

**The Characterisation of Sensemaking in the Formulation and Enactment of the
New General Foundation Programme in Omani Higher Education Institutions Context**

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Abstract

This qualitative study develops an improved understanding of the General Foundation Programme (GFP) policy enactment in the Omani higher education context. Using a cognitive framework, the study explores how the different stakeholders' individual cognition (beliefs, experiences and knowledge) and their situated cognition (social, cultural and physical contexts) influenced the formulation and enactment of the GFP in a selected higher education institution in Oman. The study made use of a combination of semi-structured interviews and document analysis. A total of 13 interviews were conducted with different stakeholders including policymakers, Associate Deans, Heads of Departments and Skills Coordinators. Documents drawn from the GFP portfolio prepared by the higher education institution under study were reviewed and analysed to develop a comprehensive understanding of the policy formulation and practice. The interview data and the document analysis data were analysed using the thematic analysis approach. Consequently, this revealed the process of how agents went through the phases of making sense, interpretation, reconciliation and/ or counterbalancing different institutional logics to enable or constrain them in the policy enactment process. The study findings revealed that the GFP reform employed a top-down approach in its formulation and individual cognition played a significant role in the formulation and enactment of the GFP policy. Although the GFP policy was a brainchild of the OAAAQA, the success of its enactment in the higher education institution was largely dependent on the individual cognition of the stakeholders within the institution. In addition, it was revealed that the situated cognition played an important role in the formulation and enactment of the GFP in the higher education institution context. The institution's effective organisational structure and culture promoted the extent to which the GFP policy was enacted. However, it also emerged that the lack of the engagement of the higher education institution in the formulation of the GFP policy created a cognitive dissonance regarding the level of complexity of the GFP learning outcomes at the institutional level. This study further enhanced an understanding of the dynamic nature of education policy enactment and its conceptualisation as a multi-layered endeavour under different conditions, contexts and resources.

These and other issues are discussed in detail in the thesis. One of the significant contributions of the thesis is the development of a clear conceptual framework of the cognitive model that stakeholders can deploy to effect educational policy reform and its subsequent effective enactment. The thesis acknowledges its limitations and sheds light on possible avenues for future research.

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Abbreviations

ADIGFP	Academic Departments involved in the GFP
BoD	Board of Directors
CAP	Center for Academic Practices
CFS	Center for Foundation Studies
CELTA	English Language Teaching to Adults
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DOP	Department Operational Plan
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
GFP	General Foundation Program
GFP QA	GFP Quality Audit
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HoD	Head of Department
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ICDL	International Computer Driving Licence
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LA	Learner Attributes
Los	Learning Outcomes

MES	Module Evaluation Survey
MIG	Module Information Guide
MoHERI	Ministry of Higher Education Research and Innovation
MLO	Module Learning Outcome
MRR	Module Review Report
OAAAQA	Oman Academic Accreditation Authority and Quality Assurance
OASGFP	Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Program
PGCert	Post Graduate Certificate
PLOs	Program Learning Outcomes
PM	Program Manager
PRT	Program Review Team
QA	Quality Assurance
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time bound
TESOL	Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages
TLS	Teaching and Learning Strategy
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
UG	Undergraduate
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

Dedication

This solid achievement is dedicated to my late father, Khalfan and my mother Sharifa who played a prominent role in encouraging me to have full determination, strength, and resilience. Their sacrifices and love despite all the hardships they have gone through made me the person I am today.

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Author's declaration

This thesis results are entirely from my own work and have not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma.

Asma Al Afi

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and context of the study

In the light of the rapid development at the global and local level, the preparation of well-educated and qualified young generations at highest levels was and continues to be an urgent need. These generations are required to obtain competencies of dealing with international standards, modern technology, and booming knowledge in all fields. The Sultanate aims to obtain graduates of academics, scientists and researchers that shall contribute locally and internationally (MOHERI website, n.p.).

Oman's higher education is relatively young, having established its first public university in 1986. The establishment of the Ministry of Higher Education Research and Innovation (MOHERI) under the Royal Decree Number (2/1994) helped to champion the rapid expansion of the higher education (HE) sector. The MOHERI worked closely with the government and the private sector to expand the provision of HE across the country. To date, although there are only three public universities in the country, there are 27 private university colleges that are providing different degree programmes in the country. To enhance the quality of higher education, the Government allowed private universities to establish collaborative partnerships with other universities from countries such as the UK, Germany, US, Netherlands and others. In addition, the quality assurance body, Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance (OAAAQA), was established to regulate the provision of higher education across the country.

The Oman Government is determined to provide good quality higher education to the young people in the country. As a result, when it was observed that many young people from secondary schools were not ready to be enrolled directly onto the degree programmes, the General Foundation Programme (GFP) was introduced. Ideally, attainment of secondary exit standards should enable the

student to enter directly to their specialisation at university level. That said, about 88% of all students who undertake the higher education programme at the university level in Oman are found to be required to complete the GFP which underscores its significance (Tuzlukova, 2022; Tuzlukova et al., 2023).

In 2002, the OAAAQA formulated the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes (OASGFP). This was achieved in partnership with the MOHERI. Following their development, the implementation of these standards became mandatory for all higher education institutions in Oman, that is, both public and private universities. For quality enhancement, the MOHERI encouraged all the HEIs to construct a coherent curriculum that is in line with the national Oman Academic Standards of GFP (OASGFP). The GFP in Oman plays an important role in the higher education sector, serving as a preparatory stage that equips students with the necessary skills and knowledge for academic success. All higher education institutions (HEIs) in the country have adopted this programme, to ensure a consistent and high-quality foundation for the learners. The GFP is not only about academic preparation, but it also aims to foster critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and independent learning skills, which are essential for undergraduate studies and beyond.

However, since the introduction of the GFP in all HEIs in Oman, to my knowledge no study has been conducted to explore the delivery of the programme from the policymakers and enacting agents' perspective. Having worked in one of the private university colleges in Oman where the GFP is implemented, I was curious to develop a critical understanding of the issues around the formulation and enactment of the GFP policy within the higher education sector in the country. This chapter presents an account that helps to situate the inquiry, and to provide an overview of the study I conducted as part of my doctoral journey.

1.2 Research Aim

To gain a better understanding of policy design and enactment in higher educational contexts, this study critically examines and investigates the

nature of the General Foundation Programme (GFP) reform from the policymakers and the enacting agents' perspective. I was interested to identify the various factors influencing the GFP policy enactment by eliciting the views of the policymakers who are in a central national regulatory unit (OAAAQA), and the enacting agents (Associate Deans, HODs, and Skills coordinators) who are based in the selected HEI. The perceptions of the participants were elicited within the cognitive framework utilised in the thesis. The research questions are listed below.

1.3 Research Questions

The study formulated the following main research questions:

1. What role does individual cognition (knowledge, beliefs, experience) play in formulating and enacting the GFP?
2. How does situated cognition (institutional logics and infrastructure) influence the formulation and enactment of the GFP?
3. What is the utility of the cognitive framework in characterising the educational reform, and its subsequent implications in reframing policy enactment in the HE sector?

1.4 The Provision of GFP in HEIs in Oman

The GFP is a formal and structured programme that is designed to prepare students for a wide range of subsequent post-secondary and higher education programme options. It has been formulated and enacted in Oman HEIs for more than two decades now having been launched in 2002. The HEIs were encouraged to address the students' education, experiences, feelings, and needs. In other words, it was the responsibility of each HEI to develop the GFP curriculum, teach and assess students, and review and improve its curriculum in line with the requirements of the national standards. This represented a significant quality enhancement opportunity for different HEIs around Oman (Tuzlukova et al.,

2019). The GFP is a significant phenomenon in Oman's higher education landscape. Its primary focus is on the attainment of the prescribed learning outcomes in the four core areas including English, mathematics, information technology and study/life skills. However, as indicated earlier, the GFP was envisaged to contribute to the development of other important skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and autonomous learning. The nature of the GFP and its implementation is mandated by the MOHERI in each HEI in Oman. Quality assurance organisations including OAAAQA at the programme level and institutional accreditation at the regional or national levels require programmes to show student attainment of foundation skills outcomes (Ryan, 2011). Furthermore, results from the GFP learning outcomes spur dialogue and action in the programme committee for continuous development and quality assurance purposes.

Academic standards in higher education play a significant role in driving quality of education forward in terms of catalysing improvements in programmes or curricula (Ali et al., 2020). Considering this, Oman has introduced an inaugural set of standards for GFP and developed it for broader quality enhancement. To begin with, it is important to mention that GFP is a non-credit bearing programme, different from specialised foundation programmes that comprise core subjects taken in the first year to provide a basis for the rest of the programme. OASGFP is not a bridging course that provides educational opportunities that were missing between the exit standards of high school and entry standards of college. It does not address structural gaps in the education system, instead it provides additional assistance for those students who have had exposure to the required academic standards yet have not succeeded in meeting them. Henceforth, the significance of the study, GFP is simply too important to ignore, and the establishment of its comprehensive set of standards focused on bridging the gap of higher education entrance requirements.

Moreover, the term 'General' in General Foundation Programme GFP indicates that the programme is generic preparation for all university/college

specialisations within undergraduate or postgraduate programmes and can be augmented as necessary for the requirements of a subsequent programme of study. As such, GFP standards apply nationally; yet, they are set at the level of generic learning outcomes. This provides flexibility while allowing each HEI to develop their own curriculum (Ali et al., 2020). In addition, the process of standards development did not indicate the presence of the competencies necessary to implement and enact them. Yet, they were designed in a way to ensure HEIs have the maximum level of flexibility in managing their GFPs.

The introduction of GFP into the HEIs used a top-down approach (Meng & Su, 2021). The standards were formulated in a central office, that is, the OAAAQA. While the HEI stakeholders value the GFP, some legitimate questions can be asked regarding the extent to which they make sense of the GFP policy, internalise it, and enact it in their classrooms? What are their beliefs, attitudes, emotions regarding the GFP, and how does this affect the policy enactment? How do social interactions among those implementing agents, the organisational environment, and resources aid in their cognition and enactment of the GFP? These questions that are raised are crucial since each HEI is responsible for teaching and assessing student attainment of the learning outcomes over the course of a mandatory GFP that is offered to students to prepare them for their future areas of study and eventual employment. This underscores the importance of investigating the extent to which the institutional stakeholders, I will now refer to as the enacting agents, view, understand, and practise GFP. All this has an impact on the quality of education they provide, that is, whether they achieve to instill in the students the desire for lifelong learning, fostering intellectual curiosity and engendering critical thinking through the courses of English language, mathematics, information technology and study/life skills. Arguably, to ensure its effective enactment, which follows the general education principles and standards, such as to adequately prepare students for the 21st Century learning and serve as an integrated, interdisciplinary, and applied learning opportunity, efforts are required to understand the cognition of the GFP enacting agents.

Since the ministerial decision which states that all private and public HEIs operating in Oman should adopt the GFP, it is interesting to note that no study has explored the delivery of the programme from the policymakers' and enacting agents' perspective. The constitution of pan sectoral working groups comprising national and international academicians who developed the GFP standards, using national and international benchmarking, with extensive public consultations have not yet investigated the HEIs stakeholders' sensemaking of the GFP, or how they enacted the GFP policy in practice. As highlighted earlier, this prompted me to conduct the present study. The following section highlights the significance of my study.

1.5 Significance of the study

This thesis utilises the cognitive/sensemaking framework to address an identified gap in literature, that is, to unveil how the GFP is enacted in HEIs in Oman. The study findings provide important insights to the government, international bodies and private HEI sectors to assess the education quality and explore the effective enactment of educational reforms such as the GFP policy. However, one important question is: how is education quality assessed in practice? Can this be achieved through the identification of specific academic dimensions or through the development of appropriate indicators? If so, what comprises the appropriate indicators then? Is quality education a key indicator to the learners' preparation for the world of work, maximising their earning power, while contributing to national GDP? Or is it one that equips the learners with knowledge, liberating their minds with competences and skills which can increase personal earning and contribute to economic productivity. The lack of agreement on what education quality entails is vivid and so the multiplicity of education quality conceptions also affects the design and enactment of programme assessment, monitoring, and improvement strategies (Baxendale, 2015). Nevertheless, this study focuses on the understanding of the GFP and its national standards for effective enactment. Arguably, the insights from this study are important for different stakeholders including students, the enacting agents within the HEIs, and lastly but not least,

the policymakers.

Furthermore, this thesis is a form of a revival in enactment studies that aims at both understanding and explaining the dynamics of policy enactment relationship, while seeking to develop appropriate prescriptions to the cognitive framework developed by (Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane et al., 2019) through the contextual understanding of educational reforms from the experiences of representative stakeholders in an Omani HEI. Since there is still lack of attention to the appropriateness of differing conceptualisations of the policy enactment relationship to desired outcomes, the thesis substantially contributes to focus on this gap through examining the ongoing conversations in the ‘inhabited institutionalism’ and sensemaking traditions of the GFP national curriculum in Oman. From a broader perspective, the thesis argues that it holds empirical significance on the development of cognitive framework that can be utilised in HEIs that are engaged in similar reforms with similar contexts to enhance policy enactment practice at local, regional, national and global levels. The context is very important and has great significance on the processes of sensemaking and the subsequent notions of institutional logics and enactment. Previous studies have not provided an Omani context for implementation of educational reform through the lens of sensemaking. This Oman context shares paramount similarities in the region and may be used as a “working model” in other similar yet far international contexts. At the core, practice is agentic. Understanding agency based on perceived sensemaking activities and processes is critical to practice and therefore flightpath and trajectory. The institutional broader cultural context provides the policymakers with logics for the formulation of the reforms at a macro level and provides the enacting agents with logics for interpretation and enactment of reforms at a micro level (Hallett, 2010; Thornton et al., 2012). This is achieved by showing how those agents make sense of GFP situated in their system’s organisational identity to address the institutional needs and concerns and demonstrate their efforts to rebuild educational infrastructure and quality of teaching and learning. The thesis is an in-depth case study; however,

it remains at a small scale since it is only conducted in one of the HEIs in Oman, hence, its results cannot be generalised across the sector. Nevertheless, it makes a good contribution to both professional and academic fields of knowledge, through reaching a conclusion on what constitutes a successful enactment from four areas which are: individual cognition, situated cognition, distributed cognition and role of representations. Implications of the thesis include a significant addition to the body of knowledge of policy enactment research in higher education. It goes beyond the constraints of evaluation studies as it develops and supports the notion of how policy enactment can be reconceptualised and/or re-made as a process by the enacting agents within their situated contexts (Trowler, 2014). As highlighted earlier, there has been a scarcity of research in studying the Omani context for implementation and enactment of educational reform through the lens of sensemaking and cognition, thus, this context shares paramount similarities in the region and may be used as a 'working model' in other similar, yet, far international contexts. In a nutshell, the thesis contributes significantly to the development of the cognitive framework that can be utilised in different higher education institutional bodies, both nationally and internationally to enhance policy enactment.

1.6 Thesis structure

The thesis begins with the introduction chapter that mainly sets out the background and context of study, including the research aim and questions, as well as the significance of the study.

Chapter two commences with a critical presentation of extensive literature review on understanding policy and policy enactment and cognition, institutional logics, and organisational culture change. The chapter makes it explicit that educational infrastructure, inhabited institutionalism, and institutional logics constitute important contextual factors for policy sensemaking and enactment.

Chapter three presents the research methodology and methods. Methodology is considered as the umbrella term that includes the research design, the theoretical

framework, researcher positionality, research methods, data analysis methods, and the ethical implications of the study at hand. Methods refer to the procedures or techniques used to collect and to analyse the data. The study is qualitative in nature and is, therefore, underpinned by the interpretivist philosophy. As you will notice, the chapter presents and discusses the sensemaking and cognitive framework. These theoretical frameworks enabled the exploration of the GFP policy enactment in the selected HEI.

Chapter four presents the data analysis and discussion of the findings considering the consulted literature. The presentation and discussion of the findings is arranged thematically via the development of substantial arguments focusing on the thesis' central research questions. The findings are further contemplated in terms of the theoretical framework employed.

Lastly but not least, chapter 5 culminates with a comprehensive summary of the principal findings, emphasising their relevance and potential for application in similar contexts. Reflecting on the study's limitations, the chapter reflects on the research's contributions, its uniqueness, and the consequent implications for future studies aimed at understanding the complex relationship between policy enactment and organisational dynamics.

1.7 Summary

This chapter gives an overview of the focus of the study, the background and context of the study, the study aim and the main research questions. In addition, the chapter highlights the significance, and the novelty of the investigation addressed in the thesis. It provides the rationale for the research and derived research questions that are examined throughout the thesis. The following chapter presents the literature review.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents a review of extant literature related with the issues under consideration in this study. As clearly articulated in chapter 1, the study sought to bring to light the intersecting factors linked with the enactment of the General Foundation Programme (GFP) policy in Oman. As a result, this chapter critically examines literature on the development and enactment of educational policy within the higher education sector, paying attention to the approaches used to develop the education policy and the contemporary issues raised regarding policy reception, reproduction, and enactment. In addition, the chapter presents a discussion of some of the relevant theories such as the sensemaking theory, and cognition, which constitute the main theoretical framework of the study. Educational infrastructure, inhabited institutionalism and institutional logics are identified as the contextual factors for policy enactment in the educational institution under study.

2.2 Defining Education policy

There was a time when educational policy as policy was taken for granted...Clearly that is no longer the case. Today, educational policies are the focus of considerable controversy and public contestation...educational policy making has become highly politicised (Olssen et al., 2004, p. 2-3).

Education policy features highly on the development agenda of governments across the globe. This epitomises its role as a driving force for actualizing the predetermined national goals. While I acknowledge the complexity and the near impossibility of making a definitive all-encompassing definition, Bates et al. (2019) define education policy as “the raft of laws and initiatives that determine the shape and functioning of educational systems at both national and local level” (p.39). The importance of education policy can be gleaned from this definition, that is,

the existing education policy determines how education systems are formulated and developed. In addition, it can be extrapolated from the above definition that education policy can be initiated by the national government or by local authorities. In the same vein, Trowler (2003) provides a formal definition of education policy as a specification of principles and actions, or a statement of intentions and practices related to educational issues that are mandated to bring desired educational goals. Once a policy is defined, context is important as this determines how the policy is interpreted and translated into practice. The concept of practice in this thesis is informed by institutional logics and sensemaking theory, recognising that policy enactment is a dynamic and context-dependent process. Therefore, practice mainly refers to the situated actions and interactions through which institutional actors (e.g., educators and administrators) interpret and implement policy in their specific organisational contexts. To adopt an operational definition of the word practice, it is important to say that it is not a mere execution of policy but an adaptive process where actors negotiate, reinterpret, and sometimes modify policies based on institutional constraints and resources. Drawing from Spillane et al. (2019) and Ball et al. (2012), the thesis considers practice as enactment, meaning that policy is actively shaped by those who implement it, rather than being merely applied as written. The thesis also adopts Trowler's (2003) view of policy as a practice, emphasising that policy is continuously reconstructed through institutional logics and local discourse.

Arguably, the policy making process is complex as there are many factors that influence a policy, for instance, different stakeholders can interpret a given policy differently. For example, those who present the policy might interpret its content differently from those who receive the policy. As a result, a policy may be better understood as a plurality of policies that emerge and develop as the policy process moves from formulation to implementation. This study considers policy as a practice (Trowler, 2003) and is focusing on exploring the enactment of the GFP policy in Oman's higher education institutions, that is, how the policy is "interpreted and translated and reconstructed and remade in different but similar

settings, where local resources, and diffuse sets of discourses and values are deployed in a hybrid process of enactment” (Ball et al., 2012, p.6).

The policy under consideration in this case, the GFP policy, was initiated by the national government with the view to enhancing the quality of education. Heimans (2012) raises some important questions that resonate with some of the questions addressed in this study related to the policy design. He asks questions about where the policy makers’ power to make certain knowledge forms mandatory and assessable lie and, in whose interests, policymakers or the educational institutions? He further questions what is it that the policymakers can do? What is it that educators must do, or have a choice over given a set of policy demands? In other words, to what degree do the policy instruments consult or coerce to ensure that its goals are realised, and how are the results of achievements evaluated by the government and those who are affected by its actions? These questions demonstrate that there are several factors that influence policy development, implementation and enactment as indicated above. This study was designed to bring to light some of the factors affecting the enactment of the GFP policy. However, there is little mention of how the measurement of the realisation of the goal can, if ever, be fully and precisely achieved.

2.2.1 Approaches to Policy development

It was useful to understand the approaches used to develop educational policies. As a result, I engaged in scoping some literature around this topic. I was able to appreciate that different approaches can be used to develop educational policies. Literature highlights top-down approach to policy development as one of the most commonly used (Aizawa & Rose, 2019; Ball, 2006; Brynard, 2010; Gaus et al., 2019; Heimans, 2012; Hudson et al., 2019; Khoboli et al., 2013; Scott, 2020) My experience of working in Oman and talking to some experienced education professionals in the higher education sector shows that the most common approach used to design educational policies in the Middle Eastern countries, is the top-down approach, also known as the managerial approach. This is a

hierarchical and centralised structure that dictates orders to be transmitted vertically from the top of the organisational pyramid to the base, and policies are expected to be fully implemented without question (Palinkas, 2018; Scott, 2020; Walsh, 2020). This approach to policy development carries some benefits. For instance, having a group of experts in a centralised unit can ensure that policies are developed quickly and cascaded down for implementation. In addition, like in the case of the GFP policy in Oman, having been developed by OAAAQA, this meant that the same standards were to be promoted consistently across all the HEIs in Oman. There is no guarantee though that the actual implementation of the policy would be consistent given the different contextual factors, and this will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections of this thesis. In the same vein, the downside of this approach is that the leaders and the teachers in the HEIs may not understand the policies, thereby making it difficult to translate them into practice. Several authorities state that this constitutes a fundamental flaw of the top-down model, its core focus is on the perspective of the decision makers neglecting strategic initiatives from the recipient levels and/or local implementing officials (Meng & Su, 2021). Such criticism underestimates the strategies used by the street level bureaucrats to go about enacting the policy or diverting it to their own purposes (Fullan, 2007). Yet, such an eliminatory approach is not ideal to understanding such a complex process with different perspectives. The experience of the cognitive collective shareholders is critical for improved understanding of the practice and the subsequent enactment. Much of the existing literature tends to regard the managerial approach as problematic in terms of achieving coordination and compliance with policy in terms of power relations, conflicting interests and value systems between agencies who are responsible for making policy and individuals who are responsible for taking the action (Chan, 2010). In this view, it is nearly impossible for managers to shape organisational culture to implement policies precisely as they are designed. This is because organisational cultures are intricate and consist of diverse values, making the interpretation and application of new policies a complex task. Educational organisations are characterised with individuals and groups who have deeply rooted values and attitudes drawn to think critically and can learn

and evolve in their innovative practices opposite to slavish obedience to the approved way of enacting reforms and this depicts policy as discourse (Bates et al., 2019). In doing so, this will either lead to concealing the recipients' own inventions or results in resistance, subversion, non-compliance and ultimately failure (Viennet & Pont, 2017).

An additional dimension that can be examined during the study is a better understanding of how policy can be put into effect if its aspirations are culturally and structurally distanced from the attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and expectations of the enacting agents who can be individuals in a group of organisations such as colleges and universities? It is perhaps clear that such organisations which are characterised with multiple and conflicting cultures are likely to fail in translating the education policy to practice and will need sufficient resources to build a strong coherent culture and clarity on how to bring about change that ensures the policy is enacted as intended (Trowler, 2014). These factors intersect, and sometimes conflict with each other. For example, having the infrastructure and resources is not a guarantee that a given policy would be enacted effectively. These issues will be revisited when discussing the findings of this study. As indicated in the preceding chapter, the GFP policy is an example of a top-down policy, hence, it was interesting to establish how it was being enacted in the selected HEI.

A more viable alternative to the methodological weaknesses of the top-down approach has been developed by the bottom uppers such as Hjern et al. (1982). The bottom-up approach involves the identification of goals, strategies, and framework from a network of local, regional and national actors involved in planning, financing and execution of the relevant governmental and non-governmental programmes. The mechanism of moving from street level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) to the top level of policy makers in public policy sectors provides the opportunity for pursuing strategies from a wide range of actors' values, attitudes, and perceptions. In this case, policies tend to evolve through

the multiplicity of actors, which is considered as part of bottom-up process. When policy becomes refracted as it is implemented, i.e., distorted and less coherent as it is interpreted and put into practice, ground level actors are regarded as agents more than receivers since their production of policy reflects their priorities and interests characterising their location on an implementation staircase (Saunders, 2006). Moreover, while the top-down approach focuses on the extent to which the overall system is constrained and structured, the bottom-up focuses on local implementation structures, accurately mapping the strategies of actors with policy problems, enhancing the understanding of actor interaction in policy sectors overall.

Researchers in this field argue that the two approaches, i.e., top-down and bottom-up, are better when combined because the policy process is best conducted with mutual comprehension between the macro, meso and micro levels. However, anecdotal evidence reveals that such a combination of the two approaches is non-existent in the Middle Eastern countries especially, in Oman.

This constitutes a gap in the development of higher educational reforms as it is very important for the policy makers to understand the nature of the cultural characteristics of their educational institutions (Ball et al., 2012). Arguably, a policy design model that combines the best features of the top-down and bottom-up approaches is an optimal solution for understanding policy subsystems and its production.

As can be gleaned from the preceding section, the development of educational policies is influenced by the educational ideologies which shape the policy makers and enacting agents' behavior. This view is captured by Trowler (2014) who asserts that the set of values, attitudes and beliefs which relate particularly to the educational policy design can act as a guide and a justification of how policy should be designed to achieve what is desired. Yet, policy design tends to be far away from the outcome desired because it is not simply the mechanical application of means to realise given ends, but a reflection of decisions made by networks of

actors in a complex web that involves negotiation, compromise, and exercise of power. As such, the policy design is usually laden with multiple agendas, values and set of meanings and requires complex practices of interpretation, sensemaking, and negotiation from the enacting agents' perspectives as well. The following section discusses policy implementation and enactment, making explicit the different factors that are likely to affect policy process and practice.

2.2.2 Policy Enactment

This study explores the factors influencing the enactment of the GFP in the selected HEI in Oman. In this section, an attempt is made to highlight some of the factors that militate against the effective translation of policy into practice. Once the government has chosen its policy instrument to implement a specific educational programme, for example the GFP, there is a question around the degree to which this programme will be enacted towards completion at the recipient level across the HEIs. This is because the level of attention paid to implementation and enactment once the policy has been issued can greatly differ from one HEI to another. Scott (2011) argues that the level of understanding and knowledge of policy should be the same across all HEIs to ensure that the enactment is as close as possible to the intentions of the policy makers. Even if this is achieved, the contextual differences constitute a major source of difference in the way the enacting agents enact a policy. These contextual factors include the institutional logics, infrastructure and the inhabited institutionalism, and each of these will be discussed in the following section.

Nevertheless, if the educational policy such as the GFP is carried out in line with the policymakers' intentions, does that necessarily count as a success? I agree with the observation made by Scott (2011) who argues that a policy could be successfully enacted from the standpoint of the government; yet, fail to meet the needs of those who are affected by it. Trowler (2014) points out that policies used to be concentrated on authority and capacity measures, whereas now they encompass a wider array of instruments for successful reforms. This brings me

to the question about how the different policy instruments or approaches may be employed to design policy metrics to gauge the success of a policy practice. At the institutional level, it is important to examine the nature of this practice through a theoretical framework, namely institutional logics. The next section critically examines institutional logics and infrastructure with the view to facilitating the critical understanding of the GFP in its formulation and enactment.

2.3 Institutional Logics and Infrastructure

Institutional logics are defined as: “the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organise time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality” (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p.804). In their definition, Thornton and Ocasio (1999) make it explicit that the actions and beliefs of individuals and organisations are guided by the institutional logics. These logics can either be material practices or symbolic systems and they provide meaning to the activities and influence the shape and the changes observed within institutions. I concur with the observation made by Friedland and Alford (1991) that to understand the practices within an institution, it is important to develop an understanding of the nature of the context of the institution. They further argue that institutions represent overarching frameworks of human action that enable individuals and organisations to create and sustain their material livelihood. These structures also facilitate the organisation of time and space, while simultaneously conferring significance upon the social reality they experience. Institutions are the bedrock upon which society constructs and maintains its existence, both physically and conceptually (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). Thornton and colleagues (2012) argue that the conduct of individuals and organisations is embedded within an institutional framework that does not only regulates behavior, but also offers opportunities for autonomy and transformation. Building on the framework of institutional theory, which encompasses coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures, a critical perspective for understanding practices lies in the

examination of institutional logics. Institutional logics were introduced to organisation studies by Alford and Friedland (1985). The later research by Thornton and others (2012) further sheds light on the intricacies of practices and the evolution of related identities.

The emphasis on 'assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules' is crucial as they are intimately connected to the process of sensemaking, influencing the cognitive comprehension of practices and thus affecting their enactment. Thornton and Ocasio (2008) expanded upon Friedland and Alford's (1991) original five institutional logics by adding a sixth corporation, while omitting the previously proposed democracy logic. Later, Thornton et al. (2012) introduced a seventh logic, community, resulting in a comprehensive framework of seven institutional logics: state, market, family, corporation, religion, profession, and community. These logics represent the foundational principles of institutions, each closely linked to specific societal structures. Their applicability may derive from their cognitive recognition by individuals, making their enactment pivotal. This highlights the importance of a deeper exploration of the cognitive theory and sensemaking within this research. Thornton and colleagues (2012) further applied these logics to understand the intricacies of institutional transformations (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999; Thornton et al., 2012). The use of institutional logics in higher education research is a burgeoning field. Cai and Mehari (2015) observed that most studies in this area traditionally focused on 'new' institutionalism, emphasising concepts like isomorphism and structuration. However, more contemporary theories such as institutional entrepreneurship and institutional logics have not been employed frequently. Lepori (2016) recognised the value of applying institutional logics theory to the field of higher education research. He posited that this theory offers a nuanced and adaptable approach that acknowledges the significance of inherent human agency and the complex layers of societal interactions.

The importance of human agency cannot be overstated when it comes to understanding practices. Although this framework might be perceived as more encompassing rather than intricate when compared to the institutional theory, its strength lies in its capacity to provide a faithful depiction of human agency, which is inherently contextual, subjective, and fluid. The manifestation of institutional logics is observable solely at the individual and organisational strata.

Nevertheless, it is through the lens of cognitive theory, and consequently the sensemaking processes of individuals, that we can gain a deeper comprehension of institutional practices. As a result, in this study, the views and experiences of the policymakers and the HEI enacting agents were elicited. Furthermore, an examination of individual cognition, situated cognition, distributed cognition, and the role of representations, which are the four central tenets of the cognitive framework under examination (Spillane et al., 2002) is imperative for a holistic understanding. To understand the formulation and the enactment of the GFP in the selected HEI in Oman, it was important to explore both the individual cognition and the situated cognition of the different stakeholders. As argued by Thornton et al. (2012), I understood that the institutional logics provide a framework for understanding how actors maintain a degree of autonomy from societal structures, which is essential for a deeper investigation into the interplay between these logics and individual actions. I felt that this perspective allows for an analysis of how embedded norms and beliefs guide behaviour, while also acknowledging the capacity for agency within the confines of these institutional parameters. By exploring this dynamic, I expected to gain insights into the mechanisms that enable actors to operate with a certain level of self-direction, despite the overarching influence of established institutional beliefs or norms.

