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*Educational innovations in action*

EDUCATION AS A MOTOR  
FOR DEVELOPMENT:

Recent education reforms in Oman with  
particular reference to the status of women  
and girls

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INTERNATIONAL BUREAU OF EDUCATION

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The author was deeply impressed not only by the vast knowledge of those he met, but also by their deep dedication to their country's progress. He found that the state of information, including the availability of appropriate statistics, was much better than what seemed to be the case looking from abroad. He also thinks that Oman, with its rich cultural heritage, wisdom of its leaders and people in their constant efforts for modernization and development during the last generation, and the great diversity of its beautiful landscapes, is not sufficiently well known and appreciated by the outside world.

It is therefore his wish that this work will contribute in some small degree to make Oman better known in the West, particularly the meritorious achievements of the country in the field of educational reform with its particular emphasis on the advancement of the female population.

Without question, what the reader finds in this publication is the reflection of the author's perception and not the responsibility of the people with whom he had the privilege of talking and discussing various matters.

## Preface

The International Bureau of Education (IBE) is very pleased to have collaborated with the Omani authorities in the publication of this study as part of its *INNODATA Monographs* series. The case study of recent education reforms in Oman illustrates the very commendable efforts undertaken over the past three and a half decades in building an education system to meet the needs of the people of the country and to ensure its ongoing development. It shows the impressive advances made in women's and girls' education as a priority of educational policy. Numerous other improvements have taken place in the structure of the school system, curriculum and textbook development, student assessment, special education, teacher education and physical conditions of schools, indicating the significant investment the government has made and continues to make to educational provision. With the publication of this study, the IBE looks forward to strengthening its relations with Oman in the interests of further improving the quality of education in this country and the region.

Cecilia Braslavsky  
Director, IBE

# Introduction

## OMAN'S SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

Oman is located in the south-eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, with a total land area of 309,500 square kilometres and sharing borders with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. It overlooks the Arabian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. As a gateway between the Indian Ocean, East Africa and the Arabian Gulf, Oman's location has always been strategically important.

According to Oman's Ministry of National Economy (Information and Publication Centre, 2003) the total population of the country in 2002 was 2,538,000, composed of 1,870,000 Omanis and 668,000 expatriates (26.3%). The latest statistics from 2003 show there were 1.77 million Omanis and 0.552 million expatriates for a total of 2.33 million people.

Most expatriates work in the private sector (547,000 or 82%). Others work in the public sector including the field of education — 7,932 of 41,641 employees in the Ministry of Education are expatriates.<sup>1</sup> In 2000, 74% of the population was Omani nationals but they represented less than 19% of the total labour force (Oman, 2002–2003, p.132). In the same year, Omanis' participation in the private sector labour force was approximately 10%. In 2003, there were 123,000 expatriate government employees (about 20%).

Women are participating more and more in the labour force. According to statistics for 2000 (*LaborSta database* 2003) the total economically active population, including Omanis and expatriates (men and women), was 721,000.<sup>2</sup> There were 598,000 employed men and 123,000 employed women, which translates to 17% of the female population. If we compare that figure with the 11.9% proportion of women in the labour force in 1990, we find that the progress achieved in a decade is considerable.

Women enjoy an outstanding position in the Ministry of Education. According to 2003–2004 statistics, there are 18,249 women on the teaching staff, 1,906 women on the administrative staff of schools and 608 women on the administrative and technical staff working in headquarters and regional offices, for a total of 20,763 (Ministry of Information, 2004).

The gross domestic product (GDP) of Oman was estimated to be 7,809 million Omani rials in 2002; out of 3,009 million rials representing the total government revenue, 75.7% came from the gas and oil sector.<sup>3</sup>

Total oil reserves of Oman known so far are 5,802 million barrels (Ministry of Information, 2003). With the present average daily oil production of 956,000 barrels,<sup>4</sup> these reserves will not last for more than sixteen to seventeen years, while natural gas reserves

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<sup>1</sup> These statistics are as of 30 June 2003. The most recent data collected during the author's visit in 2004, give the figure of 38,466 employees in the Ministry of Education, of which 6,378 are expatriates (around 17%).

<sup>2</sup> Compare with 635,000 from other sources.

<sup>3</sup> Oman's GDP reached the level of 8,302 million rials in 2003. Oil and gas revenues in 2004 constituted 74.6% of GDP, compared to 78.4% in 2000. Note that one Omani rial is equivalent to US\$2.60.

<sup>4</sup> For various reasons this figure has been reduced in 2004.

estimated at 21 trillion cubic feet will last much longer — around sixty-two years — if the production level of 2001 continues.

Non-oil exports of Oman looked very limited as of 2002. Out of 4,295.6 million rials of merchandise exports, the non-oil export added up to 261,6 million rials (6%). Despite the great reliance on the oil sector's income, the overall budgetary deficit of the government was nearly 328 million rials in 2001 (equivalent to 4.3% of GDP), while the deficit for 2003 was predicted to be around 400 million rials (Europa World Year Book, 2003, p. 3182).

We will see later in this study the insistence of Omani authorities in their long-term plan on the diversification of the economy, the development of human resources through education and training, and the stimulation of the private sector's investment. All of these endeavours are vital for the future of the country.

Concerning social characteristics including demography, until recent years Oman still had a rather high fertility rate, with a crude birth rate of 25.6 per 1,000 people in 2002 compared to 32.6 two years before (Information and Publication Centre, 2003). Life expectancy at birth is around 75 for women and 72 for men. The total number of students was 628,971 in 2002, which translates to 24.7% of the total population. The literacy rate in Oman among the adult population is around 80% for men and near 62% for women (UNDP and Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, 2002).

This introduction clearly shows the extent to which enrichment of human capital as a substitute for the richest natural resources of the country — namely oil and gas, which may become exhausted within a few decades — is vitally important for the future of Oman. The realization of this fact has led the authorities in Oman to attach particular value to education and to embark on reforming the entire education system during the last decade. The purpose of this study is therefore to analyse Oman's educational reform, its successes and its problems, always in relation to the overall development objectives of the country, with particular emphasis on the female population as actors or beneficiaries of the reform. After some preliminary remarks, the study will present:

- a detailed description of the reform and its rationale;
- a description of the role of women in the area of education and in the society as a whole;
- an evaluation of the reform, its successes as well as its shortcomings; and
- the long-term perspectives of the country and the tasks ahead of the educational system for the purpose of contributing to the fulfillment of the desired future.

An additional chapter will deal with the co-operation of Oman in the field of education with other countries, particularly in the Gulf region.

## A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF EDUCATION IN OMAN

Oman has had a non-formal educational system throughout its history. However, the history of a modern educational system is not long, since its beginning was only in 1970 under the wise guidance of H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said (Al-Belushi, Al-Adawi & Al-Ketani, 1999).

One can recognize three stages in the development of education in Oman:

1. stage one emphasized the rapid quantitative development of education;
2. stage two started in the early 1980s, when the Ministry of Education initiated serious efforts to improve the quality of education; and
3. stage three beginning from 1995, after the Conference on Oman’s Economic Future, Vision 2020, when a number of reforms were introduced in order to cope with the educational requirements of the future (Ministry of Development, 1997).

Concerning stage one, the statistics show that from 1969 to 1970 there were only three schools in Oman with a total of 909 male students. In 1980–1981 the number of schools had increased to 389<sup>5</sup> and the number of students to 106,032 (70,842 boys and 35,190 girls). At that time, there were also three shift schools that also provided adult education. None of the schools were housed in appropriate buildings since the widespread development of educational services during the 1970s was so fast that it was practically impossible to construct all of the required buildings with the necessary specifications.

During stage two, the quality of education became a concern of the Ministry of Education. All educational system components were reviewed, including teacher education, teaching materials and methods, and curricula, with the help of competent education experts. The school structure at that time was a traditional one, similar to that of many other countries: six years of primary education, three years of preparatory and three years of secondary education. The concept of basic education of ten years duration for all did not yet exist. Table 1 shows the number of schools and students — both girls and boys — from 1980 to 2003.

**TABLE 1. Number of schools and enrolment by gender, 1980–1981, 1995–1996, 2001, 2003**

Year	No. of schools	No. of students	No. of girls	Proportion of girls (%)
1980/1981	373	106,032	35,190	33
1995/1996	953	488,797	236,331	48
2001	993	554,845	270,344	49
2003	1,022	576,472	279,180	48

*Source:* Ministry of Education 2002a; Statistics provided during author’s visit to Oman

Clearly, the introduction of qualitative measures has not stopped the pace of quantitative expansion. In fifteen years (1980–1995) the number of students has been increased by a factor of 4.6.

<sup>5</sup> This figure comes from the Al-Belushi, Al-Adawi & Al-Ketani (1999) report. The (Arabic) statistical book dealing with the evolution of educational statistics from 1970 to 2001, published in December 2002, gives the figure of 373 (Ministry of Education, 2002a).

The specific measures introduced at this stage to improve the quality of education include: construction and equipment of adequate buildings for schools; abolition of the double shift arrangement; better training of teachers;<sup>6</sup> preparation and provision of adequate textbooks; and provision of necessary science teaching equipment. In addition, other measures will be discussed later because most of these reforms are still continuing. In particular, one important aspect has been the movement towards the equalization of education for girls and boys as Table 1 demonstrates.

In stage three from 1995 to 2003, several new reforms were added with the view that all children go through ten years of basic education to better prepare them to face the challenges of the future.

Documentation related to Oman's "Vision 2020" — produced in 1995 on the country's economic future (Ministry of Development, 1997) contains specific policies concerning education inspired by the following statement of the Ministry of Education (Al-Belushi, Al-Adawi & Al-Ketani, 1999):

The challenges facing Oman, particularly the need of self-sufficiency and the need to diversify the economy and keep pace with technological change, require new educational goals to prepare Omanis for life and work in the new conditions created by the modern global economy. These will require a high degree of adaptability and a strong background in mathematics and science in order to independently apply rapidly changing technologies to Oman's needs. The proposed educational reforms are designed to achieve the knowledge and mental skills and attitudes that young Omanis will need to learn and adapt to the very different future most of them will face.

