

# Issues & Challenges of Small and Medium Sized Enterprises: A case study of Omani Entrepreneurs and SMEs

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**Abstract:** Choosing the right kind of business model is the key for success for Omani SMEs. SME mode of business is of utmost importance for Omani firms. However, there is a lack of analysis concerning the SME Decision Process (SDP), specifically with regard to small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). The authors study the SDP among SMEs intent on pursuing their business in the Omani industry and how it affects the overall strategy. Using six cases of Omani SMEs, the authors have developed a model of the SME SDP. Their results imply that the SDP evolves and goes through various phases. By focusing on the post-entry phase, this study enhances knowledge on decision-making frameworks by linking the traditional marketing literature related to initial SME with “mainstream” international business literature. Furthermore, the study reveals that SMEs adopting a more rational SDP are more likely to succeed as it demonstrates the importance of real options reasoning as a theoretical lens for making SME decisions in the context of SMEs.

**Keywords:** SME Entrepreneurs; Issues and Challenges; Entry and Expansion.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Selecting the mode of entering the Omani industry is, alongside the market entered, among the most important decisions an SME firm has to make. These two topics are among the most popular research topics in Omani businesses and a plethora of studies explain the factors affecting the decision on mode of SME success. However, there is a notable lack of analysis of the decision-making process (SDP) in practice (Malesios, et al, 2018); Ben Youssef, Leicht, Pellicelli & Kitchen (2018) argues, for instance, that while strategic SDPs of some kind seem to exist in SME firms, the area remains mostly unexplored in the entrepreneurship literature, even though export decision making, for example, is seen as one of the key drivers of a firm’s success (Stekelorum, Laguir & Elbaz, 2018). As Co, Nguyen, Nguyen & Tran (2018) noted, the researcher lacks detailed knowledge of how SME decisions are actually made,” and to gain this knowledge the researcher need to “scrutinize the decision process preceding business operations and the expansion into various industries in the post entry phase. This issue is more accentuated in the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (Caloffi, Mariani, Rossi & Russo, 2018), there being a paucity of empirical research on how the decision makers in SMEs make decisions when they operate (Islam & Hossain, 2018) and when they select entry strategies for the different markets in which they are operating.

The purpose of our study is to respond to the call in previous literature for more research on the SDP behind the choice of SME (Ansori, Satalaksana & Widyanti, 2018). Hosseini, Brege & Nord (2018) states SME as an institutional arrangement that makes possible the entry of a company’s products, technology, human skills, management or other resources into a SME country. The researcher further refers to the decision-making mode as the “method and logic” used by managers in SMEs when analysing a decision to operate into a new market or “to expand the scope of their existing international business” (Pticar, 2018). A further aim is to enhance understanding of how the SDP eventually affects the firm’s international market development strategy—in other words, in the post entry phase—and the possibility of changing the SME in the future. Our study contributes to the literature in various ways. First, drawing on previous research, the researcher argue that three multidimensional constructs characterize different decision - making modes. The current dominant stream of literature has adopted an effectuation–causation logic (Hosseini, Brege & Nord, 2018). The researcher takes a more nuanced view of the decision-making mode by considering rationality as a key concept. With a view to

narrowing a gap in the literature, the researcher proposes a conceptual framework of different decision-making modes (Brink, 2018) and their implications, which takes the form of four testable propositions. This information will increase awareness of the strengths and the weaknesses of different decision - making modes and their use during the internationalization process. This is of great importance to SME managers responsible for entrepreneurship activities, who play a key role in initiating international operations, often starting with exporting. Second, instead of focusing only on the initial SME,

The researcher also considers the post entry phase, during which, the researcher argues, a company may adopt a different decision - making mode than was used or chosen in the initial phase. The researcher suggests that different decision - making modes affect firms' subsequent operations, something not studied in detail to date (Castela, Ferreira, Ferreira & Marques, 2018). Furthermore, these modes also affect decision-making-mode evolution in different ways. The researcher thus provides a more integrated picture of the SDPs of SMEs operating in international markets and contribute to the entrepreneurship literature by studying not only how decisions are made (Ferencikova, 2018) but how that process changes.

