

Article

University-Based Educational Leadership Preparation Programs: A Mixed-Methods Study in Oman

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Abstract

The study investigates how university-based leadership preparation programs in Oman contribute to the preparation of school leaders and responds to calls for a better understanding of leadership preparation in under-researched contexts. Using mixed methods, this study examines participants' satisfaction with university-based educational leadership programs, their perceptions of these programs' effectiveness, and the challenges associated with their implementation and delivery. Survey results indicate high satisfaction levels with the availability of support resources and the quality of academic staff, positioning these components as central contributors to positive program experiences. High satisfaction with faculty is reinforced by qualitative accounts emphasizing their subject expertise, research profiles, and commitment to student support. However, both quantitative and qualitative data indicate that participants do not perceive the programs as adequately preparing them in all aspects of leadership, particularly in teacher evaluation and improvement, school budgeting, and student discipline. Qualitative findings further indicate that students and graduates perceive the programs as theoretically robust but insufficiently grounded in real-world leadership practice, highlighting a persistent theory–practice gap. This study raises important questions about the type of practice for which students seek preparation, particularly considering dominant technicist and performative approaches to leadership.

Keywords: leadership preparation; leadership development; school leaders; educational leadership; mixed-methods; Arab societies; Oman

1. Introduction

The growing complexity of school environments has broadened principals' responsibilities (Bush, 2016; Daresh et al., 2000; Tamadoni et al., 2024) and heightened expectations among stakeholders (Daresh et al., 2000; Wang et al., 2024). Consequently, many school leaders report feeling overwhelmed by the demands of their roles (Earley & Bubb, 2013; Hobson & Sharp, 2005; Tamadoni et al., 2024). Research also indicates that novice principals often face challenges such as professional isolation, limited leadership skills, and difficulty translating theory into practice, all of which can undermine school performance (e.g., DeMatthews et al., 2023; Kılınç & Gümüş, 2021). Substantial evidence further shows a positive association between principals' training and overall school performance (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Hamka, 2023; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Mamo, 2023). This realisation has prompted numerous global initiatives to improve leadership training and



Academic Editor: Izhar Oplatka

Received: 26 March 2026

Revised: 4 May 2026

Accepted: 24 June 2026

Published: 30 June 2026

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professional development for school leaders (Allen et al., 2022; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Donmoyer et al., 2012).

One of the venues where school leaders are expected to acquire the knowledge and skills needed for their new roles is the leadership preparation programs (Arar, 2018; Eacott, 2013). University-based leadership education programs remain the largest reservoir for preparing school leaders (McCarthy, 2015).

The present study recognises that university-based leadership programs neither claim nor necessarily aim to prepare school leaders. However, in the absence of national systems of licensure and formal leadership provision (Bush, 2016; Hammad & Al-Harthi, 2021; Hammad & Bush, 2023), these academic programs have become a de facto avenue for preparing prospective school leaders, particularly in the Arab world (Karami-Akkary & Hammad, 2019), including Oman (Hammad & Al-Harthi, 2021; Hammad & Bush, 2023). Conversely, research has identified several challenges associated with these programs (Eacott, 2013; Fluckiger et al., 2014; Kanan & Baker, 2006), with empirical findings indicating that school leaders are not sufficiently prepared for their leadership roles (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Fluckiger et al., 2014; Hammad & Bush, 2023; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2016).

This study aims to investigate how university-based leadership preparation programs (LPPs) support the development of school leaders in Oman. This study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. To what extent are current students and program completers satisfied with the structure, content, and delivery of educational leadership programs offered by universities in Oman?

RQ2. How do program graduates and faculty members perceive the effectiveness of these programs in preparing effective school leaders?

RQ3. What challenges do students, graduates, and faculty encounter in the implementation and delivery of these programs?

RQ4. What improvements do stakeholders (or research participants) recommend to enhance the quality, relevance, and impact of these programs?

The significance of this study stems from several considerations. First, despite the widespread international consensus that leadership is one of the most important factors in school effectiveness (Bush, 2016; Kılınç & Gümüş, 2021; Liebowitz & Porter, 2019; Mamo, 2023; Tamadoni et al., 2024), there remains a scarcity of research on how effectively school leaders are prepared in the Arab world, including Oman (Abunaser et al., 2025; Al Haj Sleiman et al., 2025; Hammad & Al-Harthi, 2021; Hilal & Al-Alawi, 2023; Karami-Akkary & Hammad, 2019). Second, in the absence of licensure and formal leadership preparation programs in the Arab world (Hammad & Al-Harthi, 2021; Karami-Akkary & Hammad, 2019), university LPPs serve as the primary route for preparing future school leaders; therefore, understanding these programs and exploring students' and faculty perceptions is crucial.

Third, research in the Omani context has raised concerns about the preparation of school leaders and has recommended that future research examine how effectively leadership preparation programs prepare future leaders (Abunaser et al., 2025; Hammad & Bush, 2023). The present study is part of this national body of literature, as it aims to explore the perceptions of faculty, students, and program completers regarding specific aspects of university-based educational leadership programs.

At the international level, this study's aims align with extensive research confirming the crucial role of school leaders in students' achievement and overall school performance (Hamka, 2023; Heck & Hallinger, 2009). The multifaceted and complex nature of school leadership underscores the importance of deliberate, structured preparation, further highlighting this study's key significance (Bush, 2016).

2. Literature Review

This section reviews key literature on school leadership and leadership preparation. It first examines the complex and diverse nature of school leadership and its impact on school performance. It then highlights the importance of leadership preparation, focusing on international and regional perspectives on program design, effectiveness, and challenges.

2.1. School Leadership: A Complex and Multifaceted Function

Studies continue to link effective leadership with effective schools and emphasize the need for effective preparation to develop effective leaders (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996; Orphanos & Orr, 2014). Researchers have established that school principals influence both academic and non-academic student outcomes (Coelli & Green, 2012; Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Wu & Shen, 2022). This influence is largely indirect, operating through mechanisms such as enhancing teacher capacity, cultivating supportive and effective learning environments, fostering school cultures oriented towards learning, and mitigating barriers to instructional effectiveness and student achievement (Kilag & Sasan, 2023; Leithwood, 2011; Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). The diverse ways in which leadership influences school performance and student achievement highlight its complex and multifaceted nature. This, in turn, requires school leaders to develop a variety of skills and knowledge.

