THE INFLUENCE OF PERSONAL AND WORK ENVIRONMENT CHARACTERISTICS ON STAFF ENGAGEMENT IN INFORMAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES AT PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

WL	Workplace Learning
FL	Formal learning
ILA	Informal Learning Activity
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
EU	European Union
SE	Staff engagement
PUs	Private Universities
HRD	Human Resources Development
PHEIs	Private Higher educational Institutions
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
MHE	Ministry of Higher education
ME	Ministry of Education
HEC	Higher educational council

PENGARUH CIRI-CIRI INDIVIDU DAN PERSEKITARAN KERJA TERHADAP PENGLIBATAN KERJA STAF DALAM AKTIVITI PEMBELAJARAN INFORMAL DI UNIVERSITI SWASTA DI OMAN

ABSTRAK

Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji pengaruh faktor peribadi dan persekitaran kerja terhadap tahap penglibatan staf di universiti-universiti swasta di Oman dalam pembelajaran informal. Pendekatan campuran kuantitatif dan kualitatif telah digunakan dalam proses pengumpulan data di empat buah university swasta. Bahagian kuantitatif melibatkan soal-selidik yang dibina dalam Bahasa Arab dan Inggeris. Data dikutip daripada 281 responden untuk mengukur pengaruh faktor peribadi dan persekitaran kerja terhadap penglibatan staf dalam suasana pembelajaran tidak formal. Statistik inferen telah digunakan untuk menentukan kesan pengaruh tersebut. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa terdapat pengaruh faktor demografi yang berbeza terhadap tahap penglibatan staf dalam pembelajaran tidak formal dan bahawa faktor persekitaran kerja dan peribadi mempengaruhi penglibatan staf dalam aktiviti pembelajaran secara tidak formal. Seterusnya, data kualitatif juga menunjukkan bahawa factor persekitaran kerja dan peribadi mempunyai pengaruh terhadap tahap pembelajaran tidak formal staf iaitu staf menggunakan pelbagai cara untuk belajar secara tidak formal untuk menampung pekerjaan mereka dan untuk kemajuan kerjaya mereka. Dapatan kajian mendapati bahawa aktiviti melayari internet merupakan aktiviti pembelajaran yang paling kerap dilakukan oleh staf. Dapatan kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa ciri peribadi dan persekitaran kerja mendatangkan impak secara positif atau negatif kepada pembelajaran tidak formal seseorang staf. Secara praktikal, dapatan ini menyokong kesimpulan bahawa selain daripada aspek kelayakan pendidikan, staf juga menggunakan pembelajaran secara tidak formal sebagai laluan yang boleh diharapkan untuk kemajuan kerjaya mereka. Staf juga lebih cenderung menggunakan pengetahuan dan kemahiran yang diperoleh daripada penglibatan mereka melalui pembelajaran tidak formal untuk memenuhi tahap keperluan dan kemajuan kerjaya, serta dalam menangani masalah yang timbul dan menyiapkan diri dialam pekerjaan pada masa hadapan. Kajian ini turut mengemukakan beberapa cadangan kajian masa depan supaya penyelidikan dan praktik dalam bidang pembelajaran di tempat kerja dan pembangunan sumber manusia dapat diteruskan pada masa hadapan khususnya di negara Oman.

THE INFLUENCE OF PERSONAL AND WORK ENVIRONMENT CHARACTERISTICS ON STAFF ENGAGEMENT IN INFORMAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES AT PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to investigate the influence of personal and work environment factors on staff engagement in the informal learning at Omani private universities. A mixed method approach has been used to collect data from four selected private universities. The quantitative part consisted of questionnaire developed in Arabic and English languages. The data was gathered from 281 respondents to measure the personal and work environment factors' influence on the staff's engagement in informal learning activities. An inferential statistics were used to determine the influential effects. The results revealed that there are influences of different demographic aspects on staff engagement in informal learning and that that work environment and personal characteristics also influenced the employees' level of engagement. On the other hand, the qualitative results revealed that staff uses different ways to learn informally to support their profession and to progress in their career. For instance, it was found that searching Internet is the most common learning activity used by the staff involved in this study. Furthermore, personal and work environmental characteristics have both positively or negatively impacted staff informal learning and their participation in their workplace activities. Practically, these results support the conclusions that in addition to their educational qualification, staff uses informal learning as a reliable way for progression in their career and that they tend to use knowledge and skills acquired from the engagement in informal learning to meet the desirable levels of work requirement as to progress in their careers, to cope with emerging problems and to prepare for their future profession. Finally, this study provides recommendations for future research and implications for practices to the field of workplace learning and human resources development, particularly in the Sultanate of Oman.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

