Sultanate of Oman

The Education Council

The Most Remarkable Projects Developed by

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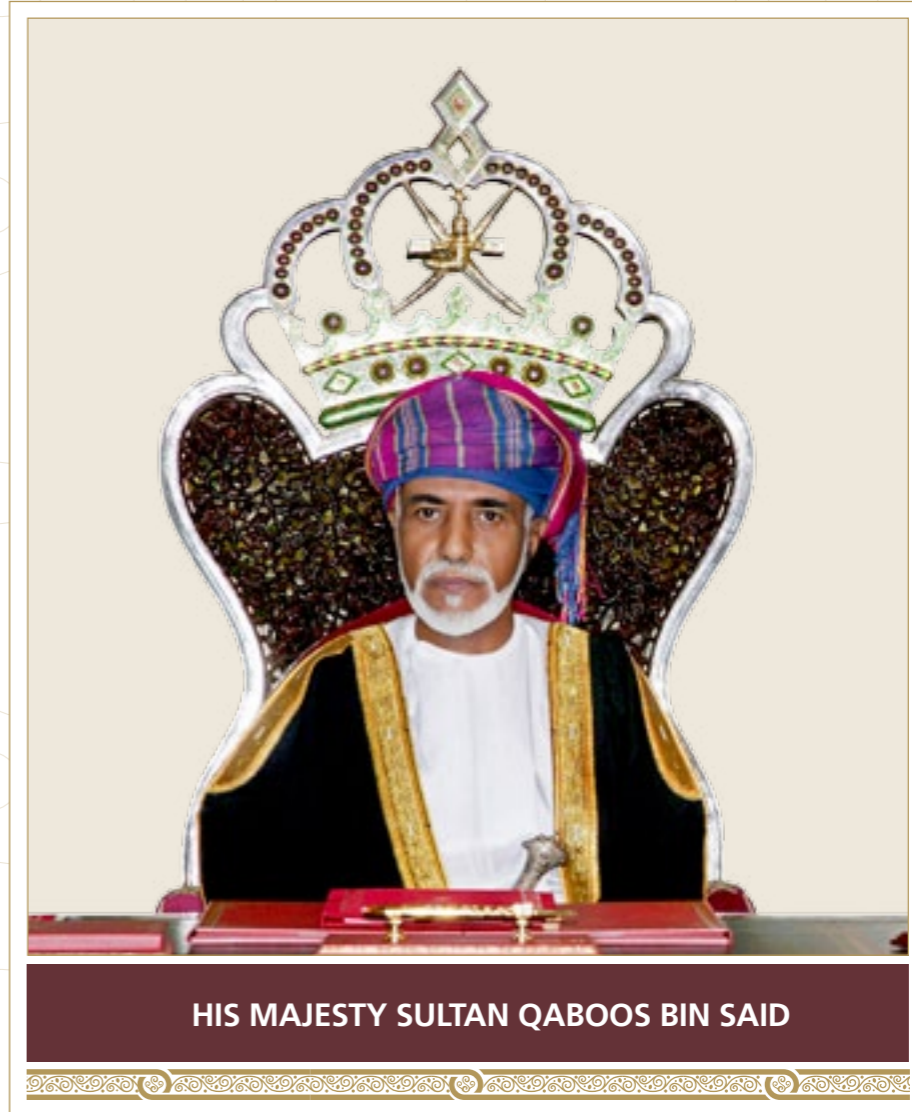
The Education Council

ILLUMINATED WORDS

"It is well understood that education is the basis of development. In the various stages of education and through its diverse curricula, national manpower, which is necessary for domestic development and for the implementation of its programmes, is prepared. Therefore, it has been necessary, for the success of development plans and the execution of its programmes, to work to secure the quality of output of all types of educational establishments in accordance with the general policies of the state, to help attain the goals that we all aspire to achieve.

During the past period, various systems of education and curricula were implemented and different training programmes were executed, but the matter calls for greater attention to be accorded to linking the educational output to the requirements of the labour market. Hence one of the priorities of the current stage of development and the next stage, which we prepare for is to revise the educational policies, its plans and its programmes, which need to be developed to keep pace with the changes that the country is going through.

More attention should be accorded to the requirements imposed by scientific and cultural development towards the evolution of a generation armed with awareness, knowledge and the abilities required for worthwhile work. The establishment of the Education Council seeks to promote this sector. Therefore, all departments in charge of education at all levels have to cooperate with this Council in total dedication and perseverance.

We would also like to call upon the Council of Oman to present its opinion in this respect to the Education Council, and we are confident that joint efforts will lead to the desired results".

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said – Council of Oman 2012

HIS MAJESTY SULTAN QABOOS BIN SAID

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Introduction

Education is the one of the most important pillars of sustainable development. Nations utilize education to build their human resources to achieve progress and development and to consolidate their status at the international arena.

Countries from all over the world strive and try hard to compete with other nations to raise the standards of their educational systems and to improve their outcomes in a way that fits their current and future conditions. In this sense, countries of the world intend to evaluate their educational systems to achieve quality in teaching and learning. Such evaluation takes place in systematic manners that grant accuracy and credibility.

The government of the Sultanate of Oman has realized the importance of education in leading the comprehensive development of the country. Thus, it devotes much care to quality education to promote human resources efficiency and capability to assume their roles in national development. Educational plans were directed at the beginning of the Omani Renaissance to spread education and make it accessible for all in a way that copes with development five-year plans of the Sultanate. Since present time is witnessing a lot of technological and cognitive changes as well as economic, social and cultural challenges, the government directed efforts towards achieving quality in education and raising its standards.

In recognition of the political leadership of the importance of making education goes along with rapid developments in the fields of knowledge, technology and economy, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said gave his directives in his speech to the annual sitting of the Council of Oman in 2011 and 2012, to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of Education in Oman. Such evaluation deems necessary to identify challenges and find appropriate mechanisms to overcome them to produce a generation that is able to cope with developments at both international and regional levels. His Majesty, also, emphasized the importance of linking education outcomes to the needs of labour market through revising different educational policies, plans and programs to meet the requirements of the Omani society and the needs of the labour market.

