

11 **Implementing the BA Project: A Ministry perspective**

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1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the experience of implementing the BA Project between 1999 and 2008 from the perspective of the Ministry of Education. Although challenges, such as the handling of the occasionally competing demands of the Ministry and the University, are discussed, they should be seen against a background of immense achievement by both the Ministry and the University and consistently positive evaluation from outside agencies. All the organisations involved in the Project played a full part in this.

Many documents have been referred to while writing this chapter. In particular we have looked at minutes of BA Project Executive Management Committee meetings, Project Manager's reports, University of Leeds Programme reviews and Academic Coordinator reports, Independent Evaluator reports, minutes of Regional Tutors' (RTs) meetings, as well as other discussion documents.

2 THE PROJECT AS PART OF THE MINISTRY'S BROADER VISION

The BA Project can be regarded as a successful teacher education innovation in many ways. It was an integral part of the Ministry's broader vision, its educational reform initiative (see Chapter 1), and being part of this broader vision was fundamental to its success. Both the academic and the wider professional development of teachers who studied on the BA Programme were as successful as they were because they accompanied parallel national educational reforms. A key implication is therefore, as Freeman (2007) notes, that projects like the BA will be more effective if they are in tune with wider developments in curriculum reform.

3 THE PROJECT FRAMEWORK

Various factors contributed to the successful establishment of the BA in Oman.

First the project benefitted from a very clear framework document (the contract), which set out clear responsibilities on both sides, particularly in relation to funding.

Secondly, from the very start the Ministry made an important distinction between the BA Project and the BA Programme. The overall initiative was a teacher development project to develop the skills and qualifications of English teachers with an academic programme as the core of the project. The Ministry was responsible for the first, while the University was responsible for providing the second. A mission statement was developed, which clarified the goals of both the project and the programme (O’Sullivan, 2000) and this distinction provided a valuable framework for the collaboration over the next nine years. The project – programme distinction engendered a creative tension, which provided an opportunity for criticism to be aired, but in a way that could lead to improvements in performance on both sides.

Third, a clear management structure was established within the Ministry. The BA Project was accountable upwards to several layers of management and three committees. Initially the project was the responsibility of the Director of English Language Curriculum Department (ELCD, subsequently the Department of Human Sciences, DHS), and above that, through the Director General (DG) of Curriculum, to the Under-secretary (US) for Curriculum and Education.