To enhance our understanding of agency and practice, it is useful to consider institutional logics and their role in sensemaking as they offer a comprehensive, yet often subconscious, framework of processes within an organisation. A crucial

perspective for grasping these practices comes from scrutinising institutional logics. Thornton et al. (2012) offers insightful perspectives on the evolution of practices and the formation of related identities. They propose that organisational identity and practices are pivotal in connecting institutional logics with the processes within organisations. This conceptualisation helps in understanding how institutional frameworks influence organisational behaviours and vice versa. Their analysis sheds light on the intricate relationship between the macro-level logics of institutions and the micro-level actions within organisations, providing a comprehensive view of organisational dynamics. Logics inform actions as they embody a framework of anticipated patterns in social interactions and conduct. These underlying principles serve as a blueprint, guiding individuals on how to engage and behave within the societal construct. They are not merely abstract concepts but are instrumental in shaping the dynamics of human relationships and the conduct expected in various social scenarios. By adhering to these logics, individuals navigate the complexities of social norms and fulfil the roles and responsibilities that come with their social identities. Essentially, logics are the invisible forces that mould social conduct and interaction, providing a consistent set of standards by which people can align their actions. The emphasis on 'assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules' is particularly significant because these are intimately connected to the act of sensemaking. These elements and processes play a crucial role in the development of a cognitive understanding of practices, which in turn affects how these practices are carried out. Understanding these foundational aspects is essential for grasping how individuals and organisations interpret and engage with their routines and procedures, shaping their actions and interactions. The work of Thornton and her associates also extends to the application of these logics in understanding the intricate nature of changes within institutional systems. (Thornton & Ocasio ,1999; Thornton et al., 2012).

Although the application of institutional logics in higher education studies is considered to be relatively new (Cai & Mehari, 2015), I agree with the

observations made by Lepori (2016), that this framework holds much promise in studies like mine. Lepori (2016) affirmed the potential of the theory of institutional logics for the study of higher education, stating that “logics theory could provide a more nuanced and flexible framework, which considers the role of embedded human agency and the multi-level nature of societal dynamics” (p. 245). Human agency is critical to understanding practices. While the framework is perhaps seen as more comprehensive than the institutional theory, it can provide an accurate ‘account’ of human agency which is contextual, subjective and dynamic.

It has been noted widely in literature that institutional logics offer significant value in higher education research (Bastedo, 2009). This is largely because the HE sector has been historically recognised for being heavily influenced by professional dominance. Such a viewpoint provides a robust framework for understanding the complex dynamics and practices within educational institutions. The HE sector increasingly represents a complex institutional system containing plural and even contesting institutional logics (Bastedo, 2009; Shields & Watermeyer, 2020). Suddaby et al. (2010) articulates a significant worry that even minor alterations have become institutionalised. This apprehension is shared in institutional logics, where any meaning system is considered an institutional logic, thereby overlooking the necessity for substantial or field-level transformation, as noted by Dacin et al. (2002). This is even far more complex when this change is presented as governmental policy at a national or even local level as in the case of the introduction of the GFP in HEIs in Oman. Meanwhile, Durand and Thornton (2018) point out that the identification and operationalisation of institutional logics is not at the same level of refinement and systematic analysis as in the categories in literature leading to delays in the development of new generalisable concepts. Furthermore, Ocasio et al. (2017) express concern that the proliferation of articles on institutional logics has led to some confusion regarding the conceptualisation and application of the institutional logics perspective. As a result, they call for more research on the degree of coherence of institutional logics and how they are differentiated from

societal logics (Ocasio et al., 2017). Lepori (2016) found that most higher education studies have not fully mobilised the analytical potential of the approach and the methods developed by mainstream logics studies. This makes it hard to utilise the framework in effective research designs. Reay and Jones (2016) note that: “different authors reveal and interpret institutional logics in diverse ways, and despite the large volume of studies about logics, there is very limited discussion about how they can be identified, described, and measured” (p. 442). Yet, they identified three techniques, used by researchers in organisation studies to qualitatively capture institutional logics, namely (1) pattern deducing, (2) pattern matching, and (3) pattern inducing. These different approaches expose a tension in institutional logics studies and perhaps represents an oversimplification of the approach. On the one hand, rigorous application of the seven classic institutional logics can more fully mobilise the analytical potential of institutional logics, helping to discern a logic and distinguish among logics, demonstrating when multiple logics are at play in a field or organisation and revealing institutional complexity (Reay & Jones, 2016).

On the other hand, the theoretical development of institutional logics is continuing to grow through these multiple approaches (Reay & Jones, 2016). Institutional logics function beyond the scope of individual organisations, serving as both tangible and symbolic tools that shape practices. They form a foundational philosophy that guides practical actions within professional fields. All these theoretical perspectives are useful when exploring the impact of institutional logics on the way the enacting agents enact the GFP in the HEI under study. Institutional fields exhibit a logical plurality, and while they are distinct from the socially unlocated orders of worth as posited by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), they nonetheless delineate areas of social engagement. The underlying principles of institutional logics elude simple explanation or derivation from the habitual interactions of individuals or organisations, nor can they be solely attributed to the repetitive rational choices of individuals or the dynamics of competition and coercion in organisational dealings. The essence of a religion or

an economy transcends its structural embodiment. The authors emphasise that institutional logics are not simply synonymous with individual dealings or the organisational structure of fields. These logics manifest through actions and are perceptible only through the behaviours at both the individual and organisational levels. Thornton and colleagues (2012) contend that these principles are crucial for studies like mine, which focus on understanding the enactment of policies through the lens of institutional logics. This perspective considers the conduct of individuals and organisations as embedded within an institutional framework that not only governs behaviour, but also offers opportunities for agency and transformation.

2.4 Policy development and enactment

Given that the study at hand seeks to establish the factors affecting the development and enactment of the GFP, it was useful to conduct a review of literature to identify some of the factors discussed in extant literature. It is important to understand how individuals interpret GFP and adopt it into their local daily practice in the Omani context. The social and physical arrangements of the HEI under study are also influential because they enable and constrain efforts to enact educational reforms. Such conditions include resources as human capital, curricular materials, workplace norms, staff development, local will or motivation and organisational arrangements that support collaboration among staff members (Spillane et al., 2019). As argued earlier, ideology and culture also play an important role in policy making and implementation since it heavily impacts on how policy is interpreted and enacted. Educational policy is multidimensional in character, it is always in a state of constant sensemaking, interpretation, negotiation, and change. Several factors including the educational infrastructure and inhabited institutionalism impact on the policy processes as discussed below.

It appears that there is a dearth of studies focusing on understanding the extent to which the enacting agents of the programme make sense and enact those standards at the street level, therefore, it is important to investigate the matter thoroughly. Studying the inhabited institution can open doors to view how

organisational members use environmental materials to negotiate meanings of the GFP in their everyday work that in turn can reproduce and/ or transform organisational practice (Hallett, 2010). Some of the old and recent studies have explored the impact of redesigning the educational infrastructure on educational systems (Cohen et al., 2018; Han et al., 2023; Hayat, 2005; Liu et al., 2023; Polikoff & Porter, 2014; Spillane et al., 2015; Spillane et al, 2016). The role of structure and resources used by educational systems to coordinate and support instruction in line with the educational reforms has been proved to maintain instructional quality. Spillane et al. (2019) argue that leaders in educational systems making sense of, and using materials (standards, and related texts, discourses), while attempting to redesign their educational system, demonstrate good educational infrastructures that support coherent visions for instruction. This contributes to the literature of inhabited institutionalism and sensemaking traditions by showing how educational leaders make sense of and combine different policy texts and discourses in ways that help to address their needs and concerns. Furthermore, the study of the system's organisational identity and how its members make sense of their environments is essential to understand how circumstantial situations influence organisational practice in rebuilding educational infrastructures. With the term 'inhabited institutionalism', scholars argue to reframe the conceptualisation of relations between organisations and environments, which shows how organisational members negotiate meaning through texts and discourses (Binder, 2007). Therefore, inhabited institutionalism frames individuals as actively making sense of and interpreting stimuli from their environment and negotiating the meaning of local actions through local interactions (Everitt, 2018). Sensemaking is an active process of constructing meaningful interpretations within sensible contexts, and it is inherently linked to the development of an organisation's identity. This identity is shaped by the traits that members of the organisation consider to be essential and unique to their collective existence. Essentially, the way an organisation understands and interacts with its environment reflects its core and distinguishing attributes as recognised by its members. Drawing attention to how organisational members'

sensemaking is situated within their school environment, captures the operation of negotiation of meaning of the educational policies that guide the core educational systems. The sensemaking and cognition framework incorporates policies as text and discourses, where policy as text attends both to policy makers' encoding the representations of ideas in policy documents and how these texts are decoded and used to negotiate meaning and sensemaking (Ball, 2006; Han et al., 2023; Malmborg, 2023; Spillane, 2004; Stich et al., 2023; Zemsky et al., 2018). Policy discourses refer to systems of practices, beliefs, and values that create a framework of sense and obviousness within which policy is conceived, discussed, negotiated, and contested in educational systems (Ball et al., 2012). Therefore, a focus on policy discourse draws attention to a network of practices, beliefs, and values that undergird policy texts and reform more broadly. The term discourse is essential in understanding how policy meaning is shaped, contested, and legitimised within the institutional context. Thus, discourse refers to systems of practices, beliefs, and values that shape how policy is thought, talked about, and enacted within institutional settings. Moreover, to provide an operational definition in this study, policy discourse is both textual (policy documents) and interactional (stakeholder dialogues), influencing how policy ideas are communicated, interpreted, and applied. Drawing on Ball et al. (2012), Spillane et al. (2002), and Hyatt, (2013) discourse is seen as a key mechanism in policy enactment, structuring the ways in which institutional actors negotiate meaning and make sense of policy. This thesis examines how discourse operates at multiple levels, from national policy directives to local institutional narratives, shaping how policy is enacted within HEIs.

Educational leaders' use of ideas and practices related to standards and accountability texts and discourses in making decisions about redesigning educational infrastructures influence instructional improvement (Mirhosseini & Haghi, 2023). This is especially effective when having policy enactors that come from diverse functional backgrounds, multiple departments, and different organisational levels as what appears with the study's sample of participants. In

the HEI under study, the enacting agents are from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. It is, therefore, important to evaluate the individual, situated and distributed cognition of the enacting agents, to appreciate how the individual, situated and distributed cognition shape the sensemaking and the GFP enactment processes. The different views, perspectives, and interpretations of educational reforms are all solved in negotiations to reach cognitive consensus on how key issues should be interpreted and enacted. In other words, the confrontation of unstructured, dynamic, ambiguous, and complex issues allows the cognitive group of enactors to reach to an agreement and unify their conceptualisation and operation of the policy to hold the organisation together.

Thus, the sharing of cognitive frames among enacted organisation can be conceptualised on a continuum of sharing that should involve both unity and diversity (Stepka, 2022). Institutional logics, furthermore, that have been described as socially constructed patterns of assumptions, values, beliefs, and practices, shape enacting agents' decisions and actions in organisational settings (Milley & Dulude, 2020; Thornton et al., 2012). As such attending to it contributes to unpacking the institutional complexity of the agents' decision making with respect to new policies, programmes or reforms given the complex policy environments in which they work and the specific characteristics of their organisations. This makes the educational organisations as sites that instantiate institutional logics and their related resources, while having filled with agents who actively engage in sensemaking, sense giving, negotiating, and contesting their respective understandings to the institutional logics and resources (Stich et al., 2023; Weick, 2020). Henceforth, the individual and organisational behavior can lead to practice that is constituted in the interactions among people who make sense of policy and respond to their understanding of that policy (Spillane et al., 2019). In fact, institutional structure is viewed as the medium and outcome of practice that is created, reproduced, and potentially transformed by human agents in interactions. What is more is that practice is resource dependent, and Spillane et al. (2019) define it as a constellation of 1) human capital that invests

on human knowledge and expertise to perform its work for example to improve teaching quality in an educational policy world. 2) Social capital that involves investing on social relations by changing the way people relate with each other to facilitate productivity in achieving outcomes of practice. Teachers' collective sensemaking about the assigned policy is shaped through patterns of interactions and information exchange which develops to organisational routines, daily practice, and enactment. 3) Technology and tools mediate human interactions in organisations as it enables organisational members to execute their plans of actions efficiently. The introduction of technology can alter institutional roles and patterns of interactions among organisational members' practice that is ultimately transformed to organisational structure (Spillane, 2006).

What kind of organisational culture and socialisation patterns need to be adopted for attitudinal readjustment in higher education contexts? Trowler (2014) lists several strategic resources for the desired organisational culture change to happen such as the use of symbols, rituals, and improved communication strategies (logos, mission statements, informal conversations). Also, recruitment of new employees, the conduct of staff development, rewards for conformity, coercion and other use of threats are regarded essential for cultivating a successful organisational change towards a single strong culture which can be shared and enacted by all the stakeholders. The reason why organisational culture carries much significance in the success of policy enactment is because it provides the enacting agents a sense of meaning and identity that has significance and context for them. To clarify further, the element of belonging acts as a means of uniting members in a shared vision of past, present, and future which can shape behavior and produce united actions towards common goals for the effectiveness of policy enactment. Overall, the organisational culture plays a crucial role in shaping behaviour within organisations.

Furthermore, the situated understanding of policy varies according to how it is received and interpreted in different institutional contexts, history and

environments which again leads to reinterpretation of the texts that could bring some formidable misunderstandings having good or bad consequences (Ball et al., 2012; Mirhosseini & Haghi, 2023). Overall, the tension between agency and structure in policy process, the incoherent nature of policy making, and the situated character of the policy reception are all considered as major issues in higher education policy enactment (Trowler, 2014). Moreover, since sensemaking is regarded as an ongoing process that happens within a broader context of organisational power and social experience, it is important to discuss the nature of it to shed light on its complex process that occurs within and is influenced by a broader social environment (Mills et al., 2010).

As highlighted earlier, this thesis employs overlapping theoretical frameworks including dimensions of cognition (individual, situated, distributed and institutional logics). These frameworks are interwoven throughout the exploration of policy enactment, sensemaking, and institutional dynamics in Oman's General Foundation Programme. Individual cognition underscores the importance of personal beliefs, knowledge, and experiences in shaping how enacting agents interpret and engage with policy. In the context of GFP, this dimension highlights how individual educators and administrators perceive policy signals and adapt them based on their prior experiences and cognitive structures. The strengths and weaknesses of each theoretical framework is indicated below, including a reflection on the value of combining the frameworks in my study.

- **Strengths:** This framework acknowledges that policy enactment is not a mechanistic process but a deeply personal and subjective one. It emphasises the agency of the enacting agents in constructing meaning from policy.
- **Limitations:** Individual cognition alone fails to account for the broader institutional and social contexts that influence personal interpretation. Moreover, it risks oversimplifying the complex interplay between personal agency and systemic constraints.
- **Synthesis:** Individual cognition is most valuable when viewed as part of a broader network of influences, shaped and constrained by institutional logics and material conditions. For example, an individual's knowledge and beliefs about the GFP are not formed in isolation but through interactions within situated and distributed cognitive

environments.

Situated cognition emphasises the social and organisational contexts in which knowledge and practices are embedded. This framework is crucial for understanding how institutional history, workplace norms, and local practices influence the enactment of GFP policies.

- **Strengths:** Situated cognition captures the variability of policy enactment across different HEIs, providing insights into how local contexts mediate the translation of policy into practice.
- **Limitations:** A potential weakness lies in its tendency to view context as static, overlooking the dynamic and evolving nature of institutional environments. For example, shifting power dynamics or changes in external pressures may alter the situated realities of enacting agents.
- **Synthesis:** Situated cognition provides a bridge between individual cognition and institutional logics by illustrating how personal interpretations are shaped by the immediate social and organisational environment. In the GFP context, the interplay between institutional norms and individual agency becomes critical for understanding policy enactment.

Distributed cognition broadens the analytical scope by including the role of tools, technologies, and collaborative interactions in shaping cognitive processes. It underscores how policy enactment is mediated by material and social artifacts, such as infrastructure, resources, and professional networks.

- **Strengths:** This framework emphasises the collective and material dimensions of cognition, providing a more holistic view of how policies like the GFP are enacted within resource-constrained environments.
- **Limitations:** Distributed cognition can sometimes overemphasise materiality, assuming equitable access to resources and collaboration across settings. This assumption is particularly problematic in Oman, where resource disparities among HEIs may significantly impact policy outcomes.
- **Synthesis:** Distributed cognition complements situated cognition by highlighting how material resources and social networks enable or constrain local practices. For instance, the availability of teaching aids and technological tools directly influences how enacting

agents interpret and implement the GFP.

Institutional logics provide a macro-level perspective, focusing on the overarching values, norms, and beliefs that guide behavior within organisations. In the GFP context, this framework is invaluable for understanding how state-driven mandates intersect with institutional autonomy and professional cultures.

- **Strengths:** Institutional logics offer a comprehensive view of how broader societal structures shape individual and organisational practices. They elucidate the tensions between competing priorities, such as state-driven standardisation versus institutional adaptability.
- **Limitations:** This framework can risk being overly deterministic, underestimating the agency of individual actors. Additionally, the plurality of institutional logics within HEIs e.g., state, market, and professional logics requires careful unpacking to avoid oversimplification.
- **Synthesis:** Institutional logics provide the structural backdrop against which individual and situated cognition operate. They frame the boundaries within which sensemaking, and enactment occur, highlighting the interplay between macro-level mandates and micro-level practices.

The overlapping nature of these frameworks necessitates a holistic synthesis to capture the complexities of GFP policy enactment. Each framework contributes unique insights:

- **Interdependencies:**
 - Individual cognition provides the foundation for sensemaking but is shaped by situated and distributed contexts.
 - Situated cognition situates individual interpretations within specific organisational environments, influenced by institutional logics.
 - Distributed cognition highlights the material and social scaffolding that supports or constrains these processes.
 - Institutional logics establish the overarching norms and values that frame all cognitive and situational processes.

- **Tensions and Complementarities:** The frameworks reveal inherent tensions, such as the conflict between top-down institutional mandates (institutional logics) and bottom-up localised practices (situated cognition). However, they also demonstrate complementarity by addressing different levels of analysis—from individual sensemaking to systemic structures.
- **Implications for GFP:** In the context of Oman’s HEIs, these frameworks collectively illuminate the factors that enable or hinder policy enactment. For example, while institutional logics explain the macro-level drivers of GFP policy, situated and distributed cognition reveal the micro-level adaptations and challenges faced by enacting agents.

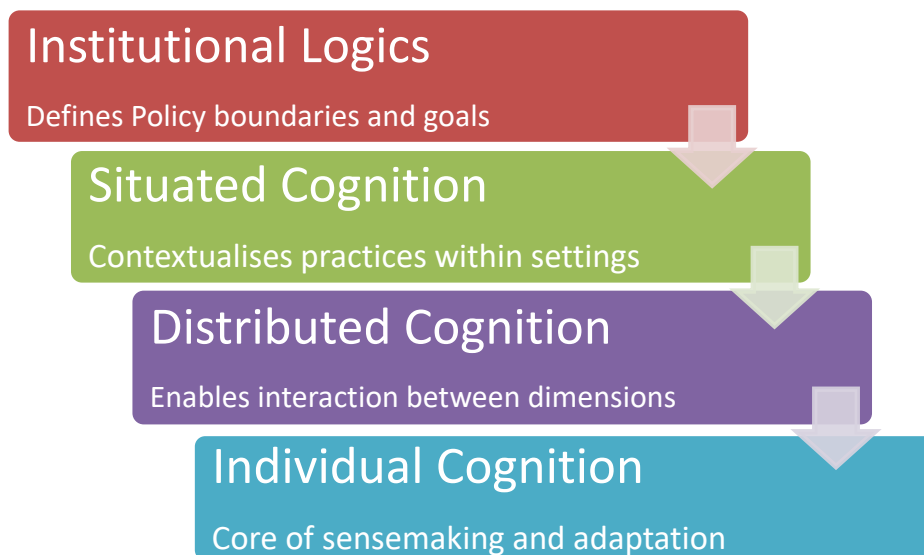


Figure 1: Proposed meta-framework that combines all the concepts together

The diagram above proposes a meta-framework that places institutional logics as the overarching structure that defines the boundaries and goals of policy enactment. It then positions situated cognition as the intermediary layer that contextualises individual and collective practices within specific organisational settings. The distributed cognition is highlighted as the enabler of interaction between material, social, and cognitive dimensions. Finally, it anchors individual cognition as the dynamic core where sensemaking, interpretation, and adaptation occur. This meta-framework not only clarifies the unique contributions of each

dimension but also demonstrates their interdependencies, offering a comprehensive lens for analysing policy enactment. The synthesis of these overlapping frameworks provides a nuanced understanding of the GFP policy enactment in Oman's HEIs. By integrating individual, situated, distributed cognition, and institutional logics, this meta-discussion highlights the multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of policy processes. Future research and policy design should adopt such integrated perspectives to address the complexities of educational reform, ensuring that policies resonate with the realities of enacting agents and institutional contexts.

2.5 Summary of the chapter

This chapter examined the current understandings of education policy, and the approaches to policy development and policy enactment. Institutional logics provided an overview umbrella for understanding the processes which can capture policy changes and implementation. Yet cognitive, sensemaking will provide a more nuanced understanding of the agency in context as policy implementation is the outcome of individuals operating in context whose background, status, age, gender amongst other factors may influence the nature and the degree of implementation and hence enactment. The next chapter presents the research methodology and methods.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Methods

3.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents the research methodology and methods, making explicit, how the answers to the main research questions pursued in this study were generated. The study aimed to generate answers to the following research questions:

1. What role does individual cognition (knowledge, beliefs, experience) play in formulating and enacting the GFP?
2. How does situated cognition (institutional logics and infrastructure) influence the formulation and enactment of the GFP?
3. What is the utility of the cognitive framework in characterising the educational reforms, and its subsequent implications in reframing policy enactments in the HE sector?

After defining the focus of my study and drafting the main research questions highlighted above, I had to decide how the research was to be conducted. This is well-articulated by Sikes (2004) who asserts that: “you as the researcher, have to decide what is going to constitute ‘valid’ data, or evidence, and which [methods] or techniques, are going to be used to collect and analyse it” (p.15). I concur with Wellington’s (2000) interpretation of methodology as “the activity or business of choosing, reflecting upon, evaluating and justifying the methods you use” (p. 22). This involves deciding the type of study, the appropriate methods for data collection and analysis as well as clarifying the ethical considerations to be made in the conduct of the study, among other things. Therefore, in this chapter, I include the research design, that is, the type of study, the theoretical framework, a brief description of the researcher positionality which makes explicit my ontological and epistemological orientation, the research approach (case study), the research methods, the data analysis, the robustness of the research, ethical considerations,

and the summary of the chapter. The following section focuses on the research design.

3.2 Research Design

There has been a debate for many years on how to conduct research on policy discourse and understand how it is enacted (Hill, 2001; Hyatt, 2013; Ryan et al; 2019). However, only a few studies have analysed enacting agents' understanding as local knowledge from an interpretive and constructivist perspective in a developing context which can affect policy implementation and enactment. Researchers, including me, who have an interest in investigating the intrinsic value of educational policy and its degree of enactment at the micro level, value the relevance and importance of qualitative methods. I agree with Crossley and Vulliamy (1996) who affirm that qualitative research in education has a special potential to reveal nuanced understanding of policy that could lead to a more focused and in-depth investigation of policy process and implementation. This would be especially effective in the Middle Eastern countries like Oman, from my perspective, where not many educational enquiries have been undertaken inductively.

Based on the nature of the research questions pursued in this study, and the researcher's philosophical orientation, this study embraced the interpretivist research paradigm (Creswell, 2013). Sikes (2004) posits that "in any research that involves people in social settings, multiple perspectives and interpretations are almost inevitable" (p.15). The research design is based on critical relativist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology. I agree with the notion that facts exist but are hard to uncover and they depend on the observer and or agent. In this case, through interactions with the enacting agents and the policymakers included in my study, I was able to develop an understanding of their perspective of the GFP policy enactment. Every actor is bound to make sense of the policy enactment in their own way and as a collective as discussed in the sensemaking or cognitive framework (Spillane et al., 2002). In the same vein, Holloway and Galvin (2023), describe this interpretive approach as qualitative research methodology as it

focuses on social reality and lived experience of human life. This is quite fitting as the purpose of my study is to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, perceptions and lived contextual realities of the enacting agents of the GFP policy in Oman. Similarly, Mason (2002) states that: “Qualitative research is normally associated with the interpretivist sociological intellectual tradition” (p. 24). This sociological tradition is a result of what is driven by agency and the interactions with perceived structures and systems. This perception comes from notions of sensemaking activities. Therefore, this interpretivist qualitative approach is adopted because of its utility in providing empirical contextual discourse critical to inferred findings. Given that the observer is also the agent within the structure, makes this even more complex as it will often be difficult to distinguish between perceptions, facts, feelings and how these elements provided the backdrop for sensemaking and hence practice. The challenges of endogenous research are discussed by Trowler (2011), and my position as an ‘insider researcher’ and the ethical implications are discussed in detail in this chapter. Nonetheless, this approach remains quite effective in terms of providing an enhanced understanding of a complex social phenomena such as the enactment of the GFP policy which is the focus of this study. In support of the conduct of qualitative research in education policy, Crossley and Vulliamy (1996) argue that it has special potential in developing countries, and this of course includes Oman where this research was conducted. The use of a qualitative research design in studies such as mine is also supported by authorities such as Dawadi et al. (2021) who assert that: “a qualitative method has the strengths of sensitivity to multiple meanings, logical ground, great methodological flexibility and in-depth study of smaller samples which helps to study the process and change” (p.28).

From a cognitive perspective, the qualitative enquiry facilitated studying the relationship and the interaction of the three dimensions in my study which include: 1) the agents’ existing cognitive structures (which include knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes), 2) their situation and 3) the policy signals. Arguably, it also highlighted

the critical role of the agents' capacity (knowledge and skills) and will (attitudes and beliefs) for the successful policy enactment. The exploration of the three core elements for the necessary cognitive process, namely, the enacting agents', policy signals, and the situation in which sensemaking occurred also identified the types of challenges observed during the enactment of the GFP reform.

The following Table 1 provides an overview of the research design adopted with the ontology and epistemology methodological approach adopted. Further details of the research design including the data collection methods and sources used will be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs as such information cannot be summarised in the Table 1. The Table contains the ontology (nature of reality), epistemology (nature of knowledge), theoretical perspective (underlying philosophy), methodology, Methods or procedures used for data collection, and lastly but not least, the sources of data (mainly the discourses of the participants shared during the interviews, as well as the analysis of the audit report accessed at the institution under study). My philosophical orientation (i.e., ontology and epistemology) and the nature of the problem under study influenced the choice of the methodological approach (Creswell, 2013).

Table 1: Overview of the research design

Ontology	Epistemology	Theoretical perspective	Methodology	Methods	Sources
Reality as interpreted by the agents. Varied enactments Constructivism	Reality needs interpretation Meaning Social realities constructed	Interpretivism	Qualitative Heuristic and hermeneutic inquiries Inductive Case study	Interviews X13 interviewees Document review. Interviews were conducted in Teams and lasted an hour each.	Agents' Discourse (semi structured interviews) Document review and analysis

3.3 Theoretical Framework

My thesis is based on qualitative research which utilised the cognitive theoretical framework developed by Spillane et al. (2002) to capture through an interpretive and constructivist epistemological lens (Yilmaz, 2013), how a group of stakeholders, in particular, policy makers and the enacting agents within the selected HEI (associate deans, heads of departments and skills coordinators) engage with policy enactment. The cognitive framework provides the utility of reframing the relations between institutional organisations and environments, and this is crucial to conceptualize how organisational stakeholders interpret and negotiate meaning of government-initiated policies with text and discourses (Binder, 2007; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Smith & Samuel; 2022). Furthermore, it provides a theoretical framework for examining the wider cultural context that may shape the stakeholders' interpretations, which in turn affects their understanding of educational programmes mandated by the government (Alam & Mohanty, 2023; Coburn, 2004; Khoboli et al., 2013; Louis et al., 2005; Nguyen 2020; Stillman, 2011).

The concept of 'inhabited institutionalism' stresses the fact that institutions and individuals mutually constitute each other while framing the individuals as stakeholders who actively make sense of, interpret, and negotiate meanings via legitimate interactions and actions within their environment. Spillane et al. (2019), argue that sensemaking and interpretation of organisational members is situated in their everyday work practice, and it can substantially affect the implementation of the educational reforms. The term 'implementation' needs to be differentiated from the term enactment. Implementation refers to the process of putting a policy into effect, that is, it involves the practical steps and measures taken after a policy has been developed and this may include planning, resource allocation and monitoring. Yet, according to Braun et al. (2011), enactment involves agents interpreting signals through reading or making meaning of policy texts, followed by translating, where re-reading of policy and literally developing it through talks, school plans, meetings, classroom lessons and school websites take place. Furthermore, the factors that shape and influence enactment are known to be complex, multifaceted, and multileveled which can lead to misunderstanding by stakeholders and their inability to align their different views of the policy signals (Hudson et al., 2019; Walsh; 2020). Studying the deployment of context as an analytic device to make sense of the processes that involve policy enactment opens windows for the researcher to understand the complex ways in which official policies are enacted through educational institutions and this can provide a significant contribution to the critical policy studies (Ball, 2006). Recognising and understanding patterns in teacher logics and sensemaking will not only extend on previous literature on policy interpretation and enactment, but it will also assist educational leaders to better design policies and provide the necessary support for reform enactment in line with teachers' beliefs and practices (Mitchell & Sherer, 2016; Smith & Samuel; 2022). Thus, the thesis investigates the source of stakeholders' interpretations from their individual professionalism, collegial communities and the broader culture that may shape their interpretation. These are known as institutional logics, and they help us to understand the critical factors in the agents' policy enactment. To clarify, and as mentioned earlier, institutional

logics are “socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules” (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p.804). They help us to understand the various belief systems that influence the behaviour of individuals and organisations in different social situations. More details about the institutional logics discussed in this thesis are provided in the subsequent sections.

A cognitive framework is utilised in this thesis to consider the objective conditions together with the subjective interpretational dynamics offering the overlapping of interrelated contextual dimensions. This includes situated contexts (e.g., locale and institution history), professional cultures (e.g., beliefs, teacher commitments, and experiences in policy management), external contexts, materiality, and policy technology (artifacts), which aid in analysing the policy cycles of the educational reform with the aim to re-professionalise teachers, redefine effective teaching and quality learning (Ball, 2006; Trowler, 2008). While it is important to understand how individuals cognitively interpret GFP and subsequently adopt and enact into contextualised local daily practice in Omani context, the social and physical arrangements or structures of the HEI practice under study are also influential as they have the potential to enable and/or constrain efforts to enact educational reforms. Such conditions include resources such as human capital, curricular materials, workplace norms, staff development, local will or motivation and organisational arrangements that support collaboration among staff members (Spillane et al., 2019). It is important to use a framework that can utilise systems of practices, beliefs, and values to understand the common sense of policy texts and discourses from the enacting agents. In fact, Ball (2006) emphasises the fact that “frameworks of sense and obviousness with which policy is thought, talked and written about” (p.4) shape how policies can not only be developed but also made sense of, negotiated, and disputed in organisations (Weick, 1995). The current thesis uses a cognitive framework developed by Spillane et al. (2002) to examine policy discourses through paying attention to its network of practices, beliefs, and values that undergird the policy texts. In addition, it is a framework that mainly informs how enactors interpret reforms involving four processes as Crossan et al. (1999) describe: intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalising within

the individual, group, and organisational levels. The study and management of implementation and enactment is a decidedly complex endeavour, “even more complex than the policies, programmes, procedures, techniques, or technologies” (Blasé & Fixsen, 2005, p.2), since it constitutes many contextual factors facilitating or impeding successful enactment of policy. Limited research has focused on interaction and/or conflict with policy and collegial nature of higher education in terms of roles of leadership to facilitate the interpretation and enactment of policy at a micro level (Gaus et al., 2018). Specifically, the local conditions influencing policy implementation in HEIs in Oman have received minimal, if any, consideration.

