

Towards a Synthesis of the Perspectives on Student Dropouts in Oman

Jaya Sangeetha^{1*}

¹Ph.D., Member of Faculty, Modern College of Business and Science, Department of Business and Economics, Baushar Street, Baushar, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

DOI: [10.36348/jaep.2021.v05i11.003](https://doi.org/10.36348/jaep.2021.v05i11.003)

| Received: 08.10.2021 | Accepted: 13.11.2021 | Published: 27.11.2021

*Corresponding author: Jaya Sangeetha

Abstract

The development and growth of any emerging economy rests on the shoulders of the youth of that nation. The countries in various parts of the world are experiencing alarming rate of drop-outs of students from the education system. It is of paramount importance that the reasons are identified and addressed. This is of greater importance to the various economies in the Middle East and GCC who aim to diversify by creating a knowledge economy. This paper attempts to identify the macro and the micro perspectives behind student drop-outs from the tertiary education and endeavors to suggest some intervention strategies to address this phenomenon. The methodology involved collection and analysis of the secondary data available followed by a qualitative research at a private educational institution in Oman. The findings were analyzed using Gilbert's Behavioral Engineering Model. The results indicate that personal, academic and financial reasons contribute to the majority of student dropouts. These can be effectively detected, measured and addressed by putting in place proper institution-wide systems and partnerships and by offering contextually relevant academic and student support services.

Keywords: Student dropout, higher education, Middle East.

Copyright © 2021 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution **4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)** which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

Non-completion of upper secondary education has immense consequences not only for the individuals concerned but for the societies they live in. Youth who drop out of upper secondary education have difficulty in not only securing and maintaining stable employment and growth but also earn far less (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2008). Coming to the effects on the society, completing upper secondary is a necessity to ensure full participation in civic life and to ensure better chances in the labor market (Lyche, 2010). The phenomenon of students dropping out of upper secondary education is prevalent all around the world, but seems to be severe in the Middle East. This cannot be ignored especially considering the focus of the government on diversification and sustainable development in this part of the world. This paper aims to research and further understand the reasons behind students dropping out of higher education institutes. Due to the importance of this stage in an individual's education since it sets the career path, it is extremely important to research and analyze the reasons behind students making the decision to drop out and to try and keep the numbers at a minimum by designing suitable strategies. The research starts by looking at the larger scope of

statistics in Oman, and then focuses on the statistics of a private higher education institution - Modern College of Business and Science.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The predominant cause of student dropouts in USA and other parts of the world has been found to be Social reasons like racial and ethnic differences followed by financial reasons (Davalos, Chavez and Guordiola, 1999 and Chen and DesJardins, 2010 etc.). However, in the Middle East where most of the students are sponsored by the Government through scholarships, the reasons are very different.

Abdulla and Ridge (2011) in their research in UAE regarding young Emirate men found that they drop out of school at year 10 and comprise of almost 13% of drop-outs around different cities in UAE. Also, those who do continue to pursue further education have poor quality of English speaking skills and are poor in learning the language instructions. In particular, it means that they are ill-prepared for the switch to a full English medium institution. This further intensifies the problem and leads to greater male attrition rates in higher education. With regard to socio-economic

stratification, it was clear that young men in the northern emirates have higher drop-out and university no-show rates than those in Abu Dhabi or Dubai. Same findings are echoed by the subsequent article by Chaudhary (2013). However, the effect of the economic incentives that could have resulted in low higher education participation by males was not explored in the study. Socio-economic status and its differences across the whole geography of UAE was not considered.

Al Ghanboosi and Al Qahtani (2011) conducted a comparative study of Student Drop-Out Trends at Sultan Qaboos University and Kuwait University. The study shows that in SQU, the male students have a higher tendency of dropping-out of their studies, than the female students. At colleges that are scientifically oriented, the drop-out numbers are even higher. Even the students with higher school GPA have a large drop-out rate. In Kuwait University, freshmen and sophomores tend to have higher drop-out rate than the other students, while at SQU the rates are higher in senior and junior years. However, the reasons that cause students with higher GPA to drop-out, as well as the reasons behind the higher male students' drop-out numbers were not included.

