behavioural skills which were only mentioned by employers.

As a training manager in a large multinational company put it: “*if a new employee is adaptable and has good skills of thinking and reasoning, then s/he will be able to learn quickly on the job; however with poor skills of adaptability and only subject specific knowledge the person will take a long time to become productive. Even then their contribution will be limited*”.

4.1.1.e. Contribution of other students: Owlia and Aspinwal (1996) observe that as the quality of students' input is vital to the transformative role of HE, the degree and quality of personal interaction between students will have important influences on each other and can greatly influence the quality of the process and outcomes. However, not many respondents identified this as a major contributor to the overall learning experience which once again highlights the general lack of emphasis on student participation. The three students who did mention the role of other students as an important criterion (one Business Administration and two IT students), were very emphatic that group work, attitude and commitment of other students in the classroom and outside of it were key determinants of the quality of their overall learning experience. The Business Administration student expressed it as "*learning together and from each other*" and cited examples of specific modules where this had happened, as a result of which his learning experience was richer in comparison to his other classes where students were not that keen. He was one of the few students who placed the blame for this lack of enthusiasm on students themselves, stating that "*the attitude of the students, their maturity, and family background and personal values*" were key factors that affect students' commitment to studies. He noted that "*the more open and committed the students were, the more they had to share with each other and learn from each other*". He observed that this enthusiasm also influenced lecturers who would then be motivated to try more interesting methods of teaching. In contrast, two IT students identified the role of competition among students as a key motivator that helped them to learn both with each other and individually.

A probe question explored whether students were influenced by comments by their friends and other students regarding lecturers, modules or generally about an institution. Although some students did not want to commit to this, many did indicate that negative comments from the student population particularly their friends, did tend to influence them which is consistent with Hill (1995). A few, however, stated that they often changed their negative perceptions after going through the experience on their own and they found the reality to be positive.

4.1.2 Curriculum

While curriculum was clearly seen as very important, there was a marked difference between the three groups in their perception of what the curriculum should focus on. Most

academic staff seemed to feel that the range, relevance and currency of topics covered were the most critical aspects of achieving good standards. In fact, six lecturers identified the content of the programme as probably the single most important input that determines the quality of HE. As a lecturer in management stated “*quality in HE is first and foremost about ensuring the right modules and content relevant to the programme*”. When questioned about how she defined ‘right content,’ she responded that this would be “*content that prepares students adequately for industry/workplace without employers having to invest further in training the student*”. However, there seems to be inconsistency among academics as to what such content should cover. While some lecturers indicated that academic standards of the programme are determined by the range and depth of topics included, a few (three) preferred a focus on specific topics with substantial depth. As one Accounting lecturer put it, “*sometimes the range of topics covered especially at levels 2 and level 3 is at the expense of a more in-depth knowledge of fundamental topics*”. He noted that “*undergraduate HE seem to be focusing on developing managers rather than junior level or middle level staff with the result that the product is not really fit for any of the roles*”.

Two students emphasised programme clarity, as they preferred to have more structured programmes that included specific core or essential modules relevant to that discipline as opposed to many different options. While IT students emphasised that “*knowledge of the latest applications*” and advancements in the field were important, students in general were not really concerned about the range of topics covered. They felt that it was sufficient to focus on the most important, fundamental and relevant topics. Surprisingly, however, this view was also echoed by employers and a few of the lecturers as stated above.

Employers felt that curriculum should focus on in-depth knowledge of selective topics identified as fundamental to the subject and the application side of those subjects. Once such knowledge is acquired, employers felt that it would provide the basis on which students can further enhance their knowledge, either through masters programmes or professional courses depending on personal/career aspirations. Employers also stated that while IT and accounting students probably needed to have stronger subject specific knowledge as these subjects are more “*technical*”, even this could be focused rather than spread over a wide range of areas. They, therefore, emphasised the “*quality and depth of a few subject related topics*” rather than a broad range and that “*programmes should have specific learning objectives*”. While employers agreed that the curriculum should be current

and up to date, particularly in the use of “*latest technologies, trends, case studies, applications*”, they were quite clear that the role of undergraduate education is not to “*teach everything*”. This, they felt, was impossible and not required and the resulting outcome was unsatisfactory when graduates started working. A Marketing Director emphasised: “*The focus of the curriculum should be on building a strong fundamental knowledge of subject areas with emphasis on developing flexibility, adaptability and application. Too much subject matter, especially advanced theoretical concepts would result in the student just studying for the examinations and not really appreciating their importance or even understanding them properly*”.

A significant change highlighted by employers is that nowadays, most applicants seeking their first jobs have a first degree, compared to the past where having a first degree was comparatively rare and, therefore, considered adequate for middle-level managerial positions. The demands on managers are now very significant and require, in addition to educational qualifications, extensive experience as well. Hence, employers stressed “*specific knowledge for specific jobs*” while the transferable skills acquired by students “*should enable them to enhance their on-the- job learning*”. These findings are consistent with Thomas (2007) and Eagle and Brennan (2007) who note that economic and demographic changes have highlighted the need for more flexible curricula with greater emphasis on lifelong learning rather than reproduction of subject knowledge. They are also supported by Baruch and Lemming (1996) who suggest that business graduates require more specialized or focused knowledge in the early stages of their career while more generalised knowledge became important later on.

Kember (1997) notes that the role of curriculum in influencing teaching staff to focus only on subject knowledge rather than the development of critical skills must not be overlooked. Accordingly, while many Business lecturers highlighted the importance of curriculum focus on the development of skills, IT academics did not. They stressed the practical aspects of the curriculum in association with effectiveness in the workplace, while they ignored the importance of including skills in the curriculum altogether.

4.1.3 Learning Resources

While resources were not overtly emphasised by the interviewees, the focus by students and staff was mainly on teaching facilities, up-to-date and adequate library and IT resources. The “*range of texts and journals available to students and staff*” was seen as critical. IT students emphasised the importance of having access to the latest versions of relevant hardware and software programmes. General campus appearance and facilities for extra curricular activities such as sports facilities, and student forums such as IT clubs and student magazines so as to add variety and fun to campus life were mentioned by 2 students. When asked if they felt that students would participate in such activities, both students and a few staff felt that given the local culture it may take time for wider participation; nevertheless, they stressed that such facilities were necessary to provide all round development and in time participation would improve. A few lecturers also pointed that the staff-student ratio was very important and the tendency to have larger lecture sessions was not seen as very conducive to learning, given the difficulties of learning in a second language. While HE was traditionally concerned with the transmission of knowledge larger lecture groups may have been acceptable, however, as Hill et al (2003) argue, small seminar groups are necessary in order to provide the necessary opportunities for students who have difficulty adjusting to HE.

4.1.4 Outcomes

While the quality of the outcome in terms of graduates’ preparation for the workplace was identified as a key indicator of the quality of an HEP, there was less clarity on the most appropriate vehicles for such measurement. The sub-themes that emerged under the outcome dimension included assessment methods, student performance in assessments and assessment of subject specific knowledge vs. skills.

4.1.4.a. Assessment methods: Stefani (2005) emphasises that assessment is integral to student learning and that it essentially drives the curriculum. Three Business lecturers felt that it is the assessment “*process*” which has a more significant influence on the quality of HE rather than outcomes in the form of high grades. This observation is consistent with Hewitt and Clayton (1999) who find that academic staff consider the quality and integrity of the overall learning process which requires students to be proactive partners, rather than the

outcome, to be the most critical factor. Two lecturers emphasised the use of a variety of assessment methods in order to develop different skills and not merely subject knowledge. As one of them stated “...*programme teams must incorporate a varied assessment strategy rather than only traditional examinations, if they are really serious about developing skills*”. Three lecturers felt that a continuous assessment strategy involving quizzes, presentations, short essays and tests would be ideal for developing skills and subject matter and to keep students focused. However, the same staff observed that a continuous assessment strategy would be very demanding for students, given the time demands involved. One lecturer mentioned the role of feedback on assessment performance which she felt had the most constructive role in influencing student learning.

Students did not mention the role of assessments in influencing the quality of their learning. On being questioned, many students felt their assessments were challenging and appropriate to their programmes. A few of them stated that when multiple course-work was involved, the challenge was more of managing their time rather than the assessments themselves. When asked whether such an assessment strategy would develop their time and self-management skills, students responded positively but some still felt compelled to state that given more time and less pressure they would be able to perform better on assessments, which they perceived as important. Students did not have much to say about assessment feedback indicating a lack of awareness of the critical role of feedback in improving learning.

The general consensus was that a variety of assessment methods must be employed across a programme of study to help foster the development of core transferable skills and understanding of the subject. Most academic staff felt that while examinations were appropriate for assessing some modules depending on the nature of the subject matter, exams were the least useful of all assessment methods in developing or assessing skills of creativity, critical thinking, communication and presentation. However, two IT lecturers did state that examinations were the most suitable assessment method for their subjects. Some students particularly Accounting and IT students, indicated that they were happier with examinations than take away assignments, presentations etc. This may imply that they find traditional examinations less challenging in terms of overall requirements in comparison to other forms of assessments which is consistent with the literature that students are more comfortable with conventional forms of assessment. Other than two employers who

mentioned the role of assessments together with the teaching and learning process in providing a challenging process for students, none of the employers mentioned the importance of assessments

4.1.4.b. Student performance in assessments: While performing relatively well in assessments was indicated as important, many interviewees felt that high grades did not necessarily indicate a distinctive quality of HE. The general perception was that quality in HE is much more than a set of grades, percentages and degree classifications.

Academics and employers felt that high grades and high pass rates, although indicative of a good level of student performance are not really indicative of good quality provision. Essentially, many interviewees felt that that it would be relatively easy to record high levels of performance in assessments, if HEPs restricted their intake to high achievers but this did not necessarily indicate that the quality offered by the institution was exemplary. Similarly, not achieving high grades may not necessarily imply a lack of quality in the process, particularly if the value added to the student in comparison to the original intake is considerable. Academic staff noted that performance in assessments was influenced by factors such as general student motivation, the support mechanisms available (e.g. workshops on examination techniques), the extent of preparation expended by the lecturer towards assessments in class and students self-management skills. They also pointed out that standards of assessments may not be consistent across institutions and, hence, it may be easier to obtain higher grades in some institutions compared to others. Some felt that “*assessments may not really be assessing critical or key outcomes*” and, therefore, “*it cannot be assumed that high grades would exemplify all the required outcomes*”. This view supports the existing evidence that students tend to adapt surface learning strategies in accordance with the requirements of the task (Struyven et al., 2002) and getting good grades can merely indicate that the student was successful in meeting task requirements but not necessarily in enhancing subject understanding or skills.

One employer in fact stated that he would be reluctant to employ graduates with very high grades unless it was backed up by a strong personality and well rounded skills that reflect the grades. As he put it: “*I would be very suspicious of students who get very high grades. In my experience I have found that such employees lack initiative and creativity, they tend to be good at appearing for examinations but such abilities are not very useful at work*”.

The researcher did ask employers if their recruitment procedures ignored grades particularly in the case of fresh graduates. Four of the respondents from government ministries and multinationals stated that when the number of applicants was large, grades served a means of screening out applicants.

Students' main concern regarding assessments was that they are prepared and guided adequately, i.e. *“teachers should not design assessments which are aimed at testing what we don't know, the aim of the assessment should be to test what we do know.”* When questioned further, although some students felt that high grades were not necessarily an indicator of quality, performing well in assessments did make them feel good and more motivated to learn. Students also pointed out that overall poor performance of a group is indicative of problems i.e. *“If many students fail in the exams or assignments then there is something wrong”*.

4.1.4.c. Assessing subject specific knowledge versus assessing skills: Consistent with their views on the purpose of HE, academics and employers were emphatic that assessments should focus on both subject specific knowledge and key transferable skills. However, when it came to assessing skills, students were hesitant and uncertain about what this implied. The uncertainty seemed to arise from their lack of understanding and appreciation of what assessing skills would entail. There also seemed to be some apprehension that this would result in assessments which are more difficult than those assessing only subject knowledge. There also seemed to be a lack of appreciation among students that mere passive reproduction of subject knowledge is no longer an adequate preparation for the work place. In contrast, most lecturers and employers were emphatic that assessing transferable skills and subject knowledge is the natural outcome of a teaching and learning process and curriculum focused on transforming students and developing mature individuals.

4.1.5 Admission Policies

Strict admissions criteria and resulting quality of student intake is considered a key determinant of the quality of output in the literature, but this was not identified by any of the respondents. Three sub-themes emerged from the data.

4.1.5.a. Student Aptitude: Two academic staff identified aptitude of students for certain disciplines that were more technical (e.g. computer science and accounting) as a key determinant of students' success and motivation on the course. An IT lecturer put it thus, "*often many students join IT and computing programmes as they feel it may be easier and not that language dependant. Such students may not really have the aptitude for logic and programming and hence fare badly*".

4.1.5.b. Attitude and commitment of students: The literature states that students' role as co-participants in the process of education is vital. One student identified the importance of students being mature enough to respond "*positively and fully*" to learning. When questioned further, she clarified that it is not important to restrict admissions only to the best students in terms of performance at secondary school. She felt that student involvement in learning had more to do with "*emotional maturity and personal values*" rather than actual grades obtained or entry qualifications.

At least six academics expressed strong views on students' attitude and overall interest in the process of learning and in developing their knowledge and skills. They emphasised positive attitude and commitment towards learning and personal development as a key factor that improves the quality of the overall learning process. As one of them put it, rather than focusing on "*high entry qualifications, colleges should have some other way of filtering out those students who are really interested in developing themselves and those who are just in because everybody else is doing it or as a result of parental pressure*". When asked, "*what do you suggest that HEPs do in order to identify the really interested students from others, if not focus on marks obtained at entry level?*", she suggested "*that one way could be to conduct admission interviews where students have to demonstrate their interest in HE and how they would help themselves learn*". It was pointed out by one lecturer that while many part-time working students could really contribute to the learning process as they were in a position to appreciate and apply what they learnt to the workplace, some of them were only interested in obtaining a certificate as they had already secured "*good jobs*" in the government sector.

A Business studies lecturer noted, "*The issue is not whether the students are the most intelligent or have the highest grades. What makes all the difference is when you have students who are really keen and interested in learning and in developing himself/herself*".

Academic staff noted that as far as full-time students were concerned, motivation to learn was generally good except for a certain proportion who either just wanted a certificate in order to get a government job or who were there because of their parents. However, most students were used to and thus expected only traditional tutor-centred approaches to learning and assessment. Variables that affected student involvement in the learning process were identified as lack of understanding and interest in the educational process and low levels of self-confidence on the part of learners.

Employers considered attitude of students towards others, and their acceptance of responsibility to be more important than their grades. In fact, some employers felt that students' attitude to work, personal development and responsibility would be a key indicator of students' general attitude to work in future.

4.1.5.c. Range and variety of programmes on offer: Wright and O'Neill (2002) note that as a result of changing lifestyles and societal changes, students expect HEPs to offer a variety of courses with a range of campus and delivery options that are easily accessible and user friendly. Five students and two employers noted that that HEPs should offer a wider range of programmes and courses to choose from, depending on students' interests and preferences. It was felt that this choice was lacking in Oman at present.

4.1.5 d. Strict admissions criteria: Although the quality of student intake is considered by many to be a necessary condition for institutional success (Cheng and Tam, 1997), none of the respondents identified strict rules for admissions and high quality student intake as an important criterion. Some of the academic staff indicated that the value added to the student is what is more important in determining quality of provision of an institution. i.e. a comparison of before and after. As one put it, "*Of course it might make our jobs easier as teachers if all students were the cream of the lot. But I would question the notion that quality means you take only the best students because the institution would then have to do very little to add value*". This criterion was, however, added to the questionnaire as there is a lot of debate in the literature on the impact of admissions criteria on the process and outcomes of HE.

4.1.6 Institutional Factors:

This was one of the last themes to be identified under which the following sub-themes that were relevant to HEPs in general were included.

4.1.6.a. Institutional Reputation: The reputation of the institution and the resulting prestige associated with studying in a particular institution were considered very important by students. Institutional reputation in terms of employability of graduates was also very important to students. Academics considered institutional reputation to be a key criterion in attracting good students and faculty and in ensuring employability of graduates. Employers admitted that in some instances, recruits were short listed based on their past experience with graduates of particular HEPs or the reputation of the HEP. This practice is consistent with Morley and Aynsley (2007) who find that recruitment decisions by employers in the UK are most often based on institutional reputation. However, this comparison between UK and Omani HEPs is probably not valid considering that UK HEPs have had a significantly longer time to establish their reputations in comparison to HEPs in Oman which have been established only over the last decade. Hence, employers in Oman would not really have sufficient information or time to make accurate decisions based on institutional reputation. Accordingly, one employer did state that as many Omani HEPs were quite new, it was not really fair to graduates to rely too much on institutional reputation.

4.1.6.b. Academic standards: The majority of academics and employers indicated that they expect institutions to be “*representative of certain standards*” and were very emphatic that standards are maintained. Institutional reputation was considered to be linked to perceived “*academic standards that are representative of certain outcomes, i.e. “the abilities of graduates”*”. While many students stressed that the reputation of the institution is a key indicator of quality, only two students actually linked this to academic standards and graduate outcomes. As a student stated: “*the college, the course and lecturers must challenge students so that we can improve ourselves. If the standards are not high then students will not be interested in learning and the reputation of the college will not be good. If the level of education (meaning standards) is low, then later on it will be known that the graduates of that college are not good*”.

However, other students were not clear on what they expected from institutions with good reputations, other than that they were perceived to be superior. In fact, many students were not aware of the association between quality and academic standards while some considered academic standards as the ability of HEPs to ensure that “*students perform well*”. These findings are consistent with Rolfe (2002) who observes that while most students see a degree as a route to better career prospects many are indifferent as to whether or not this involves high academic standards.

4.1.6.c. Links with industry: Two academic staff identified the need for “*networking*” and “*practical cooperation with local and international enterprises*”. They pointed out the value of establishing strong links with local industry as well as multinational companies so as to enhance student and staff awareness of industry trends and developments. Specific potential benefits as a result of networking were identified as “*practical, industry-oriented teaching, relatively higher acceptance and acknowledgement of graduates in the community, exposure to guest speakers from the industry and other key organisations*”. Other benefits of closer cooperation with industry included “*developing case studies, consultancies and opportunities for customised training courses*”. Staff felt that unless such close links are established, HEPs would function in isolation, with the result that faculty and students would be less aware of the latest industry developments. The ultimate relevancy of IT and Business courses lay in “*preparing students for the industry*”. In order to do this, teaching staff must have appropriate opportunities to update themselves with the latest trends whether in “*human resource policies*”, “*accounting and taxation systems*”, “*information systems and use of latest information technologies and their applications*” or even “*the general usefulness and limitations of theoretical applications in the actual workplace*”.

4.1.6.d. Extracurricular activities: Although one might expect extracurricular activities to be important to college students generally, it was mentioned by only three students. However, the students who did identify this as an important criterion were very emphatic about the role of such activities in their overall learning experience. They considered them to be opportunities to “*develop closer bonds with the institution*” which can have a positive influence on their overall development and attitude.

4.1.6.e. Attendance requirements: Two students felt that HEPs should enforce strict attendance requirements for its students. Being Omanis themselves, they felt that many Omani students irrespective of age were not mature enough to take the right decision when given a choice and should be forced to attend classes. In this way they would not miss out on classes without which they would not have the skills to be successful on their own.