3.3.1 Critical sensemaking

Sensemaking is a socially constructed process that involves individuals interacting with their environment and with other stakeholders to create meaning and enable action (Christianson & Barton, 2021). The different facets of sensemaking which include noticing, meaning making and action are intertwined, and it will be useful to see how these manifest in the policy making process and practice related to the GFP enactment in Oman. Policy analysts have long recognised that policy evolves in the process of implementation and enactment of reforms during human sensemaking (Spillane et al., 2019). In an educational context, the enacting agents such as academic staff and the senior leaders are always in a cycle of sensemaking for a behavioral change to reflect the policy’s core intent. Yet, this behavioral change from the individual is regarded to be fundamentally a cognitive exercise. Sensemaking includes more than just the interpretation of cues, it includes noticing, bracketing, and authoring information (Spillane et al., 2019). In fact, part of the sensemaking process, organisational members extract cues from their environment to clarify and reconstruct their understandings of situations that can be full of ambiguity, uncertainty, change, surprise, and discrepancy filling in some existing gap in knowledge (Odden & Russ, 2018). The individuals’ ability to maintain a certain level of cognitive efficiency through practicing these skills or strategies, act as the basis for constructing meaning and making sense of their

experiences to continue to enact the environment. As such, sensemaking perspective analyses what people notice in their environments, how they frame, interpret, and respond to the cues. In addition, one of the biggest areas that is considered key to sensemaking is argumentation, where people make claims, construct explanations, and articulate their ideas. From this perspective, sensemaking is an integral part of learning new knowledge and is collaborative through building, defending, and critiquing each other's arguments all as a part of coherence-seeking (Odden & Russ, 2018). In policy studies, overall, sensemaking is defined as a dynamic process of building an explanation to fill in a gap or inconsistency in policy knowledge. This contributes to understanding how implementing and enacting agents construct ideas from and about national standards, figure out what policy means to ignore, adapt, or adopt in organisational context such as HEIs. This underscores the importance of engaging and eliciting the views of the different stakeholders in the selected HEI to identify how they make sense of the GFP for its successful enactment.

Furthermore, the conceptualisation of critical sensemaking is important in organisations such as HEIs. This is because it focuses on socio-psychological processes through which a sense of situation is created out of various interactions and sets out to provide a lens through which to analyse the power relationships reflected within the formative contexts in institutions and its consequences such as how it affects the individuals' sensemaking. As such, critical sensemaking positions the formative context as a link between a dominant environment that shapes the routines of social values/behavior and individual preferences and actions. This represents a restrictive influence of discourse on organisational rules that are established by individuals according to their own sensemaking and enactment of meaning. Sustaining the dominant assumptions can mould conflict over the shaping of the ideas of social possibilities, identities, and interests (Mills et al., 2010). Consequently, the exploration of the contextual factors of structure and discourse that affects/sets limitations to the individuals' socio-psychological sensemaking and how it operates within macro-level contexts facilitates the understanding nature of enactment (Liu et al., 2023). It also aids in understanding

how individuals make sense of their environments at a local level against the acknowledgment of power relations formative contexts. As indicated earlier, the institutional logics shape the enacting agents' sensemaking and the subsequent policy enactment.

The sensemaking framework offers the ability for 'authoring' the reforms especially when encountering situations of ambiguity, uncertainty, change, and/or discrepancy that can interrupt the ongoing flow of the members' experience within an organisation (Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane et al., 2019). The cognitive framework is used to understand the sensemaking process of the individuals and how they extract the cues from reforms in relation to clarifying what is going on in their environment while they are reconstructing their understanding of their situation (Weick, 2020). As such, organisational members extracting, bracketing, and interpreting cues from their environment in relation to the policy, helps them to have a certain level of cognitive efficiency (Spillane et al., 2019). All in all, a sensemaking perspective analyses how people are inundated with reforms in their environment, as well as, frame, interpret and respond to the cues that are relevant to their experiences. Moreover, studying the individual cognition, situated cognition, distributed cognition and the role of representations that constitute the 4 main pillars of the cognitive framework understudy (Spillane et al., 2002), will not only bring light to how the HEI leaders make sense of their educational system, but also how they build it through designing their educational infrastructures (Cohen et al., 2018; Spillane et al., 2015; Spillane et al., 2016). In other words, how they build their roles, structures, and resources that can be used in the educational institution to maintain instructional quality and enable instructional improvement.

3.3.2 Cognitive Framework

The cognitive framework is a useful lens for analysing the sensemaking of the different participants in this study. It can be inferred that sensemaking captures the cognitive aspects of policy enactment including the ways actors understand

policies and their related practices (Spillane et al., 2019; Weick, 2020). Unpacking the key dimension of the enactment process from a cognitive perspective, in terms of the ways enacting agents come to understand their practice, potentially changing their beliefs and attitudes, is essential. Spillane et al. (2019) construct a theoretically grounded cognitive framework to characterise sensemaking in the implementation process, finding meaning which revolves around three central elements including 1) cognitive schemas, which comprise actors' knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes, 2) actors' social contexts including macro contexts such as HEIs and micro contexts such as social norms, and organisational structures and 3) policy signals or messages in a form of legislations, and regulations. In a broad sense the term cognitive framework considers basic information processing, complexities and influences involved in the processing of information about abstract ideas and the role of social context and social interaction as main factors affecting sensemaking. Consequently, the characterisation of the way the natural sensemaking process goes beyond understanding how enacting agents interpret policy and identifies the variables that influence such interpretations in broad parameters of a cognitive framework, and which is critically discussed below.

(a) Individual cognition

Individuals assimilating new experience and information through existing knowledge structure indicates that educational reforms are made sense of depending on the enacting agents' repertoires of existing knowledge and experience. The content of a policy, and its idea on imposing extant behavior greatly depends on the enacting agents' ideas, expertise, and experiences to actively construct meaning while interacting with their environments. However, what role do prior knowledge, beliefs, values, and experiences play in shaping the agents' understanding of policy and their relation to it? The implications of building new understandings of policy on present understanding of supplementing rather than replacing knowledge aligns with Weick's (2020) notion where people use past understandings and schemas, select cues and signals to notice, process, encode, organise, and subsequently generate interpretations on new stimuli. As such, new

information is always interpreted in the light of prior ontological knowledge, schema, experience, tacit expectations, and beliefs about how the world works to see patterns and guide the processing of rich or ambiguous information (Christianson & Barton, 2021). Therefore, individuals' assimilation is a conserving process to make the 'unfamiliar familiar' and this solves the difficulty of engaging with complex ideas by restructuring them to existing schemas preserving existing frames rather than radically transforming them. Yet, the danger of seeing new ideas as mere examples of what is already known leading to constructing superficial similarities in achieving the true principles of the reform can be an obstacle to implementation. This also means that different agents will construct different understandings depending on their frame of reference, as Spillane et al., (2019) argue that what we see is influenced by our expectations of what we want to see. As such, the influence of expectations from existing knowledge structures helps to focus understanding, yet, may lead to rejection of information incongruous with those expectations. Many studies emphasised the importance of difference in sensemaking of top-down educational reforms and practice (Gaus et al., 2018; Malmborg, 2023; Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane et al., 2019). At the recipient level, the top-down nature which causes inconsistencies in the different ways of sensemaking and interpretations of the same policy message, greatly affect the level of enactment influencing policy implementation. Enacting agents who view standards through the lens of their current practice and incorporate reforms into their existing beliefs and understandings of epistemology fail to reflect on the fundamental changes in extant practice advanced by the reformers and so causing a conflict with the intent of the policy.

To summarise, sensemaking refers to the cognitive process in which individuals use their prior knowledge and experience (schemata) to notice, make sense of, interpret, and react to incoming stimuli, while actively constructing meaning from their interactions with the organisational environment (Christianson & Barton, 2021). Based on this, this study used the cognitive framework as a lens to examine how different stakeholders involved in the GFP policy enactment conducted the process.

(b) Situated cognition: A social sense-maker

It is important to consider that knowledge is embedded in social contexts, social practices, and common beliefs which greatly affect sensemaking of the individual and action in policy enactment. Spillane et al. (2019) define situation as a multifaceted construct that includes everything from national and professional identities to the structures of the offices and organisations in which people work. Both macro and micro levels of context play an important role in the agents' sensemaking as they encounter policy in a complex web of organisational structures, professional affiliations, and social networks. At a macro level, individual's frameworks belong to multiple communities of national and ethnic identity, religious affiliation, professional identity, social class memberships, all of which aid in developing a unique set of experiences, assumptions, and expectations in constructing a worldview of reference that shape perceptions. For example, from an institutional perspective, social agents' reasoning and action are shaped by the norms and rules governed by the educational institution's tacit schemata. This usually structures agent's behavior and give meaning and order to constrain or enable action (Gallagher & Varga, 2020). As such, individuals' cognition and agency are strictly constrained by the educational institutional sectors that structure work practices, innovations, and enactment process. At a micro level, the immediate environment, i.e., the workplace, also contributes to how agency make sense of new experiences and situations to determine what policies mean, drawing on collective knowledge. The fact that group interactions bring insights to the surface enhances the discussion of ambiguous situations and expose individuals to alternative interpretations of shared stimuli. Local actors can explicate tacit beliefs which can be open to discussion, debate, and negotiation to mediate confusing messages and leverage the knowledge that is situated within webs of social relationships. It is against this background that this study involved exploring the different stakeholders' experiences of the GFP policy enactment, highlighting how the institutional logics and infrastructure impacted on the process.

3.3.3 Implications of the cognitive framework on policy design and external representations

The representation of policy design in a form of verbal or written media including regulations, directives, legislations, governments and professional association pamphlets of different sorts and professional development workshops play a key role in the degree of sensemaking and the enactment process (Spillane et al., 2002). Analysing how policymakers' external representations enable or constrain enacting agents' sensemaking is pivotal from a cognitive perspective. One key issue is that challenges exist in crafting policy to communicate messages about how to change the extant practice. For example, policy inconsistency and ambiguity undermine the implementation and so enactment since they increase the discretion of the enacting agents and agencies over how to put policy proposals into practice (Ball et al., 2012; Donaldson et al., 2021). Moreover, some policies call for tremendous change in existing behavior when it is not easy to restructure belief systems of the individuals as this requires more complex cognitive transformations to obtain the desired change. As discussed above, institutional logics shape the enacting agents' sensemaking, hence, this study explores how these dynamics worked out for the GFP policy enactment. Sensemaking is multifaceted and the different facets including noticing, meaning making and action are intertwined. Policies that seek complex changes in local behavior are more prone to implementation and enactment deficiencies since they require such fundamental changes in enacting the agents' knowledge structures. Consequently, the enacting agents rely on superficial similarities between their current practices and the reform, losing important aspects of the latter by assimilating it into existing knowledge structures and so reforms end up reflecting the superficial aspects of a new policy rather than the deeper ideas intended by the reformers (Spillane et al., 2019). The present study sought to bring to light the experiences of the different stakeholders in the enactment process of the GFP policy.

A key challenge is that the enacting agents need to make sense of the policy, and the communication of abstract policy ideas in a simple manner is not enough since

individuals tend to draw analogies to surface, as mentioned earlier, rather than structural features of their existing knowledge leading to misunderstanding of the new information. There is a critical need to structure better representations of policies with thicker descriptions and extend learning opportunities for the stakeholders to construct an interpretation of the policy and its implications for their own behavior (Weick, 2020).

In a nutshell, it is important to conclude that the cognitive framework discussed explores the way implementing and enacting agents construct ideas from policy and how this contributes to the evolution of policy proposals in the enactment process. The variables identified within the cognitive framework help to account for the understandings that those agents construct from both top-down and bottom-up reforms. The changed behavior the enacting agents construct from policy are a function of the interaction of a) the policy signal, b) the agent's knowledge, beliefs and experience, c) the situation in which the local actor attempts to make sense of policy (Christianson & Barton, 2021). The result of the enacting agent's sensemaking as they percolate through the educational systems, sheds light to the ways on how education standards might evolve. Thus, it can be evaluated that the framework mainly suggests patterns in what and how the HEI agents understudy come to understand from the GFP reform. The Figure 2 below summarises the cognitive framework and its components that are used as a lens in the present study.

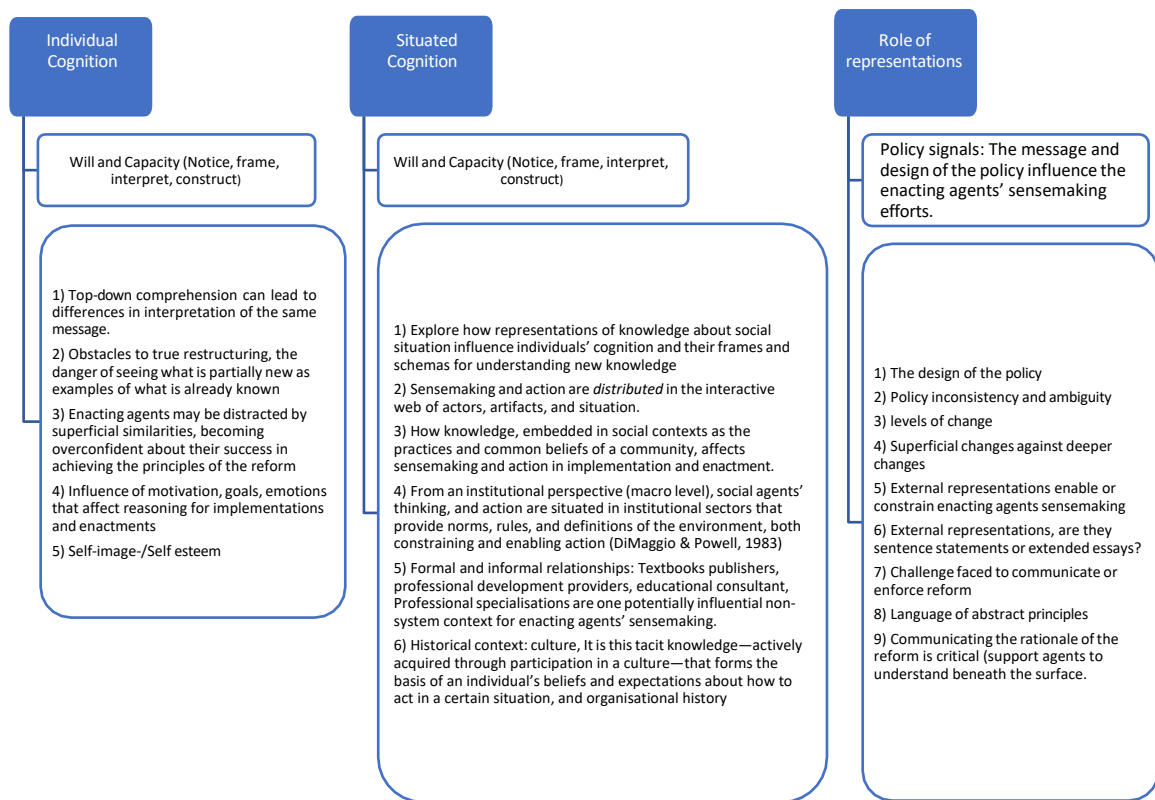


Figure 2: Summary of cognitive framework and its components.

However, the cognitive framework lacks several important variables that can further demystify the factors affecting the agents' sensemaking and how close their understanding can resonate with the core intent of the educational policy. Those variables are 1) values and emotions and their roles in cognition and 2) the role of distributed cognition in educational contexts that mainly focus on the necessary human and material resources needed to undertake the policy change regardless of the agent's ability to construct understandings that reflect policy makers' intent.

The rationale behind using the cognitive theory, also known as the "sensemaking" framework, is that it encompasses more than just the interpretation of the object, in this case, the policy as given. Also, unless the enacting agents are recognised as part of the education system, in terms of their social and historical context and their subjective realities to construct, filter, mediate and shape their educational practices without treating the reforms as empty vessels, the impact of the policy implementation and enactment remain a puzzle. Thirdly, policies and practices evoke interwoven and complex dynamics in education that cannot be viewed as a linear approach, where policy is initiated and implemented as intended in an implementation staircase (Baugh & Baugh, 2021; Crawford et al., 2023; Saunders & Sin; 2014). It was also shown that the enacting agents can sometimes remain in the background, simply receiving policies in silent voices (unheard) without being actively involved in their formulation. Enacting agents have been increasingly an absent presence in the discourse of education policy; "an object rather than a subject of discourse" as Reay (1998, p.194) contends, and are expected to modify their contexts to meet the prescribed specifications laid by the policymakers who are neither aware of the teachers nor their context in which they work. Furthermore, studying the local condition that includes capacity and will (motivation) of local actors and agencies is important to the successful educational policy enactment (Spillane et al., 2019). Generally, the local actors and agencies do not practice in a vacuum; rather they work in organisations which impact on their practice for the better or worse. More precisely the circumstances of local practice are intimately connected to how local actors encounter and perceive the educational policy and, in this case, it is the GFP.

The section below focuses on the discussion of emotional cognition to help illuminate how this framework can be expanded in the conduct of the present study.

3.3.4 Critical approach to emotional cognition

According to Reeve and Shin (2020) emotions are defined as short lived, constantly generated, unfolded, and changed through multiple recursive effects at any moment to help us adapt to the opportunities and challenges we face during important life events. In the same vein, Richards (2020) views elements of emotions as something fuzzy, dynamic, multifaceted and are typically regarded as soft and irrational/nonlinear; hence difficult to research. Yet, the influence of emotions, core values, and motivation for reasoning on cognitive processing is substantial. The term known as “hot cognition” coined by social psychologists (Sanchez & Dunning, 2021) emphasises that emotional associations comprise an integral part of knowledge structures used to reason about the world. Reasoning and judgment together with self-image and self-esteem influence one’s core practices about change. Yet, human judgement making to preserve self-esteem can go against convincing enacting agents of the differences between their current practices, the goals of policy and the need to change. Early implementation and enactment studies revealed the detrimental emotional consequences who failed to understand unclear policy mandates, while feeling anxious, confused, and frustrated abandoning their attempts in implementation (Borg, 2021; Chen, 2021). Research on the relationship between enacting agents’ values and emotions and their sensemaking of reforms is scarce as studies revealed that reform efforts rarely address the emotional wellbeing of teachers and their implications on educational reforms. The negligence of the emotional dimension for the change process calls for the need to establish a coherent conceptual framework to understand agency’s social and psychological emotions that will fruitfully frame new lines of inquiry into the enactment process adding knowledge to cognitive science and social cognition framework. Perhaps by interviewing the different

stakeholders at the institution under study, the emotional cognition and its implications on policy enactment can be explored.

Furthermore, Majeski et al. (2018) confirm that the emotional presence is vital in social cognition and how it plays out in sensemaking process where it includes more than just emotional expressions. It includes motivational and affective experiential elements such as “self-efficacy, openness, expanded self-awareness, heightened receptivity to others, and enhanced ability to manage high arousal emotional states” (Majeski et al., 2018, p.54). Emotional cognition synonymously aligns with emotional intelligence that constitutes emotional perception, emotional facilitation, emotional understanding, and emotional management all of which facilitate in policy sensemaking and enactment. The ability of the enacting agents to recognise and understand their own feelings and values facilitate their enhanced thinking of policies and regulate their emotions experienced within oneself and with others. Besides, emotional perception, understanding and regulation are important to constructive communication, empathy and conflict resolution which enable for group cohesion to have a better understanding and feeling of less discomfort with conflicts around policies (Majeski et al., 2018). At the recipient level of educational policies, academicians’ emotional states are considered as the most dynamic qualities of teaching and are inevitably at the epicenter of their work to manage their teaching contexts (Yazan 2023; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). In fact, their emotions are influenced by 1) personal antecedents such as their personality, professional beliefs, knowledge, values, and identity and by 2) contextual antecedents such as sociocultural, policy and organisational factors. The way these antecedents shape the agents’ emotions is critically analysed in the analysis and discussion chapter. Furthermore, Chen (2018) and (2020) explains how agents emotion intertwines with their cognition and motivation associated with their instructional behavior in an educational context. The influence of emotions on cognitive processes that include agents’ thinking, identity and vulnerability significantly dictate their personal and professional lives, and well-being. This entails the exploration of emotions and its intrinsic relationship with cognition and identities to contribute to a better understanding of how sensemaking, reasoning,

and learning is explored in this study. Arguably, the study of emotions provides deeper insights into what concerns enacting agents have at stake, the scrutiny of emotions can contribute to the increased and nuanced understanding of their commitment and identities (Yazan 2023; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). In conceptualising knowledge and cognition, emotions should be incorporated to understand the agents' knowledge, beliefs, and identity construction. This facilitates an inquiry into how agents negotiate, frame, and enact educational reforms within their identities in emotional contexts.

3.3.5 Distributed cognition

Distributed cognition originates from the field of sociocultural psychology, where it looks for a broader class of cognitive events that concerns the mindful practices of human agents in socio material relationships, such as the technologies and other materiality (Shutkin, 2019; Stillman & Anderson, 2015). In other words, sensemaking and action are distributed in the interactive web of actors, artefacts, and situations which becomes the system that is at an appropriate level of analysis (Stillman & Anderson, 2015). Since the cognitive framework has the social cognition as one of its main pillars, the focus here will be on distributed cognition that concerns the role of the material environment and technology in cognitive activity. Yet, considering the cognitive roles of social and material world, how can we understand the relationships of the social and material with cognitive processes that take place in the mind of the individual? Or on what level of analysis can distributed cognition (social, material and environment) support or act as computational medium to the internal representations of human schemas? To elaborate, researching distributed cognition informs the assumption that effective cognition and learning occurs because of interactions between brain and body with material things (Shutkin, 2019).

Spillane et al. (2016) further assert that understanding the implementation and enactment under the broad rubric of distributed cognitive constructs remains rather novel in policy research, and so studying distributed cognition and its conceptual

tools to frame implementation and enactment research is likely to extend investigations that will contribute to the cognitive framework. Yet, this cannot happen in a vacuum, because the social cognitive process takes place in inhabited institutions, and so looking at how multiple and perceived incongruous institutional norms, values and practices shape the enacting agents' interpretations and priorities based on their educational infrastructure and policy environment is essential (Stillman & Anderson 2015).

3.3.6 Social constructivism

Personal and social constructivism were effectively applied in the cognition framework that were utilised in the thesis to examine how enacting agents construct knowledge and subsequent enactment of the GFP. This is through establishing in depth- understanding and insights from the policy actors' personal and social experiences to effectively build knowledge and communicate their expectations, views, and expressions (Murray et al., 2020). Also, social constructivism provides an authentic perspective on how the roles of teachers' interaction play, in terms of intellectual change that takes place in situated settings and physical resources (Khoboli et al., 2013). Young and Lewis (2015), affirm that usually the enactment of reform is much more about the complexity in how networks define and negotiate roles via defining optimum strategies necessary to advance the reform agenda. Therefore, the role of networks in social constructivism and cognition provides a better understanding on how the GFP structure is informed and practiced within the context of the HEI understudy.

3.4 Researcher's positionality and approach

I was working as a Lecturer within this private HEI, specifically in the Centre for Foundation Studies where GFP is implemented, when I conducted the study. Therefore, I was considered as an 'insider researcher' and greater effort was needed to remain grounded in academic scrutiny, maintain neutrality and prevent preconceived notions and understandings that were inherently and subconsciously involuntarily formed over the years from influencing the systematic and methodical

nature of the research. This perhaps placed significant internal quality control methods to ensure that the discourse collected, analysed and presented was not subject to any personal bias. Trowler (2011) highlights a range of difficulties inherent in conducting endogenous research, particularly the risk of losing the capacity to generate unbiased, 'etic' perspectives that are culturally neutral. In addition, there is the danger of becoming blind to certain aspects of social life due to their normalisation. Furthermore, the issue of interview bias arises when respondents, familiar with the researcher as a colleague, might alter their responses based on their assumptions about the researcher's views and inclinations. In conducting my research, it was imperative to make careful choices to navigate the complexities encountered. For example, to guarantee the authenticity of 'etic' perspectives, I shared the transcripts of the interviews with the participants. This allowed them to verify and affirm the accuracy and trustworthiness of the information recorded, thereby ensuring the integrity of the reported findings. I also involved senior leaders in the study, for example, the Associate Deans who were not directly related to me in my work as a Lecturer in the Department of Foundation Studies. This way, I avoided 'interview bias', the senior leaders were able to articulate their own views without trying to align their views with my own expectations. The specific HEI was chosen because it is the largest private HEI in Oman that has been enacting the GFP reform since the ministerial decision was made in 2002. The study adopted an interpretive/constructivist epistemological paradigm which helped to construct understanding epistemologically and ontologically in an authentic manner. Staying true to this methodological approach, I believed that realities are varied because there are great differences on how individuals interpret reality. Put differently, there is always pre-existing knowledge, attitudes and behavior that affect the responses, the meaning, and the enactment of the educational policy, and so it is not surprising that realities of the reform are also diversely constructed (Gaus et al., 2018).

Moreover, it is important to note that adopting a purist stance towards interpretive research does not mean that there was an engagement of a very deep level of subjective interpretation, rather there was a presentation of the participants'

experiential structure and subjective understanding at an adequate manner and at their level of meaning (Creswell, 2013). The study maintained the interpretations and experiences of the participants in the foreground. Notwithstanding that the thesis is theory driven in its approach, I resisted the precedence knowledge to the sensemaking experience of the actors and did not presume to know what was going on in each setting at an abstract level. It was important to discount the first-hand experience and interpretation in favor of a purely theoretical view. Since the organisational reality is essentially socially constructed, the voice given to the policy formulators and actors allowed to dig for a deeper structure of their interpretations and actions.

In addition, my responsibility was to articulate how the participants' views were aligning with the cognitive theory. This implies that there was a grounded theoretical analysis that aimed at uncovering the underlying dimensions of sensemaking in the context under study (Gaus et al., 2018). As a result, the theoretical analysis gave a balanced voice to multiple perspectives providing the potential for insight into the dynamics of policy sensemaking and successful enactment. Overall, the interpretive and constructive oriented research documented the processes of the GFP formulation and enactment, to generate findings that will be helpful to the improvement and further refinement of the enactment strategies of educational reforms in HEIs.

Studying the Omani local context of the reform of GFP is crucial since it is a high determinant of enactment, regardless of it being concentrated or dispersed. An intervention can be successful in one context but not necessarily deliver the same results elsewhere (Allcock et al., 2015; Braithwaite et al., 2018). This is one reason why this thesis emphasises the need for policy makers to confront the messy engagement of multiple players with diverse sources of knowledge in educational reforms (Hudson et al., 2019). From my personal perspective, I have always been interested in eliciting the teachers' understanding of education policy, which calls for a conceptual background on the education policy and practice debate. It appears that many countries around the world have trouble putting policy into

practice. The literature revealed remarkable discrepancy between the existing policies and what happens on the ground. This makes me question, what is policy then, and whether policies constitute official statements, legislation, circulars, and documents that may not be implemented, and certainly that do not guide what people do. There appears to be a discrepancy between the stated policies and the policies in practice. Having policy intentions that do not translate to concrete actions reflects a disjuncture between policy text that is set out to lay down the ground rules for its use and policy practice, i.e., causing an implementation gap (Trowler, 2002). However, what interests me more is the so-called spaces, silences, contradictions (a gap in reasoning) that practitioners have that can impede the smooth enactment of a policy. Consequently, studying the peculiarities and the particularities of the policy actors' context and their perceptions of the intended and actual policies is important. Furthermore, examining how policy text in use can be partial and inherently vulnerable, while being distorted, deflected, or simply ignored from the enacting agents, calls for attention. As a researcher, I realise that education policy is a main arena for contestation, conflicts, and challenges, and so the split between policy production and policy enactment creates disconnected policy receivers (Ball & Bowe, 1992). The cognitive framework utilised in the study assists in showing that legislated texts are recontextualised through different kinds of interpretations since it needs to be understood in a variety of contexts. Ball and Bowe (1992), precisely say that policy is not a fixed or a rigid text, rather it is "a constantly changing series of texts whose expression and interpretation vary according to the context in which the texts are being put into practice" (p.10). Thus, policy enactment is a process rather than a product, it involves negotiation, contrasting and opposing different views which may impede the implementation process and hence the enactment (Ozga, 2000). The above views are personal reflections which highlight the context and motivation for my involvement in enactment studies. It outlines the way my thinking developed through the strands of research to seek deeper understanding of the processes at play and perhaps yield further development in the trajectory of the contextual enactment of the current GFP reform. My interest in policy enactment

research within the context of the GFP is a significant endeavour, particularly as it pertains to educational reform within my area of expertise. As discussed earlier, the formulation and enactment of educational policies are complex processes influenced by various institutional logics, including academic, professional, and market forces. These logics often intersect and sometimes conflict, shaping the nature of policy outcomes in HEIs. By conducting this endogenous research (Trowler, 2011), I sought to gain an enriched insider's perspective on how these logics operate within the HEI. I was keen to understand the underlying values, beliefs, and practices that inform decision-making processes and the enactment of policy. By considering the broader socio-cultural context and the specific historical and cultural environment of my workplace, I gained critical insights into the unique dynamics at play in the GFP's educational reform as elaborated in this thesis.

3.5 Research Approach

This study is mainly a case study of policy makers and enacting agents' understanding and meaning making of the GFP formulation and enactment in the HEI under study in Oman. Adopting the qualitative case-study approach enabled me to deal with complex and multifaceted issues associated with HEI stakeholders' sensemaking of the GFP reform, pertaining to what happens on the ground level. Rose and McKinley (2017) recommend that policy-oriented studies should use more qualitative case study approaches as they have remained as the main means to reveal local knowledge of policy implementation and enactment presented by stakeholders. In the same vein, Yin (2009) notes that it is a useful type of approach that can study social phenomena, processes, and relationships in real life situations specific to time and place. Therefore, the qualitative inquiry employed in this study devoted to reveal nuanced understanding of the reform that led to more focused and in-depth investigation of the implementation and enactment processes of the GFP. The significance of the case study method utilised in the study is that it provided a point of reference that yielded to a condensed analysis of how enacting agents understood the GFP and the extent to which they

enacted it. However, the study did not provide a platform for drawing general conclusions displaying transferability of the qualitative findings to other HEIs (Creswell, 2013). Nevertheless, it generated rich enough description of data to allow for other researchers to decide on the applicability of this analysis, while mapping it to their own educational contexts.

3.5.1 Setting the context.

The following section provides a brief introduction to the context of the HEI where the research took place. To begin with, making sense of meanings is not buried in texts for the enacting agents to find, rather they negotiate the meaning of policy texts in interaction with their environment for practice (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, 2006; Spillane et al., 2019; Weick, 1995). The thesis examines the factors affecting the policy formulators and HEI leaders' (as enacting agents) sensemaking and their enactment of the General Foundation Programme (GFP) in one of the top private colleges in Oman, rated the best for teaching quality among the 27 private colleges in the country. It has over 5000 students and 200 multinational teaching faculty members. The GFP is of critical importance to the HE sector in Oman and is undertaken by most Omani students prior to their admission to higher education programmes. Most students graduating from secondary school in Oman need to undertake the GFP to develop the knowledge, skills and competencies needed to successfully undertake a higher education programme. HEIs are required to provide a GFP which includes a minimum four core areas of study: English Language, Mathematics, Computing and General Study or Life Skills that should be completed in a minimum of 3 semesters (GFP Quality Audit Manual, 2017). The government designed the national curriculum for the GFP with the aim of implementing systemic reform. This initiative involves the creation of standardised curricula to ensure that the teaching staff and the leadership teams are held accountable, thereby ensuring that policy is closely integrated with instructional practices. Since 2002, the GFP has been implemented by HEIs to support students for their future higher education studies. The Quality Audit of GFPs supports the OAAAQA's mandate to promote the quality of higher education in Oman. It also

supports OAAAQA in meeting its mission which includes the intention to encourage and support the Omani higher education sector in meeting international standards, and a wider commitment to providing reliable information to the public and other stakeholders about HEIs and their provision. To my knowledge, no studies have been done to understand the extent to which the enacting agents of the programme make sense and enact those standards at the 'street level' (Lipsky, 1980). It is, therefore, important to investigate the enactment of the GFP thoroughly. Studying the inhabited institution can open doors to view how organisational members use environmental materials to negotiate meanings of the GFP in their everyday work that in turn can reproduce and/ or transform organisational practice (Thornton et al., 2012). As mentioned earlier, the term 'inhabited institutionalism' argues that institutions and individuals mutually constitute each other, since institutions "function reciprocally from the ground up and the top down, as people actively construct the meaning of legitimate action via local interactions in ways that are enabled and constrained by the structured conditions of their environments" (Everitt, 2018, p. 12). Thus, the HEI under study frames the stakeholders as actively 'sense makers' and interpreters of cues from their environments about the GFP text and discourse while negotiating its meaning through local interactions for a successful enactment. The next section highlights the rationale for conducting this study.