As mentioned in the Vision 2020 document, those policies are (Ministry of Development, 1997):

- to implement and improve the standards of basic education;<sup>7</sup>
- to make secondary education more consistent with the requirements of the future society;
- to pay more attention to the science subjects;
- to introduce the teaching of computers in schools as a basic subject;
- to improve the teaching/learning of the English language in basic education;
- to provide schools with adequate human resources and educational equipment;
- to improve the status of teachers;
- to improve in-service training courses and workshops for all staff in the educational field; and
- to improve teaching methods and education practices according to new trends and to encourage the concept of learning by doing.

One of the outcomes of stages two and three was the increase of the percentage of females both among the students and teaching staff.

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<sup>6</sup> At the beginning, most teachers had only a secondary education or less.

<sup>7</sup> The new system of education was introduced in 1998 in a number of schools and was gradually generalized — grades eight to ten still have to be implemented as well as the reformed secondary school with grades eleven and twelve.

In 2003–2004 out of 576,472 students, 279,180 are girls (48.4%).<sup>8</sup> In all public schools — basic, primary, preparatory and secondary — in the same school year there are 14,096 male teachers (both Omanis and expatriates) and 18,249 female teachers. Therefore, out of 32,345 teachers of both genders, 56% are female.

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<sup>8</sup> The number of students in the age group 6 to 15 enrolled in schools in 2003–2004 is 460,308 students including 225,735 girls and 234,573 boys.

# Chapter 1

## A detailed description of the reforms and the rationale for them

### THE RATIONALE

There is no doubt that the political leadership of the country has been instrumental in introducing these education reforms. The movement in favour of basic Education for All (EFA), supported by the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) throughout the world, recommending a longer period of compulsory education for all children and youth, has received a favourable response from Oman.

A number of speeches by H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said show how much the human resource development of all Omanis has received his full support. He considers that “the development of human resources is the foundation stone of our policy” and explained that “the human being is the power, the instrument and the ultimate arm of national development. Thus, we exert every effort to provide him with these essential qualities so that we can all, together, build our nation”.<sup>9</sup>

Through an examination of various documents, it is clear that there have been several reasons that called for a fundamental change in the education system:

1. Increasing the Omanization ratio — the percentage of Omanis in the labour force — and the necessity, even within the Ministry of Education, of responding to the problem of the shortage of qualified individuals among nationals.
2. Awareness that the dependence of Oman's economy on oil cannot continue forever because “oil is a finite resource, with its price at the mercy of external circumstances beyond local control”.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, Oman should adopt a four front policy: “the diversification of the economy, the development of human skills, the effective exploitation of the available natural resources and the creation of the suitable conditions to encourage the private sector to perform a greater role in the growth of the national economy”.<sup>11</sup>
3. Consciousness of the need to be prepared to encounter the challenges of globalization: “We shall do so through the improvement of our national capabilities, basing the economy on the firm foundation of international competitiveness and

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<sup>9</sup> From *The Royal speeches of H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said, 1970–2000*, on 18 November 1999 (Ministry of Information, 2001, p. 188).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 211

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 213

- productivity, enhancing the performance of our institutions, and recognizing the value of knowledge, technology and research...”<sup>12</sup>
4. Attaining the objective of democratization — accomplished by the establishment of a consultative Assembly in 1981 and later replaced in 1991 by Majlis-ash-shoura (consultative council) — both created by royal decree and by the adoption, again by royal decree, of An-Nizam-al-Assasi-lil-Dawlah, article 13, (Basic Charter) in November 1996, which contains among other things the rights and duties of the people and a number of basic principles including the right to education and to literacy and the obligation of the state to produce a generation physically and morally strong, proud of its country and its cultural heritage and equipped with the knowledge of modern science and technology.

The following statistical information clarifies the above-mentioned points. Concerning point 1, Oman’s Fifth Five Year Development Plan 1996–2000 (Ministry of Development, 1997), states: In 1990, the ratio of Omani labour in the total labour force of Oman was 42.5%; in 1995, this ratio decreased to 35.2%. Therefore, the planned objective of Omanization of the workplace with 44% Omanis and 55% expatriates has not been met.

The Sixth Five Year Development Plan 2001–2005 (Ministry of Development, 2002, p. 12) relates to human resource development and states that even in 2000 the Omanization ratio in both the public and private sectors was not more than 34.3%. Consequently, one of the strategies for human resource development up to 2020 corresponds to that of the Fifth Five Year Development Plan document (Ministry of Development, 1997, p. 193): substituting expatriate labour with highly qualified Omani labour in order to shift the economy from a low value-added to a high value-added one. Furthermore, to increase the participation of Omanis in the labour market in general, with particular focus on the participation of women, the Five Year Development Plan contains a number of measures — policies and mechanisms — in order to apply and achieve this strategy (Ministry of Development, 1997, chapter 5). Under the Sixth Five Year Development Plan, the main objective of diversifying the country’s economic base was pursued with particular emphasis on developing non-petroleum sectors such as tourism, expanding the privatization programme (which began in mid-1994), reducing public expenditures, creating jobs for Omani nationals, increasing funding for education and training, and limiting expatriate employment in certain fields (Europa World Book, 2003, p. 3182).<sup>13</sup>

It will be interesting to fully observe to what extent Omanization of the jobs in various sectors is being met with success. It is reported that Omanis now constitute at least 90% of employees in banking and finance. As far as Omanization in the teaching and educational staff is concerned, for the academic year 2001–2002, out of 26,416 teachers in primary, preparatory, secondary and basic education, 67.2% were Omanis (Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 22). The percentage in other education positions varied between 37.8% (subject inspectors) and 95.6% (laboratory technicians). Over 74% of headmasters and examinations officers were also nationals.

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<sup>13</sup> Another target of the new plan is to increase the number of secondary school students enrolling in higher education and technical colleges.

Latest figures for 2003–2004 show that out of 32,345 teachers at various levels, 80.46% are Omanis. In 2003, 43,953 people were employed in the Ministry of Education, of which 84% were Omanis.

Regarding point 2 above, the latest available statistics show that there is still great dependence on oil income. The Europa Year Book (2003) states that petroleum and natural gas provided an estimated 41.8% of GDP in 2001. With a daily production of around 952,000 barrels, the petroleum reserves are sufficient to sustain production only until 2016. Exports of Omani crude petroleum provided 80.4% of total export earnings in 2001. The proven gas reserves are sustainable for almost sixty-two years at 2001 production level (Europa Year Book, 2003, p. 3181). However, the government budget still largely depends on petroleum and natural gas revenues.

With regard to point 3 concerning the challenge of globalization, one of the important decisions for increasing the quality of education in Oman was to extend the school year from 160 to 180 days (Al-Belushi, Al-Adawi & Al-Ketani, 1999; ICET, 1998). The Ministry of Education also decided to lengthen the lessons from thirty-five to forty minutes and expand the school day from four to five hours. Another decision was to equip Omani schools with modern computer and science laboratories as well as learning resource centres.<sup>14</sup>

The reports from Oman are quite explicit in showing the interest of education authorities in meeting international standards. Al-Belushi, Al-Adawi & Al-Ketani (1999, p. 15) state that the total number of school days finally adopted in Oman compares well to the number of days assigned in various countries. The result of that change is that in the past system the total number of hours for ten years of basic education was 5,693, while with the implementation of reform the number of hours went up to 9,600 (an increase of about 70%). In past arrangements, there was no allocation for computer time; now, 264 hours are devoted to that subject during ten years of basic education. Life skills — useful for Oman's environment — and information technology are also new additions to the curriculum.<sup>15</sup>

Concerning point 4 above, the best indication of progress in education is the tremendous opportunities created for girls and women to reach equal status with boys and men in Oman society. According to a report on the evolution of education statistics, in 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000 the percentage of girls among all students was 16%, 33%, 46.6% and 48.7% respectively (Ministry of Education, 2002a). The percentage of school teachers evolved from 32% in 1970 to 52.2% in 2000. The estimated ratio for 2001 was 58.4%. The statistical department of the Ministry of Education provided the following information on teachers by cycle and by gender in public schools for the school year 2002–2003 (see Table 2).

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<sup>14</sup> In October 2003 we visited several of these schools at various levels and discovered that they are properly equipped with modern technology.

<sup>15</sup> See Al-Belushi, Al-Adawi & Al-Ketani (1999, table, p. 16), which shows great expansion in courses on science, mathematics and English language, increasing by 89%, 90% and 121% respectively.

TABLE 2. Teachers by education cycle and gender in public schools in 2002

Type of school	Male	Female	Female / Male
Basic	3,190	7,950	2.49
Primary	4,192	2,847	0.68
Preparatory	3,139	2,835	0.90
Secondary	2,951	3,279	1.11
Total	13,472	16,911	1.26

*Source:* Data provided by Ministry of Education during author's visit 2003.

The latest statistics for the school year 2003–2004 give the following figures: 14,096 male teachers and 18,244 female teachers at all levels and in all types of schools, with a female/male ratio of 1.29. (Data provided by Ministry of Education during author's visit 2004)

The Ministry of Education explained that the concentration of female teachers in the first cycle of basic education (four years) followed by the second cycle of basic education (six years) is likely due to the natural tendency of women to assume a maternal role. Almost exclusively, female teachers have shown more care and understanding towards the younger generation compared to male teachers. The relative ease of finding a job in the education sector may be another reason for that concentration.

The report on the evolution of educational statistics further states that in 2001 out of 2,681 education administrators, 1,524 were women or 57.5% (Ministry of Education, 2002a). This percentage, compared to the situation in 1974 of 26.4%, shows in itself the long way women have already come in Oman. The latest figures for 2003 show that out of a total of 3,273 education administrators 1,906 are women or 58.2%.

