UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF BUSINESS, LAW AND ART

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Examining the entrepreneurial context of Oman: Multi-layered perspective using the institutional lens

by

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ABSTRACT

EXAMINING THE ENTREPRENEURIAL CONTEXT OF OMAN: MULTI-LAYERED PERSPECTIVE USING THE INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Rashid Nasser Al-Mataani

This research aims to examine the influence of institutional environment in the entrepreneurial context of Oman. It draws on the burgeoning literature that links entrepreneurship and institutions. Previous entrepreneurship literature has largely focused on the developed world, and assumed transferable findings to emerging economies regardless of the significant institutional differences, which warrants scholarly attention. In response, this research produces three papers that examine three interrelated phenomena within the entrepreneurial context of Oman, using institutional lens. The first paper examines the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs, an understudied phenomenon in the informal entrepreneurship literature, and its effects on the entrepreneurial ecosystem and the wider economy. Calling upon the weaknesses in the institutional environment that led to the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs, the second paper examines the role these institutional dynamics play in shaping the efficacy of entrepreneurial learning (EL) programmes. As the second paper showed a dominance of unfavourable institutions that undermine formal EL programmes, the third paper was inclined to examine the informal collaborative EL approaches that entrepreneurs follow by utilising prevailing coexisting institutional logics, mainly digitisation and social capital logics. Embedded in interpretive paradigm, the three papers followed qualitative approach using in-depth interviews with 44 entrepreneurs and stakeholders within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. The papers revealed an interplay between unique institutional elements that have given rise to different implications to entrepreneurship in Oman. These include: regulatory weaknesses despite the government's momentous efforts to develop entrepreneurship sector; the undue influence of the family in shaping individual endeavour; limited entrepreneurial mindset in the society; the emergence of digital social networks; the normative influence of *wasta*; and an Islamic value to knowledge sharing. The overall research offers theoretical, methodological, and contextual contributions as well as practical implications by providing multi-layered understanding of entrepreneurship phenomenon within an understudied context (i.e. Oman), which generated new insights at the intersection of entrepreneurship and institutional theory.

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Rashid Nasser Al-Mataani, declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

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I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. With the oversight of my main supervisor, editorial advice has been sought. No changes of intellectual content were made as a result of this advice;
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Abbreviations

EL	Entrepreneurial Learning
CMA	The Capital Market Authority
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
GCC	The Gulf Corporation Council (includes Oman, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEM	Global Entrepreneurship Monitor
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IPR	Intellectual Property Rights
ITA	Information Technology Authority
KOM	Knowledge Oasis Muscat
NBC	National Business Centre
NCSI	National Centre for Statistics and Information
OTF	Oman Technology Fund
PASMED	Public Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development
PEIE	Public Establishment for Industrial Estates
SME	Small- and Medium-sized Enterprises
SQU	Sultan Qaboos University
TRC	The Research Council
WTO	World Trade Organisation

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research overview

This doctoral study aims to examine the role of institutional environment in shaping entrepreneurial activities in the context of Oman, an emerging economy. Three core papers are produced to contribute towards this aim (See Chapters 4, 5 and 6). The thesis is suggested by the wide acknowledgement of the influence of institutional elements, such as rules, regulations, societal culture and norms, as well as taken-for-granted assumptions (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; North, 1990; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991b; Scott, 2014), in shaping the entrepreneurial context (e.g. Busenitz *et al.*, 2000; Aidis *et al.*, 2008; Manolova *et al.*, 2008; Stenholm *et al.*, 2013; Walter and Block, 2016). Research shows that institutions can enable and/or constrain entrepreneurs' behaviour and actions at the micro level (Welter and Smallbone, 2011; Audretsch *et al.*, 2013), firms' activities at the meso level (Webb *et al.*, 2010; De Castro *et al.*, 2014) and public entrepreneurship programmes at the macro level (Henry *et al.*, 2013; Arshed *et al.*, 2016). While the nature of institutions and their influence on entrepreneurial practices are increasingly being studied in the context of developed economies, they remain understudied in the context of emerging economies (Puffer *et al.*, 2010; Kim and Li, 2014).

This study lies at the intersection of entrepreneurship and institutional theory literature. The literature shows a growing number of studies linking entrepreneurship and institutions (Jennings *et al.*, 2013; Kim and Li, 2014). The starting premise of such research is that complete reliance on economic elements as a measure can be myopic, failing to reveal the whole picture of the entrepreneurship phenomenon (Walter and Block, 2016). It is unhelpful to deviate from the fact that entrepreneurship is a social phenomenon as much as it is an economic one (Steyaert, 2007; Korsgaard and Anderson, 2011). Subsequently, this study is underpinned by the premise that entrepreneurship is socially embedded (Jack and Anderson, 2002; Davidsson, 2003) and can be understood as 'a context-dependent social process' (Ireland *et al.*, 2001: 51). It can affect, and be affected by, the social dynamics of the culture within which it is immersed (Anderson *et al.*, 2009).

Ireland *et al.* (2001) view entrepreneurship activity as a function of various contextual elements that interfere with the entrepreneurial process. Additionally, Shane and Venkataraman (2000) offer a broad definition of entrepreneurship research, conceptualising it as a 'scholarly examination of how, by whom, and with what effects opportunities to create future goods and services are discovered, evaluated and exploited' (219). This definition is broad enough to include a wide variety of entrepreneurship activities and operations (Jennings *et al.*, 2013). By taking the conceptualisations of Ireland *et al.* (2001) and Shane and Venkataraman (2000) into account, this study examines how the contextual/institutional environment influences the process of the discovery, evaluation and exploitation of opportunities, considering the context of an emerging economy: Oman.

Although social context is a critical lens through which to view entrepreneurship, institutions are key to the entrepreneurial social process, as they emerge from the social interaction of the various actors in the economy, including policymakers, community members, entrepreneurs and educators (Scott, 2014). Subsequently, they can be influential in shaping entrepreneurial activities, as shown in the growing literature that links entrepreneurship and institutions (e.g. Moore *et al.*, 2010; Dickson and Weaver, 2011; Urbano *et al.*, 2011; Stenholm *et al.*, 2013; Walter and Block, 2016; Williams and Shahid, 2016). For instance, institutions are found to influence the pace of entrepreneurial development and entrepreneurial actions (Phillips and Tracey, 2007; Welter and Smallbone, 2011). While they are empirically proven to influence a firm's performance (Sheng *et al.*, 2011; Pergelova and Angulo-Ruiz, 2014), institutions also play a substantial role in shaping an individual's perception towards entrepreneurship (Liñán *et al.*, 2011; Diaz-Casero *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, institutions shape the strategic behaviour of entrepreneurs when considering market entry forms (Arando *et al.*, 2009), internationalization (Ahistrom and Bruton, 2002; Shirokova and McDougall-Covin, 2012; Ketkar and Acs, 2013), exporting (Hessels and Terjesen, 2010), franchising (Shane and Foo, 1999), strategic alliances (Dickson and Weaver, 2011) and foreign initial public offerings (IPOs) (Moore *et al.*, 2010). They also shape entrepreneurs' decisions about the (in)formalising of business activities (De Castro *et al.*, 2014; Williams and Shahid, 2016). Recently, scholars have argued that institutions can shape entrepreneurial practices based on how individuals and firms interpret and make sense of the prevailing, and often contending, institutional logics (Reay and Hinings, 2009; Smets *et al.*, 2015; Pallas *et al.*, 2016). However, explorations of the institutional environment are still lacking in the context of emerging economies (Puffer et al., 2010; Kim and Li, 2014). The next section explains why examining emerging contexts warrants scholarly attention.

1.2 Examining an emerging economy

Most of the studies that link entrepreneurship and institutions have focused on industrialised nations, which are often characterised by mature and stable institutional structures (e.g. Sine *et al.*, 2005; Meek *et al.*, 2010; Moore *et al.*, 2010; Pergelova and Angulo-Ruiz, 2014). While these studies provide interesting insights into the field, scholars have called for more elaboration and examination of the theory within the context of emerging economies (Meyer *et al.*, 2009; Puffer *et al.*, 2010; Hoskisson *et al.*, 2011; Kim and Li, 2014). Their argument is based on the potential to generate new insights into less-understood contexts that can enrich our understanding of institutional structure and how it shapes the entrepreneurial process in these economies (Puffer *et al.*, 2010). Emerging economies are characterised by low income, increasing economic growth, and immature institutional structures (Kim and Li, 2014; Webb *et al.*, 2014).

Examining emerging countries is imperative for three main reasons. First, emerging economies have not been thoroughly examined in entrepreneurship research (Bruton *et al.*, 2008), particularly in relation to institutional dynamics (Kim and Li, 2014). Scholars have argued that studies need to have a customised understanding of institutional principles that suit the emerging context, rather than relying on institutional frameworks that have been developed through studies that focused mainly on industrialised countries (Wright *et al.*, 2005; Bruton *et al.*, 2010; Puffer *et al.*, 2010).

This leads to the second reason for studying emerging economies: the uniqueness of their institutional environments. The institutional configurations in emerging economies are often deficient and underdeveloped when compared to developed countries, a situation which warrants careful consideration (Stenholm *et al.*, 2013; Webb *et al.*, 2014; Williams and Shahid, 2016). Therefore, these configurations can provide different implications for entrepreneurs and the overall entrepreneurial ecosystem. Studies have found that institutional conditions that foster entrepreneurial activities in some contexts can hamper them in emerging economies (e.g. Levie and Autio, 2011; Stenholm *et al.*, 2013). Hence, institutional configurations must be unpacked to extend entrepreneurship theory (Puffer *et al.*, 2010). Surprisingly, the research direction to understand the characteristics and sources of these institutional differences on one hand and how they influence entrepreneurial practices and entrepreneurial diversity in these contexts on the other is still lacking (Bruton *et al.*, 2008; Webb *et al.*, 2014; Welter *et al.*, 2016).

Third, such emerging nations strive to nurture their economies by enhancing the small to medium enterprise (SME) sector as a way to create jobs and foster economic growth and prosperity (Acs, 2006; Acs and Szerb, 2007; Audretsch *et al.*, 2007; Bennett, 2008). Understanding the various institutional influences in these contexts is necessary to enhance entrepreneurial activities and practices, as well as to develop beneficial public policies within the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Arshed *et al.*, 2014; Arshed *et al.*, 2016). In particular, there is little consensus regarding the precise institutions that are critical to entrepreneurship development (Estrin *et al.*, 2013).

For these reasons, this study considered the context of Oman as an exemplar of an emerging economy, seeking to empirically examine the configuration of its institutional environment and how it affects the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem. Oman is a small country with a natural resource-based economy that is striving to diversify by building an effective SME sector; currently, that sector contributes only around 15% of the gross national product (GDP). The institutional context of Oman has its own unique characteristics and promises new insights into entrepreneurship theory (Al-Riyami *et al.*, 2002; Al-Shanfari, 2010), as entrepreneurship within emerging countries, especially in the Middle East, remains under-researched (Bruton *et al.*, 2008; Nasra and Dacin, 2010). An overview of the institutional and entrepreneurial context of Oman is provided in Chapter 2.

1.3 Thesis aims and research questions

This thesis has one overarching aim and three sub-aims, developed during the study. The underlying aim is to examine the influence of institutional dynamics on entrepreneurial activities in Oman. Within this broad aim, three sub-aims have been developed and are addressed in the three papers that form this thesis. Two to three research questions have been outlined to address each sub-aim. The following table illustrates these sub-aims and their corresponding research questions, paper title and chapter number:

Table 1-1: Thesis aims and research questions

Thesis aim	***Paper RQs***	**Paper Title**	**Chapter No.**
1. To examine the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs in Oman	1. *Who are hidden entrepreneurs and how do they bridge the formal and informal economies?* 2. *What are the perceived effects of hidden entrepreneurs on local entrepreneurs and the wider economy?* 3. *How can international hidden entrepreneurs contribute to the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem?*	Hidden entrepreneurs: Informal practices within the formal economy	**4**
2. To examine the institutional effect on entrepreneurial learning (EL)	1. *How do the elements of the institutional environment influence EL programmes?* 2. *How do these elements interact*	What makes entrepreneurial learning programmes	**5**

Thesis aim	*Paper RQs*	Paper Title	Chapter No.
programmes within Oman	*with each other in the context of EL programmes?*	(un)successful?	
3. To examine the institutional influence of social capital digitisation logics in shaping the informal EL practices in the context of Oman	*1. How does social capital logic affect the learning of Omani entrepreneurs?* *2. How does digitisation logic affect the learning of Omani entrepreneurs?* *3. How do Omani entrepreneurs reconcile the social capital and digitisation logics to generate meaningful learning?*	Collaborative entrepreneurial learning in the digitisation age: Institutional logics perspective	**6**

1.4 The three papers: Multi-layered perspective using the institutional lens

Guided by the classical understanding of institutional theory (Scott, 1995, 2014) and the meta-theory of institutional logics, which is part of the development of institutional theory (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008), this thesis provides a multi-layered understanding of the entrepreneurship phenomenon. It responds to the increasing calls to mobilise multilevel frameworks to provide meaningful insights into the entrepreneurship phenomenon (Davidsson *et al.*, 2001; De Clercq *et al.*, 2013; Tatli *et al.*, 2014). Tatli *et al.* (2014) view the entrepreneurship phenomenon as a set of interconnected properties, patterns and processes that can be better understood through a multilevel relational perspective. Situating entrepreneurs within their wider context provides a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the entrepreneurial process (Karataş-Özkan, 2011; Shepherd, 2011). Using the institutional lens contributes to this multilevel understanding by linking entrepreneurial experiences and practices at the micro level with the social environment at the meso level (i.e. societal norms and values) and the regulatory environment at the macro level (i.e. rules, regulations and public policies).

The thesis provides three qualitative papers (See Chapters 4, 5 and 6) that demonstrate the multi-layered interplay between the actors in the entrepreneurial ecosystem and the institutional environment at various levels (i.e. micro, meso and macro). Informed by the overarching aim of the study, various theoretical and empirical gaps are addressed by using a qualitative approach in these three separate, but related, papers. The initial premise of this thesis is that the uniqueness of institutional arrangements in emerging economies in general, and in Oman in particular, can generate new insights into entrepreneurship theory and practice. On this ground, several knowledge gaps in the entrepreneurship literature are identified which warrant scholarly attention. This section briefly highlights these gaps, the rationale for the three papers and the use of institutional perspective as an overarching lens to provide a holistic multi-layered understanding of the phenomenon in all three papers. An in-depth literature review and key contributions of each paper are discussed in detail in their corresponding chapters (4, 5 and 6).

1.4.1 First paper

The first paper, which has been accepted for publication in the *European Management Review*, introduced the notion of 'hidden entrepreneurship' that is widely practiced in the Omani context. These practices involve international individuals (i.e. hidden entrepreneurs) who exploit domestic institutional configurations by entering into informal agreements with locals to establish firms under the locals' names and exploit opportunities within the domestic market in exchange for a fixed amount of money. While their businesses are legal, officially registered and produce legal goods and services, the ownership and governance structure is illegal. Although hidden entrepreneurship practices are widely persistent in Oman and other neighbouring countries (Al-Shaya, 2015; Al Khaleej, 2015), they are surprisingly understudied within informal entrepreneurship/economy research.

As institutional conditions are proved to determine the (in)formalisation of business activities (Webb *et al.*, 2009; Williams and Shahid, 2016), this first paper employed Scott's (2014) institutional framework to examine how the institutional configurations within the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem allowed hidden practices to emerge. Additionally, the paper provided evidence of the perceived pros and cons of these practices for active local entrepreneurs and the wider economy.

The findings show how the prevailing regulative, normative and cognitive institutions assisted the emergence of the hidden practices and undermined locals attempting to engage in active formal entrepreneurship. While hidden entrepreneurship is perceived to negatively influence local active entrepreneurs and the wider economy, it has also been contributing to local entrepreneurship development through the provision of entrepreneurial learning and access to scarce resources outside the market. Through these findings, the paper contributes to the informal economy literature by introducing the notion of international hidden entrepreneurs who straddle the formal and informal economies (Webb *et al.*, 2014). It also contributes to practice by emphasising the importance of establishing a mechanism to legitimise and absorb hidden entrepreneurs in the domestic formal economy to promote entrepreneurship development through knowledge transfer and access to scarce resources.

This paper outlines a lack of entrepreneurial mindset in the Omani context, which has encouraged passive locals to accept hidden practices. This is despite the abundant government efforts to provide entrepreneurial learning (EL) programmes that aim to promote the entrepreneurial mindset in the Omani community and to develop the capacity of existing entrepreneurs. However, the outcomes of such programmes remain questionable. This gap motivated the second paper, which examines the efficacy of formal EL programmes.

The first paper took a macro-level perspective, as hidden entrepreneurs and their emergence were considered macro-level influences that affect the overall domestic entrepreneurial environment. This was useful to set the scene of the prevailing institutional arrangements in Oman at the macro level, which has various implications for local entrepreneurs at the micro level. These implications underlie the second paper, which presents a multilevel understanding of how these inadequate institutions are shaped by the continuous interplay between various actors at multiple levels, such as policies and regulations at the macro level, values and norms at the meso level and entrepreneurs' perceptions and experiences at the micro level.

1.4.2 Second paper

The second paper, which is currently under review at the *International Small Business Journal*, provides a multi-layered perspective of the interplay of institutional components in the entrepreneurial learning (EL) context. EL programmes, such as education, training, advisory and incubation programmes, have been used as policy tools to stimulate entrepreneurship as well as SME sector and economic development (e.g. Kosters and Obschonka, 2011; Atherton and Smallbone, 2013; Obeng and Blundel, 2015; Thompson and Kwong, 2016). However, EL studies have been inconclusive in confirming the outcomes of EL programmes in motivating entrepreneurial activities (e.g. Mole, 2000; Peterman and Kennedy, 2003; Pittaway and Cope, 2007a; Oosterbeek *et al.*, 2010; Jones *et al.*, 2013; Huber *et al.*, 2014; Thompson and Kwong, 2016). This was due to how such studies have frequently overlooked the role of the institutional environment in shaping the efficacy of EL programmes (Patton *et al.*, 2000; Bae *et al.*, 2014; Walter and Block, 2016) and disregarded the interaction between the various institutional elements (Kim and Li, 2014). Therefore, this paper draws on institutional theory (Scott, 1995,

2014) to bridge these knowledge gaps. It examines the role of institutional elements in influencing EL programmes and delineates how these elements interact with each other in the EL context.

The findings reveal that EL programme delivery can be very challenging in less developed institutional environments. Institutional elements in the cognitive dimension (i.e. anti-entrepreneurship perceptions, negative attitude towards learning programmes), normative dimension (i.e. family mindset, lack of open criticism of EL programmes) and regulative dimension (i.e. conflicting policies, rigid regulations) can all determine EL effectiveness. Additionally, the paper demonstrates the reinforcement effect between the institutional elements in a multi-layered relationship. It shows how institutional components are inextricably linked in the EL context, a factor that warrants careful consideration when studying EL. Through these findings, two main contributions are generated. First, the iterative and reinforcing nature of institutional interactions in the context of EL forms a key theoretical contribution at the intersection of EL and institutional theory. Second, recognising the embeddedness of institutional pressures and the situated nature of EL, the paper shows unique determinants of EL in an emerging economic context.

The questionable efficacy of EL programmes in Oman triggered our interest in understanding how entrepreneurs learn under these institutional pressures. It was necessary to understand how entrepreneurs pursue meaningful learning while facing a challenging formal learning environment. In such institutional conditions, entrepreneurs would be expected to improvise different learning practices by utilising other coexisting institutional systems to overcome the deficiency in formal EL programmes. The third paper discusses these EL practices.

1.4.3 Third paper

In light of the growing literature, including the second paper, that questions the efficacy of formal EL programmes at the macro level, researchers have begun to examine informal EL approaches. EL, and informal EL in particular, remains complex and understudied due to its dynamic and situated nature (Cope, 2005; Keith *et al.*, 2016). Cope (2005: 392) argues that EL is not stable, consistent or predictable. Rather, it is characterised by change and discontinuity. As such, the third paper draws on the institutional logics perspective to examine how entrepreneurs act upon their embedded agency to make sense of the multiple coexisting institutional logics at the meso level to generate meaningful learning (Kraatz and Block, 2008; Besharov and Smith, 2014; Currie and Spyridonidis, 2016).

Institutional logics are understood as ‘socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs and rules’ (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999: 804). Institutional logics are useful in this context because they gives a sense of agency to entrepreneurs, visualising how entrepreneurs at the micro level can make sense of and react to the institutional configurations at both the normative meso level and the structural macro level when pursuing learning (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). While most studies have focused on formal EL, which is often offered by state and market logics, limited research has examined informal EL, which is often endorsed by the social system through what I call ‘social capital logic’ (Tannenbaum *et al.*, 2010; Noe *et al.*, 2013; Noe *et al.*, 2014). The role of social capital logic in EL is complex and understudied, especially in emerging economies (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Atherton and Smallbone, 2013). This complexity is elevated with the emergence of ‘digitisation logic’, which has transformed social capital and allowed for contemporary digital learning to emerge (Nambisan, 2016; Smith *et al.*, 2017). This paper aims to deliver an understanding of how entrepreneurs make sense of these two coexisting logics at the meso level to generate beneficial learning.

The findings reveal various institutional prescriptions within social capital and digitisation logics that entrepreneurs can use to achieve more effective and convenient learning that overcomes the challenges of traditional formal learning programmes. Central to the findings is the reinforcement of collaborative EL, which is manifested in the way entrepreneurs transform capital(s) by combining unique social capital elements (e.g. wasta, wider networks, values of knowledge sharing) with the affordances provided by digitisation logics (e.g. shareability, interactivity), to generate useful learning. Through these findings, the paper contributes to the entrepreneurship field by incorporating ‘digitisation’ into entrepreneurship research, particularly in EL literature (Nambisan, 2016). The paper also provides evidence of context-specific social capital factors that encourage entrepreneurs to pursue learning in the Omani context. Finally, yet importantly, the paper demonstrates learning opportunities that are generated through the interplay between the coexisting heterogeneous logics (Kraatz and Block, 2008).

Overall, the three papers utilised the institutional lens to contribute to a multi-layered understanding of the entrepreneurship phenomenon. Institutions often influence entrepreneurship at the macro level (i.e. first paper). However, institutions are also shown to reinforce each other through an iterative interplay between their various dimensions at the macro, meso and micro levels (i.e. the second paper). Additionally, the third paper elucidates the interplay between institutions at the micro and meso levels by showing how the perceptions and experiences of entrepreneurs at the micro level lead to changing learning practices based on entrepreneurs’ interpretation of the prevailing meso institutions. These theoretical findings provide evidence of the interrelatedness of various institutional components at different levels in the context of entrepreneurship. These findings also demonstrate an embeddedness of institutions in the entrepreneurial practices of emerging economies. This warrants the attention of researchers and policymakers when dealing with the entrepreneurship phenomenon.

The next section outlines a brief overview of the institutional theory that has informed the three papers.

1.5 Theoretical framework

Within the entrepreneurship field, institutions are conceptualised as the ‘rules of the game’ that guide entrepreneurs’ behaviour and shape their interactions with other social, economic and political actors for the purpose of entrepreneurial activity (Bruton *et al.*, 2010). Institutions can foster or impede entrepreneurs’ actions. They are the reasons behind the presence of different types of entrepreneurship: productive, unproductive and destructive (Baumol, 1990). This study draws on institutional theory, which is widely acknowledged in entrepreneurship literature since its first use in 1999 (Bruton *et al.*, 2010). Institutional theory was developed through the work of Zucker (1977), DiMaggio and Powell (1983), Meyer and Rowan (1991), Powell and DiMaggio (1991a) and North (1990), to name a few. Its significance in examining the entrepreneurship phenomenon has been emphasised in many studies, showing that it is very useful for exploring the complex nature of institutional environments (e.g. Baughn *et al.*, 2006; Phillips and Tracey, 2007; Minniti, 2008; Urbano *et al.*, 2011; Welter and Smallbone, 2012; Walter and Block, 2016).

The first and second papers have used the classical institutional theory as summarised by Scott (2014). Scott (2014) argues that three main institutional dimensions shape the behaviour of organisations and individuals: regulative, normative and cognitive. The regulative pillar comprises the formal rules, regulations and policies that shape individual and organisational behaviour. The normative dimension comprises the shared beliefs, values and norms that define the objectives of individuals and organisations, as well as the appropriate way to pursue them. The cognitive dimension takes into account the individual beliefs, perceptions and experiences that shape individuals’ behaviour. This framework was useful in the context of the first and second papers to explain how the entrepreneurship phenomenon is shaped by its surrounding institutional environment.

However, the framework was less appropriate for addressing the reactions of entrepreneurs to the prevailing institutional environment in the EL context as explored in the third paper. Hence, that paper followed the institutional logics perspective of the institutional theory (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thornton *et al.*, 2012). This perspective rejects the assumption of isomorphism held by the classical approach (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). Instead, it posits that society consists of multiple institutional systems that are privileged by individual actors based on their interpretations and experiences to generate meaningful reality (Besharov and Smith, 2014). Institutional logics are defined as ‘material practices and symbolic systems through which individuals and organisations produce and reproduce their material subsistence and provide meanings to their space and time experiences’ (Friedland and Alford, 1991: 243). By taking account of this perspective, the third paper demonstrated the agency of entrepreneurs as they interpret and react to the prevailing institutions at the structural macro level and the normative meso level. The institutional logics perspective was appropriate for demonstrating how entrepreneurs interpret and make sense of the prevailing logics when pursuing learning. Moreover, while the classical approach is useful for explaining established institutional elements such as rules, regulations, culture and norms (Stenholm *et al.*, 2013), institutional logics are more appropriate for illuminating newly emerging contemporary institutional logics, such as digitisation, that can enable and constrain the actions of individuals and organisations (Bertels and Lawrence, 2016).

1.6 Methodology

In this thesis, including the three constituting papers, the interpretivist stance is followed (Neuman, 2000). The selection of this paradigm is informed by the underlying philosophical assumptions as well as the nature of research questions and existing literature on the phenomena under investigation (Hindle, 2004). By taking account of this philosophical stance, the existence of multiple realities that are constructed and co-constructed through social interaction is assumed; only through continuous interpretation of the meanings, experiences and perceptions of social actors within their social settings can one construct a meaningful understanding of reality (Lincoln *et al.*, 2011). Given the underlying aims of this research (see section 1.3 above), I assume a ‘passionate participant’ role and engage in a process of interpreting the meanings, experiences and perceptions of key social actors (i.e. entrepreneurs and stakeholders) in the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem (Guba and Lincoln, 2005: 194). Through this process, I was able to generate an understanding of the reality of the Omani entrepreneurial context and how it is shaped by the prevailing institutional environment (Guba and Lincoln, 2005: 194). Guided by the ‘interpretive practice’ school of thought, both questions related to the how and what of social reality were considered (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011b). Through this approach, I paid close attention to the role played by the cultural and institutional context in shaping entrepreneurial activities in Oman (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011b).

Guided by the underpinning philosophical assumptions and the underlying nature of the research questions, I deemed the qualitative approach to be an apt method for answering the research questions. It is more appropriate for my research because I aim to answer questions of ‘how’ rather than 'how many' (Pratt, 2009). Embracing the qualitative approach responds to the burgeoning calls for incorporating this type of research into studies to enrich our understanding of entrepreneurship phenomena and generate new insights into entrepreneurship theory, especially when entrepreneurship is concerned with the 'outliers' (Gartner and Birley, 2002; Hindle, 2004; Neergaard and Ulhøi, 2007; Leitch *et al.*, 2009; Karatas-Ozkan *et al.*, 2014; Suddaby *et al.*, 2015).

My research is informed by a qualitative naturalistic inquiry design, which is concerned with examining the phenomenon within its existing settings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The design involved data collection via in-depth interviews as well as publicly available documents. Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants who provided comprehensive details in their answers to our research questions. The sample included 44 active local entrepreneurs and representatives of the various stakeholders within the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem, such as SMEs, relevant public agencies, financial institutions, educational institutions and public and private providers of entrepreneurship support programmes. Face-to-face recorded semi-structured interviews were conducted, generating about 52 hours of data. The interviews ranged between 30 minutes to 2.5 hours in length. An initial interview guideline was prepared based on literature and publicly available documents to cover all possible issues of institutional influence on entrepreneurial activities in Oman. In an iterative process, I revisited the guidelines to realign the focus towards the interesting issues that emerged during interviews. Additionally, I have undertaken some follow-up interviews when necessary to seek elaborations and explanations, as well as highlighting new issues. I used the various documents collected (e.g. policies, rules and regulations, annual reports, media reports, magazines, statistics) to guide the sampling process, formulate interview questions, and explain any inconsistencies found in the data. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using a thematic approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006). The process was informed by matrix display (Miles *et al.*, 2013) and template analysis techniques (King, 2004, 2012). The analysis involved an iterative process of coding the data into meaningful themes and subthemes that were then categorised and tabulated in a template that facilitated interpretation and answered the research questions. Finally, the findings were reported in the three papers that form this thesis. Each individual paper has its own methodological details that reflect the particularities of that paper (See Chapters 4, 5 and 6). I provide a detailed description of the philosophical and methodological choices and rationale in Chapter 3. Chapter 3 also outlines the reflexive procedures that were undertaken to establish 'trustworthiness' while maintaining ethical compliance (Lincoln and Guba, 1986).

1.7 Research contributions

This research project makes a number of contributions at both the paper level and thesis level. At the paper level, the first paper extends the informal entrepreneurship literature by shedding light on an understudied phenomenon: hidden entrepreneurship (Webb *et al.*, 2009; Webb *et al.*, 2013; Williams *et al.*, 2016a). It emphasises the role of institutional configurations in the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs. In addition, the paper rejects the completely negative stigma attached to these practices by providing evidence of the hidden entrepreneurs' contributions to the domestic entrepreneurial ecosystem. The second paper contributes to the EL literature and extends institutional theory by demonstrating the inextricably linked nature of institutional components in the EL context (Mole, 2000; Peterman and Kennedy, 2003; Oosterbeek *et al.*, 2010; Jones *et al.*, 2013; Thompson and Kwong, 2016). Through the interactions of social actors, institutions are found to be reinforcing each other, which can result in the success or failure of EL programmes (Walter and Block, 2016). Additionally, the paper emphasises the embeddedness of institutional forces in EL practices by generating insights into unique institutional conditions of an understudied emerging context, Oman (Jack and Anderson, 2002). The third paper advances the limited literature on informal EL practices by discussing them at their intersection with institutional logics and digitisation literature (Tannenbaum et al., 2010; Keith et al., 2016). It illuminates the role of the emerging digitisation logic in transforming EL practices, especially with the transformation of traditional social capital into a digital form (Smith *et al.*, 2017). Through this, the paper advances the field by integrating digitisation into entrepreneurship research (Nambisan, 2016). Finally, the paper emphasises the relevance of multiple institutional logics in EL. The various prescriptions of the coexisting logics (i.e. digitisation, social capital logics) can be interpreted into an effective collaborative EL approach (Kraatz and Block, 2008).

Calling upon these multiple theoretical and practical contributions at the paper level, the thesis offers theoretical, methodological and contextual contributions at a broader level. First, the overall study emphasises the interrelatedness between entrepreneurship and institutions (Walter and Block, 2016). The two concepts are demonstrated to be closely linked and to influence each other. The papers demonstrate how actors can shape institutional environment through social interactions and interpretations (i.e. the second paper). At the same time, the institutional conditions can shape entrepreneurship practices (e.g. hidden entrepreneurship as in the first paper and collaborative EL practices as in the third paper). Second, the study responds to the increasing calls for multilevel understanding of the entrepreneurship phenomenon (e.g., Shepherd, 2011). Through the three papers, entrepreneurship is shown to be influenced by multilevel interactions (i.e. macro, meso and micro levels). The first paper shows the influence of macro-level institutional configurations on micro-level entrepreneurial perceptions. The second paper shows the interplay between the three levels in shaping the efficacy of EL programmes. The third paper demonstrates how entrepreneurs rely on meso-level institutional logics (i.e. digitisation and social capital) to satisfy their learning needs at the micro level. Third, the thesis addresses the limited research examining entrepreneurship within an emerging context (Bruton *et al.*, 2008). In particular, the research examines a context that is rarely studied in the extant entrepreneurship literature: Oman (Al-Shanfari, 2010). The unique characteristics of the institutional environment in this context generated new insights into entrepreneurship (e.g. emergence of hidden entrepreneurs).

1.8 Thesis structure

The thesis is structured in seven chapters. The order and the details of each chapter are outlined in Table 1-2 below.

Table 1-2 Thesis structure

Chapter No.	Chapter Title	Description
Chapter 1	Introduction	It provides an overview of the thesis, research aims and research questions, rationale for the three papers, the theoretical framework, philosophical and methodological approaches and thesis structure.
Chapter 2	The research context: Oman	It gives an overview of the entrepreneurial and institutional contexts of Oman and structures them using institutional theory framework.
Chapter 3	Methodology	It provides a detailed account of the selected philosophical paradigm, research design, data collection and data analysis approaches and procedures and ethical considerations, as well as establishing the trustworthiness of the research.
Chapter 4	Hidden entrepreneurs: Informal practices within the formal economy	These chapters represent the core of the thesis. Although they are produced through one overall project, they are stand-alone papers. Each chapter represents a research paper that includes its own
Chapter 5	What makes entrepreneurial	

	learning programmes (un)successful?	introduction, literature review, methodology, findings and discussion and conclusions.
Chapter 6	Collaborative entrepreneurial learning in the digitisation age: Institutional logics perspective	
Chapter 7	Conclusions	This chapter provides conclusions for the overall thesis. It summarises the overall research process and findings. It revisits the research aims and elucidates the findings, contributions and implications. It ends with a reflexive account of research limitations and directions for future research.

1.9 Chapter summary

This chapter offered an overview of the research, aims and approach of the thesis. First, the underlying gaps that motivated the research were briefly explained with an emphasis on the rationale for choosing the emerging economies context. Then the chapter introduced the overarching aims of the thesis and the research questions addressed in the component three papers. This was followed by a summary of the three papers with a focus on the rationale and interrelatedness of these papers, the role of theory and the individual papers' key contributions to theory and practice. Next, the chapter provided an overview of the theoretical framework that informed the three papers. After that, a sub-section described the underlying philosophical assumptions of the research along with the methodological approaches and design. The chapter ended with a discussion of key theoretical, methodological and contextual contributions of the thesis project as a whole and an outline of the thesis structure.

Chapter 2: Institutional context of Oman

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the institutional arrangements of Oman and highlights their impact on the entrepreneurial ecosystem. First, an overview of Oman and its economic and SMEs development are provided. Then, the institutional arrangements in Oman are outlined. They are structured in three subsections in accordance with the classical categorization of institutional framework (i.e. regulative, normative, cognitive) as posited by Scott (1995, 2014). There is a dearth of literature that describes the institutional conditions in Oman, especially in relation to entrepreneurship (for exceptions see Al-Riyami *et al.*, 2002; Khan and Almoharby, 2007; Belwal *et al.*, 2015). Also, Oman is missing in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM). Therefore, I relied largely on grey literature such as official websites, international reports, unpublished academic dissertations and conference papers, and newspapers and magazines, to set the scene of the institutional and entrepreneurial context of Oman.

2.2 Background about Oman

Oman is an emerging country in the Middle East region. It has a total area of 309,000 sq km with a population of about 4.6 million people, of which 46% are non-Omanis (NCSI, 2017). Oman's GDP is about 70 billion USD with a growth rate of 5.7% as of 2015 (NCSI, 2015). In 2014, petroleum activities accounted for 50% of Oman's GDP, represented 66% of the total exports, and formed 84% of government revenue (NCSI, 2015). However, following the fall in oil prices in 2014, economic growth started declining, and the contribution of petroleum activities in government budgets has weakened (Ministry of Finance, 2017). On the other hand, the SMEs sector is estimated to contribute not more than 20% of total GDP (Oxford Business Group, 2014).

The ruling system in Oman is a monarchy, and currently HM Sultan Qaboos is the monarch. He assumed power in 1970, and since then this period has been recognized as the 'Renaissance Era' for the dramatic change in the development of the economic and social prosperity (Al-Shanfari, 2010). Prior to this, Oman was characterized by poor conditions in infrastructure (e.g. education, health, etc.) and overall well-being. There was limited development due to the closed international policy that isolated Oman from the world. Subsequently, market development and entrepreneurship were missing from the government policy (Al-Shanfari, 2010). However, since 1970, development has started in all sectors, and the welfare of Omani citizens has become a priority. Development was boosted by the rise of the national income through the discovery and exploitation of oil and gas.

Although oil has driven economic development and social welfare, it has also led to slow progress in the diversification of the economy through innovation and entrepreneurship. The government currently faces a challenge in the population growth that exceeds the capacity of the labour market and higher education institutions (Khan and Almoharby, 2007). Figures show that 134,000 people are seeking jobs, and this figure is increasing (Alwatan, 2015) . With the threat of decreasing oil and gas resources and increasing unemployment rate, Oman has started to develop policies to diversify its economy and to move towards a knowledge-based economy. The situation has become more pressuring following the drop in oil prices.

2.3 Regulative dimension

The first dimension of institutional environment is the regulative pillar, or formal structural institutions, which can enable or impede entrepreneurial activities (Stenholm *et al.*, 2013).The following sections outline the main public policies, legislations and regulations that directly and indirectly influence entrepreneurship in Oman.

2.3.1 SME and entrepreneurship policy

SMEs are defined by the Omani government on the basis of number of employees or annual sales. There are three categories: micro, small, and medium enterprises. The criteria are as indicated in the following table:

Table 2-1: Criteria for SME definition

Criteria	**Micro**	**Small**	**Medium**
No. of employee	1-5	6-25	26-99
Annual sales (OMR[1])	Less than 100,000	From 100,000 to 500,000	From 500,000 to 3 millions

The Omani government developed several goals in its long-term plan 1996-2020 (i.e. Oman Vision 2020), focused on diversifying the sources of national income, developing human resources,

[1] 1 OMR = 2.6 USD

expanding the participation of the private sector in economic development, and increasing integration with the global economy (Atef and Al-Balushi, 2015). However, Oman Vision 2020 became outdated due to the developments that occurred in various sectors since its drafting, such as the decline in oil prices, and the rise of the tourism sector. Subsequently, in 2013, royal orders were given to draft Oman Vision 2040 (Malik, 2014). Although the eighth five-year plan (2011-2015) stressed the importance of the private sector and entrepreneurship, there was no clear national policy or framework to promote entrepreneurship (Buckley and Rynhart, 2011).

Only recently, a major breakthrough occurred in the national policy stressing the importance of SMEs and entrepreneurship development. As a result of the national symposium that was held in Seih Al-Shamikhat from 21 to 23 January 2013 (PASMED, 2014), a framework for SMEs development was designed and implemented. It marks a turning point towards building a favourable entrepreneurship environment in Oman. The symposium aimed at addressing the challenges that are faced by SMEs and involved all relevant actors in developing strategies to build a conducive entrepreneurship environment. There was wide participation from various stakeholders in the discussions, which covered four main pillars: ‘entrepreneurship mindset’, ‘business enablers’, ‘policies, legislations and regulations’, and ‘finance and investment’ (PASMED, 2014).

The outcomes of the symposium were endorsed directly by His Majesty, resulting in 14 binding decisions and further arrangements at different levels to reform the entrepreneurship landscape in Oman (See Appendix A for a list of the main directives). Several reforms have been directed in each of the 4 pillars of the symposium, including promoting entrepreneurial mindset in the society through education and media, revising legislations and regulations to be more favourable for SME, and facilitating entrepreneurial activities through EL programmes and financial support. One of main outcomes was the launch of the Public Authority for SME Development (PASMED) with objectives to foster SME development by all means, and to implement strategies to promote entrepreneurship culture. Additionally, the Al-Raffd Fund, which forms the funding arm for PASMED, was a major milestone in the funding sector in Oman. It unites all previous government SME funding programmes (e.g. *Sanad, Mawrid Rizq*, government loan guarantee program) under one government entity in order to achieve better facilitation and coordination (PASMED, 2014).

For PASMED, the first task was to ensure the implementation of the binding decisions of the SME Development Symposium. Therefore, another national symposium was held on 26-28 January, 2015 at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), to evaluate the progress of implementation of the decisions of the Seih Al-Shamikhat Symposium. This step indicates the seriousness of the government’s intention of building an effective SME sector. The SQU symposium revealed good progress in implementing the previous decisions (around 90%) (PASMED, 2014). The symposium also highlighted the challenges that persisted in facing entrepreneurs, which resulted in proposing more decisions that were enforced again by His Majesty. The articulated challenges included the unfavourable Omanisation requirements for SMEs (Omanisation policy is explained in the next section). Additionally, there were some poorly designed policies that warranted revision in the latter symposium, such as the criteria for the granting of leave for publicly employed entrepreneurs. Therefore, the major decisions included drafting a new law that takes into account all SME issues, speeding up the payments process for entrepreneurs, and exempting SME from Omanisation requirements in the initial years of venturing (Details of the new directives are drafted in Appendix A.3) (PASMED, 2014).

Despite the fact that Oman has undergone enormous reforms towards promoting entrepreneurship culture and building a conducive entrepreneurship environment, the efficacy of these reforms has not yet been put under scrutiny. For instance, who are the key players amongst the stakeholders who participated in the discussions? To what extent were the entrepreneurs involved in drafting these policies? To what extent can the new reforms develop a better environment for SME to flourish? Therefore, these policies need to be scrutinised and revisited to ensure better compliance with the dynamic market requirements and entrepreneurs' needs. This thesis takes some steps towards examining some of these policies, especially the ones that are concerned with SME identity and EL.

