

1 Background to the BA (TESOL) Programme and Project

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1990s the Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman decided that teaching should become an all-graduate profession. Several UK universities were approached and asked for proposals for providing an up-grading programme for teachers of English. From initial discussions in 1996, a University of Leeds BA degree in Educational Studies (TESOL) was designed, the first teachers were enrolled as undergraduates in July 1999 and the final cohort completed their studies in December 2008. The whole endeavour between 1999 and 2008 was coordinated by the Ministry of Education in what became known as the BA Project. In the following sections we discuss the background to this project, review the educational policies that underlay the goal of a graduate teaching profession for Oman, discuss how the BA (TESOL) fitted into these policies and consider what expectations the Ministry had for the Project.

2 EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AT THE END OF THE 1990S IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

When His Majesty Sultan Qaboos ascended to the throne in 1970, there were only three schools in the whole country, with a mere 900 students being educated by 30 teachers. Figures from UNESCO indicate that in that year, Oman's adult illiteracy rate was 65.7%, with a staggering 43.9% of men and 88.3% of women being illiterate (Ministry of Education, 2006:55). His Majesty's vision was to see the Sultanate use its natural and human resources to develop a modern economy, and one of his government's first commitments was to develop a public education system that would reach all parts of the country and would include all sections of society.

The lack of a public education tradition in Oman meant that the first task for the newly created Ministry of Education was to conduct a campaign to raise people's awareness of the importance of universal formal education for their present and

future well-being. To encourage school attendance, the government provided free education for all who wanted it, free textbooks for all classes and, where distance required it, free transport from home to school.

While arousing a demand for education in the population, the Ministry also had to meet the major challenge of providing the required infrastructure and staffing levels. The government committed itself to a large-scale school building programme although, at the beginning, schools were also opened in rented premises, in specially constructed non-permanent buildings and even in tents. Since there was a very limited cadre of educated personnel from which to draw teachers and administrators, an extensive overseas teacher recruitment drive was carried out. Teachers were recruited from Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia and, in addition, for teachers of English Language, from Britain, Sudan and countries from the Indian sub-continent.

By 1971 the number of schools had increased to 42 and the student population to over 15,000. Education for preparatory level students (grades 7-9) was introduced in 1972 and for secondary level (grades 10-12) in 1973. In a period of only 20 years, educational provision in the country was transformed with more than 300,000 students being taught by over 15,000 teachers in 780 schools by 1990 (Ministry of Education, 2006:25-29).

During this period of rapid expansion, the need for large numbers of teachers meant that many teachers with low qualifications were recruited into the system. Although most were recruited from outside the country, Omani citizens who had completed their secondary education abroad and those who had completed their preparatory education inside Oman were also recruited as teachers. In 1972, nearly 50% of the teachers employed in Oman's schools held qualifications of a lower level than the equivalent of a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and a mere 8% possessed a university degree (Ministry of Education, 2006:87).

Throughout the 1970s, over 90% of the teaching staff were expatriates. In 1975, two Teacher Training Institutes were established, one for males and one for females, and this allowed more Omanis to be recruited. By 1990, the Ministry was employing more than 4,360 Omani teachers, although this still represented less than 29% of the total teaching force. However, a policy for the Omanisation of the Sultanate's economy had been introduced in the Third National Development Plan (1980-1985), and this committed the Ministry to gradually replacing its expatriate teachers with Omani nationals. The progress made by the Ministry in this regard could be seen by 2000, when the number of Omani teachers had risen to nearly 17,750, representing more than 67% of the total teaching force (Ministry of Education, 2006:86).

In the early years, curricula and textbooks were imported from other Arab countries. The courses were heavily content laden, teacher-centred and emphasised rote learning. Assessment was conducted entirely through examinations which almost exclusively tested memorisation and which all students were required to pass in order to progress to the next grade. The main concern for assessment at the end of grade 12 was to provide a test of minimum competence for entry to university. In the mid-1970s, the Ministry of Education began to develop its own curriculum, subject syllabi, textbooks and teacher guides, although the emphasis on a teacher-centred, content-driven approach, tested by high-stakes examinations

assessing lower-order skills, continued.