The International Study of Principal Preparation (ISPP) (Webber & Scott, 2010) is widely regarded as one of the most comprehensive studies of principal preparation worldwide. The study identifies several key areas for adequately preparing school leaders: knowledge of financial and budget management, fostering positive organizational cultures, and managing change effectively, in addition to knowledge of system policies, which is essential for informed decision-making (Tamadoni et al., 2024). Essential skills include effective communication, relational abilities for collaboration with diverse stakeholders (Cowie & Crawford, 2008; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2016; Tamadoni et al., 2024), problem-solving, reflective thinking, and sound judgment (Donmoyer et al., 2012; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2016). Personal attributes and values, including self-awareness, reflection on individual values, and identity formation, underpin leadership credibility and effectiveness and are particularly important early in a leader's career (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Eacott, 2013). Therefore, the complexity of the role and the need to develop a broad range of skills and knowledge necessitate thorough preparation for school leaders.

2.2. Leadership Preparation Matters

There is a growing consensus that school leadership is a specialized profession that requires specialized preparation (Bush, 2016). At their onset, preparation programs focused on equipping school principals to fulfil their managerial responsibilities (Kılınç & Gümüş, 2021; Pannell et al., 2016). However, these programs soon had to adapt to meet the needs of a more complex and multifaceted role, particularly amid the increased demands placed on school principals (Daresh et al., 2000; McCarthy, 2015; Wang et al., 2024).

Recent educational reforms in Oman are consistent with these international changes, as there is a movement in Oman towards conceptualizing the role of school principals not only in administrative terms but primarily as instructional leaders (Al-Mahdy et al., 2018). However, a focus on instructional leadership may not be a point of consensus in the preparation of school leaders. In fact, due to the multifaceted and complex nature of leadership, there seems to be little consensus on what leadership preparation entails, or on whether the focus should be on the managerial aspects of principalship, the instructional, or the critical and moral (Eacott, 2013).

Consequently, the content and processes of university-based leadership preparation programs have been the subject of considerable criticism and debate. While there is a substantial body of research offering recommendations on how these programs can address these challenges, the literature concedes that improving leadership preparation requires attention to the curriculum, pedagogy, admission criteria, organization, resources, and opportunities to link theory and practice. In terms of organization, studies show that a cohort model, in which students enter and exit the program as a group, provides social and professional support. Research has also shown that rigorous admission criteria are a key factor in achieving the successful outcomes set by school leadership preparation programs. McCarthy (2015) considered the selection of individuals for preparation as school leaders to be one of the main challenges facing the improvement of school leadership preparation programs. In their survey of 97 University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) member institutions, Anderson and Reynolds (2015) found that institutions do not pay enough attention to their selection processes.

In the Arab world, of which Oman is a member, admission criteria can be even more significant, as colleges of education have less stringent admission standards than institutions in other parts of the developed world (El-Zubair et al., 2019). Additionally, international literature research shows that for these programs to be effective, they need to have a curriculum that strongly focuses on key aspects of school leadership, such as instruction, school improvement, change management, conflict resolution, teamwork, communication, analytical skills, and an understanding of the wider social, political, and economic contexts of education (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Orr & Orphanos, 2011). Scholars agree that pedagogical approaches linking theory and practice are crucial to improving the effectiveness of leadership preparation programs (LPPs) (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Orr & Orphanos, 2011). While this is a valid concern, it also highlights a deeper schism between theory and practice (Keedy, 2005). University professors are positioned as knowledge producers and critics, while school leaders are often relegated to the role of practitioners, expected to apply skills grounded in theoretical knowledge “out in the field” (Keedy, 2005, p. 137).

To address this gap, the article draws on Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy to reconceptualize the relationship between theory and practice. Freire’s work emphasizes that theory and practice are not separate or linear but interdependent and mutually reinforcing. As he argues, “in dialectical thought, world and action are intimately interdependent. But action is human only when it is not merely an occupation, but also a preoccupation. That is, when it is not dichotomized from reflection.” (p. 53).

This perspective shifts the focus from simply applying theory to actively engaging with it through critical reflection. Pedagogies that integrate theory and practice, such as complex case studies, inquiry-centred internships, problem-based learning, simulations, action research, and inquiry projects—provide opportunities for school leaders to critically reflect on and theorize their own practice (Black & Murtadha, 2007; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Cosner et al., 2018). These approaches enable students to apply theoretical knowledge in real school settings and then reflect on these experiences, linking coursework with workplace-based investigations of authentic leadership issues (Cosner et al., 2018).

However, while these are all valid concerns for LPPs, a central question remains: what forms of leadership, and which kinds of leaders, are constructed as effective and desirable? While one aspect of this challenge is pedagogical, particularly in linking theory and practice, we argue that it is, more fundamentally, a challenge for the field itself. This argument is situated within broader neoliberal trends in education, reflected in the dominant cultures of performativity and consumerism that increasingly shape the work of school leaders (Eacott, 2013; English, 2006; Gunter, 2016). Within this context, Gunter

(2016) argues that leadership preparation has shifted towards leadership training, with an emphasis on preparing students for professional roles and equipping them with technical and managerial skills for efficient school administration. This shift reflects a reductionist, technicist conception of leadership, while also responding to the practical demands placed on school leaders operating in performative, consumer-driven environments. It is within this context that concerns emerge that university leadership preparation programs may comply with these market imperatives and adopt “narrowly framed ‘how to do it’ recipes for effective and efficient corporatised practice” (Gunter, 2016, p. 41).

Encouraged by ambitious education reform agendas driven by national development visions, educational leadership preparation has recently attracted greater attention in the Arab world (Al Haj Sleiman et al., 2025; Hammad & Bush, 2023). However, existing programs have been criticized for several reasons. Generally, these programs are governed primarily by government agencies, such as ministries of education. They place strong emphasis on technical skills, administration, and instructional supervision, with less focus on practical skill development and pedagogical flexibility (Al Haj Sleiman et al., 2025; Hammad & Al-Harthi, 2021). They are often perceived as ineffective because they rely on “one-size-fits-all” or passive workshop models that lack the sustained support needed to translate learning into context-specific school improvement (Ghamrawi et al., 2024). Most importantly, these programs are largely modelled on frameworks and standards borrowed from Anglo-American contexts, raising concerns about their relevance to the specific cultural, religious, and social contexts of Arab societies (Al Haj Sleiman et al., 2025; Karami-Akkary & Hammad, 2019).

