CONCEPTUALISING QUALITY ASSURANCE AND HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN OMAN PRIVATE HIGHER INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract: The results of the quality audit and institutional standards assessment carried out for higher education institutions (HEIs) in Oman indicate that there is insufficient improvement in quality assurance and human resource management practices. Several (HEIs) have not met the specified criteria and, therefore, they have been placed on probation. Nevertheless, Oman has demonstrated awareness of the progress made in higher education, characterised by rapid advancements in the adoption and execution of quality assurance measures, and the utilisation of an effective human resource management system. This awareness has been developed through the Islamic beliefs which characterised the Omani culture. The present study aims to investigate the quality assurance and human resource management practices effects within private higher institutions in the Sultanate of Oman. A literature review was conducted to enhance comprehension of the conceptualisation of these two ideas throughout the industry. A well-equipped atmosphere at private higher education institutions in Oman has been shown to facilitate the implementation and cultivation of a culture of quality assurance by the government. It is imperative to focus more on implementing general human resource management practices by cultivating an effective and equitable system that adequately supports employees in their respective roles. These practices include planning, attraction, retention, and development of human resources. As a result, the education sector will be capable of providing an outstanding level of education to students, who will benefit from the satisfaction of the labour force.

Keywords: External agencies, Globalisation, Quality audit, Institutional standards assessment, Regulations

1. Introduction

Quality in the context of higher education institutions refers to the extent to which workers conform to a predetermined set of standards and processes. The establishment of these standards and regulations is the responsibility of the government, external agencies, or institutions (Tight, 2020). The practices and standards encompass the conceptualisations of the desired actions that institutions aim to undertake to achieve their objectives, hence quality is regarded as a theoretical concept (Tight, 2020). Harvey and Green (1993) argue that the concept of quality is subjective, as it is contingent upon the perspective of the individual utilising it. Additionally, it is noted that individuals hold diverse perspectives on their understanding of the concept of quality. At different junctures, an individual may adopt multiple attitudes regarding the concept of quality. It is essential to note that various stakeholders within the field of higher education may possess divergent perspectives on the concept of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993). According to Ntshoe et al. (2010), the quality

assessments made by different stakeholders can vary based on the evaluation's specific objectives, criteria, and contextual factors. Moreover, the concept of quality in Islam has a crucial impact on the lives of Muslims. Khan and Khan (2018) argue that Islamic management concepts have a specific influence on shaping people's behaviours spiritually and ethically. Furthermore, quality is emphasised as a fundamental aspect of Islamic theology, where Muslims are encouraged to adopt quality practices as a fundamental part of their lives (Salah & Alhabeeb, 2020).

Human resource management is a deliberate and systematic approach to effectively managing an organisation's most valuable assets, namely its people. These employees, individually and collectively, play a crucial role in the organisation's overall success in attaining its objectives (Armstrong, 2008). Moreover, strategic Human Resource Management (HRM) is an approach that high-performing firms use to manage their people resources effectively. In the realm of higher education, there is a pressing need for more scholarly investigation that integrates conceptual analysis with empirical evidence in strategic HRM. According to Allui and Sahni (2016), the level of discrepancy is considerably higher in the Arab world. This observation suggests a dearth of extensive research undertaken about HRM within the context of higher education institutions (HEI). According to Norhasnina et al. (2018), the increasing significance of strategic HRM can be ascribed to the recognition that in economies driven by knowledge, employees are regarded as a crucial element in attaining a competitive advantage.

In addition, the success of firms relies heavily on the crucial components of Quality Assurance (QA) and HRM practices. Multiple research has indicated a positive correlation between both factors, namely the quality of employee performance, and organisational performance (Rodjam et al., 2020; Almutairi & Arabiat, 2021; Bastas & Altinay, 2019; Obeidat et al., 2018). However, the present study aims to perform a comprehensive literature evaluation about quality assurance and HRMPs within the context of higher education. The study aims to elucidate the potential impacts of both quality assurance and HRM practices on the cultural dynamics within educational establishments of private higher institutions in Oman. The subsequent outlines serve as the structural basis for the paper. The discussion commences with a concise synopsis of Islamic customs about quality assurance and the administration of human resources procedures. The subsequent section of the research elucidates the concept of quality assurance in higher education, specifically focusing on quality assurance within higher education institutions in Oman. This section pertains to the topic of human resource management practices. Furthermore, the discussion section addresses the inquiries arising from the subjects' findings explored in the literature review. Ultimately, the culmination of the study is encapsulated in the form of a conclusion, serving as the final segment of the scholarly endeavour.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Quality Assurance and Human Resource Management Practices in Islam

