

## Review Article

# Establishing a Risk Management Process and Policy in Higher Education

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**Abstract: Background:** Risk management is highly needed in higher education in general and in nursing education in particular. This is because nursing education is facing many risks that urges universities and colleges to change their strategies and plans. One of the recent risks that nursing education is facing in Oman and all around the world is the COVID-19 pandemic. The spread of COVID-19 has forced nursing colleges to change their plans. **Aim:** This article aimed to describe the experience of one nursing college in Oman during the COVID-19 pandemic and how it responded to this crisis. In addition, this article explored the barriers in implementing risk management process/policy and steps needed to develop the risk management process. This article also presents more lessons learned and recommendations to strengthen future risk management plans for the higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly for the nursing programs. **Design:** A literature review was done related to risk management in higher education in general and in nursing education in particular. The experience regarding the steps of mitigating the educational process during the peak of COVID-19 pandemic in one of the governmental colleges in Oman that provides nursing program was discussed in this article. **Results:** Despite that there were no clear policies or guidelines of a risk management system, the nursing program in the college was able to develop a contingency plan to deal with the wide-spread of COVID-19 and restore nursing education. The plan included shifting learning from face-to-face teaching to online teaching, postponing of clinical practicum, and others. Plans and strategies implemented during the pandemic were successful to some extent. **Conclusion:** Risks are inevitable and, therefore, risk management system should be part of any higher education institution (HEI), especially for those with professional training and/or clinical practicum. Adopting a new plan is risky by itself and it needs great commitments from all stakeholders including administrators, faculty and students to ensure success of the plan. Therefore, Omani nursing curriculum should be flexible for risky changes and upgrade the curriculum with more learning opportunities to respond to the future educational problems during pandemic/non-pandemic crises. In addition, more training courses and programs on the emergency-preparedness should be conducted for students in order to keep them ready for any future emergency crises. Furthermore, the plan adopted by the nursing program in the college should be tested for its effectiveness and feasibility to be used in future.

**Keywords:** Risk management, nursing education, COVID-19.

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## INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is a universal pandemic crisis that has affected all aspects of human life and caused alteration in the social, economic, and educational fabric in many countries. In Oman, the wide spread occurrence of COVID-19 pandemic has affected various sectors of the country including the health and the education sectors. The pandemic necessitated

closure of some shopping malls, social and religious places, schools, universities, colleges, and many other sectors in Oman. The sudden onset and the wide spread occurrence of the virus have urged colleges and universities all around the world to develop a risk management plan to restore the effectiveness of the education process (Dewart, Corcoran, Thirsk & Petrovic, 2020).

Similar to the situation in other parts of the world, nursing education in Oman was affected by the spread of COVID-19 pandemic where face-to-face classes, clinical training and laboratory classes were suspended (Dewart et al., 2020). Switching to online classes without any formal educational platform and reliable internet connectivity was a major challenge to the nursing educational system. Many risk-management plans were developed to ensure the safety of nursing students, and majority of the plans encompassed the removal of students from clinical placements and the suspension of face to face and laboratory classes (Agu, Stewart, McFarlane-Stewart & Rae, 2021; Dewart et al., 2020).

Identifying risks and planning to mitigate them in advance is crucial for the HEI's success. Therefore, the authors of this paper discussed the experience of one public Nursing and Allied Health Sciences College in Oman regarding the risk management plans during the peak of COVID-19, in 2020. This article describes how this college was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and how it responded to this crisis. In addition, the authors explore the barriers in implementing risk management process/policy and steps needed to develop the risk management process. Furthermore, this article describes how the HEIs can respond to future emergency challenges. Finally, it presents more lessons learned and recommendations to strengthen future risk management plans for the HEIs.