The literature on educational leadership preparation in Arab countries portrays university-based programs as a relatively recent phenomenon, emerging only in the past few decades (Kanan & Baker, 2006; Karami-Akkary & Hammad, 2019). Historically, the development of educational leadership and administration across the Arab region has been dominated by short-term training courses and workshops organized by government ministries rather than formal degree programs. These courses have often been criticized for overemphasizing theoretical knowledge at the expense of developing practical, contextually relevant leadership skills (Hammad & Al-Harthi, 2021; Kanan & Baker, 2006).

3. Study Context

The educational leadership landscape in Oman has traditionally been characterized by a highly centralized system in which school leadership authority rested primarily with the principal, whose main responsibility was to ensure compliance with centrally issued policies and regulations (Hammad et al., 2023; Common, 2011). In this centralized structure, public schools are required to implement the national curriculum and adhere strictly to the Ministry’s rules and directives. Consequently, school principals have had limited decision-making authority, with their autonomy largely confined to administrative tasks such as supervising teaching practices, organizing timetables, and maintaining relationships with the community.

In recent years, however, educational reforms have gradually shifted towards decentralization, granting principals greater autonomy and decision-making authority (Ministry of Education, 2015). The revised job description for school principals in Oman now emphasizes their pivotal role in leading teaching and learning, promoting teachers’ professional development, and strengthening engagement with the wider community (Ministry of Education, 2015). These changes underscore the need to align leadership preparation programs with the evolving demands of the role.

In 2014, the Ministry of Education took an important step in professional development by establishing the Specialized Institute for the Professional Training of Teachers (SIPTT),

which offers a range of programs that integrate theoretical and practical components (Ministry of Education, 2018). A key initiative is a mandatory two-year school leadership program for principals and vice principals. The program focuses on equipping participants with the leadership competencies needed to enhance teaching and learning, particularly in school improvement, change leadership, teacher professional growth, and collaborative practice. Recent research reports generally positive perceptions of the program while identifying areas for further enhancement, including sustaining school improvement efforts, supporting underperforming teachers, and strengthening teacher professional development (Hammad & Bush, 2023).

In addition to ministerial efforts to support leadership development, leadership preparation in Oman has evolved through university-based programs that offer structured academic pathways for aspiring educational leaders. Across Oman, five universities provide educational leadership preparation through their master's programs in educational administration, including the three universities investigated in this study (Hilal & Al-Alawi, 2023). The three programs share a common national purpose, namely, to supply the Omani education system with professionally prepared leaders, supervisors, and administrators who can manage educational change, improve school performance, and align institutional practice with national education policies. All three programs are delivered in Arabic and mainly target in-service educators. Each program combines theoretical foundations in educational leadership and management with applied components such as research projects or practical field experiences. The curricula across the programs include common core areas such as educational leadership, educational policy and planning, human resource management, instructional supervision, and research methods.

In terms of duration and overall structure, the three programs share broadly similar frameworks that align with international standards for master's degrees in education. Each program typically requires about two academic years of full-time study (or up to three or four years part time) and combines coursework with an applied or a research component.

Despite the above similarities, the three programs differ in depth and in the extent of alignment with international standards. Specifically, University A's program is the oldest and most institutionally articulated (Hilal & Al-Alawi, 2023). It is described as a "pioneering" national program preparing future educational leaders in Oman. Recently revised to meet international accreditation requirements, it shifted from traditional managerial preparation to standards-based leadership preparation. To this end, the program has been aligned with the standards developed by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) (Hammad & Al-Harathi, 2021). However, despite the emphasis on leadership and the role of principals in Oman, a systematic review by Hilal and Al-Alawi (2023) found that leadership preparation was entirely absent from Arabic publications and significantly under-researched in the English literature, with only a single study by Hammad and Bush (2023). This highlights a clear need to examine leadership preparation within the Omani context.

4. Methods

4.1. Research Design

A sequential, explanatory mixed-methods research design was used in this study to examine how university-based LPPs contribute to the preparation of school leaders in Oman. Mixed methods combine the strengths of theory building and theory testing, which is particularly helpful for understanding the complex phenomenon of higher education and for capturing its structure, environment, and the interactions among the various stakeholders. It allows for both generalizations from the quantitative perspective and in-depth analysis from the qualitative perspective (Seyfried & Reith, 2019).

In this study, data were collected from current students, program completers, faculty members, and department heads at three LPPs in the Omani higher education system. Quantitative data were collected via a questionnaire administered to current students and program completers in the LPPs, while in-depth, semi-structured individual and focus group interviews were used to collect qualitative data from students, faculty members, and department heads. The development of the research tools (i.e., interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis) was primarily informed by the International Study of Principal Preparation (ISPP) (Webber & Scott, 2010), which identifies the leadership areas addressed in the LPPs across the three participating universities. The tools were designed to capture participants' perceptions and levels of satisfaction regarding three main components of the LPP: program structure, coverage of leadership areas, and challenges and suggestions for improvement.

4.2. Research Participants

This study involved three major universities in Oman that offer LPPs in both the Omani government and private sectors (hereafter referred to as University A, University B, and University C). At the time of data collection, there were four LPPs in the country, all of which were included except for one program, which was excluded due to its remote location. Table 1 presents the demographic information of participants across the three LPPs. Ethical permission to conduct the research was obtained from all three universities prior to data collection. The quantitative sample comprised 71 current students and program completers, while the qualitative sample included 39 participants: three department heads from the three LPPs and 32 students who took part in the focus groups.

Table 1. Participants' demographics.

Institution	Data Collection Tool	Male	Female	Total
University A	Student Questionnaire	6	26	32
	Student focus group	0	7	7
	Faculty Interviews	0	1	0
	Department Head Interview	0		
University B	Student Questionnaire	11	4	15
	Student focus group	5	6	11
	Faculty Interviews	1	1	2
	Department Head Interview	1		1
University C	Student Questionnaire	4	20	24
	Student focus group	6	8	14
	Faculty Interviews	1	1	2
	Department Head Interview	1		1

4.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The overarching purpose of this study was to understand the contribution of LPPs in preparing school leaders in Oman. While both qualitative and quantitative data informed this understanding, the analysis prioritized qualitative data, treating it as more dominant because it provided deeper interpretations and understanding (Creswell, 2014). Moreover, the quantitative data were collected from a convenience sample with no intent to generalize the findings, as it was not feasible in this study to obtain a representative sample of current students and program completers from all LPPs. However, the quantitative data still reached more participants, providing additional validation and a broader representation of the qualitative interpretations.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics to examine overall satisfaction with program components and the coverage of leadership areas. The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 14).