The Islamic faith places significant emphasis on the concept of quality, which is considered paramount throughout several domains of life, encompassing personal behaviour,

commercial transactions, social engagements, and religious observances. The significance of excellence and the pursuit of perfection in all endeavours is emphasised in the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) (Elzoubi et al., 2021). According to Al-Momani (2021), the comprehensive integration of an Islamic perspective into the notion of a quality management system enhances its significance. It increases the probability of its adoption within Islamic communities. The Holy Qur'an emphasises the significance of quality, tidiness, and thoroughness. The inclusion of an Islamic perspective enhances the importance of this system and increases the probability of its adoption within Islamic countries. Furthermore, Islam is highly esteemed for its comprehensive cultural framework derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah, evident in various domains such as science, literature, politics, and all other facets of Muslim life (Al-Momani, 2021).

Moreover, the significance of human resource management practices in Islam is demonstrated by prioritising the welfare and productivity of individuals and society. According to Al-Salmani et al. (2015), Islam incorporates several essential human resource management practices, including the provision of equitable and impartial treatment, adherence to ethical principles, cultivation of compassion and empathy, promotion of work-life balance, emphasis on continual learning, and facilitation of personal and professional development. According to Godil et al. (2019) and Fesharaki and Sehhat (2018), Islamic HRM practices exhibit distinct characteristics in organisations that employ individuals of the Islamic faith, operate within predominantly Muslim societies, and adhere to the principles of Sharia law. The cornerstone of Islamic HRM is rooted in Islamic law and ethics, which place significant emphasis on attributes such as fairness, reliability, and accountability among workers.

2.2 Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The higher education sector has garnered much public scrutiny and evaluation. The responsibilities of institutions have transformed, resulting in a notable growth in their overall number (Al-Amri et al., 2020). Multiple factors contribute to the transformation of higher education encompassing new forms of governance, reduced levels of public expenditure, globalisation of education, innovative technology, and an increasing need for higher education (Varouchas et al., 2018). According to Chen (2017), the higher education industry has undergone a substantial shift which can be attributed to the process of globalisation, the decline in public funding, the rapid advancement of information technology, and shifts in demographic patterns. Furthermore, these modifications have significantly influenced the evaluation of higher education, resulting in a significant growth in the number of higher education institutions (Chen, 2017).

The implementation of accountability regulations holds greater significance, while governments demand that higher education institutions provide evidence of their effectiveness and quality (Noaman et al., 2017). Accountability and quality assurance have drawn more attention from academics due to this new trend in higher education (Dakovic & Gover, 2019). The importance of accountability in higher education is primarily driven by challenges within the sector, including escalating tuition expenses, declining student completion and progression rates, limited knowledge acquisition, inadequate development

of employable skills, and weakening societal standards (Prakash, 2018). Implementing external quality assurance in higher education has become a reality due to stakeholders' heightened understanding of educational institutions and their pursuit of enhanced educational standards (Stura et al., 2019). The implementation of external quality assessment has been undertaken as a means of augmenting higher education. Quality assurance agencies conduct external quality assessments on higher education institutions (Dakovic & Gover, 2019). According to Shah (2013), the primary objective of the quality agency is to conduct and record quality audits of higher education institutions to enhance quality assurance in critical and other domains. The primary objective of quality assurance in higher education encompasses accountability, control, compliance, and improvement.

Stensaker and Leiber (2015) argue that the function of external quality assessment is to serve as a governance mechanism that facilitates the establishment of a link between national authorities and institutions of higher education. Consequently, the external quality assessment system has evolved into a highly useful asset for universities and other higher education institutions. Furthermore, the assessment has influenced the internal governance structures of universities, a topic that has been extensively researched. The phenomenon has enhanced managerial authority by boosting the importance of central administration within academic institutions. Implementing quality control measures at the program level necessitates the creation of novel accountability structures between the central administration and the subordinate entities responsible for educational provision. According to Beerkens (2018), external quality assessment has also played a role in facilitating strategic management and fostering a sense of shared identity inside universities.