In response to the directives of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, the Education Council dedicates itself to draw the general policy of all forms and levels of education. The Education Council works on directing education to be in line with the general policy of the country and the requirements of the comprehensive development in a way that achieves the objectives of the philosophy of education in the Sultanate of Oman.

Within this framework, the Education Council is working to develop the National Strategy of Education in the Sultanate of Oman 2040 in coordination with concerned authorities. This work is well integrated with the project of re-structuring all forms and levels of education completed in 2013. In addition, the Education Council supervises the process of the drafting of both laws of general education and higher education as well as other developmental projects in the field of education developed by other concerned parties.

First

National Strategy of Education in the Sultanate of Oman 2040

The Sultanate of Oman has made remarkable achievements in the education sector represented in enrolment of 97% of children at basic education age in schools. Enrolment in post-basic education increased to reach 84.3%. In higher education institutions, 28.7% of students at the age-group 18 – 24 were enrolled in 2012 compared to 12.6% in 2002. All these achievements are concerned with quantitative expansion of education, meanwhile the issue of quality is still a significant challenge to the Omani educational system. Furthermore, the focus was on the educational institutions rather than on the whole system.

The education sector is facing many challenges of which the most apparent is the existence of many bodies supervising the educational process, especially at higher education level. Other challenges are: the need for improving the quality of the outcomes of the education system and to provide work opportunities to graduates, shortage in highly qualified researchers and the high level of dependence on government funds. Facing these challenges requires finding appropriate solutions in a scientific systematic manner and setting a comprehensive well-integrated strategy for education.

The national strategy of education 2040 is a response to the directives of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said included in his speech to the Council of Oman in 2011 and 2012 when he gave his orders to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the educational process. The strategy is based on specialized studies conducted by a group of local and international experts. It takes into consideration latest developments in the education sector. The overall vision of the national strategy of education 2040 is represented in producing human resources who are equipped with skills required for work and life and to make them productive in this knowledge-based world. The strategy is also concerned with preparing them to adapt themselves to changes of the present time,

maintain their national identity and intrinsic values and capable of contribution to the development of human civilization in general.

The strategy is built on four principles that pave the way for five sub-strategies. Each sub-strategy discusses one aspect of the process of development of education. The four principles are: adoption of a new framework for education, capacity building, delegation of responsibilities to educational institutions and adoption of an outcome-based approach.

The national strategy of education 2040 includes five sub-strategies. These are: education management strategy, strategy of students' enrolment and their progress throughout educational levels and work sectors, strategy of development of quality in education, strategy of research and development and strategy of providing funds for education.

These strategies were identified according to the general principles of the overall strategy of education. They are built on studies, recommendation, papers, researches, a study of the Education Council, a study of the technical team and the policies of the Supreme Council for Planning. These strategies discuss challenges which should be overcome to realize a strategic vision. Each strategy starts with a general objective and includes recommendations to achieve these objectives.

An executive plan was developed for the strategy. It includes identifying a priority of implementation of each recommendation, the parties responsible for such implementation, expected outcomes, indicators to measure implementation and a time framework of starting and completing implementation. It also included sequential steps of application of every recommendation.

A- Education Management Strategy

The education sector witnessed during the last two years establishment of many authorities and councils to cope with local and international changes. In this regard, the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority, the Research Council and the National Centre for Career Guidance were established. Private education also witnessed huge expansion. Despite this development in the education system, the principles on which strategic planning is based as well as legislative and controlling aspects and their operational process are not clear.

The general objective of the education management strategy is to identify roles and responsibilities of specialized councils and other parties concerned with education as well as their inter-relationship to enable the whole education system to achieve its national objectives in effective manner.

The education management strategy calls for organizing the education sector in a way that separates strategic planning processes from legislations regulating the sector and the operational processes of the educational institutions. Therefore, the strategy recommended that the Education Council should follow up the implementation of the national strategy of education. It also recommended re-identifying the jurisdictions of the Ministry of Education in providing school education, following its operations and setting its standards. According to the strategy, the jurisdictions of the Ministry of Higher Education was also to be re-identified to act as a regulator of both public and private higher education sectors through implementation of legislations and regulations which organizes operations within higher education and supervises putting such regulations in effect. The strategy recommended restructuring the educational ladder of the education system in a way that meets the targeted goals. The strategy confirmed the necessity of improving the system of quality management

of the whole education system to ensure maintain a level of performance that meets international standards.

This strategy recommended building capacities within educational institutions to enable them to bear responsibility of managing these institutions and to entrust people in charge of these institutions responsibilities and authorities as step to grant them self-management jurisdictions associated with legislations for administrative and financial accountability.

In the view of fact that the skills of leadership and management of senior employees at educational institutions are very important, it becomes very necessary that the efficiencies of senior management employees of educational institutions should be improved in a way that raises the standards of administrative work in accordance with best practices in this field.

The strategy confirmed the importance of development of an effective electronic system to manage administrative information to ensure efficiency of administrative performance of educational institutions. It called for setting a comprehensive plan to improve facilities and infrastructures of educational institutions, improve specifications of the school building in a way that matches topographical nature, build residential complexes for teachers at remote areas and provide boarding houses to higher education students. The strategy recommended organizing the work of the ministries responsible for education, specialized councils and educational institutions through drafting the law of school education and the law of higher education to identify jurisdictions, responsibilities and frameworks which are appropriate to the operations of the Omani education system.

B- Strategy of students' enrolment and their progress throughout educational levels and work sectors

Data of the National Centre for Statistics and Information indicates that the percentage of population in the age group less than 15 years represented 33% of the total Omani population in 2012. New generation of youth are to be provided with opportunities to be enrolled in an education system with a high level of internal efficiency if they were to be prepared in an appropriate manner and in which they can easily change their paths of study in accordance with their abilities and interests. Such education system should provide them with the skills required for the twenty first century and promote their entrepreneurship capacities. This can facilitate their entry to labour market to make them effectively contribute to the development of Oman in the future.