For the qualitative data analysis, an interpretivist approach was used to understand participants' perceptions of different aspects of the program, while setting aside the researchers' prior understandings of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). "NVivo 14" was used for the qualitative data analysis. In the first stage of data analysis, transcripts were imported into NVivo and then read as a whole, taking notes to obtain a holistic view. The first author first coded the data using open coding, and these codes were grouped into categories using axial coding, which resulted into the main research themes. This process was then reviewed by the two other two authors. Notes on the coding process and emerging codes and themes were regularly shared between researchers during regular research meetings (Patton, 2014). Furthermore, to ensure the reliability of the results, the researchers used the constant comparative method by continually comparing data with the codes generated and writing memos about the codes and their meanings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Then the researchers grouped the different categories into broader themes, which were subsequently integrated with the quantitative findings and organized around the four program dimensions presented in the Results Section. Through this collaborative coding analysis and review, the researchers reached a consensus on the final research themes (Gibbert et al., 2008).

5. Results

This section presents this study's findings, integrating qualitative and quantitative results to provide a comprehensive account of the data and to reflect the mixed-methods research design. By merging quantitative and qualitative data, this study identified four themes: program coverage and content; program processes and support; teaching methods; and assessment. These themes capture participants' perceptions of the program's strengths and areas for improvement, as well as the challenges facing students and program completers, and therefore collectively provide insights into answering this study's research questions outlined in the introduction. Therefore, collectively, this section answers RQs 1–4.

The faculty members described the program as providing holistic preparation for school leaders and researchers by developing higher-order thinking and argumentation skills, building a solid knowledge base in leadership concepts and theories, and offering practical opportunities to apply learning. This dual focus on research and practice is reflected in the diverse cohort, comprising both experienced practitioners and recent graduates, as presented by faculty members: "We have a very diverse cohort; some come with extensive experience, while others are fresh graduates. Consequently, some focus on research, while others seek practical applications they can use in the field" (Faculty member, University A).

Participants' reasons for enrolment broadly aligned with these aims, including career development, personal growth, and preparation for doctoral study. For career development, students and graduates expected the program to strengthen administrative and leadership skills and enhance competitiveness for leadership roles, particularly in response to changing job requirements: "This degree will provide me with administrative and leadership skills to compete for more senior positions in schools" (Students, University C), and "Having a degree in leadership is now a requirement for my job" (Graduate, University A). Personal growth was another key motivator, with participants valuing opportunities for professional connection and renewal: "The program gives me the opportunity to meet other school leaders and break the routine" (Student, University B). Finally, several participants viewed

the program as a pathway to doctoral study, describing it as “a stepping stone for pursuing a PhD” (Student, University A).

5.1. Program Coverage and Content

To examine participants’ perceptions of program content, the survey included 21 leadership areas (see Table 2) identified by the ISPP as essential for school leaders. Qualitative data have also provided insights into recommendations to improve certain areas of the program. The results indicate that leadership coverage in the program was highly rated by students and program completers across the three universities. Table 2 shows participants’ ratings of the extent to which specific leadership areas were addressed in their LPP, reflecting their agreement that these areas were included in the program they were enrolled in. The highest-rated items included relational and community-oriented leadership aspects such as *building positive relationships with school staff* (85%), *developing relationships within the community* (84%), and *building positive relationships with parents* (83%). This suggests that interpersonal and community engagement skills were perceived to be strongly emphasized in the program content. Other highly rated aspects included administrative functions such as *applying ministerial policies and directives* (84%), *managing time* (83%), *balancing Ministry directives with local needs* (80%), and *managing staffing appropriately* (80%). Moderately rated items included areas related to dealing with teachers and school staff, such as *promoting teacher involvement* (78%), *handling organizational conflict* (76%), *evaluating teachers* (74%), and *addressing poorly performing staff* (73%). The lowest-rated leadership area was *managing student discipline* (44%).

These quantitative results resonated with our qualitative data analysis, in which students and program completers at the three universities emphasized that the content is diverse and that they are introduced to different components of leading a school. A student from University A noted: “In each of our courses, we have the opportunity to focus on different aspects of leadership. In our culture, it is important to build genuine relationships with staff, and this was a common theme across many of the courses.” Narratives also showed that participants appreciated learning about their role in leading and supporting teachers’ professional learning: “One important aspect of the program has been the attention it gave to our role in leading learning and supporting teachers’ professional development” (Graduate, University B). Overall, and in line with the quantitative data, the qualitative data showed that participants perceived a diverse content of leadership: “The program provides us with diverse understandings of the different aspects of leadership and helps me understand my role in balancing and implementing the ministry’s policies and directives” (Student, University C). Moreover, the faculty also reported the need to update program content and make it relevant to the Omani context, as one of them clearly expressed that: “Given the global and local challenges, and Oman Vision 2040, the content of these courses, and the program itself, needs to be developed” (Faculty, University B).

Quantitative data analysis showed that students were generally satisfied with various components of the program, including the diversity of course content (79%) and the academic material presented (77%) (see Figure 1). However, these aspects were rated lower than other components (Figure 1), which qualitative data suggest may be due to students perceiving some course content as redundant and overly theoretical. Some students and graduates reported overlap across courses, while others attributed this to prior training through SIPPT: “Some topics are covered in more than one course,” and “many concepts were already covered in SIPPT. That was a very beneficial because it gave all the skills needed to run a school, very specific” (Student, University A). In an attempt to improve the current program coverage and content, students suggested merging courses with overlapping content to reduce redundancy: “There are plenty of courses that can be

merged; why are we studying the same thing over and over again?” (Student, University C). In this regard, the faculty explained that some concepts are revisited in different courses to provide varied framing, which can enhance understanding: “Some concepts are presented in different courses in different ways. It is crucial that students understand how theoretical framing affects their leadership” (Head of Department, University B).

Table 2. Leadership areas covered in the courses.