According to Ghafour (2010) a big number of Saudi students, approximately 88,000, were studying abroad under the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program. About 30% of the students drop out of foreign universities mainly because of family reasons and an inability to cope with studies.

Several reports and articles in the newspaper and magazines - Times of Oman, Muscat Daily, Y magazine- over the past two years have been bringing out the phenomenon of high student drop-outs in Oman.

They cover various aspects from the effect on the economy to the probable causes for giving up education. The economic effects include the considerable financial pressure on the government's scholarship system, loss of potential knowledge pool from the private sector, lost opportunity for students who failed to receive the scholarship etc.

Some causes that lead to abandoning the studies range from personal reasons, academic, to financial reasons. These include emotional turmoil, getting married, lack of motivation, flaw in education system, time required to finish the studies, poor level of English, the huge cost etc. However, the details were not captured.

Through the review of literature, it has been found out that some of the main reasons which forced college students to give up on their education before receiving their degree are personal issues, academic issues and financial issues. However, the objective of this study is to find out the specific concerns in the various categories and thereby identify suitable intervention strategies to overcome this phenomena in the higher education institutions.

METHODOLOGY

The research aiming to find the reasons and numbers behind drop-outs had two research phases: first, a secondary research which was done through gathering existing information from the Ministry of Higher Education to further understand the numbers and analyze the gathered information. Second, a micro study with a focus on the Modern College of Business and Science alone was undertaken using qualitative research method. All data is analyzed, and conclusions and recommendation are made.

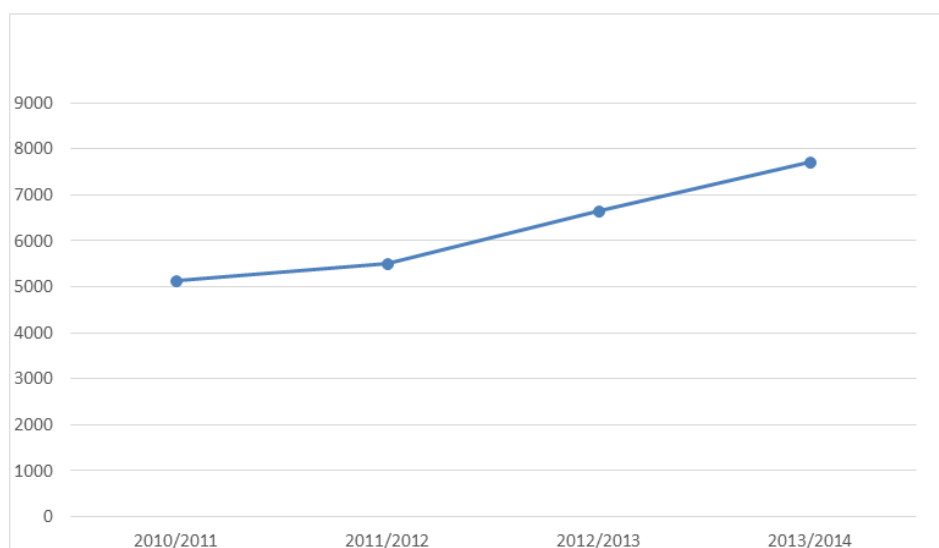


Fig 1: Total Number of Dropouts per Academic Year

Source: Higher Education Admission Center 2017

Findings

Macro Study: Secondary Research

The secondary research to this project was through checking and analysing statistical data about drop-outs from the Ministry of Higher Education for the years 2010/2011 and up to 2013/2014.

Fig 1 demonstrates the number of total dropouts from both private and public educational institutions throughout the four academic years being studied. It shows a stable increase in the number of dropouts per year.