The traditional pedagogical approach was in part dictated by very large class sizes which, even as late as the mid-1990s, often contained between 40 and 50 students. Such an approach could be defended in the early years when the overriding educational priority was to eradicate illiteracy. However, by the mid-1990's the significant increase in the numbers enrolled, most of whom progressed to secondary level, meant that universal formal education had, to all intents and purposes, been achieved. Moreover, the need to supply graduates to work in the emerging so-called 'knowledge economy', required a new approach, which recognised and catered for the differing abilities and aspirations of all students.

In 1995, under the directive of His Majesty the Sultan, a conference on The Vision for Oman's Economy – Oman: 2020 was launched to develop a strategy for achieving economic balance and sustainable development in the country. One of the key dimensions of this strategy was the development of human resources to enable Omanis to deal effectively with global and local challenges. Emerging global and national economies, it was agreed, require workers who are technologically literate, can engage in analytical thinking and are skilled communicators. It was recognised that the country's future prosperity and economic growth would depend on how effectively the education system could provide young Omani citizens with the knowledge and skills they need to participate in the changing economy and job market.

In the light of this, it was agreed that a shift in emphasis away from quantitative expansion to qualitative reform of the Sultanate's education system was required. The Government, through the Ministry of Education, began the process with an ambitious programme to restructure and reform its elementary and secondary education systems, placing stress on the reform of the first 10 years of the general education cycle with the aim of creating a strong universally accessible 10 year system of Basic Education (Ministry of Education, 1996). This was to be followed by a two-year, and also universally accessible, Post-Basic Education system. The main features of the new systems were to:

- Develop teaching and learning materials and pedagogy that adopt a student-centred approach.
- Revise courses, school textbooks and teacher guides in order to reduce theory and abstract concepts and increase the use of practical and real-life contexts which encourage the development of transferable skills.
- Replace traditional book-based libraries with learning resource centres to provide students with access to a wide range of resources, including the internet.
- Use a wide range of assessment and evaluation instruments, with greater emphasis given to continuous assessment.
- Reduce class sizes in order to allow teachers to employ the new teaching, learning and assessment strategies.
- Introduce new subjects, such as IT (information technology) and life skills, into the curriculum and strengthen key existing subjects, such as science, mathematics, Arabic and English through the allocation of additional teaching time.

Since the mid-1990s, there has thus been an on-going process of change involving teaching, school administration, school performance and the encouragement of formative assessment techniques. Taken together, these reforms represent a significant change in emphasis and constitute a major challenge for teachers. Their experience was of a recently established education system dominated by a traditional teacher-centred approach. Now, they were being expected to apply new classroom management techniques to enable them to move away from whole class teaching that rewards rote learning, towards student-centred methods that emphasise group work and individualized approaches which promote inquiry learning and display evidence of analytical and higher order skills.

The Ministry was aware that the successful implementation of its reform initiatives was, to a large extent, dependent on the quality of the response of its teaching staff. Class sizes were reduced significantly (in grades 1-4 of Basic Education a maximum class size of 30 students was stipulated), but this along with a hopeful statement that the Ministry expected its teachers to change their practices was not enough; what teachers required was help to understand the rationale for the reforms and to develop the skills and techniques required to achieve the intended outcomes. In other words, the Ministry needed to develop a well-qualified, well-trained, well-supported and well-informed staff. Due to the Government's Omanisation policy the Ministry could no longer rely on recruiting suitably qualified expatriate teachers, but had to concentrate its efforts on developing a better qualified Omani teaching force.