The general objective of this strategy is represented in ensuring that all students at school-age have an access to education at both pre-school and basic education school in all parts of Oman. The education system should facilitate their effective progress across educational levels up to higher education and eventually join the labour market according to their qualifications.

This Strategy calls for achieving enrolment rates at both general education and higher education according to international standards. This requires adoption of pre-school level as a formal educational level as it prepares children to join schools. It is also necessary to pass legislations that make general education obligatory to all children at school age. This shall eventually leads to increase enrolment rates at higher education. The strategy emphasizes the importance of realizing balance between academic education and vocational education as well as providing multiple options to students in accordance with their interests, abilities and needs. This requires opening vocational education paths following the basic education level.

The strategy of students' enrolment and their progress throughout educational levels and work sectors addressed the importance of integration and harmony between general education and higher education to arrive at a unified homogeneous education system that facilitates progress from one level to another. The strategy calls for the evaluation and improvement of post-basic education curricula to produce graduates who obtain skills and competencies that help in easily getting enrolled and succeed in higher education institutions.

The strategy emphasises establishment of a technical and vocational education in a way that allows movement between different technical and vocational careers in the future and link them together. It also allows linking it to both general education and higher education. The technical and vocational education should be attractive to all categories of students and should meet their different interests.

The strategy calls for linking the educational system to the requirements of the labour sectors. It should be flexible to be able to respond quickly to rapid changes of work sectors and their needs of skills that can be obtained by students. This matter requires availability of effective mechanisms to identify skills required by labour sectors and ensure that such skills are known to educational institutions to design and develop their programs accordingly.

The strategy confirms that education is a main element for development of skills and general features of entrepreneurship as well as for raising levels of awareness of moving towards private business through establishment of small and medium-sized enterprises.

C- Strategy of development of quality in education

The Sultanate of Oman achieved remarkable progress in the education sector during the last four decades with regard to students' enrolment or to establishment of educational institutions at both general and higher education levels. Yet, there is an urgent need to improve quality of the education system to reach international standards. The most important challenges in this regard are: improvement of mechanisms of quality assurance, setting national standards to develop staff efficiency and evaluate their performance, improvement of students' attainment, ensuring that students acquire twenty first century competencies. Among the challenges that face the issue of quality is also how to adjust education to meet the needs of the labour market, and to enable general education graduates to follow up their higher education or join labour market to contribute to the comprehensive development of the country.

This general objective of the development of quality in education aims at assuring that quality of the system is of the same standard of international systems to produce high quality outcomes.

This strategy recommends that the Ministry of Education should establish an internal system to assure quality within the general education system and that the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority should continue its work to complete the national accreditation system of higher education institutions and their programs. It also recommends that competencies should be developed in the field of quality assurance.

The strategy also recommends that the national framework of academic qualifications in the Sultanate of Oman should be improved to be a comprehensive framework that includes all types of qualifications and meets the needs of the whole education sector.

The strategy calls for quality building to raise performance

of staff through training and adoption of a licensing system for the teaching profession and thus teachers shall be able to perform their duties in an efficient manner. The strategy also calls for developing a long term plan for preparation of higher education staff to achieve Omanization of 60% of the total number of staff by 2040. Furthermore, it calls for designing a program for professional training for higher education staff. The strategy suggests introduction of a comprehensive system for evaluation of staff performance at schools and higher education institutions as well as accountability and incentive system.

This strategy recommends that the teaching learning process should be improved through designing programs to prepare graduates to master their specializations and acquire basic knowledge in other related fields as well as to use student-centred approaches in teaching and develop students' basic skills required for life and work. The strategy recommends establishment of a national centre for educational evaluation and examinations to provide indicators for quality in general education.

On the other hand, the strategy recommends enhancement of roles of institutions in implanting patriotism education and values as well as positive attitudes among students.

This strategy emphasises the role of educational institutions in serving their communities. It recommends strengthening cooperation and partnership between these institutions and local communities to improve educational outcomes and to contribute to the development of these communities.

D- Strategy of research and development

The consecutive five-year development plans stated that research is one of the elements of science and technology. The future vision of Oman economy, Oman 2020 confirms that research is a corner stone for sustainable development and a basic element for strategies of economic diversification in the future vision since this vision depends on research in the transfer and nationalization of technology.

The government of Oman devoted great care for research by the establishment of the Research Council in 2005. The Research Council developed a national strategy for research (2008 – 2020) and it included eight research sectors such as education and human resources. These researches show that rates and types of research in the education sector is in an urgent need for an strategy that makes a radical change to achieve excellence in research.

The overall objective of this research is to build sustainable capacities in research in educational institutions and to reinforce its vital role in contribution to building a knowledge-based economy.

The strategy of research and development emphasizes the role of universities in providing suitable environment for improvement and encouragement of research in different fields. It also emphasizes finding an influential and effective interrelationship between research centres and universities at one hand, and establishments concerned with productivity and service provision on the other hand. Such establishments benefit from researches and as a result, they expand their research capacities. The strategy recommends that research plans and postgraduate programs in higher education institutions should correspond with the national strategy plan of research.

This strategy also confirms the importance of innovation for the development of successful economies and then

improves their positions in the international competitive market. It also emphasizes reinforcement of learning engineering and technology since they are the base for innovation and at the same time it calls for devoting care for social sciences and humanities due to their important role in understanding individuals and the structure of the society.

The research and development strategy recommends establishment of scientific incubators which links universities and research centres at one hand to productive sectors at the other hand. These incubators also, at the same time, serve universities and research centres through adoption of research outputs released by researchers and then they improve, implement and market such ideas in a form of new products.

The strategy called for building national capacities in research field, developing students' capabilities in conducting researches at all levels of education and supporting students' innovative projects through adoption by government and private institutions.

