His Majesty Sultan Qaboos
This report is a follow-up to the "National Report on the Development of Education in the Sultanate of Oman" issued to UNESCO in 2001. While this report focuses on issues and developments that have occurred in Oman's education system since 2001, developments before that date have been mentioned when they can assist the reader to put recent developments into a meaningful context.

In the last report, it was noted that when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos acceded to the throne in 1970, there were only three schools in the whole of the Sultanate of Oman. The priorities, therefore, were to expand educational provision to all parts of the country and to ensure that all sections of society had equal access to education. By the mid-1990s this quantitative expansion of educational provision had largely been achieved and the attention of the Ministry of Education shifted towards attempts to bring about a qualitative improvement of the country's education system.

The last report also noted that the most ambitious of the Sultanate's educational reform programmes, the Basic Education initiative, was first introduced in 17 schools in the 1998-99 academic year. This new programme involves the replacement of the existing General Education system with a unified child-centred education system covering the first ten years of schooling. Since the last report, the Ministry of Education has continued with its phasing-in programme and the number of schools involved in Basic Education had risen to 352 by the academic year 2003-04.

The Ministry of Education has initiated a number of additional reform programmes since the last report. These include projects to evaluate the effectiveness of the Basic Education programme, to help students with learning difficulties, introducing a new model for school evaluation, promoting the idea of involving staff in schools in "reflective practice" and collaborative action, and reforming the curriculum and assessment system in grades 11 and 12. The overall aim of all of these efforts is to ensure that all young people in the Sultanate of Oman have access to a quality school education system appropriate to the needs of the 21st century's globalised world.
Section 1

The education system at the beginning of the twenty-first century: an overview

1.1 Major reforms and innovations introduced in the education system at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in particular concerning:

a) the legal framework of education
b) the organisation, structure and management of the education system
c) curricular policies, educational content and teaching and learning strategies
d) objectives and principle characteristics of current and forthcoming reforms

1.2 Major achievements, both quantitative and qualitative, and lessons learned:

a) access to education
b) equality in education
c) quality (especially in terms of relevance) of education
d) content of education (major trends and challenges for curriculum development processes)
e) policy dialogue, partnerships and participation by civil society in the process of educational change

1.3 The main problems and challenges facing the education system at the beginning of the twenty-first century
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 2</th>
<th>Quality education for all young people: challenges, trends and priorities</th>
<th>38</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Education and gender equality</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Education and social inclusion</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Education and competencies for life</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Quality education and the key role of teachers</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Education for sustainable development</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| References and Appendices | Documentary references used for preparation of report | 54 |

| Appendix 1 | Organisation of the Ministry of Education | 56 |
| Appendix 2 | Statistical Review                       | 57 |
The education system at the beginning of the twenty-first century: an overview
Section 1:
The education system at the beginning of the twenty-first century: an overview

1.1 Major reforms and innovations

1.1a. The legal framework of education

The foundation for the legal framework and policies for all sectors in the Sultanate of Oman derives in the first instance from the directives and decrees of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said which are based on the recommendations of the committees of Majlis Al Shura (Shura Council) and other consultative committees.

The government determines the broad goals and policies for the country’s development based on recommendations and suggestions from various committees. The legal framework of education is, therefore, set in the context of firstly the directives of His Majesty the Sultan and secondly the goals and policies specified by his government.

In 1995 His Majesty the Sultan directed that a conference should be set up to consider the future direction of the country economic and social development. This conference, titled “Oman 2020, The Vision Conference for Oman’s Economy” was convened in July 1995. The resulting conference report recognised that the world we are living in today is changing at a faster rate and in more fundamental ways than ever before. The acquisition of global knowledge, information and technology and the development of advanced human skills are becoming essential prerequisites for progress. The conference report stressed that it was vital, therefore, that the country should achieve the following by the year 2020:

1. An efficient and competitive private sector.
2. A diversified dynamic globalised economy.
3. Well developed human resources.
4. Sustainable development within a stable macro-economic framework.

The conference report was endorsed by the government and its findings became part of the legal framework that the Ministry of Education had to work towards.

Following another Royal Decree issued by His Majesty the Sultan, a Basic Statute of State came into force in November 1996. Article 13 of the Statute, which dealt with matters relating to education, stated that:
"Education is a cornerstone for the progress of society which the state fosters and endeavours to spread and make accessible to all."

"Education aims to raise and develop the general cultural standard, promote scientific thought, kindle the spirit of research, respond to the requirements of economic and social plans, build a generation that is physically and morally strong and takes pride in its nation and heritage and preserves its achievements."