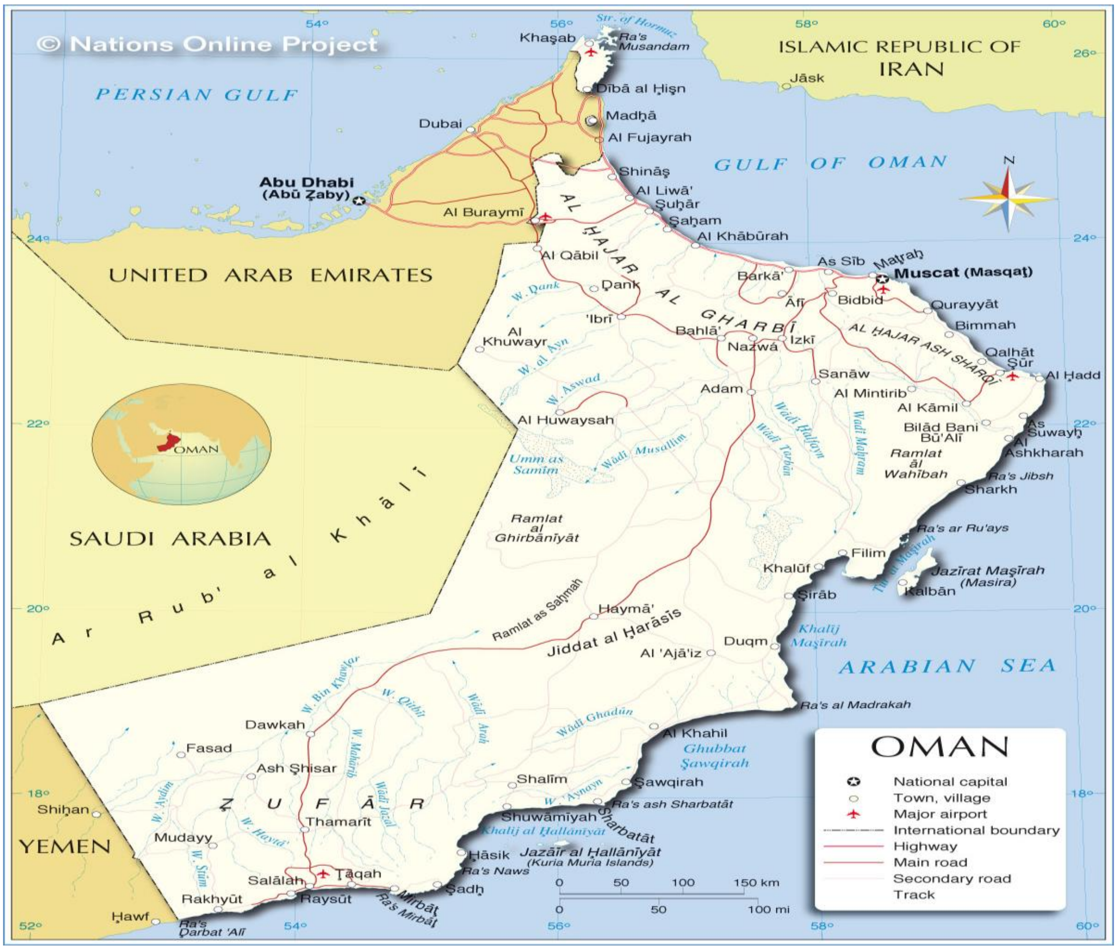
1.1 Introduction

Oman is the oldest independent state in the region of Arabian Gulf. It occupies the southeastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, from the east it is bounded by the Sea of Oman, from the south the Arabian Sea, the Republic of Yemen, from the south-west Saudi Arabia from the west, and the United Arab Emirates from the North (see map of Oman). Muscat is the capital city of Oman with other major cities such as Sallalah and Sohar. Oman is the third largest country in the Arabian Peninsula after Saudi Arabia and Yemen. His Majesty, Sultan Qaboos bin Said is the current head of state, acceded to the throne in 1970.Oil and natural gas are major products of Oman with the daily average production reached 965,617 barrels per day according to reports of the ministry of oil and gas published in January 2017.The major crop is dates with the total dates’ production reached around 270,000 metric tons. The estimated total number of date palm trees is around 8,700,000.Oman is the eighth’s largest world producer of dates in 2012 with numerous varieties exceeding 250(FAO, 2014).

The educational history of the Sultanate of Oman has undergone rapid development. Before 1970, there were three primary schools in the country with less than 1000 students and no college or university (Al Bandary, 2005; Al Shmeli, 2009). The trend started in the 1970s the government of Oman has taken the responsibility of providing free education to all Omani nationals. Schooling begins at the age of six and most students must stay in education and sit for a General Education Diploma until age of 18. As Issan (2013) indicated, with the renaissance period of Oman the number of students and schools increased to almost 600,000 students of both sexes and 1045 schools in 2002. While in the year 2011, the number of schools increased to 1427. In the general education, total students' enrolment reached 523,112. The declines in number of students' between year 2000 to 2010 is because of birth control policy that has been applied. According to the National Center for Statistic Information of 2017, the population was 5.4 million; the Omanis represent 3.4 million and expatriate was around 2 million (Sultanate of Oman, NCSI).

