A Study of the Convergence between Entrepreneurship, Government Policy and Higher Education in the Sultanate of Oman

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Abstract

This paper will present the results of a study that explores the inter-relationship between government policy and a key element in an enabling infrastructure, education, in the development entrepreneurship, in the Sultanate of Oman.

Daniel Isenberg's work in developing an 'ecosystem' approach to understanding entrepreneurship builds upon the notion that key capitals are required for entrepreneurs to flourish. Isenberg, however, incorporates an understanding that entrepreneurs develop in a system of interacting agents (organizations and individuals) in conjunction with the other non human resources in their environments. This paper examines one of the 'capitals' or 'sub-capitals' of an entrepreneurial ecosystem, namely, education, and specifically higher education, in the context of policy development and implementation in Oman.

The paper draws upon key respondent interviews to garner informed insight into government initiatives deployed in higher education in the Sultanate to develop indigenous Omani entrepreneurs.

Findings of the study point to a dislocation between approaches adopted in higher education institutions and the context in which they have been employed. The study indicates that there has not been a holistic appreciation of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Oman. Developing such a perspective will require significant changes in mind-sets amongst government, higher education professionals, industrialists and, importantly students, to produce an effective ecosystem in which entrepreneurship flourishes.

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Keywords

Entrepreneurship; Higher Education; Ecosystems; Policy; Oman.

Introduction

There is little extant literature on the attempts by Oman to diversify and develop an economy based on entrepreneurial endeavour. This paper examines policies and initiatives employed within the higher education sector in Oman intended to develop entrepreneurship. It views the initiatives through the prism of entrepreneurial ecosystems, a framework developed by David Isenberg at Babson College in the USA.

The paper begins with an overview of the Omani context and reports on approaches taken in Oman to develop entrepreneurship through initiatives in higher education institutions (HEIs). It goes on to introduce entrepreneurial ecosystems with particular emphasis on higher education within an ecosystem. The method of research employed is then described. The paper proceeds by presenting an analysis of the views of key representatives of agents within the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem on the development and impact of initiatives in higher education to foster entrepreneurship in Oman. The paper concludes with observations on the impact of initiatives in higher education designed to promote entrepreneurship in Oman.

The Omani Context: The Necessity for Enterprise and Entrepreneurship

Oman is a developing society and economy. The Omani economy has been radically transformed over a series of development plans beginning with the first five-year plan (1976–1980). The five-year plans aim to deliver economic growth and social welfare. In addition,

Vision 2020 was launched in 1996. It was developed in collaboration with the IMF and established the country's economic and social goals over 25 years. It outlines a developmental path towards an economy that is less dependent on the oil sector and in which gas resources are leveraged to boost industry, providing for more sustainable growth in the long-term (Deloitte, 2013).

Oman's gross domestic product (GDP) was $ (US) 79.66 billion in 2013 (World Bank, 2015). Petroleum activities account for 48 percent of GDP. Of the 52 percent of non-petroleum activity, significant elements are based on the petroleum industry, for example, manufacturing of chemicals and natural gas, approximately another 15-20 percent of GDP (Oman National Statistics, 2015). Oman's economic oil output is estimated at 16 years without significant investment albeit any estimates remain a contentious issue.

Oman's indigenous population has been growing, driven by factors such as economic development, improved healthcare and lower infant mortality. In 2013 the population was 3.87 million, of which 60 percent are below the age of 25. There are 2.17 million indigenous Omanis and 1.7 million are expatriates. In 2012, the workforce was 1.85 million. Private sector accounted for 80 percent of all employment, whilst 11 percent worked in the public sector and a further 9 percent were registered with the public authority for social insurance. Of the 0.2 million employees in the public sector, 14 percent were expatriates. In direct contrast, expatriates account for 88 percent of the 1.49 million private sector employees (Oman National Statistics, 2015).

The Omani economy is thus severely unbalanced, heavily dependent on petroleum and expatriate workers. The enormous disparity in the private sector between expatriate and

indigenous workers is of particular significance. Lacking effective private sector companies, the paucity of the private sector's contribution to the Omani economy is a key issue for the government. Engaging the private sector in the development of new businesses and ideas is an important aspect of developing entrepreneurship.