Third, the researcher highlights the importance of rationality in the choice of SME, as mentioned in the post entry phase (Wallo & Kock, 2018). The researcher extends the notion of rationality to explain the SDP with regard to planning comprehensiveness (i.e., managers' approach to planning), the learning process, and time frame. This enables us to study a SDP beyond the effectuation – causation dichotomy. In addition, the researcher suggest that the different SME decision-making logics have performance implications because they affect firms' ability to adjust their SMEs after entry. Consequently, the researcher contributes to decision-making theories by providing evidence on the outcomes of SDPs (Price, Shutt & Sellick, 2018), and the researcher especially highlight the role of real options reasoning (Kiss, Fernhaber & McDougall, 2018) as a theoretical lens for making SME decisions in the context of SMEs.

#### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY:**

Decision making is one of the most important parts of management work, and in the context of international marketing, effective decision making is becoming increasingly critical to success (Malesios et al, 2018). Various decision-making styles, models, or modes have been presented in the literature, the primary common reference point being the extent to which they are related to rationality (Ben Youssef, Leicht, Pellicelli & Kitchen, 2018). Rationality is defined as “the reason for doing something and to judge a behaviour as reasonable is to be able to say that the behaviour is understandable within a given frame of reference” (Stekelorum, Laguir & Elbaz, 2018). Rational decision making is often understood as consisting of steps. These include setting managerial objectives, then searching for information to develop a set of alternatives that will later be compared and evaluated to enable the company to make the best choice. The selected option is implemented and subjected to follow-up and control (Co, Nguyen, Nguyen & Tran, 2018).

Within the entrepreneurship context, in particular when export decisions are analysed, decision theory has been used as a platform (Caloffi, Mariani, Rossi & Russo, 2018), from two different perspectives: normative and descriptive. The normative approach “is associated with planning and is defined as a process (Islam & Hossain, 2018). The descriptive approach, however, envisages that “many decisions that affect a firm's performance is made outside the planning process” (Ansori, Satalaksana & Widyanti, 2018). The two approaches may coexist in reality. The main factors that might influence the SME's decision – making mode are information scarcity (Hosseini, Brege & Nord, 2018); resource availability (Pticar, 2018); decision makers' leadership characteristics and their interpretations of the environment (Brink, 2018); the entrepreneur's prior knowledge, experience, and business and social networks (Castela, Ferreira, Ferreira & Marques, 2018); the hybrid governance structures in SMEs, in which the business model is normally co-created with partners, implying that the decision-making process too is shared with partners (Wallo & Kock, 2018); and goal setting (Ferencikova, 2018). In addition, few smaller firms have the elaborate routines found in larger organizations, and decisions may be made on the basis of management's existing knowledge (Castela, Ferreira, Ferreira & Marques, 2018).

#### **HYPOTHESIS:**

H1: SME Entrepreneurs' positive attitudes towards OI (Open innovation) will be positively associated with OI adoption.

H2: SME Entrepreneurs' EO will be positively associated with market or organisation-oriented OI adoption.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

To further explore, refine, and develop our theoretically driven propositions, the researcher compared six SMEs to study how they made decisions before and after entering various industries. Our aim was to determine how the different decision - making modes could be linked theoretically to the managers' approaches to the process. Therefore, our research

is confirmatory, elaborating on existing theories (Kiss, Fernhaber & McDougall, 2018) by exploring previously unexplained theoretical links. According to Wallo & Kock (2018) recommendations, the researcher used multiple case studies to develop and reconnect these theoretical links. This approach is easily generalizable and theoretically testable (Malesios, et al, 2018).

**The Case:**

In selecting our cases, the researcher used purposeful sampling, which is suitable for studying underexplored phenomena (Ben Youssef, Leicht, Pellicelli & Kitchen, 2018). The researcher chose cases on the basis of theoretical reasoning, with regard to replication and theory extension (Stekelorum, Laguir & Elbaz, 2018). Ben Youssef, Leicht, Pellicelli & Kitchen (2018) argues that choosing cases randomly is neither necessary nor preferable. The researcher based our selection on several criteria that helped describe the SME SDP. First, the cases had to meet the defining criteria of an SME.