The Ministry of Education (2002a) also supplied the following information concerning female participation in decision-making within the Ministry, where women were represented as:

- one undersecretary for education curriculum and four of sixteen advisers (25%);
- one of fifteen directors-general (6.6%);
- eight of 86 directors (9.4%);
- 305 of 862 supervisors (35%);
- 374 of 674 school principals (55%);
- 18,249 of 32,345 teachers (56%);
- thirty-five of seventy-six committee members responsible for writing curriculum and textbooks (46%); and
- twenty-two of fifty-eight committee members for the revision of curriculum (38%).

It is true that the rate of literacy is still much higher among males compared to females, but the percentage of women and girls in literacy classes is considerably higher than that of men (UNDP and Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, 2002).<sup>16</sup> In 2001–2002

<sup>16</sup> For 1999, the adult literacy rates for males and females were 79.1 % and 59.6 % respectively.

there were 5,214 females and only 418 males in literacy classes (Ministry of Education, 2002a, p. 91). Concerning adult education in specialized centres, the number of females in the same academic year of 2001–2002 was 5,935 compared to 2,761 males (68% and 32% respectively). The latest figures for 2003 indicate that 6,238 women and 348 men attend literacy classes, and 5,834 women and 2,682 men participate in adult education centres.

Data indicating the number of adults who completed literacy programmes from 1973 to 1999 show that during these twenty-six years out of 50,507 persons who followed the programme, 70% were female (Ministry of Education, 2001).

## DESCRIPTION OF THE NEW EDUCATION REFORMS

By the new educational reforms, we refer to those reforms that were planned and implemented after 1995, and particularly after 1998 when the basic education system was introduced.<sup>17</sup> Eleven important aspects of these new reforms are discussed here, namely: 1. improved Ministry of Education structure and procedures; 2. adoption of new objectives for the education system; 3. changes in the structure of the school system; 4. changes in curriculum content and textbook development; 5. changes in student assessment; 6. improved teacher training; 7. improved educational infrastructure; 8. improved organization of schools; 9. promoting special education; 10. encouraging the private sector to enter the education field; and 11. continuous evaluation and improvement of programmes. An additional important reform measure is included — 12. financial effort in favour of education — since Oman also aims to increase the education budget.

### *1. Improvement in the structure and procedures of the Ministry of Education*

Some changes were introduced in the structure of the Ministry of Education in order that the staff could communicate and take actions in an easy, fast and more efficient way. After a committee reviewed the general educational aims and prepared a plan for the coming years, four committees were formed within the Ministry to ensure that the aims were correctly translated into the curriculum, with the main committee headed by the Minister of Education.<sup>18</sup>

### *2. Adoption of new objectives for the education system*

In addition to the general aims of education formulated in 1971, namely to get rid of ignorance and provide education even “under the shadow of trees”,<sup>19</sup> new targets were

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<sup>17</sup> In 1998, the basic education system (comprised of three stages: four years in the first cycle, six years in the second cycle, and in addition for some students two years of secondary education) was implemented in only seventeen schools across the country. The decision was that the new formula would be generalized to all schools by 2000. It is clear that for some time, the two systems will continue in parallel.

<sup>18</sup> For the description of the tasks of the committees, see Al-Belushi, Al-Adawi & Al-Ketani (1999) and Ministry of Education (2001, p. 37–38). In addition to the main committee, the other three committees were responsible for: (1) curricula, assessment (examinations) and training; (2) curricula subject committee; and (3) planning and building committee (including finance).

<sup>19</sup> From a speech in 1972 by H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said to celebrate the second anniversary of National Day.

considered such as satisfying human resource requirements of the future economic development and ensuring the technological and scientific advancement of the country.

### *3. Changes in the structure of the school system*

This aspect refers to a change in the structure of the school system from the previous primary, preparatory and secondary levels with six, three and three years respectively to the new ten years of basic education with two cycles of four and six years each, leading for most students to two years of secondary education or vocational training. According to the Ministry, implementing a basic education system will reduce the chance of students leaving the school system at an early age.

### *4. Changes in curriculum content and textbook development*

The changes in the curriculum have been one of the most important aspects of the new reform. Two issues came under particular attention: (1) the content of the curricula, and (2) the teaching methods. Regarding the method, teachers were advised and trained to refrain from basing their teaching and assessment on rote learning and memorization. They were also encouraged to concentrate on learning through experience. The Ministry emphasized that the new curricula should foster critical thinking skills and problem solving capacity among students and provide opportunities for practical experience and application to real life situations. To introduce the change, international experts were consulted and the Ministry tried to use appropriate scientific methods to plan and implement the desired change.

Concerning the content of the curricula, consideration was given to:

- areas of knowledge taught to students in developed countries; and
- relevance of the content to the culture and other conditions of Omani society as well as to the age, background and level of thinking of the learners (Al-Belushi, Al-Adawi & Al-Ketani, 1999, p. 17).

With regard to textbook development, according to the Oman country profile (IBE, 2003), “The Ministry of Education provides all textbooks at no charge to all students. The Curriculum Development Directorate carries out, through its experts and specialists, the tasks of revising, modernizing and developing the contents of textbooks and all relevant elements of curricula. The textbooks are printed by local printers”. The country profile further indicates that the “content of the instructional materials take account of international trends, the needs of Omani society and the overall development objectives” (IBE, 2003). One of these objectives is to link education outcomes with labour market demands.<sup>20</sup> The introduction of computer studies, information technology and life skills

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<sup>20</sup> According to the Fifth Five Year Development Plan document (Ministry of Development, 1997, p.255–256), one of the important challenges facing the country is the incapacity of education and training output to meet the labour market requirements. This has led to an increase in the size of the expatriate labour force from 57.5% to 64.8% between 1990 and 1995.

<sup>21</sup> The publication Oman 2002–2003 (p. 129–132) produced by the Ministry of Information provides the following data: Number of higher technical industrial colleges: One in 1984, and five in 1993. In 1999, Oman technical colleges launched a programme to provide both scientific (theoretical) and technical (practical) skills and train young Omanians as technicians. Vocational training is taking place in four centres. In 2001–2002, these centres took in 1,841 trainees. Between 1994–1995 and 2000–2001, these centres

and the emphasis on experiential learning and practical work within the framework of general education has been one way of responding to that need. The expansion of technical–vocational education, which is still limited in Oman, could be another response.<sup>21</sup>

As stated earlier, the number of school days during the year was extended from 160 to 180 days. In basic education schools, there are eight periods (courses) per day and each period lasts for forty minutes. Because of the great increase in the number of hours during ten years of basic education (3,907 additional hours), the possibility was created for strengthening science courses (including mathematics) and English language courses. Information technology (120 hours) and computer skills were also added (264 hours). As Sayyid Saud Al Busaidi, the Minister of Education indicated in 1997, Omani students need to be exposed to similar knowledge to what is offered to students in developed countries so they will be able to complete their education or attend training sessions in those countries without problems. This open-mindedness clearly shows that the authorities are quite conscious of the implications for Oman of the globalization process underway. This also explains why a considerable number of Omanis are already studying abroad.<sup>22</sup>

One aspect of recent curricular reform has been the introduction of environmental life skills, as mentioned before, in order to link school learning with the student's local environment characteristics and needs. Fields such as geography, health, ecology, nutrition, traditional culture and craft, family life, citizenship and many other subjects related to the knowledge requirements of each age group are introduced in well designed and colourful books that are easy and attractive to read, comparable to any good reading material. Ensuring the transfer of skills and knowledge into the students' practical world has been the main focus of the environmental life skills programme and textbooks.

It is too soon for outside observers to make an accurate evaluation of the degree to which changes in the curriculum content and teaching methods have responded to expectations. There is no doubt that some of the proposed changes correspond to the best practices in the developed countries such as making students the centre of education, encouraging students to investigate and find answers to questions themselves, promulgating experiential learning and work in co-operative groups, and inviting students to express their views and engage in participatory learning. But it is legitimate to ask how successful teachers and administrators have been in introducing these recommended practices. At the present time the Ministry is embarked on the evaluation of the first cycle and the results will become available soon.

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produced 4,730 semi-skilled and 2,574 skilled workers. There are also 164 private institutes and centres offering training in technical, vocational and administrative disciplines. The government tries to ensure that the public and private vocational training sectors complement each other. Training courses based on the national vocational qualifications (NVQ) system have been introduced at training centres with certificates awarded by British institutions. NVQ provides skilled and semi-skilled workers, while the GNVQ (general national vocational qualifications) system provides technicians and skilled labour.

In addition, according to the Fifth Development Plan (p. 479) the government provides grants for 70% of the cost of study in private institutions (Ministry of Development, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> According to a statistical book published for the school year 2001–2002, the total number of Omani students in universities abroad was 11,126 (4,348 men and 6,778 women), with the great majority concentrated in the field of education (6,514), then in commerce and administration sciences (1,150), engineering (678), computer sciences (640) and the rest scattered in other fields (literature, science, medicine, pharmacology, law, etc) (Ministry of Higher Education, 2002a).

### *5. Changes in student assessment*

As the content and method of teaching has changed, there was a need to change the assessment of students. If the curriculum de-emphasizes rote memorization, the examination methods should reflect that change. Among different types of assessment, it seems that Oman is planning to implement performance assessment in its reform (Al-Belushi, Al-Adawi & Al-Ketani, 1999, p. 22). The national report on the development of education informs us that the Ministry of Education has taken two decisions in that regard (Ministry of Education, 2001, p.22):

- to avoid complete dependence on examinations as the basic measurement tool to evaluate students' school achievements; and
- to abolish promotion examinations in cycle one of basic education and instead adopt a continuous formative assessment system.<sup>23</sup>

The Ministry intends to take inspiration from some of the modern thinking about assessment methodology. For example, instead of summative assessment concentrating on factual contents of the students' answers, it plans to use formative assessment of a wide range of aspects of learning, e.g. knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Students' progress will no longer be measured in comparison to others in the class, but rather in terms of stated criteria that are known in advance by the students and that are in tune with their individual abilities. A report on the development of education in Oman provides more information including a number of tables sharing the results of continuous assessment of students at various levels of education and in different fields of study (Ministry of Education, 2001, p.46–50).