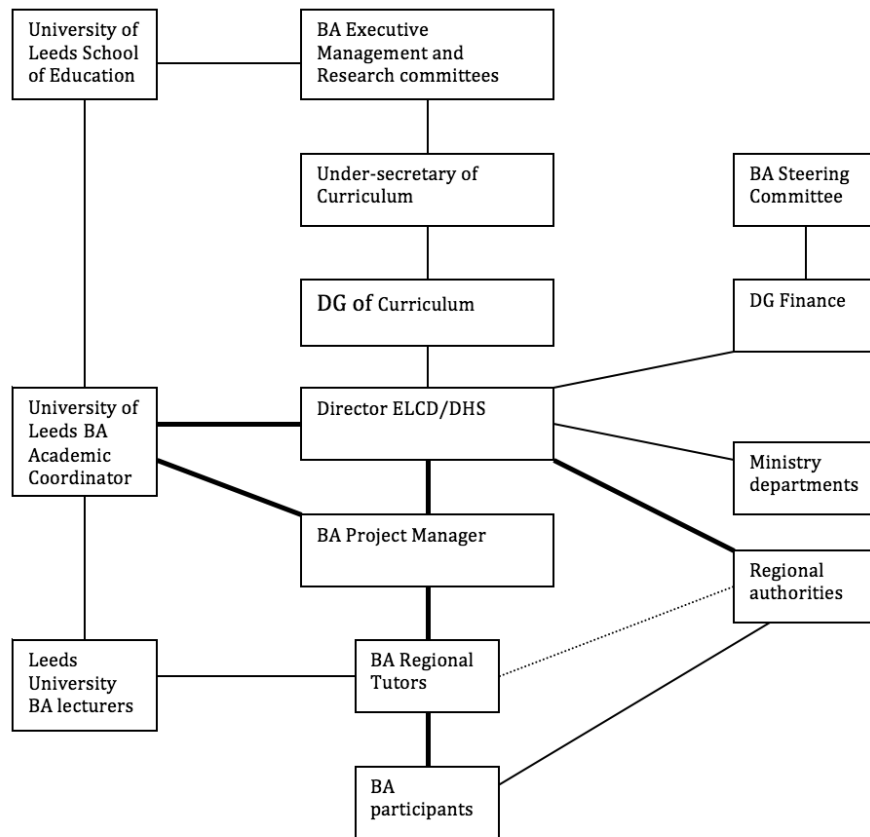


Figure 1: BA Project Management structure in Oman.

The activities of the BA Project were supervised by three Ministry committees. The BA Executive Management Committee, chaired by the US for Curriculum and Education, reviewed annual technical reports and made strategy decisions affecting the academic programme and the operation of the project. The BA Steering Committee, headed by the DG Finance, handled major financial matters as well as administrative matters such as graduation, while the Research Committee handled matters concerned with project-related research. The Director of ELCD (DHS) and the Project Management team were members of all three committees, with the Project Manager responsible for preparing Ministry documents for the annual Executive Management Committee and Research Committee meetings.

Matters concerning the University were the responsibility of the Director of ELCD (DHS) who initially liaised with the Head of International Education of the School of Education and subsequently the BA Academic Coordinator. The Project Manager looked after day-to-day management of this link with the Leeds Academic Coordinator, professional staff and administrative colleagues.

Day-to-day administrative and financial matters that needed action from departments in the Ministry were again dealt with through the Director ELCD (DHS), as were day-to-day Project matters affecting the regions, working through the regional Directors General of Education, Directors of Educational Supervision, Senior Supervisors of English and Teacher Trainers.

Matters concerning participants and RTs were dealt with directly by BA Project Manager, who chaired regular meetings of tutors, regularly visited regional cohort groups and their tutors, and chaired regional Staff Student committee meetings.

Thus while major policy decisions concerning the BA Project in Oman were made by higher levels of management in the Ministry, the often conflicting pressures of its day-to-day operation were handled by the English Language Curriculum Department, specifically by the BA Project Management Office.

4 THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST AND GOODWILL

Trust and goodwill were absolutely critical to success throughout the project.

The BA Project required constant sensitivity to Ministry thinking at the highest levels, while simultaneously building and maintaining relationships with the University. A sense of ownership of the project needed to be developed and maintained in Oman, particularly by building support for it in the regions and in schools. Project implementation thus required trust and goodwill on both sides. This was supported by the development of communication systems that kept key stakeholders informed all the time.

The project was initially subject to very close scrutiny from within the Ministry of Education and other Ministries. English was the first (and still the only) subject to benefit from a project to train teachers for an overseas degree and some senior Ministry officials exhibited concern at the beginning, with the result that regular meetings of the BA Project Steering Committee were held to assess progress. The rationale for why a particular action was needed would be discussed and agreed between the Project Manager and the Director, who would then justify the action upwards to the senior levels of management. A close working relationship between

Project Manager and the ELCD (DHS) Director based on mutual respect and trust was therefore essential. As the project developed and was seen to be well-structured, effectively managed and successful in achieving its goals, there was increasing goodwill and acceptance from the Ministry.

The BA Project Manager's position was itself politically sensitive. In the early years it was important to avoid any perception by the Ministry that the Project Manager was a 'Leeds' person. Simultaneously it was important for the University and the post holder to establish and maintain a relationship of reciprocal trust.

There were also issues of acculturation between the Ministry in Oman and the University in Leeds. The Ministry was constantly concerned to make sure the University kept its side of the bargain fully, and the opportunities for face to face communication provided by Leeds staff visits to Oman in the early years played an important part in reassuring both sides that they understood what the other expected.

5 COMMUNICATION BETWEEN OMAN AND LEEDS

The person responsible for the project in Leeds (initially the Head of International Education, latterly the BA Academic Programme Coordinator) was the University's point of communication with MoE, with the Director of ELCD (DHS) holding the equivalent role in Oman. All matters of substance were handled by signed fax between the post holders of these roles. Communication about academic and other professional matters took place electronically between the Project Manager and the Academic Coordinator and others in Leeds. Generally this system worked well.