The researcher used the Ministry of Commerce, Oman’s (2017) definition of SMEs. This threshold is applied in many countries, such as Canada and the United States, for classification in many industries, as the well as in earlier research (Co, Nguyen, Nguyen & Tran, 2018). Second, the extent of international experience and operations governed the selection. In particular, the researcher included in our original samples companies that had started operations in at least one GCC market, one of the GCC countries (i.e., Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait), and one emerging non-GCC market. Including different host markets with varying levels of uncertainty in our sample gave us enough variance to make a robust comparison of decision-making modes in different environments: the researcher considered it important to include uncertainty and risk perceptions since they are elements that influence the SDP (see Caloffi, Mariani, Rossi & Russo, 2018). Third, the companies had to have been in operation in the host markets for more than one year prior to our interviews (Islam & Hossain, 2018), so that the researcher could observe their post entry behaviour and entry changes. Finally, the researcher applied accessibility criteria, choosing 20 potential companies and ultimately selecting 6 of them according to their willingness to participate in the research and their fit with the criteria described previously. Companies A, B, and C are based in Muscat and the rest in Salah, Sohar and Nizwa respectively.

**Data Collection:**

Interviews are a highly efficient method by which to gather rich, empirical data, especially about infrequent phenomena (in our research, the SDP driving SME-market entry mode choice) (Islam & Hossain, 2018). The researcher therefore conducted in-depth interviews with key informants from the case companies. The researcher ensured that the interviewee people were those whom the researcher were fully familiar with, and highly knowledgeable about, the companies’ SME operations, and who had been involved in the SDP for SME expansion and SME choice-namely, SME Entrepreneurs or senior managers.

The researcher started with structured interviewing, guided by the extant research (see Ansori, Satalaksana & Widyanti, 2018), and the researcher conducted a total of 11 interviews within the six companies, each lasting between one and two hours. The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed on a word processor. Before conducting the main interviews, the researcher carried out two interviews with managers in two of the companies as a pre-test so that the researcher could make any necessary modifications. Similarly, after doing our data analysis and coding, the researcher conducted four additional interviews with informants from Companies A, B, and C to check the validity of the data and for follow-up purposes. A sample of the main questions asked during the interviews is provided in the Appendix.

**Table 1: Decision Making Mode in SMEs**

Dimensions	Decision-Making Modes			
	Reactivity	Incrementalism	Bounded Rationality	ROR
Approach to Planning	Unplanned	Limited planning	Some planning	Systematic planning
Alternative analysis	Limited analysis	Little analysis	Some analysis	Rigorous analysis
Decision-making criteria	Limited number of criteria	Small number of criteria	Some criteria	Many criteria
Path Dependency	High	Medium	Low	Limited
Number of alternatives considered	Few (or none)	Some	Some	Many
Number of initial entry modes considered	Few (or none)	Some	Some	Many
Number of postentry modes considered	Few (or none)	Some	Some	Many
Time	Short term	Short to medium term	Medium term	Long term
Goal time	Short term	Medium term	Long term	Long term
Long-term approach	Short term	Medium term	Medium term	Long term
Decision-making length	Short term	Medium term	Medium term	Long term

**Table 2: Details of SMEs Investigated**

	Company A	Company B	Company C	Company D	Company E	Company F
Establishment year	2007	2001	2005	2009	2002	2004
Ownership	Family	Family	Sole trader	Family	Family	Sole trader
Number of employees	51	39	12	32	19	41
Industry type / product type	Service	Catering	Material handling	Electrical devices	Electronic components	Food industry

In addition, the researcher consulted the websites of the case companies to obtain information about their entrepreneurial histories, products, industry branches, and other related secondary materials. Moreover, the researcher studied the companies’ archival documents, such as company bulletins, and asked our key informants to evaluate the comprehensiveness of our data. The researcher also ensured our informants had been involved in the SDPs for SME and post entry changes. All this enabled us to triangulate our data (Ansori, Sitalaksana & Widyanti, 2018). The fact that these archival sources were produced in “real time” mitigated the impact of retrospective sense making and potential memory bias among the interviewees (Hosseini, Brege & Nord, 2018).

**Data Analysis:**

Like most qualitative research, our analysis progressed through a cycle of inductive and deductive reasoning (Pticar, 2018). During the early stages, the researchers were influenced by previous research on SME managers’ decision - making modes, and the researcher were familiar with the continuum of rationality, as discussed earlier. The researcher therefore began our analysis by classifying each of our six cases following Brink (2018) categories, to understand the rationality exhibited in each one (see Table 3 below).