### *6. Improved teacher training*

Without doubt, the key to every education reform depends on the qualifications and the attitudes of the teachers. Two important actions have been taken in Oman in order to prepare teachers to implement the reform. The first one step was to launch an in-service training programme to help teachers already in the system to understand the reform and to teach in accordance with the new exigencies. The second action was to encourage all the current elementary teachers who had only two years of college education to go through sufficient training to upgrade their qualifications to a bachelor degree in education. In addition to these two measures, the intention is to send teachers abroad for study in the educational sciences. The following statistical information demonstrates the progress already achieved as a result of teacher training (see Table 3).

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<sup>23</sup> See Al-Belushi, Al-Adawi & Al-Ketani (1999, p. 23) who present a table comparing old and new methods of assessment.

TABLE 3. Evolution of the number of teachers between 1970 and 2003

Year	1970	1980	1990	2001	2003
No. of teachers	196	5,150	15,121	28,385	32,345

Source: Ministry of Education, 2002a; data provided by Ministry of Education during author's visit.

The last figure is comprised of 45.7% males and 53.3% females, which is a good indication of the role of women in the teaching profession.

Data from a table on the distribution of teachers in public schools by cycle, nationality, gender and qualification reproduced in a 2001-2002 CD-Rom prepared by the Ministry of Education (2002a), show a significant concentration of teachers with high qualifications — that is, a university degree at a minimum. Out of 28,385 teachers, of which 20,085 are Omanis and 8,300 expatriate (29.2%), 17,707 (62.4%) have at least a university degree, for example, a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree. There are 6,426 Omani female teachers and 4,350 Omani male teachers who hold a university diploma, a difference that merits particular attention.<sup>24</sup> The latest figures for 2003–2004 show that out of 32,345 teachers comprised of 26,026 Omanis and 6,319 expatriates, 22,944 are University diploma holders (70%) including 4,285 Omani women and 4,316 Omani men.

The statistics of the College of Education in Oman, published by the Ministry of Higher Education (2002) for the academic year 2001–2002 show that out of 8,684 students, 5,111 are women and only 3,573 are men (58.9% compared to 41.1% respectively). As mentioned already, out of 11,126 Omanis studying in universities abroad, 6,778 are women (61%). If the dominant field of study of the science of education is considered, there is an even greater majority of women (5,220 out of 6,514 or 80%).

### 7. Improved educational infrastructure

During our visit to Oman, which included visits to all types of educational institutions including colleges of education and Sultan Qaboos University, we found that most of them were housed in appropriate buildings, having at their disposition computers, science labs, libraries, learning centres, etc. Basic education schools have received particular attention in these respects. Many education colleges also maintain dormitories for students, particularly girls, coming from other cities, towns or villages. In both the Third and Fourth Five Year Development Plans, particular attention was paid to building schools. In the fourth plan (1991–1995), the Ministry of Education provided basic facilities such as libraries, laboratories and home economics rooms in the new school buildings.

We should specify that until 1999, a good number of schools were double shift (Al-Belushi, Al-Adawi & Al-Ketani, 1999). With the abolition of that arrangement, not only did it become possible to increase each class period and to extend the school year from 160 to 180 days, but it also made better use of buildings and allowed student involvement in a number of school activities such as working in science labs, visiting the libraries, etc. The Ministry of Education is also responsible for readily providing teaching aids, equipment,

<sup>24</sup> Among expatriates, 3,384 men and 3,547 women are University diploma holders. Here also females surpass males.

tools and necessary materials for teaching science. It does not seem that the private schools and colleges are able to compete with the public sector in this respect.

#### *8. Improved organization of schools*

One of the most appropriate decisions of the Ministry of Education was to support decentralized administration of the system through regional directorates of education, the education council and the inter-regional council of parents.

As the IBE (2003) country profile specifies, “In 1993, the Ministry delegated the responsibility of school management to the local administrative bodies and school staff. School administration is formed of a school head, an assistant school head, teachers, administrators and some technical staff such as librarians and laboratory technicians...To promote the participatory approach in school management, the school charter has stipulated that support councils consisting of the school board, students councils and parent–teacher associations shall assist the school head in running the schools and in achieving educational objectives”.

Visiting some schools in Oman, we found an atmosphere of friendly collaboration among administration and teaching staff at school level. Some teachers were able to introduce innovations, which shows that there is no imposed or authoritarian way of running schools. The idea of having parent–teacher associations at central and regional levels as well as the level of school is to be commended.

#### *9. Promoting special education*

One of the most valuable actions taken by the Ministry of Education was to provide education facilities for students who are blind, deaf or have other physical or mental handicaps.

According to the publication, *Evolution of educational statistics in the Sultanate, 1990–2001* (Ministry of Education, 2002a), there are three government schools dealing with special education<sup>25</sup> with 587 students and 104 teachers.<sup>26</sup> The Ministry supervises one school (Al-Amal) for deaf students and one for students with mental handicaps. Blind students are sent abroad to study in specialized institutes, according to the country profile, though a special school for these students is now established in Oman. Those who complete their preparatory education are allowed to join mainstream secondary schools.

The Al-Amal school covers the eleven years of the elementary and preparatory levels. In the subsequent preparatory school, the students are given some vocational training such as carpentry, typing and tailoring. The school for students with mental handicaps also covers eleven years of basic education and offers training in carpentry and weaving. The school for blind students covers eleven years as well.

Out of the total number of students in special education, 222 or 38% are girls. Among teachers of special education, eighty-five (or 82%) are women, perhaps an indication of women’s greater patience and compassion. The Department of Special Education was established in 1974–1975 within the Ministry of Education.

In addition, in January 2002, a privately funded school for blind students, Omar bin Al Khattab Institute, was launched in Seeb. Over 300 students who are visually impaired

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<sup>25</sup> Until 1998–1999 there were only two schools with 477 students for this type of education. The third school was added in 1999–2000.

<sup>26</sup> The latest statistics (2003–2004) show 626 students and 128 teachers. (Data provided during author’s visit)

from across Oman are taught at this institute. There are also fourteen Alwafa voluntary social centres for the care of 1,282 children with disabilities in the regions. A private sector company and volunteers assist these centres.

#### 10. *Encouraging the private sector to enter the education field*

The development plan documents are explicit in encouraging private investment both in the fields of economy and in the social areas. Table 4 shows the role private initiative is playing in the area of education.<sup>27</sup>

TABLE 4. Figures on private and public education in Oman 2002-2003

Type of education	No.of schools	No.of classes	No.of students
Public	1,019	18,538	578,003
Private	132	1,302	23,166

Source: Sultan Qaboos University, 2003b.

Out of a total of 601,169 students, only 3.85% are in private institutions. As mentioned in the country profile (IBE, 2003), the private sector plays a supportive role particularly in extending elementary education to all school age children. Kindergartens and nurseries are mainly privately owned. Private schools also offer education at elementary, preparatory and secondary levels.

The private sector is active at the university and college level and has so far set up twelve private universities and higher education colleges (Ministry of Information, 2003). The students of these private institutions can pursue a vast number of fields such as administrative sciences, business, modern sciences and technologies, engineering and medicine. There were 2,079 students in 1999–2000 and 5,496 in 2001–2002. In addition, the “government supports private institutions by the provision of land, exemption from some customs duties and grants equivalent to 50% of paid-up capital, up to a maximum of 3 million rials” (Ministry of Information, 2003). The Higher Education Council provides scholarships for a good number of students in private institutions. These universities and colleges are under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education and most of them are affiliated with outside recognized bodies to ensure the right standards.

#### 11. *Continuous evaluation and improvement of programmes*

One important activity of the Ministry of Education is to follow-up programmes that have been reformed, evaluate them regularly and improve them if necessary.<sup>28</sup> There are reviewing committees on basic education both at central and regional levels that visit schools four times a year for this purpose. Core teams have been created in various regions that include inspectors and regional training staff, whose function is to train basic education

<sup>27</sup> As of 2003–2004 there are 1,022 public education schools compared to 129 private ones; the number of students in public and private schools are 576,472 and 23,553 respectively. (Data provided during author’s visit

<sup>28</sup> As previously mentioned, the ministry has evaluated the first cycle of basic education.

staff on site in their regions (Al-Belushi, Al-Adawi & Al-Ketani, 1999, p. 26–27). New teachers in basic education also go through “peer training” by being “twinned” with more experienced teachers already in the field.

It seems that a vast plan has been prepared and implemented for the training of all categories involved: inspectors, senior teachers, heads of schools and their assistants. A publication prepared in 2002 by the Department of Human Resource Development of the Ministry of Education (2002b), indicates the training programme for each category of education staff and each individual, including the subject area, length and location of training inside and outside the county. The 202-page document is in Arabic.

The Ministry also conducts, with the help of the Education Research Centre at Sultan Qaboos University, various research projects aimed at the improvement and development of the education system (IBE, 2003). In his speech at Sultan Qaboos University in May 2000, H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said expressed his wish that academic research be promoted in all fields:

Today’s theories [he added] may change tomorrow and it is imperative that we continually keep up to date with these changes. For this reason, we have ordered that research programmes be supported annually at our personal expense, above and beyond the allocations laid down in the University budget. We shall not stint but will begin with an appropriate sum, which will increase in proportion to the increase in research needs.<sup>29</sup>

The social policies section of the Fifth Five Year Development Plan, in relation to one of the most important objectives of the plan, “encourages scientific research and establishing a greater connection between the University and the needs of the community” (Ministry of Development, 1997). For the achievement of that objective, it is recommended that “university teaching staff be motivated and encouraged to conduct research and studies...in relation to development sectors of the country” (Ibid. p. 477).<sup>30</sup>

### *12. Financial effort in favour of education*

Since education and human resource development is a national priority, there is considerable effort by the government regarding financing. According to a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report, public education expenditure from 1995 to 1997 was 4.5% of GNP (UNDP and Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, 2002). This represents 16.4% of the total government expenditure. It should be added that with the application of the privatization policy, the government contributed largely, both directly and indirectly, to the expenses of the private education system in order to motivate and encourage private investors. Table 5 shows the structure of total investment in the Fifth and Sixth Five Year Development plans (1995–2000 and 2001–2005).

