Understanding the Dynamics of Student Voice in Oman's Higher Education Institutions: Exploring the Case of

the Student Advisory Council

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Abstract

The themes of student voice and representation in HE decision-making through student representative groups have become 'close to universal' in their application. However, it has not gained much traction in the Arab world because of, it might be argued, the nature of the political cultures. This thesis develops a better understanding of the meaning and dynamics of student voice and representation in Higher Education Institutions' (HEIs) decision-making in Oman. It uses the Student Advisory Council (SAC), formed following the Arab Spring in 2011, as the lens.

A qualitative case study methodology was adopted, consisting of semi-structured telephone interviews with HE stakeholders and relevant policy and legislative documents to explore the rationales informing the establishment of the SACs in HEIs, how the meaning of student voice is shaped by policies and practices and perceived by the HE stakeholders and what role the SAC has in enacting student voice in HEIs.

The thesis finds that two rationales contributed to the establishment of the SAC in Omani HEIs: i) to facilitate the representation of student voice in HEIs, and ii) more importantly, the SAC was established and promoted in a way to maintain the status quo by controlling power dynamics and student voice (at HEIs and national levels) to deter potential unrest that may be instigated by HE students. The findings indicate a shaping process in the meaning of student voice, which has an impact on HE stakeholders. The stakeholders accept the 'official' meaning of student voice and that it is directed to, and limited to, issues related to educational facilities and student services within the higher education framework – rather than anything more 'political'. While there seems to be genuine efforts by the SACs to represent student voice, the representation mechanisms within HEI policies ensure that the SAC serves only narrowly defined purposes and yields limited change.

This thesis contributes empirically and theoretically to the research on student voice and representation in HEIs decision-making in a rentier-state context and establishes new avenues for future investigations in analogous contexts.

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List of Abbreviations

CC   Consultative Council

CoTs   Colleges of Technology

ESU   European Students' Union

GCC   Gulf Cooperation Council

HE   Higher education

HEAC   Higher Education Admission Centre

HEISACC Higher Education Institutions Student Advisory Council Committee

HEIs   higher education institutions

ISIS   Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

ITUC   International Trade Union Confederation

KSA   Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

MENA   Middle East and North Africa

MLA   Ministry of Legal Affairs

MOHE   Ministry of Higher Education

MOHERI Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation

MOI   Ministry of Information

MONE   Ministry of National Economy

NCSI   National Centre for Statistics and Information

OAAA   Oman Academic Accreditation Authority

OCHR   Omani Commission for Human Rights

Ofsted   Office for Standards in Education

SAC   Student Advisory Council

SACRG Student Advisory Council Regulatory Guide

SC   Student Council

SCP   Supreme Council for Planning

SQU   Sultan Qaboos University

UAE   United Arab Emirates

UNCRC United Nations Children's Rights Convention

VAT   Value Added Tax

WHO   World Health Organization

WTO   World Trade Organization

Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own independent work, except where otherwise stated, and the views expressed are my own. Other sources are acknowledged by explicit references. The thesis has not been edited by a third party beyond what is permitted by Cardiff University's Use of Third Party Editors by Research Degree Students Procedure.

Statements:

1. This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Aim of the thesis

The overarching aim of this thesis is to contribute to the understanding of the dynamics of student voice and representation in Oman's higher education institutions (HEIs), using the student advisory council (SAC) as a lens. The SAC is a formal forum of student representative groups established in Oman in 2014. The study is based on data from 71 semi-structured interviews to examine perceptions on voice and the SAC held by higher education (HE) stakeholders: SAC members, the wider HE student population, staff from public HEIs, policymakers and managers from the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), academics/educationalists and members of the Oman Council. These data were also complemented with policy document analysis, which were used to gain further insights into the meaning of student voice as prescribed by the policymakers. This thesis seeks to address the following three research questions:

Question One: What was the rationale informing the establishment of the SAC in Omani HEIs?

Question Two: What are stakeholders' perceptions of the meaning of student voice within Omani HEIs?

Question Three: How does the SAC contribute to the enactment of student voice within Omani HEIs' decision-making?

Question Three is the main question of the thesis as it explores the SAC's contribution to the enactment of student voice in HEIs. Addressing this question is underpinned by understanding the rationales of the establishment of the SAC and the perceptions held by the study stakeholders about the meaning of student voice. The research questions are organized in this way in order to address the main research question. This chapter starts by introducing the overarching aim of the thesis and the methods used to address the research questions (Section 1.1). Section 1.2 lays out the background and the significance of the thesis. Section 1.3 sets out the research design underpinning this thesis as well as the theoretical framework. The chapter concludes with an outline of the thesis's structure (Section 1.4).

1.2 Background and Significance of the Study

In the wake of the economic crisis between 2000 and 2010, caused by fluctuating oil prices, 2011 was a turning point in Arab history. It was marked by serious disruption

and underlined a deep chasm between the governments and citizens in most Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, in what is called 'the Arab Spring'. Oman was one of the most affected states in the GCC by the waves of the Arab Spring (Behbehani 2016). The political unrest coupled with other geopolitical tensions in the region (e.g., the civil wars in Syria and Libya) created a conducive environment for the populations to campaign on numerous issues and for the government to shore up their position in two ways: suppression or reaching out to citizens to address their concerns at various levels (e.g., political, social and educational). With specific reference to the HE sector, as a focus for young people with their particular concerns, social unrest brought about additional demands from HE students on the government for more voice and greater forms of representation at HEIs (Al-Sadi 2015). Students' expectations and awareness of their rights and responsibilities towards society deepened (Al Hashimi 2011). After the protests in 2011, "a relatively bigger margin of freedom was being witnessed … Youth, including students, can now express themselves and voice their concerns to officials more openly than before" (Al-Sadi 2015, p.5).

Students asked for change within their settings (including HEIs) by asking for a platform where they can exercise their rights and responsibilities as student citizens and express their voices and concerns (Al-Sadi 2015), if not more broadly. Marie-Therese (2011), for example, describing her students at an HEI in Oman, elucidates that the establishment of SACs where students have opportunities to voice their concerns was one of the vital demands after the Oman Spring. Making these changes and reforms in such a political and social environment was challenging. However, the conditions made it imperative for the government to respond to the demands sensibly or face further challenges (Badry and Willoughby 2015).

Oman, like the other GCC countries, is considered a rentier state (Beblawi 1987; Levins 2013) which is known for earning surplus revenues (rent) by selling natural resources, mostly oil and gas, that are discovered within its territories (Luciani 1990). As a result of the revenues from the natural resources, citizens are granted subsidies, decent jobs with limited or no direct taxation, modern infrastructure and free services in basic sectors like health and education. In return, there is a general acceptance of the absence of political critique in Oman by the citizens (Al-Farsi 2013; Herb and Lynch 2019). Whilst features of political participation (e.g., participation in parliamentary

elections and voting) are permitted through public engagement in policy formation, and opportunities for freedom of speech are stated in the constitution, these channels are very limited (Beblawi and Luciani 2015). However, due to the declining natural resources reserves and the fluctuating oil prices, the government is facing challenges to meet the expectations that have been created for the citizens (Levins 2013), which led to the introduction of some taxes on some services and reduction on utility bills subsidies (Krane 2019). As a result, the political allegiance of citizens, which is gained through the benefits of a rentier state (Luciani 1990), began to be questioned. This in part was one reason for protests in 2011 which led to political changes, among them the introduction of new policies including the establishment of the first formal student representation group (i.e., the SAC) in Oman's HE sector. The SAC establishment came after many years of demands from HE students. Moreover, HE students form the largest population group in Oman, hence, creating the SAC, to gain support from the largest constituency group and preventing them from participating in contentious activities e.g., protests, was one reason for this policy's approval.

Altbach (2007) notes that participation in protesting and campaigning are usually discussed as part of the broad theme of student politics. Klemenčič (2020a) suggests that student politics can be discussed as part of two strands of activities in HE: activism and representation. Through the former strand, students are usually engaged politically to bring about political and social changes (Altbach and Klemenčič 2014) and through the latter strand, students' needs and demands are formally intermediated and advocated by student representative groups to influence HEIs' decisions (Klemenčič 2012). Both strands are germane to the case of this thesis due to the nature of the establishment of the SAC in 2014.

Student voice and representation in university governance through student unions has become 'close to universal' in its application and became a tradition in universities in the US and Europe (Luescher-Mamashela 2013, p. 1442). However, it had not gained much traction in the Arab world because of the nature of the political cultures which are mostly known for their top-down governance and the repression of any revolts that threaten the state's authority (Ashti 2018). To date, no previous studies have been conducted in Oman on student voice and representation in HE, except for one book which is published in Arabic titled *The History of Ten Arab Public Universities.* One

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chapter provides an overview of the history of Sultan Qaboos University[1] (SQU), which also contains a brief section regarding the establishment of the SAC[2]. The current thesis aims to explore in detail themes of voice and representation within the milieu of rentier states, through the lens of the SAC. This thesis argues that the emergence of the SAC was the result of political upheavals that took place during the wave of protests in 2011 and that it was purposefully instituted in HEIs in Oman to quell potential unrest that might be triggered by HE students within and outside the HEIs context. I argue that the creation of the SAC is part of a containment policy through which the state can maintain the status quo (i.e., power dynamics and student voice mechanisms) within HEIs and beyond.

This thesis contributes to the literature on the concepts of student voice and representation in the context of rentier states in three ways. First, it analyses the contextual factors (e.g., political, economic and social) in which the first formal student representative group was created and examines the mechanisms of student voice and representation in Oman's rentier state context. In such contexts, the extant literature argues, representation groups are totally banned or closely monitored (Klemenčič 2012). However, this study finds that in Oman the student representative group (i.e., the SAC) was instituted by the state to support the preservation of the status quo and its authority within HEIs and beyond. Second, this study explores how the meaning of student voice is represented in HE policies and how the perceptions of stakeholders (e.g., HE students, HEIs staff, and HE officials) are impacted by these policies. Student voice, as discussed in the extant literature, is mostly seen as a mechanism for bringing change in relation to various students' needs (Cook-Sather and Cook-Sather 2006; McLeod 2011). However, this study finds that student voice in the Omani HE context is not necessarily linked to bringing change. Instead, it has limited influence, and only on service and education-related issues within the HEIs. Third, this study contributes to the understanding of the mechanisms of enactment of student voice in HEI's decision-making in a rentier state context by analysing the design of the SAC. The study examines Luescher-Mamashela's (2013) seminal typology about the practice of involving student representation groups in HE decision-making and finds that the four

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[1] The first and the most elite public HEI in Oman which was established in 1986.
[2] See (Al Maamari 2018).

cases in the typology (i.e., the political realist, the consumerist, the communitarian and the democratic cases) only partially reflects the Omani case of involving student representation groups in HEIs' decision-making. Thus, the thesis makes an argument for an additional case which is named the 'containment case', where, through the involvement of the student representation groups in HE decision-making in rentier state's contexts, the state aims to contain the student body within the confines of HE policy and secure their allegiance both in relation to HEIs-related issues and more broadly. Indeed, this study offers a specific understanding of the dynamics of student voice and representation in Oman's HEIs, using the SAC as the lens.

1.3 **Design and Theoretical Framework**

This study seeks to provide insights into the mechanism involved in enacting student voice in HEIs in Oman, with a specific focus on the SAC as a case for analysis. It is informed by an interpretivist methodological perspective and based on a qualitative case study methodology and the use of two data sources: (1) semi-structured telephone interviews with 71 HE stakeholders and (2) relevant policy and legislative documents. In both cases, the purposive snowballing sampling technique was used to recruit participants and enquire about additional relevant documents. The first part of the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the circumstances under which the SAC was created in 2014. The study also analyses the specific design of the SAC with the intention to explore how the aims of its creation are reflected in its design. The second part of the study aims to explore the meaning of student voice for different HE stakeholders. More specifically, it examines what shapes the meaning of student voice and what the implications are. In the third part, the study aims to analyse the process through which student voice is channelled by the SAC from the student body[3]. It seeks to understand what the SAC's role is in realizing student voice and the nature of the influence it can bring out of student voice.

At the centre of this analysis is (Arnstein 2019)[4] ladder of citizen participation, which views the power to make a decision and to control issues as the measuring tool and

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[3] The collective of students at a university is known as the student body (Badat 1999).
[4] The article was originally published in 1969. The new version of the article is published in 2019 in the Journal of the American Planning Association.

ultimate aim for participation (Tritter and McCallum 2006). The thesis adopts this model as an explanatory tool to facilitate the interpretation of the data.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis comprises nine chapters. Chapter One offers an introduction to the study as a whole and sets out the background, the research questions and the contribution to the existing body of knowledge. Chapter Two explores the key literature that forms the foundations of the arguments discussed in this study. The chapter discusses the main themes that relate to voice, such as citizenship, participation and power - with a specific reflection on the rentier state context of Oman. The main aim of the chapter is to offer a theoretical underpinning for the thesis and to serve as a precursor to the subsequent chapter which focuses on the case of Oman. Chapter Three provides the contextual background of the study that specifically relates to the causes and implications of the 2011 Arab Spring. It specifically discusses the scene in Oman and how student activism was part of the protests. Also, the chapter explores the social (e.g., youth population) and educational (e.g., expansion and governance of HE) contexts which set the background for the creation of the SAC in 2014. Chapter Four explains the methodology underpinning this study and justifies using qualitative methods to collect data. Chapters Five to Seven present the empirical findings from the study which seek to address the research questions outlined earlier. In Chapter Five, the discussion centres around the context and the rationales which formed the basis for establishing the SAC in HEIs in Oman. Chapter Six then looks at the concept of student voice in terms of meaning, construction, limits and implications as suggested by policy documents and study participants. In Chapter Seven, the focus is on how the SAC functions to enact student voice generally at HEIs. The chapter also discusses some potential flaws in the role of the SAC to represent student voice. Chapter Eight discusses the findings of the study in relation to the research questions of the thesis, based on the analysis of the data generated from the interviews and policy documents and the analysis of emerging themes across the empirical chapters (i.e., Five–Seven). Chapter Nine concludes the study, presenting the key findings, main contributions and limitations of the thesis, as well as implications for policy, practice and future research.

Chapter Two: Citizenship, Student Voice and Participation

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is devoted to reviewing the literature and theories on the main substantive themes of this thesis: citizenship, student voice, participation and representation. The first part of the chapter, Section 2.2, explores the concept of citizenship. The discussion describes the main dimensions of citizenship, such as rights and duties, with a particular focus on the context of a rentier state. Some citizenship dimensions and elements may vary among cultures. The social contract between the state and the citizens makes a partial fulfilment of citizenship elements, in the sense that the majority of citizens are left aside from influencing the politics of the state in rentier states.

Section 2.3 explores the notion of student voice and the different discourses linked to this concept, which paves the way for this study to address gaps in the literature on the meaning of student voice in a rentier state. The section also discusses the connection between student voice, participation and power relations. This discussion centres around how spaces for student voice are structured based on power relations between the students and other stakeholders, which might provide for or hinder student participation. This discussion sets the scene to discuss how power is used to shape SAC's involvement in HEI's decision-making, which forms a critical inquiry of this study.

Section 2.4 emphasises the importance of enabling youth participation in different spaces following national and international charters (e.g., the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) as this is the best period to inculcate active participation skills in youth. These frameworks suggest that schools and HEIs are central to the inculcation of active participation skills. The section then gives a brief account of the various forms of student representation in HE in different educational systems and explores the different justifications for involving students in HEIs' decision-making (Luescher-Mamashela 2013), setting the context for discussing the case for involving student representation groups in HEIs in Oman.

Finally, Section 2.5 reviews the nature of citizens' participation and the degree of influence that citizens can have on public policies, using Arnstein's (2019) model of citizen participation as the theoretical framework. The model is used as a visual representation and an explanatory tool to help interpret data and identify divergences

and commonalities in how the policy documents and the study participants view students' participation in HEIs' decision-making. This is achieved by analysing the perceptions of each group of study participants and the Student Advisory Council Regulatory Guide (SACRG[5]) (The Ministry of Higher Education 2014 and see Chapters 3 and 8) and matching this to the description of the relevant rungs in Arnstein's model. The conclusion to the chapter is provided in Section 2.6.

2.2 Conceptions of Citizenship

This section elaborates on the concept of citizenship, outlining its various elements before looking at how these elements impact citizens and the states. Citizenship is a widely debated concept (Bellamy 2008) and cautiously defined by scholars in social and political sciences because of the abstract theoretical discussions linked to the concept (Ahier et al. 2003) and their ramifications on complex issues related to democracy, ethnicity, race, age and gender (Arthur and Bohlin 2005). The concept is under constant extensive negotiation in national and regional policy discourses, but perhaps especially so with regard to the current political and economic transformations in the Arab region and the GCC (Almaamari 2014; Al Zadjali 2014). Related to the political and economic transformations in the region, the concept of citizenship has developed and changed (Martiniello 2008). Therefore, to understand the context of discussions around citizenship in Oman, it is vital to develop an understanding of the rentier state concept. The objective is to explain how the meaning of citizenship, as shaped by the rentier state context, has an impact on student voice and the role of SACs in HEIs.

The concept of citizenship has no absolute and single definition (Martiniello 2008; Lonnie et al. 2010) and comes with various ideas held within the concept of citizenship (e.g. membership, participation and rights). According to Bellamy (2008), citizens are members of a political collectivity and have the right to participate in managing their lives and enjoy different rights. Some authors consider political participation aspects (such as voting and participation in political debates) essential in defining the concept

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5 The SACRG is the main policy document that emerged from the ministerial decree establishing the SAC (see Chapter 3). Note that this policy was updated by the Ministerial decree 13/2019. However, no major changes are noted between the two versions, so this thesis continues using the first version which was published in 2014.

of citizenship (Martiniello 2002), whereas others focus on both the rights and responsibilities of individuals (Marshall 1950).

Citizenship can be viewed in two different trajectories: "The one defends a political, the other an economic definition of man, the one an active—participatory—conception of freedom, the other a passive—acquisitive—definition of freedom; the one speaks of society as a polis; the other of society as a market-based association of competitive individuals" (Ignatieff 1987, p.400). This definition shows that each trajectory entails multi-dimensional interpretations of the concept attributed to the constantly changing needs of societies and cultures (Martiniello 2008). However, Ignatieff's (1987) division between the political and the market lacks a reference to the different contexts in which political participation may be more or less active, depending on the political structure.

Another influential analysis of the citizenship concept is that of T.H. Marshall. Marshall defines citizenship as "a status bestowed on those who are full members of society; all who possess the status are equal with respect to rights and duties" (Marshal 1950, p. 28). He outlines three elements in the concept of citizenship. The first element refers to civil rights, which concern the individual's civil status and legal rights, which the law courts governed. Individuals, through their civil rights, have fair and equal access to trials and legal systems. The second element is political rights, to ensure political equality, which led to the emergence of ballot boxes and new political parties in the 19th century (Marshal 1950). The third element refers to social rights, developed mainly in the 20th century and through which all citizens are entitled to the general welfare, security and education (Marshall 1950). Marshall (1950, p.35) advocates civil, political and social rights for all citizens, defining those as follows:

> The civil part consists of the rights that are important to make individuals feel the freedom (speech, faith, owning and justice which are governed by courts of justice), by political rights, the citizen can participate in the political process through being an elector in parliaments and council of governance and by social rights citizenship have the right to receive all the standard available in a society from welfare to security.

While the above perceptions apply to the developed world, citizenship is evolving differently in the developing world, especially in light of their enormous political and social changes (Lloyd 2005). The concept of citizenship and its associated ideas are applied differently in other cultures (Lloyd 2005), especially in the MENA region, where civic participation is marginalised (Geha and Horst 2019).

Scholars within the Arab world, like Sharif (2012), view citizenship as a concept that acknowledges the various opinions of individuals who are equal in terms of rights and responsibilities regardless of their ethnicity, sect or sex. According to Sharif (2012), the basic essence of the concept of citizenship is centred on the reciprocal relationship and engagement between the ruling/governing body and the citizens, guided by the principles of freedom and ability, which form the basis of ethical responsibility. Citizens decide on any disagreement through political participation, governed by the law that ensures citizens' equal treatment as part of citizenship rights - what Marshall (1950) calls political rights. Nonetheless, elements of engagement and political participation rights are missing in the Arab states (Al Zadjali 2014) due to the context of a rentier state (see section 2.3.1).

The above discussion shows that the concept of citizenship has divergent interpretations. The literature demonstrates that different cultures attach different meanings and practices to the concept. The following section discusses the citizenship dimensions and typologies.

2.2.1 Citizenship Dimensions and Typologies

The previous section shows that definitions of citizenship often view the concept as comprising the relationship between the citizens and the state, which is bonded by the political, social and civil rights and the settings required for social participation (Matthews 2001). This section discusses the dimensions and typologies of the concept of citizenship. Bellamy (2008, p.12) suggests that the primary dimension of citizenship is "the feeling of the membership of a democratic political community." Membership in the community is contrary to practices of exclusion from society on racial, gender, colour or social basis (Modood and Meer 2013). Similarly, Oman's Constitution affirms that "all citizens are equal before the law, and they are equal in rights and duties, and there shall be no discrimination because of sex, origin, colour, language, religion, sect, domicile" (The Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs 2021, p. 15).

In addition to membership in the community, another critical dimension of citizenship that many scholars emphasise is the existence of a combination of rights and duties/responsibilities attached to that status. Rights relate to the interests and freedom that individuals expect to get from society according to the civil law in that society (Nasser 2003). Some examples of rights include the right to choose the leader,

participate in public affairs and express an opinion through voting (Al Mahrouqi 2017), the right to freedom of speech and not to be detained, searched and imprisoned without a reason (Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs 2021). Rights cannot be stripped from a person based on language, sects or beliefs and the state has to treat the citizens equally, although such occurrences exist in different countries (Sharif 2012).

Bellamy (2008) points out ideological disagreements regarding citizenship rights. Different ideologies held by people and governments shape their perspectives on granting social and economic rights. For instance, those who prioritize reducing government power and emphasizing individual responsibility tend to view granting such rights based on individual equality as appropriate. On the other hand, those who prioritize equality of welfare are more inclined to consider providing social security and health services as essential, ensuring that a basic standard of living is a right for all citizens (Bellamy 2008). Bellamy (2008, p.3) suggests that citizens should decide between these different positions by participating in the democratic process "primarily by voting, but also by speaking out, campaigning in various ways".

Attached to rights is responsibility. As Marshall (1950) argues in his theory of citizenship, this entails both duties and rights. Citizens are bound by the responsibilities required to be community citizens in a specific place (Al-Hagery 2007). The prime duty of all citizens is to obey the laws (Bauböck 2009). For example, duties may include joining the military service and contributing to government revenues through tax payments (Al-Hagery 2007). Moreover, activities that cause harm to others (e.g. murder, rape, burglary) are against the laws and citizens are prohibited from engaging with them (Ministry of Justice 2009). There are also moral or ethical duties, primarily derived from religious and cultural sources, which citizens are encouraged to observe, although there may not be a legal obligation to fulfil them (e.g. helping family and poor members of the community) (Abdin 2008). Nonetheless, duties and responsibilities should not mean a total passive submission to the government, although this interpretation is present in the definition of the citizenship concept in some Arab states (Almaamari 2015) (see section 2.2.2).

In addition to the dimensions of citizenship discussed earlier, knowing the different types of citizenship helps understand how the concept of citizenship can vary in meaning across different cultures. Leenders and Veugelers (2009) discuss different types of citizenship: Adapting, individualistic and critical citizenship. In 'adapting citizenship' individuals associate their life with the collective group as they share values and attributes. Fulfilling the duties towards others within the community is more crucial than individual rights. This type of citizenship can be spread in schools to inculcate loyalty and obedience. Such an approach is criticised by Westheimer and Kahne (2004) because it does not advocate the critical thinking skills required to support a civic and democratic culture. Under 'Individualistic citizenship', individual rights and freedom are accentuated over individual duties. For individualistic citizens, "rights are interpreted in terms of protection of the individual and his or her autonomy. Duties are put in the background since they mean a restriction of liberty" (Leenders and Veugelers 2006, p. 8). The final type Leenders and Veugelers (2006) proposed is 'Critical citizenship'. This type is based on two principles: independence and social commitment. In this type of citizenship, individuals have the courage to critically and independently evaluate new societal phenomena and actively interact with the factors from which they derive. Simultaneously, they have the utmost caring attributes towards society. This relationship stresses active participation and commitment towards social cohesion and is described as democratisation (Leenders and Veugelers 2006).

In addition to the above three types of citizenship, most literature emphasises the importance of 'active citizenship', which enables individuals to become involved in the decision-making process that influences their welfare (Lloyd 2005). Active citizens are those who actively participate in political aspects of the country or community volunteering (Hoskins et al. 2012). Gifford et al. (2014) maintain that becoming active citizens requires knowledge, skills, and cultural and social learning. These elements are essential to help citizens participate in everyday spaces (Hoskins et al. 2012). For Neaga (2010), active participation is a core element for citizenship and it is underpinned by civic values and political matters, which are promoted by the state as its central role (Geha and Horst 2019). On the other hand, passive participation would involve submission to the state and the status quo (Neaga 2010).

The type of citizenship that is most common in the Arab states (especially the GCC states) is adapting and passive citizenship because, in most of these societies, loyalty to the family and the prominent tribe is "absolute" (Al-Farsi 2013, p.25; Almaamari 2014). Such a foundation towards strengthening citizen allegiance to the government and undermining the importance of critical thinking is attributed to the context of the rentier state and the social contract in Oman[6] discussed in the next section.

2.2.2 Citizenship in a rentier state context

This section presents the rentier state theory and its relation to how the rentier regimes have been able to exchange material benefits and security for citizens' loyalty in the prevailing social contract. Rentier state in this thesis refers to the economic model of Oman. Based on the literature discussed in Chapter 3, this thesis argues that there is the rentier state and the political model of governance reinforce each other. In this model, the government exercises control over revenue generation while citizens exchange political participation for economic privileges (see section 3.4.1 for discussion about Oman's political structure). It emerged during the rise of the new oil states in the 1970s (Beblawi 1987). The rentier concept is mainly used to refer to states that earn surplus revenues (rent) by selling natural resources, primarily oil and gas, discovered within their lands (Luciani 1990). Herb and Lynch (2019, p. 3) suggest that the rentier state theory aims to explain the challenges faced by these states on "diversifying economies, the bloating and inefficiencies of state institutions, the absence of democracy, the power of national security states, and patriarchal political cultures". A critical characteristic of a rentier state is that the government controls the rent generation. At the same time, citizens and those who work on distribution (the majority of the population) are only distributors and utilisers of the wealth obtained from the rent (Beblawi 1987). All GCC states are considered rentier (Beblawi 1987, Levins 2013).

Upon the discovery of oil in those countries, the status of the ruling regimes was strengthened (Beblawi and Luciani 2015). When distributing revenues to the citizens, the monarchies extended their power over citizens through a social contract. "The

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[6] The social contract is "the pledge of allegiance between people and regimes", whereby people are provided with decent jobs and some subsidies by the regimes, with no or little taxation (Al-Farsi 2013, p.1).

basic terms of the contract are that rulers would provide citizens with oil revenues and citizens would provide allegiance, or political quiescence, to their rulers" (Herb and Lynch 2019, p.5). Through the contract, citizens are granted subsidies, decent jobs with limited or no direct taxation, modern infrastructure and free services in important sectors like health and education. Citizens' rights to political participation are waived while enjoying these material benefits, which partially explains the citizens' political quiescence and absence of political critique in Oman and other rentier states (Al-Farsi 2013).

Moreover, this explains that, as discussed in section 2.2.1, Adapting citizenship is common in the Arab world and the rentier states of the GCC. This type of citizenship is nurtured to inculcate loyalty and obedience to the state, undermining the importance of critical thinking skills (Westheimer and Kahne 2004). Al-Farsi (2013) contends that the social contract is used as a containment policy. It is implemented by the ruling regime to buy allegiance, especially from the potential rebellion tribes, to maintain the legitimacy of their rule and keep political interference from the citizens to its minimum (see section 3.2).

Whilst the government permits some forms of political participation through public engagement in policy formation and the opportunities for freedom of speech, as stated in the Constitution, these channels are minimal as the citizens fulfil their part of the social contract (Beblawi and Luciani 2015). Even the power and authority of the body that formally represents citizens, the Consultative Council (see section 3.4), is curtailed from making any drastic changes to government policies (Al-Farsi 2013). In this context, the state is not pressured into making political reforms and bringing more democratic measures because oil (rent) control consolidates the ruling regime's position (Beblawi 1987).

Since oil prices continually fluctuate and oil and other natural resources reserves constantly decline, the rentier states face extreme challenges in meeting the expensive requirements of the social contract (Levins 2013). For instance, between the 1980s and 1990s, Oman and other GCC countries suffered economically due to the sharp decline in oil prices (Al-Lamki 2002). Then, the oil crash in 2014, during which oil prices went down to 25 USD per barrel (Oman Ministry of Oil and Gas 2016), forced the Omani government to initiate new policies to face the economic challenges,

such as imposing valued added taxe (VAT) for the first time since the late Sultan Qaboos took reign in 1970. Also, fees were introduced on previously-free government services and utility bill subsidies were reduced (Krane 2019). Further evidence of the instability in oil prices was provided during the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020, which caused the oil prices to plunge to 25 USD in April 2020 (Oman Ministry of Oil and Gas 2020).

While the reforms and the introduction of new policies, as described above, have helped in reducing budget deficits, the governments in rentier states face challenges from the citizens who are suffering the effect of these measures that they see as depriving them of some terms of the social contract (i.e., reduced subsidies and cuts to free services) (Beblawi 1987). As a result, the continuation of the classical citizens' political allegiance, which is gained through the rentier state model, was impacted (Luciani 1987). The citizens paused political quiescence and instead inflicted tremendous pressure on the state, demanding the expansion of political participation, which affected the state's legitimacy (Al-Farsi 2013). As a result of such pressure and because of the decrease in oil reserves, Rabi (2002) argues, the Omani government allowed the emergence of the Consultative Council and later the State Council (see section 3.4 for more information about these two councils). This thesis argues that the emergence of the SAC is also directly linked to the political upheavals during the 2011 wave of protests (see Chapter 3 for the discussion on the Arab Spring and Chapter 6 for a discussion on the context of the SAC's establishment).

The interpretation of the concept of citizenship can vary substantially. The regime in which it is embedded plays an integral part in shaping its elements, which can be reflected in the practices and beliefs within the different state institutions and the citizens themselves. Thus, this study argues that the rentier state model is a critical factor in constructing citizenship, which is discussed in the following section.

2.2.3 Citizenship in the Omani Context

This section provides a general view of the concept of citizenship prevalent in Oman and how it is framed. In Oman, the state's legislation is derived from its written Constitution. Although a definition of citizenship is not directly provided in the Constitution, some of the concept's dimensions are underlined therein. These include the right to participate in general, political, social, economic and cultural welfare (Al

Zadjali 2014, see also Section 3.4.2). Most of these rights are exercised through voting and election processes. The degree of influence from this participation is limited (Beblawi and Luciani 2015), but in Oman Vision 2040[7], citizenship is set as a national priority that has received the attention of the government (Ministry of Finance 2020) (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 National Priorities in Oman Vision 2040 (Ministry of Finance 2020, p.17)

The Oman Vision 2040 vows to pay special attention to preserving the Omani identity and traditions by advocating citizenship values that maintain social cohesion among its citizens (Ministry of Finance 2020). During the preparational phase of this national plan, and as a sign of allowing political participation, the majority of sectors (i.e., civil, government and private) participated in setting the general features of Oman Vision 2040 to display unity between the political leadership and all segments of society.

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[7] Oman vision 2040 is a national plan that defines Oman's national priorities in different fields to be achieved over the next two decades. The vision entails national priorities, strategic directions and objectives policies and a 5-year development plan.

However, the nature of participation of the citizens in subsequent phases and the amount of influence they can exert on these plans are unclear.

Citizenship, as viewed by the Omani author Al Zadjali (2014), is the overarching framework that holds into account the interactions that take place within the boundaries of the homeland. Once a person becomes a citizen, various associated laws and social justice initiatives shape multiple aspects of their life. Nevertheless, some key dimensions of citizenship are being indirectly limited, and the governments in the GCC want to create a specific type of citizenship through the educational systems (Almaamari 2018a). For example, a study that analysed civic education curricula in three GCC states, Oman, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), found that the focus of civic education is on strengthening the values of nationality, loyalty to the ruling family and showing gratitude for its contribution to building the state. By contrast, issues related to the legal and legislative dimensions that regulate the interaction between citizens and the authority were missing from the curriculum (Almaamari 2018a).

Furthermore, Almaamari (2018a) found that civic education curricula were missing subjects related to political participation, critical thinking, or freedom of speech, which are considered important rights for citizens as discussed in Section 2.2.1. Such systems create citizens who are "having loyalty, feeling of belonging to the country that one has lived in for a long time and sacrificing one's wealth for the nation's sake, respecting the law and abiding by the duties and responsibilities" (Al kandari et al. 2013, p.85). These elements highlight a one-sided view of the relationship between the citizens and the state, which focuses on creating passivity and malleability rather than critical citizens. As discussed in the previous section, these elements are ubiquitous within rentier states (Beblawi 1987), which also has an impact on shaping student voice as discussed in Chapters 6 and 8. The following section explores the meaning of the concept of student voice in international contexts, before looking at the meaning of student voice in Oman.

2.3 Student Voice

The first part of the chapter showed how, central to the discussion of the concept of citizenship, is the right of citizens to participate in subjects that affect their lives. This part of the chapter is centred on the theme of student voice which is considered a key

element in participation (Tonon 2012; Horgan et al. 2017). In a more concrete definition, McLeod (2011, p. 181) refers to voice as "identity or agency, or even power, and perhaps capacity or aspiration…or connote a democratic politics of participation and inclusion or be the expression of an essentialised group identity." Also, Cook-Sather (2006) agrees with McLeod that having a voice entails having power and agency, and when someone speaks their mind within a democratic context, it is heard and might yield a change. After looking at the meaning and emergence of voice, later sections shed light on various discourses around student voice and how these influence students' identities. The last part discusses how power is linked to voice and student participation. Voice in the context of this study is discussed in terms of what it can offer and what change (if any) it can bring in the context of HEIs in Oman.

2.3.1 The Concept of Student Voice

The emergence of the concept of student voice was supported by student rights movements in the 1970s and later received further manifestations in the late 1980s (Rudduck 2007). As discussed in Section 2.4, the codification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989 (see United Nations 1989), especially in educational discussions and debates, was the main catalyst for the term to re-emerge (Rudduck 2007; Pearce and Wood 2019). In addition to the student movements and the UNCRC, the term student voice was supported by researchers who consider students important stakeholders and consumers who should be allowed to have a say in their education (Rudduck 2007). Thus, there have been many calls in countries like the USA, Canada, Australia and the UK to champion the student voice in policies related to learning, teaching and schooling (Cook-Sather 2006).

In the late 1990s, the term started to be included in discourses around teaching and learning, research and reform (Austen 2020). For instance, Okupe and Medland (2019) highlight the heterogeneity of student voice and its influence on the development of teaching practice in UK HEIs. In the US, Mitra (2018) explores the role of student voice in secondary school reforms and examines the issue of power in the relationship between youth-adults. Bron et al. (2018), in a European Erasmus+ project, show that students can become self-directed and active citizens when they work in partnership with school management. Hosein and Rao (2019) explore international student voice in UK HEIs and examine available spaces for their voice. Thiessen and Cook-Sather (2007) drew extensively on students' experiences in various countries

such as Afghanistan, Ghana, Ireland, Pakistan and the United States and explored how students have a role in improving their schools. Tamrat (2020) explores the level, type and quality of student voice and participation in the governance of 20 Ethiopian public HEIs. At first, student voice was allowed based on having the right to participate in institutional governance (Cook-Sather 2014) democratically. However, the higher education sector in the US and Europe shifted the focus of student voice to managerial, transactional and consumerist purposes (McLeod 2011; Skea 2019).

Nonetheless, when searching for similar work in the context of HE in the GCC, no studies discussing student voice as a concept or practice could be retrieved. Thus, this research aims to contribute original knowledge in this area and take the lead to generate understanding related to student voice and student representation focusing on HE. Specifically, this thesis explores how voice is understood in a context of a rentier state, such as Oman's (see chapter 6).

The term student voice refers to the methods through which students participate and communicate their ideas, opinions and initiatives either verbally or non-verbally, and influence decision-making in an educational context (Messiou and Hope 2015; Havlicek et al. 2016; Mitra 2018; Jones and Hall 2021). West (2004) believes that the notion of student voice encapsulates a chance to communicate ideas and opinions and, more importantly, the ability to create change. As part of students' efforts to participate and influence decisions within universities, Buckley (2018) suggests that Arnstein's (2019) participation model can facilitate understanding the outcomes of student voice efforts (see section 2.5).

Canning (2017) suggests that student voice term can include everything students raise to the universities formally or informally, sometimes through campaigning and protest to influence and improve students' educational decision-making status (Rudduck 2007). Moreover, Cook-Sather (2006, p.362) suggests that voice indicates "a legitimate perspective" on the student's part by being actively involved in decisions regarding education policies, practices, and critical global issues (Holdsworth 2000). Freeman (2016) adds to Cook-Sather's perspectives on student voice by describing more vigorous and wide-ranging effects on higher education. For instance, student voice "shapes the concerns of management and academics; it changes the organisation and content of degree courses and, at times, challenges authority"

(p.859). The definitions above share one central tenet: the importance of the possibility of change based on student voice.

In line with this, this study views student voice, as defined by Thomson (2011, p.21), as "an opportunity to express opinions, access to events and people to influence decisions and active participation in deliberation about decisions and events". The reason for adopting this definition is because it does not only encompass the chance for active communication of ideas but also access to people and taking part in events in which decision-making is made.

Although student voice is considered in many universities, Seale (2009) reports that the concept of student voice remains underdeveloped in the higher education literature. Hence, Canning (2017) suggests that further development and theoretical conceptualisation are needed to gain insights into power dynamics and interests through which policies and practices are shaped (see also Section 2.3.5 for more discussion on student voice and power). Moreover, the above different definitions largely reflect policy and practice in Western countries. In universities following an Anglo-Saxon country model, for example, student tuition fees are governed by a system where students take loans and repay them once they surpass a specific income threshold. Thus, universities tend to view students as customers and a voice that should be heard (Collini 2012). This thesis aims to explore the different meanings carried by the participants and policy documents in Oman on the meaning of student voice and how the SAC delivers on this voice in HE governance and decision-making (see Chapter 6).

2.3.2 Student Voice as Consumerism

The notion of student voice in HE has been presented in different discourses that make it seem problematic. Part of the literature presents students as consumers of the universities who have the right to give feedback on university products (Canning 2017). This notion of the student as a consumer has prevailed in the UK since student tuition fees were introduced in 1998 (McCulloch 2009). Evaluation feedback and surveys fulfil quality management and assurance agendas (Seale et al. 2015). Moreover, as consumers, the students are seen to be always right and entitled to pressure the "unresponsive university" (Furedi 2011, p.3). In this quasi-market scenario, students are seen to be empowered and have increased university rights.

McMillan and Cheney (1996) state that the consumer concept brings some advantages. McCulloch (2009, p.173) mentions that the student consumer view encouraged the HE sector to adapt to the socio-cultural changes, contributing "to the university's long-standing role in developing the student's confidence and enabling them to find an authoritative voice." Furthermore, the concept of the student as a consumer demands the university to prepare students for the business and economy of the outside world (McMillan and Cheney 1996). McCulloch (2009) finds that this discourse has caused changes in various academic aspects like quality and student academic support.

The student as a consumer notion, however, as argued by McCulloch (2009, p.277), is ineffective because it a) "overemphasises one aspect of the student's role and of the university's mission; b) suggests an undue distance between the student and the educational process, thereby de-emphasising the student's role in learning; c) encourages passivity in the student…d) compartmentalises the education experience as 'product' rather than 'process' e) and, reinforces individualism and competition at the expense of community." Lodge (2005, p.132) adds to McCulloch's criticism of the student consumer concept by revealing that such notion regards the student passively and student's account is used only as "a source of information, or as the consumer providing feedback. The purposes are for institutional gains." Klemenčič (2018) argues, in addition, that in such notions of consumerism, HEIs become increasingly concerned with reputation management, especially if it is held negatively by the students and the public. Thus, the students can impact institutional legitimacy through their consumerist role. However, the context of Oman as a rentier state and its fee regime is different, making the exploration of this topic important.

2.3.3 Student Voice as Tokenistic

Student voice as tokenistic occurs when students are offered a voice but they have no control over what to express (Hart 1992). Hart (1992) confirms that tokenistic student projects far outpace genuine ones. The tokenism discourse of student voice corresponds to the tokenism degrees in Arnstein's citizen participation model - see section 2.5. At this level of the participation ladder, citizens are consulted, and they inform some decisions jointly with the powerholders. However, the citizen voice is far from making any impact. Student voice can be legitimate and genuine when it is known when, where and how their voices are heard (Robinson and Taylor 2012). Besides, to

make their voice more effective, students should set their own agenda for change, not those dictated by others (Lukes 2005; Shier 2010 - see section 2.3.5 for discussion of Lukes' work on power relations and agenda setting).

Perceiving student voice in a tokenistic manner has some adverse effects on students. In addition to being a breach of the UNCRC Article 12 (see section 2.4), it can damage the trust between the students and the other adults since the promise of listening to students' needs has not been fulfilled, which might further the feeling of isolation from the educational environment (Fielding 2004a). Additionally, some contend that it would be better not to have an actual student voice project, such as a student council, than to have a tokenistic one which causes negative effects on student citizenship learning and development (Alderson 2000). Finally, students become more disconnected and disenfranchised when the expectation of a genuine voice is unfulfilled (Fielding 2004b; Herriot 2014). On the other hand, Harriot (2014) notes that students can speak openly if a non-tokenistic approach is taken toward their voice work. Furthermore, seeking genuine student voices and perspectives can increase students' sense of empowerment and enhance the student experience (Robinson and Taylor 2007; Warwick 2008). The following section explores the frameworks that underpin student voice work nationally and internationally.

2.3.4 Student Voice and Participation Frameworks

Various international and national frameworks have included student voice and participation activities within various educational settings. One of the main international frameworks, (as noted in Section 2.4), promoting the rights of voice for children and young people is the UN's (1989) Article 12. The article mandates that youth are allowed to participate in various matters and take part in discussions that affect them (Taylor and Robinson 2007). In addition to UN Article 12, there are National Acts that require schools and HE institutions to seriously consider students' views, especially on matters that directly relate to their lives.

A vision for student voice is stated on the Ministry of Education in New Zealand website, encouraging active participation (The New Zealand Ministry of Education 2021). Extensive programs that improve the experience of youth voice are offered by the Ministry of Education in Ontario, Canada. In the UK, schools are mandated by the 2002 Education Act to consult students on learning matters. The UK Quality Code in

the HE sector is considered a reference for all UK HE providers. According to the Quality Code, colleges and universities are required to arrange for participation mechanisms such as student representative members to enable student voice at all levels, including governance, faculty and departments (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2018).

In Oman's HE system, which is the focus of this research, the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority[8] (OAAA) looks into student feedback in its ongoing accreditation process at all HEIs. Through Criteria 1.3, which is about management structure, and 7.3, which is about student satisfaction, the OAAA calls for appropriate mechanisms to be in place for student representation in decision-making processes (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority 2016 and see section 3.3.2 for more information about the OAAA). Also, after political unrest in Oman, MOHE[9] ordered the establishment of SACs at all HEIs in Oman. One objective is to set the framework for student voice and representation, in areas that concern students (see Chapter 5 and Section 8.2 for more discussion on creating the SAC).

While various spaces and activities promote student voice within the HE sector, Freeman (2016) concludes that the purpose of discussion of such endeavours should be under scrutiny. Also, Freeman (2016) warns that senior managers, staff and students, who might be directly or indirectly involved in these spaces and activities, have different expectations from them. Freeman (2016, p.859) states:

> I find it troubling that those who encourage student voice practices rarely acknowledge the complex imperatives and ideologies that have informed its development… It is very rare that the underpinning ideologies that inform student voice mechanisms are made explicit.

Senior managers tend to view student voice work as necessary because it formally influences the institution's name. Some academic staff were able to formulate new ideologies toward student satisfaction, and others felt that "these new roles were threatening and riddled with inauthenticity" (Freeman 2016, p. 861). "The reasons for this vary, but we do need to acknowledge the range of institutional and professional

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8 The current name of this unit is Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education.
9 The Ministry is currently called: The Ministry of Higher Education, research and Innovation (MOHERI).

issues, often culturally and historically entrenched ones at that, which prevent dialogue, participation and transformation" in schools (Robinson and Taylor 2007, p.15). Indeed, Freeman (2016) argues that although students recognise the deployment of various student voice mechanisms by managers and academic staff, students feel that these mechanisms do not lead to an empowering experience because the impact of these mechanisms is weak in reality.

By contrast to the previous discussion, Bragg (2007) contends that student voice ideas are mostly featured as democratic and participatory. Explicit and implicit rules still govern some of these ideas, stipulating who can express their voice, which questions they are allowed to ask, what topics are allowed and what is considered taboo (Canning 2017).

To discuss the topics the students can express their voice on, this thesis borrows a concept used in political science and international relations: 'high politics and low politics' (Painter 1995). According to Kauppi and Viotti (2020, p.403), the term high politics refers to "matters of security, particularly the strategic interests of states" and their survival. It is usually linked to the explicit types of power and control in the government's hands. Whereas 'low politics' refers to the "welfare issues supposedly of lesser interest to government leaders or diplomats" (Kauppi and Viotti 2020, p.403). The nature of low politics has a lesser impact on the survival of the state and its power and control and more on issues within local communities.

While these terms are useful in explaining distinct forms of politics being applied at different levels of society (Kauppi and Viotti 2020), there are some criticisms of their usage. First, it is difficult to differentiate between the nature of 'high or low politics' issues because they can change depending on their vitality and societal influence. For instance, some low politics welfare issues that affect a minority group might gain importance at a national level and threaten the authority or legitimacy of the state (i.e. 'high politics') (Painter 1995). As discussed in Section 3.2, that the Arab Spring started because of anger at local governments, but this escalated to high politics and caused disruption at strategic levels in most Arab countries. Moreover, dividing issues as low and high politics can be seen as devaluing the issues needed by every person in society. For some, what can be seen as 'low politics' can be viewed as high politics for others (Kauppi and Viotti 2020).

These two concepts are used in this study because they are found to be useful for classifying topics and issues student voice is allowed or denied engaging within the context of Oman's HEIs. In the context of this study, the concept 'high politics' is used to describe the vital issues within the HE sector (e.g., administration and finance issues and major educational policies) and broadly within the society (e.g., political, social and legal rights). In contrast, 'low politics' refers to operational issues such as educational facilities and student services at an institutional level. The distinction between low and high politics is used to explore the nature of issues the SAC can enact student voice on in HEIs in Oman, which is the main objective of this study (see Chapter 7 and Section 8.4).

2.3.5 Student Voice, Participation and Power

Power dynamics are related to student voice work in higher education (Freeman 2016). Until recently, theories of power and student voice research have primarily prompted educational debates (Taylor and Robinson 2009). In this section, I will examine the notions of participation and power[10] and how they relate to student voice and citizenship. After this, a brief account of how power is viewed in the student voice literature is provided.

An influential view is presented by Lukes (2005), who studied power as a broad concept that can take different forms. He proposes that power comes in 3-dimensions. The one-dimensional view of power is a pluralist view supported by the prominent political theorist Dahl (1958) who discusses behaviourist concepts of political power and pluralist theories of democracy. The proponents of the pluralist view of power argue that different interest groups rival for power in political power structures (Lukes 2005). Power is also seen as influence and control where person A has power over person B to the degree that person A makes person B act on something they would not otherwise do (Lukes 2005). In this dimension, the group with more power can be identified by looking at who prevails in the decision-making process based on its *observation* (Lukes 2005). Bachrach and Baratz (1970) theorise the second dimension of power. The focus of power here is not only on decision-making power but also on non-decision-making power in which those with power arrange which issues should

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[10] It is not, however, the aim of this thesis to include power as a central theme in the discussion of student voice as it is beyond the intended scope of this research.

be included and which should not be included in the agenda to avoid potential conflicts (Lukes 2005). Moreover, in such events, there is a covert power relation when person B avoids raising issues of interest so that any hostile reaction from person A is avoided (Lukes 2005).

The third dimension of power, set out by Lukes himself, is based on ideological power, in which powerful agents influence the thoughts and ideas of others, including shaping these against their self-interest (Lukes 2005). For example, if people believe in the efficiency of a political or economic system, they might be willing to accept the status quo and legitimise the powerholders of that system, even if that is against their interests. This may lead powerholders to use manipulation to legitimise the status quo, for example, through media or the education system. Lukes (2005) considers this as the "most insidious exercise of power" because it is about how the perceptions are controlled and shaped so "they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable" (Lukes 2005, p.28). Lukes' (2005) views of power as multi-dimensional can contribute to exploring the power relations used during SAC's participation with HEI governance in decision-making processes (as shown in Chapter 7 and Section 8.3).

A different view of power is offered by Foucault (1980), who theorises that power is relational and circulates among individuals who can exercise it. According to Foucault, power is always present. This is contrary to conceptions of power as episodic, which is possessed only by specific individuals. In considering the mechanisms of power, Foucault (1980, p.39) refers to a type of "capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives." Linked to the Foucauldian notion of power is the concept of governmentality (Bragg 2007). In this concept, the various civic entities, like schools and hospitals, in disciplinary societies use time and space to differentiate individuals so they can be monitored and classified (Foucault 1991). For example, in schools, students are categorised according to age, gender and capability.

Mayes (2018) explains that in such modes of governance, "relations of power are dynamic and productive rather than a possession that one has or does not have or a

structure that one is positioned within" (p.2). Using the governmentality perspective of Foucault, Bragg's (2007) and Robinson and Taylor's (2012) analysis of student voice concludes that this may help to nourish students' self-governance, and facilitate the regulation of their learning and behaviour.

Power imbalances and regulatory structures significantly impact student participation and voice, emphasizing the crucial role of power-sharing for effective student participation. The extent to which students participate within spaces (e.g., representation platforms within schools HEIs) is affected by the power imbalance and the structure regulating student-teacher relations (Devine 2002). Wood et al. (2018) affirm that power constantly moves between adults and students and note that "the need for complex understandings of power-sharing is required if young people are to participate in student voice and citizenship action in the context of highly regulated school spaces" (ibid p.179). This finding emphasises that "power-sharing is key to student participation and student voice." (ibid. p.192).