Higher education in Oman plays an instrumental role in the development of human resources to supply the country with professional workforce that is highly specialized to work in occupations that require a high degree of skills and knowledge. Improvements in the education infrastructure have come through the heavy investments that have been -placed by the government (Baporikar, 2012; Issan, 2013). There have been several key phases in the development of public higher education in Oman, and the rapid growth in the population constitutes one of the most critical problems confronting the government in Oman. Prior to the establishment of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), higher education has been offered through local post-secondary institutions and specialized colleges in the country. Sultan Qaboos University was the first public university started educational services in 1986, and other higher educational institutions represent the base infra structure for Higher education in Oman. According to Al Shmeli (2009), the higher educational institutions are more than 62, institutions, run by private and public sectors offering a wide range of programmes. The total number of students in these institutions was approximately 80,000. Public higher educational institutions are supervised by several organizations that includes the Ministry of Higher Education, the Ministry of Man Power, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of

Commerce and Industry, beside other governmental entities. Based on Oman national qualifications framework, the undergraduate level; one-year programs lead to a certificate, two-year programs lead to a diploma and three-year programs lead to an advanced diploma. The duration of bachelor degree programs are normally four to five years. At the post graduate level, a postgraduate diploma requires one year, master’s degree two years and doctoral degree programs is a 2-4 years of duration (world data on education 7th edition, 2010/11).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Dubai
Abu Dhabi (Abū Z̧aby)
Al Buraymī
Shināş
Şuḩār
Al Khābūrah
As Sīb
Muscat (Masqaţ)
Quarayyāt
Şūr
Ra's al Ḩadd
Nazwá
'Ibrī
Bahlā'
Adam
Al Huwaysah
Umm as Samīm
Ramlat al Ghirbānīyāt
Ramlat al Wahībah
Jazīrat Maşīrah (Masira)
Haymā'
Jiddat al Ḩarāsīs
Duqm
Ra's al Madrakah
Dawkah
Ash Shişar
Thamarīt
Z̧ufār
Shalīm
Shuwāmiyah
Jazāir al Ḩallānīyāt (Kuria Muria Islands)
Ḩāsik
Mirbāţ
Ţāqah
Şalālah
Raysūt
Rakhyūt
Ḩawf
Mudayy
Shiḩan
Fasad
National capital
Town, village
Major airport
International boundary
Highway
Main road
Secondary road
Track
0 50 100 150 km
0 50 100 mi

Figure 1.1

Map of Oman (and neighboring countries) [Retrieved Oct.26, 2015 from: http://www.nationsonline.org/ one world/map/oman-map.htm]

1.2 Background of the Research

This study was conducted in the contexts of private universities in Oman. Currently, there are eight private universities in various locations of the country, which are run independently by private sector. The Ministry of Higher education encourages the private sector to establish more private higher institutions to accommodate high school leavers. These universities operate under license from the Ministry of Higher Education at different stages of development. Most of these universities are affiliated to international institutions in USA, UK and Australia. In general, higher educational institutions play an important role in the development of human resources. One of its main tasks is to supply the country with a professional work force that is highly specialized to work in occupations that require a high degree of practical and theoretical skills and knowledge (Baporikar & Iqtidar, 2012; Issan, 2013). Furthermore, within the government national plan for human resources development, private universities have to consider clear programs relevant to professional development to provide their employees with required knowledge and skills to adapt to changes occurred in technologies and workplace practices. Employees’ knowledge acquisition may encourage employers to emphasize the need for a continuous career development.

In contemporary knowledge and information society, work activity becomes more complicated as knowledge rapidly gets out-of-date and the requirements for employees’ competence constantly increase. Because of these challenges and circumstances, these organizations are prompted to create the favorable conditions for their employees that motivate them to involve into the lifelong learning process. This process is inevitable for dealing with the changes in the society. Researchers acknowledged in order to attain success for organizations, it is imperative for organizational' leaders to find a best and most effective method to develop their employees' skills needed to develop employees' involvement in such development learning " (Burke & Hutchins, 2008; Kowtha, 2011; Kulkarni, 2013). In today's organizations, HRD professionals are responsible for working with employees in their organizations to diagnose performance needs as well as to plan, implement, and evaluate interventions that address those needs (Lalao, 2012; Lohman, 2007; Kulkarni, 2013). Managers and units leaders can take this initiative to assist and encourage their subordinates learning by providing conducive conditions to facilitate this type of learning in the organizations.

Private universities, however, have adopted one single approach to develop their employees' competence by offering training opportunities for staff. This type of learning could not offer the necessary skills and knowledge for individuals' performance. Instead, informal learning plays an instrumental role in providing the required skills and competencies for individuals to perform well and stay current in their workplace. Human resources developers have indicated there is insufficient efforts that help to implement those learning opportunities as ways of competence development inside the organization. In this sense, the employees' abilities to learn, to perceive new situations and recognize critical aspects of these situations, the interpersonal skills and transferable competencies become important. Transferable skills or competencies are common for big number of professional activity areas. The main of them are competencies of communication, collaboration, group work/teamwork, critical thinking, information literacy, problem solving, etc. Therefore, the objective of the study was to examine the factors of personal and work environment characteristics on the employees' engagement in the process of informal learning.

