

HIGHER EDUCATION IN TRANSITION: GENDER AND CHANGE IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

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ABSTRACT

Education is crucial for the fast development of the Sultanate of Oman as, having signed, in 2002, the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), Oman has become a country committed to interacting in the competitive global economy. To this end, Oman has taken serious steps to develop higher education (HE) to cope with economic and market changes. However, it may be that in the drive towards generating models and practices of economic efficiency, the gender dynamic has been marginalized. In a society where over 51% of the working-aged population is female it is important for policy makers to focus upon the education of females as a key factor in the development of the workforce. Yet institutional development of the higher education sector, may not have taken this fully into account.

This paper examines recent educational developments and delineates strategies adopted to extend higher education, notably in the context of the teacher-training sector. It will be argued that the diversification of this sector has resulted in course provision which is not only more likely to appeal to males but also replicates the provision already offered by the private college and university sector. This presents a predicament for the government as, whilst there is a need to expand provision, in part to meet growing numbers of secondary school graduates, the curricula imported for the new colleges may not address the gender dynamic in both public and private HE. It will conclude by supporting the need for greater gender sensitivity when developing policies for HE in Oman.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

BE	Basic Education
BEC	Basic Education Curriculum
CAS	Colleges of Applied Sciences
GATS	General Agreement on Trade in Services
GE	General Education
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IBA	International Business Administration
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IT	Information Technology
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MOHE	Ministry of Higher Education
SQU	Sultan Qaboos University
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

BACKGROUND

The Sultanate of Oman, geographically located at the mouth of the Arabian Gulf, at the extreme east and south-east of the Arabian Peninsula, has moved with immense speed from being a neo-tribal territory in 1970, when the present Sultan Qaboos bin Said took control, to currently being one of the most stable and western-looking countries of the Gulf region (Al Talib 1990). Although formed over 2000 years ago (Philips 1989) with the arrival of Arab tribes, from Yemen or from Hijaz (modern Saudi Arabia) each headed by leaders, Shaikhs, the current population of 2.6m mainly lives in urban settlements.

Just as migration 2000 years ago resulted in changeable boundaries so, too, do new forms of technology, politics and economics blur national boundaries (Peterson 1996). This has profound implications for education policy making and its provision at all levels, especially in a political-economy located at the cross-roads of two interwoven forces - globalisation and Omanisation.

In the Sultanate, as in many other countries of the South, education policies take account of and accommodate the pressures of economic globalisation on human resource development. Oman's 2020 Vision (Ministry of Development 1995) clearly proposed policies and options for sustainable development within a stable macro-economic framework. This included the diversification of the economy beyond oil production and focused upon the development of the private sector for commercial, industrial and educational corporations and opportunities.

Additionally, the government has been encouraged by education policy-making elsewhere (Yousef 2004), to introduce 'modernising' learning systems throughout all stages of education. It is recognised that a nation's ability to secure prosperity and future economic growth depends on the quality of its education system (Brown and Lauder 1996; Green 1997; Robertson *et al* 2007). New knowledge systems and the development of a 'knowledge economy' with social formations based on intellectual capital, have superseded geographical and national boundaries (Donn 1998). Further, whilst it becomes important to develop new 'mapping strategies' to situate people in this global world (Pallerin 1996), it is also important to build upon domestic considerations of 'belonging' to 'a nation', 'citizenship' and 'nationality'. Such concerns tend to be eroded in a world system of states, held together by political-economies of international finance capital and foreign exchange dealings. With foresight, in 1991 Mulgan noted:

As technology advances, the importance of national boundaries will decline and the communication systems of multinational companies will have the potential to become the guiding force for the development of the world's political and economic policies (Mulgan 1991:45).

It has been argued more recently (Green *et al* 2006; Giddens 2002) that education may act as a unifying force in what is otherwise an exceedingly disparate, dissipating and disjointed world. For although globalisation draws people nearer metaphorically, in fact it leaves them stranded in space and time. Education, then, becomes crucial in developing understandings of this complex and dislocated world. In a similar context, over the past eight years, the Ministry of Education in Oman has introduced a Basic Education Curriculum (BEC) which, as in other countries, has an explicit focus upon 'life skills' within a global economy. It promotes the acquisition of literacy, numeracy, language, information technology, communication and team building skills in a standards-driven, outcomes-based curricular programme.