In addition to power-sharing and student participation, Kesby (2007) suggests the need for reflection on the spaces for participation. More social spaces are imperative when participation is embodied by agency, identity and empowerment of students rather than structured by adults only (Percy-Smith 2010). These approaches, which are adult-led limits participation (Fielding 2009). As an act of citizenship, participation should not only focus on "the exercise of, and input to, (adult) political power" but also be concerned with "autonomy and self-determination" of the agenda and values of the individuals (Percy-Smith 2015, p.409), higher education students in the case of this thesis. As discussed further in Section 2.5, Arnstein (2019) speaks of power as the means for participation. Arnstein views power as a gradient from non-participation at the lowest level on the ladder of citizen participation to citizen control at the top level. Power in Arnstein's model refers to who has control and influence on others through coercion, persuasion and manipulation (see section 2.5). The next section explores spaces for youth participation and representation and the mechanisms for involving student representation groups in HE decision-making.

2.4 Youth Active Participation

This section sheds light on youth[11] civic participation and citizenship. This is included because the main research participants are students between 18 and 24 who joined the HEI for their undergraduate studies. The United Nations (UN) defines youth with reference to the age group 15-24 (Nations 1981). Students are typically enrolled in a college or a university[12] when they are 18-19 years old, depending on the country's educational system. According to Finlay et al. (2010), this period of life is the best time to instil civic values and citizenship skills within the youth. Lundy (2007) explains the chronology in Article 12 by asserting that young people need the chance to be able to participate with their views, be assisted to voice their concerns, and need an audience to be attentive to their voice and act upon it. The UNCRC's (1989) Article 12 made it explicit that children have the right to say on matters related to their lives. This article is the most crucial article that supports children and youth participation as citizens (Matthews and Limb 1998; Lundy 2007; Raby 2014). Article 12 (UNCRC, 1989, p.5) reads:

> States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Because of this article, the participation of young people has widely spread in many countries (Percy-Smith 2010; Tisdall 2010). In Wales, for example, the Children's Commissioner for Wales at the time promoted UNCRC articles and conducted activities to raise awareness of children's rights to participation (Children's Commissioner for Wales 2022). Examples of such practices and activities by student councils and youth parliaments are significant in youth political practice (Raby 2014). Percy-Smith (2010) maintains that with such engagement in decision-making tasks, young people are assumed to become active citizens and will gradually develop active citizenship skills for participation. However, young people's participation often has limited effects on decisions. Percy-Smith (2009), for instance, reports that youth

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[11] It should be noted that in different student voice literature, especially in schools, scholars may refer to children as students, pupils or children. However, Fielding and Bragg (2003) sought to maintain using "student" because it is the term was first used in the UK and abroad when the student voice movement started.

[12] Admission to a college or a university is considered to be part of the higher education system in Oman.

developed self-confidence and built-up personal abilities when participating in well-developed children's trusts in the UK, although there were scarce examples of youth influencing the decisions within the trusts. As a national framework in Oman, the government has given special care to youth participation in its Vision 2040[13], where it is maintained that "looking after the youth is a guarantee for the future as it encourages their social and political participation in building the future" of the country (Ministry of Finance 2020, p.26).

Tonon (2012) and Horgan et al. (2017) find the term 'participation' in UN Article 12 to entail voice and decision-making. Tonon (2012) views these types of participation that the youth make in institutions they belong to as actual participation, while symbolic participation refers to the type of involvement that does not impact decision-making. In reflecting on the outcomes of participation, we can draw on Arnstein's (2019) model of citizen participation in which participants at the higher rungs in the model signal citizen's control and power and the lower indicates tokenistic or no actual participation (see section 2.5 for more discussion on Arnstein's model).

2.4.1 HE as a Space for Citizen Participation

After discussing the emphasis on active participation among youth, I will explore the spaces in which active participation is learned and developed within HE settings (see section 3.4 for a discussion on student representation in HE). Higher education contributes to the development of social and political life (Bloom et al. 2005). While there are ideologies that fight for HE education policies to become more instrumental and focused on the economy and market competition, other ideologies focus on democracy and human rights (Harkavy 2006) and the role HE plays in preparing students for civic life and democracy (Hamrick 1998; Cheng and Holton 2018). Tonon (2012, p. 33) regards the university "as a space of socialisation and construction of effective citizenship". It is influential in framing young people's lives and identities (Cheng 2018). Schugurensky (2006) insists that space is required for the youth to learn active participation. Percy-Smith (2010) contends that participation takes place in spaces where youth are in their natural settings like home, neighbourhood, and

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[13] See section 5.3.3 for details about the Child Law in Oman.

education institutions and the nature of the space where they practice participation influences the nature of the activity.

There are various channels whereby students can exercise citizenship participation within HE. For example, Kennedy (2007) refers to the provision of opportunities to practice active citizenship, for example, through the university student unions or students' councils in schools. Klemenčič (2016) gives an example from Harvard University when proposing a new general education program, as the university holds meetings with the students to discuss the proposals. Given that HE students in Europe are considered a vital constituency in HE governance (Bergan 2004), elements of citizenship are exercised within the universities such as student representation in university governance (Klemenčič 2016). "Creating pathways for student involvement in governance allows students to exercise active citizenship and reinforces the conception of higher education institutions as sites of citizenship" (Klemenčič 2020c, p.716 - see section 3.4 for further discussion on student representation). Other examples of citizenship exercises in higher education include having voting rights on issues that concern the student body and during elections of student unions (Klemenčič et al. 2016).

However, under paternalistic governments, state entities including HEIs are subject to close supervision and use by the state (Osipian 2012). In Oman, the HE system is fully controlled by the government (Al'Abri 2015). Therefore, establishing spaces for active student participation at HEIs in Oman needs to abide by the state's orientation and policies, and the state has the power to use these spaces to contain potential dissent (Al-Farsi 2013). Hence, this thesis aims to examine the rationales for establishing the SAC, which is created as a formal space for student participation, and in all HEIs in Oman (see Chapter 5 and Section 8.2).

2.4.2 HE as a Space for Student Representation

This section discusses student representation in HE, which is explored as part of student politics, a potent political force that carries the potential to shape and influence educational, as well as political, debates (Altbach 2007; Altbach and Klemenčič 2014). Klemenčič (2020a) suggests that student politics can be discussed as part of two

strands of activities in HE: activism and representation. Through the former strand, students are usually engaged politically to bring about political and social changes (Altbach and Klemenčič 2014) and through the latter strand, students' needs and demands are formally intermediated and advocated by student representative groups to influence HEIs' decisions (Klemenčič 2012). Both strands are germane to the case of this thesis due to the nature of the establishment of the SAC in 2014. HE students in Oman took part in the Arab Spring protests and the establishment of the SAC was one result of students' demands and activism. However, this study aims only to explore the dynamics of the second strand of student politics i.e., student representation, through the SAC in HE decision-making in Oman.

Following the waves of university democratization in the 1960s, which was the result of student protests in many HEIs in the USA and Western Europe, students individually and collectively have been recognized as an integral "constituency in university governance" (Luescher-Mamashela 2013, p. 1444).

 In different educational systems, the students' body is named differently depending on the rules and policies of the HEIs (AL Shammari 2016). The term students' representative body/organization is "used to describe a formal body that represents and promotes the interests of students" (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2018, p.1). At most UK HEIs, the student representations are named the Student Unions, and these are all gathered under one umbrella, the National Union of Students (NUS) which was founded in 1922 (NUS 2019). Similarly, with European HE legislation reforms adopting a democratic governance model, all important HE stakeholders, especially students, take part in decision-making (Pabian and Minksová 2011; Klemenčič 2012). Student unions from different parts of Europe like the 'FZS' in Germany and the 'UNEF' in France are part of the European Students' Union (ESU) which is considered the umbrella student association (EUS 2019).

Klemenčič (2012) suggests a typology of national systems of student representation in which neo-corporatist and pluralist models are employed to explain the relationship between HE students and states in democratic societies. According to Klemenčič (2012), in neo-corporatist systems of student representation like in Germany and Norway, only a few select student associations participate in the decision-making process. Moreover, under this system, the state enacts specific financial measures to

ensure the financial stability of the organization. Whereas, in the pluralist system of national systems of student representation like in Italy and France, there are multiple intermediate student associations that perform similar functions. To gain access to policymaking and financial resources offered by the state, the student groups compete to secure funding (Klemenčič 2012). However, under authoritarian regimes, Klemenčič (2012) states that student organisations –especially at the national level– are either totally banned or only permitted in a corporatist style, whereby they are subjected to censorship and controlled by governments in legislation, regulation and resources.

The main aim of these different student organization groups is to promote students' voice and represent the interests of the students within the governance structures of the HEIs (Klemenčič 2012). Other roles include the organization of social activities and the provision of academic and welfare support to the student community. Recently, the unions' role in the UK has been greater in terms of representation and relationship with senior HEI management as indicated in a study by 78% of students' union officers in the UK (Brooks et al. 2015). These union members, as described by Brooks et al. (2016a, p.472), "are seen by many, including senior institutional managers, as key actors in articulating students' views and concerns in a market within which 'the student voice' has assumed considerable power, and are now often represented on high-level institutional decision-making bodies."

Also, the legitimacy and autonomy of student organization groups are dependent on organizational characteristics such as their legal status, resources and membership (Klemenčič et al. 2016). These groups are typically given autonomy in how they structure their organization and carry out their activities (Klemenčič 2020b). However, being autonomous does not necessarily mean they are financially and legally independent. Some groups receive financial support from institutions or membership fees to sustain themselves. Within HEIs, these groups sometimes serve as administrative units with employees who operate under the policies and regulations of the hosting university. As a result, they come under the legal authority of the institution (Klemenčič 2020b).

To begin the discussion on the organizational characteristics of student groups, the concepts of the logic of membership and influence by Schmitter and Streeck (1999) can be taken as starting points (Klemenčič 2012). According to Schmitter and Streeck

(1999), the organization of the interest representation process varies based on the political influence and membership interests at play. The primary objective of student representation groups in HEIs is to advocate for the interests of the student community to higher authorities, including HEIs and the government. Thus, they face the challenge of balancing between these two distinct sets of 'logics'. Klemenčič (2012) explains that national student representative groups follow a two-level operation. On one level, these student groups work on representing the voice of the members (i.e., student population) they represent i.e. the logic of membership. On a second level, the student groups need to relate their modus operandi in accordance with the public structures and policies i.e. the logic of influence. Hence, the organizational characteristics of representation groups (i.e. legal status, resources and funding, and membership) are influenced by these 'logics' (Klemenčič 2014).

A central theme revolves around the justifications to include students in university decision-making. In discussing these student groups' engagement with HEIs decision-making, Luescher-Mamashela (2013) presents a typology for reasons to include student representations in university decision-making. These are as follows:

- **The political realist case**: student representation is a matter of politics which has an influence on the opinion of the public. It has been argued by O'Neill (2016) and Crossley and Ibrahim (2012) that student unions have broadly become increasingly engaged with politics, an argument that has been contested by Brooks et al. (2015) using data drawn from a UK-wide survey of students' union officers and students, which suggest that the unions gather students with the aim of representation and delivery of services only, without reaching the political level (Brooks et al. 2015). In exercising their roles and duties, it is expected that unions should exhibit firm independence from the influence of any party other than the student body (ESU 2009). Having said that, it does not mean necessarily that students generally do not have an interest in politics as shown by a study that involved English and Irish HE students conducted by Abrahams and Brooks (2019).

- **The consumerist case**: the students, in general, are consumers of university products, thus, they have the right to be involved in decision-making. While the consumerist case is popular among politicians, policymakers and other social actors, many student unions demonstrated their opposition to such articulation, although in

practice some of the student unions' activities indicated a consumerist nature (Brooks et al. 2016a; Raaper 2018). Indeed, no matter what lens the student representations at HE is viewed through, their practice conforms with "the marketized nature of contemporary higher education" (Brooks et al. 2015, p. 179). Nevertheless, the idea of naming student groups as consumers and HE as a commodity has been rejected by student activists and student representatives as it undermines their aim, which goes beyond the market and consumer relationship (Luescher-Mamashela 2013).

• **The communitarian case**: by contrast to the consumerist case, in the communitarian case students are seen as part of the community. Therefore, their representation is justified on the basis of community members' rights. This case resonates with McCulloch's (2009) conception of 'co-production' where students and others working in the university are engaged in "a cooperative enterprise which is focused on knowledge, its production, dissemination and application, and on the development of learners" (McCulloch 2009, p. 181). Thus, the students alongside the university are engaged in bringing changes to the educational processes as they share the "collective experience of the learning group and on community and the involvement of individuals" (McCulloch 2009, p. 178). Nonetheless, this stance has been subject to the argument that the students are considered juniors in their fields and their knowledge and experience is limited compared to the staff members (Morrow 1998; Zuo and Ratsoy 1999). Klemenčič (2020b) suggests that it is challenging for students to grasp the complex factors that are required to create a lasting quality institutional performance.

• **The democratic case:** in democratic societies, students' representation in university is vital as it is one way to promote an active citizenship culture, by promoting democratic values and activities. Although this statement is widely agreed upon in the literature, Bergan (2004) argues that there is little evidence to support it. Rather, Luescher-Mamashela (2013, p.1451) indicates that "surveys conducted with students at three African universities in 2009 showed no significant difference in their understanding of democracy, and their level of support for democracy, between students who had previously been formally involved in university decision-making and their non-participating peers." This democratic concept might be implemented in countries that have recently embraced democracy and the process of transitioning to democracy is still ongoing. In such contexts, universities can play an integral role in

strengthening a democratic culture through the involvement of students in university decision-making processes (Luescher-Mamashela 2013).

After assessing the different types of cases of participation in HE decision-making, this thesis aims to examine the main justification for involving the SAC in university decision-making and employ the typology as a useful framework to explore the patterns of student representation and participation in Oman and the role of the SAC (see section 8.4.3). Furthermore, it aims to explore how the SAC's participation in HEI's decision-making contributes to bringing about change for students. The next section discusses Arnstein's (2019) model, which is used to interpret the study's findings on student voice, power and participation in HEIs in Oman.

2.5 Arnstein's Ladder of Citizenship Participation

This section discusses Arnstein's (2019) ladder of citizen participation as a central framework to the thesis, which is employed as an explanatory tool to interpret the findings in the empirical chapters. In the 1960s, as the US witnessed waves of economic, social, and political turmoil, it was a peak time for various movements like the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the youth movement. In that period, as Gaber (2021) explains, there were intense equality and justice debates related to the situation of some minority groups (black, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Indians, Eskimos), which Arnstein names as 'have-nots', and the exclusionary actions of local governments, which Arnstein called the 'powerholders' (Arnstein 2019, p. 24). The US government designated support funds and implemented strategic policies to redevelop urban fields to reduce such issues. Upon her involvement with some committees responsible for the redevelopment projects of the urban areas, Arnstein realised there was widespread confusion about how citizens could participate in the planning of their communities (Lauria and Schively 2021). Therefore, she worked on her model of citizen participation to argue for the maximum inclusion of minority groups in the planning process and decision-making to work out redevelopment plans (Lauria and Schively 2021). Section 2.2 discusses how the notion of citizenship entails the relationship between citizens and the state, which is bonded by the political, social and civil rights and the settings required for participation. However, there are no parameters that measure the participation of the citizens. For Arnstein, the main question in the model is: What is citizen participation? She answers this question (Arnstein 2019, p.24):

My answer to the critical what question is simply that citizenship participation is a categorical term for citizen power. It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. It is the strategy by which the have-nots join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parcelled out.

For Arnstein, "citizen participation is citizen power" (Arnstein 2019, p.24). Thus, Arnstein adds 'power' as an extra dimension within the discussion of social, civic and political participation (see section 2.2). The power to make a decision and to control issues is the sole measuring tool for participation and the ultimate aim of citizen participation in the model (Tritter and McCallum 2006). While the model describes participation as a gradient that increases as someone moves up the ladder, the effect of power here might be argued to reflect Lukes' first dimension of power. In this dimension, as discussed in Section 2.3.5, the influence is single-sided, whereby person A controls person B and forces them to do an action that they would not otherwise do (Lukes 2005). According to Walsh and Wilson (2021, p.172), Arnstein's landmark model was intended to critique the 'hypocrisy of participatory practices, which was featured among the powerholders who were opposing the calls to power redistribution with the community members because of 'racism, paternalism, and resistance' (Arnstein 2019, p. 25), despite the ongoing talks about citizen participation at that time (Walsh and Wilson 2021). After witnessing the disparity in power distribution between the community groups and government officials, she developed the ladder of citizen participation model to provide a more explicit analysis of how citizens can more actively participate and have power in planning processes.

The model comprises eight rungs in a ladder pattern (see Figure 2.2) where the bottom rungs correspond to non-participation, the middle rungs correspond to some degree of tokenism, and the top rungs indicate that citizens have power and control over the goals they want to achieve (Arnstein 2019). Like Arnstein's conception of participation, Cook-Sather (2006) and McLeod (2011) suggest that having a voice entails power and agency, which yields a change (see section 2.3.1). This thesis focuses on similar aspects of Arnstein's model, examining whether student representative groups' participation in HE in Oman brings substantive change or is mostly tokenistic and rarely yields any change (see Chapter 7 and Section 8.4).
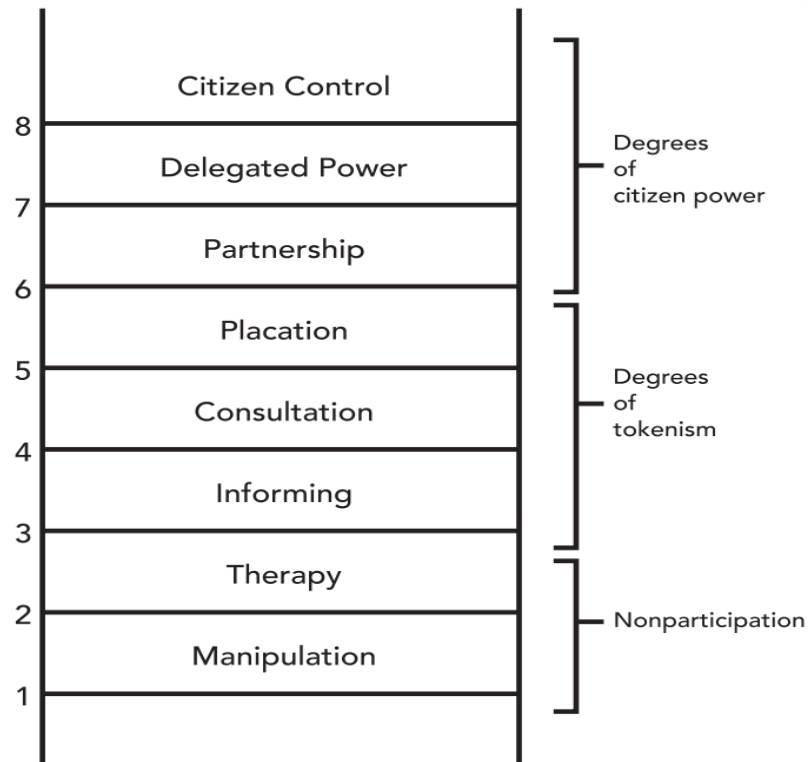
Figure 2.2 Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (2019)

The rungs from the bottom to the top indicate citizens' degree of participation and power in decision-making (Arnstein 2019). The first two rungs at the bottom of the ladder, manipulation and therapy, indicate that citizen participation is entirely absent. Specifically, in the manipulation rung, the citizens are engaged in an "illusory" participation process by the authorities who, under the disguise of consultation, obtain citizens' approval for plans intended to support the powerholders' interests (Arnstein 2019, p.26). Citizens from community groups are placed in "rubberstamp advisory committees" to show that their participation is genuinely needed, and the reality is that they are only used to engineer the support and consent from other citizens of the same community. This rung evokes notions of Lukes' (2005) third dimension of power, where power is viewed to manipulate consent and shape thoughts (see section 2.3.5).

In the second rung from the bottom, therapy, quasi-participatory programs are created by the authorities and officials to cure and educate the citizens who are made to think that they have problems when problems may be created by the authorities and their policies (Organizing Engagement 2018). The only difference between the two first rungs is that in the therapy rung, citizens might be re-educated in some form after attending a program (Almanzar and Zitcer 2021). In general, the main goal in these

two lower rungs is to hinder citizen participation and to maintain power in the hands of the powerholders (Bartley et al. 2010).

In the middle rungs, 'degrees of tokenism', which include informing, consultation and placation, community members are consulted, and they inform some decisions jointly with the powerholders. Jaber (2021, p.14) considers this step of moving upward in the ladder as a crucial step towards "legitimising citizen participation". Nevertheless, influencing decisions at this stage is far from reality. Specifically, citizens are informed about their rights and responsibilities in the informing rung. However, channels to receive feedback and negotiation power are absent (Arnstein 2019).

Also, in the consultation rung, common methods for consultation are general attitude surveys and public hearings where citizens are not fully aware of their options (Arnstein 2019). Nonetheless, the input from citizens' ideas is only restricted to this. "Participation is measured by how many come to meetings, take brochures home, or answer a questionnaire" (Organizing Engagement 2018, P.5), which is used as evidence of citizen participation collected by powerholders (Arnstein 2019). The placation rung represents the highest level of tokenism on the ladder. In this rung, citizens are granted minimal influence and allowed to advise in planning and processes. However, the powerholders have "the right to judge the legitimacy or feasibility of [that] advice" that is received from certain people who are carefully selected by the powerholders (Arnstein 2019, p.29). Still, the right to final decision-making is retained by the powerholders (Falanga and Fonseca 2021).

At the top of the ladder, the rungs demonstrate citizen control and power (Arnstein 2019). For example, at the partnership rung, "power is redistributed through negotiation between citizens and powerholders" (Arnstein 2019, p.30) and shared in joint committees. It should be noted that power in this rung is not necessarily voluntarily given, but it is taken by the citizens sometimes through protests or campaigns, which are also used to negotiate better options. This indicates that even at levels of a high degree of participation, there is a counter-effort from the powerholders to hold power.

In the delegated power rung, some power is delegated to citizens to manage and control some aspects of the programs that the government officials were originally tasked to control. Also, the powerholders give up some degree of control and decision-making to citizens who become the majority seat holders in joint committees. At this

level, the negotiations on any differences would require the powerholders to request the change after they used to only respond to requests from citizens (Arnstein 2019). In the final rung, citizen control, citizens have the full responsibility to govern the programs and lead on policies. They acquire what Arnstein describes as "the means by which they can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society" (Arnstein 2019, p. 24). This rung shifts power from the authorities and officials to the 'have-nots', who have control over the decision-making process. Thus, for Arnstein, citizen participation is all about who has the power to control and who is involved in the decision-making process (see section 2.3.5 for more discussion of the power notion).

The next subsection justifies using Arnstein's model over other frameworks, before discussing its applications and limitations.

2.5.1 A Justification for Using the Model

Arnstein's model is used as a central framework for the thesis, over alternative influential frameworks that study citizen participation, such as Roger Hart's (1992) children's participation and Altbach's (1979) student activism framework for various reasons (see also Altbach 2007). Hart's framework is in essence an adaptation of Arnstein's model but focused on children (Cook-Sather et al. 2014), and the original Arnstein's model better reflects the enquires and aims of the thesis. Moreover, the distribution of the eight rungs in Arnstein's model is found advantageous to interpret the SAC's participation in decision-making over Hart's model which also includes eight rungs. This is because Arnstein's model has three levels of participation (i.e., non-participation, tokenism and citizen control) and these levels provide a better reflection of the nature of SAC's participation in HEI's Decision-making (see Figure 2.2). Whereas Hart's (1992) model consists of only two levels: non-participation and degree of participation and rungs like 'assigned but informed' are viewed as part of the later level, although some requirements to meet this rung. Thus, in my view, it falls short in reflecting the true nature of participation (see Hart 1992).

Altbach's framework is also germane to this thesis because it is used as a reference for work on student activism and representation, and it sets different propositions for student politics in different contexts (e.g., the developed world and the third world[14]).

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[14] As they are called in (Altbach 1979).

Nevertheless, Altbach's framework has not been used because "Altbach did not view his work on student activism as theoretical; indeed, he asserted that 'student activism lacks any overarching theoretical explanation" (Luescher 2018, p.299) and there is in fact no application of Altbach's work as the theoretical framework in the way Altbach articulated, only eclectic use of certain concepts or propositions (Luescher 2018). Also, in terms of focus, Altbach's framework does not focus on creating formal representation groups (e.g., the SAC) but on student activists and those who follow them (Luescher 2018). Thus, Arnstein's model has more advantages than the two former frameworks.

Moreover, Arnstein's model is a useful analytical tool for the following reasons. First, the elements of this thesis are thematically related to Arnstein's model of citizen participation. This model can be used to understand participation "in which the empowered public institutions and officials deny power to citizens in different contexts (Organizing Engagement 2018, p.1), which is relevant to analysing the operation of SACs. Secondly, this model is relevant to the current research because it provides a benchmark scale to indicate the level of SAC's participation in HE governance. Using Arnstein's ladder as a scale facilitates the analysis of the nature of SAC's participation. A further reason for using this model relates to participation and power. Arnstein (2019) theorises citizen participation as "a continuum of power" that is defined as a core component of citizen participation in the model (Stelmach 2016, p.276). This idea relates to previous discussions on citizenship, voice and power[15] and the importance of citizen participation in the decision-making process that influences their welfare (see section 2.2).

Finally, this study uses this model because the main aim of Arnstein's model is to model empowerment for the citizens whose voice is marginalised (and seen as powerless in the context of this framework), to get their rights in deciding what most concerns them. For example, Botchwey et al. (2019) have applied Arnstein's model to study the marginalisation of student voices in planning venues. Likewise, this study focuses on the rights of HE students in relation to what matters to them (i.e., the HE policies that directly or indirectly affect their studies and future). HE students in this context are considered subordinate to HEIs and HE governance, and despite their

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[15] See section 2.3.5 for more discussion on voice, participation and power.

formal rights (as students) to participate and engage in HEI decision-making, their power to influence these institutions may be limited. Arnstein's model is used in this thesis to provide insights into how students can rightly participate with adults in decision-making in different planning activities.

2.5.2 Application of the Model

Arnstein's (2019) ladder of citizen participation has been used in different fields and with different groups. The model was first designed for planning and redevelopment (e.g., Lauria and Schively 2021). However, Arnstein (2019, p. 25) acknowledges that the model could be used in "…colleges and universities which in some cases have become literal battlegrounds over the issue of student power…" wherein students are trying to gain enough power to make their HEIs respond to their needs and demands. Bovill and Bulley (2011) noted a few studies applied Arnstein's model in HE. For instance, Carey (2018) utilized the model to enhance the theoretical understanding of how institutional policies and processes affect student engagement in university decision-making. Carey (2018) used Arnstein's model to enhance the understanding of student engagement in institutional governance and to argue that the power dynamics of HE should not be ignored when exploring student engagement. He adds that student participation is manifested in the university's structures and mechanisms for student engagement (Carey 2018).

Bovill and Bulley (2011) adapted Arnstein's model to explore how far active student participation in HE curriculum design is a desirable and possible practice. Through the adaptation of Arnstein's model into the ladder of student participation in curriculum design, they concluded that while there is much support for such practice, its desirability is bound by the context of the curriculum design and other factors, including the availability of resources and the institutional policies as well as the challenge to meet the requirement from professional bodies (Bovill and Bulley 2011). Bovill and Bulley (2011) agree with Carey (2018) that institutional policies and mechanisms are relevant factors that reflect the level of student participation in curriculum design.

A further application of Arnstein's model in HE is provided by Bartley et al. (2010). Their study explores university teachers' perceptions of student participation with regard to organisations, processes and contents. Arnstein's model is used in this study to analyse power structures in different situations (Bartley et al. 2010). For instance,

student participation is generally a top-down process in HE governance, which entails external factors and stakeholders (e.g. community leaders, politicians). There are chances of higher student participation in actual teaching situations given that the teachers create the space for this participation and the students are willing to participate. However, the students are found to have more power when they participate in evaluating activities. Student participation is characterised as a bottom-up process (Bartley et al. 2010). These three applications of Arnstein's model in the context of HE provide a reassurance that Arnstein's model can be adopted as an explanatory model to facilitate the interpretation of the data and reflect on the nature of SAC's participation and representation of student voice in HEIs' decision-making.

Having discussed the application of Arnstein's model in different fields, including higher education research, some limitations need to be considered. First, while the model focuses on citizens in democratic countries, it is unclear if the model can be applied in non-democratic countries where the citizenship dimensions of Western democracy do not necessarily apply. For example, in juxtaposing the model with the aspect of student voice as consumerism in the context of a rentier state, such as Oman's, the meaning of voice might be perceived differently by the citizens/students, as discussed in Section 2.3.2. Therefore, this study builds on this model by testing it in a rentier state context, which is also featured as non-democratic.

Another limitation of the model is that it lacks sufficient explanation on the use of power, although it is centred on citizen power. Moreover, Arnstein's model is vague regarding the necessary methods of participation of the different stakeholders. The model takes little account of the different theoretical reasonings (e.g. rights for participation as citizens) for the different methods to use by different stakeholders who are involved in the participation process (Tritter and McCallumb 2006). Moreover, while the model aims to place the citizen at the apex of the ladder, further tensions might be identified in the model's partisan nature, potentially creating tension between citizens and government representatives.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the main themes of this thesis: citizenship, participation and student voice. Relevant theories and literature were discussed for each theme, and the links between concepts were presented. The main research questions

address gaps identified in the literature, with the principal gap captured in the main research question: **how does the SAC contribute to the enactment of student voice within Omani HEIs' decision-making?** In the first section of the chapter, the discussion reviewed the concept of citizenship in different contexts and reviewed its multitude of dimensions and typologies. However, there is limited research published on enacting citizenship in higher education in the context of a rentier state, particularly on the spaces for student participation and representation.

In the second part of the chapter, the notion of student voice is defined and explored by looking at its emergence and related discourses like consumerism and tokenism were highlighted to help understand how the concept evolves within different systems in schools and HE systems. A discussion of student voice in the context of HE in Oman is considered original since no previous studies explored the concept of student voice in a rentier state context. The later sections of the chapter examine the connection between student voice and other factors, such as power and regulated spaces and the difference between activism and representation. While part of the literature insists that student voice should entail a change (West 2004; Cook-Sather 2006; McLeod 2011), other studies affirm that student voice practices are sometimes applied in a tokenistic way and for market purposes.

The key point for consideration is that most theories on citizenship argue for the rights of citizens to participate in various areas that affect their lives and for their voice to yield a change. In Oman, while this assumption is manifested by the Constitution and reflected in various occasions (*e.g., the participation in setting the Oman Vision 2040*), the degree of citizens' (and students') influence is kept at its minimum. However, no studies have explored the situation with regard to students in higher education specifically. In the context of this study and through using the framework for citizen participation (*Arnstein's model for citizen participation*), students' degrees of power and participation can be better understood. The next chapter discusses the Omani context that unfolded the enactment of student voice and representation groups in Oman's HE.

Chapter Three: Higher Education in Oman in the Wake of the Arab Spring

3.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the context of the study and addresses three main themes: i) political unrest in the region, ii) the expansion of the HE sector, and iii) HE governance and student voice in Oman. The chapter commences with an overview of the protests in 2011 throughout many Arab countries in what became known as the 'Arab Spring'. The chapter specifically explores the main socioeconomic and political factors contributing to the unrest. In setting the context, I move from the general to the particular, first providing an overview of the unrest as it swept across the Arab world before focusing specifically on Oman. Here, I am concerned with examining the government's political, economic and educational reforms in response to the citizens' demands in the region. The second theme explores the expansion of HE. I begin with a global overview of these transformations within the sector before turning attention to the expansion of HE in Oman. These changes can be evidenced in terms of expanding the sector's infrastructure and the growth of the student population. Finally, the third theme considers how the HE sector has responded to student demands for their voices to be heard. In Oman, the establishment of the SAC became the channel through which students could express voice, and have their needs, wants and general concerns heard. This discussion will establish the context for the main objectives of the study, which are to explore the rationale for establishing the SACs in Oman's HEIs, to understand the meaning of student voice as held by the study stakeholders and in policy documents and, finally, to explore the dynamics of student voice and representation in Oman's HEIs with the SACs as the focus of study, especially under the exclusive circumstances of political unrest and HE expansion in Oman.

3.2 The Start of the Political Unrest in the Region

The year 2011 was a turning point in Arab history. It ushered in a challenging period marked by serious disruption and underlined a deep chasm between the governments and citizens (Behbehani 2016). The 'Arab Spring'[16] refers to the series of anti-

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[16] According to Abusharif (2014), the term is first used by Marc Lynch in an article in the Foreign Policy Journal in January 2011.

government protests, violent demonstrations and rebellions by citizens demanding an end to entrenched authoritarian Arab governments.

Some commentators claim these momentous events began with a tragedy caused by an injustice which ended with a tragic death. In 2011 in Tunisia, a vegetable vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi, set fire to himself in a public demonstration of his anger and frustration after the local government seized his unlicensed cart (see section 2.3.4 for discussion on 'low politics'). His eventual death sparked mass waves of solidarity protests in the country, which led to the arrests and deaths of citizens who confronted the police. Numerous rallies against President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali took place, which ignited further unrest and demonstrations in other North African and GCC countries (Rosiny 2012). The protests continued for months in Egypt, Kuwait and Libya, and in some cases, such as Yemen and Syria, left on in civil wars that continue today.

Oman was one of the GCC states most badly affected by the Arab Spring (Behbehani 2016). Surprisingly though, the waves of unrest went unnoticed by international observers whose attention was focused on what they saw as more serious events taking place in Egypt, Libya, and Syria, and closer in Bahrain (Worrall 2012). In Oman, around two hundred citizens joined in protests against the ever-rising cost of basic food items such as rice and wheat and demanded higher wages. A month later, on February 8, 2011, a group of teachers publicly demanded more pay and extra allowances, complained about their high contributions to the retirement pension, and requested the establishment of a new teachers' association in Oman (Spinner 2011). The protests were orchestrated and spread through short message service (SMS); several schools throughout Oman were closed. These first protests, the Green Marches (Worrall 2012), were followed by a second series of protests of around four hundred citizens and took place in Muscat, the capital city of Oman. The protestors submitted a written petition that was handed to the 'Diwan', the Sultan's chief administrative office, in which they affirmed their loyalty to the Sultan before requesting his immediate intervention on their behalf to put an end to the practice of some elite merchants and ministers who were taking advantage of their political positions (Valery 2013).

Besides, there were sit-ins in different towns and cities, the most tense of which was in Sohar, a city 150 km away from Muscat. Behbehani (2016) describes how in late February 2011, some young protestors were outraged when they were not hired following an announcement of a port project in Sohar's newly established industrial zone. The police responded with tear gas to end the protests (Spinner 2011), triggering a wave of mass violence and arrests which led to the death of one protester (Valeri 2015). News of the tragic death of the protestor spread across the regions, sparking further demonstrations. Some protestors decided to camp on the Globe Roundabout in Sohar, later renamed the Reform Square, similar to the Tahrir Square in Egypt (Behbehani 2016). On March 01, 2011, armed forces were called to disperse the crowds in the most famous protest location in the Globe Roundabout in Sohar. These were unprecedented moments in Oman's history, involving huge protests of over twenty thousand citizens across Oman (Worall 2014). The ultimate call was for REFORM, as heard in the slogans chanted by the crowds. They wanted reform of the government, ministries and ministers and an end to nepotism (Arslanian 2013).

3.2.1 The Reasons for the Unrest: Economic and Political

The Arab Spring was anticipated by some observers when following the eruption of similar protests in Iran, driven by similar factors and catalysts (i.e. economic and political). Many such reforms were discussed in a conference titled the *Declaration for Democracy and Reform* held in Doha in 2004. At this conference, many high-profile government officials, politicians, human rights agencies and activists from most Arab countries signed the declaration. On June 04 2004, the conference issued eleven significant calls. The most important of these included an urgent appeal that Arab governments should start adopting modern constitutional protocols for a democratically elected cabinet.

Additionally, the forum called for abolishing the emergency laws, military courts and mechanisms and use of force by some Arab regimes to control uprisings (Reza 2007). There was also a call to all participants to outlaw discrimination against citizens based on religion, gender, race or language (Doha Declaration 2004). Notably, these are almost the same demands the protestors called for, and most regimes were aware of them. However, they were very slow in implementing the profound changes on the ground and neglected the urgency of the need to stay in pace with the need for the democratisation of the nations (Al-Shoukeirat 2016).

The main catalyst reasons for the Arab unrest can be attributed to economic and political reasons. Among the most significant factors that led to the uprisings was the financial pressure imposed upon most Arab economies by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Salih 2013). Salih (2013) explains that the member countries were obliged to implement an economic plan which pushed the governments to put off any commodities subsidies to the destitute and indigent citizens and raise taxes on consumption. This factor created deteriorating conditions in important sectors such as health and education. Moreover, the population observed how the country's wealth remained in the hands of the leadership and the elites. The spreading economic discontent and the corrupt context triggered such rallies in the Middle East.

The protests were also attributed to the high level of unemployment among the youth below the age of 25, who represented approximately 65 per cent of the total population of the Arab world (Salih 2013; Brownlee et al. 2015). Of these young Egyptians and Tunisians, one out of four was unemployed during the Arab Spring (Qadirmushtaq and Afzal 2017). Ultimately, unemployment directly led to increases in poverty rates, mortality, mental health issues and crime (Hakim 1982). In Oman, the same unemployment scenario was repeated. When looking at the rise of employment rates between 2003 - 2010, there was only a 4% rise in the employment of Omanis (AL Shanfari 2013). Moreover, the private sector observed a steady decrease in Omani employees from 18.8% at the end of 2005 to 12.9% in March 2012 (Valery 2013).

The authoritarian status of the MENA region was also a key factor for protests and demonstrations (Howard and Hussain 2013). The protests represented transitional waves from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occurred in the same period, as suggested by an early definition of waves of democratisation by Huntington (1991). Although these so-called waves of democratisation have swept the globe, they had not reached the Middle East before the Arab Spring. Authoritarian governments discouraged all endeavours to promote fundamental human rights like the right to vote and the expression of voice through the continuous declaration of emergencies (Müller and Hübner 2014). In the Omani context, also viewed as "an authoritarian" state (Peterson 2013, p.327), all unions, associations, political parties and active participation in public affairs were not permitted over the last four decades (See also Section 3.4.1 for an overview of Oman's political structure). This created social and

political tensions among Omanis, which exploded dramatically during the Arab Spring, as described above (Al Hashmi 2013).

3.2.2 Demands, Consequences and Changes

The destabilization of the Arab spring had a major impact in the region. The governments had to respond to various demands. There were two types of demands from the protests: in republican states, there was a demand for full regime change, like in Egypt and Tunisia. On the other hand, in monarchies, the citizens wanted various social, economic and political reforms without the need to change the monarch. This was the case in most GCC (Behbehani 2016). As a result, within the first 30 months of the protests, four heads of state whose regimes had lasted for more than 20 years were ousted: the Tunisian, the Egyptian, the Libyan and the Yemeni presidents (Brownlee et al. 2015) and only recently, the Sudanese and the Algerian Presidents were also ousted. The period also featured mass arrests and violent clashes between people and police and army, leading to the death of approximately 90000 civilians in 16 countries and causing waves of migrations to the GCC and Europe (Brownlee et al. 2015). Moreover, the Arab Spring caused another extreme layer for the Arab region: the radicalization of the youth. In a study conducted by Al-Badayneh et al. (2016) to examine the impact of various social factors (see section 3.2.1) on the radicalization of the Arab youth, the study concludes that the Arab Spring, among other geographic and social factors, push young people to radicalization. The Arab Spring brought waves of political upheaval in the region, causing further instability and an increase in, the already soaring, unemployment rates among youth (see section 3.2.1). This socio-political context created a conducive environment for the extremist groups to exploit and recruit the discontented youth, by promising them with transformative change. These factors, including the search for identity during upheavals, increase the youth's susceptibility to join the radical groups which put a lot of emphasis on group unity and membership loyalty (see section 5.3.2 for more discussion on recruitment of students and unemployed youth by terrorist organisations such as ISIS).

In Oman, the list of demands included "more job opportunities and measures to curb rising prices and inequalities, along with an end to corruption, the promulgation of a constitution to replace the Basic Law, the guarantee of a separation of legislative,

executive, and judicial powers, and above all, the appointment of a prime minister." (Behbehani 2016, pp. 142-143).

Higher education students also took advantage of the region's critical condition (Spinner 2011). AL Mahrouqi (2013) narrated that during the protest in Oman, the students in many HEIs took the moment to demand the establishment of a student union. During such events, Klemenčič (2020a) suggests that student activism becomes a potent force that can influence different types of policies, politically and socially (see section 2.4.2).

The rulers In Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were able to address these by making instant reforms on different levels. For example, on economic levels, some financial rights were granted to Saudis following a promise by King Abdullah, who decreed the allocation of $29 billion to decrease unemployment rates. Furthermore, a bureau was established to eradicate the widespread pilfering of wealth (Salih 2013).

In Oman, His Majesty, the late Sultan Qaboos, addressed many of the demands of the population. Forty royal decrees and urgent orders were issued in less than a month for the first time since he took over the throne in 1970 (Al Hashmi 2013). On an economic level, for example, there were orders to create 50,000 job opportunities in both the public and private sectors, raise the minimum salaries by 25%, decrease the contribution to the pension from 8 to 7 % and introduce a new living expense allowance and set a salary of OR 150 per month (equals to $ 400) for non-employed youth (Al Hashmi 2013). Moreover, a new Public Authority for Consumer Protection was established for the first time. This office is responding to protestors' demands against the merchant's corruption. Furthermore, the Sultan promised to accelerate Omanisation[17] mechanisms to support Omanis' employment in positions held by the foreign workforce (Arslanian 2013).

For the first time in 40 years, the demonstrations made it possible for the people to express their voice in public, and this had effects on the political identity of the citizens. During the rallies and demonstrations in different cities in Oman, many talks were delivered by academics, authors, economists and intellectuals from different sectors (Saleh 2013). There have been developments in the national dialogue of citizens and

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[17] The process of replacing foreign workers with Omani nationals

the content of the formal discourse when people were allowed to interfere and ask questions (Al Lawati 2013). It is not any more glorifying and appraising the elites rather than talking about efficacy and trustworthiness. The people became more open to discussing equality and values before the law. Some protesters were doing it for the first time and did not have enough experience, which occasionally led to conflicts between them (Saleh 2013).

The response to the protestors' demands felt more serious on the political level as it touched on amendments to the Basic Law of Oman (Barany 2013). For instance, the extension of authority and power in legislation and regulation to the Consultative Council (CC) was updated, a neglected political reform many protestors called for. The 84 members of this CC were guaranteed immunity to express their voice freely. They could also now review the annual state budget and any developmental projects by the government. The concept of a state was being built, especially after the decrees, which gave more power and authority to the state and the CC and more independence to the judiciary systems. On a new note, municipal councils in each region were established to encourage regional self-governance (Al Hashmi 2013). This new approach was aimed at allowing citizen representation within local regions.

On the educational level and after many student protests in HEIs, the response was to open a new public university and raise the students' stipends (Barany 2013). Moreover, 7,000 internal and 1,500 external scholarships were granted, and more students were admitted to public higher education colleges and universities like SQU and Colleges of Technology (COTs)[18] (Al Hashmi 2013). Of special relevance to this thesis, after several past rejections students were allowed for the first time the formation of SACs in all HEIs in Oman (Almaamari 2018b). This new channel was designed to allow students to express their voice in HEIs – a key question of whether this has materialised is tackled by this thesis.

From the above developments and the aftermath of the Arab Spring, this research aims to closely investigate the rationale behind establishing the SAC after many years of students' demands. This study also explores how the SAC can contribute to enacting student voice within the HEIs. The next section looks at how the expansion

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[18] COTs are now merged with other 6 public colleges of applied sciences and jointly formed the public University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS).

of HE sets the context for developing a student voice policy for establishing the SACs in Oman.

3.3 The Expansion of Higher Education

In this section, I explore the expansion of the HE sector and the dynamics that supported the expansion, first generally worldwide, then more specifically in Oman. The aim is to understand how the Omani HE system is engineered and shall serve as a basis to understand the rationale for the student voice policy development that took place after the protests in 2011. Understanding this context reveals how students might have changed after the protests and how the government changed its views towards the 'new type' of students.

3.3.1 The Expansion of HE Worldwide

After the Second World War, and particularly in the early 1960s, there was a significant increase in the higher education sector globally (Schofer and Meyer 2005). Using pooled regression analysis between 1900 and 2000 in 100 countries, Schofer and Meyer (2005) found that the number of HE-enrolled students in 1900 was only about half a million of the relevant age cohort. By 2000, the number of HE-involved students had rocketed to a hundred million of the age cohort worldwide, though age cohorts have also increased. The HE expansion has occurred in almost every country with some variations (Altbach 1991). Altbach (1991) adds that the expansion started in the US, then in Europe, and then continued in developing countries. Other indicators of HE expansion include the worldwide rise of universities, enrolled students, departments and degree programs (Frank and Meyer 2007). According to Schofer and Meyer (2005), these waves of HE expansion were supported by international-level dynamics:

- Democratisation: that institutionalised and supported a democratic decision-making process, and this was measured by the competitive and open elections and the avoidance of tyrannical features.

- Global scientization: that supported the existence of scientific authorities and institutions worldwide.

- Increase of national development planning: that focused on developing the human capital and planning manpower through increased higher education.

- Structuration of the world polity: that maintained a strong connection with international non-governmental agencies.

- Expansion of human rights: that advocated for minorities, lower-status people and women, after they experienced a high level of segregation.

To the relevance of this research, Pavel et al. (2016) made two important assumptions corresponding to the HE expansion. The first assumption is that the expansion of higher education leads to a diverse mix of students with varying backgrounds, requirements, and expectations. The second assumption, which is the main focus of this research, is that the expansion of higher education has broadened the representation of students within the sector. This thesis particularly examines this aspect in Oman and the MENA region, where the expansion is recent.

These recent developments have brought about a new societal model that values the knowledge and skills gained through higher education for various social roles. This has replaced 'a more closed society and occupational system—with associated fears of "over-education"' (Schofer and Meyer 2005, p. 898).

The HE systems worldwide have undergone significant changes and have been greatly influenced by globalisation. The term 'globalisation'[19] is frequently used in media, academic literature, and everyday conversations (Mundy 2005). While there may be varying definitions of the term, most researchers concur that globalisation, aided by ICT and other technologies, has made the world a smaller place (Al'Abri 2011). The HE sector and HEIs have become hubs for the persistent exchange of human and financial capital, knowledge, and information technology. Therefore, it has been deemed impossible for individual HE systems to be isolated from the influence of globalisation (Marginson and Wende 2007).

Oman is among all other countries affected by globalisation, through which more economic and social competition and trading challenges spread in the region (Hatimi 2018). Al'Abri (2011, 2015) argue that Oman has been affected by waves of mixed global and regional pressures, and the reforms made to the HE system (as discussed in the following section) are partly in response to meet the challenges of globalisation

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[19] After looking at different definition of globalization, Al'Abri (2011) considers it "as processes that make the world a small village through time and space compression with new technologies being an important facilitator of this interconnectivity. This process is marked by speedy, free movement of people, services, capital, goods, ideas and knowledge across borders" (p. 493).

(as well as the Arab Spring demands for reform). For instance, Oman has been a World Trade Organization (WTO) member since 2000, which means it must, like other members, undertake a set of guidelines leading to "progressive liberalisation" (Robertson 2006, p.6). Oman has been committed to liberalising its policies and allowing external competitors to participate in providing HE services (Al Harthy 2011).

Another factor that has an impact on the HE system in Oman is the economy. Oman is a state that is highly dependent on oil revenues and reserves (Al-Hamadi et al. 2007). The government's dependence on oil and gas significantly increased by about ten percentage points between 2003 and 2014. With plunging oil prices, approximately from $125 per barrel in March 2011 to $65 per barrel in January 2017, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) (National Centre for Statistics and Information 2017), government expenditure on many sectors, including HE, has been badly affected. That is, since the HE sector is dependent on the government and thus diminishing oil revenues, it has increasingly faced funding issues (Issan and Osman 2010; Al Sarmi 2014).

Different government initiatives to address the dependence on oil and gas have been introduced at different levels. On a national level, a long-term strategy called Oman's Vision 2020 was created to guide the diversification of the economy and find new sources of income in different sectors like tourism, industry, fisheries, and agriculture (Supreme Council for Planning (SCP), 2016). The strategy calls for developing national human resources by providing the necessary training and skills to replace foreign workers with Omani nationals and accelerate Omanisation (Al'Abri 2015). This mission is handed over to the HE system to enact policies and plans to develop the human capital strategy and equip Omanis with the necessary skills and knowledge for the new economy diversification schemes. An example of this plan is to increase the number of entrepreneurs by introducing an entrepreneurship program in all HEIs (Al-Shabibi 2020). The Omani government implements this strategy to create new skills to contribute to economic diversification plans (Al-Shabibi 2020).

Amid this uncertain economic condition coupled with issues in HE funding, Al'Abri (2015) argues that students become more sceptical of the future promises from the

government on HE opportunities and future careers. This increased demands for student voice within HEIs.

3.3.2 The Expansion of HE in Oman

After ascending to the throne in 1970, His Majesty the late Sultan Qaboos focused his efforts on two key sectors: health and education. As a result, these sectors experienced significant growth and expansion. For example, education in Oman has been developed through two main stages (AL Harthi and AL Shaibani 2010). Since 1970 and up to the 1990s, the focus of the Omani government was to increase the infrastructure and quantity of schools. Since the mid-90s, the second stage of schooling development has aimed to improve the quality of education through performance assessment and policy reviewing, while also maintaining infrastructure growth (Al Harthi and Al Shaibani 2010).

With regard to higher education, Baporikar and Shah (2012) describe the main stages of Omani HE evolvement:

- Before 1970: There was no HE in the country. Omanis wishing to study travelled to other countries.
- The 1970s – 1980s: Some higher education vocational centres and health institutes were established. The most important event in this stage was the establishment of SQU in 1986.
- The 1990s – present: Major expansion took place in this stage. The important milestone was the establishment of MOHE in 1994 and the creation of six new education colleges, which later were renamed Colleges of Applied Sciences[20]. The HE system allowed for the first time to establish private HEIs.

To ensure quality assurance measures and meet national and international standards, the OAAA was established in 2010. The OAAA is an administratively and financially independent entity responsible for regulating the quality of higher education in Oman to meet international standards and improve the internal quality processes of HEIs (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority 2016). The authority is also responsible for

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[20] See Footnote 2 in p.7.

accrediting all HEIs in Oman in two stages: The Quality Audit and the institutional standard assessment (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority 2016).