1.3 Informal Learning and Employees Performance

Employees are valuable assets of an organization. Every employee contributes towards the success of an organization. Organizations need to respect their employees to feel motivated and develop a sense of loyalty and attachment towards the organization. They need to be acknowledged and appreciated. For these reasons, employee development program have been planned to support the employees with new knowledge and to sharpen their skills and upgrade their existing knowledge and abilities. Employees' development activities upgrade an individual's existing knowledge, and prepare them to take up new opportunities in the future. Employee development activities play an important role not only in the professional but also personal growth of employees. Efforts have been taken by the organizations to upgrade their employees' existing knowledge and encourage them to take up new initiatives towards learning engagement. Individuals who have not upgrade their skills from time to time find it difficult to survive in the long run. The employees' development is a continued process where the employees with the support of their employer undergoes various training programs to enhance their competence and acquire new knowledge and learnings.

Today Informal learning is a common feature of modern organizations. It takes precedence over formal learning. As much as 60 to 80 percent of the learning that occurs in today's organizations is informal (Koopmans, Doornbos & van Eekelen, 2006). Informal workplace learning plays a key role in providing employees with knowledge and competences; it constitutes a major part of HRD planning.

Organizational employees need to adapt to changes occurred in technologies and employees' knowledge acquisition to encourage employers to emphasize the need for a continuous career development and employee performance. Employees Development program refers to steps that are taken by an organization to motivate the employees and to update their existing knowledge and skills. This ongoing process has been taken by the organizations to help the employees to enhance their skills and knowledge and to contribute more effectively towards the organization. According to Kulkarni (2013), employee development programs should include employee education, employee skill development, training effectiveness criteria, and employee quality of work life. In order to attain success for organizations, it is imperative for organizational' leaders to find a best and most effective method to develop their employees' skills needed to develop employees' involvement in certain learning programs (Burke & Hutchins, 2008; Kowtha, 2011; Kulkarni, 2013).

As it was mentioned earlier that in today's organizations, HRD professionals are responsible for working with employees in their organizations to diagnose performance needs as well as to plan, implement, and evaluate interventions that address those needs (Lalao, 2012; Lohman, 2007; Kulkarni, 2013). Managers and units leaders can take this initiative to assist and encourage their subordinates learning by providing conducive conditions to facilitate this type of learning in the organizations. According to Gill (2013), managers who want to increase their employees' engagement and productivity need to become an active agent in their learning. The broader and complex job responsibilities have created new learning needs for employees to engage in informal workplace learning.

Individuals in educational institutions need to recognize the importance of professional development programs to adapt to global competitions through engagement in certain activities of such programs to acquire knowledge, values and competencies and stay current and employable. Informal learning plays an instrumental role in the employees' development programs. Activities such as coaching, and mentoring, talking and collaborations with others, sharing resources, represent common forms of informal learning in the work setting (Jacobs & Park, 2011). Organizations as well as higher educational institutions could employ such activities for employees' development to engage in such activities to enable these institutions to maintain and continue providing higher educational services and customer expectations. Talking and collaboration with others are common examples and most activities used, among other informal learning activities for employees' knowledge acquisition. Hall (2002) defines the activities of talking and collaboration as processes whereby employees share their expertise and align with the organization's goals and performance. These types of learning activities are considered important and the most common used activities that equip employees with knowledge and competencies in the organizations. Talking and collaborative with others can be used to support individuals with skills and abilities.

Lohman (2007) acknowledged that academic employees rather than independent activities such as searching the internet and scanning magazines and journals preferred interactive activities such as talking and collaborative with others. Employees' engagement in such learning activities result in the development of their professional knowledge and skill. Browsing the internet is another interactive learning activity that individuals can rely on and use to support their work-related learning. As noted by some researchers, Web 2.0 technology has become a ubiquitous component of our daily lives offered an easy access to information and ideas on a vast array of topics to billions of people. Google currently represents the largest learning platform in the world, providing answers to thousands of inquiries every second (Cross, 2007; Lohman, 2007).The rapid growth of tools that offered by Web 2.0 have made it possible for employees and organizations as well to have ready access and highly interactive internal information networks.

Coaching and mentoring, are also other forms of informal learning activities that must exist in educational institutions as professional development tools to equip employees with necessary expertise. Mentoring is one of a common method of employee development that fit within the scope of enhancing learning inquiry and the development for employees within those institutions. Mentoring is an intentional relationship that focused on developing individuals through dialogue and reflection. Benefits that individuals gained from their involvement in mentoring programs include improved self-confidence, an increased availability of advice additional personal support, improved effectiveness, an awareness of culture, politics, and philosophy of the organization (Rawlings, 2002). According to some researchers, mentoring programs continue to be a useful tool for enhancing the performance of employees, transferring knowledge from more experienced employee to less experienced individuals and for the retention of employees in the organizations (Hall, 2002; & Torraco, 2007).