## **BACKGROUND**

Risk is an issue that affects the ability of all educational/non-educational institutions to meet their objectives. Risk entails uncertainty and undesirability (Dewart et al., 2020). The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) defines risk as "the threat or possibility that an action or event will adversely or beneficially affect organization's ability to achieve its objectives" (2005, p.24). Higher education institutions (HEIs) face many risks including lack of resources, over-dependence on technology, an increase in the number of hackers (electronic networking and internet connectivity issues), the spread of pandemic diseases, violence, and other risks that can debilitate any institutions and interrupt the institution's daily routine (Raanan, 2009). Therefore, the HEIs are urged to maintain their functionality and reputation under the rapid and continuous growth of globalization. The HEIs are pressurized to establish a system that deals and controls risks that they might face. This can be accomplished by having a risk management system within schools, colleges and universities (Raanan, 2009).

According to Raanan (2009), risk management plan can be defined as "a blueprint for dealing with unexpected or undesirable events before they actually occur. Risk management plan is often "conducted in order to reduce the impact of potential threats on the

organization to an acceptable level (p. 43)." Therefore, the concept of risk management has recently attracted a lot of attention in the higher education institutions and is considered a frequently repeated concept for the HEIs that aims to enable the HEIs to develop a strategic decision and ensure that institutional objectives are achieved (Ruzic-Dimitrijevic & Dakic, 2014).

Risk management is a dynamic process, and its usefulness depends on the consistency in planning and implementing the process (HEFCE, 2001b). Implementing risk management in HEIs improves communication between different departments and supports the effective use of institutional resources. Moreover, the risk management process maintains continuity in institutional improvement plan. In addition, risk management enhances an institution's ability to achieve its objectives and focus on internal audit. Risk management enables HEIs to be ready for any risks and deal wisely with the consequences of such risks. Having a well-designed risk management policy reassures the stakeholders and enables HEIs to achieve new opportunities. Risk management can maintain stability in strategic and operational planning (HEFCE, 2001b).

## **Origin of Risk Management Worldwide and in Oman**

Risk management gained attention in 2000 after the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) introduced the mandatory Risk Management Framework for its HEIs. The HEFCE established a risk management policy to be used as a governance tool and hoped that the risk management policy will put HEIs in control and enhance the accountability and efficiency of those institutions (Huber, 2009). Therefore, most of the European Universities had a well-placed internal quality assurance system by 2010 (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010). Following the HEFCE steps, the Australian Commonwealth Committee recommended the establishment of Tertiary Education Quality and Standard Agency (TEQSA) in 2009. TEQSE is a regulatory higher education system responsible for applying risk-based regulatory standards in the Australian Higher education System (Hommel & King, 2013).

In the United States of America, the United Education (UE) was established in 1987 based on the recommendations of the National Association of College and University Office (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges [AGB], 2009). The UE is responsible for accepting the special nature of the educational system and to bring down the cost of any possible risks that might affect its members. Moreover, the members of the UE are entitled for education-specific services in risk management (AGB & NACUBO, 2007). The University Risk Management and Insurance Association (URMIA) is an international,

non-profit educational association concerned with advancing risk management practices and standards in the US HEIs (URMIA, 2014). The URMIA has more than 600 members of HEIs and 100 companies that support those institutions.

Literature review revealed no published research work on risk management measures in the HEIs in Arab countries. In Oman, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) is responsible for developing rules, regulations and policies concerned with HEIs (MoHE, 2014). There are different HEIs in Oman including one government university, six private universities, seven government colleges and twenty three private colleges with an overall enrolment of more than 119184 students in 2018-2019 (MoHE, 2020). Risk management is a new concept that was introduced in the HEIs in Oman a few years ago. The HEIs in Oman face risks that are similar to those in any other HEIs. These include an increase in the cost of infrastructure and that of higher education, greater competition, higher level of quality of education, and risk of damaging of professional reputation (Raanan, 2009). Nonetheless, there is no clear policy that guides the risk management process in Oman's HEIs. Moreover, literature review revealed no published research that examines the need for a risk management policy or effectiveness of the risk management process in Oman's HEIs.

Establishing a risk management system for nursing programs within Oman higher education requires extra effort from Oman's governing bodies and stakeholders. This is because Oman does not have a risk management system in place for nursing programs. Nonetheless, creating a risk management system in Oman's HEIs necessitate change in the organizational structure, qualified personnel to lead the process, adequate financial resources and an effective strategic plan. Furthermore, to maximize the effectiveness of risk management system in Oman HEIs, research into the success of the process is required and modification of the plan and implementing changes based on the research results. In view of the growing risks encountered by the HEIs, risk management system has become a necessity for all countries and institutions to ensure the safety and well-being of the students and faculty.