Furthermore, Beerkens (2018) asserted that the implementation of external quality assessment has had a significant role in enhancing the professionalisation of quality systems in higher education institutions. It entails establishing an appropriate bureaucratic structure consisting of specified protocols and criteria and distinct organisational entities or roles to facilitate the fulfilment of duties. Additionally, she stated that quality assurance has implemented protocols, requirements, and hierarchical frameworks perceived to be demanding and ineffective by individuals in the lower levels of the firm. The acquisition of information has played a crucial role in facilitating organisational learning and disseminating best practices inside and between institutions, contributing to the professionalisation process. In addition, quality assurance is associated with a range of outputs. The elements encompass consequences, outcomes, and effects (Kajaste et al., 2015). Quality assurance is anticipated to have various consequences across different domains. The factors Matear (2021) identified include value, organisational performance, student learning, culture, attitudes towards quality assurance, justification of quality assurance, and involvement and participation of students' voices in quality processes.

Since the turn of the millennium, numerous studies have sought to assess the influence of External Quality Assurance on higher education. Brennan and Shah (2000) investigated the influence of quality assurance on higher education institutions (HEIs) in fourteen different countries and made a distinction between the institutional level and the mechanism of impact. According to their theoretical framework, the potential impact may manifest itself across many levels and through the utilisation of three distinct mechanisms. The hierarchical

structure of the educational system consists of various levels, starting with individuals as the fundamental unit. Individuals form the building blocks of faculties/departments, which in turn contribute to the overall functioning of the institution. Furthermore, the institution is crucial to the broader national education system. According to Brennan and Shah (2000), three processes can be employed to bring about change in higher education: rewards, policy, structural modifications, and cultural alterations.

Yung-Chi et al. (2015) assessed the effects of external accreditation across four distinct domains, encompassing the critical aspects which include organisational structure, curriculum design, faculty effectiveness, and learning outcomes. The research reveals that Taiwan's higher education institutions experienced substantial effects due to external accreditation, while various sectors experienced positive results. These factors encompass the implementation of a more robust collaboration between faculty members and staff, an increased focus on students' learning outcomes and instructional methodologies, and the enhancement of internal quality assurance processes inside higher education institutions. Significantly, the study reveals that the internationalisation of higher education institutions has been elevated to a more advanced stage. Finally, the study indicates that faculty sufficiency's effects on research and instruction remain uncertain.

Shah (2012) conducted a study examining the impact of external quality assessment on Australian higher education institutions over a decade. The findings of the study indicate that the occurrence of impact is contingent upon two fundamental factors. In this context, the subjects encompassed are organisational leadership, academic leadership, and teaching and learning. The research also reveals that the external quality evaluation enhances three distinct domains. According to Shuiyun et al. (2015), the enhancement of quality in universities can be achieved through the implementation of strategic planning processes, self-review mechanisms of university committees, and the cultivation of an evidence-based decision-making culture. Wahlén (2004) conducted a study to assess the effects of the national quality audit on Swedish higher education institutions during the period from 1995 to 2003. The research revealed a favourable impact on the advancement of policy formulation and the establishment of institutional quality practices. Nevertheless, there was a lack of observable cultural transformation inside the department. `João Rosa et al. (2006) undertook a study that focused on examining the quality assessment system and its implications at the institutional level. The study's findings indicate that university rectors hold a more favourable perspective on the implications of quality evaluation for educational institutions than the academic staff. The research furthermore reveals that the managerial executives of the organisations have a greater inclination towards internal protocols and services, strategic management, and institutional management frameworks. However, there has been a lack of emphasis on the student learning experience (João Rosa et al., 2006).

Based on the effect studies that have been discussed previously, it is possible to deduce that most of the research is concentrated on the system, structure, teaching and learning, and the general perceptions of external quality assurance in higher education. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to examine the impact of external quality assurance on the internal human resources of private higher education institutions in Oman and its subsequent influence on employee performance.