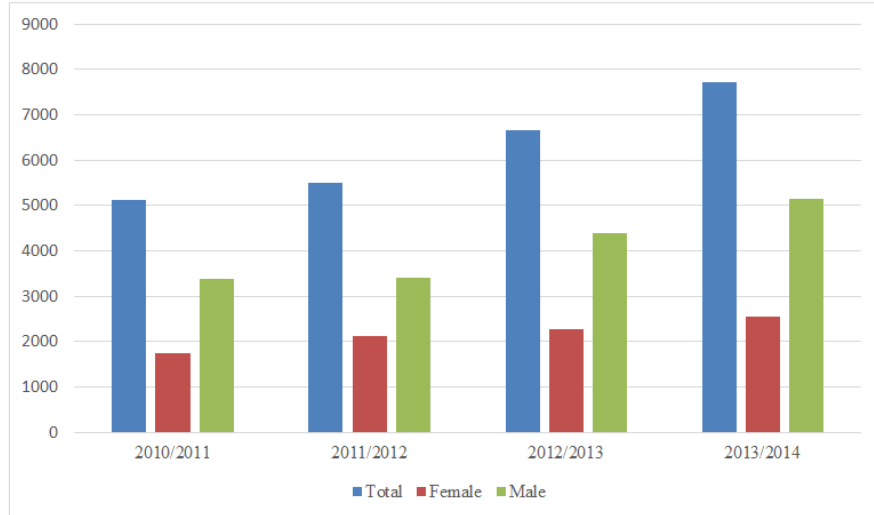


Fig 2: Total Number of Dropouts per Academic Year from 2010 to 2014 (by Gender)

Source: Higher Education Admission Center 2017

Fig 2, shows the numbers of drop-outs in total and in both genders. This data proves that although

more females are known to getting scholarships, more males drop-out of college.

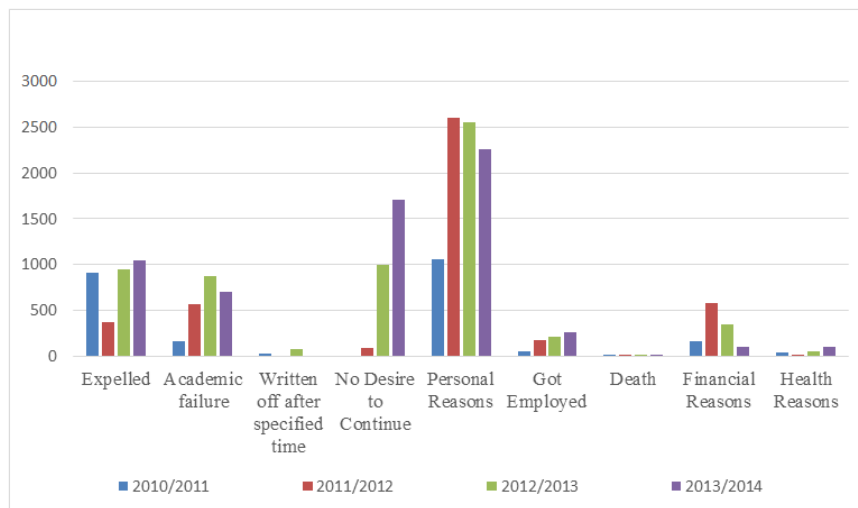


Fig 3: Reasons given by students for Dropping Out

Source: Higher Education Admission Center 2017

In general, Fig 3 indicates some of the key reasons students claimed by students for dropping out of college. The chart shows that the majority describe their reasons for dropping out as personal. Which means that they are either too shy to pick an answer or the reasons could be family related or they could even be unspecific which would lead many to pick the answer: Personal Reasons. Other major reasons are -

being expelled, academic failure and financial reasons. Unlike personal reasons, other reasons such as these are easier to find solutions for.