As discussed by Trowler (2011), being an 'insider researcher' had several advantages for me in the conduct of this study. For instance, I had some knowledge of the culture and the context, and I also had good collegial relationships with stakeholders which facilitated data collection. This is in addition to an understanding of some of the needs for the reform and hence the introduction of the practice. As explained earlier when I talked about my positionality, the complexity of being an 'insider researcher' did not influence my neutrality as a researcher, I remained committed to gaining knowledge as a 'researcher-qua-researcher' (Creswell, 2013). The specific HEI was chosen because it is the largest private HEI in Oman that has been enacting the GFP reform since the ministerial decision was made in 2002. The Centre for Foundation Studies prepares

approximately ($n=60$) teachers with different nationalities to execute the GFP. In addition, it also claims that its GFP standards are in complete alignment with the OAAAQA, whose standards have already been benchmarked with international practices. Nonetheless, no systematic study had been conducted to examine the reform's understanding and practice at institutional level. The current study, therefore, addressed this gap, through understanding the agents' sensemaking of the GFP and thus examining the HEI's degree towards successful enactment and achievement of the desired educational outcomes. The HEI also presented a multinational environment, where the enacting agents (associate deans, head of departments and skills coordinators) came from different nationalities; creating an opportunity to understand their diverse beliefs, attitudes, experience of the reform and their enactment of the GFP practices. So, all data came from a single higher education institution and studying a site that has a long history with the GFP enactment was helpful in allowing the researcher to analyse the enactment that reflected multiple years of cohorts and adjustments (Cohen et al., 2018). This means, the participants responded to the ideas they construe from policy, rather than some uniform fixed vision of policy. This revealed the uni-directional relationship between policy and practice. The advantage of becoming an insider researcher gave easy access to the data including my existing knowledge and connections with faculty members who would facilitate the data collection. These fostered deep relationships with the subjects of policy allowing for a closer look to the data and so there was a personal and direct experience with the knowledge structures of the participants. The advantage of this provided information, meanings, and perspectives unattainable otherwise as it facilitated the researcher's role as mediator and translator in policy democratisation (Levinson et al., 2009). However, as a researcher, I was aware of the challenges involved in conducting research as an 'insider researcher' such as the interpretation of findings that might be influenced by own self-understanding and personal experiences (Mercer, 2007). As highlighted above, I maintained a 'researcher-qua- researcher' position throughout the conduct of the research that was done carefully and faithfully, avoiding unnecessary biases in data interpretation. The nature of the study was

explained clearly to the colleagues for them to understand its academic purpose and hence cooperate fully in the data collection process. A desired pluralist perspective of the thesis would have been best to adopt an outsider researcher to juxtapose and multiply informants and data sources (Ryan et al., 2021), yet this was not possible as the case study only represented the interpreting perspective of a single observer, who was thus subject to idiosyncrasies. Although I, the researcher, was closely grounded in the context and experience of the informants, attention was not given to the insiders' representations of experience and interpretive world view, instead the entire voice and face value were given to the participants' values, beliefs, knowledge, and expertise, looking into the deeper structure of their interpretations and actual experiences. As discussed by several authorities cited in Trowler (2011), being an 'insider researcher' presents both benefits and challenges. It was important for me to navigate my way carefully to achieve the objectives of my study. At times, engaging in interviews with the senior leaders to whom I am accountable presented a challenge, particularly when their viewpoints diverged significantly from my personal experiences. Nevertheless, I remained committed to maintaining objectivity and ensuring that my personal insights did not influence the integrity of the data presented. I also feel that as an insider, the issues I was raising in the interviews had the potential to prompt the enacting agents who included the senior leaders in the organisation to reflect and explore ways to continue to improve their practice. This way, the research process as well as the final report is bound to make an impact within the institution.

3.5.2 Research Participants and Sampling

This study employed purposive sampling to identify the maximal variation representative of the diversity in the HEI's programme areas, nationality, and professional identities. I investigated a few, yet rich cases ($n=13$ participants), that were vastly different to disclose a range of variation of knowledge and experiences. Patton (2002) asserts: "any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects or impacts of a programme" (p.172). For the sampling,

therefore, the thesis purposefully selected potential participants in different

Table 2: Participants' profile with relevant information

Sample participant	Number of participants	Gender	Job title	Professional experience in years	Nationality	Discipline/ Department	Organisation
Policy maker	1	male	Deputy Dean, Quality and Register	>30	Syrian	-	OAAAQA
Associate dean	1	male	1.Associate Dean of Academic Affairs	>20	Indian	Department of, Engineering, Electronics and Computing	Private HEI
Associate dean	1	male	Associate Dean of Research and innovation	>20	Pakistani	Department of Mathematics, Management and Centre for Foundation Studies	Private HEI

Head of Department	3	2 females 1 male	Centre for Foundation Studies	10-20 years	Indian	English	Private HEI
			Head of Department of Mathematics,	10-20 years	Omani	Mathematics	
			Head of Department of Computing	>20 years	Tunisian	Computing	
Skills coordinators	7	1 female 6 males	Computer skills coordinator	10-20 years	Indian	Department of Computing	Private HEI
			Reading and writing skills coordinators,	10 years	Algerian, Jordanian	Centre for Foundation Studies	
			Listening and Speaking Skills coordinators,	<10 years	Syrian, Omani		
			Study skills coordinators	<10 years	Omani	Centre for Foundation Studies	
			Mathematics skills coordinator	< 10 years	Indian	Department of Mathematics	

categories which included (policy maker, associate deans, head of departments and skills coordinators) who were deemed as important variables as they were

directly involved in the formulation and enactment of the GFP. The sample of 13 participants was considered sufficient by the researcher to obtain deep, strong, and rich data since they were drawn from heterogeneous backgrounds with a mixture of genders, (males and females) holding different roles. This last category of participants (skills coordinators) was perhaps largely represented with 7 participants and will be adequately addressed in the data analysis chapter. Other than the policy maker from OAAAQA and the associate deans of the HEI understudy, the volunteer participants came from 3 different core discipline areas which constituted the GFP, namely English, Mathematics, and Computing. To be more specific, the participants who were interviewed were as follows: one policy maker from OAAAQA, two associate deans of the HEI understudy, three head of departments (English, Mathematics and Computing), and seven skills coordinators which included, English skills coordinators, Mathematics skills coordinators and Computing skills coordinators. All participants were experienced academics and because of their heavily involvement in formulating and enacting the GFP, their relative experience, seniority made them able to articulate the complexities of the policy informed and their teaching of GFP as practice, as well as their agency in creating narratives for the thesis informed across any contradictory discourses (Mathieson, 2019). Table 2 below provides further information on the sampling of the participants selected with the very disciplines selected as a constitution of the GFP.

3.6 Data collection methods

Since the research was informed by a social interpretive and constructivist paradigm, where social realities are perceived as socially constructed, the knowledge, experiences and the phenomenon by each respondent were the sources of social realities and could only be probed deeply using qualitative instruments (Gaus et al., 2018). Thus, one primary sources of data were collected in accordance with the highest of ethical standards namely 1) semi-structured interviews with the relevant stakeholders ($n=13$), 2) and a subsidiary source known as document analysis from the GFP Portfolio prepared by the HEI understudy.

3.6.1 Semi-structured interviews

To begin with the primary data collection method; semi-structured interviews were selected because they are regarded as flexible and insightful instruments to gather relevant information and opinions deeply rooted in reflective processes. The interviewer elicited the participants' views and subsequently analysed and interpreted their responses to recognise common trends and/or distinctive views of the subject matter. The generated data will be discussed further in the data analysis chapter. The key topics and questions that were discussed were listed thematically in the interview schedule, of course allowing some room for divergence if necessary (Creswell, 2013). Three sets of the semi-structured interview questions were structured to target three categories of people holding different roles or professional titles, namely 1) policy maker, 2) associate deans and HODs and 3) skills coordinators from different disciplines to capture the diversity of disciplinary contexts in which those academics were negotiating their teaching practices. The questions were predominantly open-ended and were designed in light of the cognitive framework with the intention to reveal authentic attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge experiences associated with the overall objectives of the RQs (See appendix A for samples of 3 sets of semi-structured interviews including 1) policy maker from OAAAQA, 2) Deans, HODs and Assistant HODs/ Programme Managers and 3) GFP Skills Coordinators). The 13 individual interviews took place during the COVID-19 time. As a result, in line with the health and safety guidelines, the interviews were conducted online via MS Teams, which also recorded and transcribed the participants' responses verbatim. This is perhaps not ideal and may not have provided the highest degree of comfort for the interviewees. The (1- 1.5 hours) of interview sessions utilised a series of prompts and prods to encourage the participants to answer the questions asked and to allow space for elaboration. Pilot testing was conducted prior to the data collection phase, subsequently, questions were reframed to be short and straight forward to ensure the participants could easily absorb information and understand what was being asked from them. The interview questions were carefully crafted to induce authentic discourse by setting the context to the participants and exploring their

current level of understanding of and engagement with the GFP. This realisation that the HEI stakeholders are imperative as enactors of the policy, reflected what Ball and Bowe (1992) call different interpretational stances, implying an active role on the part of the enactor.

Undoubtedly, enactment of policy poses several demands on its agents in terms of knowledge, skills and attitude which can only be met by interpretations, or creations of policy versions that come from personal and subjective frames of references. Ball and Bowe (1992) refine this point by saying: "Practitioners do not confront policy texts as naïve readers; they come from histories, with experience, values and purposes of their own, they have vested interests in the meaning of policy" (p.22). Since policy writers cannot control the meanings of their texts, the conduct of the semi-structured interviews was important to understand the connection between the practical responses of the GFP formulators and the GFP enactors to understand which part of policy texts were implemented, and/ or rejected, selected out, ignored, deliberately misunderstood and so on. Therefore, the empirical interview data recount participants as powerful mediators in the view of their interpretations and emotional responses to educational policy which ultimately affect policy enactment. In other words, eliciting meaning of teachers' understanding of the education policy GFP characterise the policy practice interface (Smit, 2005). Mainly, the interviews explored how the GFP was formulated in line with the OAAAQA, and how the HEI stakeholders negotiated the process of teaching and practice the reform within their disciplinary workgroups. This further allowed for identifying the agents' strategies adopted and the challenges they faced during the enactment of the GFP.

To enhance transparency and coherence in data presentation, this thesis employs extensive use of direct quotations from participants and documentary sources. Below is a clear statement on the function of these quotes and their methodological justification. The use of quotations serves three primary functions:

a) Illustrating stakeholder views and experiences

Quotes provide authentic voices of HEI stakeholders, policymakers, and faculty members, capturing their lived experiences, interpretations, and perceptions of the General Foundation Programme (GFP) enactment. This aligns with qualitative research principles that prioritise participant narratives as a means of understanding social phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

b) Illustrating Themes and Categories in the Analysis

Selected quotes support the thematic analysis by exemplifying key patterns, such as policy enactment challenges, institutional sensemaking, and stakeholder negotiations of policy meaning. This method follows Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis framework, where direct excerpts substantiate identified themes.

c) Enhancing Credibility and Triangulation

The integration of interview excerpts and documentary data ensures a triangulation approach, validating themes by comparing institutional policy documents with stakeholder perspectives. This approach mitigates researcher bias, ensuring that findings are grounded in multiple perspectives as described by Cardno, (2018).

The quotes were selected based on relevance to emerging themes, ensuring they effectively illustrate the core findings (Borish et al., 2021). The length of quotes was carefully considered: Short quotes are used for concise illustrations of stakeholder views. Longer excerpts are utilised when more nuanced explanations are necessary. Each quote is accompanied by an interpretative commentary, ensuring that its meaning is contextualised within the broader analysis (Naeem et al., 2023). To maintain participant confidentiality, quotes are anonymised and coded, ensuring that individual identities remain protected.

To maintain attribution and anonymity quotes are labeled (e.g., HOD A, GFP Quality Audit Manual, GFP Quality Audit Portfolio) to clarify their source while

preserving anonymity. Moreover, the thesis avoided the overuse of quotes, because while quotes enrich the narrative, excessive reliance on direct excerpts can dilute analytical depth. Therefore, each quote was purposefully integrated to contribute meaningfully to the thesis' arguments (William and Mosar, 2019).

3.6.2 Document review and analysis

To establish triangulation, the other subsidiary method that was used in combination with interviews to capture the fullness of the policy formation, and practice was document review and analysis. Organisational and institutional documents have been a staple in qualitative research for many years (Berg, 2009; Briggs & Coleman, 2012; Mohajan, 2018). The private HEI authored a portfolio that investigated and documented the life of the GFP since its first implementation which dated back to 2002. Authenticity and usefulness of this portfolio was determined considering the original purpose of evaluating it, the context in which it was produced, and the intended audience. To explain further, portfolio analysis was used to provide data on the context which the participants operated in, contextualising the data collected during interviews, while bearing witness to past events. This provided background information as well as historical insight on the practice of the GFP which eventually helped the researcher to understand the historical root of the formulation of the GFP and indicated the conditions that facilitated and / or impinged its enactment. Other reasons for selecting document analysis (portfolio) as the complementary qualitative method in the thesis were because its data provided 1) stability for repeated reviews, 2) exactness of names, references, details of events, 3) broad coverage over a long span of time. The comprehensive coverage established authenticity, credibility, accuracy, and broad representativeness of the life of the GFP.

Portfolio analysis took place in a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating the portfolio (computer based) materials which was issued electronically. The examination and the interpretation of the portfolio elicited meaning and enabled better understanding of the processual aspects of the GFP

developing empirical knowledge at a minimal time frame (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Nevertheless, precautions were taken to avoid any biased selectivity and or incomplete collection of data that were directly aligned with corporate policies and procedures and with the agenda of the organisation's principles. The documents were looked at with critical eye necessarily to determine its data relevance to the research problem and purpose establishing contribution to the issues explored. Therefore, a thorough systematic review of documentation provided background information that served to ground the research in the context of the GFP. Apart from providing contextual richness in the research, the portfolio was particularly useful in pre and post interview sessions for validation. It can be concluded that the reviewed document augmented the interviews and thus served a useful purpose for a convergence of results.

Overall, document analysis greatly supplemented research data becoming a valuable addition to the semi-structured interviews. Documentary analysis is a key methodological tool used in this study to complement interview data and establish triangulation of data sources. A key definition of documentary analysis is that it is the systematic examination of institutional and policy documents to extract meaning, track changes, and validate findings from other data sources. To provide an operational definition in the thesis, the documentary sources analysed in this study include institutional audit reports, GFP policy documents, and historical records of policy implementation. Using qualitative content analysis, policy texts were coded and compared with interview data, ensuring that the documentary analysis functioned as a corroborative tool rather than as a standalone dataset. Following Bowen (2009) and Corbin & Strauss (2015), documentary analysis in this study involved evaluating authenticity, credibility, and relevance of documents, ensuring they contributed meaningfully to the research questions.

Along with exploring the agents' beliefs, context factors, and practices, it tracked changes and developments which led to a discovery of unanticipated twists and turns throughout the course of the GFP enactment. Together with the semi-structured interviews, this brought into the view possible recursive aspects of the

GFP that can eventuate in modifications to its standards that were formulated to enhance agents' cognition and thus enactment. The following Table 3 provides a summary of the data collection methods.

Table 3: Methodological design

Methodology	Methods	Object/Subject	Sample	Venue	Duration	Analysis
Interpretivism	Qualitative (Document review)	Review of OAAAQA GFP portfolio of the HEI understudy.	Documents from English, mathematics, and Computing Departments	The document was in the form of a portfolio	Four weeks	Content analysis and categorisation of information related to the RQs
Constructivism	Qualitative (Interviews)	1. Three participants from each of the departments of Mathematics, and Computing. (6 interviewees) 2. Four participants from the English department. (4 interviewees)	Representatives from English, Computing, Mathematics, associate deans And Policymakers	The interviews were conducted online via MS Teams	Four weeks (Conducted 3/4 interviews in each week for a total of 13 participants) Each interview	Conceptual analysis Transcription, coding and thematisation according to the RQs

		3. Associate Deans (2 interviewees)			lasted for 45-60 minutes	
		3. One participant from the policy makers from the (OAAAQA) (1 interviewee)				

Data were collected in an ethically sound manner through a combination of document analysis and semi-structured interviews with the relevant stakeholders ($n=13$). The interview questions were carefully crafted to induce authentic discourse. The data were analysed to construct themes to address the main research questions. Emphasis was given to the enacting agents' voice, to provide their local knowledge through qualitative inquiry of the GFP. From a broader perspective, looking at the multiplicity of actors who come from "multidisciplinary, multi-level and multi-focused contextualisation" (Hill & Hupe, 2002, p.16) produced versatile perspectives of the GFP. Data analysis presented in the thesis was constructed mainly from the in-depth interviews and minorly from the document review with thematic analysis. The findings and implications were categorised into four pillars mainly 1) *Individual cognition*: discussion on how the will, capacity, motivation, and goals influence individual cognition to enhance reasoning, interpreting and constructing the GFP reforms for enactment. The implications on the top-down policy approach and its effect on the recipient level of understanding that is subject to multiple interpretations is also discussed. 2) *Interpersonal*: discussion on how representations of knowledge about social situation influence individuals' cognition and their frames and schemas for understanding and enacting the GFP reform. Analysis of the effectiveness of sensemaking and action as they are distributed in the interactive web of actors, artefacts, and situation (distributed cognition) is also presented. 3) *Community*: discussion on how

knowledge, embedded in social contexts as the practices and common beliefs of a community affects sensemaking and action in reforms enactment. The analysis focused on the role of historical context, the organisation's history, culture, and tacit knowledge to exemplify how they build the individual's beliefs and expectations towards enhancing policy practice. The findings also discussed how the professional or occupational identities of the enacting agents influence their work with other individuals in professional communities sharing norms, knowledge, perspectives, commitments, all of which influence their work in the organization and perceived logics. Analysis focused on how institutional expectations strongly influence individual perception and guide the interpretation of ambiguous messages. Discussion from the institutional perspective, social agents' thinking and action which are situated in institutional sectors that provide norms, rules, and definitions of the environment, and how they can both constrain and enable policy enactment is discussed in the implications section. The above findings aid towards the improvement and further refinement of enactment strategies in the GFP, and in educational reforms in HE sector in general. Through the discussion of the findings above, it was revealed that the nature of connections between policy makers and the enacting agents in terms of their individual lives and social actions at an institutional level show their interdependence, and/or influence upon each other. Hence, it builds on the literature of the micro-understanding of policy sensemaking in formulation and enactment within different hierarchical levels from top (macro level) to meso, and micro levels of HEIs.

To explain the hierarchy and interplay of data sources and as indicated above, this thesis employed two principal data sources: semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. Their roles and relative importance were deliberately structured to align with the research objectives and the interpretivist framework guiding the inquiry (Creswell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source, offering rich, experiential insights into the enactment of the General Foundation Programme (GFP) policy. Engaging directly with policymakers, associate deans, department heads, and skills coordinators allowed

for an in-depth exploration of their lived experiences, interpretations, and the challenges encountered during policy implementation. This approach is consistent with the interpretivist paradigm (Creswell, 2013), which emphasises understanding phenomena through the meanings individuals assign to them. As Patton (1999) articulates, triangulation in qualitative research involves using multiple data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Carter et al., 2014). In this context, the interviews were indispensable for capturing the nuanced processes of sensemaking and the cognitive and institutional logics influencing GFP enactment.

Documentary analysis functioned as a secondary, corroborative tool, providing contextual and historical grounding to the primary interview data. The analysis of institutional audit reports, policy papers, and government directives offered a backdrop against which the interview findings could be understood and validated. While documentary sources are valuable for understanding policy objectives and the rationale behind chosen policy options (Cardno, 2018), they often lack the capacity to reveal how policies are interpreted and enacted in practice. Therefore, in this thesis, documentary analysis was employed not as an independent source of data but to triangulate and reinforce the findings derived from the semi-structured interviews.

The integration of these data sources was designed to achieve methodological triangulation, enhancing the credibility and validity of the research findings (Creswell, 2013). However, this triangulation was hierarchical rather than equal, with semi-structured interviews providing the primary empirical foundation and documentary analysis serving to support and contextualise the interview data. This deliberate structuring acknowledges that while documentary sources can inform the broader policy context, they do not capture the dynamic and interpretive processes inherent in policy enactment. By prioritising the perspectives of those directly involved in implementing and enacting the GFP, the thesis ensures that the findings are grounded in the realities of practice rather than solely in policy

prescriptions.

Key contributions of this approach include:

1. **Emphasis on Human Agency:** By prioritising interview data, the thesis highlights the centrality of human agency in policy enactment, challenging notions that policies are implemented as written without adaptation or interpretation.
2. **Enhanced Validity Through Triangulation:** The use of documentary analysis to corroborate interview findings strengthens the research's validity, ensuring that interpretations are well-founded and contextually informed.
3. **Methodological Rigor:** Clearly delineating the roles and hierarchy of data sources demonstrates a thoughtful and rigorous approach to research design, aligning data collection methods with the thesis's epistemological stance and research objectives.

This refined approach, grounded in established qualitative research methodologies, provides a robust framework for understanding the complex interplay between policy formulation and enactment, ensuring that the voices of practitioners are foregrounded in the analysis.

3.7 Robustness of the research

Empirical interview data recount HEI stakeholders and policy makers as powerful mediators in view of their sensemaking, interpretations, and emotional responses to education policy, which ultimately affect policy formulation and enactment (Ryan et al., 2021). Guided by the research questions, the thesis data collection was an exploratory process where the transcribed interviews and the institution's portfolio were analysed to generate themes that aided in mainly understanding how the agents made sense of and engaged with the GFP in their respective context. As the sole researcher and interpreter of data, I ensured that the process of analysis was made as rigorous and transparent as possible since qualitative enquiry demands no less. The priority was to give voice to the enacting agents as this has typically not been done in previous studies (Green & Whitsed, 2015; Hiver et al.,

2024; Hoff & Gobbo, 2019). The themes generated produced versatile perspectives of the GFP and revealed new knowledge of how the stakeholders' cognition and engagement evolved over time within their situated HEI. Data analysis presented was constructed mainly from the in-depth interviews and document review with thematic analysis; a method that has commonly been used in policy-oriented studies (Rose & McKinley, 2017). All the interview data were transcribed verbatim and were inductively analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis, with coding management system. Coding of the raw data from the interviews and the documents reviews that yielded data excerpts, quotations, and entire passages followed the process of qualitative content analysis, also referred as thematic qualitative text analysis which included organising data into major themes, categories, and case examples. To explain this, first the data were read to obtain a general idea of the contents before a thorough inductive coding process and examination were conducted (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This means there was a back-and-forth interplay with the data, where the researcher constantly checked and re-coded the elemental codes and concepts. After the process of scrutinisation and comparison of the empirical data, ideas were organised, and concepts were pinpointed and clustered into substantive categories. Critical content analysis was then carried out to merge themes that helped to obtain a profound interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2013). This is by asking questions such as: How is this text similar or different from the preceding text? Or What kind of ideas are mentioned in both the interviews and the portfolio review? The identification of the similarities and differences between the two sets of data sources formed general data patterns, and a provisional list of the initial categories was checked within the data and amended as new concepts emerged through the cycles of coding. The portfolio analysis was also instrumental in refining ideas and identifying conceptual boundaries to fit into the relevance of the pre-determined patterns and themes while triangulating the findings across data sources. The key question of the interviews and document analysis was to understand how the individual cognition, situated cognition and policy representations characterised sensemaking of the agency and aided in the

formulation and enactment of the GFP. As such, the analytic interest in this thesis was to understand how the stakeholders make meaning and experience the GFP in the context of the HEI and how is this associated with the implementation and enactment of the GFP in the teaching and learning context. This was important because as Spillane (1996) emphasises that:

local educators (teachers) adopt an active stance towards policy and in doing so re-shape policymakers' proposals to fit with their local contexts and work. Local practice is the site where teachers figure out what policy means for their work (p. 431).

Therefore, the institutional practice and discourse of the GFP that emerged out of the responses of the practitioners articulated how policy was framed and practiced at the street level. This was important as Ball and Bowe (1992) believe that education policy in the form of legislated texts is always re-contextualised through different kinds of interpretations and contexts and so it is not simply a form of following or putting an act to practice. The GFP reform rather remains partial, where it could be distorted, deflected, or simply ignored (Spillane et al., 2019). In this regard, thematic analysis that formed out of pattern recognitions within this data emerged categories of analysis. The process of careful, and focused re-reading, review and selection of data aided in the construction of categories and the uncovering of the themes pertinent to the research questions. Considering this, the researcher demonstrated objectivity while representing the research material fairly and sensitively in the selection and analysis of data. The emergence of the codes, themes and categories were integrated from the different sources to provide quality in data. The portrayal of the diverse sources of data collection and analysis gave a complete picture of the results that counteracted threats to trustworthiness, researcher bias and respondent bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The robustness of the research was thus established with the comparative method used to guide the data analysis, and of which was based on an inductive approach geared to identifying patterns and discovering thematic properties in the data. I was satisfied that the process of data collection and analysis were complete when all

the evidence from the semi-structured interviews, and the document analysis created a consistent rendering of the way in which the GFP was formulated, understood, and practiced in the HEI.

There is a plethora of literature around the theory of mixed-methods, and on the breadth and depth of this design (Aramide et al., 2023; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell, 2013; Hendren et al., 2023; Hirose & Creswell, 2023; Wang and Kruk, 2024). Mixing two sources of qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews and document analysis) was helpful since it allowed for a deeper understanding of the issues being investigated, honouring the voices of its participants, and producing rich insights into the researched phenomenon that could not have been fully understood by using one source of data. By triangulating data, the researcher attempted to provide a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility in understanding how sensemaking characterises educational policy formulation and enactment. The examination of the information collected through the different methods corroborated findings across data sets and thus reduced the impact of potential biases that could have existed with one source of method. As such, the multiplicity of qualitative methods integrated, and synergised multiple data sources consolidated to view the considered case from different perspectives and research lenses seeking for a wider view of the issues explored (Aramide et al., 2023). To clarify further, the mixed-method design used in the thesis, allowed for a triangulation of data to validate the results obtained from comparing the findings drawn from the interviews and document analysis and achieve trustworthiness and consistency in the interpretations and convergence of the results (Creswell, 2013; Dawadi et al., 2021). This merged qualitative data emerged from a necessity to fully address and provide greater insights to the exploratory research problems and thus verify, validify and generate stronger inferences on the cognitive framework. As what Creswell and Clark (2018) believe: “The intent of integration in a convergent design is to develop results and interpretations that expand understanding, are comprehensive and are validated and confirmed” (p.221).

Furthermore, due to the complexity of the subject matter, the importance of understanding the general principles of the framework in the specific context of the HEI, deemed for the use of hybrid design because of the need to acquire depth and breadth of understanding the GFP framing, dissemination, and enactment (Palinkas, 2018). The utilisation of mixed methods also identified the barriers and facilitators to a successful GFP implementation and enactment, developing strategies to monitor and enhance the sustainability of the cognitive framework. Thus, data triangulation in the thesis has led to some well validated findings while promoting the creditability of the inferences obtained from the complementary sources of the qualitative methods, producing greater certainty and wider implication in the conclusions with new avenues for future inquires in policy formulation and enactment (Dawadi et al., 2021).

3.8 Ethical considerations

Ethical principles are the backbone of research integrity and are essential in ensuring the dignity, rights, and the welfare of research participants (Wellington, 2000). The conduct of my study was underpinned by sound ethical practices. For instance, the principle of informed consent was important to me. I ensured that all the participants in my study were provided all the necessary information about the study allowing them to make an informed decision about their involvement in the study. In my view, which is supported by extant literature, this process respects individual autonomy and promotes transparency (Cohen et al., 2017). The principle of no harm to participants is equally important, obligating researchers to avoid causing physical, psychological, or emotional distress. It ensures that the benefits of research outweigh the risks involved. Privacy is another important ethical principle that seeks to protect the confidentiality of participant information, safeguarding against unauthorised access and potential misuse. Together, these principles foster trust between the researcher and the participants, promote the credibility of research findings, and uphold the integrity of the research work. I adhered to these and other important ethical principles in the conduct of my study.

The ethical considerations made in my study are discussed in the following section.

As indicated above, the importance of ethical principles and underpinnings, being active and revisited was reinforced throughout the thesis. This is because ethical issues can arise in institutions if there was no firmly established qualitative research design (Lenton et al., 2021). Since the thesis is qualitative enquiry, where it allowed for in-depth, personal and lived experience of the participants to be examined (Freeman, 2018), the open-ended nature of the interviews could have led to unexpected ethical issues above and beyond what would be considered usual (Dempsey et al., 2016; Hoagwood et al., 2014). To make sure that the study was implemented in an ethically sound manner, permission for the conduct of the research was sought and granted from Lancaster University's Research Ethics Committee and the HEI's ethical research committee that both have well-established ethical protocols.

Procedurally, participant forms which included the nature of the study and what the participants are required to do were distributed to all the interviewees for them to be informed and have a clear idea of their roles. Participant form also explained to the participants the research contribution this thesis will generate from their participation in the study, and how it will benefit understanding the GFP for a better formulation and enactment at the HEI level. After that, signed consent forms were obtained from all the participants. They were assured about their anonymity and confidentiality and were informed that the results will be disseminated for research purposes only with their consent. They were also made aware of their right to withdraw at any point during the research phase. The completion of the ethical procedures ensured to counteract any potential ethical dilemmas that could have occurred during the research (Lenton et al., 2021). As a matter of fact, it was fortunate to see that all the participants ($n=13$) collaborated willingly and were open to share their views, beliefs and perceptions on the formulation and enactment of the GFP reform in the context of the HEI understudy. This revealed how the ethical practice was embedded in an ongoing dynamic process throughout the thesis (Fahie, 2014).

3.9 Summary

This chapter highlighted the rationale and fundamentals of the research design carried out in the thesis. Firstly, the thesis is a qualitative case study that explored sensemaking, perspectives and lived experiences of the stakeholders in the formulation and execution of the GFP reform. The researcher's positionality was critically discussed in line with the constructivist and interpretivist epistemological paradigm. The research design was thoroughly explained and summarised in a tabular form. This included selecting the site, adoption of a purposeful sampling of the participants who volunteered to undergo a semi-structured interview as the main instrumental method used to collect data. Document analysis was the second source of data, it was utilised for the convergence and triangulation of data. Ethical application practices were reinforced and upheld to the fullest throughout the course of the thesis to ensure the reliability of the findings. Robustness of the research explained how well designed the research methodology was in order to achieve its goals and how securely it was carried out. Data presentation and analysis was discussed briefly referring to the use of thematic analysis. Further details of data analysis will be discussed further in-depth in the data analysis chapter. The cognitive framework presented an effective lens in understanding the agents' sensemaking and this enhanced an understanding of the policy maker formulation of the GFP and the enacting agents' social behaviour and practice of the GFP. The chapter concluded its discussion on the status of the findings, its limitations, and the extent of its applicability and/or transferability into other HEI contexts for broader research significance and contribution.