Alongside these global pressures, regional and local geo-political concerns have impacted upon education policy. The Sultanate of Oman, has been keen to build upon its Islamic past, a past shared with – and still evident in – its neighbours, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and the Yemen, but as one of the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), it also has a commitment to reduce migrant

labour (currently 0.7m) and thereby to Omanise the workforce. In fact, ‘Omanisation’ came into being with the publication of Oman’s Third National Development Plan 1980-1985, which proposed the replacement of expatriate labor with similarly skilled, trained and highly educated Omani nationals (Al-Farsi 1994).

In 1987, shortly after the Third Five Year Plan, an investigation (Pridham 1987) was conducted on the obstacles that might hinder the policy to achieve total Omanisation within 20-30 years. The survey indicated that the main obstacles were the quantity and quality of the work force. Indeed, 26.7% of the random sample of employers expressed their views that ‘national manpower is under-skilled, under experienced and under-trained’(Pridham 1987:4). Further, 20% of employers saw Omani nationals as having poor attitudes to vocational work, preferring white collar jobs. Finally, a significant number (13.3%) of employers showed anxiety over the high rate of turn-over in the national labour force.

That being the case, suggestions were proposed to accelerate the Omanisation process. These included propositions to increase wage rates in the private sector to attract more nationals and to increase benefits in the private sector, particularly in relation to job security. There was also the view expressed that Omanisation would be advantaged if policies were enacted to decrease the mandatory use of education for office work in the private sector (Al Farsi 1994). Despite these efforts, studies on manpower (Donn and Al-Manthri 2007) show that Oman is still heavily dependent on imported labour. According to the Ministry of Manpower statistics for 2005 (see Table 1), Omanis constitute a mere 25% of the labour force in the private sector (up from 15% in 1995), and 88% in the public sector (up from 68% in 1995). In 2005/6 the total participation of Omanis in the work force has risen to 64% from only 22.19% in 1992 (Al Lamky & Suleiman 1992) and 23% in 1995.

Table 1: Estimates of Workforce in 2020

NO.	INDICATORS	1995	2020
1	Manpower:		
	i) Percentage of males in labour force to total population;	17%	50%
	ii) Percentage of females in total labour force	6%	12%
	Total	23%	62%
2	Omanization:		
	i) Omanization rate in Public Sector	68%	95%
	ii) Omanization in Private Sector	15%	75%

Source: <http://www.moneoman.org/2020 - details4.htu/>.

So, whereas Omanisation impacts upon the visions of and possibilities for the Omani government, the private sector and the Omani citizen, globalisation, on the other hand, exerts different and sometimes competing pressures on the policy makers of the Sultanate (Donn and Al-Manthri 2007).

The World Bank-funded country report on Oman, Vision 2020 (Ministry of Development 1995), drew attention to the differential rates of public and private sector employment of Omani labour. It established targets to be achieved in terms of manpower and Omanization. The Report noted that as more jobs in the public sector were being filled by Omani citizens, this was not happening with the same speed in the private sector. Further, it noted that in the private sector, those posts beginning to be held by Omani citizens were, in the main, middle management and semi-skilled. In part this was attributed to an historical unwillingness on the part

of Omani males to become involved in semi-skilled and un-skilled labour. Jobs in these sectors were seen as appropriate for migrant labour. However, as Omanisation developed as a policy priority, a change in both economic and social attitudes had to be developed. So, although Oman has shown reasonable growth over the past many decades, the existing patterns of growth have some limitations (Lopez-Carlos and Schwab 2005).

Interwoven with these pressures, run commitments to enhancing the role of women in Omani society. The Omani government acknowledged that it is frequently girls' education that delineates successful social and economic development. From the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to other targets and goals set by UNESCO, Governments, the World Bank and International Development Organisations, the focus has been on girls' access to, retention in and achievement through schooling (Arnot 2000). And as time moves on from the Millennium, the focus has widened to encompass HE as well as schooling and Basic Education (BE).

Although, in Oman in 2006, females comprised almost 50% of enrolments at all levels of education, just 9% of the labour force was female. Therefore, there is a perceived need by policy makers, employers, educationalists and academics to promote and encourage Omani women to join the workforce, possibly through mechanisms of affirmative action and equal opportunities. Indeed, one of the key employment sectors where women have been economically active is in teaching. Not only is this seen as a possible area of employment by women themselves, but is deemed 'appropriate' by most parents. As teachers represent about 25% of the total public sector labour force (although just 3.8% of the private sector labour force), and as 60% of teachers are female, it is incumbent on a government, committed to social, political and economic activity on a global scale, to enhance the possibilities for female participation in the workforce.

