

Chapter 44

Quality Assurance in English Education in Omani Schools: A Critical Look

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ABSTRACT

Quality emerged as an important consideration in educational contexts around the world more than three decades ago. However, providing quality education is no simple matter as there are many different perspectives about achieving this outcome. Despite this challenge, there is an increasing awareness in the Sultanate of Oman about the need to create and monitor education quality at all levels. In pursuit of this goal, Oman's Ministry of Education has implemented several important reforms which have encompassed all school subjects, including English. Basic education is one of the most significant of these reforms. To date, however, there is no indication of any significant improvement in English achievement levels in either schools or universities as a result of these programs. The aim of this chapter is to elucidate the challenges reported in the literature that face the provision of quality education at all levels in Oman. Opportunities for improvement and solutions to existing problems are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION: EDUCATION REFORM IN OMAN

For around the last three decades, there has been a growing recognition worldwide that quality education is one of the most important foundations of economic growth, sustainable national development, and the well-being of a nation's people (Barber, Mourshed, & Whelan, 2007). In Oman, this recognition was first apparent at the official level in the mid-1990s after the country succeeded in providing education access to a majority of its population which was largely illiterate and did not have access to

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formal schooling before 1970. In 1970, there were only three all-male public schools in Oman, with students in these hand-picked by the previous sultan as a reward for their families' loyalty. There was no formal education for females outside of religious schools and an American-run missionary school in old Muscat. However, after the establishment of a new government under Sultan Qaboos in 1970, the situation changed rapidly, and there are now around 1,048 government-funded schools for both males and females with approximately 523,000 students enrolled. These public schools are complemented by about 486 private schools with enrolments of around 97,000 students. Moreover, in response to the increasing demand for access to higher education, there are about 32 higher education institutions, some with multiple campuses, around the country.

These numbers demonstrate the huge advances that have been made in the provision of formal education in Oman since 1970. However, because of rapid societal and economic changes, globalization and technological advances, especially in relation to communications technologies, a number of challenges have impinged upon the quality of education offered at these institutions. The Ministry of Education has recognised this as an important issue, and has subsequently directed its attention to enhancing the quality of education in Oman. The need to focus on quality in education in the country as espoused by the ministry has been highlighted by a number of studies. For example, the UNESCO/UNICEF report, "Monitoring Learning Achievement", detailed "lower than expected student achievement levels" in the sultanate's schools (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 97). Inadequacies were also offered by a World Bank study which pinpointed deficiencies in facilities, resources, and teacher training in the country.

More findings highlighting the need for reform emerged from the 1990 UN Jomtien Conference and the Dakar Framework for Action in 2000, both of which raised the question of education quality. In addition, the official "Vision for Oman's Economy – Oman 2020" policy document stated that education is a key to the nation's continuing development. Oman wants to participate fully in the global economy; however, as oil and gas revenues continue to experience volatility (Chapman, Al Barwani, & Ameen, 2009), it needs a creative national workforce to sustain both its economic and social development. At the official level, it is believed that providing quality education is the key to workforce empowerment and national development. It is in this belief that a number of wide-ranging reform initiatives to the country's education system have been introduced.

In striving to achieve curriculum reform, the country's Ministry of Education worked with a number of international organizations, including the Educational Consultancy Service, in developing the Basic Education system. This system initially consisted of two cycles: Cycle One (grades 1-4) and Cycle Two (grades 5-10). In 1996 and 1998, the Scottish Qualifications Authority recommended that the assessment system employed in Omani government schools should be reformed. Also in 1998, the UK's Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills offered guidelines for the evaluation and assessment of Omani schools while, following reports from the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT) in 2001 and the Ministry of Education in 2006, Post-Basic education (grades 11-12) was restructured in government schools and career and guidance services were introduced.

In response to input from these reports, and considering international best practice, towards the end of the 20th century, the Ministry of Education decided to take the following courses of action:

1. Emphasise Arabic, English, mathematics and science, and introduce IT and life skills;
2. Introduce continuous assessment and test higher order thinking skills instead of memorised information;
3. Use learner-centred methodologies;

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