To go in-depth with the numbers even further, the tables below show the exact statistics of reasons behind dropping out of college as well as gender and sector (Private or Public) for each Academic Year:

Table 1: Reasons for dropping out by HEI type and gender in the academic year 2010/2011

Reason for leaving HEIs	Total			HEI					
	T	F	M	Private			Public		
	T	F	M	T	F	M	T	F	M
Expelled	915	79	836	2	0	2	913	79	834
Academic failure/not permitted to continue	171	21	150	80	18	62	91	3	88
Other personal reasons	1063	461	602	818	434	384	245	27	218
Gone into employment	60	19	41	47	19	28	13	0	13
Written off after of specified time	27	8	19	27	8	19	0	0	0
Death	24	5	19	6	4	2	18	1	17
Financial reasons	163	88	75	163	88	75	0	0	0
Health reasons	42	26	16	42	26	16	0	0	0
Unknown	1139	587	552	1001	567	434	138	20	118
Other	1524	447	1077	192	112	80	1332	335	997
Grand total	5128	1741	3387	2378	1276	1102	2750	465	2285

Source: Higher Education Admission Center 2017

Statistics of the Academic year of 2010/2011 show most students having personal reasons, unknown or other reasons to describe why they have dropped out. As presented by the numbers, most drop-outs come from Public Higher Education Institutes by males. However, it is important to note that the Public sector does take a larger number of students and initially, if it

were to be calculated in percentages, the difference gap wouldn't be as large.

“Unknown” reasons were a sizable number in the private institutions and “other” was significant in public educational institutions. These two categories are however vague.

Table 2: Reasons for dropping out by HEI type and gender in the academic year in the academic year 2011/2012

Reason for leaving HEIs	Total			HEI					
	T	F	M	Private			Public		
	T	F	M	T	F	M	T	F	M
Expelled	374	27	347	9	7	2	365	20	345
Academic failure/not permitted to continue	573	64	509	118	14	104	455	50	405
Lack of desire to continue the study	94	42	52	0	0	0	94	42	52
Other personal reasons	2601	1159	1442	2196	1068	1128	405	91	314
Gone into employment	184	32	152	49	8	41	135	24	111
Interruption of the study	1062	461	601	730	392	338	332	69	263
Death	15	5	10	2	2	0	13	3	10
Financial reasons	578	305	273	578	305	273	0	0	0
Health reasons	23	14	9	22	14	8	1	0	1
Grand total	5504	2109	3395	3704	1810	1894	1800	299	1501

Source: Higher Education Admission Center 2017

The following year, 2011/2012, most drop-outs are males (as they are in all years investigated) however, most males through this year have dropped from Private Higher Education Institutes. This is due to personal reasons, financial reasons and their education

being interrupted. The same is shown in 2012/2013 report in the next page. Though the predominant reasons for drop-outs remain the same, however, more females were found to drop-out from private institutions.

Table 3: Reasons for dropping out by HEI type and gender in the academic year in the academic year 2012/2013

Reason for leaving HEIs	Total			HEI					
	T	F	M	Private			Public		
	T	F	M	T	F	M	T	F	M
Expelled	947	68	879	5	1	4	942	67	875
Academic failure/not permitted to continue	876	104	772	211	37	174	665	67	598
Lack of desire to continue the study	994	398	596	353	180	173	641	218	423
Other personal reasons	2556	1192	1364	1990	1046	944	566	146	420
Gone into employment	333	18	315	113	13	100	97	5	92
Interruption of the study	533	218	315	357	159	198	176	59	117
Death	19	9	10	6	3	3	13	6	10
Financial reasons	349	171	178	332	166	166	0	0	0
Health reasons	57	37	20	57	37	20	0	0	0
Movement to other institution	45	36	9	35	26	9	10	10	0
Written off after lapse of time	77	26	51	76	26	50	1	0	1
Grand total	6786	2277	4509	3535	1694	1841	3111	578	2536

Source: Higher Education Admission Center 2017

As for the final year of our studies, 2013/2014, the majority goes back to males from Public Higher

Education Institutes as shown on the below table. The trend is similar to the previous year.