4.2 STAKEHOLDER DETERMINANTS OF QUALITY

The ability of HE to facilitate the successful development of students in terms of a portfolio of “*generic transferable skills*” was the main recurring theme among employers and academic staff. Students and academic staff were firm in their conviction that the purpose of HE is to produce graduates who are equipped with the “*right level and range of skills and knowledge for the workplace*”. However, although students stressed the importance of preparing for the workplace, they were not really aware of the relationship between a rigorous and challenging learning process and the ultimate portfolio of skills and abilities

There was consensus among academics and employers that although the outcome of HE in terms of knowledge and skills is very important, the process of HE is probably the most vital aspect in developing the longer term abilities of students. Academic staff emphasised standards of the programmes as synonymous with quality while employers emphasised that the HE process and the curriculum must be challenging enough to have an impact on students’ overall development and abilities. Students as a group did not exhibit much appreciation of the importance of academic standards but were more concerned that the programmes met their expectations and needs, although many were not very clear about exactly what their expectations included.

Students and academic staff placed the greatest emphasis on the ‘role of the lecturer’ as one of the most significant input determining the quality of HE. The role of the lecturer in shaping students’ classroom experience and thereby the “*actual*” process of teaching and learning through their teaching methods/styles was greatly valued by students and staff. Employers also emphasised the role of “*lectures*”, lecturers and the institution in providing adequate challenges and self-development opportunities for students during their time at college. An important aspect is the complete absence of references to research and its role in

underpinning teaching. This omission, however, is consistent with the general focus in most HEPs in Oman on the teaching function.

A significant finding was the lack of appreciation by students on their own role in contributing to the teaching and learning process and how this ultimately influences the overall quality of the process and outcomes. While few of the students indicated that the responsibility for learning ultimately rests with themselves, they apparently had not realised or acknowledged this fact until some of the interview questions made them reflect on this. It was quite evident that until this reflection took place many of them tended to place the onus on HEPs and lecturers to “*make*” them learn and to provide a quality of experience which is not possible in reality unless students themselves are effective contributors to the overall experience. Furthermore, although the role of student participation and motivation in maximising learning was acknowledged as very important by academic staff, they did not seem to be very clear on how student expectations and participation could be managed effectively.

The literature contains numerous references to the demands that the dynamic economic environment places on industry and thereby new graduates. Employers clearly supported this and emphasised that graduates cannot afford to be complacent either about their abilities or their jobs. However, the added demands from graduates are not necessarily in terms of subject knowledge. Employers were most emphatic and focused in their view that the process of HE should be challenging enough to transform students into responsible and reflective individuals. Consistent with the findings of Hewitt and Clayton (1999), employers emphasise graduates’ skills profile, their ability to adapt to different requirements and situations and to communicate effectively with people. Graduates’ attitude to work and their willingness to learn was considered very vital. Although these views were echoed by academic staff, their responses indicated that they have not really considered their own role in this transformation as opposed to developing subject knowledge.

To answer the first research question, the key quality values expressed by each stakeholder group in the interviews are presented below:

Students:

- Lecturers who are enthusiastic, committed, have impressive personalities, have excellent teaching skills and are able to stimulate interest in the subject;
- Teaching staff with excellent communication and presentation skills;
- Focus of lecturers on developing subject knowledge of students
- Good reputation of the institution in terms of quality of programmes and employability of graduates;
- Curriculum that is current, focused and prepares students for the workplace;
- Practical aspects of subject areas
- Teaching methods that make students think and breaks the monotony of traditional lectures;
- The availability of the latest resources in terms of Information Technology and library;
- Teaching facilities;
- Extra-curricular activities that enhance student participation, improve team work, and create interest towards the college and society;
- Adequate preparation and guidance for assessments;
- Contribution of other students towards the learning process.

Academic staff:

- The academic standards of the programmes;
- Curriculum that covers a range of topics and skills relevant to the workplace;
- Enthusiastic teaching staff with good subject knowledge and impressive teaching skills and who can relate to students' needs;
- Teaching staff with excellent communication and presentation skills;
- Focus of lecturers on developing subject knowledge of students;
- Students as co-producers of learning: students' attitude and efforts towards the learning process;
- Extensive library resources and teaching facilities;
- Assessment strategies that allow the development and evaluation of skills and subject knowledge;
- Constructive feedback to students on assessment performance;
- Links with industry and international collaborations;
- Student aptitude for a programme;

- Support systems available for students.

Employers:

- Acquisition of core transferable and behavioural skills;
- Curriculum that covers a range of topics and skills relevant to the workplace;
- A challenging process of teaching and learning and assessment that emphasises personal development, adaptability and general awareness;
- Focused subject specific knowledge;
- The academic standards of programmes.

4.3 CONCLUSION

The dimensions and criteria identified in this chapter were represented in the questionnaire in the form of 41 statements. An additional 23 statements were also included in order to cross verify and further explore perceptions on key values. The quality values identified here are further discussed in combination with the quantitative findings in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: QUANTITATIVE DATA

The second research question was aimed at identifying any differences or congruencies in the quality values of the three stakeholder groups and the implications for HEPs. Accordingly, this chapter presents the differences and congruencies that were revealed by the larger quantitative survey using the questionnaire developed from the quality criteria identified from the interview data. It also examines stakeholder perceptions about different definitions of quality and objectives of HE. The first part of this chapter presents the findings from the survey and the latter part discusses the findings and the implications for HEPs.

5.1 PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

The demographic profile of the respondents in terms of stakeholder group, gender, subject area, designation and organisation is presented in tables 2 and 3. The total number of usable questionnaires was 314. The proportion of each stakeholder sample is representative of the actual population, with students forming the largest proportion (n=194, 61.8%) followed by academic staff (n=72, 22.9%) and employers comprising 15.3% (n=48) of the total sample.

Around 62.7% of the respondents were male and 37.3% were female. Gender representation was also proportionately maintained across each stakeholder group. The proportion of female academic staff was slightly higher (51.4%) reflecting the existing scenario in some HEPs in Oman. The proportion of male students at 64.9% was higher than female students (35.1%) which reflect the higher participation by male students in HE.

Also reflecting the existing demographic trends, the majority of students (89.7%) and employer representatives (79.2%) were Omani nationals while only 5.6% of the academic staff were Omanis. The remaining proportion of academic staff includes other Arabs, Asians and a few British and Australian nationals. In terms of subject discipline, 44.3% of the student population were IT students and the remaining 55.7% were Business students. While 45.8% of the academic staff teach on IT programmes, 54.2% were Business Studies lecturers.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics: Overall

	Description	N	%
Stakeholder	student	194	61.8%
	academic staff	72	22.9%
	employer	48	15.3%
	Total	314	
Gender	male	197	62.7%
	female	117	37.3%
	Total	314	

Table 3: Demographic characteristics: By Stakeholder Group

		N student	%	N academics	%	N employer	%		
Gender	male	126	64.9%	35	48.6%	34	70.8%		
	female	68	35.1%	37	51.4%	14	29.2%		
	Total	194	100%	72	100%	48	100%		
Subject	IT	86	44.3%	33	45.8%				
	Business	108	55.7%	39	54.2%				
College	College A	63	32.4%	26	36.1%				
	College B	40	20.6%	10	13.9%				
	College C	42	21.6%	14	19.4%				
	College D	23	11.8%	11	15.3%				
	College E	26	13.4%	11	15.3%				
Nationality	Omani	174	89.7%	4	5.6%			38	79.2%
	Other Arabs	5	2.6%	24	33.3%			3	6.3%
	Others	15	7.7%	44	61.1%			7	14.6%
Organisation	Private					30	62.5%		
	Government					18	37.5%		
Designation	HR Mgrs					11	22.9%		
	Bus. Func. Mgrs					28	58.3%		
	IT Mgrs					9	18.8%		

5.2 QUALITY DIMENSIONS

Respondents were asked to indicate the degree of importance they attach to different criteria representing the six dimensions of quality, and to indicate the overall importance they attach to each dimension. As the mid-point in the Likert scale indicated average importance (=3), the percentage of responses that rated each criterion >3 (very/most important) and >4 (most important) were determined. Table 4 presents the six dimensions of quality in HE in descending order of means for each stakeholder group.

Table 4: Quality Dimensions: Descending order of Means

Students	>3	>4	Academic Staff	>3	>4	Employers	>3	>4
Teaching & learning	73.7%	42.3%	Curriculum	95.8%	61.1%	Curriculum	95.8%	35.4%
Resources	70.6%	29.9%	Teaching & learning	93.1%	43.1%	Teaching & learning	100.0%	27.1%
Curriculum	66.0%	29.9%	Assessment & Outcomes	94.4%	27.8%	Admissions Policies	87.5%	35.4%
Institutional Factors	61.3%	24.7%	Resources	84.7%	31.9%	Institutional Factors	85.4%	16.7%
Assessment & Outcomes	59.3%	33.5%	Admissions Policies	86.1%	15.3%	Resources	72.9%	18.8%
Admissions Policies	57.2%	21.1%	Institutional Factors	76.4%	22.2%	Assessment & Outcomes	75.0%	14.6%

>3 shows % of respondents who selected 4 (very important) or 5 (most important)

>4 shows % of respondents who selected 5 (most important)

Closely reflecting the interview data, students consider the Teaching and Learning dimension as the most critical aspect of HE while curriculum was given the highest importance by academics and employers followed by Teaching and Learning. However, while Outcomes are next in importance for academics, they are the lowest priority for employers. The importance attributed to the Teaching and Learning and Curriculum dimensions by the quantitative data is closely supported by the earlier qualitative findings. While Resources are ranked second by students, academics and employers rank resources lower, i.e. 4th and 6th respectively. Students also rank those dimensions that are directly concerned with their performance i.e. Admissions polices (quality of student intake) and Assessment and outcomes as the least important among the six dimensions.

5.3 QUALITY CRITERIA

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis Test show that of the 42 criteria, 24 criteria i.e. more than half, had significant differences in relative quality values between the stakeholder groups. These findings as well as the percentage of respondents rating each criterion as very/most important and the criterion rank according to mean value of responses are presented in the following sections:

5.3.1 Admission Policies

Two of the four criteria under the Admissions dimension show statistically significant differences between the three groups (Table 5).

Table 5: Admission Policies: Kruskal-Wallis

Criteria	Stakeholder	Criteria rank	% >4	% >3	Mean	Chi-Square	Significance
Strict Admissions policy	student	41	13.4%	45.4%	148.82	7.552	0.023*
	academic staff	36	16.7%	65.3%	181.40		
	employer	39	12.5%	52.1%	156.71		
Student Attitude	student	28	26.3%	61.9%	138.06	26.044	0.000**
	academic staff	16	50.0%	80.6%	185.69		
	employer	7	56.3%	83.3%	193.78		
Subject aptitude	student	33	29.4%	61.3%	152.26	2.129	0.345
	academic staff	31	15.3%	84.7%	169.10		
	employer	30	22.9%	72.9%	161.28		
Variety of Programmes	student	18	30.9%	67.0%	157.78	5.464	0.065
	academic staff	35	23.6%	55.6%	142.07		
	employer	17	22.9%	91.7%	179.52		
Overall admissions Policies	student		21.1%	57.2%		18.622	0.000**
	academic staff		15.3%	86.1%			
	employer		35.4%	87.5%			

>3 shows % of respondents who selected 4 (very important) or 5 (most important)

>4 shows % of respondents who selected 5 (most important)

* Significant at 0.05 level of significance ** Significant at 0.01 level of significance

Strict Admissions policy: The Kruskal-Wallis test shows significant differences between the groups ($p=0.023$) with 62.5 % of academics rating this criterion as very/most important in comparison to 52.1% of employers and 45.4% of students. The interviews had indicated that most respondents did not consider a strict admissions policy as an important determinant of quality. Similarly, the normal means show that out of the 42 criteria, all three stakeholders rank this criterion very low with academics ranking it at 36 and students giving it the lowest rank of 41.

Attitude and commitment of students: There are very significant differences ($p<0.01$) in how stakeholder groups perceive students' attitude and commitment to learning. More than 56 % of employers (rank 7) and 50% of academic staff (rank 16) rate student attitude as most important to the quality of HE. In comparison, only 26.3% of students (rank 28) share this view, thus lending support to the interview findings that students do not realise the importance of their role as co-participants in the process of HE.

The responses to the remaining two admissions criteria, i.e. **Students' aptitude** and **Variety of programmes** of study are more congruent with differences among respondents being statistically insignificant. Subject aptitude ranked 30-33 is considered more important than strict admission policies. Consistent with the interviews, providing a variety of programmes of study is considered important by a higher proportion of employers (91.7%) at rank 17 and students at rank 18, compared to academic staff (rank 35) .

Overall Importance of the Admissions Dimension: The responses show statistically significant differences between the three groups on the overall importance of the Admissions dimension with a higher percentage of employers rating this as very/most important followed by academics and lastly students.

5.3.2 Institutional Factors

There are significant differences in stakeholder values with regard to three out of the five Institutional factors (Table 6).

Table 6: Institutional Factors

Criteria	Stakeholder	Criteria rank	% >4	% >3	Mean	Chi-Square	Significance
Attendance	student	27	28.9%	61.9%	148.25	6.081	0.048*
	academic staff	25	38.9%	73.6%	175.88		
	employer	23	33.3%	72.9%	167.33		
High academic standards	student	24	27.8%	61.9%	143.58	14.252	0.001**
	academic staff	20	43.1%	83.3%	186.24		
	employer	18	27.1%	85.4%	170.64		
Extracurricular activities	student	39	23.7%	54.1%	150.69	6.820	0.033*
	academic staff	37	12.5%	58.3%	156.14		
	employer	25	18.8%	81.3%	187.06		
Institutional Reputation among students	student	19	38.1%	62.9%	153.52	4.207	0.122
	academic staff	33	16.7%	83.3%	152.60		
	employer	10	37.5%	87.5%	180.94		
Institutional Reputation among employers	student	17	34.0%	64.9%	150.38	4.516	0.105
	academic staff	27	20.8%	88.9%	162.67		
	employer	12	37.5%	85.4%	178.52		
Overall Institutional Factors	student		24.7%	61.3%	150.02	3.978	0.137
	academic staff		22.2%	76.4%	168.33		
	employer		16.7%	85.4%	171.50		

>3 shows % of respondents who selected 4 (very important) or 5 (most important)

>4 shows % of respondents who selected 5 (most important)

Significant at 0.05 level of significance ** Significant at 0.01 level of significance

High academic standards of programmes: Only 61.9% of students consider standards to be important in comparison to more than 83.3% of academics and 85.4% of employers, which is consistent with the interviews findings that programme standards are more important to academics and employers in comparison to students.

Strict attendance requirements: There is again a significant lack of congruence between academics and employers on one hand and students on the other as employers (72.9%) and academics (73.6%) consider attendance requirements as very/most important in comparison to 61.9% of students.

Extracurricular activities: Employers value extracurricular activities significantly higher than students and academic staff, possibly reflecting employers' emphasis on the overall skills development of students.

Reputation of the institution: Although the proportional patterns of rating are very similar without any significant differences in the importance attached to this criterion by the three stakeholder groups, employers place a higher value on the overall reputation of the HEP in comparison to students and academics.

Overall Importance of Institutional Factors: Significant differences among the three stakeholder groups indicate that employers (85.4%) consider the Institutional factors dimension more important than both academics (76.4%) and students (61.3%).

5.3.3 Curriculum

The interviews indicated that although curriculum was considered very important particularly by academic staff and employers, there are differences in emphasis by the three groups, especially regarding curriculum content and subject focus. The quantitative data shows statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between the groups on all 5 of the criteria under the Curriculum dimension, indicating that there is a considerable degree of variation in responses (Table 7). The lack of congruence, however, is essentially due to the consistently lower proportion of students who rated the curriculum criteria as important.

Table 7: Curriculum: Kruskal-Wallis Test

Criteria	Stakeholder	Criteria rank	% >4	% >3	Mean	Chi-Square	Significance
Coverage of Curriculum	student	35	24.2%	56.7%	136.64	34.511	0.000**
	academic staff	8	55.6%	87.5%	205.64		
	employer	19	27.1%	81.3%	169.58		
Curriculum subject focus	student	37	20.6%	51.5%	143.08	39.970	0.000**
	academic staff	13	48.6%	87.5%	213.81		
	employer	40	8.3%	54.2%	131.30		
Curriculum practical focus	student	8	40.7%	73.7%	147.75	9.840	0.007**
	academic staff	5	56.9%	90.3%	184.22		
	employer	9	29.2%	100.0%	156.83		
Job relevance of programmes	student	5	47.4%	71.1%	146.03	16.411	0.000**
	academic staff	2	66.7%	98.6%	192.21		
	employer	8	37.5%	93.8%	151.81		
Curriculum skills focus	student	10	40.7%	70.6%	139.32	23.964	0.000**
	academic staff	3	62.5%	95.8%	187.48		
	employer	2	62.5%	93.8%	186.00		
Overall curriculum	student		29.9%	66.0%	136.66	34.292	0.000**
	academic staff		61.1%	95.8%	203.63		
	employer		35.4%	95.8%	172.54		

>3 shows % of respondents who selected 4 (very important) or 5 (most important)
>4 shows % of respondents who selected 5 (most important)
Significant at 0.05 level of significance ** Significant at 0.01 level of significance

The coverage and content of the curriculum in terms of range of topics: While curriculum coverage and content has very high importance for academics (87.5%) and employers (81.3%), it has much lower importance for students (56.7%) at rank 35. However, a significantly higher proportion of academic staff (55.6%) rate curriculum coverage as most important, ranking it at 8, compared to only 27.1% employers (rank 19).

The emphasis of the curriculum on subject-specific knowledge: Consistent with the response on curriculum content and coverage, the majority of academics (87.5%) also rate curriculum focus on subject knowledge as very/most important, thereby complementing the emphasis placed by academics in the interviews on this factor. However, this keen focus on subject knowledge is not shared by both students (51.5%) and employers (54.2%), which is also consistent with the interviews. In fact, only 8.3% of employers rate subject focus as most important compared to 48.6% of academic staff and 20.6% of students.

Practical components in the curriculum & links to the industry: The findings show that practical skills and knowledge and relevance to industry are rated among the top criteria, especially by employers and academics. 100% of employers and 90.3% of academics have rated practical components and industry links as very/most important, while the student proportion is significantly lower at 73.7%. However, out of this proportion, while 56.9% of academics and 40.7% of students rate practical focus as most important, only 29.2% of employers give it the highest importance.

Relevance of the programme to the job market: The relevance of the programme in terms of employment is ranked second by academics with 98.6% respondents rating it as very/most important. Student proportion is maintained quite surprisingly, as in the previous criteria at 71.7% (rank 5). While 93.8% of employers rate relevance to the job market above the mid-point, only 37.5% consider it to be most important (rank 8), compared to 66.7% of academics and 47.4% of students. This is again consistent with the interviews as academics and students placed the strongest emphasis on this factor.