However, as this article will argue, changes in the teacher training sector will reduce rather than maximise possibilities for female participation. At a time when females continue to strive for places in teacher training, five of the six Colleges of Education have become 'Colleges of Applied Sciences' (CAS). Further, it will be seen that in being focused on design, ICT, management and tourism, the curricula of CAS replicate what already exists in the private sector and, most worrying, are programmes that, historically, have been taken up mainly by male students. Therefore, it will be suggested that the impact of these changes may result in reduced opportunities for female participation in the labour market; and that this may be precisely the opposite result intended by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) as it works on its next five year plan. Given this dislocation, the article will conclude by drawing attention to the need for 'host countries' (i.e. those importing a curriculum programme or an education policy) to be pro-actively aware of the problems, as well as the advantages, involved in policy borrowing.

PART ONE: CHANGES IN GENDERED LIFE IN OMAN

In 1958, Wendell Philips presented a gloomy picture of Omani women in his book *Unknown Oman*, when he describes her as "the silent one". He says:

in terms of personality, of economy, of politics and of civics, there are no women in Oman. Women exist in numbers always greater than men, but their existence is domestic (Philips 1989:2).

However, since 1970 the position and role of women in Oman has changed dramatically. Before 1970, girls were excluded from schooling, there being only three schools with 909 male students. When Sultan Qaboos began his rule in 1970, the first girls' school was established. Since that year, girls' enrolment in education has been increasing rapidly. To safeguard the implementation of policies related to Omani women, policies for all stages of education and for social welfare have been

introduced. These are intended to ensure that women play a more effective role in the development of their society.

To this end, the government instituted legal statutes which advocate women's involvement in public and personal spheres. Oman's Basic Law of the State (1996) guarantees gender equality, while the Personal Status Law (1997) includes a number of articles which give Omani women a say in decisions that affect their lives. The 282 article of this Law regulates issues like marriage, divorce and child custody. It gives the woman a right to the conditional mutual acceptance of marriage, to renounce betrothal, file for divorce and manage her personal assets (Ministry of Legal Affairs 1998). The Omani Labour Law of 1973 provides for equality between the sexes in job opportunity, rights and obligations and, at the same time, offers special protection and privileges to women as a result of their special conditions – notably, regarding maternity leave, death of husband, night shifts and jobs detrimental to a woman's health and morals.

Similarly, the Civil Service Law of 1980 provides for the recruitment process for both sexes on the basis of competence and employment entitlements such as salary, promotion, leave and allowances. However, regardless of all efforts, in some local communities girls are discouraged by tradition and marriage to study or to take up educational opportunities or to travel overseas for education. Nevertheless, over the past three decades, women in the Sultanate of Oman have shown by increasing numbers enrolling in education (both at home and abroad) and joining into the workforce, that they are eager to learn, to obtain the qualifications necessary to enter the labour force and to play a major role in their society.

With sustained national commitment to education, therefore, Oman has experienced rapid expansion in education and particular progress has been noted in expanding educational access for girls. According to Ministry of Education data, in the school year 2005/2006 there were 174,920 students in Basic Education (BE) (89,302 boys and 85,618 girls) and 397,939 pupils in the older system of General Education (GE) (206,162 boys and 191,782 girls) (MOE 2006). However, this does not show much gendered improvement on the figures for 1998/1999 which were 281,145 males and 263,920 females in general education (there being no BE at that time).

Although girls comprise 49% of the total school enrolment in BE at ages 7-12 (the pre-7 years actually see more than 50% of the cohort being girls) by age 14 only 37% of the cohort are girls and by 15 years of age, that number has fallen to 29%. Unfortunately, this is no improvement on the past system of GE which still exists in over half of all schools in Oman: indeed, under GE 31% of the cohort aged 14 and over were girls (Ministry of Education 2005). Yet an international study (UNESCO 2004) places Oman among the top ten countries making the most progress in closing the gender gap in education. Further, in terms of human development, Oman is placed among the top five countries categorised as being of Medium Human Development.