With the changes and developments in the HE sector, the number of HEIs has increased over the years. Figure 3.1 below shows the number of government and private HEIs in Oman between 2011 and 2016. The figure clearly shows that the number of HEIs has grown from 59 before 2014 to 69 public and private HEIs in 2016. This could be attributed to the demands of the Arab Spring, as discussed in Section 3.3.2. Moreover, as Figure 3.1 shows, there was a gradual increase in the public HEIs compared to the private HEIs, which seemed to level out throughout the period.
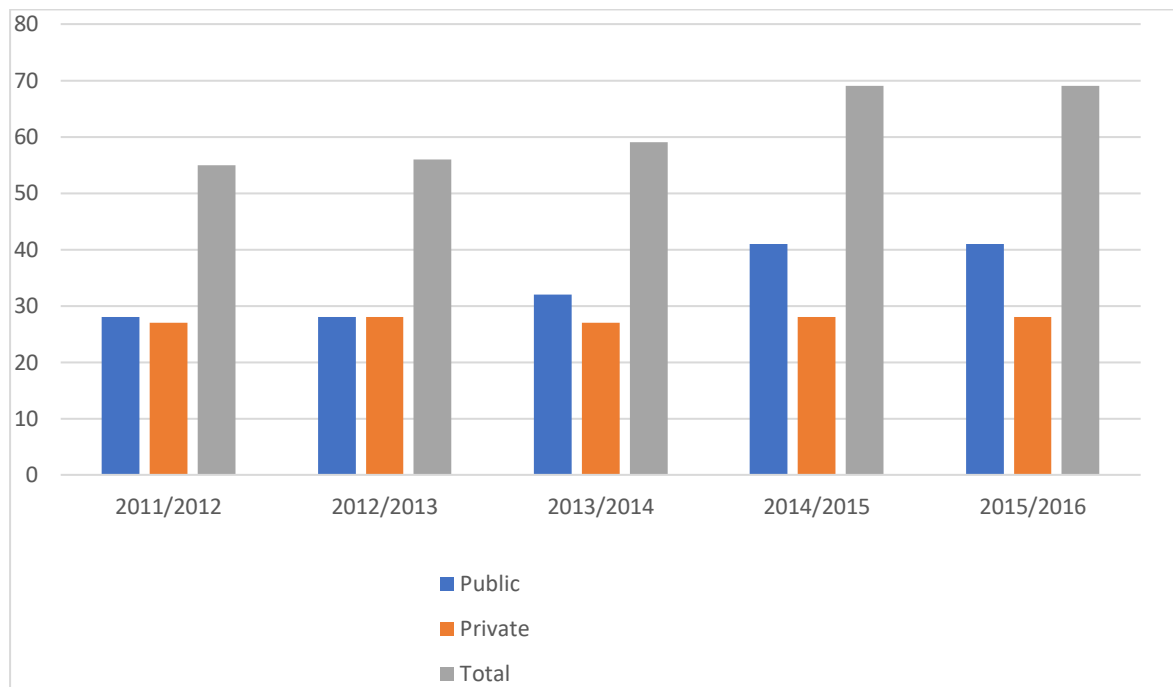
Figure 3.1 The Number of Government and Private HEIs in Oman (National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) 2019).

With the increase of the HEIs and the number of new programs and specialisations, the number of students enrolled in the HE sector has also risen. Figure 3.2 displays the number of students enrolled in HE between 2007 – 2017. Between the academic years 2007/2008 and 2012/2013, Figure 3.2 demonstrates an increase of 54% of the total number of HE student population i.e. young people who have demanded higher education access as a means to secure personal success, which has contributed to the expansion of HE in Oman (Altbach1991).

Figure 3.2 The number of newly enrolled students in HE between 2007-2017 in Oman (Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC) 2018).

The first reason for this increase might be, as discussed in Section 3.2, that Oman witnessed protests in 2011. The government made a major change in the HE admission policy in response to political demands. Al'Abri (2015) explains that the Omani government responded to the protestors' demands by lowering the HE admission criteria. Thus, the number of students admitted to the HE increased. This action by the government affected the quality of the services provided to newly admitted students. Without equal preparations and changes to the teaching resources and facilities compared to the inflation of students, the quality of education will decline (Gibbs and Jenkins 2014). However, the number of HE-enrolled students decreased again in 2015 due to fluctuations in oil prices, particularly the significant drop from $120 to under $50 per barrel in 2015. It is anticipated that the government-funded education system will be affected by this trend (Al'Abri 2015).

The second factor that led to the expansion in the number of HE students is the young age demographic of Omani society (Alyahmadi 2006). Since the 1990s, there have been more high school graduates than before. For example, there were only 17,163 students who graduated from high school in 1995. The number rocketed to 34,510 in 2000 and peaked at approximately 54,000 high school graduates in 2010 (Brandenburg 2013). In addition, in mid-2015, the population demographics of Oman

showed that 41% of the Omanis were under 17 (NCSI 2017). Out of the 41% of these youth, 26% are between 12 – 17 years old. As of January 2023, Omani HE students make 13.5 % of the overall Omani population (NCSI 2023). Al-Haddad and Yasin (2018) strongly believe that the young population of Omani society and the increasing number of high school graduates greatly impact HE policies in Oman. These youth, especially after the protests in 2011, have higher expectations from the government in terms of HE opportunities and employment.

Eventually, the government will need to prepare further robust plans and allocate extra resources to expand the HE capacities to ensure students receive proper HE or join the job markets (Brandenburg 2013; Al'Abri 2015), taking into account the background and the experiences these students had after the Omani Spring in 2011. If the HE system fails to consider such urgent reforms, it will provoke student discontent, which might lead to similar scenarios of 2011, as anticipated by Al Yahmadi (2006). Thus, amid the expansion of the HE sector (in terms of HEIs and students), it was inevitable for the state to create strategies to gain support from the largest constituency group and contain their voice within the HEIs, preventing them from participating in revolts and maintaining its authority within the HEIs and more broadly at the national level. This thesis aims to explore the mechanisms used by the state to achieve these aims. The next section discusses how HE governance is orchestrated given the Omani political structure, highlighting HE policymaking and student voice in HEIs.

3.4 Oman's Political Structure and HE Governance

In the previous section, the discussion is about the HE sector in Oman and the drastic changes it witnessed in the last decade, focusing on the increase in infrastructure and students. This section gives a brief account of Omani HE policymaking and governance given the unique political structure of Oman. In this part, we will see how the policy is structured and who takes part in the process, which will touch upon the HE policymakers allowing for the first time establishing the SAC. A detailed insight into this council, including its formation, objectives, and duties, is explored. Also, a critical account of the regulatory guide that governs the function of the SAC is laid out. The discussion of the SAC in this section will allow the reader to understand the context in

which Omani HE students exercise what they have been demanding since the last decade.

3.4.1 An overview of Oman's Political Structure

This section focuses on the contextual aspects of Oman, encompassing its political framework and geographical position. Positioned in the southeast of the Arabian Peninsula, the Sultanate of Oman is categorized as a developing nation. It shares borders with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) to the west, the UAE to the north, and Yemen to the southwest (Al'Abri, 2015). Predominantly reliant on oil and gas, Oman is considered a middle-income state in contrast to its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) counterparts (Al Shabibi, 2020).

Oman's political structure, as outlined in the Constitution, adheres to a royal and hereditary system of governance (see also Section 5.3.1). This system vests the leader with sovereign power and absolute authority to make decisions in the best interest of the country. Al'Abri (2015) argues that the Basic Statute of the State grants the Sultan the supreme authority to formulate policies for the state, requiring respect and compliance by the people in all matters. The Council of Ministers assists the leader in overall state planning and the implementation of policies (The Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs, 2021). Moreover, there are critical positions that His Majesty the Sultan holds: the Minister of Defence, Finance and Foreign Affairs, and each of these Ministries has a Minister responsible for their affairs who is helping the Sultan. Oman is viewed by Peterson (2013, p.327) as "an authoritarian" state because all authority and power of all internal and external issues are concentrated in the hands of one person.

As discussed in Section 3.2.1, political parties are prohibited in Oman, and as noted by Alhaj (2000), formal democratic organizations, as seen in Western democracies, are absent. Instead, the Omani government instituted a parliamentary council known as the Council of Oman which comprises two entities: the State Council (with members appointed by the Sultan) and the Consultation Council (whose members are elected by citizens every four years)[21]. The primary role of the Council of Oman is to "approve

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[21] The first one is the State Council which is an administratively and financially independent and legal institution. It has the authority to propose, amend and approve draft laws and

or amend draft laws and discuss developmental plans and the state's general budget, and it may propose draft laws" (The Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs, 2021). Initially lacking legislative powers, the Council has been granted some regulatory and legislative authority following demands made during the Arab Spring protests in the MENA region in 2011. This implies that while Oman exhibits certain democratic characteristics such as openness, public involvement in policy formation, and freedom of speech, these features are constrained or limited in their scope and it is described as a "state-centric polity" (Al'Abri 2015, p.13).

This governance model is related to the economic model of Oman. As discussed in Section 2.2.2, that, economically, Oman is a rentier state because it generates surplus revenue by selling natural resources, primarily oil and gas. In this model, the government exercises control over revenue generation, while citizens, as outlined in the social contract, exchange political participation for economic privileges. Their rights to political participation are waived while enjoying these material benefits, which partially explains the citizens' political quiescence and absence of political critique in Oman. The state, hence, is not pressured into making political reforms and bringing more democratic measures because the economic model consolidates the model of authoritarian governance (Beblawi 1987). This illustrates the interconnected relationship between economic and political models of governance in Oman. This is also featured in how the higher education sector is governed as discussed in the following section.

3.4.2 HE Governance and Policymaking in Oman

This section shows how the HE (public and private) is governed in Oman. HEIs in Oman are under the responsibility of many governing bodies. More than eight

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policies of the state. The second one is the Consultative Council which is also an administratively and financially independent agency whose members are elected by the citizens as a form of representation for four years. It enjoys legislative and oversight authority on the service ministries. The citizenry-elected members are expected to represent the society before the government (Al-Farsi 2013). The Council is expected to carry out certain mandates like reviewing annual budget plans, approving and modifying bills and interrogating service ministers in case of power overrun besides other duties. Given the plethora of power, immunity, and freedom of expression for members, the citizens put substantial hope on these members to voice their concerns and express their needs and hold the government into account the welfare of the society.

government entities participate in the governance of HEIs pertaining to their specialities. For instance, there are more than 30 (8 public and 28 private) HEIs under the direct governance of MOHERI, more than a dozen nursing and health institutes under the governance of the Ministry of Health and more than ten colleges/institutes specialized in Air, Naval, Commanding and other military affairs and sciences under the governance of the Ministry of Defence (MOHE 2019). After HE expansion in particular, as described in Section 3.3.2, the HE governance and policy-making task became challenging for the government and hence, requires a robust approach to ensure the tight supervision of HEIs.

Al'Abri (2015) elaborates that HE policy-making in Oman is "very much a top-down approach" (p.201) which is a result of the Omani political system. The government makes all HE decisions, however, on different levels. His Majesty the Sultan gives his directions in the forms of Royal Decrees22, Speeches or Royal Orders in response to national or international reforms and necessities. Al'Abri (2015) states that the Royal Decrees are usually announced to approve a major policy project, such as the Royal Decree 1994/2, to establish the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE 2019). In addition to Royal Decrees, the Sultan issues Royal Orders to respond to urgent national circumstances. For example, he ordered increasing HE admissions during the protests in 2011, as mentioned in the previous section (Al Hashmi 2013). On lower-level policies linked to other institutions, the making of HE policies can be orchestrated by the concerned ministries, councils or institutions like the SCP, the Education Council and other government entities that manage public HEIs like the Ministries of Higher Education and Health (see Figure 3.3). It should be noted that the Education Council has been abolished according to the Royal Decree (108/2020) (The Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs 2020).

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22 As defined by the official Oman E-Government Portal, a Royal Decree is "a law issued by the head of state, the Sultan of Oman. Once it is officially issued in public, it comes into immediate effect" (Omanuna 2019, p.1).
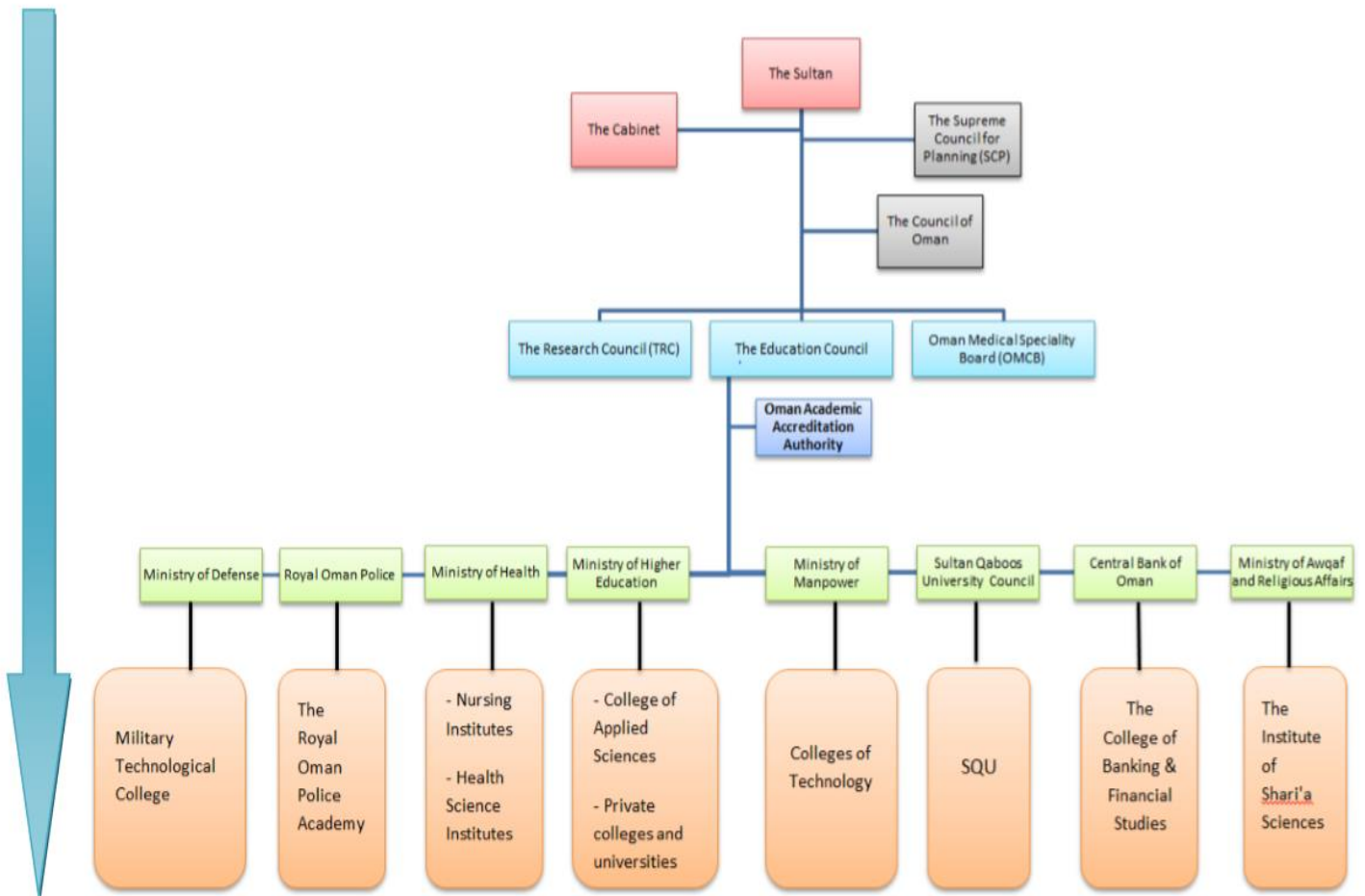
Figure 3.3 The HE Policy-Making Hierarchy in Oman (Al'Abri 2015)

It is worth noting that the Council of Oman was established with Royal Decree No. (86/1997) and the Research Council (TRC) was established with the Royal Decree (54/2005) to supervise and regulate all research activities in Oman and implement a national strategic research plan at different levels. As far as the Oman Medical Speciality Board is concerned, it is a medical training body that strives to achieve excellence in health education and research activities as well as supervising and approving postgraduate health programs for health professionals and practitioners. Along with OAAA, these agencies work cooperatively and independently with the Education Council influencing HE in terms of quality assurance, health education and research activities (Al'Abri 2015).

Al'Abri (2015) argues that while the HE policy-making hierarchy looks robust, as shown above in Figure 3.3, the HE policy-making process is incoherent and complex.

Many parties have overarching roles within the sector; therefore, the allocation of responsibilities in the governance and policy-making process is unclear. Al'Abri (2015) identifies four possible scenarios for making HE policies. They are either (1) decreed by the Sultan directly, (2) developed by the Education Council, (3) suggested by the cabinet and the SCP or (4) proposed by the Council of Oman. Overlapping roles of many government bodies lead to ineffective plans and policies because each party would consider their priorities based on their policies (Al Harthy 2011).

It is worth mentioning that according to the Royal Decree 48/2012, the Education Council is responsible for all education levels and forms (schooling, health, technical, religious and HE), and it is directly affiliated with the Diwan[23] of the Royal Court. On the other hand, MOHE is only responsible for Oman's HE policies. Moreover, all decision-makers in any education sector are members of the Education Council.

Al'Abri (2015) maintains that the Education Council is chaired by the Minister of the Diwan of the Royal Court and it "is considered the highest-mandated body in the Omani government under the Sultan and the Council of Ministers to oversee the HE sector and make its policies" (p.100). Through its jurisdiction, it prepares an annual report to the Sultan. As a concluding remark, Al'Abri (2015) presents a strong argument by stating "that HE policy-making is basically a political tool, firmly in the hands of the government and as such heavily dependent upon the quality of advice to the government" (p.202).

From the above discussion and review of the governance and policy-making hierarchy, there seem to be questions on the participation level of the specialists in the sectors (Universities and Colleges) and limited space for citizens' voice on HE-related matters.

3.4.3 Student Voice and Participation in HE Governance

As discussed in Section 2.4 student participation and representation in university governance through student unions is not a new theme. However, the theme is not very popular in the Arab world in general (Ashti 2018) and in the GCC in particular,

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[23] A government body which is directly working under His Majesty the Sultan (The Ministry of Legal Affairs 2012).

except in Kuwait (Almaamari 2018b), because it has a history of student unions dating back to the 1960s (Ayoub 2018). The existence and intensity of participation of student unions diverged from one country to another; however, it is generally poor. Ashti (2018) classified the formation of student unions in the Arab world into three categories:

a. Unions formed when the university was established and continued to function up to date. At AL Khortum (Sudan) University and Tunisia (Tunisia) University, the first student unions were established in 1938 and 1951 respectively. The activities of the unions differed depending on the ruling parties of the unions. Similar unions of this first group were in Kuwait, Damascus University and Jordan University.

b. Unions that were occasionally interrupted by political regimes, although there were many times when students re-established them. Examples of these were in Cairo (1946), Lebanon (1953) and Libya (1966) Universities.

c. Unions that were not established, although there were many attempts and demands by the students. At Sana'a University (Yemen), the disagreement on whom should lead the union failed the whole project. At SQU in Oman, the student demanded a union in 1996 and again, in 2001, but the university administration did not approve this. Instead, in 2014, it allowed the establishment of SACs after a ministerial decree from MOHE commanded so (see section 3.4.3).

Ashti (2018) concludes that most of the studies of Arab universities show that semi-democratic governments, like that of Kuwait, were more responsive to student movements, and the students would be able to negotiate their demands with civil authorities, in contrast to the undemocratic ones and the military regimes, as in Egypt, which would not allow any form of communication and would terminate the student union activities. After the Arab Spring, students' expectations and awareness of their right from the governments and their responsibilities towards society deepened (Al Hashimi 2011). It was time for them to mark a change within their settings (HEIs) by asking for a platform where they can express voice and concerns, at least on educational matters (Al-Sadi 2015), despite the fact that such activities are not popular in the Arab World (Ashti 2018).

After the protests in 2011, Almaamari (2018b) narrates that students at SQU [and in many other HEIs] once again seized the moment to ask for the establishment of a student union. The critical situation at the time seemed to favour students and ultimately the idea of having a form of student representation was approved.

Al Rubei (2011) expresses that students have a strong argument for establishing such a platform at HEIs in Oman. He stresses in an article on student demands for more voice that:

> Omani students have been exercising their right to protest, and one of their main demands is to have a say in how their HEIs are run. And so they should. It is through their student councils that students in higher education around the world have the most powerful voice; and it seems that student councils in Oman's HEIs have not been as empowered, or as active, as they should have been (Al Rubei 2011, p.1).

Badry and Willoughby (2015) state that making these changes and reforms in such a political and social environment was challenging. However, the status quo makes it imperative for the government to respond to the demands sensibly or face further challenges because student protests occur more frequently when they do not have formal channels of communication and consultation (Luescher-Mamashela 2013).

3.4.4 Student Advisory Council in Oman

Section 3.2 discussed how Omani HE students took the opportunity after the protests in 2011 to demand the establishment of student unions, which later led to the establishment of SAC. The Education Council is the body that directed the policy issuance (i.e., The Ministerial Decree 71/2014) which was drafted by the MOHE (The Ministry of Higher Education 2014). Also, the MOHE issued the SACRG to organise and unify the work and activities of all SACs. In preparation for the SACRG, Al Jelaniah (2014) mentions that 28 different institutions (government and private) submitted proposals that include the functionalities and terms of reference of the SAC to MOHE. A group of administrative staff, academic lecturers and students from HEIs and the ministry representatives analysed the proposals to produce the first draft of the SACRG. Later, the draft was sent by MOHE to all HEIs for feedback and opinion. After receiving feedback, in a two-day workshop, representatives from the HEIs were invited by the MOHE to discuss the final draft which was sent later to the Education Council for approval (Al Jelaniah 2014). The decision by the Education Council mandated the

establishment of the SAC internally at all HEIs' locations in Oman. According to Article 2 of the SACRG, no branches of the SAC can be established outside the HEIs (The Ministry of Higher Education 2014). Up to the completion of this thesis, there is no student representation groups at the national level in Oman. Therefore, the institutional SACs play no role in the HE governance at the national level.

Article 61 in the SACRG shows the organizational structure of the SAC (The Ministry of Higher Education 2014) (see figure 3.4):
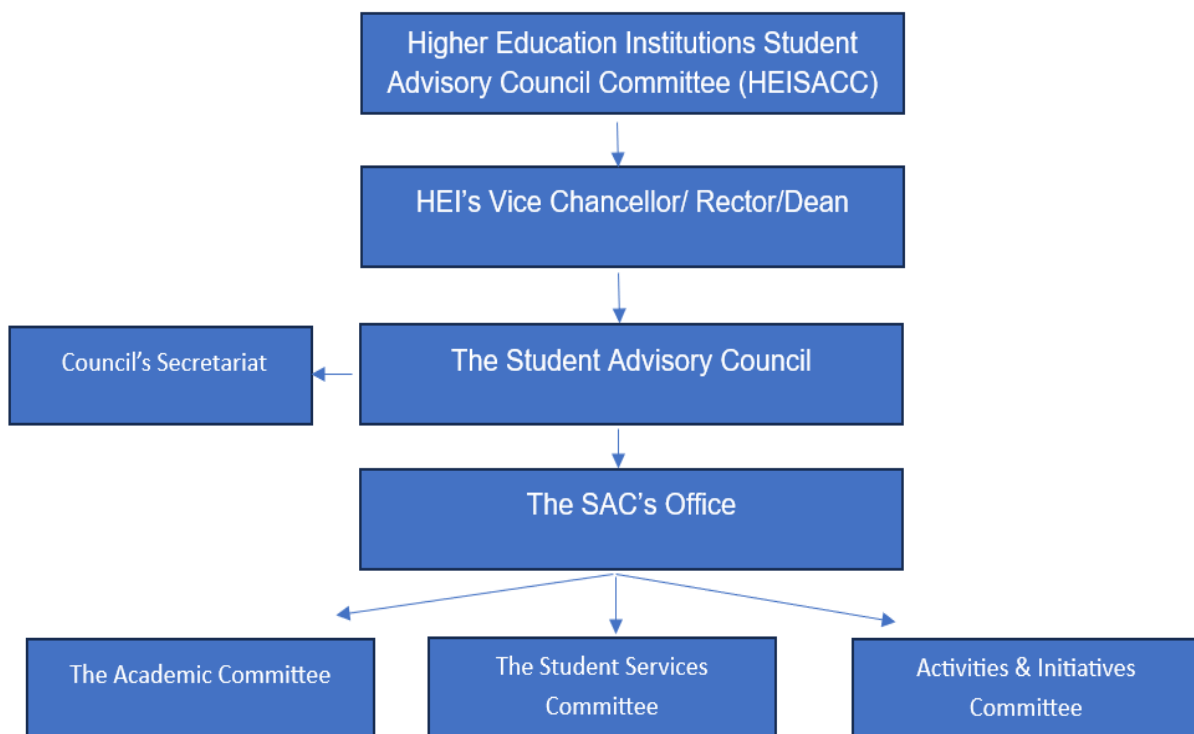
Figure 3.4 The organizational structure of the SAC

The SAC is supervised by the Higher Education Institutions Student Advisory Council Committee (HEISACC). The HEISACC is responsible for approving SAC election results, studying reports from HEIs concerning SAC and conducting research to resolve any issues faced by SAC. This committee is formed by a decision from the Minister of MOHE and headed by the MOHE's undersecretary with the following members as stated in the Ministry of Higher Education (2014, p. 5):

A.   State council education committee representative;

B.   Consultative council education and scientific research committee representative;

C.   Education council representative appointed by the president of the education council;

D.   2 Vice Chancellors/Deans from government higher education institutions or their deputies appointed by the Minister for 2 non-renewable years;

E.   2 Vice Chancellors/Deans from private higher education institutions or their deputies appointed by the Minister for 2 non-renewable years;

F.   2 students from student Advisory Councils. One representing government higher education institutions and the other representing private higher education institutions appointed by the president of the committee for one non-renewable year;

G.   Ministry representative acting as member and secretary (reporter)

Box 3.1 The members of the Higher Education Institutions Student Advisory Council Committee.

According to the SACRG and as displayed in Figure 3.4, the functions of the SAC fall under the direct supervision of the HEI's principal e.g. Vice-Chancellor, Dean or Manager. The principal of the HEI is responsible for taking care of the SAC within the HEI, implementing the guidelines in the SACRG and approving all SAC's operations, procedures like elections and action plans. Before engaging in any activity outside the HEI and when dealing with financial matters, the SAC seeks the approval of the principal (see section 8.2.2 for more details about the design of the SAC). Executing operations and activities of the SAC fall under the direct responsibility of the SAC's office within the institution only (see Figure 3.4).

The SAC is established with an office that consists of 6 members who are *all formally students* of the HEI and are elected by the student body via electronic elections for one academic year. These members are the President of the SAC, the Deputy President (Deputy President of the council's office), the Council's secretary, the Head of the academic committee, the Head of student services committee, and the Head of activities' and initiatives' committee[24](see Figure 3.4). The electronic elections practice

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[24] In every SAC, three committees are established as permanent entities. The academic affairs committee focuses on addressing students' academic and educational requirements. The student services committee is responsible for handling challenges related to student

ensures a fair selection of the SAC members to be the formal representing body for the student community. It is vital to mention that this is the first time such voting and election activities have been applied in HEIs. These positions are deemed leadership positions within the SAC. In addition to these permanent members, other members are included based on the registered number of students at an HEI, as shown in Table 3.1:

Number of students in the institution	Number of members in the Council
1500 or less	11
1501 – 3000	14
3001 and more	17

3.1 The number of Council members decided by the number of students

Although the number of SAC members seems to be large, it is very common that only a minority of the student community is concerned with becoming members, voting in student elections and participating in governance issues (see Bergan 2004). A challenge that student union/council members ought to face is finding new strategies to convince the student community of the importance of participating in such activities.

The SAC was established with the following objectives (see Box 1) as stated in Article 18 in the Ministry of Higher Education (2014, p.7):

A.   Contribute to the improvement and development of educational / research process and services provided to students.

B.   Enhance transparency principles and encourage constructive sensible opinions and commitment to polite dialogue.

C.   Develop awareness of being productive and creative citizens who practice human and social activities in a responsible manner.

D.   Develop spiritual, moral values and national feeling, proudness of the nation, its culture, heritage, high ideals and values.

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services. Lastly, the activities and initiatives committee is responsible for managing activities and programs organized by the SAC within HEIs.

E.   Provide students with the basics that help them strengthen their character, develop teamwork spirit, think scientifically, develop dialogue spirit, respect others' opinions and provide them with communication skills.

F.   Follow up student issues, educate them, maintain their achievements and work closely with the institutions to solve their problems.

G.   Improve student activities in all scientific, cultural, social, sport, artistic and other constructive fields.

H. Emphasise the values of volunteer work to support charitable activities and projects.

I.   Support outstanding students and create a suitable atmosphere to help them study and carry out scientific research.

J.   Raise the level of intellectual, artistic, social and sports activities and enhance communication horizons and activate communication channels between the students and officials in the institutions.

Box 3.2 The Objectives of the SAC (The Ministry of Higher Education 2014, p.7)

From the objectives of SAC and as far as this research focuses on student voice, four out of the ten objectives can be identified as having a clear emphasis on voice (see section 2.3), and these are items: B, C, D, and H. However, it is not explicitly indicated anywhere in the SACRG how these objectives can be achieved. With regard to the duties and responsibilities of the SAC, none of them has any links to the aforementioned objectives. The duties and responsibilities mentioned in Article 21 (The Ministry of Higher Education 2014, pp. 7-8) are:

A. Preparing the annual plan;
B. Making necessary decisions in accordance with the applicable regulations and systems of the institution and objectives of the council;
C. Representing the students and the institution at external events as advised by the principal;
D. Discussing and approving financial and administration reports submitted by the council's office;
E. Monitoring the performance of the council's office and taking necessary actions;

> F. Dismissing a member who commits an unlawful or dishonest or disreputable act;
>
> G. Discussing the council's budget plan submitted by the council's office;
>
> H. Considering the re-joining of a member who has lost his/her membership.

Box 3.3 The duties and responsibilities of the SAC

In the absence of such important links, many questions can be raised on the practicality and helpfulness of the SACRG to facilitate the achievement of the expected SAC missions as defined in the SACRG. This is obviously not only gathering information from students, as argued by Kuruuzum et al. (2005), but also to promote student voice and represent the interests of the students within the governance structures of the HEIs (Klemenčič 2020c).

Article 21 is central to this discussion because it does not explicitly state that the SAC has the authority to represent the student voice and participate in HEI governance beyond advising the administration on students' needs, which is a common role for student representation groups under authoritarian regimes, as noted by Luescher-Mamashela (2013). Moreover, it is not allowed for any SAC member to engage in any political activities and cooperate with any authorities or organisations outside Oman without consent from the MOHE. The SACRG stipulates that SAC members can only be invited to the institution's board meetings if there are any concerns pertaining to students' activities and their well-being and services, which can be expressed by the president of the SAC, only upon receiving an invitation (The Ministry of Higher Education 2014).

To sum up, through the SAC, Omani students succeeded in securing a formal platform to be able to raise concerns. Nevertheless, as Pabian and Minksová (2011) put it, the extent and the nature of their participation in HE decision-making is still ambiguous and exercised differently by different stakeholders. Therefore, this study aims to explore the reasons behind the establishment of the SACs under such an approach and whether the SAC, with its current organisational characteristics, is capable of enacting student voice of HEIs in Oman.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has set the context for the study by exploring how Oman has expanded its HE system in response to political, social and economic pressure. Although the

system has undergone major changes throughout the period, it is still considered relatively new. This chapter has set the background to address the first research question: **What was the rationale informing the establishment of the SAC in Omani HEIs?** Section 3.2 discusses the start of the unrest in the region, the reasons, the demands of the protestors and the consequences. After the protests in Oman during what was known as the Arab Spring, a new type of identity existed among the citizens who demanded more democratic attention than previously. Then, Section 3.3 discusses the expansion of higher education worldwide and in Oman. Section 3.4 looks at the governance of HE and student voice in Oman. In the context of HE in Oman, many students who took part in these protests asking for more democratic forms of representation and greater voice. Although policymakers have clearly perceived the new expectations of the HE students and allowed the establishment of SACs, the existing form of governance does not seem to offer enough concessions to advocate this form of student movement.

Chapter Four: Research Methodology

4.1   Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodology and methods used to carry out this research. It starts by establishing the researchers' perspective (and thus justification) on the ontological and epistemological approach to the research (Section 4.2). Then, the chapter presents the research aim and objectives that lead to the main research question: **How does the SAC contribute to the enactment of student voice within Omani HEIs' decision-making?** (Section 4.3). Following the presentation of the research aims and questions, the chapter describes the study design and the methods used to collect and analyse data to address the research questions (Sections 4.5 and 4.6). The ethical considerations adhered to in carrying out this research are stated in Section 4.7, followed by a brief reflection on the limitations experienced during the Covid-19 Pandemic (Section 4.8).

4.2   Ontology and Epistemology

In any research process, it is understood that researchers embrace a set of philosophical assumptions and views that impact how they discern knowledge and reality (Creswell and Creswell 2018). These world views can be termed paradigms (Kuhn 2012). Paradigm is also defined by Troudi (2011) as "a wider world view or research approach that informs the researcher's choices of a methodology based on one's understanding of the nature of knowledge, epistemology, and the nature of social reality, known as an ontology" (p.212). Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009) and "what is, with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality as such" (Crotty 1998, p.10).

Bryman (2012) notes that social ontology looks at the nature of social entities. It examines whether social entities can be objective entities that exist autonomously from social factors or are social constructions built up from individuals' interpretations and perceptions. On the one hand, some schools of thought consider the existence of one reality, like the positivist and objectivist schools. On the other hand, constructionism and interpretivism reject the premises of objectivism and positivism, arguing that there are different perspectives and experiences of reality (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009).

Upon establishing their ontological assumptions, researchers focus on discovering reality and producing and understanding the nature and scope of knowledge, known as epistemology (Cohen et al. 2018). Epistemology is viewed by Crotty (1998) as a way of making sense of the world and the nature of the knowledge surrounding it. Moreover, Cohen et al. (2018, p.5) add that epistemological assumptions are made to know how nature and the form of knowledge "can be acquired and how communicated to other human beings." It is also stressed here that the epistemological position researchers adopt has a palpable impact on their understanding of the nature of knowledge and social behaviour (ibid). For instance, if knowledge is viewed as hard, objective and tangible, researchers normally adopt an observer role and have "an allegiance to the methods of natural science" (Cohen et al. 2018, p.5). On the contrary, when researchers view knowledge as personal, subjective and unique, they are more likely to reject the natural scientists' methods and rather be involved with their subjects (Cohen et al. 2018).

Two main paradigms are dominant, with different ontological and epistemological assumptions: positivism and interpretivism (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Positivism has been described as "the dominant and relatively unquestioned methodological orientation in the social and behavioural sciences for much of the 20th century" (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009, p.12). As an ontological assumption, positivism emphasizes the idea that there exists only a singular, objective reality, and in its epistemological view, it posits that reality and knowledge exist independently from individuals' consciousness (Crotty 1998, Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009). In addition, every research undertaking is considered to be rooted in objectivity and evidence, substantiated through value-neutral experimentation. Here, the researcher has no role in shaping the nature of reality, as this is directly discerned through measurement and observation methods (Bryman 2012; Ormston et al. 2014).

Moreover, this tradition has a distinctive means of producing knowledge, in that, instead of giving reasons behind a phenomenon, positivism would offer a description of what is observed. However, positivism would not explain the underpinning reasons for the observed activities, an aspect for which it has received criticism (Ormston et al. 2014). Other criticisms of positivism focus on its mechanistic view of nature, which

adopts a measurable stance towards perceptions, attitudes and thoughts of humans, whereas these notions, unlike the measurement of physical attributes like length or temperature, can be beyond explicit observation or measurement (Hammersley 2013). Thus, researchers opting for researching abstract conceptualisations may find restrictions in applying only positivist methods.

By contrast, interpretivist position rejects positivist traditions and holds the ontological assumption that reality is constructed and can entail multiple interpretations (Crotty 1998; Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009; Bryman 2012; Hammersley 2013). Interpretivists stress the importance of the researchers in uncovering knowledge and knowing about the world through the perceptions and interpretations of the participants. Researchers also use their perceptions to reflect and understand what they observe. Another important distinction is that understanding the research process's inductive nature characterises interpretivism. In other words, the main research process starts with data collection and finishes with theory generation (Bryman 2012). This feature can also be applied to data analysis approaches that formulate general knowledge from detailed instances.

Interpretivism also has limitations. While interpretivism succeeds in gaining a profound understanding of the phenomena under research, there is a gap in the way it can verify the validity of the outcomes because it is hardly possible to replicate research. After all, there are no standardised mechanisms to make the replication process (Bryman 2012; Cohen et al. 2018). Furthermore, quantitative researchers often criticise qualitative research findings arguing that they are biased because of the subjective nature of the researcher's unsystematic interpretations and views (Bryman 2012).

Despite these criticisms of interpretivism, this research adopts an interpretivism position for several reasons. In response to criticisms of the subjective nature of the research, it can be argued that research is never without bias. Even in objectively oriented research, researchers' subjectivity interferes with the way the research topic is chosen, the way the research is carried out, and the way findings are reported. I argue that no matter how detached the researcher aims to be, zero-biased research is far from reality. Although some researchers like Hammersley (2005) state that qualitative enquiry is thought to be most prone to bias, especially in research

processes such as data collection and interpretation, mainly because the research instrument here is the researcher, Weber (2004) maintains that bias is unavoidable. Weber argues that positivists and interpretivists "bring biases and prejudices to the research they undertake and that the research methods they use have strengths and weaknesses" (p. vi). More importantly than partisan accusations, researchers must conduct the research "in the way that 'anyone' would pursue it who was committed to discovering the truth" (Hammersley 2005, p.145). In addition, researchers should be reflexive about the ways they apply research methods and bring about their personal values when generating knowledge (Bryman 2012 and see section 4.7.5).

Questions around the validity of the research outcomes, noted as a weakness in interpretivist research above, are affected by researchers' decisions in choosing an epistemological position (Creswell and Miller 2000). Many interpretivist researchers have opted for concepts like quality and trustworthiness to verify validity (Lincoln and Guba 1985), whereas positivists verify validity through controllability and replicability (Cohen et al. 2018). In interpretivism research, these concepts can be achieved through procedures such as thick and rich descriptions and prolonged engagement in the field, as Creswell and Miller (2000) explain.

I believe that knowledge and reality can be multiple, and they can be discerned in light of individuals' experiences and perceptions. This means that our abilities and knowledge are still limited and subjective as they result from endeavours to explore (not discover) and understand the social world. This position is supported by Cohen et al. (2018), who confirmed that "the social world can only be understood from the standpoint of the individuals who are part of the ongoing action being investigated." (p.17). Moreover, due to the divergent perceptions of realities, mechanisms to interpret and view these realities also differ. Therefore, the knowledge produced is subjective because of the influence of different factors related to the researcher, the participants and the context.

In looking at my epistemological assumptions, I adopt an interpretivist approach to viewing the world. In this approach, I strongly feel that I have an impact on the social world and the social world also has an impact on me. In such a case, the researcher and the research are inseparable. Moreover, in understanding the social phenomena

in this research, the SAC's role in relation to student voice among HE students, depends on my understanding and interpretations of the context. Thus, the researcher's own values and perceptions are input into the research process (See the researcher's positionality in Section 4.7.5).

In addition to my own perceptions, and since this research seeks to understand and explore the SAC's contribution to the enactment of student voice, a better justification of understanding stakeholders' perceptions and behaviour is crucial to understanding this social phenomenon. Participants gain their perceptions while interacting and practising different activities as SAC members. The development of participation and representation skills cannot be seen as a purely objectively oriented phenomenon that exists autonomously from the HE students but rather a subjective one. Finally, my above ontological and epistemological assumptions are established in the research methodology and design, methods and analysis, which will be discussed in the following sections.

4.3   Research Aims and Questions

Overall, this research's main aim is to explore the perceptions of the dynamics of student voice and representation in Oman's HEIs, using the SAC as a lens. To inform this aim, the research questions sought to critically analyse the context informing the establishment of the SACs in HEIs in Oman and understand the perceptions different stakeholders hold on the meaning of the concept of student voice. The research questions also sought to explore how these perceptions are shaped by various policies and practices within the rentier context of Oman in general and the HEIs context in particular and understand the SAC's role in the enactment of student voice in HEIs in Oman. Considering the study's main aim and objectives, this research aims to address the following research questions:

Question 1: What was the rationale informing the establishment of the SAC in Omani HEIs?

Question 2: What are the stakeholders' perceptions of the meaning of student voice within Omani HEIs?

Question 3: How does the SAC contribute to the enactment of student voice within Omani HEIs' decision-making?

The research questions in this study emerged from my observation of activities conducted by the SACs in some HEIs in Oman and from the relevant literature (although not specifically in the context of Oman) on, e.g. participation, student voice and representation. The HE stakeholders included in this research are the SAC members, HE students, university/college staff, managers and policymakers from the MOHE, academics/educationalists and members from the Oman State Council (see Table 4.1 in Section 4.5.3). The next section discusses the qualitative design used to address the above research questions.

4.4   Research Design

The research will follow a qualitative methodology to address the research questions. Maxwell (2013, p.3) provides a brief definition of qualitative research:

> Qualitative research is research that is intended to help you better understand (1) the meanings and perspectives of the people you study— seeing the world from their point of view, rather than simply from your own; (2) how these perspectives are shaped by, and shape, their physical, social, and cultural contexts; and (3) the specific processes that are involved in maintaining or altering these phenomena and relationships.

Consistently with this definition, this research focuses on participants' perceptions towards the issue under study i.e., student voice and the establishment of the SAC. In addition to positioning the researcher as a key instrument to collect the data in its natural setting, the study participants' views have an important role in understanding the topic under enquiry (Creswell 2014). This helps to understand the participants' multiple perspectives on the issue rather than bringing the researcher's interpretations of the research (Creswell and Poth 2018). In this way, within a qualitative approach, HE students' perceptions of themes like student voice and representation can be explored. This approach is aligned with the researcher's ontological and epistemological viewpoints, as discussed in Section 4.2, that multiple and subjective realities are socially constructed in specific contexts and understood through the

participants' perceptions. Moreover, the research questions focus on the perceptions of the students and other stakeholders on these themes.

Another important feature suggested by the definition above is the unique context of the phenomenon under study, which is aligned with this study's aim to research the rationale informing the establishment of the SAC in Omani HEIs. This qualitative inquiry helps the researcher to examine the cultural, social and political contexts that informed the development of the SAC through understanding "how events, actions, and meaning are shaped by the unique circumstances in which these occur" (Maxwell 2013, p.30). Thus, because of the particular context of this research, which concentrates on SACs in the rentier context of Oman, and the nature of the research themes, which explore the HE student voice in a context where democracy is in its earliest stages (Al'Abri 2015), the researcher is bound to give a holistic account of the study by engaging with various participants to develop a detailed understanding of the issue (Maxwell 2013; Creswell and Poth 2018).

In addition to Maxwell's definition of qualitative research, Hammersley (2013) adds another important feature to the nature of inquiry by using more verbal rather than statistical approaches that aim to test theories and hypotheses. The nature of the current research fits with Hammersley's additional feature in this regard, i.e., the research aims to explore the contribution of the SACs to the enactment of student voice in HEIs in Oman. The most suitable approach in such exploratory and discovering endeavour is the qualitative inquiry approach (Patton 2015; Creswell and Poth 2018 and see section 3.4.3 for more information about the establishment of the SAC).

In understanding the role of the SAC in relation to student voice, the research adopts a qualitative case study design. Yin (2018) defines a case study as "an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident." (p.45). Vaus (2001) refers to the case as the object of the study and the "unit of analysis" (p.220). This unit of analysis can be fenced in as a single person, a program, an organisation or even a community (Merriam and Tisdell 2016).

Creswell and Poth (2018) point out the main characteristics of the case study. The first important feature is identifying the specific case(s) the research intends to describe and analyse. This feature is considered the most essential because unless the researcher explicitly elucidates the object of interest in the case, any research can be named a case study (Bryman 2012). In this research context, the SAC in the context of HEIs in Oman is taken as the case study of this research. Because such a council is unique to the higher education context and has not been researched previously, a case study design is suitable. Through the case study design, the research can move beyond a mere description of the practices to understand and explore the imperatives and perceptions that research participants hold on SACs and their functions in HEIs in Oman. Yin (2018) stresses that through a case study approach, researchers can bring focus to the nature of the study through the different perspectives and meanings the study participants hold.

Another key feature of case study design which can be extracted from Yin's definition is its bounded system (Yin 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) indicate that the case study is bounded by parameters, e.g. the place, the timeframe or sometimes the individuals, that define and describe the case. These parameters can also be different from one case to another according to the nature of the study and its context. In this study, the parameters that bound the case study of the SAC are the two HEIs that participated in the study sample, the students who are members of the SACs in these HEIs, the students who are non-SAC members, HEI staff and HE policy-makers.

Since the aim of this research is to explore perceptions of SAC's contribution to the enactment of student voice, an exploratory case study design is adopted. Yin (2018) confirms that this type of case study design can help the researchers develop ideas about the phenomenon, especially when there is a dearth of previous literature on the topic and limited knowledge available to the researcher to support conducting an explanatory case study design (Dutton 2013). From the above discussion of the case study design, the next section explains the methods followed in this study to collect data.

4.5   Data Collection and the Study Participants

For qualitative research, the data-gathering process usually draws on four methods: interviews, questionnaires, documents and audio-visual materials (Creswell 2012). Based on the nature of the research and its aims, any method or a combination of these methods can be used (Ibid). This study drew on interviews and relevant documents for the reasons discussed in the following two sections.

4.5.1   Qualitative Interviews

The interview was the primary data collection method in this study. Tedllie and Tashakkori (2009, p. 199) define an interview as "a research strategy that involves one person (the interviewer) asking questions of another person (the interviewee). The questions may be open-ended, closed-ended, or both." Through the basic conversational mode of human interaction, researchers ask and listen to what individuals say about their feelings, lives, views, opinions and the world they live in (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018). The research interview, "is an inter-view where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and interviewee." (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018, p.2). In qualitative research, interviews are viewed as more advantageous than other methods because the interviewees provide answers to specific questions that relate to the research topic asked by the researchers (Creswell 2012), making it possible to capture the complex experiences and lives of individuals (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018). The nature of the interview questions framed by the wider research questions, allows the interviewees to communicate freely and openly in their own words. Indeed, Maxwell (2013) avers that research questions guide what the researcher wants to understand; the interview questions are what the people are asked to gain that understanding.

Tedllie and Tashakkori (2009) propose a common sequence for carrying out interviews. Initially, it is important to build rapport with the interviewees by using an unstructured informal conversational approach before engaging with the real interview questions. Then only the interview guide can be used to guide the outline of the conversation to increase the responses (See Appendix 1 for the interview guide).

Cohen et al. (2018) discuss forms of interviews based on the degree of structure and the nature of the research. On the one hand, structured interviews are mostly used with positivist research methods in which the questions serve as a survey conducted orally. In this form of an interview, the items mostly apply closed-ended and fixed inquiries, limiting participants' freedom of expression and feelings (Patton 2015). On the other hand, unstructured interviews employ in-depth, open-ended items to understand the deep meaning of the phenomenon for participants. The researcher's values, beliefs, opinions and knowledge have to be sided away during the conversation, giving the full freedom to the participants to express and inform their opinions about an issue without restrictions (Cohen et al. 2018). The third form of interview, semi-structured interviews, falls between structured and unstructured interviews. In this type of interview, the researcher prepares a list of questions that reflect the research area, known as the interview guide. However, there is flexibility in the way the researcher asks questions and the way the participant answers them without the need to follow an exact format and order of the interview guide (Bryman 2012). Moreover, the researcher in this interview form can reasonably add up questions as they deem important and relevant during the interview.

Qualitative interviews are commonly used in the social sciences for their perceived advantages. Interviews can provide insight into the issue being researched when direct observation of the participants is impossible. Another advantage, especially with the semi-structured interview, is related to the flexibility of time and question order both the interviewer and the interviewee may have (Creswell 2012). Criticisms of interview-based methods include that the information gathered during the interview is summarised solely by the researcher, potentially leading to the overlooking of some views of the participants. Another disadvantage of interviews is that because the interview is that the researcher's presence, may affect participants' perceptions and responses (Creswell 2012). A way to deal with these disadvantages is to ensure that all information received from one interview is considered in connection with other interviews and data collected by means of other techniques employed in the research.

For this thesis, the primary source for data collection is semi-structured interviews. The main reason for this choice is related to the nature of the study and the phenomenon underpinning the research questions. The SACs in Omani higher

education are relatively newly established groups, and their functions have not been researched before. Moreover, explicitly or implicitly, the notion of student voice has been scarcely examined in the Omani context. In order to grasp the underpinnings of how SAC and student voice intersect within HE, it is very important to discuss the issue with students themselves to understand their interpretations of this topic.

While semi-structured face-to-face interviews were initially planned, telephone semi-structured interviews were conducted instead due to the restrictions placed during the Covid-19 Pandemic (see section 4.8). The use of online communication channels (e.g., Zoom or Microsoft Teams) was avoided because some study participants (especially students in Study Sites 1 and 2) lived in remote areas with unstable internet coverage. All interviews were conducted from Oman, with the exception of the first one which was conducted from the UK. Communication during the phone calls was clear and easy to understand. On average, the interviews lasted for 50 minutes. The longest interview was 120 minutes, while the shortest one only took 27 minutes.

Kee and Browning (2013) suggest that conducting interviews using telephones can be attractive as it is usually less time- and resource-consuming. The researcher and the respondents could save travel time (Kee and Browning 2013). However, using telephone interviews is criticised for its limited ability to build rapport between the research and the study participants (Carr and Worth 2001). Moreover, Novick (2008) notes that through telephone interviews, nonverbal cues, which are sometimes important to analyse the data, can be lost. To minimise the effects of these pitfalls, I tried to give the participants enough time for informal communication to establish rapport before commencing the interview questions. Also, notes about the interviewees' behaviour during the interviews (e.g. nervousness, anxiety) have been taken, and I checked with interviewees that they are happy to continue the interview (see section 4.7.1).

While it was important to consider the disadvantages of using telephone interviews, it was felt that they were helpful since telephones were available to all participants. Moreover, since Oman was in a lockdown state (due to the Covid-19 Pandemic), using telephones was found to be an encouraging feature for participation, especially for

students, who felt more relaxed about sharing ideas and concerns (about a topic that some view as sensitive), while in their comfortable space (Novick 2008).