Leadership Areas	Agreement %
Building positive relationships with school staff	85
Developing relationships within the community in which the school is located	84
Applying policies and directives from the Ministry of Education	84
Managing time	83
Building positive relationships with parents	83
Enhancing teachers’ professional development (improving their knowledge and teaching skills)	81
Participation in supporting school improvement initiatives	81
Working with parents to support students	81
Understanding the culture of the community in which my school is located	81
Balancing Ministry directives with local needs	80
Managing staffing appropriately	80
Developing and communicating the school vision and mission	79
Instructional leadership (leadership practices focused on teaching and learning)	78
Promoting teacher involvement	78
Handling organizational conflict	76
Evaluating teachers	74
Reviewing school’s policies and procedures	74
Managing school budget	74
Addressing poorly performing staff (helping teachers to change ineffective teaching methods)	73
Organizing extracurricular activities	71
Managing school’s financial and logistical issues	70
Managing student discipline	44

Students also expressed concern about courses that focused predominantly on theory without clear links to leadership practice: “There is a high level of theory; I want to know how to deal with practical issues while relating these to theory” (Student, University B). While participants acknowledged the importance of theoretical foundations, they felt there was insufficient guidance on applying theory to research and practice: “There was more focus on theory than practice” (Graduate, University C). The faculty echoed this tension, noting the challenge of addressing the diverse needs of research- and practice-oriented students: “We are aware that we will need to provide more opportunities for students to apply what they are learning and include more topics pertaining to the technical aspects, such as the school budget and dealing with underperforming teachers” (Faculty, University C).

These narratives align with the quantitative data analysis, which showed that students perceived the program as not adequately addressing aspects requiring more evaluative or managerial decision-making, such as evaluating teachers (74%), managing the school bud-

get (74%), and addressing underperforming staff (73%). Additionally, managing student discipline emerged as a significant gap in content coverage, as it was the lowest-rated area by far (44%).

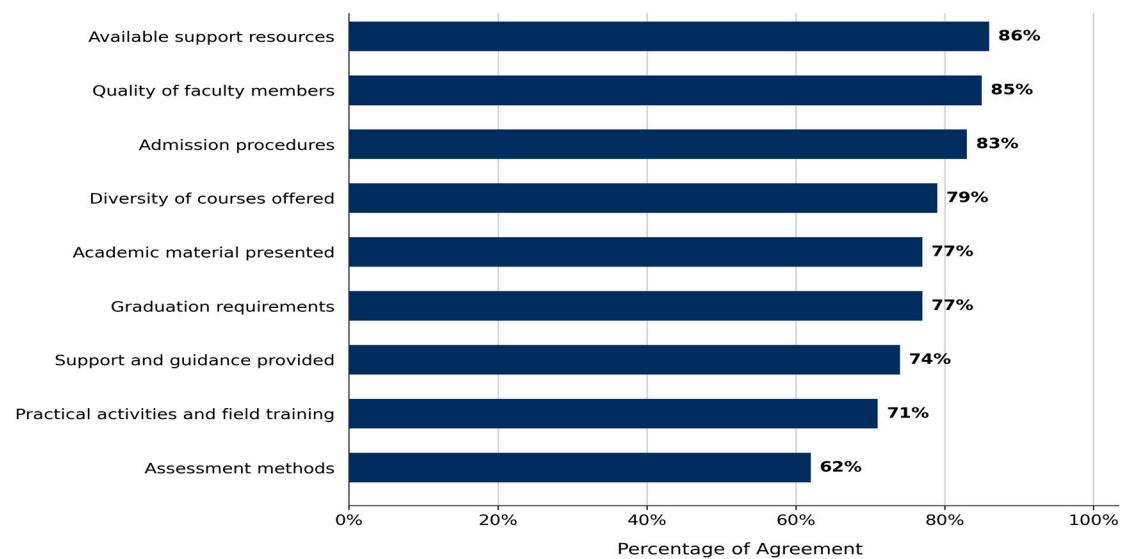


Figure 1. Level of satisfaction with program components.

5.2. Program Processes and Support

Students were satisfied with the program admission procedures, with a satisfaction level of (83%), reflecting the LPP's efforts on admission and follow-up procedures. This was emphasised by faculty members, who described the graduate committee's role in organising orientation and induction programs and in monitoring students' progress throughout their studies. The Head of Department at University C noted: "The committee is very active and readily available to help and support students and relay their voices and concerns."

Support resources emerged as a key strength of the program across all three universities, as evidenced by both qualitative and quantitative data. As shown in Figure 1, support resources were the top-rated component, with 86% of students reporting satisfaction. Students also expressed high satisfaction with library and ICT services, particularly their online and off-campus accessibility. They described support staff as efficient, professional, and supportive, and as "very competent and always find a solution to the problem" (Student, University A). Faculty members similarly highlighted the role of these services in supporting student learning: "The university invested a lot into the support services" (Faculty, University B).

In addition, students reported strong academic support from faculty members, highlighting their subject expertise and research profiles: "Our faculty are keen on supporting us and are very knowledgeable about their subjects" (Student, University B). Graduates indicated that the program enhanced their content knowledge, personal growth, and broader perspectives on education, noting changes in how they organise ideas and support arguments. However, students still felt the need for more support and guidance, as they reported lower satisfaction with "support and guidance" (74%). This suggests a need for support in non-academic aspects of their studies.

Our qualitative data analysis provided insights into the kind of support that might be needed and hence contributed to answering RQ 4 of this study, as balancing full-time employment, family responsibilities, and academic demands emerged as a major challenge for students. Most participants were employed full time and reported limited study leave and competing caregiving responsibilities: "I have a demanding job and was only allowed

one relief day [from teaching] to enrol in the program”, and “I am a mother of three and currently expecting; it is not easy to balance everything” (Student, University A).

These constraints limited students’ participation in workshops and seminars designed to support academic writing and research development, leaving these “support” opportunities inaccessible: “I had to miss a number of seminars because I did not have the time” (Student, University C). Some students expressed frustration with the level of institutional and ministerial support, particularly when compared with students at other universities who received full work relief: “It is crucial that the Ministry acknowledges the challenges we face and provides more relief” (Student, University B); “more attention need to be given to part-time student who working full time, regarding the timing of the courses and the assignment deadlines” (Student, University C). Faculty members acknowledged these challenges and described the difficulty of responding to students’ needs while maintaining program standards. As one faculty member explained, “We are mindful that many of our students work full-time; however, we cannot compromise the quality of the program. Workload and assessment are designed to meet programme aims” (Faculty, University C).