2.3 Quality Assurance in Oman Higher Education Institutions

The field of higher education in Oman exhibits a lack of isolation from the global educational landscape. Oman is part of the world and a member of the United Nations (UN) and its specialised organisations such as The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It is known that the UN has developed seventeen Sustainable Development Goals which includes SDG4 Quality Education. Conversely, establishing quality assurance might be attributed to various issues necessitating its implementation. According to Goodliffe and Razvi (2011), the need for a skilled and knowledgeable workforce, the responsibility placed on the higher education sector to produce graduates of exceptional calibre, and the limited availability of opportunities for students to pursue higher education studies at the sole government HEI, Sultan Qaboos University, have been identified as factors that contribute to the implementation of quality assurance measures in the higher education sector in Oman.

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA) is tasked with fostering a culture of quality and validating institutions and programmes in the country. Additionally, it is responsible for developing and maintaining the Oman Qualifications Framework (OQF) and ensuring school quality through rigorous assessment processes (Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education [OAAAQA], 2023). On January 13, 2021, Royal Decree 09/2021 was enacted, officially establishing the organisation known as Oman Academic Accreditation Authority and Quality of Education (OAAAQA). The authority was established as the successor of the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA). The OAAA has been replaced by the Oman Academic Council (OAC), which the OAAA succeeded. The formation of the OAAA was authorised by Royal Decree 54/2010 on May 3, 2010 (OAAAQA, 2023). The OAAAQA has defined two steps for implementing quality assurance in higher education in Oman. According to the information in Figure 1, the initial stage is denoted as the quality audit, while the subsequent stage is referred to as the Institutional Standards Assessment (ISA).
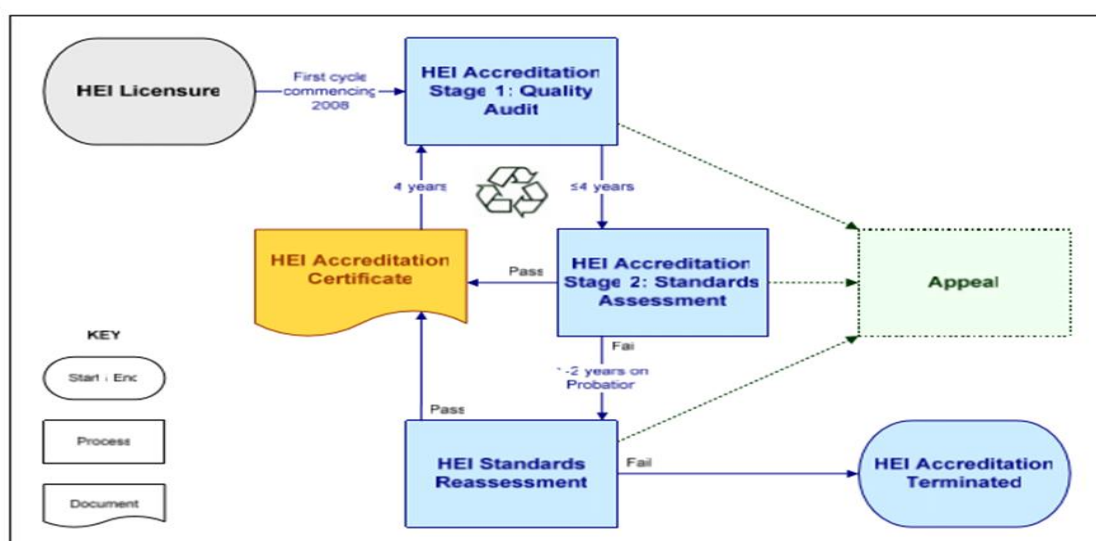

Figure 1. HEI Quality Assurance Framework (Oman Accreditation Council, 2008)