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<sup>29</sup> Speech made at the occasion of a royal visit fourteen years after the university was established.

<sup>30</sup> It was not possible to find out how much was allocated by the Plan and how much was actually implemented. We find in the Arab Human Development Report of 2002 that between 1990 and 1995, 466 papers in science and technology have been published by Oman’s scholars or referred to in international journals (UNDP and Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, 2002).

TABLE 5. Projected statistics on overall proportion of private and public investment in Oman 1995–2000 and 2001–2005

Period	Private investment	Public investment
Fifth Five Year Plan (1995–2000)	37.7 %	62.3%
Sixth Five Year Plan (2001–2005)	53.9%	46.1%

Source: Ministry of Development, 1997, 2002.

As indicated by the Oman country profile, the Ministry of Education provides private schools with textbooks and administrative and educational instructions (IBE, 2003). Teachers' supervision is offered free of charge to private schools. The Ministry also provides training to the teaching staff of these schools. The Ministry approves fees on condition that the private schools provide a quality education. Private higher education institutions set their fees without Ministry interference.

As previously indicated, the government provides grants up to 70% of the cost of studying in private technical and vocational institutions as approved in the Fifth Five Year Development Plan, with the limit of the grants set at 1,200 rials per student in technical fields and 1000 rials in administrative fields. The plan document adds that the Council of Ministers decided that the government should bear 100% of the cost of technical education and vocational training conducted by the private institutes in the first stage (Ministry of Development, 1997, p. 479). Table 6 gives annual distribution of allocations for human resource development through various Ministries including the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education.

TABLE 6. Annual distribution of government allocations for human resource development in Oman: 1996, 1998, 2000

Government Divisions	1996	1998	2000
Total of all responsible bodies (in million rials)	28.2	68.0	63.8
Ministries of Education and Higher Education (in million rials)	21.0	18.8	43.3

Source: Ministry of Development, 1997.

## THE HIGHER EDUCATION COUNCIL AND ITS FUNCTIONS

In relation to the funding of education and to the promotion of research, we should not forget to mention the role played by an important institution called the Higher Education Council established by royal decree in 1998. Both the Minister of Education and the Minister of Higher Education, with other interested colleagues, sit on the council. The most important reasons for establishing the council were to develop public policies for higher education and scientific research in universities and institutions of higher education and to align Oman's education institutions with the needs of the nation. The council regulates student numbers and intake procedures, evaluates the performance of existing institutions and approves proposals for new private universities. Though the council deals mainly with

higher education institutions, its decisions, if endorsed by the Cabinet of Ministers and H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said, influence other levels of education, including vocational training, expanding education and training opportunities for secondary school leavers, supporting private education institutions and providing scholarship for students from low-income families.

Some of the achievements of the council are:

- permission for the first private university to be established in Sohar;
- helping the establishment of the council for academic accreditation;
- approval of 1,000 scholarships for male and female students needing financial assistance;
- accepting an increase in the number of secondary school graduates to be admitted to Sultan Qaboos University and the technical colleges;
- approval of the creation of a “career guidance service” under the direction of the Ministry of Education; and
- preparation of a national development strategy for both general and higher education for the period 2006-2020.

## Chapter 2

### The place and role of girls and women in education and public life

Oman is one of the Muslim and Arab countries where the status of women has improved considerably during the last few decades. This improvement is very much due to the progress the female population has achieved during one generation in the field of education. As noted above, nearly 49% of all students were girls in 2001–2002, around 54% of teachers were female, women held a good proportion of high positions in the Ministry of Education, and women surpass men in number in literacy classes.

The growing visibility and active involvement of women in the education sector has spread to other areas of public life including the political arena. Thanks to a decree by H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said, a consultative assembly was created in 1981 and replaced in 1991 by the Majlisal-Shoura. Women were nominated as candidates for the first time in 1994 and two women were subsequently appointed to the Majlisal-Shoura that year. More and more women are playing prominent roles in various sectors of public life.

As of June 2004, three women were serving as government ministers and several Ministries benefit from the service of women undersecretaries. A report published in 2001 provides the following data (Ministry of Social Development, 2001):

- The number of women in the public sector increased from 1,364 in 1980 to 18,641 in 2000 (nearly 19% of all people working in the government). In the private sector, the number of women employees increased from 2,840 in 1994 to 10,084 in 2000.
- In primary and secondary education the percentage of female students increased from 12.7% in 1971–1972 to 48.7% in 1999–2000. In various higher education institutions, the share of women varied between 25% (Sharia and law) and 59% (health sciences).
- In 1999–2000, there were four female under-secretaries in the following Ministries: education, higher education, national economy and social development. There was one female ambassador (to the Netherlands). There were two female members of the municipal council among other important positions that were assigned to women.
- There were 1,825 individual enterprises (without associates) belonging to women; the number of women in societies or companies with several associates was around 1,995.

The Omani Women's Association (OWA), which began in Muscat in 1970 and then expanded at the beginning of the 1980s to at least twenty-seven localities, has an active role in the country's social development. OWA recruits women for voluntary work in areas such as running workshops and training courses, lectures, seminars and exhibitions. At the end of 2002, OWA had 3,592 members (Ministry of Information, 2003) and thirty-eight branches have been opened in most of the provincial entities (*wilayáts*). Twelve Women

Training Centres have been set up with the help of government or local institutions to improve the productivity of Omani families and also to preserve the country's heritage. In 2001, nearly 4,000 women attended these training centres. An additional fourteen rural centres in remote regions provide training in crafts and traditional works. There are forty-one kindergartens attached to OWA. Among other activities of OWA are an infant school and a children's care home along with literacy classes for adults.<sup>31</sup>

Because of the high priority in Oman of education, training and development of human resources, it seems that the best way for women to gradually achieve a better place in society and to move towards equal rights and privileges is to respond specifically to this challenge. Opening the third term of the Council of Oman<sup>32</sup> on 21 October 2003, H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said declared the following:

In urging young Omanis to make use of the available educational, training and job opportunities, we should like every one to understand that our repeated calls for attention to be given to human resources — to education, training and employment — reflect the importance we attach to this vital issue, an issue which we regard as the cornerstone of the future and the main stimulus enabling us to reach our goals (*Times of Oman*, 2003, p.2).

Women's participation in higher education is very impressive. The numbers of registered female students at the Sultan Qaboos University has been rising steadily over the years with overall female registration exceeding male for six years from 1992 to 1997 (Sultan Qaboos University, 2003b). Of the total registered students at the University in 2002/2003, there were 5888 females compared to 5946 males. A very small percentage of both male and female students are from other countries.

Female students significantly outnumber males in a number of academic branches, including science, see Table 7:

TABLE 7. Comparison of male/female registration in various University colleges

College	Female	Male	Total
Agriculture and marine sciences	350	495	845
Arts and social sciences	1,169	626	1795
Commerce and economics	879	1032	1911
Education	1272	782	2054
Engineering	218	1114	1332

<sup>31</sup> A number of OWA publications exist in Arabic such as annual reports or national strategy for the advancement of Oman women.

<sup>32</sup> Oman has two councils: a state council appointed by the Sultan as the upper chamber and a consultative council or Majlis-ash-Shura, which plays a purely advisory role reviewing proposed legislation and submitting suggestions and proposal to members, therefore having no formal legislative power. With the permission of H.M.Sultan Qaboos bin Said, native born citizens voted for the first time in the election of council members in October 2003.

Medicine and health sciences	395	368	763
Science	707	652	1359

*Source:* Sultan Qaboos University, 2003b

Men outnumber women in engineering, commerce and economics and agriculture.<sup>33</sup> With regard to the college of Sharia and law, the number of students in 2001–2002 was 527, the majority being male (368 or 70%). Since 1994, the number of female graduates at bachelor degree level has been consistently higher than males (with totals in 2002 of 613 women and 581 men). The number of Masters level female graduates has fluctuated since 1995 but surged from 2 in 2000 to 47 in 2002 (compared to 64 males). (Sultan Qaboos University, 2003b)

With Omanization<sup>34</sup> as one of the pillars of government policy, women and girls are expected to acquire appropriate knowledge and skills. This strategy was launched in 1978 in order to secure employment for the growing number of young Omanis entering the labour market every year. Table 8 shows the distribution of the labour force in 2001–2002.

TABLE 8. Distribution of the labour force in Oman in 2001–2002

Sectors	Omanis	Expatriates
Civil service	63,934	20,728
Private sector	55,671	494,699
Total	119,605	515,427

*Source:* Ministry of Information, 2003

This means that in the labour force, the proportion of Oman nationals is only 18.8%. However, the recruitment of expatriate labour is now under greater control and a detailed labour guide is produced to monitor Omanization in the private sector. The government seeks by different methods to provide more jobs for nationals, including through vocational training. With respect to human resource development, we do not have access to detailed information to determine the percentage of women in technical–vocational training. It seems that with the exception of secretarial and administrative work, other fields are not presently very attractive to women.

As stated earlier, some educated women have attained positions of authority in government and business. Approximately 30% of all civil servants are women, and of these 59% are Omani citizens. In the public sector women are entitled to equal pay for equal work, though not all private sector employers observe such regulations. Some educated women still face job discrimination because prospective employers fear that they might

<sup>33</sup> With regard to engineering and agriculture, women have nevertheless shown considerable progress since in 1997–1998 there were no women in the college of engineering and the number of women in the college of agriculture was two out of a total of 220 students (IBE, 2003).

<sup>34</sup> Total population of Oman in 2000 was around 2.4 million, with 1,778,000 Omani nationals (74%) and 624,000 expatriate residents (26%).

resign to marry or raise a family, a problem found in many countries and not specific to Oman (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2002).