Coaching is another term that is used to support the process of reviewing established or emerging practice. It is mainly concerned with performance and the development of certain skills and focus on meeting very specific objectives within a set period. It usually takes place on a one-to-one basis and has a very specific purpose. It is usually a planned program with a much shorter timeframe than in mentoring, so the learning goals are usually determined in advance. Coaching is more structured learning process aimed at explicit professional development in agreed areas of performance. Evidence suggests that mentoring and coaching are amongst the most effective means of supporting the professional development of employees in such organizations. Research shows that coaching is an effective strategy for ongoing professional development and has a key role to play in the professional development processes. (Devine et al., 2013). It has been recognized that many individuals have been mentoring and coaching their colleagues within universities in a variety of ways over many years including directly supporting academic practice enhancement and professional development.

Mentoring and coaching can be ‘stand-alone’ activities, but they can also be used to complement each other and may be considered as forms of learning conversations offering space and time for exploration, challenge and support. These types of practices create a pool of staff who are able to work in this way extends the opportunity for colleagues to learn from one another, and offers the potential to develop learning and teaching practice across the institution. By building such capacity, it is potentially possible to provide this type of one-to-one learning to a broad range of staff, whereas in some organizations mentoring and particularly coaching are seen as a type of professional development reserved for senior management. Such activities have helped organizations over the years developing and retaining talents.

Today, organizations have greater opportunity to employ these programs not only to senior leaders, but also to scale them across the organization to positively affect employee career growth, engagement, and retention at all levels (Hargreaves, 2010). Programs that contained coaching and mentoring offer the participants a high quality learning experience that aligns with their values and interests and provides the opportunity for meaningful engagement with their colleagues in the university. De Grip (2015) noted that it is important for workers to keep their knowledge and competencies up to date through informal learning for their employability. Furthermore, informal learning in the workplace that is represented by different forms of learning activities is considered useful tools for employees' development and organizations performance.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

Informal learning plays a key role in providing knowledge and competences to employees in higher educational institutions it constitutes a major part of employees' development programs. According to some researchers, employee's development programs play an instrumental role in maintaining both employee satisfaction and performance. In such institutions, by having well-organized developmental planning, these organizations will have the human capital to achieve their objectives (Isabelle, 2012; Lalao, 2012; Okurame, 2014). Skule (2004), emphasizes informal learning is viewed as a key factor to organizations competitiveness and thus seen as a major target area for organization's HRD. Evans and Rainbird (2002) claim that despite the importance of informal learning, informal learning is poorly understood and under-researched. Doornbos et al. (2008) acknowledged that our understanding of informal learning is insufficient.

In order to overcome the limited knowledge of informal learning, some conceptual models have been introduced to integrate informal learning within the employees development programs (Matthews, 1999; Sambrook, 2005; Svensson, Ellstrom, & Aberg, 2004). Marsick and her colleagues in 1990 offered a theoretical framework to describe how employees learn informally in their work setting. Ellinger (2005) indicated better understanding of informal learning could be accomplished by investigating the influences of personal and work environment factors on informal learning. Other researchers indicated that workplace knowledge become obsolete more quickly because of nature of job content, organizations restructure, and employers' demands (Choi, 2009). In a study conducted by Lohman (2005) on school teachers, the finding revealed that seven personal characteristics such as initiative, self- efficacy, love of learning, interest in the profession, professional commitment, a nurturing personality, and an outgoing personality encourage the motivation to engage in informal learning. Lohman (2006) indicated staff wishes to secure their employment and employability by developing their knowledge and skills through informal learning activities. De Grip (2015) stated for organizations to remain competitive in the global economy, organizational' workforce has to have adequate skills and be committed to keeping those skills up-to-date. Many policymakers thus emphasize lifelong learning because continual technological change alters skill demands.

Although most organizations are aware of the importance of informal learning, they do not know how to optimize the learning potential of the workplace to boost worker performance need. As Noe (2003) indicated, the term employee development typically imply a broader set of activities that have both learning and career development goals such as talent development, job rotation, degree programs, special courses, and mentoring relationships, to achieve individual and organizational goals. Informal learning is viewed as a key factor to an organization's competitiveness and a major target area for organization's HRD. In the past, professionals at human resource departments were primarily responsible for the design and delivery of training programs. In today's organizations, HRD professionals are responsible for working with employees in their organizations to diagnose performance needs as well as to plan, implement, and evaluate interventions that address those needs (Lalao, 2012; Lohman, 2007; Kulkarni, 2013). Managers and units leaders must take this initiative to assist and encourage their subordinates learning by providing conducive conditions to facilitate this type of learning in the organizations.

For the purpose of employees' development programs, Omani private universities invest financial resources believing that the investments in such programs will result in useful outcomes. In these institutions however, the employees' development programs concentrate on one part of learning which is on- the- job training or off- the-job training. This type of learning is a planned system that provides employees with opportunities to obtain specific skills or knowledge that are required to perform their current job. Noe (2003) emphasized the role of learners in such programs tend to be passive and communication about learning objectives follows the direction from instructor or facilitator to trainees. Trainers or facilitators are responsible for delivering content, answering questions, and testing learning. Researchers identify formal learning is composed of the planned events or experiences that are designed to prepare individuals to attain a specific set of knowledge and skills. In off- the-job learning, employees are separated from work to attend lectures, workshops, etc.