5.3. Teaching Methods

Teaching and assessment were identified as strengths, particularly by faculty members. However, participants provided several recommendations to improve teaching. The faculty described using active teaching approaches, including discussion and case study analysis, to promote conceptual understanding and link theory to practice: “We rely a lot on discussion, and the analysis of case studies” (Head of Department, University C) and “classes focus on dialogue, leveraging students’ experiences” (Faculty, University B). While students valued these approaches, they noted that they were not consistently applied across all courses and described classes that used them as their “best classes”, where “the theory is coming to life” (Graduate, University C). In this vein, both students and the faculty emphasised the need to strengthen practical application and link theory to practice. Students recommended inviting guest speakers, field visits, case studies, and drawing on their own professional experiences: “We come with a vast and diverse range of experiences; it would be great if faculty could use these experiences to make links to the concepts they are teaching” (Student, University A). They also advocated for more learner-centred approaches, such as discussion-based classes: “We learn when we talk and share experiences with other students. I would like to see more discussions in class” (Student, University C). The faculty supported these suggestions, proposing field visits, guest speakers from schools or policy bodies, and making the practicum more relevant to students’ professional contexts: “We make an effort to take students on field visits to school or the Ministry, but this can be challenging due to time factors and logistics involved” (Faculty, University B); “We have practica across different courses, and this helps with contextualising theory” (Head of Department, University A). However, narratives showed that practising students viewed the practicum as not adding much value to their learning: “The practicum did not add much to my experience; I am already a high school principal” (Graduate, University, C). Interestingly, many students described the theoretical dimensions of their courses as being not beneficial for their preparation and irrelevant, and some suggested removing them from the program; “We took a course on the philosophy of education why do I need this, this will not help me in managing my school” (Student, University A); “there was a part of a course that dealt with critical though in educational leadership, honestly this is not needed and can be removed easily” (Graduate, University B).

However, despite students’ concerns about teaching and assessment, quantitative data showed that 85% of students were highly satisfied with the “quality of faculty members” (Figure 1). Students viewed faculty members as knowledgeable and able to contextualise

course content and research within the Omani educational context. They appreciated faculty members' ability to connect international literature to local realities: "Our faculty are knowledgeable about international literature and how to apply it within the Omani education system and culture" (Student, University C); "Our professors are well-known scholars in the field, and they have a lot of knowledge" (Graduate, University A). Faculty confirmed that the program is designed to reflect market needs and the expectations of the Ministry of Education and the Omani educational system.

5.4. Assessment

Assessment was another area of concern. While the faculty viewed assessment positively, students rated it the lowest, at 62% (Figure 1). Further analysis of the qualitative data indicated that this may be due to the number and types of assessments used in the LPPs and highlighted areas for improvement suggested by the participants. Faculty members align their assessment with program aims and learning outcomes, particularly the focus on higher-order thinking: "Our assessments focus on evaluating analysis and students' ability to link theory to practice" (Faculty, University B). This is supported by students' reports of heavy workloads and inconsistent expectations across courses: "Different faculty have different expectations, and this confuses us" (Student, University C); "There are too many assignments" (Student, University A).

In parallel, faculty members identified students' limited preparation for analytical and argumentative writing as a challenge: "Students struggle with critique and higher-order thinking, and this is expected at the graduate level" (Head of Department, University C). Students recognized these difficulties but expressed dissatisfaction with grading outcomes, noting that sustained effort was not always reflected in their marks: "We work a lot for our assessment and get comments like our analysis was weak" (Student, University B). In this vein, students and faculty members recommended additional support to enhance research and analytical skills. Faculty members suggested offering workshops in collaboration with the library on literature review and research methods: "We need to give more workshops on how to conduct and write a literature review" (Faculty, University B). Students echoed this, noting gaps in their preparation: "I don't feel I have fully developed my research skills; when I began my dissertation, I felt lost" (Graduate, University A). Additionally, despite faculty members' attempts to link assessments to practical applications, students reported a need for assessments to focus on application and critical thinking, as they found these types of assessments most beneficial: "those that require us to think and apply our learning" (Student, University A). This finding was further supported by the quantitative data, which showed that student satisfaction with practical activities and field training was among the lowest-rated areas, ranking second lowest at 71%. A faculty member from University C explained that the reason for not including that is: "We do not need students to do field training because they are all coming from the field". Another faculty member from University B explained: "We want students to focus more on research and writing their thesis".

6. Discussion

This study investigates participants' satisfaction with university-based educational leadership programs in Oman, their perceptions of these programs' effectiveness in preparing school leaders, and the challenges associated with their implementation and delivery. By integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, this study demonstrates how survey results provide a broad evaluative frame that is deepened and problematised by participants' narratives.

Our data analysis revealed that faculty members and students were generally satisfied with the programs, despite divergent views on pedagogical approaches and content. Both quantitative and qualitative student data indicated that the programs were perceived as not preparing students for all aspects of leadership, with some important areas deemed insufficiently covered, such as teacher evaluation and improvement, school budgeting, and student discipline. This aligns with the literature identifying gaps in the leadership aspects addressed by preparation programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Fluckiger et al., 2014; Hammad & Bush, 2023; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2016). It also reflects the complexity of leadership and the increasingly challenging and diverse demands that school principals face (Bush, 2016; Daresh et al., 2000; Tamadoni et al., 2024).

Support services and *faculty quality* emerged as the most valued elements of the programs. Survey results indicated high satisfaction with the availability of support resources and the quality of academic staff, positioning these components as central contributors to positive program experiences. Qualitative data add explanatory depth by illustrating how accessible library and ICT services, flexible online provision, and responsive support staff enabled students, many of whom were full-time practitioners, to cope with the demands of postgraduate study. Participants' descriptions of staff as "very supportive" and "always finding a solution" underscore the relational dimension of these services, echoing literature highlighting their importance in graduate education (Cain et al., 2003; Kennan et al., 2014).

Similarly, high satisfaction scores regarding faculty members are reinforced by qualitative accounts that emphasize their subject expertise, research profiles, and commitment to student support. Students reported that faculty members enhanced their analytical thinking, broadened their perspectives on education, and supported their academic development. Faculty narratives complemented these views by highlighting institutional efforts to recruit nationally and internationally experienced academics. This finding is supported by prior research identifying the human element of postgraduate programs as more critical than the academic content (Bright & Graham, 2016; Kanan & Baker, 2006; Keedy, 2005). Bright and Graham (2016) highlighted "program climate", including the quantity of support from program instructors, as the most significant predictor of overall graduate student satisfaction. Specifically, Keedy (2005) stresses the key role of program instructors as "collaborative partners", arguing that high-quality staff are those who can make complex research accessible and help students turn theories into practice.