Since the number of participants in some of the groups was high, especially students who were non-SAC members, the research could opt for a focus group interview to save time by meeting several participants in one setting. Nevertheless, it was important to remember that the research dealt with a topic that entails student voice as part of students' rights within HE. In such cases, it was anticipated that some participants, including students, might utter sensitive issues that might be considered to go against the status quo. Thus, in such an instance, potential harm can be expected if any participant in the focus group reports such expressions (see section 4.7.4). Moreover, participating in a focus group with other audiences may force participants to remain silent rather than elucidating their issues in front of others, impacting the results obtained. For these reasons and based on the sensitive nature of the study context, individual telephone interviews were used to maintain the participants' confidentiality and anonymity better.

On the technical part of the interviews, the interview questions were constructed based on the elements discussed within the main themes (i.e., student voice, SAC's establishment) in Chapters Two and Three (i.e., literature review and the context chapters). The organization of the questions in the interview schedule were informed by the order of the research questions. However, the order of the research questions was changed after the data analysis stage (see section 4.3 for research aims and questions). The interview schedule, then, was reviewed by the supervisors. After finalising the interview schedule and before starting the interviews, face-to-face[25] pilot interviews were conducted with two Omani students who share similar characteristics with the student sample. The main aim was to check the clarity of the questions and the time needed to administer them. As a result, some questions required rephrasing to ensure clarity. Moreover, some other questions were merged and omitted to shorten the interview duration (see Appendix 2 for the guide to the pilot interview). Two devices were used to record the interviews (after obtaining the participants' consent): a

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[25] The pilot interviews were conducted face-to-face, as originally planned. However, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the actual interviews were conducted through telephone.

recording device as a primary tool and a smartphone as a backup for the first device (see sections 4.7.1 and 4.7.3).

Since all the participants' mother language is Arabic and many of them (especially the students) are not competent users of English, the interview schedule was made available and interviews were conducted in Arabic. The researcher also shared the same language, and this facilitated in-depth understanding and discussion through the data collection process. Eventually, the researcher worked independently on translating the data collected from Arabic to English. According to Temple and Young (2004, p. 168), "the researcher/translator role offers the researcher significant opportunities for close attention to cross-cultural meanings and interpretations and potentially brings the researcher up close to the problems of meaning equivalence within the research process". Esposito (2001) explains that the process is intricate, encompassing the analysis and understanding of words, as well as the creation of a comprehensible translation that considers contextual meaning. Temple and Young (2004, p.174) advise that the "identity/culture" of language needs to be preserved, this includes the use of metaphors and narratives of the community language (i.e., Arabic). To avoid the loss of meaning during the process of translation, the researcher followed Esposito's (2001) approach, which stresses the importance of translating based on meaning rather than a literal word-for-word translation. Furthermore, recordings were carefully reviewed to ensure that the translation adequately preserved the intended meaning of the data and maintained the original meaning of the interviewee's statements.

4.5.2 Documents

The second source of data this study employed to address the research questions is relevant policy and legislative documents, which are also considered very rich sources of data for qualitative enquiry (Bryman 2012; Creswell 2012). To be selected, the documents must be relevant to the thesis topic and related to the HE policies discussed in the thesis. Additionally, they should be easily accessible to the public. Examples of these include Oman's Basic Statute of the State, the Philosophy of Education in Oman, and the SACRG. Other documents related to the activities,

operational plans and minutes of meetings of SACs in the participating HEIs were also included in the analysis (see Appendix 3 for the full list of documents).

Documents are usually provided in text and ready to be analysed. This saves the researchers' time and resources in tasks like transcribing, compared to interview data (Creswell 2012). The main purpose of the documents is to examine the aims that these documents presented in relation to the main themes of this study (e.g. student voice, student participation and representation). More specifically, through examining the SACRG, it was possible to recognise the aims and objectives of the SAC, the structure of the student body and how its activities are organised and governed by the hosting HEI and the MOHE. For instance, this gave insight into policymakers' perceptions about the rationales for establishing the SAC and its role within the HEIs.

Although researchers consider documents as substantially rich sources to unravel meaning, Atkinson and Coffey (2011) express some doubts about their practical representation of the reality of the organisation/entity that produced them. They argue that the documents, no matter how official they are, have been produced for the readers in a way that is favoured by those it meant to represent. Therefore, it is highly suggested that the contexts these documents have been produced should be carefully examined before using them by the researcher. To mitigate and reduce the impact of this disadvantage, the researcher used and analysed the content of the documents in light of the data collected through the interviews, and their relevance to the aims and objectives of the research was checked (Atkinson and Coffey 2011).

Another negative side of documents is that they are sometimes difficult to reach or obtain. For this reason, as also discussed in document sampling, in addition to the researcher's effort to gather the documents which are relevant to the topic of the thesis from physical and online settings, snowballing sampling was used to identify the important documents that the research may benefit from by getting the interviewees' advice. In this study, a question about the key documents that are relevant to this thesis was asked at the end of interviews, especially with participants who are experts in the field of the study. The Child and the Societies and Associations Laws are examples of some key documents that were suggested by the interviewees,

Using documents depends on their authenticity and accuracy (Creswell 2012) and this was checked through careful perusal of the details of the authors, contexts, reasons and the timeframe in which the document had been published (Merriam and Tisdell 2015). In this study, whilst several official and legislative documents were used as sources for data such as the Basic Statute of the State (No. 06/2021) and the Ministerial Decision No. 72/2004 that sets out the bylaws (see The Ministry of Manpower 2004) that govern the HEIs under investigation (Bowen 2009), two key policy documents received more attention. The first policy document is the SACRG, which is a central document for this thesis because it is deemed the general reference for the SAC's functions within the HEIs. As discussed in Section 3.4.3, the SACRG is the only document explicitly outlining the SAC's terms of reference, objectives and structure (see the Ministry of Higher Education 2014).

A second key policy document for this thesis is the Philosophy of Education in Oman (see The Education Council 2017). This document is one of the most recent policy documents that lays out the principles for important themes within the thesis (e.g. students' political and social participation, voice). It consists of 16 broad principles and 89 objectives, and it serves as a guiding source for policymaking and planning of the whole educational sector in Oman. Furthermore, this study finds it important because it "comprises of a set of principles and objectives which serve as guidelines for the development of all sectors of the education system" (The Education Council 2017, p.11). It stresses the importance of developing social and political participation and constructive approaches to expressing ideas among students. Thus, these two policy documents are used as key references to understand the philosophy under which the SAC is established and is working within HEIs, which served as the basis for the inquiry of this research.

4.5.3 Participants and Sites of the Study

The first step to start collecting data, as Creswell (2012) suggested, is to identify the participants and the sites for investigation. Because the focus of the research was on the meaning of student voice in Omani HEIs that are governed by Omani administration, the research sought to exclude the private HEIs and only engage with public institutions for two reasons: 1) the governance body and board of trustees in

the private institutions sometimes include non-Omanis who might have different perceptions about the meaning of student voice because of their cultural and political backgrounds, leading to deviation from the focus of the study and 2) the SAC members in private HEIs can consist of international students who also may experience student voice differently. However, it should be noted that the COVID-19 Pandemic made it difficult to recruit participants, particularly those who are active and interested in the area of the research, thus, the study had to recruit an interviewee who works in a private HEI (i.e., Adam). Because the study aims to explore the meaning of student voice as held by Omani HE stakeholders, it only recruited Omanis for interviews.

Another factor in selecting the sites was the number of the student population. In this research, and since the focus is on student voice and how the SACs represent that, it was decided only to include Colleges of Technology (CoTs) (and not other public HEIs) because they host nearly half of Oman's HE student population. For instance, in the academic year 2018-2019, the percentage of HE students enrolled in the HEIs under investigation was 54.4 % compared to 19.7 % in SQU and 11.7 % in Colleges of Applied Sciences (HEAC 2018).

The scope of this case study covered two public HEIs located in two different regions in Oman. The objective of including two institutions in this case study is to facilitate the collection of rich data and to provide the chance to highlight the variances in perceptions and practices among the stakeholders of these institutions (Freeman 2014). The basis for including these two institutions is the degree of activity in previous student voice actions during the protests in 2011, which led to the establishment of the SACs. One institution (**henceforth named study site 1**) was extensively engaged in the protests to the extent that they demanded the dismissal of the Dean of the college, as witnessed by the researcher. On the other hand, the other institution (**hereafter named study site 2**) was less active during the protests and barely had any action, which epitomises student voice during the same event. Based on this difference between the study sites, the researcher explored and compared the perceptions and practices embedded in student voice activities among SAC and non-SAC members in study sites 1 and 2. Both HEIs are mid-ranked and they are two of seven under the supervision of the Ministry of Manpower. There are between 4000 and 5000

undergraduate students at these two HEIs enrolled in programs such as engineering, business and information technology studies.

Based on the nature of the study that informs the research questions, this study drew a sample from individuals directly linked to the SACs in HEIs in Oman. As shown in table 4.1, the participants are (1) the members of SACs, (2) the wider student population as they are in direct relation with the SACs activities and are the group whose voice the SAC is meant to represent, (3) university/college staff as they are responsible for the SACs functions within HEIs, (4) policy-makers from MOHE as they are the responsible government agency to oversee the functions of all SACs at all HEIs in Oman, (5) Academics/educationalists who are interested in citizenship studies and active in the educational matters in Oman and finally (6) Members of the Oman Council as their function and work is critical to elevate the citizens' voice which is a major theme informed by the research questions. The council also sets up a model for how the SACs function at HEIs.

Before proceeding with data collection, an official letter was sent from the Ministry of Manpower to facilitate access to the study sites (see Appendix 4). Also, the Deans of both study sites were contacted in advance to seek permission to access the SAC members and other non-SAC members who are deemed important to understand the student voice concept and answer the research questions. Gatekeepers were used to ease access and communication with the Student Affairs departments at both study sites (Andoh-Arthur 2019). However, the number of students recruited through the gatekeepers was insufficient. Therefore, snowball sampling was used to recruit more students. Creswell (2012) states that this strategy can be used after the study starts. Here, the researcher can pose a request or ask a question, during interviews or informal conversations, to the interviewees to name or recommend other participants to be included in the study sample. This method was very helpful in recruiting participants, particularly during the closure of HEIs in Oman due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. Bryman (2012) adds that the principles of purposive sampling do not necessarily apply only to people; it can be used to gather data from other sources like documents, as discussed in the previous section. The first interviewee was recruited after they were recommended by a PhD student. This interviewee showed interest in the topic and agreed to the interview appointment. The original plan was to include 73

interviewees, however, two interviewees (a MOHE official and HEI staff) declined to participate after proposing telephone interviewing, as discussed in Section 4.5.1, so the total number of interviews was 71 as shown in Table 4.1 (see also Appendix 5 for list of participants' demographic details)

	Participants	Sample size	Rationale
1	SAC Members from 2 public study sites (1 and 2)	Five members from 2 colleges (**total 10**): -the President -the Deputy President. -the Head of the Academic Committee; -the Head of the Student Services Committee; and -the Head of Activities and Initiatives Committee.	-These five members hold the highest positions in the council. They are most likely to engage with other students and college governance. - study sites (1 and 2) have different levels of activity in protests in Oman, which helps to see if students in these colleges hold different views on the study themes, student voice and representation. -Access was ensured due to institutional affiliation
2	The wider HE student population from 2 public study sites (1 and 2)	25 students from each of 2 public study sites (1 and 2) (**total 50)**	The student body is the main participant whom the SACs are meant to represent before the HEIs governance.
3	Staff from 2 public study sites (1 and 2)	**Five** College Board Members from 2 colleges, normally the Dean and the Assistant Dean of Student Affairs and Head of the Department of Student Activities and Counselling	These members are directly and closely involved with SAC functions and activities in these colleges. These are, moreover, the main admin contact points should students raise any concerns.
4	Policymakers and managers from the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE)	**Two** Senior management/policy-making officials	These members are closely involved with SAC activities in HEIs in Oman. They are also directly liaising with the Main Council Committee that oversees the functions of all SACs in all HEIs.
5	Academics/educationalists	**Two**[26] leading academics/educationalists from elite institutions (e.g., SQU)	These participants are active in citizenship studies and have an interest in educational matters in Oman, thus, they can give an account of current citizenship education, policies, and practices in Oman.

6	Members of the Oman Council	**Two members:** One member of the State Council One member of the Consultative Council	The role of these members is to represent citizens in their regions before the government. Therefore, their perceptions of student voice are vital to explore the activities and the boundaries around the SAC in representing this voice.
Total number of participants		71	

Table 4.1 The study participants, sites and reasons for selection.

After looking at the data collection methods and the data sources, the following section discusses the data analysis employed in the study.

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[26] There was a heavy reliance on of this participant (i.e. Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI) because of his deep involvement and expertise in dealing with topics of similar interest to the research.

4.6   Data Analysis

After conducting the interviews and obtaining all the required documents, the data analysis process unfolded. Denzin (1989) explains that data analysis is a process which requires researchers to conduct a rigorous interpretation of data. When the transcription of interviews is finished, the data gathered through the interviews were analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Tedllie and Tashakkori 2009, Creswell 2012). Braun and Clarke (2006) provide six steps to carry out the thematic analysis process:

1. **Becoming familiar with the data**: this could be achieved through transcription, re-reading the transcripts and creating the first set of ideas. This helped me to immerse myself in the data and develop a deep understanding of what the data carries.

2. **Generating initial codes:** this works through assigning codes across entire data in a systematic manner and gathering the data that are relevant to the assigned codes.

3. **Searching for themes:** uncovering potential themes from the collated codes. (see Appendix 6 for examples of identified codes and developed themes)

4. **Reviewing themes:** the data extracts can be checked against the corresponding themes leading to the creation of a thematic map of the analysis.

5. **Defining and naming themes:** defining and naming themes clearly after analysing the specifications of each theme.

6. **Producing the report:** finalising theme analysis and connecting them to the research questions before making them ready for inclusion in the result section.

This method was used because of its flexibility, it is easy to learn and straightforward and can be applied to different data types and theoretical frameworks (Braun and Clarke 2019), especially since I am a novice researcher. Moreover, according to Braun and Clarke (2019), using the thematic analysis approach allows the researcher to capture the different perspectives of the study participants, an area this study aims to uncover, especially when comparing the perceptions about the meaning of student voice held by participants at higher levels (e.g., policymakers and HEI staff) and those at lower levels (e.g., SAC members and wider student body) (see Chapter 6). The themes like student voice and participation and representation identified in the

research questions and main literature review, were organised and structured to facilitate the thematic analysis approach.

Nevertheless, Holloway and Todres (2003) argue that because of the flexible and simplistic nature of the thematic analysis approach, the produced themes might be incoherent and inconsistent. This pitfall was mitigated by constantly checking the study's aims and objectives to ensure that I stayed focused on the research questions. Thus, I expanded the relevant themes (e.g., the context informing the establishment of the SAC, the meaning of student voice and the SAC representation of student voice) to ensure the aims and research questions were consistent (see Appendix 6).

Some researchers resort to computer tools and software, e.g. NVivo, to aid in identifying the emerging themes and subthemes in qualitative data analysis. Although such software can effectively categorise and restructure the material, "the task and the responsibility of interpretation remain with the researcher" (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018, p. 113). This study used MAXQDA 2020 as it was very convenient to export and work with the Arabic transcribed interview files with no reported issues, as found with NVivo. The software proved helpful in applying thematic analysis steps to get familiar with different grouping of data sets. Moreover, MAXQDA 2020 was used to assign and group codes inductively and deductively (see Appendix 8 for an example of coding by MAXQDA 2020). In other words, in the former method, the codes were assigned based on data, and in the latter method, the codes were assigned based on the literature review (e.g. student voice, participation and representation in HEIs, citizenship rights). Thus, the final list of themes was used after checking the themes derived from the data (see Appendix 6 for examples of themes and codes and Appendix 7 for preliminary themes and final themes). The coding process took four to five months to be completed (i.e., starting in September 2020), before commencing to produce the final reports. As discussed in Chapter Two the themes of student voice and representation in HE are new to Oman's context. Therefore, it was important for this study to be flexible in adding new themes and patterns rather than being limited to formerly identified themes.

With regard to the data collected through documents, a content analysis approach was adopted. The analysis protocol in this approach depends on coding and categorizing

large textual information (Mayring 2000). The main aim of this analysis is to examine the content, structure and discourse of communication. For example, in analysing the SACRG through this approach, the document is prepared and examined thoroughly to identify data relevant to the research questions and the themes which were identified through literature review and interviews (e.g., student participation and representation, student voice, limits on voice) (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). These themes, then, are organized to formulate a general description of what is being said in the SACRG about the SAC participation and representation of student voice. Moreover, what the impact is in terms of the limits stated in the SACRG about student representation in HEIs before finally reporting the results (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). The content analysis used in this study followed the descriptive approach to interpreting the data from the documents. The data from the documents are viewed as a representation of the textual information and expressions, and their meaning should be acted upon (Krippendorff 2004). As noted by Elo and Kyngäs (2008), the process of content analysis has similar steps to the thematic analysis approach described earlier in terms of getting familiar with the data and organizing and reporting the data.

4.7   Ethical Considerations

Before starting the fieldwork, some ethical issues were considered while designing the research. First, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University on 14 February 2020 (see Appendix 9). There were suggestions by the Committee on issues like ensuring smooth data transfer while outside the UK, the limits of confidentiality and the other mechanisms to protect the researcher and the participants from any potential risk.

The data collection process took place between 12 March and 20 April 2020. During this time, regular correspondence between the researcher and the supervisors was continued via emails. Furthermore, all data collected during this period were transferred to Cardiff University Servers through Cardiff University OneDrive as the IT University services advised. Following Cardiff University's ethical Committee and the ethical guidelines for Educational Research of the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2018), the following cautionary measures were strictly followed while collecting data (see sections 4.7.1, 4.7.2, 4.7.3, 4.7.4).

4.7.1 Informed Consent

All study participants were given a consent form and participant information sheet listing all the study details (See Appendices 10 and 11). All participants' consent was obtained before the interview, which was submitted and received electronically due to the lockdown during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Also, verbal consent was sought at each interview's start and confirmed at the end. The participants were informed about any potential benefits, risks or obligations linked to participating in the study. All participants were clearly informed before the start of the interview that they could withdraw from taking part in the interview any time they wished or not answer specific questions without the need to justify their decision.

4.7.2 Anonymity and Confidentiality

The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were strictly observed throughout data collection, data analysis and data reporting. All participants were anonymised by giving them a pseudonym for the outputs like file names and transcripts. The audio files were stored with the pseudonym and stored securely on university servers. All recordings were transferred from the recording device to the university server and were deleted from the recording device as soon as the interviews adjourned and the files transferred. The researcher ensured that nobody had access to data records and all the identifiable information (e.g., personal characteristics, the specific positions and living areas of participants) was removed from interview excerpts before including them in the thesis. All participants agreed to be recorded before commencing the interviews.

4.7.3 Data Storage and Management Procedures

Proper data management and storage measures that adhered to university guidelines were always observed. All participants and those persons who facilitated the access to obtain data were informed in advance that all data collected (e.g. interview recordings and their written transcripts) were stored securely on Cardiff University servers following the university rules and regulations (General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 1998) and this was clearly stated on all the documents like the consent forms and participant information sheet (See

Appendices 10 and 11). Moreover, all recordings were transferred from the recording device onto the university server as soon as possible and deleted from the recording device when the transfer was complete. Transcripts and analyses were kept anonymous using pseudonyms and information that could identify a participant was removed. The researcher ensured that nobody had access to data records and that all the identifiable information (for example, personal characteristics, the specific positions and living areas of participants) were removed from interview exerts before including them in the thesis. All forms and the digital record were held in a safe place (e.g. in my room locked in a secured suitcase while in Oman and locked in a cabinet in the Researcher's Office when in Cardiff). Upon completion of the study, all collected data will be held on Cardiff University Servers for a minimum period of five years following the GDPR and Data Protection Act 1998.

4.7.4 Protection from Harm

There might be potential harm or risk to the researcher that might arise if the purpose of the research is not understood clearly. Since the research discusses active participation towards the concepts of citizenship and student voice, the misunderstanding of these concepts might lead others to think the researcher might be advocating for students to protest and/or strike. Generally speaking, protesting and/or striking can be sensitive for the government and there might be consequences for anyone involved in such activities. To minimise any potential risk to the researcher and the participants, the research aims and objectives were made very clear to all people who came in contact with the research, whether these were in HEIs or ministries. All parties were assured the aim was not to advocate any politics that would lead to protests or riots, which were considered very sensitive issues that might lead to negative consequences. Eventually, no harm was reported to the researcher or any participant.

4.7.5 Positionality

Cohen et al. (2018, p. 302) affirm that "researchers are in the world and of the world that they research." It is inevitable that some of their values and biographies are brought into the research process. The researcher's positionality refers to the views and positions held and adopted by the researcher and how the social, cultural, and

political contexts influence these views and positions (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014). Hence, the researcher must be conscious of how their beliefs and values may impact the research process, including design, analysis and implications (Holmes 2020).

This positionality can be identified according to the research topic, participants and context (Savin-Baden and Major 2013). As far as the research topic is concerned, studying student voice and representation in HE is a very motivating theme for me as a researcher. I have been working in the HE field since 2009. The experience of working with HE administration and observing the interactions of HE students has shaped my understanding of the mechanisms available for student voice. Furthermore, In the last four years before commencing the PhD program, my position in the Quality Assurance Department allowed me to attend HEI's Board meetings. Through these meetings, I observed student participation and representation in such meetings. These experiences are part of my positionality and my motivation to explore this topic.

Regarding the relationship with the participants, the researcher's positionality is judged upon the consideration of being an insider or outsider to the culture they are studying (Holmes 2020). According to Griffith (1998, p.362), an insider is "someone whose biography (gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so on) gives her [sic] a lived familiarity with the group being researched", while the outsider is "a researcher who does not have an intimate knowledge of the group being researched prior to their entry into the group" (ibid.). Being an Omani working as a lecturer and quality assurance officer in an HEI where parts of the group participating in this study are studying and working (e.g. SAC members, student body and college staff), I consider myself an insider. I also consider myself an insider to the community of the other participants, such as the policymakers and the Oman Council members, because of the shared social and cultural values, but at the same time, an outsider to their field of work (Deutsch 1981).

Regarding the context of the study, I strongly felt that as an insider to the Omani culture, being aware of political and economic contexts has influenced my perceptions about this topic. Having the awareness of how voice might be viewed at the political

level sometimes made me more careful about how to discuss the issues linked with this concept. At the same time, I strongly feel that the voice is a right for all, and I have an obligation towards the society I live in and my country generally to raise awareness about this notion, starting from the HEIs.

Lee (2016) suggests that being an insider has advantages, such as ease of access to HEIs and more trust and openness when discussing issues (e.g. student voice in this context). On the other hand, Byrne et al. (2015) note that being an insider is seen as a disadvantage due to the inherent bias to society and culture. I needed to realise how my positionality could impact the various research stages and I became fully aware of the possibility of bias during data collection and analysis (Cohen et al. 2018). Therefore, to minimize the bias and reduce the impact of my positionality especially on the students, I maintained identifying myself as a researcher and avoided mentioning my position as a lecturer and quality assurance officer. Moreover, the aims and objectives of the research were constantly visited to ensure that the focus on addressing the research question is maintained.

4.8   Method Limitation

Some implications for the research during the data collection stage resulted from the COVID-19 Pandemic. The initial plans to conduct face-to-face interviews were exchanged with telephone interviews. While the latter mode of interviews appeared to be successful and less resource-consuming, as discussed in Section 4.5.1, it presented a challenge to conduct such interviews with more HE policymakers and HEI staff, who had initially consented to a face-to-face interview but showed less interest to participate in the telephone interviews. Nevertheless, one of the high-profile policymakers who agreed to participate in the interview proffered relevant and varied data, which to some extent, relaxed the need for additional policy-makers interviewees. Moreover, another challenge caused by the Pandemic is accessing official documents at HEIs and ministries' levels. During the fieldwork for data collection, Oman was in a state of lockdown, whereby any physical research activities were halted. Thus, this study mostly used online available documents, and additional documents sent by some SAC members like the SAC's activity plans and minutes of

meetings. The analysis could have been deeper should I have had more access to documents from ministries and HEIs.

4.9   Conclusion

This study aims to explore the perceptions of student voice and representation dynamics in Oman's HEIs, using the SAC as a lens. The research specifically looked at the rationales behind establishing the SAC and explored the different perceptions around the meaning of student voice and how different policies and practices within Oman shape this meaning. My ontological and epistemological position (Section 4.2) were observed throughout the different research stages, allowing me to follow cautious steps towards my position within the study field and conceive data as carrying multiple realities. This chapter discussed the methodology and methods adopted by this research. A qualitative case study approach was employed to answer the research questions, benefiting from two data collection methods and access to two sites (HEIs). The first and main method is a semi-structured telephonic interview with 71 participants from 6 stakeholder categories: SAC Members, the wider HE student population, HEI Staff, MOHE managers, academicians in the field of the study and members of the Oman Council. The secondary method was document content analysis in which policy and legislative documents were reviewed to examine the aims and objectives of the case of the SAC. The utilization of interview and document analysis methodologies enabled the systematic examination of the content to develop a comprehensive understanding of the data prior to its organization and subsequent reporting. The empirical findings from these two methods will be presented in the following three chapters (5-7).

Chapter Five: The Establishment of the SAC in Oman

5.1 Introduction

This first analysis chapter addresses the first research objective: understanding the context and the rationale for informing the establishment of the SAC in HEIs in Oman. Section 5.2 discusses the previous form of the student council and how it evolved into the current SAC. According to some interviewees, the SAC was not a new HEI entity. Similar student organisations representing students' interests existed in Oman before the SAC, but this practice was inconsistent across HEIs. In 2014, the MOHE issued a ministerial decree to mandate *all* HEIs in Oman to form new SACs as described in the SACRG (see Ministry of Higher Education 2014). The design and the characteristics of the SAC are also discussed. Section 5.3 examines, specifically, how the political circumstances and other concurrent policy developments set the ground for SAC's creation.

In analysing the context and explanation of the establishment of the SAC, as well as understanding the meaning of student voice as held by participants (see Chapter 6), the scene is set for discussion of the main research objective, which focuses on exploring the role of the SAC in the enactment of student voice in HEIs in Oman (see chapter 7).

5.2 Student Councils

This section explores what is known about the student councils that existed in some HEIs prior to the SAC, as reported by interviewees. The discussion highlights the main differences between the previous student council and the current SAC in terms of formation, roles and the impact of these differences on the legitimacy of the SAC. This facilitates understanding the context within which SACs were created.

As noted by many interviewees, the idea of having a student representative body was not a new idea at HEIs in Oman. The name of the older student group was the Student Council (SC). Very few details about this Council could be retrieved during the research process for this thesis. However, the following SAC member notes that:

> The SAC used to be called the Student Council. In the beginning, the [name of the] College was the first to create this idea, and the name was Student

Councils, and then it turned into Student Advisory Councils. [Waleed, a male student and Head of SAC, study site 2].

Whilst the above interviewee stated that this HEI had been the first to create a Council, a further recollection by a different interviewee suggests that there had been some forms of student organisations at other HEIs in the past -when the interviewee who was now a staff member was a student back in 2000. There was no indication of a date before that year in the interview data. The current SAC looks different from what this staff member experienced when he was a student, however:

> I joined the College of Education in 2000/2001 and we had [student] councils…, we only had forums and emails, but the social media platforms did not exist…however, the communication channels and dealing with the [admin and academic] officials and their experience was more mature, you feel that they understood what it means to have a student council and they directed us on how to work in these councils…it was indeed a different experience I had as a student at that time, and when I joined as a staff in 2011. [Jamal, a male Student Affairs Department staff, study site 2].

The above informant relates his experience working with the former SC as a student and the current SAC. The interviewee suggests that the function of the old Student Council differed across HEIs and was not fully and formally established. Thus, this affected the level of interaction between administrations and students and produced inconsistent levels of engagement across HEIs, especially as not all HEIs had this structure. However, this also may show that the SC worked independently and had no or little formal supervision from the HEIs, something Klemenčič (2014) regards as a conducive space for student activism (see Chapter 2 and Section 8.2.2).

Another difference between the SC and the SAC relates to its composition. The following excerpt explains the difference:

> The councils did exist, but when it was not in a satisfactory way. I mean, the institutions used to interfere in the nomination and the selection of the members. These members were elected by the administration, so it means they would be on the management's side. Therefore, their presence was weak and not satisfactory. [Lamees, a female MOHE policymaker].

Unlike the current SAC, there was no indication of any council structure, and the members were selected by the administration, so they were on the administration's

side, as suggested by the above study informant. By contrast, SAC members are elected by students, using electronic voting systems (see section 3.4.3):

> The election or the electoral process, the training of students on it, electronic voting, and so on, these things have been recently introduced. [Khadija, a female MOHE policymaker].

Utilising digital voting and election systems can enhance the democratic structure of the SAC and potentially attract a more significant number of students to participate in the process instead of the old manual method. This indicates that the designers of the new SAC aim for more student involvement around the SAC.

In terms of the name of the Council, the word "Advisory" was added in 2014 to the new form of the Council with a purpose:

> The keyword in the new council's name is "advising" …The word "advisory" gave new roles to these councils other than student complaints, and so on. [Khadija, a female MOHE policymaker].

As confirmed by Khadija, the main difference between the SC and the SAC is the changing role of the Council from dealing with student complaints to offering advice to students or college administration on different students' needs and issues suggested by the SACRG. Additionally, it indicates that the SAC is evolving regarding its roles and the values associated with its new advisory role. Luescher-Mamashela (2013) asserts that an advisory role is usually assigned to student representation groups by authoritarian regimes (see Chapter 3). The advising role of the SAC can be reflected in the middle rungs of Arnstein's (2019) model of citizen participation (see section 2.5). According to the description of the middle rungs, consultation and placation, the SAC is limited to providing advice to the administrations upon request. However, the HEI administration retains the authority to decide whether or not to act upon the advice given (see section 8.2.2).

Khadija highlights further distinctions between the two forms of Council:

> It (the previous Council) was not given importance or a significant role. However, now its role has become more significant. The government has begun to pay attention to this role. Also, many of the institutions and these SACs now have an acknowledged identity not within the HEI only, but also outside the community. Therefore, for example, the SACs now have an independent budget which did not exist in the past…and they have their

slogans and official papers to communicate in their names, so it had a role. [Khadija, a female MOHE policymaker].

These newly added roles and resources to the current SAC show the SAC is being formalised to elevate and legitimise its status and new identity within and outside the HEIs. An additional difference between the two types of Council is related to the tasks and roles in relation to representing student voice (see section 2.3):

I think in the past they [members of the previous Council] did not have any experience…they conveyed THEIR opinion and not the opinions of the other students. [Yara, a female bachelor IT student, study site 2].

The current SAC is viewed as having been created with a more representative role. This seems to show that the old councils failed to represent the wider student voice, as they only reiterated the council members' opinions and ideas. By contrast:

The strongest reason is conveying the student voice, communicating their desires, or communicating the student's needs. I expect this is the main reason for the establishment of the advisory Council. [Saleem, a male Higher Diploma IT student, study site 2].

Saleem suggests that SAC came as a platform to represent the student body and convey their needs and other issues within the institution rather than merely representing the council members' opinions and ideas. Moreover, the current SAC has the freedom to communicate with other academic departments and support centres (e.g., the Business Studies Department and the Educational Technology Centre) in the HEI, which also highlights the level of independence the SAC has achieved. This is also apparent in the following excerpt, which was sent in as a formal letter by the SAC's Head in study site 1 to the Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs:

After the decision of the Supreme Committee that monitors the spread of the disease to suspend studies for a month, and as the Student Advisory Council is a link between the administration and students, we are pleased to communicate with you again to convey to you one of the problems faced by students of Information Technology Department. Some subject teachers in this specialisation assign the students activities - known as (Assignments) - and for each subject, there is more than one activity without explanation by the teacher. As you are fully aware that the activities work through certain software and the student may not have the ability to do these activities, because they are only found on computers in the college. Finally, we ask you to reconsider

this matter for the benefit of the students. [A letter sent from SAC to Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs, study site 1].

Compared to what was before with the former student council and following its new status, the SAC is now authorised to communicate independently with officials, providing it with a level of autonomy in its function and legitimacy, at least internally. The above communication from the SAC's Head to a high position in the institution indicates that the SAC can follow official procedures in carrying out its activities. These two key organisational traits are frequently observed in student-representative groups in the West and the US (Klemenčič 2020c) (see Chapter 2). From the above discussion and in comparison to the SC, it can be stated that the SAC has evolved in many ways compared to Student Councils.

Changes to the SAC have greatly influenced how it is perceived within HEIs. The members of the SAC have been granted more independence in how they are elected and nominated without any interference from the administration. This may indicate to the student body that the SAC is an impartial entity that can convey the original ideas and needs of the students. However, despite these changes and the SAC's autonomy to communicate with HEI officials, the SAC has an advising role, which means that the administration has the authority to determine the validity and practicality of the advice provided (Arnstein 2019). The nature of SAC's advisory role raises questions about the motivations and context behind its establishment within Oman's higher education institutions. These issues are discussed in the following section (see also Section 8.2).

5.3 The Context Informing the Establishment of the SAC

This section argues that the SAC came into existence following student demonstrations that took place in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and was part of a broader transformation taking place in Oman. The formal declaration of the SAC's establishment in HE was in 2014, but the data reveals that demands to have such councils through which HE students can be represented started well before that. The circumstances surrounding the establishment of these councils in HEIs in Oman are discussed below.

5.3.1 Oman's Political Structure

Since its establishment in 1996, and after its amendments in 2021, the Omani Basic Statute of the State, called the Constitution in some countries, defines the political

system in Oman in six chapters and 98 articles (see section 3.4.1 for more details about model of governance in Oman). The first article in the Basic Statute of the State defines the country:

> The Sultanate of Oman is an Arab, Islamic, Independent sate with full sovereignty. (The Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs 2021, p.7)

This article declares the identity of the state, its religion and the official language and its position internationally. Oman is ruled by a Sultanate system in which the Sultan, who is also the Head of State and the Government, has the supreme power and authority in running the affairs of the country:

> His Majesty the Sultan is the Head of State and the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, his person is inviolable, respect of him is a duty, and his command is obeyed.
>
> [The Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs 2021, p. 20].

According to the above article, the Sultan holds other positions like the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and the Head of the State Council of Ministers, with deputy ministers working under him (see section 3.4 for more details about Oman's political structure).

In terms of the governance system in the country and the participation of the citizens, the Basic Statute of the State asserts in Article 12 that:

> The Governance in the Sultanate shall be based upon justice, Shura[27] and equality. The citizens, according to this Basic Statute and the conditions and provisions prescribed by the Law, shall have the right to participate in public affairs. [The Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs 2021, p.9].

The principles of justice and equality are ensured through impartial and independent Judiciary systems where the rules of the Law shall be the basis of the governance. Also, it can be seen in the above article that citizens have the right to participate. However, they can only do so in public affairs such as social aspects and the welfare of society (cf. The Education Council 2017).

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[27] This refers to the consultation process in Oman which is represented by the Shura (consultative) Council. See section 3.4.2 and 6.4.

On the notion of forming associations or societies[28], Article 40 of the Basic Statute of the State confirms that:

> The freedom of forming societies on a national basis, for legitimate objectives, by peaceful means, and in a manner that does not conflict with the provisions and objectives of this Basic Statute, is guaranteed following the terms and conditions prescribed by the Law. It is prohibited to form societies the activity of which is averse to the order of society, secretive, or of a military nature. It is not permissible to force anyone to join any society.

> [The Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs 2021, p. 18].

The above article indicates that it is permissible to form societies in Oman. However, the terms and conditions that rule the formation prohibit establishing organisations that can have a political orientation.

Article 4 in (The Ministry of Legal Affairs 2000), the Ministry of Social Affairs lists the areas in which the societies can function as the following:

1. Orphan Care

2. Childhood and Motherhood Care

3. Women Services

4. Elderly Care

5. Disabled and Special Needs Care

6. Any other area or activity shall be added only after the approval of the Council of Ministers. (The Ministry of Legal Affairs, p. 2).

The above article shows that the contexts around forming associations should focus only on social or humanitarian activities. Similarly, citizens are allowed by the Government to participate only in these areas:

> Social participation has many aspects, meaning that it links the participation of the individual to the general social issues rather than the issues related to political and economic dimensions, i.e., volunteering, joining associations for the disabled or associations of women, donating, for example, supporting the needy charities. [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI].

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[28] Different civil associations and /or NGOs that have been formed.

Under item (6) there can be professional associations such as those that focus on medicine, engineering, or other work-related functions (see examples of professional associations in appendix 12). The establishment of SACs also falls under item (6) and is also impacted by rules and laws promulgated by the Basic Statue of the State. SACs are strictly prohibited from participating in any politically focused activities. They must focus on academic and education-based pursuits, as mandated by the SACRG (see section 3.4.3).

Establishing an association in any area outside of the five areas mentioned in Article 4 requires obtaining permission from the Council of Ministers, headed by the Monarch. This approval process makes establishing any new associations or societies that fall under item 6 challenging. Therefore, establishing the SAC was a challenging task due to the strict procedures involved in making the relevant decisions.

Furthermore, it is imperative to note that there are stringent limitations by legislation and laws on partaking in any political activities within HEIs (see also Section 6.5.2). As discussed in section 6.5, any association with politics is usually avoided. For example, the name and the demands of the students were to establish Student Unions. However, this was rejected:

> Interviewee: …the students wanted student unions. But they (Government Officials) saw that this name did not fit with the nature of the existing society.
>
> Interviewer: What is the difference between the name of the student unions and the advisory councils?
>
> Interviewee: As I understood, it does not fit with the nature of the...I mean, it can have aspects that are closer to things, I mean, the political aspects.
>
> [Lamees, a female MOHE policymaker].

This policymaker shows that student unions were understood to be linked to politics. This is because, as Brooks (2017, p.7) suggests, they "contribute to the politicisation of the wider student body by bringing together like-minded individuals". Student unions provide a platform for students with similar political interests to connect and engage in campaigning activities (Crossley and Ibrahim 2012). The establishment of the SAC occurred in an environment that restricted political engagement. Policymakers made a conscious effort to keep the SAC politically neutral by choosing the name "council"

instead of "union" and avoiding political connotations. This is also reflected in the regulations stipulated in the SACRG, as discussed in Section 3.4.3.

All government systems support this state's approach, including the way the curriculum is designed:

> Interviewee: Most of the gatherings allowed for students are academic gatherings or outside of these frameworks that I mentioned [political and economic], meaning that they (students) express their talents and social orientations, in particular, related to social service and charity work. These aspects are, of course, not prohibited. I mean, they can discuss and organise an event because this adheres to the general orientation (of the state).
>
> Interviewer: So, what we understand from your answer is that issues that are apolitical or non-religious are accepted?
>
> Interviewee: Not argumentative in general.
>
> Interviewer: So, are they allowed to be discussed?
>
> Interviewee: I mean, in this context, it is not allowed to discuss, and this, of course, is not limited to students, even the courses being offered. We do not find that controversial nature related to politics and philosophy in the educational system in Oman, not even in the Gulf region. What exists is only a focus on sociology which is usually far from these arguments that can cause a clash. Perhaps the aim is to maintain social cohesion and the state of harmony that exists within the society.
>
> [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI].

The discussion above states that the overall political structure influences how the educational sector operates. The SACRG strongly emphasised that the general focus of the SAC is apolitical, and centred on social and educational matters, to support students' learning. It is then evident that there is a misalignment between the values outlined in the Philosophy of Education policy, which "reinforces the right of individuals to political and societal participation" (the Education Council 2017, p. 22) to develop more awareness of civic activities like elections and the electoral process (Kooli et al. 2019), and the reality on the ground (see Chapter 8). It could be argued that student representative groups have the potential to promote awareness on the matter, as noted by Klemenčič (2012). However, the SAC faces significant limitations in this regard due to policies such as the SACRG (see Chapter 8).

Following an examination of the political structure that impacted the formation and operations of SAC, the next section delves into additional political factors that contributed to the establishment of SACs in HEIs in Oman.

5.3.2 The Arab Spring

The political context that surrounded the establishment of SAC includes the Arab Spring (see section 3.2), although very few participants (especially students) related these events to the establishment of the SAC in 2014. This is because the student participants were in primary schools in 2011 and the Arab Spring events might be out of their recollection. However, other participants relate the SAC's establishment to the political context:

> I think there was a declared goal and a hidden goal in the establishment of councils. Regarding the declared goal, it is to benefit the students within the institutional framework and to listen to their views regarding different matters. This is a kind of giving value to the students as they are the main element that these institutions serve. The hidden goal, on the other hand, is that the councils were established because of previous contexts to contain any unusual tendencies from the students, especially after the increase in the number of higher education institutions. This hidden goal was based on previous demands in the late nineties from the University's (Sultan Qaboos University) students. But, during the events in 2011, about ten years later and this request was still not fulfilled, the demands were renewed at that time, and I imagine that at that stage, it had a great impact in accelerating the establishment of student advisory councils. [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI].

From the above informant's narrative, the establishment of SAC adopted a dual-facet context: SAC was created amid an increase in the number of students. The increase in the number of HE students created greater expectations among a youthful population. Therefore, a form of representation and containment was needed in HEIs. On the other hand, the above participant claims that there is an undeclared context behind the establishment of the SAC. It should be noted that the approval to launch the SAC took more than a decade. Starting with students' demands in the 1990s and then the pressure from the waves of the Arab Spring, especially from youth and HE students, made it mandatory for the Government to establish SAC in HEIs as a political concession.

Furthermore, interviews with policy-makers revealed that in the context in which SAC was established, the Government was attentive that establishing SAC was an approach of containment for the youth:

> Frankly, I mean, we can say that there is an awareness from the government that there must be containment for the student, the containment of young people in general, including the youth group affiliated with higher education institutions who represent the largest segment of the society and that reinforced the presence of student advisory councils. [Lamees, a female MOHE policymaker].

As discussed in Section 3.2.2, one main reason for the establishment of the SAC was that the HE students were the main actors in the political upheaval during the Arab Spring. The excerpt above shows a governmental effort to avoid conflict with youth and the students in HE. Al-Farsi (2013, p.219) suggests that some degree of challenge is expected from the Omani youth because "their number is increasing and the government's ability to maintain the same level of the implicit social contract is decreasing" (see also Section 2.2.4). Thus, they have higher expectations than previous generations from the Government regarding HE opportunities and employment. The realisation from Government that SACs needed to be established in HEIs, amid demands from the youth, who constitute the largest segment of society, but SACs were only established after the state's concession primarily, to meet educational needs in HE, such as quality assurance and accreditation requirements - as discussed in Section 2.3.4. The "containment" strategy mentioned by the above MOHE policymaker confirms that SAC's creation was a form of intentional intervention by the Government.

Another decision-maker's response confirms the claim made above by Salim. Khadija, a MOHE policymaker, provides a detailed account of SAC's establishment[29]. First, it is asserted that the establishment of SAC came amid fear that Omani youth and especially the HEI students, were a potential target of political agenda from other countries:

> In 2011, when the big events began, which have reached all the Arabs and called the Arab Spring, we also got affected in the country. Of course, there was a big role for the youth at this stage, whether they were in higher education

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[29] Khadijah's account is presented in a series of excerpts below to avoid extended elaboration.

or employees, etc., it was noticeable that the young people that were participating in the issues at that time (protests and the political upheaval) and were targeted by some countries which have some agendas[30] were the same category in higher education which have been brainwashed with some ideas, they can be incited against the state and towards the accomplishments. They [young people at HE] were made to think [by propaganda from other countries] that little has been done for them, and more is needed. [Khadija, a female MOHE policymaker].

This fear also came amid the spread of the terrorist group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) between 2013 and 2014, which saw many people, especially students and unemployed youth, recruited by this terrorist organisation in the MENA region (Darden 2019). This shows that the Government was wary of external powers which may have a hand in inciting riots and protests in the country by making the youth demand more changes (see section 3.2). Thus, the Government chose to contain the students before they might be involved in the disruption of the status quo within Oman.

As Khadija also noted, the second factor involves the level of awareness among the youth regarding their reactions to the protests and demands that could impact the political and economic situation in Oman:

> Many of the things that happened in 2011 were related to this group's [young people at HEI] lack of awareness of their reactions and how it might severely affect the country on the political and economic levels. Hence the idea began. At the outset, it was based on the idea of creating student unions that can have an influential role and their voice and demands are heard in the country, etc…This was the place for its launching, which is higher education institutions, which accommodate the largest group of youth from the age of 18 to 25 years old and usually it is the group that is known as delicate or fragile, which also can be a gap for any destructive ideas, ideas that do not positively support the society and thus there was a kind of "a refinement" to the idea of student unions to become student advisory councils. [Khadija, a female MOHE policymaker].

As a reaction, establishing the SAC was used as one of the tools to contain and control disruptive actions by the 18 - 25-year-old population. When considering the view of creating the SAC to contain the students - who were conceived as 'lacking awareness', 'delicate' or 'fragile'- we can draw on the 'therapy' rung of Arnstein's (2019) participation model. In this rung, quasi-participatory programs are created by the

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[30] This might be a reference to countries/groups that have terroristic agenda in which they indoctrinate young people with ISIS ideology (e.g., ISIS in IRAQ and other Arab countries).

authorities and officials to cure and educate the citizens who are made to think that they have problems; however, the primary goal in this lower rung is to hinder citizen participation and to keep the power maintained in the hands of the powerholders (see section 2.5).

The idea of "student containment" mentioned above is further reinforced by the views of interviewees, who defined student voice as a tool for containment (see section 6.2):

> These councils also are made aware of how to express an opinion in a civilised and conscious manner without causing any harm to the state at the political and economic level etc., so this was the real place that these youth masses or youth councils could be established which are the institutions and from here started the idea. [Khadija, a female MOHE policymaker]

The above statement indicates that the state had to deal with students' demands cautiously and in a contained way. Hence, instead of a total ban, the government allowed student associations that could be shaped and controlled according to the needs and goals of the state.

On the reason why SAC was established four years after the 2011 incidents, Dr Salim explains:

> It is not just a decision to establish councils after four years. This period also, because of students' demands, witnessed an improvement in the housing conditions and the number of students accepted (in HE). This also represents part of the demands that were responded to, and hence, this gives us the conclusion that this decision was made within the framework of this stage because it is also supported by meeting other (students') desires that were demanded. [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI].

Although the protests took place in 2011, the improvements granted to students in HE continued to be met throughout the protest period. This suggests that SAC was established in a context that coincided with other student demands, which the government also met, and some of which it prioritised over the establishment of SACs.

5.3.3 Optimal Grounds for SAC's Establishment

In addition to the above political context that prepared the ground for establishing the SAC in HEIs, there was a political shift amid various pressures. The outcome was a shift in the political discourse that created an optimal environment for SAC's

establishment. The establishment of human rights agencies and the introduction of new laws, such as the Child Law 2014 (see below), are some of these changes:

> The establishment of the (new student) councils…was linked to the Omani Commission for Human Rights (OCHR) establishment in light of the growing pace of human rights in the late nineties. This climate led to pushing forward demands for the establishment of student advisory councils, which took time, I mean, we are talking about fifteen years, which is a very long period. [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI].

> When the OCHR and other human rights bodies were established, there were international demands as well to show that there is importance, protection, and follow-up of human rights, this is analogous to student councils' (establishment). [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI].

According to Salim, the formation of the SAC was in line with other agencies, like human rights agencies, which were established in response to national and international pressure. As stated by the above interviewee, an example is the OCHR established in 2008 following global demands for an independent institution to promote and protect human rights in Oman. The establishment of the OCHR might have contributed to a conducive environment for platforms like the SAC, where voice is tolerated, and their activity is enshrined in Law. Regarding the SAC, its formation was primarily driven by national demands, as discussed in the previous section. Creating the SAC was necessary to avoid disruption and gain the support of students in order to maintain the current state of affairs (see Chapter 8).

Another policy that created conducive conditions for the establishment of the SAC was the Royal Decree concerned with the Law to protect children's[31] rights. The Law was published at the same time as SAC's establishment, in 2014 (see The Ministry of Legal Affairs 2014). Children's civic rights, which are set out in the second Chapter of the Child Law, gave children the right to participate and express views and opinions (see also Sections 2.3.4 and 2.4). The issuance of such laws to protect children's rights while creating the SAC shows that the SAC establishment occurred amid a holistic policy review of the states' positions regarding human rights more generally and the rights of children and youth in particular.

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[31] The Child defined in this Royal Decree is that every person who has not completed eighteen years of age according to the Gregorian calendar.

A third contextual factor that also existed during the SAC establishment is the creation of labour unions:

> When labour unions were established in the region, there was global pressure for the existence of unions that protect workers and preserve their rights, and therefore we are talking about an external factor… this is parallel with [the establishment of] student councils [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI].

The above interviewee maintains that external factors were mounting by international organisations such as the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). These pressures to form the above institutions and unions related to issues over the rights of the country's workforce. During the Arab Spring in 2011 (see Chapter 3), there were numerous demands to protect labour rights, especially in the private sector. The Ministry of Manpower issued a decree that governs the creation, operations, and registration of labour trade unions and federations, with the goal of safeguarding and advancing the rights and interests of laborers and union members (The Ministry of Manpower 2012). Establishing the SAC in response to student demands during the Arab Spring mirrors the process of creating labour unions – it was part of a similar agenda to increase rights to a voice. These external factors and internal student demands pushed the Government to permit the student group.

In addition to establishing OCHR and developing child rights and labour unions, SAC was also founded amid political changes in the participation processes of Oman. As discussed in Section 3.2.2, the Consultative (Shura) Council's power and authority had been extended to include more ability to review government budget plans and the state's expenditures. Such elements are seen to add extra strength to the Council. Moreover, the members of the Council were guaranteed immunity to express their voice. Immunity can support members in performing their duties without fearing repercussions when reporting abnormalities. In addition to the extended legislation to the Consultative Council, new Municipality Councils were launched in 2011 to encourage regional self-governance. Additional duties of this new Council are to provide recommendations regarding systems and municipal services in the regions. In explaining the context concerning SAC founding, the below interviewee states:

> It (SAC's establishment) paralleled with other transformations in the country to organise participation processes and make them more institutional and

democratic similar to what exists in other countries, whether it is the Consultative councils, labour unions, student councils. It is to complete this democratic image in which things are done in various educational institutions in the country. [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI].

From the above discussion and changes, it can be indicated that the context in which the SAC was established within was characterised by additional citizen representation processes in different sectors from protecting human rights agencies to the creation of labour unions and the extension of the power and authority that is given to the existing Consultative Council members. Following national and international pressure, it appears that the process for establishing the SAC replicates procedures used for other institutions, which were deemed necessary to implement in higher education sectors.