Education and Higher Education in Oman

In 1970, there were only three schools in the whole of Oman with literacy at around 66 percent. Sultan Qaboos University was founded in 1986 as the first higher education institution in Oman. Significant investments in education created a national education infrastructure in 40 years from a base of zero. There are now 28 HEIs, controlled by the Ministry of Higher Education. Most HEIs are privately owned, for profit ventures, whilst some are public HEIs, for example, Sultan Qaboos University and the Higher College of Technology. The private colleges and universities enrol around 35,000 students. Sultan Qaboos University has around 15,500 students, whilst the Higher College of Technology has around 7,300 students enrolled (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015).

Education up to graduate level is free for Omanis with further generous subsidies by the government to eligible students to continue their studies at the postgraduate level either at home or abroad. Although traditionally engineering oriented, business studies and more 'creative' areas of study are becoming popular at HEIs. Research output from Omani HEIs is limited due to the relative infancy of the higher education sector. Also, more able Omani students tend to take their undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications abroad, often in the US and Europe.

Current Provision of Entrepreneurship Support, Education & Research in HEIs.

The development of entrepreneurial activity has been the focus of considerable attention by the Omani government. In January 2013, a SMEs symposium, held under His Majesty Sultan Qaboos's directive, placed a significant focus and responsibility on HEIs in supporting SMEs and entrepreneurship. The ultimate goal of Oman is to foster knowledge-based socioeconomic and human resource development. A number of public and private sector initiatives have been launched in support of enterprise and entrepreneurship (see Table 1 below for examples initiatives by public sector authorities). What should be noted is that the plethora of initiatives mainly represents interventions to the perceived and perhaps real need for action, however, they are not underpinned by strong research evidence in terms of need or impact.

Public Sector Authority	**Enterprise & entrepreneurship initiative**
Ministry of Manpower	Established incubators in Oman's technical colleges
Nizwa Technical College	Set-up an incubator
Nizwa University	Set-up an incubator
Ministry of Higher Education	Established Academic Entrepreneurship Council – aim to spread awareness through media, workshops and seminars, organise events for presenting entrepreneurial business ideas to business supporters and investors, and also mediate the creation of new ventures by academic and private sector actors and institutionalise legal formats for collaborative arrangements
Omani government	Self-sustainable program (Injaz) set up in 2006 for training students in entrepreneurship
Omani government	Redesign of colleges of education curriculum to include graduate entrepreneurial schoolteachers
The Research Council (TRC)	Organise initiatives, such as linking entrepreneurs with key players in business communities, an open grant programme for research in entrepreneurship research and contracts for entrepreneurial support services and academic grants for entrepreneurship development and IPR protection

Table 1: *Initiatives By Public Sector Authorities*

Despite the evidence of intent on behalf of the Omani government and its agents, the Ministry of Higher Education and HEIs, the impact of these initiatives has not been systematically researched. They certainly have not been assessed adopting a holistic approach.

Entrepreneurship, Ecosystems and Higher Education

There is a vast array of literature on the development of entrepreneurship, many with normative development frameworks, that authors suggest can be applied to any situation. Kenworthy and McMullan (2013) question the practical implications and even worth of the volumes of normative and positivistic research into entrepreneurship. Isenberg (2010) suggests that studying entrepreneurship as an ecosystem can overcome the shortcomings of the current approaches. An entrepreneurial ecosystem incorporates an understanding that entrepreneurs develop in a system of interacting organizations and individuals in conjunction with the other non human resources in their environments (Also see Moore, 1993). An ecosystem is made up of agents that interact with each other. Ecosystems are complex and adaptive systems; they incorporate multi-agent and level systems; they exhibit entropy: vulnerable to death. Systems, however complex, that do not adapt will eventually die. Ecosystems are self-organizing and move towards chaos when presented with a complex task. Although these complex adaptive ecosystems have weak cause-effect linkages, there is capacity for pattern recognition. Isenberg (2014) describes the term entrepreneurial ecosystem as a "… *metaphor for fostering entrepreneurship as an economic development strategy*". The diagram below depicts the thirteen factors or agents that Isenberg and his colleagues at Babson have identified. These, they claim, form the pillars on which the edifice of entrepreneurship stands.