The emphasis of curriculum on developing skills for the work place e.g. skills of self management, communication, creativity, team work, analysis, application: A main finding from the interviews was the emphasis given to the development of skills by all stakeholders, particularly employers and academic staff. Similarly, it is found that the focus on skills development in the curriculum is considered very/most important by the majority

of the respondents i.e. 93.8% of employers and 95.8% academics. Employers' responses rank it as the second most important criteria and more important than practical or subject knowledge while academics rate it as the third. Once again, the proportion of students rating the development of skills above the mid-point is maintained as in the previous two criteria at around 70.6% resulting in a significant lack of congruence.

Overall importance of the Curriculum dimension: There are significant differences in stakeholder response to the overall importance of the Curriculum dimension, with academics attaching the most importance followed by employers and lastly students.

5.3.4 Resources

There is congruence among the respondents on all the five criteria under the Resource dimension (Table 8).

Table 8: Resources: Kruskal-Wallis Test

Criteria	Stakeholder	Criteria rank	% >4	% >3	Mean	Chi-Square	Significance
Teaching facilities	student	2	52.1%	74.7%	152.59	2.030	0.362
	academic staff	4	50.0%	98.6%	168.51		
	employer	5	47.9%	91.7%	160.83		
Library resources	student	4	42.8%	77.8%	151.92	3.162	0.206
	academic staff	11	48.6%	93.1%	172.51		
	employer	13	39.6%	89.6%	157.52		
Staff student ratio	student	14	38.1%	66.5%	152.57	2.484	0.289
	academic staff	22	36.1%	86.1%	171.26		
	employer	22	39.6%	64.6%	156.77		
Campus layout	student	23	29.9%	61.3%	165.19	4.056	0.132
	academic staff	39	2.8%	62.5%	145.29		
	employer	35	16.7%	52.1%	144.72		
Sports & recreation	student	36	25.3%	56.2%	163.35	4.033	0.133
	academic staff	42	6.9%	41.7%	139.56		
	employer	37	14.6%	56.3%	160.76		
Overall resources	student		29.9%	70.6%	154.26	3.706	0.157
	academic staff		31.9%	84.7%	173.62		
	employer		18.8%	72.9%	146.41		

>3 shows % of respondents who selected 4 (very important) or 5 (most important)

>4 shows % of respondents who selected 5 (most important)

The highest importance by the 3 groups is accorded to the following 2 criteria:

Quality of teaching facilities such as classrooms, IT labs and lecture halls and the range and quality of library resources:

The number of students in a classroom or the staff: student ratio follows with 86.1% of academic staff and 66.5% of students giving it high importance.

Campus layout and appearance and sports and recreation facilities are given comparatively lower importance by all groups, although it is considered important by the majority of respondents particularly students and employers.

Overall importance of the Resource dimension: Stakeholders are congruent in their response to the overall importance of the Resources dimension with the large majority rating the role of resources in influencing the quality of HE as very/most important.

5.3.5 Teaching and Learning

There are 16 criteria under the Teaching and learning dimension and responses indicate significant differences between stakeholder perceptions for 10 of these criteria (Table 9).

Table 9: Teaching and Learning: Kruskal-Wallis Test

Criteria	Stakeholder	Criteria rank	% >4	% >3	Mean	Chi-Square	Significance
Accessible explanation	student	1	60.8%	76.3%	146.13	11.416	0.003*
	academic staff	1	76.4%	91.7%	174.96		
	employer	1	75.0%	100.0%	177.25		
Faculty communication, organizing, assessing ability	student	13	38.7%	68.0%	142.33	16.461	0.000**
	academic staff	6	52.8%	97.2%	184.77		
	employer	3	50.0%	91.7%	177.92		
Understanding student needs	student	6	48.5%	71.1%	155.70	7.053	0.029*
	academic staff	9	50.0%	94.4%	176.88		
	employer	31	31.3%	77.1%	135.71		
Faculty ability to stimulate thinking	student	29	35.6%	62.4%	139.84	21.661	0.000**
	academic staff	10	51.4%	93.1%	187.87		
	employer	4	43.8%	97.9%	183.31		
Faculty experience	student	26	27.3%	63.4%	158.87	7.634	0.022*
	academic staff	40	16.7%	48.6%	137.65		
	employer	20	29.2%	77.1%	181.76		
Similarity in teaching styles	student	42	16.0%	45.4%	167.49	29.653	0.000**
	academic staff	41	9.7%	48.2%	172.60		
	employer	42	2.1%	12.5%	94.46		
Student efforts	student	34	19.6%	60.8%	137.35	34.934	0.000**
	academic staff	12	47.2%	91.7%	205.88		
	employer	24	14.6%	89.6%	166.39		
Contribution of other students	student	32	23.7%	55.7%	137.92	30.191	0.000**
	academic staff	15	41.7%	94.4%	201.59		
	employer	21	22.9%	83.3%	170.50		
Interactive learning methods	student	40	21.1%	53.6%	139.79	26.888	0.000**
	academic staff	21	34.7%	90.3%	201.08		
	employer	28	14.6%	75.0%	163.70		

Additional academic support	student	31	21.6%	61.9%	152.15	6.815	0.033*
	academic staff	30	22.2%	83.3%	179.99		
	employer	38	12.5%	66.7%	145.36		
Teaching methods	student	3	50.0%	100.0%	152.66	2.625	0.269
	academic staff	7	52.8%	93.1%	171.26		
	employer	6	37.5%	75.3%	156.44		
Faculty ability to motivate interest in subject	student	7	45.9%	70.6%	154.38	1.888	0.389
	academic staff	14	38.9%	95.8%	169.46		
	employer	14	29.2%	89.6%	152.17		
Faculty qualifications	student	12	36.1%	70.6%	151.98	2.130	0.345
	academic staff	23	33.3%	86.1%	165.94		
	employer	15	37.5%	81.3%	167.16		
Faculty Personality	student	16	37.1%	68.0%	156.44	871	0.647
	academic staff	26	27.8%	84.7%	164.88		
	employer	27	18.8%	83.3%	150.70		
Preparation for assessments	student	9	36.6%	72.2%	161.98	2.741	0.254
	academic staff	29	26.4%	77.8%	157.67		
	employer	33	22.9%	64.6%	139.14		
Faculty focus on workplace skills	student	11	35.1%	74.7%	149.11	5.022	0.081
	academic staff	18	41.7%	88.9%	171.84		
	employer	16	41.7%	89.6%	169.92		
Overall teaching & learning criteria	student		42.3%	73.7%	152.21	2.840	0.242
	academic staff		43.1%	93.1%	171.78		
	employer		27.1%	100.0%	157.44		

>3 shows % of respondents who selected 4 (very important) or 5 (most important)

>4 shows % of respondents who selected 5 (most important)

Significant at 0.05 level of significance ** Significant at 0.01 level of significance

Once again, the comparatively lower emphasis by students on many of the criteria is the main reason for the lack of congruence. Among these, the following factors which are directly related to teaching staff show significant differences with $p < .05$.

Ability of the lecturer to explain topics in a manner accessible to all students: The lecturer's ability to explain complex subject topics in an easily accessible manner so as to facilitate students' understanding is considered the most important of all the 42 criteria by the three groups and is ranked first among all 42 criteria. However, there is more congruence between employers' and academics' responses compared to students. While more than 75% of academic staff and employers have rated this factor as most important (with 100% of employers rating it either very/most important), surprisingly only 60.8% of students consider this criterion as most important.

Ability of the lecturer to communicate, organise, & assess their subject areas: Although considered highly important by all groups, the proportional patterns of rating by employers

and academics are very similar showing that they value these core skills of lecturers more than students.

Ability of lecturers to understand individual student needs: Understandably, the empathy that teaching staff have towards students' is very important for students (ranked 6) with 71.1% rating it above the mid point and 48.5% as most important which is consistent with the interviews. Academics also consider this criterion as playing a key role in the quality of teaching and learning with 94.4% rating it above the mid point and 50% as most important (ranked 9). While 77.1% of employers rate this as very/most important, the mean rank is only 31.

Ability of lecturers to make students think, to change attitudes and develop behavioural skills: The responses demonstrate similarity between academics and employers on this criterion. The ability of lecturers to influence students' thinking, attitudes and behaviors is highly prized by employers (97.9%) who rank it as the fourth most important criteria. The interviews had revealed that employers place great value on behavioural skills and positive attitudes, while academics and students had not really emphasised this. The results here show that academics do consider these skills as very important (93.1%, rank 10) but students do not seem to share this high regard with only 62.4% rating it as very/most important (rank 29).

The experience of lecturers in terms of number of years: In comparison to students and employers, academic staff attach less importance to their own experience. Only 48.6% of academic staff rate experience as very/most important compared to 63.4% students and 77.1% of employers.

Teachers teaching on a programme have similar teaching styles/methods: Similarity of teaching styles is given the lowest importance amongst all criteria by all groups. Although there is a significant difference in the proportional pattern of response by the three groups, this factor is considered important by less than 50% of students and academics and only 12.5% of employers.

Teaching and learning criteria for which there is lack of congruence include the following:

The effort put in by students outside the classroom to read and understand the subject material: Similar to other factors which involve student input, students do not attach much importance on their own efforts and initiative to understand the subject before or after lectures, ranking it at 34. Only 19.6% of students consider this as most important while

41.2% rate it as very important. Not surprisingly, the large proportion of academic staff particularly (91.7%) and employers (89.6%) consider this as very/most important.

The contribution of other students to a student's overall learning experience inside & outside the classroom: Only 55.7% of students attach any importance to the influence that other students can have on their own learning, in comparison to 94.4% of academics and 83.3% of employers who recognise the impact that students in general can have on each others' learning experience.

Opportunities provided for interactive student-centred learning experiences in the classroom: Similar to other criteria which require students to put in more effort, interactive teaching methods that should in essence stimulate student interest and motivation, do not find much favour with around half of the students in the sample (ranked 40). Only 53.6% of students rate it above the mid point, in comparison to 90.3% of academic staff and 75% of employers.

Additional academic support systems available to students: Although placed comparatively lower on the list of teaching and learning criteria, additional academic support systems are considered important by more than half of the respondents in each group.

The faculty related teaching and learning criteria on which respondents' are congruent include:

The teaching methods and teaching styles of the lecturers: The importance attributed to this criterion finds considerable congruence among stakeholders and has been rated either as very important or most important by 100% of students. It is ranked as the third most important criteria by students and the sixth and seventh by employers and academics respectively.

Ability of lecturers to motivate students' interest in the subject: Motivating student interest is ranked among the top 15 criteria by all stakeholders, without significant differences in responses between the three groups. 70.6% of students, 95.8% of academics and 89.6% of employers acknowledge that this ability of lecturers has a key influence on the quality in HE.

Students, employers and academic staff attach considerable importance to all four of the criteria listed below without any significant differences in their responses. One point of note

is that a smaller proportion of employers consider preparation for assessments as very important compared to other two groups, reflecting the lower importance attached to assessments by employers.

- **Qualifications of teaching staff;**
- **Teachers have an impressive and warm personality;**
- **Preparing students for assessments;**
- **Focus of lecturers on developing skills required for the workplace:**

Overall importance of the Teaching and learning dimension: Students, academics and employers are congruent in their response with the largest proportion of respondents rating the Teaching and learning dimension as very/most important compared to the other five dimensions.

5.3.6 Outcomes

Table 10 shows that stakeholder responses are congruent without any significant differences for the following three out of the seven criteria under the Outcomes dimension:

Table 10: Outcomes: Kruskal-Wallis Test

Criteria	Stakeholder	Criteria rank	Overall Rank	% >3	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	Significance
High Grades	student	25	33.5%	60.3%	165.55	4.425	0.109
	academic staff	38	1.4%	61.1%	145.47		
	employer	34	16.7%	45.8%	143.02		
Assessment methods	student	21	26.8%	64.9%	153.67	1.238	0.539
	academic staff	32	16.7%	83.3%	166.53		
	employer	26	20.8%	72.9%	159.42		
Continuous assessments	student	22	27.8%	62.9%	157.47	.137	0.934
	academic staff	34	18.1%	66.7%	155.18		
	employer	29	20.8%	70.8%	161.10		
Assessment feedback	student	15	27.3%	70.1%	144.44	12.209	0.002**
	academic staff	17	40.3%	90.3%	181.56		
	employer	11	41.7%	81.3%	174.22		
High standards of assessments	student	30	23.7%	55.2%	151.46	8.056	0.018*
	academic staff	28	22.2%	80.6%	182.22		
	employer	36	10.4%	64.6%	144.81		
Assessment focus on skills	student	20	30.9%	66.0%	150.21	9.352	0.009**
	academic staff	19	41.7%	84.7%	184.58		
	employer	32	18.8%	75.0%	146.34		
Assessment focus on subject knowledge	student	38	19.6%	50.5%	149.21	33.644	0.000**
	academic staff	24	25.0%	88.9%	205.47		
	employer	41	2.1%	41.7%	119.03		

Overall assessment criteria	student		33.5%	59.3%	150.35	8.746	0.013*
	academic staff		27.8%	94.4%	183.72		
	Employer		14.6%	75.0%	147.08		

>3 shows % of respondents who selected 4 (very important) or 5 (most important)

>4 shows % of respondents who selected 5 (most important)

Significant at 0.05 level of significance ** Significant at 0.01 level of significance

Achieving high grades in assessments: Although considered important, obtaining high grades in assessments is not rated as a very important indicator of quality in HE by all three stakeholder groups in comparison to other criteria. This is also consistent with the interviews, where many of the academic staff and employers stated that although high grades and high pass rates indicate a good level of student performance, they do not necessarily indicate good quality HE provision. Good grades could be the natural outcome of a stricter admissions policy and did not necessarily prove that the quality of the provision was exemplary, clearly providing more support to the value added concept of quality. Although not statistically significant, the proportion of employers who rate grades as very important are comparatively lower (45.8%, rank 34) in comparison to 60.3% of students (rank 25) and 61.1% of academics (rank 38).

- **The variety of assessment methods:**
- **Continuous assessments in a module requiring students to work continuously:**

Both the above criteria on assessments have elicited a very similar pattern and proportion of responses from the three groups. More than 62% of respondents in the three groups consider the use of a variety of assessment methods and a continuous assessment strategy as important.

The remaining four assessment criteria show statistically significant differences between the three groups:

The feedback provided to students on assessment performance: Academic staff (90.3%) clearly value the positive impact of providing constructive feedback to students on their assessment performance, followed by employers (81.3%) and lastly by students (70.1%).

Assessments set high standards for student performance: Similar to their views on programmes setting high academic standards, academic staff attach considerable importance to assessment standards. Academic staff rank this criterion at 28, while students rank it at 30 and employers 36. Interestingly and consistent with their views on assessments, although

employers greatly value high standards of programmes (section 5.3.2), they are comparatively less enthusiastic about high assessment standards with only 64.6% rating it as very/most important.

- **The emphasis of assessments on assessing skills for the workplace and**
- **The emphasis of assessments on subject specific knowledge:**

Responses are significantly different with academics placing more importance on both the above criteria in comparison to students and employers. However, when comparing responses to the two criteria, it is found that while students and employers place more importance on assessing skills for the workplace, academics place slightly more importance on subject knowledge. Employers in particular do not attach the highest importance to subject knowledge with only 2.1% rating this as most important which is consistent with their response on curriculum focus on subject knowledge versus skills and the interviews.

Overall importance of assessment criteria: Significant differences in responses of the three groups to the overall importance of Outcomes and assessment criteria show that academic staff attach the most importance to this dimension.

5.4 CROSS-VERIFICATION

This section presents stakeholder responses on several general statements on HE. These statements were included for the purpose of cross-verifying and further analysing stakeholder perception on key issues identified in the interviews.

5.4.1 Standards versus students expectations

Respondents' perceptions on the importance of high academic standards was explored in the interviews and in section 5.3.2, where it was found that students place the lowest importance on high academic standards compared to employers and academic staff. In order to further explore students' views on programmes meeting their needs and expectations versus the importance of standards, the following statement was included in the questionnaire:

'It is more important for students to cope with their courses easily rather than setting high standards'.

Responses to this statement (Table 11) are consistent with the previous findings on high academic standards in 5.3.2, with a higher proportion of academics and employers

disagreeing with this statement compared to students. Significant differences ($p=.000$) in the responses of the three groups indicate that 52.8% of academics and 54.2% of employers, disagree with this statement, in comparison to only 21.6% of students. None of the academic staff and employers express strong agreement with this statement while a small proportion (18.6%) of students do. 30.4% of students, 26.4% of academics and 27.1% of employers are neutral on this point.

Table 11: Standards vs. student expectations

	Stakeholder	% =5	% =4	% =3	% <3	Chi-Square	Significance
Coping with courses	student	18.6%	29.3%	30.4%	21.6%	40.908	0.000**
	academic staff	.0%	25.0%	22.2%	52.8%		
	employer	.0%	18.8%	27.1%	54.2%		

** Significant at 0.01 level of significance. <3=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5= strongly agree

5.4.2 Examinations

During the interviews, the researcher had noted a general assumption by some respondents on the superiority of examinations over other forms of assessment, thereby negating the importance of incorporating a variety of assessment methods. The importance of a varied assessment strategy was explored in section 5.3.6, the response to which was both congruent and very positive. The following statement was also included to test respondents' views on the appropriateness of examinations.

'Examination is the best method to test students' knowledge and skills'

Table 12: Examinations

	Stakeholder	% =5	% =4	% =3	% <3	Chi-Square	Significance
Suitability of examinations	student	20.6%	27.9%	22.7%	28.9%	20.716	0.000
	academic staff	2.8%	25%	25.0%	47.2%		
	employer	8.3%	10.5%	20.8%	60.4%		

** Significant at 0.01 level of significance. <3=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5= strongly agree

There are significant differences in responses with the majority of employers (60.4%) disagreeing that examinations are the best assessment method, while only 47.2% of academics disagree (Table 12). The strongest support for examinations come from students, with 27.9% of them agreeing, 20% strongly agreeing and only 28.9% disagreeing with this

statement, which is consistent with students' preference for traditional teaching and learning methods.

5.4.3 Student evaluation of teaching

Student feedback and evaluation of teaching is an important part of quality assurance in many HEPs. In order to determine if there is consensus among the stakeholders on this practice, the following statement was included:

'Students have the capacity to evaluate the teaching they receive'.

The findings (Table 13) reveal significant differences in opinion between the group that is the subject of the evaluation and the other two groups. Both students and employers believe that students are capable of evaluating the teaching they receive, with more than 72% of each group expressing agreement, in comparison to only 44.2% of academic staff.

Table 13: Student evaluation of teaching

	Stakeholder	% =5	% =4	% =3	% <3	Chi-Square	Significance
Student capacity teaching evaluation	Student	26.8%	46.4%	21.6%	5.2%	29.277	0.000
	academic staff	4.2%	40.2%	38.9%	16.7%		
	employer	10.4%	62.5%	27.1%	.0%		

** Significant at 0.01 level of significance. <3=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5= strongly agree

5.4.4 Institutional versus Student Responsibility

While all HEPs have the responsibility to provide the most appropriate resources and opportunities for student success, students must accept their share of the responsibility as a co-participant in the learning process in order to enhance its effectiveness. However, there seemed to be little awareness of the importance of student responsibility and participation in the learning process during the student interviews. In order to further explore stakeholder perception of student responsibility towards the learning process versus that of the HEP, the following statement was included:

'It is the institution's responsibility rather than the students' to ensure students are successful in their studies'

The evidence indicates that employers and academic staff clearly disagree with the above statement and expect students to take responsibility for their own learning. There is a significant difference of opinion by students, with 47.4% agreeing that it is the institution's rather than their own responsibility to ensure their academic success.