Together, these findings suggest that program effectiveness, as perceived by participants, is strongly underpinned by institutional capacity and academic capital, aligning with international literature on the quality of leadership preparation (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Fluckiger et al., 2014). In Oman and more broadly in the Gulf region, this aligns with the literature, which suggests that sustained economic growth and prosperity have enabled universities to secure substantial budgets, thereby facilitating the recruitment of high-quality academic talent (Bahgat, 1999).

Despite overall satisfaction, both data strands revealed uneven perceptions of how effectively programs prepared students across leadership domains. Quantitative results showed that relational and community-oriented leadership areas were highly rated, whereas practical areas, such as addressing underperforming teachers, managing school finances, and managing student discipline, received lower ratings. Community-oriented leadership is particularly important in the Omani context, as Oman remains a communal and tribal society where social ties are a pillar of society (Hammad et al., 2023; Hilal & Al-Alawi, 2023). Effective leadership in Oman is perceived as grounded in strong relationships with the community, both within and outside the school (Hammad et al., 2023). Students frequently characterised assessments as demanding and time-intensive, particularly given their full-time employment and family responsibilities. This perception contributes to the

broader challenge of work–study balance identified in the qualitative data, which is also linked to the fact that most students work full time. Faculty members acknowledged these pressures but maintained that assessment standards could not be compromised without undermining program quality. This tension reflects a well-documented challenge in post-graduate professional programs, particularly those serving diverse cohorts of practitioners and aspiring researchers (Orr & Orphanos, 2011), which is representative of the cohort in our study. It is important to note that faculty members, particularly at University A, emphasised the significance of aligning the program’s national and international standards to enhance its effectiveness. Our results indicate that elements of the program that, according to faculty responses, reflected this alignment were associated with a level of student dissatisfaction. This finding aligns with concerns about the applicability of these standards to the unique cultural, religious, and social contexts of Arab societies (Al Haj Sleiman et al., 2025; Karami-Akkary & Hammad, 2019).

By contrast, qualitative accounts indicated that students and graduates viewed the programs as theoretically robust yet insufficiently grounded in real-world leadership practice. Students acknowledged the value of theoretical foundations but expressed concerns about limited opportunities to translate theory into practice, a tension widely documented in the leadership preparation literature. Keedy (2005) used the term “schism” to describe the theory–practice gap, rooted in 19th-century positivism and early 20th-century technical rationality, ideologies that prioritized empirical testability and scientific progress over the messy realities of practice. In the context of our study, the relatively lower ratings for practical activities and field training suggest that current leadership preparation programs may not sufficiently bridge the gap between university-based learning and the lived realities of school leadership in the Omani education system. In a previous study, Hammad and Bush (2023) found that Omani school principals highly valued the practical elements of their leadership preparation, praising its positive impact on their leadership learning.

The question of how the theory relates to practice might, at first glance, seem legitimate. However, it also rests on the assumption that theoretical and practical aspects are two distinct entities, which is not necessarily accurate: “there is nothing so practical as a good theory”. Pedagogical approaches help students recognize the strong links between theory and practice. This explains why the students in the study frequently emphasised the need to relate the theory they were learning to their practice, and even to leverage their professional experience to explain theoretical concepts.

This highlights the importance of using “pedagogies that recognise leadership as an ethical and moral practice integrating conceptual and abstract knowledge while continuously engaging in critical and reflective inquiry” (Black & Murtadha, 2007, p. 10), so that students not only relate to the course but also recognise their experiences as a pivotal part of the teaching. This, in turn, requires the use of critical reflection in case studies, practica, and reflection on practice, which students reported were not adequately present across all the courses they attended. This finding resonates with the literature, which delineates that these are important parts of the teaching in LPPs (Bush, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Orr & Orphanos, 2011).

Such an approach in leadership preparation programs allows a clear distinction between “an administrative intern completing a traditional program” and “an educational leader as a public scholar” (Black & Murtadha, 2007, p. 18), who leads their school by “persisting in reading, pursuing writing, and engaging in scholarly work” (Black & Murtadha, 2007, p. 18). In Oman, this becomes particularly relevant as the new national reform advocates a move away from administrators (Al-Mahdy et al., 2018). This also aligns with research showing that leadership programs employing “active learning strategies that

integrate theory and practice and stimulate reflection” (Orr & Orphanos, 2011, p. 120) receive positive feedback from students and graduates regarding their effectiveness.

However, while such pedagogical approaches are essential to help students recognise and appreciate the interconnectedness of practice and theory, a critical examination of the students’ narratives, considering the dominant technicist and performative approaches to leadership (Eacott, 2017; Gunter, 2001), raises questions about the kind of practice students aim to be prepared for. Educational leadership, as both a practice and discourse, has become dominated by system imperatives that evaluate leadership effectiveness based on meeting standards, achieving goals, and an overall performative approach rooted in meritocracy (Gunter, 2023; Hilal & Gardner-McTaggart, 2025). This aligns with the reasons our participants shared for enrolling in leadership programs, which are consistent with previous research showing that enrolment often stems from a desire for better employment opportunities, salary increases, and job promotions (Kanan & Baker, 2006). Our qualitative data, particularly from students’ narratives, indicate that they expect the program to prepare them to be job-ready by equipping them with technical and managerial skills to run a school efficiently. This reflects a preference for training over preparation (Gunter, 2016), especially as many students spoke highly of the SIPPT program, describing it as clear in telling them what to do. This positions school leaders as practitioners expected to apply, rather than critically engage with, what they have learned. This framing helps explain why students in our study questioned the value of theoretical knowledge. For many, theoretical frameworks and courses in educational philosophy were seen as “useless” and not particularly useful for implementing the “what works” strategies. Educational leadership is a challenging field to prepare students for because, on one hand, these programs must develop performance skills (Bush, 2009), while, on the other, they must ensure that students acquire a solid knowledge base that enables them to become leaders, not just implementers of performative cultures (Gunter, 2016).