2.3.2 Omanisation policy

One of the main issues that affect the business operations in Oman is the Omanisation policy, which influences the labour market. Omanisation policy is, in brief, the process of substituting expatriates with Omani nationals throughout the public and private sectors with the aim of providing job opportunities for Omani youth (Al-Lamki, 1998). The Omanisation policy was launched officially by the Ministry of Manpower in 1996. The policy has been controversial as it puts a burden on start-up companies by setting an Omanisation requirement. It is considered costly to employ Omanis instead of expatriates, who are usually both highly-skilled and affordable. This problem became even more sophisticated after the amendments of the Omani Labor Law that increased the minimum wages for Omanis. Moreover, among many entrepeneurs, local people are considered less committed and less skilled (Kuehn and Al-Busaidi, 2000). The recent *Global Competitiveness Report 2016-2017* shows that inefficient labour market and limited educated workforce are amongst the major challenges to doing business in Oman (Schwab, 2016).

2.3.3 Legislations and regulations

The Commercial Law (Royal Decree 55/90), the Capital Market Law (Royal Decree 80/98) and Intellectual Property Rights Law are amongst the crucial legislations for the Omani entrepreneurship context. The independence, neutrality and sovereignty of the law is clearly emphasized in the Basic Law of the State (Al-Shanfari, 2010). The legislative and regulative institutions are considered well-established in Oman (Schwab, 2016). The legal structure is considered one of the major competitive factors of Oman. According to the Global Competitiveness Report 2016-2017, Oman is ranked 28 out of 138 nations in the *institutions* pillar. In 2014, it scored 7.2 in the *legal system and property rights* dimension (ranked 25 out of 159), and 7.9 in the *regulations* dimension (ranked 25 out of 159) of the Economic Freedom of the World index (Gwartney *et al.*, 2016). However, a slightly declining trend can be noticed since 2010 in the economic freedom of the world index. This is shown in the inefficiency and drawbacks in the enforcement process in the judicial system. According to *Doing Business Report 2017*, Oman suffers from inefficiency in terms of contract enforcement, and is ranked 60 out of 190. The report shows that the process of resolving commercial disputes in Oman involves 61 procedures and 598 days, and costs 13.5 % of the claim (World Bank, 2017). This can put off potential entrepreneurs. In terms of the level of investor protection, the *Global Competitiveness Report* 2016-2017 shows a declining trend for Oman as it scored 4.3 out of 10, with a ranking of 108 out of 138. This could be amongst the reasons for the reluctance of international entrepreneurs to establish businesses in Oman. As such, they may see hidden entrepreneurship practices as a better way to protect their businesses and earn money with less risk (See the first paper in Chapter 4).

Although, overall, the legal structure reflects a favourable environment for doing business, some legislation raises concerns for entrepreneurs. For example, legislations relating to innovative industries such as ICT or e-commerce need further developments to give entrepeneurs confidence to capitalize on the opportunities envisaged in this sector. In terms of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) law, Oman has undertaken many steps towards IPR protection as an obligation of membership of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (Al-Shanfari, 2010). Many laws have been issued by Royal Decrees for patents, trademark, industrial design, copy rights, and others. The IPR office is the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. Nevertheless, there is no clear enforcement mechanism of these laws. Another critical law that influences entrepreneurship is the bankruptcy law. The bankruptcy system in Oman can be harsh on failed entrepreneurs (Articles 602 and 604 of the Commercial Law). It favours the creditors against entrepreneurs. Those entrepreneurs facing bankruptcy lose their civil rights, and cannot have a public career. They are forbidden from being on the management board of any company. They lose all their assets and future income. Such legislation amongst others requires revision to build a conducive regulative environment (Al-Shanfari, 2010).

Anti-trust laws are also critical to ensure fair competition in the market in order to give entrepreneurs fair chance to succeed. The Omani market seems to suffer from inefficiency in this matter. In the *Global Competitiveness Report 2016-2017*, Oman scores low on the extent of intensity of local competition, extent of market dominance, and effectiveness of anti-monopoly laws (Schwab, 2016). This would indicate a dominance of a small group of businesses in the market. Yet, some positive steps have been shown recently. In July 2014, the Competition and Anti-Monopoly Law was issued (Royal Decree 67/2014), and significant amendments were made to the Commercial Agencies Law (Royal Decree 26/77) that removes exclusive rights from agencies. These laws are expected to liberalize the market and contribute towards efficiency. Also, they would offer more opportunities for local entrepreneurs.

Although Oman lacks efficiency in terms of competition, it scores well in the incentive provided for investors by the taxation system and the tax rate (Schwab, 2016). The *Tax Law* (Royal Decree 28/2009) specifies the corporate tax of only 12% which is payable only when the company income exceeds 30000 OMR. Also there is tax exception for the first 5 years of investment on specific sectors like manufacturing, mining, hotels, and tourism.

Regulations including procedures and their costs are amongst the critical factors that influence entrepreneurship environment. Oman is working hard to facilitate the entrepreneurship environment conditions. *Doing Business 2017* report ranked Oman 66th out of 190 nations in the list, a drop in the ranking as compared to 2014 where the general rank was 60. However, there is an indication of improvement in the procedures, time required and cost to start a business. In the pillar of *starting a business*, the *Doing Business 2017* report ranked Oman 23 out of 190 countries (i.e. Procedures = 4.5; Days required = 6.5; Minimum capital required = 0). According to Al-Shanfari *et al.* (2013), entrepreneurs in Oman suffer from a number of obstacles in regulations and procedures, especially for start-ups. There is an evident overlap and lack of coherence between some government institutions that are involved in SME development. Complexity of regulations and procedures and government red tape are amongst the biggest barriers facing entrepreneurs (Al-Shanfari *et al.*, 2013).The most critical factors that hamper business development in Oman are rigid labour regulations, lack of educated workforce, and government bureaucracy (Schwab, 2016). The difficulty of bureaucracy in Oman has been well-document in the literature (Dechant and Lamky, 2005).

What adds more complexity to the regulations is the corruption that exists in public and private institutions. Enforcement of regulations becomes problematic in such cases. The Corruption

Perceptions Index 2014, published by Transparency International, raises some concerns in the Omani public sector, ranking Oman 64 out of 175, scoring 45 out of 100. Corruption, whether it is bribery, *wasta* or any other forms, increases transactions costs for SME, hinder productive entrepreneurship, and distort market competition. On the other hand, evidence from transition economies shows that corrupt practices facilitate entrepreneurship activities because of the inefficient regulatory institutions in these context (Tonoyan *et al.*, 2010).

2.3.4 Key actors in the institutional environment

There are multiple key players in the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem. They include public and private entities along with the individual entrepreneurs and the community. The following table lists the main key actors in the public and private sector with indication of their role in the entrepreneurial context of Oman.

Table 2-2: Public and private actors in the entrepreneurial context of Oman

Key actor	Public/ Private	Policies design & co-ordination	Financial support	EL support	Other support (e.g. offices, licences, e-portals, etc.)
Ministry of Commerce and Industry	Public	✓		✓	✓
PASMED (Riyada)		✓		✓	✓
Al-Raffd Fund		✓	✓		
National Business Centre				✓	✓
Sas incubation programme				✓	✓
Ministry of Higher Education		✓		✓	
Ministry of Education		✓		✓	
Ministry of Manpower		✓			✓
The Research Council		✓		✓	
Ithraa					
Oman Central Bank		✓			

Ministry of Housing		✓			✓
Oman Technology Fund (OTF) (public-initiative)			✓		
Sharakah (public-initiative)			✓	✓	
Oman Development Bank			✓	✓	
Sultan Qaboos University				✓	
Colleges of Applied Sciences				✓	
Technical Colleges				✓	
Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry		✓		✓	✓
OMIFCO (*The Cell*)			✓	✓	✓
BankMuscat (*Al-Wathbah*)			✓	✓	
BP Oman (*Khazzan*)			✓	✓	
The Zubair Corporation (*Zubair SEC*)	**Private**		✓	✓	✓
Shell Oman (*Intilaaqah*)				✓	
Injaz Oman (NGO)				✓	
University of Nizwa (private)				✓	
University of Sohar (private)				✓	

One of the early entrepreneurial initiatives in Oman is the *Sanad* programme. It is a supporting programme launched in 2001 and managed by Ministry of Manpower. It aims to create employment for national youth by helping locals to open their own projects and providing them with funding and administrative and legal guidance (Khan and Almoharby, 2007). However, the directives of the Seih Al-Shamikhat Symposium reformed the program and shifted its administrative and financial resources to PASMED and Al-Raffd. Until 2011, *Sanad* sponsored 12000 projects, created 28000 job opportunities and served over 40,000 people (MOI, 2012). However, most of these projects focused mainly on opening a mimic businesses rather than having a creative product or process (Al-Shanfari, 2010).

One of the key entrepreneurship developments in Oman is the establishment of the Knowledge Oasis Muscat (KOM) which is overseen by the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (PEIE). KOM is a technology park which hosts a business incubator called National Business Centre (NBC). NBC supports start-up businesses by providing advice, training and many affordable facilities (PASMED, 2016). Through these facilities and support, NBC aims to transform the innovative ideas of entrepreneurs into competitive companies in the market. In the same location (i.e. KOM), the Information Technology Authority has established an ICT incubation programme (i.e. *Sas*). With almost the same services provided by the NBC, *Sas* aims to establish an ICT sector in accordance with eOman strategy which is overseen by the ITA (PASMED, 2016).

Injaz Oman is another key programme that works in collaboration with various public and private organisations to promote an entrepreneurship culture amongst university students. Intilaaqah, which was initiated by Shell Social Investment in 1995, also aims to create an entrepreneurship environment by helping Omani students to consider opening their own businesses. Both Injaz Oman and Intilaaqah provide four main services free of charge: training, counselling, workshops, and awards (INJAZ, 2016). Additionally, some prominent entrepreneurship support initiatives, such as the CELL and Zubair SEC, have been launched by the private sector (PASMED, 2016). The CELL, initiated by OMIFCO Company, and Zubair SEC, initiated by Al-Zubair Corporation, form part of their CSR strategy. Both programmes provide advice, training, and funding for aspiring entrepreneurs. Oman seems to have fair amount of entrepreneurship supporting programs; however, there are some concerns regarding the overlapping of these efforts, the extent of effectiveness of these programmes, and how they have been designed and delivered. In other words, do they really address entrepreneurs' needs?

Financial actors are key in any entrepreneurial ecosystem (Bowen and Clercq, 2008). According to *the Global Competitiveness 2014-2015*, the 'financial market development' ranking of Oman is 28 out of 144. However, this has dropped recently to 55 out of 138 as of 2016-2017, mainly due to a severe decline in the *legal rights index* (Schwab, 2016). This is despite government measures to build a stable financial environment. The Capital Market Authority (CMA) was established as a regulatory body to control the operations in the securities market. Moreover, Oman has a well-established network of banking services that are all overseen by the Central Bank of Oman. A major reform occurred in the banking system in 2011 when the Islamic banking system was given permission to start operation in the country. New Islamic banks such as Bank Nizwa and Al Izz Islamic Bank have been established. Following the Islamic trend, commercial private banks have also launched some Islamic products.

SMEs often find it hard to obtain finance from private banks due to the substantial collateral required by banks (e.g. lands, estates) (Al-Shanfari *et al.*, 2013). Information imperfection could impede the process of risk measuring and evaluation, and hence banks feel reluctant to issue loans to start-ups. However, Oman Development Bank (state-owned) issues loans up to 1 million OMR with a competitive interest rate of 3% (ODB, 2016). However, there are some restrictions and conditions that make it difficult sometimes for entrepreneurs to use these services, such as the Islamic value that forbids the interest rate. However, the new Islamic banking services are expected to give good opportunity for Omani aspiring entrepreneurs who previously resisted taking loans from commercial banks because of the interest rate.

Oman suffers in terms of providing seed capital to finance start-ups due to the immature venture capital industry. There are few funds in the country. The first one is *Funds for Development of Youth Projects*, which is referred to as 'Sharakah'. This is considered the first venture capital and was established in 1998 (Sharakah, 2016). The second venture capital company is GroFin. It is a multinational company that offers risk capital to SMEs in Oman. Currently, Al-Raffd, which was launched in 2013 after the Seih Al-Shamikhat symposium, is now the leader in funding most of SMEs. Recently, Oman Technology Fund (OTF) was launched. It is the largest venture capital fund (200 million USD) that target technology start-ups in Oman and the region (MuscatDaily, 2016).

2.4 Normative dimension

Values, norms and beliefs are critical factors that shape the behaviour of individuals (Scott, 1995; Busenitz *et al.*, 2000). . The values and expectations of the social reference group are found to be influential on entrepreneurship intentions (Krueger *et al.*, 2000). Social reference groups would include family, spouses, and friends and even at a wider context, the national culture. In this section, attention is given to the values, beliefs and norms that guide entrepreneurial behaviour amongst Omanis.

Social desirability for entrepreneurship as a profession is almost negative in Oman. This is because of several reasons including a risk intolerance culture, rewarding and secured jobs in public sector, and the lack of acknowledgement of successful entrepreneurs (Forstenlechner *et al.*, 2014; Atef and Al-Balushi, 2015). The Omani national culture is characterised by a high uncertainty avoidance, and this suggests limited societal support for risk takers (Al-Shanfari, 2010). For instance, entrepreneurs would find it hard to get financial support from family and friends. They may even find it hard to get married. Due to the limited entrepreneurial mindset, the society fails to appreciate high achieving entrepreneurs (Al-Shanfari *et al.*, 2013). In some cases, society perceives entrepreneurs as people who have failed to find jobs because of their incompetence, forcing them to open their own businesses to survive. Thus, the national culture at a higher level undermines entrepreneurs, and often, higher status is given to certain professions such as doctors, engineers, and academics (Varghese and Hassan, 2012).

Additionally, the collectivist nature of the Omani culture puts high pressure on those who attempt to refuse and escape the values of the social reference group, limiting the entrepreneurial intentions amongst Omani people. Social capital and networks, both social and entrepreneurial, are crucial in helping entrepreneurs recognise and exploit opportunities (De Carolis and Saparito, 2006; Aidis *et al.*, 2008). The collective culture of Oman offers a wide network for entrepreneurs, which could be an asset in supporting entrepreneurs. However, the wide social network could also apply negative pressure because of the negative perceptions of entrepreneurship as a career. On the other hand, Islamic values are conducive to entrepreneurship and self-employment (Audretsch *et al.*, 2013). According to the Islamic history, most of the prophets were self-employed. As Islam is the dominant religion in Oman, its values would be expected to support the entrepreneurial environment.

Nevertheless, entrepreneurship values and beliefs and expectations of social reference groups, could be promoted using proper media channels and an education system that takes into account entrepreneurship development (Verheul *et al.*, 2002). Until the launching of the National SME Development Symposium in 2013, entrepreneurship and SMEs were hardly articulated in Omani media in all types of channels, and limitedly taught in schools and HEI. The directives were clear in this matter. The same was regarding the education system. The directives were:

1. Broadcast various TV business and informative programs aiming at infusing the entrepreneurship mindset through the existing TV channels or to create a new business channel.

2. Include the entrepreneurship culture in the school curriculums and educational programs using up to date methods to infuse the entrepreneurship mindset in the Omani youth.

3. Provide entrepreneurship courses at various Higher Educational Institutes and to support, in cooperation with private sector, the student activities in the field of the entrepreneurship culture.

While these directives have been already implemented, their efficacy at creating a pro-entrepreneurial environment at the normative level warrants careful examination.

The literature shows some existing opportunities for entrepreneurial networking that are provided by different bodies such as PASMED, Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and NBC.

However, these efforts need to be examined and assessed (Khan and Almoharby, 2007). Additionally, in the current digitisation age, social capital has transformed to a digital form through social media and networking sites (Nambisan, 2016; Smith *et al.*, 2017). They provide vast amount of opportunities for entrepreneurs for networking, learning and building digital business models (The third paper discusses this topic in Chapter 6).

2.5 Cognitive dimension

Cognitive dimension relates to the individual perceptual assumptions that are based on the cognitive framework within which they interpret the information and formulate reality (Scott, 2014). In this context, the cognitive pillar is understood as the degree of confidence among Omanis such that they are able to visualize and seize opportunities, start their own businesses, and succeed. According to Al-Shanfari *et al.* (2013), Omanis' entrepreneurial behaviour is characterized by risk aversion. Omani people perceive career security as critical to gain legitimacy. Secured and rewarding public sector jobs are perceived as more attractive than the risk of being entrepreneurs (Varghese and Hassan, 2012). This indicates low risk tolerance amongst Omanis. Furthermore, there is a lack of role model entrepreneurs in the society, who are argued to be influential on entrepreneurial cognition (Aidis *et al.*, 2008). Omani society fails to acknowledge such successful entrepreneurs through media, educational institutions and other channels. This might have been reinforced by the limited entrepreneurial mindset in Oman. Such perceptions would limit the entrepreneurial cognition amongst Omani people.

The Omani government has devised a number of EL policies and programmes to enhance the entrepreneurial cognitive abilities and perceptions of Omani people. The following table illustrates the main public initiatives:

Table 2-3: Main EL programmes in Oman

Public Agency	Programme	Target
Ministry of Education	- Some basic business skills are implicitly included in the school curricula. - In 2013, a policy reform is launched aiming to include entrepreneurship concepts in school curricula and educational programmes	Primary Education level (Yr 1-10)
	- Some economics and business concepts are taught within the elective course of 'Applied Mathematics' course	Post-Primary Education level (Yr 11-12)

Public Agency	Programme	Target
	- Extra-curricular activities are offered and monitored by the National Centre for Career Guidance	All students (Yr 1-12)
Higher Education Institutions (HEI)	- As per the policy reform of 2013, entrepreneurship courses are offered to all students in all higher educational institutions - From 2013, student activities/clubs start to be implemented in the field of entrepreneurship - More entrepreneurship elective courses are offered within business/management discipline	Students within Higher Education Institutions
Public Authority for SME Development (Riyada)	- Provides financial, technical, administrative and legal consultancies - Enables the entrepreneurs to establish their own clubs, in which they can exchange ideas and experiences	Potential and existing SMEs
Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (PEIE)	- The National Business Centre (NBC) offers internal and external incubation services	Any start-ups
Information Technology Authority	- SAS incubation programme	ICT start-ups
	- Training programmes in ICT	Technical Omani citizens
The Research Council	- Industrial Innovation Centre is launched with the collaboration of PEIE to enhance the capacity of the industrial R&D	All Omani firms
Oman Development Bank	- Provides various consultancy services for SMEs	Potential and existing SMEs beneficiaries
Ithraa	- Provides advice on international export and investment	Firms aspiring to internationalisation

Cognitive abilities are argued to be influenced by the educational system and the various EL programmes (Verheul *et al.*, 2002; Commission, 2006). Education that is targeted towards promoting entrepreneurship would influence businesses with growth potential (Bowen and

Clercq, 2008). Further, most of the cognitive abilities and skills are gained from student-learning environments such as clubs and societies within the educational institutions that can enhance EL (Pittaway and Cope, 2007b; Pittaway *et al.*, 2011).This implies that education is critical to develop know-what and know-how, and thus entrepreneurial perceptions. In other words, graduates who receive such entrepreneurial education would be more confident at exploiting opportunities and starting new ventures. The Ministry of Education has been working steadily to upgrade the educational system to meet the future needs of social and economic development in Oman. Despite their efforts, the ministry have faced challenges at building an effective curriculum (Al-Shanfari, 2010). The quality of education in Oman remains questionable as the system fails to graduate a skilled and educated workforce (Schwab, 2016).

Furthermore, entrepreneurship materials are not very well incorporated in the school syllabus except in an optional basic math course in the last year (Grade 12) with more emphasis on business planning and basic economics (Al-Shanfari, 2010). However, in the recent SME reform, entrepreneurship materials are expected to be infused into the curriculum at all levels (PASMED, 2014). The Ministry of Education realises the importance of innovation and entrepreneurship and has started incorporating some developmental programmes. For example, some workshops have been conducted in schools by Injaz Oman (INJAZ, 2016). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education has launched a special centre called ‘National Centre for Career Guidance’, and it aims to support students in schools to make the right decision for their career life. As part of their activities, they build awareness and promote entrepreneurship culture among students. Moreover, the Educational Innovation Assistance Programs have been launched by The Research Council (TRC) with the aim to promote innovation in the public education sector (TRC, 2016). These programs encourage innovative thinking and empower students’ innovative abilities by offering training and facilities for teachers, supervisors and students.

In regards to the higher education system in Oman, little evidence is found of the quality and quantity of entrepreneurship courses and programmes for students. Entrepreneurship courses are limited and offered mainly for business students (Al-Shanfari, 2010). However, in the recent SME reform, there was a directive to teach a compulsory entrepreneurship course to all students. Yet, the design and delivery of this course would determine the effectiveness of this directive. Some efforts to develop entrepreneurship and innovation are evident in Sultan Qaboos University (the biggest university in Oman) (Khan and Almoharby, 2007). SQU has recently launched a department specializing in innovation development and technology transfer for the purpose of commercializing innovation and creating collaboration with the industry. Moreover, The Research Council has launched the Academic Innovation Assistance Project that aims to enhance academicians’ and students’ competence in innovation and entrepreneurship know-how (TRC, 2016). As for research, although it is considered an important element in the mission of all Omani universities and colleges, research efficiency remains vulnerable (Al-Shanfari, 2010). Overall, educational policies and strategies need to be revised to ensure effective inclusion and implementation of entrepreneurship courses and programmes and other associated enablers such as research. These are crucial to build entrepreneurial cognitive abilities in Omani people.

Overall, the regulative, normative and cognitive institutional environments have some unique elements that can strengthen the entrepreneurial ecosystem. However, there are considerable weaknesses that can hamper entrepreneurship development in Oman. The context of Oman shares some similarities with many other transition and emerging economies that have similar historical and sociocultural backgrounds. For example, transition economies such as Russia, Bulgaria and China face hurdles in entrepreneurship because of institutional voids, bureaucracy and corruption (Manolova and Yan, 2002; Aidis *et al.*, 2008; Tonoyan *et al.*, 2010; Sheng *et al.*, 2011). Entrepreneurs in such contexts often utilise informal institutions that are embedded in the socio-cultural environment (Manolova and Yan, 2002; Puffer *et al.*, 2010). *Blat* in Russia and *Guanxi* in China, concepts similar to *wasta* in Oman, are found to be key institutional elements in the normative environment to overcome failures in the regulatory institutions when pursuing entrepreneurship (Puffer *et al.*, 2010; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011; Su *et al.*, 2015). The institutional context of Oman is also similar to that of other Arab countries, especially to that of neighbouring Gulf nations (e.g. UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait) who share similarities in history, economy and culture (Alsahlawi, 2011). People in these countries often have a limited preference for self-employment because of the social contract that is created with the government who, on the other hand, feels obliged to create jobs for its citizens (Forstenlechner *et al.*, 2014). This study potentially generates insights that can be transferred to other contexts that share similarities with the institutional conditions of Oman.

2.6 Chapter summary

This chapter provided an overview of the institutional environment of Oman with an emphasis on the relevant institutions to entrepreneurship. The institutional environment, as seen in regulative, normative, and cognitive dimensions, revealed a number of favourable and unfavourable institutional conditions that shape the entrepreneurial context in Oman. The regulatory structure in Oman has increasingly developed and become more pro-entrepreneurship since 1970. However, there are some immature regulative elements that can hamper entrepreneurship development due the newness of the entrepreneurship policy reforms. Weaknesses appear in the legal enforcements, bureaucracy, rigid regulations, inefficient labour market, and immature entrepreneurship education and support policies. Further, a number of normative elements affect the entrepreneurial ecosystem, such as the collectivist culture that endorses commitments towards family, friends and tribe, the risk aversion culture, the lack of an entrepreneurial mindset, and undervaluing self-employment. At the cognitive level, the educational system has only recently turned to emphasising entrepreneurship education and programmes. This has resulted in graduating students with limited entrepreneurial intentions, and skills for many years. The interplay between the institutions at these three levels can generate different implications to entrepreneurship in Oman and similar contexts.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Each paper in this thesis has it is own methodology section, to provide insight into how the data and analysis for that paper was conducted. However, the aim of this chapter is to provide a much more detailed account of the underlying philosophical and methodological approaches, techniques and procedures used in the thesis as a broader body of research (Gephart, 2004; Leitch *et al.*, 2009). The main aim of the thesis is to examine the influence of the institutional environment on entrepreneurial activities in Oman. The thesis presents three papers that follow a rigorous process of interpretive qualitative inquiry, and which draw upon a purposive sample of 44 active local entrepreneurs and stakeholders, who were then interviewed in-depth. The generated data was enriched and triangulated with publicly available secondary sources. The data was analysed and interpreted using a thematic approach, with the findings reported in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

This chapter begins by outlining the philosophical paradigms, particularly the interpretive paradigm and the rationale for its use in the thesis. This is followed by a detailed justification for choosing a qualitative approach, before introducing the context of my three papers. The chapter then provides a detailed description of the research approach, which includes a discussion of the research design, describing the study context and determining the unit of analysis in each study, the sampling and data collection methods employed in the research project, and the analysis approach and procedure. The chapter then discusses the ethical considerations and precautions that were undertaken during the research process. Finally, the chapter concludes with a detailed evaluation of the research, its weaknesses and how they were addressed.

3.2 Philosophical paradigms

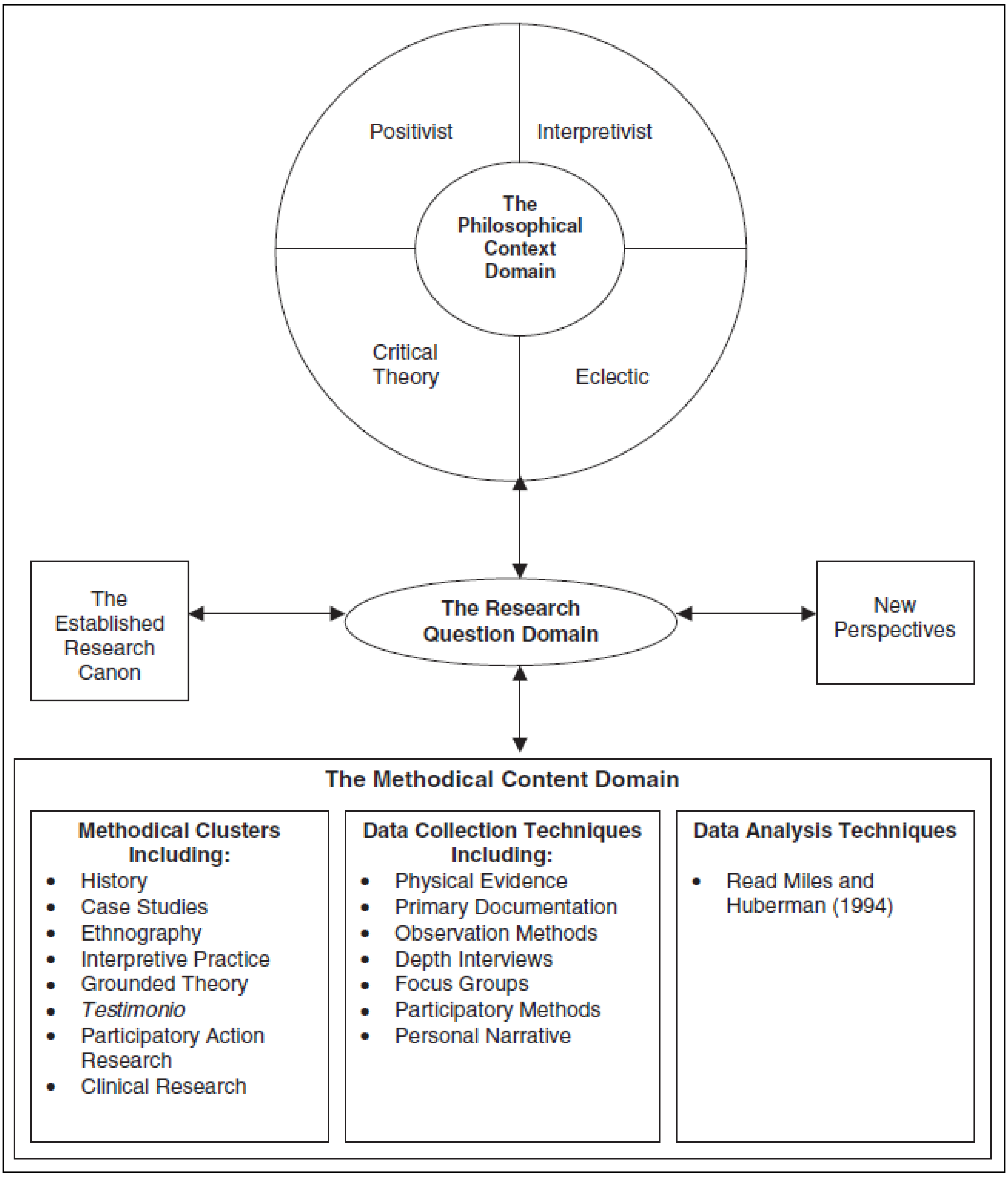
3.2.1 Relevance of philosophical paradigm

Determining the philosophical paradigm in which the research is situated is necessary to establish meaningful insights to the reader of the thesis, and to eliminate any philosophical confusion. Burrell and Morgan (1979: 24) explain that being located in a particular paradigm means ‘to view the world in a particular way’. It is the underpinning assumptions of this philosophical paradigm which informed the process of the research inquiry from start to finish. As argued by Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2008), the quality of management research and the research design are determined by the ability of researcher to think through the philosophical assumptions during the research process. Therefore, I made sure that my chosen paradigm reflects how the three papers have been designed, how the data was both collected and analysed, and how the research findings were presented (Creswell, 2013a).

However, before providing a detailed account of the philosophical stance and assumptions, we should allude to the historical and continuous debate between philosophers in the social sciences with regard to the nature of the social world, the extent to which one can know about this reality, and how one can arrive at this knowledge (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). The underlying assumptions regarding these elements have grouped scholars into various schools of thought that sometimes overlap and contradict with each other (Patton, 2015). While acknowledging these debates and the variations in these schools of thought, the aim is not to discuss the history of these philosophical debates, nor to take part in these seemingly never-ending ‘paradigm wars’ (Punch, 2013). The aim is, instead, to discuss the main paradigms in the social sciences and to provide the rationale for why our chosen paradigm has been selected to inform our research.

For this purpose, we draw on the useful lens posited by Hindle (2004), which is acknowledged by other scholars (e.g. Bagheri and Pihie, 2010; Klotz *et al.*, 2014). Hindle (2004: 575) calls it ‘the canonical development approach’ (CDA); it is depicted in Figure 3-1, below. It is considered to be a map that links three main components in the research process: ‘the philosophical context domain’, ‘the research questions domain’, ‘the methodical content domain’. He emphasized the reciprocal and iterative relationships between all the three principle components.

Figure 3-1 A Canonical Development Framework for choosing qualitative research methods (Extracted from Hindle (2004))



Starting from the philosophical context domain, the choice is simplified into four generic research paradigms. The philosophical context is classified into Neuman (2000)'s three popular categories: positivism, interpretivism, critical theory, and the fourth paradigm is an eclectic, or hybrid, between the former three. The choice depends on the assumptions that we hold with regards to the four main elements. These dimensions are often referred to as ontology, epistemology, axiology and the believed logic of inquiry (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Hindle, 2004). In brief, ontology relates to what a social scientist understands by the nature of reality; epistemology relates to the nature of knowledge of the social world and how it should be acquired, axiology is concerned with the role of values in acquiring the truth, and the logic of inquiry is a 'researchers' beliefs about what constitutes a generally legitimate logic of inquiry' (Hindle, 2004: 580).

3.2.2 Rationale for choosing interpretive paradigm

The assumptions were considered in relation to the nature of the research problem. As the overarching aim of the thesis was to examine the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Oman through an institutional lens, the interpretivist paradigm was deemed to be an appropriate lens that could enable unpacking the entrepreneurial practices as understood by the relevant social actors (i.e. entrepreneurs and stakeholders). Interpretivism resulted from the belief that only through interpretation the social world can be comprehended (Johnson, 1987; Johnson, 2013). Interpretivism is 'a direction in social science that focuses on human beings and their way of interpreting and making sense of reality' (Holloway, 1997: 93). Max Weber and Wilhelm Dilthey have been associated with this direction. They stress the relevance of human experience in the surrounding context in social research.

This direction suits the three papers due to the nature of the papers' aims to seek in-depth *understanding* of the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs and emerging contemporary EL practices. As the burgeoning literature emphasises the complexity of the entrepreneurship phenomenon (e.g. Gartner and Birley, 2002; Neergaard and Ulhøi, 2007; Suddaby *et al.*, 2015), not all techniques, such as the ones used in the natural world, can assist in apprehending the complexities of the social world (Walker, 1985). An interpretive lens can facilitate depth and a holistic understanding of entrepreneurship activities (Hindle, 2004).

Moreover, the research falls within two key concepts; entrepreneurship and institutions. The literature shows that both concepts evolve in a way that makes the interpretive paradigm an apt lens to understand the issues studied within these two concepts. For instance, Jack and Anderson (2002) show in their study how entrepreneurship is embedded within the social context, which makes it evolutionary and interdependent. In this sense, entrepreneurs and social actors co-construct the reality of opportunities and entrepreneurship through various interactions and manipulations in the social context.

From the institutional perspective, Scott (2014) states that the meanings of institutions are generated through human interactions and, hence, they are preserved and changed through social actions. These human interactions generate 'rules such as regulatory structures, governmental agencies, laws, courts, professions, and scripts and other societal and cultural practices'(Bruton *et al.*, 2010: 422). Therefore, both entrepreneurship and institutional concepts indicate a relativist ontology that entails interacting with the members of the entrepreneurial community and living the experience in order to interpret and consolidate the meanings held by all these members, to generate a meaningful understanding that is reflective of their reality (e.g. hidden entrepreneurship and EL) (Lincoln *et al.*, 2011).

The interpretivist paradigm is often used interchangeably with the term 'constructivism' (Guba and Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln *et al.*, 2011), despite some epistemological differences regarding the objectivity of the subjective experience (Schwandt, 1998). For simplicity we keep the term 'interpretivist' herewith, as our generic philosophical paradigm, as proposed in the CDA framework (Hindle, 2004).

3.2.3 Why not other paradigms?

Positivist and post-positivist positions were deemed inappropriate for this research, as they use a natural science philosophical approach and treat the collected data objectively, since the researcher is considered to be independent and external to the reality (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). I found these positions less appropriate to this subject of study because unless we immerse into the subjects and interpret their meanings and the processes through which they construct their realties, it would be hard to answer the '*how*' questions that we seek to answer in the papers (See Chapter 1) (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011b). I question the assumptions that there are clear rules and laws that govern the phenomena under study (Hughes, 1976). The newness of the topic that I am examining (e.g. hidden entrepreneurship) required me to immerse myself in the context to understand how the examined phenomena unfolded. Also, Bruno and Tyebjee (1982: 306) believe that:

> 'Research methodologies that link objective environmental characteristics to organizational start-ups ignore the crucial role of the entrepreneur's subjective interpretation. Research must address the terms in which the entrepreneurs assess the environment, the relative weight they give to its different aspects, and the information they use for evaluation.'

A critical theory stance also did not suit the research aim, as it focuses on 'the critique and transformation of the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender structures that constrain and exploit human kind, by engagement in confrontation, even conflict'(Guba and Lincoln, 1998: 211). While critical theorists are consistent with my interpretivist assumptions on the ontological belief of subjective reality, they contrast with them in the aim of inquiry, and the role of the inquirer in the research process. Critical theorists tend to take the role of a 'transformative intellectual', aiming for critique and transformation (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). This differs from the aims of this study, which sought to understand how realities are constructed (e.g. how hidden entrepreneurs are perceived by active entrepreneurs and stakeholders?; how does digitization emerge as a dominant logic in the EL context of Oman). To construct these realities, I had to take the role of 'passionate participant' who could facilitate the reconstruction of these realities (Guba and Lincoln, 2005: 194). By doing so, I acknowledge that I was value-laden, and influenced by my background and perspectives (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

3.2.4 Interpretive paradigm in the three papers

Hindle (2004) posits the research questions context at the centre of the canonical development framework, which determines both the appropriate philosophical lens and methodological choices. Also, Karatas-Ozkan *et al.* (2014) emphasize the need to make a clear elucidation of the connection between the paradigmatic position and the nature of research problems. Hence, I illuminate these linkages in all the three papers that contribute to this thesis. In all papers we used the approach whereby the subjective multiple realities of the social world is acknowledged. The approach requires the researcher to engage with the subjects and interact with the social actors within their contextual settings in order to interpret the meanings that they have regarding the phenomenon that is studied.

For example, in the first paper, the focus was to examine the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs. The research questions were exploratory in nature, with no intention to establish causal relationships (e.g. who are hidden entrepreneurs and how do they manage to straddle the formal and informal economies?). In the second paper, the aim was to construct the reality of EL programmes by interacting with Omani entrepreneurs and other relevant stakeholders and interpreting their perceptions and experiences, through which we could generate an understanding of how formal EL programmes are influenced by institutional dynamics. In this context, Hannon (2006) argues that every actor in entrepreneurship education context can have a different perception and meaning of social reality.

The interpretive stance was also useful in the third paper, where entrepreneurs were viewed as social actors who construct the meaningfulness of their learning approach through the experiences, perceptions, values and beliefs that they have regarding the prevailing social capital and digitisation logics, which are inextricably linked in the context of EL. Interpreting the narratives of entrepreneurs as well as stakeholders enabled us to construct the reality of EL within the co-existing heterogeneous logic. In all the papers, there was no intention to validate a particular theory. Rather, central to the aims was what Cope (2005: 167) suggests as developing a 'bottom-up interpretive theories that are inextricably "grounded" in the lived-world'.

Given the nature of the study's research questions and the philosophical interpretivist paradigm, the research was consequently informed by a qualitative approach using an 'interpretive practice' methodical cluster (Hindle, 2004; Holstein and Gubrium, 2011b). Before providing the rationale for employing 'interpretive practice', it is necessary to discuss the context and development of interpretive qualitative research in the entrepreneurship field.

3.3 Interpretive qualitative inquiry in entrepreneurship research

Qualitative research aims to comprehend the meanings, perceptions, and experiences of the participants within their natural settings to construct a meaningful understanding of the social phenomenon (Neergaard and Ulhøi, 2007). Quantitative research, on the other hand, aims to discover causal relationships and achieve objectivity by investigating phenomena using numerical data that is suitable for mathematical analysis (Creswell, 2013b). Entrepreneurship literature has often deployed quantitative, rather than qualitative methodologies, which caused a failure to generate an indigenous theory of entrepreneurship that delineates it from strategic management theory (Suddaby, 2014; Suddaby *et al.*, 2015). Despite the growing calls for an increased adoption of qualitative approaches in entrepreneurship research, the field is still dominated by positivist research with its associated quantitative approaches (Gartner and Birley, 2002; Hindle, 2004; Neergaard and Ulhøi, 2007; Leitch *et al.*, 2009; Karatas-Ozkan *et al.*, 2014; Suddaby *et al.*, 2015).

Studies have emphasised the need for openness when evaluating methodological approaches (Hindle, 2004). Researchers are warned to avoid debating which methodological approach is more credible (qualitative vs. quantitative) when, instead, they should be open-minded and appreciate all philosophical and methodical perspectives (Hindle, 2004). Methodological approaches should be looked at as complements, rather than substitutes, when studying the entrepreneurship phenomenon (Gartner and Birley, 2002). While acknowledging the influential role of quantitative research in advancing the entrepreneurship field, Karatas-Ozkan *et al.* (2014) challenge the domination of this positivist approach in theorising entrepreneurship, and call for more diversity in methodological designs. Gartner and Birley (2002: 387) believe that 'many substantive issues in entrepreneurship are rarely addressed, and that many of the important questions in entrepreneurship can only be asked through qualitative methods and approaches'.

Similarly, Welter *et al.* (2016) and Chell and Karatas-Ozkan (2014) argue that entrepreneurship is a multi-faceted phenomenon that should not be reduced to one special case of entrepreneurship. For example, considering the hidden entrepreneurship practices that we study in the first paper (Chapter 4), they fit within the informal entrepreneurship research area that is called a 'missing piece in the entrepreneurship jigsaw puzzle' (Welter *et al.*, 2015). 'Part of why the field is so exciting is that we remain in exploratory mode, needing to observe, assess, and understand the full range and richness of differences and variations that flourish around us' (Welter *et al.*, 2016: 8). Qualitative methods can contribute to the methodological diversity that Welter *et al.* (2016) call for in order to understand 'the other'. Gartner and Birley (2002) doubt the ability of quantitative studies to generate a meaningful understanding of the entrepreneurship process and entrepreneurs' behaviour as experienced and lived, particularly because entrepreneurs are the 'outliers' in the community. Additionally, Bygrave (1989) believes that 'entrepreneurship begins with a disjointed, discontinuous, nonlinear (and usually unique event) that cannot be studied successfully with methods developed for examining smooth, continuous, linear (and often repeatable) processes.'

Therefore, the importance of qualitative approaches for the development of the entrepreneurship field has been continuous. For example, there have been calls for qualitative research in special issues of some elite entrepreneurship journals, such as the special issues of the *Journal of Business Venturing* in 2002 (Gartner and Birley, 2002) and 2015 (Suddaby *et al.*, 2015), and the special issue of the *Journal of Small Business Management* (Karatas-Ozkan *et al.*, 2014). Also, the book edited by Neergaard and Ulhøi (2007) entitled '*Handbook of qualitative research methods in entrepreneurship*' has influenced the qualitative interest in entrepreneurship research .

As discussed, the extant entrepreneurship literature shows ample opportunities for the development of entrepreneurship theory which can be exploited through qualitative methodologies. In this thesis, and through the three qualitative papers, I attempt to contribute to bridging this methodological gap. The overall research contributes methodologically by extending entrepreneurship research and exploring new dimensions and processes (i.e. hidden entrepreneurship, contemporary EL practices) within entrepreneurship by employing qualitative methods that are less used in the extant literature. The research aims were inclined to generate insights into the world from the perspective of those studied, by answering questions related to 'how' rather than 'how many', which made qualitative research more suitable for answering the research problems (Pratt, 2009).