Table 14: Institutional vs. Student Responsibility

	Stakeholder	% =5	% =4	% =3	% <3	Chi-Square	Significance
Institutional responsibility	student	22.2%	25.2%	28.9%	23.7%	53.720	0.000
	academic staff	4.2%	8.3%	23.6%	63.9%		
	employer	2.1%	10.4%	29.2%	58.3%		

** Significant at 0.01 level of significance. <3=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5= strongly agree

5.4.5 Quality of Student Intake

Despite the emphasis in the literature on attracting a high quality student intake in order to maintain standards and quality, none of the respondents in the interviews mentioned the role of a strict admissions policy or the importance of attracting a high calibre student intake. In addition to including strict admission criteria under the admission dimension, the following statement was also included to cross-verify the earlier findings and to further explore any differences in stakeholder perceptions:

'Attracting high quality student intake is a "necessary" condition for ensuring quality in HE'.

Table 15: High Quality Student Intake

	Stakeholder	% =5	% =4	% =3	% <3	Chi-Square	Significance
High quality of student intake	student	12.9%	36.1%	33.0%	30.9%	9.956	0.007
	academic staff	12.5%	38.9%	33.3%	15.3%		
	employer	6.3%	33.3%	14.6%	45.8%		

** Significant at 0.01 level of significance. <3=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5= strongly agree

Academics are slightly more inclined to agree that good quality student intake is an important factor in ensuring quality which is consistent with the findings in section 5.3.1. Again, there are significant differences in stakeholder responses on this point (Table 15). While 51.4% of academic staff agree with the statement, 15.3% disagree and 33.3% are neutral. The strongest disagreement with the statement comes from employers, with 45.8%

who do not agree that high quality student intake is necessary for ensuring quality, while 39.6% do consider it an important condition. Student responses are not very strong either way, with 49% of students who do not consider student intake as important, 30.9% who do, while the remaining 33% are neutral.

5.4.6 Value Added versus high quality student intake

The following statement further explores stakeholder perception on the importance of high quality student intake versus the value added concept of quality in HE:

‘The quality of the student intake is not important; the focus should be on the “value added” to the student.

Table 16: Value Added

	Stakeholder	% =5	% =4	% =3	% <3	Chi-Square	Significance
Value added	student	28.9%	60.3%	27.8%	11.9%	6.508	0.039
	academic staff	18.1%	50.0%	25.0%	25.0%		
	employer	16.7%	58.3%	14.6%	27.1%		

** Significant at 0.05 level of significance. <3=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5= strongly agree

Once again there are significant differences in responses (Table 16). However, there is a clear indication by all three stakeholder groups that they agree with the value added concept of quality more than a restrictive admissions policy that ensures a high quality student intake. The strongest support for the value added concept is from students followed by employers and lastly, academics.

5.4.7 Defining Quality in Higher Education

The last section of the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate the extent of their agreement with five definitions of quality in HE. It was found that the majority of respondents agree to a relatively high degree with most of the definitions. Responses to two out of the five definitions of quality show significant differences between stakeholders (Table 17).

Table 17: Definitions of Quality in Higher Education

	Definition	Stakeholder	Rank	% >4	% >3	Chi-Square	Significance
Not Congruent	Meeting specified objectives	student	5	22.2%	64.9%	26.392	0.000**
		academic staff	1	44.4%	94.4%		
		employer	5	20.8%	77.1%		

Not Congruent	Efficiency and effectiveness	student	3	30.4%	71.6%	7.954	0.019*
		academic staff	3	31.9%	81.9%		
		employer	1	37.5%	97.9%		
Congruent	Exceptional education	student	4	27.3%	64.4%	3.300	0.192
		academic staff	4	18.1%	75.0%		
		employer	5	33.3%	81.3%		
Congruent	Achieving consistency	student	2	34.5%	76.3%	5.353	0.069
		academic staff	5	15.3%	80.6%		
		employer	2	31.3%	91.7%		
Congruent	Transformative ability	student	1	38.1%	71.6%	3.373	0.185
		academic staff	2	41.7%	87.5%		
		employer	3	22.9%	93.8%		

>3 shows % of respondents who selected 4 (agree) or 5 (strongly agree)

>4 shows % of respondents who selected 5 (strongly agree)

*Significant at 0.05 level of significance ** Significant at 0.01 level of significance

Definition 1: Providing education that meets specified objectives or goals

There are significant differences in responses, although a large proportion of all three stakeholder groups agree that quality in HE is about ‘*Fitness for Purpose: the extent to which education meets the stated purpose or goals*’. The means for this definition show that academics rank this definition the highest, with 94.4% agreeing with this definition. In comparison, students and employers prefer this definition the least.

Definition 2: The ability of the institution to be efficient and effective

Responses show significant differences for this industry based definition of quality with its focus on “*achieving efficiency and effectiveness*” which not surprisingly, gets the largest support from employers who rank it highest. 97.9% agree that quality in HE is about institutional efficiency and effectiveness. More significantly, the large proportion of academic staff (81.9%) also agrees with the efficiency definition (ranked 3), which is not consistent with the literature in that academics are not necessarily interested in efficiency or effectiveness. The majority of students (71.6%) although smaller than the other 2 groups also agree with this definition (ranked 3).

There are no significant differences in shareholder responses for the remaining three definitions.

Definition 3: Providing education that is exceptional and has high standards:

Among the five definitions, the lowest proportion of the three stakeholders agrees with this definition, although this proportion includes more than half the respondents in each group. Employers rank this the last while academics and students rank it the second last.

Definition 4: Achieving consistency in internal processes and performance:

The consistency definition of quality finds the strongest support from students with 76.3% (rank 2) and 91.7% of employers (rank 2) agreeing with this definition. 80.6% of academics also agree that quality entails achieving consistency in processes and performance but the overall rank by academics for this definition is 5 making it the least preferred definition for academics.

Definition 5: The capacity of the institution to be transformative and to continually learn through empowerment and enhancement of all involved:

This definition treats transformation as translating into real empowerment of everyone involved in the learning process resulting in a process of continuous learning and enhancement. 87.5% of academics (rank 2), 93.8% of employers (rank 3) and 71.6% of students (rank 1) agree with this definition. 38.1% students strongly agree with the transformative definition of quality making this the most preferred definition by students. In fact, with the high percentage of stakeholder agreement for this definition without any significant differences in responses among stakeholders, the transformative definition is clearly considered very important by all three groups.

5.4.8 Purpose of Higher Education

Respondents were also asked to indicate their agreement with the following four objectives/purposes of HE (Table 18).

- ***Providing education and services that meets the needs and expectations of students***
- ***Developing graduates who meet the expectations of the society***
- ***Developing graduates who meet the requirements of employers.***
- ***Equipping students with the skills to learn and think for themselves***

Table 18: Purpose of higher education

	Objective	Stakeholder	Rank	% >4	% >3	Chi-Square	Significance
Congruent	Learning for themselves	student	1	53.1%	79.4%	4.987	0.083
		academic staff	1	56.9%	97.2%		
		employer	1	60.4%	100.0%		
Congruent	Meeting employer expectations	student	2	43.8%	78.9%	2.203	0.332
		academic staff	2	40.3%	95.8%		
		employer	2	54.2%	85.4%		
Congruent	Meeting societal expectations	student	3	35.6%	74.2%	4.145	0.126
		academic staff	3	37.5%	93.1%		
		employer	3	37.5%	89.6%		
Congruent	Meeting student needs expectations	student	4	32.0%	74.2%	3.224	0.199
		academic staff	4	25.0%	73.6%		
		employer	4	18.8%	66.7%		

>3 shows % of respondents who selected 4 (agree) or 5 (strongly agree)

>4 shows % of respondents who selected 5 (strongly agree)

Responses show congruence on all four of the objectives with all three groups expressing the strongest support for equipping students with the skills to learn and think for themselves. More than fifty percent of respondents in each group strongly agree with this objective. Students, academics and employers consider the need to develop graduates who meet the requirements of employers as the second most important purpose of HE, followed by meeting societal expectations. Meeting students' needs and expectation finds agreement with the lowest proportion of all stakeholders; nevertheless, this proportion constitutes more than 65% of the respondents of each group. Employers consider meeting students' expectations to be comparatively less important than the other two groups.

5.5 Differences between students based on subject

The results of the Mann Whitney test revealed no significant differences between IT and Business students on any of the criteria on quality or on any of the remaining statements including the definitions/purpose of HE.

5.6 Differences between academic staff based on subject

The Mann Whitney test revealed significant differences between IT and Business academic staff on eleven out of the 42 criteria on quality in HE (Table 19: Appendix 1). The differences indicate that Business lecturers place more importance on the following three criteria under the Curriculum dimension in comparison to IT academics:

- high academic standards of programmes
- the focus of the curriculum on practical components and the industry
- relevance of the programmes to the job market

Business lecturers also place more importance on the following seven criteria under the Teaching and learning dimension:

- Ability of lecturers to understand individual student needs
- The teaching methods and teaching styles of the lecturers
- Ability of the lecturer to explain topics in a manner accessible to all students
- Opportunities provided for interactive student centred learning experiences in the classroom
- The effort put in by students outside the classroom to read and understand the subject material
- Focus of lecturers on developing skills required for the workplace
- Overall importance of the Teaching and learning dimension

However, IT lecturers place more importance on the overall importance of the Assessment dimension in comparison to Business lecturers. IT lecturers are more in favour of examinations as only 33.3% disagree with the statement that “*examination is the best method to test students’ knowledge and skills*”, in comparison to 63.6% of Business lecturers.

Higher proportions of IT lecturers also seem to agree or are neutral on the point of institutional responsibility versus students’ responsibility when it comes to students’ success. Only 53.8% of IT lecturers disagree that “*it is the institution’s responsibility rather than the students’ to ensure students are successful in their studies*” in comparison to 75.8% of Business lecturers.

Among the two more popular definitions of quality in HE, 97.4% of IT lecturers agree that quality is “*Providing education that meets specified objectives or goals*” compared to 90.9% of Business lecturers. However, only 82.1% of IT lecturers agree with the transformative definition of quality in HE compared to 93.9% of Business lecturers.

Regarding the purpose of HE, a larger proportion of IT lecturers (89.7%) consider that HEPs must provide education and services that “*meets the needs and expectations of students*” compared to 54.5% of Business lecturers. Furthermore, a smaller proportion of IT lecturers in comparison to Business lecturers agree that the “*purpose of HE is to equip students with the skills required to think for themselves*”, which was ranked number one by all stakeholder groups.

5.7 DISCUSSION

The survey results are strongly consistent with stakeholder values as identified in the interviews. The findings revealed strong congruence on many aspects of HE between academic staff and employers. Student responses indicate that a comparatively lower proportion attach the same degree of importance to many of the criteria that are highly rated by academic staff and employers. However, there are also a number of criteria in which there is congruence between all three groups.

5.7.1 Defining Quality in Higher Education

Cheng and Tam (1997) and Green (1994) stress the futility of identifying a single best definition of quality particularly in HE and note that quality is best defined in terms of different qualities. Consistent with this view, the study finds considerable support from the three stakeholders for all five of the definitions of quality, thus underlining the multi-dimensional character of quality which cannot be easily assessed by only one indicator. Most of the definitions have similarities between them (Cheng and Tam, 1997) and none of the definitions in principle contradict each other. Hence, it is more practical and constructive to consider the different characteristics of quality including transformation, efficiency and effectiveness, consistency, fitness for purpose and excellence as correlates of quality when evaluating HE provision. Inclusion of all such correlates of quality will ensure that the legitimate views of stakeholders and the different perspectives of quality are addressed.

Academics agree most with the ‘*fitness for purpose*’ definition of quality defined in the questionnaire as ‘*meeting specified objectives*’ which is based on the business concept of ensuring a pre-defined outcome designed to meet specific objectives. However,

surprisingly, it is least preferred by both students and employers resulting in a lack of congruence between academics and the other 2 groups. This is one of the few definitions that refer to quality in terms of outcomes/objectives as the other definitions refer essentially to the process of HE. Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003) suggest that this definition is most likely to find favour with employers rather than academics, as it is similar to the business concept of designing and customising products to meet particular needs. However, the findings in this study are more consistent with Watty (2005) and Lomas (2002) who find that the fitness for purpose definition is widely prevalent among academics and HEPs in Australia and the UK. The latter might explain the preference of academic staff for this definition, as three of the HEPs in the survey are affiliated to UK universities and, therefore, follow similar quality assurance systems. It is now common practice to design HE programmes, particularly in business studies around industry input and requirements (Lawrence and Pharr, 2003). There are also a range of HE 'products' (part-time courses, e-learning, distance learning, etc.) that seek to address needs of particular market segments and to provide flexibility. Issues that naturally arise from the *fitness for purpose* definition are the validity of the stated objectives which would depend on their relevance, their acceptance by the broader community and the extent to which stakeholders are satisfied with the outcomes. The relevance of the objectives will depend on the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the market research that informs such objectives.

The idea of achieving efficiency is often misunderstood as implying the need to lower costs and thereby compromising quality (Deming, 1982). The '*efficiency and effectiveness definition*' of quality found the strongest support from employers which is not surprising, considering the business emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness. It is surprising that the majority of academics and students (although to a lesser extent) agree with the definition, particularly if one were to consider the general emphasis that HE is essentially different from other services. Some researchers suggest that achieving economic efficiency and offering the best value for money may not necessarily be considered an indicator of quality in HE, particularly by academics. For instance, Cyert (1993) argued that academics believe universities are as efficient as they should be and any further efforts in this direction are unnecessary. Clearly, this is not the case in this study but one would have to consider whether the concern for efficiency and effectiveness shown by academics in this case is because they all work in private HEPs. With the support from all stakeholder groups for this definition, it may be concluded that they interpret efficiency and effectiveness as not

necessarily associated with compromise but leading to a win-win situation for all stakeholders, which is important for long-term survival.

The excellence definition of quality with its emphasis on excellent outcomes and high standards also found considerable support and congruence across all three groups. According to Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003), the concept of quality as excellence should correspond to the student's view of quality. Nevertheless, it is ranked only fourth out of the five definitions by both students (which is consistent with their lower emphasis on standards) and academics and the last by employers. This indicates that excellence although a desirable outcome of HE is not viewed as the primary indicator of quality by any of the groups.

Although achieving a degree of consistency in all processes and performance is necessary, the *consistency definition* is criticized for encouraging bureaucracy, and stifling creativity and innovation (Doherty, 1997). Moreover, product control, minimising variation and avoidance of error which are some of the fundamental principles of industry-based quality models, are considered to be undesirable or inapplicable for HE with its varied outcomes and processes. The evidence, nevertheless, indicates that students particularly consider it important that quality management ensures some consistency both in internal processes and performance of HEPs, followed by employers. As students are in the dual position of being the main input and a customer in HE and considering the complexities involved in the processes, it is quite understandable that they desire the comfort of consistency i.e. knowing what to expect. However, although stakeholders' responses are congruent, academics rank this definition the last, indicating that as educators they are more aware of the inherent problems in aiming for consistency in processes and outcomes in the complex process of HE. This does not follow Srikanthan and Dalrymple's (2003) assumption that the consistency definition would be favoured by academics and administrators whose job satisfaction requires that all behavioural norms are met and the core ethos is upheld.

From the various definitions, the capacity of the institution to be transformative and ultimately empower all participants found strong support from all three groups. Becket and Brookes (2005) observe that this definition is particularly important for internal stakeholders and accordingly the strongest support was from students followed by academics as well as employers as external stakeholders. The transformative definition

based on the concept of the learning organisation is one of the newer definitions of quality in HE and is based on the empowerment of all participants by enhancing their critical abilities. It is indeed positive that the three main stakeholders groups in Oman and most importantly students recognise its significance. Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) identify transformation of learners by enhancing their ability to think for themselves as the highest level of achievement to which HE can aspire to, which requires innovation and enhancement in all aspects. The emphasis of this definition is on enhancement, not just quality assurance and requires the very active participation of all participants and as Becket and Brookes (2005) note, is most likely to result in a culture of quality being embedded within institutions. However, while transformation and empowerment of participants are very worthwhile goals for HEPs, the other findings from this study indicate that student awareness about their role as co-participants in the transformative process is very poor.

5.7.2 Purpose of Higher Education

Similar to the definitions of quality, the majority of respondents agree with all four objectives of HE that were presented without any significant differences between the stakeholders. This leads us to conclude that HE would need to meet a range of objectives centred on meeting the needs of the society, employers and students while most importantly equipping students with the critical skills to think and learn for themselves. This is again consistent with the view that it is impossible to arrive at a single identifiable purpose for any form of education because of differing needs and expectations which may also overlap in many aspects (Doherty, 1997).

Consistent with stakeholder support for the transformative definition of quality, the survey found strong consensus from all stakeholders for equipping students with the ability to think for themselves and thereby empowering them as the ultimate purpose of HE. This objective is considered even more important than preparing students to meet the needs of employers which is consistent with Eagle and Brennan (2007) who stress that the most important goal of HE is to develop graduates with the ability to think critically and laterally. Learner transformation entails using innovative and interactive teaching and assessment methods in order to expose students to poorly defined and varied situations that require them to engage in effective actions in increasing uncertainty. There is strong support from both academic staff and employers for innovative teaching methods but other findings clearly indicate that

such methods may be strongly resisted by students, despite their strong agreement with the transformative objective.

Meeting employers' needs is ranked second and addresses a point of contention in the literature (Gibbs and Iacovidou, 2004) that as employers' needs are secondary to developing critical skills, preparing students for employment is not a valid purpose of HE. The interviews had also revealed that meeting employers' needs is very important, particularly for academic staff and students. The overall findings, therefore, show that although developing critical skills is most important, stakeholders do not believe that this objective is contrary to meeting employers' needs as responses of employers and academic staff both in the interviews and survey emphasise the development of students' personal and critical skills as necessary prerequisites for employment.

All three groups including students, surprisingly, attach the lowest importance to meeting students' needs and expectations among the four definitions, which is a positive indication that students do realise that their expectations may not be the best indicator of quality. Nevertheless, the fact that the majority of respondents in each group do agree that meeting students' needs and expectations is important, indicates acceptance of the concept of the student as a primary customer, partner and stakeholder in HE.

In essence, there should not be contradictions among the different objectives; for instance, equipping graduates with the skills for employment or to meet societal needs does not mean that they cannot think or learn for themselves or should lack critical skills. In fact, these objectives complement each other as do many other aspects of HE. Hence, rather than arguing which objective is more valid as some writers do, it would be more constructive for HEPs to consider how their programmes can develop the overall skills profile that would enable their graduates to meet the demands of the 'real' world, including employers and the society. As Wals and Jickling (2002) note, HEPs would have to provide sustainable and meaningful learning opportunities that will develop dynamic qualities in their students that will enable them to be critical and cope with poorly defined situations in different contexts.

5.7.3 Academic Standards

The issue of academic standards is very closely linked with the concept of academic rigour and quality, as the standards set for a programme of study are a key determinant of the level of performance expected from students. High standards are supposed to be indicative of a high level of quality (Doherty, 1997) and, therefore, three statements in the questionnaire tested the views of the respondents on academic standards: the first on programme standards, the second on assessment standards and the third on the importance of maintaining standards versus students coping with their courses.