Oman is no stranger to global performative approaches to education, where schools and principals are evaluated against specific standards that emphasise technical aspects of school management (Hammad et al., 2023), and instructional leadership aimed at improving students’ performance (Al-Mahdy et al., 2018). Given this context and the fact that they are practising educators in Oman, it is unsurprising that the students were particularly interested in learning how to run a “successful” school, where success is defined by criteria that prioritize managerial and technical skills over theoretical knowledge. Another contextual factor that helps explain this focus is the highly centralised structure of the Omani educational system. While understanding the theoretical and critical dimensions of leadership is thought to empower principals to exercise agency and autonomy (Hilal & Gardner-McTaggart, 2025), such elements of leadership preparation appear less relevant within Oman’s centralized school bureaucracy (e.g., Hammad et al., 2023). In highly bureaucratic educational systems, school leaders experience significant constraints on their decision-making power, as they often operate within tightly prescribed policy frameworks and central directives (Bush, 2009). This creates a fundamental tension in which leaders remain accountable for school outcomes, while an emphasis on compliance and managerial tasks reduces their space for school-specific improvement priorities (Niesche et al., 2023). Consequently, this makes it challenging for university LPPs to adopt critical pedagogies that highlight the intertwined role of theory and practice and help develop school leaders capable of critically engaging with and theorising their practice (Black & Murtadha, 2007).

7. Conclusions and Implications

This study examined the effectiveness of university-based educational leadership preparation programs in Oman using a mixed-methods design that drew on the perspec-

tives of current students, program completers, and faculty members across four universities. By exploring participants' perceptions of program structure, content, delivery, challenges, and areas for improvement, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how these programs are experienced by those directly involved.

Our findings have implications for leadership preparation programs not only in Oman but also across the Arab region. Although participants generally expressed overall satisfaction with the programs, their reflections highlight an important tension between a strong theoretical foundation and the perceived need for more explicit connections to leadership practice. This tension should not be interpreted as a shortcoming of theory, but rather as a pedagogical challenge concerning how theory is enacted, contextualized, and connected to students' professional experiences. This study, therefore, contributes to ongoing global debates about the purpose and design of leadership preparation by underscoring the need for greater coherence among program aims, pedagogy, assessment, and the lived realities of diverse student cohorts. Enhancing flexibility, strengthening support for research and analytical skills, and adopting more consistent pedagogical approaches that integrate students' professional knowledge may improve the responsiveness and perceived relevance of these programs.

This study also highlights broader policy implications. Leadership preparation programs are not only responsible for equipping individuals with the skills to manage schools, but also for cultivating leaders capable of critical reflection and meaningful school improvement. Such leadership requires a degree of professional autonomy, which in turn calls for a reconsideration of highly centralised bureaucratic structures and autocratic school cultures characterizing educational systems in the Arab region (Hammad, 2010; Hilal & Al-Alawi, 2023). Furthermore, principal evaluation systems should recognise and value forms of leadership that draw on theoretical understanding, ethical reasoning, and reflective practice, rather than focusing predominantly on performative and managerial indicators. Without such systemic alignment, leadership preparation programs risk being pressured to prioritize technical competencies, thereby widening the gap between theory and practice and reducing school leaders to technicians operating within narrow accountability frameworks (Hilal, 2025; Habermas, 1985). Additionally, while international standards are an important factor in LPP effectiveness, they must be critically examined, as our results show that aligning programs with them does not always yield positive outcomes.

The findings should be interpreted in light of this study's limitations. The survey sample was relatively small ($n = 71$), reflecting the decision to include only recent graduates and current students to capture contemporary experiences. This limitation was mitigated by rich qualitative data collected from multiple participant groups, which enabled a deeper understanding of survey trends. Future studies should expand the participant pool beyond recent graduates and current students to include a broader range of stakeholders, such as practising school leaders who completed the program several years earlier, program administrators, and administrative supervisors. Additionally, this study focused exclusively on master's-level programs at three universities, as these were the most established in Oman and provided the most appropriate context for examining perceptions of teaching, content, and assessment. However, we recommend that future studies broaden their scope to include doctoral programs and a wider range of institutions to enable comparative insights and enhance the generalizability of findings. Moreover, our results included only one faculty member from University A. This limitation was mitigated by the rich, detailed descriptions provided by this faculty member, who had previously served as a department chair and played a key role in restructuring the educational leadership MA program.

In conclusion, this study underscores the complex challenge facing educational leadership preparation programs in Oman and, more broadly, across the Arab region: balancing

theoretical rigor, practical relevance, and responsiveness to diverse learner needs within specific cultural and policy contexts. Achieving this balance is essential if such programs are to remain effective in preparing school leaders to navigate the growing complexities of educational leadership in their respective societies.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Y.Y.H.; methodology, A.S.A.A.-H.; software, Y.Y.H., A.S.A.A.-H.; validation, A.S.A.A.-H. and W.H.; formal analysis: Y.Y.H. and W.H.; investigation W.H., Y.Y.H., and A.S.A.A.-H.; resources W.H., A.S.A.A.-H.; data curation: W.H. and A.S.A.A.-H.; writing—original draft preparation: Y.Y.H., W.H., A.S.A.A.-H.; writing—review and editing, Y.Y.H., W.H., A.S.A.A.-H.; supervision: Y.Y.H.; project administration: Y.Y.H., W.H. and A.S.A.A.-H.; funding acquisition: Y.Y.H., W.H. and A.S.A.A.-H. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research & Innovation in Oman, grant number RG-EDU/DEFA/22/01.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived because formal Institutional Review Board approval was not required for this type of educational research at the authors' institution at the time the study was conducted. However, official approval to implement the study was obtained from the concerned higher education institutions involved in the investigation.

Informed Consent Statement: I would like to clarify that written consent was not obtained for this study; instead, verbal informed consent was used. This approach was carefully considered and deemed appropriate within the Omani context. In many cases, participants in Oman are more comfortable providing verbal consent, as there can be cultural reluctance toward signing formal documents, particularly in non-clinical research settings. Requiring written consent may have discouraged participation and potentially affected the openness of responses. All participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, their rights (including voluntary participation and the right to withdraw), and how their data would be used and protected. Verbal consent was obtained prior to data collection, in line with ethical research practices and with sensitivity to local cultural norms. We confirm that this consent procedure was approved by the relevant ethics review process associated with the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data cannot be shared due to anonymity.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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