In addition to the above discussion on general policy developments, there were more changes to the specific outlook of the educational philosophy in Oman. The main shift in the education sector was emphasised through the general guidelines for the educational policies and practices stipulated in the Philosophy of Education in the Sultanate of Oman[32] (Al Harthi 2014). This national-level-policy called on all educational institutions to act in accordance with its provisions, which supports students social and political participation and recognizes the provisions of the UNCRC as discussed in Section 2.3.4 and Section 6.2.1. The education sector is required to take the policy as an essential national framework to guide the development process and to build educational institutions' strategic plans (Al Harthi 2014). In support of this view, the following interviewee maintains that the Philosophy of Education in Oman is the driving force that controls educational institutions' policies and strategies and thus the boundaries for students' actions and learning experiences. The educational context that exists during SAC's establishment is described as follows:

The structure of the educational system is that the teacher is a leader and that it is a book that must be finished and implemented, and the spaces of freedom are codified, and therefore this affects the issue of raising students to express their voice and to pay attention to the impact of this voice. I see our educational system is a negative indicator in some way [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI].

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[32] See sections 4.5.2 and 6.4 for more discussion on the Philosophy of Education in Oman policy.

The educational context in which SACs were established is viewed as having a negative impact on the ability of students to learn how to express voice. Student voice received minimal attention within educational institutions, as evidenced by the limited opportunities for expression in classrooms, dominated mainly by teacher-led instruction. This interviewee argues that university lecturers mainly focus on delivering the assigned curriculum and abide by academic calendars. Similar concerns are reported in Chinese higher education, which is entirely centred around the one-party state (Zhang 2017). In a study exploring how Chinese students learn in their undergraduate programmes before they come to the UK, Zhang (2017, p.868) found that "Chinese students are intentionally denied opportunities to develop their critical thinking disposition, skills and knowledge" by the ruling party to control their thoughts from developing critical and oppositional thinking (see section 8.3.1).

Since SAC's formal launching in 2014, the formal grounds for the practices of participation and voice seem to be widely enabled within the HE, though on limited topics, as discussed in Chapters 6 and 8.

5.4 Conclusion

This Chapter addressed the first research question which is 'What was the rationale informing the establishment of the SAC in Omani HEIs?' At the outset of the Chapter, a comparison was drawn between the former and the new Student Councils, unveiling apparent differences in their working systems and standards. The contrast also highlighted how the former student council had prefigured the current SAC after receiving more attention from the state, which granted the current SAC new roles, status, and identity that ultimately resulted in a fixed structure at all HEIs in Oman. While the current SAC has improved from the old version of the Student Councils, limits are still placed on its functions within the HEIs.

In exploring the context that saw SAC's emergence, there is considerable consensus in the literature about the political context in Oman. From the authoritarian system that posits limited arenas (only in social and welfare aspects) of participation to the political disorder caused by waves of Arab Spring, demands, especially from the youth and HE students, have a compelling case to push for the establishment of the SAC. In addition to this political context, other reforms were also behind the consolidated demand of SAC establishments, like changes to human rights laws, child's laws, and other

educational policies. Amid these foundational changes, coupled with international and national pressures, the SAC was constituted within Oman's political system as a containment tool and to represent student voice within the HE system – as will be argued in the next chapters.

But before exploring how the SAC enact and represent student voice, it is crucial to understand how the meaning of student voice is conceived and constructed in Oman, which is discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Six: Understanding Student Voice in Oman

6.1 Introduction:

This chapter addresses the second research question, which aims to understand how the meaning of student voice is understood within the Omani HE sector. As discussed in Chapter 2, this study views student voice as defined by Thomson (2011), which encompasses possibilities for active communication of ideas and access to various forums in which decision-making is made. Besides, this study proposes incorporating an additional element in the definition, emphasising the significance of enabling change through student voice (West 2004; Cook-Sather 2006; McLeod 2011). The focus of the discussion in this chapter is to explore how the focus and meaning of student voice are shaped by different policies and practices in Oman generally and in the context of HEIs. The chapter examines the views of the interviewees who 1) design the policy around student voice (e.g., policymakers, members of the Oman council) and those who 2) implement the policy in HEIs' (HEI managers and administration, academics and the students). The chapter is organised in the following sections: Section 6.2 discusses how student voice is constructed in policy and enacted in practice; Section 6.3 looks at the different meanings of student voice based on the participants' views on what it covers, and how it is exercised and induced within HEI culture. Section 6.4 reviews cultural, national, and institutional boundaries, the limitations placed on student voice, and the consequences for violating these boundaries.

6.2 Shaping of Student Voice

This section looks at data about the meaning of student voice which helps to understand how it is constructed in policy and practice. The data in this section are sourced from interviews and documents (see section 4.5), which indicate that student voice is shaped by educational, cultural and social factors, as discussed in the following subsections (see sections 6.2.1, 6.2.2 and 6.2.3).

6.2.1 Shaping Student Voice Through Education

The educational system and its philosophy play a role in shaping student voice in Oman. Interviewees maintain that the construction of student voice is all connected to the educational philosophy:

> The educational philosophy influences everyone, whether it is schools or higher education institutions; although the nature of each institution is different, the philosophy is the same…The general framework drives the concept of the student's voice, whether it drives it negatively or positively. [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI].

Through the Philosophy of Education policy, students are encouraged to participate actively in different societal events. This is emphasised in the following principles and objectives:

> Principle 2, Objective 7: Develop self-responsibility and the values of social participation. [The Education Council 2017, p. 21].

> Principle 5, Objective 8: Reinforce the right of individuals to political and societal participation. [The Education Council 2017, p. 22].

As discussed in Section 2.3.4, the Philosophy of Education policy in Oman recognises the UNCRC, which gives children and youth the right to express voice (The Education Council 2017). According to Tonon (2012) and Horgan et al. (2017), the term "youth voice" in this article pertains to the ability of young people to express their opinions and be included in decision-making processes. The principles outlined above encourage education policymakers and planners to instil in students the knowledge that they possess the full right to participate in society and politics as citizens. Additionally, students are urged to increase their awareness of civic activities, such as elections and the electoral process (Kooli et al. 2019).

However, the reality often differs from these ideals and the policy's overarching principle does not seem to align with the actual practices of political participation. Al Kharusi (2011, p. 243) elaborates that "political participation activities such as joining a political party, attending political party events, donation of money to a candidate or political party are still not part of the political participation culture in Oman" given that it is a context that uses a top-down approach in its ruling (Al-Farsi 2013, and see section 6.4 for discussion about limits on student voice). Moreover, there is a misalignment between the general principles set in different policies (e.g., the

Philosophy of Education in Oman and the SACRG)[33] and the translation of these in some HEIs, impacting how student voice is understood by the study participants:

> Our educational system does not allow enough spaces for students to express opinions. Why? Because the structure of the educational system is that the teacher is the manager of the class and he must finish what is in the book. So, the space for freedom is reduced, affecting educating students to express their voice. I view the educational system as having some negative effects on this issue of educating students to express their voice even though there are some practices. [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI].

In the classroom teacher-centred approaches are predominant; the focus is primarily on content delivery and completing the curriculum, which can hinder the development of students' skills in expressing voice (Al kharusi and Atweh 2012). The above scene, where the teacher dominates the classroom, is like the family scene where the father deals with other family members in an authoritarian approach, leaving limited space for voice construction. Although some form of discussion and dialogue is used to solve some family-related issues, the father ultimately makes the decisions (Al-Barwani and Albeely 2007).

The 'practices' mentioned in the quote above can be examples of elected student councils at schools designed to allow students to share their ideas, concerns and suggestions with the classroom teacher. Nevertheless, these student councils have been found to be "practically useless" and receive tokenistic support from teachers (AL Kharousi and Atweh 2012, p. 267). This is reflected in the top-down management styles as observed by Al Kharousi and Atweh (2012), where students are given very few chances to interact and express their voice and opinion while the teacher's talk dominates the majority of the time. There is an apparent misalignment between the general principles set by the Philosophy of Education in Oman and the translation of these principles in some schools.

Students are expected to acquire and develop these participation skills and values as they progress from schools to universities. Nonetheless, some interviewees express that HEIs need more explicit guidelines to provide activities that promote student voice within their institution:

> If we want to convey this concept [of student voice] to everyone, there must be legislative, from the Ministry of Higher Education. I think that this is about

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[33] The rationale for focusing on these two policies are noted in Section 4.5.2.

enacting laws, systems for establishing mechanisms…by drawing the roles of everyone, such as university administration, faculty members such as students, the local community and parents. Even in setting clear lines, setting clear policies and legislations, every individual and institution must adhere to them to create a generation capable of communicating their opinion, conveying its ideas, and communicating its aspirations in higher education institutions. [Adam, a male Dean in a private HEI].

HEIs are uncertain due to lack of transparent government directives on how to establish and execute policies and procedures around student voice. While HEIs may lack clarity on policies related to student voice, it appears that social views can be expressed and activities be implemented in less problematic ways:

> …If they (students) express their social tendencies related to social service and charitable work, these aspects, of course, are not prohibited. They can speak, discuss and organise an event because this is consistent with the general orientation (of the state). [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI].

Social activities that entail altruistic endeavours (e.g., soliciting donations for the less fortunate, aiding marginalised communities, promoting environmental causes, and participating in voluntary work) are encouraged in HEIs. This is because the principles and practices of such activities are aligned with the government's aims and support its mission to fulfil the citizenry's needs without causing disruption within/to the HEIs.

6.2.2 Shaping Student Voice: Cultural Factors

Cultural and religious factors were also seen to shape the meaning of student voice in Oman during the interviews. The Islamic principle of 'Shura' means consultation between community members about different matters (Al-Raysuni 2011). In terms of student voice policy in HE, the Consultative Council and other Councils (e.g., the State Council, see section 3.4) appear to have an essential role in reforming education policies (Al'Abri et al. 2019).

The Shura (i.e., consultation) is also mentioned by students when asked about the shaping of student voice:

> Our religion…commands us to 'Shura', our customs and traditions, and our ancestors did meet in councils for consultations, all of this urges us to practice consultation and the Quranic verse reads:" ***and those who conduct their affairs by mutual consultation***".
> [Ayman, a male student and deputy Head of SAC, study site 1].

The work of the SAC is similar to the work of the Consultative [Shura] Council, but in a smaller scale... We can go there (to the Consultative Council) and learn what the mechanisms are, what the system is, so that we can be taught about it. [Waleed, a male student and Head of SAC, study site 2].

The above data show that the students aspire to work on the principles of Shura because it is an established culture within the society. In society, there exist various traditional gatherings where individuals convene to discuss and negotiate relevant societal matters (i.e., use consultation) that they encounter in their livelihoods, which different participants of different ages and levels cherish:

I think norms, traditions and values have a large share in consolidating this concept [student voice]. If we take the example of the Shura, it is an integral part of the Islamic religion and Omani society. Even if we look at the societal clusters, there are tribal and village councils. This culture should be preserved and fostered. [Adam, a male Dean in a private HEI].

Similar views to students' were also reported by the institutional manager in the same and different HEIs and around cultural and religious factors that support the construction of student voice in HE. Hence, student voice was deemed positive by participants since it reflects cultural and religious principles that are very much fostered in society. However, it is unclear whether implementing this principle is integrated into HE institutional practices and would have been followed without the Arab Spring.

6.2.3 Shaping Student Voice: Social Factors

In addition to cultural factors in society, socialisation has a crucial role in constructing student voice. One interviewee suggested that a person's upbringing within their family can heavily influence the development of their personality as a student:

Interviewer: If we take the concept of student voice, how is it constructed?

Interviewee: Its basis comes from home. It then moves with the student as he moves to school and then to the university. If the child's upbringing is coercive at home and coercive at school, then the student's voice will be weak and frightened at the university and vice versa.

Interviewer: So, does this (construction of voice) start at home?

Interviewee: Exactly. For example, when you are at home, I will explain what happens generally at our homes, If the father speaks, no one can speak in his presence.

Interviewer: Yes.

Interviewee: But when the student is living in a house where there is freedom in dialogue and discussion, and he sees his father, mother, brothers, sisters, aunts, and those around him, talking to each other and so on, he will definitely grow up with this behaviour and this is observed and practised. [Juma, a male State Council member].

Student voice is structured differently depending on the nature of communication and experiences seen at home, especially since the Omani family is described as a "central and pivotal institution" (Al-Barwani and Albeely 2007, p. 129). This is consistent with what Muddiman et al. (2019) found in a mixed-method study that civil engagement, activism, and political participation are transmitted and nurtured within the familial environment.

Moreover, in some families, senior members exert their power and authority over the other members, as is the case with the father in the above data excerpt. This resonates with an anthropological study conducted by Barth (1983) in a town that is typical of other Omani towns. He states that men (e.g. the husband, father, or the older son) have "…the final power of decision in all questions concerning wife and children, as well as the responsibility for their behaviour" (p. 117). The same is found by Albeely (2003), who conducted interviews with 20 Omani families, including males and females and found that these families did not have a space for free expression and democratic ideals and practices were missing. As a result, other members, including students, are influenced by such power imbalance (see section 2.3.5).

Furthermore, this scene highlights the nature of Omani people and society in general. Al-Farsi (2013) views Omanis as generally 'quiet' or 'peaceful' in the sense that they are absent from participation in social or political conflicts. Al-Farsi (2013) explains this absence in three different ways: the satisfaction of Omanis with the current political practices, the realisation of the limits which forbid people from discussing sensitive topics, or they are just uninterested in politics as long as they are profiting from the social contract between them and the state (see section 8.3.1). This reasoning is also mentioned by the following student:

Interviewer: Let us go back to the point of society, how can society interfere with the Omani people's nature?

Interviewee: The nature of the Omani society, if they have a voice or an opinion, they will not display it, rather, it will be kept hidden between themselves, this is the idea, we are not like other nations who protest and

create hostile things, no, we move away from such things, the Omani society, thanks to God, is a peaceful society that understands these matters, if it has something, it will keep it between the members of the society only.

Interviewer: Is this something positive or negative?

Interviewee: In my view, I see it as something positive, so that no rioting and no rebellion happens. [Moza, Bachelor a female Engineering student, study site 1]

This student's observation highlights a common trait among Omanis which is non-interference in the affairs of others. It is a fundamental article of the Omani Statute of the State (The Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs 2021, p. 10) which maintains that Omani political principles are underpinned by "stressing cooperation bonds and affirming the bonds of friendship with all countries and people based on mutual respect, common interests, and the non-interference in internal affairs". This is reflected in the citizen's practices and experiences in expressing voice. The primary reason for exhibiting a passive demeanour is to maintain peacefulness and avoid societal tension. This behaviour also promotes social cohesion, often expected within a paternalistic state. However, the Arab Spring events show that this trait may change and Omani citizens showed more interest in participation, at least in areas that directly affect their lives such as working and employment conditions.

6.3 The Meaning of Student Voice

This section discusses the study participants' understanding of student voice in the context of Omani HEIs in terms of focus and framework, examining the impact of the aforementioned factors on their perceptions. The discussion also looks at what types of needs or issues student voice covers within HEIs. Ultimately, the section highlights the key approaches that can be used to exercise student voice and induce it within HEI culture.

6.3.1 Participants' Views on Student Voice

The research revealed that there are different interpretations (i.e., narrower and broader) of the concept of student voice among participants. Informants in top positions, policymakers from MOHE and HEI managers and staff, have a narrow view towards student voice and its implications. For instance, in the following statement expressed by an MOHE policymaker, when asked about her understanding of student voice in Oman, she replies:

> What comes to my mind about student voice is the sense that the student has the freedom to express their opinion on any topic related to the educational process, and this opinion has an echo, and someone has to listen to him and he should participate so that we are trying to contain this voice, because if it is not contained within the educational institution, it may have side effects that will reflect on the whole community. [Lamees, a female MOHE policymaker].

The above quote shows that students can express voice, but only on some issues. According to this policymaker, student voice within HEIs is used to *contain* students. It also signals that voice expression is permitted on educational matters only, and it is uncertain if this act of expression makes a difference. Moreover, the meaning of the student voice held by Lamees seems consistent with the state's orientation and interests, as discussed in 6.2.1. Therefore, HEIs are used as venues for student voice 'containment', which perhaps could be expected in HE systems under authoritarian systems. These control "policymaking and play a great role in the HE system" (Al'Abri 2015, p.84). Through the containment aspect of student voice, the aim is to keep student voice away from contentious activities that may cause tensions and disruption to the status quo within and outside the HEIs, similar to the 2011 protests (Al Hashmi 2013, see also see sections 2.4.2 and 3.2.2).

Another policymaker believes that student voice is not only about raising student needs and requirements, but is also mindful of the effects it can have on society:

> Of course, when we talk about student voice or student opinion, it is linked to many principles, including the responsibility linked with this voice. In other words, the student's realisation that his voice or opinion has a responsibility, has many consequences such as the credibility and the transparency of this opinion…and to what extent this opinion affects the community that he belongs to, which is the student community, the institutional community, as well as the external community… If the student is aware of the responsibility and value of this opinion in each of these categories I mentioned here, I think the student has reached a level of consciousness. [Khadija, a female MOHE policymaker]

This policymaker believes that consciousness and transparency are necessary prerequisites for exercising student voice, making student voice a conditional right for the students.

The State Council member below emphasises student voice and its strict linkage to education and course-related needs. However, the member supposes that students' needs related to material requirements, such as demands for extra stipends and

entertainment, are not included in the meaning of student voice. When asked about the perception he carries of student voice, his response was:

> The student voice is a term that exists all over the world and in respectable universities, let me say the respectable educational institutions (where) students have their societies (clubs/associations) and thus express what they see in a way that is appropriate for the student, because a student may have many requirements, perhaps not academic and not scientific, I do not mean student voice in material (money-oriented) claims, this is my understanding of student voice. [Juma, a male State Council member].

This respondent considers unions within HEIs legitimate because universities in democratic societies permit clubs and societies to voice their opinions and worries on behalf of fellow students, which this respondent deems "respectable" (see Klemenčič 2020c, see also Chapter 2).

While the policymaker and the member of the State Council viewed student voice as being limited to only academic-related issues, HEI staff add that student voice can also be expressed on non-academic issues, but only within the HEIs. For example, students could express voice on recreational facilities or sports facilities within the HEI:

> Student voice is a student's requirement in terms of the academic needs and the existing services provided, the student's needs for academic or administrative services [e.g. recreational facilities, catering services] from us as a college. [Saif, a male Assistant Dean, study site 1]

> You can say that student voice is the rights of the student that he conveys to the college administration or the things that the college administration must provide to the student. These things are communicated through the student to the college's administration, whether it is educational services or non-educational services. [Naser, a male Student Affairs Department staff, study site 1]

According to the extract above, student voice refers to students' right to voice their academic and non-academic needs to college management.

In comparison to the views expressed by policymakers and HEI staff, students' interpretations of student voice encompass wider expectations and hold a broader view of the focus of student voice. Student voice is generally interpreted by students as wider observations, suggestions or needs which are conveyed to the college administration and management without specifically limiting them to academic or service-related needs:

> The way I see student voice is the student's observations, and how they are communicated to the concerned departments in the college. Their (students') observations, complaints, actions, opinions, suggestions, and anything related to the student. [Waleed, a male student and Head of SAC, study site 2]

These perceptions of student voice in HE in Oman differ from how student voice is defined in the extant literature. For instance, the literature widens the meaning of student voice to encompass the actual ability to bring about change through direct means (e.g. representation, activism), not only communicating ideas and opinions (West, 2004; McLeod 2011; Cook-Sather, 2006). Moreover, McLeod (2011) and Cook-Sather (2006) relate student voice to the possession of agency and power to communicate ideas in a context that can yield change.

Another SAC member in study site 1 views student voice as a '*right*' through which the student is being involved in different college operations, at least those that affect students' lives directly at the campus:

> It is the right for the student to participate and to take actions with his voice and form the regulations to which students are subject in a way that does not interfere with the college administration, so that the student has the right to participate and has the right to comment on everything that happens in the college, of course not everything, but on things that concerns the students whether on activities or academic matters. In general, this is my definition. [Ayman, a male student and deputy Head of SAC, study site 1].

As previously noticed, this SAC member's perception of student voice is wider than the views of policymakers and HEIs' staff and managers. The student widens it to 'everything that happens in the college' at least on things that 'concern the students'. However, the SAC member insists on adhering to the college laws and stays within the established limits, without relating student voice to change.

In addition to the above perceptions of student voice, other students (non-SAC members) reported to understand the concept as having the 'ability' to communicate concerns. Having ideas and opinions on academic issues or general services is one thing, but effectively expressing those concerns without pressure is equally important.

> For me, student voice in HEIs is to have the ability to express an opinion or idea to the concerned people in that college, and not to be under particular pressure. Student views must be more impartial and honest than driven by certain persons or entities. [Yaseen, a male Diploma Business student, study site 2]

The student implies that when they feel pressured to conform to other individuals' or entities' opinions, expressing their own honest and unbiased viewpoint can be challenging. The student's understanding of voice is in line with what UNCRC's Article 12 prescribes for youth voice, in that they need the chance to participate with their opinions and receive support in voicing their concerns rather than being pressured into accepting alternative viewpoints (Lundy 2007).

Policymakers and HEI managers may disagree with SAC members and students on the inclusion of the expression of non-academic concerns, and limits are set to stymie any anticipated student pressure on non-academic needs, as will be discussed in Section 6.4.

When it comes to views on the content of student voice, students often have various issues to communicate (see Table 6.1), both academic and non-academic. Table 6.1 below summarises the needs and issues of the students according to the interviewees' responses:

Nature of issues	Students	College management and Academic Staff	Policymakers
Academic	- Teaching methods - Infrastructure (outdated lab tools and software, old classroom furniture) - Exam timings and difficulty - Printing facilities - Assessment system (Accumulative) - Outdated curriculum - Focus on theory teaching rather than practical - Online Learning (since the pandemic started)	- Teaching methods - Repetition of taught courses - Tuition Fees (Private HEI only) - Improving student marks - Reducing curriculum content	- Academic issues in general and educational systems - Study timetables

Non-academic	• Student accommodations • Wellbeing • Volunteering • More activities and events to develop students talents • Student car park • Catering companies and food hygiene • More recreational and entertainment facilities	• Student facilities and venues for events and activities • General services • Personal family issues	• Ethical issues, harassment, and assault

Table 6.1 Student needs (Source: Interview data)

Participants were asked the following question: *What are some common issues and concerns that students typically voice?* As summarised in Table 6.1, it seems students mostly expressed their voice on matters (academic or non-academic) that are directly connected to life within HEIs. The issues mainly fall under the 'low politics' category, as explained in Section 2.3.4. These include educational facilities, student services, and other higher education system operational aspects. Overall, the interviewees, including the students, did not mention any external factors related to environmental, political, or social issues that could impact the survival of the HEI or substantially affect the community or society beyond the college (high politics). This may be due to the lack of prior exposure to similar practices, and differs from the results of Persson's (2004) who, in a survey conducted on students, HEI representatives and ministries responsible for HE to explore student participation in HE governance in Europe, found that students showed concerns about social issues as well as academic and educational content -and they had the most influence on these areas.

6.3.2 The Exercise of Student Voice

Data from interviews indicate that participants also hold varying perspectives regarding the exercise of student voice within HEIs. One policymaker states that student voice can be exercised through representation in HEIs:

> Student voice which is the student opinion is to be represented in the institution. We know that we have a big number of students in the institutions, so for each student, his voice must have value and an effect. But when we talk about the dimension of student voice in student advisory councils (SACs), this

student voice refers to the student's opinion which represents the majority (of students). [Khadija, a female MOHE policymaker]

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 5, the SAC is a formal channel established for all students at all HEIs in Oman in 2014. This policymaker sees the SAC as a representative body that conveys the voice of the students in the context of expansion in the HE population (see Chapter 7).

This SAC member agrees with the above policymaker about exercising student voice through representation:

> Student voice means that the student's views, opinions and attitudes, as well as the problems and challenges, and how can this voice be conveyed to the administration. Of course, we are here to be a link between the student and the administration. Therefore, the student voice is one of our concerns as the student advisory council at the college. [Rashid, a male student and Head of SAC, study site 1].

The above interview excerpt stresses students' views on communicating student's opinions and suggestions to the concerned authority. However, the SAC Head restricts the channel for expressing student opinions to the administration through the SAC.

A private higher education institution manager (see section 4.5.3 for inclusion of participants from private HEIs) has a contrasting perspective on how student voice can be exercised, differing from those of policymakers and public institution staff:

> Student voice (concept), through my work in higher education institutions, is for the student to have a role in communicating their opinion and the opinion of their colleagues to whoever has the decision in HEIs, and the student is a true partner in the teaching and learning and the decision-making process regarding the educational matters. [Adam, a male Dean at a private HEI]

This informant reveals that students can exercise a partnership role in expressing voice regarding academic concerns to the decision-makers within HEIs. These concerns and opinions can be about academic issues/needs, such as course and program evaluations and satisfaction with teaching and academic services. This participant, moreover, adds that through student voice, students are 'true partners' in the HEI where they are invited to participate in the decision-making process, although only on academic-related issues. The nature of this partnership resonates with Fielding's (2015) typology that points out patterns of partnership. In this typology, students are seen as joint authors, whereby they and staff decide on a joint course of

action together, but the typology does not limit the partnership to certain topics as is the case in the Omani HE context.

The participant is a Dean at a private HEI and students are a vital source of revenue, and these views on student voice can be related to the student voice as consumerism discourse, presented in Section 2.3.2. Students as consumers in international contexts have the right to give feedback on university products (Canning 2017). However, as a rentier state, the Omani situation differs. Higher education in a public university is viewed as a right of citizenship, rather than situated within the right of the consumer (see section 2.2.4):

> As for me, (through student voice) the student is given a role, a responsibility in the institution that every student has a right and a voice. This allows me to give my opinion and give suggestions about the institution. This is a very good thing. [Meera, Bachelor Business female student, study site 1]

According to this student, student voice is a legitimate right within the higher education institution (see Nasser 2003 and see section 2.2.1 for discussion on rights and responsibilities as a dimension of citizenship).

However, students show dissatisfaction if they experience a lack of response to their needs. For instance, some students left the college because the college failed to listen to their voice:

> Interviewee: We do not have a point of view. These (college management) are dominating us, we cannot continue on things they impose on us.
>
> Interviewer: Do you have examples of such experiences, maybe with you or your colleagues?
>
> Interviewee: Yes, yes. Last year I had one student who lives in the same accommodation. He used to tell me it is not reasonable that we are staying here, and these (college management) don't even give us books, we have to print all the course notes…so he said I better join the military, I don't need to be here anymore [Moosa, a male bachelor Engineering student, study site 2].

Other students expressed similar dissatisfaction in the interviews because the college had decided to cease course materials printing in an attempt to manage its resources better.

The SAC is regarded as the body that best represents student voice at HEIs. However, restricting the exercise of student voice through the SAC, which also agrees with the

HE policies, might signal its use as a containment strategy. Yet, student dissatisfaction may arise if their needs are not effectively addressed.

To institutionalise the legitimacy of student voice within HEIs, an academic participant, who is viewed as an expert in the field, insists that students need some sort of space to be able to shape their voice and construct it in different forms, similar to what happens in other international contexts:

> It all depends on the type of framework that will govern this voice and the platforms on which students can express their opinions. This case is a very educational one in the sense that if I offer the student a space to express his opinion, I should offer him some form of organisation, for example, a student union or an advisory council…Many Western universities, for example, have newspapers that express the student's voice in which students write about community issues, issues related to them in universities… many methods allow the student to learn what this voice means and how he can express it in a systematic and organised manner consistent with the law. However, if the law does not allow that, how can he (the student) discuss and negotiate and take away what makes this voice more valuable. Therefore, students should be taught this. [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI]

In addition to the formation of the groups, the above extract suggests that students can learn and exercise their voice when a chance is given. Without breaking the law, the students can be allowed a space to express their voices with community issues, as discussed in Section 5.3.1. Indeed, students can learn these skills while in the HEI as long as rules and systems permit them to do so. However, this is far from the current reality.

The student participants refer to HEI management's top-down role in constructing voice. It all depends on how students are informed about voice when they join the HE:

> I think it is all with the administration. If I, as an authority, want to listen to the students and know what they want, I should accept anything that the students propose, whether positive or negative. Am I, as a college administration for example, able to listen to the students, whatever their opinion is, whatever their problems are and regardless of how sensitive the topics they raise? [Maysaa, Bachelor Engineering female student, study site 2].

Maysaa suggests that students' ideas and opinions, regardless of their sentiments, should be listened to by the HE management. Students look for the reassurance of two things from the administration to make the voice institutionalisation process more effective: i) An assurance of space for expressing their voice, and; ii) assurance of the accurate interpretation of student voice to avoid potential adverse effects, such as the

cultivation of negative perceptions among other students regarding the act of voicing one's opinions. However, these assurances are not guaranteed, especially since there are limits placed on student voice, as discussed in the next section.

To sum up, the above discussion has explored different interviewees' conceptions of student voice and its expression. There are various, although in some respect also consistent, interpretations of the focus of the concept. For example, informants in top positions like policymakers from MOHE and HEI managers have a narrow view towards student voice and its implications, which is only purely academic and course-related student concerns. Through this narrow perspective, student voice is allowed at HEIs to maintain control of the student population; students are allowed the freedom to express voice but only on certain academic issues they face while in the college and without a need for the institution to respond to these students' needs.

On the contrary, most students, SAC and non-SAC members, hold a broader view of the focus of student voice. Students' interpretation of student voice is unrestrained to academic needs and also includes non-academic needs (e.g., recreational and financial needs), although, it does not incorporate a requirement that it will bring about change.

6.4 Limits on Student Voice

The previous sections dealt with the construction of the meaning of student voice and how it is conceived and exercised within HEIs in Oman. In this section, the discussion covers the limits on student voice, including general regulations, specific HE regulations and cultural boundaries. Then, the discussion moves on to explore the sanctions allotted for infringing these boundaries and limits and how these sanctions are put into practice at the HE and students' levels.

6.4.1 Limits by Legislation and Laws

The general legislation and bylaws dictate the next layer of boundaries. The Basic Statute of the State (The Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs 2021, p. 17) confirms that the freedom of opinion and expression, orally, written or in any form, is guaranteed within the boundaries of the law. From a legal point of view, Al Fulaiti (2015) explains that the public authorities are obliged by the Basic Statute of the State to guarantee the exercise of this right within the limits of the law. Among these limits, it is impermissible to express an opinion in speech, in writing, or by publishing in a manner

that harms the security of the state or undermines its prestige. This is perhaps expected because the state's political structure as a monarch makes practices of democracy very limited (Beblawi and Luciani 2015). Thus, student voice is governed by the boundaries set by the general laws.

Moreover, a principal guide for HEIs included in this study is the College Bylaws, which was decreed by Ministerial Decision No. 72/2004, and it fundamentally directs the overall operations and governance of these HEIs. The College Bylaws cover areas like the structure of the HEIs, admission systems, examinations and assessments and student disciplinary systems. It also states in general terms that students must refrain from certain acts. The first of these acts reads:

1. All acts or utterances that infringe upon religious beliefs or state reputation or disrupt the rules of good conduct or public decency. (The Ministry of Manpower 2004, p. 52).

It is worth noting that student voice here is a student's ability and the capacity to communicate their ideas and opinions to either cause a change or represent a difference and promote participation in various events including politics, as referred by Thomson (2011), West (2004) and McLeod (2011). Thus, according to the above Bylaws statement, students are not allowed to express voice that undermines religious beliefs as it is part of legal boundaries. There is hardly any such declaration of infringement against general religious beliefs, and a public breaching of religious beliefs is extremely unexpected in colleges and universities. This is because laws are enshrined first by society, and the bylaws and regulations take such violations very seriously.

The statement above leaves no space for such discussion and expression on religion from the students. The statement does not specify how the students might infringe on the reputation of the state; however, since Oman shares common features of paternalistic states (Ramady and Kropf 2015), the state has overall control over the executive power and the Sultan has absolute power to the extent that any "formal policy inputs from the society" can be overridden by him (Common 2011, p.217). Thus, any direct criticism against the state is usually not allowed by anybody because this is deemed to question the state's authority. These edicts combined with the educational environment shape students' understanding of societal interactions and ultimately frame student voice in a limiting way.

One member of academic staff, not from the two study sites, has related similar limits on student voice which are consistent with limits set in the College Bylaws:

> We know that educational institutions are governed by specific laws that specify what prohibitions the student should not engage with. For example, political discussions, religious discussions, criticism of the state's symbols, whether in writing or discussion, also the religious aspect. [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI].

These limits are the same as stated in Article 77 of the College Bylaws (2004). When discussions between the students themselves involve politics and religion, even if they are not directed to the institution or the state, these discussions are not allowed and would be considered sectarian or political fanatism. Thus, student voice is governed by different types of limits (e.g., legal and social).

The following quotes confirm that politics is not something that HE students would want to express their voice on publicly:

> Interviewer: ... In general, we do not want to get involved in politics, why do you think students avoid or are afraid to talk about politics?
>
> Interviewee: If we take the Omani society… our customs and traditions would not allow us to talk about politics. We leave politics for certain people. We do not interfere with it.
>
> Interviewer: Is this applicable to everyone, that they are afraid?
>
> Interviewee: Almost yes, I feel a small percentage of those who talk about politics, and when they do so, they speak secretly. [Marya, a female Diploma Business Student, study site 1].

The student explains that talk about politics can take place secretly between a small number of students. This suggests that for students to express their voice, they can find a space to share their thoughts. However, if this took place on a significant scale and authorities discovered it, this action would be considered a breach of law and would be punishable, as will be discussed in Section 6.4.3. The traditions and customs in different cultural institutions support the state to maintain power and consider talking about politics as a taboo, and not a practice in which everyone can get involved. As discussed in Section 6.2, this may also explain the common view of Omani people as 'quiet' or 'peaceful', in the sense that they are normally absent from being involved in social or political disputes (Al-Farsi 2013).

6.4.1.1 SAC's Legislation

The MOHE is the body responsible for directing the operations and functions of all HEIs in Oman, following the social, cultural, economic, and scientific aims of the state (The Ministry of Legal Affairs 2002 p. 62). In addition to cultural boundaries and the limits set on student voice by the legislation and other general policies, MOHE has established a third layer of limits specifically on the SAC and its activities. According to SACRG:

> The council shall not be involved in any political, sectarian, tribal or racial or regional issues. The council shall not practice any activity against or contrary to traditions, customs, social and religious values, or institutional regulations or systems. [The Ministry of Higher Education 2014, p.7]

The statement above does not place limits on student voice per se. Instead, banning the SAC's involvement in the activities listed in the statement (i.e. *political, sectarian)* strips it of its ability and agency to represent and participate in a range of issues that are outside the HE context. These limits are consistent with the narrow perceptions held by MOHE policymakers about the focus of student voice on academic-related issues. Such guidelines are repeatedly stressed to the SAC members, making them more aware of such limits than other students (see Chapter 3 on SAC activities).

This also may explain why students did not refer to social, environmental or political issues in their interviews. It is likely that HE policies make no space for the HE students to be involved in participation in such matters, although general policies (e.g., the Philosophy of Education in Oman) and cultural and religious practices (e.g., Shura) encourage participation in all matters of society. The same limits also apply to the various national student societies and clubs in or outside Oman. For instance, any Omani student or student organisations and clubs in international universities are prohibited from engaging in political and religious matters that might trigger sectarian conflicts (MOHE 2016).

6.4.2 Cultural Boundaries

Cultural boundaries are found to be the primary layer that frames the limits of student voice. These norms might not be officially written in the same way as government policies and legislations, but they have an equal influence on regulating different guidelines, such as student voice, in HEIs:

These laws (that govern HEIs) are written texts and related to society's norms. There are social values that society does not agree to be touched. [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI]

The data excerpt above shows that social values and norms are deemed crucial. The same view about social considerations is also held by an MOHE policymaker when asked about the boundaries of student voice:

The caveats in the institution are those general caveats that we as individuals do not talk about, do you get me? There are some caveats that as a student, is not supposed to talk about because the government has decided on them for example sectarianism…or ethical aspects. Whatever is disapproved by the society, also applies in the institution, and it is not permitted to practice it within the educational institution [Lamees, a female MOHE policymaker].

This interviewee highlights the issue of sectarianism as one of the boundaries that cannot be opened for discussion in society and HEIs. The main reason for this is that sectarianism is one of the reasons that lead to divisions in the Arab world, including Oman where people of a certain sect prioritise their allegiances to those of similar sects like in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria (AL Farsi, 2013). To avoid such divisions, Oman has set an example among Muslim countries regarding its religious and sectarian pluralism whereby Muslims of different sects (Ibadis, Shi'is and Sunnis) and other religions (Baha'is, Hindus and Christians, Jews, though in smaller numbers) have a religious presence in the country (Al-Ismaili 2018). To preserve this culture of pluralism, any discussions around sectarianism and religion are discouraged by society's norms, affecting HE policies. Also, the Basic Statute of the State bears equal rights for all citizens regarding religious opinions. It states that all citizens are equal and "there shall be no discrimination amongst them on the grounds of gender, origin, colour, language, religion, sect, domicile, or social status." (The Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs 2021, p. 15). Religious matters and beliefs are always considered sacred and can only be discussed by scholars specialising in the religious field, but not the public.

Other cultural considerations when setting limits for student voice are those that go against Islamic culture in a conservative society like Oman. For example, in the case of smoking, "the consensus concerning the Islamic ruling was that smoking is either completely prohibited or abhorrent to such a degree as to be prohibited" (World Health Organization 2000, p.5). Even though the number of HE student smokers is increasing

in Oman (Maroof et al. 2013), any demands or requests on such needs by the students are unlikely to be voiced before HEI management and they are considered out of the boundaries:

> It is more about the culture of the community…Therefore, he (the student) avoids mentioning that he is a smoker, and he wants a special smoking lounge in the college. [Yaseen, a male student and Head of Academic committee in SAC, study site 1].

This same principle is also applicable to other ethical norms (e.g., holding a mixed dancing event within HEI premises) that are considered unacceptable by society; it is not expected that students would be able to express their voice and demand on such matters. It is worth noting that not all cultural norms are written in policies or official documents as is the case with other limits, as seen in the following section.

6.4.3 Sanctions on Infringement

This section deals with the sanctions attached to the infringement of these limits and boundaries. These sanctions are based on the breach's level and severity and whether any impacts are caused. The Omani Penal Law (see The Ministry of Legal Affairs 2018) is a key law that stipulates different ranges of sanctions on various infringements. For example, the promotion of sectarian and religious fanatism that may lead to division in society would lead to imprisonment for a period between 3 and 10 years (see The Ministry of Legal Affairs 2018, Article 108). The same sanction shall be applied to those who create and organise an association, a party or an organisation that contests the state's political, economic or social principles (see The Ministry of Legal Affairs 2018, Article 116). These sanctions are aimed at anyone outside and inside the scope of the HEI.

No sanctions are mentioned in SACRG because SACs function under the HEI they belong to, so HE students need to comply with the same policies and laws of the HEI. If any student is found to breach such boundaries and limits, they are subject to sanctions, yet different from the above listed by the Oman Penal Law. On the other hand, students are subject to the same sanctions whether they are involved with SAC or not. According to Article 78 of the College Bylaws (see The Ministry of Manpower 2004), the violators face certain disciplinary measures: the lightest sanction is a verbal notification and warning that the teacher can inflict, and the toughest sanction is to dismiss the students from the college. An investigation Committee is formed by the

Dean of the college to conduct a thorough investigation of violations committed by students on campus or during participation in an external activity performed by the college. These sanctions are inflicted by a Disciplinary Committee chaired by the Dean of the HEI with the membership of three teaching staff members[34]. Indeed, the HEIs' sanctions seem laxer than those by the Penal Law. Stories of such sanctions on some individuals outside the HE are echoed within the society and people feel more afraid to talk about politics again. Students also reflect on these stories:

> interviewer: I just want to understand, why is it prohibited to talk about politics?
>
> Interviewee: I think some people talked about politics …and when they did, they talked about some people who could cause them big troubles… certain people have personal blogs where they write about their opinions and eventually, they had to seek asylum in other countries. I think these stories cause fear when people want to talk about politics. [Aida, a female Bachelor IT student, study site 2].

Stories of people who experienced different types of sanctions or had to leave the country because of their opinions against the state or specific prominent figures in the country instil fear. The state avoids opening spaces for political pluralism and political parties are banned in an attempt to ensure long-term political stability (Common 2011, p.217).

Moreover, the fear of losing the benefits that extend from the social contract (see Chapter 2) is another factor that makes students prefer to keep the peace rather than express dissenting voices.

While sanctions deter many students from breaking regulations, they do not always stop students from expressing voice. A member of SAC reported not following the HEI administration regulations and discussing an assessment issue on National Radio. The case was about a high rate of failures in some courses (sometimes, a student failed 5 courses at once). The high failure rate was due to using new assessment criteria, and students were not aware of the new marking scheme. The SAC member was among those who failed 5 courses in one semester, and voice their concerns on the National Radio. This unprecedented move indicates that the SAC member was willing to use the visibility provided by the SAC position to express critical views of the

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[34] See College Bylaws, Part 9 The student disciplinary system, Articles 78, 81, 84 p.51- 53.

HEI where the student was enrolled. This action of the SAC member influenced the HEI's decision and led to reassessing those final exams.

6.4.4 Awareness of Regulations and Sanctions

This section discusses awareness of such regulations and sanctions outlined in the previous sections. The interview data with policymakers, academic staff and HEI managers indicate that students are made aware of such regulations and limits through HEI policies and student handbooks that are made available to them when they join:

> …All of these (limits) are available in the student handbook and if the student commits any of them, he is a violator [Lamees, a female MOHE policymaker].

> …These things are documented as a law and a policy, and every student of course is aware of these matters while attending universities. [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI].

> Things are completely addressed by the SACRG. The laws and guidelines are clear in the (SAC) organisational guide. It is very clear in things that students are never supposed to come close to. [Waleed, a male College Dean, Study Site 1]

As part of the awareness procedures, students are informed, in a series of lectures during the induction week, about different college rules and regulations. These sessions may include the general academic system, administrative and student financial matters and other services available to them. Furthermore, students are handed a Student Handbook that can be retained for reference which also includes a summary of the bylaws, including the disciplinary measures for any misconduct or breach of rules and regulations.

In sum, this section of the chapter has explored how student voice is shaped by various boundaries and limits in the eyes of stakeholders. Cultural and religious factors seem to be a general boundary that not only defines student voice in Omani society but also has a strong influence on the interpretation of the agents that engage with student voice, whether they are students, HEI managers, or policymakers. Public organisations like HEIs (especially government HEIs) under a paternalistic state tend to empower the state and limit students' opportunities of any potential bottom-up challenge. Despite the presence of formal councils like the SACs in the HEIs (and the Consultative Council more broadly), previous discussions have shown that some SAC

members seem to adopt an institutional view of student voice and the limits it sought to apply to student voice.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter addresses the second research question of the thesis, which aims to understand stakeholders' perceptions of student voice in Oman and the (socio-political, -legal and -cultural) parameters that shape how voice might be exercised. The chapter has shown that most interviewees, except students, have narrow perspectives towards student voice, limiting the concept to HEI-related matters and students' academic and course-related needs. Their perspective is also evident in how they perceive the experience of student voice. They prioritize the effects of student voice on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and student satisfaction, rather than emphasise the importance of freedom of speech or the broader societal benefits it could bring. By contrast, students show a wider perspective of the meaning of student voice, hoping for greater freedom in how they express their voice. Their perspective on student voice is not oriented towards academic matters only. They envisage the potential to develop students personally as well as academically.

Students, moreover, expressed different circumstances, both academic and social, under which they want to express their voice. However, these student voice prospects are restricted by practices within HEIs. The study found that there is a misalignment between the general principles found in the main policies, which encourage student's participation in different aspects of life and student voice, and how HEIs implement these principles. Secondly, policymakers and HEI managers tend to disqualify student voice for issues other than those strictly related to their academic needs. Societal and cultural norms serve to reinforce these boundaries to student voice. This can hinder students' confidence to engage and cause passivity amongst the student population. Therefore, this study next aims to investigate whether the SAC can contribute to the enactment of student voice within HEIs in Oman.

Chapter Seven: Enactment of Student Voice by the SAC

7.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters explore the contexts and factors that informed SACs' formation in 2014 and the extent to which student voice is permitted and how it is shaped. They examine the understanding held by the study participants, as well as what relevant policy documents tell us about the meaning of student voice in the context of Oman's HEIs. The data suggest that student voice is understood as an articulation of students' needs and demands as they relate to their studies, a forum to communicate and voice these needs and bring about changes in day-to-day students' educational and social welfare within the HEI.

This chapter specifically explores the SAC's position in enacting student voice within HEIs' decision-making processes. Section 7.2 views the organisational characteristics (e.g., legal status, resources and membership) that determine SAC's autonomy and legitimacy. Section 7.3 explores the tasks performed by SACs to represent student voice. It also examines what the SAC does to act on student needs and how the SAC handles issues, compared to individual students. Section 7.4 looks at the role of the SAC when participating in the decision-making process, including setting the agenda and enacting decisions. Finally, Section 7.5 elaborates on other considerations around the SAC's enactment of student voice. The main argument is that whilst the SAC is vital in representing students within HEIs' decision-making, it faces substantial limitations that cause the SAC to have a minimal representational role and limited contribution to enacting student voice.

7.2 Organisational Characteristics of the SAC

This Section explains the organisational characteristics (legal status, resources, membership) that shape the SAC's level of autonomy and legitimacy (Klemenčič et al. 2016, see section 2.4.2). Data from the SACRG shows that all HEIs in Oman are requested to establish SACs with independent offices[35] and members from within the HEIs. However, the SAC is governed by the rules and regulations promulgated by the SACRG and the hosting HEI. With regard to the organisational structure of the SAC,

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[35] The SAC's office is headed by the president of the council and comprising the deputy head, the three Heads of SAC's main committees (academic, student services and activities and initiatives) and SAC's secretary. (The Ministry of Higher Education 2014).

the Head of the HEI holds ultimate responsibility for all functions and activities of the SAC. It is not within the SAC's authority to independently determine its political and professional agenda. When it comes to SAC's funding, Article (57) of the SACRG states:

> The council shall have an independent budget under the supervision of the council's office throughout the duration of the council's session. Its funds shall be deposited with a bank recommended by the council after obtaining the president's approval [The Ministry of Higher Education 2017, p.23]

While the above article indicates that the SAC has an independent budget, all transactions (e.g., expenditure and revenues) of the budget require the approval of the head of the HEI because the SAC depends on annual institutional grants allocated from the HEI budget. Indeed, the SAC's administrative, legal and financial systems indicate significant reliance on the HEI, hindering their autonomy (see also Klemenčič 2020b).

In terms of physical resources, the SAC should be given space and run an office to receive students' concerns. Rashid sets out the general parameters of how the SAC runs in this particular HEI:

> The student can visit the council's office and we have set a schedule (to meet students), or he contact us on social media or via the (advisory) council's email. One of the (SAC) members must be present at all times from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm. Every two hours, the shift changes. The student discusses with the existing member the problem or the thing he wants to deliver to the administration and the member raises the problem between the concerned committee. We have three committees in the council, as you know. The problem is then transferred to the concerned committee, for example to the Academic Committee, If the problem is academic, it is transferred there and discussed, then suggestions are submitted to the Head of SAC and the Head approves them (the suggestions), and then they are submitted to the administration. [Rashid, a male student and Head of SAC, study site 1].

As the SAC's Head notes, the SACs possess various resources such as an office and multiple contact channels that enable them to cater to students' needs. Having access to an SAC-designated office can enhance students' privacy and confidentiality, allowing them to express their concerns with greater comfort and security. Moreover, being allowed to use an official email address suggests that the SAC has gained formal status within the HEI.

The second aspect that can be drawn from the above interview extract is that, in comparison to the previous informal student councils, the SAC has a systematic and organised approach to dealing with students' ideas/suggestions before raising them to the administration (see section 5.2 for a discussion on previous Student Councils). This is shown in the office working times and the procedures followed from the point the SAC office receives students' requests to the moment they are conveyed to the administration.

In addition to legal status and resources, membership is an essential organizational characteristic that impacts the SAC's legitimacy and autonomy. All students have the right to participate in the voting process to choose the members who will work for the SAC voluntarily (see section 3.4.3 for details about SAC's members). According to the SACRG:

> Membership duration in the council shall be for one renewable academic year from the date of announcement of results (The Ministry of Higher Education, 2017, p.17)

Having discussed the SAC's organizational characteristics and resources, the next section discusses the SAC's position on representing student voice.

7.3 SAC's Representation of Student Voice

This section explores the nature of the SAC's representative role within the HEIs. According to interview data with student participants, the SAC predominantly conveys student voice and intermediates student interest to the HEI administration. In cases where the SAC is unable to resolve an issue, it may guide students to find the best resources to address the problem. For example, the following student reflects on how the SAC represents the student body's voice to the administration of the HEI:

> The SAC communicates (students') ideas. For example, some ideas that the students did not like in the college, such as car parking or when one of the college's entrances are closed (and the students want it open)..., the council communicates these concerns to the administration. [Qusay, a male Bachelor Engineering student, study site 2].

This interviewee discusses that the SAC becomes a recipient of their ideas/demands, through various channels (as mentioned in Section 7.3). Subsequently, the SAC approaches the administration to solve students' issues. Many students opt to utilise the SAC when communicating with the administration, as the SAC's voice holds

greater weight and is more likely to be heard and responded to than individual students. The main reason for this is that the SAC is viewed to have a legitimate position within the college, as discussed in Section 7.3.1.

In addition, the SAC represents student voice through intermediation between the student population and the HEI administration:

> There was a decision made (by the administration) that the students have to print the course materials on their own…there were a lot of problems and the students were not convinced by this new policy. The advisory council tried to talk to the administration, it tried to convince the two parties (the students and the administration), but it felt like the council was between two fires: the administration and the students. It listens to the students and the administration. [Samia, a female Bachelor of Engineering student, Study Site 2].

This student interviewee suggests that the SACs have a role in convincing students and the administration to compromise. While the SAC is meant to represent students, it also channels their requests in ways that may be acceptable to institutions (see section 7.5 for more discussion of caveats on the SAC's role), convincing either party to accept the other party's suggestion without clearly asserting its propositions in such interactions. Eventually, since the SAC has only an advising role (as stated by the SACRG) and limited influence on the decisions (see section 7.4), the final say remains with the HEI administration. The representative role of the SAC in this scenario can be reflected in the placation rung on Arnstein's (2019) ladder of citizen participation (see section 2.5). The SAC is granted minimal influence and allowed to advise the administration on students' needs, but the HEI administration retains the right to judge the acceptability of the SAC's advice.