Oman is carefully following the recommendations approved at international women’s conferences organized by the United Nations. The report on the implementation of the Beijing Plan of Action 2000 and in the spirit of the Beijing conference recommendations (1995), prepared jointly by the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Vocational Training and UNICEF (2001), titled Status of Women in the Sultanate of Oman, emphasized how the Fifth Five Year Development Plan of Oman (1996–2000) gave particular attention to improving economic and social status of women.<sup>35</sup> The report starts with the obstacles to the full participation of women in the social and economic life, namely the relatively low profile of women, illiteracy, traditional views about the role of women, women’s lack of awareness of their rights and the shortage of support services for women — such as nurseries, employment related information and access to development loans. The Fifth and Sixth Five Year Development Plans have addressed all of these issues.

The report continues with a good picture of financial and institutional measures taken in Oman for the advancement of women, describing the achievements by women in various areas within the framework of the Beijing Plan of Action and finishing with some recommendations for the advancement of women within the context of Omanization such as enhancing women’s participation in the workforce. Table 9 summarizes what the report identifies as the “most significant indicators of women’s development”

TABLE 9. Women’s development between 1993 and 1998

Participation of women	1993 (%)	1998 (%)
Women in primary education	47.6	48.2
Women in secondary education	51.1	51.4
Women in S. Q. University	49.6	52.0
Women employed in government sector	20.4 <sup>1</sup>	26.0
Women in industrial activity	20.9	26.4 <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 1995

<sup>2</sup> 1996

Source: Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Vocational Training and UNICEF, 2001.

The report concludes with a number of recommendations for future action:

- combat literacy in remote areas;

<sup>35</sup> The report was prepared in 2000 but published in 2001 to reflect achievements during 1995–2000; the next report will be prepared in 2005. From the beginning, the report refers to three priorities incorporated in the Fifth Five Year Development Plan document: (1) increase the number of students enrolled in various disciplines of technical education and vocational training (p.502); (2) increase the participation and involvement of Omani women in the national work force (p.503); and (3) increase the rate of Omani women’s participation in economic activities within the context of gender parity (Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Vocational Training and UNICEF, 2001, p.505).

- provide women-oriented services, particularly in the education field;
- improve women's skills through training courses;
- train women in productive activities, enabling women to acquire new skills, excel in handicrafts and implement small income-generating projects;
- expand productive job opportunities by providing credit facilities for women, establish associations for self-supporting women and guarantee the necessary capital, for example for developing youth projects;
- develop a sense of public participation and co-operation with local and rural development centres; and
- enhance the status of women in the labour market, particularly in non-government sectors.

In addition, the report proposes to develop a gender-based statistical database, as a responsibility of the social statistics directorate of the Ministry of National Economy.

## Chapter 3

### Evaluation of the reforms

As the reforms have not been fully implemented and the old system and the new one (basic education) are co-existing, an overall summative evaluation is left to the future. The evaluation work that is being done now relates more to the implementation process (formative evaluation) than to the whole philosophy of the reform (Al-Belushi, Al-dawi & Al-Ketani, 1999, p. 29–30). Several committees in the Ministry of Education are responsible for carrying out the implementation evaluation.

In a short period of time Oman has achieved considerable progress in the area of education. Considering that 90.6% of children and youth are enrolled in the primary and basic cycle (net), 71.7% in the preparatory cycle and 59.9% in the secondary cycle, it is clear the country is very close to achieving the high objective of universal education.

It is heartening to observe that from the beginning of Oman's renaissance in 1970, the leadership was well aware of the priority of human resource development, given the fact that the petroleum income on which the economy is very much dependent will not last long.<sup>36</sup>

Being open to new ideas in the international community after a period of rapid quantitative development in its educational system, Oman embarked on qualitative and structural reforms guaranteeing at least ten years education to all and encouraged the access of youth to higher education through the creation of Sultan Qaboos University in 1986, by launching study abroad programmes in the important university fields and providing incentives for the establishment of private colleges and higher education institutions in the country.<sup>37</sup>

One of the most important achievements of the reforms has been providing equal opportunities for girls and boys in the field of education. The Ministry of Social Development report (2001) states that the percentage of women in post-secondary learning institutions were as follows: 49% in the faculty of education; 34% in the faculty of industrial technology; 59% in the health education college; 55% in banking courses; 25% in faculty of law and Sharia, 49% in the Qaboos University Baccalaureate degree programme and 35% in the same university in higher level courses. The report also gives the percentage of women studying in higher education institutions outside the country as

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<sup>36</sup> The proven petroleum reserves of 5,500 million barrels at the end of 2001, taking into account the production of 959,000 barrels per day, will be sustained only until 2016. Proven gas reserves will be sufficient for approximately sixty-two years at the 2001 production level. For various reasons the per day oil production has been reduced in the past year.

<sup>37</sup> Examples of these efforts so far are: 1. college of administrative science; 2. modern college of business and science; 3. Muscat college; 4. the national college for sciences and technology; 5. Sohar University; 6. the fire and safety engineering college; 7. Caledonian college of engineering; 8. Mazoon college of administration and applied sciences; 9. Al Zahra college for girls; 10. Sur University college; 11. Oman medical college; 12. Waljat Institute of Applied Sciences; 13. Institute of Banking and Financial studies; 14. the Oman academy for hospital and tourism. Total registered students is 6,234.

61.5%. The process of modernization of the country can be accelerated by these Oman graduates returning home.

There is no doubt that the reforms have had a valuable impact on the life of women. As more and more girls and women benefit from education, a higher percentage of them will enter the labour market and not only to look for jobs or positions traditionally designated for women, but also to seek new areas of activity.<sup>38</sup>

According to the UNDP and Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (2002) report, among Arab countries Oman has a high population growth (3% or more). The situation — a fertility rate of 5.85 per woman— is unlikely to continue in the near future, particularly in urban areas.<sup>39</sup> During the author's visit, it was suggested that the population growth is now declining, which may be due as much to the rush of women to study and work outside the home as it is to the success of family planning programmes. The report further states that in 1997, the rate of labour force participation in Oman's economic activity was 42.9% for men and 8.6% for women (p. 158). This will also necessarily change, partly due to the requirements of Omanization as well as the need to have a greater percentage of women entering the labour market.

Though educational reform efforts have had many successes and achievements, it is not possible to conclude that everything has gone well without encountering any problems. Several categories of problems that authorities encountered in the implementation phase and for which they found subsequent solutions have been identified (Ministry of Education, 2001):

- a cautious attitude by some teachers vis-à-vis the reform;
- shortage of the necessary equipment and tools;
- lack of sufficient “national” expertise to teach some of the new subjects (courses);
- absence of a specialized educational research centre;
- time needed for rapid construction of new schools or classrooms in order to abolish the double shift system; and
- shortage of know-how to use new technology or to prepare instructional materials or produce these materials in attractive form and in sufficient quantity in a short period of time.

Among major problems facing the education system at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the same report adds the following:

- insufficient number of Omani qualified teachers;
- shortage of professional Omani personnel;
- little education research;

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<sup>38</sup> In 1970 there were only 1,136 girls in schools; in 2001, there were 276,299 (243 times more). This cannot be without impact on family life, age of girls at marriage, etc. In 1991 and in 2001 there were 15,403 and 59,192 girls at secondary schools (the age that corresponds to early marriage in Muslim countries). In 2001–2002, 3,067 females were studying in private universities and colleges and the number of registered women students at Sultan Qaboos University was 5,247.

<sup>39</sup> According to the report, only 12% of the Oman population in 1996 was urban. This seems to be the lowest in the Arab countries (UNDP and Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, 2002. p. 143).

- difficulty in providing sufficient funds for development; and
- reluctance of the private sector to participate in providing educational opportunities.

The experience during 2003 has shown that it is not easy to replace expatriate human resources by Omani nationals. In 2002, out of 547,477 expatriate workers in the private sector, 110,637 or 19% individuals have already received secondary and in some cases university education. With the current number of Omani graduates from secondary and higher education institutions, it will take a long time before those expatriates can be replaced. The greatest concentration of expatriate activity is in the wholesale and retail trade (148,350 workers), thus many more Omanis should be trained and become experienced in that particular activity.

Considering all of the successes and all of the problems of educational reform, we envisage the highest priority actions for the coming years as follows:

- Complete the basic education system and reform of the secondary education (grades eleven and twelve) to coincide with important improvements already taking place in grades one to ten of the basic cycle.
- Provide an overall summative evaluation of the reform by comparing achievements with objectives.
- Eliminate problems and bottlenecks identified in this paper.
- Create a national research centre, including a section on education with the assistance of the international agencies active in the field such as UNESCO.
- Strengthen the literacy effort and the adult education endeavour.
- Attain a 100% enrolment rate in schools compared to the respective age groups of students, at least up to the end of the secondary cycle. For the academic year 2002–2003, the net enrolment rate for the primary and basic cycle was 91.1% for boys and 90.1% for girls; for the preparatory cycle it was 71.1% for boys and 72.4% for girls, and for the secondary cycle it was only 54.9% for boys and 65.1% for girls.
- Expand and diversify technical education and vocational training with necessary attention to the requirements of the labour market.

One of the important side effects of the educational reform in Oman has been to create an atmosphere of dynamism, enthusiasm and goal orientation within the appropriate Ministry. One indication of this interest is found in the vast number of professional development programmes implemented by the respective directorate of the Ministry of Education, as Table 10 shows.

TABLE 10. Professional development programmes coordinated by Ministry of Education

Type of professional development programme	Number of programmes during 2002	Number of beneficiaries	Number of programmes during 2003	Number of beneficiaries
Training in basic and general education organized at centers	193	6,181	198	6,284
Training at the regional	1,228	29,351	1,185	40,735

level				
Training outside Oman	26	34	38	58
Total	1,447	35,566	1,421	47,077

*Source:* Ministry of Education, 2002b

In summary, there is no doubt that Oman's education system has achieved great success in terms of equalizing opportunities among its citizens, particularly between men and women. The quality of education has improved dramatically and the initiation of students to new information technology has advanced at a rapid pace. Better-trained teachers have been employed and the mechanism of professional development and upgrading of teachers and other educational personnel has proceeded satisfactorily. Vocational training and technical education have expanded rapidly, though not to the degree required in order to respond adequately to the Omanization objectives.<sup>40</sup>

Among the noticeable benefits of educational reform in Oman has been to dynamize the development of the Ministry of Education and to reinforce its management and planning capacities<sup>41</sup> as well as to bring education closer to the high economic and social objectives of the long-term vision. And there is always the necessity of greater co-ordination between the perception and activities of all Ministries and institutions concerned with the development of human resources, which the Higher Education Council can provide.