Stakeholder responses were not congruent across the three statements as a comparatively lower proportion of students value high standards. A significant proportion of the student sample do not appreciate or possibly understand the importance of maintaining or setting high standards, particularly assessment standards, which is consistent with the interviews. Instead, they place more importance on how easily they can cope with the demands of their study. This is consistent with the literature (Eagle and Brennan, 2007) that students may not really consider high academic standards as essential for career advancement or even representative of high quality. While students consider HE as essential for a career, they are indifferent to whether high standards are maintained (Rolfe, 2002) and as Carlson and Fleisher (2002) note, many now tend to shop around for the easiest courses with the highest grades. The lower importance attached to assessment standards by students may also reflect Mattick and Knight's (2007) observation that students are anxious about assessment performance and as a result do not consider or reflect on the quality of their learning approaches (and by implication standards) and focus only on their performance.

On the other hand, academic staff and employers greatly value programme standards and are firm in their view that academic standards cannot be sacrificed so as to keep students happy or to ensure that they can cope with the demands of the programme. The focus on student satisfaction and the concept of students as customers is often criticised by educators for falling academic standards (Gibbs and Iacovidou, 2004; Barnet, 1997). While this study found that it is important to understand students' needs and expectations and to motivate their interest, i.e. concepts which are associated with the student-customer concept, it also finds that maintaining high academic standards is considered vital in ensuring the quality of

HE by the key internal and external stakeholders. Clearly academic staff and employers do not consider a student oriented approach as inappropriate or incompatible with maintaining high academic standards.

However, although employers value high academic standards of programmes with 85.4% considering it extremely important, they are less enthusiastic about assessment standards with only 64.6% rating it as very/most important. Academic staff are more consistent across the three statements with the most emphasis on assessment standards. The differentiation by employers between assessment standards and programme standards is difficult to explain. Logically, high academic standards are measured and maintained by high assessment standards and accordingly responses of academic staff are consistent on both criteria. One reason for this differentiation could be that some employers feel that the whole process of HE should be of a high standard with appropriate checks and balances which should not be just reflected in the standards of assessments. Furthermore, responses to other relevant criteria show that employers do not really consider assessment performance as a good indicator of the quality of education; therefore their comparatively lower appreciation of high assessment standards may be just reflective of their overall perception of assessments. This is discussed further in the next section on assessments.

5.7.4 Quality of Intake and the Value Added View of Quality

Pursglove and Simpson (2007) indicate that admissions standards have a significant quality control role in influencing the quality of the overall educational outcomes as entrants with lower achievements at entry level are more likely to continue to perform poorly in HE. This study found that although academic staff are significantly more enthusiastic about strict admission policies and students the least, the overall ranking for this criterion is among the lowest by all groups. While students' responses may be more or less expected, it is more surprising that employers and academics rate admissions criterion quite low.

The quality of student intake is considered by many to be a necessary condition for institutional success (Cheng and Tam, 1997). However, although this study found that high academic standards of programmes is very important to academic staff and employers, high admission standards i.e. restricting student intake in terms of marks or grades at entry, is not considered a key determinant of quality, particularly by employers. Furthermore, although

stakeholders consider an institution's reputation to be an important indicator of the quality of its provision, apparently the majority do not feel that this reputation should be based on restricting admissions to the best possible student intake. Determining the aptitude of students for the programme of study and their attitude and commitment to HE are considered more important than a restrictive admissions policy in terms of high grades. As suggested by an academic staff in the interviews, conducting admissions interviews aimed at determining students' level of interest and commitment to learning can be a better measure of whether students are really interested in developing themselves through HE, rather than a restrictive admissions policy.

We should consider whether these findings are contrary to Morley and Aynsley (2007) who find that employers in the UK associate high academic standards with strict entry requirements. However, a restrictive admissions policy makes it easier to achieve higher standards even though the institution may have put in comparatively less effort in providing high quality teaching and learning experiences. It is easier for HEPs to demonstrate better outcomes with a higher quality student intake irrespective of the actual quality of the provision or effort by the institution. With a broader range of abilities at entry level, no doubt an institution will have to expend relatively more effort to ensure that their provision is adequate for attaining the desired standards. We should also consider whether the fact that HE in Oman is relatively new, is accountable in part for employers currently not equating high academic standards with strict entry requirements, contrary to the UK. Over time, with more graduates leaving the higher education system, there is the possibility that employers in Oman may form stronger perceptions about the educational provision (including admission policies) by the different HEPs and as a result may equate stricter admissions policies with higher standards.

The findings clearly showed that stakeholders make a distinction between high standards and the quality of the process of achieving such standards. The value added to the students' knowledge and skills profile through the inputs and teaching and learning opportunities provided by the HEP is considered to be a better indicator of quality by all three stakeholders. This view sees quality as a measure of whether the HEP has provided a satisfactory bridge between entrants and the intended outcomes by providing adequate opportunities that sufficiently enhance their knowledge and skills rather than based on the inherent ability of the students (Yorke, 1999). Irrespective of the quality of intake, what

would be more relevant is whether the curriculum, teaching, assessment, support and guidance are the most appropriate with respect to the student profile in order to achieve desired outcomes. This does not imply that the extent of the value added is not important as employers and academics also expect HEPs to maintain rigorous standards.

The value added view of quality corresponds with the admissions policy of most private HE institutions in Oman, where the students' performance in the pre-requisite Foundation year determines their entry to the degree programmes. A pass in the secondary school examinations would generally secure a place on the Foundation programme in most institutions and based on the extent of value added in terms of a satisfactory performance at the end of the foundation year, they can proceed on to the undergraduate programmes. Nevertheless, although the value added view of quality is probably a more accurate reflection of the quality of provision, it entails taking in a broader range of students, some of who may not be equipped to handle the rigour and demands of HE. This requires innovative approaches and greater commitment from both students and teaching staff to walk the extra mile in order to add value to the required level.

5.7.5 Core Transferable Skills for the Workplace

A very significant finding of this study is that employers as well as academic staff and students, although to a lesser extent, consider the development of core transferable skills as possibly more important than even subject specific knowledge and practical understanding of the subject. Transferable skills are very highly prized as these are skills which although learned in one area can be transferred into other areas; however, Yorke (1999) observes that a key difficulty is identifying transferable skills that are particularly relevant for employment. The transferable skills expected of graduates of undergraduate programmes as identified in the interviews include interpersonal skills, the ability to communicate effectively, team work skills, adaptability, self-management, creativity, application, problem solving and general awareness.

This shift from subject knowledge is emphasised in the literature and as Bourner (1998) states, the critical function of HE is no longer seen as imparting subject knowledge but the development of higher level transferable skills which include critical thinking and reflection. The findings are also consistent with Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2004) who find

that employers give low ratings to academic knowledge while skills such as problem solving, team interaction, communication etc., are highly valued. Given the comparatively lower emphasis by students on skills, it is also worthwhile to consider Peronne & Vicker's (2003) recommendation that in order to prepare graduates for the transition to the workplace, HEPs and academic staff would need to put in greater effort to enhance student awareness of key transferable skills. The development of skills is quite possibly more difficult to achieve than imparting an understanding of the subject and any effort to enhance students' skills profile must be adequately supported by appropriate emphasis in all the integral aspects of HE including curriculum, teaching and learning methods and assessments. As Struyven et al. (2002) note surface approaches to learning that focus on and assess memorisation of facts should be discouraged; rather a deeper approach to learning that focuses on how students use, evaluate and interpret information must be encouraged.

Three statements addressed the importance of workplace skills, the first one focused on the role of curriculum, the second on the role of the lecturer in developing such skills and the third on assessing skills. While there was congruence on the importance of the role of the lecturer in this context, there was a lack of congruence on the emphasis of the curriculum and assessments on skills, particularly because a comparatively lower proportion of students considered the latter as very important. This shows that students value workplace skills as long as the lecturer is responsible for developing such skills but many are not that enthusiastic. The findings indicate a gap between students on the one hand and employers and academics on the other, regarding the importance of emphasising skills in all aspects of HE if indeed learner transformation is to be achieved. This is consistent with the interviews which showed that despite their emphasis on being prepared for success at the workplace, students' interpretation of what this preparation entailed was less clear and in some cases included only practical understanding of the subject.

Despite the importance placed on core transferable skills in the literature, it must also be considered whether the importance placed by employers and academics in this study is the result of local/regional contexts, given the particular problems faced by HEPs in the region in inculcating such skills in students. In a study on students in one of the countries in the Arabian Gulf, Bridger (2007) observes that students have to be guided very carefully at tertiary level to make the transition from a tutor-centred approach to a student centred-one, where they take responsibility for their own learning. Students in Oman do face similar

problems due to the existing practices in the public secondary school system (Goodliffe, 2004). This coupled with the fact that Omani secondary school leavers have to rapidly adjust to learning in a second language in HE, makes the development of core transferable skills such as critical thinking and reflection, learner independence, team interaction, effective communication skills etc., quite difficult. As such skills are particularly lacking, the effectiveness with which an HEP is able to inculcate the core transferable skills can largely determine the perception about its graduates in the workplace.

5.7.6 Curriculum

The importance attached to the curriculum dimension by academic staff and employers underlines its relevance in achieving the desired outcomes of HE. This is consistent with Nabi and Bagley (1998) who stress the critical impact of curriculum on almost all aspects of HE; curriculum can encourage or discourage the development of subject and practical knowledge, the development of core skills, the choice of teaching and learning methods and assessment strategies. However, students' responses indicate that they are not fully aware of the primary role of curriculum in influencing their overall experience and the outcomes of their education. Student responses, therefore, are responsible for the lack of congruence between responses on most of the curriculum criteria.

The highest importance is attached by all three stakeholders to curriculum focus on transferable skills, which is consistent with the findings in the previous section. The importance of incorporating skills development in the curriculum is supported by many researchers, for instance, Thomas (2007) emphasises the need for more flexible curricula with greater emphasis on the skills required for lifelong learning, as a result of economic and demographic changes. The curriculum can also encourage the adoption of active teaching and learning methodologies by tutors and students which is fundamental in developing reflective abilities and critical thinking skills. The comparatively lower emphasis on skills by students maybe consistent with Dillon and Hodgkinson (2000) who find that some students find it irritating and demotivating when they are repeatedly faced with similar advice that focus on skills development. It is also consistent with students' reluctance to engage in interactive learning methods and non-traditional assessment methods as indicated in other sections.

An important value of this study is to provide an understanding of how subject knowledge is viewed by employers and academic staff. The study found significant differences between academic staff on one hand and employers and students on the other regarding the focus of the curriculum on subject knowledge. Strongly consistent with the interview findings, the survey indicates that while many academics rate curriculum focus on the subject and coverage as very important, employers do not share the same emphasis on subject knowledge. As employers revealed in the interviews, they felt that undergraduate programmes should focus on in-depth knowledge of a more narrow range of core fundamental topics rather than a broad range of topics. Employers and even some academics expressed their concern that an extensive coverage of subject topics may often result in the majority of students not really having an in-depth understanding of most topics. It was noted that with its focus on an extensive range of topics HE seem to be producing undergraduates who are not really fit for junior or middle level jobs for which they are recruited, nor for the higher level jobs which require considerable experience. Hence, consistent with Baruch and Leeming (1996), employers consider that more focused in-depth knowledge of the core and fundamental subject concepts may be needed in the early stages of a graduate's working career. This must be accompanied by an awareness of how to adapt theoretical understanding to practical work situations which was also valued very highly by both employers and academics but comparatively lower by students.

Middlehurst (2001) contends that a critical issue in effective curriculum development is whether curriculum developers are able to determine if the curriculum meets the ever changing needs of both students and potential employers. Otherwise, the content will not be fit for the purpose for which it is designed, either for the direct customer (student) or the indirect purchaser (state or employer). HEPs in Oman may consider it productive to evaluate whether the curriculum does provide adequate in-depth and focused subject knowledge required at this level or whether the curriculum is too ambitious in that it ultimately provides only a superficial knowledge of too many topics without sufficient emphasis on core skills. Kember (1997) notes that curriculum can influence tutors to focus on the subject matter rather than on the development of critical thinking. The challenge for HEPs lies in designing curriculum that provides a balance between subject content and context with adequate scope for students to enhance practical skills and a critical mind-set. Ultimately, curriculum should be also built around the needs and aspirations of the learners so that they are adequately motivated in order to become deep learners.

5.7.7 Teaching and Learning

The very high importance attached to the teaching and learning dimension in this study is consistent with the increasing focus in the recent literature on the resurgence of the importance attributed to the teaching function. Consistent with the interviews, faculty related factors and teaching methods have been given high importance by the three stakeholder groups. The importance attributed by the three stakeholders to the lecturers' teaching methods and styles and their ability to communicate and explain topics, reinforces the critical role of academic staff and the teaching function in enhancing the quality of HE. However, although factors such as accessibility of explanation and the lecturers' ability to stimulate thinking and behavioural skills are highly valued by all three stakeholders, a comparatively lower proportion of students attach the highest importance to these factors resulting in a significant lack of congruence. This reveals less emphasis by students on aspects which require them to understand or to undergo transformation.

The literature indicates that the focus on learner-centred methods has resulted in the critical role of academics being generally underplayed (Bradley, 1999). Lomas (2004) highlights the need to reward and recognise good quality teaching in an environment that does not adequately emphasise the teaching function. The ability of teaching staff to stimulate students' interest in the subject and to motivate them to participate in the learning process is considered extremely important by all groups. This is consistent with Anderson (2000) who stresses that a crucial factor in the complex interactions in HE includes students' engagement with the subject which is influenced in part by the enthusiasm and skill of the lecturer. Pennington and O'Neil (1994) also emphasise that the lecturer's personal commitment and enthusiasm for the subject is vital in shaping students' interest and thereby deep approaches to learning, which in this highly tutor-centred context is highly relevant to the development of critical skills. What is generally not sufficiently considered is that student-centred teaching and the complexities inherent in mass education require tutors to adopt more effective and innovative teaching and learning methods and assessment strategies.

Reflecting the emphasis on transferable skills, the survey finds that stakeholders greatly value the ability of teaching staff to be transformative i.e. to stimulate thinking and develop

behavioural skills in their students. Employers, particularly, value tutors' focus on skills and behavioural development more than most of the other teaching and learning criteria. This is supported by Hawawini (2005) who observes that employers of business graduates are increasingly demanding behavioral and societal skills and is also consistent with Stefani (2005) who argues that the traditional role of tutors in the transmission of knowledge is no longer adequate as today's knowledge economy requires tutors to develop a different skill set. However, the lack of congruence on the tutors' ability to stimulate thought and behavioural development showed that a comparatively smaller proportion of students attached the same level of importance. In comparison, a higher proportion of students consider development of workplace skills as important, which indicates that many students do not relate critical thinking and behavioural skills to the workplace. This is consistent with the findings in the interviews that students are not aware of what transferable or workplace skills entail.

However, the interviews also found that while the development of transferable skills was seen as vital by academic staff, there was less clarity on their own role in developing such skills. Academic staff were not really aware of what was required from them in terms of effective skills and personal development and seemed to perceive their role as that of imparting subject knowledge. Therefore, while the survey found that lecturers consider their ability to develop skills as very important, the interview findings indicate that lecturers require further guidance on how this can be achieved. The survey also found that while academic staff do acknowledge that they have a key role to play in inculcating core skills, they nevertheless consider that the curriculum plays a stronger role in this process in comparison to themselves. Hence, it appears that a degree of confusion does exist among academics on their own role in developing skills and whether the inclusion of skills development in the curriculum will naturally allow such skills to be developed without an equal focus by teaching staff. As the development of core skills would require extensive input from teaching staff, especially in the current context which is heavily tutor-centred, any lack of awareness on the part of academic staff on their role will have a negative influence on the ultimate outcome of HE.

Hill (1995) stresses the critical role that personal interaction between student and staff has in enhancing student motivation and learning which is exemplified through tutors' sensitivity to student needs. Accordingly, the survey found that empathy with students'

needs is valued by both students and lecturers as an important aspect of teaching and learning. Employers however, do not rate this as very critical. This may be due to the fact that employers are not directly involved in the process of teaching and learning and hence may not appreciate the more subtle factors. Employers may also consider that understanding individual student needs is not that important as they attach more value on the HE process being challenging enough to mould students' character and attitude, as revealed in the interviews. Surprisingly, the survey also finds that academic staff place comparatively less importance on their own experience in terms of number of years. The minimum experience of the academic staff in the sample is 6 years and, therefore, their lack of appreciation for teaching experience may suggest that they feel that experience by itself does not add much value.

A main finding of this study is that although students attach the highest importance to instructor related factors, they are not very enthusiastic about their own role in the teaching and learning process. This is exemplified by the lower importance they attach to all criteria that involve student participation, including reading and understanding the subject material, interactive teaching methods and contribution of other students to their learning. This strongly reflects a tendency on the part of many students to rely solely on lecturers and tutor-centred teaching methods. Many students also do not place much value on the positive impact that other students can have on their own teaching and learning experience, while this is considered important by both employers and academics.

The lack of appreciation for interactive student-centred teaching methods by students reflects the observations by academic staff in the interviews that many students resent student-centred and interactive methods of teaching, preferring to rely on lecturers for all the input. Considering that most students prefer traditional teacher-centred teaching methods to more innovative methods, together with the high importance they attach to teaching methods, we could conclude that many students perceive teacher-centred teaching methods to have the most positive impact on their learning. This view is not shared by most academics and employers who value interactive teaching methods, possibly to ensure students' participation in the teaching and learning process and stimulate and enhance skills. Hence, HEPs do not have the hard task of convincing their staff about the value of using innovative interactive teaching methods; instead they should educate students about the value of such methods and thus gradually overcome their resistance. Staff development is

also essential in order to develop awareness of practical ways to reduce student resistance and enhance motivation and participation.

Hill et al (2003) highlight the importance of support systems in student transition from school to HE and they find that students greatly value such support systems. However, although additional academic support systems are considered important by the majority of the respondents, it is ranked comparatively lower on the list of teaching and learning criteria. It must be noted that this criterion was not overtly emphasised in the interviews as well.

While the majority of respondents believe that student feedback must be an important focus of quality management and that students can evaluate good teaching, the proportion of academics who believe that students can indeed evaluate good teaching is lower than the other two groups. This is consistent with Harvey & Langley (1995) who write that academics believe that students are not the best judge of the education they receive, particularly in terms of identifying the knowledge and skills necessary for their future careers. There may be some truth in this particularly if teaching staff have the difficult job of weaning students away from traditional tutor-centred teaching approaches to a student-centred one by introducing non-traditional teaching methods that are strongly resisted by students. As the interviews revealed, academic staff do feel that students may resent tutors who attempt to do so and student feedback may be coloured by this lack of appreciation.

5.7.8 Assessments

Consistent with the interviews, employers in particular, rank assessments and outcomes the least important among all the six dimensions of quality. While employers share the concern of academic staff for programme standards and the process and curriculum aspects, they do not agree to the same extent as academics on the importance of assessments. This can be considered as evidence that employers share the same doubts as Barnett (1994) as to whether the complex nature of HE can be easily and accurately reduced to a set of easily measurable competencies.