Chapter 4: Results Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

The chapter presents the most significant results from the study, illustrating the constructed themes considering the contemporary literature related to sensemaking and cognition in policy formulation and enactment. The main findings generated from this study capture themes related to how policymakers and the enacting agents understand and engage with the Oman Academic Standards of General Foundation Programme (OASGFP) in their respective contexts. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance (OAAAQA) played a central role in the formulation of the General Foundation Programme. The priority was to give voice to the enacting agents as this has not been given adequate attention in existing studies (Green & Whitsed, 2015; Hoff & Gobbo, 2019; Kirk et al., 2018). The analysis remained closely tied to the participants' wording, adopting an inductive approach to evaluate the effectiveness of the cognitive theory in expressing the General Foundation Programme (GFP) agents' sensemaking while revealing new knowledge of how their cognition, and its associated formulation and enactment evolved over time in the higher education context (Ryan et al., 2021). Considering this analytic interest of gaining a better understanding of policy and enactment, the study sought to answer the research questions articulated in the previous sections.

4.2 Data presentation and analysis

This study employed a systematic, multi-stage approach to data analysis, integrating semi-structured interview data with documentary sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the GFP enactment, as well as providing clarity and transparency in the data analysis process. Basically, the thesis employed a rigorous approach by explicitly detailing the processes of coding, thematisation, and data integration. As such, the thesis provides a transparent and methodologically sound framework for analysing complex qualitative data. This

approach does not only elucidate the interplay between policy documentation and the practitioner experiences but also contributes to the broader discourse on effective qualitative research methodologies. Below is an explicit breakdown of the process, to provide a well-structured explanation of how the documentary sources that were analysed, and how they were merged with interview data. The data analysis process includes thematic coding, comparative analysis, triangulation through the integration of documentary sources with interview data.

1. Data Preparation: Initial Processing and Familiarisation

All interview data were transcribed verbatim and underwent multiple readings to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the data and to retain the authenticity of participants' responses. Documentary sources (institutional reports, policy documents, and audit portfolios) were digitally reviewed and catalogued for relevance and alignment with research questions. Furthermore, both datasets were initially inductively coded, meaning themes were constructed from the data rather than being imposed a priori. A repeated reading process was undertaken to become familiar with the dataset, enabling initial impressions and potential coding categories to be identified.

2. Coding Framework: Identifying Themes Across Data Sources

The coding process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, ensuring systematic identification of patterns across both the interview data and documentary sources.

Step 1: Open Coding (Inductive Theme Identification)

Interview transcripts were examined line-by-line, with codes assigned to key ideas, recurring concepts, and participant interpretations related to GFP enactment. Documentary sources were subjected to qualitative content analysis, where policy objectives, institutional guidelines, and government expectations were coded for comparison with interview findings. Initial codes were generated

separately for interviews and documents, ensuring that themes emerged organically from each data source.

Step 2: Axial Coding (Developing Relationships and Patterns)

Once initial coding was complete, codes were compared across data sources to identify patterns, contradictions, and areas of alignment (Gibbs, 2012). To facilitate the integration of data sources, comparative coding was conducted to determine alignments and discrepancies between interview narratives and documentary sources. In other words, codes from both interviews and documents were compared to identify relationships and overarching themes. This process helps in understanding how different data sources converge or diverge on specific issues. For instance, if interviewees expressed concerns about policy misinterpretation, documentary sources were analysed to determine whether the policy language contributed to this confusion. If policy documents outlined an intended implementation framework, interview responses were assessed to see whether institutional actors enacted it as prescribed or modified it in practice.

Step 3: Thematic Categorisation (Final Themes)

Related codes were grouped into overarching themes, reflecting the core insights from both interview narratives and documentary analysis. The final themes were cross-checked against research questions to ensure that they effectively captured the key aspects of GFP policy enactment. Key themes emerged around policy interpretation, institutional adaptation, and cognitive sensemaking, revealing how institutional actors negotiated policy enactment.

Step 4: Integration of Data: Triangulation and Thematisation

To enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, the thesis employed methodological triangulation (Gibbs, 2012), integrating multiple data sources to cross-verify information and ensuring that data integration was not just a

mechanical process but a meaningful synthesis of perspectives. Cross-Verification was applied with the themes identified in interview data and were cross-checked against documentary sources to confirm consistency or highlight discrepancies (Naeem et al., 2023). This step ensures that the findings are robust and grounded in multiple forms of evidence. Documentary data provided contextualisation or a backdrop for interpreting interview findings, situating personal experiences within the broader policy framework.

It is worth to note that where interview and documentary data aligned, the convergence was noted to strengthen credibility. However, where discrepancies emerged, further analysis was conducted to understand whether they resulted from policy ambiguity, contextual differences, or institutional constraints. In addition, it is worth to note that the key analytical strategy applied was the comparative method (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to assess consistency between data sources. Coding matrices were also used to visualise overlaps and differences between interview narratives and documentary discourse, ensuring a structured integration of findings. Therefore, and as mentioned earlier, the two sources were merged through a process of triangulation, ensuring convergence and validation: For example, when interview responses aligned with documentary data, the convergence was noted to strengthen credibility or regarded as confirmatory evidence. When discrepancies emerged, further analysis was conducted to understand whether they resulted from policy ambiguity, contextual differences, institutional constraints and/or divergence in practice.

Step 5: Justification and Methodological Rigor

To obtain methodological rigor the combination of thematic analysis and triangulation adheres to rigorous qualitative research standards, ensuring a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the GFP policy enactment. To ensure trustworthiness, the integration of codes from both sources strengthened the credibility of the research findings, reducing researcher bias and respondent

bias (Borish, et al., 2021). Furthermore, this enhanced stability through the process of systematic coding and theme extraction which reinforced the internal validity of the findings. This is by integrating multiple data sources that mitigated biases and enriched the analysis while ensuring that the findings were not solely dependent on one data source. This led to yield more credible and well substantiated conclusions. Another strength was the methodological rigor which was carried out by explicitly outlining the coding and triangulation process (Williams and Mosar, 2019).

In summary, the use of multiple data sources mitigated bias, strengthening the credibility, enhancing validity and transferability of findings. The methodological transparency was obtained by clearly defining how documentary sources were analysed and merged with interview data and this enhanced replicability and rigor. Overall, the thesis demonstrated rigorous qualitative analysis that aligns with contemporary qualitative methodologies in advancing policy enactment and education. The thesis has also ensured that findings reflect both institutional frameworks and lived experiences in reinforcing the role of institutional actors in shaping policy outcomes.

To demonstrate rigor in the data analysis, overarching thematic categories systematically and methodically synthesised from the discourse were generated and demonstrated in line with the cognitive framework as shown in the Figures 3 and 4 below.

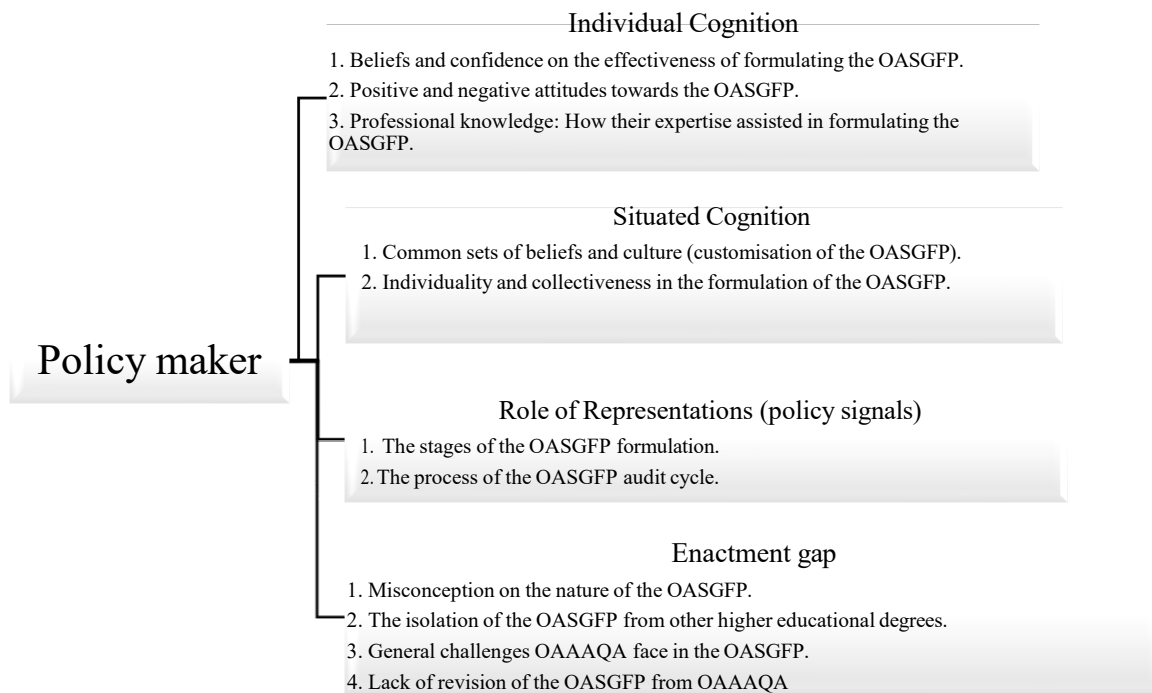


Figure 3: Policy maker's individual and situational cognition, with role of representations.

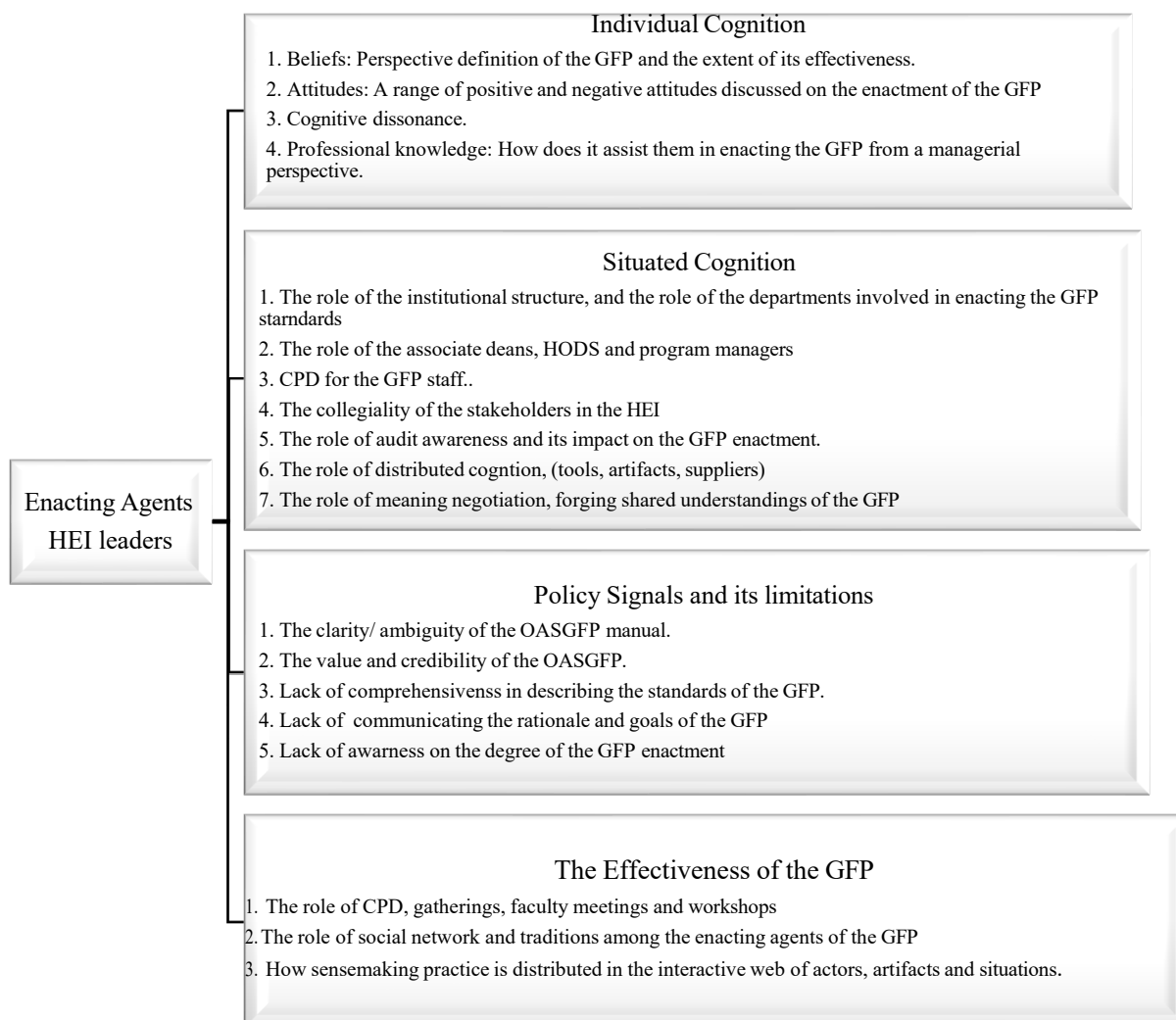


Figure 4: HEI Leaders (Deans, Head of Departments (HODs), and GFP Coordinators) individual and situated cognition and the role of policy signals.

The above Figures 3 and 4 depict the themes constructed during thematic analysis and these are discussed thoroughly in this chapter. The research questions (RQs) were mainly addressed in the following way: RQ1+ RQ2 were answered simultaneously using the cognitive framework lenses on 2 different sets of people (Policy maker, and the enacting agents who were: Associate deans, HODs, and Skills coordinators). Therefore, the individual cognition and situated cognition of the policy maker is discussed first in terms of how they influenced and enhanced sensemaking, interpretation and formulation of the

OASGFP. Enactment gaps are also discussed from the policymaker's view. Subsequently, the individual and situated cognition of the enacting agents are discussed, together with the role of the policy signals for successful enactment. RQ 3 is then addressed focusing on the implications of the top- down policy approach and its effect at the recipient level of understanding and multiple interpretations. Interpersonal association and the role of institutional logics and infrastructure (human and social capitals) are discussed later to help understand how representations of knowledge about social situation influences individuals' cognition and frame their schemas to enact the GFP reform. Analysis of the effectiveness of the sensemaking and action as they are distributed in the interactive web of actors, artifacts, and situation (distributed cognition) is also presented in this chapter. In addition, this chapter also discusses how the professional or occupational identities of the enacting agents influenced their work with other individuals in the institution sharing norms, knowledge, perspectives, and commitments. Finally, 'a sensemaking reformed model' is built to exemplify how institutional factors influence individual cognition and action which are situated within the HEIs demonstrating how these factors can both constrain and/ or enable policy enactment.

4.3 Policymaker's individual cognition: Understanding the aims of policy formulation, and its effectiveness

Individual cognition played a significant role in the formulation and enactment of Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programme (OASGFP). For instance, the results of the interview with the policymaker revealed that the formulation of the OASGFP was a product of a Ministerial decision that came up after identifying major gaps in foundation skills. It was decided that all public and private HEIs were to adopt the OASGFP. This was shared by the QA consultant who said:

The Ministry of Higher Education Research and Innovation (MOHERI) identified a gap between school leavers and the requirements of university studies.

Students entering university really struggled with their English, Mathematics, IT and Study skills. To address this gap, the OASGFP was proposed to meet the academic requirements of English-medium HE specialisations.

The consultant had a firm belief on the effectiveness of the OASGFP formulation. The observations made by the QA consultant resonated with my own experience, I was aware that the GFP was effective in supporting students for their university studies. I observed that students who entered university through the foundation programme performed better than students who enrolled directly onto the degree programmes. The consultant confirmed that the OASGFP formulation went through a systematic analysis where research with high school (Year 11 and 12) was done to determine the areas of weakness students experienced and subsequently the amount of scaffolding needed in the foundation programme as a mitigation plan. Furthermore, the consultations and reviews conducted led to a decision not to follow the international standards but to develop the country's own standards. This was a reasonable decision to make because from my knowledge, the local students had lower attainment levels in skills compared to international expectations. This was well-articulated by the QA consultant as highlighted below:

We don't call them international standards; we call them Oman Academic Standards. A lot of customisation happened accordingly. We came up with very basic standards, for example, the minimum level of English competency these standards require should be at a level equivalent to IELTS band of 5 for them to be exempted from the English Language component. Similarly, ICDL and IC3 certificates are considered for exemptions from the Computing component of the GFP. So, as you can see, they are not the same as international standards, they are less rigorous.

It is well-documented in literature that the developers of the OASGFP believed that the reform was at the heart of the success of higher education and stated that its primary focus was to develop learning outcomes that had the potential to

contribute to the development of the Omani society (Oman Academic Standards, 2010). This view corroborates findings from previous research on general education standards and principles and their incorporation into the foundation programme and teaching practice in similar contexts (Tuzlukova et al., 2023). The studies confirmed that the prerequisites for each course, the materials, learning outcomes along with the necessary descriptors, testing matrices and administrative procedures and rules for both teachers and students were clearly identified and articulated. I can also confirm that I had access to all the provided resources and guidance as a Teacher of English on the GFP demonstrating the amount of work that went into the development of the programme. However, to develop a comprehensive picture of the OASGFP, its situated cognition was examined as discussed further in the next section.

4.4 The situated cognition in the formulation of the OASGFP

The findings of the study revealed that this programme was designed mainly by (OAAAQA). This also confirmed my own understanding as a Teacher of English on the GFP, I was aware that as Teachers we were primarily guided by OAAAQA's expectations in the way we delivered the programme. It was, however, useful to gain insights from the QA consultant about the procedures that were followed during the GFP formulation. No one in our organisation had taken time to explain the details generated through the study, hence, the significance of the study. According to the QA consultant, stakeholders from different divisions in the country and beyond were involved in the formulation of the OASGFP:

During the proposition, there were a lot of regional and international consultations and benchmarking involving GCC countries, Malaysia, the UK, and Australia. Consultations from local stakeholders such as the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Health, private and public HEIs in Oman, oil and industrial companies, Royal Court Affairs (RCA), among others, were conducted.

The QA consultant provided the rationale for the involvement and consultations of international stakeholders and representatives given the experience they had in delivering similar programmes in their own countries. In addition, during the formulation of the OASGFP, individual and collective identities from the academic board influenced the input of the programme. The higher education sector in Oman has continued to rely on expertise from outside the country to ensure the development and delivery of good quality degree programmes. For instance, I know that all the private university colleges such as the institution under study, were mandated by the government to establish collaborative partnerships with external universities for the delivery of high-quality degree programmes. In the same vein, it is understandable that OAAAQA had to enlist the support of experts from international partners to help develop the GFP. As explained by the QA consultant, the OAAAQA mostly looked at commonalities between the feedback that was provided by the international stakeholders and made some compromises to create the best version of the standards for the Omani context as explained below:

I can assure you, creating the standards was a very thorough process. The reason why we call them Omani academic standards, is because those standards went through a customisation process to meet the minimum Omani students' levels and abilities, i.e., they were tailored to suit the standards of the Omani cultural context.

Henceforth, it is evident that standards were developed at the top by pan-sectoral working groups (top-down approach) comprising leading national and international academicians. This is not a surprise, Oman's higher education system is still young, hence, having a centralised system helps to ensure effective coordination and the development of good quality programmes such as the GFP by a small group of experts. Specifically, the formulation process involved national and international benchmarking, a review of past and current national experience, and extensive public consultations. All Oman Academic Standards were formally approved by a decision from The Minister of Higher

Education Research and Innovation (MOHERI) based on the recommendation of the OAAAQA. The four main areas of learning (English, Mathematics, Computing and Study skills) were selected based on the use of international literature, and international benchmarks. As a product, the GFPs offered in Oman's public and private HEIs provide a comprehensive intellectual base that act as a gateway to all higher education studies, with the development of critical thinking and other relevant life skills, needed for successful engagement with degree studies.

It can be gleaned from the QA consultant's statement that the OASGFP has been designed and developed by HEIs in Oman with complex teaching and learning contexts which incorporated multiple factors, such as, multiple stakeholders, culture of the society, local and global needs of the future citizens, social communities, communication networks, and collaboration among various institutions/universities (Tuzlukova et al., 2023).

To ensure the OASGFP andragogic effectiveness, the standards were moulded based on Bloom's taxonomy of learning and its hierarchical domains namely cognitive, affective, and psychomotor used for the classification of educational learning objectives into levels of complexity and specificity (Bloom, 1974). This strategy was consistent with the development of generic graduate attributes for Omani citizens in Oman Academic Standards (2010). In addition, the OASGFP could be described as miniature communities as Dewey (1997) highlighted, viewing education as a social process which assists the young ones to get inducted into the real-world scenarios that mirror the social relations and activities of the larger society, hence, preparing them for the future.

The study findings revealed that OAAAQA acted as the central authority of the OASGFP's formulation, giving directions, and networking between the Omani HEIs while providing retrospective monitoring and the strength of local capacity of HEIs in responding, learning interpreting, and enacting the reform content and goals to ensure its full implementation and enactment (Gaus et al., 2018). In addition, having OAAAQA acting as the main external stimulator and impetus to

elicit change was important to maintain quality control and audit purposes in the implementation and the enactment of the OASGFP. Following this, the execution of the educational policy by the agents (HEIs) was mandated in compliance with the OASGFP. Barret (2004) considered this traditional structure of governance as the ideal model for effecting policy as it is characterised by “the separation of politics and administration, and coordination and control through authority and hierarchy” (p. 254). Arguably, this approach helps to quicken the implementation of reforms in situations where there is limited expertise across the sector, for example, Oman. As explained earlier, the experts in a central office can marshal ideas and make decisions as well as providing guidance at pace compared to an approach where the grassroots are involved.

Moreover, it is important to mention that although the OASGFP has been run for almost 15 years now in all the HEIs in Oman, there were no changes or adaptations made to the programme, mainly because it acted as a minimum set of requirements that programmes of study in the HEIs were expected to follow and attain. Also, it was agreed that the standards undergo a major review only after the first cycle of the audit exercise took place. The audit exercise has been an ongoing process, i.e., the assessment of the GFP against the Oman Academic standards in all public and private HEIs in Oman has not yet been completed. To my knowledge, only a handful of the GFPs were audited while others were still being audited or waiting to be audited. According to the OAAAQA’s audit report that I accessed within our institution, the GFPs which were audited were found to have met the required standards, and were accredited with a license of 6 years, until the second phase audit cycle begins (GFP Quality Audit Portfolio, 2021). Therefore, it can be deduced that OAAAQA is not yet at the stage of launching a review process of the OASGFP.

The next section discusses the challenges faced by the OAAAQA to deliver the OASGFP signals and representations in the HEIs and highlights the factors that led to the implementation and enactment gap of the GFPs in the HEIs.

4.5 OASGFP Enactment Gap

4.5.1 The misconception on the nature of the OASGFP

The QA consultant reported that there were many challenges related to the HEIs, OAAAQA, and the supervising ministries, that militated against the enactment of the OASGFP. However, one key challenge was the misconception of the OASGFP, that is, lack of clarity in terms of what the programme was supposed to look like. Most of the stakeholders in the HEIs thought that the programme was only about teaching English Language. This was because before the formulation of the OASGFP, there existed a foundation programme that only focused on English language teaching. As a result, many HEIs continued to hold this concept of mainly teaching English language as opposed to giving equal emphasis to the other three components that were introduced in the GFP reform, that is, Mathematics, Computing and Study Skills. The QA consultant also believed that the reason why many HEIs focused on teaching the English language was because all their undergraduate/post foundation programmes were delivered in English, so they considered learning English language to be the main requirement to pass the GFP.

During the audit, we found out that the concept of the OASGFP was not fully comprehended, there were a lot of variations of focus in the GFP; different aspects of the programme were emphasised differently in different HEIs. I keep telling the HEIs who were involved in the quality assurance panels that this GFP was not just about English!

Based on the findings from my study, it emerged that not all HEIs were simply focusing on English language teaching. For instance, the institution under study taught all the four components of the GFP curriculum. More information regarding the way the GFP was being enacted at the institution under study will be discussed in subsequent sections in this chapter in the section focusing on HEI Leaders' enactment of the GFP.

It also emerged that there has been a misconception by the HEIs regarding how the standards were to be enacted. It appears that the HEIs felt that they must follow those standards exactly as they are, disregarding the fact that these were only the minimum guidance to build upon. This was articulated by the QA consultant:

Of course, the standards are not compulsory, they are guiding standards that act at a minimum level. Institutions are always encouraged to go beyond those standards. This is the minimum, the starting point, not a threshold.

From the above quote, the use of the standards by the HEIs should have acted as guidance in the development of their own version of the GFPs as it was stipulated that the OASGFP was not a rigid curriculum, it was merely based on standards. Each HEI had the responsibility to develop its own GFP curriculum, teach and assess students, and review and improve their programme (Oman Academic Standards, 2010). This means HEI stakeholders had the flexibility to modify and adapt details of their own subject aims, topics, assessments, graduate attributes and learning goals in alignment with the OASGFP. In addition, the HEIs were also eligible to add areas of learning in their GFP in addition to the four components. Therefore, the HEIs had the flexibility to meet the requirements of the OASGFP in the manner they deemed best. While flexibility might be viewed as an added benefit, this lack of robustness allowed for varied interpretations and hence differences in implementation approaches (Qiu et al., 2022; Trowler, 2003; Wilson, 2000). However, it is important to mention that it was not just a case of evaluating the extent to which the OASGFP was adapted or deflected, rather it was the case of how these HEIs were providing efficient delivery of the GFP while considering internal and external factors including motivation, pedagogy, methodology, curricula, infrastructures, facilities, policies and rules to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in higher education (Aizawa & Rose, 2018; Gaus et al., 2018; Heimans, 2012). One key lesson drawn from this study is that for effective policy enactment, communication should be made clearly to avoid misinterpretation of the provided guidance. Anecdotally, if all the HEIs had been

given clear guidance, it is highly likely that the policy enactment would have been achieved consistently across the HE sectors in the country.

4.5.2 The isolation of the OASGFP from the higher education programmes

The QA consultant had a personal perspective regarding the GFP saying that it was generally isolated from the undergraduate programmes provided in the HEIs. Ideologically, the GFP, its students, staff, curriculum designers were viewed as being less important than the other entities in the HEIs. As such, not equal emphasis and rights were given to the GFP stakeholders and students. Examples were provided such as:

They are not highly appreciated, their efforts are least recognised, they get lower salaries, less research facilities and funding support. HEIs do not give the GFP stakeholders the required attention, they view them as less important than the other stakeholders. Their recognition is less, unfortunately, so how would they be able to show their full potential if they are not fully equipped and recognised as part of the overall higher education structure.

The QA further proposed the idea of changing the mindset of the HEIs to integrate the GFP within the institution inseparably by giving it a recognition that it deserves as an important part of the higher education. As an insider researcher, I agree that the integration of the GFP and the undergraduate programmes did not exist in harmony, and this created a gap at the institutional level. For instance, I am aware that there were huge discrepancies between the salaries of staff on the GFP and those on the undergraduate programmes. This affected the motivation of staff on the GFP. In addition, staff on the GFP were not given time to focus on development the scholarship of teaching and learning activities. These factors unfortunately acted as hindrance for the GFPs to provide high quality of education, to ensure efficiency and synchronicity in students attaining the desired learning outcomes in their higher education. Another reason for this was that most HEIs stakeholders did not believe that the GFP should exist at all. They viewed the foundation as a programme that provide subjects associated with

undergraduate and/or postgraduate degrees. The QA consultant agreed with this notion as well; yet, questioned the ability of the high school students entering their higher education programmes immediately while lacking fundamental skills in English, Mathematics, and IT proficiency.

There should be no need for the GFP, one thing it is costly, and the government pays a lot to launch it, this should not be the case, but unfortunately, the output of the general education from high school is not satisfactory and therefore these learners need the GFP. Yet, the real foundation should be specialisation based. They become tailored to specialised academic programmes. So, English should be taught in terms of relating it to the different disciplines like; English for Business, or English for Medicine, rather than teaching grammar of English, vocabulary, or sentence structure.

The data demonstrate that there is lack of collaboration between high schools and the GFPs in HEIs. So, the GFP not only stood isolated from higher education specialisations where the learners go to, but also from the high school education, where they come from. The need to harmonise and synchronise issues related to organisational, professional, interpersonal communication between these different organisational bodies is inevitable (Tuzlukova et al., 2019). A natural progression must exist from less to more complex foundation programme courses with full integration and interdisciplinary with higher education specialisations. This can be achieved through raising awareness of these standards not just among the GFP stakeholders, but also among stakeholders in high school and in higher education. Peng et al. (2014) asserted that foundation programmes' teaching practices should carefully be moulded to synchronise with higher education specialisations and needs, as well as helping students become more responsible and productive citizens to serve the community at their best. Since the OASGFP is characterised by its general multidisciplinary nature, its integration with the under/post graduate programmes should not be difficult. With appropriate institutional support, HEI stakeholders can incorporate the GFPs core objectives in high school and university specialisations to develop effective communication quantitative reasoning, and computer literacy, which were built on pillars of breadth of knowledge, critical thinking, integration of knowledge and social responsibilities (Tuzlukova et al., 2023). As the nation seeks to compete globally, tackling these issues will develop and continue to enhance high quality, robust and sustainable educational system in Oman.

Having said this, it is important to understand its posited practice trajectories, through investigating the HEIs' leaders i.e., the enacting agents sensemaking and cognition (Spillane et al., 2019) to identify their views and perceptions about how the GFP was executed within their institutions. Examining the situated cognition of the GFP in the HEI under study as a representative is also vital as it gives insight into how those enacting agents interpreted the programme within their situated contexts which hopefully further expands the understanding of the OASGFP enactment in Oman. The next section discusses this in more detail.

4.6 HEI leaders' individual cognition

The study examined the cognitive experiences, beliefs, and confidence of the 12 HEI leaders who were interviewed: (2 Associate Deans), (4 Heads and Assistant Heads of different departments), (5 GFP Coordinators) and the GFP Manager. These leaders were responsible for the execution of the GFP within the institution under study. The Figure 5 below demonstrates the GFP Management structure of the HEI understudy.

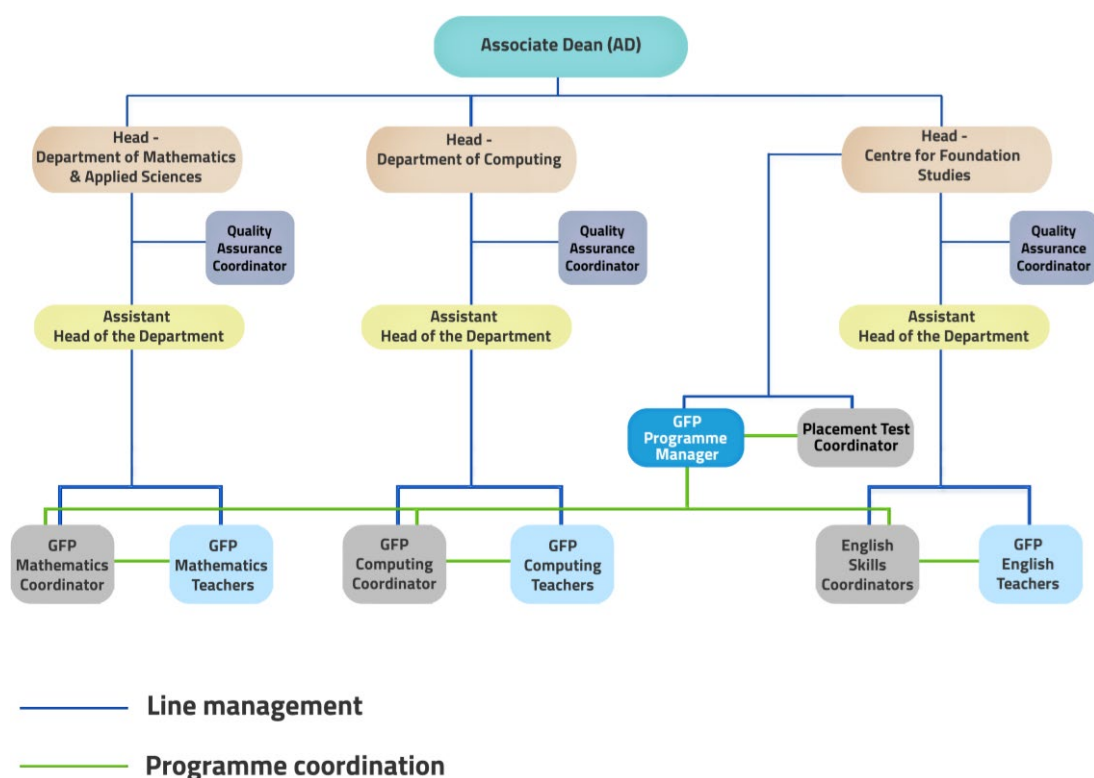


Figure 5: GFP Management Structure (adopted from the GFP Quality Audit Portfolio, 2021)

The HEI under study delivered its GFP under the Centre for Foundation Studies (CFS). The Head of the CFS, known as Head of Department (HOD) was responsible for the GFP operations and was supported by the Assistant Head. The overall responsibility of the programme was vested in the GFP Programme Manager (PM). The PM liaised with the GFP Coordinators from the Computing,

Mathematics and Applied Sciences Departments and with the Skills Coordinators for English Language skills (Writing, Reading, Listening and Speaking) and Study skills. The Quality Coordinators (QCs) assisted the Heads of the Academic Departments Involved in the GFP (ADIGFP) which were: Centre for Foundation Studies (CFS), Department of Computing, and Department of Mathematics and Applied Sciences to implement, monitor, and enhance the provision of the GFP in compliance with the HEI's Quality Management System (QMS).