It is heartening to read that girls seem to be 'doing better' in schooling. A gender analysis of educational efficiency indicators in Oman reveals a reversed gender disparity in favour of girls. In examining the data, Al-Barwani (2000) noted that persistence rates at Grades 6 and 9 are higher for girls than for boys, as are their promotion rates at these levels. Repeat rates are correspondingly lower for girls than for boys and the same applies to drop-out rates. On average, girls take 11.3 years to complete the 9-year education cycle (old GE system), while boys take 13.9 years.

Also, there has been a progression of female university enrolment since the establishment of the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in 1986, with women making up almost half (49.2%) of all students who graduated from the University in 2005/6 (SQU 2006). There are now more than 12,000 students, of whom half are female. In Table 2 it can be seen that the largest number of graduates are from the Faculties

of Education (where 1,768 females and 1,244 males graduated 2005/6) and Arts and Social Sciences (where 1,443 females and 791 males graduated 2005/6). The Faculty of Engineering graduated over 1,544 males and just 400 females, whereas the Faculties of Science and Medicine/Health Sciences graduated similar numbers of males and females. Although, in the latter case, most males studied medicine and most females studied health sciences.

Table 2: Distribution At SQU Colleges by Gender

No. COLLEGE	1997-1998			2003-2004			2005/2006		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
1 Agriculture & Marine Sciences	60	6	66	501	386	887	577	483	1060
2 Arts & Social Sciences	76	131	207	731	1403	2134	791	1443	2234
3 Commerce and Economics	171	124	295	1013	840	1853	925	722	1647
4 Education	231	419	650	938	1485	2423	1244	1768	3012
5 Engineering	165	-	165	1270	271	1541	1544	400	1944
6 Medicine & Health Sciences	42	45	87	400	411	811	515	516	1031
7 Science	86	96	182	796	730	1526	732	896	1628
TOTAL	831	821	1652	5583	5592	11175	6328	6228	12556

Admission & Registration at SQU, from University Annual Report 2006.

It is interesting that female enrolments declined in some colleges, notably in commerce and economics. Some commentators note the discrimination policy, which allows male students to be enrolled with fewer percentage points on secondary certificates, compared to points gained by females. This policy has been implemented, it is suggested, to satisfy labour market needs in certain sectors – business, commerce, economics especially - where a male workforce is seen as preferable. This preference can be explained by the different contract arrangements in private and public sectors. In the private sphere, pay and conditions of service, including hours worked, are significantly different to those in the public sector. Many females would choose to work in schools and the civil service because of set hours (8am to 2.30pm) and permanent positions. Private companies tend to have longer working hours, perhaps 8am to 3.30pm and 7pm-9pm, these being less conducive to those with domestic and child care commitments.

It has been suggested also that the decline in female enrolment at SQU was due to an increase in female students studying abroad. Yet, figures do not support any substantial increase: in 2002-2003, whilst there were 10,664 students studying overseas, less than half, just 3,996 were women. By 2005/6 there were 12,819 students studying abroad, of whom 4,772 were female. Of the total, 1,446 were taking advanced degree courses with 304 being female (MOHE 2006). Further, 3,757 were privately funded, 396 were on scholarships from other countries, 319 were sponsored by Petroleum Development of Oman, 222 were supported by companies, banks and individuals, and 554 by the MOHE itself.

The gender profile of those studying abroad in 2004/5, continued to reflect girls' enrolment in certain subjects: 39 females and 29 males studied medicine; 28

females and 6 males studied health science; 6 females and only 2 males studied pharmacology; 9 females and 8 males studied arts subjects. There is a different gender profile however for administration and commerce (61 males and 4 females), engineering (98 males and 13 females), science (17 males and 10 females), agriculture (11 males and 1 female), computing (27 males and 5 females), law (19 males and 7 females) and education (6 males and 4 females). There is a prevalence of males in administrative science, commerce, engineering, agriculture, science, computing and law. What makes this particularly interesting is the fact, as will be seen below, that the latter-noted subjects are exactly those subjects being developed in the private college sector and also in the new CAS. With the diversification of the Colleges of Education, and with the expansion of the private sector, one may wonder whether this gendered enrolment is being addressed, replicated or replaced.