3.4 Qualitative inquiry design in the context of the three papers

Gephart (2004: 458) alludes to the regular failure of qualitative researchers to convey sufficient details of the research design and process to the audience, and 'how research practices transform observations into data, results, findings and insights'. Also, Leitch *et al.* (2009: 7) note that entrepreneurship researchers following the interpretivist paradigm should provide a detailed account of the research process and design, in order to give the reader the opportunity to measure the rigor and integrity of the research findings. Responding to these calls, we aim in the next sections to elucidate our design, the step-by-step procedures in the sampling, data collection and analysis, and reflect on the ethical and quality issues within our research.

3.4.1 Research approach

Within qualitative research, numerous theoretical positions have been developed. They hold different ontological and epistemological assumptions, focus on answering different types of questions and employ different methods. The overlap and contradictions that are exhibited in these schools of thought make it impossible to have a definitive way to categorise these philosophical and theoretical positions (Patton, 2002). Examples of these qualitative traditions are ethnography, phenomenology, case study, constructionism, grounded theory, and hermeneutics, among several others (Crotty, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The development of these qualitative approaches can only be seen as continuous and ‘ever expanding’ (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2013a).

Given the interpretive philosophical paradigm, the nature of the research aims and the existing literature (See Chapters 1, 4, 5, 6), all the three papers were informed by an ‘interpretive practice’ approach (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011b), which is a particular variant of constructionist research (Crotty, 1998; Blaikie, 2007). Similar to most interpretive qualitative traditions, constructionist research benefits from elements from other projects, such as social phenomenology (Schutz, 1967, 1970), social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), and ethnomethodology (Heritage, 1984), for the purpose of answering questions related to ‘the agentic processes – *the hows*- by which social reality is constructed, managed and sustained’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011b: 342). However, the constructionist analytics of interpretive practice revive questions related to the *whats* of social reality. Hence, it is concerned with both *how* the social actors construct their experiences and their world, and *what* are the contextual conditions that inform their social reality. In other words, it seeks to add questions relating to what the roles of cultural and institutional contexts are in shaping and informing social activities (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011b). The interpretive practice approach is defined as ‘the constellation of procedures, conditions, and resources through which reality is apprehended, understood, organised, and conveyed in everyday life’(Holstein, 1993; Gubrium and Holstein, 1997; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; 2011b: 342).

As entrepreneurship is considered to be a socially constructed phenomenon (Steyaert, 2007; Drakopoulou Dodd *et al.*, 2013), it was important to unpack the social construction of this phenomenon. Therefore, interpretive practice was a particularly useful approach for the research, as the focus is on both elements of the *hows* and *whats* of social reality. The research sought to both understand *how* entrepreneurial activities (i.e. hidden entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial learning) are carried out, and *what* roles are played by the institutional context of Oman in shaping these practices.

Moreover, the emerging practices that we studied, such as the notion of hidden entrepreneurship, contemporary EL practices using digitisation institutional logic, the role of religious values and wasta in EL, are rarely discussed in the literature in the context of the study (See Chapters 4-6). This can be attributed to the limited number of studies that have examined emerging countries, and the Omani context in particular (Bruton *et al.*, 2008). The status of prior studies positions the research within the 'nascent' category in the three archetypes of methodological fit in field research that is posited by Edmondson and McManus (2007). The other two categories are 'intermediate' and 'mature'. Edmondson and McManus (2007) called for methodological fit or internal consistency between the various elements of a research project (e.g. research questions, prior research, design, collected data and analysis, and theoretical contribution). They focused on the state of prior research to posit a framework that can guide the methodological choice and consistency. To them, pure qualitative research is more suitable for nascent exploratory studies (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). As the research problems were not based on sufficient prior understanding (Bruton *et al.*, 2008; Nambisan, 2016; Welter *et al.*, 2016), the qualitative approach was more appropriate to explore the phenomena in its nascent stage.

Qualitative naturalistic inquiry design was particularly useful for the research, as it enabled studying the phenomena within in their natural setting, by using the meanings and experiences of the social actors who were involved in these phenomena (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The qualitative design provided us with flexibility to accept any element that might emerge through the data collection, data analysis and interpretation process (Schultz and Hatch, 1996). Qualitative research was more valuable than quantitative methods, as it provided 'description and understanding of the actual human interactions, meanings, and processes that constitute real-life organizational settings' (Gephart, 2004: 455). For instance, when examining the illegal practices of hidden entrepreneurship, the paper sought to understand the role of the institutional environment in the emergence of these practices, and how entrepreneurs and stakeholders perceived the effects of these illegal practices. Therefore, I had to interact with these social actors to generate a meaningful understanding of this phenomenon. Similarly, when studying the EL programmes in the second paper, and the informal EL approaches in the third paper, qualitative research allowed us to understand the EL process through the experiences and perceptions of the learners and educators, who were the social actors involved in the construction of the EL reality.

Alternatively, the research could have employed quantitative approaches to establish some causal relationships between the various indicators of the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Oman (e.g. firms' performance, size, quantity) and some institutional variables (e.g. indicators for cognitive level, regulatory environment)(Stenholm *et al.*, 2013). However, predefining these variables is questionable, as emerging economies are characterised by unique institutional dynamics that are less transferable to a developed context (Puffer *et al.*, 2010; Webb *et al.*, 2014). If the study followed approaches such as surveying entrepreneurs, it would not have provided evidence for the emergence of 'hidden entrepreneurship' in the context of Oman. Therefore, quantitative approaches were considered to be less appropriate for this research, which aimed mainly for exploratory understanding. In other words, the attention was primarily on 'an inherently literary and humanistic focus' rather than mathematical and statistical knowledge that is associated with quantitative research (Gephart, 2004: 455).

3.4.2 Inductive approach to a degree

Research has often been divided into deductive and inductive approaches (Ormston *et al.*, 2013). The deductive approach, which is usually associated with quantitative methods, is known to start with theory and hypotheses and tries to test them, whereas the inductive approach involves building up a theory based on the data collected (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). Although qualitative approaches are widely considered to be inductive in nature (Gephart, 2004), this is rather a misleading depiction (Ormston *et al.*, 2013). I draw upon many scholars who reject the dualistic depiction of inductive vs deductive by arguing that there is no pure inductive research (Patton, 2002; Blaikie, 2007; Ritchie *et al.*, 2013). Patton (2002: 67) notes that 'conducting holistic-inductive analysis and implementing naturalistic inquiry are always a matter of degree'.

As such, I took an inductive stance but not a pure one, because I had to work deductively at some stages of the research process (Patton, 2002). For instance, in the context of the first paper, the attention to the hidden entrepreneurship emerged only after the preliminary analysis of the initial pilot interviews that I conducted. As a result, the subsequent interview questions had to be changed to reflect the new findings. Also, during the analysis process, there were new themes emerging that warranted attention, and required more follow-up interviews. An example is apparent in the third paper, when the 'digitisation' theme emerged as an influential institutional logic in the context of informal EL. During the whole process, the assumptions that I held as a result of prior readings and experience informed the data collection and data analysis process, as I will describe later (Ormston *et al.*, 2013). In a nutshell, the research involved both inductive and deductive approaches throughout the enquiry process.

3.4.3 Defining context and unit of analysis

Defining the context is important to determine the boundaries of the phenomenon under study and to outline what will not be studied (Miles et al., 2013). The context of the research was the entrepreneurial context of Oman, or what can be referred to as the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Oman. Mason and Brown (2014: 5) define an entrepreneurial ecosystem as 'a set of interconnected entrepreneurial actors (both potential and existing), entrepreneurial organisations…, institutions …and entrepreneurial processes…which formally and informally coalesce to connect, mediate and govern the performance within the local entrepreneurial environment'. This definition is useful to outline the boundaries of the research context in the three papers of the thesis.

Given the definition of the unit of analysis, which is the entity or phenomenon that is being examined in the study (Babbie, 2015), this research considered the unit of analysis to be the whole entrepreneurial ecosystem and its actors who affected, and were affected by, the institutional configurations. According to Yin (2013), the unit of analysis reflects the focus of the research questions. Revisiting the research questions of the three papers, each paper focuses on phenomenon in relation to the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem. The first paper examines the emergence of hidden entrepreneurship practices as a result of institutional configurations and how such practices influence other actors within the Omani context. The second paper examines the EL programmes, how they are influenced by the institutional dynamics, and how institutional components reinforce each other. The third paper considers the influence of institutional logics in shaping entrepreneurs' learning practices. As such, individuals, organisations and institutions are inextricably interconnected in the context of the research.

It is important to acknowledge the difficulty of abstracting individual entrepreneurs from their surrounding context in entrepreneurial studies. Hindle (2004: 584) states that 'individual entrepreneurs do not live and operate in vacuums'. Additionally, Jack and Anderson (2002) allude to the embeddedness of entrepreneurs in their social environment, that constrains their actions and, hence, they attempt to manipulate these constraints in order to benefit from them. Therefore, all three papers draw upon the argument that entrepreneurs operate within a complex system that should be looked at as a whole (Bygrave, 1989).

> 'And I am certain that we cannot separate entrepreneurs from their actions. After all in a start-up company, the entrepreneur and the company are one and the same … We should avoid reductionism in entrepreneurship research. Instead we should look at the whole.'
>
> **(Bygrave, 1989)**

As such, qualitative design was useful as 'it is open to unanticipated events, and it offers holistic depictions of realities that cannot be reduced to a few variables'(Gephart, 2004: 455). The strength of qualitative research is that it considers multiple units of a program holistically (Patton, 2002). Therefore, it was important to consider the perceptions and experiences of all accessible relevant individuals who could provide a holistic illuminative understanding of the phenomenon under study. Babbie (2015) reminds us that the unit of analysis should not be confused with the unit of observation, as the latter defines the units that we draw the data from. In all the three studies the data was drawn from legitimate active Omani entrepreneurs, together with individuals who represented the stakeholders within the entrepreneurial context of Oman, who were involved in, or knowledgeable about, the phenomenon under study. They included officials from SMEs' development government bodies, representatives from financial institutions, educational institutions, incubation programmes, acceleration programmes, private entrepreneurship CSR initiatives, and business associations. The next section outlines in detail the research sample, the sampling procedure, and the data collection process.

3.4.4 The sample and sampling techniques

Qualitative research is different from quantitative research in that it focuses on a smaller sample, which is administered in-depth to generate insights into the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2002). While quantitative research relies on probability sampling, purposeful sampling is key in naturalistic qualitative inquiry, in which cases are selected because they are 'illuminative' and 'information rich', which can provide useful insights into the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). As explained by Saunders *et al.* (2009), purposive (judgmental) sampling enables the researcher to use their own judgment regarding which cases are more appropriate to be included in the sample and will generate the right data to meet the research objectives. Patton (2002) lists and describes 16 strategies for purposeful sampling which a naturalistic inquirer can use to draw the research sample. However, these methods are not mutually exclusive, as researchers can employ more than one strategy to enable them to collect the appropriate and information-rich data that can answer the research questions.

In our research, given our naturalist inquiry design, multiple purposeful techniques were employed to ensure recruiting information-rich participants to be interviewed, who could provide an insightful and holistic understanding of the phenomenon in each study. The following table describes these techniques and the rational for their use.

Table 3-1: Sampling techniques employed in the three papers (Drawn from Patton, 2002: 243)

Sampling technique	Purpose	Rationale in our context
Intensity sampling	Information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely.	The familiarity to the field and my prior knowledge of the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem allowed me to select cases that I believed could illuminate the phenomenon under study (i.e. hidden entrepreneurship, EL programmes).
Maximum variation sampling (heterogeneity)	Aims to capture and describe central themes that cut across a great deal of variation.	Cases included individuals who represented various actors in the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem. (e.g. entrepreneurs, government bodies, educational institutions, financial institutions, etc.). We used this technique to achieve variability and to meet the research objectives by looking in a holistic way at the phenomenon. For instance, it was important to consider the various perspectives of entrepreneurs as well as stakeholders regarding the hidden entrepreneurship practices, in order to capture common themes that explained the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs and their effects on the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Chapter 4). Also, in the second paper (Chapter 5), as the focus was on EL programmes, it was important to capture the experiences of the educators as well as entrepreneurs, in order identify unique, diverse or common themes from different actors.

Homogeneous sampling	Focus; reduce variation; simplify analysis	To achieve in-depth understanding of the phenomenon from each perspective, we recruited a number of participants from each category. For example, we recruited a number of incubated entrepreneurs; a group of non-incubated entrepreneurs; multiple government officials; a number of financial institutions; a number of entrepreneurship support programmes.
Snowball or chain sampling	An approach to identify information-rich key informants by sampling people who knew people who knew which cases were information-rich.	This was very crucial to our study, as on many occasions we relied on the participants to refer us to active Omani entrepreneurs in the market, as finding active ones who were not engaging in hidden practices was challenging. There were also incidents where we had to rely on friends to facilitate access to some key informants, such as government officials at senior levels. Also, in some organisations where I was not aware of the structure, I benefited from suggestions by some participants to guide me to other key informants in the same organisation. Additionally, this was particularly useful in the second study, as we needed to ensure selecting entrepreneurs who had some experience of formal EL programmes. Therefore, we relied on the EL programme managers to suggest some names from their beneficiaries.

In order to provide a holistic account of the phenomena in the three papers, the sample included individuals who represented a variety of actors in the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Oman. For the purpose of addressing the research questions of all three papers, the sample included:

- Omani entrepreneurs running a variety of businesses to capture wide variation (Eisenhardt, 1989).They were the key actors in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. I made sure that they were the SMEs' owners and managers, as there are many Omani entrepreneurs who engage in hidden practices, who have a passive role in the firm. I also ensured that they had some experience of formal EL programmes to provide rich details of these programmes. Also, one would-be entrepreneur (who currently owns a successful business) was interviewed to provide some insights from nascent entrepreneur perspective. As they were the key focus of the study, their perceptions and experiences of the surrounding institutional setting were important to generate insights into the influence of the institutional environment on the entrepreneurial activities in Oman.

- Government officials, who were selected from a variety of managerial levels to provide different perceptions of the phenomenon under study, and to allow for triangulation to identify any conflicting information. They were selected from the main government agencies that are key actors in the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem, such as PASMED (Riyada), Al-Rafd, the Ministry of Education, and the Information Technology Authority. Interviewing these participants was useful to generate insights into the regulative dimension of the Omani institutional environment.
- Participants representing the higher educational institutions, together with government officials from the Ministry of Education, representing the primary (schooling) education. Their insights were important for providing a detailed account of the primary and higher education system and entrepreneurship educational courses and programmes.
- Participants from a variety of public and private incubation programmes and entrepreneurial support initiatives. They are core in any entrepreneurial context, including the Omani context. Their insights into entrepreneurship development were important, especially regarding EL.
- Participants from financial institutions. They represented banks and venture capital firms. They were crucial in the study because they offered finance as well as support to entrepreneurship development, and had initiated a number of entrepreneurship development programmes. Therefore, their perceptions were important for providing a holistic view of the phenomenon.
- A participant representing the Omani business association, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. He was useful for providing a detailed account of the general voice of Omani entrepreneurs and how they are influenced by the various institutional elements.
- A participant from a consultancy firm that provides technical solutions to SMEs. As consultancies are very limited in the Omani context, I was able to interview only one participant for the purpose of providing an essence of the role of consultancies in entrepreneurial development, and how they perceive the SMEs and the overall entrepreneurial ecosystem.

As the process of data collection and analysis is iterative and ongoing (Patton, 2015), the first study included thirty-eight participants and then the second paper involved an addition of one new participant during the follow-up interviews, while the third paper involved an addition of another five participants during the research process. The total sample for the whole research project was forty-four participants. The following table provides a detailed account of all 44 participants, their codes, their descriptions, duration of the interviews, and the mode of interview. For ethical and anonymity considerations, only brief details of participants are provided.

Table 3-2: Participants and interviews details

Participant Category	Participant Code	Participant Description	Mode of Interview	Duration of Interview (minutes)
Entrepreneurs	Ent-01	Entrepreneur in technical solutions & consultancy	Face to face	106
	Ent-02	Entrepreneur in scientific solutions & consultancy	Face to face	45
	Ent-03	Entrepreneur in advertising	Face to face	137
	Ent-04	Entrepreneur in design	Face to face	146
	Ent-05	Entrepreneur in IT solutions	Face to face	58
	Ent-06	Entrepreneur in IT solutions	Face to face	92
	Ent-07	Entrepreneur in IT solutions	Face to face; Email; WhatsApp	131
	Ent-08	Entrepreneur in IT solutions	Face to face	128
	Ent-09	Entrepreneur in design	Face to face	70
	Ent-10	Entrepreneur in design	Face to face	120
	Ent-11	Entrepreneur in E-business	Face to face	87
	Ent-12	Entrepreneur in technical solutions & consultancy	Face to face, Email	97
	Ent-13	Entrepreneur in games development	Face to face	36
	Ent-14	Entrepreneur in IT solutions	Face to face	39
	Ent-15	Entrepreneur in consultancy firm	Email; WhatsApp	-
	Ent-16	Entrepreneur in tourism industry	Email	-
	Ent-17	Entrepreneur in Food Industry	Facebook	34

Participant Category	Participant Code	Participant Description	Mode of Interview	Duration of Interview (minutes)
			Messenger	
	Ent-18	Entrepreneur in Food Industry	Face to Face	42
Stakeholders	PublicOfficial -01	Director in government agency	Face to face	59
	PublicOfficial -02	Director in government agency	Face to face	44
	PublicOfficial -03	Head of Department in government agency	Face to face; Email; WhatsApp	108
	PublicOfficial -04	Director in government agency	Face to face	48
	PublicOfficial -05	Director General in government agency	Face to face	145
	PublicOfficial -06	Director General in government agency	Face to face	43
	PublicOfficial -07	Assistant to Director General in government agency	Face to face	53
	PublicOfficial -08	Head of Department in government agency	Email; WhatsApp	-
	PublicOfficial -09	Deputy Director in government agency	Face to face	44
	PublicOfficial -10	Head of Department in government agency	Face to face	66
	PublicOfficial -11	Head of Department in government agency	Face to face	33
	PublicOfficial -12	Director in government agency	Email	-
	Uni-Ent-Support	Director of entrepreneurship development department in academic institution	Face to face	116
	Uni-Academic	Assistant professor and head of department in academic institution.	Face to face	63
	Incubator-1	Manager of an incubator	Face to face	128
	Incubator-2	Assistant manager of an incubator	Face to face	99
	Incubator-3	Director in an incubator	Face to face	64

Participant Category	Participant Code	Participant Description	Mode of Interview	Duration of Interview (minutes)
	Ent-Program-1	Executive director of a corporate entrepreneurship program	Face to face	75
	Ent-Program-2	Program advisor of a corporate entrepreneurship program	Face to face	74
	Ent-Program-3	Manager of a corporate entrepreneurship program	Face to face	80
	Ent-Program-4	Program officer in a corporate entrepreneurship program	Face to face	72
	Banker-1	SMEs credit manager in a bank	Face to face	60
	Banker-2	Deputy director of SME Department in a bank	Face to face	67
	Tech_Consultant	Technical consultant in SMEs consultancy firm for SMEs	Face to face	65
	VC	Manager in a venture capital firm	Face to face	80
	OCCI	Deputy director in Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry	Face to face	60

Although I had shortlisted more than 80 people who could have been potential interviewees, I managed to interview only 44 of them, due to access, convenience and time constraints. These 44 participants were sometimes interviewed more than once in the follow-up stages, which assured achieving data saturation (Patton, 2002). As it was challenging to locate participants who were ready to offer some time for lengthy interviews, especially entrepreneurs and senior managers in the public sector, I had to follow various approaches to access the key research informants. On my request, I was issued with a letter from the Ministry of Higher Education (my sponsor) that required all relevant individuals to provide me with all possible details that were needed for my research (See Appendix B.1). Furthermore, I used my networks to help me access some critical and information-rich informants. Visiting exhibitions that had been prepared by PASMED and other agencies for entrepreneurs to display their products and services was useful for recruiting my sample. The incubators were useful locations, where I found some legitimate and active Omani entrepreneurs. What I found particularly useful was the referral by active entrepreneurs to their colleagues, who were also active entrepreneurs. In such cases, entrepreneurs were ready to have a conversation for even more than two hours, and also were easily accessible for follow-up interviews. In the next section, the data collection methods and process are explained.

3.4.5 Data collection methods and process

After defining the potential participants for the empirical work, the process of data collection started, and was iterative throughout the research duration. Given the interpretive paradigm and qualitative naturalistic inquiry design, I drew upon 'naturally occurring' data, which was primarily collected though in-depth face-to-face interviews, and which was enriched by some publicly available secondary sources (Lewis and McNaughton Nicholls, 2014).

Referring back to the CDA framework (Hindle, 2004), in-depth interview was chosen as the most appropriate data collection technique within the methodical content domain. Interviews are considered to be the best approach to generate data for qualitative research (Yin, 2013). As stated by Patton (2002: 341), interviews are important for capturing 'the other person's perspective'. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985: 268), interviews are a data collection and generation method that provide 'here-and-now constructions of people...reconstructions of such entities as experienced in the past; projections of such entities as they are expected to be experienced in the future' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 268). Given the interpretivist paradigm, interviewing allows for interactions through which we can interpret the meaning and experiences of the 'other' in order to construct the reality that we seek to understand. Choosing interviews was in line with the 'traveller' metaphor of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009: 48):

> 'The interviewer-traveller... walks along with the local inhabitants, asking questions and encouraging them to tell their own stories of their lived world…The journey may not only lead to new knowledge; the traveller may change as well. The might instigate a process of reflection that leads the traveller to new ways of self-understanding.'

In this sense, the knowledge does not exist prior to the interviews; rather, it is constructed through collaboration and negotiation between the interviewers and the participants (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011a). As such, this perspective fits broadly with the interpretivist/constructivist research approach (Yeo *et al.*, 2014). The interviews were useful to capture the perceptions and experiences of the entrepreneurs and stakeholders regarding the influence of institutional environment on entrepreneurial activities. The verbal voice was essential to reveal the unobserved phenomena, such as the hidden practices and the informal learning practices.

Furthermore, the research also involved collection of some publically available documents. The documents included laws, regulations, strategies, government websites, magazines, social media channels, EL programmes' published materials, and entrepreneurship syllabi from educational institutions. The documents were used as secondary sources to set the scene of the Omani entrepreneurial and institutional context (Hodder, 2000). Looking into documents offers a perspective of how the 'behind-the-scenes' looks (Patton, 2002). Through the documents I was able to generate a brief understanding of the entrepreneurial context, identify the key actors, and the nature of interactions between the various actors in the Omani entrepreneurial context. Also, they were used for triangulation at some points. For instance, in the third paper, I referred to the government social media channels to reflect on what has been said by the interviewees. Also, the documents were a source for stimulating the themes that we discussed during the interviews, such as the directives of the national symposium for SME development that was held in 2013, which was a key turning point in the entrepreneurship development in Oman (Patton, 2002).

There are various types of interviews, which differ in terms of structure and purpose, including structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (open-ended) interviews (Minichiello *et al.*, 2008). For the purpose of the three papers, I conducted initially open-ended interviews that were broad and did not have a precise structure. The responses of the interviewees controlled the flow of the interviews. Open questions were useful for holding a dynamic conversation with the participants, and to focus on some interesting issues. The interview questions were informed by the overall research aim, which was to examine the influence of the institutional environment on entrepreneurial activities in Oman. As the interviews proceeded, the questions were refined and became more akin to semi-structured interviews to cover specific issues in the entrepreneurial context of Oman, which emerged during the initial interviews. These elements represent the focus of the three papers: hidden entrepreneurship, EL programmes, and informal EL practices, which emerged as critical issues in the entrepreneurial context of Oman.

Patton (2002: 344) posits that '[interview] guide provides a framework within which the interviewer would develop questions, sequence those questions, and make decisions about which information to pursue in greater depth'. Therefore, interview guides were prepared for each group (i.e. entrepreneurs, government officials, educators) to ensure that similar questions were put to each participant of each particular group (Minichiello *et al.*, 2008). The interview guide was informed by the research objectives and the literature review (See Appendix B.2 for illustration of the initial entrepreneur interview guide). They enabled the research to focus on some key areas that promised generation of valuable new insights. However, during the interview, I was flexible enough to ask follow-up questions when I realised that there were some potentially interesting insights that were worth further elaboration (Schultz and Hatch, 1996). There were some specific questions that were asked, in order to address the specific focus of each study. Details of the focus of each dimension can be seen in the methodology sections of each paper (See Chapter 4, 5 and 6).

I conducted most of interviews between January 2014, and July 2014 in the Sultanate of Oman. However, there were some follow-up interviews conducted in 2015 and 2016, to elaborate on some issues and to identify some missing information. I stopped interviewing only when I realised that saturation had been achieved (Yeo *et al.*, 2014), that is to say, when I realised that participants kept talking about the same issues and that no new themes were emerging. While the respondents came from a variety of Omani cities, the interviews were conducted in Muscat, the capital city of Oman, which is inhabited by one third of the Omani population (NCSI, 2015). The reason for conducting interviews in this location was the concentration of entrepreneurial ecosystem actors in this region. However, there were some key participants in other regions, such as Sur and Ibri, to where we had to travel to conduct face-to-face interviews.

As it is usually useful to inform participants about the nature of the research questions in order to generate better data (Patton, 2002), a participant information sheet (See Appendix B.3) was sent to potential participants via email to brief them about the interview questions, to give them an indication of their rights and the potential benefits of this research, and to seek their informal consent (Minichiello *et al.*, 2008). Formal consent was obtained by asking the participants to sign a consent form (See Appendix B.4).

With regards to the location for conducting the interview, preference was left to the interviewee's convenience. The location of the interviews was mainly on the interviewees' 'home ground' (Yeo *et al.*, 2014), usually their office, board room, or sometimes a nearby coffee shop. The interviews were recorded using a MP3 electronic recording device, with another one for a backup. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2.5 hours, generating about 52 hours of recorded data. While I conducted most of the interviews face-to-face, there were extra follow-up interviews. Nine of the participants were interviewed more than once. For the follow-up interviews, sometimes I travelled back to the field, but mostly I used emails and social media, such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, to facilitate the interview process. These means were very useful to overcome the challenge of being far away from the field.

3.4.6 Data Analysis

In this section, I outline the general steps followed in the analysis of the empirical data for the three papers.

For the selection of appropriate analysis techniques, Hindle (2004) refers to a detailed book on analysis techniques for qualitative research by Miles and Huberman (1994), or a recent edition of the book by Miles *et al.* (2013). The three papers were informed by a thematic analysis approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006), and followed the 'matrix' display (Miles *et al.*, 2013) and 'template' analysis techniques (King, 2004, 2012) to facilitate coding and interpretation. Thematic analysis is an approach that involves identifying patterns within the data, which is interpreted and clustered in a meaningful way (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach is not limited to any particular theoretical construct or discipline, which makes it a broadly accepted approach in most qualitative research (Spencer *et al.*, 2013). Miles *et al.* (2013) posit a matrix display that facilitates easier examination of extensive data. It involves an intersection of rows and columns that shows a relationship between different elements. The format of the matrix is informed by the research questions and the developing concepts of each study (Miles *et al.*, 2013). For instance, the institutional pillars (i.e. regulative, normative, and cognitive) were used to display how they had influenced hidden entrepreneurship (first paper) and EL programmes (second paper). Also, the prevailing institutional logics were important in the display in the third paper. The matrices of the three papers were developed carefully, in order to be informative enough to deliver a detailed analysis and report the findings.

Spencer *et al.* (2013) put forward that the formulation of ideas, capturing of phenomenon and selection of the theoretical framework in qualitative research start with the beginning of the research and end with the write-up stage. The analysis stage of the research project started immediately after completing the first three interviews with entrepreneurs, and continued during and after the data collection stage, which is the inherent nature of qualitative research (Spencer *et al.*, 2013). An 'eyeballing data' matrix was developed initially for exploratory examination of the initial data. During the initial exploratory stage, the most critical and interesting elements that emerged were the three topics covered in the three papers, which triggered focused research attention. The data collection and analysis then turned to focus on these three topics and examined them in-depth until saturation was achieved and research aims were achieved.

'Template analysis' was followed by the preparation of a detailed matrix for each paper (King, 2004, 2012). Template analysis is a technique used to thematically analyse qualitative data, including interview transcripts. The process involves hierarchical 'coding' of the data into a template, which summaries the important data in a meaningful and useful way (King, 2004). As shown in the data structure of each paper, the process involved first-level codes or broader themes, which I called 'category', second-level codes for narrower and more specific themes, which I called 'themes' and, in some cases, where there was deeper elaboration, third-level codes were created and called 'sub-themes'. The codes or labels were created in accordance with the theoretical lens (i.e. institutional elements) and sometimes they reflected the research questions for that particular paper. They were usually phrases to enable ease of interpretation and reading of the data.

The process of the data analysis for each paper followed similar steps after the interviews were transcribed verbatim, preparing them for the analysis:

- The transcripts were kept in the language used in the interview (i.e. English or Arabic, or a mix of both) to eliminate any distortion of the meaning. However, the coding was in English. The relevant quotes were translated into English only after the analysis had been finished. For this reason, computer assisted software that supports qualitative analysis, such as Nvivo, was not used, as it does not support the Arabic language. Therefore, I decided to reply on the features of MS WORD, which were helpful to facilitating the data analysis, although it was time consuming.
- The analysis started with very few described priori codes, which represented the overall research questions. However, given the interpretivist/constructivist stance taken, these codes were open to modification throughout the reading and coding of the transcripts.
- While reading through the transcripts, the material that was found to be relevant to the existing codes was assigned to these codes, and where the material did not fit the code definitions, a new code was created.
- These codes were organised into an initial template (See Appendix B.5 for an example of the initial template for the 2nd paper. Illustrated quotes have been omitted from the example due to space constraint).
- Then, the initial template was applied to all transcripts, and modified through careful consideration of each transcript, until a final version of the template was developed.
- The final template was used to facilitate interpretation and reporting of the findings (They are found in each paper in Chapters 4, 5 and 6).
- In the abstraction and interpretation stage, the template was used to make descriptions and explanations of the emerging themes (Miles *et al.*, 2013). The extracted data was carefully examined to identify similarities, variations, linkages, and to propose key concepts that underpinned the emerging themes.

The analysis process was not linear or sequential, as it appears to be in the above explanation, as it involved a lot of going back and forth between the raw data, the template, and the explanations, and even sometimes going back to the field to seek more illumination of some emerging issues. Miles and Huberman (1994: 224) picture the process as ‘the abstraction ladder’, on which the researcher moves up and down. Also, Spencer *et al.* (2013: 287) believe that ‘the ability to move backwards and forwards, thinking conceptually, linking and nesting concepts in terms of their level of generality, lies at the heart of good qualitative analysis’.

More customised discussion of the analysis process and illustration of the data structure and coding for each paper is outlined in the methodology section of the corresponding chapters (See Chapter 4, 5, 6).

3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are central to good quality research (Webster *et al.*, 2014). It is widely known that research that involves humans brings ethical concerns with it, which need to be addressed throughout the research study (Patton, 2002). Therefore, from the beginning of the research, ethical implications were clarified with the supervisory team, and were addressed through following the ethical compliance procedure that is followed in Southampton University. I filed a research project for ethical approval via the ERGO system (Ethics and Research Governance Online), which was approved by the Ethics Committee. During the process, I filed various documents and details, such as the main ethics application form, risk assessment form, consent form, participant information sheet, debriefing statement, and the interview questions. This step was important, to ensure ethical compliance with the university guidelines. Informed by these guidelines, I considered all ethical issues during the conduct of the research, including the worthiness of research, the informed consent of the participants, voluntary participation and the avoidance of pressure, identifying and avoiding the risks associated with participation, and respecting participants' anonymity and confidentiality (Bryman, 2015).

First of all, I ensured that the research was important and worthwhile and that there was no 'undue intrusion' (Webster *et al.*, 2014: 87). I explained the benefits of the research to the participants in informal conversations, and formally, by sending them the participant information sheet via email (See Appendix B.3). This document offered the participants information about me (the researcher), an overview of research, why they had been chosen, and what was expected from them if they decided to take part in the research, what benefits the research would bring (i.e. adding new knowledge to the entrepreneurship field and generating new insights into the understudied context of Oman, which was expected to benefit entrepreneurs, stakeholders, researchers, and policymakers), and establishing that there was no risk in taking part in the study apart from the sacrifice of one to two hours of their valuable time to conduct the interview. I also communicated to them their rights regarding confidentiality and anonymity, and the right to freely withdraw from the study anytime they wanted. As promised, participants' identities and personal information were kept confidential as part of complying with the Data Protection Act and the Data Protection Policy of Southampton University. All information was kept in a password-protected folder in a password-protected computer. The anonymity of participants was ensured during the analysis and the write-up by replacing their names with codes, as shown in

Table 3-2 above. Moreover, the voluntary participation in the study was clearly communicated in the informed consent form. I obtained informed consent from all interviewees before they participated in the study (See Appendix B.4).

While keeping in alignment with the ethics guidelines, the nature of qualitative research allows for new issues to emerge, which makes it harder to stick to particular ethical codes (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). As such, we took a 'situational approach', in which we always considered what was best for participants in that particular situation, and negotiated that ethical problem reflexively (Kvale, 1996). For instance, one interviewee asked me to stop recording during the interview, to tell me about some confidential information that he/she preferred to be kept off-record, and we resumed recording afterwards, despite the signed consent to do the recording. In such an emergent situation, I appreciated the trust and honesty of the participant, and kept this information off-record, as I know that such information, if circulated, could be problematic for the participant and other people.

Ethical issues were carefully considered during the interviewing, analysis, and reporting processes. Before the interviews, I made sure that participants had a clear idea of the nature of the interview, its duration, and location. During the interview, I assured interviewees that they could easily refuse to answer any question but, at the same time, I repeated the importance of their participation, and the promise to keep everything confidential. This was important to establish trust, and also to make sure that the interviews generated as much detail as possible, in order to provide deep understanding to answer my research questions. Additionally, I ensured that the conversation ran freely, without tension about the pace and time. The location of the interview was left to the interviewee to choose; however, I tried to encourage them to go to a coffee shop, as I realised that in such locations they became less formal and spoke freely, which assisted me to conduct some interviews for more than two hours. After the interview, I thanked the participants and gave them a debriefing sheet, which contained detailed information about my research. I also shared with them my willingness to send them the findings of my research if they were interested. I am still keeping in regular contact with more than half of my participants and thank them for being a valuable source for my current and future research. Moreover, careful attention was given to the analysis and reporting of the data, as I ensured that I dealt with the data accurately and free from any biases or distortion during all the stages of analysis and reporting.

3.6 Establishing 'trustworthiness' in our qualitative studies

Establishing the quality of our qualitative research was necessary to justify the relevance of our research and findings. Despite the burgeoning studies that employ qualitative designs, 'the legitimacy of these approaches is still subject to debate on the grounds of rigor and relevance' (Karatas-Ozkan *et al.*, 2014: 590). Establishing the elements of rigour and relevance was challenging because of the absence of standardised guidelines. (Pratt, 2009: 856) argue that there is 'no accepted *boilerplate* for writing up qualitative methods and determining quality', which makes it very challenging for a qualitative researcher to legitimise their research outputs. Leitch *et al.* (2009: 7) wrote an influential paper that discusses the quality issues in interpretivist qualitative design in the entrepreneurship arena. They posit that 'quality permeates the entire research process that involves not only a sound understanding of its ontological and epistemological underpinnings and research design, but also experience and skill in the use of data gathering and analysis techniques' (Leitch *et al.*, 2009: 7).

As the purpose of qualitative inquiry is different from that of quantitative research, the criteria to judge its quality is different and needs to match the nature of the qualitative research and its audience (Patton, 2015). The common aim of qualitative research is 'to use qualitative methods to describe and explain phenomena as accurately and completely as possible so that their descriptions and explanations correspond as closely as possible to the way the world is and actually operates' (Patton, 2002: 546). Patton (2002) argues that constructivists and interpretivists have different language for quality and rigor from that of positivists. Lincoln and Guba (1986) posit four elementary criteria that reshaped how the quality of qualitative research can be judged, which I followed when addressing the quality of the three papers. Lincoln and Guba (1986) replaced internal validity with 'credibility', external validity with 'transferability', reliability with 'dependability', and objectivity with 'confirmability'. The four constructs represent the trustworthiness (rigour) of the study. In the following paragraphs I delineate how my research methods and findings reflect these constructs.

Credibility in qualitative research is concerned with the consistency of the findings with reality (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). The research should ensure that the phenomenon is accurately studied (Shenton, 2004). In my research, as explained earlier sections, I adopted a well-established approach, design, and methods for data collection, analysis, and display, which are widely acknowledged in the social science and entrepreneurship fields. Additionally, I familiarised myself with the research context through my experience as a resident in the country under study (i.e. Oman), and through the secondary data collected from publicly available sources, such as official websites, magazines, and newspapers. Moreover, I made sure to have a variety of participants representing the main actors in the context, in order to provide multiple voices in the study, which enabled me to depict an illuminative holistic picture of the phenomena and how institutional dynamics were articulated within the voices of the various actors in the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem. Furthermore, the credibility of the study was enhanced with the triangulation that was incorporated into the research process. Triangulation involves the uses of different methods to study the phenomena under scrutiny (Shenton, 2004). I used methods triangulation, 'checking out the consistency of findings generated by different data collection methods', by having primary in-depth interviews and secondary data from publicly available documents (Patton, 2002: 556). For example, in the context of the third paper (i.e. informal EL), we referred to social media to check the consistency of what had been said in two conflicting answers by public officials, which was then explained by the differences in the job titles of the participants in their particular organisations. Also, I used multiple-sources triangulation, 'checking the consistency of different data sources within the same method' (Patton, 2002: 556). The variety of participants, ranging from entrepreneurs and various stakeholders, enabled the checking and explanation of any inconsistency in the generated data. Believing in multiple realities, it is important to note that triangulation was used to illuminate and explain any inconsistencies found in the data, rather than to establish consistency (Patton, 2002).

Credibility was also achieved by employing some tactics to establish trust and honesty with the research participants, so that they provided as accurate details as possible (Shenton, 2004). As explained in the ethics section above, I did not exert any pressure on the informants to participate. I clearly communicated their voluntary participation, their right to withdraw, and the safeguarding of their anonymity and confidentiality. I established rapport with the informants through finding some social ties that linked us. It was very useful in encouraging them to give as much detail as I needed. Also, credibility was enhanced through continuous debriefing with my supervisory team. The frequent discussions allowed me to explore new issues, and new sources of data. The supervisory team helped me with interpretation and to recognise any biases. I also involved my PhD colleagues in frequent discussions regarding my research and their insights were useful for strengthening the arguments of the paper and the development of the research process. I have also presented and discussed my research with peers at well-known conferences, such as the Academy of Management (AOM) and the European Group for Organisation Studies (EGOS), who provided valuable feedback that enriched my understanding. Additionally, my educational background and experience as a lecturer in a business school in Oman gave me the competence to conduct this research at a professional level. The competence was further developed through attending the various research methods courses that are offered by Southampton Business School and the graduate school at Southampton University. Moreover, 'member checks' were conducted 'on the spot' by asking the informants to provide examples and explanations of their perceptions, in order to provide accurate findings that matched what they actually intended to say (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). Last, but not least, credibility was demonstrated in the detailed description of the phenomenon and the context under study (See Chapter 4, 5, 6).

The second construct of trustworthiness is transferability, which answer questions related to the extent to which the findings can be applied to other contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). Although generalisation should not be sought in qualitative research, the findings of the research can be transferred to similar contexts that encounter the same phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

'If context A and context B are sufficiently congruent, then working hypotheses from the sending originating contexts may be applicable in the receiving contexts' (Lincoln and Guba, 1986: 124). In our research, we cannot assume the applicability of the findings to any other contexts. However, we provide a detailed explanation of the phenomenon under study, a detailed account of the methodology, findings, and conclusions, and a whole chapter that describes the institutional and entrepreneurial context of Oman (See Chapter 2). It is now left to the readers to decide whether the explained phenomenon and context are congruent with their own. However, we may assume a potential transferability of our findings to the neighbouring Gulf region countries, which share similar institutional contexts.

The third trustworthiness construct is dependability, which is very much achieved through establishing the 'credibility' of the research, as argued by Lincoln and Guba (1986). Dependability is concerned with the extent of confidence in the process and outcomes of the research (Shenton, 2004). In order to address the issue of dependability in this research, a detailed description, explanation and justification of the methodology design and process are clearly stated within this chapter and chapter 4, 5, 6. I have demonstrated the research methods, and how they have been executed, in detail. The PhD rigorous process and peer- and supervisor-check were useful to ensure the dependability of our research process.

Confirmability is the fourth construct of trustworthiness that we addressed in our research. This replaces the objectivity criterion in positivist research (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). As objectivity cannot be attained in qualitative research, researchers are required to establish that the research findings represent the informants' perceptions and experiences, rather than that of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). To achieve this, triangulation, as mentioned earlier, was very useful to explain any inconsistencies and overcome any biases. Also, the research methods, design and procedures have been clearly described, to reflect the integrity of the research. Additionally, my reflexive beliefs and assumptions are clearly stated in the methodology (this chapter) and throughout the thesis. Again, cross-checking by supervisors and colleagues was utilised to ensure that biases were eliminated from the research.

3.7 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have discussed the methodological philosophy and research design and detailed procedures of the field work. In summary, Hindle (2004)'s CDA framework was used to guide our philosophical position and the selection of methodological approaches. The overall research was informed by the assumptions of the interpretivist paradigm and guided by the interpretive practice methodical cluster (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011b). All three papers followed a qualitative naturalistic inquiry design (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). The data was collected using semi-structured interviews with a total of 44 entrepreneurs and stakeholders. The collected data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006), incorporating the template analysis technique (King, 2004, 2012) and the matrix display technique (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Miles *et al.*, 2013). The research followed a rigorous methodological design and process, and careful procedures to ensure that it was ethical and trustworthy (Lincoln and Guba, 1986).