"The state provides public education, works to combat illiteracy and encourages the establishment of private schools and institutes under its supervision and according to the provisions of the Law."

The Basic Statute of State is, therefore, another important part of the legal framework of education.

Taking the lead from His Majesty the Sultan's directives, the Ministry of National Economy draws up the general overall aims for the country's development and objectives for all government sectors through a series of five year plans. For example, with regard to education, the Sixth Five Year Plan (2001-2005) specifies the following general aims:

- Continuing the expansion of education to make it available to all.
- Developing education through:
  - abolishing the double-shift system in schools
  - expanding the implementation of Basic Education
  - developing the curriculum
  - increasing Omanisation
  - developing secondary education
  - developing educational research
  - expanding the use of technology in schools
  - developing the assessment and evaluation system
- Encouraging the expansion of private education.
- Developing programmes for the abolishment of illiteracy.
- Expanding special education facilities.

The Five Year Plans are another part of the legal framework that the Ministry of Education is obliged to work towards.
1.1b. Organisation, structure and management of the education system

The Ministry of Education recognises that effective educational change requires an effective organisational structure. This recognition was explicitly expressed in the Ministry’s 1995 report on educational reform, which was jointly produced by the Ministry and international education consultants. The report stated that the Ministry faced a major challenge in achieving its proposed educational reforms. Accordingly, organisational and procedural changes to strengthen the Ministry’s capacity for planning and implementing policy decisions were recommended.

As a result, structural changes are taking place at the same time as the Ministry is gradually implementing educational reforms. The main objective of these structural changes, which are taking place at Ministry, regional and school levels, is to provide an environment that will allow the educational changes to produce their expected outcomes. See Appendix 1 for a diagram showing the present Ministry of Education structure.

(i) Ministry level
Following the issue of the last national report to UNESCO in 2001, a number of structural changes have been made at the Ministry level to support educational reform. These changes include the following:

(a) Establishing a Human Resource Development Department
Human development is the single most important factor contributing to the success of any organisation. This is particularly significant in educational organisations, since they are concerned with facilitating personal development. Thus, the Ministry realised that without creating a structure that provides continuous learning opportunities for human resources at various levels in the Ministry, local authorities and schools, educational change is not likely to occur. Consequently, a central Human Resource Development Department (HRDD) was established in order to plan, implement and follow-up in-service training opportunities according to the reform plan.

In general terms, this department is concerned with developing and implementing the Ministry’s five-year plans for human resource development in cooperation with various internal and external related bodies. In addition, the
department establishes communication channels with other organisations concerned with human resource development in order to exchange experiences and improve its activities accordingly. At the level of local authorities, the Ministry established training centres in each local educational authority in order to supervise local training activities. These centres are under the direct supervision of the HRDD.

The HRDD carries out its duties through five organisational sections, namely, (1) the central training centre, (2) training programme planning, (3) training affairs, (4) qualifying programme planning and (5) training evaluation and follow-up.

The future vision of HRDD is based on the idea of decentralised human resource development activities. Currently, the department is working on two closely related major projects. The first involves introducing the concept of distance learning to human resource development within the Ministry of Education. The Ministry, in cooperation with international consultants, has conducted a study on this project and efforts are now being made to build the necessary infrastructure in regions and schools so as to make the delivery of distance training a reality. The second project is to adopt the concept of school-based training by building training capacities in schools. School-based training is a strategic policy decision in a young country like Oman. Schools are still increasing in numbers every year; the topography of the country necessitates decentralising training and adopting models such as a school-based training approach.

(b) Establishing an Educational Evaluation Department

Feedback is essential for improvement. In accordance with the recommendations of the Ministry's educational reform plan, the Ministry has carried out various evaluation exercises since the reform of education was initiated in the late 1990s. However, during the 1990s evaluation was carried out through temporary teams and committees formed for particular evaluating purposes. Thus, institutionalising the efforts of evaluation was of paramount importance in later stages when educational change started to take shape in the Omani educational institutions.

The Ministry, therefore, decided in 2002 to establish the Educational Evaluation Department (EED), which in order to inform policy decision reports directly to
H.E the Minister of Education. The main responsibility of the EED is to evaluate the various dimensions of the educational system so as to provide the Ministry with feedback on its performance at various levels. Special emphasis is placed upon assessing student achievement in schools since enhancing student learning is the ultimate goal of the Ministry.

The EED consists of four organisational sections, namely, (1) educational measurement and evaluation, (2) examination administration, (3) tests and achievement monitoring and (4) analysis and studies.