Table 4: Reasons for dropping out by HEI type and gender in the academic year in the academic year 2013/2014

Reason for leaving HEIs	Total			HEI					
	T	F	M	Private			Public		
				T	F	M	T	F	M
Expelled	1045	154	891	195	95	100	850	59	791
Academic failure/not permitted to continue	708	154	554	85	29	56	623	125	498
Lack of desire to continue study	1706	670	1036	1304	584	720	402	86	316
Other personal reasons	2253	976	1277	1405	823	582	848	153	695
Employed	261	16	245	60	7	53	201	9	192
Interruption of study	1513	509	1004	802	407	395	711	102	609
Death	16	3	13	4	2	2	12	1	11
Financial reasons	106	20	86	97	19	78	9	1	8
Health reasons	101	54	47	89	52	37	12	2	10
Complete program	4	1	3	0	0	0	4	1	3
Exceeded the allocated time limit of study	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Others	2	1	1	2	1	1	0	0	0
Grand total	7716	2559	5157	4044	2020	2024	3672	539	3133

Source: Higher Education Admission Center 2017

It is interesting to note that there are a lot of personal reasons among the list in the table, which cover almost all the possible personal reasons. However, the high proportion of selection of this category could either include difficulties of living outside their home towns or lack of motivation to keep up with the academic rigor, which is not explicitly mentioned or documented. Considering that the students are allowed to choose their higher education institutions, the former reason may not be highly

prevalent. So, the difficulty in facing the academic rigor could be cited as the predominant cause. This calls for more and better academic and student support services like advising, peer tutoring, counseling etc. from the higher education institutions.

Micro-study:

Data collected over the last five years by MCBS about the students dropping from the institution is as follows.

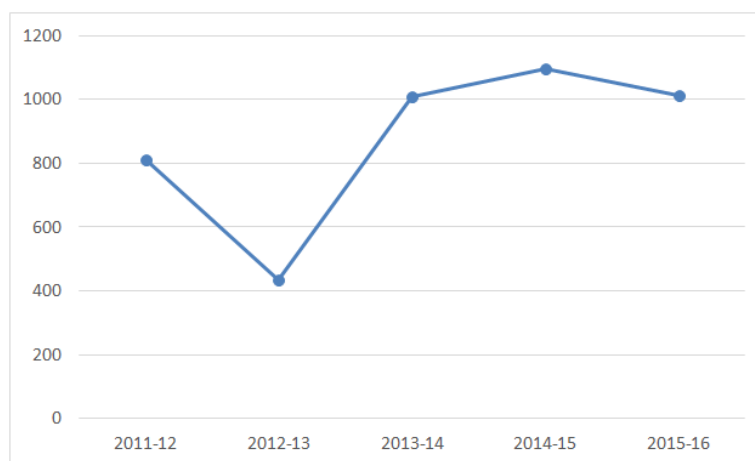


Fig 4: Number of Student Drop-outs from MCBS

Among the reasons for drop-outs as captured by MCBS, the split up is as follows: completion of study; left study; current study; postponed; transferred; withdrawn.

The major proportion of the student drop-outs could be categorized under “left study”. As the reasons were not evident from the title, a qualitative research was undertaken using the in-depth interview method

with the major touch-points of student drop-out information like the Registration department and the Student Affairs department. From the several interviews conducted with the staff in the two departments, the reason for drop-outs could be summarized as: personal reasons, academic reason, financial reasons etc.

Personal reasons include: 1. distance from their hometown and difficulties living in Muscat; 2. getting married; 3. child rearing duties; 3. found employment; 4. not willing to continue studies; 5. poor health etc. Academic reasons found are: 1. Difficulty in acquiring the required level of English; 2. Academic failure; 3. Difficulty level of college courses etc. Financial reasons found are: 1. Expiry of sponsorship period; 2. Inability of parents to continue sponsoring studies;

The majority of the drop-outs were found to fall under the “Personal Reasons” in line with the statistics from the Ministry of Higher Education followed by academic reasons.