3 HOW THE BA PROJECT FITTED INTO THIS PROCESS OF CHANGE

To meet the requirements of its Omanisation strategy and to support the successful implementation of its reform initiative, in the mid-1990s the Ministry of Education began to plan an ambitious, pioneer in-service teacher development strategy aimed at upgrading the qualifications of more than nine thousand diploma-holding Omani teachers with different specialisations to first degree level. The Ministry envisaged a number of training programmes in different disciplines to improve the competencies of its diploma-holding teachers, upgrade their qualifications to degree level and so enable them to implement the education reform more effectively.

English was fortunate to receive initial attention. The special concern given to the teaching and learning of English has been a consistent theme in royal directives since the beginning of the educational renaissance. These directives derived from principles of Islam, which call for harmony, peace and communication between the different nations of the world, regardless of race or language. Learning English as a second language was thus seen as increasing the opportunity for understanding and cooperation between nations and thus as promoting world stability and peace. In addition it was clear that English had become the primary means of international communication. It was not just a foreign language, but the language of today, the tool for accessing the world of technology, the internet and global information resources, the world of business and international higher education.

It was in this context that the Ministry began a major initiative to enable diploma-holding English language teachers to upgrade their diploma qualifications to a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The total number of English teachers targeted by the initiative was initially 1050, though retirements, transfers and other circumstances reduced this to 921. The BA Project, as it became known, was thus the first step towards fulfilling the aspiration of the Ministry to upgrade the qualifications of all diploma-holding teachers in all subject areas and a major step towards meeting the expectations of all diploma-holding teachers.

4 WHY INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION?

A history of international cooperation in many spheres helps explain why Oman found it natural to turn to an overseas university to find a solution to its local problems. Oman has for a long time had particularly strong links with the UK in many areas of economic and human resource development and many Omanis have been educated in UK universities. There were precedents in the Ministry of Education for cooperation with the UK. In particular English curriculum advisers and those designing materials for learning English as well as teacher training advisers, had traditionally come from UK. It was in this context that, when the Government of the Sultanate of Oman first invited expressions of interest from universities interested in offering a BA (TESOL) programme in Oman in 1996, three UK universities were eventually shortlisted.

The key criteria the Ministry of Education applied were that :

- the university selected should offer an opportunity for students to be exposed, through study on its programme in Oman and through visits to the university, to the language and culture of an English-speaking country.
- the university should be internationally recognised and respected in the fields of initial teacher education, teacher development, particularly with young learners, TESOL, and research.
- the design / content of the programme should be of a high standard and suited to the needs of the Government of Oman, bearing in mind that it was important that it should support the Basic Education Reform programme.
- the university should have had experience of running similar programmes for teachers from other foreign countries.
- the university should be able to demonstrate transparent quality control procedures which would guarantee the successful delivery of all academic aspects of its BA (TESOL) degree programme in Oman.
- the university would commit itself to delivering a degree programme in Oman of an international level and quality, equivalent to the same degree being taken at the university itself.
- the cost should be competitive.

(Cameron & Al-Lamki, 2001)

Of the three universities that were eventually invited to tender, the University of Leeds was able to offer a programme that in addition included language development modules alongside methodology and other modules as part of the programme.

After due consideration, the University of Leeds was selected to deliver a BA in Educational Studies (TESOL) and the BA Project was initiated.

5 GOALS OF THE BA (TESOL) PROJECT

The Ministry defined the primary goals of the BA Project as follows:

- To develop a cadre of highly skilled and motivated primary English teachers capable of contributing significantly to the development of school-level English language teaching and capable of providing Omani students with high quality English language training relevant to the demands of the 21st century, in line with the expectations of the educational reform programme.
- To upgrade all diploma-holding Ministry of Education teachers of English to a BA degree in Educational Studies (TESOL) with the intention of raising the teaching of English in Oman in the direction of an Omani graduate profession.
- To enable participants to develop the necessary knowledge and skills to progress further within the education profession. It is expected that some graduates will move into curriculum development, teacher supervision and inspection, teacher education and educational administration.
- To enable participants to attain a level of proficiency in English and knowledge of English language that will enable them to teach and study effectively.