Chapter 4: Hidden entrepreneurs: Informal practices within the formal economy

Abstract:

The focus of this study is 'hidden entrepreneurs' who bridge formal and informal economies. While their business activities are legal, the governance and ownership structures of their organizations are illegal. This qualitative study draws upon institutional theory to illuminate the emergence of international hidden entrepreneurs in Oman as an unintended response to institutional configurations, and to examine its perceived effects on the domestic entrepreneurial ecosystem. Hidden practices, shaped by the dynamics of institutional environments, are perceived negatively by policy makers and domestic entrepreneurs, but offer potential contributions for entrepreneurial development. In-depth interviews with entrepreneurs and stakeholders reveal how hidden practices are shaped by the dynamics of regulatory and social institutions. Loopholes, or flawed institutional configurations, and prevailing sociocultural factors drive the emergence of hidden practices. The study contributes to informal entrepreneurship literature and policy-making through highlighting the relevance of international entrepreneurs in enabling entrepreneurial ecosystem development.

Key words: hidden entrepreneurs; informal economy; institutional environment; developing economy; Oman; qualitative

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4.1 Introduction

Policy makers often introduce new regulations with the aim of developing stronger small- and-medium-sized enterprise (SME) sectors that can contribute to economic growth (Dennis, 2011; Williams, 2013). Despite the positive intentions to reshape institutional environments, unforeseen outcomes from insufficient regulation design can undermine these SME development policies and lead to the emergence of informal business activities and a hidden enterprise culture (Williams and Nadin, 2012). We extend the work of Williams and his colleagues (e.g., Williams and Round, 2007; Williams, 2008, 2010; Williams and Nadin, 2012) on hidden enterprise culture, and introduce the notion of 'hidden entrepreneurs', to examine the specific case of international individuals active in Omani business ventures. While their business activities are legal, the governance and legal structures of their ventures are illegal as they use local Omani nationals as a front to circumvent laws that prohibit non-Omanis from owning domestic ventures within the Sultanate[2]. Williams (2008) has indicated that most small enterprises engage in the informal as well as the formal economy despite government attempts to undermine the informal activities. The motivation of these individuals is to increase profitability by circumventing tax capture and regulatory compliance in some venturing activities. In the example of Oman, hidden entrepreneurs emerged as a response to government efforts to ban foreign entrepreneurs, to enforce labor regulations, reduce competition for domestic incumbents and minimize the transfer of revenues overseas. As such, we argue hidden entrepreneurs straddle formal and informal economies.

Empirical studies on the institutional environment in various countries show that institutions, including regulatory and social institutions, can influence the behaviour of entrepreneurs when pursuing entrepreneurship (e.g., Aidis *et al.*, 2008; Williams and Vorley, 2014; Williams and Franic, 2016; Williams and Shahid, 2016). The extant literature has emphasized the presence of institutional loopholes, which can be viewed as unintended institutional configurations that enable the informal economy to flourish (e.g. Schneider, 2002; Webb *et al.*, 2013). However, little is known about how international hidden entrepreneurs exploit these loopholes to develop collaborative relationships with domestic entrepreneurs.

Omani policy makers view hidden entrepreneurs as undesirable because they undermine government plans to diversify the economy and rebalance Omani interest from public employment to entrepreneurship, to develop a local entrepreneurship ecosystem. However, the

[2] The issue of 'hidden entrepreneurs' has also been raised in Saudi Arabia (Al-Shaya, 2015).

academic literature indicates that this informal activity can be used as a launchpad to develop new entrepreneurial capabilities and to test potential venture ideas (Khavul *et al.*, 2009; Bennett, 2010; Williams and Schneider, 2016). While academic studies have examined the potential of the informal economy for improving low income areas (Maloney, 2004; Hudson *et al.*, 2012; Siqueira *et al.*, 2016), they have overlooked the role of international entrepreneurs in contributing to the development of the formal and informal economies.

Hidden entrepreneurs require a local resident who is willing to become an owner/manager and undertake a passive or non-existing role in the governance and the day to day activities of the enterprise (i.e. passive entrepreneur). Local Omanis accept that their identity will be used to conceal the role of the foreign entrepreneur, in exchange for a fixed financial payment. In contrast, the hidden entrepreneurs exercise full control and power over the venture, despite it being illegal for them to do so, as they are not listed in the ownership register[3].

This study aims to explore the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs in Oman in response to recent regulations that seek to prohibit the hidden activities of non-Omani entrepreneurs, with the objective of protecting the domestic entrepreneurs. In doing so, we examine the perceived negative effects but also the overlooked potential contributions of the collaborations that could emerge from this informal economic activity. We address the following research questions:

- Who are hidden entrepreneurs and how do they bridge the formal and informal economies?
- What are the perceived effects of hidden entrepreneurs on local entrepreneurs and the wider economy?
- How can international hidden entrepreneurs contribute to the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem?

This paper contributes to the informal entrepreneurship literature by introducing the role of hidden entrepreneurs who bridge the formal and informal economies. We also highlight the perceived challenges as well as the opportunities that arise from hidden practices. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: it discusses relevant literature, outlines the methodology, and examines the findings. The final section concludes with policy implications, limitations and further avenues for future research.

[3] Hidden entrepreneurs often stay in the country using work permits under the sponsorship of the passive owners/managers.

4.2 Literature Review

4.2.1 Understanding hidden entrepreneurs

Informal economies represent a large share of the world's business activities. The informal economy accounts for 13.4% of the GDP in OECD countries, 37.6% % in transition countries, and around 27% in the Middle East and North Africa region, as estimated in between 1999 and 2007 (Schneider *et al.*, 2010). From an employment perspective, two-thirds (1.8 billion) of global employees work in the informal sector (Jütting and Laiglesia 2009). Despite the significance of informal economy especially in developing countries (Ilahiane and Sherry, 2008; ILO, 2014), there is still little understanding of business activities within the informal sector (McGahan, 2012; Webb *et al.*, 2014).

The extant literature has shown diverse examples of informal business activities such as violation of registration regulations, tax evasion, violation of labor and environmental regulations, and production and selling of counterfeit goods (Schneider, 2002; Williams and Nadin, 2012; Webb *et al.*, 2013; Webb *et al.*, 2014). The growing literature on the informal economy has sought to define informal economic activities and differentiate them from formal activities (e.g. Williams, 2008; Webb *et al.*, 2009; Thai and Turkina, 2014; Williams and Schneider, 2016). Researchers have argued that informal entrepreneurship includes 'any remunerated activities not declared to the authorities for tax, social security and /or labor law purposes when they should be declared' (Williams and Schneider, 2016: 6). In this sense, hidden entrepreneurs' practices can be considered a form of informal entrepreneurship as their practices do not only violate ownership regulations, but also labor laws as foreign entrepreneurs exploit their work permits to become hidden entrepreneurs in the local economy.

Recent research has shown that enterprises do not necessarily fit into one category (formal *vs.* informal), as business activities can have different degrees of (in)formalization as shown in studies of Ukraine (Williams and Round, 2007), England (Williams, 2010), the Dominican Republic (De Castro *et al.*, 2014) and Pakistan (Williams and Shahid, 2016; Williams *et al.*, 2016b). This is similar to the case of hidden entrepreneurship, where the business is officially registered and produces legitimate goods and services, but breaches both ownership and labor regulations. Hidden entrepreneurs retain full control of the business through a convoluted trust relationship with passive local partners, where the latter operates as the legal face of the business, concealing the former. Although the practices of hidden entrepreneurs are consistent with informal economy definitions, they are understudied in the burgeoning literature of informal entrepreneurship. This warrants scholarly attention to examine the notion of hidden entrepreneurs who straddle formal and informal economies. This paper aims to address this knowledge gap by examining the causes as well as the pros and cons of their existence in the domestic entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Moreover, growing academic interest in the informal economy has predominantly focused on developed nations that are characterized as benefitting from solid and mature institutional structures that enable more efficient markets. Yet, more attention should be given to the informal entrepreneurship activities within developing economies that suffer more deficiencies in their institutional configurations (Webb *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, examining hidden entrepreneurs in Oman can be a valuable addition to the informal economy literature.

The widespread existence of hidden entrepreneurship activities in Oman and the fact that their profits are often transferred outside the Omani economy cause growing concern to the policymakers of Oman who view these partially legal ventures as undesirable; causing disturbances to the legitimate entrepreneurs (i.e. active entrepreneurs) and the national economy (Al-Nasseri, 2015) (See Figure 4-1). Despite these criticisms, hidden entrepreneurship activities persist, generating positive outcomes for the global economy, large returns for hidden entrepreneurs and income for local business partners. The burgeoning informal economy literature posits multiple benefits of informality for entrepreneurs. It is viewed as a means to overcome the rigid regulations and the administrative costs that can undermine the profitability of the business ventures (Maloney, 2004; Williams and Round, 2007) as well as acting as a 'stepping stone' that helps firms test their business models before they move to the formal sector (Khavul *et al.*, 2009; Bennett, 2010). Furthermore, informal activities are considered a solution to the inefficient formal market (Webb *et al.*, 2013) as informal entrepreneurs are known for their efficient use of resources which can lead to improved economic and social stability (De Soto, 1989).

Hidden entrepreneurship practices are also socially accepted within the Omani communities, although the government's perception is that it undermines the main policy objective of developing local entrepreneurial capabilities (Supreme Council for Planning, 2016).

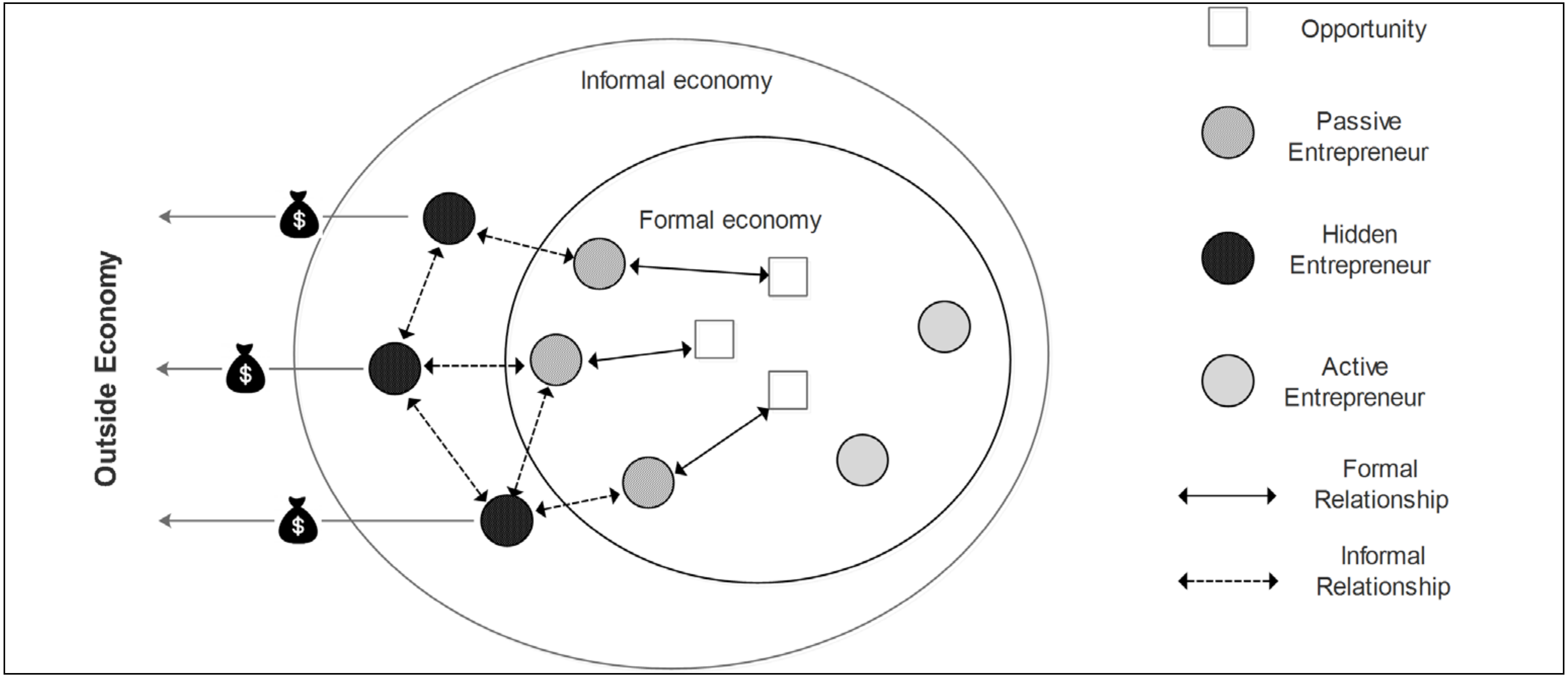

Figure 4-1: Hidden entrepreneurship mechanism (Authors elaboration based on Webb et al. 2009)

4.2.2 Hidden entrepreneurship from an institutional perspective

Hidden entrepreneurs are key actors in the Omani informal economy. Although the informal economy literature is extensive, studies have focused on various illegal activities, but not the illegal form of ownership, governance structures and illegal labor practices, which define hidden entrepreneurship. In explaining the emergence of informal entrepreneurship, Webb *et al.* (2013) have demonstrated that there are multiple theories that can work in complementarity, such as institutional theory, motivation-related theories, and resource-allocation theory. Others have used opportunity versus necessity driven entrepreneurship as a basis to explain the informal economy (e.g. Williams and Round, 2009; Adom, 2014; Williams and Youssef, 2014). However, starting from the premise that entrepreneurial activities are very much influenced by the surrounding context in which they are embedded (Welter, 2011) and the fact that informal economy is considered institutionally embedded (Estrin and Mickiewicz, 2012), this study argues that hidden entrepreneurs' activities can be well-explored through the lens of the institutional theory which has proved useful for analytical purposes within the informal economy literature (e.g. Webb *et al.*, 2009; De Castro *et al.*, 2014; Williams and Shahid, 2016). Webb *et al.* (2009) conceptualize informal economic activities from institutional perspective as the ones that exist outside the formal institutional boundaries, yet, are legitimate within the informal institutional boundaries.

The starting premise of institutional theory is that the beliefs and actions of individuals and groups (i.e. hidden and passive entrepreneurs) are guided and shaped by the institutional environment (Scott, 2014). However, it is important to acknowledge here the two broad perspectives of institutional theory before engaging in the discussion of the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs; the economic and sociological approaches. The economic perspective holds that the society imposes formal and informal institutions that determine what is considered legal and/or legitimate economic activity (North, 1990; Webb *et al.*, 2009; Webb *et al.*, 2013). While formal institutions are the codified rules and regulations, the informal institutions are the shared beliefs, values, and norms that define which activities can be considered legitimate and socially acceptable. The sociological view, on the other hand, holds that due to cognitive limitations, human behaviors are driven by the shared culture, and social norms, and persist due to the taken-for-granted assumptions (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991b). Despite the different assumptions of the two scholarly views, we draw upon (Hirsch and Lounsbury, 1997; Bruton and Ahlstrom, 2003) to argue that both perspectives can complement each other in explaining the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs.

Although the formal and informal institutions framework proved to be useful to explain various informal economic activities (Webb *et al.*, 2009; Webb *et al.*, 2013; Williams *et al.*, 2015), this approach might not be sufficient to rationalize hidden practices because it would be difficult to explain why international hidden entrepreneurs and local passive partners jointly engage in the risky hidden practices that can expose the hidden entrepreneurs to deportation ,and passive entrepreneurs to potential prosecution arising from the liabilities of owning a business where they have no control. Hence, we argue that cognitive institutions are critical in determining the hidden entrepreneurial practices as recent literature shows that knowledge, skills and perceptions of informal entrepreneurs determine the degree of informality of their business activities (Williams and Shahid, 2016; Williams *et al.*, 2016b). This is more relevant since the hidden entrepreneurship activities require the consent and involvement of passive local partners who would not engage in these risky activities if it was not for some possible cognitive limitations. Therefore, incorporating the sociological approach of institutional theory would enable better understanding of hidden entrepreneurs' practices and would help avoid the dichotomy of formal/informal institutions by adding other parameters such as the cognitive abilities and perceptions of hidden and passive partners. We draw upon the framework of Scott (2014) which summarizes and categorizes these multiple perspectives into regulative, normative, and cognitive dimensions (Bruton *et al.*, 2010).

Building on the understanding that institutions shape the formality of individuals and firms (Thai and Turkina, 2014), the first objective of this study is to demonstrate the significance of the institutional factors that encourage hidden entrepreneurs to engage in the act of bridging the formal and informal economy by illuminating the role of regulative, normative and cognitive dimensions of these institutional dynamics (Scott, 2014). While regulative dimension includes public policies, rules and regulations, normative dimension includes the shared values and norms that shape the entrepreneurial behavior. The cognitive dimension takes into account the individual knowledge and skills and perceptions that shape their behavior (Busenitz *et al.*, 2000).

From a regulative dimension, many studies argue that the ineffective legal institutions such as the perceived rigid registration regulations, unreasonable taxes, and government corruption (De Soto, 1989; Raijman, 2001; Schneider, 2005; Siqueira *et al.*, 2016) as well as the associated institutional imperfections can facilitate informal entrepreneurship approaches (Webb *et al.*, 2009). In the context of Oman, the existing loopholes in legislation and public policy can encourage hidden informality of non-Omanis who are otherwise, required to make a minimum investment of around 390,000 USD in order to operate an official partnership business in Oman. Even when this requirement is satisfied, they are denied majority ownership status in ventures, making hidden practices more attractive for them. Additionally, the literature suggests that weak enforcement of legislation enables the hidden entrepreneurs and their local partners to exploit opportunities in the informal economy without the fear of being charged (Webb *et al.*, 2013; ILO, 2014; Williams and Shahid, 2016).

Social institutions complement regulatory institutions in shaping individuals' and firms' informal behavior (Thai and Turkina, 2014; Williams and Vorley, 2014; Williams and Shahid, 2016), and provide a conducive environment for the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs. In the hidden practices, there are usually two individuals involved: the hidden entrepreneur and the passive (local) partner. We argue that the embedded normative and cognitive institutions would allow better comprehension of how this relationship has developed. From a normative dimension, studies show that the entrepreneurial mindset is developed within the sociocultural environment and through 'meso institutions' such as community norms and entrepreneurial abilities (Baughn and Neupert, 2003; Tonoyan *et al.*, 2010; Huggins and Thompson, 2014). The extent of valuation of entrepreneurship as a career and the extent of acceptability of hidden practices within the society can help in explaining the prevalence of the hidden practices. In addition, the cognitive abilities of entrepreneurs are influential in determining the entrepreneurial opportunities they pursue (Scott, 2014). Stuetzer *et al.* (2014) argue that entrepreneurial culture influences individual intentions and perceptions towards business opportunities.

In the informal economy literature, Williams and Shahid (2016) identify a number of cognitive factors that can determine the level of informality, such as perception towards public sector corruption, the risk involved in the informality, and the tax morality. The education background is also shown to be deterministic in the level of informality of firms (Williams and Shahid, 2016). Subsequently, the knowledge and skills gained from social and educational institutions would influence the ability of entrepreneurs to visualize opportunities in the market. As entrepreneurs become more confident that they have the right skills and knowledge to succeed, they are more likely to pursue entrepreneurship activities by themselves (Arenius and Minniti, 2005). In absence of sufficient knowledge and skills, they may consider alternative ways such as partnering with experienced and risk-tolerant hidden entrepreneurs to overcome their cognitive deficiencies and accept higher returns to their investments without active involvement.

Having discussed these different dimensions of institutional environments, they should not be viewed in isolation when explaining the motives for hidden entrepreneurship practices. Webb *et al.* (2009: 495), for example, argue that 'the informal economy exists because of the incongruence between what is defined as legitimate by formal and informal institutions'. Other scholars have used the term 'institutional asymmetry' to explain the emergence of the informal activities in Bulgaria (Williams *et al.*, 2015), Croatia (Williams and Franic, 2016), Slovakia and Ukraine (Ostapenko and Williams, 2016). Incorporating these debates, hidden entrpreneurs would have more prevalence in the society when there is a wider gap between what is considered illegal by the regulators and what is considered legitimate and acceptable within the society.

4.2.3 Effects of Hidden Entrepreneurship

The implications of hidden entrepreneurs on the domestic entrepreneurial ecosystem are not well understood. Earlier research has highlighted the implications of informal business activities on the wider economy, and the level of their magnitude within both developing and developed countries (Webb *et al.*, 2014; Williams and Schneider, 2016). According to the informal economy literature, entrepreneurs practicing within the informal economy may overlook and/or sidestep legislation (Nichter and Goldmark, 2009; Neuwirth, 2011; Webb *et al.*, 2014). In the case of hidden entrepreneurs, this concerns labor regulations, taxes, and ownership rights, leading to an unfair advantage over the active local entrepreneurs. As hidden entrepreneurs have no legal connection to the business involved, they are effectively beyond the reach of the law. In extreme cases, unwitting local business partners who legally own the business may be prosecuted for breaching the law, while their hidden entrepreneur partner escapes prosecution. As such, hidden entrepreneurs may evade tax (Ott, 1999) or breach Omani labor regulations (Al-Mamari *et al.*, 2013). The repatriation and shifting of profits by hidden entrepreneurs can also be perceived as being problematic by policy makers. Researchers have argued that the money generated in the informal economy is often circulated into the formal economy, limiting the negative impacts for the overall economy (Schneider, 2002; Webb *et al.*, 2013). However, with hidden entrepreneurship, returns are claimed to be largely shifted overseas (Al-Nasseri, 2015).

Hidden entrepreneurs also have the potential to adversely affect the future of local entrepreneurs, and the entrepreneurship development plans of the government. Former studies have demonstrated that informal entrepreneurs are able to undercut the entrepreneurs that comply with the regulations in the formal economy, creating an unlevelled playing field (Williams, 2007a; Andrews *et al.*, 2011; Hudson *et al.*, 2012).

Since activities within the informal economy can generate both constructive and destructive effects (Webb *et al.*, 2013), it can be argued that hidden entrepreneurs have the potential to make some contributions towards the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem. The collaboration between the hidden and the local entrepreneurs can result in mutual benefits. Informal economic activities have been known to provide efficient resources that increase the competitiveness of the formal firms (Coletto, 2010). Also, collaborative learning can be expected due to the interactions between the local entrepreneurs and the experienced international hidden entrepreneurs.

In summary, although hidden entrepreneurship practices fit well with the conventional definitions of informal entrepreneurship, they are understudied in the extant literature. Subsequently, this paper aims to bridge this knowledge gap by examining how institutional dynamics resulted in the emergence of hidden entrepreneurship, while delineating the perceived effects of these practices on the entrepreneurial ecosystem and wider economy.

4.3 Methodology

This paper uses an interpretive qualitative approach (Myers, 2013) to form a new understanding of a previously unstudied phenomenon (Gephart, 2004; Doern, 2009). The 'naturalistic enquiry' perspective of this study enabled a comprehensive investigation of hidden entrepreneurship as it is perceived and experienced within its context (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). For this study, in-depth interviews were undertaken and policy documents were analyzed to gain exploratory insight into the emergence of the hidden entrepreneurship and its perceived effects on entrepreneurship development and the economy. Laws and policy documents were used to contextualize the research by examining the existing regulations that shape the entrepreneurship environment in Oman.

The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique to provide wide variability and representation of the study context in Oman (Patton, 2015). Triangulation in the data was achieved by examining multiple sources of data (i.e. interviews and documents), and by recruiting informants at multiple levels (Patton, 2015). The sample included senior and middle manager level public officials who were recruited from number of government agencies that are considered to be the key supporting agencies for SMEs in Oman. The variety of selection in the authority level is sought to ensure capturing perspectives from policymaking and policy implementation levels (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). The sample also included active entrepreneurs from various businesses, along with other stakeholders including bankers, academics, support programs managers, consultant, venture capitalist, and business associations. In total, thirty-eight interviews were conducted, which generated about fifty hours of interview data. Respondent details and their corresponding codes are illustrated in Table 4-1. We were unable to recruit hidden entrepreneurs in our sample because people who engage in such illegal practices often do not want to be identified (Schneider *et al.*, 2010). To generate insights into these practices, we relied on the experiences of local active entrepreneurs and stakeholders who interact with them and are knowledgeable about hidden entrepreneurs. The familiarity of the lead author with the local entrepreneurial ecosystem enabled access to appropriate cases that were information-rich and that would yield data and informational saturation (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007).

Table 4-1: Description of participants and their corresponding codes in the 1st paper

Participant Code	Participant Description
Ent-01	Entrepreneur in technical solutions & consultancy
Ent-02	Entrepreneur in scientific solutions & consultancy
Ent-03	Entrepreneur in advertising
Ent-04	Entrepreneur in design
Ent-05	Entrepreneur in IT solutions
Ent-06	Entrepreneur in IT solutions
Ent-07	Entrepreneur in IT solutions
Ent-08	Entrepreneur in IT solutions
Ent-09	Entrepreneur in design
Ent-10	Entrepreneur in design
Ent-11	Entrepreneur in E-business
Ent-12	Entrepreneur in technical solutions & consultancy
Ent-13	Entrepreneur in games development
PublicOfficial-01	Director in government agency
PublicOfficial-02	Director in government agency
PublicOfficial-03	Head of Department in government agency
PublicOfficial-04	Director in government agency
PublicOfficial-05	Director General in government agency
PublicOfficial-06	Director General in government agency
PublicOfficial-07	Assistant to Director General in government agency
PublicOfficial-08	Head of Department in government agency
PublicOfficial-09	Deputy Director in government agency
PublicOfficial-10	Head of Department in government agency
PublicOfficial-11	Head of Department in government agency
Uni-Ent-Support	Director of entrepreneurship development department in academic institution
Uni-Academic	Assistant Professor and Head of management department in academic institution.
Incubator-1	Manager of an incubator

Participant Code	Participant Description
Incubator-2	Assistant Manager of an incubator
Incubator-3	Director in an incubator
Ent-Program-1	Executive Director of a corporate entrepreneurship program
Ent-Program-2	Program Advisor of a corporate entrepreneurship program
Ent-Program-3	Manager of a corporate entrepreneurship program
Ent-Program-4	Program Officer in a corporate entrepreneurship program
Banker-1	SMEs credit manager in a bank
Banker-2	Deputy Director of SMEs Department in a bank
Tech_Consultant	Technical consultant in SMEs consultancy firm for SMEs
VC	Manager in a venture capital firm
OCCI	Deputy Director in Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry

The primary data was collected using semi-structured interviews (King and Horrocks, 2010). All interviews were conducted in 2014 in Muscat Governorate, which is the largest region in Oman and represents people who have come from all regions of the country. This provided an in-depth understanding of the overall Omani institutional context, which might differ from one place to another in regards to the socio-cultural environment. As the initial interviews sought to explore the impact of institutional environment on entrepreneurial activities in a broad sense, seven follow-up interviews were conducted via email to focus on the hidden entrepreneurs (Fontana and Frey, 2000). Guidelines for the semi-structured interviews were developed to make sure that similar issues are covered to allow analytical comparability (Wengraf, 2001). There was flexibility to explore new issues that emerged during the interviews, data analysis and interpretation process (Schultz and Hatch, 1996; Patton, 2015). The guidelines included questions of who are the hidden entrepreneurs and why they choose Oman for their activities, how they affect active entrepreneurs and the wider economy, and what contributions they bring to the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem. Most of the interviews were conducted in Arabic. However, the language choice was left to the participants, to keep a free flow of their stories, in order to yield rich information and minimize distortion.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve precision of the data. Translation of the narratives into English was only completed after interpreting the data to attain precise meanings. Following a thematic analysis approach (Myers, 2013), the data was coded and analyzed in a ‘template’, to identify some categories, patterns, themes, and relationships (King, 2004). Some initial categories and themes were identified from the literature, then they were reviewed and modified in accordance with the collected data (King, 2004). In analyzing the transcripts, the aim was to identify institutional factors that enable hidden entrepreneurs’ practices as reported by active entrepreneurs and stakeholders. The institutional forces were categorized by type (i.e. regulative, normative, cognitive), and their sources were identified. Additionally, the perceived negative implications as well as the positive contributions associated with hidden entrepreneurs’ practices were categorized by the affected parties. Table 4-2 illustrates the categories, themes and sub-themes, along with some illustrative quotes that emerged from the data.

Table 4-2: Categories and themes that emerged from data analysis of hidden entrepreneurship phenomenon

Main Categories	**Themes**	**Sub-Themes**	**Illustrative Quotes**
Causes	Regulative institutions	No legislations that criminalize hidden practices	'In order to stop these practices, new legislations that criminalize these practices should be enforced.' (Ent-04)
		Easy regulations to open a business for local entrepreneurs	'Hidden entrepreneurship is supported by the ease of registering ventures and obtaining licenses …'(PublicOfficial-07)
		Lax competition regulations	'… Because of the missing regulations, anyone [meaning non-Omanis] can enter the market and they invade the market. This affects us badly.(*Ent-02*)
		Lack of monitoring of non-Omanis labor activities.	'Government departments should have more solid regulations to support local companies while conducting more investigation about the identity and operations of each company' (Ent-07)

Main Categories	Themes	Sub-Themes	Illustrative Quotes
		Poor policy design	'…I was telling them, the mechanism implemented now is not working. If we really want to give the 10% to the real local entrepreneurs, we should be frank with ourselves; we have to know the real identity of the beneficiaries of this support…' (Ent-01).
	Normative institutions	Trust relationship between Hidden and Passive entrepreneurs	'…There is also good collaboration and trust between the local entrepreneur and the foreigner..' (PublicOfficial-07)
		Embeddedness of hidden practices in the social context	'.. Also the wide spread of this culture and its embeddedness within the locals and foreigners in the country, and considering it the legitimate way of doing business…' (PublicOfficial-03)
	Cognitive institutions	Lack of entrepreneurial mindset	'The lack of entrepreneurship mindset amongst Omanis, is the reason that allowed foreign people to enter the country using deceptive practices...' (PublicOfficial-05)
		Lack of entrepreneurial	'It might be a thought by most local entrepreneurs that hidden entrepreneurship can be one way for an easy cash and this can be true in some cases while this might be due to the lack of business knowledge

Main Categories	**Themes**	**Sub-Themes**	**Illustrative Quotes**
		skills and knowledge	and skills by those local entrepreneurs’ (Ent-07).
		Lack of awareness of the effects of hidden practices	‘…This is supplemented with the lack of awareness of some Omanis about the risks associated with hidden entrepreneurship.’ (PublicOfficial-07)
Negative implications	Active Entrepreneurs	Unfair competition	‘These practices affect us negatively through the competition and the prices the hidden entrepreneurs charge.’ (Ent-04)
	Passive Entrepreneurs	Fraud incidents	‘.. Because what happens, not in all cases, but it happened; when a problem occurs the foreigner escapes, and all losses fall into the head of the Omani.’ (Banker-2)
	Overall Economy	Profit is transferred abroad	‘..Some of the dangerous impacts of hidden entrepreneurship activities are the transfer of most of profit generated from these activities to outside the country.. distortion of economic growth figures..’ (PublicOfficial-07)
		Increase of unemployment rate	‘..Also hidden entrepreneurship deprives Omani nationals from employment opportunities.. Facts have shown that foreigners employ people from their own race. This distorts the Omanization regulations..’ (PublicOfficial-07)

Main Categories	**Themes**	**Sub-Themes**	**Illustrative Quotes**
		Distortion of Entrepreneurship policies	'…hidden entrepreneurs can cause stronger un-equal competition against local entrepreneurs while getting same advantages from regulations and benefits officially made for local entrepreneurs.' (Ent-07)
Potential contributions	Domestic entrepreneurial ecosystem	Source of knowledge transfer	'…since most Omani firms are engaged in hidden practices, if I collaborate with them I can transfer knowledge and skills from these experienced international entrepreneurs. Especially, we don't have many legitimate Omani entrepreneurs whom we can learn from'. (Ent-7)
		Access to resources in international market	'Well.. Through hidden entrepreneurs I can have access to valuable suppliers and customers whom I can deal with. Also, I can recruit international skilled employees in these firms who have experience in the Omani market..' (Ent-4)
		Achieving efficiency through competition	'When we try to benefit from these hidden entrepreneurs, and we consider them a source of success factors rather than barriers, and we learn and develop our businesses through them, we can be inspirational sources for the passive entrepreneurs. In the long run, the passive entrepreneurs might decide to be active and take control over their businesses; which of course, will be more useful to the Omani economy.' (Ent-7)
		Achieving more formalization in the long run	

4.4 Findings and discussion

In the following three sub-sections we address our research questions of how institutional dynamics caused the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs in Oman, how they are perceived by active entrepreneurs and stakeholders, and finally how hidden entrepreneurs can contribute to the domestic entrepreneurial ecosystem.

4.4.1 Emergence of hidden entrepreneurs from an institutional perspective

The empirical analysis revealed multiple regulative institutions that motivated hidden entrepreneurs' activities. First, the Foreign Capital Investment Law of Oman that provides strict controls on foreign investments plays an important role in the emergence of hidden entrepreneurship activities. In particular, the dual requirements to establish formal partnerships with locals, and to invest a large amount of capital (around 390,000 USD) are some of the critical regulations that act as a barrier for non-Omani entrepreneurs (i.e. Artical 2A of The Foreign Capital Investment Law: Royal Decree 102/94). Furthermore, there are no specific regulations that directly criminalize hidden entrepreneurs' activities (Al-Nasseri, 2015), which sees investors use hidden practices as a route to circumvent the above mentioned regulations. Consistent with previous informal economy studies, over-regulations often encourage informal entrepreneurs, including the hidden practices in our case, to look for opportunities within the informal sector to overcome the cost and efforts to register their businesses (c.f. Biles, 2009; Siqueira *et al.*, 2016).

Insufficient market regulations can also be considered as enabling elements. Poorly designed and implemented competition regulations leave markets amenable to the exploitation of hidden entrepreneurs. Hidden entrepreneurs from overseas are often more comfortable in using lobbying to gain competitive advantages, and are protected from prosecution to a degree as the legal ownership of the business and the associated risks sit with the local passive partner instead of the hidden entrepreneur. Besides, underdeveloped foreign labor regulations contribute to the persistence of hidden entrepreneurship activities by creating ease of immigration for foreign workers, undermining the local labor market. The foreign workers utilize the experience and skills that is gained abroad to exploit opportunities in the local market (Frederking, 2004) through hidden practices. Respondents illustrate these issues:

> 'To be frank with you, we have a free market in Oman, this is good, but there should be some regulations that control the market entry. Because of the missing regulations, anyone [meaning non-Omanis] can enter the market and they invade the market. This affects us badly.' (Ent-02)

> 'Hidden entrepreneurship is supported by the ease of registering ventures and obtaining licenses. Also supported by the legal cover that characterizes these enterprises.'(PublicOfficial-07)

The inefficiency in the regulations have been often associated with corrupt business activities (Tonoyan *et al.*, 2010). Consistent with the informal entrepreneurship literature, the persistence of hidden activities is highly encouraged by weak governance quality such as institutional voids and the weak enforcement of laws that allow for opportunity recognition and exploitation within the informal economy (Webb *et al.*, 2013; Thai and Turkina, 2014). Lisi and Pugno (2010) have posited in their model that tougher monitoring and minimizing the over-regulations may reduce the persistence of the shadow economy and would help encouraging formal structures.

Despite the introduction of enterprise support schemes in 2013 to develop the domestic entrepreneurial ecosystem, their poor design has also unintentionally encouraged hidden entrepreneurs' practices to prevail as a means of generating 'easy money'. This can be considered to be a consequence of poor policy design where the program does not fit sufficiently with the Omani institutional context (cf. Wagner and Sternberg, 2004; Minniti, 2008), as suggested below:

> 'We have been invited to the Tender Board as they wanted to hear our opinions about the mechanism to implement the 10% procurement policy that is allocated to SMEs…I was telling them, the mechanism implemented now is not working. If we really want to give the 10% to the real local entrepreneurs, we should be frank with ourselves; we have to know the real identity of the beneficiaries of this support. What is happening in the market is a game, and we are aware of it..because we feel it and see it every day..I am not exaggerating if I say most of [these names] are only pictures, behind which there are other real owners'. (Ent-01)

The analysis also revealed how the prevailing normative institutions have encouraged the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs. Hidden practices are found to be embedded in the social context, similar to most informal activities (c.f. Estrin and Mickiewicz, 2012). An entrepreneurial culture is largely absent in Oman, undermining the potential of formal entrepreneurship to flourish (Al-Riyami *et al.*, 2002). People often perceive public sector jobs as the ultimate goal (Forstenlechner *et al.*, 2014), which hinders their ability to visualize opportunities in the formal sector. Hence, they often wait for an international entrepreneur to bridge this gap by utilizing this informal practice. Consistent with previous claims (e.g. Webb *et al.*, 2009), the social acceptability of the hidden activities assure their legitimacy and persistence. Another interesting finding is the extent of trust that exists between the international entrepreneurs and their passive partners, which are built through social interactions to overcome the perceived risk associated with these practices. While acknowledging the complexity of trust construct in entrepreneurship studies (Welter, 2012), we may refer it partially to the Omani culture that often promote good faith on others, unless there is obvious reason to be skeptical. A public official presents some of these elements:

> '…the mentality of the local entrepreneurs who accept little profit, and appreciate the gain from foreign labor…and complete reliance on them. Also the wide spread of this culture and its embeddedness within the locals and foreigners in the country makes it a legitimate way of doing business. Also, citizens lack the skills and knowledge that motivate real entrepreneurship. Also, they lack the concentration on their enterprises because of the time imbalance between the enterprise and their own jobs' (PublicOfficial-03)

From the cognitive institutional dimension, as indicated in the above quote, the limited entrepreneurial culture in Oman is a salient factor enabling hidden entrepreneurs as it deprives potential local entrepreneurs from realizing the benefits of self-employment. Omani nationals lack the entrepreneurial skills and the knowledge that would give them the confidence to run their own businesses. As Arenius and Minniti (2005) suggest, they are triggering factors for nascent entrepreneurship. Additionally, the behavior of Omanis is consistent with high risk avoidance (Al-Riyami *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, hidden entrepreneurship approach becomes an attractive opportunity to generate a small fixed income within legal boundaries, while avoiding the risk of failing and the hassles of the day-to-day business activities.

Furthermore, the empirical analysis shows that a lack of awareness amongst the passive locals regarding the potential negative impacts of hidden entrepreneurs on socioeconomic environment is another major factor. There are several negative externalities that Omani nationals are unaware of, as passive locals authorize hidden entrepreneurs to handle all business activities on their behalf, exposing themselves to very high risk without knowing. These findings advance the informal entrepreneurship literature which has predominantly focused on the economic perspectives (e.g. Webb *et al.*, 2009; Williams and Franic, 2016). This adds to the limited studied that have highlighted the role of cognitive abilities and perceptions, such as tax morality and awareness of regulations, in explaining the informal business activities (Williams and Shahid, 2016). A public official explains some of the cognitive elements:

> '…This is supplemented with the lack of awareness of some Omanis about the risks associated with hidden entrepreneurship. Also, it exists because of risk intolerance amongst Omanis and the complete authorization of foreigners to manage, sign contracts and agreements, supervise, and implement all business activities. There is also good

collaboration and trust between the local entrepreneur and the foreigner.. Also, these practices emerge because some Omanis are not dedicating their time to their business because of the focus on their official job.' (PublicOfficial-07)

4.4.2 Stakeholder perceptions of hidden entrepreneurs

The empirical findings discussed in this section demonstrate the perceived negative consequences of hidden entrepreneurs for domestic active and passive entrepreneurs. First, hidden entrepreneurship is found to increase the pressure on active entrepreneurs through generating unfair competition in the market. Interviewees stated that non-Omanis tend to accept lower profit margins to undermine the prices requested by domestic Omani firms, which is achieved by employing foreign workers sourced from overseas networks, who accept lower wages. In contrast, active entrepreneurs need to charge higher prices to offset the opportunity cost of sacrificing a job in public or private sector, which have generous remuneration packages. The extant literature have emphasized the lower competitiveness of formal firms that is caused by the unfair competition (Kettles, 2007; Perry, 2007; Webb *et al.*, 2013), despite the findings of Williams (2007a) that informal entrepreneurs are not a major concern to the formal firms in the UK due to their small size. The hidden entrepreneurs in Oman, however, can undercut the competitiveness of active entrepreneurs due to their formal structure and can even be large firms. Additionally, the effects of hidden entrepreneurs are perceived to be more significant since international entrepreneurs have access to more efficient resources outside the domestic market while utilizing the Omani cover to access competitive resources domestically that are meant for the development of local entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs noted the unfair practices:

> 'We deal mostly with construction and consultancy firms, which are mostly controlled by non-Omanis. These people are collaborating with each other very much. You will find them winning tenders easily, because they are competing aggressively…' (Ent-01).

> 'These practices affect us negatively through the competition and the prices the hidden entrepreneurs charge. These foreigners tend to charge more competitive prices because they are experienced in the field and their requirements are little. And these hidden firms are covered with Omani uniform so they can benefit from all possible facilities as the government is currently supporting Omani SMEs' (Ent-04).