The cause analysis was done using the Gilbert's Behavioural Engineering Model (BEM). The BEM separates performance problems into two levels: the individual and environment. The factors within the individual that influence the performance are considered under “individual level” and the factors within the environment that influence performance are considered under “environment level”. Performance influencing factors are further categorized by the BEM into three, namely: information, instrumentation, and motivation (Gilbert, 1996). This results in a six-cell matrix (Levels x Influencing factors) shown as below:

Table 5: Gilbert's Behavioural Engineering Model for Student Dropouts

	INFORMATION	INSTRUMENTATION	MOTIVATION
ENVIRONMENT	Difficulty level of courses	Difficult living conditions Expiry of govt. sponsorship Inability of Parents' sponsorships	Found employment
INDIVIDUAL	Inadequate proficiency in English	Getting married Child rearing duties Poor health	Distance from hometown Academic failure Not willing to continue studies

The cause analysis using Gilbert's BEM Model provides insights on the intervention strategies that can be adopted to check and minimize the student drop-out problem.

To address the information factor across the individual and environmental level (college level), the academic support services can be enhanced by providing mentoring, academic advising, student tutorials etc. The instrumentation factors can be address across both the levels by forging alliances with organizations providing the required services. Eg. Financial institutions to provide student loans, child care services, organizations to provide reliable and hygienic living conditions and food etc. Student support services like personal counselling can help in addressing the student personal issues and suggest them the best alternatives considering their present and future needs.

Lyche 2010 emphasizes on the preventive measures for early drop-out by strengthening academic support services. Considering that the public schooling system involves Arabic as the predominant language of instruction, the major higher education institutions have ‘foundation programs’ in place to supplement student needs. Also, mentoring and tutoring has been suggested for those not picked by earlier intervention. Providing sports activities are also being emphasized as a vital measure.

Lack of motivation has been cited in most research around the world as the primary cause for dropouts (Markussen, 2010). It can easily be measured by absenteeism (Hernes, 2010). This could mainly be

addressed by providing appropriate academic and student support services like effective academic advising, student-peer tutoring, counseling etc. These services must be provided both at the HEI level and at the Ministry of Higher Education who are the sponsors of majority of the students coming to the various educational institutions in Oman. This would help prevent students from leaving their studies, especially those who leave for vague reasons.

Monitoring of student disengagement and individualized intervention through effective advising and mentoring program is being recommended by Hammond et al., 2007. Further, considering the cultural and the academic context in Oman, it is suggested that the academic advising be made more effective using multi-tiered advising which involves academic advisors apart from personal mentors speaking the local language, who could provide psychological support and guidance to students to overcome their specific challenges.

Instrumentation factors which include capacity, support, tools and resources can be effectively addressed by forging partnerships with organizations providing the right type of services like financial support, child care support, personal support services like transportation and food. These can also be powerful grounds for industry-academia partnerships.

Student support services such as faculty monitored student peer-tutoring provides the endangered students to have open communication thereby helping them to seek clarifications openly and thereby instill academic confidence. Also, it helps the

student tutors to keep in touch with the current contents and concepts thereby improving their self-efficacy. Overall, the student peer tutoring program can lead to high academic and social engagement.

Effective student counselling through trained and experienced clinical psychologists helps the students to vent their difficulties and frustrations and further seek psychological help. It would greatly enhance the effectiveness if the counselling is provided in the native language to create cordial relationship and understanding.