The institutional accreditation process in Oman encompasses several interrelated stages that aim to enable institutions to follow their distinct objectives and goals while guaranteeing minimal criteria (OAAAQA, 2023). Recently, the OAAAQA has decided to conduct the Institutional Standards Assessment after the graduation of the first cohort of the institution, as shown in Figure 2 below.
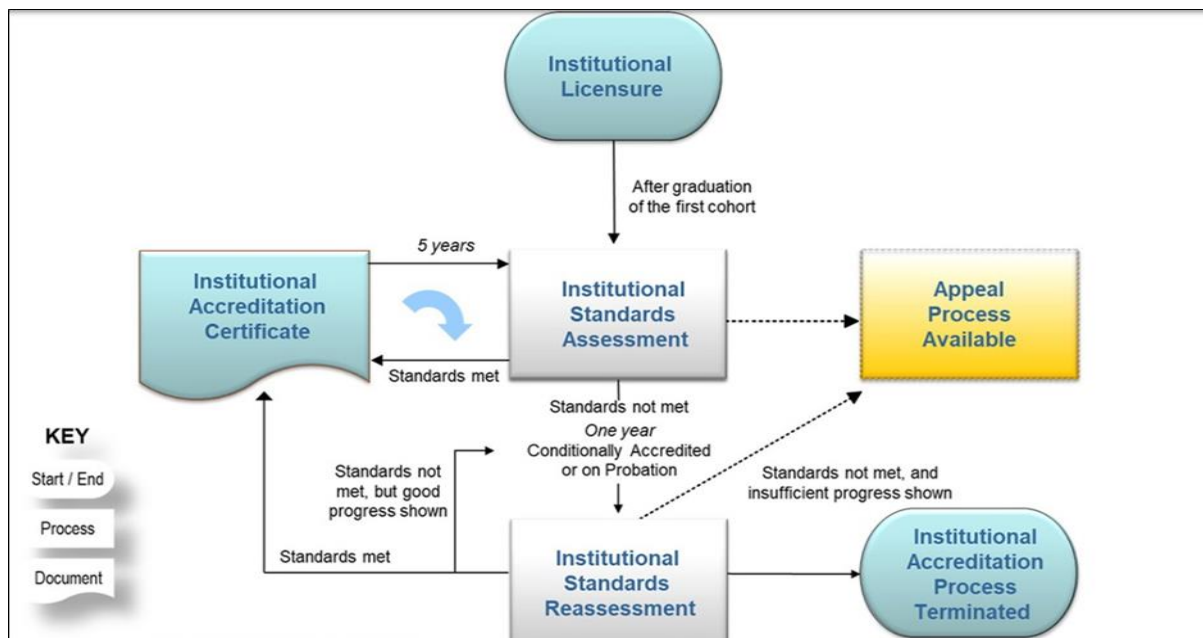

Figure 2. HEI Quality Assurance Framework (OAAAQA, 2023)

The present situation indicates that most private higher education institutes in Oman have completed the first phase of quality audit and subsequently proceeded to the second stage of standards evaluation (OAAAQA, 2023). In the standards assessment stage, the statistics presented by the OAAAQA (2023) reveal that seventeen institutions have obtained full accreditation; one institution is conditionally accredited, while four institutions are now undergoing probationary status. The other five institutions will undergo an institutional standards assessment as per the schedule of review by OAAAQA. The four institutions that have been placed on probation did not satisfy the pertinent national requirements and criteria as stipulated by the OAAAQA.

2.4 Human Resource Management Practices

According to Norhasnina et al. (2018), human resources' significance and substantial impact on organisations are paramount, given that human resources are highly valued and serve as the fundamental support system for enterprises on a global scale. The workforce is a critical asset that an organisation can strategically leverage to achieve a competitive advantage. The capacity of a firm to allocate resources towards the development and advancement of its workforce is a vital determinant of its ability to sustain a position of superiority within its respective industry (Hamadamin & Atan, 2019). In this context, employees need to possess the perspective that Human Resource Management (HRM) is distinctive, cohesive, and widely acknowledged, as this is crucial for its effectiveness and accomplishment (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). It is argued by Ying et al. (2020) that employees'

perspectives towards HR practices are a crucial factor in determining the level of accomplishment achieved by these activities.