The results also indicate that high grades in assessments are not considered a reliable or important indicator of quality in HE by all three stakeholder groups. This must be

considered together with employers' emphasis in the interviews, that although the process of HE should be challenging enough to mould and develop students' skills and knowledge, they would not necessarily trust higher grades as indicative of better skills. This indicates that employers and to an extent academics do not really trust assessment strategies to induce the transformative process in students or to be a valid measure of the extent of that transformation. One may conclude that employers share Trow's (1996) opinion that attempts to measure educational outcomes are spurious as education is more of a process rather than an outcome. However, many organisations do rely on grades in the first instance to screen applicants, as revealed in the interviews. As Schray (2006) observes, although the most important evidence of quality in HE is considered to be performance, especially student achievement of learning outcomes, this must in fact be represented by a broad range of performance indicators including access, student learning, degree completion, and economic returns and not merely grades.

The survey findings are also consistent with comments of academic staff in the interviews that they place more value on the assessment process in influencing the quality of HE rather than high grades. However, while academics share the view that good grades in assessments are not a very important indicator of quality, they attach considerable importance to the role of assessments and assessment standards in influencing the overall quality of HE. This reveals a lack of consistency in their response, because if academic staff really believe that assessments and assessment standards are important and integral to learning and can affect student transformation, then they should in effect consider assessment performance to be very important. This lack of consistency implies that while academics acknowledge that assessments are a vital factor in driving HE quality, they also acknowledge, like employers, that current assessment strategies are not appropriate in terms of measuring important competencies. Employers and academics may also share Gibbs and Simpson (2005) belief that if the assessment strategy is not well designed or comprehensive it may become comparatively easier for students to provide the teacher with whatever s/he expects without really going through a transformative process or enhancing their capabilities. This is particularly true when we consider academics' views in the interviews that assessments may not really be assessing critical or key outcomes or that it may be easier to obtain higher grades in some institutions compared to others as assessment standards may not be consistent across institutions. In comparison, the fact that students rank assessment performance higher than the other two groups may be consistent with students' comments in

the interviews that they feel good when they perform well in assessments. This can exert its own influence on student motivation.

Research indicates that the quality of student learning is higher in non-traditional and assignment-based courses rather than exam-based courses (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005). As students in this study prefer traditional tutor-centred teaching methods, it is logical to assume that they would prefer traditional and more prescribed assessment methods as well. This is indeed supported by the findings, as the large proportion of students consider examinations to be the best assessment method which is consistent with McHardy and Allen (2000) who find that students prefer and are more comfortable with prescriptive and traditional methods of learning and assessment. In comparison, it is found that employers do not consider examinations to be an appropriate test of students' skills and knowledge. Academics are comparatively more undecided on this aspect, although almost half of the sample disagrees with the appropriateness of exams. Another reason for this ambiguity could involve the concern expressed by a few academics in the interviews that some forms of assessments such as take-away assignments can be misused by the use of unfair means. Further analysis of academic responses by subject shows that while IT lecturers consider examinations to be the best assessment method, Business lecturers do not. This may indicate that examinations are more appropriate for the IT discipline or may also reflect the lack of skills focus by IT lecturers. Consistent with this response, academics (mainly IT lecturers) place slightly more importance on assessing subject knowledge, while employers and students attach more importance on assessing skills for the workplace. This is consistent with Eagle and Brennan (2007) who emphasise that assessing graduates for entry to the workplace requires much more than the passive reproduction of subject knowledge.

It is also found that the implementation of a continuous assessment strategy is supported by all stakeholders so as to provide rigour and challenge to the process of HE. The endorsement of continuous assessments by the majority of students is surprising, considering the workload that this entails. Feedback on assessments is an integral part of an effective assessment strategy and findings show that academics and employers clearly realise this; but students do not. Many student interviewees did not seem aware of the practice of tutors providing feedback on assessments. The relationship between feedback by tutors and the enhancement of students' capacity for critical reflection is highlighted by Harvey & Knight (1996). The significantly lower importance given to this criterion by

students indicates that some of the institutions in the study may not have assessment feedback systems for students to appreciate the value of feedback or that the feedback given may not be considered constructive or useful by the students. The challenge is to provide opportunities for students to receive regular constructive informal and formal feedback on their performance. Students focus on parts of the curriculum for which they are rewarded (Gordon, 2003), so if students receive constructive feedback on their skills and subject understanding they will be motivated to spend more time and effort in developing them.

5.7.9 Resources

Students attach more importance to the resources dimension in comparison to employers and academic staff. Among the different resources, the highest importance is given to the range and quantity of library resources and quality of teaching facilities by students and academics, which is not very surprising. Students to staff ratio is valued by the majority of academic staff indicating the difficulties of managing larger student numbers and what will essentially be mixed ability students in the same class due to the diversity of student intake. This is consistent with the interviews, as larger lecture sessions were not seen as very conducive to learning, given the difficulties of learning in a second language. Closer personal interaction between students and staff and small class sizes may be required if tutors are to influence students personal and skills development. Sports and recreation facilities although ranked lower are also valued by the majority of respondents, particularly students which is not surprising as well as employers. Employers' responses are consistent with their view on the overall development of the student not only through teaching and learning but through recreational activities which provide opportunities for personal development.

5.7.10 Students as Co-Participants

Student transformation requires a very active and joint participation between students and HEPs (Hill, 1995). Harvey and Knight (1996) note that students' analytical and critical skills can be developed only by the joint participation of students and academic staff. The concept of students as co-producers of their own learning requires them to participate to the fullest possible extent, or the learning outcomes or objectives may not be met satisfactorily. Accordingly, both employers and academic staff in this study consider the attitude and

commitment of students and their participation in the teaching and learning process as extremely relevant to quality. Their overall response to student related criteria indicate that while it is very important for HEPs to focus on students and facilitate learning to the fullest possible extent, this does preclude students from taking responsibility for their own performance and learning.

However, a significant finding of the survey is the confirmation that majority of students have no awareness of the importance of the concept of student participation in the learning process. It was found that students clearly expect a lot from HEPs and their tutors with regard to their academic success, although they attach considerably lower importance to all factors that involve their input and participation. Students' responses consistently placed lower importance on all factors that involve their input while they attach the highest importance to what can be provided for them by tutors and the HEP. They are less emphatic about academic standards, student participation and their own contribution to learning inside and outside the classroom, although they value the skills and knowledge that will prepare them for the workplace. Although they share the same view as employers and academics that HE is about equipping students with the skills to think for themselves, they do not seem aware of their own role in this process. There is a definite lack of awareness among students that in order to learn effectively and develop relevant skills and knowledge, the process of learning has to be equally comprehensive and challenging and requires their commitment and participation. These findings are consistent with Telford and Masson (2005) who also find that students did not consider their own commitment to learning as important

Student responses on the question of institutional responsibility versus that of students' also show that almost half of the sample consider that it is the institution's rather than their own responsibility to ensure their academic success. This also confirms the interview findings that many students tend to expect tutors to impart knowledge and thereby ensure their success, without realising the importance of their own contribution towards the process if learning is to be indeed successful in the true sense of the word. The findings clearly support Mattick and Knight's (2007) view that undergraduate students may not be prepared for a learning environment which involves self-directed participation and that they may find the process of self-directed learning and participation daunting. In order to overcome such trepidation and encourage student participation, tutors and academic advisers should

provide a supportive learning environment with adequate guidance on self-directed learning and how its success could be evaluated. Hill (1995) makes the connection between student expectations and their prior educational experiences and Rolfe (2002) finds that students tend to adopt passive learning approaches and expect all information to be provided to them as a result of their secondary school experiences and time and societal constraints. As undergraduate students do not have any comparative frame of reference with regards to expectations in HE other than that of their schooling system, they may have unrealistic expectations, which is clearly the case of students in Oman who come from traditional tutor-centred schooling environments. Enhancing student participation will take careful management by HEPs because the interviews revealed that academic staff did not really have clear ideas of how they could motivate and support students, the majority of whom are comfortable only with traditional teaching and assessment methods, together with the difficulties of learning in a second language. These findings also lead us to consider the concerns raised by Clayson and Haley (2005) that students as fee paying customers will take less responsibility for their own learning and will place the responsibility for their failure or poor performance on the HEP or more precisely their tutors. It would be interesting to find out if this attitude is shared by students in government owned institutions that do not charge fees.

5.7.11 Differences between Academic Staff

Significant differences in the responses of the two groups of academic staff (IT and Business) indicate that Business lecturers are more aware of the changing facets of HE in terms of responsiveness of programmes to the job market, practical relevance of education, transformative learning and the importance of transferable skills. Possibly as a result, Business lecturers are also more emphatic about the importance of faculty related factors such as understanding student needs, teaching methods and teaching styles and accessibility of explanation of subject related concepts. Quite significantly, Business lecturers place more importance on core transferable skills than IT lecturers, a fact which was also brought out in the interviews. Therefore, they are also more open to the use of interactive teaching methods and place more stress on the importance of students' own contribution to learning inside and outside the classroom.

IT lecturers account for the ambiguity present in the responses of academic staff on certain criteria as a comparatively smaller proportion attach high importance to academic standards, interactive teaching methods and student responsibility while a larger proportion value traditional assessment methods and meeting student expectations. A comparatively smaller proportion disagree that examinations are the most appropriate assessment method which is also consistent with the lower emphasis by IT lecturers on transferable skills, learner transformation and interactive teaching methods. Morley and Aynsley (2007) find that what constituted quality in HE differed according to the sector with scientific and technical employers placing greater emphasis on graduates' subject knowledge. Although Morley and Aynsley was referring to employers, it is plausible that lecturers of more technical subjects such as IT may also emphasise subject knowledge more than lecturers of less technical subjects such as Business. However, in the interviews employers were emphatic that IT graduates should possess better soft and transferable skills, and not just subject knowledge. A smaller proportion of IT staff also agree that the purpose of HE is to equip students with the skills required to think for themselves, which was ranked as the most important objective by all stakeholder groups, thus highlighting significant differences between IT lecturers and the other stakeholder groups. Even more surprisingly, a larger proportion of IT lecturers in comparison to Business lecturers consider that it is more important for HEPs to provide education and services that meets the needs and expectations of students and also place more responsibility on the institution rather than the student in ensuring students' success.

While demonstrating more empathy with students by emphasising the importance of understanding student needs, accessibility of explanation and other faculty related criteria, Business lecturers are nevertheless more emphatic about maintaining standards and not merely meeting student expectations. They, therefore, emphasise the importance of equipping students with the skills to think and learn for themselves as the most important purpose of HE. There is thus more congruence between the views of employers and Business lecturers, while IT lecturers are more congruent towards students' views in certain aspects. The latter is not a positive indication as the congruencies involve key criteria such as high academic standards, student effort and participation and the development of core transferable skills; hence, HEPs will have to ensure that IT lecturers understand the importance of these factors if they are to provide a more meaningful teaching and learning experience to their students.

5.8 CONCLUSION

In order to answer the second research question, this chapter presented the congruencies and differences in the perceptions of the three stakeholder groups on the quality criteria identified from the interviews and the ensuing implications for HEPs. Further measures to be taken by HEPs are discussed in the next chapter which presents the framework of the stakeholder determinants of quality in HE.

CHAPTER SIX

FRAMEWORK OF STAKEHOLDER DETERMINANTS OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The third research question sought to propose a framework for managing quality based on the stakeholder determinants of quality (SDQ). This study reveals that although there are significant differences among stakeholders on the determinants of quality in HE, there are sufficient similarities among the majority of stakeholders to facilitate a framework for managing quality that addresses the management of the differences and builds on the congruencies. This chapter discusses the proposed framework for managing quality in HE for Business and IT undergraduate programmes based on the key SDQ identified from this study.

6.1 SDQ FRAMEWORK

The proposed framework for managing quality set out in Table 20 contains 28 key criteria under the six dimensions of HE for continuous monitoring and enhancement. It is intended as a framework for institutional self-assessment that can be applied by HEPs to support their continuous quality improvement efforts so that quality becomes a way of life rather than a distinct or separate aspect of the institution's activities. The framework identifies the key areas that must be addressed by HEPs, however, it does not suggest any processes and procedures that may be used in order to monitor and enhance these key criteria.

All the criteria identified in the framework are important in managing the quality of the provision; however, it is useful to note that each criterion may require different levels of attention, management and monitoring. Criteria which are congruent between the 3 groups or between 2 groups and which are considered most important by the majority of respondents in those groups are indicated as having 'strong congruence'. These criteria are extremely important and require constant monitoring and enhancement. Where a significant lack of congruence between the stakeholders was identified, this is indicated as a 'gap' in the framework which requires very careful and appropriate management by HEPs, particularly if the gap is on the part of students or academic staff. Those criteria on which there is congruence but has comparatively lower emphasis by respondents is indicated as

‘congruence’ and may require comparatively less attention; however this does not mean that they can be ignored.

Table 20: Framework of Stakeholder determinants of quality in HE (SDQ)

Quality Dimension	Quality Criteria	Congruence
Admission Factors	<i>Ascertaining students’ commitment and attitude to learning at point of entry</i>	Gap: <i>Students unaware of their role as co-participants in the teaching and learning process.</i>
	<i>Provision of a range of programmes on offer in accordance with industry and societal requirements</i>	Gap: <i>Academics are not as concerned about programme variety as students and employers.</i>
Institutional Factors	<i>Academic standards of programmes must be rigorous and challenging in order to ensure students’ overall development and transformation</i>	Strong congruence <i>between employers and academic staff.</i> Gap: <i>Students unaware of the importance of maintaining standards or the role of standards in their own development.</i>
	<i>Enhance institutional reputation and industry links</i>	Strong congruence
	<i>Apply and monitor attendance requirements</i>	Congruence
Curriculum	<i>Balance curriculum focus between subject knowledge and core transferable skills.</i>	Strong congruence
	<i>Focused rather than extensive subject knowledge</i>	Gap: <i>Academics emphasise wide coverage of subject. They should aim for in-depth focused knowledge of key subject areas in the first instance. Coverage of further areas must not be at the expense of core fundamental subject knowledge and application of that knowledge which is greatly emphasised by employers.</i>
	<i>Emphasis on developing core generic skills for the work place</i>	Strong congruence <i>between employers and academic staff.</i>

		<p>Gap: More emphasis on transferable skills by IT curriculum is required.</p> <p>Gap: Students lack adequate awareness what skills for the workplace really entails.</p>
	Practical components in the curriculum	<p>Strong congruence between employers and academic staff.</p> <p>Gap: Lesser emphasis by students as they may lack adequate awareness of the role of curriculum.</p>
	Ensure relevance of the programme to the industry	<p>Strong congruence between employers and academic staff.</p> <p>Gap: Lesser emphasis by students as they may lack adequate awareness of the role of curriculum.</p>
Learning Resources	Quality of teaching facilities	Strong congruence
	Range and quality of library resources	Strong congruence
	Staff: student ratio	Congruence
	Sports and recreation facilities	Congruence
Teaching & Learning	Tutors' ability to provide accessible explanation of subject concepts	<p>Strong congruence between employers and academic staff.</p> <p>Gap: Lesser emphasis by students.</p>
	Tutors using interesting teaching methods and teaching styles including providing interactive student-centred learning opportunities.	<p>Strong congruence</p> <p>However, students' definition of interesting teaching methods may differ from that of the HEP/employers'. Students are also unaware of the importance of new and innovative learning experiences in enhancing their skills and learning. Students must be made aware of the benefits of particular methods and adequately supported during the process of familiarisation with non-traditional teaching methods.</p>
	Tutors' role in motivating students' interest in the subject	Strong congruence

	<i>Tutors' role in developing core transferable skills for the workplace</i>	Strong congruence <i>However, students may be unaware of what workplace skills really entail. Academics require considerable support and guidance in fulfilling this role.</i>
	<i>Tutors' role in stimulating thought and behavioural and personal skills</i>	Strong congruence between employers and academic staff. Gap: <i>Many students unaware of the relationship between behavioural skills and critical thinking and skills for the workplace. Academics require considerable support and guidance in fulfilling this role.</i>
	<i>Tutors' empathy towards individual student needs</i>	Strong congruence between academics and students.
	<i>Tutors' skills of organisation and communication of subject of teaching staff</i>	Strong congruence between employers and academic staff. <i>Students do not attach the same level of importance.</i>
	<i>Efforts put in by students outside the classroom to read and understand the subject material</i>	Strong congruence between employers and academic staff. Gap: <i>Students unaware of their role as co-participants in the learning process.</i>
	<i>Enhance contribution of all students to overall learning experience inside & outside the classroom</i>	Congruence between employers and academic staff. Gap: <i>Students unaware of their role as co-participants.</i>
	<i>Additional academic support systems to enhance participation of students in the learning process and develop student awareness</i>	<i>Emphasised by academic staff. However the importance of such support systems is not recognised by students essentially as they are unaware of their role as co-participants.</i>
Assessments	<i>Variety of assessment methods</i>	Strong Congruence <i>However, many students and IT academics tend to prefer traditional assessment methods such as examinations.</i>

	<i>Emphasis of assessments on skills and not just subject knowledge</i>	Strong Congruence between academic staff and employers. Gap: Students place less emphasis on this criterion. Moreover, employers and academics do not believe that assessments are currently a good indicator of students' critical/overall skills and this must be addressed.
	<i>Feedback provided to students</i>	Strong Congruence between academic staff and employers. Gap: Students unaware of the importance of feedback to their learning
	<i>Use of continuous assessment strategy</i>	Congruence

In accordance with Becket and Brooke (2005) who identify the requirements of an analytical quality framework, the following elements have been considered in proposing the framework:

1. ***The degree to which inputs, processes and outputs in HE are assessed:*** The SDQ comprise key criteria which fall under the input, process and output dimensions of HE. As all the criteria exert differing but considerable influence on the overall learning experience and ultimately the outcomes of HE, it is important to ensure a synergistic balance between all dimensions i.e. Admissions Factors, Resources, Curriculum, Institutional factors, Teaching and Learning and Assessment.
2. ***The degree to which different stakeholder perspectives are considered:*** the strength of the proposed framework is that it is based on the key determinants of quality as perceived by the three main stakeholders. Where there are gaps or differences in perceptions among the three groups it entails managing the differing expectations and deficiencies.
3. ***The extent to which different quality dimensions are considered:*** All the key dimensions of quality in HE as identified in the literature are covered by the framework.

Academic support systems such as registration and finance are not included, as they were not identified by the stakeholders as having a direct impact on the quality of HE.

- 4. *The balance of quality assurance versus quality enhancement practices and processes:*** An essential requirement of the proposed framework is that managing quality is a normal, integral and continuous aspect of all activities within HEPs. This necessarily involves quality assurance and enhancement as integral aspects of quality management and should not be seen as disparate functions. Quality thus becomes the responsibility of every member of staff, who must be empowered and supported so that they are able to monitor and enhance their own contribution towards addressing the SDQ and the objectives of the programme/institution.