Passive entrepreneurs, on the other hand, are vulnerable to high risk as a result of engagement in hidden entrepreneurship practices. Due to the limited entrepreneurial mindset, some local entrepreneurs authorize hidden entrepreneurs to handle all business activities. Fraud incidents have occurred, where passive entrepreneurs have had loans taken out in the business name without them knowing. To our knowledge, this effect has not been reported in any informal economy study. The previous studies mainly highlight the risk of being detected by the regulators (See Williams and Shahid, 2016). A banker illustrates fraud incidents:

> 'When we finance a company, we find almost no involvement from the Omanis. Even sometimes, we find the foreigner would sign the papers needed. This is causing a problem to the customers as sometimes they fail to pay their loans. Because what happens, not in all cases, but it happened; when a problem occurs the foreigner escapes, and all losses fall into the head of the Omani.' (Banker-2)

Interviewees also stressed the negative impact of hidden entrepreneurs on the wider economy. For example, the profits generated from hidden activities are often transferred abroad instead of being circulated within the Omani economy, facilitated by the freedom of currency transfer regulations. Figures suggest that approximately 8 billion USD attributed to hidden activities, is transferred out of Oman every year (Al-Hinai, 2014). This encounters the claims of Schneider (2002) and Webb *et al.* (2013) that the money generated in the informal economy is usually invested back in the formal economy. Contrasting the findings that informal sector is considered a source of jobs (Kingdon and Knight, 2004; Webb *et al.*, 2013), hidden entrepreneurs are perceived to escalate the unemployment rate amongst Omani people. Hidden entrepreneurs utilize their authority to employ foreign labor to reduce their operating costs and compete aggressively against the local SME owners, who sometimes have to close their businesses; undermining government attempts to create a robust entrepreneurial ecosystem. A public official argues:

> 'Some of the dangerous impacts of hidden entrepreneurship activities are the transfer of most of profit generated from these activities to outside the country.. distortion of economic growth figures. Also hidden entrepreneurship deprives Omani nationals from employment opportunities.. Facts have shown that foreigners employ people from their own country. This distorts the Omanization regulations. Also, commercial activities in the market are guided by the interests and wills of these foreigners. It is unfair competition against the local active SMEs' (PublicOfficial-07)

While the major concern of policymakers in informal economic activities is the loss of tax revenue that is needed for national development (ILO, 2014; Webb *et al.*, 2014), it is not highlighted in the context of hidden entrepreneurs because their activities act formally in terms of operations and tax payment. The respondents rather emphasized the distortion of government entrepreneurship policy and plans. Despite the support interventions introduced in the policy reforms in 2013, hidden activities continue to take place, with negative implications for active entrepreneurs who aspire to be competitive. For example, hidden entrepreneurs bid in the reserved 10% of public procurement tenders quota, which is allocated for Omani SMEs, as the ventures are registered under a local Omani's name. Such practices have distorted government mechanisms to identify active entrepreneurs, leading to an ineffective allocation of resources. Government efforts to endorse and encourage an entrepreneurial mindset and self-employment culture are constantly being challenged by hidden entrepreneurs' practices.

4.4.3 Uncovering collaborative potential

Despite the negative externalities related to hidden entrepreneurs' practices, the respondents raised some potential contributions for the domestic entrepreneurial ecosystem. For instance, hidden entrepreneurs can provide a source of knowledge for local entrepreneurs or owner/managers enabling them to improve their skills. An active entrepreneur demonstrates how they interact with hidden entrepreneurs for the purpose of learning and growing, despite it is being against government aims to outlaw hidden entrepreneurs:

> '...We see how they prepare proposal to a competitive level, so I get a good knowledge about that. Also, I will be able to know the skills he is using, the secrets behind his success. Also, if we do the project together, I will be able to get involved in the skills they are having, I will be able to know how they run their business and how they are controlling the projects. This is very valuable learning…Since it is hard to get rid of these practices, we as entrepreneurs should not consider them a barrier to our success. We shouldn't blame them for our failures. We should benefit from the people who practice these activities. If we want to look at it positively; our key success factor is the experience; experience in developing the business and gaining customers and understanding the market..and since most Omani firms are engaged in hidden practices, if I collaborate with them I can transfer knowledge and skills from these experienced international entrepreneurs.'(Ent-7)

Furthermore, hidden entrepreneurs can be utilized as a good network with linkages to international resources and markets. They usually have access to knowledge, finance, human resources and suppliers that are unavailable in Oman. Collaboration and engagement between the hidden and local entrepreneurs could foster entrepreneurial development and economic growth. An entrepreneur demonstrates such benefits:

> 'Well.. Through hidden entrepreneurs I can have access to valuable suppliers and customers whom I can deal with. Also, I can recruit international skilled employees in these firms who have experience in the Omani market. For example, I can identify a

> business developer who can understand the Omani market and Omani consumers. So it will be easier for me than trying to recruit people whom I don't know.' (Ent-4)

Moreover, these practices can potentially strengthen the local active entrepreneurs as they learn to be more efficient because of market competition. As such, some active entrepreneurs reject the idea that hidden practices are solely negative for their business. Besides, the existence of more successful local entrepreneurs in the long-run would inspire the passive owners/managers to shift their business activities towards a more formal structure, in which they obtain full power and control:

> 'When we try to benefit from these hidden entrepreneurs, and we consider them a source of success factors rather than barriers, and we learn and develop our businesses through them, we can be inspirational sources for the passive entrepreneurs. In the long run, the passive entrepreneurs might decide to be active and take control over their businesses; which of course, will be more useful to the Omani economy.' (Ent-7)

These potential contributions support the thesis that informal economic activities often bring positive contributions that can add value to the economy and society (Webb *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, instead of trying to regulate away hidden entrepreneurs, there could be mechanisms to absorb them within the formal entrepreneurial ecosystem. The findings also indicate how the collaboration with hidden entrepreneurs can result in some positive cognitive institutionalization within Oman. As such, active local entrepreneurs could encourage passive entrepreneurs to legalize their structures and attain the full benefits of entrepreneurship and venture control. In the long term, they could be role models for passive entrepreneurs and promote legitimacy and formal economic activities.

While the informal economy literature demonstrates the significance of the informal activities in overcoming the institutional imperfections and supporting the socioeconomic stability through the efficiency generated by these informal activities (De Soto, 1989; Raijman, 2001; Williams, 2008; Webb *et al.*, 2009), hidden entrepreneurs offer different kind of contributions, principally entrepreneurial knowledge. As well as efficiency, they tend to provide more intangible contributions such as provision of entrepreneurial learning, and its role in creating a formal entrepreneurial mindset in the long run amongst passive entrepreneurs and Omani citizens.

4.5 Conclusions: Contributions and implications for research and policy

The overall aim of this paper was to explore the notion of hidden entrepreneurship in Oman by examining their perceived causes, effects and potential contributions on the domestic entrepreneurial ecosystem. The analysis focused on three key actors; passive and hidden entrepreneurs, who unofficially collaborate in business partnership that is registered solely under the passive local entrepreneur's name, but unofficially owned and operated by the international hidden entrepreneur. The third actor is the active local entrepreneur who has to deal with these firms as competitors and collaborators at the same time within the domestic market. The study provided evidence on how hidden entrepreneurs persists utilizing the prevailing institutional configurations, such as weak regulations and policies at the regulative level, anti-entrepreneurship societal mindset at the normative level, and deficiencies in business knowledge and skills amongst passive entrepreneurs at the cognitive level. Whilst hidden entrepreneurs are perceived negatively by the local active entrepreneurs and stakeholders in terms of competition, fraud and distortion of government SME policy, interestingly several contributions were revealed by those who benefited from these international hidden entrepreneurs in terms of learning and access to scarce resources.

Through these findings the study contributes multiple insights into informal entrepreneurship research. First, the paper contributes to the field by introducing hidden entrepreneurs who are understudied in the informal economy literature. Similar to most practices of the informal economy, hidden entrepreneurs engage in hybrid activities involving both legal and illegal practices (Williams and Shahid, 2016). While their businesses are registered and sell legal goods and services, they violate ownership registration and labor laws. However, they differ from other informal activities in terms of effects on the economy. A critical example is the undermining of the local economy due to the transfer of earnings outside the country. Second, the paper benefited from the institutional lens to advance understandings of hidden entrepreneurs by elucidating the role of institutional dynamics in encouraging international entrepreneurs to pursue hidden practices in the context of Oman. Although previous informal economy literature largely followed formal and informal institutional frameworks to explain informal entrepreneurship (e.g. Webb *et al.*, 2009), this study demonstrated the usefulness of Scott's (2014) sociological approach to unpack risky, hidden practices in Oman. Particularly, the findings exhibit the role of societal culture that undermine entrepreneurship as a career and the limited cognitive abilities of some locals in privileging these practices. Also, trust between the hidden and passive entrepreneurs appears to be an important sociocultural construct that enables the creation of hidden practices. Third, the paper demonstrated the importance of examining informal economic activities in the context of developing countries especially in under-researched contexts such as Oman and the Gulf region (Webb *et al.*, 2014; Al-Shaya, 2015). The unique institutional configurations of these countries differ from that of developed countries in terms of maturity and sociocultural orientations, which allow for different types of informality to emerge as shown in the case of hidden entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, our article provides policy implications, particularly for the Omani government. The government has been labeling hidden entrepreneurship practices negatively, while overlooking the potential contributions that could be gained through working alongside these experienced international entrepreneurs. While it may be true that hidden entrepreneurs can undermine government plans, the findings also highlight how collaborative programmes could enhance local entrepreneurs' capabilities and resources. Interestingly, rolling back attempts to penalize international hidden entrepreneurs, or working closely with them, could enhance the domestic market, assisting the economy and entrepreneurship development. . Normalizing and legitimizing these activities could be a useful intervention, through which violators (i.e. hidden and passive entrepreneurs) are encouraged to declare their business interests and labor status. The Omani government could learn from the 'deshadowization' program of Ukraine, where the government encourages firms to enter the formal economy, through regulatory simplification and incentives (Williams and Round, 2007). In our context, this could be achieved through revising foreign investment regulations to facilitate the creation of more joint ventures between international and local entrepreneurs, where more collaborative learning can be realized. Incentives such as making it easier to bid in public procurement programs could also be offered to support joint ventures. In addition, the government could invest more in awareness programmes to change the societal views of these 'illegal' practices and to promote joint ventures as a legitimate form of entrepreneurial activity. Through these interventions, both hidden and passive local entrepreneurs could pursue legal collaborative businesses that can generate economic growth for the country as well as supporting entrepreneurship development via knowledge transfer.

Overall, the contributions of our paper are two-fold. First, it introduced the role of hidden entrepreneurs who bridge formal and informal economies, generating insights into the institutional environment of an emerging economy (i.e. Oman). As a developing economy, Oman has various institutional deficiencies which have indirectly facilitated the rise of hidden entrepreneurs. Subsequently, instead of creating a formal developed SME sector, the government has created a dual formal and informal economy. Building on this, our second contribution focuses on the work in informal sector by examining the perceived effects of hidden entrepreneurs on the formal economy alongside, opportunities arising for greater collaboration between local and hidden entrepreneurs. Instead of trying to regulate away hidden entrepreneurs, we highlighted opportunities for absorbing the expertise and capabilities of international entrepreneurs to develop the local entrepreneurial ecosystem.

4.5.1 Limitations and future research

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study and suggest future avenues for research. First, We were unable to directly interview hidden/informal entrepreneurs as they did not want to be identified or to participate (Schneider *et al.*, 2010). We suggest researchers of future studies to spend time establishing trust with hidden entrepreneurs in order to include them in their studies, although gaining access may still be challenging due to the hidden and secretive nature of their activities. We also encourage future researchers to further examine hidden practices by studying the mechanism of the collaborative relationship between the passive and hidden entrepreneurs at the individual level and learn how trust and networking shape this affiliation. Furthermore, hidden entrepreneurship does not only exist in Oman, but also in other neighboring countries such as Saudi Arabia (Al-Shaya, 2015), perhaps due to the similar institutional settings. Subsequently, we suggest that further investigations of hidden entrepreneurship could examine neighboring countries within the Gulf region (i.e. Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain) to develop greater insight into this unique phenomenon.

Chapter 5: What makes entrepreneurial learning programmes (un)successful?

Abstract

Studies of entrepreneurial learning (EL) programmes have been inconclusive, with scholars unable to establish if such programmes are useful in supporting entrepreneurship. Earlier research has overlooked the role of the institutional environments in which these programmes are embedded, warranting further research on their impact. This qualitative study draws on institutional theory as a lens to examine the role of the institutional environment by deploying in-depth interviews with various Omani EL actors. The study finds that EL programmes are often negatively influenced by regulative, normative and cognitive institutional arrangements, as a result of overlooking these important attributes. The study contributes to the EL literature by recognizing the importance of institutional factors in EL programme design.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial learning, institutional theory, entrepreneurial education, entrepreneurial policy.

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5.1 Introduction

Governments have been investing heavily in entrepreneurial learning (EL) programmes, including entrepreneurial education and training, knowledge transfer, advice and incubation in order to cultivate entrepreneurial intentions and stimulate entrepreneurial activity (Adegbite, 2001; Henry *et al.*, 2004; Lockett *et al.*, 2008; Mole *et al.*, 2008; Kosters and Obschonka, 2011; Atherton and Smallbone, 2013; Obeng and Blundel, 2015; Thompson and Kwong, 2016). However, studies that examine the efficacy of EL programmes have been inconclusive, warranting further research and scrutiny to identify the reasons for programme success or failure (Mole, 2000; Peterman and Kennedy, 2003; Pittaway and Cope, 2007a; Oosterbeek *et al.*, 2010; Jones *et al.*, 2013; Huber *et al.*, 2014; Thompson and Kwong, 2016). Among the possible reasons for the mixed results is a tendency to overlook the antecedent institutional factors. Earlier studies examined EL programmes by focusing on the micro level, for example entrepreneurial intentions and behaviours (Peterman and Kennedy, 2003; Rauch and Hulsink, 2015), while overlooking the influence of institutional environments at the macro level (Patton *et al.*, 2000; Walter and Block, 2016). However, overlooking the institutional environment in EL programme design undermines the potential efficacy of the programmes (Bae *et al.*, 2014).

This justifies scholars' call for more critical multi-level understanding that recognizes the relationships of entrepreneurs within their wider context when examining EL programmes (Karataş-Özkan, 2011; Shepherd, 2011). A small body of research which considered the institutional environment as a factor for EL programme success (Walter and Block, 2016) did not account for the interactions between different institutional elements and how they influence the efficacy of EL programmes (Kim and Li, 2014).

A close examination of the institutional environment and its different pillars is particularly important when studying EL programmes in emerging countries, due to unique institutional configurations that differ from earlier studies in the developed context (Bruton *et al.*, 2008; Nasra and Dacin, 2010). Our paper seeks to address these gaps in the knowledge by focusing on the influence of the institutional environment and the interactions that occur between its components on the efficacy of EL programmes in the context of Oman.

Oman launched its first formal EL programmes in 2001 to diversify its economy away from oil and gas extraction by growing a small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) sector, (Khan and Almoharby, 2007). A second wave of EL programmes was announced between 2013 and 2015 (PASMED, 2016). Careful examination of these EL programmes is necessary to ensure their efficacy (Bennett, 2008; Williams, 2013), given that Oman, like many emerging economies, is less experienced in devising entrepreneurial policy and EL programmes (Al-Riyami *et al.*, 2002; Khan and Almoharby, 2007).

Institutional elements, such as education and entreprenurship policies, and regulations at the macro level, social culture and norms at the meso level, and individual perceptions and experience of entrepreneurship at the micro level, could shape the success of EL programmes (Dada and Fogg, 2016; Walter and Block, 2016). In light of these institutional influences, the overall aim of the paper is to examine their effect on EL programmes within Oman. The study poses the following research questions: (1) How do the elements of the institutional environment influence EL programmes? (2) How do these elements interact with each other in the context of EL programmes?

We use institutional theory as a lens to explore how elements within the institutional context influence the efficacy of EL programmes (Scott, 1995, 2014). Institutional theory has been widely used in context-based entrepreneurship research, as it recognizes the influence of the wider context within which EL takes place (Bruton *et al.*, 2010). The study draws on the institutional pillars framework (i.e. regulative, normative, cognitive) (Scott, 1995, 2014) to unpack the distinct institutional arrangements and their indirect effects on the outcomes of EL programmes.

The contributions of this paper are twofold. First, the study uses institutional theory to investigate the role of institutional elements in influencing EL programmes, contributing a more critical analysis to the field of EL (Toledano and Urbano, 2008; Walter and Block, 2016). The iterative and reinforcing nature of institutional interactions in the context of EL forms a major contribution to theory at the intersection of EL and institutional theory. We demonstrate the dialectical relationship between the needs of entrepreneurs, their value systems and dispositions towards EL and various institutional pressures. Second, the study contributes empirically to the EL literature by providing evidence from an emerging economy, Oman. EL literature is heavily based on evidence from Western economies (Bruton *et al.*, 2008). Recognizing the embeddedness of institutional pressures and situated nature of EL, we demonstrate the determinants of EL in an emerging economy context.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the extant EL literature and its intersection with institutional theory debates. Section 3 outlines the methodological approach. Section 4 follows with a discussion of the findings. The final section concludes the paper and discusses the wider implications for theory and practice.

5.2 Literature Review

5.2.1 Influence of institutional environment on EL programmes

The literature on EL programme efficacy is inconclusive (Martin *et al.*, 2013; Nabi *et al.*, 2016). While some studies identify positive EL programme outcomes (Peterman and Kennedy, 2003; Henry *et al.*, 2004; Souitaris *et al.*, 2007; Fayolle and Gailly, 2015; Thompson and Kwong, 2016), others question the value added by these programmes (Oosterbeek *et al.*, 2010; Von Graevenitz *et al.*, 2010; Jones *et al.*, 2013). Recent research has drawn attention to the omission of complex contextual factors from studies that examine the effectiveness of EL programmes, which may explain the field's mixed results (Bae *et al.*, 2014; Nabi *et al.*, 2016; Walter and Block, 2016).

This paper has identified three main knowledge gaps within the literature. First, the direct influence of institutional elements in the efficacy of EL programmes is rarely explored (see Walter and Block, 2016 for an exception in the context of entrepreneurship education). Studies have shown that EL programme efficacy can be determined by institutional elements. These can include regulations as well as socio-cultural norms (Bae *et al.*, 2014; Walter and Block, 2016). As Minniti (2008: 781) argues, 'one size does not fit all', meaning that policy programmes should be designed to fit the institutional context of particular regions in order to be effective (Wagner and Sternberg, 2004). Second, institutions are generated through social interactions, and are subject to change, as individuals are in continuous interaction with their surroundings (Scott, 2014). While a small body of literature has explored how informal institutions can interact with formal institutions, e.g. business venturing in emerging economies, and entrepreneurship development in transitional or crisis-hit economies (Kim and Li, 2014; Williams and Vorley, 2014, 2015), little is known about institutional interactions in the context of EL. The influence of these interactions on the efficacy of EL programmes deserves scholarly attention. Third, it is necessary to examine the EL programmes in multiple layers, since EL is a multi-layered process (Karataş-Özkan, 2011). For example, individuals at the micro level interact with the social environment at the meso level, and the regulatory environment at the macro level. Multi-level approaches are still limited in the context of entrepreneurship research in general (Davidsson *et al.*, 2001; De Clercq *et al.*, 2013; Tatli *et al.*, 2014), and EL research in particular (Karataş-Özkan, 2011).

Considering these three gaps, this study aims to highlight the influence of institutional dynamics on EL programme efficacy by drawing on institutional theory (Scott, 2014). Institutional theory has been recognized as a useful framework to navigate the contextual environment and investigate its influence on entrepreneurial activities (Acs *et al.*, 2008; Aidis *et al.*, 2008; Bruton *et al.*, 2010). While previous studies have mostly framed institutions as macro level forces, they unfold in micro and meso level contexts as they shape individual behaviour (Wicks, 2001 via Bruton *et al.*, 2010). Institutional theory can be used to examine how the micro and macro level institutions and their interactions affect the behaviour of EL actors (Arshed *et al.*, 2014). Simultaneously, this interaction cannot happen in isolation of the meso level forces (socio-cultural institutions, such as family support), which also shape the learning process (Huggins and Thompson, 2014; Jayawarna *et al.*, 2014). In order to understand the overall institutional environment, the three institutional forces introduced by Scott (1995, 2014) are adapted in this study, following recent work by Audretsch *et al.* (2013) and Walter and Block (2016).

5.2.2 Institutional dimensions

In examining the regulative dimension, research shows that EL is influenced by the education system (Naudé *et al.*, 2008; Obeng and Blundel, 2015). There is a positive correlation between formal education and support provided to entrepreneurs: the ability to start and grow ventures (Naudé *et al.*, 2008). However, it is not only about access to education, but about access to more effectively designed EL programmes that are tailored to fit (Peterman and Kennedy, 2003; Kirby and Ibrahim, 2011; Fayolle and Gailly, 2015). The education system has been criticised for its shortcomings in equipping graduates with practical entrepreneurial skills (Anderson and Jack, 2008). Some of the shortcomings arise due to the inability of public officials to agree on what entrepreneurship is, and what it is for (O'Connor, 2013; Arshed *et al.*, 2014; Arshed *et al.*, 2016), leading to poor EL policy design.

Some studies have argued that training and advisory programmes improve SME performance (Chi *et al.*, 2008; Sawang *et al.*, 2016). However they can be costly, and a struggle to access for many micro and small firms (Smith and Barrett, 2016). The literature questions the efficacy of these programmes, as they sometimes add insufficient value, because the expertise of public providers in EL education is limited (Atherton and Smallbone, 2013; Jones *et al.*, 2013; Van Cauwenberge *et al.*, 2013). This can result in SMEs failing to recognize the benefits of training and advisory support (Bennett, 2008; Mole *et al.*, 2009; Obeng and Blundel, 2015). Therefore, inadequacies in the regulatory environment can be argued to undermine the success of EL programmes.

Social norms and values can also influence the efficacy of EL programmes. Normative institutions can encourage or discourage EL by influencing the interest of students and entrepreneurs towards entrepreneurial education and training (Frederking, 2004; Liñán and Chen, 2009; Urbano *et al.*, 2011; Díaz-Casero *et al.*, 2012). For example, countries with high uncertainty avoidance characteristics tend to have negative perceptions about entrepreneurship (Drakopoulou Dodd *et al.*, 2013). These cultural elements are found to negatively affect the ability of entrepreneurship education to boost entrepreneurial intentions and activity (Bae *et al.*, 2014; Walter and Block, 2016). In Oman, the low risk tolerance among students reduces entrepreneurial intentions (Belwal *et al.*, 2015), and hence their interest in EL programmes.

Social capital is another important element of the normative institutions. While Gibb (1997: 13) asserts that SMEs are 'learning organisations' that continue their learning through interaction with their close network environment, Zhang *et al.* (2006) describe them as 'innovative' if they encourage deeper and wider learning through creating effective external relationships. Subsequently, EL is not only about the know-what and know-how; it is also about the know-who (Wang and Chugh, 2014), and the type of know-who (Hansen and Hamilton, 2011). Social networks can be very useful in acquiring the knowledge and skills that are needed for exploiting opportunities (Jones *et al.*, 2010). Bennett (2008) finds that informal sources, such as family, friends and colleagues can be useful sources for advisory and other learning opportunities, which half of the SMEs claimed to use. In the Omani context, informal sources would be expected to play a bigger role, due to the collective nature of the Arab culture, with close commitment from the extended family and tribe (Al-Hamadi *et al.*, 2007).

While previous studies have mostly sought to understand the impact of EL programmes on individuals' entrepreneurial attitudes and intentions (Souitaris *et al.*, 2007; Do Paço *et al.*, 2015; Fayolle and Gailly, 2015; Westhead and Solesvik, 2015), little is known about how individuals' beliefs, perceptions and experiences influence the efficacy of EL programmes. Positive cognitions and behaviour, such as entrepreneurial learning orientation, self-efficacy and positive attitudes towards learning can be influential in EL (Hannon, 2006; Voudouris *et al.*, 2011; Dada and Fogg, 2016; Smith and Barrett, 2016). Self-efficacy is considered a motivational factor for choosing any business activity, including selecting and attending specific learning programmes (Bandura, 1997; Smith and Barrett, 2016). Society can affect an individual's self-efficacy towards EL when evaluating entrepreneurship as a career and determining its legitimacy within the social structure (Krueger *et al.*, 2013).

Interest in training programmes is highly linked to the entrepreneur's perceived beliefs in the benefits of a programme, as well as its convenience (Walker *et al.*, 2007). Additionally, other cognitive factors, such as trust in the service provider (Curran and Blackburn, 2000), perceived reputation and benefits of previous programmes (Storey and Westhead, 1997; Obeng and Blundel, 2015) can influence the inclination of entrepreneurs to seek advisory support. Our paper suggests that cognitive elements, such as attitudes and beliefs, can influence the effectiveness of EL programmes by exerting an enabling or hindering effect.

5.2.3 Institutional interactions in EL

Scholars have emphasised the 'complex and endogenous' nature of the relationships between the different institutional elements, which require further studies on how they affect EL programmes (see Bruton *et al.*, 2010: 433). Although Bruton *et al.* (2010) found it challenging to identify these interdependencies, this study seeks to contribute to the literature by highlighting these relationships through an in-depth exploration of EL programmes and the institutional environment. The study of the interdependencies is important, as Hayton *et al.* (2002) posit, in that there is simultaneous reflection and reinforcement between national systems and sociocultural values and beliefs. Additionally, Williams and Vorley (2014, 2015) demonstrate how the interaction between the different institutional dimensions can enable or hinder entrepreneurship development in Bulgaria and Greece, while Kim and Li (2014) showcase how normative institutions can counteract regulatory deficiencies in business venturing in emerging economies. In this paper we argue that institutional interactions can also be expected in the context of EL.

The political environment can influence the societal perception of entrepreneurship and EL. For instance, policies that generate jobs for people in the public sector can create a 'social contract' between the citizens and the Government (Forstenlechner *et al.*, 2014: 45), reducing the desirability of entrepreneurship (Fayolle and Liñán, 2014). As a result, these values and norms are reflected in the societal perception of EL. This societal perception can be transmitted to the individual's cognition through habitual behaviours and actions (Krueger *et al.*, 2013). Interest in EL is determined by beliefs and orientation (Deakins *et al.*, 2012) which form an 'incentive for individuals to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills' to exploit opportunities (Díaz-Casero *et al.*, 2012: 851). The literature shows that while an individual's cognitive attitudes, such as positive learning experiences, are deterministic in the individual's desire to attend future formal entrepreneurship education and training, their perceptions and self-efficacy are expected to be reinforced by best practice entrepreneurship programmes (Peterman and Kennedy, 2003; Obeng and Blundel, 2015). Such interaction can either reinforce or undermine EL effectiveness.

Likewise, normative elements can affect the development of learning programmes at the regulative level. Effective EL programmes cannot be developed unless they are shaped by constructive feedback to meet the needs of the participants (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Given that culture plays a moderating role in feedback giving and seeking behaviour, the way feedback is sought can also be influential. Feedback sought in a direct way might lead to losing face in most Arab and Asian countries, where people prefer a more indirect approach. This can undermine the usefulness of the feedback (De Luque and Sommer, 2000).

Normative principles such as social values can influence the psychological traits and attitudes of individuals (Krueger *et al.*, 2013). For example, the social values that celebrate entrepreneurship are likely to create interest among individuals towards EL. For example, Liñán *et al.* (2011) found that the perception of entrepreneurship within the social system explains the different levels of development in Catalonia and Andalusia in Spain, in the way these values influence individual attitudes and subjective norms. Previous research demonstrates that in order to achieve effective policies, including EL programmes, the overall institutional system should be consistent in all dimensions (Minniti, 2008). Inadequacy in one dimension is expected to lead to a shortfall in others, and vice versa. Therefore, the three institutional components are argued to be inextricably linked and interact within a multi-layered framework in the context of EL. This empirical investigation of the Omani context will generate useful insights to understand these dynamics.

5.3 Methodology

5.3.1 Study context:

Oman has been chosen to empirically investigate the influence of institutional elements and interactions on EL programmes. Despite being considered a wealthy country, with a GDP per capita of USD 19,310 in 2015 (The World Bank, 2015), Oman suffers from some deficiencies in the institutional configurations, which can affect the EL process. Evidence shows that about 67% of the Omanis who graduated between 2010 and 2013 were employed in the government sector (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015). Estimates show that the SME sector accounts for only 15% of the GDP (Oxford Business Group, 2014), whereas oil contributes around 50% of the GDP, and 80% of government spending (NCSI, 2015). These figures raise concerns, as Oman's economic health is closely tied to oil prices, which began to fall from their peak in mid-2014.

Oman suffers from insufficient coordination among public EL providers, with inadequate regulation and monitoring of the education system, while entrepreneurship has a low social status (Al-Riyami *et al.*, 2002; Khan and Almoharby, 2007; Al-Shanfari, 2012). Although the Omani Government has launched policies and programmes to promote EL through education, training and advice (See Table 2-3 in Chapter 2), the entrepreneurial mind-set is still lacking amongst Omani people, which hinders the economic diversification plans of the country (Atef and Al-Balushi, 2015). For example, university students are found to be lacking in business knowledge, due to the small quantity and poor quality of entrepreneurship courses and activities (Belwal *et al.*, 2015). The prevailing normative institutions that undervalue entrepreneurs, and cognitive attitudes such as the risk averse culture are amongst the barriers that challenge the promotion of entrepreneurial activities in Oman (Belwal *et al.*, 2015).

5.3.2 Research approach and sample

Following an interpretivist epistemology, the paper draws upon a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews to answer our exploratory research questions (Gephart, 2004; Myers, 2013). According to Scott (2014), institutions generate meaning through human interactions, and are preserved and changed through social actions. Therefore, it is critical to capture the meanings ascribed by the institutional actors (i.e. entrepreneurship stakeholders) in order to understand the nature of institutional dynamics and their influence on EL. Our point of departure is that every individual within the multi-level framework (macro-meso-micro) has different experiences and perceptions of EL, which are shaped by the prevailing institutions. Hence, it was necessary to seize the meanings articulated by the different stakeholders at different levels in order to capture the interactions that occur between the institutional components. As Ogbor (2000) argues, there are multiple truths of entrepreneurship that are determined by the prevalent political systems, sociocultural systems, norms and experiences. Drawing on the notion that EL is not universal (Drakopoulou Dodd and Hynes, 2012; Drakopoulou Dodd *et al.*, 2013), we argue that every respondent would have different conceptions and experiences of how entrepreneurship could be learnt.

Purposeful sampling techniques were used to recruit 39 participants who could provide richness and depth to answer the research questions (Patton, 2015). The sample included entrepreneurs from a variety of backgrounds at different stages of the business lifecycle, and looked at how they were influenced by their surrounding institutional environments. The entrepreneurs all had experience of government- sponsored EL programmes. To achieve a holistic perspective of EL, and to capture institutional interactions, a number of entrepreneurship stakeholders were recruited, including representatives from entrepreneurship-relevant public agencies, primary education institutions, higher education institutions, and SME development agencies, acceleration and incubation programmes, bankers, consultants, academics, and instructors. Table 5-1 illustrates the details of participants.

Table 5-1: Participants details in the 2nd paper

Participant Category	Participant Code	Participant Description
Entrepreneurs	Ent-01	Entrepreneur in technical solutions & consultancy
	Ent-02	Entrepreneur in scientific solutions & consultancy
	Ent-03	Entrepreneur in advertising
	Ent-04	Entrepreneur in design
	Ent-05	Entrepreneur in IT solutions
	Ent-06	Entrepreneur in IT solutions
	Ent-07	Entrepreneur in IT solutions
	Ent-08	Entrepreneur in IT solutions
	Ent-09	Entrepreneur in design
	Ent-10	Entrepreneur in design
	Ent-11	Entrepreneur in E-business
	Ent-12	Entrepreneur in technical solutions & consultancy
	Ent-13	Entrepreneur in IT and games
	Ent-14	Would-be entrepreneur
EL providers	PublicOfficial-01	Director in government agency
	PublicOfficial-02	Director in government agency
	PublicOfficial-03	Head of Department in government agency
	PublicOfficial-04	Director in government agency
	PublicOfficial-05	Director General in government agency
	PublicOfficial-06	Director General in government agency
	PublicOfficial-07	Assistant to Director General in government agency
	PublicOfficial-08	Head of Department in government agency
	PublicOfficial-09	Deputy Director in government agency
	PublicOfficial-10	Head of Department in government agency
	PublicOfficial-11	Head of Department in government agency

Participant Category	Participant Code	Participant Description
	Uni-Ent-Support	Director of entrepreneurship development department in academic institution
	Uni-Academic	Assistant Professor and Head of management department in academic institution
	Incubator-1	Manager of an incubator
	Incubator-2	Assistant Manager of an incubator
	Incubator-3	Director in an incubator
	Ent-Program-1	Executive Director of a corporate entrepreneurship programme
	Ent-Program-2	Programme Advisor of a corporate entrepreneurship programme
	Ent-Program-3	Manager of a corporate entrepreneurship programme
	Ent-Program-4	Programme Officer in a corporate entrepreneurship programme
	Banker-1	SMEs credit manager in a bank
	Banker-2	Deputy Director of SMEs Department in a bank
	Tech_Consultant	Technical consultant in SMEs consultancy firm
	VC	Manager in a venture capital firm
	OCCI	Deputy Director in Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry

5.3.3 Production and analysis of empirical material

Following the interpretivist qualitative approach, data was collected using in-depth interviews and complemented with publicly available documents. Documents were used to contextualise the existing entrepreneurial education and learning programmes and to identify the main EL providers, which also facilitated the recruitment of participants throughout the study. A semi-structured interview guideline was developed to capture the influence of the institutional environment on learning, knowledge generation and development, and competence building (King and Horrocks, 2010). The interview questions addressed the main institutional pillars within the EL context, and differed according to the interviewee type (e.g. public officials, educators, or entrepreneurs). To highlight some questions, public officials were asked about their role in developing EL programmes and their perceptions about entrepreneurs' learning behaviour. Educators were asked about the learning opportunities they offered and how entrepreneurs/students engaged with these programmes. Entrepreneurs were asked about the learning opportunities that were available to them, their perceptions about these programmes, their approaches to learning, and how the surrounding environment, including regulations, policies, society and family had influenced their learning.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the recorded and transcribed data (King, 2004; Myers, 2013). The analysis sought to identify the multiple institutional elements that influence EL, which were classified according to the three institutional pillars. Furthermore, the analysis focused on the interactions that occur between the different institutional elements, and how they influence EL.

The analysis, as shown in Table 5-2, involved three levels of coding (Pittaway *et al.*, 2011). First, institutions were investigated individually, where each institutional pillar represented a category to guide the analysis (level 1). Building on these categories, sub-themes were created to highlight emerging institutional elements that influence EL programmes (level 3), which were grouped into two main themes (level 2): *enablers* and *disablers*. The analysis identified the instances where interactions occurred between institutional elements and where they influenced EL. While *'interactions between institutional elements'* was placed as a main category (level 1), every interaction influence on EL was added as a sub-theme (level 3), and grouped into themes that highlighted the relationship direction of the interaction (e.g. influence of regulative on normative) (level 2). Finally, the dataset was interpreted to address the research aims.

Table 5-2: Coding with illustrative examples in the 2nd paper

Category	Themes	Sub-themes	Illustrative Quotes
Regulative	Regulative enablers	Policy reform towards developing entrepreneurship education	‘We are currently developing the standards for ‘Life Skills’ subject and we have taken into consideration entrepreneurship concept in more depth and direct approach’ (PublicOfficial-10)
		Many formal EL opportunities	‘The centre provides various opportunities for learning and networking’ (Ent-03)
	Regulative disablers	Some policies and regulations	‘The regulations should be more flexible…For example, I might need to bring someone from outside the country for one week to do some training and then he would leave. Such thing should be facilitated’ (Ent-3)
		Multiple conceptualisation of ‘entrepreneurship’	‘Government should have clear direction towards entrepreneurship. Because SMEs and entrepreneurship are totally different and have different needs’ (Ent-12)
		Low quality public training and advisory support	‘Most of the support provided is very general. It is very shallow’ (Ent-7)
		Lack of information about available courses	‘We did not know much about the TKM incubator… We were so lucky that we were taken on a field trip to KOM… Only over there; we knew that we can open a company in an incubator. From there, we started thinking for the first time about our business idea’ (Ent-4)

Category	Themes	Sub-themes	Illustrative Quotes
Normative	Normative enablers	Wide networking opportunities facilitating informal learning	‘Everything is done by self-effort. And when there is something that I don’t know, I rely on some friends’ (Ent-11)
	Normative disablers	Society values and culture	‘So we had to stop many teaching units due to noncompliance to social values’ (PublicOfficial-10)
		Family entrepreneurial mind-set	‘In entrepreneurship, I think the financial conditions of the family, and also the entrepreneurial mind-set are some factors that would encourage students to be more interested in entrepreneurship learnin.’ (PublicOfficial-10)
		Lack of open criticism for EL programmes	‘We conducted a survey but we didn’t find entrepreneurs caring about the importance of this survey…they fill questionnaires randomly’ (PublicOfficial-1)
Cognitive	Cognitive enablers	Self-directed learning	‘We tend to conduct our training in the office. We enhance our knowledge internally’ (Ent-2)
		Momentum in the interest within students towards entrepreneurship education	‘We felt that passion to learn about entrepreneurship with most students…’ (PublicOfficial-9)
	Cognitive disablers	Negative perception of entrepreneurship among students	‘I have never thought of opening my own business. Even at the university level, when I used to develop some projects, my ambition was to win a prize only, not to commercialize the projects’ (Ent-12)

Category	Themes	Sub-themes	Illustrative Quotes
		Lack of interest in attending formal learning	'All training is conducted in-house. Because I have tried the training outside, and I know how useless it is. But inside the firm, we develop programmes that are suitable for our employees' (Ent-05)
Interaction between institutional elements	Influence of normative on cognitive	Society mind-set influences students' perceptions	'…when you ask them in reality, unfortunately they don't have the will to be entrepreneurs…We know that it is all because of the society culture and the surrounding environment' (PublicOfficial-9)
		Family entrepreneurial mind-set influences interest in EL	'…the financial conditions of the family, and also the entrepreneurial mind-set are some factors that would encourage students to be more interested in entrepreneurship learning' (PublicOfficial-10)
	Influence of regulative on cognitive	Government and media focus help in changing the perceptions of students	'I think because of the increase in government focus and media focus in the issue of entrepreneurship…students now started to build interest in learning about entrepreneurship' (Uni-academic)
		Inappropriate training courses lead to negative attitude towards learning	'We noticed that the SMEs don't attend the training session. Why? Because the content was higher than their level…This was one of the problems that we got to know later' (Incubator-3)
		Lack of proper training leads to self-directed learning	'Of course we need training, but it is too expensive and we need to allocate it time. We don't find training in our field in Oman. So we rely on the internet for training. We train ourselves' (Ent-9)

Category	Themes	Sub-themes	Illustrative Quotes
		Lack of entrepreneurship education leads to self-directed learning	'We never, never learnt about entrepreneurship when we were in the university, and no one talks about it actually…we learnt by ourselves' (Ent-12)
	Influence of regulative & normative on cognitive	People mentality and education policies create negative perceptions of entrepreneurship	'We need to change the concepts and mentality of people. You may remember back in the days when we were studying in schools, we had to choose between Science route and Art route. The [less competent students] will always go for the Art route. And given that business concepts are taught to Art students only, this means this is something not important and is taught to less competent people.The society instils in us that seeking a job should be our target. This is should be changed. And the change starts at childhood' (Ent-07)
	Influence of normative on regulative	Lack of open criticism for EL programmes influence the ability of institutions to enhance EL programmes	'When we used to do training evaluation and we ask entrepreneurs how the workshop was, they tend to say good, out of courtesy. They were not frank with us' (Incubator-3)
		Sociocultural values obstruct the inclusion of entrepreneurial skills in curriculum	'So we had to stop many teaching units due to non-compliance to society's values ' (PublicOfficial-10)
	Influence of cognitive on regulative	Negative learning attitudes lead to changes in policies	'Entrepreneurs tend to skip the training courses that we offer for free, after registering…We have plans now to address this attitude by asking them to contribute 5 to 10% of the cost' (PublicOfficial-06)

Category	Themes	Sub-themes	Illustrative Quotes
	Influence of normative on regulative	Entrepreneurship narratives lead to changing CSR policies	‘Business incubation programmes cannot work in isolation. They have to work with others. The good thing in Oman now, everybody talks about entrepreneurship and SMEs. Every company comes with CSR ideas’ (Incubator-03)
	Influence of regulative on normative	Incubation programmes lead to informal learning through networks	‘What is good about SAS it gives opportunity for networking. If I have something that I don’t know about, I can share my problem with my other incubatees who are always helpful’ (Ent-06)

5.4 Findings and discussion

The analysis reveals a number of direct effects of institutional elements on the efficacy of EL and EL programmes, as well as more complex effects resulting from the interaction of the elements (See Table 5-3 for empirical evidence on these influences). The findings reveal that while some of these effects are positive for EL programmes, a great number of them affect EL programme efficacy negatively.

5.4.1 Direct effects of institutional elements on EL

This section examines the direct effects of Omani institutions at the regulative, normative, and cognitive dimensions.

The first challenge facing the EL programmes at the regulative level is the varied understanding of the term 'entrepreneurship' by policymakers. The SME sector presents a great deal of heterogeneity, and every small or new firm should not be considered as entrepreneurial (Santarelli and Vivarelli, 2007). A number of our participants raised concerns that policymakers fail to differentiate innovative entrepreneurs from SMEs or self-employment:

> 'SMEs and entrepreneurship are totally different and have different needs. The investment in innovation takes time. It takes not less than three years before you enter the market'. (Ent-12)

Blanket EL programmes that disregard the differences among SMEs fail to recognize entrepreneurs. This was seen as a particularly strong reason for the shortcomings of EL programmes, leading to inadequate programme design, delivery and evaluation (cf. O'Connor, 2013; Arshed *et al.*, 2016).

A second regulative challenge to EL is the presence of unsupportive regulations that interfere with the provision of high quality EL (Vyakarnam and Adams, 2001). For example, the majority of the Omani firms could not invite non-Omani entrepreneurs and educators into the country to conduct EL programmes, due to immigration laws that limit such invitations to large firms only:

> 'The regulations should be more flexible…For example, I might need to bring someone from outside the country for one week to do some training and then he would leave. Such thing should be facilitated' (Ent-3).