According to Kawani (2018), Human Resources (HR) plays a vital role in every firm and is a critical determinant in attaining tangible organisational objectives. In other words, the efficacy of human resource practices relies on how the recipient perceives these activities' impact on the efficiency with which they are designed and implemented to optimise employee satisfaction. In addition, numerous enterprises depend on their workforce to attain a competitive advantage within the industry. Consequently, a strong correlation exists between organisational success and the proficient functioning of its workforce, which is intricately tied to human resource management (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021). The presence of efficient Human Resource Management Practices (HRMPs) is crucial for enabling employees to contribute towards attaining an organisation's goals and objectives actively and productively (Sabiu et al., 2019). In addition, Sabiu et al. (2019) have posited that efficient Human Resource Management Practices (HRMPs) are anticipated to provide several benefits. The phenomenon serves as a driving force for individuals to exhibit a commitment toward their professional responsibilities, fostering a climate of constructive behaviour that enhances the overall effectiveness of the business.

It has been revealed that the perceptions held by employees regarding human resources (HR) procedures can potentially play a significant role in mediating or moderating the relationship between an organisation's HR policies and the individual-level behaviours and attitudes exhibited by employees (Aryee et al., 2012). Moreover, according to Bowen and Ostroff (2004), employees' viewpoints regarding human resources (HR) procedures play a crucial role in assessing the overall effectiveness of a firm at the organisational level. Implementing HR management plans is essential for successful integration into the global market. The challenges encountered by HRMPs and the trends they adhere to have experienced substantial transformations throughout the years. According to Jouda et al. (2016), Human Resource Management (HRM) practices play a crucial role in facilitating the effective and efficient execution of HR policies, which are necessary for the attainment of organisational goals.

Moreover, HRM practices play a crucial role in highlighting the importance of the company's efficiency and achievement, as they serve as the fundamental basis for long-term competitive advantages and overall success. Human Resource Management Practices (HRMPs) are currently tasked with showcasing the significance of their objectives through evidence of their impact on organisational efficiency, cost savings, quality improvement, and overall contribution to the firm and its client base (Kawani, 2018). Human resource management has a growing emphasis on examining the effectiveness of "systems" or "bundles" of human resource practices in facilitating the achievement of strategic objectives by organisations rather than solely focusing on individual human resource practices. It contrasts the conventional emphasis on individual HR activities (Boon et al., 2019). Moreover, the study of international human resource management (IHRM) in the Middle East presents a unique and captivating setting due to the region's workforce composition, primarily consisting of expatriates from diverse global origins. Due to the special characteristics of the

workforce in the Middle East, the region's backdrop provides a distinctive and captivating environment for conducting research (Pawan et al., 2018).

3. Discussion

Given the findings presented in the literature review, it is unsurprising that quality assurance and HRM practices hold significant implications within the field of higher education. The existence of these entities is an essential requirement that must be fulfilled for organisations operating in the higher education sector to accomplish their strategic objectives effectively. Hence, it is essential to study the impact of quality assurance and HRM practices on different areas of higher education. This includes but is not limited to employee performance, employee satisfaction, organisational commitment. A conceptual framework is suggested to undertake a research project as shown in Figure 3 below. It is suggested to study the impact of external quality assurance and perceived HRM on employee performance. Moreover, organisational commitment and job satisfaction are used as mediating variables between external quality assessment, perceived HRM practices and employee performance.
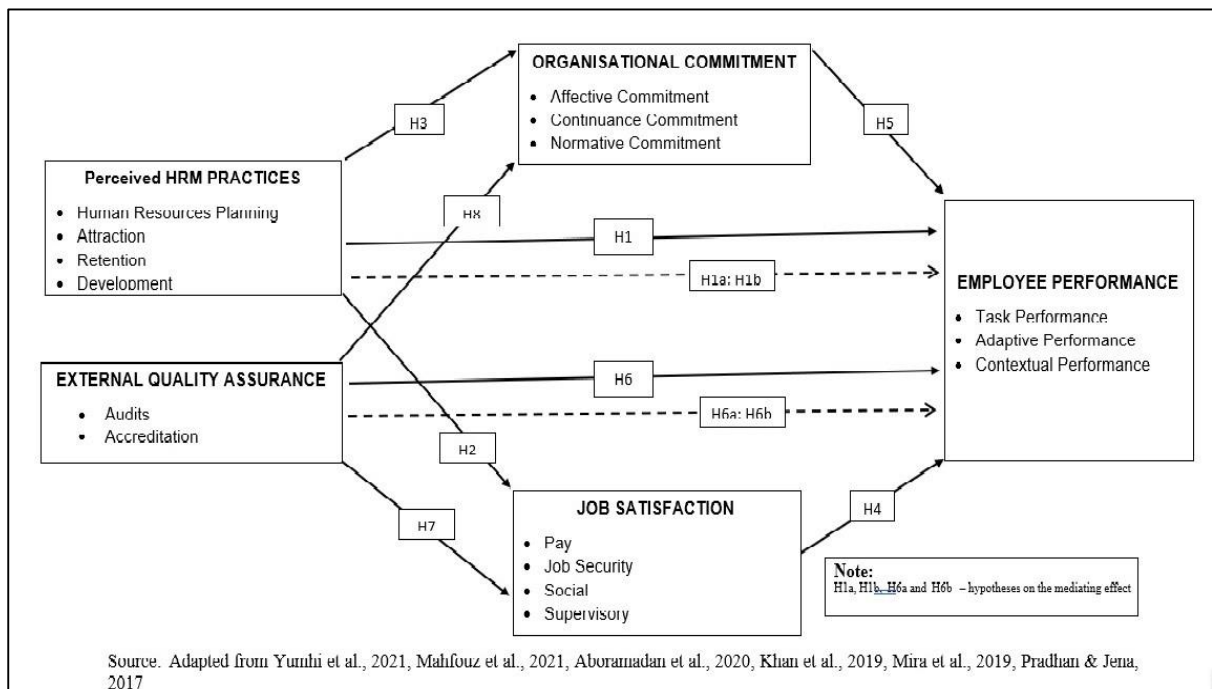