PART TWO: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The owners of private colleges may well have seen that almost 4,000 of those studying abroad were privately funded: this could have been one of the reasons why the government viewed as possible, the introduction of the private sector in HE in Oman. If parents could pay overseas fees and substantial living costs, there would appear to be a market for private sector provision within Oman.

Partly in response to this parental pressure, and partly to address global goals, the MOHE has encouraged the private sector to establish high quality colleges and institutes of HE. This policy initiative is congruent with UNESCO's strategies for education. In the UNESCO country report on Oman (UNESCO 2000) it was noted that, for Basic Education to be achieved, certain goals have to be assiduously pursued:

sustained effort, galvanised inter-institutionalisation of major functions and continuous activities, strengthening of focused research capacity, promotion of data-based decision-making, innovative searches for new partners, and an encouragement of the private sector's involvement in education (UNESCO 2000:15).

At present, there are 23 privately-owned colleges and universities of HE which operate under license from the MOHE. They are at quite different stages of development, as some have been in Oman for almost twenty years, whilst others are recently established. Additionally, three colleges, Nizwa, Dhofar and Sohar, have been awarding degrees and even higher qualifications, so that now they are designated as Universities. Also, three are about to merge into one Private University of Muscat.

These private institutions have been formed, also, to meet the demand for higher education, a demand that the public sector could not meet (Al-Lamki 2000). As Al-Lamki notes, a pressing issue in the GCC states is the age profile of the population. With an overall growth rate ranging from 2.0 to 3.5, and a population of about 60% under 21 years of age, access to HE has become a central concern on all national agendas (Al-Lamki 2006). Indeed, provision of suitable places in HE is a challenge to the social and economic well being of all GCC nations (Coffman 2003).

The MOHE has become aware of the importance and the potential of relationships between the public and private sectors. They note that the authorisation and future development of private colleges and universities may absorb more than 3,000 school-leavers each year, although currently just 5,000 students are enrolled across all 23 private institutions. With over 55,000 school leavers each year exiting school, there is an ever-increasing demand on places in further and higher education. Of those graduating from school, 27,000 are entitled to apply for places, but only about 2,000 *per annum* get accepted at SQU, 2,000 at technical industrial colleges, 700 at health science institutes and 90 at financial banking institutes. Private colleges are now

able to receive around 1,400 pa.

However, the curriculum for these 23 educational establishments tends to reflect a particular vision of the labour market and of labour market requirements in the next decades. Courses in computer sciences, engineering, commerce and business are available at most of the private colleges. One college focuses on medicine and pharmacy and a number on English language courses. Most award diplomas and a few are now able to award degrees. Often these are accredited through universities and colleges in Australia, UK, India, Jordan, Lebanon, Canada and the USA.

Table 3: Student numbers in private colleges by discipline and gender (2005/6)

Specialisation	Omani (Male)	Omani (Female)	Total Omani
Foundation Programme	1591	1537	3128
Medicine and Pharmacy	61	520	581
Engineering	1434	325	1759
Computer	1277	1604	2881
Literature	273	1464	1737
Commerce and Administrative Sciences	2298	2583	4881
Economics	1	1	2
Education	110	712	822
Sciences	60	191	251
Languages	--	14	14
Other Subjects	39	85	124
Grand Total	7144	9036	16,180

When one examines the gender breakdown of students attending private colleges (Table 3), it becomes apparent that males are significantly over represented in engineering courses (1434 males and 325 females registered 2005/6) whilst females are more likely to study literature and language courses (1478 females and 273 males registered 2005/6)

Alongside the general political and economic support for a fast expansion in private sector provision of higher education, there is a concern that many colleges are producing graduates similarly qualified in engineering, computer science and business. Historically, these are not courses into which women have been enrolled or have had qualifications awarded.

PART THREE: DIVERSIFICATION OF TEACHER TRAINING COLLEGES

By far the largest number of females have graduated with teaching qualifications. In 2000 females accounted for 42.3% of the total enrolments in teacher training colleges, for 30% at the College of Shariah and Law, 47.4% at the Banking and Finance Institute and for over 36.7% at Technical and Industrial Colleges (Al Barwani 2000). By 2005 the number of females graduating from the teacher training sector reached almost 450 *per annum*.