However, the separation of work and learning has functioned almost paradoxically (Jucevičienė & Lepaitė, 2000). Unlike formal learning, informal learning is implemented to deal with problems or to improve a situation that individuals are encountered. Employees at these institutions demand more participations in various learning opportunities for extending and securing their employability.

Furthermore, informal learning is pervasiveness and a key factor to an organization's competitiveness and organizational performance; Researcher thinks these institutions are challenged to equip their employees with the necessary knowledge and competencies that cannot be achieved through one single type of training. Furthermore, these universities need to adopt clear strategies concerning employees' development programs, for developing their employees through inclusion and integrating informal learning activities in their employee development programs especially those institutions that lacking a clear framework relevant to professional development planning. In order to achieve these organizations their goals, it is imperative for these organizations to enhance their employees informal learning to attain skills and ability and enhance the organizational performance.

The employees of those organizations demand more learning opportunities for updating and expanding their skills and knowledge to stay current and employable in their organization. This put informal workplace learning in the position of serving employees at different levels of the organization with different professional skills and responsibilities. Studying the phenomenon of informal learning within the contexts of such institutions will benefit these institutions in their performance and add more to our understanding of how this process occurred in the context of such institutions.

Through staff engagement in informal learning activities, employees in such organizations develop their knowledge and skills and secure their employment and employability (Lohman, 2006). Therefore, this study was designed to address the following objectives:

1.5 Research Objectives

To investigate the significant differences of demographic aspects (Gender, marital status, educational qualification, age work experience and profession) on staff engagement in informal learning activities.

1. To investigate the influence of work environment characteristics (organizational climate, autonomy, management support) on staff engagement in informal learning activities.
2. To investigate the influence of personal characteristics (self-efficacy, initiative, professional attitudes) on staff engagement in informal learning activities.
3. To investigate the staff perspectives on universities support towards employees informal learning.

1.6 Research Questions:

The study has been designed to address the following research questions:

1. Are there any significant differences of demographic aspects (Gender, marital-status, educational qualification, age, work experience and profession) on staff engagement in informal learning activities?
2. Is there any influence of work environment characteristics (organizational climate, autonomy, and management support) on staff engagement in informal learning activities?

3. Is there any influence of personal characteristics (self-efficacy, initiative, professional attitudes) on staff engagement in informal learning activities?

4. What are staff perspectives on universities support towards employees' informal learning?

1.7 The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the study investigates the influences of work environment characteristics and personal characteristics factors on staff engagement in the process of informal learning in the context of Omani private universities. The factors are indicated in figure 1.2, the conceptual framework of the study consisted of factors contributing to staff engagement which are represented by four rectangular shapes; personal ,Work environment characteristics, demographic aspects and semi-structured interviews. Personal characteristics are measured by three variables, which are on the right side of the shape. Work environment characteristics are also, measured by three variables, on the left section of the Figure 1.2.

The staff engagement in informal learning, which is the criterion variable that is represented by four different activities, indicated by rectangular shapes in the bottom section of the Figure 1.2. The suggested shape is developed to guide this study as it outlines the influences of work environmental characteristics as well as personal characteristics on staff's engagement in informal learning, and how these factors could contribute to the employees' engagement in the process of informal learning.

Literature reviews reveal that (self-efficacy, initiative and professional attitudes) have been established as major personal characteristics affecting the learning processes and outcomes in informal learning process. However, these variables have not been investigated as influencing factors in the study of staff engagement in the private universities, though some studies have elicited the variables as encouraging factors affecting informal learning process (e.g., Lohman, 2000; Lohman, 2005; van Woekrom, Nijhof, & Nieuwenhuis, 2002).

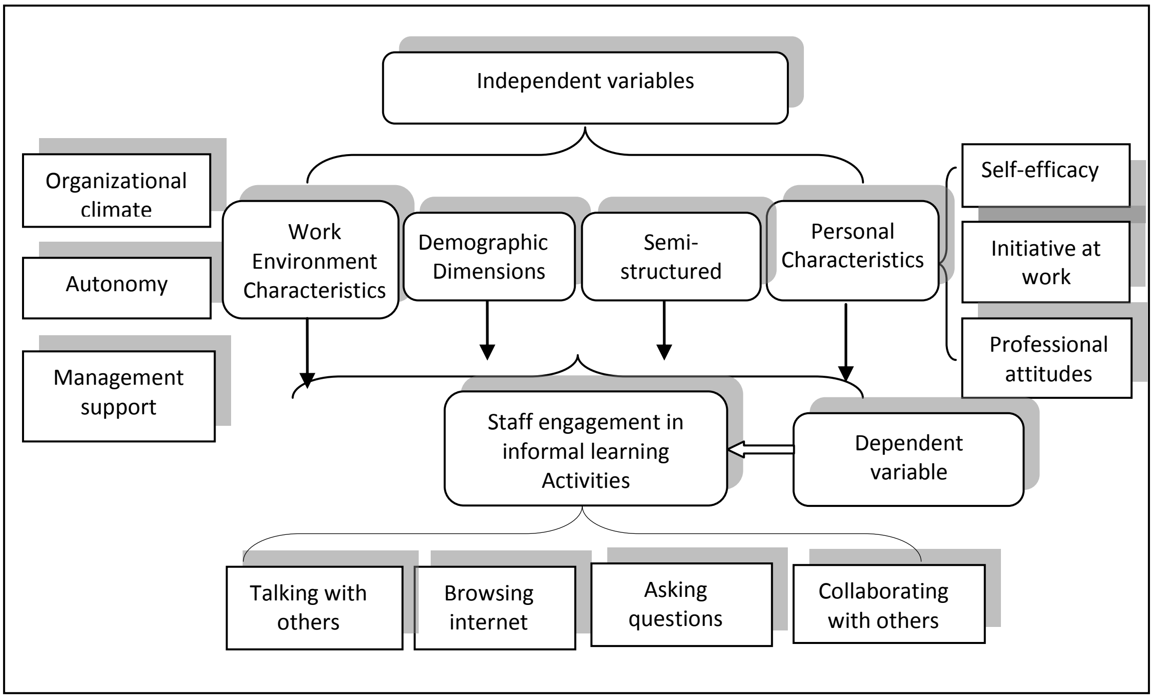
Independent variables
Organizational climate
Autonomy
Management support
Work Environment Characteristics
Demographic Dimensions
Semi-structured
Personal Characteristics
Self-efficacy
Initiative at work
Professional attitudes
Staff engagement in informal learning Activities
Dependent variable
Talking with others
Browsing internet
Asking questions
Collaborating with others