Figure 3. Framework of Quality Assurance and HRM practices

The concept of quality and HRM practices is important in Islam, and these must be utilised beneficially. Oman is a nation founded on Islamic principles; hence it is required to provide evidence that all quality standards and best practices for managing human resources are being adhered to. Employees in a nation whose Islamic precepts are intended to regulate the interaction between them, and their employers need to have the sense that they benefit from their employment in that nation to be content with their choice to work there. As a result of the legislation and regulations enacted by the OAAAQA, the private higher education industry in Oman is in a privileged position. These laws and regulations require institutions to maintain a high-quality assurance profile. The various institutions understand all the rules and

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standards that OAAAQA has developed. Failure to meet the requirements will result in adverse consequences (OAAAQA, 2023).

The environment of Oman's private institutions of higher education has been adequately prepared to undergo quality assurance audits, standards assessment, and program accreditation to meet the requirements of these processes. As part of the quality audit and institutional standards assessment, one of the evaluated standards is the Staff and Staff Support Services standard. It should not come as a surprise that businesses are familiar with the prerequisites necessary to fulfil the requirements of this standard, given the tight link between this standard and the procedures for managing human resources. However, it is stated that some institutions tend to recruit low-level academic staff (Issan, 2016). As a result of the lack of a requirement for them to pay their instructors a considerable wage, numerous educational institutes use instructors of low quality who have insufficient degrees. In addition, there is a significant need for improved accountability in recruitment practices as well as exact remuneration scales, all of which contribute to an abnormally high employee turnover rate in certain organisations (Issan, 2016).

In addition, the findings of the second stage of the examination of the institution's standards disclose findings comparable to those stated previously (OAAAQA, 2023). The institutions were put on probation because they did not fulfill the Staff and Staff Support Services requirements and failed to satisfy the standard. It may have to do with certain educational institutions treating higher education like a business (Issan, 2016). Because of this, the care they put into ensuring their satisfaction with quality requirements should be considered carefully.

4. Conclusion

At Oman's private institutions of higher education, the processes of quality assurance and the management of human resources are two areas that need continuous improvement. It is necessary to achieve the goals that have been established. There is an agreement that if OAAAQA continues to implement the bylaws established by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation, then it will be led along the route mapped out for the private higher education industry in Oman. It is impossible to overestimate the significance of OAAAQA's role in the industry. Because of this, all aspects of private higher education will be significantly impacted to a significant degree. Consequently, Oman will at long last have a sector that is more concentrated on delivering excellent educational opportunities to the nation's youth.

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