Moreover, as noted earlier in this section, students can approach the SAC if they have concerns regarding exams or curriculum and other services and facilities within the HEI (which can be framed as 'low politics' concerns -see Table 6.1 in Section 6.3.1 for details about student needs), which the SAC would normally communicate to the HEI administration. Nonetheless, if students raise strategic concerns that are outside the SAC's scope, like those which require additional finance or topics that need approval from higher authorities, the SAC would advise the students to take their concerns to the appropriate body (e.g., the Dean's Office) (see section 2.3.4 for discussion on high and low politics). This shows that SAC members accept limits being set in the SACRG

(see Chapter 6 for a discussion on limits of student voice) and act according to the government's interests.

The primary representative role of the SAC remains limited to transferring students' concerns to the administration. It aligns with how students perceive the meaning of student voice, as discussed in Chapter 6. What is emphasised, is that the SAC, on its own, plays little role in resolving students' issues. The limited role of the SAC potentially undermines students' trust in it, given SAC's inability to influence the HEI administration and effectively address students' needs and demands. The next section reviews perceptions around SAC's efficacy.

7.3.1 The Perceptions of SAC's Efficacy

This subsection explores perceptions of SAC's efficacy. The question asked during the interview was: *what is the difference in the process of addressing an issue if raised by individual students or if raised by the SAC?* Students are asked this question to understand whether the SAC can be more effective than individual students in enacting student voice (see section 8.4.2). The vast majority of the study informants reported that SAC is more effective in addressing student issues for several reasons:

> Interviewee: Perhaps the student advisory council's word is heard more than the individual student because the advisory council is elected by the students, and like what I told you, it is representing the students, so it is maybe closer to the administration than the ordinary student.
>
> Interviewer: Can SAC's voice be heard more?
>
> Interviewee: Certainly, the voice (of SAC) is more heard, and the administration is keen to take the council into more consideration than the other students. I don't say the administration does not take their voice, but the council's voice is stronger than the individual students. [Rashid, a male student and Head of SAC, study site 1].

Members of the SAC have the privilege of access to administration, and therefore they are expected to have a higher chance of voicing students' issues. Another asset the SAC has attained is the formality in dealing with the administration when making any demands:

> If the subject is raised by the Student Advisory Council, the subject takes more formality, they (SAC members) are summoned to official meetings and so on. But if the subject is raised by other students, they will not be called to official meetings. [Adam, a male Dean in a private HEI].

> If there is a problem, the student can come to us directly, why? Because we can send a letter to the administration directly. We don't need to go to the head of the department or so, we raise it to the Dean or the Assistant Dean, and their response to the advisory board is necessary. I suppose I get a response, whether it is in an official email or a written letter in the same week. [Waseem, a male student and Deputy Head of SAC, study site 2].

The above study informants assert that when the SAC is involved in voicing students' concerns, the administration takes the subject matter more seriously. According to Waseem, it is a common practice that the SAC receives a reply from the administration promptly within a specified timeframe, e.g. one week, although no formal and specific regulations around communication timeframes have been seen at the study sites. This shows that SAC has a legitimate position to pressure the administration to respond to SAC's queries. This legitimacy is granted to the SAC because it is the only formal student-elected group in HE institutions that represents students, as stated in the SACRG. Hence, the SAC has more rights to be listened to by the administration than any other student groups within the HEIs.

Another factor that legitimises the SAC to follow up on student voice is related to the member's awareness of the systems and procedures in place:

> Interviewee: The individual students can make mistakes because they are not familiar with the steps and the processes that must be followed, unlike the members in the advisory council, who have a background and full knowledge of the laws, regulations, processes and other procedures, so they are maybe more organised than the other students.
>
> Interviewer: So, will the issue be resolved?
>
> Interviewee: Yes, the issue will be resolved correctly and positively.
>
> [Deena, a female student and Head of the Academic Committee in SAC, study site 2]

The above interview excerpt indicates that SAC members have more scope to voice students' issues than other students because they possess more knowledge and information about the rules and processes in the institution. Once SAC members are officially elected, the administration team holds a meeting with them to inform them about the rules and procedures to follow when communicating with the administration. Also, SAC members over time gain experience and knowledge of the system, allowing them to handle issues effectively. With access to these resources given by the administration, the position of SAC in HEI gains legitimacy.

The SAC also has greater reach to the administration than other students, as suggested by the following student:

> The council, of course, has authority because it is an elected parliament. It has the power to easily communicate with the people concerned, easier than the individual students. To be frank with you, once, I wanted the student allowance to be raised, but none [from the HEI] replied to me even with a letter, while when the council [SAC] spoke, there was a discussion, and they met the University Vice-Chancellor and they went to Her Excellency the Minister (of Higher Education)…I won't get consideration If I don't have the authority as the Head of the Student Advisory Council or the Head of one of the Committees (of SAC), this position has weight. [Faris, a male Diploma Business Student, study site 1].

In the interview excerpt above, the SAC's reach and access are compared to those of individual students. SACs have access not only to the lower administration but also to the higher administration, like the Vice-Chancellor and the Minister, who are normally very difficult to access. The legitimacy of the SAC makes it able to reach and be responded to sooner than individually acting students. This acceptance of the SAC seems to derive from its status as the only formally elected student body, which is legitimised by the law.

However, some students may opt to approach the administration individually, depending on the nature of the problem.

> I trust them if I am not able to solve the problem by myself... It is according to the problem I have. For example, if I have a private problem, I will normally follow it up myself. [Adham, a male Diploma Business Student, study site 1].

While giving priority to SAC to ensure their voices are heard may seem like a positive approach to student representation and coordination, it could also lead to the exclusion of voice from individual students who prefer to handle matters independently. The SAC only takes action when approached by students, and students are typically encouraged to voice their concerns first to the SAC. This reduces the individual students' scope to go directly to the administration and be heard. When the students approach the SAC for any concerns and the SAC thinks that the issue is not worth being taken to the administration, or if the SAC is unwilling to confront the administration, the individual students may not be able to take the issue further. This is because they know they will not be considered in the same way as the SAC. This is particularly true when students encounter personal issues, like receiving an incorrect

grade on an evaluation for a particular subject. Therefore, it can be argued that the privileges the SAC has may demonstrate a position to control how the student body's voice is represented. Barzilai-Nahon (2011) refers to gatekeeping as the method used to control how information is channelled through a gate or a filter. Given the HE policies and the privileges and resources afforded to SAC, it possesses 'gatekeeping rights' over student voice and controls how student voice reaches the administration (see section 8.4.1).

Having discussed that the SAC has more ability to reach the administration and make the student voice further heard, the SAC's participation in decision-making and effectiveness in triggering action is discussed in the following section.

7.4 SAC's Participation in HEI Decision-making

Discussing the SAC's participation in decision-making is crucial to understanding the extent to which the SAC can address students' demands and needs. In this section, decision-making refers to the participation of the SAC in regular meetings of HEI decision-making bodies such as University Councils or Academic Boards[36]. The section examines whether the SAC has power in the decision-making on topics directly linked to student issues and whether it exercises that power in HEIs' decision-making process. The section talks about the rights and roles of the SAC within the decision-making process, the scope for agenda-setting during decision-making processes and finally, the SAC's actual role in enacting student voice.

7.4.1 Roles and Rights within Decision-making Process

According to the SACRG, the participation of SAC in HEI's academic decision-making boards is deemed legitimate:

> The academic board of the institution (university – college – institute) shall invite the President of the SAC to attend meetings if the items on the agenda include students' welfare, services, activities and issues and whenever the academic board of the institution deems appropriate (The Ministry of Higher Education 2014, p.4).

From the above statement, the SAC is only to be involved in academic boards when invited and when the agenda includes student-related issues. If the SAC has topics outside of students' welfare and activities, these are not expected to be discussed in

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[36] See Appendix 13 for more details about the duties of the College Council in the College Bylaws.

the academic board meetings, and neither is it clear where such issues should be directed. Moreover, the SAC's attendance is deemed unnecessary when the academic board agenda deals with non-student-related issues or subjects. Thus, the SAC's participation in board meetings is not mandatory for the institution; this can interpret the need for SAC's participation. In reflecting on the power dimension and control of the agenda to avoid potential conflicts, we might draw on Lukes' (2005) second dimension of power (see section 2.3.5). The administration has agenda-setting power regarding the way student voice is managed and can be exercised, thus, curtailing the SAC's right to fully participate in HEI decision-making.

It is worth noting that the academic boards at HEIs are considered the highest authority that oversees the implementation of the operations and plans. Also, they are responsible for making all types of internal decisions related to the management and operation of the HEI as well as suggesting and proposing all administrative, financial and educational needs to the Ministry, which has the ultimate authority to make decisions:

> Interviewee: One cannot make decisions except through the College Council or the Ministry. The process must be organised for the Student Advisory Councils, the Dean, his assistants, and the heads of departments…you know how decisions are made and how the organisational structure and the terms of reference should exist. If the terms of reference do not exist, the whole process will not be organised, each one does what he wants.

> Interviewer: There have been considerations to make the Head of SAC or his deputies permanent members of the Academic board, is there anything new about this?

> Interviewee: No, not permanent, it is only once in an academic term we (the Academic board) meet the SAC, and we did meet them this term and last term.

> [Waleed, a male College Dean, study site 1]

Waleed emphasises in this excerpt that the academic board in HEIs has its limitations when it comes to decision-making, as it only has the authority to implement teaching delivery plans, forecasting the numbers of students in different departments, suggesting the HEI needs and the academic calendar, as stated in the Article 16 of the College Bylaws (Ministry of Manpower 2004). The main duty of the decision-making body at this HEI is to make suggestions to the Ministry of Manpower (the entity that governed the HEIs under inquiry). This also reflects the top-down relation in the way this HEI is governed (see section 3.4.1 for a discussion on HE Governance and

Policymaking in Oman). Given the terms of reference stated in the College Bylaws, the SAC's representation of student voice within the institution is not mandated in the College Bylaws. There is, then, a divergence in obligations stated by the SACRG, which the Ministry of Higher Education issues, and the obligations stated by the College Bylaws, which are issued by the Ministry of Manpower. Whilst the SACRG promotes the representation of student voice through the SAC, the College Bylaws does not refer to the SAC and its roles within the HEI. This presents an ambiguity on the circumstances under which the SAC should be allowed to participate in the HEI decision-making process, leaving the option to involve the SAC in Academic board meetings at the discretion of this HEI administration. For this reason, some participants noted that SAC's capability to influence student voice is constrained by the regulations:

> To what extent is there drafting of legal formulation or legislation to take into account the students' voice, meaning do students vote in the presence, for example, of their representatives, in the presence of departmental councils and colleges, or participate in voting on certain issues at the university? This also determines the impact of the student voice. [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI]

The above informant suggests that the SAC's effectiveness requires legitimisation of their presence in different levels of meetings within the HEIs such as at the College Board, Department Councils, or any other permanent college-wide committees. Moreover, coupled with their attendance is the power of decision-making through equal voting as other members of the Boards. According to Salim, participation in voting in academic boards is essential for students to have a voice in HEIs, which the SAC does not formally have at the moment. We can reflect on Lukes' (2005) first dimension of power, which emphasises evident demonstrations of power to influence organisational practices and constrain the power of others. In this situation, HEI policies and practices shape the SAC's decision-making power, rendering SAC's voice somehow without decision-making power.

7.4.3 Setting the Agenda for Decision-making

After looking at SAC's roles and rights within decision-making processes, this section explores SAC's ability to shape the agenda when participating in decision-making processes. Some HEI staff believe the SAC's involvement should be linked to a specific need or emergency. For example, there was extensive consultation between the SACs in the two study sites during the early stage of the Covid-19 Pandemic, as

suggested by most interviewees in both study sites. The consultation topics included exam durations, timetables, and marks distribution. When asked about SAC participation in decision-making in the college, the HEI staff views were:

> Interviewee: The most appropriate example of what we are in is the crisis of exams and the final assessments of students…I think the best example is the Corona crisis, they (SAC members) participated with us (college administration) positively.

> Interviewer: Isn't this participation (of SAC with the academic board) exceptional because of Covid-19?

> Interviewee: It is like that, they just participate *only* when we are genuinely in need, the participation is not to entertain the students or the college management. Participation takes place when there is a real need and in a time of crisis. [Ali, a male College Dean, study site 2].

The above discussion with this college Dean demonstrates that the SAC cannot participate when it wants to, rather, when the administration only sees a value in their participation, which suggests boundary setting for the SAC. For instance, during the Covid-19 crisis and because there were many uncertainties for the students due to HEI closures, the SAC played a significant role in disseminating information and gathering student suggestions. So, there was a real need for the SAC from both the HEI administration and students.

The other consideration towards SAC's role in agenda-setting is that it is generally perceived that the SAC is formed to represent students in HEIs but, at times, the HEI administration requests the SACs to align with the administration's perspective, as suggested below:

> Interviewee: Sometimes they (SAC members) ask for leniency, sometimes they request that the homework be made easy…

> interviewer: Is this the request of the Council itself, or is it the voice of others (students)?

> Interviewee: This has to be a culture within the advisory council. They are not supposed to convey such demands when they are approached by students, they are supposed to be on the administration's side when it comes to discipline, not with the students' side. This Council and its members must know the laws and understand them so that the student with such requests is directly rejected.

> [Waleed, a male College Dean, study site 1]

In the above excerpt, Waleed determines the type of needs or demands the SAC should accept or reject, and indicates that there should be a lack of independence on the side of the SAC in setting its own agenda. While Waleed's concerns about students' discipline might be genuine, insisting such authority and control on SAC prompts some undesired outcomes, as discussed in Section 7.5. We can look at Lukes' (2005) second dimension of power that pertains to power dynamics and agenda control (see section 2.3.5). In these circumstances, the administration controls the agenda the SAC should accept from students and limits the SAC's ability to choose what issues they represent on behalf of the students.

The SAC assisted the administration in implementing many decisions related to online learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic, which many students opposed due to the lack of network and internet infrastructure in some remote areas. The SAC took part in the consultations and negotiations and the online classes were eventually implemented. Such involvement of the SAC is particularly valued by HEIs when the issue may cause student dissent.

In relation to SAC's participation in the agenda-setting process, the MOHE policymaker informs that:

> Perhaps there is a policy that has been approved but it is expected that it may trigger the reaction of the students, and probably it would not be accepted, and the students must accept it. Therefore,   it is explained to the member of SAC, who is also a member of the academic board, the consequences and justifications for the existence of this policy and how this policy can serve the students, etc. so that they (Academic board members) have someone to represent and defend this policy before the students [Khadija, a female MOHE policymaker].

The SAC can be strategically utilised by HEIs as a means to circumvent contentious policies that would otherwise prove challenging to persuade students to comply with. According to the above interviewee, at times, the SAC may be consulted by Academic boards on controversial policies that have already been decided upon, to legitimise the decision. The SAC is used as a cover to show that such controversial policies have been discussed, negotiated, and approved by the formal student representative body. Therefore, the administration has followed the correct procedures before approving any bill, which shifts the blame from the administration and mitigates conflict with other students:

Interviewee: We know the Student Advisory Council is a non-executive body, but many students do not understand that.

Interviewer: So, what are the students' perceptions about the advisory council?

Interviewee: …Not everyone has the passion to learn about these procedures, like the ones followed by councils. In the end, they do not have this culture. The student only blames the advisory council…most of the time I see (social media) accounts in the college, there is always anger among the students, widespread anger.

Interviewer: Anger at what?

Interviewee: Anger at some of the decisions. For example, the recent decision to include the whole curriculum (in the assessment) annoyed the students. The students are studying remotely and they are not prepared for it at all. There is prevailing anger. Who do they (the students) blame? The Advisory Council.

[Yaseen, a male Diploma Business student, study site 2].

Yaseen explains that a lack of awareness and interest in the SAC's role among some students results in a general lack of clarity towards the SAC's role. Instead of directing criticism towards the administration, this is directed at the SAC. Moreover, as discussed earlier in the section, the SAC could potentially be utilised to circumvent controversial policies. In such cases, the SAC becomes a tool for blame shifting (by giving responsibility for certain unpopular decisions among students to other entities - Bartling and Fischbacher 2012) from the HEI administration for unfulfilled demands or needs that the administration has not responded to.

7.4.4 Influence over HE Decisions

This section analyses SAC's role in influencing HE decisions. The below SAC members describe how the SAC participates in HEI's decision-making:

Interviewee: There was another meeting in the middle of the semester that was with the College Board, and we (SAC Members) gathered all the matters in an organised manner and there were special files for each committee which contained the students' issues and their suggestions and opinions and this meeting was a great benefit for communicating the suggestions of the students.

Interviewer: Is this meeting to communicate suggestions or to make decisions?

Interviewee: We don't make decisions.

Interviewer: Aren't you involved in making decisions?

Interviewee: We communicate decisions (suggestions, ideas, and student concerns) but we do not know if they are taken because the authority is with the college (administration) itself. The student is not able to make any decision, his decision is not listened to. For example, in various decisions concerning the Services Committee in dealing with some issues and problems in the toilets and in the places that the student needs in the college, these decisions can be implemented…but for the academic committee, the issues are usually higher. (The SAC's) resolutions are usually rejected and are not implemented.

[Abdulhamid, a male student and Head of Services Committee in SAC, study site 1].

Interviewer: To what extent are you, as a council, involved with the college administration in making decisions?

Interviewee: It is not at a very high level, it is a simple thing, because, in the end, the administration has the right to make decisions, but we can discuss some matters between the council (SAC) and the administration, the Council (SAC) can express its opinion.

Interviewer: Does this mean you participate in sharing the opinion, but not in making the decision?

Interviewee: Possibly, in the end, making-decision is the right of the administration.

[Naila, a female student and Head of Activities and Initiation Committee in SAC, study site 2].

The above two interviews of SAC members from the two study sites describe the actual practices of the SACs at both study sites when it comes to participation in decision-making processes. They emphasise that the nature of the SAC's role is only to provide advice to the administration, but this does not necessarily have to be followed by institutions. As indicated by Abdulhamid, there are substantial efforts to collect feedback and suggestions from the students on different areas such as services, activities and academics and put them forward for discussion with the administration in a prearranged approach, in the hope that solutions or decisions are made on these issues. Nonetheless, the two SAC members' responses note that it is only "the administration's right" to make the decisions (see sections 2.5 and 7.3 for discussion on Arnstein's (2019) placation rung).

Although there might be genuine attempts to engage the SAC in the meetings of the top levels of HEI management, the SAC is only involved in low politics topics such as issues and problems in the toilets (see Table 7.1). In such cases, the SAC is shown

to have communicated students' needs, and the administration responded very quickly to these demands.

Types of issues	(a) Examples of issues resolved after SAC's influence	(b) Examples of issues proposed by the SAC but reported to be still pending	(c) Examples of issues rejected by HEI's administrations
Educational/ learning	-Allocation of student study halls -Extending library opening time during exams -creating a 'student mentor' initiative	-Demanding more practical than theoretical work (for engineering students). -content not covered in class shouldn't be included in exams -Changing exam timings	Students demand to stop online learning during Covid 19 because of insufficient network infrastructure in remote areas. Changing of IELTS entry marks requirements
Services	-Changing the food menu in the student canteen -Changing sitting arrangements in the canteen - Providing toiletries -Changing plant irrigation time because it wets students -Permits for car access into the university campus for female students	-Student Designated parking -Maintenance of University buildings	Extra student Finances/Allowance
Recreational	-Organising more student activities (i.e. sports, cultural) -Providing furniture (i.e. chairs and tables) for student events	Allocation of halls for each student activity	

Table 7.1 Examples of issues raised by students and degree of influence by the SAC (source: interview data)

When it comes to high politics, the SAC is not invited to meetings, and its ideas or suggestions are not considered (see sections 2.3.4, 6.3.1 and 7.3 for discussion of low and high politics). This reflects the distribution of responsibility and power, which allows the SAC the right to represent student voice – it has a responsibility in this regard – but curtails its power to contribute to the enactment of student voice in HEI's

decision-making process on issues that are considered of vital importance to the institution.

7.5 Other Considerations of the Role of SAC at HEIs

This section scrutinises the power resources SACs have if students' needs and voice is not fulfilled in the HEIs in Oman. Lévesque and Murray (2010) suggest that unity among its members strengthens the union's power. When union members share common goals and a sense of purpose, it enhances their ability to act in the best interest of the collective union. In the context of this study, this student holds views that suggest the SAC can use its power resources to incite students:

> Interviewer: Is there any risk posed by these councils?
>
> Interviewee: Yes, a coup in the opinion
>
> Interviewer: What do you mean by the coup in opinion, can you explain, please?
>
> Interviewee: The coup in opinion is when I see the administration does not respond to me…as a student or as the head of the council. What would I do? I would turn against them (the administration) on social media and incite students, and this is dangerous.
>
> [Yaseen, a male Diploma Business student, study site 2]

The above interviewee warns of a negative reaction if the administration gives no clear response to students' needs or demands which have been represented by the SAC. Through the mobilisation of its power resources and the sharing of common goals with the student body, the SAC can enhance the students' ability to act in the best interest of the collective student body. Social media plays an important role in this respect, as HE policies and regulations put restrictions on the SAC:

> The council may not issue any bulletins, statements, publications, notices or organise gatherings contradicting laws and regulations applicable in the Sultanate or at the institution concerned.
>
> (The Ministry of Higher Education 2014, p.4).

This article bans the SAC from activities that may disrupt the status quo within HEIs and Oman. But, as per Yaseen in the interview extract above, social media platforms could be a potential channel for such actions. Ambusaidi (2022) suggests that social media platforms, such as X (formerly known as Twitter), play a crucial role in promoting

digital activism in contexts like Oman, where traditional forms of protest and mobilisation are severely limited.

An example which illustrates the SAC using its power resources in social media took place in study site 2 when the previous SAC (the SAC group before the one I interviewed) declared their membership withdrawal as the SAC office and all its members and committees. The declaration reads:

> The Advisory Council expresses its deep regret over the measures taken by the college administration for marginalising all the authority of the Council at the level of all committees and its unwillingness for the Council to participate with the administration in matters of common interest between the two sides, which is stipulated the by the organisational Guide for the Student Advisory Councils in various matters of interest to students in the fields Academic, service and activities…and therefore, the Council would like to inform the administration that it is withdrawing from the SAC's office with all its members and committees. [A previous SAC at study site 2, 2019]

In this declaration, the SAC's members express clear contempt against the administration for disregarding the SAC's position and its assigned responsibilities as given in the SACRG. According to the declaration, some reasons for its issuance are the exclusion of the SAC from decision-making processes that affect students, as well as the denial of their presence in college board meetings. Although there were no follow-up actions in this example, the critical issue is that this declaration was publicised on the SAC's social media accounts, and therefore, it was made public to all students as well as the external community, which has the potential of mobilising students towards the administration for ignoring the students' elected members. According to Luescher (2020), when student representation in decision-making proves ineffective, students may resort to alternative methods of expressing their voice, such as student activism, which will be disruptive to teaching and learning processes within HEIs.

Also, the SAC's members' withdrawal from the SAC's office indicates that the SAC members are more audacious than the individual students (as the data revealed and as is discussed in Section 7.3.1), in expressing their views towards the administration as its members can be less afraid to announce their concerns openly given their role in the SAC. This is also evidenced in the case discussed in Section 6.4.3 when a SAC

member, for the first time, overlooked the boundaries set by the HEI and chose to air some exam assessment issues on National Radio.

In both cases and in contrast to individual students, SAC members seem less afraid of the administration's sanctions. This might have resulted from the institutional legitimacy that their SAC position provided them, their visibility and the power resources they could mobilise against sanctions, which provided them with more protection than other individual students would have. Indeed, in both scenarios, if the SAC, and also the students, are met with unresponsive administrations there is a risk of growing anger from the students. Nonetheless, other consequences may also influence the administration as seen by the following interviewee:

> Interviewee: The college administration is aware that if it does not listen or respond to students…this will reflect negatively on the administration. For example, the students can cause some problems.

> Interviewer: What is the problem they may cause if the student voice is not heard?

> Interviewee: There are many problems, for example, the students may escalate their voice to a higher authority, which is bigger than the college administration, and this is going to affect the administration. Also, there might be an act of collective absence of students or the (students') gatherings. These all affect the administration.

> [Naser, a male Student Affairs Department staff, study site 1]

Since Naser works in a student affairs department and is very close at work with students and the SAC, he describes the possible reaction of the students (the SAC and the individual students) in case the administration does not address their needs. The reactions are described to be potentially collective. While it is unclear if such reactions have happened, they can pose a threat within the HEI if not given enough attention.

Also, institutional control of the SAC prompts undesired outcomes:

> I think there should be some credibility in working for the students and not for the institution. Sometimes these councils think that they belong to the institution and that the institution's management must be satisfied with its (council's) work and that it (the SAC) is evaluated by the management of the institution, this too may be a form of misunderstanding in the council or its

members. The councils represent the students, therefore, they should seek to get support from the students and should be keen to satisfy them (students) more than the institution. [Salim, a male academic and researcher in a public HEI]

As pointed out by the study participant, an undesirable outcome is the deviation of the SAC from its intended purpose of advocating for students, instead of representing other parties. When the SAC deviates from its intended purpose, it can have two related negative consequences, which negatively affect both the SAC and the students who rely on it:

> Sometimes, institutions deal with the advisory council on the basis that we have set these rules and spent some amounts on these databases[37] and so on, and we want you (the advisory councils) to convince students to be enrolled in these programs and also react positively in the media about this service even if this service has some issues, it is a kind of indoctrination, and these are the caveats that I will always be wary of, it is abusing these councils and use them as tools to pass some matters which the student community may not fully agree with. [Khadija, a female MOHE policymaker].

The first negative impact is that the SAC's role legitimises the HEI's decisions and covers up undesired policies that may be forced on the student community, like the shift to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. In such cases, the SAC faces the challenge of balancing between what Schmitter and Streeck (1999) call the 'logic of influence' (i.e. observing HE policies and structures) and 'logic of membership' (i.e. representation of student voice), which either enacting student voice or being influenced by the HEI administrations (see section 2.4.2 for more discussion on the two logics). This sometimes leads to pressure from the administrations:

> Interviewee: I even saw that some administrations hold the students so that they (the students) do not reveal anything, as if they were threatening them.
>
> Interviewer: Do you mean, the college administration threatens student council members?!
>
> Interviewee: Exactly. They are told (by the administration): "You don't say this and instead do this, this is not going to be in your interest." It is said indirectly. What they (the administration) are doing is wrong! I mean, he (the SAC member) is expressing an opinion, he is communicating students' views and

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[37] Referring to some HEIs which made purchases to new equipment and online platforms to be formally introduced during the pandemic as a shift for online learning.

ideas. How do you prevent him from doing this thing? He should be allowed to express his opinion. Such behaviour makes the student feel afraid to speak. This is not supposed to happen!

[Waleed, a male student and Head of SAC, study site 2]

This Head of SAC unequivocally refers to incidents of influence on the SAC and its initiatives, putting them under challenging circumstances and imposing the administration's policies. On the other hand, if SAC agrees with the administration (i.e. the logic of influence) by taking on what is being dictated by the administration and rejecting student voice and the ideas they bring, the second negative impact on SAC is as described by the following student participant:

The problem is that when students' ideas are not accepted, I mean the advisory council does not accept the students' ideas, and rejects them. This could lead to tensions between the students and the advisory council. [Raouf, a male Higher Diploma Engineering student, study site 2].

The SAC standing with the administration could lead to clashes with the students' community. This also risks igniting students' activism, however, between the students (SAC members) and the student body.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter addresses the third research question, which seeks to explore perceptions on the contribution of the SAC to the enactment of student voice in HEIs decision-making in Oman. With the formation of the SAC, a formal platform is created for the students to resort to when they encounter issues that touch upon their university lives.

The interview data showed that the overarching role the SAC has towards students is to represent their needs before the HEI administration and guide the students to other day-to-day activities within the university. The SAC has benefited from its position and status in various ways. For instance, the SAC is favoured over individual students by the administration. Due to its close ties with administration, formality and members' awareness, the student body has high expectations for the SAC to address their needs and concerns over 'low politics' issues effectively. Nevertheless, the data and discussion show that privileges held by the SAC give it a level of control over how the student body's voice is represented. The SAC's primary responsibility is limited to conveying students' concerns to the administration, but their representation role is

somewhat restricted to mainly giving advice, undermining its credibility and risking losing students' trust.

There seems to be some genuine effort by the SAC to represent the student voice at all levels and in all areas of students' needs. However, the policies and practices of HEIs (e.g., the SACRG) seem to be impacting the decision-making authority of SAC by limiting its participation and voting rights in decision-making meetings, making their voice less effective in the process. Through this strategy, HEIs can ensure that the SAC's mechanisms in representing student voice have less potential to cause disruptions to the status quo.

Instead, the SACs' position is exploited in different ways, and on occasions, HEIs can strategically use SACs for blame-shifting and to pave the way for the implementation of policies that may conflict with students' interests. Consequently, this may create a loss of confidence from the students towards the SAC. Nevertheless, the SACs also provided new power resources to students, and visibility and legitimacy to their demands. The chapter thus documents how SAC leadership has begun to use media to express student voice publicly in new ways, making use of those resources and legitimacy.

Chapter Eight: Discussion

8.1 Introduction

Based on the discussion of the data generated from the interviews and policy documents and presented in Chapters 5-7, this chapter discusses the findings of my study as they relate to the overall thesis research objectives and questions outlined in Chapter 1 and the literature. In particular, the chapter discusses the following research questions:

1. What was the rationale informing the establishment of the SAC in Omani HEIs?

2. What are the stakeholders' perceptions of the meaning of student voice within Omani HEIs?

3. How does the SAC contribute to the enactment of student voice within Omani HEIs' decision-making?

This thesis investigated the perceptions held by the stakeholders[38] (i.e. HE students, SAC members, HEI administrations, HE ministry officials, academics and researchers in the field of the study, and members of the Oman Council) on the SAC's establishment and its origins, as well as how the SAC, the first formal student representative body in Omani HEIs, contributes to students' participation in decision-making at HEIs. In the discussion that follows, I argue that the SACs fulfilled a dual purpose: i) to represent students' needs and to provide a platform for their voice, ii) but also to help maintain the status quo and political stability in Oman by acting as a mechanism to limit and curtail dissenting voices (see section 8.2). As will be discussed in subsequent sections, student participation and the representation of student voice through the SAC remain far from fulfilled, being characterised by tokenistic levels of participation.

The literature review (Chapter 2) indicated that governments recognise that organised student groups can be potent political forces and carry the potential to shape and influence educational, as well as political, debates (Altbach and Klemenčič 2014). As such, extant literature (Section 2.4.2) has noted that student organisations –especially at the national level– are either totally banned under authoritarian regimes or only

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[38] See section 4.5.3 and Table 4.1 for further details about the selection of the stakeholders.

permitted in a corporatist style, whereby they are subjected to full censorship and controlled by government legislation and regulation (Klemenčič 2012). However, my analysis of the Oman case, viewed as an authoritarian state (see Chapter 3), suggests that the nature of the relationship between student organisations and the state can adopt other forms. I thus argue that the analysis reveals a different type of relationship between the state and student organisations not previously identified in the literature. The argument is that in Oman, student representative groups are not banned - as we might expect them to be based on current literature - but they are in fact, actively promoted by the state. The basis upon which this is argued is that the SAC has a dual purpose in serving the government: firstly, by representing students to help solve service and education-related issues, and; secondly, by contributing to the maintenance of the status quo by offering opportunities to express voice within legitimate avenues (i.e. the SAC), and in this way lessening the likelihood of any potential political activism that HE students might otherwise instigate (i.e. containment).

As such, what this thesis represents is a contribution to the literature on student voice, insofar as it explores the rationale for creating student representation groups, specifically in a rentier state and within an authoritarian context, where the creation of student representative groups is one strategy to deter and control student activism.

Moreover, this thesis finds that the meaning of student voice in this context departs in important ways from the definitions of student voice discussed in the literature, where it is perceived as a mechanism for change. Finally, the thesis identifies a *sui generis* justification for the involvement of students' representatives in HE decision-making that has not been discussed in the literature and proposes the inclusion of a case that is not covered by Luescher-Mamashela's (2013) seminal typology, which I label as 'the containment case'. In this case, the rationale behind students' involvement is to secure allegiance to maintain the existing state of affairs and to prevent political interference from HE students.

The rest of this chapter is organised according to the thesis research questions, as follows. First, drawing on Arnstein's model of citizen participation, as discussed in Chapter 2, Section 8.2 critically examines how the rationale for and the design of the establishment of the SAC serves the state as much as students. Section 8.3 explores

how HE policies and practices shape the meaning of student voice policies and structures and how it is perceived in the context of a rentier state. Section 8.4 looks at the nature of the SAC's participation in enacting student voice in HE decision-making. Finally, the conclusion is presented in Section 8.5.

8.2 The Rationale and the Design for SAC's Establishment

This section discusses the key findings related to the rationale for establishing the SAC and its design. The background to understand this starts with the political upheavals which Oman witnessed during the waves of the Arab Spring in 2011 – discussed in Chapters 3 and 5. These upheavals led to political changes, among them the introduction of new policies, including the establishment of the first formal student representation group, the SAC, in Oman's HE sector. The main argument of this section is that while the establishment of the SAC was presented as a response to the needs of students and to increase the representation of student voice, the SAC was also purposely devised and promoted in ways that uphold the existing state of affairs, and deter potential student unrest. The dual rationale and the design of the SAC are discussed in detail in Sections 8.2.1 and 8.2.2.

8.2.1 The Dual Rationale for Establishing the SAC.

This subsection draws a comparison between the intended outcomes of the SAC, as expressed in the policy documents and the perceptions of the study participants on the rationale for establishing it. The aim is to explore where, if at all, the two align/misalign. Arnstein's (2019) model of citizen participation, is used to identify divergences and commonalities between the SACRG and the views of study informants, as shown in Figure 8.1. The model is used as a visual representation and an explanatory tool for the presentation of the SAC in policy documents and in stakeholders' perceptions (see section 2.5).

8.2.1.1 Establishing the SAC for Student Representation

The SACRG characterises the SAC as a consultative body. This policy document outlines ten objectives that reflect the rationale behind the SAC's establishment (see section 3.4.3). To achieve these objectives, the SAC is expected to focus on the development of student services and support students by creating an environment conducive to educational and scientific activities. Moreover, the SAC was created as a resource to enhance communication channels between the student body and

leadership at HEIs. However, as stated in Article 9 of the SACRG, where the issues raised are beyond the scope of activities that the SACRG assigns to the SAC, the institution's board has decision-making authority to act on these issues, and the SAC is only consulted (see Ministry of Higher Education 2014, p.4). While these objectives show a desire to permit the SAC to have a prominent role within HEI, it is strongly emphasised that these activities should be carried out in a 'responsible manner' and via 'polite dialogue'; the importance of loyalty to and pride in the nation is reiterated throughout (Ministry of Higher Education 2014, p.7). This requires the SAC to conform to the *adapting* and *passive* citizenship typologies discussed in Chapter 2 (see Leenders and Veugelers 2009), which insist that citizens be loyal to the state, obey the rule of the law, and adhere to societal norms.

These objectives are also closely monitored by HEIs, hence the state (i.e., as discussed in Section 2.4.1), so the SAC is deterred from engagement with the student body in activities that might open contentious topics (e.g. political or sectarian). This is aligned with what Al-Farsi (2013) referred to as a containment policy, which is implemented by rentier states to secure allegiance to maintain the legitimacy of the status quo, and to encourage minimal political interference from the citizens, to deter potential rebellion (see section 2.2.4). While Al-Farsi (2013) talks about citizens in Oman in general, this thesis focuses on a specific student organisation (i.e. the SAC) as a means of containment through HE.

In examining the rationale of SAC's establishment, as suggested by the SACRG, and if read against Arnstein's model, the main purpose is consultative, as illustrated in Figure 8.1, with SAC's remit being limited to the provision of student feedback and opinions (see also Section 8.4). Consultation, moreover, takes place exclusively on service and education-related issues. Thus, the SAC allows space for student voice to be heard, but there is no guarantee that their requests are met. This shows that the SACRG's original aim does not allow more than a tokenistic level of participation. This is also reflected in the way the SAC is designed (see section 8.2.2) and how the SAC enacts student voice (see section 8.4).

Contrary to the SACRG 'consultation' perspective, interview data discussed in Chapter 5 indicates that the majority of stakeholders, although not the policymakers, believe that the main reason for the SAC's creation was to represent student voice, to solve

resource issues and to improve their university experience in terms of education and infrastructure and other services (see section 8.4). These views place the SAC on the placation rung, which is higher than the consultation rung on Arnstein's model. In this rung, participants have some degree of influence, though in SAC's case only through the advice it provides to the HEI administration. However, their participation remains within the tokenistic level (see Figure 8.1[39]) because the HE administrations retain the right to decide the legitimacy of the advice and to act or not act accordingly.

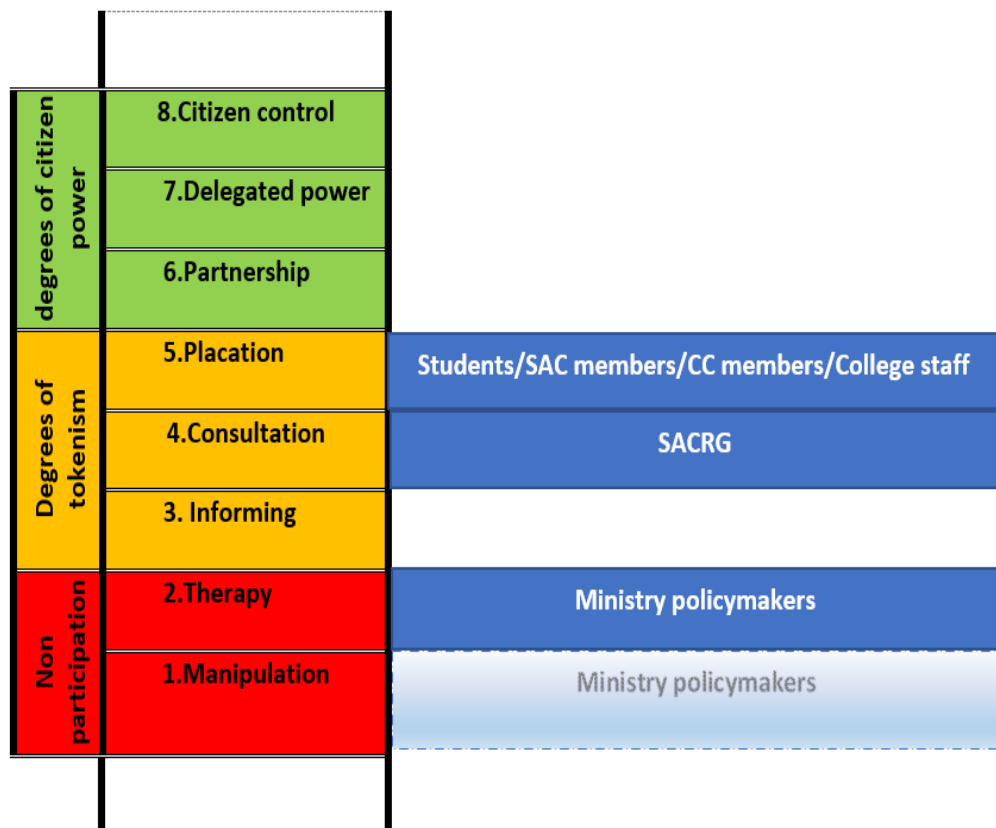| degrees of citizen power | 8.Citizen control | |
	7.Delegated power	
	6.Partnership	
Degrees of tokenism	5.Placation	Students/SAC members/CC members/College staff
	4.Consultation	SACRG
	3. Informing	
Non participation	2.Therapy	Ministry policymakers
	1.Manipulation	Ministry policymakers

Figure 8.1 Participants' views on the rationale for SAC's establishment mapped to Arnstein's model of citizen participation.

For some staff in HEI administration, the creation of the SAC based on the consultation rationale is crucial – especially after HE expansion in Oman (see Chapter 3) – to serve as a link between the expanding student body, HEIs' administrations and the Ministry of Higher Education:

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[39] The model's colours were intentionally selected. Red denotes a complete halt in participation, amber indicates some minimal signs of participation, and green represents a more participatory zone.

> The student advisory councils were established after they saw that the number of students and universities increased. There must be a council that organises the work of these student advisory councils so that there is a link between students and the Ministry of Higher Education. [Waleed, a male College Dean, study site 1]

Waleed's quote supports the narrative about the expansion of HE and is consistent with commentators such as Altbach (1991), who concludes that the expansion of the sector in Europe increased students' inclusion in academic decision-making. According to Altbach (1991, p.303), because of the rapid expansion, academic conditions deteriorated, and students demanded the end of the "rigidly hierarchical organisation of the traditional European university systems", to be exchanged with democratised decision-making and governance models pursued in the universities of countries like France, the Netherlands and Sweden. In Europe, the step towards democratisation in HE has recognised students and their representative bodies as major constituencies and participants in HE governance (Persson 2004). But data in Chapter 5 suggest that the establishment of the SAC was also a result of political protest (also see section 3.2.2).

Interviews with SAC members also reinforced the view that the establishment of the SAC is vital because of the role it can play in light of the expansion of higher education. Before the establishment of these councils, there did not exist a formal representative body for HE students in Oman or channels through which students could voice their concerns and have their complaints heard. The SAC's establishment was a necessary initiative, introduced to support the increasingly large student body and their communication with HEIs administration:

> The reason (for SAC's establishment) is that the institution has 5,000 students. If we say that every student has a problem, do 5,000 students go [to the administration]? For example, let us say that each student has 10 minutes with the administration for 5,000 problems. How much time do we need for each student? Things are the same, so the best thing is to establish a student advisory council. [Waleed, a male student and Head of SAC, study site 2].

As interview findings in Chapter 5 and Section 7.3 showed, SACs are functional for HEIs in that they are tasks with synthesising the needs of students who come to the HEIs' administration with different interests and ideas:

I mean, every student differs in their way of thinking, everyone gives you his opinion, but when opinions are gathered, you can choose the appropriate opinion for a specific thing. [Yahya, a male student and SAC Deputy Head, study site 2].

This intermediary role between HEIs' administration and students is typical of the role of other student representative groups, as suggested by Klemenčič (2012) and Klemenčič et al. (2016).

In international contexts, the need for educational improvements based on student voice and feedback is frequently associated with consumerist discourses (see section 2.3.2). The Omani situation, as a rentier state, differs. Higher education is viewed as a citizenship right and a public good and provision is free in public HEIs for all student citizens; books are also free, and students receive a monthly allowance (Al-Lamki 2006). As discussed in Chapter 2, while students enjoy these benefits as citizens, they are banned from participating in activities that conflict with the state's orientation. For example, their rights to participate or interfere in political debates are prohibited at HEIs (see Chapter 6). Therefore, in serving the student's needs, the work of the SAC is restricted to service provision, and the body is bereft of any political power. The SAC is expected to abide by the rules of the HEI, as reflected in the placation rung shown in Figure 8.1.

The data showed that, indeed, students, SAC members, and HEI staff placed the rationale behind the SAC's creation on the placation rung. They perceive that while the SAC is empowered to advise the administration, the right to act – or not - upon the advice of the SAC is retained by the HEI administration (see Figure 8.1). Interviewees, moreover, reported that SAC members represent the students on their educational and facility-related needs before the HEI administration[40]. None of the interviewees referred to matters of power delegation and control (which is at the highest level in Arnstein's model) with the SAC.

There is, then, a subtle difference between how the SACRG, on the one hand, and the students, SAC members, and HEI staff, on the other, understand the rationale for establishing the SAC:

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[40] See also Section 8.4 for the issues which the SAC can enact student voice on.

The strongest reason (for establishing the SAC) is to convey student voice, it is a right for the students to participate and share their opinions, I think it is the strongest reason to convey student voice and improve the educational process. [Sumaya, a female H. Diploma IT student, study site 2].

The student quoted here strongly believes that the SAC's remit is to allow students to exercise their right to participate and to communicate their ideas, complaints and advice on educational issues. However, the view of the right to be heard is confined to the improvement of the educational process (see section 8.3). This illustrates a wider view among study participants that the SAC was established as a group to represent students and to serve their more immediate and practical academic and study needs.

By contrast, findings from Chapter 5 show that the establishment of the SAC, as viewed by policymakers, can be placed on the second rung of Arnstein's (2019) model, i.e. therapy (see Figure 8.1). On this rung, there is an assumption that students will be enabled to participate, and the SAC will represent their interests; in essence, this right gives students a representative voice, but the SAC's intermediatory role serves the state's interests. Confining its remit narrowly means that it is able to mitigate the possibility of students' engagement with political issues or external propaganda. Hence, the SAC is formed in a way that restricts its participatory power and is monitored so that it does not exceed its mandate (see section 8.2.1.2).

While the above discussion shows that the rationale for the establishment of SACs was a response to the imperative to better meet students' needs by enabling them to discuss educational resources and facilities, the next section discusses a further rationale for the establishment of the SAC associated with the maintenance of the status quo.

8.2.1.2 Establishing the SAC to Maintain the Status Quo

As highlighted in Chapters 5 and 7, the SAC was purposely created to maintain the status quo at HEIs, and socially, and deter potential student unrest. The SAC uses recognised channels to articulate student voice e.g. attending College Board meetings and writing formal letters to college officials. However, given the limited range of topics the SAC can discuss, and the checks placed on its participatory rights in board

meetings (see section 8.4), it is clear that the decision-making power remains with the HEI administration.

The SAC establishment did not only have a functional origin, but also a symbolic one. SAC's establishment came as a political concession and a strategy to avoid unsettling the status quo from the possibility of potential disruption instigated by HE students, who comprise the largest segment of Omani society -see Chapter 3. This is evidenced in the way the SAC is designed, as will be discussed in the following section, and the roles and tasks as assigned to it by the SACRG.

According to Klemenčič (2014), student protests have resulted in significant consolidation of student representation within universities. Amid the political upheavals in Oman following the Arab Spring of 2011 (see Chapter 3), the state focused on developing mitigating strategies to alleviate emergent regional tensions and conflicts before they escalated, as had happened in some countries in the MENA region. The Omani State sought to create the SAC with formal, rigid guidelines as a platform within the HEIs, that would reduce the possibility of political propaganda influencing students and preventing the recruitment by extremist militant groups such as ISIS, as discussed in Section 5.3. The state's concern was that if the extremist ideologies of such terrorist groups took root amongst the Omani youth, there would be adverse consequences for national stability. Thus, instead of ignoring or banning students' demands for the establishment of student unions, the government pragmatically allowed a form of student representation that could be aligned with the state's needs and goals. This concession to establish the SAC can be examined in the context of previous demands during the Arab Spring: economically, increasing minimum wages; politically, dismissing one-third of the cabinet and expanding the power of the Oman Council; and, educationally, opening a new public university and increasing access to HE (see Chapter 3).

Other elements suggest that the rationale for the SAC's establishment is situated by the policymakers in the lowest rung of the model, i.e. manipulation (see Figure 8.1). This can be found in the way the SAC is deployed as evidence that HE students are autonomously represented by a student group but, in its operations, lacks competence and autonomy (as will be discussed in Subsection 8.2.2). In reflecting on power relationships within this context, we might draw parallels with Lukes' (2005) third

dimension of power and the manipulation of subjective interests: student perceptions – about how they participate and might be represented – are shaped to view the SAC as a mechanism that contributes to the legitimisation of the existing situation, and in doing so prevent potential conflicts (see sections 2.4 and 2.8). At the HEIs' level there is evidence of similar dynamics, as the SAC can be used as an instrument for the legitimation of unpopular institutional policies and regulations, as discussed in the next section (see also Sections 7.4 and 8.4).

In comparison to the rationale presented by policymakers, who place the SAC in the lower rungs (therapy and manipulation), the previous discussion showed that HEI staff perceive the rationale for the SAC establishment on the placation rung. This difference can be attributed to the difference between the intention and enactment of policies[41] partly derived from the lack of involvement of HEI staff and students in the development stages of the SAC. As stated by one HEI staff:

> These advisory councils came as a decree from the General Directorate which said [to the HEIs], "you must apply these advisory councils." The vision is not clear because they (students and HEI staff) did not participate in its making, decisions, or elements. [Jamal, a male Student Affairs Department staff, study site 2].

The interviewee reported that during the creation of the SAC, staff at this particular study site were not involved or consulted, which indicates the low level of discussion about the mandate of the SAC between policymakers and the HE sector (see section 8.3.1 for discussion on policy intention and enactment).

Currently, the HEIs under study are governed by their own set of bylaws. However, the functions of the SAC, which are listed in the SACRG issued by the Ministry of Higher Education, are not mentioned explicitly in the HEI's bylaws. This may create a misunderstanding regarding when and how the SAC can participate in addressing emergent issues, especially if the HEI's bylaws does not make it clear that the SAC should be consulted in such situations.

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[41] See (Ball 2000) who discusses the misalignment of policy and practice i.e. policy enactment, and argues that that policy often has unintended results and leaves much room for interpretation.

After looking at the rationale behind the establishment of the SAC, the next section discusses in more detail how the design of the SAC supports upholding the current state of affairs.

8.2.2 The Design of the SAC

This section discusses how the SAC's design supports the status quo and examines the degree of consistency between the SAC design and the stated rationales behind their creation, as discussed in the previous section. The analysis covers four key areas, which emerged from the interviews and document analysis: a) areas of competence, b) institutional representation, c) resources and d) collaboration with other organisations.

Previous literature argues that under authoritarian regimes, student organisations are banned or allowed to operate in a corporatist style (Klemenčič 2014). However, this thesis argues that Oman presents a different case, as the creation of the SAC was promoted to serve the state's interest in maintaining the status quo and quell potential protests that can be triggered within the HEIs in search of political stability. Luescher-Mamashela (2013) argues that such a structure gives student representation groups an advisory role rather than one of decision-making. Under its consultation and advisory roles, the SAC has rights only to observe and comment during the decision-making process and is denied any voting rights (see Klemenčič 2012 and see also section 8.4). Further, this role is limited to general student services and teaching issues. The SAC is also constructed to have a representative role and only on an *ad hoc* basis, when the need arises.

A further point of relevance is the status of the SAC as a council. A review of the literature in Chapter 3 and findings in Chapter 5 suggest that HE students have articulated demands to establish student unions in Oman since the 1990s. The findings reveal that the decision was deliberately taken to create a council rather than a union because some ministry officials associated student unions with broader potentially destabilising politics (see Chapter 5). Comparing the two, Klemenčič (2012) maintains that a union-type student representation group entails a legally independent entity, whereas the council-type student group integrates student representation and keeps it dependent on the institutional governance structure. This latter model ensures that the SAC remains under the full control and supervision of the HEI and by

extension, the state. Assigning the SAC the status of a council rather than that of a union hinders its ability to advance to a higher level of participation.