Figure 1.2
The Conceptual Framework of the Study

Work environment characteristics have been supported as a critical factor that is able to influence engagement in informal learning because it is inherently experimental, social, and context-oriented. Based on the review of literature, the conceptual framework is developed to guide this study as it investigates the influencing factors, posing research questions to be answered with survey data gathered from the private universities' employees. As shown in Figure 1.2, the conceptual framework outlines the influences of personal characteristics, and work environment characteristics on informal learning. The primary research question was, "Are there any influences of personal and work environmental characteristics on staff engagement in informal learning activities?

Other research questions are:

1. Are there any significant differences of demographic aspects (Gender, marital-status, educational qualification, age, work experience and profession) on staff engagement in informal learning activities?
2. What are the staff perspectives on universities' efforts towards informal learning?

1.8 Definition of Terms

For the purpose of the study, the conceptual and operational definitions of the terms are provided in order to understand the study.

1.8.1 Informal learning

Informal learning in its simple definition is the activity that is undertaken by individuals from daily life in order to acquired knowledge and skills. Such activities that are initiated by people in work settings, which resulted in the development of their professional knowledge and skills (Cofer, 2000; Lohman, 2000). Livingstone (1999) has given a definition for the term of informal learning as any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions, or the courses or workshops offered by educational or social agencies. In this study, informal learning any activities that are initiated by employees in the context of private universities to acquiring knowledge and skills related to their work, and are represented by the following activities, namely asking questions, browsing internet, collaborating with others, and talking with others.

1.8.1(a) Asking questions

As Merriam-Webster dictionary defines asking questions, an interrogative expression often used to test knowledge *(2)*: an interrogative a word that asks for information, a sentence or clause a sentence, phrase, is used to test someone's knowledge. In this study however, we meant by asking questions is a learning activity by which employees acquire knowledge and skills relevant to their work.

1.8.1(b) Browsing Internet

It is a process of searching the Web, by which, individuals search for the information relevant to their professional needs, by using a browser program that could enable them to search ("surf") and retrieve information on the Worldwide Web (WWW). In this study, browsing Internet is meant a learning activity that individuals use the internet and retrieve necessary information.

1.8.1(c) Collaborating with others

Collaborate with others, is an interactive activity that people use to learn something relevant to their need. Fischer et al. (2006) defines this activity as a situation in which two or more people learns or attempt to learn something together. In this study, it is meant as a process by which individuals acquire knowledge and skills from their colleagues via collaborative learning.

1.8.1(d)Talking with others

It is an interactive activity by which individual acquire information. The word "Talking "is engaging in speech or discussion, the action of the verb talk to express or exchange ideas by means of spoken words, to say words in order to express your thoughts, feelings and opinions.http://www.yourdictionary.com/talking#8dz00f4vvg9o2vOJ.99. In this study, talking with others, means a learning activity by which, individuals acquire knowledge and skills from their co-workers in their organizational context.

1.8.2 Work Environment characteristics

Work environmental characteristics are defined as the perception of the practices and conditions in an organization that are likely to promote or inhibit participation or engagement in workplace learning activities. In this study, we mean by work environment characteristics are the attributes of work setting where individuals work. Work environment characteristics a group of variables that are represented by organizational climate, autonomy, and management support.

1.8.2 (a) Organizational Climate

There are many different and competing definitions of organizational climate available in the literature, which signifies the concept in varied perspective. Organizational climate was defined as the way in which organizational members perceive and characterize their environment in an attitudinal and value-based manner (Denison, 1996; Moran & Volkwein, 1992). There have been additional studies that explored the relationship between organizational climate and individuals 'learning

(Bertels, 2011). According to Chen and Huwang (2007), organizational climate refers to shared beliefs, value systems and common practices that an organization follows.