The leaders' discussion on the GFP and how it has been executed in the institution was quite comprehensive. First, all the interviewees appeared to have an in-depth understanding on the purpose or role of the GFP highlighting that it was a remedial year in which the GFP learners can be prepared in areas of literacy such as the English language, computer, and science as well as becoming digitally equipped to successfully undertake undergraduate or postgraduate specialisations. Most of the HEI leaders aligned their answers and beliefs by saying that the GFP sought to help students attain the prescribed learning outcomes as per the OASGFP in all the four domains. In other words, the GFP was a bridge between the high school education and higher education. This was well captured by one of the leaders:

It's a one-year programme and the aim of the programme is basically to fill in the skills gap, i.e., to equip students who are underprepared with the required skills, so they can navigate successfully through their mainstream courses and higher education programmes (HOD A). Keeping that in mind, it is quite challenging for students because 90% of the population receives education in Arabic medium at the school level and then they are expected to switch over to the English medium at the university level. I am happy with the effort we're making to align it to the Oman Academic Standards (HOD A).

Contrary to the view held by the QA consultant about the HEI stakeholders' knowledge of the nature of the OASGFP, the interview data showed that the HEI stakeholders in the institution under study, presented a good level of

understanding of the role of their GFP reform and its enactment. They also felt that it was their duty as lecturers to prepare the GFP learners for their higher education specialisations through focusing on all the four components of the OASGFP. As such, it can be gleaned from the findings that most of the participants recognised the educational value of the GFP as some of them referenced this programme as an opportunity to prepare students with graduate attributes and eventually develop them to be global citizens for global workplaces.

Understandably, educational organisations are more than just sites to develop institutional logics, since they have people who actively engage them in meaning-making. Hence, the importance of studying the micro-level enactment through the sensemaking theory is a necessity (Coburn, 2001; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Spillane et al., 2002; Weick, 1995). Ryan et al. (2021) emphasised that when enacting agents make sense of, interpret, and use different logics diffused through available resources, they rely on their prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences to understand the reform, and select and use the associated resources that guide them in the process. Therefore, highlighting the HEI leaders' sense making and cognition on the nature of the GFP and its development and practice gave insight into the extent to which the GFP was fully enacted. Furthermore, data analysis sought to examine the GFP enactment experiences from the HEI stakeholders with the goal of determining how much policy enactment research still marginalises the perspectives and experiences of those enacting the policy and what are the variables that contribute to their perception of the GFP (Cohen et al., 2017).

Regarding the alignment of the GFP, most of the HEI leaders believed that the institutional learning outcomes were in parallel with the OASGFP and were achieved as expected by the OAAAQA. The study findings revealed that the macro structure of the institutional standards was in alignment with the strategic objectives or goals related to the higher education sector. The governance of the GFP within this institution was built through an operational plan which was

subject to be reviewed biannually to make sure all the standard criteria were met.

According to the Associate Dean A, there was an in-house strategy developed to show how the institution's mission, vision and values have been operationalised while providing all kinds of infrastructure, educational support and activities that were closely connected to the requirements of the OASGFP. Due to my position as an 'insider researcher', I was able to access the institutional documents such as the GFP Quality Audit report. This helped me to understand more details regarding the enactment of the GFP. Sometimes as an academic, you do not get to know all the strategic details of the projects implemented in the university, however, by conducting this study, I was privileged to access all the key strategic documents. I was able to appreciate that, in addition to the strategy, the institution had formed the 5 strategic pillars and 4 enablers to aid the achievement of the vision through the mission forming institutional Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). These KPIs were aligned with the five strategic pillars and the four enablers and were further operationalised through the Department Operational Plans (DOPs) as per the OASGFP. The Figure 6 below demonstrates the in-house strategy.

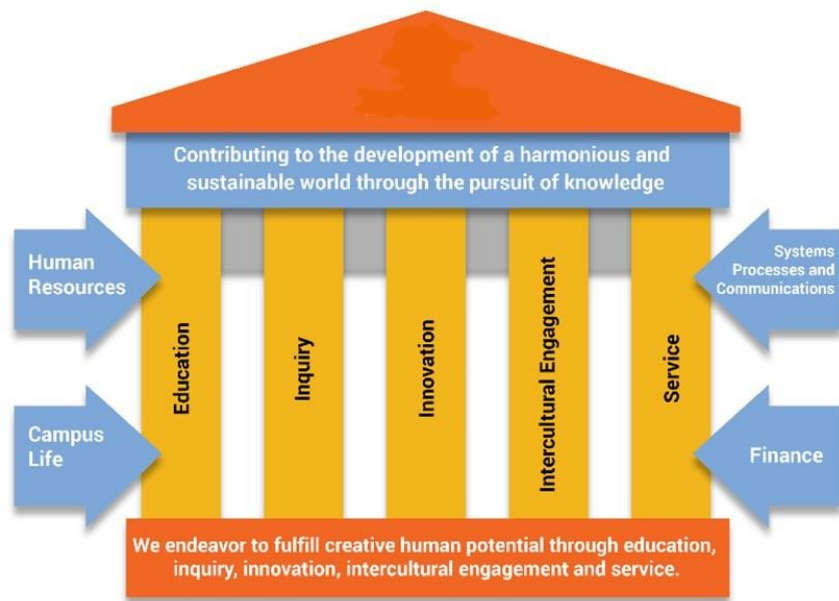


Figure 6: HEI's Strategy House (Five Pillars and Four Enablers) (adopted from the GFP Quality Audit Portfolio, 2021)

The GFP was aligned to the institutional Vision, Mission, and Values where the KPIs are operationalised through the DOPs of the three Academic Departments involved in the GFP (ADIGFP). The strategic goals that were aligned to the OASGFP were also reflected in the institution's Learner Attributes (LAs) which included 'Professional competence - domain knowledge and research skills', 'Ethical awareness and practice', 'Leadership and teamwork skills', 'Communication skills', 'Digital competence', 'Intercultural competence', 'Community engagement', and 'Lifelong learning'. The GFP contributed to the realisation of the institution's Vision, Mission, Values, and LAs through its curricular and extracurricular activities. The KPIs of the Education Strategic Pillars were achieved using the latest teaching and learning practices which included student-led, technology-enhanced, and task-based learning (GFP Quality Audit Portfolio, 2021). In addition, the GFP quality audit portfolio which is the document analysis used as a secondary method for data collection also provided a matrix that was prepared to show the mapping between the GFP module learning outcomes against the OASGFP. Further, one of the participants explained that:

I find that our GFP programme is very well aligned to those standards, and we have also benchmarked with other GFPs in Oman. In addition, we have done some surveys on the students who are coming out of the GFP compared to those who are who are joining the GFP, and their levels were being appropriately mapped in line with the OAAAQA expectations (Assistant HOD B).

It was interesting to note that the GFP investigated within this HEI is different from the other GFPs in Oman. Each HEI in the country has its own designed GFP with different learning outcomes, courses, levels, and skills informed by the OASGFP. Therefore, the auditing and accreditation took place to ensure the full compliance, alignment, and enactment of the different versions of the GFPs to the prescribed standards.

The theoretical designs of the GFP were viewed favorably by the HEI leaders. Most of them reported that they had good confidence in the content of the GFP since they were personally involved in the formulation of its policies and procedures and had carefully reviewed the appropriateness of the standards with respect to the OASGFP. Also, the learning outcomes were benchmarked with international testing systems such as the IELTS for English components and ICDL for computing modules.

We have A GFP coordinator for each skill, learning outcomes were clearly prescribed, and regular meetings were conducted within the departments to ensure the best delivery of the modules. We also have qualified teachers who have master's degrees not only to teach the GFP modules, but also the specialisation modules and so they have the advantage to align the undergraduate specialisations skills with the GFP (HOD B).

The data demonstrates that the HEI at hand made successful attempts to enact the GFP, despite its flexibility and perhaps subjectivity of practice. They followed the OASGFP mandates to support the GFP learners' future studies. The shared decision- making process implemented in the curriculum making process of the GFP bore a meaning of one aspect of collegiality that was played by the members of HEIs towards the success of the institutions per se (Gaus et al., 2018; Hellawell & Hancock 2001). This corroborates with Alzahmi et al.'s (2022) study where they emphasised the significance of the teachers' professional relationships and collegiality to develop their career and educational reforms within the social context. Collegiality was also advantageous in terms of fostering qualities of trust, teamwork, and resource sharing as professional aspects of communal bonds to form the ground for academics to work together, combat problems and complete collaborative work projects, and in this case, it is the enactment of the GFP. Also, the collegial and friendly environment acted as a gateway for the agents to understand their roles in practice by planning their own activities for the enactment of the GFP. In this manner, the central values guiding this type of collaboration included the respect for diversity, while different opinions, advice,

and views were taken into consideration. Overall, the network of jointly interlinked undertakings was essential in the making of the GFP curriculum. Scoles et al. (2019) assert that the decision-making process which are implemented through discussions and meetings have symbolised the share of power among the colleagues who have a mutual understanding about the objectives of the institution and therefore make successful attempts in educational practices. The next section discusses the enacting agents' view on the OASGFP representations, text, and discourses.

4.7 OASGFP representations and its limitations

Most of the participants confirmed that the portfolio, regardless of it being outdated, had embodied clear guidelines with chronological representations to transform their cognition, attitudes, and beliefs to the required expectations of achievement. Their views were articulated by one of them who said:

The GFP standards portfolio was quite clear; yet, not a comprehensive document, it is available both in Arabic and English. Any higher education institution can refer to this document to help them prepare/ develop their new or existing GFP (Associate Dean B).

The participants also reported that the OASGFP was communicated to all the HEIs and so the system leaders inhabited both its text and discourses to make the necessary decisions aligning the standard outcomes of their GFPs with the MOHERI.

Yes, the mandate was clear, and well organised. Criteria was provided also to guide the HEI in meeting the right standards. So, without those clarity of goals, planning, and directives, it would have been difficult for us to understand and formulate a GFP (Assistant HOD, B).

The OASGFP document as policy text had been written in a form of a portfolio that consisted of legislations and statements which listed the outcomes of each

GFP module required for the HEIs to achieve. Although it was portrayed as a mandate, it was framed broadly enough to allow flexibility in interpretation and curriculum development to fit the HEIs' needs. This indicated that the academic leaders as professionals could practice their academic freedom and autonomy considering the objectives of the government driven policy. Due to lack of comprehensiveness, the findings revealed that the HODs and the coordinators faced difficulty in the beginning to understand and create an in-house GFP that was consistent with the OASGFP expectations:

Maybe some misunderstood the interventions made to enact the GFP at the beginning, but CPD workshops were conducted for the GFP faculty members to explain the process and procedures in preparing a GFP that was in line with the mission and vision of the OAAAQA. By now most of the doubts are cleared and all the faculty members are on the same page (HOD, B).

At the beginning we struggled to understand the implicit meaning of the GFP and what it should contain, or how we should enact it, so we faced difficulty at this point since the standards were mainly covered in abstract language without tangible examples. So how can we employ the GFP as policy if there was a gap in understanding what it requires? However, after clarifying and simplifying those standards in definition and meaning, we managed to enhance our understanding and achieving the prescribed goals (HOD C).

One of the HODs gave a very comprehensive review on the way the standards were written claiming that the portfolio did not give equal rights to each module (English, Mathematics, Computing, and Study Skills). For example, very few outcomes were dedicated to the English language which was supposed to be taught at different levels of difficulty while equipping the GFP learners with the fundamental skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This perhaps shows the lack of interdisciplinary planning and the compartmentalised approach to the programme as opposed to a holistic enterprise.

Although OAAA has laid out the outcomes for us, the HEIs are still not very clear on approaches to defining their own GFP outcomes. Therefore, we are now mapping our outcomes of each level with other HEIs, and it is so tedious because each educational institution has its own structure of GFP (HOD, A).

Similarly, a vital module, such as Computing, lacked details and did not give comprehensive outcomes to be achieved by the HEI, it lacked practical learning outcomes covering the standards of ICDL or IC3. The standards focused more on abstract theoretical concepts rather than obtaining practical skills and competencies on digital media.

I believe that the learning outcome should be more practical, for example, let the students show the steps of how to use the Windows operating commands and this will cover a wider variety of learning assessments (Computing Coordinator).

The mathematics module covered massive learning outcomes, yet it did not prescribe the exemption criteria or assessment that can exempt the GFP learners from studying Maths components. It was clear that for the English language it was benchmarked with standards of IELTS, Computing for ICDL or IC3. Yet, for Maths, there was no prescribed standardised international testing system that could benchmark its learning outcomes with aspired attainment and progress with the ones prescribed in the OAAA. From this, it can be deduced that the OASGFP manual is incomplete, or rather not comprehensive enough to cover all the necessary areas of learning outcomes needed in the programme for the enactors to easily make sense, understand and enact.

However, one reason for this lack of comprehensiveness was to give room for flexibility in constructing the curriculum customised for each HEI though this has led to inconsistency and discrepancies in practices at the micro level as mentioned earlier. Moreover, the lack of detailed information of the initiative itself was underscored as one of the most apparent factors that led to inconsistent

interpretations causing difficulties for teachers to enact the GFP in practice at a micro level. In fact, the GFP manager concluded that if the HEIs were involved in the formulation of the GFP, more input and consistency would have been built in compared to having an external committee creating a GFP national standards that are insensitive to the local needs.

We had some awareness sessions to clear things out on what is required from the HEI, and how we should react accordingly to obtain and maintain those OASGFP. Perhaps if the teachers were involved from the very beginning in the process of formulating the OASGFP, we wouldn't have needed the awareness sessions or CPD workshops to understand how to function. The teachers would have been able to make sense of the structure of the GFP and understand the way how it should be taught, and the outcomes that are to be achieved maintaining the national standards (The GFP Manager).

The lack of involvement of the local HEIs in formulating the OASGFP had formed dissonance on decisions such as the level of difficulty the standards should reflect. Although the QA consultant talked about the customisation of the OASGFP to the Omani GFP needs and academic level, the GFP manager opposed this, confirming that the external committee had created standards which were far from the local needs and abilities of the learners. Thus, it can be deduced that each GFP designed by different HEIs would have inconsistency and variation in the level of standards which could cause implementation gap that is considered as one of the main hinderance to a successful enactment.

Moreover, since policy responses and policy documents are polyvalent (Ball et al., 2012; Gaus et al., 2018; Trowler et al., 2012), OASGFP was translated into a complex of initiatives, interventions and plan of actions configured to satisfy the policy expectations. "Enactments, therefore, cannot be read-off from texts and neither can they be reduced to anything that might be called an implementation gap. Policy is always contested and changing (unstable) – always becoming" (Ball et al., 2012, p.11). Aizawa and Rose (2018) argued that this can result in ambiguity and multitude of interpretation of the content and regulations that can

make the enacting agents unclear about the process of enactment. This resulted in the need of continuous professional development (CPD), workshops, team meetings, seminars held by the management to understand the GFP further. As such, management played as key actors who were typically the conduit for, and interpreters of the GFP policy texts that provided others with their interpretation of meanings providing intellectual foundations for policy and practice at a micro level. This is in line with Rich and colleagues' (2021) study where it was found out that the value of CPD in personal and institutional developments was critical for the achievement of the institutional desired outcomes. Their study aligns with the current one as it provided evidence on the positive impact on teachers' confidence, motivation, and self-efficacy, given that the workshops needed to be of high quality, sustained and aligned with the stakeholders' needs to reflect on their practice.

The next phase of the analysis discusses the social cognitive process involved in the enacting agents' construction and negotiation of meaning (sensemaking) in complex or contradictory situations as they tried to understand connections among ambiguous or confusing messages, and their situations (Spillane et al., 2019; Weick, 1995). The analysis also involved a deeper examination of the variables influencing the enacting agents' social networks and their situated cognition which could be considered as an emergent phenomenon extending to the broader policy and enactment literature.

4.8 Situated Cognition

4.8.1 Capacity, values, and beliefs

The findings highlighted the contextual factors that influenced sensemaking about reforms. One of the Associate Deans at the HEI under study explained that their institution upheld certain values of quality, respect, transparency, and diversity in its environment that impacted on the understanding and the enactment of the GFP. Such values have been gradually inculcated together with the definition of common sets of rules to achieve the institutional goals.

Our teachers, although they come from different cultural backgrounds, they were very much aware about the cultural environment here. So, in that sense, our organisational culture was usually influencing what we were thinking and doing. We had a set-up policy which we were following coherently, this made the teachers understand the organisational context they were working in to achieve consistency and the institutional goals (Associate Dean A).

From the above quote, it can be understood that the social cognitive process was highly dependent on common sets of beliefs, culture, experiences, and emotions which structured the sensemaking framework. The commonality of work culture despite the enactors' different backgrounds brought unity and conformity to understanding the GFP and hence enhanced its enactment within the HEI. This is also depicted in Spillane's (2006) apt observation that: "the social aspect of the cognitive process includes an individual's situation or social context that fundamentally shapes how human cognition affects policy implementation" (p.56).

In this view, social cognition was considered as a major contextual factor which explained how meanings were constructed about a policy demand situated in an organisation (Spillane et al., 2019). Moreover, the institutional logics such as the organisational structure and professional affiliations played vital roles by showing how HEI leaders made sense about their organisational identity within institutional environments (Spillane et al., 2019). The institution under study had structures in place to facilitate the effective enactment of the GFP. For instance, data analysis revealed that the responsibility of running the GFP was with the head of Centre for Foundation Studies (CFS) supported by two other academic departments (Mathematics and Applied Sciences and Computing). As one of the colleagues in the Centre for foundation Studies, I was aware of the harmonious relationships that existed between our department and the other entities in the institution that were playing a role in the delivery of the GFP. The existing culture of collaboration was also highlighted in the interviews, for instance, it was evident

that there was a very strong coordination between the head, the GFP manager and the coordinators.

We are very much connected, so we have various mechanisms through which we are engaged within the society or community starting from Board of directors to board of trustees. Then we have a society that includes, employers such as associate deans, and HODs, employees including administrators, coordinators and teachers, students, parents, and industry experts that we are engaging with. So, the society gave us inputs about the expectations of our understanding and performance and that always helped us in devising our action strategies related to industry engagement, community engagement and teaching and learning, which we call it education (Associate Dean, B).

Considering the above quote, it can be concluded that the tight bond among the organisational structures has led to an enhanced sense of meaning of practice and hence better sensemaking of the GFP. This is especially because the organisational members are not free agents since their sensemaking and practice is shaped by the organisations they work at (Sykes et al., 2012). This finding resonates with the observations made by Kathawalla and Mehta (2022) and Mirata and Bergamin (2023), who confirmed that organisational readiness and structure in an institution is a prerequisite to promote intergroup relations for the success of the educational reform.

Social networks and norms are other factors which had a great effect on the enacting agents' understanding and practice. One of the HODs confirmed that conducting professional development workshops organised by the Centre of Academic Practices (CAP) had not only enhanced the agents' existing knowledge, cognition, and skills in understanding the nature of the GFP, but also their ability to put the ideas mandated by the policy into practice and their performance towards the enactment of the GFP.

We have started moving towards a holistic approach based on the programme and hence it gave an opportunity for everyone to know what was happening

across the GFP. Meetings have been conducted in different committees to address the status of the programme and whether there were any innovative initiatives or improvements done to enhance the enactment of the GFP. This gave awareness of what was currently happening at the GFP and kept everybody on the same page (Assistant HOD, C).

The provision of CPD played a great role in disseminating good practices, building social networks between the employees, and allowing them to adopt common norms and behavior. Different committees conducted programme-oriented meetings where best practices, developments, and enhancements on the GFP were discussed and shared to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. These formulated patterns of behavior that emerged from the actors' interactions with each other as mediated by aspects of the situations over time (Bourdieu, 1990) towards achieving the GFP goals. This was echoed by Bourdieu (1990) who asserted that:

Individuals act, but they do so in relation to others and it is in these interactions that practice takes form in organisations. Although practice unfolds in the present, it is tied to the past as people draw on a logic that is informed by their past interactions. (p.86)

In this case, enactment was considered as the HEI's collective work practice that was fundamentally about interactions among the agents, mediated by aspects of the situation (Spillane, 2006; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Spillane et al., 2019).

4.8.2 Situational factors: Human and social capital.

Most of the interviewees reported that there was consistency in the interpretation of the GFP reform among the enacting agents.

We have an inbuilt system to make our employees become aware of how the GFP was operationalised. The functionality of the GFP was defined through the strategic goals, thematic directions, values, set of policies, and procedures that allowed the agents to clearly follow and enact on the ground. Also, the GFP

document formulated by the HEI had guided principles which clearly outlined the entry requirements, teaching methods, teaching philosophy, engagement with the research community, and the rights and responsibilities of the stakeholders for complete guidance (Associate Dean, A).

From the HEI leaders' responses, they firmly believed that most of the GFP enactors had an adequate understanding of the programme and its value system in the organisation. This is because specific mechanisms were applied to persuade the enacting agents executing the policy by being aware of the programme in which they were employed or recruited for. Any new staff who joined the organisation was given induction meetings that provided comprehensive orientation on how to implement the GFP (GFP Quality Audit Portfolio, 2021). This strategy helped to eliminate any resistance, problems arising from conflicting opinions about the policy text (Gaus et al., 2018). CPD workshops have also played a great role in reducing the ambiguity or uncertainty in understanding the programme and brought uniformity in channeling rules with clear objectives of instructions and regulations (Alzahmi et al., 2022) from OASGFP at the local actors' level within the HEI context.

Although the OASGFP rules and objectives were derived from national sources, it is the local context of the HEI that determined the interpretation and enactment of the policy. In fact, most of the coordinators reported that the HEI understudy had a very safe and non-threatening environment, where criticism on any of the GFP standards was welcomed without any consequences. They also indicated that they were the authors and the decision makers of the standards used to enact the GFP.

I think it was very important for us to learn how to work collaboratively, and this has clarified many standards and many policies because the discussion and the huge number of questions about the concepts, 'why', 'how', 'where', etc. has helped us clarify and understand the GFP standards deeper since we were the ones who applied these standards on the ground in the first place (English Coordinator, B)

It can be appreciated that the HEI has invested in the development of social capital including investing in social relations by changing the way people understood the reform and how they related with each other to achieve the goals and enhanced outcomes of the GFP practice. As such it is evident, in line with Bourdieu's (1977) claim that social capital enables people to achieve goals that would not be possible in the absence of the relationships in organisations. The approach used influenced the flow of information within the organisation and formed ties between the enacting agents shaping how policy messages should be understood and enacted at a micro level. The patterns of interactions have also shaped the agents' collective sensemaking through the exchange of information; a single ingredient in developing new knowledge and skill developing their human capital (Ball et al., 2012; Khalfaoui & Derbali., 2021; Mirata & Bergamin, 2023). However, a few participants had some reservations about the approach, for instance, HoD, B said:

The layers of awareness and execution of the GFP concepts differed from one agent to another, not all of them were at the same level of understanding. For example, the GFP coordinators had deeper sense of meaning of the modules taught in the GFP than those who taught them, since they orchestrated the curriculum to achieve the standards. We must accept this variation simply because some agents got exposed to the programme more than others. What is more important was the exchange of our experiences during the workshop sessions and department meetings held to fill in the gaps and clarify doubts while trying our best to unify the level of understanding among all the GFP stakeholders.

How enacting agents understood the reform and put these understandings into practice was sensitive to the pattern and quality of social ties in the HEI. This is perhaps why it was important to form strong ties among those agents to promote conformity (perhaps reduced agency) and hence enhance policy enactment. A final comment was made by one of the English Coordinators demanding for real communication with the OAAAQA body regarding the OASGFP claiming that to

bridge the gaps, physical communication should take place:

We were only communicating with the document, we were not talking to them face to face, so there should be a kind of quarterly meeting or semester wise meetings with the OAAAQA so that we can exchange views on the document and the changes/amendments we request to make.

Creating information systems which enable the policy 'consumers' to communicate directly with the OAAAQA is a necessity to engage with the GFP educational reform more deeply within the institution. As Cohen et al. (2017) argued, enactment research must engage more with the pattern and direction of information flow that can affect the scale and the pace of policy take-ups. The notion of enactment research can expand its interests in the identification of 'decision points', tracing network actors, or mapping policy communities. In this circumstance, OAAAQA must develop an approach or a system which facilitates communication between individuals, communities, and agencies and how one relates with the others.

Furthermore, consistency in understanding the GFP mainly relied on the professional identity and the amount of experience the agent had spent on enacting it. According to HOD A, the senior employees had a deeper understanding of the GFP compared to the newly appointed ones since they were involved in developing the programme throughout the years. Their knowledge, educational level, ethics, and values assisted in interpreting, decoding, and effecting the programme by performing tasks that were key to the job responsibilities they held for the success of the HEI. This means their understanding of the GFP was very deep that they saw its alignment to the mission and vision of the HEI and its mapping with the OASGFP in theory and practice.

I am confident that faculty members know what GFP is, what are the different skills, what are the different activities under each of those skills, how and why

are we teaching them and assessing them. Overall, I'm happy with the way teachers have taken it, understood it, and their contribution into further development and improvement of the GFP (HOD, A).

It is worth noting that although, the newly joined agents were inducted fully to the GFP programme to develop a good understanding of its enactment, the findings above showed that there remains some discrepancy between the new and experienced GFP enactors that should be addressed by the HEI leaders. Ensuring a proper and effective induction of the newly joined enactors of the GFP course has not eliminated the discrepancy in the depth of understanding the programme and hence hindered its full enactment. What is found here resonates with what was established in some of the previous studies about human capital including resources, knowledge, skills and expertise (Khalfaoui et al., 2021; Sykes et al 2012) where it was indicated that agents' credentials and years of work experience do affect the overall achievement of the organisations in significant ways. For instance, a master's degree holder, for example, is more experienced in achieving educational programme goals than the lower credential holders such as bachelor's degree.

Furthermore, the reviewing mechanism played an important factor to deepen the understanding of the GFP, where at the end of every annual academic year, the GFP performance was being reviewed with constructive feedback for an efficient enactment. Conducting those reviews and team meetings by the CFS helped the enacting agents to stay updated in knowledge, pedagogy, skills, and the learning outcomes that were required to meet the upgraded version of the GFP (GFP Quality Audit Portfolio, 2021). The review meetings made use of data generated from module evaluations as indicated by the Associate Deans:

Different types of surveys were administered throughout the academic year to develop the GFP, such as module evaluation survey, and BLITZ survey, all of which were prepared in a module review report to capture any changes that could be brought by the faculty members to enhance the programme based on

the surveys feedback. For example, we have the English textbook which we have changed recently, and that came from the faculty's deep understanding of the GFP's development. So, the close interaction with the GFP has allowed the faculty members to propose for changes, and that couldn't have been possible if they were not fully aware of the requirements of the programme (Associate Dean, B).

A considerable majority of the GFP coordinators felt empowered and inspired because they had the opportunity for collegial dialogue and reflection that added value into their practice and were encouraged to take ownership of the accountability agenda. This led to a greater sense of understanding of the GFP and ownership amongst the teachers. This is consistent with the current higher educational environment, where many HEI leaders are also strategic learners who adapt their approach according to the task, situational constraints and professional accountability (Brown et al., 2023; McGreal & Olcott, 2022; Miley & Dulude 2020). Within this context, the discussions helped the agents to refine their matrix in course curriculum, resulting in a set of indicators designed to capture some of the complexities underlying constructive alignment. Thus, this can be considered as a rewarding experience since it has enhanced the transformation of the ideas of both enacting agents and policy makers alike and, in my view, encouraged the HEI to take a deep approach to the GFP reform.

4.9 Factors affecting the GFP enactment.

Given that the GFP is enacted in all the HEIs in the country, this study sought to understand the factors that affect its enactment to identify good practice and avoid potential pitfalls. Several factors/barriers that hinder the GFP enactment in the HEI under study were identified. A significant factor was attributed to agency, the enacting agents, in particular, the coordinators reported that there was lack of awareness on the OASGFP at the beginning until recently. Awareness sessions on the OASGFP only started when the audit and accreditation exercise of the HEI commenced from the OAAAQA body. One of the English coordinators explained saying:

I haven't heard of OAAAQA until in the recent years. Many of my colleagues only heard of it when the HEI was going under the process of accreditation. So, before that, we didn't even know what OAAA means, we didn't know that there was something called OASGFP to be followed and that they were set by the OAAAQA. In fact, some of us didn't see the original portfolio of the OASGFP. I'm pretty sure there was a big implementation gap due to prior lack of awareness and knowledge. This was even worse with the newly joined teachers. Introduction to OASGFP and the study of it only started when the accreditation exercise was taking place (English Coordinator, A).

This raised a lot of concern around quality assurance in the implementation and enactment of the OASGFP, when the enacting agents were not even aware of the governmental body that provides it. Yet, surprisingly, the Associate Dean mentioned that the HEI prepared a GFP handbook that was aligned with the OAAAQA standards saying:

The GFP Handbook that was created by the HEI was clear and consistent with the OAAAQA standards, so we are trying our best to make it implementable and apparent in definition and meaning to the enacting agents.

Perhaps this happened during the accreditation process, where the HEI leaders

felt that they should prepare a GFP handbook to guide the agents to a successful enactment. This was crucial as to my knowledge, there were no GFP handbook prepared earlier to introduce the reform. Furthermore, the enacting agents claimed that they had no clear knowledge about the OAAAQA and its role in formulating the OASGFP. As such, there is need to keep the enacting agents in the loop and have awareness of the OASGFP through providing continuous professional and operational support enabling them to understand the nature of the GFP and to engage them in intellectual deliberations.

Another factor was related to collective meaning of practice. Having markedly opposing views on how to deliver the GFP effectively among the enacting agents perhaps hindered the delivery of the GFP. One of the coordinators reported saying:

We had many agreements and disagreements, where we shared our differences of perspectives with the module leaders and the line managers. Everyone had his own perspective, but at the end, we had the same goal which was the success of the GFP (English Coordinator, C).

The coordinators believed the disagreements were fruitful for everybody to express their point of views and their level of understanding to ultimately be on the same page. However, at some point this acted as a barrier since these disagreements among the GFP coordinators translated into very different perceptions (Ball et al., 2011; Spillane et al., 2019; Trowler et al., 2012) for teacher candidates in the messages communicated about the purpose of the GFP and the goals/standards that were to be achieved upon the completion of the programme.