**Table 3: SME Decision Making Process**

Company	Decision-Making Process	Decision-Making Mode
Company A	“[To enter markets], we find that in one country, there will be big demand.... We find a potential partner ... and we discuss the mutual interest concerning the project and decide on the distributor, agent, and other issues.”	Incrementalism
Company B	“We only considered exporting through a distributor in the first place. Different alternatives are analyzed based on our experience in the postentry phase.”	ROR
Company C	“First, we analyze market potential. Then, we look for a potential local partner, as a distributor.”	Incrementalism
Company D	“Everything started from meeting during an exhibition. Then we collected info on market opportunities and interest in our products ... then we started to collect proposals from partners.”	Reactivity
Company E	“Normally we start with distributor agreements; then, if we feel that there is scope for interesting growth in the future, we may decide to open a sales subsidiary and later even a production plant.”	Incrementalism (ROR for Turkey)
Company F	“When we enter a new market we analyze the market potential and the people. The DMP varies in relation to the postentry strategy.”	Bounded rationality

Notes: Quotations are from interviews conducted for this study with managers of case companies.

The researcher coded the data according to the principles of thematic analysis (Brink, 2018), utilizing analytic replication in which each case served as its own experiment (Castela, Ferreira, Ferreira & Marques, 2018). The researcher first created a list of first-order themes from our case evidence. The researcher then reread the relevant literature to see how the researcher could explain what the researcher had found in our data. For example, the researcher related the statements regarding whether the managers had considered other alternatives when deciding to enter a market (first-order theme) to alternative analyses (second order theme). Thereafter, the researcher organized the second – order themes into aggregated theoretical dimensions, as represented in our data structure (see Brink, 2018). Through this procedure, the researcher categorized our second - order themes into three main SME decision-making dimensions, viz

- (1) approach to planning,
- (2) path dependency, and
- (3) time.

These dimensions may have varying levels of importance, depending on the SME’s decision-making mode. Table 4 shows our data structure, and in Table 5 the researcher uses illustrative examples to explain how the researcher derived our second - order themes.

**Table 4: Data Structure**

First-Order Theme	Second-Order Theme	Aggregated Dimensions
Statements regarding whether managers considered other modes of entry when making the decision, and if so, the extent to which they analyzed them	Alternative analysis	Approach to planning
Statements about the final decision-making criteria for choosing a specific entry mode	Decision-making criteria	Approach to planning
Statements showing whether managers considered any alternatives to the chosen entry mode	Alternatives	Path dependency
Statements showing the initial mode of entry into the foreign market	Initial entry mode	Path dependency
Statements showing whether the initial mode was changed to a different mode postentry	Postentry mode	Path dependency
Statements showing whether the managers’ goals were short term or long term	Goal time	Time
Statements showing how much managers considered their future operations and market development	Long-term approach	Time
Statements indicating how long it took to make the decision and how long the decision-making process was	Decision-making length	Time

### 3. RESULT AND DICUSSION

Logit regression was used for the analysis, because it is recognised as a good method for binary choice analysis. To assess model fitness, Castela, Ferreira, Ferreira & Marques (2018) were reported. Before the regression, multi-collinearity was checked. Ferencikova (2018) suggested that a variance inflation factor (VIF) larger than 10 can cause a serious collinearity problem. For all variables, the VIF values were between 1.155 and 3.488. Thus, it can be said that there was no serious collinearity problem in the sample. Acknowledging the multidimensionality of OI, analyses were conducted to identify possible differences and similarities of SME Entrepreneur impact between OI modes, and the results are reported in Table 4.