(Ministry of Education, ELCD, 2001:2)

These goals aimed to effect an increase in the expertise of the Omani English teaching cadre and develop 'life skills' through which graduates would contribute to the on-going development of the nation. The BA Project was therefore initiated to support the Basic Education Reform programme by developing the Sultanate's Omani teachers of English as members of a graduate profession, and so support the nation's Omanisation. In broad terms the BA Project aimed to contribute to preparing Oman to face the challenges of the 21st century.

6 MANAGEMENT OF THE BA (TESOL) PROJECT

While the University of Leeds was tasked with delivering the core of the initiative - the BA degree programme - for the duration of the project, the Project itself was overseen by an Executive Management Committee, which was responsible for reviewing academic matters and broader aspects of the collaboration, and comprised representatives from both the Ministry and the University and also by a Ministry of Education Steering Committee, responsible for broad financial and administrative aspects of the Project, while the BA Project Management Office ensured the smooth running of the whole operation. From 1999 to 2009 the Ministry and the University of Leeds worked together to ensure that the BA Programme was of the highest quality and that teachers graduating from the Programme obtained the knowledge and developed the skills that would enable them to maximise the effectiveness of their teaching.

7 THE BA (TESOL) PROJECT AND THE BASIC EDUCATION SCHOOL REFORM PROGRAMME

7.1 Compatibility of the BA with the Basic Education reform initiative

The Ministry of Education considered it important that the BA Programme should be compatible with the Basic Education school reform initiative in both content and process. Key concepts that underlay this initiative included the following:

- A shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred curricula and from transmission-oriented teaching to learner-centred teaching. In this respect the BA programme would be expected to place emphasis on co-operative learning, for example through negotiating outcomes to tasks carried out in groups, and on individual responsibility for demonstrating learning, for example through the writing of assignments. The programme should aim to graduate teachers who understand the need for teaching practice to be underpinned by theory and research evidence about learning. Self-directed learning should be encouraged and supported, so that graduates will be equipped to develop similar learning strategies, for use both in and outside of the classroom, in their pupils, and to continue their own professional development when the course is finished.
- An emphasis on education for thinking, reflecting, problem-solving, adaptability and knowledge creation. Thus the BA Programme would be expected to focus on developing learner independence, problem-solving and reflective abilities, analytical and critical evaluation abilities.
- A focus on valuing individual differences and nurturing a wide range of talents and interests. Thus the BA would be expected to develop the whole person, to develop a wide range of learning skills and to promote self-awareness, self-respect and respect for others.
- A view of education as preparation for life in a global economy. Thus the BA Programme should focus on making teachers more independent, more skilled and better able to contribute to making Oman successful in achieving its national and international aims.

(Ministry of Education, ELCD, 2001:6)

These values were shared by the university.

7.2 Supporting the implementation of the Basic Education reform programme in English

While the BA Programme would not have a teaching practice component, as a BEd would, it would need to support teachers in the process of implementing the Basic Education reforms. The aim of the BA would therefore not just be to support the objectives of the changes, but also to support implementation, by supporting the

teachers while the system was undergoing these changes. Regional Tutors, recruited by the Ministry of Education to provide aspects of the BA Programme in Oman, would therefore be expected to work closely with BA participants, not only to provide academic support, but also to discuss problems they encountered as teachers and consider possible solutions, based on making links between classroom practices and concepts encountered on the BA. The emphasis would be on developing participants' underlying cognitions rather than just their classroom behaviour, arguably a more appropriate model for in-service teachers. The main aspects of teacher education on the BA would therefore be to enable teachers to critically analyse and understand classroom materials and modes of assessment, to understand underlying philosophies and principles and through these to develop their practices as teachers.