The SAC is a formal entity operating under the close supervision and monitoring of the HEI administration and the state. This restricts the freedom of student representative groups, which before the establishment of the SAC, worked independently and without formal supervision from the state, which is regarded as conducive to activism (Klemenčič 2014). This design means that the SAC does not have the ability to participate as an independent body even within the HEI context.

The second area of design is related to the SAC's institutional representation. The SAC was established as a platform for student participation in HE governance. When it is invited to do so, the SAC offers advice and acts in a consultative capacity on students' concerns and needs. However, university administration often successfully manages to persuade the SAC to endorse its policies. Theoretically then, the SAC participates in meetings and the outcomes of those meetings are deemed valid (see section 8.4), but the HE administration exerts power in ways that secure the SAC's acquiescence (see Lukes' discussion of power in Chapter 2). While the SAC is expected to represent the students' ideas and interests, they are also influenced by the administration's ideas. This, together with SAC's lack of voting power, makes their participation in university processes symbolic, and a mechanism for the legitimisation of HEIs' decisions.

The third design feature that acts as a mechanism of control of the SAC is the strict limit on the topics the SAC can address (i.e., low politics, as will be discussed in Section 8.4) and the limitations of the possibilities for networking and collaboration with other national and international organisations. As data from the policy document and interviews in Chapter 5 show, SACs are encouraged to prioritise activities that focus on social aspects and the welfare of society (i.e. joining associations for the disabled, volunteering to support charities) and are banned from activities with a more political orientation. Moreover, strict guidelines ban the SAC's international collaboration without prior approval, as noted in point 3. The SACRG states:

> The council shall not coordinate or cooperate in any way with counterparts (authorities or institutions) abroad before obtaining written approval from the council's committee. (The Ministry of Higher Education 2014, p. 7).

This limitation arguably challenges the SAC's external legitimacy in the eyes of other HE stakeholders, and its autonomy. Therefore, under the current outlook, the SAC is characterised by limited organisational characteristics, which impact the legitimacy and autonomy of the student representative group (Klemenčič 2020c) (see Chapter 2).

Fourth, the SAC is designed in ways that prevent financial and administrative autonomy, as it is dependent on HEIs for its resources (i.e. monetary, human, administrative and logistical). Interview data with SAC members indicate that SACs are entitled to modest institutional funds and resources to achieve their goals, and the SACRG confirms that SAC's legal status is integrated into the governing structure of individual universities. The SACRG decrees that "a council shall be established at the institution's location" (The Ministry of Higher Education 2014, p. 2). This decree declares the internal legitimacy of the SAC to be recognised by the students as a formal student-representative body that can effectively foster and represent student interests (Klemenčič et al. 2016). Nevertheless, it remains wholly dependent on the HEI management for funding, which is restricted at the discretion of the HEI administration. According to Klemenčič (2012), in cases of low autonomy, as in this case, there is a high possibility that student representation groups are controlled by the HEI, and it becomes easier for HEI administrations to weaken student voice (Klemenčič et al. 2016). SACs' dependence on HEI's resources limits their ability to run activities and impacts its legitimacy among the student body. In addition to limiting the SAC's financial autonomy, the above ministry article places restrictions on the SAC's autonomy to function outside Oman. The SAC is thus placed in a position where it receives funds and resources from HEIs but is controlled in terms of what activities it can undertake, with these displaying power in overt ways to shape organisational characterises and practices and limit SACs' power (see Lukes 2005).

To summarise, the establishment of the SAC and its operational framework follows the demands of a rentier state context which, through the social contract, detaches students from participation in contentious activities (see section 2.2.4). Through the basic terms of the contract, the students' and the SAC's rights to political participation and external legitimacy are controlled, while higher education remains free, and the student body and the SAC receive monetary subsidies. The social contract is implemented in the HE sector as a containment policy to secure allegiance and

minimise students and the SAC's interventions in politics (see Al-Farsi 2013 in Chapter 2). Students are given a tokenistic degree of participation (i.e. consultation and placation), as discussed in Section 8.2.1.1 (see also Section 8.4). They are allowed participation and given voice, but their "participation is restricted to these levels, there is no follow through, no 'muscle', hence no assurance of changing the status quo" (Arnstein 2019, p.25).

Thus, the design of the SAC is consistent with the two rationales (representation and containment) for the establishment of the SAC as set by the policy document and interviewees. The first rationale for the establishment of the SAC is the representation of student voice in HEI's decision-making to improve the student experience. Nonetheless, given the nature of the SAC's design (its roles, areas of competence and lack of autonomy), it can be argued that upholding the current conditions at HEIs and at the national level provided a stronger rationale for SAC's establishment. The creation of student representative groups in rentier state contexts can be used as a strategy to deter student activism, by institutionalising the management and control of dissent. To provide further evidence of the main argument, the next section discusses how perceptions around the meaning of student voice in the context of a rentier state are shaped in such a manner that encourages acceptance of the status quo.

8.3 The Meaning of Student Voice in a Rentier State Context

The SAC's rationale and design served specific purposes. This section addresses the thesis' second research question, on the meaning of student voice within Omani HEIs (see Chapters 2 and 3). It adds to the discussion in Section 8.2 by arguing that the meaning of student voice has also been shaped to maintain the existing state of affairs in the context of Oman. The section also argues that the perceptions held by the study participants depart in important ways from definitions of the student voice that are prevalent in the literature (see Chapter 2 and, for example, McLeod 2011 and Cook-Sather 2006).

Student voice can entail various meanings and activities through which students are given the right to express, formally and informally, their opinions and perspectives (Havlicek et al. 2016; Canning 2017). As noted in Chapter 2, Taylor and Robison (2009) assert that student voice focuses on promoting norms for students, to enable more opportunities for them to express their views. The extant literature discusses a

wide range of activities in which students can be involved and express their voice in higher education (Freeman 2014; Seale 2016; Canning 2017; Klemenčič 2018; Kennedy and Pek 2023). Examples of such activities can include completing feedback surveys, raising complaints about services, and representing and participating in institutions' decision-making and protesting to bring about improvements (Freeman 2014; Canning 2017).

Although the definitions, practices, and activities of student voice may vary, they share a common belief in the significance of the change and influence that student voice can bring about (e.g. Cook-Sather 2006; McLeod 2011 and see Chapter 2). However, this study finds that in the Omani SAC experience, student voice has little real influence (see section 8.2). The next subsection explores how the meaning of student voice is shaped by the Omani context, policies and structures.

8.3.1 Shaping the Meaning and Content of Student Voice

This subsection explores the various elements that shape the meaning of student voice in Oman and how they contribute to the preservation of political stability in the country. Specifically, it examines the impact of the educational philosophy in Oman and the gap between policy and practice on student voice (see Chapter 6). The meaning of student voice is shaped within Omani HE through different policies, practices and processes as well as by the socio-political and cultural norms of a rentier state.

 As outlined in Chapter 6, policy documents such as the Philosophy of Education in Oman[42], stress the importance of developing social and political participation and constructive approaches to expressing ideas among students (The Education Council 2017). However, data from interviews and policies, presented in Section 6.2, suggest that there is a misalignment between what the policy proposes, the structures for their implementation, and what is enacted. The educational philosophy and system in Oman are criticised by interviewees who are in the educational field as having a negative impact on the ability of students to learn how to express voice. Student voice receives minimal attention within educational institutions, as evidenced by the limited opportunities for expression in classrooms, which are mostly dominated by teacher-led instruction. This results in constraining student voice and the reinforcement of

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[42] See more details about this document in Chapters 4 and 6.

teacher authority in the classroom. Similarly, Al Kharousi and Atweh (2012) discuss how students in Omani schools have few opportunities for interaction and expression of their own opinions (see section 6.2.1). Although there are spaces to express student voice (i.e. school student councils), they are often viewed as "practically useless" and receive only tokenistic support (Al Kharousi and Atweh 2012, p.267). This practice leaves little opportunity for developing student voice and communication skills in the classroom. Hence, students learn that their duty (as citizens) is primarily to obey the rules set by the authority (see Al Mahrouqi 2017 in Section 2.2) and their rights (as citizens) to participate in public affairs and express an opinion is kept limited. This shapes a non-threatening student voice (see Al-Farsi 2013 and see section 6.2.3).

The gap between policies and their enactment is attributed to the lack of clarity in the guidelines for the HEIs. Relevant policies, such as the Philosophy of Education in Oman and the SACRG, lack clear guidelines on how students can build 'voice' skills in schools and HEIs. Policy often has unintended results and leaves much room for interpretation, but there is a conflict between policy texts (Ball 2000), as the Philosophy of Education in Oman and the SACRG differ in how student voice is manifested. The former policy reinforces discourses around "the right of individuals to political and societal participation" which comes as part of the education of human rights and duties (The Education Council 2017, p. 22). This conflicts with the latter policy which clearly and strongly limits the practices of student participation to academic and educational issues, as discussed in Chapter 6. Such conflict between policies creates confusion in understanding and actions pertaining to student voice in HEIs and uncertainties around how HEIs could effectively enact student voice, keeping the meaning and practice of voice underdeveloped and constrained.

In addition, the policies and practices in HEIs' context make little explicit reference to student voice, and where and how it is heard and treated beyond the SAC -an aspect that is discussed further in the following section. Robinson and Taylor (2012) suggest that student voice lacks legitimacy in this type of scenario and can make little impact.

As discussed in Chapter 6, whilst the Educational Philosophy in Oman – as a principal policy – reinforces the legal elements mentioned in UN Article 12, which grants children and youth the right to express themselves, the practice is misaligned with these considerations. According to Tonon (2012) and Horgan et al. (2017), voice in

the context of UN Article 12 refers to participation in decision-making and having the right to express their views. Hence, as noted by McLeod (2011), the emphasis on student rights appears to be advocacy for the right to have their voice heard and to have a say in decision-making. While the HE policy acknowledges the UN Article 12, the meaning of voice as a right is restricted in Oman to no more than a transactional voice directed to limited ' low politics' issues – as opposed to a voice seeking the right to be heard on 'high politics'. This understanding of voice departs from enabling students to express their values and participate in discussions around "low and high politics"[43], including social and political matters. Interviews with policymakers reveal their belief that the student voice should be confined to 'low politics' issues and only within the HE context. Deviations from this may disrupt the status quo and are seen as having potentially negative consequences for society. The meaning of student voice in Oman is shaped by the state, resulting in limitations on the exercise of students' rights and an emphasis on their responsibility to adhere to the rules set forth by the state (see section 2.2 and Almaamari 2015).

The situation in Oman can be contrasted with other national contexts. For example, within the UK, the focus on student voice is becoming more transactional and service-orientated. Unlike the Omani context, however, there are HE avenues where radical voices may be expressed. Seale (2016, p. 212) reviews examples of a range of student voice activities by UK student unions, "involving students in the curriculum (re)design; obtaining students' evaluations of their learning experiences and establishing student representation on decision-making bodies".

In addition, in general, the primary objective in the UK is to bring change for students. However, Brooks et al. (2015) found that the nature of the voice of these unions has also changed over recent years. In their UK-wide survey of HEIs and interviews with student union staff and officers and senior managers from 10 case study institutions, almost a third of the survey respondents perceived that student unions are now primarily focused on serving representational roles and delivering services and events for the student body. Brooks et al. (2015, p.176) contend that their findings support claims of the domestication of student voice (see Klemenčič et al. 2016), as "students' union officers inevitably foreground issues that affect the day-to-day lives of students

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[43] See Chapters 2 and 7 for more details about "low and high politics" issues.

rather than broader political or social concerns that may be more aligned with an 'activist' agenda." But these findings cannot be generalised to all student unions (Brooks et al. 2015) because the alternative discourse of student voice which might "include political representation and deeper forms of engagement than merely providing feedback data" is still promoted by the National Union of Students (NUS) (Young and Jerome 2020, p.692). Indeed, the student voice in the UK context can encompass broader issues, for instance, student campaigns to recover fees because of industrial action, which is also supported by the NUS. This contrasts with the situation in Oman, where the SAC cannot be involved in advocacy around such matters on students' behalf (see sections 7.5 and 8.4).

In addition to shaping student voice through HE policies, I argue that the rentier state context plays a crucial role in shaping the understanding of student voice. A social contract where citizen voice and participation in sensitive (i.e. political) matters are often waived in exchange for benefits shapes citizen voice (Al-Farsi 2013 and see Chapter 2). Similarly, and as Herb and Lynch (2019) suggest, HE students in the rentier state receive free education and other generous benefits in exchange for their quiescence on political and social issues. The introduction of the SAC and the provision of a platform through which student voice may be heard represents another specific strategy to shape the meaning of student voice, as discussed in Section 8.3.

Bragg (2007) contends that ideas around student voice are governed by explicit and implicit rules that decide what topics can and cannot be discussed. As noted in Chapter 6, there are different cultural and legislative limitations placed on student voice (e.g. discussing political and sectarian/religious topics or criticising state symbols), and infringements of these may lead to the imposition of sanctions. The policy and legal documents (i.e., the SACRG and the College Bylaws) discussed in Chapter 6 specify the sanctions that may be applied to those who breach these restrictions. In the most severe cases, sanctions result in students being expelled from the institution (see Chapter 6).

In terms of Arnstein's (2019) model of citizen participation, it can be concluded that the meaning of student voice is being monitored and restrained by HE policies and structures, keeping student voice persistently at the bottom of the participation ladder. Therefore, the impact of the social contract of the rentier state and its cultural and

legislative boundaries stimulate the political acquiescence of HE students, to maintain political stability within the HEIs and in society, as is further discussed in the following section (see section 8.3.2).

The above subsection has explored how the meaning of student voice is shaped within HEIs in Oman. It discussed how the various educational and cultural policies and practices, within the rentier context of Oman in general and the HEIs context in particular, play a central role in shaping the meaning of student voice. What is evident is that voice is shaped in ways that aim to bring about practical improvements in higher education but also to deter potential unrest, such as engaging in riots and vandalism or voicing discontent. This discussion adds an understanding of the meaning of student voice specific to the rentier state context of Oman, and the mechanisms by which that is achieved.

8.3.2 Acceptance of the Official Meaning of Student Voice

This section explores the extent to which the perceptions of student voice presented in policy documents have been accepted by stakeholders. Chapter 6 discusses how different types of participants perceived the meaning of student voice differently. Policymakers, HEI staff and a State Council member tended to hold a restraining view of the meaning of student voice. They perceive voice to mean giving students the right to express their voice, but also perceive this right to be conditional (see Chapter 7). More specifically, for them student voice is permissible so long as it addresses educational and student-related needs and basic services. It is also to be controlled by certain conditions, such as consciousness, credibility and responsibility, or avoiding risk affecting the internal (i.e. institutional) as well as the external (i.e. society) communities (see section 6.3).

In contrast, interview data derived from students (both SAC and non-SAC members) discussed in Chapter 6 suggest a belief that student voice is an unconditional right, that it encompasses wider agendas about the institution and HE, and that it is free from any control. Commenting on such a view, Shier (2010) suggests that freeing student voice from restraints opens up the potential for a more effective voice on a range of topics. Indeed, students perceive the meaning of student voice to be wide-ranging, touching on everything that concerns them in college rather than being limited to academic or course-related matters. Their perceptions of student voice show that

students also aspire to gain more control over and the capacity to effect a change in the areas that most relate to their university experience, education and student services.

However, perhaps surprisingly, some students seem to accept the view put forward in HE policy documents, instead of moving up the controlling level in Arnstein's ladder. Interview data in Section 6.3.1 show that a SAC member argues that students should not interfere with the HEI authority and that student voice applies only to matters that directly concern the students, such as online learning facilities, student recreational centres and catering services. This practice of the SAC member is inconsistent with views on the meaning of student voice reported previously in the section. This demonstrates clearly that some students (especially SAC members as interview data revealed) show more adherence and alignment to the views put forward by the HE policy which states that the SAC can only "attend meetings if the items on the agenda include students' welfare, services, activities and issues" (The Ministry of Higher Education, 2014, p.4). The shaping of student voice in this manner relates to the 'adapting' citizenship which is common in the Arab world (see section 2.2.4). The student voice is nurtured to accept the views of the state, undermining the importance of critical thinking skills (Westheimer and Kahne 2004).

Furthermore, the SAC advises that students may independently take their cases to the HEI administration if the case is beyond the SAC's scope, for instance, in cases where finance applications require approval from higher authorities (see section 7.2). As one student explained,

> If the case can be resolved or discussed, they (SAC) will take it without hesitation, but if they have nothing to do with the case, they advise you to go to the person or a place higher than them or the person concerned. [Fatma, a female Bachelor of Engineering student, study site 1].

According to this student, the SAC can provide only limited support to resolve issues beyond their limited remit, and limited representation service is provided. The SAC's perception of what student voice entails is often limited, which is linked to a lack of agentic opportunities which "emerge for the students from the external environment" in the form of policies, structures and processes (Klemenčič forthcoming, p.8). These agentic opportunities impact how the SAC can enact student voice, as discussed further in Section 8.4.

Other students also reported minimal influence from the exercise of student voice through SACs:

> Interviewer: What do you know about the aims of establishing the SAC?
>
> Interviewee: ...among the aims is to fulfil the right of the students which is the student voice.
>
> Interviewer: To what extent is this aim fulfilled by the SAC?
>
> Interviewee: I don't want to give it a high degree, because not everything that is said by the SAC is implemented, there are college laws and regulations that should be followed…and it takes time to solve the student problems.
>
> Interviewer: But isn't the SAC established only to communicate the student voice?
>
> Interviewee: It is not enough for the SAC to communicate student voice and then become silent about it. What is the impact of the student voice and what are the results of this voice?
>
> [Marya, a female Diploma Business Student, study site 1].

In this context, the data reveals that the SAC can exercise student voice in the Omani HE context but has limited influence apart from changes to 'low politics' within the HEIs (see section 8.4). This finding highlights a critical difference compared to the understanding of student voice within extant literature, which emphasises the importance of yielding to change -as pointed out earlier in this chapter (See Cook-Sather 2006; McLeod 2011; Klemenčič 2015). Thus, in Oman's HEI context, the concept of student voice is confined to certain aspects concerning students' educational and service requirements, and has an insignificant influence on the areas in question.

To conclude, this section associates the creation of SACs with the maintenance of the status quo through the shaping of the meaning of student voice held by stakeholders, especially the students (see Lukes' 2005 third power dimension). However, differences in the understanding of voice between stakeholders were also evident: policymakers and HEI staff tend to hold a controlling and restraining view of student voice whereas students associate voice rights with gaining more control and the ability to make a change, at least in some of the areas that concern their education. Different HE policies and processes nevertheless aim to make students accept that voice should only encompass "low politics". This argument is linked to the previous sections' discussions, where it was argued that the establishment of the SAC and the dynamics

of student voice support the maintenance of the current conditions in Oman, and tame potential student political activism. The findings in this section contribute to the extant literature by offering a unique understanding of the dynamics of student voice in Oman, a rentier state. The next section explores the dynamics of the enactment of student voice using the SAC as the lens.

8.4 The Enactment of Student Voice Within HEIs' Decision-making

This section addresses the third research question of the study, which investigates the enactment of student voice within HEIs' decision-making processes. The section argues that while the SACs participate in HEIs' decision-making to represent student voice, their power is limited by existing HE policies and practices. Thus, the current mechanisms of SAC's participation, in practice, mainly support the existing state of affairs.

This analysis offers an original account of HE student participation and representation in institutional decision-making in the rentier state context of Oman. In addition, it adds an extra case to Luescher-Mamashela's (2013) seminal typology (i.e. the politically-realist, the consumerist, the communitarian and the democratic cases) on the rationale for involving student representation groups in HE decision-making. The involvement of the SAC in HEIs' decision-making in Oman is for a 'containment purpose' to curb potential unrest so that events similar to the 2011 unrest can be prevented (see section 8.4.3 and Chapters 3 and 5).

Chapter 2 shows that student representation in institutions' decision-making is one common activity through which HE students express their voice (Seale 2016; Canning 2017; Klemenčič 2018). Little et al. (2009, p.16) report that it is becoming "near universal" at institutions and HEI's wide committees, especially after the student protests in the 1960s and early 1970s resulted in "the consolidation of student representation within university decision-making" (Klemenčič 2014, p.397). Representation is arguably one of the most potent ways HE students impact HE systems (Klemenčič forthcoming).

Klemenčič and Park (2018) identify two conditions for student representation in HE systems. The first condition is the existence of a formal, democratic and independent student representative group and the second is related to the institutionalisation of formal channels to represent student voice within HE governance. These two

conditions are theoretically fulfilled in Oman through the formal establishment of SAC at all HEIs (as decreed by the SACRG) and the communication channels used by the SAC to intermediate student voice. However, a third condition refers to the ability of the student group to participate in HE governance freely and bring about change, a condition which is lacking in Oman but is required to maintain the legitimacy of student representation. Similarly, Brooks et al. (2015) argue that the existence and legal involvement of student representative groups are insufficient evidence of their legitimacy but also their ability to bring about meaningful change.

8.4.1 Student Voice as a Control Mechanism

This subsection explores the processes through which student voice acts as a control mechanism. As discussed below, student voice is constrained through a range of processes to 'filter' student voice and support the preservation of the status quo. These processes are (a.) delegitimising alternative student voice channels, (b.) gatekeeping of student voice and (c.) using agenda-setting rights to sift student voice (see Figure 8.2).
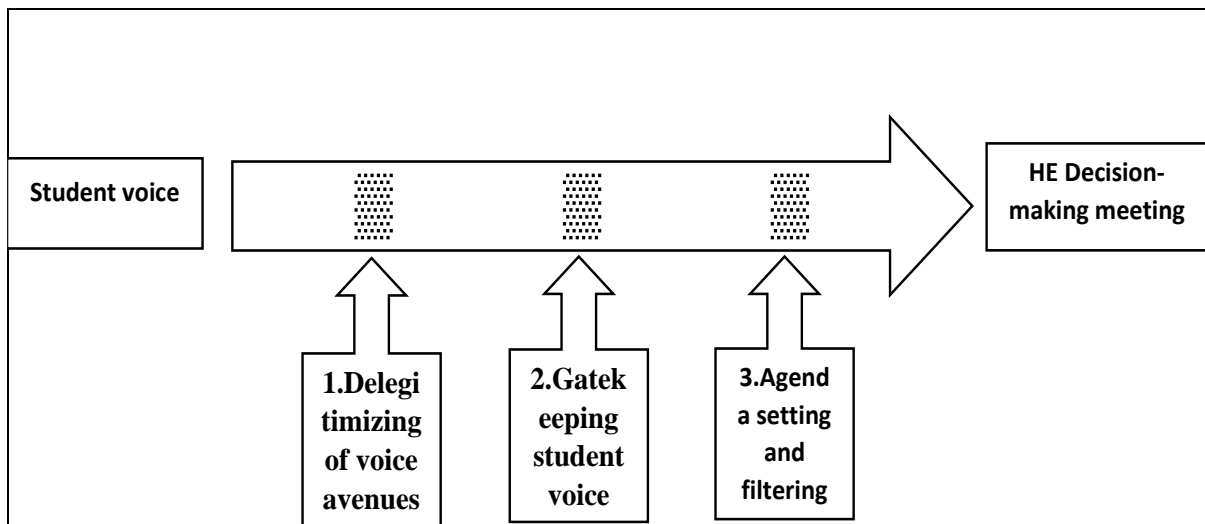

Figure 8.2 The process of filtering student voice

The first mechanism to control how student voice is enacted within the HEI context and the SAC is through delegitimising alternative student voice channels. In this filter, some of the channels for students' expression of voice are made ineffective after the establishment of the SAC. For instance, before the establishment of the SAC, students could independently express issues, such as exam marks or dissatisfaction with teachers, to the head of the centre/department, through existing portals and e-links,

or raise these through student societies[44]. As interview data show, students are expected now to raise issues initially through SACs. Chapter 7 notes that this is because this has become the main channel for student voice and because the SAC has some "privileges", i.e. physical resources, easier access to administrative staff and more knowledge of the HEIs' policies and procedures compared to individual students, which means the SAC is more likely to succeed in tackling the issues that it addresses than individual students. Because of the resources that it has at its disposal, staff and students perceive the SAC to be the first point of contact when students face issues:

> As it is well known, the advisory councils are the only point of contact between the student and the administration. But the student himself is facing difficulty in searching for other means. It is possible that this method [The SAC] is the only means to send my voice because, you know, the voice must be delivered gradually. It is impossible if I have an opinion or an idea to go directly to the Dean and tell the dean that I have an idea. No one accepts this. [Abdulhamid, a male student and Head of Services Committee in SAC, study site 1]

> We have the student advisory council which is concerned with communicating information. Any student who has a specific inquiry can refer to the student advisory council. The advisory council itself may benefit from it, and it is possible to change the focus or the meaning of the question to a clearer topic that serves the same enquiry. [Saif, a male Assistant Dean, study site 1]

These interview extracts prove that, on the one hand, the SAC is becoming a legitimate tool to represent student voice and, on the other, it seems to delegitimise other channels for student voice such as students raising issues and complaints individually. For instance, interview data in Chapter 7 shows that if a student approaches the administration to raise concerns, they are likely to be asked to report it to the SAC before approaching the administration. However, this reduces the individual students' scope to address and be heard by the administration. The only feasible way available for students to resolve issues is -increasingly- through SAC, which is subordinated to the HEI's (and the state's) mechanisms (Valeri 2015).

Moreover, when students approach the SAC, this has the capacity to decide whether the issue is worth being taken to the administration, and if the answer is negative

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[44] These can be named differently; they are mainly responsible to conduct cultural and sport events and activities.

individual students may not be able to take the issue further. Thus, once voice passes the first filter (see Figure 8.2), it confronts a second filter, as the SAC is given the right (by the HE policies and practices) to act as a gatekeeper, controlling which issues can be discussed with the HEI administration. At this stage, the SAC rearranges the agenda to represent student voice to be communicated to the administration availing 'gatekeeping rights', as discussed in Section 7.3.1. According to a SAC member:

> If a student, for example, is annoyed and upset by something... it is better for him to communicate with the advisory council and express his opinion to them [SAC's members], and the council will reform the idea, or respond to him with a specific answer, or the council will amend the idea and transfer it to the administration.
[Naila, a female student and Head of Activities and Initiation Committee in SAC, study site 2].

Ultimately, student voice reaches the administration through the SAC, which employs channels set out in the different SAC regulatory policies. At this stage, the SAC sets the agenda for matters arising from the student voice, especially on 'low politics issues' (see section 7.4). If students have concerns within the realm of 'high politics', as data in Section 7.5 point out, students may in some cases utilise other channels, such as social media platforms, but not SACs (see section 8.4.2).

The third stage of student voice filtering refers to the agenda-setting power of HEIs in the selection of issues for discussion with SACs (see Figure 8.2). As discussed in Chapter 7, the SACRG policy states that the SAC can only "attend meetings if the items on the agenda include students' welfare, services, activities and issues and whenever the academic board of the institution deems appropriate" (The Ministry of Higher Education 2014, p.4). Thus, HEIs can determine the agenda and the limits of the SAC representation of student voice.

Those issues that pass the three filters described above (see Figure 8.2) will have a chance of deliberation and success in the HEI decision-making meetings, but most issues will have been filtered out earlier on in the process. It should be noted that while these filters can control how student voice reaches HEI administrations, SAC members have over time become bolder to express contempt against the administration if the SAC's position and assigned responsibilities are overlooked. For example, all SAC members at study site 2 were audacious enough to publish an official statement of withdrawal from their office on social media channels (see section 7.5).

This demonstrates that the SAC members have felt able to speak out against the administration, something which is happening for the first time in Oman.

Moreover, the use of social media to express voice suggests that while the SAC is the formal representative forum for students, these may choose to circumvent the SAC, particularly if their concerns are beyond SAC's capabilities or ignored by HEIs. As discussed in Section 6.5.3, a SAC member reported to have challenged the boundaries set by the HEI and raised issues about exam assessment on the National Radio, which caused embarrassment for the HEI's administration. Eventually, the SAC Head was summoned and spoken to by the HEI's administration, but the student had the confidence to discuss controversial issues publicly, partly as a result of its position of authority as a representative of students, thus asserting voice rights.

These two instances of SAC's members speaking out manifest the potential for the SAC to instigate disruption and assert voice, though on operational issues like exams and services, and even so, this has happened on a minority of occasions. Nonetheless, the possibility exists for these issues to escalate to expand to the "high politics" of higher education in the future. This indicates that the measures designed by the state to regulate voice through the SAC may not invariably yield the intended outcomes.

The next section considers the process of SAC's participation in enacting student voice in HEIs' decision-making.

8.4.2 SAC's Participation in Decision-making

This section discusses the nature of the issues that reach the HE decision-making meetings and the degree of influence the SAC has over these issues. I argued in Section 8.2 that the rationale behind SAC's creation is presented in policy documents in a way that aligns it with the consultation rung on Arnstein's model, whereas the majority of study participants placed the SAC on the placation rung -with the exception of policymakers who placed the SAC on the lower rungs of non-participation (see section 8.2 and see Figure 8.1). This means that the SAC is viewed to have some degree of influence, though only indirectly, through the advice it provides to the HE administration, and only on a restricted set of topics. Thus, when certain conditions are met, the SAC can be successful in its requests.

As discussed in Section 7.4.4, the SAC *can* participate in representing student voice only on an *ad hoc* basis (i.e. when the need arises) but is effective in representing student voice and influencing HE decisions when the demands are about 'low politics' (see Table 7.1 in Section 7.4.4). For example, data collected showed that the SAC could solve issues that fall within the purview of the HEI's administration such as changing seating arrangements within the canteen and providing toiletries in student washrooms. These changes have generated a pervasive sentiment of contentment among the students. It should be noted, however, that under its consultation and advisory role, the SAC is only given the right to observe and comment during decision-making but has no voting rights (see Klemenčič 2012 and see section 8.3).

When it comes to issues that need strategic decision-making (i.e. major projects that require an extra budget, major education policy changes or establishing the position of the university regarding potentially contentious issues – 'high politics'), the SAC is not viewed by the study participants (e.g. participants at the top i.e. policymakers and HEI staff and lower levels i.e. SAC and non-SAC members) as having an effective role in representing student voice.

This is consistent with the results of an earlier study on students' participation in governance in 15 countries. In that study Bergan (2004, pp.8-9) found that study respondents felt that students have the most influence over what may be seen as "immediate issues, such as social issues, the learning environment and educational content", but minimal influence when it comes to "hard" matters like financial decisions or staff recruitment criteria. In reflection of SAC's level of participation in such instances, we can draw on Arnstein's (2019) model once again, to suggest that the SAC is placed (in policies and according to the views of study informants) on lower rungs (i.e. manipulation and therapy) when dealing with "high politics" issues, as also interview data show in Section 7.4.4. This means that the SAC does not have a genuine representative opportunity to enact student voice when the agenda includes "high politics" issues (see Figure 8.3).
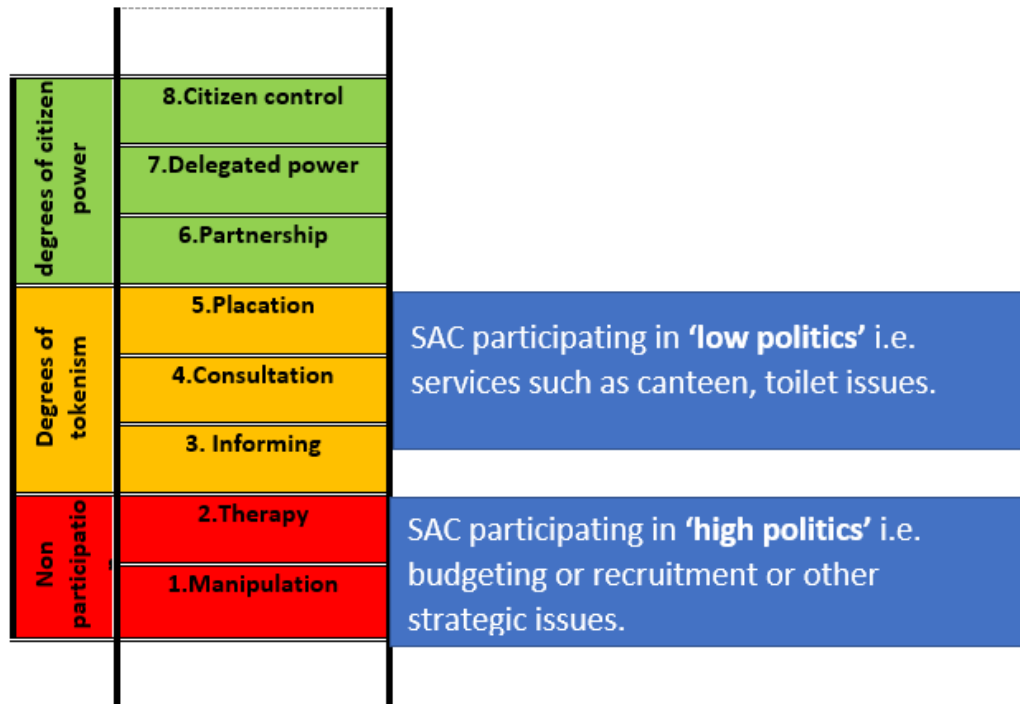
Figure 8.3 SAC's participation in 'low and high politics' mapped to Arnstein's (2019) model of citizen participation.

This shows that the HEI administration only gives a tokenistic degree of power to SAC and responds to SAC's demands only on issues that do not entail major changes to the current situation.

While the SAC is expected to represent student voice in university decision-making, it can be utilised by HEI administrations to legitimise policies that the student community may not support. Interview data in Section 7.5 shows that there are occasions when the SACs are utilised by HEIs as a "depot" to receive the blame for implementing initiatives that could be considered unpopular and receive the responsibility for the failure of implementation of certain programs. Bartling and Fischbacher (2012) employ the concept of 'blame shifting' to discuss the delegation of responsibility for some types of unpopular decisions. In this context, the SAC can be allocated responsibility for being part of the decision-making process. Blame would be shifted from the HEI administration alone and onto the SAC, if the students disagree with the new policies[45]. In addition to deflecting blame from the institution, the SAC is used to preserve institutional legitimacy. This is achieved by asking the SAC to spin information about

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[45] See the example of introducing online learning discussed in Sections 7.4 and 8.2

the newly proposed programs to create a positive outlook for the institution among the students. Creating this outlook is vital for the HEI to garner acceptance from students and maintain its legitimacy.

Moreover, interview data in Section 7.5 shows that the pressure exerted by some administrators influences SAC's participation in the enactment of student voice. This undermines SAC's legitimacy as a channel for student voice. In such cases, the SAC faces the challenge of balancing between what Schmitter and Streeck (1999) call the 'logic of influence' and 'logic of membership' that influence the organisational characteristics (i.e. legal status, resources and membership) of representation groups, as discussed in Section 2.4.2. The SAC is impacted by the 'logic of influence' as it engages with HE policies and structures to enact student voice. At the same time, the SAC is expected to act on the 'logic of membership' and intermediate student voice to HE administration (Klemenčič 2014). SAC's credibility depends on how it balances between the two logics: enacting student voice or being influenced by the HEI administrations (Klemenčič 2014 and see section 7.5). To achieve credibility in its efforts to represent student voice, the SAC should lean more towards the 'logics of membership', because the SAC is established to serve the members it represents (i.e. the student population). If the SAC is unable to achieve this, students expressed concerns that this leads to tensions between the SAC and the students -see section 7.5.

In addition, interview data in Section 7.5 shows that using the SAC in such a controlled fashion may have adverse repercussions on the current state of affairs. Interview data in Section 7.5 shows that the students view the SAC as providing new resources that can be used against the status quo if the HEI's administration becomes unresponsive to its demands. Section 8.4.1 expounds upon the circumstance wherein the SAC's members at study site 2 were united in withdrawing from the SAC's office in response to the perceived uncooperativeness of the administration at that time. Interview data show that the students constantly monitor the activities of the SAC via various social media outlets i.e. X (formerly known as Twitter) Hashtags, which according to Ambusaidi (2022), facilitate the nurturing of digital activism in contexts such as Oman's, where protesting and mobilisation are highly constrained (see section 7.5). Particularly, they may resort to digital activism when they feel that expressing their

voice through SAC brings no change or when they have concerns of 'high politics', which can result in some forms of sanction:

> Students, of course, express their issues within the council and speak out, especially in recent years, but some of them... are afraid that their voice, for example, will not be communicated, and sometimes they are afraid of being reprimanded or punished, and sometimes they resort to pseudonyms within the social media platforms... I know some accounts that confirm this thing, for example (*Confessions*). I mean, perhaps you feel they do not have any seriousness in their content, but when you focus deeply on these accounts, it is sometimes a reaction to the lack of real expression, or for example, it is possible that officials might shut down their doors. [Jamal, a male Student Affairs Department staff, study site 2].

Thus, there is a possibility in such instances, even if this is low, that HE policies and the SAC cannot confine student voice and that digital activism is favoured by the interaction and visibility facilitated by the SAC. Students may use different ways to exercise their rights to voice to mobilise opinions against the administration using social media channels.

8.4.3 The Reasons Behind SAC's Involvement in Decision-making

This section discusses the main justification for involving the SAC in university decision-making. It looks, specifically, at Luescher-Mamashela's (2013) seminal typology of four cases: (1) the politically-realist case, (2) the consumerist case, (3) the communitarian case and (4) the democratic case (see section 2.4.4 for more details of these four cases). This typology is a useful framework to explore the patterns of student representation and participation and the role of the SAC in enacting student voice in decision-making. In this subsection, however, I argue that the four cases proposed by Luescher-Mamashela (2013) provide an incomplete explanation for SAC's involvement in HEI's decision-making in Oman, and thus it is necessary to develop the typology further.

In the first type of student involvement in HE decision-making, the **politically-realist type**, students are viewed as potent political constituents of the university who can impact policies and society in various ways (Luescher-Mamashela 2013). While this may apply to the HE students in Oman, e.g. students had an impact during the 2011 unrest, Tamrat (2016) and Shahabul et al. (2022) suggest that the politically-realist case in Luescher-Mamashela's (2013) typology mainly pertains to violent unrest that frequently arises when HE administration deny students formal channels of

involvement in decision-making. As discussed in Chapter 3, the students' participation in the 2011 protest was part of national and societal unrest caused by other political and social factors such as corruption, unemployment and the Arab Spring (i.e. high politics). Therefore, the SAC's involvement in HE decision-making does not entirely apply to the politically-realist case.

Concerning the **consumerist** type, the university perceives the teaching and learning services as commodities provided to its consumers and clients (Luescher-Mamashela 2013) who have a "contractual relationship formed between the individual students enrolling and the institution providing education services" (Klemenčič forthcoming, p.16). In addition, Sporn (2007) suggests that the consumerist notion is premised on the idea that for HE governance, the dominant goal is to satisfy the consumers. However, the HE context in Oman, as a rentier state, is distinct. The students are not viewed as consumers as HE is seen as a public good, which is provided free to students (Al Harthi 2011) in public HEIs (Al'Abri 2019). Students are also offered free books and a monthly allowance (Al-Lamki 2006). Also, the state mostly subsidises HE in private institutions through land grants, tax exemptions and around 8,000 annual scholarships to the private HEIs funded by the government (Ameen et al. 2010; Al' Abri 2019 and see Chapter 2). The consumerism concept applied in some Western HE systems does not help explain particularly well the involvement of the SAC in Oman's HEI decision-making.

The **communitarian** type is premised on the idea that students are members of the university community; thus, they have constituency rights to be involved in HE decision-making to bring changes to the educational processes (Luescher-Mamashela 2013). This case has been questioned by Morrow (1998) and Zuo and Ratsoy (1999) because the students are considered juniors in their fields and their knowledge and experience are limited. In the case of the SAC, data from policy documents and interviews (as discussed in Chapters 6 and 7) indicate that the SAC is only involved when the agenda is related to "low politics" issues, but not on major issues, and they are not fully part of the decision-making. Thus, the idea that the SAC is involved in HE decision-making on a communitarian case basis can only partially fit the Omani case.

The **democratic** type is underpinned by the idea that student involvement in HE decision-making is crucial to inculcate a democratic culture among students where

"universities may positively contribute to the consolidation of a national democratic culture through student representation in university decision-making" (Luescher-Mamashela 2013, p.1451). However, the SAC's involvement in HE decision-making lacks democratic ethos in several ways. Furthermore, the HE decision-making meetings in which the SACs are involved deny the SAC the right to equal voting. In addition, information sharing during the HE decision-making process is one-sided, as the information related to the decision-making process is not necessarily shared with the SAC and this affects the transparency of the process and of the SAC's involvement in HE decision-making. Given that the SAC lacks autonomy and that there are restrictions placed on its function and networking (as discussed in Section 8.2), it can be argued that the SAC's involvement in HE decision-making does not conform to the democratically driven case.

I thus argue that the SAC's involvement in HEIs' decision-making does not align closely with any of the cases suggested by Luescher-Mamashela (2013). I propose the inclusion of an extra case to Luescher-Mamashela's (2013) typology which is labelled as 'the containment case', where the involvement process of students is part of a general top-down policy of student containment (see Chapter 2 and Al-Farsi 2013). The reason behind students' involvement, in this case is to secure allegiance to uphold the legitimacy of the status quo, encourage minimal political interference from students, and deter potential rebellion. Through the involvement of the student representation groups in HEI decision-making, the state aims to contain the student body and secure their allegiance in relation to HEI-related issues and more broadly.

The SAC is specifically designed to curb potential unrest and maintain current conditions at the local (i.e. HEIs) and national levels to help prevent events similar to the 2011 unrest. This is attained by allowing the formal involvement of the SAC in HEI's decision-making only to provide consultation on 'low politics' issues, as discussed in Subsection 8.4.2, while also tightly controlling its organisational characteristics (as discussed in Section 8.2) and closely monitoring its activities. At the same time, the SACs and their members can be used to promote the allegiance of the student body so that the legitimacy of the status quo is strengthened in the eyes of HE students, who are a central constituency for policymakers.

8.5 Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter has centred on the key findings about the meaning and representation of student voice in the context of HE in Oman. My central argument is that the way the meaning of student voice is constructed and the SAC is established and enacted in Oman's higher education system serves the state in the maintenance of the status quo and quells potential unrest that might be triggered by HE students. This thesis has found that while there seem to be genuine efforts by the SAC members to represent student voice, the representation mechanisms within university policies make SACs serve narrowly defined purposes and yield limited change. This chapter looked at how HE structures and policies shape the meaning of student voice and explored the process of enacting student voice whereby the SAC is used to filter student voice by delegitimising other avenues to express voice and using SAC's gatekeeping and HEIs' agenda-setting powers.

The thesis adopted Arnstein's (2019) model of citizen participation and found that the SAC is mostly positioned on the middle rungs, the tokenistic level of participation according to students and HEI staff and policy documents, and on the lower rungs for policymakers. Mere attendance at HEIs' decision-making meetings is insufficient for authentic student voice representation. Redistribution of power is needed to achieve a higher level of participation and representation, which can be achieved through policy reforms, as will be further discussed in Chapter 9.

In discussing the above themes, I examined a range of possible rationales for the establishment of the SAC in HE in Oman. The involvement of the SAC in HEI's decision-making was discussed in light of Luescher-Mamashela's (2013) typology, which was found not to fully capture the findings from the data. The data show that one reason is that the SAC was established to serve students and to represent their voice before the HE administration. However, after examining the context in which the SAC was established (i.e. after the 2011 upheaval) and the careful design of the structure of the SAC (characterised by a focus on consultation and involvement in "low politics" issues, limited influence in institutional representation, lack of financial and administrative autonomy and the restrictions on collaboration and networking), this study offers strong evidence to suggest that the SAC's establishment came as a political concession and a strategy to maintain the existing state of affairs. As such, the perceptions held by the study participants depart in important ways from the

definitions of student voice discussed in the literature, where student voice is perceived to relate to bringing about change (i.e. McLeod 2011 and Cook-Sather 2006). Effectively, student voice contributes to the prevention of potential disruptions that may be catalysed by HE students, who comprise the largest segment of Omani society.

In terms of the enactment of student voice in HE extant literature contends that student participation in HE decision-making should be employed to show the real power of student participation, rather than a means to curb dissent (Brooks et al. 2015) and to shift national political agendas (Olsen 2007). Through policies like the SACRG and some HEI practices (i.e. delegitimising and gatekeeping voice avenues), the SAC is orchestrated in a way that sifts student voice in various ways before transmitting their views to the administration. Ultimately, this tames potential student dissent.

Such design and structure have some implications for the independence of student voice and the future of the relationship between the student community and the student representative groups. First, the SAC remains incapable of fully delivering on student voice and misses the chance of authentic representation of student voice in HE decision-making. Rather, through the containment policy in the HEI decision-making, the SAC is involved in supporting and maintaining the current system's authority, securing the allegiance of the student body, and preventing students' rebellion. However, this eventually jeopardises trust between the student community and their representative group, the SAC.

Chapter Nine: Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

This thesis has aimed to develop a better understanding of the meaning and dynamics of student voice and representation in HEI's decision-making in Oman – a rentier state – using the SAC as a lens. The thesis explored how the meaning of student voice is perceived and what role the SAC has in enacting student voice. The thesis was informed by an interpretive approach and used a qualitative research methodology, drawing on 71 interviews with HE students, SAC members, HEI administrations, HE ministry officials, academics and researchers, and members of the Oman Council, as well as relevant documents.

The rentier state context has an impact on the notion of student voice in Oman. Avenues for expressing voice in the country are promoted and participation in political and public affairs are legally permitted by the constitution. There are various spaces which the government set for participation activities such as the Consultative and Municipality Councils at the national level. The SAC, which has been the focus of this study, permits the expression of student voice within HEIs. The construction of this type of voice in a rentier state context is facilitated by the tacit social contract between the state and the citizens over quiescence in exchange for social benefits.

Nevertheless, after the 2011 Arab Spring a constant decline in the prices of natural resources such as oil and gas posed significant challenges in fulfilling the expensive requirements of the social contract in Oman. Furthermore, the youth population achieved a greater margin of freedom to participate in public affairs, as highlighted by Al-Farsi (2013). These factors contributed to the creation of the SAC, providing higher education students with a formal platform to express their voice. However, this thesis contends that the restrictions placed on the SAC limit its potential to bring about change.

This chapter concludes the thesis by offering a summary of the key findings and outlining the answers to the research questions (Section 9.2). Then, the chapter highlights the key contributions made to the extant literature by commenting on how student voice and student representation in HEIs' decision-making in Oman's rentier state context depart from what the literature has offered so far (Section 9.3). The chapter also discusses the limitations of the thesis and recommendations for future

research (Sections 9.4 and 9.5). Finally, the chapter finishes by outlining the implications of the policy and practice of student voice in HE in Oman (Section 9.6).

9.2 Overview of the Research Questions and Key Findings

This thesis addressed the following research questions:

1. What was the rationale informing the establishment of the SAC in Omani HEIs?

2. What are the stakeholders' perceptions of the meaning of student voice within Omani HEIs?

3. How does the SAC contribute to the enactment of student voice within Omani HEIs' decision-making?

The main objective was to explore the dynamics of enacting student voice within Omani HEIs through the study of SAC, the main channel for student voice in HEIs in the country.

In relation to the first research question on the rationale informing the establishment of the SAC in Omani HEIs, the thesis documented how the SAC was established in 2014 following students' demands for the creation of a student representative group that went back to the 1990s. This thesis concludes that, in addition to the existence of an increasing range of examples of such structures internationally, two rationales contributed to the establishment of the SAC in Omani HEIs at that point. Firstly, to facilitate the representation of student voice in HEIs and enhance the overall quality of university experiences across services and education-related needs. Secondly, the SAC was devised and promoted to uphold the status quo by controlling power dynamics and student voice (at HEIs and national levels) and to deter potential unrest instigated by HE students. This thesis finds the second rationale was more important than the first given the rentier state context, and in light of the nature of the SAC's design encompassing its roles, areas of competence and lack of autonomy.

The second research question was 'What are the stakeholders' perceptions of the meaning of student voice within Omani HE?'. This thesis found that stakeholders hold varying perceptions about the meaning of student voice. Policymakers, HEI staff and a State council member hold a restricted view of the meaning of student voice. In contrast, the meaning of student voice for students entails an unconditional entitlement to express voice on different broader agendas and encompassing issues beyond

academic issues within HEIs and externally such as social (e.g., volunteering), cultural (e.g., participation in drama and sports) and wellbeing (e.g., hygiene and accommodation).

It is worth noting that the meaning of student voice is shaped, within Omani HE, through different policies, practices and processes as well as by the socio-political and cultural norms of a rentier state. This has had an impact, especially on SAC members, whereby they accept the official meaning of student voice to be no more than a transactional voice directed to issues related to educational facilities and student services i.e. 'low politics' – as opposed to a voice seeking the right to be heard on a broader set of political and legal issues and encompassing strategic decisions about the HEIs in 'high politics' areas. The restricted remit of the SACs prevents them from promoting potential unrest through the discussion of highly politicised issues or promoting radical change in how HE institutions operate.

The third research question addressed 'How does the SAC contribute to the enactment of student voice within Omani HEIs' decision-making?' This thesis found that the SAC's enactment of student voice is shaped by HE policies and how the HEIs choose to implement them. While the SAC was reported as successful in influencing some HEIs' decisions related to 'low politics', the way the SACs represent student voice is funnelled through three processes: (a) delegitimising alternative student voice channels, (b) gatekeeping of student voice and (c) using HEIs' agenda-setting rights to sift student voice. Thus, in practice, the current mechanisms of SAC's participation support the existing state of affairs.

This study concludes that the SAC's justification for involvement in HEI's decision-making does not fit any of the types proposed by Luescher-Mamashela (2013) and identifies a fifth type, called 'the containment case'. In this case, the reason behind students' involvement is to secure allegiance to uphold the legitimacy of the status quo, encourage minimal political interference from the students, and deter any potential agitations.

9.3 Key Contribution of the Study

Overall, this study contributes empirically and theoretically to the research on student voice and representation in HEIs decision-making in a reinter-state context in six main ways.

First, this study contributes to the understanding of student voice in authoritarian contexts where student representation groups are expected to be banned or fully monitored. This study documents a case where these groups were actively promoted by the state to contribute to the maintenance of the status quo. This study contributes to the extant literature (Klemenčič 2012) by showing that the creation of student representative groups in authoritarian contexts can be one strategy to deter student activism by providing students with institutionalised and controlled communication channels, and filtering student voice through internal institutional processes in HEIs.