(c) Establishing an Educational Supervision Department

Sustainability is one of the key concepts in educational change and the Ministry’s educational reform plan gives considerable attention to this concept. Therefore, in addition to establishing the HRDD, the Ministry also established a department for Educational Supervision (ESD) with the responsibility of supervising teachers in schools. The ESD provides technical support to teachers through a mechanism of continuous follow-up. This includes organising the activities of teacher supervision, assuring that curricula are properly implemented, issuing relevant technical publications, analysing field reports and identifying training needs of teachers and teacher supervisors.


(d) Establishing an Information Systems Department

The main focus of the Ministry's educational reform plan is on improving teaching and learning in classrooms. For this to happen, the Ministry realised that it is insufficient to only concentrate on the direct inputs of the teaching and learning processes. Equally as important are actions that help to improve the environment in which teaching and learning take place. Therefore, the Ministry decided to establish the Information Systems Department (ISD) as an essential step towards building a healthy environment in which teaching and learning can prosper.

The main responsibility of the ISD is to equip the Ministry at various levels with modern technology that is likely to improve work systems and help to simplify
communication and administrative procedures. This includes computerising the Ministry, creating, updating and managing databases, developing programs and networks and providing maintenance services.

The ISD consists of four organisational departments, namely, (1) systems development, (2) networks, (3) technical support and (4) equipment.

e) Establishing a Textbook Production and Education Technologies Centre

High quality education demands high quality teaching and learning materials. Previously, the production of these materials was the concern of two separate departments; the Textbook Department and the Education Technologies Department. The Ministry felt, however, that there was an increasing overlap in the responsibilities of these two departments and so, in 2003, it took the decision to amalgamate them into one centre.

The centre consists of six organisational sections, namely, (1) Textbook design and editing, (2) Textbook production and follow-up, (3) Technical support, (4) educational aids, (5) learning resources and (6) Educational technologies.

(ii) Regional level

A principle aim of the Ministry is to encourage decision-making at the local level through a policy of decentralisation. Directorate generals have been created in the Sultanate’s eleven educational regions. These Directorate generals have played a remarkable educational role through committees and teams formed. Such committees and teams are concerned with various educational issues such as educational evaluation. Furthermore, these Directorate generals in the regions organized educational conferences, seminars and workshops which had a good impact in enriching the experiences and practices of teachers, supervisors and other concerned educators. It worth mentioning that the Ministry encourages and approves such activities. The responsibilities of the regional Directorate generals can be summarised as follows:

a. Applying all Ministry policies and decisions.

b. Applying the Ministry’s directives relating to issues such as student affairs, curricula, textbooks, assessment and illiteracy eradication.

c. Preparing the educational plan for the region and setting the annual budget.
d. Collecting statistical data to be sent to the appropriate departments in the Ministry.
e. Distributing of teachers and supervisors to schools.
f. Supervising and evaluating the performance of the teaching and administrative staff.
g. Providing the support services required by the educational services in the Directorate.
h. Coordinating with the Ministry of Health to provide school health services.

(iii) School level
In 1997 the Ministry began development work on a Basic Education programme to gradually replace its three level General Education system (primary, preparatory and secondary). The aim of this reform is to create a unified education system covering the first ten years of schooling. Basic Education is organised into two cycles: first cycle (ages 6-9) and second cycle (ages 9-15) and will be followed by a two-year post-Basic Education school system (see Diagram 1 below). The first schools started to introduce the new system in the academic year 1998/1999.

Diagram 1: Basic Education System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade level</th>
<th>Stages in Basic Education</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Post-Basic Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Basic Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Cycle Two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Basic Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cycle One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As Basic Education system is being implemented at the same time while the three level system is still in operation, the Ministry arranged to make the two systems come closer to each other so as to prevent a multiform of learning outcomes. In this respect, the ministerial decree No. 5/2004 was issued to consolidate the three educational levels in schools that are not implementing basic education into one educational level called general education composed of all grades from one to twelve.

1.1c. Curricular policies, educational content and teaching and learning strategies

In the light of the recommendations emanating from 2020 vision conference described in section 1.1a, the Ministry of Education took steps to ensure that students would be adequately prepared for the requirements of further and higher education, the labour market and modern life generally. To achieve this, the Ministry agreed that the educational content and teaching and learning strategies in the school system required urgent and thorough reform.

The Ministry of Education has embarked on a number of initiatives to tackle the above issues in recent years. The most ambitious of these was the initiative to replace the General Education system with a new Basic Education system (see section 1.1b).