Lastly, lack of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in learning was one of the main constraints that hindered the enactment of the GFP. Most GFP learners had negative attitude towards learning English, Mathematics, and ICT, as they believed that these were just module requirements to pass the foundation year, not viewing those GFP components as lifelong learning. Consequently, most of

them, skipped their classes, missed their assignment deadlines, failed their examinations, and violated academic integrity policies resulting them in failing in the GFP. This has been explicitly expressed by the respondents:

We have introduced lots of mechanisms to help our students to engage and `be aware of the consequences of violating academic integrity policies. Despite the large amount of awareness of the institutional policies on academic integrity, we have many students violating it through malpractice and ghost writing (English Coordinator, B).

However, the GFP enactors did their best to not just boost those GFP learners' motivation in learning, but also change their perception and beliefs about the GFP and integrate its learning as part of their mentality and culture.

Our task was to continuously keep encouraging our students to use this language in their daily life in speaking and reading so they could read works of literature for example. They can even watch a movie, without looking at the subtitles. It was not a matter of just using this language during the classroom in a school or a university. The main challenge was to change this mentality and culture in our students to make English as a medium for life (English Coordinator, A).

Teachers were introducing a lot of activities, games, online apps, technology integration etc. Our students are digital natives and the majority have smartphones and electronic gadgets and Internet connectivity, so adopting to technology embedded courses should be the optimal solution to captivate their motivation (HOD, A).

Technology offered students greater flexibility, and it advanced their learning and subsequent engagement through the utilisation of self-directed learning to suit their needs (Wengrowicz et al., 2018). The autonomy of studying in this way was found to be a significant intrinsic motivator for the GFP learners where they became intrinsically motivated to seek out autonomous learning environments.

Moreover, bringing authenticity to the classroom was highly valued and encouraged by the teachers since realistic situations and problems could be motivating for the students. Most of the GFP enactors were able to integrate those authentic learning opportunities by including professional practice and real solving scenario cases into the curriculum to prepare the GFP learners for situations that can occur in their professional lives with the hope to boost their motivation for learning as well. This finding is consistent with (Ferrare, 2020; Jiao & Liang, 2022) studies where they established that student motivation arises from engagement activities that build internal value and locus of control together with self determination to learning. Overall, such approaches had motivational impact on the GFP academic achievement.

The study findings indicated that the enactment gaps were also caused by the top- down reform approach. Cohen (2021) contends that these factors are dynamic and must be understood and addressed. In addition, they argue that a hierarchical and centralised structure that dictates orders to be transmitted vertically from the top of the organisational pyramid to the base and policies cannot be expected to be fully enacted without barriers. Disregarding the fact that running the GFP in the HEI remained a main challenge; its enactment stood as a continuous responsibility for the HEI to meet and achieve to provide a viable quality of education that could be approved for accreditation ultimately. Yet, the HEI has been working hard to address those challenges towards the successful enactment of the GFP.

4.9.1 Mechanisms to measure the OASGFP outcomes.

The GFP institutional logics and educational infrastructure encouraged the system leaders to build close relationships with the reform to support instructional improvement. The components of the GFP infrastructure were identified in the data analysis to be, student assessment, staff evaluation, routines/procedures, instructional materials, monitoring, and revision mechanisms. From the respondents' excerpts, it can be concluded that the HEI understudy enacted

those rigorous measures to monitor the achievement of its outcomes. In fact, the HEI confirmed that there was a clear programme review mechanism that was being used within the institution to measure the extent of the outcomes achieved.

The strategic goals and outcomes of the GFP were being reviewed triennially, we also had strategic and operational planning that ran annually and risk assessment cycle which ran every semester. These regular reviews helped us monitor our activities over KPIs, where we measured the GFP outcomes achieved (Associate Dean A).

Contrary to the views of the Associate Dean, other HEI leaders such as the HOD explained:

We were not only reviewing the programme, but also, reviewing the entities of the institution, whether they were doing well, whether they were on the right track to achieve the KPIs designed to achieve the outcomes of the GFP (HOD, A).

Apart from those reviewing mechanisms, there were organisational routines which enabled efficient coordinated action for monitoring the progress of the GFP. The programme manager prepared a formal monitoring report at the end of every semester, where its input was fed from the skills coordinators or module leaders to review the quality of teaching, quality of assessments such as, measuring the constructive alignment of the modules, the content, and assessments through internal and external exam moderation and scrutinisation (GFP Quality Audit Portfolio, 2021). The report also extended to measuring the consistency of marking the answer scripts while assessing the performance of the modules with respect to the students' achievements. Thus, there was a robust, deliberate, and periodic review system available to monitor the performance of the GFP, and to encourage deeper approach to the pedagogic practice. The effectiveness of the GFP curriculum was monitored through module and programme-level reviews conducted every semester which informed the Triannual programme review. The reviews involved evaluation of module content,

textbooks, teaching quality, and other learning resources. If a change in textbooks was recommended, a Textbook Review Team was formed to evaluate the textbooks currently used and to identify textbooks which match the HEI's GFP aims, Learning Objectives (LOs), and meet student requirements (GFP Quality Audit Portfolio, 2021).

4.10 Distributed Cognition and the effectiveness of the GFP

Distributed cognition constitutes one of the important factors that enacting agents heavily relied on, such as resources, learning standard goals, capacity building measures, staff recruitment, staff evaluation procedures, professional development, instructional materials including textbooks and curriculum, students' assessments, organisational routines, technology, and tools to inform enactment of the GFP within the HEI. The recruitment of the GFP enactors counted as a determining factor to the effectiveness of the GFP delivery. As such, the HEI had to make appropriate recruitment of the GFP staff with the required qualifications and experience guided by the Recruitment and Selection Policy and Process for ensuring the quality of teaching. In addition, the enacting agents of the GFP have always been provided with short- and long-term training programmes as part of CPD such as Postgraduate Certificate Course in International Higher Education Professional Practice (PGCert) offered to staff in partnership with international affiliated universities, Masters programmes, Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA), and split-site PhD programmes all to ensure that they stay abreast with the latest developments in their domain and innovative and research- informed pedagogies (GFP Quality Audit, 2021). In addition, the HEI has been committed to increasing its institutional research profile through supporting faculty research groups in exploring opportunities for community engagement. In other words, the enacting agents were being motivated to conduct research, participate in national and international conferences and symposiums to be updated with the current practices, and publish papers in high peer reviewed journals to ultimately contribute to the

improvement on the performance of the GFP delivery and enactment.

Through research, we could see what aspects of the GFP that were done properly, and what needed to be changed to enhance the effectiveness of the programme. So, research helped the faculty members to bring results about changes that assisted in achieving the desired outcomes. (Programme Manager).

This view was further buttressed by the Associate Dean A who said:

We were continuously trying to improve our employees professionally. Most of the GFP faculty members now have TESOL Arabia membership as a professional certification, as well as they are constantly organising conferences and participating in academic and research deliberations together with professional development programmes related to teaching qualifications.

The data demonstrate that professional support was offered progressively to develop staff in relation to teaching, research and industry engagement. So, effective enactment heavily depended on the skills and knowledge of the agents, through the distribution of, access to, and activation of resources. According to Hutchins (2001), distributed cognition are resources that are made up of a constellation of physical, financial, social, and technical assets that agents individually and collectively use to generally accomplish organisational work. In addition, Jacques (2020) argued that organisational resources work in the improvement of student achievement only if they are recognised by the enacting agents and used efficiently in work practice. Therefore, understanding how the HEI leaders navigate through these infrastructures and or resources would further expand the understanding of the performative aspects of the resources and hence the reform's enactment (Blasé & Fixsen, 2005; Spillane et al., 2019). It is important to mention though, that resources do not determine practice, rather agents draw on them through which they deploy strategies of action to fulfil the organisational requirements. In this sense, Béland et al. (2022) conceptualise this as a toolkit that does not determine the action but provides resources for action

from which agents can choose to create desired strategies for desired outcomes. Also, as inhabited institutionalism what Spillane et al. (2019) would suggest, agents actively make sense of and construct their responses to policy texts and discourses through engaging with ideas, materials, and practices from their institutional environments.

Furthermore, the HEI's enacting agents used materials from their environment related to the OASGFP including student assessments, learning standards, lesson plans, and units in their efforts to re-build their local educational infrastructures. Spillane et al. (2019) confirmed that these materials embody ways of thinking about instruction and its improvement. Hence, as the HEI agents used these materials in re-designing their educational infrastructures, the materials potentially disciplined how and what they see and value influencing their work for instructional improvement and quality. Those agents also confirmed the effectiveness and readiness of the GFP saying that the programme was preparing the students to meet undergraduate courses criteria which was also reflected in the vision and mission of the HEI understudy that measured the outcomes of the students' achievement and skills required to successfully undertake under/postgraduate programmes. HOD C stated that:

We were not limiting ourselves to the OASGFP outcomes, we were trying to bring students to a higher standard and achieve a little more than what was prescribed to help them integrate to undergraduate or postgraduate studies easily.

The above view was further reinforced by HOD A who asserted that:

We try our best to enact the GFP fully in the given time span. As for its effectiveness, we check it through different angles, like one thing would be to benchmark the programme learning outcomes with the module level outcomes. Second would be to take feedback from stakeholders including students, teachers not just who teach the GFP, but also from the post GFP teachers and

from alumni, and external examiners as well. So, we try to find out the efficacy of the GFP from all these angles.

The Programme Manager further complimented saying that there was a study done to compare the students who graduate from the GFP and those who are enrolled in specialisations directly without taking the GFP. The results of the study revealed that the GFP students had gained better skills in knowledge compared to those who had not taken the GFP. This shows that the GFP was very much successful in developing the necessary skills and knowledge required for those learners to advance to their specialisations.

Furthermore, when the HEI leaders were asked whether the GFP has undergone through any adaptations or transformations throughout the years for efficacy and efficiency, most of them said that there were technological modifications which were developed on the learning strategies and pedagogies. The HEI understudy utilised technology and different tools to contribute to the effective enactment of the GFP. For example, Associate Dean B, confirmed that the institutional pedagogical approach to teaching and learning in the GFP was underpinned by the three tenets of the institutions' teaching and learning strategy: active learning, student-led learning, and community of learners (GFP Quality Audit, 2021):

I feel that the GFP was doing a good job to a great extent, we have also been encouraging our students to develop digital learning skills such as the massive online open course known as MOOC which was being used as an embedded lifelong learning mechanism to prepare the students for challenges in their future studies (Associate Dean, B).

In addition to promoting active learning, a wide range of technology- enhanced learning applications have been used inside and outside the classroom through the HEIs Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)-Moodle, and other online applications such as Kahoot, and Socrative (Al Auji & Naidu, 2021). To achieve lifelong learning, GFP pedagogy included varied approaches such as task-based, group-work, and project- based methods. Module delivery was supported

by the availability of appropriate and adequate teaching resources. Student-led learning was promoted through flipped learning, guided discovery learning, and extra-curricular and community outreach activities. In fact, as part of distributed cognition, students were engaged in various activities such as poster-design, video-creation, and presentations to develop social, communication and digital skills. Further evidence was provided the excerpt below.

We have a very focused, deliberate approach towards the GFP. When we say that students should develop these outcomes, we ensure that the faculty have the understanding and capabilities of approaches and technological tools to deliver the desired outcomes. Similarly, in community outreach activities our GFP faculty were asked to interact with the local communities to become aware of the challenges the community currently might be facing. Therefore, everybody was equally contributing and taking forward the mandate of the GFP (Associate Dean, B).

Educational technology has been a hot topic for decades regarding its capabilities and potential utility to proliferate teaching and learning (Hands & Limniou, 2023; Sykes et al., 2012). The use of educational technology at the HEI under study helped the agents to execute their plans of action, and in this case promoted active learning. Using these resources to engage in the work of building institutional logics and educational infrastructure has enhanced the GFP delivery. As such distributed cognition has played an important role in providing the HEI with the necessary artefacts to facilitate the successful enactment of the GFP.

4.11 Proposed Adaptations to the OASGFP

Regardless of the overall HEI leaders' satisfaction with the effectiveness of the OASGFP, some of them reflected on the need to develop the standards/learning outcomes further. The analysis revealed that there was a need for some adaptations to be made to the OASGFP, modifying the enactment to promote innovation of the reform. Academic departments involved in the GFP stated that structural constraints often impede full enactment of a wide range of innovations.

The current OSAGFP hindered the adoption of new practices since it was written from a long time. Hence, there was a need for an update and expansion of the reform in its standards and achievements as most of the participants highlighted saying:

The learning outcomes need to be adapted or split further, including providing more details on the knowledge and skills required for each and specific outcomes for the different disciplines (English, Maths, IT and Computing) from the OAAAQA (HOD, A).

Contrary to this, the English Coordinator A said:

We know that OAAAQA has put these standards, but we as teachers were the ones who were working in the profession, we were expected to enact those standards that were written long time ago. Some of them might not be applicable to this era anymore. I mean we must adapt to the changes that might happen accordingly because from their side, they were not taking this into their consideration. For example, when COVID-19 hit, the standards were not even adaptable to online education. There was nothing in the document related to online teaching.

A sizable challenge is that the GFP took a holistic oriented approach and so the HEIs could not edit or suggest an adaptation on the structure of the learning outcomes. As mentioned earlier by the policymakers, it takes a long process to change the portfolio, and this requires national bodies' approval. As such, the HEIs were only allowed to make amendments to their in-house curriculum of the GFP adhering to the national standards as a threshold. However minor changes, such as reallocation of marks, reduction in number of assessments in some of the GFP modules and change of prescribed textbook for English modules, have been made throughout the years within the local GFP curriculum and assessment. Nevertheless, the gap lied within the document itself since the standards were outdated. The enacting agents have given their point of view,

perspectives, and their insights on developing the OASGFP in the light of modern education and sustainability, but no practical implementation took place due to lack of authority. There was lack of bottom-up policy approach taking place in this case. Learning outcomes must be followed as they are disregarding the extent of their validity and applicability over time and contextual merit. Therefore, the enacting agents did not have the power to suggest or argue for adaptations of the OASGFP and were only left with the option to accept the document as it was while enacting it to its maximum extent.

Moreover, specific recommendations were made by the GFP agents regarding the adaptations or the developments of the OASGFP as most of them claimed that it was outdated and lacked details and practicality within the learning outcomes. Specific changes were offered by some of them:

We must encourage practicality over theory. More room should be given to practise the learning outcomes. The GFP learners should not concentrate on memorising the theoretical part, for example, memorising the rules of the grammar, instead of being able to produce it in an essay. Going for field trips and experience real life situations such having live conversations with people from different sectors: companies, exhibitions, airports and involve in real communications rather than listening to audio scripts for IELTS exam. I'm talking about the quality of learning. I know that best practices were left to the HEIs to produce and go beyond the OASGFP requirements, yet, usually most of the teachers misunderstood this and just followed exactly what was mentioned in the document (English Coordinator, A).

From the suggestions above, the OASGFP need to be tailored considering the contemporary advancements in higher education teaching and learning. As for the Computing Coordinator, he claimed that almost all the academic standards related to IT and computing were outdated and no emphasis were given to using smart phones for learning. He also claimed that the standards listed are not comprehensive and lack wider coverage. The main issue lied again with the practicality part, and not having learning outcomes that were more current to

today's age:

The learning outcomes related to computing, and IT should be updated every two or three years. For example, one of the learning outcomes have something related to floppy disk. We are in an era that doesn't use floppy disks anymore, so that should be removed. Also, CDR CDRW's, we don't use these much anymore, nowadays we are using cloud computing, online OneDrive, and Dropbox. The idea is for the OASGFP to keep up with the current advancements in technology and update its academic standards accordingly.

In addition to the above-mentioned findings, one of the English coordinators considered that restructuring needs should also be done in the secondary schools claiming that the level of the GFP learners was very weak due to lack of strong educational foundation that was rooted back to the middle and secondary school. He stated that OASGFP would be achieved more affectively, if those learners had good level of education especially in the English language.

We need to change this the educational system in Oman starting from middle school to secondary school because it needs growth in experience and knowledge. If we make real and true changes in these two sectors, middle and secondary schools, I believe the learning outcomes of the GFP in all private and public HEIs will practically become better (English Coordinator, B).

Based on my experience as an insider researcher (Mercer, 2007; Trowler, 2011), I think that investing one year to the GFP is not enough, learners need at least two years since most of them have a weak background in academic skills. This explains why students needed to have adequate skills and training in their middle and secondary schools by introducing new programmes or adapting the current ones to giving more importance/ reinforcement in learning the fundamental components of the GFP. The lack of collaboration between high schools and HEIs is a huge issue to address. Therefore, emphasis on natural progression and full integration of interdisciplinary approaches from high school to foundation programme courses to higher education specialisations is required in line with

what the policy maker suggested earlier. It is evidently clear that mutual adaptation was absent in the policy enactment in this case study. This can be clearly traced from the behaviours and attitudes of enacting agents towards this reform. The feelings of discomfort can be deduced from their interpretation of what was missing in the OASGFP which gave meaning towards the consequence of the lack of mutual adaptation. This could be regarded as consequences of policy formulated from top authorities or top-down approach in policy implementation. The proposals and efforts were made above to ensure that the GFP is fully enacted as per the principles of the OASGFP which will adequately prepare students for the 21st Century teaching and learning and serve as an integrated, interdisciplinary, and applied learning opportunity. First and foremost, more efforts are required to raise awareness of these standards among faculty, revisions in curriculum and teaching practices as well as helping students to become more responsible and productive citizens, thus benefiting both students and the community.

It is only possible to think sensibly about policy and its enactment if there is a dynamic and open-ended framework such as the cognitive/sensemaking framework to give an encompassing and conceptually dense definition of how policy cognition and hence enactment take place. This was examined through understanding the individual cognition of the OASGFP's formulator and its enactors. The institutional environment as a situational context was also examined to understand how the HEI leaders noticed, interpreted, and enacted the GFP texts and discourses into practice. Attending to the GFP formulators and enactors sensemaking about their individual and situational context brought multilevel of interpretation, interaction, and translation of policy signals (Spillane et al., 2002). In addition, the GFP was enacted under various conditions with varying resources against sets of existing experiences, beliefs, emotions, and professions. The use of cognitive framework/theory, overall, in this educational policy research stands important as it made a critical disposition to investigate, reveal, understand, and explain the GFP enactment in its various intersections, sites and processes. The study produced data of different sorts which made

visible what was invisible prior to the application of the theoretical lens or analytic toolkit. As such the findings help to conceptualise education policy enactment as dynamic, and a multi-layered endeavour under different conditions, contexts, and resources. Arguably, the study findings showcase how institutional complexity plays a role in the enactment of the reform. The real world outside of research dispositions and practices are waiting to be discovered and illuminated through the deployment of heuristic devices to understand policy agents' logic and this study anchored its ontological position between interpretivism and social constructivism to extend work around the sensemaking theory and contributing to educational policy enactment literature. In light of the findings a modified sense making model (Figure 7) can be adapted and developed to gain insights on the enactment of practices in higher education.

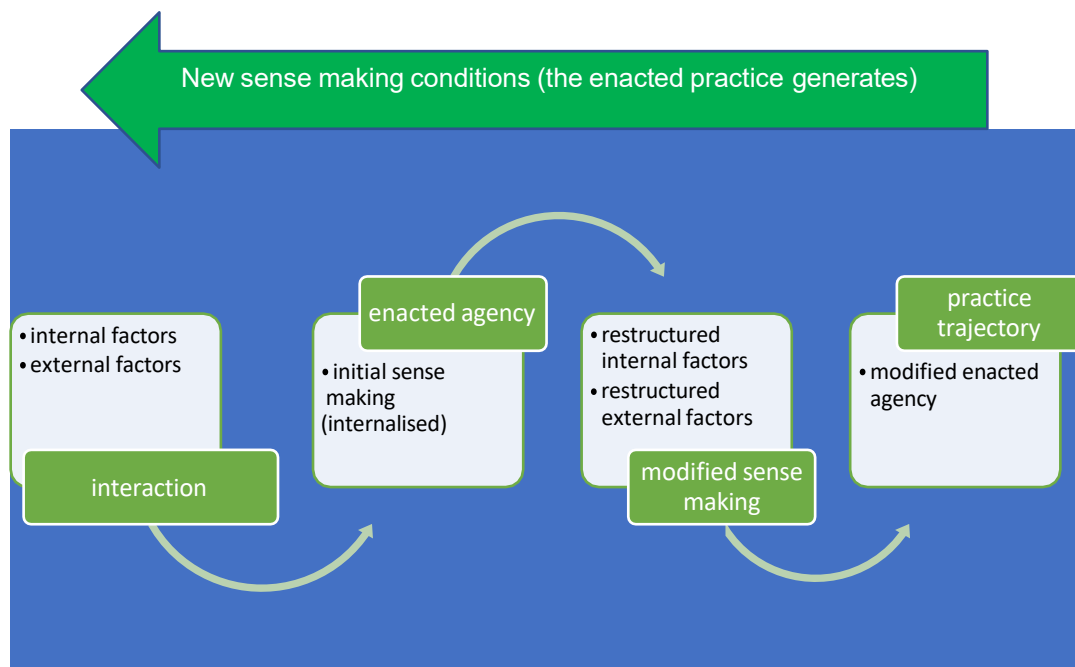


Figure 7: Modified model of sensemaking and cognition as a continuous process

The interaction between the different factors is critical to how a practice manifests itself and how the agency is involved. An important consideration is that sense making may in turn undergo transformations and modifications with each interaction and time. Sensemaking begins with the observe who is using the collective self to make sense of the external in relation to the internal. The internal is not static and may be influenced by this interaction which in some sense will render the external different even at the incremental levels. Enactment of practices generate new conditions (knowledge, experience, beliefs) of sensemaking and the cycle continues. Knowledge and experience (specialty, with all the related positions assumed, places worked and institutions) vary with time and to some certain extent beliefs may undergo changes. The institutional logics highlighted earlier provide the parameters which often govern practice. This highlights the complexity of fully characterising the degree and nature of enactment. Yet the cognitive model provides a meaningful approach to gain a better understanding of policy and practice at the HE level. While certain procedural (perhaps normative and coercive) elements of practice may be implemented in a similar matter at the administrative level, human interactions remain complex and the process of what constitutes effective deep learning remains difficult to wholesomely characterise and evaluate.

4.12 Summary

Undoubtedly “the search for evidence to develop high quality, sustainable education systems, continues to intensify as national economies seek to compete globally” (Peng et al., 2014, p.77). This study’s overall aim was to examine the value of using sensemaking a cognitive framework to characterise the GFP contextual enactment within HEI and the influence on the reframing of policy enactments in the higher education sector. Deploying this framework yielded data, which when inductively analysed provided strong suggestions that the GFP offered in Oman’s HEIs has the potential for effective integration of general education principles and standards and to build a solid basis for students’ skills and knowledge development. Furthermore, the programme was considered as a valuable experience for students to develop academically, boost their competencies and skills, and develop their personalities. However, the research also highlights significant impediments related to the inherent complex nature of practice when examined through the lens of sensemaking (with all mitigating enablers or disablers) and the discrepancy between the theoretical design aspirations and the projected enactments. To ensure that the GFP courses follow the OASGFP, adequately prepare the learners for the 21st Century teaching and learning and serve as an integrated, interdisciplinary, and applied learning opportunity, more in-depth understanding of the significance of the programme is required. This should include, first and foremost, raising awareness of these standards among all the stakeholders but more importantly, amongst faculty who are the key enactors of the policy. Further research in curriculum, teaching and assessment practices is needed, as well as helping students to become more responsible and productive citizens, thus benefiting both students and the community. The findings highlight the significance of further research on policy practice aimed at enhancing teaching and learning in higher education and perhaps the use of the model of sensemaking in attempts to narrow the practice gap between the theoretical aspirations and the enacted trajectories.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Implications of findings

5.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the key findings derived from my research. Furthermore, it highlights the educational implications of the findings from my study, as well as the potential avenues they open for further research. The core outcomes of the study are presented in alignment with the main research questions. This structured approach not only clarifies the relationship between the findings and the research objectives but also highlights the study's contribution to the field. It serves as a bridge between the theoretical framework established and the empirical evidence gathered, providing a comprehensive overview of the study's impact and significance.

The General Foundation Programme (GFP) was introduced as an initiative to address the gap that existed in the foundation programme where a considerable majority of students were struggling to meet the requirements of the undergraduate degree studies. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority Quality Assurance body (OAAAQA) in partnership with the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MOHERI) developed and mandated the HEIs across the country to enact the GFP policy. I observed that since the formulation and enactment of the GFP policy several decades ago, no study had been conducted to develop an understanding of the formulation and enactment of the GFP policy from the policymakers and the HEIs enacting agents' perspective. As a result, this study employed a case study methodological approach using the sensemaking and cognitive theoretical framework to explore the impact of the actors' individual and situated cognition on policy enactment. The study involved working in partnership with a policymaker from the OAAAQA and 12 enacting agents from a selected HEI in Oman. Being an insider researcher in the selected HEI, I was able to interpret the experiences of the participants to provide thick descriptions of the studied phenomena while at the same time maintaining my researcher-qua-researcher position (Creswell, 2013; Trowler, 2011).

The thesis provides an improved understanding of the GFP reform from the experiences of representative stakeholders in an Omani HEI through the characterisation of the dynamics of policy enactment relationship through the lens of the cognitive framework developed by Spillane et al. (2002). The utility of this framework originates from its ability to capture the nuanced drivers which shape the perceptions of agents through sensemaking and, hence, better understand the nature of the implementation and enactment of practice. Since there is still lack of attention to the appropriateness of differing conceptualisations of the policy enactment relationship to desired outcomes, the thesis substantially contributes to a focus on this gap through examining the ongoing conversations in the inhabited institutionalism and sensemaking traditions of the GFP national curriculum in Oman. The institutional broader cultural context provides the policymakers with logics for the formulation of the reforms at a macro level and provides the enacting agents with logics for interpretation and enactment of reforms at a micro level. This is achieved by depicting how those agents make sense of the GFP situated in their system's organisational identity to address the institutional needs and concerns and demonstrate their efforts to rebuild educational infrastructure and quality of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, it makes a good contribution to both professional and academic fields of knowledge, through reaching a conclusion on what constitutes a successful enactment from four areas which are: individual cognition, situated cognition, distributed cognition and role of representations. It is important to note that one of the key implications of the findings from this thesis is the significant contribution to the body of knowledge on policy enactment research in higher education. The thesis goes beyond the constraints of evaluation studies as it develops and supports the notion of how policy enactment can be re-conceptualised and/or re-made as a process by the enacting agents within their situated contexts (Trowler, 2014). From a broader perspective, the thesis argues that it holds empirical significance on the development of cognitive framework that can be utilised in HEIs in similar contexts that are engaged in similar reforms to enhance policy enactment practice at local, regional, and global levels.

Furthermore, the thesis aimed to gain a better understanding of policy enactment through the lens of the sensemaking theory. It explored the sensemaking of policy formulators and the enactors of the GFP reform using the cognitive framework to understand how their individual cognition and schemas (beliefs, experiences, and knowledge), together with their situated cognition influences the formulation and enactment of the GFP in the HEI context in Oman. In-depth examination of multiple and perceived incongruous institutional norms, values, logics, and infrastructure shape the HEI leaders' sensemaking and interpretation based on the policy environment, informed by the institutional complexity they faced during the GFP enactment. Consequently, this highlighted a process of how agents went through the phases of making sense, interpretation, reconciliation and/ or counterbalancing different institutional logics to enable or constrain them in the policy enactment process.

As indicated earlier, this chapter provides final summation to the research questions, discusses key findings with realistic claims on its applicability and transferability, and highlights the significance, contribution, and the originality of the research. Final comments on how the practice is better understood are made while discussing the aspirations of the current theoretical lens employed. Finally, further research and professional implications for practice are set and discussed in the context of higher education.

5.2 Findings of the Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to generate answers to the three main research questions, which acted as the anchor that chained the theoretical lens with the key findings of the study. As such, the study generated answers to the main research questions, and the conclusions from the research findings are framed within the domains related to the three main research questions in the following sections (5.2.1-5.2.2 and 5.2.3).

5.2.1 What role does individual cognition play in formulating and enacting the GFP?

The thesis explored the role of individual cognition, that is, individual knowledge, beliefs, and experience, within the context of the GFP formulation and enactment in an HEI in Oman. Through interviewing different stakeholders within the participating HEI, it emerged clearly that individuals are not passive recipients but active participants in policy and practice. The study findings demonstrate the profound impact that individual cognition has on the formulation and enactment of GFP policy. From the onset of the development of the OASGFP, it became clear that cognitive frameworks of individuals significantly influenced the way in which the GFP was developed and interpreted in the different HEIs with spotlight on the HEI under study. Individual cognition played a significant role in the formulation and enactment of OASGFP. The OAAAQA developed the OASGFP ensuring that the standards were aligned with the expectations of the Omani society. The policymakers strongly believed that the GFP was customised to the needs of the country, and it was going to help address the needs of the learners. The MOHERI mandated all the HEIs across the country to embrace the GFP.

The leaders from the HEI under study demonstrated that they had in-depth knowledge of the GFP, they participated actively in its formulation and enactment. It was evident that they perceived the value of the GFP, they considered the programme to be valuable in the development of their students both for undergraduate studies and for future employment opportunities. The thesis further demonstrates that organisations are more than just sites to develop institutional logics given that they have people who actively engage them in meaning making (Spillane et al., 2019). Hence, the importance of studying the micro-level enactment through the sensemaking theory is a necessity (Coburn, 2001; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Spillane et al., 2002; Weick, 1995). Ryan et al. (2021) emphasised that when enacting agents make sense of, interpret, and use different logics diffused through available resources, they rely on their prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences to understand the reform, and select and

use the associated resources that guide them in the process. The HEI leaders' sensemaking and cognition on the nature of the GFP and its subsequent development and practice gave insight into the extent to which the GFP was fully enacted. The governance of the GFP within this institution was built through an operational plan which was subject to be reviewed biannually to make sure all the standard criteria were met. The GFP was aligned to the institutional Vision, Mission, and Values where the KPIs are operationalised through the DOPs of the three Academic Departments involved in the GFP (ADIGFP).

Although the HEI under study demonstrated that it was enacting the GFP comprehensively, the thesis also revealed that there were some discrepancies in the way the GFP policy was being enacted in other HEIs. One key lesson drawn from this study is that for effective policy enactment, communication should be made clearly to avoid misinterpretation of the provided guidance. Anecdotally, if all the HEIs had been given clear guidance, it is highly likely that the policy enactment would have been achieved consistently across the HE sectors in the country. The lack of involvement of the local HEIs in formulating the OASGFP had formed dissonance on decisions such as the level of difficulty the standards should reflect. In addition, while flexibility might be viewed as an added benefit, this lack of robustness allowed for varied interpretations and hence differences in implementation approaches (Qiu et al., 2022; Trowler, 2003; Wilson, 2000). However, it is important to mention that this thesis did not just focus on evaluating the extent to which the OASGFP was adapted or deflected, rather it was the case of how these HEIs were providing efficient delivery of the GFP while considering internal and external factors including motivation, pedagogy, methodology, curricula, infrastructures, facilities, policies and rules to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in higher education (Aizawa & Rose, 2018; Gaus et al., 2018; Heimans, 2012). The study findings indicated that the enactment gaps were also caused by the top-down reform approach. Cohen (2021) contends that these factors are dynamic and must be understood and addressed. Although the GFP reform employed a top-down approach (national level policy), an exploration of the processes at the bottom level of policy delivery was the major focus of this

thesis, and it demonstrated how individual cognition of the different stakeholders played an important role in the policy enactment. The focus was mainly on the interpretations and engagement with the reform dependent on individuals' experiences, decisions and actions that were influenced by their beliefs, values, norms, and professional practices (Mitchell & Sherer, 2016; Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane et al., 2019). The thesis further reinforced the observation that the policymakers' cognitive frameworks which include their knowledge, beliefs, and experiences shape how they interpret information and make decisions. The cognitive dimension influences the entire policy process from the formulation to enactment. For instance, the conversations with the policymaker in this study indicated that the GFP policy was interpreted variously by different HEIs. This was evident within the institution under study where there was variation in the way teachers interpreted and enacted the GFP despite having the same guidance documents. Individual agency played an important role, as well as the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. It was important to develop collective meaning for the effective enactment of the GFP. This explains why it is important to device strategies and operational plans to ensure consistency in the way the policies are enacted. For example, the institution under study highlighted that they worked together to develop strategies and operational plans for the effective enactment of GFP. In addition, new staff members were provided with induction to help them develop an understanding and to make sense of the GFP policy.