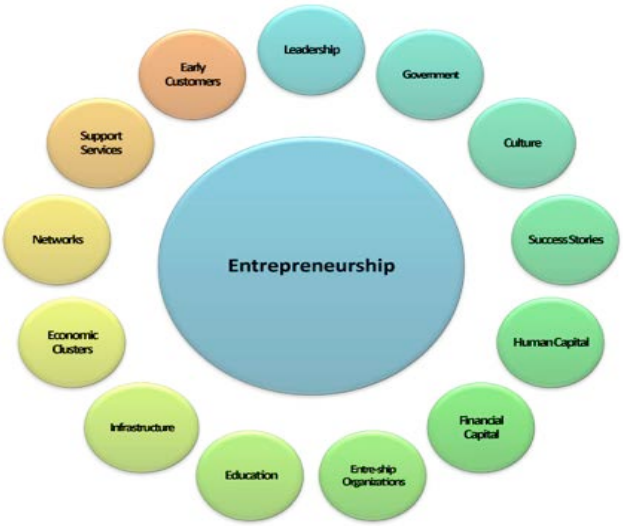

Figure 1: *Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (Isenberg, 2015)*

Isenberg (Isenberg, 2015) considers culture as one of the thirteen elements in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. However, culture can be defined as the belief system that underpins an ecosystem (See: Schein, 1985; Triandis, 2004; Weick, 2005). Thus, it is argued here that culture is core to an ecosystem. This is illustrated in Oman, where the issue of developing entrepreneurship is about changing the Omani culture. In Omani developing entrepreneurship concerns changing the perceptions of all the agents in the system, including government, parents, teachers, lecturers, employers and students.

A key agent within the entrepreneurial ecosystem is education. A number of authors have highlighted education's relevance and importance in the development of entrepreneurs. Although higher education is not listed as a sub-set of education by Isenberg, some studies have focused on the impact of higher education on entrepreneurship (Gibb, 2002; 2012; Gibb et al., 2009; Low, 2005; Kaufman Foundation, 2008; World Economic Forum, 2009). Gibb and other writers identify universities both as entities within which entrepreneurship can flourish and a catalyst for entrepreneurship in the wider communities they serve. Gibb

(2013) emphasizes the utility of an action learning approach to develop entrepreneurial capacity and capabilities – learning by doing (Also see: Senge, 1990; Revans, 1997).

Isenberg proposes (2010) that ecosystems do not operate in a vacuum and different contextual features need to be considered. Although growing, the context in which enterprise and entrepreneurship occurs is an under-researched area (Daskalopoulou and Liargovas, 2008; Elmes et al., 2012; Fritsch, 2011; Martinelli, 2003; O'Neill Jr. et al., 2009). Variances in space and location reportedly produce different drivers for the encouragement or discouragement of enterprise and entrepreneurship. As Welter (2011) indicates, there is growing understanding in entrepreneurship research that economic behaviour can be better conceptualized within its historical, temporal, institutional, spatial, and social contexts. Oman possesses some unique characteristics that will determine its entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Research Approach

The complexity and multi-layered nature of entrepreneurial ecosystems and the under-researched Omani context necessitated the application of interviews as the method of data collection. Interviews are one of the primary qualitative analysis techniques as a means of accessing individual perceptions, meanings and their constructions of their realities (Punch, 2005). Several authors (Durgee, 1985; Bryman, 1988; Burns, 2000; Deetz, 2000; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Flick, 2002; Mason, 2002) view interviewing as an appropriate method to obtain data on meaning, values, interpretation, social construction processes and human interactions. Unstructured or open-ended interviews (Noaks and Wincupp, 2004) offer maximum flexibility when attempting to explore a research topic and obtain rich data (Silverman, 2006) and thus they have been applied in this study. Interviewees were asked to

simply talk about the impact of government policies directed at higher education on the development of entrepreneurship in Oman. They were informed of the subject and the purpose of the research prior to the interview. Experienced interviewers and researchers conducted interviews. Interviews were conducted in English and took between thirty and ninety minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Purposive sampling was used which aimed to focus on informed participants in the utilisation of higher education to develop entrepreneurship in Oman (Sekaran, 1992; McBurney, 1994; Coyne, 1997; Creswell, 2006, Saunders et al., 2009). Purposive sampling enables selection of participants from a population based on a researcher's knowledge of the population (Patton, 1990) and his/her intuition (Babbie, 1995). This is informed by study of the subject, experience, observation and reflection. Purposive sampling allows for the collection of information-rich data from a relatively small sample (Patton, 1990). Since this study aimed to obtain the convergence of higher education policy, initiatives and implementation regarding entrepreneurship, the sample was purposively selected using maximum variation sampling using key respondents from government, higher education, and industry. The sample also included students. The fourteen interviews can be categorised:

- Government x 2
- HEIs x 4
- Industry x 4
- Students x 4

Thematic analysis, a method of identifying/ analysing/reporting patterns across data sets, was applied. As the research focus was exploratory, a range of views were sought, specifically an inductive thematic method was utilized (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this research identified three main themes, which included procedural, training and impact (See Figure 2 below: Key Themes) that prove useful constructs when considering the entrepreneurial ecosystem and higher educations' impact upon that system.

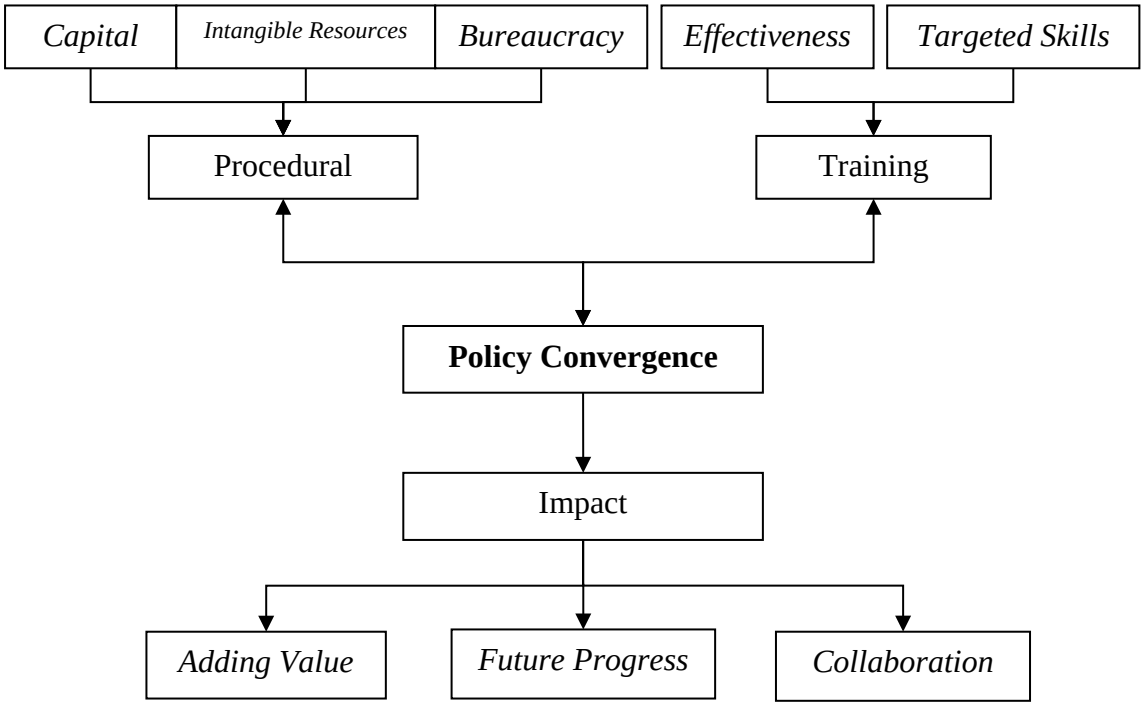

Figure 2: *Key themes and sub-themes identified around the area of policy convergence and implementation*

The findings indicate that while policy and practice display similarities in terms of the understanding of the underpinning principles of sustainable development of entrepreneurship in Oman, there are differences in perceptions as to the effectiveness and actionability of the existing policies, particularly in terms of higher education across the key stakeholders.

Many favourable policies and procedures for entrepreneurship development are currently in existence. These include: access to capital; availability of intangible resources such as expert advice and guidance; removal of ‘red tape’; and supportive educational policies. Evidence suggests, however, that there are divergences in three key areas of entrepreneurship development: procedural, training and implementation.