However, it was with foresight, in 2001, that the MOHE noted that Omanisation of the teaching workforce was reaching completion and that requirements for qualified teachers in schools would soon reach a plateau. In 2002 a study was undertaken

(Donn 2002) to outline possible options for the institutional development of the six Colleges of Education. Following a period of consultation the Council for HE passed the proposal from the MOHE to diversify the curriculum of five of the six colleges and rename these Colleges of Applied Sciences (CAS).

From 2005/6, the five colleges began to offer Bachelor degrees in Communication, Design, International Business Administration (IBA) and Information Technology (IT). These are run through a consortium agreement with a number of universities and colleges in New Zealand. The component parts of the Communication degree are in International Communications, Digital Media, Journalism, Public Relations and Media Management; in Design the curriculum is Digital Design, Graphic Design and Multimedia Production; in International Business Administration (IBA), along with formal courses in business administration, there are also courses in Tourism and Hospitality; for IT there are courses in Software Development, Networking and IT security.

However, it has been seen that many of these courses are also taken at SQU and by those studying abroad and that they are the very courses with a preponderance of male students: in commerce and economics at SQU, for example, 57% of the undergraduate and 100% of the postgraduate intake are males; of those studying abroad 94% are male. It may be that the opening up of five colleges all providing Bachelor courses in IBA (each providing – possibly – 100 places) will encourage more females to enrol in these courses. But that has not been evident from current registrations at SQU, from figures of those studying overseas or from numbers enrolled at private colleges.

In fact there may already be some over-supply in courses in business administration within the private college sector. The newly-upgraded Sohar University has 4 year Bachelor degree courses within the Business Faculty in Accountancy, Management and Marketing; within the Social Sciences and Humanities Faculty, degrees are available in Journalism and Communication, English Language and Translation. There is also an MBA degree. Similarly, Dhofar University offers 4 year Bachelor degrees in Computer Science and English Language in the Faculty of Arts and Applied Sciences, and Accountancy, Finance, Management, Marketing and Management Information Systems in the Faculty of Commerce and Business Administration. Again, a potential number of 500 students may be enrolled on these courses.

The University of Nizwa has a number of degree courses within its College of Humanities. These include a BA in Management and Information Systems, a BA in Business Administration, BAs in Accounting, Marketing, Recreational Management Information Systems and a BSc in International Trade and Finance. Similar courses in Management, Accounting, Travel and Tourism, Computer and Information Technology, as well as MBAs, are available at 16 other private colleges in Oman. Yet the MOHE has moved from courses traditionally seen as acceptable to Omani parents and female students and is developing in the CAS, courses which have had a greater appeal to males. So not only would it appear that the predominant course offerings tend to be those favoured by males, but the replication and lack of curriculum variety must be a cause for concern.

The transformation of these colleges - a major component of higher education - is part of the challenge for the MOHE. Not only must those in charge of colleges address the pressures of globalisation, but they must also recognise in their administration and curriculum development, the legitimate concerns brought about through Omanisation.

Further, Omanisation results in pressures on the Ministries providing education to ensure that, at all levels, curricula engage with employment opportunities and socio-economic developments. This means that not only should the MOHE address labour market concerns but so, too, must other Ministries with responsibilities

for education. Although HE is under the MOHE there are three other Ministries involved in education: the Ministry of Education (with responsibility for schools); the Ministry of Manpower (currently having responsibility for Technical Industrial Colleges); and the Ministry of Health (with responsibility for Nursing Colleges). At the local level, there are ten regional Directors of Education, working under the Ministry of Education. These persons oversee planning (school numbers, pupils numbers, staffing ratios, Omani and expatriate teacher numbers), the placement of qualified teachers into schools, the deployment of specialist staff and, crucially, they ensure that the new Basic Education system - with its standards-based curriculum and a structure of 4:6:2 rather than the old 6:3:3 - is supported through appropriate training and re-training courses for teachers.

However, as teacher training is the responsibility of the MOHE and SQU, it has been the case that competing priorities - brought about through both globalisation and Omanisation - have impacted upon recent developments of this sector. The Ministry has had to address numbers needed for teaching, alongside fast-changing labour market requirements. For example, in Oman, there are 29 teachers for each 1000 of the population between the age range 15-64 years, this being higher than the average for developed countries where there are 24 teachers for 1000 people of the same age range (Ministry of Education 2005). That being the case, it has been argued that there is a clear need for continued training of teachers in Oman. Policy makers, therefore, have had to weigh up competing definitions of 'need' and have made hard decisions in order to provide educational opportunity for Oman's school leavers as well as responding to the real and legitimate demands from parents and the labour market.