E- Strategy of providing funds for education

The strategy of providing funds for education addresses the analysis of current status of funding education and studies challenges which face this matter. It recommends setting new mechanisms for funding and its resources. It is observed that the current system of funding education is scattered among many parties because there is separate funding for each of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Higher Education, the Ministry of Manpower, Sultan Qaboos University and other parties supervising educational institutions. Each of these has its own budget to fund its affiliated educational institutions. This dispersion of funding responsibilities leads to duplication of efforts and lack of effectiveness. The current system of funding is centralized and that hinders quick response in taking appropriate decisions to change educational programs according to latest developments. It does not provide a room for encouraging innovation or for the best use of funds in the institutions. The most remarkable challenge that faces education sector in Oman is its dependence on government as a sole resource of funding.

The overall objective of the strategy of providing funds for education is development of new mechanisms to fund this sector and to find sustainable funding resources.

This strategy recommends development of an integrated funding framework under the responsibility of the Education Council. Thus, distribution of funds becomes under one umbrella. The strategy also recommends adopting decentralization through entrusting financial jurisdictions to educational institutions to enable them to manage their own financial affairs with an accountability mechanism in place to control expenditure.

The strategy also offers new funding mechanisms depending on the principle of linking funding to outcomes. This principle is based on the concepts of standardized funding and neutral funding. Standardized funding is low cost funding based on unified well-known specified standards which depend on performance indicators. Neutral funding is based on treating students at government and private higher education institutions on equal bases. All programs offered by these institutions are funded without any discrimination.

The strategy recommends focus should be put on efficiency since it is a crucial factor in making future decisions of funding the education system and in controlling maintaining balance of expenditure between general and higher education. It also recommends developing a mechanism to reinforce the role of private sector in supporting and expanding education. The strategy calls for finding sustainable funding resources and alternative funding resources for the education sector to ensure availability of financial support for this sector under the changing economic conditions and the ups and downs of the oil market.

Second

The Project of Re-structuring the Education System

This study was conducted in response to the directives of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said at the annual sitting of the Council of Oman in 2011 and 2012. In both speeches, His Majesty the Sultan emphasized the importance of education, quality of its outcomes and the necessity to revise its policies, plans and programs to cope with the developments taking place in Oman.

Accordingly, the Education Council issued many decrees to implement His Majesty's directives such as the decree No. 1/2012 by which a main committee was formed to supervise a study on re-structuring all levels of the education system, assuring its quality, diversifying its outcomes and increasing capacity of students' enrolment at higher education and technical and vocational education institutions. In order to carry out its assigned tasks, this main committee formed many sub-committees and teams. Each sub-committee and team was responsible for one of the above-mentioned themes.

The main committee set an executive plan to supervise the work of the sub-committees. This plan included the following topics:

❖ Identifying the general framework of the education system.

❖ Referring to previous related studies and collecting data.

❖ Comparing and analysing.

❖ Coordinating with concerned parties.

❖ Getting informed of best international practices.

❖ Writing a report.

The study managed to identify the most remarkable challenges that face the Omani education system through analysing available studies and making local and international field visits. It also evaluated the current status of the system. The study made a number of recommendations to overcome the challenges and other recommendations related to the five targeted themes. The findings of the study are included in five separate reports. Each report covers in details one theme in addition to an executive summary of the most important aspects related to development of the education system.

A- Study of re-structuring the general education system

The approach of the study was based on identifying the current status of general education through presentations, reports and data provided by specialists of the Ministry of Education, Sultan Qaboos University and the Admission Centre of the Ministry of Higher Education as well as the field visits to the governorates of Oman. The study team also reviewed the study of the World Bank and the reports of Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). It also got acquainted with best practices and educational procedures of some countries as well as some educational theories of other educational systems.

The report includes definition of the problem of the study, presentation of the methodology followed by the committee in collecting and analysing data to arrive at conclusions. The report also includes the results which the committee concluded. These results cover eight themes according to the decision by which the committee was formed. These themes are: the Omani educational ladder and levels, curricula structure, the possibility of introducing technical and vocational courses, management of the educational system, the extent to which it achieves the philosophy and objectives of education, teachers training and preparation systems, educational supervision system, approaches and methods, supporting educational services and the role of the private sector in the educational process.

The study showed that there are many achievements in the themes it covers especially with regard to access to education for all as well as increment in rates of enrolment in general education, Omanization of administrative and technical cadres and their professional development, provision of infrastructure and basic supplies, and curricula construction, revision and development.

However, there are some issues which are still below the desired levels according to international standards such as quality of education, levels of service provided to students, performance of administrative, technical and teaching staff and students' attainment. The study shows that there are some challenges that face the educational system of the Sultanate of Oman. The most remarkable of these are: students' weakness in basic skills (reading, writing and arithmetic) in all grades, low performance of students in periodical and final examinations and below average performance of students in international examinations of TIMSS (Mathematics and Science) and PIRLS (Reading).

The report also states in details the challenges related to the eight themes. Each challenge is followed by recommendations and proposals which may contribute to the improvement of the educational system and to the props on which this system is based since education is considered as the pillar around which the social, economic and cultural systems stand upright in the Sultanate of Oman.

B- Study of re-structuring the higher education system

This study is based on the need of the higher education sector in Oman for development and improvement to meet the needs of the society and to cope with rapid scientific and knowledge latest developments to enable outcomes of the education sector to compete at international levels in fields of science and technology. In this regard, this study contains many sections. They are: management of different levels and paths of higher education, development of appropriate future visions and the study of possibility of establishing a legal framework for higher education.

With regard to higher education management, the study covers different government higher education institutions excluding military institutions. It was apparent that there are many challenges facing higher education. The study provided many recommendations suggesting restructuring of this sector. The following units should be involved in implementation of the restructuring process:

❖ The Education Council in its capacity as being responsible for setting general policies for all levels and types of education in both public and private sectors.

❖ The Ministry of Education since it is a regulating, supervising and executive body concerned with pre-school education and general education in its both public and private delivery.

❖ The Ministry of Higher Education which supervises both public and private higher education institutions.