In the context of entrepreneurship training in Oman, it has witnessed growing attention and investment. For example, in 2016 all university students will have to complete a compulsory entrepreneurship course developed by a number of HEIs in Oman. Particular attention has been expended on developing the tourism sector that is currently positioned as one of the key sectors for economic diversification. Despite establishing entrepreneurial educational and training policies, practice indicates that the current approach lacks effectiveness, especially in terms of developing a practical aspect. Pourmohammadi (2015) states, *“…'hands-on' approach should be developed to equip young Omanis with the necessary skills to work in [tourism] sector...”* (p.5). A dislocation is apparent between higher education policy procedures and practices, and the requirements of key economic sectors.

Respondents believe that current government policies require updating. Future policies and procedures need to be co-developed through collaborative projects that blend the macroeconomic needs assessed by the government, actionability of proposed policies experienced by practitioners and the education/training implications. Such policy convergence carries the potential of greater magnitude of impact of entrepreneurs on Oman’s sustainable socio-economic development.

Respondents from government and higher education remarked that some of the initiatives employed were "off the shelf" solutions adopted from Western models. They referred to Oman's unique culture and the necessity for interventions to be locally sympathetic. This has resonance with Welter (2011) and Isenberg (2010) belief that ecosystem develop should be localised. Respondents saw a place for HEIs in Oman to house experiments in developing entrepreneurship. Isenberg (2010) identifies the need to relentlessly experiment to find context specific solutions in the quest to develop successful entrepreneurial ecosystems. Respondents also believed that HEIs should evaluate government initiates in rigorous and objective ways. Beyond an input into training, HEIs in Oman must develop a sophisticated research capacity. This in itself is another complex ecosystem.

In terms of procedural context constraints, findings suggest that inexperienced entrepreneurs are largely unaware of the existing regulatory environment in which they operate. Where awareness exists, respondents suggested that the Omani political and socio-economic environments have entrenched and largely inefficient and ineffective structures cemented by excessive bureaucracy. Newly established enterprises find difficulties accessing information related to both the sources of investment and the available intangible resources that can provide expert advice and guidance. Respondents believe that higher education can and is assisting in providing knowledge and skills for potential entrepreneurs.

Conclusion

The development of entrepreneurial capacity is essential for any economy. However, entrepreneurial activity is the product of the complex interaction of a number of agents. The strength of Isenberg's ecosystems approach to understanding the development of

entrepreneurship is that it combines grounded research and practice. Governments, such as in Oman, must consider all the agents that contribute to creating entrepreneurship in an economy, not in isolation, but as agents in an integrated mutually interactive system. Higher education's greatest impact on developing entrepreneurship in any society may be its power to change values and belief systems and therefore change the prevailing culture.

The three main themes, procedural, training and impact, which emerged from the research, cannot themselves be considered in isolation. Despite being significant individually, they must be studied as part of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Oman. The requirement for localised solutions for Omani issues is clear and matches Welter, Isenberg and other writers' understanding that ecosystems have to be considered in terms of their contextual applicability. In addition to learning from other economies and societies, interventions must be tailored to the Omani specific context.

Alongside higher education initiatives, legal, bureaucratic, and regulatory frameworks are required. Amendment of procedures and training are essential as Oman finds its own solutions. As Isenberg identified, Oman will have to experiment relentlessly and holistically to develop a successful model or models of interventions to assist entrepreneurship development. Higher education perhaps could contribute most in this respect. Experiments undertaken need to be systematically and objectively assessed and universities and even colleges can either house some of these experiments, such as incubators, and/or provide the research skills to assess initiatives.

Theoretical implications/ Originality of contributions

Whilst previous literature has recognised the importance of entrepreneurship and general policy, this is the first study to explore in-depth, the relationship between higher education planning, policy and the implementation in Oman. This research amplifies the work of Isenberg and his colleagues at Babson. To develop entrepreneurship, a holistic approach has to be adopted.

Practical limitations/Implications

This study is important to policy makers particularly as they are designing practical policy in higher education in Oman, but also in wider context of the Middle East. The finding highlights the importance of collaboration in policy implementation aimed at increased impact.

Research limitations/Implications

This study was a single study conducted within Oman. The relatively small sample of key respondent interviewees provides a limited perspective on the subject. Therefore the results may not be generalizable. Results may not have currency outside of Oman or other economies. The study was conducted at a single point in time; therefore it will include some lag between policy decisions being taken today and the eventual impact upon entrepreneurs.

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