Non-supportive immigration rules undermine the ability of EL programmes to deliver the highest value to entrepreneurs by limiting the educator/mentor expertise to the domestic market, which can be inadequate:

> 'We can't find technical consultants in our field within the local market' (Ent-1).

Improved coordination between multiple state authorities in charge of devising regulations is required to overcome the negative influences of the broader regulatory environment (Baumol, 1990; Minniti, 2008). For example, Riyada, the Omani public agency that was recently established to oversee the design, implementation and coordination of the enterprise policy, needs to intensify its efforts to strengthen communication between the regulatory actors that have an impact on entrepreneurial policies.

The third regulative issue related to Omani EL programmes is the quality of EL programmes provided by public authorities. Entrepreneurs reported dissatisfaction with the quality and usefulness of the training and advisory support provided by the Government:

> 'I have attended three workshops provided by [the Government]…We learnt by trial and error, because workshops don't teach you. The content is theoretical and basic. These don't give you real experiences' (Ent-12).

The findings suggest that the quality of EL programmes is hampered by limited educational capacity and expertise of the public providers and an incoherent understanding of what constitutes entrepreneurship, in addition to weak coordination among the different regulatory actors (cf. Atherton and Smallbone, 2013; Arshed *et al.*, 2016). Alongside better regulatory coordination efforts and a deeper understanding of the heterogeneous groups of SMEs operating in the economy, a more flexible approach that allows public and private providers of EL to source expertise internationally could be useful for increasing the quality and relevance of EL programmes (Van Cauwenberge *et al.*, 2013).

At the normative dimension, sociocultural elements and norms have important effects on EL programmes (cf. Bae *et al.*, 2014; Walter and Block, 2016), which appear to be mixed in the case of Oman. For example, negative societal perceptions of entrepreneurship result in a lack of interest in EL, because families encourage their children to aspire to careers that offer security and social status. An entrepreneur describes:

> 'Being brought up with a curriculum that really doesn't encourage us to learn business. Growing in a family which creates your future to be a doctor, an engineer, but not a teacher, and of course, not a businessman. It was not really easy to select this path...We

> had a lack of understanding of building a well-structured business...so we were visualizing the market with our own perception, which may be not correct' (Ent-7).

Societal perception can change the way entrepreneurship is perceived by students and educators, affecting the efficacy of EL programmes (Drakopoulou Dodd and Hynes, 2012). A banker illustrated the need for a change of societal perceptions in order for the EL programmes to achieve their developmental objectives:

> 'We have conducted several workshops in schools. I experienced this, we don't see many people interested in opening a business. The majority are not really interested…The culture needs to be changed. If I can change it, everything will change. This is what we should do now, so we can reap the fruits in the future' (Banker-2).

On the other hand, there are positive normative elements that facilitate EL in Omani society. For example, the collectivist Omani culture and extended family ties enable entrepreneurs to seek learning informally through their family members and colleagues within their extensive networks:

> 'Because we are all Omanis here, we trust each other. And we don't steal each other's ideas. If I don't know anything and I can't find it online, I simply go to my neighbours who are always happy to help' (Ent-6).

This emphasizes the role of informal sources such as family, colleagues, or friends in enhancing the effectiveness of overall EL (Bennett, 2008), particularly within the collective Arab culture that values extended family ties (Al-Hamadi *et al.*, 2007).

From the cognitive dimension, the negative perceptions of students towards entrepreneurship are found to create barriers in EL. For example, there is limited interest in gaining more knowledge in the area of entrepreneurship because of the perceived risk and challenges in entrepreneurial activities. Most students still prefer employment to being entrepreneurs, as explained by one of the public officials interviewed in this study:

> 'I have been to many schools and when I ask students about their future career, only one in 1000 would say I want to open my own business…The students tend to seek the easiest career path that doesn't involve risk or challenges. You find in their questions; who is going to finance me? What if I failed?' (PublicOfficial-9).

The analysis points to further cognitive challenges related to the lack of interest among entrepreneurs to attend training and consultancy sessions. While EL programme providers attribute this behaviour to the limited cognitive abilities of entrepreneurs to realize the importance of learning for firms, entrepreneurs justify their behaviour by doubting the quality of these educators:

> ‘The mentality of people is narrow; because they only think of financial support, whereas we know that most SME problems are caused by lack of business management and the ability to measure risk’ (Ent-Program-1).

> ‘If these consultants are good, you would have seen them opening big companies…We don’t like wasting our times in searching for consultancies and training. We just focus on what we do…We don’t need them, and I don’t think we will need them’ (Ent-05).

These findings posit that perceptions and attitudes are salient factors that influence EL programmes. While students’ interest in entrepreneurship education is influenced by low risk tolerance (Belwal *et al.*, 2015), entrepreneurs are influenced by their negative perceptions of formal learning and level of trust in the ability of the providers (Curran and Blackburn, 2000). This is sometimes a result of previous bad experiences with EL programmes (Walker *et al.*, 2007) or a lack of self-awareness of one’s own training needs (Schwartz and Bar-El, 2004).

Table 5-3: Enabling and hindering institutional elements for EL programmes

Institutional dimension	Enabling elements	Illustrative quotes	Hindering elements	Illustrative quotes
Regulative	Policy reform towards building entrepreneurship mind-set through primary and higher education	'We are currently developing the standards for 'Life Skills' subject and we have taken into consideration entrepreneurship concept in more depth and direct approach… Also we have the National Centre for Career Guidance who are focusing now on entrepreneurship as a career' (PublicOfficial-10)	Policies and regulations hinder quality entrepreneurship education	'Firstly I would change some instructors in schools…We should recruit entrepreneurs or some specialized firms. They can be even part-timers. But as I told you we don't have this flexibility in our institutional regulations. You can't do whatever you believe is right'(PublicOfficial-9)
	Many learning opportunities to develop entrepreneurial and innovative capacity	'There are many opportunities to learn and to attend workshops, but the deficiency is on the side of entrepreneurs themselves because they don't attend; they don't prepare for the workshops' (Ent-01)	Multiple conceptualisation of 'entrepreneurship' among policymakers and academics	'Also the understanding the mix up of entrepreneurship and a small business…There are some in the literature who define any start-up as an entrepreneurship. But no… I believe

Institutional dimension	Enabling elements	Illustrative quotes	Hindering elements	Illustrative quotes
	through education, training and advisory support			entrepreneurship is a higher thing that have innovation component, in product or process or whatever. So such mix-up exists. So when you are talking about instructors and academics, or the higher university level, when you talk about entrepreneurship, they think of opening a small grocery shop or a typical bookshop. ... [The entrepreneur] is a different person, you need to treat him differently, and he or she needs different kind of support. The challenge of entrepreneurship understanding, you will find it in between faculties, and also even with policymakers' (Uni-Academic)

Institutional dimension	**Enabling elements**	**Illustrative quotes**	**Hindering elements**	**Illustrative quotes**
			Low quality of public training and advisory support	'…We learnt by trial and error, because workshops don't teach you. The content is theoretical and basic… These don't give you real experiences' (Ent-12)
			Lack of information about available training courses	'There are some sponsored learning opportunities. But there is a need to create the awareness about these programmes through the media channels. For example, ITA provides training courses for international certificates for free, but only few people know about them' (Ent-14)
			Regulations impede bringing in foreign	'The regulations should be more flexible. Should not be very rigid. For example, I

Institutional dimension	Enabling elements	Illustrative quotes	Hindering elements	Illustrative quotes
			consultants for some SMEs	might need to bring someone from outside the country for one week to do some training and then he would leave. Such thing should be facilitated' (Ent-3)
Normative	The Omani socio-cultural environment facilitates good networking opportunities which spur informal EL	'Sometimes we learn from our neighbours in SAS…Because we are all Omanis here, we trust each other. And we don't steal each other ideas. If I don't know anything and I can't find it online, I simply go to my neighbours who are always happy to help' (Ent-6)	Society values and culture obstruct the inclusion of entrepreneurial skills in the curriculum	'I was visiting one school. The head teacher was telling me that it is shameful to 'milk a cow', and the society does not accept it. I tried to convince him that we introduced it because it involves a lot of skills. Big companies are producing milk and ice cream. If entrepreneurship idea was promoted to students, they would have thought of making and selling ice cream. And we don't have Omani companies in this area. We used to teach them about creative

Institutional dimension	Enabling elements	Illustrative quotes	Hindering elements	Illustrative quotes
				things of making ice cream and cheese. But unfortunately, the society culture creates barriers' (PublicOfficial-10)
			Family entrepreneurial mind-set hinders EL	'Being brought up with a curriculum that really doesn't encourage us to learn business. Growing in a family which creates your future to be a doctor, an engineer, but not a teacher, and of course, not a businessman. It was not really easy to select this path…We had a lack of understanding of building a well-structured business…so we were visualizing the market with our own perception, which may be not correct' (Ent-7)

Institutional dimension	Enabling elements	Illustrative quotes	Hindering elements	Illustrative quotes
			Lack of open criticism for EL programmes influence the ability of institutions to enhance their EL programmes	'Unfortunately, we as Omanis aren't frank. We tend to not tell whether something is good or bad.. When we used to do training evaluation and we ask entrepreneurs how was the workshop? They tend to say good, as a sign of courtesy. They were not frank with us' (Incubator-3)
Cognitive	Attitude towards self-directed learning	'For technical support you don't need anybody, Google and YouTube are more than enough. If you have Google and YouTube, lock yourself in for one week and you will become an expert. But if you go to someone to teach you, he will teach you the things that he knows and will teach you in his ways of doing things…So in training programmes your	No interest in entrepreneurship learning because of perceived risk and challenges in entrepreneurship	'I have been to many schools and when I ask students about their future career, almost 1 in 1000 would say I want to open my own business. We know that it is all because of the society culture and the surrounding environment. The students tend to seek the easiest career path that doesn't involve risk or challenges. You find in their questions;

Institutional dimension	**Enabling elements**	**Illustrative quotes**	**Hindering elements**	**Illustrative quotes**
		learning is directed by others, whereas in these resources you can direct your learning yourself' (Ent-05)		who is going to finance me? What if I failed?' (PublicOfficial-9)
	Momentum in the interest within students towards entrepreneurship education	'…I tried to do this once in a while in an informal way, just to sense [students] perception. The government is still there, private sector increased significantly, and entrepreneurship started with some students. I think because of the increase in government focus and media focus in the issue of entrepreneurship...So this has changed. Students now started to build interest in learning about entrepreneurship' (Uni-academic)	Negative perception of entrepreneurship among students	'We need to change the concepts and mentality of people. You may remember back in the days when we were studying in schools, we had to choose between Science route and Art route. The [less competent students] will always go for the Art route. And given that business concepts are taught to Art students only, this means this is something not important and is taught to less competent people...The society instils in us that seeking a job should be our target' (Ent-07)

Institutional dimension	Enabling elements	Illustrative quotes	Hindering elements	Illustrative quotes
			Negative attitude towards formal learning	‘If we think that the consultant is a successful person, he should be successful himself. He will always give you theory… We don’t like wasting our time in searching for consultancies and training. We just focus on what we do…We don’t need them, and I don’t think we will need them’ (Ent-05)

5.4.2 Institutional interactions in EL

Besides direct influences, as discussed in the above section, institutional elements also affect EL programmes indirectly through interactions with them. These interactions reinforce or weaken one another's direct influence on EL.

Firstly, some favourable regulative institutions encourage positive cognitive orientation towards EL. For example, government policy that promotes an entrepreneurial mind-set is slowly cultivating a positive attitude towards entrepreneurship in society. These efforts have resulted in signs of momentum in student interest towards entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurial career choices (Mitchell *et al.*, 2007; Minniti, 2008). This supports the argument that regulative interventions can change individual perceptions of entrepreneurship and improve the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education programmes indirectly (Hindle and Klyver, 2007; Minniti, 2008; Thompson and Kwong, 2016). An educator explains this influence:

> '…I tried to do this once in a while in an informal way, just to sense [students'] perceptions. The government is still there, private sector increased significantly, and entrepreneurship started with some students. I think because of the increase in government focus and media focus in the issue of entrepreneurship...So this has changed. Students now started to build interest in learning about entrepreneurship' (Uni-academic).

Similar outcomes are evident in the case of positive entrepreneurship narratives emerging from government policy reform (i.e. regulative influence) and enhancing the normative and cognitive values of the Omani firms. Large corporations have started changing their CSR policies and strategies towards entrepreneurial support initiatives (including the provision of EL) as a result of the positive messages about entrepreneurship in the Seih Al-Shamikhat SME development policy reform in 2013:

> 'We started straight after Seih Al-Shamikhat Symposium. In response to the government SMEs development vision, our company directed its CSR towards SMEs. Our support departs from the realisation that nascent entrepreneurs don't need finance only. But they rather need management and business skills in order to succeed' (Ent-Programme-2).

Since 2013, large corporations have launched incubation centres and acceleration programmes to support SMEs. Some examples are BankMuscat (*Al-Wathbah*), OMIFCO (*The Cell*), and BP Oman (*Khazzan*). In Malaysia, there are a similar set of interactions between regulative and cognitive dimensions, where prevailing institutional arrangements shape the CSR strategies of large corporations (Amran and Devi, 2008). The Omani Government has provideds a good lesson in reinforcing this interaction by launching 'The Entrepreneurship Award' for the best corporate initiative that supports EL.

On the other hand, other regulative configurations interact with normative institutions and lead to negative effects on the efficacy of EL programmes. The regulative institution of education policies that limit the provision of business education to 'Arts' students, and the normative values of society which encourage brighter children to choose 'Science' subjects over the Arts has resulted in the undervaluation of entrepreneurship subjects among students:

> 'We need to change the concepts and mentality of people. You may remember back in the days when we were studying in schools, we had to choose between Science route and Art route. The [less competent students] will always go for the Art route. And given that business concepts are taught to Art students only, this means this is something not important and is taught to less competent people...The society instils in us that seeking a job should be our target' (Ent-07).

Entrepreneurship is a socially constructed phenomenon (Steyaert, 2007; Drakopoulou Dodd *et al.*, 2013), and therefore the appeal of entrepreneurship to society can influence individuals' interest in EL programmes (Drakopoulou Dodd and Hynes, 2012). The above example illustrates a common case of interaction between regulative and normative elements resulting in an enhanced negative impact upon EL programmes. Poor policy design, combined with the low social status of entrepreneurship in society, further enhances the lack of cognitive interest in EL programmes.

Similarly, some normative institutions reinforce the deficiencies of the regulative environment, leading to inefficient EL programmes. While the entrepreneurs who we interviewed criticized formal training and advisory programmes for being shallow, cultural values that discourage open evaluation of EL programmes limit the ability of providers to improve these programmes. The entrepreneurs avoided criticizing the EL programmes openly, as the Arab culture discourages social interactions where one party could lose face as a result of direct criticism (De Luque and Sommer, 2000). The entrepreneurs may even have provided a misleading impression of satisfaction with the EL programmes they attended, in order to avoid culturally awkward social interactions. This posed a challenge to the educators, as they lacked direct input from the entrepreneurs attending EL programmes:

> 'We noticed that the companies don't attend the training sessions. Unfortunately, we as Omanis aren't frank. We tend not to tell whether something is good or bad. When we

used to do training evaluation and we ask entrepreneurs how the workshop was, they tend to say good out of courtesy. They were not frank with us' (Incubator-3).

The lack of constructive criticism and feedback from entrepreneurs attending the EL programmes has led to inefficiencies in these programmes to persist, generating negative cognitive attitudes amongst entrepreneurs towards attending such programmes in the future. The diminished reputation of these programmes has led to diminishing trust in the capabilities of EL programme providers (Curran and Blackburn, 2000; Obeng and Blundel, 2015), and their ability to address the actual needs of the entrepreneurs (cf. Walker *et al.*, 2007; Coetzer *et al.*, 2011). An entrepreneur provides an example of such cognitive attitude:

'Reading books is far better than attending useless lectures and workshops. I have attended three workshops…They were all shallow. I said to myself that I will not attend them again…We learnt by trial and error, because workshops don't teach you. The content is theoretical and basic…These don't give you real experiences' (Ent-12).

These cognitive attitudes, in turn, affect the regulative institutions. For instance, policymakers are planning to charge fees for the training programmes as a result of the low turnout rates. This shows how institutions are shaped by human interaction (Scott, 2014). Policymakers and entrepreneurs interact through their behaviour, as entrepreneurs' attitudes trigger the revision of government regulations: 'Entrepreneurs tend to skip the training courses that we offer for free, after registering…We have plans now to address this attitude by asking them to contribute 5 to 10% of the cost' (PublicOfficial-06).

The overall findings suggest a complex, interconnected set of institutional elements that shape the provision, delivery and efficacy of EL programmes. Each institutional element influences the other within the entrepreneurial ecosystem, resulting in a positive or a negative effect on EL (See Figure 5-1). The institutional environment continuously evolves, as institutional actors are in continuous interaction. There are multiple stakeholders (i.e. entrepreneurs, policymakers, social actors, educators, corporates) influencing EL processes during every interaction (Hannon, 2006), and each interaction is accompanied by feedback effects within the institutional environment.

These findings highlight the challenges in designing and delivering effective EL programmes in a highly complex and interactive institutional environment, particularly if there are institutional deficiencies that lead to negative interactions, as is the case for Oman. In such contexts, the dominant challenging institutions offset the other favourable arrangements, as seen in the case of Bulgaria, where formal institutions were inadequate to promote entrepreneurship development, because of the hindering effect of the prevailing informal institutions (Williams and Vorley, 2014).

In order to attain well-designed and implemented EL programmes, positive interactions should be intentionally magnified through government interventions, and special care should be taken to minimize the presence of negative interactions.

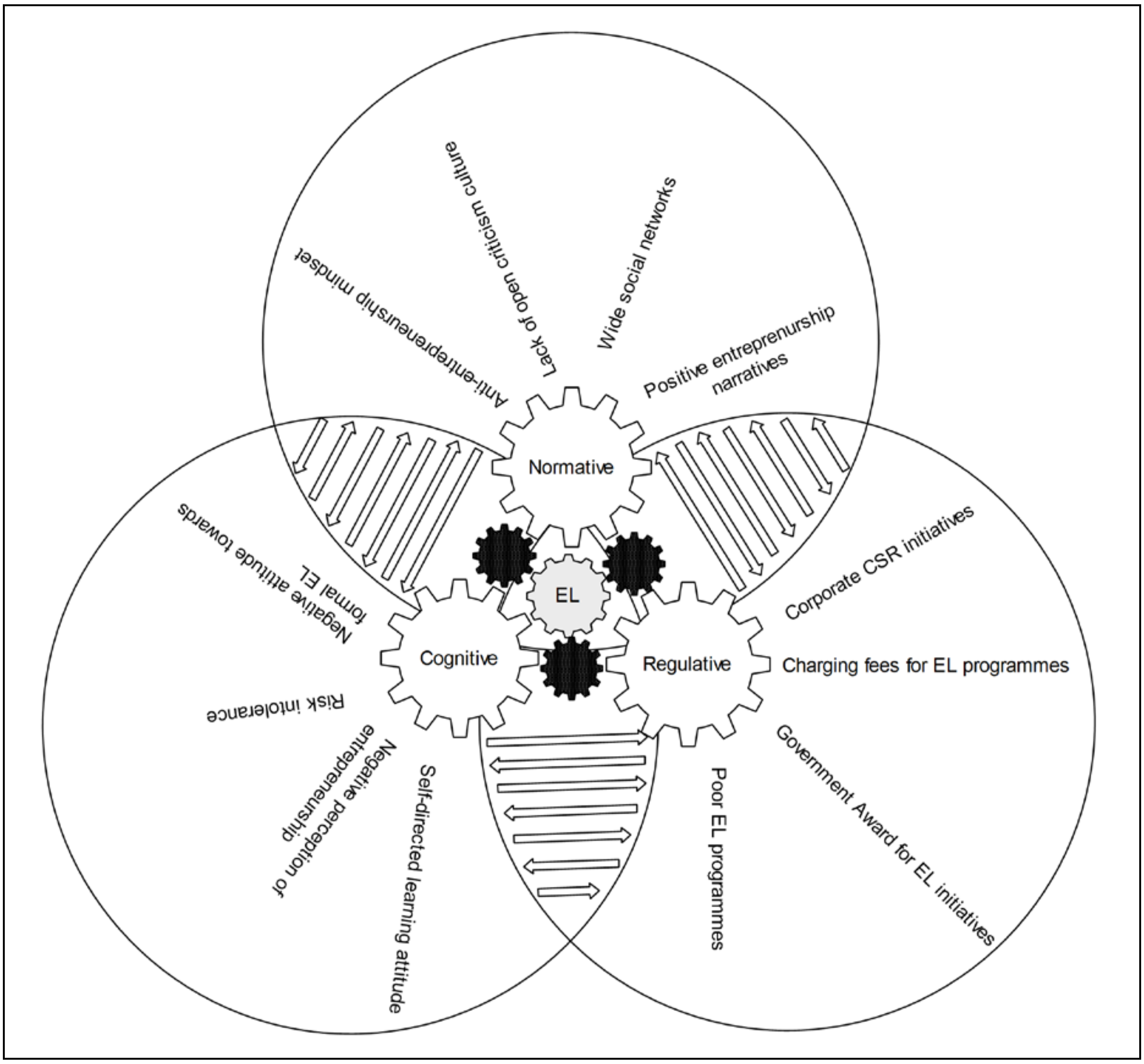

Figure 5-1: Institutional interactions in entrepreneurial learning (Source: Authors)

5.5 Conclusion: implications and future research

This paper demonstrates that the efficacy of EL programmes cannot be completely understood without considering the role of the institutional configurations. We have explored the influence of institutional elements on EL programmes by focusing on the interactivity between these institutions. The findings revealed that EL programme delivery can be very challenging in less developed institutional environments. Institutional factors in the cognitive dimension (i.e. anti-entrepreneurship perceptions, negative attitudes towards learning programmes), normative dimension (i.e. family mind-set, lack of open criticism of EL programmes), and regulative dimension (i.e. conflicting policies, rigid regulations) can all hamper EL effectiveness.

Through these findings, the paper contributes to theory and practice. First of all, the study extends EL research, which has previously focused on the impact of entrepreneurship education and training in generating favourable cognitive institutions (i.e. entrepreneurial intention and attitudes) (Westhead and Solesvik, 2015). However, these studies also overlooked the interactions between different institutional elements (Walter and Block, 2016). The Omani institutional environment exhibited a number of favourable elements for EL, such as the wide social networks which provide a useful source of opportunities for EL. However, there were a number of weak institutional arrangements which offset the usefulness of the former elements, including weak implementation of public support, and the reluctance of entrepreneurs to provide open and direct feedback to EL programmes. This substantiates the need for a more balanced institutional configuration to create a pro-EL environment (Williams and Vorley, 2014).

The paper extends this understanding by demonstrating the interplay between the institutional components within a multi-layered relationship. Institutional elements proved to be inevitably linked in the context of EL, which warrants careful consideration when studying EL. Examining the EL programmes by focusing on the micro level, such as contents and pedagogy, cannot be sufficient if the situational setting is disregarded (Leitch *et al.*, 2012). Neither is it advisable to focus on the macro level (i.e. government policies) and ignore the embedded sociocultural factors, which are the main antecedents for individual learning behaviour (Krueger *et al.*, 2013). Individual perceptions and attitudes, socio-cultural dynamics and regulatory configurations are proven to influence the efficacy of EL programmes through a reinforcement effect, due to the embeddedness of EL programmes in the institutional environment.

The iterative and reinforcing nature of institutional interactions in the context of EL is a major addition at the intersection of EL and institutional theory domains. The paper was able to uncover these dynamics by utilizing institutional theory. The study disentangles the continuous changing dynamics of institutions (Scott, 2014). The interaction effects imply an offsetting role of the dominant institutions on the less powerful institutional arrangements, leading to a positive or negative institutional situation. This is linked to actors' position as learners, and situational constraints. Guided by their cognitive dispositions and value systems, entrepreneurs, as actors, engage or disengage in the institutional elements of EL which they find problematic.

Our study adds to the policy debates on how government interventions (i.e. EL programmes) struggle to achieve their intended outcomes, due to prevailing institutional configurations (Williams, 2013). Since governments have the power to adjust the institutional environment (Lim *et al.*, 2010), they need to carefully consider the regulative, normative and cognitive dimensions when designing EL programmes. For example, while trying to raise the social status of entrepreneurship may be challenging and time-consuming in the current normative institutional configurations, EL programmes can be designed to work around these. Moreover, effectively designed EL programmes can create a positive reinforcement effect through social change.

Additionally, the study has offered empirical investigation in the under-researched context of an emerging economy through Oman (Bruton *et al.*, 2008). This generated insights into the interactive institutional elements of the Omani entrepreneurial environment, including the negative learning attitudes and lack of open criticism, for example. The negative perception of entrepreneurship that is inherited through the 'oil curse' has been a hindering factor for EL programmes. These empirical insights have enriched our theoretical contribution as the institutions of entrepreneurship are enacted and elaborated in local contexts of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Al-Mataani *et al.*, 2017). How such embeddedness of EL occurs vis-a-vis institutional practices provides significant insights to advancing theory on institutions and learning of entrepreneurs. Such questions as how to alter and adjust institutional elements as part of a co-learning process, and how this creates a specific local enactment of learning processes warrant answers in future research.

Our paper calls for further investigation of EL in weak institutional environments. In transitioning institutional contexts, it would be useful to examine micro elements of the institutional environment, such as learning behaviour, to understand how EL programmes can be better developed. Additionally, a more detailed series of studies examining different industry sectors would yield further insights with which to provide more specific and targeted EL programmes. Additionally, as institutional configurations change over time (Manolova *et al.*, 2008), longitudinal studies to understand the changing needs of entrepreneurs, not only as their businesses grow and develop, but also as they adjust to changes in the institutional environment, would be useful (Ahlstrom and Bruton, 2010).

Chapter 6: Collaborative entrepreneurial learning in the digitisation age: Institutional logics perspective

Abstract:

This study focuses on informal entrepreneurial learning (EL), an understudied phenomenon in the context of institutional plurality. Using in-depth interviews with forty-four entrepreneurs and stakeholders in Oman, the paper draws upon the institutional logics perspective to address the limited understanding of how prevailing institutional logics direct entrepreneurs towards informal learning. In particular, the interplay of social capital and digitisation logics was found to assist entrepreneurs to attain more convenient and effective ways of learning. Entrepreneurs were found to combine various elements of co-existing logics to generate useful collaborative learning. They combined the cultural values of knowledge sharing and commitments towards family, friends and wider networks with the convenience, shareability and interactivity of social media and digital platforms. The study contributes to research and practice by emphasising the relevance of social capital, digitisation logics and institutional plurality for EL.

Keywords: Institutional logics, Entrepreneurial learning, Collaborative learning, Digital learning, Social media, Social capital

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6.1 Introduction

Entrepreneurs within small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are vulnerable to high risks, due to their small size, limited resources, and the newness of their businesses (Unger *et al.*, 2011; Debrulle *et al.*, 2014; Keith *et al.*, 2016). They require convenient and effective learning to be able to handle the uncertainty associated with new and complex tasks which they encounter in the scope of their operations (Walker *et al.*, 2007; Frese and Gielnik, 2014). With the burgeoning literature that questions the efficacy of formal entrepreneurial learning (EL) programmes (e.g., formal training and advisory sessions) in addressing entrepreneurial challenges (e.g., Kotey and Slade, 2005; Atherton and Smallbone, 2013; Jones *et al.*, 2013), researchers have recently turned to exploring the role of the informal EL methods that take place through peer networks, local communities and digital sources (e.g. Tannenbaum *et al.*, 2010; Noe *et al.*, 2013; Noe *et al.*, 2014). However, despite their prevalence among SMEs, informal EL practices remain understudied (Keith *et al.*, 2016).

Informal EL practices are complex, due to the co-existing multiple institutional logics (i.e. institutional plurality) that shape EL practices (Pache and Chowdhury, 2012; Mair *et al.*, 2015). Institutional logics, which are understood as 'material practices and symbolic systems, through which individuals and organisations produce and reproduce their material subsistence and provide meanings to their space and time experiences', provide enabling and constraining prescriptions that are continuously interpreted by entrepreneurs to pursue effective learning (Friedland and Alford, 1991: 243). While formal EL is largely supported by state and market logics, informal EL is often shaped by the prescriptions of the social system and the social capital logic that system produces (Jones *et al.*, 2010). Due to the complex and diverse nature of social capital across different contexts, social capital logic is mostly missing from studies of EL (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Noe *et al.*, 2014). It has, however, become a more prevalent consideration with the emergence of the digital form of social capital, an outcome of the contemporary 'digitisation logic' (Smith *et al.*, 2017).

Digitisation logic has already transformed the traditional methods of learning in educational institutions (Al-Atabi and DeBoer, 2014). It has the potential to stimulate new learning practices for entrepreneurs through the expansion of digital social networks and, therefore, warrants scholarly attention in EL research (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Despite evidence of the increasing use of social media and digital platforms, such as Google, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Twitter, by entrepreneurs (Fischer and Reuber, 2011, 2014; Smith *et al.*, 2017), little is known about the ways in which entrepreneurs enact the socio-material elements that are embedded within these platforms in their learning (Nambisan, 2016). More importantly, less is known about the ways that the social capital and digitisation logics present in social media shape EL practices (Pache and Santos, 2013; Mair *et al.*, 2015; Pallas *et al.*, 2016). This paper draws on the institutional logics perspective to examine informal EL practices in the context of Oman, to elucidate how the intertwined social capital and digitisation logics shape EL. Oman was chosen for empirical examination because of the inadequacy and immaturity of formal EL programmes in the domestic entrepreneurial ecosystem, creating a need for entrepreneurs to seek out alternative and informal approaches to learning in order to address their needs (Al-Riyami *et al.*, 2002; Belwal *et al.*, 2015). The paper attempts to answer the following questions:

1) How does the social capital logic affect the learning of Omani entrepreneurs?
2) How does the digitisation logic affect the learning of Omani entrepreneurs?
3) How do Omani entrepreneurs reconcile the social capital and digitisation logics in order to generate meaningful learning?

The article follows a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs and stakeholders within the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem. The analysis reveals that institutional challenges in the public support system and deficiencies in the market have shaped the cognitive orientation of entrepreneurs towards self-directed learning, supported by the social capital and digitisation logics. The study suggests that the combination of these two logics generates beneficial entrepreneurial collaborative learning.

The contributions of the paper are three-fold. Firstly, the study contributes to entrepreneurship literature by advancing the understanding of the role of digitisation as a contemporary, emerging, institutional logic that shapes the EL processes (Nambisan, 2016). Although informal learning is practiced by most SMEs, this study provides evidence of how digitisation surpasses other informal approaches in terms of convenience, interactivity and potential collaborative learning (Smith *et al.*, 2017). Secondly, the paper addresses the limited number of empirical studies that have focused on EL in emerging economies, by providing insights into some context-specific social capital elements (e.g. social ties, *wasta*, and religious values of knowledge sharing) that are often interpreted and transformed by entrepreneurs into useful learning (Bruton *et al.*, 2008). Thirdly, the paper advances the relevance of institutional plurality in stimulating EL opportunities (Kraatz and Block, 2008). The study demonstrates how collaborative learning is enacted in individual and organisational practices, as entrepreneurs combine various prescriptions from the prevailing multiple co-existing institutional logics.

The next section sheds light on the recent debates to be found at the intersection of institutional logics and EL research. Section 3 outlines the methodological approach, before the findings are discussed in section 4. Section 5 concludes with some implications for theory and practice.

6.2 Literature Review

6.2.1 Institutional logics in the context of EL

As institutions are embedded in the practices of social actors, and exist in multiple fragmented, and sometimes contested, institutional orders (Lounsbury, 2007; Bertels and Lawrence, 2016), this article draws on the institutional logics perspective to argue that entrepreneurs' informal learning practices are continuously shaped by the institutional logics that dominate a particular context (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thornton *et al.*, 2012).

Scholars who have critiqued the concept of isomorphism held by the new institutional theory have developed a concept of institutional logics which views society as an institutional system that consists of multiple institutional logics (e.g. Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thornton *et al.*, 2012). The theoretical tradition of institutional logics research has been widely employed in understanding how organisations make sense of the prevailing institutions, and how the subsequent institutional pressures shape organisational activities, development and change (e.g. Smets *et al.*, 2012; Alajoutsijärvi *et al.*, 2014; Pallas *et al.*, 2016; Snelson-Powell *et al.*, 2016). In this sense, the institutional logics perspective can help us to visualise how entrepreneurs engage with the prevailing material and symbolic institutions to develop and reshape their learning practices. The strength of institutional logics lies in linking the micro-level actions of entrepreneurs with the macro-level institutional structure (Thornton *et al.*, 2012). It can be useful to explain how entrepreneurs take an agency role in interpreting and elaborating the heterogeneous, co-existing institutional logics to generate meaningful learning that suits their needs (Martin *et al.*, 2016).

EL, as part of organisational practices, can be influenced simultaneously by the various fragmented institutional logics that constitute the organisational field (Greenwood *et al.*, 2011). Different logics support different modes of learning (Pache and Chowdhury, 2012). Entrepreneurs in Oman could engage with these multiple institutional logics and prioritise particular logics over others, or combine multiple prescriptions from different logics to achieve purposeful learning (Pache and Santos, 2013). At the structural level, the *state* (e.g. public policies, regulations and programs governing EL) and the *market* (e.g. learning opportunities offered by the private sector) are the prominent institutional orders that offer a variety of formal learning opportunities, such as training and consultancy programmes. At the normative level, the culture of the society sets some expectations of individuals' behaviour and defines organisational decision making (Thornton, 2004). In Oman, *social capital* is a core institutional order of the society, where the sense of connectedness and belonging to the tribe, extended family and friends, defines the logic within which individuals behave (Sidani and Thornberry, 2010). The loyalty to family and the collective can be a source of substantial informal learning. Social capital is found to determine entrepreneurial success (Davidsson and Honig, 2003), as it allows efficient acquisition of resources, including learning through continuous social interaction. Moreover, as Islam is integral to the Omani culture (See Al-Hamadi *et al.*, 2007), the social capital logic in Oman contains symbolic elements of Islamic values and beliefs, which guide how entrepreneurs behave within the social environment (Henley, 2016). Islamic values can influence individuals' perspectives of shared learning as they interact within the social context. Each of these institutional logics exerts different influences that motivate, or constrain, entrepreneurs' actions in the learning process.

Furthermore, EL practices can be shaped by newly emerging logics (Bertels and Lawrence, 2016). With technological development, *digitization* has emerged as a new logic that has unique human/social and material characteristics that provide new motives for informal learning and new channels for social interaction (Kim *et al.*, 2011; Nambisan, 2016; Smith *et al.*, 2017). The conceptualisation of the digitisation logic draws on the work of Scott (2003) and Pallas *et al.* (2016), who delineate four elements that provide routes for any institutional logic to enter the organisational context. These are 'artefacts (including objects with specifications, conventions or standards for different types of products), routines (mainly the instructions, procedures, duties and scripts associated with organizational processes), symbolical systems (rules, laws, values and categories), and relational systems (systems of governance, power and authority, identities)' (Pallas *et al.*, 2016: 4). In the context of this study, the digitization logic is made concrete by material artefacts exhibited in various forms of digital products/services (e.g., smartphones, iPads, etc.), digital platforms (e.g. Facebook), and the content disseminated by these platforms (Yoo *et al.*, 2010; Nambisan, 2016). The digitisation logic is also formed by routines and practices, such as the interaction and networking activities that occur between various users within the social media, and digital platforms, for any particular purpose (Smith *et al.*, 2017). These interactions are governed by rules and values that are usually predefined by the affordances of the digital products/services and the values and experiences of those who use them (Smith *et al.*, 2017). The relational systems of the digitisation logic appear in the governance structures of the digital platforms that authorise and constrain users to maintain their profiles, shape their networks, and produce and disseminate information within these platforms (Kim *et al.*, 2011). These four components facilitate the integration of the digitisation logic within the EL process.

While the state and market logics provide structural institutions that mostly promote formal EL, the social capital and digitization logics provide entrepreneurs with normative and symbolic practices and beliefs that support informal EL. Given the inadequacy of formal programmes to support EL, especially in emerging economics such as Oman, the paper focuses on the informal modes of EL that are often shaped by the co-existing logics of social capital and digitisation (e.g., Atherton and Smallbone, 2013). The institutional pluralistic perspective can be useful in addressing the 'socio-materiality' associated with the informal digital learning that combines elements from both social capital and digitisation logics (Nambisan, 2016).

Most organisational studies emphasise the established institutional logics, such as state, market, families, and professions (Thornton, 2002; Reay and Hinings, 2009; Greenwood *et al.*, 2010), and often overlook the existence of newly emerging institutional logics, such as digitisation (for an exception, see Bertels and Lawrence, 2016). Hence, this study contributes to this strand of literature and advances the field of EL by shedding light on how entrepreneurs combine the newly emerging institutional logic of digitisation with those already established in the field, such as social capital, in order to generate effective informal learning practices (Dalpiaz *et al.*, 2016). The next two sections discuss how the logics of social capital and digitisation can support EL.

6.2.2 EL through social capital logic

The prescriptions of the social capital logic can provide opportunities for entrepreneurs to utilise alternative forms of learning, other than formal EL. Selectively forming a valuable and sustainable network can enhance SMEs' opportunities for learning and growth (Huggins, 2000; Hansen and Hamilton, 2011). Scholars emphasise that know-who is just as critical as know-what and know-how when it comes to EL, especially for opportunity identification and exploitation (Jones *et al.*, 2010; Wang and Chugh, 2014). Interacting with peers, friends, experts or clients, whether that is face-to-face or in a virtual environment, is among the most prominent informal EL approaches (Bennett, 2008; Tannenbaum *et al.*, 2010; Noe *et al.*, 2013; Noe *et al.*, 2014; Keith *et al.*, 2016). Studies show that collaborative learning through local communities suits the nature of SMEs more than formal training programmes or sophisticated digital systems (Anderson and Boocock, 2002; Admiraal and Lockhorst, 2009; Susomrith and Coetzer, 2015). Indeed, entrepreneurs may even perceive networking programs to be a substitute for government advisory services (Van Cauwenberge *et al.*, 2013).

The literature emphasises that various forms of learning can take place through social networks in the contexts of small internationalising firms (Anderson and Boocock, 2002), improving decision making in business development (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004), fostering SMEs' innovativeness

(Saunders *et al.*, 2013), and acquiring and exploiting external information (Debrulle *et al.*, 2014). More importantly they provide direct answers to entrepreneurs' immediate business-related problems, especially when formal learning programmes fail to generate satisfactory outcomes (Clarke *et al.*, 2006; Williams, 2007b). Despite these various uses, the contribution of social capital to EL remains understudied (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Noe *et al.*, 2014).

The nature of social capital varies between contexts. For Oman, the normative commitment towards tribes, family and friends (Al-Hamadi *et al.*, 2007) manifests in the favouring concept of *wasta*. *Wasta* is a networking terminology that is popular in Middle Eastern countries, where Arab people serve each other in non-monetary transactions (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). The favour can be paid back, even in a different form, when circumstances permit. *Wasta* can potentially be utilised in seeking know-what and know-how, and even to extend the current network (or increase know-who). Therefore, the social capital logic, with its embedded element of *wasta*, can potentially provide entrepreneurs with scarce resources, such as quality learning opportunities or contacts with influential bureaucrats, or experts in the field, through their friends and extended family network. The complexity of social capital in Oman is also escalated by the Islamic religion, which is a core composite of the social system. Previous literature has emphasised the cultural influence of religion in shaping entrepreneurial behaviour (e.g. Anderson *et al.*, 2000; Audretsch *et al.*, 2013; Henley, 2016). In the context of EL, religion can be viewed as a source of symbolic values, such as 'knowledge sharing', that feed into the social capital logic. The Islamic values enacted in daily practices can shape how, and why, entrepreneurs interact with other individuals within the physical and digital social environment. Despite the normative and symbolic influences exerted by *wasta* and religious values in day-to-day practices, they are overlooked in the EL literature. In this article we aim to scrutinise these complexities and understand how the prescriptions of the social capital logic and its embedded composites of *wasta* and religion are perceived and interpreted by Omani entrepreneurs when pursuing learning (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004). More importantly, we focus on the role of digitisation in shaping the social capital.

6.2.3 Learning in the digitization age

The transition of traditional learning to digital learning has been widely acknowledged in educational literature (e.g., Al-Atabi and DeBoer, 2014), although it has received less attention in EL research (Nambisan, 2016). Recent studies emphasize the importance of digital learning methods and online discussion forums in improving SMEs' performance as entrepreneurs learn through interactions with their counterparts and by sharing their experiences (Henley and Norbury, 2011; Jones *et al.*, 2013; Smith and Barrett, 2014, 2016).

Scholars have called for further research into how digitisation transforms EL practices, depending on different entrepreneurial demographics, and the advancement in mobile technologies and social network platforms (Smith and Barrett, 2014, 2016). The emergence of new digital platforms offers new opportunities that have transformed the landscape of social capital, which is critical for knowledge sharing (Smith *et al.*, 2017). More recently, with the launch of LinkedIn Learning, subscribers have access to many courses offered by top experts in the industry. As such, educators are using the digital environment to provide less formal learning to entrepreneurs. Therefore, this paper argues that there are high levels of informal collaborative EL that take place on these platforms, despite a lack of academic understanding in this area, with the exception of Nambisan (2016), who calls for incorporating 'digitisation' into entrepreneurship research, in order to generate meaningful insights that reflect the presence of the digital world.