❖ Oman Academic Accreditation Authority which provide accreditation for all education institutions at all levels as well as technical and vocational education institutions.

The study addresses the possibility of developing a legal framework for higher education. It recommends hastening issuing of laws of both general and higher education in both public and private sectors. Such laws are expected to identify philosophy and objectives of education and shall pave the road for implementation of the national strategy of education 2040. The legal framework shall cover all components of the educational system such as legislative, organizational and executive aspects as well as educational institutions and their affiliates and all parties concerned with the educational process. The legal framework is supposed to regulate the interrelationship among these components as well as the operational model of education at all levels and forms of public and private education.

C- Study of increasing admission capacity of higher education institutions

This study includes many aspects such as the development of higher education, the status of admission capacity and future expectations and the challenges that face its expansion. The study was based on approved statistical data and communication with parties concerned with higher education institutions to provide required data. Specialists from different education sectors made filed visits to about 56 public and private higher education institutions to conform data with actual facts on ground. External visits were also made to make use of experiences of other countries in finding solutions to similar problems.

The study shows the historical development of higher education institutions with regard to their number and number of students enrolled in these institutions as well as numbers of academic, administrative and technical staff. The study shows the development of each institution. It covers main topics such as numbers of admitted students, total number of students and facilities available in each institution.

Investigation of results of studying admission capacity indicates that numbers of admitted students considerably increased as from 2011/2012 academic year in the fields of administration, commerce, information technology and engineering and its associated technology. Meanwhile, enrolment was limited in some specializations such as architecture, construction and personal services in public and private institutions. There is relationship between admission capacity in higher education institutions and the availability of facilities and funds. Plans to increase admission are facing challenges related to provision of these facilities. Private sector institutions are subject to the principle of supply and demand. The study shows that 73 646 students enjoy government scholarships (free education) and they represent 72% of the total number of higher education students. The study concludes with expectations for future admission capacity. It provides recommendations to address current challenges and aspirations for better future for this sector.

D- Study on diversification of higher education provision and how it can meet the needs of the society and the requirements of the labour market

This study provides detailed analysis of the knowledge and skills obtained by higher education graduates and the extent to which they meet the requirements of the labour market in all business sectors in the Sultanate of Oman. The study covers five themes. These are : the future requirements of knowledge and skills in different sectors, different programs offered by higher education institutions, vocational training provided by these institutions, different plans of technical education and vocational training and experiences of countries and educational institutions of developed countries. The report of the study provides detailed results of these themes as well as recommendations.

The results of the study indicate that the challenge is not only represented in the dominance of foreign manpower over business sectors but also in the increasing numbers of expatriate workers as a result to the expansion and development of the business sectors. Thus, attainment of more skills and knowledge accompanying this development and expansion shall be in favour of expatriates rather than Omanis. Accordingly, national capacity building and acquirement of skills and knowledge by Omani nationals shall be of limited possibilities.

Although the structure of higher education in Oman indicates that the number of higher education institutions is very large in proportion to total number of population when compared to many other countries, yet, the study states that the efficiency and effectiveness of these institutions do not meet the expectations of development of national work force. This is reflected in the inability to identify skills and knowledge required for the business sectors in present and in the future, types of required academic programs, delivery of such programs and assurance of their quality as well as their appropriateness to meet the requirements of the private sector.

The results of the study also indicate that there is duplication in delivery of programs by higher education institutions. This leads to the misuse of available resources. It also shows basic weakness in the structure of qualifications of the largest system within the higher education sector in terms of number (technical education). This weakness shall eventually lead to another weakness of acquired skills at different levels (technicians, technologists and specialists) offered by the system.

The study shows lack of standards of curricula development in vocational training. Such standards reflect urgent and future requirements of economic sectors since higher education represents a unified body that awards certificates and responsible for assuring the quality of such certificates.

The study recommends establishment of skills councils responsible for identifying urgent and future required knowledge and skills, and match them with the academic programs offered by higher education institutions and with training programs in all business sectors. It also recommends improvement of the structure of qualifications of technical education through introduction of three paths within this structure from the moment students are admitted. Among the recommendations is the establishment of a body that awards certificates under the bachelor degree level, directing educational and training resources towards improvement of the teaching and training process in strategic economic fields, which are part of the Omani economy strategy, and reducing duplication of delivery of programs by higher education institutions.

E- Study of education quality management system

This study addresses the issue of education quality management system. It covers many aspects of the most remarkable are: systems and procedures used to manage quality in Oman, attainment levels of holders of general education diploma who are supposed to join public and private higher education institutions. The study is concerned with identifying the extent to which these candidates are qualified in terms of knowledge and skills to be admitted in higher education academic paths and specializations. It diagnoses quality and standards of higher education institutions graduates and the extent to which they meet requirements of the society and labour market.

It was clear, through this study, that there are serious efforts made by the Ministry of Education to manage and implement quality standards in its educational institutions. Special departments were established to assume this task such as department of quality, quality assurance office for private schools, the technical office for studies and development, department of development of school performance and the department of educational supervision. Nevertheless, the large number of these offices and departments results in dispersion of efforts and exhaustion of available resources to the extent that they are no longer effective.

With regard to public and private higher education institutions, the report of the study concluded that many education quality systems in the world are based on linking the educational process to the labour market during time allocated for teaching and learning. These systems allocate remarkable portion of learning hours for training. However, this arrangement is absent in many higher education institutions in the Sultanate of Oman. Even institutions which allocate some learning hours for training do not consider such training as part of the elements of quality.

The study analyses the ranking of the Sultanate of Oman according to the Global Competitiveness Report 2012–2013 with regard to higher education and training. The Sultanate of Oman was in the 61st position out of 144 countries. This rank requires making substantial improvements in the education system, the quality of mathematics and science taught to students, post-secondary education and training programs and services as well as in research in a way that achieves desired progress in this field. Such improvements shall have positive effects on national manpower to meet the needs of the local labour market.