Second, the study identifies significant divergence between the meaning of student voice prevalent amongst these stakeholders in the rentier state context of Oman and in the extant literature, where student voice is commonly regarded as a mechanism for change. The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on the meaning of student voice by explaining how it is shaped by public policies and how it is differently understood by stakeholders, including policymakers, HE staff and students, in the context of a rentier state. The student voice is shaped to be non-threatening, by constraining students' responsibilities' to obey the rules set by the authority while limiting their rights to participate in public affairs and express opinions.

Third, as noted in section 9.2 and elsewhere, this study contributes to the extant literature by introducing an additional case to Luescher-Mamashela's (2013) seminal typology on the justification of involvement of student representation groups in HE decision-making. This is labelled as 'the containment case' whereby the rationale underpinning students' involvement is to ensure the legitimacy of the system and students' loyalty to the status quo, discourage political interference from the students, and thus deter potential unrest. Through the involvement of the student representation groups in HEI decision-making in rentier state contexts, the State aims to contain the student body and secure their allegiance concerning HEIs-related and wider issues.

Fourth, this study provides a novel analysis of how student representative groups in the rentier state context of Oman are designed in a way to domesticate student voice through a set of filtering processes which have not been discussed previously in the literature and explains the mechanisms of enactment of student voice in HEI's decision-making in a rentier state context.

Fifth, the study contributes to the use of Arnstien's (2019) ladder of citizen participation in exploring the meaning of student voice and the creation of student representation groups. It mapped different perceptions about the rationales for SAC's establishment (see Figure 8.1) and SAC's participation in 'low and high politics' (see Figure 8.3) to the ladder.

Sixth, this study adds a third condition to Klemenčič and Park's (2018) two conditions (i.e., the existence of a formal student representative group and the institutionalisation of formal channels) for student representation in HE systems. This condition relates to the nature of the institutionalisation and the ability of the student group to participate in HEI governance freely and bring about change. This is required to maintain the legitimacy of student representation groups. This study is the first of its kind to deliberate on this concept and its dynamics in the context of HEIs in Oman.

9.4 Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations that require highlighting in this study. First, there are limitations concerning the HEIs that participated in this research. Both HEIs were governed by the same ministry, and this may account for the resemblances in some practices and understanding of the meaning of student voice. Other HEIs under a distinct body of governance might reveal different practices in terms of how the SAC is involved in enacting student voice. Furthermore, this study limited the study of student voice to public HEIs in Oman, where HE is delivered freely for all students. However, it is plausible that the meaning of student voice might be perceived differently among privately enrolled students who bear the cost of their HE. There is potential for elements of voice as consumerism amongst such privately enrolled students. These two issues might be explored in future research (see section 9.5).

As noted by some interviewees, the third limitation of this thesis is related to the fact that the establishment of the SAC in 2014 is considered a relatively new policy. Thus, it is a bit premature to observe and measure the outcomes of this initiative, especially since the culture of participation and expressing voice is deemed new amongst HE students in Oman and it can take a long time until such culture and practice of student voice evolve.

Finally, the ability to generalise the findings from this study to other rentier states may be limited due to the differences between them. Student representation in HEIs is

relatively novel in the context of Oman; however, some rentier states have long-established policies in this area. For example, as discussed in Chapter 3, Kuwait has a comparatively higher level of experience in the field of student representation as it has had student unions formed since the 1960s. Also, as noted in Chapter 3, Kuwait is known to have more democratic practices than the other GCC states, insofar as it has the powerful Majlis Umma legislative council, which is directly involved in shaping the political landscape of the country, unlike other GCC states, where the parliamentarian councils have limited advisory roles. Thus, the experiences of student voice and representation in HEIs decision-making in the Kuwaiti context are not directly comparable to Oman's and the Kuwaiti case of HE student involvement in HEI decision-making does not entirely fit the fifth case of the typology (i.e., the containment case) proposed by this thesis.

9.5 Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the research undertaken for this thesis it is possible to recommend areas for further future research. First, as mentioned earlier, future research might aim to study diverse types of HEIs. As shown in Chapter 2, the introduction of fees in HE in the US and Europe brought new perspectives of students as consumers. This might indicate that students who pay for HE studies on their own in Oman might hold a different perspective on the meaning of student voice within private HEIs. Further research to confirm such findings can be beneficial.

In addition, the findings from the thesis suggest that some HEIs were not directly involved in the design and establishment of the SAC. This may suggest the relevance of investigating the nature of the involvement of HEIs in the policy-making process within the HE sector and the implications this may have on the enactment of student voice and representation in HEIs in Oman.

This thesis explored the meaning of student voice amongst students, HEIs' administrative staff and HE policy-makers. Other key stakeholders' perceptions of the meaning of student voice are worth investigating. For instance, future research could look at the views held by teaching staff and how student voice is shaped specifically in pedagogy within classrooms. In other words, further studies could examine current teaching practices and the impact of these practices on student voice within and outside classroom settings. It would also be beneficial to draw attention to the

influence of educational policies in general on teaching and learning methods used within the classroom, and how these shape student voice in the class, from the perspectives of faculty.

Furthermore, this thesis focused on the meaning of student voice and representation in the HE context specifically. Similar research could be carried out in school settings to compare how student voice and representation in schools are shaped to gain a better understanding of whether this is based on similar state efforts to contain student voice as in higher education, as has been suggested by some study participants. This study could be compared with the dynamics of student voice and representation in Omani schools, using the Student Management Councils[46]as a lens.

Finally, due to the inability to generalise the findings of this thesis to other GCC contexts, there is potential to draw a comparison on the themes of student voice and representation in those contexts. All GCC states have HE student representative groups, although with different aims and missions (see Chapter 3). Conducting a comparative study between these contexts would bring clearer perceptions from different perspectives about what voice can entail in rentier states.

9.6 Implication for Policy and Practice

While the concept of student voice and student representation is new to Oman and thus might be developing slowly, the introduction of SACs in HEIs in Oman is a brave step by the government. This section discusses some of the implications of the thesis for HE policies and practices in the country.

First, this thesis found that there are tensions between the visions of student voice contained in policy documents, which results in major misalignments between HE policies and their enactment. As discussed in Chapter 8, there is a conflict between what is prescribed in the Philosophy of Education in Oman and the SACRG on the limits of student voice and participation. The findings of this study could be informative for policy-making authorities to close loops over such gaps.

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[46] This is a student representative group created in Omani schools as part of encouraging students to actively participate and engage in expressing views and opinions about various school activities and events (Ministry of Education 2011).

This study thus showed that some central policies (e.g. the Philosophy of Education in Oman) are not reflected in the practice of HEIs and there is a clear absence of the enactment of their principles pertaining to student voice and participation in the strategic and operational plans of HEIs. This finding may benefit HEIs and students in comprehending the existing policies and structures and for the government to better broaden the interpretation and measure the implementation of student voice.

While the SAC's creation to represent the student voice in HEIs in Oman is welcomed by students generally, the policy-making bodies and HEIs need to take further steps to improve their implementation. For example, the SAC would benefit from more flexibility in the management of its resources (financially and administratively) without interference from the HEIs administration as this would offer an opportunity for students' skills development while working under the SAC (see Rosch and Collins 2017). Also, policies around the limited role of the SAC need further consideration. The SAC should have the potential to undertake activities outside the HEIs context and to work within the community directly in order to extend its role in areas other than education (e.g. social, political and environmental). This helps the SAC to fulfil objectives around nurturing creative citizens who support volunteering and charity works (as stated in the SACRG), which can positively impact the external community and the HEI internal community (Klemenčič forthcoming).

In addition, there is currently no form of assessment or evaluation of the SAC and its activities neither by the student body nor the HEI administrations. The SAC can benefit from regular feedback and evaluation, especially from students, as it can enhance its function and role. Performance evaluation could be conducted to gain valuable insights from the aims and objectives of the SACs and the factors that are central to the success of the SAC (see Ferreira and Otley 2009). This can also be used to explore possibilities for expanding its remit further.

Another implication for policy is drawing examples of student voice and representation work from countries with similar contexts. Although there are some differences, Oman's context is most similar to that of the GCC states. In terms of student voice and representation in HE, as noted earlier, GCC states have relatively similar forms of HE student representative groups, except Kuwait. This study recommends that best practices from Kuwait's student unions are drawn for the following reasons. The

Kuwait Student Union is regarded as one of the most experienced student unions in the Arab world, with a rich history dating back to the 1960s (see Chapter 3). Ayoub (2018) reports that the function of the student union in Kuwait is underpinned by the value of the democratic voice of HE students, and it is independent of any government or political party interference. Moreover, the Kuwaiti Student Union is not restricted in terms of the issues it can address on behalf of students, nor is it confined to the context of HEIs (Ayoub 2018). Finally, the student union's organisational characteristics (i.e., legal status, resources and membership) give the union a valuable role in leading students to participate in public affairs and national politics to improve the country. It is important to note that this study does not suggest that the Kuwaiti student representation experience is fully replicated in Oman. Instead, best practices from Kuwait's experience to improve the work on the expansion of the remits of SAC can be sought. While this may exert some pressure on the state, disregarding such consequential growth of HE student representation needs in Oman can signify further challenges from the students, who comprise the largest segment in the society, including through platforms other than the SAC, such as digital activism.

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Appendix 1: The interview guide (in Arabic and English)

أسئلة المقابلات (Interview Guide in Arabic)

المتغيرات السكانية	المرحلة التعليمية :	العمر:
	التخصص :	الجنس :
	المدينة :	المنصب في المجلس:

الموضوع	مصطلح صوت الطالب
الاسئلة	1. ما هو تعريفك لمصطلح "صوت الطالب" في مؤسسات التعليم العالي في عمان؟ 2. في ذهنك ، ما هي المصطلحات الاخرى التي ممكن أن ترتبط مع مصطلح "صوت الطالب"؟ 3. ما مدى أهمية "صوت الطالب" في رأيك بالنسبة لمؤسسة التعليم العالي في عمان؟ لماذا؟ ما مدى أهمية ذلك من الناحية العملية في مؤسسات التعليم العالي ي عمان؟ 4. كيف لك ان تعبر عن رايك في قضية أو مخاوف معينة بشكل رسمي او غير رسمي في كليتك؟ 5. ما هي القضايا او المخاوف التي عادة تعبر عن رايك فيها بطريقة رسمية أو غير رسمية؟ 6. ما هي القضايا او المخاوف التي لا يمكن أن تعبر عن رايك فيها سواء بطريقة رسمية أو غير رسمية؟ 7. في رأيك ما هو سبب عدم المقدرة وهذا المنع من التعبير في هذه القضايا؟ 8. اذا تم تمكينك من التعبير عن صوتك في القضايا والمخاوف التي تهمك ، كيف ممكن لهذا التمكين أن يحدث فرقًا في تجربتك الجامعية؟ 9. كيف ممكن السماح لك بإبراز صوتك والتعبير عن رأيك يؤثر على العلاقة مع الطالب والأشخاص الاخرين (المحاضر ، الاداريين)؟ 10. ما هي الحوافز المرجوة (لك وللكلية وللمجتمع) من خلال السماح لمساحة أكبر لصوت الطالب في الكلية؟ 11. ما هي المخاطر التي يجب تأخذ بعين الاعتبار عند السماح بمساحة أكبر لصوت الطالب في مؤسسات التعليم العالي؟

الموضوع	حول الاسباب من أنشاء المجالس الاستشارية الطلابية في عمان
الاسئلة	12. ما هي وجهة نظرك حول أهداف إدخال المجال الاستشارية الطلابية في مؤسسات التعليم العالي في عمان؟ 13. ما هي أهمية هذه الاهداف في نظرك؟ 14. ماذا تعرف عن السياق والظروف التي ظهرت بها المجالس الاستشارية الطلابية في التعليم العالي في عمان؟ 15. ما هي الاسباب التي ادت الى إنشاء المجالس الاستشارية الطلابية على المستوى الوطني في عمان؟ 16. إلى أي مدى تعتبر الاسباب التي ظهرت بسببها المجالس ذات أهمية في هذه الايام؟ 17. كيف تعتقد أن إنشاء المجالس في التعليم العالي كان مرتبطا بالتطورات في المجتمع العماني والاحداث السياسية؟ 18. من النقاش أعلاه ما هو في رايك ما هو أقوى مؤثر أدى الى ظهور المجالس الاستشارية في مؤسسات التعليم العالي في عمان؟ لماذا تعتقد كذلك؟ 19. ما هي الحوافز المرجوة (لك وللكلية وللمجتمع) من خلال إنشاء المجالس الاستشاري الطلابية؟ 20. ما هي المخاطر التي تأخذ بعين الاعتبار عند السماح بإنشاء مثل هذه المجالس؟ (عمر الطالب ، الجنس ، سياسيا ، إداريا)؟

الموضوع	إدراك أصحاب المصلحة حول دور المجالس الاستشارية في إبراز صوت الطالب
الاسئلة	21. ما هو مستوى الوعي لدى الطلاب حول الأدوار المختلفة للمجالس الاستشارية الطلابية في الكلية؟ لماذا تعتقد هكذا؟ 22. ما هو الدور الذي تود أن يبرزه المجلس بين الطلاب؟ وما هي الاليات التي تتخذونها من أجل أبرز هذا الدور وهذه النظرة بين الطلاب؟ 23. كيف تقوم الكلية بجمع التغذية الراجعة والملاحظات من الطلاب عن المجلس؟ 24. إلى أي مدي يتم إشراك المجالس الاستشارية في ابراز صوت الطالب مع إدارة الكلية او الجامعة؟ **صوت الطالب:** 25. ما هي المطالبات الطلابية التي تم إحداث تغيير فيها عن طريق المجالس الاستشارية؟ 26. ما هو الفرق في العملية لمعالجة مشكلة أو قضية طلابية ، إذا أثيرت من قبل طلاب عاديين أو أثيرت من قبل المجلس الاستشاري الطلابي؟ 27. ما هي المجالات التي يمكن للطلاب الوثوق بالمجلس الاستشاري لجعل صوتهم مسموعا أمام ادارة الكلية أو الجامعة؟
اقتراحات أخرى	• هل هناك من أفكار تتعلق بالمجالس الاستشارية وصوت الطالب والمشاركة المدنية تقترح أن أضيفها في البحث؟ • ما هي الوثائق المهمة التي توصي بالاطلاع عليها لتساعدني في تطوير مشروع البحث؟ • في حالة الرغبة بالرجوع إليك للاستيضاح حول بعض الاجوبة ، هل تمانع من التواصل معك مجددا؟

Interview Guide in English

Demographics	**Age:** **Level:** **Gender:** **Specialization:** **Position in SAC:** **City:**
Focus	**HE stakeholders' perceptions of student voice**
Questions	**Student Voice:** 1. What do you understand by the term "Student Voice"? 2. What other terms do you associate the term "Student Voice" with? 3. How important do you think that "Student Voice" should be for HEIs in Oman? Why? And how important is it in practice? 4. How do you formally and informally express ideas and concerns about an issue in your college? 5. What are the issues that you usually express your voice about? 6. What are the issues (if any) that you can't express your voice about? 7. What is the reason for this preclusion? 8. How would enabling you to express your voice on issues or concerns make a difference in your college experience? 9. How do you think allowing student voice affects the relationship between you and other stakeholders (e.g. teachers, college administration)? 10. What incentives are there (for you, the college and the society) for allowing more student voice in the college? 11. What are the risks that should be considered when allowing more student voice?
Focus	**HE stakeholders' perceptions of the rationale for the creation of the SAC**
Questions	12. What are your views about the objectives of introducing SACs in HEIs in Oman? 13. How important do you think these aims are? 14. What do you know about the way SACs emerged in HE in Oman? 15. What are the reasons for SACs' emergence at the national level/the college? 16. To what extent are those reasons relevant today? 17. How do you think the introduction was related to the developments in the Omani Society and other political events?

	18. From what you discussed above, what do you feel was the most powerful influence on the SAC's emergence? Why? 19. What incentives are there for you, the college and the society by establishing the SACs in the college? 20. What are the risks that should be considered when setting up the SACs in the college?
Focus	**HE stakeholders' perceptions on the role of the SAC in relation to student voice**
Questions	21. What is the level of awareness among the students about the different roles of SAC in the college? 22. Why do you think that is? 23. How does the college collect feedback about SAC's role? 24. to promote student voice? **Student Voice:** **25.** What are the changes that students have requested that have been brought about by the SAC? 26. What is the difference in the process of addressing an issue in the college, if raised by individual students or if raised by the SAC? 27. What are the areas that SAC can be trusted to make their voice heard before the college governance?
Suggestions for documents	- Are there any issues related to SAC, student voice and civic participation that you think I should discuss in my research? - What are the significant documents that you recommend me to view to support my research? - In case I want to return to you in the future to get clarification on some answers, is it ok to contact you again?

Appendix 2: The interview Guide to the pilot interview

Note: The highlighted questions were merged/edited after the pilot interview.

Focus	Interview Questions
The contexts informing the SACs introduction	- What are the contexts that informed the emergence of SACs in HE in Oman? - What were social contexts that coincided with the emergence of SACs in HE in Oman? - What are the cultural contexts that prepared the grounds to establish SACs in Oman? - How do the national and/or international political contexts inform SAC's introduction in HE in Oman? - Which context have had the most influential role to inform SAC's introduction in HE in Oman?
Student voice	- What do you understand by the term "Student Voice"? - What do you associate the term "Student Voice" with? - How far should "Student Voice" be given attention in HEIs in Oman? Why? - What it feels like when you have/don't have voice in the college? Why? - How do you formally and informally express ideas and concerns about an issue in college/university? - What are the issues that you usually express your voice about? - What are the issues (if any) that you can't express your voice about? - What is the reason for this preclusion? - How would enabling you to express your voice on issues or concerns make a difference in your college experience? - To what extent do you think allowing student voice affect the relationship between the you and other stakeholders (e.g. teachers, college administration)? - What changes can your voice bring in a college? - What are the incentives to allow more student voice in the college?
the role of the SAC in relation to student voice	- How can student voice be promoted in the college? - How do you see the current role of SAC in making a change that students desire in the college? - What is the difference in the process of addressing an issue in the college, if raised by individual students or if raised by the SAC? - In your view, to what extent becoming engaged with SAC's activities in your college affect student voice? - How do you ensure that you represent the voice of the students in the college? - To what extent do you think can SAC be trusted by students to make their voice heard before college governance? - How can SAC's position be made stronger to promote student voice?

Appendix 3: The full list of documents used for data collection

Institution	list of documents	Subjects included
The Government of Oman	The Basic Statute of the State (2021)	The main statutory document which oversees the principles that guide the policies of the state and the governance of various fields such as the political, economic, social, and cultural principles. Also, it regulates The public plights and duties and the Judiciary system in Oman.
	Oman Vision 2040 Document (2020)	Oman Vision 2040 is a national plan that defines Oman's national priorities in different fields to be achieved over the next two decades. The vision entails national priorities, strategic directions and objectives policies and a 5-year development plan.
	The Child Law (2014)	The law gives the child the right to participate, express an opinion, and do so within a context that aligns with the rights of others, public order, societal values, and national security.
	The Associations and Societies Law (2000)	The law that sets the terms of reference and regulates the establishment of Associations and Societies
	Press and Media Law (1984)	The law organizes press and media activities in Oman and mandates following the rules and regulations of the State.
	Municipality Councils Decree (2011)	The Law is responsible to set the terms for the municipality council in terms of presenting opinions and recommendations regarding the development of municipal systems and services within the scope of the governorate.
The Education Council	The Philosophy of Education in Oman (2017)	It consists of 16 broad principles and 89 objectives, and it serves as a guiding source for policymaking and planning of the whole education sector in Oman

	The Annual Report for Education (2019)	The report is a summary of what has been accomplished in national projects and student innovations in the sector during the year 2019, explaining the most important educational statistics and indicators
MOHE	The SACRG (2014)	outlining the SAC's terms of reference, objectives and structure
Ministry of Labour	HEI Bylaws (2004)	It outlines the structure of the study sites and the overall system of governance and management
Study Site 1	-The minutes of meetings of the academic board -The minutes of meetings of the SAC -List of activities by the SAC -Sample of Correspondence between the SAC and HEI staff -The Grievance Policy	These provide insights on the relationship between HEI management and SAC, while also providing an overview of the various activities undertaken by SAC.
Study Site 2	-The minutes of meetings of the SAC -The Grievance Policy -Student Handbook The SAC withdrawal declaration	These provide an overview of the various activities undertaken by SAC.

Appendix 4: Letter from the Ministry to ease access for the researcher

Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Manpower
Directorate General of Planning and Development

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

سلطنة عمان
وزارة القوى العاملة
المديرية العامة للتخطيط والتطوير

Ref. No. : 3011/2020

الرقـم : ٣٠١١ / ٢٠٢٠

Date : 12/2/2020

التاريخ: ١٨ - جمادى الأخر ١٤٤١ هـ
الموافق: ١٢ - ٢ - ٢٠٢٠م

To whom it may concern	لـمـن يـهـمـه الامـر
This is to inform you that the employee, Faisal Abdul Sattar Al-Balushi - ID no 09222828 who has been sent for his PhD to (University of (Cardiff) the United Kingdom for the period 23/September/2018 To 30/ September/2022 has started his PhD research in Social Sciences. The title of his research is "what is the impact of the advisory councils (SACS) on student voice and civic participation in Oman higher education student". Due to the importance of the area of research locally in enriching the field of Social Sciences, the researcher requests the person in charge to facilitate his task as a researcher in collecting or providing the needed data for the research. Thank you for your thorough cooperation and ongoing support Yours sincerely, Issa Hamood Alamri Director Of H.R.D. Department Ministry of Manpower	يرجى التكرم بالعلم بأن الفاضل/ فيصل بن عبدالستار البلوشي حامل بطاقة شخصية رقم 09222828 والمبتعث الى جامعة (كارديف) بالمملكة المتحدة من تاريخ2018\9\23 وحتى 2022\9\30 وذلك لنيل درجة الدكتوراه في مجال(الثقافة والمجتمع). علما بأن عنوان بحثه هو(تأثير المجالس الاستشارية لطلاب التعليم العالي على صوت الطالب والمشاركة المجتمعية في سلطنة عمان). وكما لا يخفى عليكم دور وأهمية البحوث العلمية في إثراء المعرفة كما لها الدور الفعال في الأخذ بتوصياتها. وعليه يرجى من له علاقة بتسهيل مهام الباحث والمتعلقة بتوفير البيانات المطلوبة. شاكرين تعاونكم الدائم لما فيه المصلحة العامة وتفضلوا عيسى بن مدير دائرة الموارد البشرية وزارة القوى العاملة

ص ب : ٤١٣ مسقط - الرمز البريدي : ١٠٠ - سلطنة عمان - هاتف : ٢٤٣٤٤٣٩٨ - فاكس : ٢٤٣٤٤٣٢٠
P.O Box : 413 Muscat - Postal Code : 100 - Sultanate of Oman - Tel : 24344398 - Fax : 24344320

Appendix 5: Participants' demographic details

Note: Some details were removed to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

No	Names are hidden	Gender	age	Level of education	specialization	Participant role	Time of the interview Date	Time	Duration (Minutes)	Mode
	SAC Members									
1		M	22	Bachelor	Telecom engineering	Head of SAC	27/03/2020	10:30	75	telephone
2		M	23	H.Diploma	IT/Software	Head. Academic Committee	27/03/2020	1400	79	telephone
3		M	22	Diploma	Architect Engineering	Vice-president	27/03/2020	1700	55	telephone
4		M	23	Bachelor	HR	Head- Activities	27/03/2020	1900	72	telephone
5		M	22	H.Diploma	Electrical Engineering	Member in service committee	27/03/2020	2100	45	telephone
6		M	23	Diploma	Mechanical Engineering	HEAD of SAC	31032020	1700	66	telephone
7		F	23	Bachelor	HRM	Academic Head	31032020	2100	57	telephone
8		F	21	H. Diploma	HRM	Head of Activities	02/04/2020	1200	55	telephone
9		M	21	Diploma	IT	SAC Deputy Head	08/04/2020	8.30 pm		telephone
10		M	20	Diploma	Engineering	Head of services	10/04/2020	5 pm	42	Telephone
	Non-SAC students									

11		M	20	Diploma	Computer Engineering	Drama club	26/03/2020	9.30	52	telephone
12		M	22	Diploma	Electrical engineering	NA	28/03/2020	1700	42	Telephone
13		M	20	Diploma	Mechanical engineering	NA	28/03/2020	2100	35	Telephone
14		M	21	Diploma	Telcom Engineering	NA	29/03/2020	1200pm	45	Telephone
15		M	21	Diploma	Mechanical Engineering	NA	29/03/2020	2100	47	Telephone
16		M	24	Bachelor	HRM	BS society Chanting Society	29/03/2020	1700	58	Telephone
17		M	24	Bachelor	HRM	chanting	29/03/2020	1900	37.30	Telephone
18		M	20	Diploma	Mechanical Engineering	NA	30032020		27.22	Telephone
19		F	21	Diploma	IT	Scout	02042020	1400	49	Telephone
20		F	21	Diploma	IT	NA	05042020	9 pm	39.50	Telephone
21		F	21	Diploma	IT Networking	NA	05042020	2 pm	48.4	Telephone
22		F	23	Bachelor	BS/HRM	chanting	05042020	7 pm	53	Telephone
23		F	23	Bachelor	Engineering Electronics and telecommunication	Entrepreneurship and innovation club	05042020	11 am	44.40	Telephone
24		F	22	Diploma	IT	Scouting	05042020	5 pm	37.49	Telephone
25		F	22	Bachelor	Engineering Electronics and telecommunication	Poetry Engineering society	06042020	9 pm	58	Telephone

#		Gender	Age	Education	Field	Club/Role	Date	Time	Score	Method
						Entrepreneurship and innovation club				
26		M	21	Diploma	BS	Scouting	06042020	7 pm	46	Telephone
27		F	22	Bachelor	Engineering Electronics and telecommunication	Entrepreneurship and innovation club	06042020	11.30 am	49.11	Telephone
28		F	20	Diploma	IT (programming)	Athar volunteering	06042020	2 pm	37.06	Telephone
29		F	22	Bachelor	Electrical Engineering	Entrepreneurship and innovation club	06042020	4 pm	44.55	Telephone
30		F	21	Diploma	Computer Engineering	Entrepreneurship and innovation club	07042020	4 pm	30.01	Telephone
31		F	21	Diploma	HRM	-BS society Entrepreneurship and innovation club -Drama -photography	07042020	2 pm	56.33	Telephone
32		F	21	Diploma	Architect Engineering	Head of Entrepreneurship and innovation club	07042020	11 am	62	Telephone
33		M	22	Diploma	BS/Marketing	British overseas Scouting	07042020	7 pm	70	Telephone
34		M	21	Diploma	BS/Accounting	Poetry Group Head	08042020	7 pm	37	Telephone
35		M	21	Diploma	BS/Accounting	Head Scouting	09042020	9 pm	40	Telephone

36		**M**	**22**	**Diploma**	**SC Accounting**	**NA**	**05042020**	**3 pm**	**51.05**	Telephone
37		F	22	Bachelor	BS Accounting	Reading Club	09/04/2020	4.30	40	Telephone
38		M	22	H. Diploma	Mechanical Engineering	NA	10/04/2020	11.00 am	46.00	Telephone
39		M	20	Diploma	BS Accounting	Volunteering Drama	10/04/2020	3 pm		Telephone
40		F	22	Bachelor	HRM	Photography	11/04/2020	11 am	47	Telephone
41		M	23	H. Diploma	Electronic and Electrical Engineering	Entrepreneurship and innovation club	13042020	2 pm	57	Telephone
42		F	22	Bachelor	IT Software Engineering	IT Club	13042020	5 pm	47	Telephone
43		M	23	H. Diploma	IT Software Engineering	IT Club	13042020	8.30 pm	45	Telephone
44		F	23	Bachelor	IT Software Engineering	IT Club BS Club	13042020	7 pm	49	Telephone
45		M	23	Bachelor	Mechanical Engineering	Engineering club Volunteering Club Head student company	14/04/2020	2 pm	42	Telephone
46		F	22	H. Diploma	IT Software Engineering	NA	14/04/2020	11.30	47	Telephone

47		F	25	H.Diploma	IT	NA	14/04/2020	4 pm	43	Telephone
48		F	22	Bachelor	Electrical Engineering	Entrepreneurship and innovation club	14/04/2020	7 pm	36	Telephone
49		M	21	H. Diploma	Mechanical Engineering	Photography	15/04/2020	11.30 am	53	Telephone
50		F	22	H. Diploma	IT	NA	15/04/2020	8.30 pm	38	Telephone
51		M	23	Bachelor	mechanical Engineering	NA	15/04/2020	7 .pm	40	Telephone
52		M	23	Bachelor	Mechanical Engineering	NA	16/04/2020	11.30	34	Telephone
53		M	23	Bachelor	Mechanical Engineering	Engineering Club Art club Values and Horizons (Islamic)	16/04/2020	2 pm	42	Telephone
54		F	22	H. Diploma	Information Security	NA	16/04/2020	4.30	51	Telephone
55		M	22	Diploma	Telecommunication Engineering	NA	16/04/2020	7 pm	54	Telephone
56		F	22	Bachelor	Electrical Engineering	NA	16/04/2020	8.30 pm	45	Telephone
57		M	23	Bachelor	IT Program Engineering	IT Club	17/04/2020	2.30 pm	60	Telephone
58		F	23	Bachelor	IT	IT Club	17/04/2020	5 pm	57	Telephone
59		M	21	Diploma	BS	NA	17/04/2020	7 pm	93	Telephone
60		F	22	Bachelor	IT (program engineering)	NA	17/04/2020	9.30	48	Telephone

	Policy-Makers									
61		F	40+	PhD	Details removed	Details removed	08042020	12 pm	105	Telephone
62		F	40+	MA	Details removed	Details removed	09042020	11.00 am	66	Telephone
63		M	Not conducted							
	HEI Staff									
64		M	30	BA	Details removed	Details removed	12042020	9.45 am	53	Telephone
65		M	39	MA	Details removed	Details removed	12042020	11.15 am	75	Telephone
66		M	45 - 49	PhD	Details removed	Details removed	20/04/2020	9.50 am	41	Telephone
67		M	54	PhD	Details removed	Details removed	20042020	9.00 am	52	Telephone
68		F	Not Conducted							
69		M	40	BA	Details removed	Details removed	13/04/2020	11 am	57	Telephone
	Academicians									
70		M	42	PhD	Details removed	Details removed	12/03/2020	6:30 pm	120	Telephone
71		M	34	PhD	Details removed	Details removed	28/03/2020	1900	75	Telephone
	Members of the Oman Council									
72		M	45-49	MA	Details removed	Details removed	20/04/2020	5 pm	40	Telephone

| 73 | | M | 58 | PhD | Details removed | Details removed | 22/04/2020 | 5.30 PM | 52 | Telephone |

Appendix 6: Examples of identified codes and developed themes

Area of analysis	Examples of the set of codes	Examples of main themes developed
The Establishment of the SAC	-The educational contexts during the establishment of the SAC -The aftermath of the Arab Spring -HE students' participation in the protest during the Arab Spring -changes in other policies and laws (i.e., The Child Law)	Context Informing the establishment of the SAC
The concept of Student Voice	- 'Student voice' is a new concept in the Arab Region -Topics or subjects linked/associated with the concept of student voice -students' needs expressed through student voice -Means of expressing student voice	The Meaning of student voice in Oman's HEIs.
Enactment of Student Voice	-Student demands achieved by the SAC -SAC effect on student voice -Student trust in SAC -Handling issues by the SAC and students	SAC's Representation of student voice

Appendix 7: Preliminary themes and final themes

Preliminary Literature Theme List A		Data Theme List B	
Theme	**Sub-theme**	**Theme**	**Sub-theme**
Conceptions of citizenship	Dimensions (e.g., rights and duties) and typologies (e.g. adaptive)	Student Voice	The meaning of the concept of student voice
			The construction of the student voice
	Citizenship in the rentier state context		The needs associated with voice
	Citizenship in Oman's Context		Methods used to express student voice
Student Voice	The meaning of student voice	The establishment of the SAC	The function of the SAC
	Student Voice as Consumerism		The rationales informing the establishment of the SAC
	Student voice, participation and power dynamics.		Organizational characteristics of the SAC
			Awareness and evaluation of the SAC
Youth participation in HE settings	HE as a space for citizen participation	SAC participation and representation in HEI decision-making	SAC's representation of student voice
			Participation in issues that are within HE boundaries
	HE as a space for student representation		Participation in HEI decision-making
	Arnstein's Model for citizen participation		Arnstein's Model for citizen participation

Final Themes List C	
Themes	**Sub-Themes**
The Context Informing the establishment of the SAC	Oman's Political Structure
	The Arab Spring
	Optimal Grounds for SAC's Establishment

The Rationale for Establishing the SAC.	Establishing the SAC for Student Representation
	Establishing the SAC to Maintain the Status Quo
	Arnstein's Model for citizen participation
The Design of the SAC	Organisational Characteristics of the SAC
Understanding student voice in a rentier state context	Shaping the voice through education, cultural and social factors
	Institutionalizing student voice
	Limits of student voice
Enactment of student voice through the SAC	Student Voice as a Control Mechanism
	SAC's Representation of Student Voice
	The Reasons for SAC's Participation in HEI Decision-making

Appendix 8: Example of MAXQDA coding

Appendix 9: The approval from the Ethics Committee of the School of Social Sciences

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY
PRIFYSGOL CAERDYD

School of
Social Sciences
Ysgol y Gwyddorau
Cymdeithasol

Cardiff University

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Tel +44(0)29 2087 5179
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www.cardiff.ac.uk/social-sciences

14 February 2020

Our ref: SREC/3582

Faisal Al Balushi
PhD Programme
SOCSI

Dear Faisal,

Your project entitled *'The Role Student Advisory Councils play in the Development of Citizenship and Civic participation Skills Among Higher Education Students in Oman'* has now been approved by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University and you can now commence the project should all necessary forms of approval been received.

If you make any substantial changes with ethical implications to the project as it progresses you need to inform the SREC about the nature of these changes. Such changes could be: 1) changes in the type of participants recruited (e.g. inclusion of a group of potentially vulnerable participants), 2) changes to questionnaires, interview guides etc. (e.g. including new questions on sensitive issues), 3) changes to the way data are handled (e.g. sharing of non-anonymised data with other researchers).

In addition, if anything occurs in your project from which you think the SREC might usefully learn, then please do share this information with us.

All ongoing projects will be monitored and you will be obliged periodically to complete and return a SREC monitoring form.

Please inform the SREC when the project has ended.

Please use the SREC's project reference number above in any future correspondence.

Yours sincerely

Professor Emma Renold
Chair of School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
Cc: Niall Casserly

THE QUEEN'S
ANNIVERSARY PRIZES
For Higher and Further Education
2015

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE

Athena
SWAN
Silver Award

QAA
Cymru
UK Quality Assured
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Registered Charity No. 1136855
Elusen Gofrestredig Rhif. 1136855

Appendix 10: Consent form

Cardiff School of Social Sciences
Cardiff University
1-3 Museum Place
CF10 3BD

Faisal Al Balushi – A PhD Candidate
e-mail: albalushifa@cardiff.ac.uk

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

SREC Approval Reference: SREC/3582

(The Role of the Student Advisory Council in relation to Higher Education Student Voice in Oman)

Purpose of Study: The study aims to explore the role of the Student Advisory Council (SAC) in relation to Higher Education student voice and civic participation in Oman.

Please initial each box

1	I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
2	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.	
3	I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the School of Social Science Research Ethics Committee.	
4	I understand that the data will be stored in Cardiff University servers and know what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
5	I consent to being audio recorded.	
6	I understand that my confidentiality will be waived in the circumstances of intention of serious crime or potential harm to the participants and/or others is uncovered.	
7	I understand that this research doesn't aim to advocate any form of protesting and rioting.	
8	I don't have any issues related to COVID-19 that will obstruct me from participation in this study.	
9	I agree to take part in the study.	

Signature of Participant: Date:

Appendix 11: Participant information sheet (in English and Arabic)

Cardiff School of Social Sciences
Cardiff University
1-3 Museum Place
CF10 3BD

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Dear participant,

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part it is important for you to understand who is doing the research and know why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with me or others if you wish. Thank you for taking the time to read the information sheet.

1.Who is conducting the research?

My name is Faisal Al Balushi. I am a PhD research student at the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University in the UK. I am conducting this study as part of my PhD thesis and would appreciate your participation.

2. Title of the study:

The Role of the Student Advisory Council (SAC) in Relation to Higher Education Student Voice in Oman.

3. What is the purpose of this research?

This study aims to explore the perceptions about the role of SAC in relation to student voice. The study seeks to understand how student voice is perceived among various HE stakeholders and explore the perceptions about the role SACs play in promoting student voice. **It is very important to note here that the aim of this research is not to advocate any form of protesting and rioting among the participants.**

4. Why have I been invited?
   You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a stakeholder who is in a good position to reflect on the two important themes of this study: student voice and civic participation in HE in Oman. Moreover, you are invited because you belong to one of these sampling groups:

- A SAC member in one of the HEIs in Oman
- A non-SAC student at one of the HEIs in Oman
- A policymaker/planner in the Ministry of Higher Education in Oman
- A Dean/ an Assistant Dean for Student \ Affairs and a Head of Department for Student activities and Counselling in Omani higher education institutes
- An educationalist /an academician working in one of the Elites HEIs in Oman
- A consultative council member

5. Do I have to take part?
No, it is up to you to decide whether or not to participate in this study as it is totally voluntary. If you do decide to take part, I will discuss the study with you and ask you to sign a consent form. If you decide not to take part, you do not have to explain your reasons. **You are free**

to withdraw your consent at any time and not to answer any questions that you don't want, without giving a reason, even after signing the consent form.

6. Will I be paid for taking part?
No, it should be understood that your participation is voluntary. Thus, there are no financial benefits from taking part in the study.

7. What are the possible benefits of taking part?
While there is no direct advantages or benefits to you from taking part, your participation may help you understand the concepts of student voice and civic participation and the role of SAC on these themes. More importantly, your participation will add further value to my research and to the future of SACs in HE in Oman.

8. Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?
Rest assured that the researcher will strictly follow the Data Protection Act 1998 and the General Data Protection Regulation (**GDPR)** which insist that participants' confidentiality, privacy and anonymity will be ensured in all research stages like data collection, storage and publication, except in front of the researcher. Your information will not be passed onto anyone and in the writing up, the researcher will use pseudonyms and all the participant personal characteristics will be removed. **However, in the circumstances of the intention of serious crime or potential harm to the participants and/or others is uncovered, I will be obliged to make a disclosure to the appropriate authorities.**

9. What happens to my data at the end of the study?

In accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and GDPR, your data will be transferred and stored securely in Cardiff University Servers. The data should be retained in the servers for no less than 5 years or at least 2 years post-publication and then will be destroyed.

10. What will happen to the results of the study?
The results obtained in the study will be used for research purposes such as publications in journals and national and international conferences. The thesis will also be published by Cardiff University when I have completed my study (end of 2022). If you are interested, you can contact me to obtain a copy of the thesis or any other publications that result from this study.

11. Who is organising, reviewing and funding this research?
This study is undertaken as part of my PhD scholarship at Cardiff University. It has been reviewed and ethically approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University. It is funded by the government of Oman through the national scholarship program managed by the Ministry of Higher Education.

12. Further information and contact details
If you have any further questions about any aspect of this research, you can contact me via the phone (UK number: ⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛, Oman number: ⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛) or through my official email (albalushifa@cardiff.ac.uk).

For more information on this study, you can also contact my supervisors Professor Manuel Souto-Otero (Souto-OteroM@cardiff.ac.uk) and Dr Dean Stroud (Stroudda1@cardiff.ac.uk).

Note: you will be given a copy of the information sheet and a signed consent form to keep if you decide to participate in the study.

I would like to thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and considering taking part in this study.

Participant information sheet in Arabic

Cardiff School of Social Sciences
Cardiff University
1-3 Museum Place
CF10 3BD

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استمارة المعلومات للمشاركين

عزيزي الطالب / عزيزتي الطالبة...

أنتم مدعوون للمشاركة في مشروع دراسة أكاديمية. قبل أن تقرروا بالمشاركة، من الضروري أن تعلموا من هو الباحث وما هي أسباب إجراء هذه الدراسة. الرجاء أخذ الوقت الكافي لقراءة المعلومات الواردة أدناه بعناية قبل إبداء الموافقة على المشاركة. شكرا لكم على بذل الوقت لقراءة هذه الاستمارة.

1. **من سيقوم بإجراء هذه الدراسة؟**

اسمي فيصل بن عبدالستار البلوشي. أنا طالب دكتوراة في كلية العلوم الاجتماعية بجامعة كارديف في المملكة المتحدة. أقوم بإجراء هذه الدراسة كجزء من أطروحة الدكتوراه الخاصة بي وأنا ممتن لك لموافقتك عل ى المشاركة.

2. **عنوان الدراسة:**

دور المجالس الاستشارية الطلابية فيما يتعلق بصوت الطالب في مؤسسات التعليم العالي في سلطنة عمان.

3. **ما هو الهدف من إجراء هذا البحث؟**

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى معرفة التصورات حول دور المجالس الاستشارية الطلابية فيما يتعلق بصوت الطالب في مؤسسات التعليم في سلطنة عمان. وتسعى الدراسة إلى فهم تصورات أصحاب المصلحة المختلفين حول صوت الطالب ومعرفة الآراء حول الدور الذي تلعبه هذه المجال س في تعزيز صوت الطالب. **من المهم أن نعي هنا أن هذا البحث لا يهدف إلى أي شكل من أشكال الاحتجاج والمظاهرات بين المشاركين.**

4. **لماذا تم اختياري للمشاركة في هذه الدراسة؟**

لقد تمت دعوت كم للمشاركة في هذه الدراسة لأنكم من ضمن أصحاب المصلحة الذين باستطاعتهم المساهمة في فهم الفكرتين ال رئيسيتين في هذه الدراسة: **صوت الطالب والمشاركة المدنية** في مؤسسات التعليم العالي في عمان. بالإضافة ، أنتم مدعوون للمشاركة كونكم تنتمون إلى إحدى المجموعات التالية:

- **عضو مجلس استشاري طلابي في إحدى مؤسسات التعليم العالي في عما ن**

- **طالب / طالبة في إحدى مؤسسات التعليم العالي في عما ن**

- **صانعوا سياسا ت وقرارات بوزارة التعليم العالي بسلطنة عما ن**

- **عميد / مساعد عميد لشؤون الطلاب ورئيس قسم الأنشطة الطلابية والإرشاد في إحدى مؤسسات التعليم العال ي.**

- **تربوي / أكاديمي يعمل في إحدى مؤسسات التعليم العالي في عما ن**

- **عضو مجلس الشورى**

5. **هل يتوجب علي المشاركة في هذه الدراسة؟**

لا. المشاركة في هذه الدراسة اختيارية وتطوعية بشكل كامل. إذا قررتم المشاركة ، سأناقش الدراسة معك م وأطلب منكم التوقيع على استمارة الموافقة للمشاركة في البحث. وإذا قررتم عدم المشاركة ، فلا يجب عليكم شرح أسباب عدم المشاركة. **لكم مطلق الحرية في سحب موافقتكم في أي وقت وعدم الإجابة عن أي أسئلة لا تريدوا الاجابة عليها دون إبداء أي سبب ، حتى بعد التوقيع على نموذج الموافقة للمشاركة في البحث.**

6. **هل سأحصل على أي مكافأة مالية للمشاركة؟**

</div>

لا ، ينبغي الإدراك بأن المشاركة اختيارية وليست إجبارية. وبالتالي ، لا توجد فوائد مالية للمشاركة في الدراسة.

7. ما هي الفوائد ال مرجوة من المشاركة ؟

على الرغم من أنه لا توجد فوائد مباشرة للمشاركين ، إلا أن المشاركة قد تساعد في فهم مصطلحي صوت الطالب ودور المجالس الاستشارية الطلابية فيما يتعلق بهذا المصطلح والأهم من ذلك ، ستكون مشاركتك إضافة قيمة للبحث ومستقبل المجالس الاستشارية الطلابية مؤسسات التعليم العالي في سلطنة عمان.

8. إلى أي مدى سيتم الاحتفاظ بسرية مشاركتي في هذه الدراسة؟

كن مطمئنًا أن الباحث سيقوم باتباع قانون حماية البيانات لعام 1998 واللائحة العامة لحماية البيانات(GDPR) والتي تنص على إبقاء سرية المشاركين وخصوصيتهم وهويتهم ، كما سيتم ضمان سرية هذه البيانات في جميع مراحل البحث مثل جمع البيانات وتخزينها ونشرها . ولن يتم تمرير معلوما ت المشاركين في هذه الدراسة إلى أي شخص باستثناء الباحث نفسه . وفي وقت كتابة البحث ، سيتم استخدام أسماء مستعارة وستتم إزالة جميع الخصائص الشخصية للمشاركين. **ومع ذلك ، في حالة إقدام أحد المشاركين أو وجود نية لارتكاب جريمة خطيرة أو ضرر محتمل تجاه أحد ما ، سيكون الباحث ملزماً بالكشف عن هذا الأمر عند السلطات المختصة وفقا لأنظمة وقوانين الجامعة.**

9. ماذا سيحدث للبيانات في نهاية الدراسة؟

وفقًا لقانون حماية البيانات لعام 1998 واللائحة العامة لحماية البيانات (GDPR) ، سيتم نقل البيانات وتخزينها بشكل آمن الى أنظمة التخزين التابعة لجامعة كارديف .وسيتم الاحتفاظ بالبيانات في هذه الأنظمة لمدة لا تقل عن 5 سنوات أو بعد عامين على الأقل من بعد النشر وبعد ذلك سيتم إتلافه ا تماشيا مع قانون جامعة كارديف للبيانات .

10. ماذا سيحدث لنتائج الدراسة ؟

سيتم استخدام النتائج التي سيتم الحصول عليها في الدراسة لأغراض البحث العلمي مثل النشر في المجلات العلمية والمشاركة في المؤتمرات الوطنية والدولية. سيتم أيضًا نشر رسالة الدكتوراة من قبل جامعة كارديف عندما أنتهي من دراستي (نهاية عام 2023 بإذن الله). **إذا كنت مهتمً ا بالموضوع ، يمكنك التواصل معي للحصول على نسخة من رسالة الدكتوراة أو أي منشورات أخرى تنتج عن هذه الدراسة.**

11. ما هي الجهات المنظمة والمراجعة والممول ة لهذا البحث ؟

يتم إجراء هذه الدراسة كجزء من بعثة الدكتوراة في جامعة كارديف. تمت مراجعتها والموافقة عليها من قبل لجنة أخلاقيات البحث بكلية العلوم الاجتماعية في جامعة كارديف .كما يتم تمويل الدراسة من قبل حكومة سلطنة عمان من خلال برنامج البعثات الوطنية الذي تشرف عليه وزارة التعليم العالي.

12. موضوع الدراسة يثير اهتمامي ولكن أحتاج الى مزيد من المعلومات

إذا كانت لديك أي أسئلة أخرى حول أي جانب من جوانب هذا البحث ، يمكنك الاتصال بالباحث عبر الهاتف:

(رقم المملكة المتحدة: ▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇) أو من خلال البريد الإلكتروني الرسمي:

albalushifa@cardiff.ac.uk

ولمزيد من المعلومات حول هذه الدراسة ، يمكنك أيضًا الاتصال بالمشرفين

1. بروفيسور مانويل أوتيرو (Souto-OteroM@cardiff.ac.uk)

2. د. دين سترود (Stroudda1@cardiff.ac.uk).

ملاحظة: إذا قررت المشاركة في الدراسة فسيتم إعطاؤك نسخة من هذه الاستمارة وايضا استمارة الموافقة للاحتفاظ بها.

شكرا لك على بذل الوقت لقراءة هذه الاستمارة ,متمنيا منك الموافقة على المشاركة في البحث.

Appendix 12: Examples of Professional Associations in Oman

Name of the Association	Location	Field of Work	Issuing Number and date	Contact Details
Oman Geological Society	Muscat	Promoting the science of geology, enhancing awareness in the field of earth sciences, and enhancing the spirit of scientific research among members.	2001/79 15/04/2001	24513333 info@gso.org.om www.gso.org.om
Oman Medical Association	Muscat	Seeking to raise and develop the medical profession and related sciences	2001/88 28/04/2007	24488660 omanmedic@omantel.net.om
Oman Society of Engineers	Muscat	Contribute to organizing engineering laws and raising their level of cooperation with other authorities	2001/186 2001/7/14	24482899 omansoe@omantel.net.om
Omani Film Society	Muscat	Reuniting the actors of the film industry under one umbrella, caring for them, and taking care of their material and moral interests	2002/119 2006/06/23	24497917 www.omanfilm.net

Omani Journalists Association	Muscat	Spreading awareness in the field of journalism and media, and paying attention to journalistic cadres in the field of journalistic work	2004/192 2004/11/21	24475449 www.oja.org.om oja2044@hotmail.com
Omani Association of Writers and Literates	Muscat	Contribute to the intellectual and literary movement in Oman and work to activate and flourish it	2006/142 2006/10/8	24641574 Oman-writers@hotmail.com

(Source: The Website of the Ministry of Social Development 2019).

Appendix 13: the Duties of the College Council

Article 16 The College Council will have the responsibilities and authority stipulated in the bylaws, particularly the following:

1. The implementing the delivery plans, curricula, training programs, and commitment to the conditions of awarding certificates and academic degrees.

2. Suggesting the numbers of students and the requirements of admission in the different centres and departments.

3. Suggesting examination regulations, examination schedules, and endorsement of results.

4. Organizing study, research and practical training, coordinating between centres and departments, as well as assigning lecture halls.

5. Reviewing the annual report that the Dean presents on the work progress and the reports presented to the council by the heads of centres and departments on their activities and work, endorsing them and ensuring the implementation of college bylaws. 6. Suggesting the college needs for teaching and technical support staff, and recommending their appointments, transfers, promotions, secondments, and all other related issues.

7. Suggesting the date of commencement and end of each study semester, as well as the beginning and the end of vacation for teaching and technical support staff

8. Encouraging and coordinating research activities and development.

9. Suggesting the establishment, closure, combinations or changes in centres, departments or sections.

10. Suggesting the organization of conferences, seminars, social or cultural activities for teaching staff and/or students.

11. Forming committees, ad-hoc committees or work groups to attend certain issues, and making recommendations.

12. Suggesting the college annual budget.

13. Promoting the college relationship with the local community and private sector.

14. Carrying out any duties the College Council is assigned by the Director General.

(Source: The Ministry of Manpower 2004, pp. 16 -17)