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<sup>40</sup> As stated in the Sixth Five Year Development Plan document, the rate of economic participation of Omanis in the labour market is still low as some youth are reluctant to work in vocational occupations due to social perceptions, unattractive employment conditions for Omanis in small- and medium-scale private establishments, employers' complaints about inadequate technical and vocational qualifications of Omanis looking for work, and limited programmes to encourage Omanis to become self-employed due to shortage of financing and lack of marketing skills and experience in young Omani graduates to deal with free trade.

<sup>41</sup> The Ministry should be commended for its continuous evaluation of achievements regarding the reform plan — the plan itself contains a clear mechanism for constant evaluation of the progress made, for more information see the document Reform and development of general education (Education Commission of the States, 1995).

## Chapter 4

### Looking to the future

It is not surprising that Oman's leadership, while satisfied with the work already achieved, looks to the future with the hope and courage of undertaking more ambitious actions, in particular through Vision 2020 as stated by H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said, "It is a phase that is full of great aspirations, of heavy challenges that require your greater and stronger will".<sup>42</sup> The vision for Oman's economy in 2020 is based on the following long-term strategies:

- Strategy of economic balance and sustainable growth assisted by the following sub-strategies:
  - a. human resource development
  - b. economic diversification
  - c. private sector development.
- Social justice strategy: enhancing the standard of living of all citizens, reducing the differences between the regions and different wage groups;

In a recent speech on 21 October 2003, H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said added the following appropriate strategy: the continuation of the democratic action already started in the past several years "in which citizens of Oman play their part in taking national decisions".<sup>43</sup>

In reference to the human resource development strategy, there are few leaders in the developing countries who attach so much importance to education as a cornerstone of the future, as the motor of development and as the main stimulus enabling the nation to reach its goals.

As Oman's Minister of Higher Education said in his keynote address at the International Conference on the University of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century on 17–19 March 2001 in Muscat, "Oman Economic Vision 2020 places great importance on the development of human resources and the support of development programmes aimed at achieving economic diversification and, enhancing the role of the private sector in participating in the national development plan".<sup>44</sup> The following areas of actions are envisaged by the Oman Economic Vision 2020 (Ministry of Development, 1997):

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<sup>42</sup> See speeches on 2 June 1995, p. 513 of the Fifth Five Year Development Plan document (Ministry of Development, 1997) and on 21 October 2003 (*Times of Oman*, 2003, p. 2).

<sup>43</sup> H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said stated that this effort has been built up brick-by-brick on firm foundations based on the realities of Omani life and the conditions of the age in which we live, adding "we should joint out that if by the grace of God we are enjoying prosperity today, then we have also duty not to forget that our thoughts and plans should be focused on the future. This is because major targets and many challenges lie ahead of us and the road is long".

<sup>44</sup> H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said has also made an appeal to the private sector "to establish colleges and universities in different parts of the Sultanate" (21 October 2003).

<sup>45</sup> In the international conference on secondary education held in Muscat in December 2002, the under-secretary of the Ministry of Social Development indicated that "almost 30,000 students graduate from the

- upgrade basic education to match major international standards;
- expand technical education by encouraging the majority of students who complete basic education to enrol in this type of education and provide adequate opportunity for technical and vocational training to students who leave different levels of education;
- implement Omanization plans in both the public and private sectors;
- increase use of information systems and statistical databases related to labour market forecasts; and
- expand higher education institutions in order to enrol higher proportions of secondary schools graduates and respond to the need of the country for highly qualified people.<sup>45</sup>

After the final report of Vision 2020 was released, the Ministry of Education, in co-operation with a well-recognized international centre of expertise in the education field, prepared a comprehensive technical study for reforming education that inspires the ministerial reform endeavours (Education Commission of the States, 1995).

It is interesting to note that the long-term vision of Oman includes quantitative objectives regarding the development of the labour market:

- to increase the Omani labour force from 17% of the total population in 1995 to about 50% in 2020;
- to increase the participation of women in the total labour force from about 6% in 1995 to about 12% in 2020;<sup>46</sup>
- to increase the Omanization ratio in the public sector from 68% in 1995 to 95% in 2020; and
- to increase the Omanization ratio in the private sector from 15% in 1995 to about 70% by 2020.

It should be noted that Omanization is at the same time a challenge and a problem: a challenge because it has stimulated the government to accelerate and expand the training, inside and outside the country, of Omani nationals, including those needed for its own staff. For example, of all employees of the Ministry of Education in 2002–2003 81% were nationals and 19% were expatriates. Omanization seems to have contributed to the feminization of the Ministry, as 50% of all employees are women. In the case of teachers, the ratio of Omanization is 77% for females and 75% for males.

Omanization is also a problem, particularly in regard to the private sector, which so far is not very attractive to Omani nationals. Something needs to change in the mentality of

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secondary schools every year, while only 10,000 find places in higher education institutes” (International Conference on the Reform of Secondary Education, 2002).

<sup>46</sup> According to a publication General Directorate for Women and Child Conditions 2001, the number of women civil servants was 1,364 in 1980 and increased to 18,641 in 2000 (18.7%), the number of women in the private sector was 2,840 in 1994 and 10,084 in 2000, and the number of women who were associates in various companies was around 1,995 in 1999 (Ministry of Social Development, 2001).

young Omanis in order for them to have greater appreciation for individual initiative and entrepreneurial talent.<sup>47</sup>

Oman made an important and timely decision to prepare a vision for the Oman economy for 2020. Data from the Fifth Five Year Development Plan document shows that by 2020 the reliance on private investment and non-oil exports will be much more than today (Ministry of Development, 1997, p.182). The long-term plan envisages that the total investment in the Oman economy, which was 14.5% of GDP will increase to 34% in 2020, including 3% public investment and 31% private investment. According to the same projection, non-oil exports by 2020 will be 13% of GDP compared to 10% for oil exports. This means a drastic change in many aspects of the life of Omanis including the propensity to save and a priority role to be played by the private sector in the economy.

Making a quick analysis of the present economy of Oman, certain facts must be acknowledged. Oman is not densely populated with only 65 inhabitants per square kilometre. The average rainfall is low at 100 millimetres per year. Because of the climatic conditions and arid land, agriculture is not well developed and contributed only 2% to the GDP in 2001. Industry, including mining and quarrying, manufacturing, construction and electric power, provides 53.3% of the GDP (42% relates to mining, petroleum and gas in particular, and 8.2% to manufacturing). The rest of the 44.7% of the GDP comes from the service sector. Thus, the future of Oman seems to be in four areas:

1. fishing
2. manufacturing
3. tourism
4. service sector.

The area of fishing is in a good position with 1,700 kilometres of coastline extending from the narrow Strait of Hormuz to the southern border with Yemen and a catch of around 123,700 metric tons per year (2000 statistic). Both improved know-how and technology are needed in this field as well as in the agriculture industry.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> In 2003, the total number of expatriate workers in the private sector was 579,643 individuals, compared to 547,000 in 2002, 530,000 in 2001 and 495,000 in 2000, which represents an increase of 17% in four years. The distribution of their activities was as follows (by order of priority):

1. wholesale, retail, trade and car repairs	25.8%
2. construction	25.6%
3. manufacturing	12.6%
4. domestic services	12.5%
5. agriculture and fishing	11.9%
6. hotels and restaurants	4.5%
7. health and social services	1.7%
8. mining and quarrying	1.4%
9. education	0.9%
10. miscellaneous	3.2%

Technical education and vocational training in Oman should necessarily aim at the development of Omani capabilities in the areas of highest priority.

<sup>48</sup> The vision of Oman's economic future has projected a 5.6% growth per year in the fishing industry until 2020. Agriculture and fishery industries provide around 53.8% of Oman's food requirements and the country is self-sufficient in fish (Ministry of Information, 2003).

In the case of manufacturing, which has to be developed in the areas where Oman has a comparative advantage, the development of human resources through the expansion of technical–vocational education and training is of crucial importance.

According to Vision 2020, the share of the manufacturing industry, which was 6.8% of the GDP in 2000, should reach 15% in 2020 (Ministry of Development, 1997). The planners expect that:

- a large expansion will take place in the petrochemical industry based on gas as a feed stock;
- oil refining will be expanded;
- assembly-line industries such as computers and communication and information technologies will be established; and
- industries related to raw materials including products from the agricultural sector will receive the necessary impetus.

As far as tourism is concerned, Oman possesses many attractions that are quite exceptional both in terms of natural beauty and cultural and historical sites (Al-Taïe, Pickersgill & Al-Taïe, 1999). The country enjoys great stability, which is much appreciated in the present world situation. Oman received 424,000 tourists in 1998, 503,000 in 1999 and 571,000 in 2000 (Europa World Year Book, 2003). In addition to excellent hotels, the country has a higher education college run by the private sector to train staff for hotels and tourism agencies. According to the latest statistics provided by the Ministry of National Economy and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, in 2002 the number of “inbound tourists” was 1,112,300 of which 205,200 were from Europe and 57,200 were from Australia and the United States among other countries. The bulk of tourists came from the Gulf region, other Arab countries and Asia. About a third of the tourists come for leisure and recreation; most come to visit relatives and friends, for business and for other purposes. In 2001, out of 1,095,200 people who visited Oman, 380,000 did so for leisure and recreation, 466,000 to visit friends and relatives, 148,000 for business and 100,000 for other purposes. There were 124 hotels and hotel apartments with 9,208 beds by the end of 2002 and tourists spent 1,298,863 nights and approximately 74 million rials.

At the present pace of development of education at all levels of the service sector, in few years Oman could be an exporter of teachers and also provide higher education for foreign students within the country or other Arab countries. Sultan Qaboos University is already offering education to some foreign students.