Finally, the study emphasizes the importance of revising procedures and systems related to education quality and the importance of raising standards of holders of general education diploma or its equivalents as well as higher education graduates to meet the needs of the labour market and the requirements of national development.

Third

The Project of the Document of the Philosophy of Education in the Sultanate of Oman

The document of the philosophy of education in the Sultanate of Oman is considered as an important reference of directing the educational policy of the education system. The educational field witnessed in general, and in Oman particularly, new developments which require an urgent updating the document of philosophy of education during the current period to express the real vision of development of the educational process in Oman and to act as a foundation on which improvement of educational outcomes can be based.

The existence of a philosophy of education in Oman is crucial since it is the main drive for educational reforms in all educational institutions. It is of special importance to unify visions and practices within the education sector since this philosophy is based on contemporary educational principles and theories representing the framework which guides the educational process towards improvement and reform, in accordance with high quality and reliable resources, principles and objectives.

The document of the philosophy of education relies upon many resources. These are; Islam, the thought of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, the Basic Statute of the State, the cultural and historical role of Oman, the characteristics of the Omani society and its needs, aspirations and challenges, the learners' characteristics, the contemporary educational thought, international conventions and charters, the strategic plans of the State and current world issues.

The Omani philosophy of education confirms the principles and objectives according to which the components of the modern education system are built and developed. These components are represented in the integrated growth of learners, national identity and citizenship, national esteem and strength, adherence to values and good conduct, education for sustainable development, accountability and responsibility, education as responsibility and national partnership, education of human rights, education for peace and tolerance, democratic thinking, high quality education for all, life-long learning, science and work, scientific thinking, exploration and innovation and the society of knowledge and technology.

The objectives enlisted in the philosophy of education document are interpretation of the Omani society targets, goals, aspirations and ambitions in the field of education. These objectives identify aspects of educational concepts which are desired to be implanted in individuals. It is the role of curricula theorists, planners and developers to interpret these general objectives into procedural assessable and measurable objectives through composing learning outcomes and standards of knowledge, cognitive skills and common abilities as well as attainment aspects in different school subjects and specializations.

Fourth

The Project of the School Education Law

This project is initiated as part of a series of efforts aiming at reforming education in the Sultanate of Oman through giving care for developing the legislation and organizational structure of the educational system since this aspect is very important in achieving the objectives of the educational system and in improving its outcomes. The project of the law of school is considered as a response to the huge expansion which the education system has witnessed during the last decades and as an introduction to a new phase of development. The development of a special law of education is an interpretation of the recommendations of a set of studies conducted by the Ministry of Education in recent years. These studies agreed on the importance of governance of the education system in the Sultanate of Oman and improvement of the legislative and organizational structure which provides an educational environment which drives and support a culture of creativity and innovation at different technical and administrative levels. The law is set up by making use of the experiences of many leading education systems which succeeded in developing special laws of education.

The school education law was drafted in consultation with persons who are concerned with the educational process inside and outside the Ministry in a way that responds to the requirements of the educational system in the Sultanate of Oman as well as to the emerging needs of learners, the requirements of flexibility and efficiency required for management of the education system in the twenty first century. This law is drafted in ten sections each one of them includes many chapters. These chapters cover aspects such as requirements of admission in different education levels, special education programs, curricula, educational evaluation, special education, education environment, specifications of the school building and funding of education, as well as other aspects related to staff of the schools in terms of licensing the practicing of teaching and the principles of following up the conditions and affairs of the teaching staff.

Fifth
The Project of the Higher Education Law

This law is one of the mechanisms and tools that regulate higher education in the Sultanate of Oman. It is obvious the laws which organize higher education at present are as many as the units which supervise higher education and oversee higher education institutions which deliver educational services, the thing that result in lack of harmony between these units.

Based on the directives of the Education Council to the Ministry of Higher Education with regard to development of a comprehensive project of a higher education law, the committee responsible for drafting the law was keen to include in the proposed law all types of technical, applied and vocational higher education (public and private) as well as the procedures which regulate higher education institutions in terms of establishment, specializations, programs and quality in a way that serves the process of this sector in the Sultanate of Oman.

Drafting articles of the law took into consideration sustainability of the law and that it should avoid inclusion of detailed provisions. The texts of the law only contain basic and essential provisions to address different issues. Accordingly, the executive regulations are thus empowered to deal with different related detailed provisions. The texts of the draft law are written in a way that ensures achievement of desired objectives and goals of which the most important is the general approach of the Sultanate of Oman to adopt quality assurance standards in all dimensions of the education system.

The themes of the Higher Education Law:

❖ Chapter (1): Definitions – this chapter includes definitions of terminologies, phrases and words used in the context of the law.

❖ Chapter (2): General Provisions – provisions which is applied to facts regulated or governed by this law. These provisions state validity and applicability of the Law.

❖ Chapter (3): Objectives of the higher education – a set of objectives which higher education aims at achieving them through its all organizational and executive institutions.

❖ Chapter (4): Higher education institutions – this chapter is concerned with regulating these institutions in terms of their establishment, cancellation, and mechanisms of introducing academic programs as well as organising the work of councils, committees and administrative and financial affairs regulating work.

❖ Chapter (5): Scholarships and studying subsidies – it is concerned with regulating internal and external scholarships at university and postgraduate levels.

❖ Chapter (6): Qualifications and equalization of certificates – this chapter addresses provisions and procedures of equalization of academic qualifications and accreditation standards at higher education institutions.

❖ Chapter (7): Penalties and sanctions – this chapter regulates penalties and sanctions imposed on higher education institutions when they violate provision of this law.

To complete drafting this law, the committee made use of laws, regulations and bylaws that regulate higher education in the Sultanate of Oman as well as samples of some higher education laws in some countries to act as guiding material for the committee to accomplish this task in a professional approach.

