

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

Ali H. Fayadh

Program Director, *ELS-Oman*, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

ahfayadh@omantel.net.om

ahfayadh@yahoo.com

Protectionism in Higher Education

- ▶ In **HE**, Protectionism is seen as a HEI's "*motivation to omit or conceal areas where improvements are required or, when they cannot be concealed, to present them in a form that deliberately over exaggerates positive aspects and underplays problems. It may even motivate HEIs to ensure that certain people will be unavailable to meet with the Audit Panel during the Audit Visit*" (*Quality Audit Manual, OAC, 2008:45*).

Research Problem

In order to explore the situation in the HE sector, this work attempts to answer the following questions:

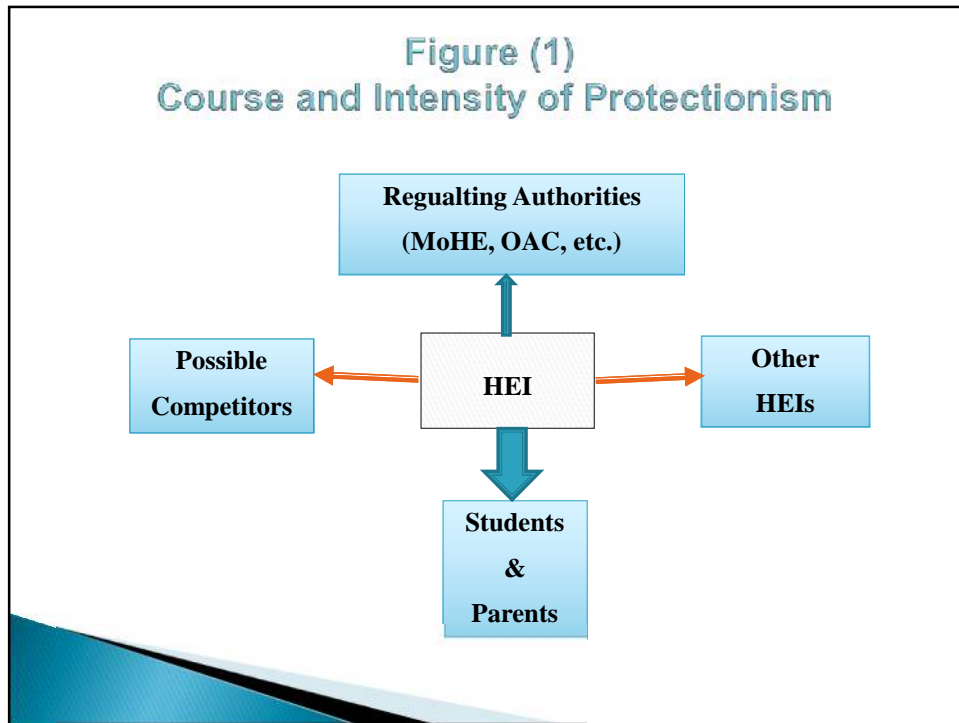
- What measures do quality monitoring organizations take to ensure transparency in Omani Higher Education?
- Are these measures adequate or not?
- What are the types of protectionary acts exercised by some HEIs?
- How to avoid protectionism?

Types of Protectionism

(1)

Route & Intensity

- ▶ Protectionary acts are undertaken to protect the HEI against (an)other stakeholder(s); stakeholders are of different ranks:
 - **Governing (regulatory authorities),**
 - **Governed (students, parents, and other beneficiaries),**
 - **Equal (other HEIs and competitors).**
- ▶ **Figure (1)** shows the course and intensity of Protectionism



(2) Legality

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

Factors Triggering Protectionism

1. **Flexibility of Current Policies**
2. **Safe Investment**
3. **Foreign Affiliation Leniency**
4. **Insubstantial Statement of Intent**