### **Risk Management and Nursing Education**

According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN, 2020), there is a need for a robust supply of nurses to overcome the acute shortage of nursing workforce and to combat the recent and future pandemics. During the COVID-19 pandemic, nursing education was severely affected, especially the nursing practicum courses (Jividen, 2020). However, little was written about the importance of risk management plans in nursing education. Ague et al. (2020) stated that during the COVID-19 pandemic,

many nursing education systems around the world struggled to deliver nursing courses, especially the clinical practicum courses. One of the reasons for such a struggle was lack of appropriate risk management plans. Ague et al. explained that in the absence of proper internet infrastructure, many teachers struggled and were forced to explore some free online-teaching platforms and to learn more about the use of those online services. On the other hand, parents also struggled to provide the needed technology support and devices for their children to gain access to online classes.

### **Risk Management in HEIs: Experience from Oman**

Oman College of Health Sciences (OCHS) is a premier health education institution of Oman that has been affected by the spread of COVID-19. OCHS teaches several health care programs such as nursing, health-information management, pharmacy, physiotherapy and x-ray. Since COVID-19 virus spread far and wide in a short time, the government ordered the closure of all schools, colleges and universities in mid-March, 2020. The unexpected closure caused confusion and disruption in the education process within the college. Therefore, the authors chose to focus on the impact of COVID-19 on the nursing program and how the college responded to mitigate this impact.

During the first month after closure, there were no classes at all and teachers and students were requested to stay at their homes until further notice. In the second month, teachers were asked to report to their workplace and the college council started developing a contingency plan to restore the educational plan using online teaching methods.

The college academic council and faculty were closely following the progress of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the possible risk management measures that could be taken to help adapt to the new unpredicted situation. Therefore, the college administration felt the need for up-to-date information regarding the decisions of the Supreme Committee Responsible to Fight COVID-19 and to modify all teaching plans accordingly. This was evident throughout the last academic year (2019-2020).

In April, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the country into a lockdown and all social/non-social activities were suspended. During this period, many schools, colleges, universities and other sectors in the community started using heavily and almost solely for most of their activities the online services, which negatively affected the internet accessibility, affordability and reliability. This negatively impacted the delivery of nursing education in Oman. In Oman, many students live in distant geographical areas such as mountains and deserts. The internet connectivity is limited and the students face many challenges to access online classes. In addition, some students complained

that they experienced frequent interruption in the internet during the classes, and things became worse during the examinations. Frequent internet interruption, unclear online voice or bad video communication, and delay in uploading presentations became a daily routine. Both students and faculty became frustrated; however, there were limited options and both were obligated to use the available resources to achieve the program's objectives.

The faculty of the nursing program in OCHS were not trained on using online classes and there was no unified online teaching platform to be used. Nonetheless, the faculty in different programs took the initiative to learn about available free online teaching platforms and how to conduct online classes. The status of the lockdown made it very difficult for the college to conduct any training programs for the faculty on online teaching and the use of free online platforms. Therefore, the college gave the faculty the freedom to select any online platform to conduct their theory classes. Consequently, both faculty struggled to deliver the course and the students were not able to receive them in a way that would help achieve the course objectives.

The academic plans for the second semester of the academic year of 2019-2020 were changed and a risk management plan was developed by all departments and programs in Oman College of Health Sciences. All theoretical and laboratory classes were cancelled and clinical trainings/practicum were suspended. In May 2020, students resumed classes for the theoretical part of the programs using various free online programs such as Zoom, Google Classroom and/or even Whatsapp. All quizzes were replaced with task-oriented assignments. Most importantly, in the absence of proper internet infrastructure, all final examinations were replaced either by assignments or group projects/presentations.