Additionally, as there is only one remaining teacher training college, with teaching being the means by which the majority of female workers in Oman had joined the labour force, one can begin to understand the concern now being expressed. With the demands for greater flexibility in the labour force, employees in Oman, as elsewhere, will be required to continue to learn, to apply and adapt to (and with) new technologies. Through this learning, it is anticipated that they may move between occupations, sectors of employment and even between countries. Further, knowledge and information-based enterprises have changed work practices from a reliance upon narrow and specific skills for a particular industry to broad-based transferable skills, including problem solving, communication and teamwork. Learning programmes, particularly those the HEIs, it is argued, will need to be designed to encourage learners to become self-motivated, logical and analytical thinkers as well as being competent, technologically literate and responsible citizens. This has been seen specifically in relation to Oman but, indeed, is a regional, international and global issue.

PART FOUR: REFLECTIONS ON THE NEW CURRICULUM

A particularly important feature of the new diversified colleges, the CAS, are degrees with a focus on various aspects of management. Access to a career in management, often considered as being at the pinnacle of the society's professional hierarchy, is not necessarily easy in Oman. In a study by Al-Lamki, (2000) which addressed the role of Omani women in management positions, obstacles to women's progress were highlighted. Additionally, also delineated were the actions needed to be taken to help women achieve greater rewards for their efforts - educational, social and personal.

Subjects in this study consisted of a sample of Omani female managers working in the public and private sectors. They occupied positions as directors, director generals, advisors to Ministers, heads of departments, assistant deans, and deans. The researcher utilised qualitative and statistical methods to describe, analyse and summarise the characteristics of the data collected. Sixty questionnaires were

dispatched to a random sample of Omani women in these management positions. Thirty-two (51%) responded. Analysis of respondents indicated the presence of an array of pressures which militated against holding management positions even though these women were better qualified than their male colleagues. The researchers attributed these barriers, or resisting forces, to cultural and traditional values coupled with traditional stereotypes on the status and role of women in Arab societies. Respondents noted that the traditional attitudes towards women tend to have spill-over effects at work, whereby predominantly male employees regard women as being less capable than men and unfit for responsible positions, particularly those related to management.

This research may be confirmed by a slow up-take in female enrolment in management degree courses in the diversified colleges. However, as other resisting forces to women in management were seen to include limited opportunities in higher education, this may be remedied by the creation of management courses in all five colleges. Further, respondents referred to discriminatory appointment and promotion practices, unspoken silent policies, an absence of legislation to ensure participation of women in management, a lack of professional management training programmes for women, few opportunities for professional networking and few female role models.

The findings of the study clearly indicate that while in principle, women in Oman have been accorded equal educational and employment rights, in practice, discrimination against women exists in the work place. This situation is made more difficult as women aspire to management positions. Several of the respondents articulated that 'merely being a woman' is a major obstacle to professional development. The majority of the respondents, confirmed that much more needs to be done to overcome barriers to the full participation of Omani women in management positions. With five diversified colleges, the Colleges of Applied Sciences, now offering degrees in Management, that may well change.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

It may be that the MOHE has made the decision to develop management, ICT and business courses in response to the future employment profile of Oman. It may also be the case, and this is by no means certain, that the MOHE has the intention of developing State education in Oman along these lines so that the private sector can be freed up, thereby allowing places for expatriate and overseas students.

Be that as it may, the end result does not speak to a gendered vision for higher education in Oman. And given the importance of the role of women in society, given the views expressed by UNESCO, the World Bank and international development agencies that women's education, particularly, provides the stable base for social, political and economic development, and – as Amartya Sen (1999) writes – the education of a girl has an eight fold impact on social development indices, then we must look with worry at the apparent absence of concern for the higher education of girls in Oman.

In Oman, most of the discussions at Majlis Al-Shurah (Consultative Council) have emphasised public demand for higher education as a human right on one hand and, on the other, the need to build upon human resources to achieve modernisation. It is clear that Omani citizens recognise the benefits of higher education for their children, not least by the fact that they have started to pay for private colleges and universities. It is therefore important that policies for institutional and curriculum development in the higher education sector do not marginalise females, or reduce their possibilities for participation, just at the time that the population moves towards acceptance of female higher education and employment.

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