Identification of Unlawful Practices

- **Unfulfilled promises**
 - ▶ They are noticed when the HEI makes hollow promises accompanied with propaganda coverage, e.g., new campuses, more facilities, enrolment concessions, etc.
- **Unsolicited actions**
 - ▶ These are claimed to be done to satisfy higher monitoring authorities, e.g., requirements of performance indicators (staff numbers, Omanization rates, new posts, etc.), benchmarking, etc.
- **Latent incompetence**
 - ▶ This is practiced in the absence of efficient staff and/or effective administrative mechanisms and academic policies, e.g., practicing plagiarism, unreal statistics, etc.
- **Voracity**
 - ▶ This is exercised when the HEI minimizes its statement of intent to generate more profits, e.g., indulgence in non-academic investments, creating false settings, mismanagement of (financial) resources, etc.

Inventory of Protectionary Acts

- ▶ **During Normal Times**
 - Self-Promotion or Bragging
 - Propaganda
 - Community Service Exploitation
 - Improper Labels
 - Ineffective Practices

- ▶ **Post-Normal Times (during Quality Checks)**
 - Before
 - During Portfolio Writing
 - Before Panel Visit
 - During Panel Visit
 - After Panel Visit
 - *Before Panel Report*
 - *In Reply to Panel Report*
 - *After Panel Report*

Tentative Terms of Reference

Question	Answer	Action to Avoid Protectionism
<p>What is Protectionism?</p>	<p>Protectionism is an undesirable act aimed to conceal facts from the HEI's stakeholders, by providing false/distorted information about the institution in order to distance itself from possible harmful measures. In other words, it is an unethical, unlawful action.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To accomplish transparency, a HEI must: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Identify itself clearly by drawing a sound statement of intent (vision, mission, goals and objectives) and applies them via realistic strategic planning. b. Maintain a delicate Resource management process. c. Communicate honestly with its stakeholders. d. Act as a non-profit organization. 2. To serve the interests of ALL stakeholders, and respect the requirements of the regulatory authorities through a legal (and even legalized) protectionary framework.

<p>Who practices it?</p>	<p>It is intentionally practiced by the HEI's owners and senior managers who know the real irregularities of the organization, and inadvertently by other stakeholders who are unaware they are protecting an offensive practice.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To set clear roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder, and sustain them in everyday transactions. 2. To ensure that the people responsible for governance (BoDs & BoTs) and administration (Chancellors, Deans, HoDs, etc.) act independently in terms of their roles and responsibilities and in line with the HEI's statement of intent. 3. To avoid all acts of coercing, threatening, etc. practiced to misinform regulatory bodies or their representatives. 4. To enroll professional cadre and sustain honest community, adopt rigid criteria of selection, procedures of orientation, and appeal/complaint mechanism to be checked by regulatory authorities periodically.
--------------------------	---	--

<p>How is it practiced?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Unfulfilled promises 2. Unsolicited actions 3. Latent incompetence 4. Indifference 5. Voracity 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To act rationally in line with a HEI's own realistic statement of intent. 2. To satisfy international performance indicators and cooperate with other peer HEIs. 3. To provide learners with reputed human resources and reliable facilities. 4. To avoid all ungrounded allegations.
-----------------------------	---	---

<p>When is it most practiced?</p>	<p>Protectionism is adhered to in:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self-reports to a regulatory authority (during quality checks) 2. Reports to a governing body (in annual reports) 3. Peaks of student enrolment (before regular study commencement) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To provide self-informative manuals and guidelines concerning all types of reports required. 2. To organize explanatory workshops, meetings and gatherings to simplify the tasks and exchange experience. 3. To produce evaluative reports relying on accurate data, and relevant performance indicators and benchmarking tools. 4. To endorse an obvious reward policy, reflecting dedication on the part of the governing and regulatory stakeholders. 5. To facilitate cooperation, not competition, between HEIs. This is the role of the regulatory authorities who must manage annual fairs, control programme licensing policy, and assure existence of manuals.
-----------------------------------	---	--

Conclusion

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

THANK YOU