Sixth

The National System of Quality Management of Higher Education in the Sultanate of Oman

In response to the urgent need to provide higher education opportunities to the increasing numbers of holders of general education diploma, the government of the Sultanate of Oman made large efforts to increase enrolment capacity of public higher education institutions. The government higher education institutions could not manage to provide sufficient seats to accommodate increasing numbers of candidates who wish to continue their higher education. Therefore, it was a natural step taken by the government to allow private institutions to deliver higher education programs to accommodate more students. Accordingly, the first private higher education institution was established in mid-nineties of the last century. It was followed by many other private higher education institutions. At present, there are 27 higher education institutions operating in the Sultanate of Oman.

One of the basic objectives of provision of higher education opportunities is to produce national qualified cadres who are able to meet the needs and requirements of the labour market and to continue to contribute effectively to the comprehensive development process in the Sultanate of Oman. Thus, it was inevitably important to establish a specialized government agency to be concerned with quality assurance at higher education institutions within a national system of quality management of higher education in Oman.

Accordingly, the Royal Decree No. 54/2010 was issued to establish Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) to replace the former Oman Accreditation Council. The OAAA is an entity with legal status and which reports to the Education Council. The Authority was established to continue the efforts initiated by the Oman Accreditation Council in the dissemination of a quality culture and accreditation of institutions and their programs. The Authority is keen on practicing extensive consultation with higher education sector and all concerned parties during different phases of designing and implementation of main components of the accreditation system.

Although such consultation approach requires more time to promote the system, yet allowing higher education sector to practice its genuine role, involving it in development processes and receiving its feedback increase the effectiveness of the Authority and assure that the system is responsive to the requirements of the sector.

Seventh
The Project of Indicators of Performance of Higher Education Institutions

Quality in higher education has many dimensions. The performance of higher education institutions or any of their programs is measured and evaluated according to many approaches and methods. The methodology used varies between "qualitative" approaches such as auditing quality or academic accreditation and "quantitative" approaches that facilitate measurement, comparison and classification through using statistics and investigating qualitative data in a quantitative form. This approach is similar to other performance indicators projects which are adopted by countries for different purposes and objectives. Among these purposes and objectives is identifying the general performance of educational institutions or conducting comparative studies on many aspects of the educational process. Some countries and international institutions use this approach to assess higher education institutions performance and classify these institutions at local or international levels as required.

This project, which the Ministry of Higher Education started developing it in 2011, is an important initiative of multiple dimensions which can be relied on in the future to conduct a national assessment process of the performance of the educational sector in the Sultanate of Oman. As it is the case for other projects, the work in this project started with collecting a sample representing a well-coordinated and integrated unit to provide more valid and significant data which can be measured and evaluated in a harmonized way. The project began with examining indicators of performance in 26 private higher education institutions included 19 colleges and 7 universities. Colleges which are affiliated to universities were considered as independent units to identify the size of variation in type of institutions (university, university college , college) and to facilitate comparisons, analysis and to identify differences resulting from using the larger unit (e.g. the university).

The project was characterized by a scientific methodology resulted in real indicators which required looking into many national documents and international experiences. The project passed through many phases such as inferring objectives, deriving goals, examining and studying the advantages of such objectives and goals as well as proposing and matching indicators and testing their features. Then, the appropriate weight of each aspect was suggested. The project produced a set of 116 indicators distributed over many major functions and activities of higher education such as courses, quality, academic support to students, research, availability of academic and non-academic staff, availability of facilities and services for students and staff, satisfaction of students and academics, international reputation and relationship with the community and employment of graduates.

Analysis of data of the project provided many and comprehensive results. It also provided large quantity of information on the overall performance of private higher education institutions and the evaluation of objectives, goals and indicators. Data analysis showed possible improvement opportunities which can be drawn on projects outcomes. Conclusions and recommendations were provided and difficulties and challenges which faced the project in general were identified.

The project arrived at important results about aspects which need more focus and care by concerned parties of the government when they monitor institutions' performance and which require improvement of performance by these institutions. Some weaknesses, according to the results of the project, were shown in the performance of institutions with regard to indicators related to research, academic guidance, students' interaction, societal activities and availability of staff with senior academic titles (professors and associate professors). Rates of these indicators were low (less than 60%). Some institutions achieved good indicators to some extent with regard to students and staff satisfaction and availability of appropriate teaching strategies and approaches.

Eighth

Improvement of School Education

The Sultanate of Oman managed during the last four decades to make free education accessible to citizens and expatriates. Enrolment rates at schools increased as per international standards, especially in basic education. Students' progress through educational levels also improved and equal opportunity to education was achieved through confirming the right of every individual in education.

Apart from achievements made so far, efforts are still going on to improve quality of education and its outcomes since the Omani society is witnessing rapid developments in all aspects of life. This requires improvement of education quality and efficiency in the light of the challenges and requirements of present time and the aspirations for the future.

The Ministry of Education initiated conducting studies to evaluate the educational system in cooperation with international specialized agencies. Such studies were further supported by getting acquainted with educational systems which their students achieved high levels of performance in international tests. The aim of these studies is to develop a road map for future improvements in the school system.

The future road map of improvement of the school system is expected to be based on many elements that ensure integration and comprehensiveness of the education system. Some of these important elements include improvement of efficiency of administrative and financial procedures of the system, improvement of levels of teachers' performance, raising capabilities of administrative and supervision staff, improvement of curricula, educational evaluation and examinations, improvement of data management systems, development of major performance indicators and enhancement communication and cooperation with concerned parties to improve outcomes of the educational system.

The future road map shall be implemented through a long term gradual plan. Short procedural plans shall be derived from the main road map during the forthcoming period. It is hoped that a qualitative shift in the educational system shall be achieved within the process of reform of school education. Remarkable results are expected in this regards. These include: (1) improving outcomes of the educational system in a way that matches international levels and making students acquire basic skills required by higher education institutions and Omani labour market (2) improving performance of teaching staff and the efficiency of administrative and supervision cadres (3) achieving good level of communication and cooperation with parents and other concerned parties (4) moving away from focusing on inputs towards focusing on outputs.