Vision 2020 hopes that the sub-sector of banks, insurance and financial services, which had a 4.3% share of the GDP, will double its share by 2020 to 8%. The effort needed to attain that ambitious objective must be studied and put into practice as soon as possible.

The goal of some Gulf region countries — for example, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates — is to become a centre of commerce, finance and banking services and modern information technology in that part of the world. Oman may consider these or other areas where the country already has good potential such as in the field of health and medicine.<sup>49</sup> By the end of 2001, 17,054 staff were employed in various hospitals including

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<sup>49</sup> The World Health Report 2000 (WHO, 2000) named Oman as the country that had achieved the greatest progress in improving health standards of its population.

2,347 doctors and 6,901 nurses, with Omanization levels at 56% (Ministry of Information, 2003, p.116). In addition to the registered students of the college of medicine and health sciences in Sultan Qaboos University — 763 in 2002–2003 — there are 69 students at a private medical college and 22 Omanis are studying medicine in the universities abroad (2001–2002).<sup>50</sup>

Concerning the very important area of research, according to UNDP, Oman's scholars published 466 papers that were printed in international journals or referred to by other scholars between 1990 and 1995. The total number of published papers from the entire Arab region (twenty-two countries) was 34,594, thus Oman with its low population compared to other countries — its population of 2.5 million is less than 1% of the 281 million of the total Arab region population — produced over 1.34% of all scholarly papers. The promotion of research should be one of the priorities in future development plans if the country wants to continue throughout the twenty-first century with full strength. For this reason, the Council for Higher Education was created “to develop public policies for higher education and scientific research in universities and institutions of higher education”.

According to a council report, “many obstacles are encountered in the conduct of scientific research in Oman”. These obstacles include:

- lack of clear scientific and technological policies paying due attention to priority needs within the available resources; and
- lack of co-ordination between various institutions concerned.

It is our belief that the council should and could overcome these obstacles if, in the light of Vision 2020, agreement is reached among all council members and partners about areas of research and development that are vital for sustained economic growth and independent of oil revenue as the main source of national income.

During the author's stay in Oman he visited “Knowledge Oasis Muscat”, a site located 32 kilometres northwest of the capital, a sort of public–private sector-led technology park, which is described as “totally committed to creating an environment in which entrepreneurs, researchers and small- and medium-sized enterprises as well as established multi-nationals can innovate and flourish within a Gulf setting”. In fact, with the full participation of the private sector, Oman could occupy the position of a “leading regional centre” in the introduction and distribution of innovative models of management and entrepreneurship.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> According to the Sultan Qaboos University Statistical Year Book 2002–2003 (2003b), the number of staff in the university hospital has increased from 208 in 1989 to 1,383 in 2002. In 2002, the University hospital treated 230,000 patients, both inpatients and outpatients.

<sup>51</sup> As part of its reform of the education system, Oman has introduced the idea of providing information technology from the first year of basic education, a goal that can become a reality in the near future.

## Chapter 5

### Educational co-operation with other countries

Oman, both geographically and historically, is very much connected with the other countries of the Gulf region. Economic, political and educational co-operation links these countries through a number of organizations.

In 1971, Oman joined the Arab League and in 1972 it joined the Islamic Conference Organization. Oman became a founding member of the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council (AGCC) in 1981. It is also one of the fourteen founders and members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IORARC).

Oman is a member of the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, the Islamic Development Bank and the Arab Monetary Fund. The six members of the AGCC established a unified regional customs tariff in January 2003, and the organization undertook efforts to establish a single market and currency by January 2004, a decision that will have great impact on the whole region.

As we see through these different co-operative institutions, there are many activities in the region, including in the field of education. The exchange of experience and expertise and the co-operation in the development of human resources and in the implementation of common projects are common in that part of the world.

A particular mention should be made of the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation (ALECSO), which prepared a vision for the future of education in the Arab world. The Arab Human Development Report 2002, identified the following ten principles adopted by ALECSO for defining the philosophy of the education reform (UNDP and Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, 2002, p. 55–63).

1. the individual should be central to the learning process;
2. the critical faculties of Arab youth should be encouraged;
3. intellectual and cultural heritage of the past should not be immune to criticism and should change in face of scientific evidence;
4. Arab education systems should be restructured to give precedence to creativity and dignity of productive work;
5. the spirit of challenge should be stimulated in the Arab people;
6. equal educational opportunities should be made available to all children;
7. education should aim at promoting, in a cohesive and harmonious manner, students' physical, emotional and societal well-being as well as their acquisition of knowledge;
8. education should help children and youth to understand themselves and their own culture in the context of a world where cultures can flourish only through openness and dialogue;
9. the education should integrate the Arab people in today's world, an age governed by the exactness of science, its rigour and method; and
10. education should help the young to cope with a future of uncertainty.

Three strategies are also recommended by ALECSO:

- enhance human capabilities;
- create strong synergy between education and the socio-economic system; and
- formulate a programme for education reform at the pan-Arab level.

The document strongly emphasizes the necessity of Arab co-operation in the field of effective education reform and suggests that “Arab education reform be a main and permanent item on the agenda of Arab summit meetings” (UNDP and Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, 2002, p.57).

Higher education is considered as “one of the most important areas of Arab co-operation in education” (UNDP and Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, 2002, p .58) and in this respect, Oman has been very much in favour of that type of action. A high number of Oman’s students are studying in the Gulf co-operation states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates where in 2001–2002 there were 7,887 of the overall total of 11,126 students abroad (or 71%). However, the number of Omani students in the other Arab countries of Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and Syria was lower at only 1,114 or 10%.

UNDP, inspired by “a vision for the future of education in the Arab world”, suggests a number of policies for expanding and improving education in the region concerned, including the following (UNDP and Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development. 2002):

- promotion of self-education;
- diversification of education and renewal of its framework;
- benefiting from modern education technology and information and communication technologies (ICT);
- content evaluation of education;
- teacher centred renewal;
- developing an innovative education administration capable of leading the process of renewal; and
- effective participation of various societal groups in learning, developing policies and putting them into action.

It is not easy to compile an inventory of numerous visits, workshops, seminars, conferences, etc., that take place in the region each year and result in a permanent exchange of knowledge and experience. Here, we refer only to one of the international conferences organized by Kuwait in 2001, which brought together many knowledgeable women from the Arab world and other regions to discuss higher education challenges of the twenty-first century (International Conference on the University of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 2001). The invitation was made by Kuwaiti women’s cultural and social society under the theme of the role of women in cultural, social and economic development.<sup>52</sup> In February of the same

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<sup>52</sup> A similar conference was organized in Oman in 2003.

year, the International Bureau of Education took the initiative of organizing an inter-regional seminar regarding curriculum (Management of curriculum change and adaptation in the Gulf region, 2001). The outcomes of both the conference and the seminar have been printed and are available to the public.

The problem with some of the inter-regional or international meetings is that most interventions, whether speeches or papers, tend to defend the position of the respective country or state, while it is more important to acknowledge problems and deficiencies wherever they exist, and then try to find adequate solutions co-operatively.

Another issue that requires attention is the necessity of considering the common ground within the framework of regional co-operation. For example, every country cannot maintain a full range of university colleges or all types of vocational schools, which is sometimes due to a limited population.<sup>53</sup> Since the common language of the entire region is Arabic and many cultural traditions are shared by the respective societies, these commonalities can be used to benefit all.

A third issue is always to be aware of the importance of keeping the regional meetings of Arab states open to the experiences of other regions or countries, as recommended by ALESCO, even if some problems appear specific to that region, since that exposure could have a cross-fertilization effect.

Finally, reference should be made to Oman's relations with Africa which go back to the first century of the Christian era when the first Omanis settled on the East coast of the African continent. In 1832, Zanzibar was considered the Omani Sultan's second country capital. The Omani presence continued for about a century and left great impact on the social and cultural life of the people. After the independence of Zanzibar<sup>54</sup>, diplomatic relations were established between the two countries and Oman has contributed to several major development projects there.

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<sup>53</sup> The only country with a large population is Saudi Arabia (21.6 million); much less populated are United Arab Emirates (3.3 million), Bahrain (0.7 million), Qatar (0.6 million) and Kuwait (2.3 million) and Oman (2.4).

<sup>54</sup> Zanzibar obtained its independence from the British in 1963. From 1964 it formed with Pemba Island part of the United Republic of Tanzania.

## Conclusion

Oman has embarked during the last decade or so on a courageous reform of its entire education system. The most important aim is not only to prepare Omani citizens to individually face the challenges of the twenty-first century, which require new ways of thinking, new knowledge, new attitudes and new behaviour, but also to develop those human resources particularly needed in a time of decreasing reliance on oil income. One of the highly praiseworthy aspects of educational reform has been the advancement of the female population, which is expected to contribute to the country's development in all sectors of life. The progress in only one generation has been tremendous, as this report clearly shows.

In a globalizing world, Oman's next task should be to define its place and functions in the Gulf region as well as in the international arena for the coming decades. The process of democratization, which began during the last several years, should be accelerated. More encouragement should be provided for Omanis to develop their entrepreneurial capacities and enter the private sector in a larger proportion. Higher education institutions should receive greater impetus to invest in research and development projects and the best university graduates should be guided in that direction. The present school reform endeavour should continue through to the end of secondary education, always hand in hand with the necessary monitoring and evaluation efforts. More women should be encouraged to enter technical education in a diversity of fields. A better orientation of students abroad should be made in the light of the priority needs of the country for highly qualified individuals.

As part of a long-term vision, the country needs an education and employment development plan organized by the Higher Education Council or a similar institution, carefully implemented and regularly adjusted and updated, that responds to the high aspirations of the people and leaders of Oman. This should be done with the continued co-operation with other countries of the region in order to better use each other's complementary resources for the benefit of all.

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## **Abbreviations**

AGCC	Arab Gulf Cooperation Council
ALECSO	Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization
ECS	Education Commission of the States
EFA	Education for All
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IBE	International Bureau of Education
ICET	International Council on Education for Teaching
ICT	Information and communication technologies
IORARC	Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation
NVQ	National Vocational Qualifications
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualifications
OWA	Omani Women's Association
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

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