Individual cognition plays a significant role on shaping the policy makers and enacting agent's knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. Through the comprehensive analysis of findings, it was thoroughly discussed how individual cognition enhanced the policymakers and the enacting agents' understanding and sensemaking of the GFP, tailored their beliefs and added their experiences towards effective GFP enactment. Examining the individual cognition of the policy makers also facilitated the investigation of their beliefs on the effectiveness of the GFP, its formulation and enactment. Again, through examining the individual cognition it allowed me to understand the perspectives of the agents and their beliefs on the GFP effectiveness.

The analysis of the discourse demonstrated clearly that the individual cognition, that is individual knowledge, beliefs and experiences, played a significant role in the formulation and enactment of the OASGFP. This is quite important and positions the agent at the forefront to gauge, assess and project the nature of implementation and the trajectory of policy enactment. Sensemaking in turn depends on individual traits and characteristics in addition to the context. For example, and as expected prior or accumulated knowledge provides an individual within the faculty with information on how to effectively perceive communication in the form of a new practice. Beliefs and experiences cannot be detached from knowledge. They are all intertwined to generate what we know and how we know it. Yet, certain beliefs based on prior experiences (or other such as religious or cultural considerations) may promote or hinder certain understandings of practice and hence implementation. A deep-rooted belief in the utility of change will influence the implementation of practice and the opposite is equally true. The GFP was a brainchild of the OAAAQA, however, the success of its enactment in the HEI was dependent on the HEI leaders' individual cognition which facilitated the sensemaking and use of the different logics to enact the GFP.

5.2.2 How does situated cognition influence formulating and enactment of the GFP?

The thesis established that situated cognition, that is, the institutional logics and infrastructure influence the formulation and enactment of the GFP. Inhabited institutionalism posits a reciprocal relationship between institutions and individuals, suggesting that they shape each other's existence. This perspective views individuals as stakeholders who are not merely passive entities but are actively engaged in interpreting and negotiating the meanings within their institutional contexts. It underscores the dynamic interplay where individuals contribute to the shaping of institutions even as they are being shaped by them. This approach to understanding institutions highlights the active role of individuals in making sense of, and giving meaning to, the institutional structures they inhabit. This thesis explored how broader cultural forces and communities influenced the

policymakers and the enactors of the OASGFP that was formulated in association with demographics shaping the broader society. The GFP was designed to address a felt problem in society, that is, the lack of preparation to embark on degree studies by students from high school.

Furthermore, the GFP was the bridge between high school and undergraduate studies. The contextual factors play an important role in the enactment of the GFP. For instance, in the institution under study, clearly defined structures were put in place to ensure the effective enactment of the GFP. The institutional values placed emphasis on quality, respect, transparency and diversity in its environment, and these values impacted on the understanding and the enactment of the GFP. Such values have been gradually inculcated together with the definition of common sets of rules to achieve the institutional goals. The social cognitive process was highly dependent on common sets of beliefs, culture, experiences, and emotions which structured the sensemaking framework. The commonality of work culture despite the enactors' different backgrounds brought unity and conformity to understanding the GFP and hence enhanced its enactment within the HEI. This is also depicted in Spillane et al.'s (2006) apt observation that: "the social aspect of the cognitive process includes an individual's situation or social context that fundamentally shapes how human cognition affects policy implementation" (p.56). It can be concluded that the tight bond among the organisational structures has led to an enhanced sense of meaning of practice and hence better sensemaking of the GFP. This is especially because the organisational members are not free agents since their sensemaking and practice is shaped by the organisations they work at (Sykes et al., 2012).

The teaching staff were supported through continuous professional development opportunities provided by the institution. Any new staff who joined the organisation was given induction meetings that provided comprehensive orientation on how to implement the GFP (GFP Quality Audit Portfolio, 2021). This strategy helped to eliminate any resistance, problems arising from conflicting opinions about the policy text (Gaus et al., 2018). Continuous Professional

Development (CPD) workshops have also played a great role in reducing the ambiguity or uncertainty in understanding the programme and brought uniformity in channeling rules with clear objectives of instructions and regulations (Alzahmi et al., 2022) from OASGFP at the local actors' level within the HEI context. These findings, as discussed earlier, resonate with the observations made by Kathawalla and Mehta (2022) and Mirata and Bergamin (2023), who argued that organisational readiness and structure in an HEI is fundamental to encourage and enhance intergroup relations for the success of the educational reform enactment. Repeatedly, the findings also confirmed that social networks and norms are other factors which have significant impact on the enacting agents' understanding and practice. One of the HODs expressed saying that conducting professional development workshops organised by the Centre of Academic Practices (CAP) enhanced the agents' existing knowledge, cognition, and skills in understanding the educational reform, and also enhanced their ability to transfer the ideas mandated by the policy into practice. Hence, improving their performance towards the enactment of the GFP. The provision of such development opportunities helped to capacitate the teaching staff who went on to interpret and deliver the GFP. Several contextual factors were shown to influence the sensemaking process in the enactment of educational reforms such as GFP (Spillane et al., 2019). It was revealed that social cognitive processes depend on common sets of beliefs, culture, experiences, and emotions which impact on sensemaking. As a result, having a shared culture is important within an organisation, and it is also important to have social networks which facilitate the development of a sense of community and the development of organisational identities that impact on sensemaking and the subsequent policy enactment (Alzahmi et al., 2022).

In addition, the study findings emphasised the importance of the institutional logics which have got implications on the agents' sensemaking, interpretation and enactment (Thornton et al., 2012). Institutional logics consist of both tangible practices and symbolic constructs, and they serve as a compass for the behavior and convictions of both individuals and organisations. These logics provide

meaning to everyday tasks and play an important role in the evolution and transformation of institutions. They act as frameworks within which daily operations gain purpose and direction, guiding the development and modification of institutional structures. Within the institution under study, collaboration was important, and this facilitated the effective enactment of the GFP. For example, there were three departments that were working together to ensure the delivery of GFP. As highlighted earlier, ensuring the development of social networks and providing support to the teachers help them to make sense and develop strategies and operational plans for the effective policy enactment.

Distributed cognition also played an important role in constructing the agents' personal knowledge and interaction with the artefacts produced for communication, teaching, learning and overall enactment of the GFP. According to Cairns (2018) and Pablo (2023), distributed cognition, as mentioned earlier, are resources that are made up of a constellation of physical, financial, social, and technical assets that agents individually and collectively use to generally accomplish organisational work. Moreover, distributed cognition constitutes one of the important factors that enacting agents heavily relied on, such as resources, learning standard goals, capacity building measures, staff recruitment, staff evaluation procedures, professional development, instructional materials including textbooks and curriculum, students' assessments, organisational routines, technology, and tools to inform enactment of the GFP within the HEI. The recruitment of the GFP enactors counted as a determining factor to the effectiveness of the GFP delivery. The data demonstrate that professional support was offered progressively to develop staff in relation to teaching, research and industry engagement. So, effective enactment heavily depended on the skills and knowledge of the agents, through the distribution of, access to, and activation of resources.

The policymaker managed to express their attitudes with regards to culture and collective thinking while formulating the OASGFP. He also explained the stages of the formulation and the process of the GFP audit cycle under the context or

the setting they went through. Furthermore, analysis discussed the social cognitive process involved in the enacting agents' construction and negotiation of meaning (sensemaking) in complex or contradictory situations as they tried to understand connections among ambiguous or confusing messages, and their situations (Spillane et al., 2019; Weick, 1995). The analysis also involved a deeper examination of the variables influencing the enacting agents' social networks and their situated cognition which could be considered as an emergent phenomenon extending to the broader policy and enactment literature. Individual and situated cognition also assisted the policy maker to identify the enactment gaps of the OASGFP. This facilitated an in-depth examination of the role of the institutional structure and how the departments were involved in enacting the GFP. Other contextual factors such as collegiality, CPD, Distributed cognition, played a significant role on dictating the extent of the GFP enactment. This also brought light on the reasons for the enactment gap.

Given that the GFP is enacted in all the HEIs in the country, this study sought to understand the factors that affect its enactment to identify best practice and avoid potential pitfalls. Several factors/barriers that hinder the GFP enactment in the HEI under study were identified. A significant factor was attributed to agency, the enacting agents, in particular, the coordinators reported that there was lack of awareness on the OASGFP. Furthermore, the study findings also revealed that the situated cognition, that is, the institutional logics and infrastructure played an important role in the formulation and enactment of the GFP in the HEI context. The HEI had an effective organisational structure and culture which promoted the extent to which the GFP was enacted. The HEI's contextual factors such as the human and social capital was key for the effective enactment of the GFP. It was also evidenced that due to lack of involvement of the HEI in the formulation of the OASGFP, there was a cognitive dissonance regarding the level of complexity of the GFP learning outcomes at the HEI level, it was not always easy to align the learning outcomes with the OAAAQA's expectations. In addition, the study findings led to an understanding of the dynamic nature of education policy

enactment and its conceptualisation as a multi-layered endeavour under different conditions, contexts and resources.

5.2.3 What is the utility of the cognitive framework in characterising the educational reforms, and its subsequent implications in reframing policy enactments in the HE sector?

The sensemaking framework was very useful, to a greater extent, in characterising the individual and situated cognitions of the agents formulating and enacting the GFP. The use of cognitive framework/theory, overall, in this educational policy research stands important as it made a critical disposition to investigate, reveal, understand, and explain the GFP enactment in its various intersections, sites and processes. The study produced data of different sorts which made visible what was invisible prior to the application of the theoretical lens or analytic toolkit. As such the findings help to conceptualise education policy enactment as dynamic, and a multi-layered endeavour under different conditions, contexts, and resources. Arguably, the study findings showcase how institutional complexity plays a role in the enactment of the reform. The real world outside of research dispositions and practices are waiting to be discovered and illuminated through the deployment of heuristic devices to understand policy agents' logic and this study anchored its ontological position between interpretivism and social constructivism to extend work around the sensemaking theory and contributing to educational policy enactment literature. However, few editions can be included to modify the framework and make it more effective for future use in HEI reforms settings. Following this deeper understanding of the interplay between different actors and factors, this study has led to the development of a modified sensemaking model (shown if Figure 6 in the preceding chapter). The adapted sensemaking, and cognition model can be adapted and developed to gain insights on the enactment of different policies in higher education settings. The study provided a clear conceptual framework of the cognitive model that stakeholders can deploy to effect educational policy reform and its effective enactment.

In a nutshell, in studying the GFP policy enactment, the cognitive framework was instrumental in understanding how policy actors (the policymakers and the HEI enacting agents) interpret, process, and implement policies within complex systems. It emphasised the role of cognition, that is, how individuals think, perceive, and make sense of information in the policy enactment process. I found this approach useful for education policy initiatives, such as the GFP policy in Oman whose standards were developed by a central unit, the OAAAQA. This policy required significant changes in classroom instruction and challenge deeply rooted beliefs and practices. For instance, when the policy was introduced, the HEIs in Oman were used to teaching English only in their foundation programmes, yet, this new policy focused on four areas including English, IT, Mathematics and Academic skills. By focusing on the cognitive aspects, researchers can understand the sensemaking activities of policy enactors, shedding light on how their beliefs, attitudes, and understandings evolve throughout the enactment process. Moreover, the cognitive framework helps in identifying the cognitive biases and meanings that may influence decision-making, thereby offering a more nuanced perspective of policy enactment that goes beyond mere compliance or resistance. It provides a lens to examine the multifaceted nature of policy contexts and the dynamic interplay between policy, practice, and cognition. In essence, the utility of the cognitive framework lies in its ability to capture the complex, often non-linear, and human-centric aspects of policy enactment, facilitating a deeper comprehension of how policies are formulated and translated into action and the various factors that can affect this translation. In a way, this is a significant contribution of the study at hand, it highlights how the cognitive framework can be a potent tool in guiding the formulation and enactment of education policy in different contexts.

5.3 Research contribution, significance, and originality of the study

From a broader perspective, the thesis presents empirical significance on the development of cognitive framework that can be utilised in HEIs that are engaged in similar reforms with similar contexts to enhance policy enactment practice at

local regional and global levels. The context is very important and has great significance on the processes of sensemaking and the subsequent notions of institutional logics and enactment. Previous studies have not provided an Omani context for implementation of educational reform through the lens of sensemaking. This context shares paramount similarities in the region and may be used as a “working model” in other similar yet far international contexts. At the core, practice is agentic. Understanding agency based on perceived sensemaking activities and processes is critical to practice and therefore flightpath and trajectory. The concept of individual and situated cognition illuminate how new policy demands are made sense of, interpreted, and enacted in institutional environments where a variety of other implicit rules, beliefs, norms, and resources may have interfered with the process of sensemaking. Given that HEI leaders’ sensemaking is situated in an institutional infrastructure (DiMaggio & Powell, 2021) that may constrain or enable decisions and actions made for policy enactment, it is important to conclude that the sensemaking process is multi-layered and complex to establish and to produce desired institutional changes. Agents’ cognition of the practice is at the core of understanding the trajectory of the enactment of the practice.

This is the first contextual study that utilised cognitive theory to engage policy formulators and enactors in the GFP in an HEI in Oman and one of the few studies internationally that addressed the GFP enactment using this methodology. It examined the enactment relationships among the HEI stakeholders within the university and subsequently provided significant conceptual contributions to the field of policy enactment in higher education. This involved interviewing the different stakeholders within the institution who had some responsibility in the formulation and enactment of the GFP. A comprehensive analysis of findings from the interviews, as well as use of document analysis and personal reflections based on my own experience as an ‘insider researcher’ generated some useful insights into the enactment of the GFP. It was enlightening to understand the role of situated cognition, for example, the importance of shared meanings and how they impacted the sensemaking and enactment of the GFP. There was evidence

of social networking and emphasis on collaboration in the way different stakeholders worked in the interpretation and implementation of GFP. Key findings have been classified to aggregated dimensions of the sensemaking and sense-giving processes of the HEI leaders which were thoroughly discussed in the Results and Analysis Chapter. The research provides a broader perspective of how the cognitive framework may help develop an enhanced understanding of the policy enactment processes across one of the largest HEIs in Oman and perhaps similar contexts. In a collective sensemaking process form, the overall approach effectively enhanced understanding the individual's cognition and contradictions in meaning formations rooted in diverse academic tribes and territories (Trowler, 2014). These insights were examined against the context of the policy cognition, formulation, and enactment literature, which resulted in the perpetuation and enrichment of the role of meaning making in the hope to achieve sustainable change and quality of higher education (Bien & Sassen, 2020; Ryan et al., 2019). The use of the cognitive theory in the conduct of this study has also contributed to extending the understanding and the establishment of the institutional norms, assumptions and organisational structures and cultures of the OASGFP. As such, studying the policy formulators and the HEI leaders' sensemaking helps to develop a deeper understanding of the institutional complexity, dissipation of practice from the macro to the micro levels, the nuanced daily navigations while attending to various policy demands. For example, it was revealed that institutional structures and common values are important in developing organisational identity that impact on the formulation and enactment of GFP. It was evident that the shared institutional values influenced the understanding and the enactment of GFP in the HEI under study. The social cognitive processes depend on common sets of beliefs, culture and experiences which in turn impact on sensemaking. The institution developed a strategy and operational plans which shaped the behaviours of the individual enacting agents in the way they interpreted and enacted the GFP.

In addition, a focus on sensemaking processes provides a micro level of understanding of how the agents attend to, interpret, shape, and mobilise

resources associated with different institutional logics, while attempting to reconcile, balance and or counterbalance those logics in their decision-making processes (Miley & Dulude, 2020). In short, this sensemaking/cognitive framework played an entry point to illuminate the HEI leaders' agency which facilitates construction, meaning making, contestation and an understanding of the multiple institutional logics underpinning policies in contemporary higher education systems.

The thesis also contributes to a thin strand of research examining the GFP in the HEI by focusing on the sensemaking and the sense giving of the HEI leaders in one of the largest HEIs in Oman. Through extensively examining the argumentation patterns of the HEI leaders, via interviews, this has contributed to the development of a sensemaking of the GFP by addressing the underlying dynamics of meaning creation in the light of diverse staff academic backgrounds. It was shown from the interview data the HEI leaders developed a sense of community, they reflected on how they develop shared understanding by discussing and working together among the three departments including the Centre for Foundation Studies, Mathematics, and the Computing department. The leaders applauded the provision of CPD opportunities by the Centre for Academic Practice, this helped to develop shared understanding of the learning outcomes that were to be achieved through the GFP enactment.

Based on these theoretical findings, the thesis has adapted the sensemaking perspective that treat the broader institutional system by understanding what people do, how they do it, and why they do it, while simultaneously attending to the institutional infrastructures at various levels that may enable or constrain practice at lower levels. The study, using the sensemaking framework also contributed to explaining how the distribution of resources operate at multiple levels attending to practice within the system of the HEI. For instance, the recruitment of staff was critical in terms of ensuring that highly qualified and competent staff were hired to help with the effective enactment of the GFP. It was also highlighted that there should be more synergies between staff on the undergraduate degree programmes and staff teaching on the GFP to ensure the

sharing of ideas and to collaborate more effectively in line with the institutional ethos. This has assisted in designing interventions that could produce change in the enactment of the GFP to improve the core work of the organisational productivity and hence the quality of higher education. Furthermore, since sensemaking rationalises with what people are doing (Weick et al., 2005), it is directly connected to discursive power within an organisation, because it does not only create an order for a viable interpretation of a new reality, but also influences the future sensemaking and the sense-giving of the agencies. Collective sensemaking in the social context has also fostered the development of the GFP policy in the HEI where the agents framed how cues for sensemaking are selected. The study's theoretical framework, i.e., the cognitive framework, also contributed to the organisational identity of the HEI that was contestable and dynamic since it was subject to multiple and variable interpretations that vary in times of change. The framework identified the different world views, ideas, and beliefs of the agents to relate to the process of creating sense of the GFP reform. In other words, it investigated how the underlying knowledge structure influenced the academics in the sensemaking process. Overall, this has enriched the understanding of the GFP enactment for future research, university leaders and HE managers. The thesis is an in-depth case study; however, it remains at a small scale since it is only conducted in one of the HEIs in Oman and so, its results cannot be generalised across the sector. From a broader perspective, the thesis argues that it holds empirical significance on the development of cognitive framework that can be utilised in HEIs that are engaged in similar reforms with similar contexts to enhance policy enactment practice at local regional and global levels.

5.4 Reflections on the limitations of the study.

The thesis included one policy maker from the OAAAQA and a group of HEI leaders from one university in Oman context. The picture might have been more diverse if a broader range of policy makers from OAAAQA and academicians from

different HEIs had been considered since they are considered as having higher stakes in the organisational identity and image compared to the other actors. However, this notion touches on the limitation of non-inclusion of students and administrative staff as they are important and powerful stakeholders in transitions and enactment of the GFP. In addition, the research design did not consider the outside factors that may be relevant to the enactment of the GFP such as laws, networks, or external stakeholder expectations (Bien & Sassen, 2020). In addition, the use of small sample inevitably limits the generalisability of the present findings as the participants such as the HEI leaders cannot be representative of other HEI leaders at other higher education organisations. Therefore, the sample is not designed to be representative of other HEIs. As such, there is a need to conduct research at other HEIs in order to verify the findings across different study bodies. Nevertheless, as a researcher, I consider that the current findings have relevance across numerous contexts, with some caveats such as the lack of clarity on the degree to which these findings would generalise to other university contexts. HEI leaders might enact their local GFP differently in different settings. Thus, providing a more comprehensive sense of enactment across the teacher education systems covering more HEIs would be a necessity to analyse the enactment process with multiple data sources, i.e., multiple HEIs. The data also rely entirely on self-reports; they did not include personal observation on how the GFP was introduced to the participants or how the enactors were supported during the execution of the GFP. Triangulating self-report data from surveys and interviews with actual observations of practice would enhance the scope of understanding about the GFP. The data also do not include information on how the participants performed on the GFP or their performance in classrooms as teachers. Tracking the performance of the participants from enactment into the field is an important next step for research on the GFP, but it is outside the scope of the current study. Although our data can only suggest potential explanations rooted in salient identities and organisational contexts for variations in implementation and enactment, it seems clear that there is a complex interplay among the multiple actors, identities, and goals of the GFP reform. The data suggest that a constellation of less readily quantifiable factors

and group dynamics contributed to differences in programmatic implementation of the GFP. Based on our interviews with different stakeholders, network structures and internal hierarchies may have played a role in the data that were generated. Understanding the particulars of these network structures is beyond the scope of this study, but the findings indicate these issues are important topics for future research on the enactment of the GFP.

5.5 Professional implications for practice

The overview of the experiences of different HEI stakeholders can be an inspiration to other higher educational institutions in situating themselves in the different categories and therefore be reassured that they are not the only ones struggling with the enactment of the GFP. From all these different perspectives, this overview of experiences and different categories of enactment of the GFP can contribute to new understanding and action for society and policymakers, researchers, educational organisations, and professionals, which all have the same goal namely, improving the GFP education in Oman. Policy and its enactment are a serious matter in educational settings since it is fundamentally linked to work practice within the organisations. Policy makers should target the behaviour of the local agent who inhibit the HEI systems to transform and shape the interactions among the enacting agents as mediated by key aspects of their situation. Acknowledging the emergent property of practice complicates policy makers' task of bringing about planned change in practice in educational organisations where change is a constant. At the same time, thinking systematically about the distribution of, access to, and activation of those resources essential for the performance of practice is suggestive of whether and how the GFP policy might matter in changing it. Moreover, efforts to understand how the organisations influence policy implementation need to be anchored in work practice so that they attend to not only the distribution of resources but also access to and activation of resources in practice (Sykes et al., 2012). The conduct of this study has been an important learning curve for me. While fully understanding practice is complex and contextual, the use of the cognitive theory

provided a more comprehensive and conclusive framework for further understanding of organisational behaviour and policy implementation and enactment in the context of HE. I consider that this thesis represents a precursor to the process of better understanding the concept of cognition and its role in policy enactment and change in higher education organisations. It was useful to examine policy enactment in a HEI in Oman context, I could easily relate and understand the experiences of the different stakeholders given my insider researcher position. Based on the study findings, there is an immediate call for the national policy makers of the OASGFP to consider the various conditions and contexts the enacting agents are experiencing in the HEIs. This is perhaps directly related to the stakeholders' cognition in relation to the introduction of practices of policymakers, government officials, university leaders and HE administrators, while re-formulating the policy (Aizawa & Rose, 2018). Reconsidering how the current curriculum of the OASGFP can be better implemented into the HEI and classroom reality to safeguard the successful enactment of the GFP reform is a necessity. The revised sensemaking model has the potential to offer new insights and conceptualisations on policy practice and enactment as it presents a direct mechanism of the interactions among the enacting agents based on perceived situational understanding. Seeing resources such as human capital and social capital as both constitutive of and constituted in practice, I have argued for attention to both the ostensive and performative aspects of resources. I have provided a framework in this thesis that different stakeholders can leverage to reframe the role of organisations in policy enactment to ensure that this will be generative, prompting others to work out this broad outline of a conceptual frame and, especially important, putting it to use in empirical studies of policy enactment.

While the findings may be particular to the selected HE context, the theoretical approach used could also conceivably be applied in other institutional contexts which bears relevance to best practice of the GFP reform. Through exploring the agents' cognition in the context of the HEI understudy, this research provided new

insights into the role of the leaders' perspectives and their critical and collaborative characteristics which inform the nature and the trajectory of enacting the GFP. Additional, research involving other participants and conducted in other HEI contexts would be necessary to provide more insights to the findings.

This study has also provided me with the opportunity to develop as a researcher in appreciating the role of deploying theory in research. Using the cognitive framework, it was possible to explore the formulation and enactment of the GFP in Omani context, thereby appreciating the complex nature of the process, and understanding the enactment gap, and how these gaps can be addressed through systematic research.

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Appendices

Appendix A:

Interview Questions:



For policy makers:

Policy Signals

1. What led to the formulation of the GFP? What are its main intentions?
 - Who are the stakeholders involved in the development of the program?
 - Was the formulation of the program based on a systematic analysis?
 - To what extent was the formulation of the program done collectively?
 - GFP quality audit manual is wholly OAAA document. As with other manuals, it would be drafted according to predetermined steps such as needs analysis, benchmarking practices, identifying criteria, engaging local or outsourced consultants (rather than committees) for the production of drafts which are then shared with the sector and other stakeholders for feedback and contextualisation..
2. How do the local GFP standards compare with the international standards?
 - How are they different, and or aligned?
3. Are there any clear guidelines/consistent directives, which assist the implementing agents' understanding and effective enactment of the GFP?
 - If so, how were these communicated to the HEIs?
 - Does the policy focus on underlying principles rather than prescribing a particular set of practices?
 - Is the rationale of the GFP communicated?
4. Were there any changes/reforms/adaptations of the GFP since its formation?
 - If so, was it based on a systematic analysis?
 - Why were those changes needed?
 - How would the reforms meet discernible deficits and needs of GFP?

Individual and Situated Cognition

5. Did your individual professional identity influence the formulation of the GFP?
 - Were the individual stakeholders' view taken into consideration?
 - Was the individual's expertise, prior knowledge and political power taken into account, or was it a top down prescribed activity (expected norms and beliefs among the team)?
 - Was there any compromise to meet the group requirement or did each individual manage to put in his own voice?

- To what extent did the role of common culture and beliefs that stakeholder have limit the individuality and promote collectiveness in the formulation of the GFP?
6. Where the GFP managers of HEIs consulted during the crafting of the GFP standards?
- What role did the different stakeholders play in the process (e.g. the GFP managers from the HEIs)? Were the GFP community actively involved in the formulation of the GFP (key people in the community)

Implementation factors (Gap)

7. Do you think the GFP changes have been interpreted correctly in the HEIs?
- Do you face any challenges to communicate and enforce reforms? What are they?
 - What has been the impact of the GFP on academic behaviour/performance in HEIs
 - Is there flexibility for HEIs to adapt the GFP to their institutional agendas?
 - Do you welcome any suggestions/ ideas or revisions of the GFP from the implementing agents?
8. What other factors do you think are affecting the implementation of the GFP in the HEIs?
9. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about the GFP that I did not cover in my other questions?

For Deans, HODs and Program Manager:

Individual cognition

1. What do you think about the GFP computing modules?
- To what extent are you aware of the GFP learning outcome standards?
 - Do you think it is aligned with your institutional agenda?
 - Do you feel confident implementing them as they are?

Policy signals

2. Were you involved/consulted in developing the computing modules standards?
- Are the standards in sync with your institutional goals/policies?
3. Was there a clear vision of adaptations in the GFP standards?
- Clarity of goals?
 - Good planning?
 - Clear directives?

Situated Cognition

4. How does the social context affect the implementing agents sensemaking and (those standards) practice of the policy in terms of
 - Organizational structure
 - Political power
 - Professional affiliations
 - Social networks/norms
 - Common sets of beliefs and traditions.
5. What are the experiences of the implementing agents regarding the interpretation of the GFP reforms?
 - Is there consistency in the interpretation of policy among the faculty members?
 - Do you think the implementing agents have a deeper understanding of the GFP standards and how they are to be implemented?

Implementation Factors (Gap)

6. Is there a careful monitoring of GFP learning outcomes in your institution?
 - How do you achieve this?
7. Does this program help to develop skills, knowledge, and the competency needed for the learners to successfully undertake higher education?
8. Does your institution have any difficulty in aligning its institutional policies, curricula, teaching and assessment methods with the GFP national standards of OAAA?
 - If so, could you tell me more about it?
 - Are there any adaptations to the GFP reforms to fit with your institutional policy?
 - Has the institution given all the (external/internal artefacts) support for the change to happen?
 - What in particular has the institution done to facilitate the enactment of the policy changes?
 - Or: Can you give me examples of how your institution has supported the implementation of the GFP?
9. How did you ensure that the GFP is implemented effectively in your institution?
 - Did you provide any training/workshops...?
10. Do you think the standards are being implemented as expected/effectively?
 - If not, what do you think is making it difficult for the implementing agents to achieve this?
 - Would you consider it as failure if the standards were not being implemented as prescribed? Explain your views.
 - What do you think is making it difficult for you to implement the GFP in your institution?
 - What should be done to address the existing barriers in the implementation of the GFP in your institution?

11. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about the GFP that I did not cover in my other questions?’

For GFP Skills Coordinators:

Individual cognition

1. Could you describe briefly how you perceive and understand the GFP in teaching and learning?
 - What are your views/beliefs/motivation/goals in it?
 - Could you say how useful/valuable (or not) you think the current GFP is?
 - Do you think the GFP is designed to cover the gap between post-secondary and higher education?
 - Do you feel the GFP helps to raise academic capabilities of students prior to their formal entrance into higher education studies?

Policy Signals

2. How was the GFP delivered to you?
 - How clear/ambiguous/ or inconsistent the OAAA policy text is?
 - How was the policy text represented? (Legislation /standard documents/ in sentences, statements or extended essays etc..)
 - Did you find any challenges communicating with the text? (eg. language of abstract principles, multidimensional, dynamic forms of instructions, complexity of the task, understanding the underlying principles etc..)

Situated Cognition

3. How does the following affect your process of understanding and implementing the GFP?
 - Professional identity
 - Common sets and beliefs/ shared commitment and responsibility
 - Historical context, individual culture/ backstories/ organizational history
 - Institutional norms, rules and definitions of its environment
 - Tacit opinions/discussions/debates/negotiation/ agreement, conflicts with colleagues
 - Tools and capacity: Text books, professional development providers (CAP), materials
4. What affects your ability to interpret the GFP?
 - Do you find it helpful to work with your team to interpret and implement the GFP standards? Or you would rather work on your own?
 - How does social interactions help (or not) in bringing insights to the surface to understand unhidden messages?
 - Could you give an example of how the group or social context enhances sensemaking process and implementation (negotiate meanings, understandings, find inconsistencies, flaws, shared concerns, and resolve them)?

Implementation factors/Gap

5. What are the sufficient knowledge, skills and capacity needed to enact the GFP ?
 - Is there a full implementation of the GFP standards in teaching and learning according to the OAAA expectations/guidelines?
 - How has your understanding/attitudes/behaviour/experience changed in the process of understanding and delivering the GFP?
 - Does your institution face any difficulties in turning the GFP national standards into practice? If yes, can you give examples of the problems/challenges?
 - Do you think the outcome of the GFP standards is in line with the GFP intentions or is there a diversion of outcomes from the intentions and why?
6. In your view, what are the barriers/challenges that act against the policy enactment?
 - What do you think are the factors/reasons for this?
 - Does these factors or challenges affect the way policy is practiced? If so how?
7. How complex is the policy to be enacted?
 - Does the policy match with your prior knowledge and experience (existing schemata)
 - Do you find there is a need for a restructure of the institution's previous practice, beliefs and knowledge towards the GFP reforms?
 - What is the level of changed required, (on the surface, needs growth in experience and knowledge, fundamental)
8. If the OAAA or the HEI were to revise the current GFP standards, what in your view are the most important aspects that should be included, omitted, changed, developed?
9. Can you please give some suggestions that can help to bridge the gap between the stated policy standards and what is delivered in practice?
10. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about the GFP that I did not cover in my other questions?