Although there is increasing acknowledgment of the importance of social media platforms for SMEs, the focus remains on the integration of social media as part of the marketing communications strategy and the process of developing marketing activities (e.g. Hanna *et al.*, 2011; Durkin *et al.*, 2013; Fischer and Reuber, 2014; Atanassova and Clark, 2015). Only a few studies have attempted to investigate the role of social media within the entrepreneurship field (e.g. Fischer and Reuber, 2011; Kim *et al.*, 2011; Fischer and Reuber, 2014; Smith *et al.*, 2017). Kim *et al.* (2011) investigated the use of Web 2.0 technologies, which include all sorts of digital platforms (e.g. Facebook), by American SMEs. They classified Web 2.0 applications into three types: 'networking, information sharing, and collaboration', and found that networking platforms were more widely used than the other two applications (Kim *et al.*, 2011: p. 169). Despite their insightful findings, their focus was on the technology applications, rather than the understanding of their specific use in learning. Fischer and Reuber (2011, 2014) underscored the influence of social media interactions via Twitter in changing entrepreneurial behaviour and strategies and, recently, Smith *et al.* (2017) elucidated how social network sites can leverage entrepreneurs' social capital. While the aforementioned studies help to advance understanding of the significance of digitisation for entrepreneurs and businesses, the questions of what, how, and why EL occurs in these platforms remains overlooked.

Although social media and digital platforms offer extensive advantages, such as affordability, efficiency, convenience, and interactivity with wider networks, they can also present challenges for learning, because of their self-directed nature (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Nawi *et al.*, 2016; Smith *et al.*, 2017). The learning can be challenging for entrepreneurs due to the loss of direct interaction with the virtual world, and the implicit knowledge components (Angehrn *et al.*, 2003; Birchall and Giambona, 2007; Smith and Barrett, 2014). Additionally, the quality of the content posted on these platforms should be carefully examined, as anyone can feed data onto them (Kim *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, this study aims to understand how entrepreneurs perceive the affordances and challenges in these platforms and, more importantly, to examine how digitisation, with its socio-material nature, can provide a space where other logics can be combined (Nambisan, 2016).

6.2.4 Institutional plurality in EL

Central to the institutional logics perspective is the co-existence of multiple institutional systems in the field (Thornton *et al.*, 2012). Organisational studies have discussed the notion of institutional plurality and its implications for organisational activities (Kraatz and Block, 2008; Besharov and Smith, 2014; Mair *et al.*, 2015). Firms have been found to develop various strategies to deal with these heterogeneous, and sometimes contending, pressures (Reay and Hinings, 2009; Pache and Santos, 2013; Smets *et al.*, 2015), including prioritising a particular logic over others, combining logics prescriptions, generating new ones, or defying them (Pache and Santos, 2013; Mair *et al.*, 2015). Although institutional plurality can be challenging, due to its incongruities, it is often perceived positively as it allows firms to achieve sustainability through developing their organisational practices in response to the prevailing institutional environment (Kraatz and Block, 2008). They offer opportunities for wider access to resources and a motivation for innovation in products/services, processes and practices (Kraatz and Block, 2008; Reay and Hinings, 2009; Mair *et al.*, 2015). In entrepreneurship studies, scholars show that informal institutions can operate as a backup for deficient formal institutions when pursing entrepreneurial opportunities (Manolova *et al.*, 2008; Kim and Li, 2014). Also, De Castro *et al.* (2014) demonstrate how informal entrepreneurs make sense of institutional plurality and navigate between the dulling institutional logics of meso and macro levels in the formalising process. Important to this study is the argument that institutional logics do not need to be necessarily contending to trigger development and change in organisational practices (Pallas *et al.*, 2016). Here, social capital and digitisation complement state and market logics in shaping EL practices, as all of them provide learning to entrepreneurs, but in different forms.

Although each of these institutional logics has its own unique influence on EL, institutional plurality can lead to capital transformation through continuous elaboration and renegotiation with the various stakeholders (Nicolopoulou *et al.*, 2016; Pallas *et al.*, 2016). The bourgeoning literature has started to acknowledge the transformation of entrepreneurial knowledge with the emergence of social media and digital platforms (Fischer and Reuber, 2011; Durkin *et al.*, 2013; Fischer and Reuber, 2014; Smith *et al.*, 2017). Recent evidence shows how social capital has transmuted to digital form by replicating face-to-face networking activities within the virtual environment, where networking activities can be wider and more productive (Kaplan and

Haenlein, 2010; Smith *et al.*, 2017). Also, as mentioned earlier, *wasta* and religion are major components of the social capital in Oman and, hence, they potentially feed into each other. This interrelatedness between the heterogeneous institutional logics and how entrepreneurs interpret them needs to be unpacked in order to generate new insights into EL. Hence, this study elucidates how capitals transform through the continuous interpretation, elaboration and renegotiation of co-existing logics of social capital and digitisation to generate meaningful learning.

Overall, the extant literature demonstrates a shortage in understanding how institutional logics shape EL practices. In-depth examination is needed to highlight how some structural institutional logics (i.e. state and market) are surpassed by other logics at the normative and symbolic levels (i.e. digitisation and social capital) in the context of EL. More importantly, we need to understand how entrepreneurs interpret and make sense of institutional plurality to generate meaningful learning. This article aims to contribute to the knowledge by bridging these gaps.

6.3 Methodology

6.3.1 Research Approach

The focus of this study is to examine the EL process in Oman. Central to this focus is to consider the institutional logics that shape the informal learning process. Therefore, an interpretive qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews and document analysis, was deemed appropriate to achieve these research objectives and to understand *how* and *why* particular institutional logics were privileged in the context of EL (Gephart, 2004; Pratt, 2009). Entrepreneurship scholars have been increasingly advocating the use of qualitative approaches, as they can answer questions that cannot be answered by quantitative approaches through their capacity to provide situated understandings, in-depth details and rich descriptions (Gartner and Birley, 2002; Jack and Anderson, 2002; Steyaert, 2007; Suddaby *et al.*, 2015). Core to this approach is paying close attention to the process and context, which is crucial to generate richness in qualitative research (Steyaert, 2007; Cope, 2011). This approach generated understanding of the content and meaning of institutions, especially contemporary ones such as digitisation, and to examine how entrepreneurs interpret and make sense of institutional plurality to pursue effective learning. The qualitative approach went beyond description to deliver explanations about how and why EL practices are shaped in the way they are (Gartner and Birley, 2002).

6.3.2 Context

Given this approach, the context of the study needs to be described (Pratt, 2009). Oman was chosen for empirical examination due to the richness of the prevailing institutional logics that shape entrepreneurship activities in general, and EL in particular. Oman suffers institutional deficiencies that weaken entrepreneurs' ability to pursue formal learning, as the government does not have sufficient experience of providing training and advisory programs. Oman is still in the early stages of entrepreneurial policy development as these policies only started effectively in 2013, at the national symposium for SMEs development (PASMED, 2016). Certainly, there is no established market for business support as the SME sector is still small in Oman, only around 15% of GDP (Oman Economic Review, 2015). Also, from the demand side, the entrepreneurship culture is limited, due to the large role of public employment. A recent survey showed that 67% of graduating students between 2010-2013 were employed by the public sector (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015), undermining the perceived importance of EL in the society. Due to these institutional arrangements, the public and private educational providers remain inadequate to facilitate EL, leaving entrepreneurs with few options to purse learning. Thus, the study examines the prevalent informal EL practices in Oman in the light of the inadequate formal EL programmes.

6.3.3 Sample and data collection

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 44 information-rich entrepreneurs and stakeholders from the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem (Patton, 2015). Within this strategy, a snowball, or chain, sampling approach was used to increase the sample size (Hartley, 1994; Cope, 2011). The familiarity of the lead author with the context was utilised to select and approach informants who were involved in or knowledgeable about EL practices and the surrounding context (Patton, 2015). The primary participants were Omani entrepreneurs from a variety of business sectors, who had had some opportunities to engage in formal training or advisory programmes provided by public or private providers. This was necessary to make an analytical comparison with other informal approaches to learning. The sample also consisted of stakeholders within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. These were public and private providers of academic education and professional training, advisory, incubation, and acceleration programmes. Interviewing stakeholders was necessary to generate holistic insights into the institutional dynamic influences on the EL process. The details of the participants and interviews are presented in Table 6-1, below. The details of the government departments and their representatives remain confidential.

Table 6-1: Details of participants and interviews in the 3rd paper

Participant Category	Participant Code	Organisation type	Mode of Interview	Duration of Interview (minutes)
Entrepreneurs	Ent-01	Security and technical solutions	Face to face	106
	Ent-02	Scientific solutions & consultancy	Face to face	45
	Ent-03	Advertising	Face to face	137
	Ent-04	Design	Face to face,	146
	Ent-05	IT solutions	Face to face	58
	Ent-06	IT solutions	Face to face	92
	Ent-07	IT solutions	Face to face, Email and WhatsApp	131
	Ent-08	IT solutions	Face to face	128
	Ent-09	Design	Face to face	70
	Ent-10	Design	Face to face	120
	Ent-11	E-business	Face to face	87
	Ent-12	Entrepreneur in technical solutions & consultancy	Face to face, Email	97
	Ent-13	IT Solutions	Face to face	36
	Ent-14	Games Development	Face to face	39
	Ent-15	Consultancy	Email, WhatsApp	-
	Ent-16	Tourism	Email	-
	Ent-17	Food Industry	Facebook Messenger	34
	Ent-18	Food Industry	Face to Face	42
EL public and private providers	PublicOfficial-01	Public	Face to face	59
	PublicOfficial-02	Public	Face to face	44
	PublicOfficial-03	Public	Face to face, Email, WhatsApp	108

Participant Category	Participant Code	Organisation type	Mode of Interview	Duration of Interview (minutes)
	PublicOfficial-04	Public	Face to face	48
	PublicOfficial-05	Public	Face to face	145
	PublicOfficial-06	Public	Face to face	43
	PublicOfficial-07	Public	Face to face	53
	PublicOfficial-08	Public	Email, WhatsApp	-
	PublicOfficial-09	Public	Face to face	44
	PublicOfficial-10	Public	Face to face	66
	PublicOfficial-11	Public	Face to face	33
	PublicOfficial-12	Public	Email	-
	Uni-Ent-Support	Public	Face to face	116
	Uni-Academic	Public	Face to face	63
	Incubator-1	Public	Face to face	128
	Incubator-2	Public	Face to face	99
	Incubator-3	Public	Face to face	64
	Ent-Program-1	Private	Face to face	75
	Ent-Program-2	Private	Face to face	74
	Ent-Program-3	Private	Face to face	80
	Ent-Program-4	Private	Face to face	72
	Banker-1	Public	Face to face	60
	Banker-2	Private	Face to face	67

Participant Category	Participant Code	Organisation type	Mode of Interview	Duration of Interview (minutes)
	Tech_Consultant	Private	Face to face	65
	VC	Private	Face to face	80
	OCCI	Private	Face to face	60

The data was collected by the lead author using in-depth interviews and was supplemented by publicly available documents that were used to outline the structure of the entrepreneurial ecosystem and the public and private opportunities available to pursue EL (King and Horrocks, 2010; Patton, 2015). The interviews lasted between 0.5 and 2.5 hours. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and audio recorded. However, given the study's approach, the data collection and analysis were iterative, which allowed for more new and follow-up interviews to be conducted during the data analysis, to elaborate on emerging issues and reach data saturation (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007). Opportunism and convenience were incorporated when recruiting our purposive sample (Patton, 2015). The communication with participants was mainly face-to-face, but sometimes had to be carried out via email, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp applications for convenience, because of spatial constraints. Utilising the social media and digital methods to conduct the interviews reemphasises the relevance of the digitisation logic in facilitating the collaborative learning in the research process (Hibbert *et al.*, 2016). The interviews were conducted by the lead author between 2014 and 2016 in Muscat Governorate, which includes more than 30% of the population of Oman (NCSI, 2015). The interview language was Arabic in most cases, although the choice was left to respondents, to ensure a smooth flow of information.

Interview guidelines were prepared for each participant group to ensure that all agreed themes that were formulated in accordance with the research objectives, relevant literature and underlying theoretical framework could be covered (Gartner and Birley, 2002; King and Horrocks, 2010). The semi-structured nature of the interviews was useful, as it allowed for unified questions to be asked to generate depth and comparability, and also enabled probing new questions to uncover any emerging themes (Patton, 2015). During the interviews, the entrepreneurs were initially asked about their regular EL practices and experiences and their perceptions of any formal sessions they had attended. As social networks, social media, and digital platforms emerged as critical components in EL, the questions turned to investigate these elements in-depth. The questions investigated in-depth the various informal approaches entrepreneurs use, and how they are perceived in comparison with the formal learning programmes. The stakeholders were asked about the general services that they provided for entrepreneurs, and then the investigation went deeper to explore the elements that were relevant to EL, such as the education, training, advisory services provided. The interviews also sought their perceptions about entrepreneurs' learning behaviour, and the extent to which digital platforms were used in providing their services. In order to strengthen the final conclusions regarding EL practices and the prevailing institutional logics, triangulation was necessary (Patton, 2015). This was achieved through analysing a variety of data sources: interviewing multiple groups of informants (i.e. entrepreneurs and stakeholders), and collecting two types of data (i.e. interviews and documents). This variability of sources and perspectives was crucial to generate a deep understanding of the focal phenomenon (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

6.3.4 Data analysis

The analysis started by transcribing each interview verbatim. The transcripts were kept in the original language to facilitate in-depth analysis, as translation can distort the meanings. Only after the analysis was completed, 'power quotes' and 'proof quotes' were translated into English (Pratt, 2009: 860). Using a thematic approach, and specifically utilizing the template analysis technique (King, 2004; Doern, 2016), few initial themes, such as the categorisation of potential logics, were generated from the EL literature and the institutional logics framework. Through repetitive reading of each transcript, the data was coded into the previously created themes. Given this technique, an iterative process of creating new themes and sub-themes, integrating some themes, and splitting others was important to assure consistency and comprehensive understanding of the data (King, 2012). The themes were then clustered into categories, which were given descriptive labels. As shown in Table 6-2, below, the data structure was shaped at the end with categories, themes and sub-themes when applicable. The categories represented an overview of the main insights (e.g. practices to overcome challenges in formal learning, prevailing institutional orders that enable informal learning). Themes and sub-themes provided narrow clustering and in-depth interpretations within these categories (e.g. self-directed learning, searching for learning abroad).

Table 6-2: Data analysis structure for the 3rd paper

Category	Theme	Sub-Theme	Illustrative Quotes
Practices to overcome challenges in formal learning	Self-directed learning		'We never...never learnt about entrepreneurship when we were in the university, and no one talks about it actually… We used to rely on the internet to learn about business concepts, business models, and business plan. All this stuff we learnt by ourselves.' (Ent-12)
	Searching for learning abroad		'We do many linkages with experienced individuals outside Oman in specific domains. So we try to develop relationships with skilled people outside Oman. It is difficult to find companies that are willing to share knowledge. Therefore, we tend to go to skilled individuals. The freelancer's websites allow you to see the expertise of the person, and the extent of trust he is given.' (Ent-7)
Prevailing institutional orders that enable informal learning	Social capital logic	Personal and business ties	'In terms of legal, I get help from my father, who works in the Police. He is very knowledgeable about the law. So I seek his guidance. He sometimes refers me to his friends for guidance regarding legal issues. Family and friends help in this matter.' (Ent-6)
		Religious values	'To my knowledge, entrepreneurial and many soft skills are 50% inherited and 50% learnt. I believe that the learnt skills can easily be gained through the plentiful programs that exist in social media. And not to mention the biography of the Prophet Muhammed, which is enough of a teacher' (Ent-8)

		Wasta	'I don't remember that I used *wasta* but my wife experienced this. She works in charge of providing administrative courses to the public. She mentioned to me that she gets asked by her manager to leave some vacancies which usually are allocated to some relatives or friends of the superiors in the organisation' (Ent-18)
	Digitisation logic	Social media & digital platforms	'I use social media and online websites continuously. They became the main reference for entrepreneurs to get most of the information they need. They enabled me to study the market by checking some specific information about the products and services offered by suppliers and the consumer needs for these products and services. Besides that, there are many other uses that help entrepreneurs' (Ent-16)
Informal collaborative learning through institutional plurality	Interactions between digitisation and social capital		'By following up some useful channels and contacts in social media, we find information easily and directly. And also we can stay updated with all the developments in our field, and we can get closer to effective individuals in our area and sometimes to some officials in the government.' (Ent-16)
	Interactions between digitisation and religious values		'…So we relied on external sources. We usually offer our programs open-source online, and we find our Lord providing us with people from outside who can provide us open-source programs as well [laughing].' (Ent-1)

	Interactions between social ties and *wasta*		‘There are some excellent training opportunities, but very rare. I attended a course sponsored publicly. One of my relatives called me and informed me about the course. If one wants to attend, it would cost about 1000 OR. I got it for free. It is all because of networks and relationships.’ (Ent-3)
Advantages of informal approaches	Social media and digital platforms	Customised learning	‘..if you go to someone to teach you, he will teach you the things that he knows and will teach you in his ways of doing things. But when you have Google and YouTube, and you have the will to learn, you can choose the things that you want to learn, and the quantity and quality that suits you.’ (Ent-05)
		Rich information	‘The online resources have changed my behaviour positively as they found me easy channels for development and knowledge and skills development. They increased my level of knowledge because of the rich resources that you can obtain from one window.’ (Ent-7)
		Affordable	‘Of course we need training, but it is too expensive and we need to allocate it time... So we rely on the internet for training. We train ourselves... There are some courses online that are free and some are chargeable, but they are affordable’ (Ent-9)
		Enable reaching scarce learning resources	‘… I found that Oman lacks such services. People lack skills and expertise. In regards to the technical issues, I rely on people from outside the country. There, it is easier to find people to do the things that you want.’ (Ent-11)

		Interactive	'We constantly use YouTube and Facebook to search for some particular information. I have many groups linked to my Facebook account. They are specialised in my area of design and virtual reality. Through them I update my knowledge, and they also allow me to discuss and follow some discussions, and interact with the experts. They are so useful' (Ent-4)
		Save time and efforts (flexibility)	'Online and social media channels are far better than the traditional learning because of the ease of access to the knowledge any time anywhere, free, and in all fields and specialisations that you require. I find the traditional courses to be constrained by time and place, which contradicts the nature of the entrepreneur who is highly mobile between cities. (Ent-18)
		Widen social network	'By following some useful channels and contacts in social media we find information easily and directly. And also we can stay updated with all the developments in our field, and we can get closer to effective individuals in our area and sometimes to some officials in the government.' (Ent-16)
	Personal and business ties	Expertise	'We have built a good network of our friends and some other new people. I am talking here about organizations; not individuals. We benefit from their experience to ease any difficulty we face. There are some firms that have already gone deep in the field. Also, we have good relationships with our university academics; we interact and learn from each other.' (Ent-4)

		Free of charge	'Online and social media channels are far better than the traditional learning because of the ease of access to the knowledge any time anywhere, free, and in all fields and specialisations that you require. I find the traditional courses to be constrained by time and place, which contradicts the nature of the entrepreneur who is highly mobile between cities. (Ent-18)
		Overcome bureaucracy	'Finding it really hard to get in touch with government officials for advice, to seek knowledge or even to get an update on an application progress via electronic methods such as emails and phones….99% of the time phones will ring and no one will answer unless you know someone personally and you call them on their mobile phone.' (Ent-15)
		Overcome ambiguity in government rules and regulations	'Many times I relied on my uncle who is an experienced entrepreneur and he is an expert in the procedures and rules of registration and starting up the business. So he helped a lot in opening my restaurant.' (Ent-18)
Digital learning vs. traditional formal learning	Substitute		'I believe now that entrepreneurs don't need training workshops and formal courses to gain knowledge because the internet contains all knowledge you need. It is now the most effective educator and the biggest university on earth.' (Ent-4)
	Complementary		'I think the training workshops and advisory sessions are also important and complement what is offered in online sources so they are complementing each other; I just don't see them as substitutes.' (Ent-16)

Changes in learning practices	Being picky with social media contacts and contents		'I also became picky about whom to friend on Facebook or follow on Twitter. The more and the bigger network you have the more you lose control of the consequences of using Social Media.' (Ent-15)
	Entrepreneurs' movement towards digitalised approach of learning		'I used to rely on others, and I would pay for them to do easy tasks for me sometimes. But now with the ease of learning through social media like YouTube and Internet websites, everything has become easy and accessible. This has saved me a lot of time and money. I now rely on them to train my staff. For example, I will open a video for them in YouTube on the Food Health Safety principles and the work rules in kitchens because they are up-to-date, free and useful. ' (Ent-18)
	Public providers' need to incorporate digitalised mode of learning support		'I would be delighted to see the training support going virtually. It would be an important experience. It would have a different atmosphere. I believe we should try it and evaluate the experience' (PublicOfficial-3)

6.4 Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings in the three subsections that delineate how entrepreneurs interpret and make sense of the social capital and digitisation logics to generate useful learning in the context of Oman.

6.4.1 Social ties and *wasta*

The empirical analysis demonstrated the critical role played by the social capital logic in shaping EL practices in Oman, due to unique sociocultural elements, such as the norms and values of collectivism and *wasta*. The entrepreneurs valued being in a network of their family members, friends, and neighbouring firms, who helped them to solve technical problems, obtain access to some limited quality training opportunities, and even to overcome red-tape practices to access some required knowledge. An entrepreneur describes how he benefited from a friend to circumvent a rigid regulation:

> 'I had thought of bringing an external consultant for two days on a visiting visa. But I found the regulations were very tough in this matter. They require that your company be in such and such grade. The number of foreign employees should be such and such. The Omani employees should be such and such. Oh guys, I want to bring this person for only two days; I want to benefit from him and he will leave afterwards. But they kept refusing. I remember that I met many officials but all of them refused. Then, I relied on one of my friends who has a company in the grade required which meets the criteria, and I brought the consultant in his name, and my problem was solved.' (Ent-3)

Furthermore, the empirics revealed that *wasta* was another critical prescription within the social capital logic that supports EL. Many entrepreneurs were found to use *wasta* to facilitate access to the knowledge they needed. *Wasta* was used by participants to sign up for rare, high-quality training courses, access special advice from well-known experts, and overcome red-tape practices in order to acquire some critical information:

> 'I have actually used wasta more than any other resource as it seems to be the quickest and most reliable. I found it really difficult to obtain any information regarding my business without getting in touch with someone via someone I know and having them recommended and contacted before meeting them. This almost guaranteed instant answers.' (Ent-15)

These findings show the how social capital logic allowed for the transformation of capitals to entrepreneurial knowledge through the means of family members, friends and colleagues. This reemphasises the usefulness of social ties in acquiring know-what and know-how (Jones *et al.*, 2010; Wang and Chugh, 2014). In Oman, this is facilitated by the collective culture, which assures support from the surrounding social ties, including tribe and extended family (Al-Hamadi *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, the sense of belonging to the social group plays a critical role in achieving informal learning at the normative level. This is complemented by *wasta,* which manifests as a unique prescription within the social capital logic in Oman, which was evidently utilised by entrepreneurs to pursue learning when facing obstructions. Previous literature has discussed the role of similar concepts, such as *guanxi* in China and *balti* in Russia in the context of business venturing (Ahlstrom and Bruton, 2010; Puffer *et al.*, 2010). By revealing the intriguing role of *wasta* in the context of EL, these findings underscore and advance the previous literature that suggests the valuable role of informal sources such as family, friends, and colleagues for SMEs in filling the gaps in the formal public support (i.e., Bennett, 2008).

The empirics revealed that the social capital logic was widely used among entrepreneurs, as it was an affordable strategic resource. Through social capital the entrepreneurs had adopted 'bricolage', by deploying the resources in hand to overcome their limited financial resources and environmental constraints to acquire knowledge (Garud and Karnøe, 2003; Baker and Nelson, 2005). Significantly in Oman, social ties were used to overcome the challenges in the institutional structure that impeded access to learning resources, rather than seeking business and technical knowledge *per se:*

> 'Also, the entrepreneur learns from them the right and best methods to complete some administrative procedures, especially the ones that are related to governmental and business rules and regulations' (Ent-16)

6.4.2 Digital learning

The social capital logic was complemented by the newly emerging digitisation logic in supporting EL. The analysis shows new approaches to EL that were supported by the digitisation logic. Social media and digital platforms (i.e. artefacts of digitisation logic) were considered to be the primary means of learning. Entrepreneurs expressed their regular use of digital platforms, such as entrepreneur.com and wikihow.com, and social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, for learning. An entrepreneur explained his digital learning approach:

> 'For technical support you don't need anybody; Google and YouTube are more than enough. If you have Google and YouTube, lock yourself away for one week, and you will become an expert. If you go to someone to teach you, he will teach you the things that he knows and will teach you in his ways of doing things. But when you have Google and YouTube, and you have the will to learn, you can choose the things that you want to learn, and the quantity and quality that suits you.' (Ent-05)

While, previously, digital learning through sophisticated systems had been considered unfavourably, partially due to their complexity (e.g. Admiraal and Lockhorst, 2009), interviewees perceived the current social media platforms to be a prominent resource for learning because of their characteristics of being more convenient, interactive and user-friendly (i.e. symbolic systems of digitisation logic). They were considered to be rich resources that could solve most problems encountered:

> 'They are useful to find quick and precise information. Also you can discuss with the specialists a specific problem and ask about any particular issue' (Ent-4).

The entrepreneurs looked at digital learning as a solution to both the pitfalls of formal training in solving specific problems encountered by business owners, and the issue of affordability and convenience that entrepreneurs usually complain about (Westhead and Storey, 1996).

Entrepreneurs in general have shown intensive support for digital learning. This study went further to investigate whether these new forms of learning were perceived as substitutes for the traditional face-to-face approaches. The findings were diverse. Some entrepreneurs perceived digital learning as the only effective method for EL, and that it could substitute for peers and government support:

> ‘I believe now that entrepreneurs don’t need training workshops and formal courses to gain knowledge because the Internet has all knowledge you need. It is now the most effective educator and the biggest university on earth’ (Ent-4).

In contrast, other entrepreneurs and some stakeholders perceived informal learning as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, traditional approaches:

> ‘Face-to-face interaction is still and will continue to be the ideal approach for equipping the target audience with a competitive advantage, including formal training. So both modes are complementary and can’t override each other’ (PublicOfficial-12).

These divergent perceptions signify the differentiated cognitive formation of each social actor in the field. Every actor has his/her own lens through which he/she interprets the world. These premises provide actors with power to prioritise some logics over others. In our case, some respondents saw digitisation logic as the dominant logic in EL, whereas others believed in hybrid modes of learning that took into account both the informal learning, through the digitisation logic, and formal learning, through the state and market logics (Pache and Santos, 2013). To address these variations in the prevailing logics, the Omani entrepreneurs had developed their own learning approaches that benefitted from the prescriptions of the prevailing logics, and avoided their proscriptions by deploying cognitive judgment.

6.4.3 Collaborative learning through institutional plurality

This section provides answers to the third research question, which examines how entrepreneurs interpret and make sense of the multiple co-existing logics to generate useful learning.

The analysis reinforced the notion of collaborative EL, which resulted from entrepreneurs’ interpretation of the various prescriptions offered by the different co-existing logics. In the process of learning, the entrepreneurs were found to make sense of the affordances provided by the digitisation logic, and combined them with the normative and symbolic characteristics provided by social capital (i.e. social interaction; collective culture; norms of wider networks; values of knowledge sharing). Collaborative learning has been proved to be a viable learning approach for entrepreneurs, as it provides them opportunities for sharing and learning from their friends, peers, business consultants or any other knowledge provider (Pittaway and Cope, 2007b). However, in this study, collaborative learning was strengthened by the availability of social media and digital platforms, and was enforced by some embedded social values.

The data showed that although the social capital logic could be seen as an independent institutional order that supported the entrepreneurs' informal learning through the power of the Omani collective culture and the embeddedness of *wasta*, it was also found to interact with other co-existing institutional logics, such as the digitisation logic. For instance, the passion to engage in wider social networks is part of the Omani Arab culture (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). The Omani entrepreneurs demonstrated this culture by engaging in multiple social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn, to widen their networks. This enabled them to access expert knowledge, which is usually limited in the local market. For example, many of them revealed their connectedness with some experts and some channels to seek their guidance regarding various technical and business issues:

> 'By following some useful channels and contacts in social media we find information easily and directly. And also we can stay updated with all the developments in our field, and we can get closer to effective individuals in our area and sometimes to some officials in the government.' (Ent-16)

In addition, a critical advantage of adopting social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, is the provision of interactive platforms, where entrepreneurs can discuss and share any issue with some experts online, at their own convenience. This interaction differed from traditional methods as it offered the flexibility to talk to problem-specific experts, and to easily locate the suitable knowledge provider from the massive number of profiles on these platforms:

> 'We constantly use YouTube and Facebook to search for some particular information. I have many groups linked to my Facebook account. They are specialised in my area of design and virtual reality. Through them I update my knowledge, and they also allow me to discuss and follow some discussions, and interact with the experts. They are so useful' (Ent-4)

Entrepreneurs can be learners as well as educators within these interactive platforms. This advances the notion of co-creation of knowledge by emphasising the role of digital platforms as prominent loci for such learning (e.g. Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Bissola *et al.*, 2016). Entrepreneurs collaborate within their virtual social network and share their experiences, knowledge, and skills. These discussions can generate new learning for everyone involved in this process.

Such collaborative learning was found to be reinforced by the encouraging religious values of 'knowledge sharing' in the Omani culture. The entrepreneurs expressed their Islamic values of knowledge sharing, which is mandated in Islamic principles. To Muslims, sharing beneficial knowledge is considered to be a continuous charity that never ends, even after death (Kumar and Rose, 2012). Social media platforms formed a potent means for Omani entrepreneurs to practice their learning in alignment with their Islamic values of knowledge sharing:

> 'Our world has become a knowledge-based world, and we believe that "when the son of Adam dies, all his deeds come to an end, except for three", and one of these is "beneficial knowledge" and even our corporate policy is that when we have a ready design that we worked hard to develop, we share it in our Facebook page. We make it open-source. However, our manufacturing secrets we protect in our own ways using our systems and software.' (Ent-1)

Although there are a considerable number of studies that have suggested the influential role of religious institutions on entrepreneurial activities (e.g. Audretsch *et al.*, 2013; Zelekha *et al.*, 2014), this evidence revealed an insightful perspective on its symbolic and normative role in shaping the entrepreneurs' learning practices.

Moreover, the findings reemphasised the interaction between the material practices in the digitisation logic and the symbolic system of the social capital logic (i.e. religious values). The data showed that the entrepreneurs reinforced collaborative learning by combining the cultural value of knowledge sharing from the social capital logic, with the affordances of social network sites, such as 'shareability', 'social interactivity', and 'interoperability', to support engaging in knowledge sharing (See Smith *et al.*, 2017: 22). Such interactions were essential for informal collaborative learning to emerge.

The intertwined nature of the social capital and digitisation logics also appeared in the way the entrepreneurs dealt with the pitfalls of collaborative digital learning. Despite the substantial advantages perceived in social media and digital platforms, there is an inherent risk regarding quality of content, as anyone can feed information onto these platforms. However, the entrepreneurs seemed to be aware of this issue, as they had become selective in the channels and individuals whom they followed and sought guidance from (i.e. routines of digitisation logic).

An entrepreneur explained the changes in his behaviour after being immersed in the social media environment:

> 'I also became picky about whom to friend on Facebook or follow on Twitter. The more and the bigger network you have the more you lose control of the consequences of using Social Media. A very simple example is that when you follow on Twitter, let's say 1000 accounts, the tweets feed that you have to go through/skip/read is exponentially more than following, let's say 100 accounts, which becomes very time consuming and also subject to losing important tweets and updates that are related to the business.' (Ent-15)

As social capital dimensions are integral components in the socio-material composite of social media and digital platforms (Nambisan, 2016), the notion of embedded agency prevails when facing digitisation logic (Garud *et al.*, 2007). In this case, entrepreneurs represented social actors who were privileged with some autonomy as being users of these platforms. The data revealed the autonomy that the entrepreneurs exercised through shaping their profiles, social contacts, interactions, and the way they managed their space and time when engaging with these digital platforms (i.e. relational system of digitisation logic). Hence, in response to the challenges that arose from these platforms, the entrepreneurs acted upon their embedded agency and used their knowledge and judgment to shape and reshape a personal digital environment structure, which they perceived to be ideal for effective learning.

In a nutshell, the challenges the entrepreneurs faced in the formal learning environment guided them to utilise the prescriptions of other prevailing logics, particularly social capital and digitisation to pursue effective learning. The entrepreneurs pursued informal learning, benefiting from the Omani social capital institutions that endorse the use of social ties, *wasta* and knowledge sharing. More importantly, the emerging digitisation logic was found to reshape the EL landscape. The empirics showed how the entrepreneurs transformed capital by navigating the social world and the digital world, primarily through the means of social media and digital platforms. The findings also imply that EL did not occur in isolation of the social context (cf. Karataş-Özkan, 2011); rather, it manifested itself in the various co-existing institutional logics that were rooted in the entrepreneurs' practices. The findings revealed the process through which the entrepreneurs interpreted and made sense of institutional plurality in their learning practices. In the process of learning, the entrepreneurs were found to draw on various prescriptions (e.g. social interaction, commitments towards family and friends, digital platforms, values of knowledge sharing) from the multiple co-existing logics that prevail in the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem. Such interpretations enabled the Omani entrepreneurs to engage in useful collaborative learning that matched their needs, beliefs and values.

6.5 Conclusions: contributions, implications and future directions

The overarching aim of the study was to examine the contemporary EL practices among Omani entrepreneurs and how they are shaped by the prevailing institutional logics. While acknowledging the prevalence of informal learning approaches among SMEs owner/managers, this study found it necessary to unpick the under-researched role of the social capital logic and the newly emerging digitisation logic in supporting informal EL. Central to the focus was the way in which entrepreneurs interpret and make sense of the heterogeneous co-existing logics in order to generate meaningful learning.

This qualitative paper provides findings at the intersection of EL and institutional logics. Firstly, the findings demonstrate a transformation of capital, which appears in the entrepreneurs' continuous interpretation and elaboration of the prevailing institutional logics when pursuing learning (Karataş-Özkan, 2011; Jayawarna *et al.*, 2014; Nicolopoulou *et al.*, 2016). The data shows how the entrepreneurs utilised normative and symbolic elements within the social capital logic (i.e. social ties; *wasta*; religious values of knowledge sharing) that are embedded in the Omani culture to transform cultural and social capitals to generate useful learning. Although previous literature provides evidence of the critical role of social capital in providing entrepreneurs with scarce resources, including learning (e.g. Jones *et al.*, 2010), this study highlights some unique context-specific institutional elements, such as *wasta* and the Islamic values of knowledge sharing, that supported the notion of informal EL in Oman. Another particular capital transformation is exhibited in the entrepreneurs' engagement with social media and digital platforms, where the entrepreneurs transformed the social and material capitals that are embedded in the emerging digitisation logic.

The second, and central, finding is the influential role played by the digitisation logic in the context of EL. Digitisation can be an overarching logic through which entrepreneurs can transform capital by navigating the structural, normative and symbolic institutional orders that are embedded within the digital platforms. This is capacitated by the socio-material nature of the digitisation logic (Nambisan, 2016). The material dimension provides the structure and affordances that form the field where various actors (e.g. entrepreneurs, public and private learning providers, peers, friends) interact to shape entrepreneurial knowledge. The social dimension, on the other hand, provides digital platforms with the essence of social reality, where norms, values, and symbolic systems shape how actors behave and interact. Because of this nature, digital platforms provide entrepreneurs and all users with an embedded agency. They have substantial autonomy to structure and restructure their field, in the light of their own experiences, values, norms and cognitive abilities, to pursue meaningful learning.

This leads to the third insight of the paper, which is the reinforcement of informal collaborative learning that results from the inextricably intertwined social capital and digitisation logics. This study advances EL literature by taking into account the institutional pluralism perspective and suggests interactive relationships within the inter-institutional system between the material practices enforced by the digitisation logic and the normative and symbolic elements of social capital logic. The data shows how these logics are intermingled and should not be considered in isolation of each other in the context of EL. The socio-material digitisation logic operates as an overarching logic that allows for the social capital institutions of networking and commitments towards the collective and the Islamic value of knowledge sharing to be enacted, and emerge in a form of informal collaborative learning.

Through these findings, the paper contributes to entrepreneurship literature in three ways. Firstly, addressing the increasing calls for digital entrepreneurship research (e.g. Nambisan, 2016), it elucidates the relevance of the newly emerging digitisation logic in reshaping the landscape of informal EL (Bertels and Lawrence, 2016; Keith *et al.*, 2016). Specifically, the study sheds lights on the socio-material nature that characterises digital platforms. This paper argues that digitisation is inextricably linked with the co-existing logic of social capital, which renders informal EL more meaningful. This leads to the second contribution, which advances understanding of the unique institutional elements that emerged from understudied emerging economies, which enable effective EL (Bruton et al., 2008). Entrepreneurs in the Omani context were found to benefit from unique social capital logic prescriptions, such as a preference for wider networks, *wasta*, and knowledge sharing values. Last, but not least, the study underscores the usefulness of institutional plurality to foster informal collaborative learning amongst entrepreneurs (De Castro et al., 2014; Mair et al., 2015). Entrepreneurs engage in continuous interpretation and elaboration of the heterogeneous co-existing logics to strategically combine elements that enable effective learning (Pache and Santos, 2013).

6.5.1 Implications for entrepreneurs

There are some key implications for entrepreneurs and educators which emerge from this study. Entrepreneurs need to immerse themselves in digital technologies to enhance their entrepreneurial learning. While previous studies have indicated the usefulness of social media and digital platforms to build wider and stronger social networks (Smith *et al.*, 2017), this study has exhibited how the digital affordances of shareability and interactivity are used in the process of EL. The interactive space of social media and digital platforms enables entrepreneurs to exchange ideas, seek guidance, share experience, and develop knowledge and skills, by interacting with other users, such as peers, consultants, friends, or government officials. However, although digital platforms can provide rich information and access to wider networks, entrepreneurs have to be selective in their choices of contacts and information, as having too wide a network is a pitfall of the affordability of these resources. Otherwise, as indicated by the data, engaging in social media can be a waste of time and a source of misleading information, which potentially can affect the entrepreneurial outcomes negatively. Additionally, with the huge development of digital technologies, entrepreneurs should look beyond learning and pursue entrepreneurial opportunities by establishing digital business models that benefit from the digitisation logic (Nambisan, 2016). Moreover, entrepreneurs should consider the embedded prescriptions within the social environment (e.g. *wasta* and preference for wider networks in the Omani context) that can facilitate easy and affordable access to effective EL. Entrepreneurs can transform their capitals through their peers, friends, and family members.

6.5.2 Implications for educators

The study also provides implications for educators. While public and private educators need to consider ways to enhance the effectiveness, affordability, and accessibility of their formal learning opportunities, they are advised to appreciate the relevance of social media and digital platforms as a vibrant means to deliver their educational services. The findings show that the digitisation logic is powerful enough to operate as a dominant logic in the context of EL. Public (i.e. state logic) and private educators (i.e. market logic) can both engage with the digitisation logic to provide more affordable and convenient opportunities for learning. For example, the government is advised to incorporate a clear digital strategy that can elevate EL support. Connecting entrepreneurs with sought-after experts through informal sessions within closed groups via social media (e.g. Facebook) is one example of a potential public provision. In these platforms, as suggested by Van Cauwenberge *et al.* (2013), governments can play the role of moderators rather than service providers, where training and advising can be outsourced to international experts, thus benefiting from the access and convenience of the virtual environment. Moreover, governments are advised to increase investment in developing informal learning opportunities, as they are more trustworthy and convenient for entrepreneurs. This can be achieved through facilitation of more networking programmes, and business centres and clubs (Davidsson and Honig, 2003). The Omani government has initiated some successful steps in this direction, such as the ‘mentorship programme’ where some volunteering senior CEOs are appointed as mentors for some entrepreneurs. Such programmes deserve more attention. Furthermore, private educators are urged to address their inflated cost. Engaging in digital platforms, such as the evolutionary LinkedIn Learning, could reduce operational costs and, hence, lead to competitive prices for entrepreneurs.

6.5.3 Future research directions

This study opens new avenues for future research. As this study focused on the various informal approaches that can support learning, rather than digital learning *per se*, future research could investigate social media and digital platforms in more depth, by incorporating technical constructs to amplify the understanding of the role of digital platforms affordances and constraints in EL (Nambisan, 2016). Furthermore, one limitation of this study is that the findings might be true in the current time, but might be rendered invalid in the future, due to the history contingency inherent in the inter-institutional system of logics and the rapid development of digital technologies (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). As such, future research should conduct a longitudinal study to see how institutional orders' power changes over time and what institutional forces remain, vanish, emerge and change in the context of EL. Additionally, this study highlighted some context-specific elements within the social culture of the Omani context that affected EL practices. Hence it would be interesting to see what logics prevail in other institutional contexts. Comparative studies in multiple contexts would also be useful to see how logics unfold differently in each setting, how entrepreneurs interpret and interact with social media and digital platforms, and how the co-existing logics in each context are interpreted when pursuing learning.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

This PhD thesis examined the influence of the institutional environment on the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the context of Oman. This was addressed in three papers (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) that looked at different phenomena within the entrepreneurship context of Oman using a multi-layered perspective. These focused on hidden entrepreneurship practices (first paper), formal entrepreneurial learning (EL) programmes (second paper), and informal EL in the digitisation age (third paper), respectively. Although each paper stands independently, they are linked insofar as they imply each other and centre on the influence of the prevailing institutional arrangements that have shaped entrepreneurship activities in the emerging country of Oman. This study was informed by an interpretive philosophical paradigm and followed a qualitative approach using naturalistic inquiry design. It drew on in-depth interviews with select entrepreneurs and key stakeholders (e.g. policymakers, educational and financial institutions, incubators, accelerators, consultancies, business associations) in the Omani entrepreneurial ecosystem. The data were supplemented with secondary sources such as official websites, social media channels, annual reports, magazines, and newspaper articles. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis and template techniques. Careful consideration was given to all particularities required to achieve trustworthy findings.

This chapter provided a brief summary of the research aims, findings, contributions, and suggestions for future research avenues. First, it revisited research aims and questions, provided details of how they were addressed, and outlined key findings. Next, implications of the thesis findings for researchers, policymakers, entrepreneurs, and educators were discussed. Then, research contributions were summarised. Finally, opportunities for future research were provided.