A- Project of Evaluation of Schools in the Sultanate of Oman

This project aims at studying the experience of the Sultanate of Oman in evaluating schools. The project is divided into three main sections. The first section discusses the introduction of the system of development of school performance in Oman which accompanied the project of reform of general education in the sixth five-year plan. It aimed at linking evaluation with achievement of the strategic objectives of the reform. The project was introduced in 2002 in cooperation with the British Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) as an expertise agency. The first section also presents the methodology used in evaluation and the administrative and technical organizational structures which form the components of the educational system, the cultural context of the evaluation process and the challenges that face this process.

The second section of the project discusses the most important international attitudes and experiences in the field of school evaluation as an indicator which feeds the future vision of evaluating Omani schools. The third section reviews future proposals to improve the experience of Oman in school evaluation in accordance with recommendations and results of studies which were conducted in this field as well as to overcome challenges that faced the previous experience in this field taking into consideration the advantages and achievements realized so far in infrastructure and technical abilities which were not available at the beginning of implementation of the system.

It worth mentioning different countries managed to evaluate quality of their education system to achieve excellence in teaching and learning. Such quality evaluation was conducted in accordance with systematic methods that assure accuracy and validity of the evaluation processes. The ultimate goal of evaluation is to assure quality and excellence of the provided educational services.

Literature in this field suggests diversification of organizational structures, work approaches and methodologies which match the nature of the educational system in every country and which are appropriate to build capacities of educational cadres in the field of performance evaluation.

Furthermore, most of education systems adopt mixing internal evaluation with external evaluation. Success of evaluation processes largely depends on existence of mutual understanding between concerned parties with regard to goals and purposes of evaluation as well as on the evaluation capabilities of the personnel in charge of evaluation processes.

B- The National Centre for Educational Evaluation and Examinations

The main objective of establishment of this centre is to provide a system of evaluation and examinations which is trusted by the society and contributes to providing information and data for makers of educational policies with regard to learning outcomes and the processes prior to these outcomes.

The mission of the centre is to enable students to join the labour market or the higher education institutions inside or outside the Sultanate of Oman. The Centre shall exert extensive efforts to achieve these targets.

The need for establishment of such a national centre for educational evaluation and examinations in Oman emerged as part of the great care that is devoted to educational evaluation in most countries of the world since it has role in identifying educational policies. The establishment of the Centre is also a response to the challenges that the Omani educational society is facing with regard to identify, in accurate and objective manner, obstacles that affect students' attainment in the absence of standardized performance measures, diagnostic tools, clear standards to check learning and achievement of its objectives and valid and reliable indicators to measure quality of school outcomes. All these are required to be used in conducting educational researches and studies to contribute to raising efficiency of the educational process and to provide flexibility and ability in making supportive decisions, legislations and laws. They are also required for the overall improvement of the educational system through provision of valid indicators of the actual performance of students in all grades (1 – 12).

C- Improvement of School Curricula: A Continuous Process

School curricula are among the most important components of the educational process. Curricula aims at achieving the general objectives of education, providing learners with knowledge in different fields, developing their skills, refining their abilities and adjusting their conduct and behaviour.

The general framework of curricula and the main documents of different school subjects are the bases for regulating elements of curricula and their improvement processes. Both, the frame work and documents, identify knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that learners should acquire. They describe the philosophy, objectives and contents of curricula and they identify methods of teaching, educational resources and aids as well as evaluation approaches. These are followed by the scope and sequence documents of all school subjects which include objectives, themes, topics and items. These documents are keen on having horizontal integrations between subjects taught at each grade and between lessons of each subject. They are also concerned with vertical integration between topics of each school subject and between subjects of different grades. School curricula include introduction of some appropriate concepts, values and skills.

School curricula are subject to continuous improvement with regard to objectives, content, activities, examples, pictures, drawings, teaching aids, resources and technologies used in teaching as well as evaluation of students' attainment. In this respect, teachers training programs are continuously enriched as part of this continuous improvement process.

According to latest studies and researches, and to the evaluation of the education system in Oman and its related recommendations, the Ministry of Education started in a comprehensive process of improvement of documents of school curricula through the adoption of the project of curricula standards. This project aims at a comprehensive improvement of Omani curricula in a way that addresses the current directions of the Omani curricula and the latest developments in the fields of curricula and methods of teaching.

The first phase of the standards project was completed. It included constructing the general framework of curricula which identifies knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that learners should acquire. The second phase has just started which focuses on building scope and sequences documents of different subjects. Whenever these documents are completed, work shall start in identifying performance indicators to monitor students' progress and to match that with professional standards of teachers.

D- The Specialized Centre for Professional Training of Teachers

The education sector and human resources of this sector receive great care in the Sultanate of Oman since this sector is considered very important for the sustainable professional development of national cadres and their continuous rehabilitation in a way that copes with the requirements of the present time and enables them to meet national needs and copes with international latest developments.

Accordingly, the Sultanate of Oman managed during a short period to make educational services accessible to all people all over the country through building schools, recruiting qualified administrative, technical and teaching cadres and providing all resources, textbooks and supporting aids to achieve better education.

The Sultanate of Oman succeeded in achieving high rates of Omanization of the education sector. There were 52 822 teachers working at schools in 2013/2014 school year as well as 13 422 technical and administrative supporting staff. His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, gave his directives, in the light of this great care devoted to education, to increase the budget allocated for professional development of teaching staff and other supporting staff in the educational sector to threefold as from the school year 2011/2012 through provision of qualitative training programs in terms of planning, designing and implementation. These programs aim at polishing academic and educational skills, improving quality of teaching and learning at schools and measuring their expected educational and learning impact.

The Ministry of Education is aware of the challenges that face all its sectors especially in the fields of rehabilitation and training of the teaching staff and other supporting staff. Therefore, these fields are given priority in the Ministry's reform plans and programs. Accordingly, the Ministry launched an ambitious national project to raise the standard of professional development to improve quality of the education system. This project is represented in establishment of the Specialized Centre for Professional Training of Teachers which is concerned with raising capabilities of teachers, polishing their skills, measuring their performance and finding mechanisms and plans for their training and analysing their performance.

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