A new Basic Education curriculum has been developed by the Ministry of Education. The aim of this curriculum is to provide students with a learning experience that remains firmly rooted in Islamic principles and Omani cultural identity while, in addition, follows international best practice and is relevant to the rapidly changing world of the 21st century. Not only have new subject areas been developed, but curricular content taught within existing subject areas has been completely rewritten to include real-life contexts and opportunities for experiential learning. The changes made to the content of education are taken up in more detail in section 1.2d.

Teacher-centred approaches to teaching and learning have tended to be dominant in the General Education system. The Ministry of Education felt,
however, that over-reliance on such methods often encourages students to become passive learners who are dependent on the teacher to tell them what and when to learn. It was decided, therefore, that the Basic Education programme should promote a student-centred rather than a teacher-centred approach to teaching and learning. To reflect this, teachers have been trained to change their role in the classroom to that of a facilitator and creator of a learning environment that allows students to be interactive and to take responsibility for their own learning.

As a result, students in Basic Education now have opportunities to learn through a variety of teaching and learning approaches, including activities involving individual, pair, small group, whole class and out-of-school work. The strategies employed by teachers aim to develop skills and attitudes such as autonomous and cooperative learning, communication, critical thinking, problem solving, research and investigative techniques, creativeness, innovation and the development of an aesthetic sense. The overall aim is to provide students with the required tools for life-long learning.

The Basic Education reform is being phased-in and, by the beginning of the 2004/2005 academic year, the programme had been developed for grades 1-8. From an initial figure of 17 Basic Education schools opened in 1998, the figure has risen rapidly and, by the 2003/2004 academic year, 352 Basic Education schools were in operation. Projected plans are in place to generalise the programme to all schools and students as rapidly as is economically and practically feasible.

Plans are also nearing completion for the implementation of a new grades 11 and 12 programme. This programme will be operational in time for students who complete the 10-year Basic Education programme at the end of the 2006/2007 academic year. The Basic Education reform and the reform of grades 11 and 12 will mean that students in all twelve years of the school cycle will benefit from new and more relevant curriculum and assessment systems.

While the Basic Education and the new grades 11 and 12 programmes are being phased-in, the Ministry is aware that it is vitally important that students in the present General Education system are not ignored. The Ministry has also, therefore, introduced a number of curricular reforms in these schools and these are explained in detail in section 1.2d.
1.1d. Objectives and principle characteristics of current and forthcoming reforms

From 1970, the government’s main concern with regard to education was to quantitatively expand its educational services in order to provide school places for citizens in all parts of the country and belonging to all sections of society. By the end of the twentieth century this had been achieved (between 1970 and the end of the 1990’s, the number of government schools had increased from 3 to over 1,000 and the number of school students from 900 to over half a million). As a result, the focus of the government has now shifted towards attempts to bring about a significant qualitative improvement to its education system. Two recent developments made it more urgent for the introduction of reforms into the education system.

The first of these developments is one which is facing all countries at the present time, i.e. globalisation of the world economy. To survive in a globalised world, countries are being forced to restructure their economies and production processes. This restructuring is resulting in big changes in work practices and in the skills demanded from the workforce. The needs of the emerging global and national economies are for employees who are technologically literate, can engage in analytical thinking and are skilled communicators.

The second development is specific to Oman, i.e. the government policy for the Omanisation of the Sultanate’s economy in order to reduce dependency on foreign labour. The policy for the Omanisation of the Sultanate’s economy was introduced in the country’s Third National Development Plan 1980-1985. It proposed the replacement of expatriate labour with similarly skilled, trained and highly educated Oman nationals. One important objective of the Ministry of Education, therefore, is to encourage and facilitate the employment of more Omani nationals in its workforce. As can be seen from Table 1 below, significant progress has been made with regard to teachers, administrators and supervisors.

Table 1: Omanisation of Ministry of Education staff (1980-2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Administrators</th>
<th>Supervisors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Omani Omanisation (%)</td>
<td>Total Omani Omanisation (%)</td>
<td>Total Omani Omanisation (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>5,150</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>15,121</td>
<td>4,361</td>
<td>28.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>26,416</td>
<td>17,761</td>
<td>67.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>32,345</td>
<td>26,026</td>
<td>80.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Putting the Omanisation policy into practice, however, also has implications for the type and nature of education that is offered to students. The aim of the government is to secure the country’s prosperity and future economic growth. Its success will, to a large extent, depend on how effective the education system is in providing young Omani citizens with the knowledge and skills they require for the changing employment market. The Ministry of Education’s objective, therefore, is to create an education system which reflects international best practice while remaining firmly embedded in Islamic principles and in Arabic and Omani culture and heritage.