**Table 5:**

Variables/OI mode	In-sourcing	R&D collaboration	Customer involvement	M&A/alliance	Licensing-out	Spin-off
	In-bound			Out-bound OI		
	Technology oriented	Technology oriented	Market oriented	Organisation oriented	Market oriented	Organisation oriented
<i>Independent variables</i>						
Attitude	0.608**	0.450**	0.296*	-0.645	0.516**	0.509**
EO	-0.081	-0.337	0.648***	3.163***	1.379***	0.988***
Patience	0.170	0.896***	0.095	0.056	-0.886***	-0.585**
Degree	0.018	0.124	0.006	0.286	0.134	0.227
Tech-Edu <sup>1</sup>	0.241	2.356***	0.316	0.135	0.777	-0.378
Manage-Edu <sup>1</sup>	0.213	1.763	0.058	4.756**	0.819	1.430
Working years	0.033	-0.051	0.027	-0.008	-0.013	-0.166
Sales/marketing <sup>2</sup>	0.888	-1.029	1.076*	1.389	0.219	1.122
R&D work <sup>2</sup>	0.331	-0.962	0.970	0.522	-0.325	0.889
Plan/strategy <sup>2</sup>	0.608	-0.559	1.686**	1.576	0.964*	0.993
Production <sup>2</sup>	0.575	-0.842	0.761	1.187	-0.268	1.499
<i>Control variables</i>						
Environment	-0.071	-0.256*	0.170*	-0.317	-0.099	0.069
Government	0.306**	0.833***	-0.018	0.307	-0.261	0.155
Firm size	0.472**	0.057	-0.056	-0.045	-0.042	0.392**
R&D intensity	0.039**	0.028*	-0.038*	-0.029	0.049**	0.008
<i>Model fit</i>						
Cox & Snell R <sup>2</sup>	0.225	0.439	0.235	0.353	0.391	0.380
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.308	0.588	0.323	0.418	0.425	0.471

The regression coefficient shown is the beta coefficient; statistical significance, \**p* < .1, \*\**p* < .05, \*\*\**p* < .01.

<sup>1</sup>Base variable is 'other academic discipline'.

<sup>2</sup>Base variable is 'other functions'.

The results showed the importance of human factors in OI adoption. However, it was also reported that SME Entrepreneur characteristics impacted OI modes in different ways, suggesting an appropriate fit between them. First, a key decision maker's positive attitude was significant in almost all OI modes, validating Hypothesis 1. OI adoption can be interpreted as a deviation from a current innovation routine, and some important elements hampering this dynamic change will be internal resistance, path dependent behaviour and indifferent attitude of internal members. As new knowledge, processes and structures are adopted through OI, divergent thinking and an open-minded culture are imperative for smooth OI adoption (Wallo & Kock, 2018). Therefore, to eliminate negative prejudice and establish an OI-friendly atmosphere, the role of SME Entrepreneurs who can strongly support and facilitate it within their firms becomes critical (Ferencikova, 2018).

There will be more company-wide risks in this type of OI, making it necessary for a key decision maker to be more entrepreneurially oriented. Moreover, the SME Entrepreneurs' patience was positively associated with in-bound OI (R&D collaboration), suggesting its importance in innovation cooperation context. Owing to substantial system differences between the firm and its partner, coordination in a collaborative R&D project is not easy (Wallo & Kock, 2018). When two (or more) firms with different cultural backgrounds, goals and ways of doing research collaborate, they will inevitably have to cope with the challenges presented by progressive adaptation to approach each other. In this respect, the patience and endurance of SME Entrepreneurs can be critical in R&D collaborations (Price, Shutt & Sellick, 2018). However, interestingly, patience was negatively associated with out-bound OI modes. This suggests that persevering SME Entrepreneurs may have a tendency to wait until innovation is achieved internally. The SME Entrepreneur who trusts more in his firm's internal potential may hesitate to release internal ideas in the hope of finding future uses for them, which will negatively influence out-bound OI. This interpretation might be supported by the fact that SME Entrepreneurs' patience and EO showed opposite associational patterns. EO was negatively associated with in-sourcing and R&D collaboration (despite its significance level), but patience was positively associated, and the reverse was the case in licensing-out and spin-off.

The results showed that SME Entrepreneurs' education in a technology discipline was positively associated with technology-oriented OI (R&D collaboration). As technology expertise is an important personal characteristic for knowledge exploration (Price, Liz; Shutt & Sellick, 2018), the key decision maker's education in science/engineering may help the firm to identify relevant technological knowledge and opportunity more easily. This fit will be more important in small organisations where SME Entrepreneurs have more frequent interaction with employees (Kiss, Fernhaber & McDougall, 2018) and often have to be involved in operational functions (Malesios et al, 2018).