7.3 Compatibility of the BA with the English language curriculum objectives, approach and methodology

While it was recognized that the BA Programme should present a range of international views on key issues, it was also considered important that views which contradicted or were incompatible with the primary EFL approaches and methodologies which formed the basis of new English language curriculum reform initiatives in Oman (Ministry of Education, ELCD, 1999) would not be put forward as models. It was therefore agreed that curriculum colleagues' advice would be sought and considered by Leeds at the module design and revision stages to ensure that methodology and other modules met the needs of Omani teachers as closely as possible. The content of modules would also be of interest and relevance to curriculum developers in the Ministry, providing an additional way of keeping updated in a fast changing field. Collaboration over compatibility did take place, but it remained an area where greater sharing of expertise could have been mutually beneficial (see Chapter 11).

8 ANTICIPATED VALUE-ADDED BENEFITS

The Ministry wanted to ensure that the benefits of the BA Project would not be limited to the skills BA students would develop within the degree programme itself or to the classrooms in which the skills would be used. To ensure that the BA Project had a broader impact, it was considered crucial to develop a clear strategy for further skill development and for the involvement of well-qualified Omanis in administration and management, teacher training and project-based research.

Thus while the BA degree Programme would ensure that all Omani diploma-holding teachers currently engaged in the teaching of the general education programme became qualified to teach at all levels from age 6-16 within the Basic Education programme, the Ministry of Education wished the BA Project to lead to the development of a cadre of personnel capable of progressing further and taking on key roles in educational management and administration, as teacher educators, supervisors and educational administrators in their regions or in the curriculum, testing or training departments of the Ministry in Muscat. These BA graduates could

be encouraged to bring their experience and their newly acquired knowledge and skills to bear on developing their new posts. In support of this aim, the Ministry planned that a number of BA Programme graduates, whom the Ministry considered to have an appropriate profile to progress further within the education profession and degrees that qualified them to apply for MA study, would undertake MA (TESOL) training. In all more than 50 teachers and other education professionals, many of them BA graduates, but also graduates from other disciplines, were selected for MA and PhD scholarships at the University of Leeds during the BA Project. Many of these have subsequently moved into new roles, while a number have left the Ministry for other educational institutions. These points are discussed further in Chapters 16 and 17.

The development of research capacity, through Research Methodology modules validated by the University of Leeds, the conduct of collaborative research activities and the publication of research findings were expected to be further strategies for capacity-building. Suitably qualified and motivated Omanis could be trained in research methodology and encouraged to collaborate with University of Leeds staff and / or Ministry Project staff on project-based research, leading to the publication of co-authored research papers. A number of relatively small research projects investigating aspects of the BA Project were initiated, but early difficulties in obtaining approval for research from the Ministry, a lack of provision within the terms of the project contract for funding research as well as difficulties in releasing and compensating Omanis willing to participate as co-researchers, meant that the number of research projects carried out was smaller than hoped for. Nevertheless several co-authored research papers are included in the present volume and clearly the BA Project has contributed to raising the profile of research in Oman by supporting the development of a research culture (see Chapter 9). The series of publications, of which this volume is one, is an example of the increasingly high priority given by the Ministry to research.

It was also anticipated that the BA might directly or indirectly influence the development of further degree level Ministry of Education training initiatives in other disciplines, such as Mathematics and Science. During the lifetime of the BA Project, discussions continued as to how training would be given in other disciplines and the Ministry cooperated with the Ministry of Education and Sultan Qaboos University to provide opportunities for teachers and administrators to continue their studies at higher education institutions. Between 2001 and 2005, 743 teachers graduated from Sultan Qaboos University with a BA. In addition, regional training centres were established and provided with training staff and the Ministry adopted a cascade model, involving the training of regional trainers in its central in-service teacher education centre in Muscat, with a view to them later providing short courses in their regions. Recent developments in in-service training and development of English teachers in Oman are discussed in Chapter 16.

9 CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed the educational policies in the Sultanate of Oman from the 1970s to the reforms of the 1990s, which underpinned the goal of developing a graduate teaching profession for Oman. The role played by the BA and the Ministry's expectations of the BA Project have also been discussed. The extent to which the expectations discussed above were met and the extent to which the Ministry actually benefitted from the collaboration are the subjects of later chapters.

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