1.8.2 (b) Autonomy

Job autonomy is defined as the degree to which the job offers considerable liberty, proving free hand and choice to the employee in scheduling the work and also defining the means to achieve the tasks (Hackman & Oldham 1975; Marchese Ryan, 2001; Morgeson, Delaney-Klinger & Hemingway, 2005; Parker, Axtell & Turner, 2001). Job autonomy has gained the attention of researchers because of the benefits it brings not only to the employees but also to the organization itself. The perception of autonomy leads to an increased level of intrinsic motivation and the outcome is effectiveness in work. (Raza Naqvi et al., 2013). In this study, autonomy meant an organizational attribute that encourage an employee to learn informally in his work setting.

1.8.2 (c) Management support

According to Yukl (2006, 2009), the meaning of management support for learning and development in the workplace is encouragement and facilitating individual and collective learning in and through work. Cromwell and Kolb (2004) management support is considered the extent to which managers positively reinforce the transfer of learning. Kwakman (2003) noted that management support refers to the amount of helpful social interaction of staff that was available. In this study, we meant by management support, the facilitation and assistance that individuals received from the management in the organization to support their informal learning.

1.8.3 Personal Characteristics:

Personal characteristics are defined as abilities, personality, traits, and interests related to learning and development activities in the workplace. In this study, personal characteristics are represented by three attributes that include self-efficacy, initiative and professional attitudes.

1.8.3 (a) Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy was commonly defined as the belief in one's capabilities to achieve a goal or an outcome. According to Bandura, 1986, Self-efficacy is a persons' judgment of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to achieve designated types of performance. Studies have shown that students with a strong sense of self- efficacy are more likely to challenge themselves with difficult tasks and be intrinsically motivated. These students will put forth higher degrees of effort in order to meet their commitments, and attribute failure to things, which are in their control, rather than blaming external factors. Students with self-efficacy also recover very quickly from setbacks, and ultimately are likely achieving their personal goals. Students with low self-efficacy, however, believe they cannot be successful and thus are less likely to make a concerted, extended effort and may consider challenging tasks as threats that are to be avoided.

Thus, students with poor self-efficacy have low aspirations, which may result in disappointing academic performances becoming part of a self-fulfilling feedback cycle (Margolis & McCabe, 2006). Self-efficacy has received continuing attention in the workplace learning and HRD literature and would seem to be one of the most relevant personal characteristics to research on informal learning activities (Lohman, 2000). Therefore, self-efficacy in this study means employees' beliefs about their capabilities to attain certain levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their workplace learning.

1.8.3 (b) Initiative:

Initiative at work was defined as an individual's action that begins a process, often done without direct managerial influence (Hilburger et al., 1997). Based on the American Heritage Dictionary, the definition of initiative as "the power, ability, or instinct to begin or to follow through energetically with a plan or task; enterprise and determination". According to some researchers, initiatives can be defined as a behavior that results in an individual taking an active and self-starting approach to work goals and tasks and persisting in overcoming barriers and setbacks (cf. Frese, Fay, Frese, Kring, Soose, & Zempel, 1996). In this study, Initiative was meant as a self-starting approach that employees persisted to overcome setbacks in acquiring knowledge, skills and abilities related to work.

1.8.3 (c) Professional attitudes

Professional attitudes could be defined as a predisposition, feeling, emotion, or thought that upholds the ideals of a profession and serves as the basis for professional behavior (Fishbein, 1967). Britt (1958) defined professional attitudes as a mental set of response. Fishbein (1967) defines it as a mental disposition of the human individual to act for or against a definite object. Kwakman (2003) acknowledged the professional attitudes, this factor reflecting the employees 'responsibilities regarding the attainment of new reform, goals and collaboration at the organizational level. In this study, professional attitude was meant the role and responsibilities of employees towards acquiring work-related knowledge and competencies through the engagement in the process of informal learning.

1.9 Private universities

Private universities are non-governmental institutions that provide tertiary education services. In this study, we meant with private universities, those universities that are currently operating in Oman and licensed by the ministry of higher education as a governmental authority to provide the higher educational services.

1.10 Significance of the Study

The present study is considered significant for the following reasons: The significance of this study lies in its focus on further investigating the influence of personal and work environmental characteristics factors on staff engagement in the informal learning at Omani private universities which has been an area of research that require attention of national researchers. Further, exploring the process of informal workplace learning in such new but promising private universities, will expand our understanding of the phenomenon of informal learning beyond industry and businesses contexts. The study has expanded our knowledge about workplace learning theory and practice. Despite the prevalence of informal learning in the workplace and the continued use of formal learning for explicit knowledge and skill development, little research has addressed the relationship among factors personal characteristics and work environmental characteristics (Ellinger, 2009; Choi, 2009). In this study, addressing personal characteristics factors, work environmental characteristics factors besides employees' Demographic information and employees' engagement in the process of informal learning in Omani private universities has added to our understanding about the process of informal learning in such institutions. Reviews of