As mentioned earlier, the Ministry has also introduced curricular reforms into the General Education schools. The Ministry’s attempts to reform the present General Education system are dealt with in more detail in section 1.2d.

Among other Ministry reform initiatives related to specific issues include projects to encourage schools to evaluate their own performance, to assist students with learning difficulties and to establish a national centre for career guidance. In order to support staff in carrying out these reforms, the Ministry has introduced an ambitious professional development programme involving teachers, supervisors, headmasters/ headmistresses and administrative and professional personnel in the Ministry. More detailed descriptions of all of these initiatives are provided later in this report.

1.2 Major achievements, both quantitative and qualitative and lessons learned

1.2a. Access to education

Oman has made impressive progress in its aim to provide education for all those who wish it. Analysis of the nation’s census data (December, 2003) show percentages of children attending school:

- for six-year old children, 89.7% of boys and 88.4% of girls are in school;
- for children aged 6-12, 93.6% of boys and 91.9% of girls are in school;
- for children aged 13-15, 91.2% of boys and 89.1% of girls are in school;
- for students aged 16-18, 82.7% of boys and 81.8% of girls are in school.
Access to education may be looked at in terms of availability, universality and quality. Clearly, both the government and the private sector have important roles to play in providing access to education in the Sultanate of Oman. This section, however, will deal only with the state sector, with the role of the private sector being taken up in section 1.3. Access to education will be considered in terms of students of school age, parts (i) and (ii), and adults, part (iii).

(i) Reducing school drop-outs and grade-level repetition
Section 2.2. of this report outlines special measures to adapt education in Oman to make it meaningful, effective and inviting to all students and hence to improve access. High quality programmes available to all, however, are not sufficient if students do not enrol, are not successful, or do not stay in schools. The phenomena of school drop-outs and grade-level repetition in the schools of Oman, particularly at grades 7-9, have been an on-going concern, although the situation has significantly improved in recent years. There has been an annual and continuous decrease in repetition rates from 13.6% in 1996/1997 to 8.0% in 2002-2003. The number of drop-outs is also gradually and continually declining year after year. While in 1995-1996, 7.1% of students dropped-out of schools, the figure decreased to 2.0% in 2002-2003.

(ii) Special Needs schools and programmes
Access to education is meant to be inclusive of all students. In this respect, the Ministry of Education pays special care to Omani youth with special needs. Based on this fact, the Ministry has opened schools for this category of students. These schools offer social, educational, psychological and instructional services to these students according to their abilities and potentialities. In addition to that, joint committees have been formed between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Development aiming at addressing the problems of the Omanis with special needs in the Sultanate of Oman. These committees also discuss suitable ways to help students with special needs to live in better conditions and to lead a normal life.

The role of the Ministry in paying care to students with special needs is represented in the followings:

1. Al Amal school for deaf and mute students. This school is concerned with the education and rehabilitation of those who have lost their hearing
and talking abilities. Total number of students in this school is 244 (male and female) during the school year 2003/2004.

2. A special school for the mentally challenged students which accommodates in the school year 2003/2004 299 students.

3. Omar Ibn Al Khattab Institute for blind students which was opened in accordance with the policy of the government in activating the role of the private sector in development plans. This institute is concerned with the education and instruction of blind students. There are 83 students enrolled in this institute for the school year 2003/2004.

In accordance with the Ministry’s policies to provide specialized curricula that suit students with special needs, a committee was formed to prepare a general framework for the curricula of special education schools. The Ministry was also keen on implementing a programme that addresses learning difficulties among students of basic education schools. This programme has started as from the school year 2000/2001. Total number of schools implementing this programme in the school year 2003/2004 was 30 schools in 8 educational regions.

The Ministry has also provided opportunities to students with special needs to get educated outside the Sultanate of Oman. Some of these students have been sent to other Gulf countries such as the State of Kuwait where 54 students are studying, and another ten students are now studying in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

Efforts of the Ministry of Education in education of blind students are extended to provide those who have completed grade nine with opportunities to follow up their studies through provision of facilities such as cassette recorders so as to record lessons. The Ministry is keen on removing all obstacles so that they can move freely between educational institutions.

In this context, it should be noted that a number of blind students have completed secondary education, attended Sultan Qaboos University, and are now themselves teaching blind students.

See section 1.3 for more details of the Ministry of Education’s efforts to provide more meaningful learning experiences for students with special needs.