All clinical practicum and laboratory classes were postponed until the summer semester of 2019-2020 in the hope that students could resume normal placement/activities very soon. However, with the rise in the number of COVID-19 cases and death toll due to the virus, the Oman government ordered that all teaching programs to be implemented on online platforms. Therefore, faculty met with students for laboratory class using different platforms and they supplemented students with videos about the laboratory procedures for various levels and programs. There were no hospital placements during that academic year; however, the clinical practicum was implemented in the college by allowing students to come in small groups to the college and the faculty conducted clinical procedures within the college.

Conducting comprehensive clinical practicum for the final year students and the development of the required clinical competencies became a big challenge

for nursing education during the COVID-19 lockdown (Agu et al, 2020; Raanan, 2009). Students in the final year were worried that the lockdown may result in the delay of the graduation semester. They faced uncertainty regarding their clinical comprehensive practicum, their graduation projects and the final examinations. Therefore, the college took some urgent measures to tackle these specific issues of the final year students including switching clinical practicum to laboratory classes, discussing case scenarios, assignments, and possible simulation in some branches.

During the peak of the crisis, similar to the situations in other countries, one of the major decisions was to call on students to volunteer to help nurses on the frontlines who needed extra manpower in the battle of fighting COVID-19 (Jividin, 2020). Without doubt, nursing students would play a major role in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic (Jackson et al., 2020). Accordingly, some students volunteered to work in the Call Center Office that was established by the Ministry of Health to help answer people's queries regarding COVID-19. Others volunteered to work with nurses (under strict supervision of nurses and in services that do not require direct contact with patients such as clerical work) in the makeshift COVID-19 hospitals that were developed by the MOH. Although many third and fourth year students were willing to volunteer to work in the hospitals to help take care of COVID-19 patients, the college decided to prevent students from going to clinical areas or to come into a direct contact with COVID-19 patients. The reason for that decision was that students were not trained to deal with pandemic/emergency crisis and sending them to clinical areas without prior training might lead to many negative consequences.

The new academic year of 2020-2021 started on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020 with a unified plan that was created for each program. Theoretical and laboratory courses were the only courses that were taught during the fall semester of the academic year 2020-2021. Some theory courses were moved from the spring semester to the fall semester and all clinical courses were placed in the spring and the summer semesters. Theory subjects were given online for 11 weeks using different platforms. Students were organized into small groups to come to the college and do the laboratory classes for four weeks under strict safety precautions. Essential procedures in nursing and allied health programs that required direct body contact such as mouth to mouth breathing in cardiac resuscitation were replaced with something else or only taught theoretically. All continuous assessments were done online; however, the final exams were conducted in the college using face-to-face mode.

### **Barriers in Implementing Risk Management Process in OCHS**

Since risk management is a new concept for the OCHS, there are many barriers and problems that

might face OCHS while implementing a risk management process. The first barrier is the lack of clear policy statement to guide the risk management process during crisis, which might lead to confusion and limit major stakeholders' support (managers, faculty, and students), in addition to insufficient funds (HEFCE, 2001a). Lack of funds affects the sustainability of the process and limits the resources needed for future planning.

Unclear lines of communication, absence of appointed personnel to take a leadership role in managing the risk management process and other factors can lead to poor commitment to the whole process (Raanan, 2009). A vague risk management scope and the identification of many risks without proper prioritization might lead to uncertain outcomes and, thus, can affect the institutions' improvement plans (HEFCE, 2001a). Furthermore, unclear objectives, and staff resistance to change are problems that might affect any HEIs' ability to implement the risk management process. Another barrier facing the implementation of risk management policies is lack of training and orientation for staff, which might increase staff resistance to change (Padro, 2014). Therefore, there is an urgent need for developing active strategies to solve those problems and overcome barriers in implementing the risk management policy and process in the college.

### **Steps Needed to Develop Risk Management System in OCHS**

The far most important step while developing a risk management system in any HEIs institution as OCHS is the establishment of a clear policy statement and presenting it to the institution's higher authority or the Board of Governors (HEFCE, 2001b). A well-designed policy statement can ensure the support of Board of Governors and stakeholders for the process. In addition, this would ensure stakeholders' commitment to and acceptance of the presence of risk, risk factors and results of risk assessment, which can ensure the success of risk management process (Raanan, 2009).