In order to effectively apply the framework, the following areas must be addressed carefully by HEPs:

6.2 STUDENT INSTITUTIONAL SOCIALISATION

If students are to be effective co-participants in HE, they must develop adequate awareness and appreciation of institutional values and what is expected of them (Hill, 1995). The process of developing congruence between the quality values of students and those of academic staff is akin to the service sector equivalent known as '*customer organisational socialization*' (Telford and Masson, 2005, p.108). Similar to service customers, students must be supported in acquiring the skills and knowledge required to interact effectively with the HEP and its staff so as to achieve planned outcomes. This process can be termed 'Student Institutional Socialisation' and should involve the following aspects:

6.2.1 Managing Student Expectations

The framework clearly identifies several gaps in students' awareness particularly their role as co-participants in HE. Closely linked to student participation are the expectations that students have of their tutors, HEPs and HE in general. Hence, an essential first step in enhancing student participation is for HEPs to effectively manage student expectations which may include those that are realistic and unrealistic. It is inevitable that students' perceptions of the quality of their experience will depend on their values and expectations which will in turn influence their involvement and commitment to the teaching and learning

process. However, while the importance of student expectations is acknowledged in the literature, there is not much evidence to show how they can be effectively managed.

Managing student expectations would require HEPs to identify and address even those expectations that it may not be possible to satisfy. As this study revealed, some students have unrealistic expectations in that they expect HEPs to be responsible for their success rather than accepting their own responsibility. It is clear that in many cases students' quality values are based on a view of HE in which their contribution is minimal. Despite the importance given to the concept of students as partial employees or co-producers in the process of HE, students clearly do not share in this understanding. However, the interviews did reveal that students can be made aware of the importance of their own contribution to learning and that it is possible for HEPs to create appropriate opportunities to raise students' awareness of the importance of participation and the ensuing benefits in relation to their future success. In particular, students must understand that teaching can facilitate learning but does not cause it.

While most HEPs tend to address issues such as teaching and learning strategies and student responsibilities during induction or orientation sessions, it is suggested that much more is required in order to deal effectively with this issue. Students must be informed of what is and what is not possible together with a rationale for the distinction. This may include creating opportunities for peer learning, more intensive student and staff interactions with a greater facilitative role on the part of the instructor. In doing so, HEPs must be aware that students tend to be strongly influenced by the perceptions of other students and negative word of mouth has the potential to compound problems. As recommended by Hill et al (1996) such dialogue between HEPs and students should encourage students to reflect on past learning experiences so that they can build on these experiences and thereby develop new skills, while at the same time allow negative approaches to be identified. It is also important to note that student expectations may change over time and, therefore, must be closely monitored. The interviews revealed that students were influenced by their peers and word of mouth communications. Hence, as suggested by Hill (1996) HEPs would do well to use their existing students in their communications with prospective students; however, they must first ensure that these students share the HEPs' values through a process of mutual dialogue.

6.2.2 Student Motivation

Irrespective of the quality of curriculum, learning opportunities and resources provided by an HEP, key factors that determine student learning relates to their motivation and commitment. The study revealed that student motivation and interest in the subject depends to a large extent on the lecturer. However, many lecturers may tend to focus on the learning process rather than more aesthetic qualities such as enjoyment with the lesson and socialisation, in addition to developing empathy with students' needs. The enthusiasm and skill of the teaching staff are very important in transmitting a sense of enthusiasm for the subject matter which is instrumental in student motivation. This requires teaching staff to become reflective practitioners and ensure their skills of communication, presentation and organisation of class contact sessions are as effective as possible. Opportunities for student interaction must be introduced so that participants can develop new skills within a HE ambience and the friendly atmosphere of the classroom.

6.3 LEARNER TRANSFORMATION

Transformation of learners and the development of core transferable skills for the workplace have been identified as the primary objective of HE. Transferable skills that were identified as most critical for graduates of undergraduate programmes in Business and IT disciplines are a combination of personal behavioural skills, generic transferable skills, general awareness and focused subject specific and practical knowledge. Specifically, they include the following:

- Willingness to learn and learning skills
- Adaptability and flexibility
- Positive attitude to work and work ethics
- Self and time management skills
- Effective skills of communication and interaction
- Ability to think critically and solve problems
- Ability to work effectively in teams
- Good grasp of fundamental core subject related topics and their application
- Knowledge of practical components
- Creativity

While HE in the past was more concerned with the transmission of knowledge, it must now make the transition to developing a portfolio of skills and knowledge that will enable graduates to succeed after graduation and enable them to make use of the information explosion that marks today's society. In order to facilitate student engagement with the learning process and the meaning of the subject, HEPs would do well to provide a coherent and consistent approach to learner transformation. This process should also involve employers who can provide an external perspective to students through industry links and workshops. As highlighted by Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) learner transformation requires curriculum aimed at transformation, teaching for transformation and assessment for transformation.

6.3.1 Curriculum focus on core transferable skills

The role of curriculum in encouraging teaching staff to focus on the required portfolio of skills and subject matter cannot be over emphasised. It might also be appropriate for curriculum developers to assess whether the curriculum incorporates an unnecessarily wide range of subject content that may not be really be necessary for the workplace and, therefore, sets unrealistic goals for most students. This should not be interpreted as a sign of lowering academic standards; rather the goal of undergraduate education should be to produce graduates who have adequate core subject knowledge together with the higher level cognitive and transferable skills such as application, analysis, problem solving, communication and learning.

6.3.2 Balance between subject and skills by teaching staff

Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) recommend a fundamental paradigm shift in the notion of teaching as a routine and subsidiary task to a key performance indicator. Moreover, if the development of skills is to be effective, teaching staff will also have to make the transition from subject focus to skills focus in their teaching. They will essentially drive the development of core skills as most undergraduate Omani students will not have the necessary skills to make this transition on their own as their previous experience in school is largely tutor-centred. This entails motivating reluctant students to move from passive learning to active learning, which requires providing and supporting them with the tools required to cope with such transition. As revealed by this study, academic staff may not be

comfortable or familiar with their role in developing core transferable skills although they fully agree with their importance. In order to facilitate learner transformation, tutors would have to stimulate thinking and cross over to the areas of personal and behavioural development. This may be a strong culture shift for many staff who see their role as imparting subject knowledge and research, not students' personal and skills development. Academic staff may not be properly equipped to handle this transition; hence, HEPs will have to provide appropriate opportunities to develop their awareness of the methods and approaches which can contribute to skills development and student transformation. The emphasis should be on developing a proactive institutional culture where all staff engage in supporting student transformation. This then requires team work and creative approaches at tutor level, institutional level and also national level by redefining objectives and adopting innovative teaching and learning strategies aimed at enhancing students' engagement with the learning process.

6.3.3 Balance between subject and skills focus in assessments

Assessment of student learning can be the most significant factor affecting transformation (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007). The study revealed that employers and to a lesser extent academics do not consider assessments an appropriate measure of core competencies. This indicates that assessment strategies must evaluate skills and overall abilities rather than focus only on subject understanding. Incorporating a variety of assessment methods that is appropriate for developing and measuring core transferable skills and which will encourage students to become active rather than passive learners is vital, however, students require careful support in managing the time demands involved.

6.4 MANAGEMENT COMMITMENT

In order to build commitment to quality both academics and management must fully appreciate the reasons why managing quality is imperative. Ultimately, quality standards will provide the main competitive edge and ensure the longer-term survival of an institution. The reality may be that when HEPs are funded by the government, the criticality of achieving this competitive edge may be diminished to an extent. On the other hand, when HEPs are privately funded, economic considerations and shorter-term objectives of meeting student expectations may overrule the longer term objectives of meeting broader

stakeholder expectations. Nevertheless in the long run, both types of institutions would have to reconcile their longer and shorter term aspirations in order to remain successful.

No quality model will be effective or can be successfully implemented unless there is adequate management commitment to quality and an adequate understanding of the complexities and subtleties of the concept of quality. The success of a quality strategy depends on the acceptance and involvement of everybody involved in its implementation and this requires a conducive organisational culture. As Senge (2000) observes, HE institutions are very complex organisations where knowledge is fragmented into specialised areas and educators are engaged in a highly individual activity of teaching. Bringing about changes in such a complex system requires commitment and acceptance of a holistic, integrated approach to quality so that it permeates throughout the institution and becomes everyone's responsibility. Management aspects include adequate attention to the appropriateness and interdependence of leadership, strategies and internal structures that will enable the integration of quality management as a normal, integral and continuous function within the institution.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

7.1 SIGNIFICANCE AND STRENGTHS OF THE STUDY

By its very nature HE is a complex activity and managing the quality of that activity is complicated and multifaceted. Similar to any management model, the successful implementation of a quality management model requires an appropriate degree of consensus by key stakeholders, without which it will not be effective in the longer-term. Identifying quality values of stakeholders is, therefore, considered critical as they underpin the motivations, expectations and the resultant behaviour of the main participants in HE. However, there are very few studies that seek to determine what the primary stakeholders in HE, namely students, academics and employers view as critical to the quality of HE. Moreover, there is a lack of agreement on the dimensions of quality and quality models in HE. This study, therefore, sought to address a gap in the literature by identifying quality criteria considered to be most important by students, academics and employers. In doing so, it has added a new dimension to the existing literature by providing a framework for managing quality in HE that is based on stakeholder determinants of quality.

The study was located in Muscat, Oman and focused on students and academics on Business Studies and IT undergraduate programmes in five out of the seven private HEPs in Muscat offering these programmes. A sample of the larger employers from both the public and private sector were also included in the survey. Currently, there is a lack of research on HE in Oman and hence this study on quality criteria pertaining to private sector HEPs also provides important and hitherto unavailable insights into the local issues in HE. In order to develop the framework, the methodology adopted was one of sequential methodological triangulation which provided both depth and breadth to the findings which is considered to be one of the main strengths of the study. The quality values of each stakeholder group were first identified through semi-structured in-depth individual interviews with a range of stakeholders from each of the three groups. This data provided an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of stakeholder perspectives. The quality values identified from the interviews were termed the 'stakeholder determinants of quality' (SDQ). The knowledge thus gained of the SDQ together with the issues identified in the interviews provide a more comprehensive understanding than is currently available in the literature of

the quality values of the three stakeholder groups in HE. This understanding was further enhanced and validated by exploring the extent of differences and similarities in quality values among the three groups using quantitative methods. A quantitative survey among a wider population of each stakeholder group was also conducted using a structured questionnaire derived essentially from the stakeholder determinants of quality that emerged from the interviews. The survey identified the criteria on which the three groups of stakeholders were congruent in their values or were significantly different. In combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, the aim was to complement the findings from each method and produce results which highlight the contributions of both and provide an integrated understanding of relevant issues. Thus the qualitative methods informed the quantitative methods and the rich data and resultant findings from both methods informed the framework for managing quality based on stakeholder values. A significant strength of this study is therefore the methodological approach which can be replicated in any setting, and not only offers the advantages of methodological and sample triangulation but also systematically explores and establishes the quality values and similarities and differences thereof between a considerably large population of the primary stakeholders in higher education.

The study established that academic staff and employers place the greatest emphasis on the core academic factors that have a direct impact on HE i.e. teaching and learning, academic standards and the curriculum. They share the perception that enhancing standards, student motivation and commitment and rigour of the learning process and environment, thereby requiring students to be active participants in the educational process are most important. The survey findings showed congruence among the three stakeholders on the importance of the process aspects of HE. i.e. the teaching and learning function. Students' engagement with the learning process and the lecturers' ability to impart, facilitate subject understanding and develop behavioural and transferable skills are considered some of the most critical issues in managing quality by all three groups. There is strong evidence that understanding a static corpus of subject knowledge is no longer considered an indicator of quality by all three stakeholders, but particularly so by employers. Accordingly, a very significant finding of this study is that employers, academic staff and students, although to a lesser extent, consider the development of core transferable skills and behavioural skills as possibly more important than even subject specific knowledge and practical understanding of the subject. Employers attach the lowest importance to the outcomes and assessment dimension. While

the study also established that students and academic staff, in particular, attach comparatively more importance to assessments than employers, the survey responses of all three stakeholders' imply a lack of confidence on the ability of current assessments to accurately evaluate the overall skills and critical attributes of graduates.

The survey also found that the most significant purpose of HE is to develop qualities in students that will allow them to act with a high degree of autonomy by equipping them with the skills to think critically. Furthermore, consistent with this purpose, the transformative definition of quality in HE found considerable support from all stakeholders. However, it also revealed that it is undesirable and perhaps impossible to arrive at a single definition of quality or purpose for HE. While there is no overall consensus on defining quality in HE, all the definitions have considerable support, with some definitions finding more support according to each stakeholder perspective. This underlines the multidimensional character of quality as emphasised in the literature and requires HEPs to achieve an appropriate balance between the key objectives of HE as well as consider a range of qualities as correlates of quality in HE. All three stakeholders also identify with the value added concept of HE where the value added to students in terms of overall development, knowledge and skills, which may not necessarily be reflected in the grades obtained, is what constitutes quality in HE. Stakeholders do not consider that high admission standards and high grades at the point of entry are necessary indicators of the quality of subsequent educational provision.

However, although student transformation was strongly emphasised, a key finding of this study is that the majority of students have no awareness of the importance of student participation in the transformation process. These findings have significant implications for HEPs as lack of student participation will negatively affect the outcomes of HE. While students attach the most importance to the process of teaching and learning and the resource inputs that affect their learning, they attribute the least importance to their own input. They show strong resistance to student-centred teaching methods and the majority prefer traditional teaching and assessment methods that allow them to remain passive participants. The lack of emphasis by students on their own role in the learning process is best highlighted by the fact that only a small proportion accept responsibility for their own academic success while the larger proportion place the responsibility for ensuring students' academic success on the institution. The findings indicate a gap between students on the one

hand and employers and academics on the other, regarding the importance of student participation in all aspects of the learning process. The findings are also consistent with the literature that students may not really value high academic standards or may not value standards as highly as academic staff.

The study also revealed that while there are no significant differences between the quality values of IT and Business students, there are significant differences between IT and Business academic staff. IT academic staff attach less importance to maintaining standards, developing core transferable skills, student participation and are less open to the use of non-traditional methods of teaching and assessment in comparison to Business staff. There is thus more congruence between employers and Business staff on learner transformation and student participation, while IT staff are more congruent towards students' views in certain aspects.

Based on the findings from the interviews and the survey with three groups of stakeholders, the study offers a unique framework for managing quality in higher education, i.e. the framework of stakeholder determinants of quality in higher education. The uniqueness of this quality framework lies in its approach as it seeks to address the differences or gaps in quality values between the stakeholder groups while it builds on the congruencies in their views. It identifies the key areas that must be addressed, monitored and evaluated by HEPs in order to manage the quality of their provision. The SDQ framework recommends that in order to achieve the desired outcomes, HEPs must provide for what has been termed 'student institutional socialisation', which is similar to the service sector equivalent of customer socialization, whereby students are supported in acquiring the skills and knowledge required to interact effectively with the HEP so that they can achieve planned outcomes. A key objective of student institutional socialisation must be to develop congruence between the quality values of students and those of academic staff. Managing student expectations, motivation and thereby behaviour are an important part of this process and must be considered as a core issue for academic management. The framework also emphasises learner transformation as the ultimate purpose of higher education through a balanced approach to subject knowledge and transferable skills in all aspects of curriculum, teaching and learning and assessment.

With the increasing concern that quality assurance requirements are diverting too much of academics' attention from their primary role of teaching and research, what is needed is an approach to quality that is integrated into the normal routine of any HEP, rather than focusing solely on the requirements of external regulatory bodies. This study offers an insight into an approach to quality management that is based on an understanding of key values of the main participants in HE. It is held that such an approach will help develop shared values and quality consciousness within institutions which quality assurance regimes that are externally imposed have not been very successful in achieving.

7.2 FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The strength of the SDQ framework stems from the fact that it is based on a combined stakeholder perspective and in its ability to draw attention to the gaps and congruencies among stakeholder groups, thereby ensuring that gaps are monitored properly and managed effectively. Any HEP in Oman that falls within the parameters of this study can implement the framework by first conducting a detailed evaluation of their own individual position in relation to each of the criteria listed in the framework. This would entail a thorough and critical self-review on how the HEP is positioned in each of the five dimensions of quality in the framework, namely, admissions criteria, institutional, resources, teaching and learning and assessment, a process which will require the HEP to evaluate the comprehensiveness of their own existing provision. Following this evaluation, the HEP would need to plan how it can satisfactorily bridge the gap between its own current position and the key areas as highlighted in the framework. Adequate emphasis must be given to learner transformation and to critical and personal development, which has been identified as the ultimate purpose of higher education. In order to do so, the institution must ensure that its curriculum design, teaching and learning methods and opportunities and assessment strategies all facilitate learner transformation, and provide an adequate balance between subject knowledge and skills in all aspects of its provision. In this respect, the role of the lecturer in managing student expectations, needs and motivations is fundamental. It is vital that lecturers use appropriate teaching methods in order to stimulate active learning and maximise participation. Academic staff will need strong support from the management and the HE community in general if they are to fulfill the role described above. It will require a

coordinated and consistent approach by the HEP in order to reinforce the message of student participation.

HEPs outside of the parameters of this study could replicate the methodological approach to determine if there are differences in the SDQ as a result of their differing subject disciplines, geographical location or other contextual factors. Nevertheless, the SDQ framework offers several areas that must be addressed by any HEP irrespective of its own individual position, or how much it differs from the HEPs in this study in terms of subject discipline, geographical area or institutional background and ownership. Regardless of these sorts of differences, the student population is diverse, and this lack of homogeneity must be addressed and managed carefully by all HEPs in order to maximise learning. It is therefore highly recommended that all HEPs invest sufficient time and resources in a continuous process of student institutional socialisation, as this is the first and most critical step in managing students' expectations and motivation. Without it, students are unlikely to understand what is expected of them. With it, greater congruence between internal stakeholder values should be achieved, which is essential in order to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning experience, and the ultimate outcome of HE.

7.3 LIMITATIONS

Given that the current study is limited to undergraduate programmes in Business Studies and IT disciplines, it is entirely possible that there are differences in quality values of students and academic staff from other subject disciplines. Furthermore, as the study focused on private HE in Oman, it may lack applicability to other HE environments. Although employers were included in the study as the primary external stakeholder, the study does not consider the views of other external stakeholders such as the Ministry of Higher Education who have a key regulatory role in the HE sector.

7.4 SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study was limited to private HEPs in Oman. Further research into quality values of stakeholders of government owned HEPs will provide an understanding of whether such quality values will differ according to the ownership orientation of the HEP. Research into

the quality values of students and academic staff in other fields of study and employers in these sectors would be valuable in determining if quality values are generalisable across other subject disciplines. Future studies could also explore quality values of key stakeholders in other countries and in other subject disciplines and with different types of tertiary institutions in order to test whether the results obtained are general and consistent across different samples. The study finds significant lack of awareness among students on their own role as co-participants in the HE process and also highlights the often unrealistic expectations that students may have for HEPs and their tutors. Bridger (2007) emphasises that students' values, beliefs and experiences, must be identified so that they can be incorporated and respected. However, there is very limited literature on how student expectations can be managed and students can be motivated to contribute effectively to the teaching and learning process. This study illuminates the need for further research into student expectations and ways in which such expectations can be managed effectively.