For the aforesaid intervention to be put into action, the study suggests the following:

- Transition support should be provided by the Higher Education Institution when the students move to the college environment. The same should be pursued when they move between levels within the HEI e.g. from the foundation to the credit courses and then to the senior courses or internships and finally while trying to seek employment and further studies.
- Propensity to drop-out should be identified early by implementing an effective advising and mentoring system. This should then be followed by intervention measures to address those specific issues.
- Effective deployment of resources towards the identified intervention measures can be achieved by undertaking appropriate risk analysis. Sharing of the generated information between the transition phases and industry partnerships would help to put in preventive measures and need specific interventions.

The above-mentioned measures such as institution-industry partnership systems, academic and student support services etc. can prove to be significant considering the huge investment by government in scholarships to students and the educational system especially with the aim is to develop knowledge economy for sustained development.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has offered analysis and insights into student drop-outs in the Sultanate of Oman, using secondary data and qualitative study thereby integrating macro and micro perspectives. The research study attempts to identify the major reasons behind students dropping out of colleges and suggest suitable strategies to control the phenomenon. Personal, Academic and Financial reasons were found to be the major causes for student dropouts. Personal reasons were found to be the predominant reasons, followed by Academic reasons followed by Financial reasons. Using Gilbert's Behavioural Engineering Model and synthesizing the various perspectives, it is evident that providing effective academic support services, student support services and

key alliances with external organizations can help in improving the student retention and graduation rates.

REFERENCES

- Abdulla, F., & Ridge, N. (2011). Where are all the men? Gender, participation and higher education in the United Arab Emirates (Working Paper No. 11-03). Retrieved from Dubai School of Government website http://www.dsg.fohmics.net/en/Publication/Pdf_Ar/W P11-03.pdf
- Bradshaw, C., O'Brennan, M. L., & McNeely, C. (2008). Core competencies and the Prevention of School Failure and Early School Leaving. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 122, 19-32.
- Chaudhary, B. S. (2013, August 11). Why are UAE boys dropping out of school? Gulf News. Retrieved from <http://gulfnews.com/culture/education/why-are-uae-boys-dropping-out-of-school-1.1218563>
- Chen, R., & DesJardins, S. L. (2008), Exploring the effects of financial aid on the gap in student dropout risks by income level. *Research of Higher Education*, 31(3), Spring 2008; 329-354.
- Davalos, D., Chavez, E., & Guardiola, R. (1999, February). The effects of extracurricular activity, ethnic identification, and perception of school on student dropout rates. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 21(1), 61-78.
- Ghafour, P. K. A. (2010, July 11). University dropout rate 30 percent. Arab News. Retrieved from <http://www.arabnews.com/node/349946>
- AlGhanboosi, S. S. A., & Alqahtani, A. A. (2013). Student Drop-Out Trends at Sultan Qaboos University and Kuwait University: 2000-2011. *College Student Journal*. 47(3).
- Gilbert, T. F. (2007). Human Competence: Engineering worthy performance (3rd ed.). International Society for Performance Improvement. Pfeiffer/John Wiley & Sons.
- Hernes, G. (2010). Making Gold out of Granite – Measures to Reduce Dropout from Upper Secondary Education and Training. Fafo-report 2010:03, Oslo.
- Lyche, C. (2010). Taking on the Completion Challenge: A Literature Review on Policies to Prevent Dropout and Early School Leaving. OECD Education Working Papers, 53, OECD Publishing. Doi:10.1787/5km4m2t59cmr-en
- Markussen, E. (2010). Dropouts from Education among 16-20 year-olds in the Nordic countries. In E. Markussen (ed.). Nordic Council of Ministers, Copenhagen, 193-226.
- Shaibany, S. (2016, January 23). Higher Education student dropout rate in Oman is a cause of concern. Times of Oman. Retrieved from <http://timesofoman.com/article/75995/Opinion/High-dropout-rate-of-students-from-Oman's-higher-education-institutions-is-a-cause-for-concern>
- Higher Education Admission Center. (2017). Ministry of Higher Education. Sultanate of Oman. accessed 1 December 2016, < <http://www.heac.gov.om>>