The next step is to develop a risk management plan of action. The plan will require appointment of an appropriate leader and personnel to take the responsibility of implementing the plan. Moreover, the plan should have clear objectives that are essential to ensure the continuity of improvement and to reduce stakeholders' resistance to change (HEFCE, 2005). Furthermore, it is important that the OCHS formulate an assessment plan to assess the risk and to implement changes as required. Another important step is the development of a plan to ensure availability of resources that will ensure the stability of the plan in future. Finally, linking risk management to strategic planning and designing a feedback system are essential steps for development of an effective risk management process (Edwards, 2012).

### **Recommendations for Oman HEIs for Future**

It is recommended that the HEIs:

- Establish a risk management department or committee that is run by an independent organization (HEFCE, 2001a). Therefore, the OAAA needs to take the responsibility to create a risk management department equipped with qualified personnel to lead the process. The department would strengthen the administrative roles of the risk management and would enforce risk standards and policies and follow its application in Oman's HEIs.
- Conduct a continuous risk assessment to identify risks within institutions and prioritize them to enable the institutions to be prepared in case of any risk (HEFCE, 2001a). In addition, it is important to establish a feedback or communication system to report risk, consequences, and plans of action taken to deal with it to ensure continuity of improvement (Edwards, 2012).
- Conduct studies to examine the impact of such pandemic crises on the higher education systems. These studies may include the effectiveness of the emergency-preparedness plans, the physical and psychological impact of the pandemic on the stakeholders, the financial impact on the HEIs, the willingness to volunteer among students during pandemic crises, the risk management plans during emergency crises, the use of technology in the learning process during crises, and other related issues regarding pandemic/non-pandemic crises.
- Conduct more training courses and programs on the emergency-preparedness for nursing students in order to keep them ready for any future emergency crises. In addition, the nursing curriculum should be upgraded with more learning opportunities to respond to the future educational problems during pandemic/non-pandemic crises. The upgrade of the curriculum may include components such as the facilitators and barriers that may face stakeholders during crises, risk management plans, and current guidelines and policies regarding the medical/non-medical services during crises.
- Having access to online resources is often expensive. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to major financial challenges to many colleges. Therefore, there is a need to search for alternative methods to deliver courses. The nursing program should start preparing learning videos (e.g. pre-recorded procedures/nursing skills) as an alternative to teaching during periods of crises. Using mannequins and standardized patients are other alternatives to delivering laboratory and clinical courses.
- Many college branches do not have resources for high-fidelity simulation. Therefore, it has become important to equip the college branches with necessary simulation resources in order to be ready for mitigating any future crises.

- The authorities of the HEIs should strengthen the risk-management policies related to emergency crises and should develop protocols to increase public health awareness procedures. The risk management policies should include instructions about public health, online learning, availability of resources, training programs, and data monitoring and documentation.

## CONCLUSION

There are many risks that are encountered by the HEIs, especially in the time of pandemic crises. The wide spread occurrence of COVID-19 and the uncertainty of its impact on the education programs disrupted the services provided to the stakeholders and led to struggles to maintain those services. Therefore, the presence of well-prepared risk management protocols and plans are essential to help mitigate the severe impact of COVID-19. However, implementing a new risk management policy is not an easy task as it requires active collaboration and support from various stakeholders and front-line managers. Moreover, a successful risk management system requires effective planning of resources, activities and responsibilities.

It has been a period of constant struggle for all health care personnel, including the authors of this study, due largely to the uncertainty behind the progress in the COVID-19 pandemic and the difficult task of searching for new strategies to continue teaching their students, especially the clinical practicum. Therefore, we are thankful to all people who stood up for the nursing profession, people who fully supported us during this crisis, students who enthusiastically volunteered and all stakeholders who prayed for the safety of our nurses and students. Without doubt, after this astonishing experience of fighting COVID-19, the nursing students are expected to become more prepared, the nursing faculty to become well-aware of the use of more alternative teaching strategies. In the future, the nursing curricula will become more flexible to face future challenges. Risk management plans should be kept in place for any future crises or unforeseen situations. We believe that we have learned some valuable lessons from this research project – one major lesson is as stated by Raanan (2009), “a risk avoided is a problem saved.”

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