7.2 Revisiting research aims and RQs

The overarching aim of the thesis was to examine the influence of institutional conditions on the entrepreneurial context of Oman. The overall focus of the thesis was addressed in three sub-aims that were in turn addressed in three separate, yet connected papers.

7.2.1 The first aim

The first aim, which was addressed in the first paper, sought to examine the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs in the context of Oman, an understudied phenomenon in the literature of informal economies (Williams *et al.*, 2016a). Utilising the lens of institutional theory, this paper investigated the role of the institutional environment in shaping hidden entrepreneurship practices (Scott, 2014). It also examined the perceived positive and negative implications of these practices in the entrepreneurial ecosystem and the wider economy. This paper provided a macro-level perspective on the role of hidden entrepreneurs who straddle formal and informal economies in Oman. Hidden entrepreneurs were defined as international individuals who are active in businesses in the host country and “hide” behind the names of locals in the ownership register. They violate labour and commercial laws of their host country by starting and running businesses under the names of local residents, who take a passive role in the firm in exchange for a fixed amount of money — and the international entrepreneurs maintain full control of the business.

Although hidden entrepreneurship is similar to informal entrepreneurship (Williams and Schneider, 2016), it differs in motives and implications (Webb et al., 2013). Hidden entrepreneurship is prevalent in Oman due to the prevailing institutional arrangements. These include deficiencies in the regulatory environment (e.g. barriers to international entrepreneurs, poor policy design), an anti-entrepreneurship mindset in society, and lack of cognitive abilities among the locals, making them less likely to pursue formal entrepreneurship. This paper revealed certain negative impacts of hidden entrepreneurs on both active and passive local entrepreneurs (e.g. undermining opportunities for active local entrepreneurship, fraud on the part of passive entrepreneurs). Hidden entrepreneurs are perceived to affect the wider economy in a negative way (e.g. by distortion of entrepreneurship policies and transfer of profits outside the economy). However, this paper advances the literature of informal economies by revealing the potential contributions of hidden entrepreneurs to the domestic ecosystem. They were perceived to be major sources for EL and access to scarce resources such as cheap expertise.

7.2.2 The second aim

The second aim of the thesis was to examine the inadequacy of Omani institutional configurations revealed in the first paper. This was addressed in the second paper by examining the influence of the institutional environment on EL programmes in Oman. This was in response to the few studies that considered institutional dynamics when scrutinising EL programmes (Bae et al., 2014). This paper investigated the influence of institutional elements on the efficacy of EL programmes. It also examined the interactions among institutional elements in the context of EL programmes. In this context the classic institutional theory framework was a useful lens to demonstrate the influence of each institutional dimension (i.e. regulative, normative, cognitive) and the interplay among various layers in the context of EL programmes (Scott, 2014).

The findings of the paper emphasised the critical influence of institutional conditions on the efficacy of EL programmes (Walter and Block, 2016). The unique institutional configurations of Oman were found to play a critical role in shaping the efficacy of EL programmes, which were found to be susceptible to regulative elements (e.g. lack of coherence among policymakers), normative elements (e.g. cultures of risk aversion and lack of open criticism), and cognitive elements (e.g. negative attitudes towards EL programmes and entrepreneurship). Particularly, this paper revealed that these institutional elements reinforce one another and are inextricably linked in the context of EL. Through this finding, this paper advances institutional theory by demonstrating the iterative and reinforcing the effects of prevailing institutional elements and shows the multi-layered interplay among the actors at the macro (i.e. policymaker), meso (i.e. family) and micro (e.g. entrepreneurial) levels in the context of EL. All positive institutional conditions may transfer among these levels and reinforce one another, leading to a favourable institutional environment for EL, or vice versa.

7.2.3 The third aim

Because the second paper showed inadequacy in the formal EL environment (e.g. training programmes), the third investigated the informal EL approaches that Omani entrepreneurs utilise to address problems and enhance capabilities. This paper addressed the limited understanding in the literature of the complexity of informal EL approaches despite their prevalence among SMEs (Keith et al., 2016). Therefore, the third paper drew upon institutional logics (i.e. new developments in institutional theory) to examine how prevailing institutional logics—particularly social capital and digitisation logics—facilitated useful, informal learning approaches for Omani entrepreneurs (Friedland and Alford, 1991). Social capital and newly emerging digitisation logics were viewed as the core logics that facilitate informal EL in Oman. The logics perspective was deemed appropriate to this study because of its strength in demonstrating the embedded agency of the entrepreneurs in their institutional context (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). It was useful for explaining the interplay among entrepreneurs at the micro level and their contexts at the meso and macro levels in how they interpret the prevailing institutional orders when pursuing learning.

This paper examined the influence of social capital and digitisation logics in EL and investigated how entrepreneurs interpret multiple coexisting logics when pursuing learning. The paper advances knowledge at the intersection of EL and institutional logics, and the findings demonstrate the unique prescriptions of the social capital logic in Oman (e.g. wider networks, *wasta,* and the value of knowledge sharing) that were utilised by entrepreneurs to pursue learning. Additionally, the paper provided evidence of transformation of social capital to digital form due to the emergence of social media and digital platforms, which facilitate effective and convenient collaborative EL (Smith et al., 2017). Moreover, effective, collaborative EL was reinforced by how entrepreneurs make sense of various prescriptions of coexisting logics. The data showed that entrepreneurs reinforce collaborative EL by combining social capital prescriptions (e.g. preference for and commitment to wider networks) and the value of knowledge sharing with digitisation prescriptions (e.g. shareability and interactivity). Hence, institutional plurality provides opportunities for entrepreneurs to achieve effective learning (Kraatz and Block, 2008).

7.3 Implications for research, policy, and practice

Through the findings of the three papers that constitute it, this thesis presented multiple implications for researchers, entrepreneurs, policymakers, and educators.

7.3.1 Implications for researchers

The study presented various implications for research, demonstrating that entrepreneurs do not operate in vacuums (Hindle, 2004). Rather, they are in continuous interaction with their institutional environments. They influence and are influenced by the surrounding institutional conditions. Therefore, researchers should continue to pursue research that links entrepreneurs with institutions to develop entrepreneurship theory (Kim and Li, 2014). To understand entrepreneurship holistically, it must be further emphasised as a socioeconomic phenomenon (Jack and Anderson, 2002). Moreover, the study showed that emerging contexts are sources of unique institutional configurations that may differ from those of the developed world and lead to the emergence of different forms of entrepreneurship (i.e. hidden entrepreneurship) (Williams *et al.*, 2016a). Hence, researchers should continue investigating emerging economies to generate insights into diverse practices of entrepreneurship (Welter et al., 2016). Furthermore, institutional theory was an apt framework for conveying multilevel understanding of entrepreneurship and explaining the interplay among various actors within the entrepreneurial ecosystem (e.g. entrepreneurs, policymakers, and community members). Researchers can benefit from the capacity of institutional theory to explain the reasoning behind entrepreneurs' actions. The institutional logics perspective, can be very useful for researchers to explain entrepreneurs' actions and strategies when they encounter multiple, and often contending, logics (Bertels and

Lawrence, 2016). Finally and importantly, the qualitative methodology proved to be as critical as quantitative methodology for entrepreneurship research (Gartner and Birley, 2002). Various important issues have emerged in this study because of in-depth interaction with entrepreneurial actors (e.g. hidden practices and digital learning). Hence, researchers are encouraged to pursue more research within this domain to better provide rich and holistic understanding of the concealed side of entrepreneurship.

7.3.2 Implications for entrepreneurs

This thesis generated multiple implications for entrepreneurs in Oman and other similar contexts. Based on the findings of the first paper, entrepreneurs are encouraged to more actively exploit entrepreneurial opportunities rather than relying on hidden entrepreneurs. Engaging in hidden entrepreneurship can be risky for passive entrepreneurs due to fraud and can undermine the potential gains that result from business activities. However, entrepreneurs are urged to collaborate with foreign nationals within official agreements in order to transfer knowledge and gain access to scarce resources such as cheap expertise. Doing formal businesses with international entrepreneurs can be useful for attaining legitimacy in the market and receiving a fair share of the gains.

In the context of EL, entrepreneurs are advised to be self-directed when pursing learning. When formal learning opportunities are limited, poor, or inconvenient, entrepreneurs can rely on other prevailing institutional elements to facilitate learning. For instance, in Oman and most Arab and Asian countries, social ties and commitments to the collective are crucial in securing learning and other resources (Boso et al., 2013). Moreover, entrepreneurs are encouraged to take advantage of widespread social media and digital platforms such as LinkedIn and Twitter, which can widen networks and, hence, sources of learning. Digitisation also provides entrepreneurs with opportunities for developing new business models that transcend traditional ones (Nambisan, 2016).

7.3.3 Implications for policymakers

The findings of this thesis provided a number of implications for policymakers in Oman and other emerging economies. Governments in developing countries should consider two policies to foster formal entrepreneurship development: enhancing the regulatory environment and increasing subsidies and support (Dennis, 2011). These two approaches are conducive to creating an institutional environment for entrepreneurship development (Williams, 2013). If both policies were simultaneously implemented, they would reinforce a favourable societal mindset by transforming the mentality towards formal entrepreneurship. They would also encourage both international and local entrepreneurs to pursue formal entrepreneurship. They may involve reducing the minimum capital required for foreign investment and facilitating access to the foreign labour permits needed in countries like Oman that suffer from inefficient labour markets and shortages in certain skillsets (Schwab, 2016). These should be accompanied by awareness campaigns to inform locals about entrepreneurship. Policymakers should provide proper training and advisory support to benefit efficient EL providers with their capacity and experience (Van Cauwenberge et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the first paper argued that, instead of regulating hidden entrepreneurs out of existence, policymakers should absorb and legitimise them within the ecosystem by revising legislation, regulations, and policies to encourage formal collaborations between local and international investors. The existence of international entrepreneurs in the domestic market was shown to contribute to the development of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the long run. Moreover, policymakers should consider the design and implementation of public policies that could influence the emergence of informal practices, as shown in the first paper, and determine the efficacy of the EL programmes, as shown in the second paper (Arshed et al., 2014; Arshed et al., 2016). In addition, incoherence among the policies of various public agencies may undermine entrepreneurial ecosystems. Policies must be coherent and aligned with one another to achieve their intended outcomes.

In the context of EL, governments must implement simultaneous efforts to enhance the EL environment. Well-designed and -implemented policies and quality EL programmes should accompany increased efforts to create a pro-entrepreneurship mindset in every individual in a given society. Such policies must be implemented simultaneously to reinforce one another, as shown in the second paper. All institutional components are interconnected and influence one another in an iterative manner.

7.3.4 Implications for educators

The three papers also provided insights for both public and private educators (EL providers). Educators may enable or constrain the intellectual development of their pupils, and hence, shape normative institutions in their societies. Secondary schools and institutions of higher education should provide quality entrepreneurship education for students from the early years of schooling until graduation. This is imperative for promoting an entrepreneurial mindset, the lack of which was found to explain passive engagement in entrepreneurship and the failure of EL programmes.

Moreover, educators should consider the advantages of digital learning on social media and other digital platforms. EL providers, including government, must adapt to the contemporary needs of society and the private sector by providing digital learning support through Facebook, LinkedIn, and other platforms, whereby entrepreneurs benefit from reduced costs and increased convenience and quality. Due to their limited capacity and experience, public providers should learn from efficient training providers on the international market. They may also adopt strategies similar to those of the Flemish government, which launched and now monitors successful support programmes operated by efficient private providers (Van Cauwenberge et al., 2013). Additionally, because the government is the main EL provider in Oman, it should devise more mentorship and networking programmes to enhance the potential for informal, collaborative EL.

7.4 Thesis contributions

This research provided multiple contributions to knowledge by generating a multilevel understanding of entrepreneurship within the institutional context of Oman's emerging economy. Three overarching theoretical, methodological, and contextual contributions were generated in this thesis and underpinned by key contributions provided by each individual paper in the study.

7.4.1 Theoretical contributions

First, the research contributed to the burgeoning literature that links institutions and entrepreneurship (Bruton et al., 2010; Jennings et al., 2013; Kim and Li, 2014). The institutional environment has been overlooked in studies of entrepreneurship phenomena such as hidden entrepreneurs and EL (Walter and Block, 2016). The three papers show that institutional conditions can shape entrepreneurial activities and practices.

The first paper contributed to the literature of informal entrepreneurship by introducing the notion of hidden entrepreneurs, who are understudied in the extant literature (Webb *et al.*, 2009; Webb *et al.*, 2013; Williams *et al.*, 2016a). In contrast with previous literature that takes an economic perspective (Webb et al., 2009), this paper demonstrated the usefulness of a sociological perspective of institutional theory in explaining the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs who straddle the formal and informal economies in Oman. A weak regulatory environment combined with a lack of entrepreneurial mindset and cognitive abilities among the Omani people were identified as the main reasons for the prevalence of hidden entrepreneurship in Oman.

The second paper contributed to the EL literature that evaluates the educational and training programmes that have been generating contradictory findings (Mole, 2000; Peterman and

Kennedy, 2003; Pittaway and Cope, 2007a; Oosterbeek *et al.*, 2010; Jones *et al.*, 2013; Huber *et al.*, 2014; Thompson and Kwong, 2016). This paper added to this research by considering the institutional environment as a main determinant of EL programme efficacy (Walter and Block, 2016). This paper extended institutional theory by demonstrating how institutional components are inextricably linked in the context of EL. Through an iterative process, institutional elements were found to reinforce one another in the context of EL. For instance, on the one hand, in terms of positive reinforcement, any change in the regulative institutions (i.e. EL policy) may lead to changes in the normative environment (i.e. entrepreneurial mindset) and subsequently influence people's perceptions (i.e. positive attitudes towards EL programmes). On the other hand, poor policy design may lead to negative attitudes towards EL programmes. Understanding these reinforcement effects is useful to researchers and policymakers alike.

Furthermore, the third paper contributed to the intersection of three streams of literature: The first explores the role of digitisation in entrepreneurship (Fischer and Reuber, 2011, 2014; Nambisan, 2016; Smith et al., 2017); the second examines informal EL approaches within SMEs (Tannenbaum et al., 2010; Keith et al., 2016); and the third studies the influence of institutional plurality on individual and organisational practices (Kraatz and Block, 2008; De Castro et al., 2014; Mair et al., 2015). The third paper advanced knowledge by incorporating digitisation into entrepreneurship research, particularly in the context of EL. By utilising institutional logics, this paper demonstrated how institutions carried within digitisation logic could enable or constrain EL practices. Moreover, it emphasised the relevance of multiple, coexisting institutional logics in the context of reinforcing informal, collaborative EL. Entrepreneurs in Oman combine the material elements of digitisation logic (e.g. the convenience and interactivities of digital platforms) with the symbolic and normative dimensions of social capital logics (e.g. the value of knowledge sharing, tendencies of wider networks, and commitments towards the collective).

7.4.2 Methodological contributions

Second, the research contributed to the yet limited literature that provides multilevel conceptualisation of entrepreneurship phenomena by demonstrating interplay among entrepreneurs at the micro level and their surrounding meso- and macro-level environments (Davidsson et al., 2001; Shepherd, 2011; Tatli et al., 2014). The first paper demonstrated the influence of macro-level factors (i.e. the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs) on the positive and negative perceptions of local, active entrepreneurs regarding hidden entrepreneurs. The second paper provided evidence of multilevel interactions in the context of EL and the interplay among various actors, such as entrepreneurs at the micro level, policymakers at the macro level, and families at the meso level. The regulative, normative, and cognitive institutions carried within these three levels are found to reinforce one another by means of interactions among actors within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. The third paper demonstrated the agency of entrepreneurs to change their EL practices by making sense of the prevailing institutions at the macro, meso, and micro levels (De Castro et al., 2014). With the challenges of formal EL environments as determined by state and market logics, entrepreneurs must utilise the prescriptions of normative-level institutions endorsed by digitisation and social capital logics. This paper showed how entrepreneurs make sense of prevailing institutions in light of their needs (e.g. quality, convenience, interactivity, affordability) at the micro level.

7.4.3 Contextual contributions

Third, this research contributed to the currently limited literature that examines entrepreneurship in emerging economies by considering the context of Oman (Bruton et al., 2008). Emerging contexts proved to generate new insights into entrepreneurship theory. In the context of the first paper, hidden entrepreneurs emerged as key actors in informal emerging economies. That is partially due to the immature institutional structure that characterises emerging economies (Puffer et al., 2010). The first paper also showed that policymakers in Oman and similar contexts can benefit from the existence of hidden entrepreneurs to foster knowledge transfer and provide access to scarce resources, which are limited in emerging contexts (Schwab, 2016). Therefore, instead of being regulating out of existence, hidden entrepreneurs should be absorbed within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Governments should devise mechanisms to legitimatise hidden practices and facilitate the creation of official joint ventures between international and local entrepreneurs. Moreover, the second paper demonstrated the unique institutional conditions in Oman that determine the efficacy of EL programmes. The lack of an entrepreneurial mindset is a distinctive characteristic of Omani society and constrains people's perceptions of EL. Another characteristic is a lack of open criticism, which undermines the ability of educators to enhance support programmes. Moreover, the third paper demonstrated the unique prescriptions of social capital logic that enable effective EL. For instance, *wasta* was exhibited as one of the key components in Omani society that facilitates entrepreneurs' access to expertise and know-how (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). Furthermore, the Islamic value of knowledge-sharing reinforces collaborative learning face to face and through social networking platforms.

The insights generated from the Omani context are transferable to most emerging contexts that share similar ecosystems. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Omani institutional context is similar to many transitional and emerging economies such as Russia, China, and Bulgaria, all of which share with Oman similar institutional conditions that influence entrepreneurship, including weaknesses in the regulatory environment such as institutional voids, government bureaucracy, weak enforcement of legislations, and corruption (Manolova and Yan, 2002; Aidis et al., 2008; Tonoyan et al., 2010; Sheng et al., 2011). They also share many equivalent social institutions, such as the role of family and social ties, and keeping face (Puffer et al., 2010). The implications of this research are relatively applicable to these contexts. In particular, the findings can be transferred largely to the contexts of neighbouring GCC nations (e.g. UAE, Saudi Arabia) because they share with Oman similar economic conditions, histories, and cultures.

7.5 Opportunities for future research

A number of limitations in this research resulted from constraints in space and time, the methodological approach, and data access. Future research avenues are suggested to address these limitations and advance the literature in the context of this study.

This study was not able to examine certain phenomena because of limited time and space. The first paper demonstrated a wide range of hidden entrepreneurs in Oman and other Gulf countries. The empirical data indicated that most hidden entrepreneurs came from developing countries in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, with a limited number from developed nations. Future research might investigate the reasons behind this phenomenon by drawing a spatial comparison between the home and host institutional environments. Potential findings may aid policymakers in devising mechanisms to absorb hidden entrepreneurs within the domestic ecosystem.

Furthermore, Oman launched many policy reforms to develop the SMEs sector and promote entrepreneurship in early 2013 (PASMED, 2014). However, since mid-2014, the economy has faced a financial crisis due to the slump in oil prices. Subsequently, government spending on entrepreneurship policies, programmes, and other plans has shrunk, further undermining the SME sector. Therefore, future research might examine Omani entrepreneurship policy reforms in the face of the recent financial crisis, particularly because Oman has limited experience in dealing with such crises. It would be interesting to know whether the government was able to sustain its entrepreneurship programmes and how slumping oil prices affected their development. At the individual level, researchers might investigate how the crisis has influenced entrepreneurial activities, given the Omani cultures of risk aversion and limited entrepreneurial mindset. The sociocultural environment might likewise be examined to see whether perceptions towards entrepreneurship have changed in light of lesser jobs in the public sector. It would be particularly useful to know whether entrepreneurship is seen as a survival strategy or a last resort, given the complex institutional configurations. The outcomes of these studies would contribute to policy and practice.

Although the third paper provided interesting insights into the role of digitisation in entrepreneurship, this area of research needs further exploration because of rapid development in technological hardware and software (Nambisan, 2016). Future research might examine the role of social media features (e.g. shareability, interactivity) in enhancing EL and widening the scope of business models (Smith et al., 2017).

The third paper, along with many other studies, emphasised the existence of multiple, often contending institutional logics that influence entrepreneurship practices in every context. Future research might examine the contending logics that influence Oman's entrepreneurial context. For instance, it might examine entrepreneurs' responses to the contending logics of Omanisation policy at the state level, which requires firms to employ a specific number of Omani people, and their inefficient labour market characterised by a costly, less educated workforce (Schwab, 2016). These two logics interact with a social logic that encourages people to pursue public jobs or ones at large, state-owned firms in the private sectors to attain social status and job security. Moreover, future research might examine entrepreneurs' reactions to the emerging logic of Islamic banking in Oman or a similar context. Although Islamic banking practices accord with local religious beliefs, their value is questionable compared to conventional, commercial practices. Hence, it will be useful to understand how entrepreneurs make sense of these two contending logics.

Moreover, a number of methodological suggestions should be considered in future research. Although the first paper generated insightful findings from the perspective of active, local entrepreneurs and stakeholders, it did not consider the perspective of hidden and local, passive entrepreneurs. These two key groups were not possible to recruit due to the secret nature of their practices. The literature of informal entrepreneurship stressed that most of those who engage in informal practices do not want to be identified (Schneider et al., 2010). Future research might address this by focusing on strategies that create trust between researchers and these critical participants. Involving researchers of the same national origin as the hidden entrepreneurs may solve the problems of building trust and speaking local languages to generate meaningful insights without distortion. Although it can be challenging, researchers can employ ethnographic approaches and engage in long-term participant observation to generate useful insights into hidden entrepreneurship practices, thereby enabling them to unpack the perceptions and motives of hidden entrepreneurs. Another method might draw case studies from firms that once engaged in hidden practices but have since legitimised their operations. Moreover, longitudinal study might examine the role of Omani entrepreneurship policy in influencing the number of firms that engage in hidden practices. It will be interesting to see how hidden entrepreneurship practices evolve with the expected changes in regulation and societal perceptions.

Although the interpretivist, qualitative approach of this research was useful for unpacking the complexities of entrepreneurship phenomena in the context of Oman, the positivist, quantitative approach remains prominent in entrepreneurship research (Gartner and Birley, 2002; Hindle, 2004). Future research might employ quantitative methods to test the findings of the three papers. For example, researchers might test the relationships among institutional factors and the tendency to engage in hidden entrepreneurship. The reinforcement of institutional conditions in the context of EL would be interesting to test. Future directions might also pursue the relationship between the degree of engagement in digital social platforms and sociocultural values by recruiting participants from a variety of cultures.

This study focused on the single context of Oman, so future avenues should involve multiple contexts to generate rich insights into the phenomena. For example, hidden entrepreneurs are prevalent throughout Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) countries such as UAE and Saudi Arabia. Future studies might examine or even compare hidden entrepreneurship in each of these countries. From a policy perspective, this would shed light on the reactions of policymakers to these practices in different contexts. Moreover, such comparative studies would be useful in the context of collaborative EL. For example, researchers might examine how different institutional characteristics across different contexts shape the intensity and quality of collaborative learning and the mechanism of its occurrence. The same might be considered in relation to the use of digital learning in different contexts.

7.6 Chapter summary

This chapter provided a summary of aims, methodology, findings, implications, contributions, and opportunities for future research in this PhD project. The research involved three qualitative papers that examine the influence of the institutional environment in the entrepreneurship context of Oman. They contributed to literature by examining three phenomena through an institutional lens. The first paper outlined how Oman’s institutional configurations led to the emergence of hidden entrepreneurs. It revealed a number of pros and cons of these practices in the entrepreneurial ecosystem and the wider economy. The second paper showed how institutional arrangements can determine the efficacy of EL programmes. It emphasised the interrelatedness of the various institutional components, which led to favourable or unfavourable reinforcement effects in the context of EL. The third paper demonstrated the importance of the coexisting digitisation and social capital logics in endorsing effective and convenient informal collaborative EL. The findings provide multiple implications for researchers, entrepreneurs, policymakers, and educators. The overall thesis provides multiple contributions to the literature. It contributes theoretically by generating new insights into the interplay between the institutional elements and entrepreneurship phenomena. It advances the limited literature that integrates a multi-layered perspective into entrepreneurship research. It offers contextual contributions by examining emerging contexts, which are understudied in the entrepreneurship literature. This chapter concluded with opportunities for future research that may advance entrepreneurship literature.

Appendices

Appendix A Entrepreneurship policy reforms

A.1 Major directives of the SME Development Symposium held at Seih Al-Shamikhat (21-23 Jan 2013)

1. Approve and implement a training program for related government employees who have direct contact with the private sector in order to promote the entrepreneurship concept and to develop and enhance the SMEs relevant procedures to provide them with better services that help them to play their development role. This program to be implemented within the second half of the current year.

2. Permit the government employees who are willing to establish and manage their own enterprises to be dedicated for them to pay their salaries for one year according to the regulations that to be approved during the current year.

3. To establish a high value annual award to SMEs and supporting bodies with effect from 2014.

4. To establish financially and administratively independent government authorities to develop and promote SMEs. Such authorities shall be funded and equipped with required manpower. It shall be responsible for the current SMEs government technical support programs and also shall be responsible for:

    a. Provide financial, technical and administrative consultancy to SMEs to promote their capabilities and enable them to produce high quality products.

    b. Establish electronic data base attached to a call centre to provide the required supportive information to SMEs.

    c. Establish a special register for the SMEs managed by devoted entrepreneurs.

    d. Review the legislations, laws and regulations related to the policies and procedures to ensure the development of the SMEs.

    e. Support the existing SMEs to ensure their development.

5. Designate suitable plots in each governorate to construct SMEs business centers and incubators. Such business centers and incubators shall be funded by the government and the private sector and shall be managed by specialized establishment. Designate suitable agricultural, industrial and commercial plots for SMEs utilization through usufruct contracts

according to the regulations stipulated by the Supreme Council for Planning and the Ministry of Housing.

6. Appropriate at least (10%) of the government tenders procurements for SMEs based on the regulations issued by Tender Board during the first half of the current year.

7. To compel the companies awarded big tenders to appropriate at least (10%) of their projects' procurements to SMEs with the priority to SMEs registered in the governorate in which the project is executed.

8. Enhance and develop the MOCI one stop station procedures in order to provide better electronic services to SMEs by the end of this year.

9. Review the competition, monopoly and bankruptcy laws to protect SMEs. The intended amendments shall be applicable by 2014.

10. Apply, in coordination with CBO and MOM, a system that compels the various private establishments to transfer their staff salaries to bank accounts with effect from 2014.

11. Increase the SMEs funding facilities via adopting various measures including increase of lending ceiling to at least 5% of the commercial loans and to simplify the lending procedures.

12. Review the finance policies, laws and procedures to cope with the policies intended to promote SMEs and to forward the review outputs to the concerned authorities by the end of this year.

13. Restructure the ODB internal charter during the current year to facilitate SMEs lending and reduce the loan guarantee.

14. Initiate a mechanism, during the first half of the current year, to accelerate the loan payment to SMEs that executing government projects.

15. Broadcasting of various TV economical and informative programs aiming at infusing the entrepreneurship culture through the existing TV channels or to create a new economical channel.

16. Include the entrepreneurship culture in the school curriculums and educational programs using up to date methods to infuse the entrepreneurship culture in the Omani youth.

17. Provide entrepreneurship culture course to the various Higher Educational Institutes and to subsidize, in cooperation with private sector, the student activities in the field of the entrepreneurship culture.

18. Establish Innovation Center under the umbrella of the Scientific Research Council to convert the ideas and inventions into products and businesses.

19. Calculate the devoted and registered with PASI entrepreneur, his wife and adult children, in the stipulated Omanisation ratio.

20. Establish a plan of action to develop the SMEs direct joined share capital during this year and to implement the action plan by 2014.

21. Expansion of the CBO Credit Information Office activities during this year to include the credit status of establishments and individuals to provide information that helps in assessing the SMEs loan risks.

22. Adopt practical measures to enable the entrepreneurs to establish their own clubs, which shall contribute to enhancing their skills and exchange of experiences, before the end of 2015.

A.2 Classification of the policy directives according to 4 pillars (Seih Al-Shamikhat, 2013)

The following is an extract of the classification of the directives according to the 4 pillars of the national symposium (Al-Shanfari *et al.*, 2013):

“Pillar 1 – Entrepreneurial Mindset

- The establishment of programs to train government employees on how to deal with the private sector and to create an appreciation for entrepreneurship and SME requirements.
- The provision for government employees who want to establish their own companies. These employees are released from their current jobs, with the allowance of up to 12 months of continued salary. The conditions of this provision will be determined in 2013.
- An annual award for SMEs and those that support them as of 2014.

Pillar 2 – Business Enablers

- The establishment of financially and administratively independent government body to focus on the development of SMEs.
- Across Oman’s major cities a provision of land will be made specifically to build centers and incubator facilities for SME development.

- Land will also be specified for SMEs to implement agricultural and industrial projects based on leasing agreement. The Higher Council of Planning and Ministry of Housing will determine the conditions of these.

- A minimum of 10% or more of all government-tendered contracts will be specifically for SMEs as of mid-2013.

- Similarly, large companies that win government tendered contracts must subcontract at least 10% of the contract value to SMEs with preference to SMEs registered in the operating area of the project.

Pillar 3 – Regulations

- Further development of the one-stop-shop concept in the Ministry of Commerce to make transactions easier for SMEs.

- Review of anti-trust laws to ensure the protection of SMEs and for these changes to be implemented in 2014.

- Owners of SMEs and their immediate family members that work in the business can be part of the Omanisation requirement so as they are registered in the Social Insurance Agency.

- Develop the mechanism and practice of salary transfers for all private sector employees.

Pillar 4 – Finance

- Full review of policies and rules relating to finance to match SME development goals by the end of 2013

- The easing of bank credit to SMEs which includes reserving 5% of total bank business loans to SMEs and the easing of credit requirements.

- Restructuring of Oman Development Bank to make it easier for SMEs to acquire loans and the reduction of collateral requirements by the end of 2013.

- Development strategy for reform of Venture Capital for SMEs, to be executed during 2014.

- The expansion of the credit information office in the Central Bank of Oman to improve the evaluation of individual and enterprise credit risk in 2013. With the aim of improving the assessment of SMEs loans.

- The creation of a system that will ensure SMEs receive quick payment for their role in all types of government projects by mid-2013."

A.3 Major directives of the Assessment of Seih Al-Shamikhat Symposium, held at SQU (26-28 January, 2015)

The new perspective to some of the previous directives was included in the recently held symposium at SQU and is as follows:

1. Issue of Privilege Card (smart card with chipsets) to all SMEs who are registered with Riyada.
2. Omanisation ratio ease to SMEs till the time they find their growth phase in business
3. Monitoring and evaluating 10% award of government contracts to SMEs to be issued by various Ministries.
4. 4 Years unpaid leave for Government employees to resign and start their own business. The option of returning back after 4 years is also available. The 4 year leave period and the associated clauses will be discussed with Ministry of Manpower officials present at Riyada and with other officials of Al Raffd Fund before proceeding further.

Appendix B

B.1 Facilitation Letter

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Higher Education
Directorate General of Scholarships
Department of Postgraduate Studies

No.e :

Date :

سلطنة عمان
وزارة التعليم العالي
المديرية العامة للبعثات
دائرة الدراسات العليا

الرقم : د. د.ع / ٣٤١

التاريخ :

الموافق : ٢٥ / ٦ / ٢٠١٣م

شهادة لمن يهمه الأمر

تشهد دائرة الدراسات العليا بوزارة التعليم العالي بأن الفاضل / **راشد بن ناصر بن راشد المطاعني** مقيد بجامعةSouthampton بالمملكة المتحدة لنيل درجة الدكتوراه في مجال (ادارة الاعمال) و هو حالياً في مرحلة إعداد البحث.

نرجو التكرم بمساعدة المذكور في تسهيل مهمته لبحثه.

٢٥ / ٦ / ٢٠١٢م

هلال بن حمد الازكي
مدير دائرة الدراسات العليا

ص.ب : ٨٢ روي، الرمز البريدي : ١١٢، سلطنة عُمان، مباشر هاتف : ٢٤٣٤٠٨٠٢، فاكس : ٢٤٣٤٠٨٠٠
P.O. Box : 82 Ruwi, Postal Code : 112, Sultanate of Oman, Dir. : 24340802, Fax : 24340800
E-mail : DG_scholarship@mohe.gov.om

B.2 Interview Guide

Initial interview questions for entrepreneurs
What is your business? What is your main innovation (or the thing that you do differently than others)? When did you start your business? How did you start?
(open question) What do you think are the main determinants for any business to succeed? (Determinants within and outside the firm)? Give examples?
(Knowledge development & diffusion) Do you have R&D strategies? How do you exploit the results thereof? How do you protect the results of your innovative efforts? Is there any support that you receive from other public or private institutions to support your knowledge development and diffusion?
(Competence building) Do you invest in education and training of your employees or largely rely on externally generated skills? Are there any difficulties in finding skilled labor? What is the extent of continuous vocational training? What are the types of primary training activities and programs that you have attended (or assigned employees for)? To what extent you think that competence building is important for your business?
(Knowledge networking and interactions) With whom do you collaborate (other firms, universities, users, suppliers, others? domestic vs. foreign organizations)? What is the nature of these collaborations? (i.e. whether these interactions are more like technical support or more like strategic alliance aiming at a specific product/process development, or subcontracting, etc.) How hard is it to create these linkages? Are there any organizations (private or public) that help you to get connected? To what extent you think that knowledge networks and interactions are important for your business?
(Demand-side activities) Who are your customers? How would you describe your market structure? How you would describe the phase of your consumer demand? (Emerging, growing or mature)? How do leading users and customers articulate their technical and quality requirements? To what extent you think these issues (market structure, growth, articulation of requirements) are influencing your business?

(Financing activities) How did you finance your start-up? What about financing the on-going operation of your business? What are the available financing options? What are the main barriers you face regarding financing? To what extent you think financial activities are important for your business?
(Market for knowledge-based services including consultancy services) What are the major consultancy services (legal, commercial, technical, etc.) available to you? (public or private) How would you describe them? Which ones are frequently used? To what extent you think that consultancy services are important to your business?
(Regularity environment) How would you describe the quality of regulatory environment and extent of regulatory pressures (e.g. commercial law, Omanisation, IPR laws, tax laws, environment and safety regulations, R&D investment, etc.,)? What are the main obstacles you face at the institutional (regulations) level? (regarding starting your business, on-going operations, employment, merger &acquisitions, exporting, etc.) To what extent you think that regulatory environment is influencing you business?
(Questions asked for participants who are in incubation programs) What made you open your business in this incubator? What other incubating options did you have? How easy was it to be incubated by this incubator? How would you describe your experience in this incubator? How would you evaluate the services provided by the incubator? What service did you benefit most from the incubator? To what extent you think that incubation is important for your business?
(Questions asked for participants who are **NOT** in incubation programmes) Have you signed up for any entrepreneurship support programme? Why? How would you describe your experience in the programme? How would you evaluate the services provided? To what extent you think that such programmes are important for your business?
(Social environment) To what extent culture and norms have influenced your decision to start up a business and influenced your daily decisions? (e.g. was there any support/challenge from family, friends, business routines?). Did it change?
What are the main challenges and barriers that you have faced to transfer your idea into a

business? And what are the challenges that keep facing you while operating your business? What are the reasons behind these challenges? How did you try to overcome them?
To what extent you think that there are opportunities for your business to flourish? What are the opportunities that you see in the future? (In terms of facilities and growth, etc.)
If you are given the power to change anything in the environment around you to facilitate your business, what would you change?

B.3 Participant Information Sheet

Study Title: 'A study exploring the influence of institutional environment on entrepreneurship and innovation activities within a context of developing country: Multilevel perspective.'

Researcher: Rashid Al-Mataani **Ethics number**: 14481

Please read this information carefully before deciding to take part in this research. If you are happy to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form.

What is the research about?

I am a student at the University of Southampton (UK) conducting a research to qualify for a PhD in Management. I work in the Ministry of Higher Education (Oman) as a lecturer at the College of Applied Sciences-Ibri. My study is fully sponsored by my employer.

In this study I aim to explore the influence of institutional environment on entrepreneurship and innovation activities in the context of Oman. To achieve this aim, I need your valuable time and experience to conduct an interview with you to answer some questions. The questions overall will highlight your knowledge and your experience in entrepreneurship and innovation development in Oman and the main challenges and opportunities that are facing the development of entrepreneurship and innovation in Oman. I will need your views regarding the possible action that can be taken to foster the development of entrepreneurship and innovation.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you are a valuable information source for my study. Since I am looking for qualitative information, I need a rich-explanation from experienced people in the field. Your job title and your relevant experience are the reasons behind choosing you in my sample.

What will happen to me if I take part?

We will arrange a time and a suitable place to conduct an interview that last between 1 to 2 hours. I will need you consent to tape-record the interview so I can transcribe it later for the purpose of analysing the data. Although the plan is to conduct the interview once, I might follow up with you, if further information is required.

Are there any benefits in my taking part?

Your participation in this study is critically important. You will contribute in adding new knowledge to the entrepreneurship field, especially to literature of the Omani context. The results of this study will contribute in understanding the entrepreneurship environment in Oman. Your insights will be considered in framing an action plan to promote entrepreneurship and innovation in the country.

Are there any risks involved?

There is no risk except sacrificing 1 to 2 hours of your valuable time to conduct the interview.

Will my participation be confidential?

As part of complying with the Data Protection Act and the Data Protection Policy of the University, all your data will be kept confidential. There will be no-disclosure of research information except for authorised person by the University. Data will be coded and kept on a password protected computer.

What happens if I change my mind?

If you changed your mind and you are no longer interested to be part of the study, you have the right to withdraw at any time without your legal being affected.

What happens if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you may contact the research support officer (risethic@soton.ac.uk) or Head of Research Governance (0044-2380 595058, rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk)

Where can I get more information?

If you have any questions after reading this information sheet, you may contact the researcher anytime:

Rashid Al Mataani

Email: rnam1g11@soton.ac.uk

Mobile (Oman) : 00968 - 9267 2223

Mobile (UK): 0044 - 79270 30912

B.4 Consent form

UNIVERSITY OF Southampton

CONSENT FORM (*V.1*)

Study title: 'A study exploring the influence of institutional environment on entrepreneurship and innovation activities within a context of developing country: Multilevel perspective.'

Researcher name: Rashid Al-Mataani
Ethics reference: 14481

Please initial the box(es) if you agree with the statement(s):

I have read and understood the information sheet (28 March 2015/V.1) and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

I agree to take part in this research project and agree for my data to be used for the purpose of this study

I understand my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without my legal rights being affected

I am happy for the interview to be tape recorded.

Data Protection
I understand that information collected about me during my participation in this study will be stored on a password protected computer and that this information will only be used for the purpose of this study. All files containing any personal data will be made anonymous.

Name of participant (print name)……………………………………………………

Signature of participant…………………………………………………………….

Date……………………………………………………………………………………

[28 March 2015] [V.1]

B.5 Extract of template analysis for the 2nd Paper

Category	Themes	Sub-themes
Challenges in the **regulative** institutional environment	Education (Primary & Higher Education)	Education instructors issues (no specialization; Lack of instructors suitable to teach entrepreneurship.; limited research interest)
		Education curriculum issues (No explicit learning objective about entrepreneurship; Non-qualified and non-specialised curriculum developers)
		Education system and policy (low quality system; limited courses to educate the parents and society; regulations hinder flexibility in recruiting instructors; Lack of seriousness from some government agencies in providing entrepreneurial learning; Mix-up between SMEs and entrepreneurship among policymakers and academics; vocational education institutes as a solution; entrepreneurship is not taught to science-route students)
	Training programs	Low quality training courses
		Lack of technical training support
		Lack of information about available training courses
		Lack of seriousness from some government agencies in providing entrepreneurial learning

		Rigid regulations to bring expatriates to do training
	Consultancy	Lack of specialists in the consultancy field
		Low quality consultation support
		Rigid regulations to bring foreign consultants for short-term
Challenges in the **normative** institutional environment	Family & Society mindset (values and culture)	Society values and culture obstruct the inclusion of entrepreneurial skills in curriculum.
		Entrepreneurs attitudes towards passive evaluation of training programs influence the ability of institutions to enhance training programs
		Family entrepreneurial mindset influence entrepreneurial learning
Challenges in the **cognitive** institutional environment	Negative perception of entrepreneurship	No interest in entrepreneurship learning because of perceived risk and challenges in entrepreneurship
		Students mentality prefers public/private jobs
		Negative perception of entrepreneurship among students : As entrepreneurship concepts are taught to Art students and top students normally go for the science-section to secure better jobs, students built perception that entrepreneurship is for the losers who can’t compete for better jobs.

	Negative attitude towards formal learning	Lack of interest in attending training and consultancies.
Entrepreneurs' reactions to the challenges faced in entrepreneurial learning environment	Searching for learning abroad.	
	Self-directed learning	
	Utilizing social networks to obtain proper training and consultancy (learning) and overcome learning challenges	
	Mix of all the above strategies	
How does the interaction between the institutional dynamics (regulative, normative, cognitive) influence entrepreneurial learning?	Influence of normative on cognitive	Society mindset influence students' perceptions

		Family entrepreneurial mindset influence entrepreneurial learning
	Influence of regulative on cognitive	Government and media focus help in changing the perceptions of students
		As entrepreneurship concepts are taught to Art students and top students normally go for the science-section to secure better jobs, students built perception that entrepreneurship is for the losers who can't compete for better jobs.
		Inappropriate training courses leads to negative attitude towards learning.
		Lack of proper training leads to positive attitude towards self-enhancement
		Lack of proper entrepreneurship education leads to positive attitude towards self-enhancement
	Influence of normative on regulative	Entrepreneurs attitudes towards passive evaluation of training programs influence the ability of institutions to enhance training programs
		Society values and culture obstruct the inclusion of entrepreneurial skills in curriculum.

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