Finally, SME Entrepreneur academic degrees and working years were examined, but no significant association was observed. This indicates that long immersion in education or experience may cause path dependence, which might be a double-edged sword for openness. On the one hand, SME Entrepreneurs' experience can help them to learn the necessary know-how, but on the other hand, it may lead them into an experience trap that can hamper their readiness for change (Malesios et al, 2018). Experienced SME Entrepreneurs may adhere to an innovation route with which they are familiar, but this path-dependent behaviour can hinder new knowledge acquisition or sharing in their (new) firms which are facing totally different (or rapidly changing) business environments (Ben Youssef, Leicht, Pellicelli & Kitchen, 2018). This suggests a possible risk of 'dominant logic' or 'industry recipe' formed by cognitive bias (Stekelorum, Laguir & Elbaz, 2018), which is also in line with the result that SME Entrepreneur experience in the technology function was not significant. As noted by Malesios et al (2018), a SME Entrepreneur's experience in technology-related fields plays an important role in increasing the level of internal R&D investments. Thus, technology-oriented leaders may be typically good at internal innovation, but they often have difficulty in diverting their research interests outwards (Co, Nguyen, Nguyen & Tran, 2018). As an individual's experience typically reflects his/her past behaviour, longer experience in technology fields may establish a path dependent behaviour more focused on internal technology development and trapped in NIH syndrome.

#### **IMPLICATIONS:**

To date key individuals' roles have been under-researched in the field of SME decision making (Caloffi, Mariani, Rossi & Russo, 2018). However, the micro-foundation of OI, in which key individuals' choices and behaviour shape firm-level strategy, cannot be underestimated (Ansori, Satalaksana & Widyanti, 2018), particularly in SMEs, where key players, such as SME Entrepreneurs, have a strong influence on firm-level decisions (Islam & Hossain, 2018). As key agents of change, they will substantially influence the resistance, readiness and momentum of organisational change (Co, Nguyen, Nguyen & Tran, 2018). The micro-foundation of OI is rooted in an individual's intentional actions, experience and

preferences, and top executives' leadership and awareness play an essential role in promoting OI adoption (Hosseini, Brege & Nord, 2018). This paper raised the issue of the importance of human factors and suggested that more attention be given in the OI literature to the field of strategic leadership and entrepreneurship. This paper also identified the fit between SME Entrepreneur characteristics and OI modes by acknowledging the multi-dimensionality of OI. Although scholars have used a list of OI modes as if they were equivalent, they are clearly not in the eyes of implementers. Based on this OI diversity, this paper observed that the effects of SME Entrepreneur characteristics on OI adoption were differently configured according to the nature of each mode. Therefore, we suggest that OI be understood as a wide innovation spectrum, Understanding the human side of openness which requires different types of knowledge and involves various types of change. The paper also provides some practical implications. SME Entrepreneurs and top managers in SMEs should know that they are at the epicentre of OI adoption, and they are better able to adopt and implement certain types of OI modes than others. Thus, to increase opportunities for successful OI adoption, they have to attempt to compensate for characteristics they may lack by recruiting appropriate complementary people. As it is not possible for a single individual to have all the personal characteristics appropriate for the adoption of all OI modes, by assigning a particular key player to a particular function, firms may be able to manage OI more efficiently. Furthermore, the top management of firms must recognise the importance of culture in OI implementation. Self-motivation and open-mindedness are two important factors that facilitate OI implementation (Hosseini, Brege & Nord, 2018) and overcoming NIH and NSH will require the establishment of a new company-wide culture encouraging knowledge import and export. The results might be extended to larger corporations and provide an implication for human resource management. The results also suggest that SME policy should become more human-oriented. Acknowledging the importance of SME Entrepreneurs, it is necessary for policy makers to realise that top management can also be an efficient policy target. As these key individuals can create and foster readiness for and momentum of organisational change (Hosseini, Brege & Nord, 2018), policy makers need to understand their strong influence on facilitating and stimulating OI in SMEs. Furthermore, it is necessary for policy makers to develop sub-specialised OI policies. As shown in the results, an independent variable can influence OI differently according to the OI mode. Considering this heterogeneity, policy makers have to recognise that one policy cannot have the same results in all OI modes. Therefore, they have to develop sub-specialised policies reflecting the multi-dimensionality of OI.

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