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APPENDIX: 1

Table 19: Differences between academic staff on subject area: Mann Whitney Test

	Subject	% >3	% =3	% <3	Rank	Sum of Ranks	Asym Sig. (2-tailed)
High academic standards	IT	82.1%	17.9%	.0%	31.78	1239.50	0.024*
	Business	84.8%	15.2%	.0%	42.08	1388.50	
Curriculum practical focus	IT	82.1%	15.4%	2.6%	32.55	1269.50	0.048*
	Business	100%	.0%	.0%	41.17	1358.50	
Job relevance of programmes	IT	97.4%	2.6%	.0%	31.81	1240.50	0.012*
	Business	100%	.0%	.0%	42.05	1387.50	
Understanding student needs	IT	89.7%	7.7%	2.6%	31.73	1237.50	0.018*
	Business	100%	.0%	.0%	42.14	1390.50	
Teaching methods	IT	89.7%	7.7%	2.6%	31.99	1247.50	0.025*
	Business	97.0%	3.0%	.0%	41.83	1380.50	
Accessible explanation	IT	84.6%	12.8%	2.6%	31.85	1242.00	0.006**
	Business	100%	.0%	.0%	42.00	1386.00	
Interactive learning methods	IT	82.1%	17.9%	.0%	32.45	1265.50	0.044*
	Business	100%	.0%	.0%	41.29	1362.50	
Student efforts	IT	84.6%	12.8%	2.6%	31.42	1225.50	0.013*
	Business	100%	.0%	.0%	42.50	1402.50	
Faculty focus on workplace skills	IT	84.6%	12.8%	2.6%	31.27	1219.50	0.012*
	Business	93.9%	6.1%	.0%	42.68	1408.50	
Overall teaching & learning criteria	IT	92.3%	5.1%	2.6%	31.35	1222.50	0.011*
	Business	93.9%	6.1%	.0%	42.59	1405.50	
Overall assessment criteria	IT	94.9%	5.1%	.0%	32.40	1263.50	0.029*
	Business	93.9%	6.1%	.0%	41.35	1364.50	
Suitability of examinations	IT	35.9%	30.8%	33.3%	41.29	1610.50	0.023*
	Business	18.2%	18.2%	63.6%	30.83	1017.50	
Institutional responsibility	IT	12.8%	33.3%	53.8%	42.50	1657.50	0.005**
	Business	12.1%	12.1%	75.8%	29.41	970.50	
Meeting specified objectives	IT	97.4%	2.6%	.0%	31.58	1231.50	0.014*
	Business	90.9%	9.1%	.0%	42.32	1396.50	
Transformative ability	IT	82.1%	17.9%	.0%	31.92	1245.00	0.027*
	Business	93.9%	6.1%	.0%	41.91	1383.00	
Meeting student needs expectations	IT	89.7%	2.6%	7.7%	41.23	1608.00	0.025*
	Business	54.5%	6.1%	6.1%	30.91	1020.00	
Learning for themselves	IT	94.9%	5.1%	.0%	32.36	1262.00	0.035*
	Business	100%	.0%	.0%	41.39	1366.00	

>3 shows % of respondents who selected 4 (very important/ agree) or 5 (most important/ strongly agree)

>4 shows % of respondents who selected 5 (most important/strongly agree)

*Significant at 0.05 level of significance ** Significant at 0.01 level of significance

APPENDIX 2

SAMPLE OF INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Stakeholder: Student/Academic/Employer

Gender: Male/Female

Name: _____

Institution: _____

Department (academics/employers) _____

Programme/Subject (students/academics): _____

Designation (academics/employers) _____

Level/Year (students) _____

1. What do you think of first when I say the words “quality higher education”?
2. What according to you are the most important issues that affect the quality of higher education? (at least three factors)
3. Why are each of these important?/. What is it that about these factors that affect the quality of the education?
4. Have you had any negative experiences regarding any of the factors identified by you
5. What is the role of the tutor in higher education?
6. Is the quality of student intake a key indicator in determining the quality of higher education?
7. Do you think the assessment and grades obtained by students are important in evaluating quality? Why?
8. What kind of skills should higher education be developing?
9. What do you think is more important, assessing skills or subject knowledge?
10. How often are you (only students) influenced by your friends’ negative comments and opinions?
11. Which of the following would you consider more important in higher education (with examples) and why:
 - The inputs (students, resources, curriculum, faculty)
 - The process (of teaching & learning, teaching methods, assessments)
 - The outcome of education: grades, knowledge, skills

APPENDIX 3
STUDENT PERCEPTION OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
QUESTIONNAIRE

The objective of this questionnaire is to determine what students think is important in managing quality in higher education. The information that is provided will be used for research purposes only and will be kept entirely confidential.

- A. Level/Year.....
- B. Programme/ specialization:.....
- C. Male Female
- D. Name of university/college.....
- E. Nationality.....

Which of the following criteria is most important to you as a student?
Circle a number on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1=least important and 5 =most important.

F. ADMISSION CRITERIA :

1) High admission criteria for entering a programme:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
2) Testing students aptitude or ability before entry to a course:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
3) Students on the programme have good attitude and commitment to studies:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
4) The variety of programmes/courses on offer:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
5) Overall how important do you consider all the above admission criteria to be:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	

G. INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

6) Reputation of the institution among the general student population:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
7) Reputation of the institution among employers & general community:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
8) Strict attendance requirements for classes:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
9) Programmes set high academic standards and challenges for student to achieve:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
10) The opportunities provided for extracurricular activities for students:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
11) Overall how important do you consider all the above institutional factors to be:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	

G. CURRICULUM AND CONTENT

12) The coverage and currency of the curriculum and content of the course:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	

13) The emphasis of the curriculum on subject specific knowledge:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
14) Practical components in the curriculum & links to the industry:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
15) Relevance of the programme to the job market:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
16) The emphasis on developing skills for the work place e.g. skills of self management, communication, creativity, team work, analysis, application:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
17) Overall how important do you consider all the above curriculum & content criteria to be:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important

H. RESOURCES

18) Quality of teaching facilities such as classrooms, labs and lecture halls:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
19) The range and quality of library resources:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
20) Campus layout and appearance:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
21) Comprehensive sports and recreation facilities:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
22) The number of students in a classroom or the staff: student ratio:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
23) Overall how important do you consider all the above resources criteria to be:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important

I. TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE

24) Ability of lecturers to understand individual student needs:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
25) The teaching methods and teaching styles of the lecturers:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
26) The ability of the lecturer to explain topics in a manner accessible to all students;				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
27) Teachers teaching on a programme have similar teaching styles/methods:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
28) The experience of lecturers in terms of number of years and level of teaching				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
29) Ability of lecturers to motivate students' interest in the subject:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
30) The qualifications of lecturers:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
31) Teachers have an impressive and warm personality:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important

32) Ability of lecturers to make students think, to change attitudes and develop behavioural skills:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
33) The contribution of other students to a student's overall learning experience inside & outside the classroom:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
34) Opportunities provided for interactive student centred learning experiences in the classroom:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
35) The effort put in by students outside the classroom to read and understand the subject material:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
36) Additional academic support systems available to students:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
37) Ability of the lecturer to organise, communicate & assess their subject areas:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
38) Focus of lecturers on developing skills required for the workplace:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
39) Overall how important do you consider the teaching & learning criteria to be:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	

J. OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT

40) Achieving high grades in assessments:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
41) The variety of assessment methods:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
42) Continuous assessments in a module requiring students to work continuously:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
43) The feedback provided to students on assessment performance:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
44) Assessments set high standards for student performance:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
45) The emphasis of the assessments on developing skills for the workplace:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
46) The emphasis of the assessments on subject specific knowledge:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	
47) Overall how important do you consider the outcomes & assessment criteria to be:	1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important	

K. To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statements?

48) It is more important for students to cope with their courses easily rather than setting high standard.	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	

49) <i>Examination is the best method to test students knowledge and skills.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
50) <i>Students have the capacity to evaluate the teaching they receive.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
51) <i>It is the institution's responsibility rather than the students' to ensure students are successful in their studies. .</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
52) <i>Attracting high quality student input is a "necessary" condition for ensuring quality in higher education.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
53) <i>The quality of the student intake is not important; the focus should be on the "value added" to the student (comparison of before and after).</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
54) <i>The professional and self development of students during the process of higher education is more important than the grades achieved by the student.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
55) <i>Using performance indicators (e.g. number of graduates with high marks, number of computers to students, student to staff ratio) is an effective means of measuring the quality of an institution.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	

L. Which of the following statements best reflects your view of quality in higher education?

56) <i>Providing education that is exceptional and has high standards.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
57) <i>Achieving consistency in internal processes.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
58) <i>Providing education that meets specified objectives or standards.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
59) <i>The ability of the institution to be efficient and effective.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
60) <i>The capacity of the institution to be transformative and to continually learn through empowerment and enhancement of all involved.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
61) <i>Providing education and services that meets the needs and expectations of students.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
62) <i>Developing graduates who meet the expectations of the society.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
63) <i>Developing graduates who meet the requirements of employers.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
64) <i>Equipping students with the skills to learn and think for themselves.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	

THANK YOU

APPENDIX 4
ACADEMIC STAFF PERCEPTION OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
QUESTIONNAIRE

The objective of this questionnaire is to determine what academics consider to be important in managing quality in higher education. The information that is provided will be used for research purposes only and will be kept entirely confidential.

- A. Please indicate your formal role in the Institution
 Lecturer/Professor Programme Manager Head of Faculty/Department
 Any other: please specify
- B. Subject areas of teaching.....
- C. Male Female
- D. Nationality
- E. Number of years experience in higher education

**Which of the following criteria is most important to you as an academic?
 Circle a number on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1=least important and 5 =most important.**

F. ADMISSION CRITERIA :

1) <i>High admission criteria for entering a programme:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Least important Low Importance Average Importance Quite Important Most Important					
2) <i>Testing students aptitude or ability before entry to a course:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Least important Low Importance Average Importance Quite Important Most Important					
3) <i>Students on the programme have good attitude and commitment to studies:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Least important Low Importance Average Importance Quite Important Most Important					
4) <i>The variety of programmes/courses on offer:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Least important Low Importance Average Importance Quite Important Most Important					
5) <i>Overall how important do you consider all the above admission criteria to be:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Least important Low Importance Average Importance Quite Important Most Important					

G. INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

6) <i>Reputation of the institution among the general student population:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Least important Low Importance Average Importance Quite Important Most Important					
7) <i>Reputation of the institution among employers & general community:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Least important Low Importance Average Importance Quite Important Most Important					
8) <i>Strict attendance requirements for classes:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Least important Low Importance Average Importance Quite Important Most Important					
9) <i>Programmes set high academic standards and challenges for student to achieve:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Least important Low Importance Average Importance Quite Important Most Important					
10) <i>The opportunities provided for extracurricular activities for students:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Least important Low Importance Average Importance Quite Important Most Important					
11) <i>Overall how important do you consider all the above institutional factors to be:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Least important Low Importance Average Importance Quite Important Most Important					

G. CURRICULUM AND CONTENT

12) <i>The coverage and currency of the curriculum and content of the course:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Least important Low Importance Average Importance Quite Important Most Important					

13) The emphasis of the curriculum on subject specific knowledge:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
14) Practical components in the curriculum & links to the industry:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
15) Relevance of the programme to the job market:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
16) The emphasis on developing skills for the work place e.g. skills of self management, communication, creativity, team work, analysis, application:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
17) Overall how important do you consider all the above curriculum & content criteria to be:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important

H. RESOURCES

18) Quality of teaching facilities such as classrooms, labs and lecture halls:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
19) The range and quality of library resources:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
20) Campus layout and appearance:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
21) Comprehensive sports and recreation facilities:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
22) The number of students in a classroom or the staff: student ratio:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
23) Overall how important do you consider all the above resources criteria to be:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important

I. TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE

24) Ability of lecturers to understand individual student needs:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
25) The teaching methods and teaching styles of the lecturers:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
26) The ability of the lecturer to explain topics in a manner accessible to all students;				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
27) Teachers teaching on a programme have similar teaching styles/methods:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
28) The experience of lecturers in terms of number of years and level of teaching				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
29) Ability of lecturers to motivate students' interest in the subject:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
30) The qualifications of lecturers:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
31) Teachers have an impressive and warm personality:				
1	2	3	4	5

Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
32) Ability of lecturers to make students think, to change attitudes and develop behavioural skills:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
33) The contribution of other students to a student's overall learning experience inside & outside the classroom:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
34) Opportunities provided for interactive student centred learning experiences in the classroom:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
35) The effort put in by students outside the classroom to read and understand the subject material:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
36) Additional academic support systems available to students:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
37) Ability of the lecturer to organise, communicate & assess their subject areas:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
38) Focus of lecturers on developing skills required for the workplace:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
39) Overall how important do you consider the teaching & learning criteria to be:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important

J. OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT

40) Achieving high grades in assessments:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
41) The variety of assessment methods:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
42) Continuous assessments in a module requiring students to work continuously:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
43) The feedback provided to students on assessment performance:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
44) Assessments set high standards for student performance:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
45) The emphasis of the assessments on developing skills for the workplace:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
46) The emphasis of the assessments on subject specific knowledge:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
47) Overall how important do you consider the outcomes & assessment criteria to be:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important

K. To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statements?

48) It is more important for students to cope with their courses easily rather than setting high standard.				
1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

49) <i>Examination is the best method to test students knowledge and skills.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
50) <i>Students have the capacity to evaluate the teaching they receive.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
51) <i>It is the institution's responsibility rather than the students' to ensure students are successful in their studies. .</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
52) <i>Attracting high quality student input is a "necessary" condition for ensuring quality in higher education.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
53) <i>The quality of the student intake is not important; the focus should be on the "value added" to the student (comparison of before and after).</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
54) <i>The professional and self development of students during the process of higher education is more important than the grades achieved by the student.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
55) <i>Using performance indicators (e.g. number of graduates with high marks, number of computers to students, student to staff ratio) is an effective means of measuring the quality of an institution.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	

L. Which of the following statements best reflects your view of quality in higher education?

56) <i>Providing education that is exceptional and has high standards.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
57) <i>Achieving consistency in internal processes.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
58) <i>Providing education that meets specified objectives or standards.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
59) <i>The ability of the institution to be efficient and effective.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
60) <i>The capacity of the institution to be transformative and to continually learn through empowerment and enhancement of all involved.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
61) <i>Providing education and services that meets the needs and expectations of students.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
62) <i>Developing graduates who meet the expectations of the society.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
63) <i>Developing graduates who meet the requirements of employers.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
64) <i>Equipping students with the skills to learn and think for themselves.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	

THANK YOU

**APPENDIX 5
EMPLOYER PERCEPTION OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
QUESTIONNAIRE**

The objective of this questionnaire is to determine what employers think is important in managing quality in higher education. The information that is provided will be used for research purposes only and will be kept entirely confidential.

- A. Please indicate your official designation.....
- B. Name of Organisation.....
- C. Department.....
- D. Male Female
- E. Nationality

Which of the following criteria is most important to you as an employer of Business and IT graduates? Circle a number on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1=least important and 5 =most important.

F. ADMISSION CRITERIA :

1) <i>High admission criteria for entering a programme:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
	Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
2) <i>Testing students aptitude or ability before entry to a course:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
	Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
3) <i>Students on the programme have good attitude and commitment to studies:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
	Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
4) <i>The variety of programmes/courses on offer:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
	Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
5) <i>Overall how important do you consider all the above admission criteria to be:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
	Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important

G. INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

6) <i>Reputation of the institution among the general student population:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
	Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
7) <i>Reputation of the institution among employers & general community:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
	Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
8) <i>Strict attendance requirements for classes:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
	Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
9) <i>Programmes set high academic standards and challenges for student to achieve:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
	Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
10) <i>The opportunities provided for extracurricular activities for students:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
	Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
11) <i>Overall how important do you consider all the above institutional factors to be:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
	Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important

G. CURRICULUM AND CONTENT

12) <i>The coverage and currency of the curriculum and content of the course:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
13) <i>The emphasis of the curriculum on subject specific knowledge:</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
14) <i>Practical components in the curriculum & links to the industry:</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
15) <i>Relevance of the programme to the job market:</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
16) <i>The emphasis on developing skills for the work place e.g. skills of self management, communication, creativity, team work, analysis, application:</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
17) <i>Overall how important do you consider all the above curriculum & content criteria to be:</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important

H. RESOURCES

18) <i>Quality of teaching facilities such as classrooms, labs and lecture halls:</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
19) <i>The range and quality of library resources:</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
20) <i>Campus layout and appearance:</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
21) <i>Comprehensive sports and recreation facilities:</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
22) <i>The number of students in a classroom or the staff: student ratio:</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
23) <i>Overall how important do you consider all the above resources criteria to be:</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important

I. TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE

24) <i>Ability of lecturers to understand individual student needs:</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
25) <i>The teaching methods and teaching styles of the lecturers:</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
26) <i>The ability of the lecturer to explain topics in a manner accessible to all students;</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
27) <i>Teachers teaching on a programme have similar teaching styles/methods:</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
28) <i>The experience of lecturers in terms of number of years and level of teaching</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
29) <i>Ability of lecturers to motivate students' interest in the subject:</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
30) <i>The qualifications of lecturers:</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
31) <i>Teachers have an impressive and warm personality:</i>				

1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
32) Ability of lecturers to make students think, to change attitudes and develop behavioural skills:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
33) The contribution of other students to a student's overall learning experience inside & outside the classroom:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
34) Opportunities provided for interactive student centred learning experiences in the classroom:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
35) The effort put in by students outside the classroom to read and understand the subject material:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
36) Additional academic support systems available to students:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
37) Ability of the lecturer to organise, communicate & assess their subject areas:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
38) Focus of lecturers on developing skills required for the workplace:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
39) Overall how important do you consider the teaching & learning criteria to be:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important

J. OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT

40) Achieving high grades in assessments:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
41) The variety of assessment methods:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
42) Continuous assessments in a module requiring students to work continuously:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
43) The feedback provided to students on assessment performance:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
44) Assessments set high standards for student performance:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
45) The emphasis of the assessments on developing skills for the workplace:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
46) The emphasis of the assessments on subject specific knowledge:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important
47) Overall how important do you consider the outcomes & assessment criteria to be:				
1	2	3	4	5
Least important	Low Importance	Average Importance	Quite Important	Most Important

K. To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statements?

48) It is more important for students to cope with their courses easily rather than setting high standard.				
1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

49) <i>Examination is the best method to test students knowledge and skills.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
50) <i>Students have the capacity to evaluate the teaching they receive.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
51) <i>It is the institution's responsibility rather than the students' to ensure students are successful in their studies. .</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
52) <i>Attracting high quality student input is a "necessary" condition for ensuring quality in higher education.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
53) <i>The quality of the student intake is not important; the focus should be on the "value added" to the student (comparison of before and after).</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
54) <i>The professional and self development of students during the process of higher education is more important than the grades achieved by the student.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
55) <i>Using performance indicators (e.g. number of graduates with high marks, number of computers to students, student to staff ratio) is an effective means of measuring the quality of an institution.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	

L. Which of the following statements best reflects your view of quality in higher education?

56) <i>Providing education that is exceptional and has high standards.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
57) <i>Achieving consistency in internal processes.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
58) <i>Providing education that meets specified objectives or standards.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
59) <i>The ability of the institution to be efficient and effective.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
60) <i>The capacity of the institution to be transformative and to continually learn through empowerment and enhancement of all involved.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
61) <i>Providing education and services that meets the needs and expectations of students.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
62) <i>Developing graduates who meet the expectations of the society.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
63) <i>Developing graduates who meet the requirements of employers.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
64) <i>Equipping students with the skills to learn and think for themselves.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	

THANK YOU