BA RTs also needed to be kept regularly informed on matters concerning course delivery, and assessment during Day Release periods, and the Project Manager therefore officially forwarded to them relevant faxes or emails referred to above. RTs dealt directly with Leeds module convenors on matters concerning interpretation of module assignments. In addition to ensuring RTs knew what progress each student was making, where re-sits would have to be taken and what advice needed to be given to individual students, Leeds set up an Oman BA database, which stored all information about marks and attendance and through which RTs could access to up-to-date information about student performance. This system worked generally well throughout.

6 DAY-TO-DAY MANAGEMENT OF THE PROJECT IN OMAN

While the management structure established for the BA Project (see section 3 above) was sound, inevitably many unforeseen issues arose during implementation. Those concerned with its management had to be focused and ready to respond in a problem-solving way. Two examples will illustrate this.

Firstly the initial period of the BA Project, 1999-2001, imposed an unexpectedly massive workload on the Project Management team, particularly associated with

the establishment and equipping of training premises, and the rapid expansion in the number of students and RTs. The Project Management team frequently had to react quickly to unexpected developments and to meet tight deadlines. During this key period the Project office was seriously under-staffed, the excessive managerial workload affected the degree to which some short term plans were achieved, making the Project systemically vulnerable in some respects.

Secondly, the enormous professional and administrative workload in the early years affected not only achievability but also the time available to work specifically on introducing the project across the country and helping it to become accepted in Oman. To some in Oman the project was, in its early years, seen as usurping other initiatives. Yet as the project matured, as project staff worked hard at building relationships, as more students obtained degrees and were able to mentor those who were being prepared to join the next cohort, as the benefits and desirability of joining the programme became clearer, as the regions and in particular Head teachers became more understanding and supportive, as the project found ways of enhancing dissemination of information and publicity to the regions and improving communication between Ministry and schools, the level of acceptance of the project improved dramatically and complaints became more muted.

Both the Project Manager and the Deputy Project Manager remained in their posts throughout the duration of the project. It is believed that the project benefited enormously from this continuity in project management positions.

7 COMMUNICATION WITH THE REGIONS AND RELEASE ISSUES

Another important factor enabling the success of the BA Project was the support the Ministry received from regional authorities. Before each cohort the Ministry sought to secure a sufficient level of release from the classroom for teachers to enable them to cope with the demands of the course. ELCD (DHS) negotiated with regional authorities for teachers to be released from teaching for one day a week to enable them to attend Day Release classes, with school timetables being adjusted so that participants could carry out their teaching in 4 days. Concerns about participants' teaching loads and extra-curricular responsibilities were passed on to the Project Manager by RTs when they arose, after which liaison took place with regional authorities to find individual solutions that were acceptable to the region, the head teacher and the teacher. These might involve moving a teacher to a nearby school; releasing two participants from the same school on different days; placing one in one cohort, one in the next, or finding other teachers to take on part of a participant's load. Many such problems were solved easily and amicably.

Teaching and administrative workloads were a problem partly due to participants' unfamiliarity with studying and teaching at the same time. However, participants' frustrations were often genuine, as some were being assigned 25, even 30 lessons a week, by head teachers, some of whom were not well-disposed to requests from teachers to be exempted from all non-teaching duties, as this suggested a lack of commitment to the life of the school (see Chapter 16). There was concern that higher workloads could impinge on academic performance and while

there was no clear evidence that they did, a reason cited by many successful students for their high achievement in Cohorts 1 and 2 was the support given by their schools, especially in reducing workloads.

The main workload challenge occurred during the bulge of the Project in Cohorts 2-4, particularly between 2000 and 2004, when 370 students were participating in the programme. Faced with concerns about the nature and degree of release from duties offered by headteachers to BA participants, ELCD recommended to regional authorities that where possible BA teachers be assigned no more than 20 lessons a week. In 2004 an audit of teaching loads and release issues of BA participants carried out by the Ministry made three proposals: that more MA TESOL opportunities could be offered as an incentive, that the regions could be obliged to reduce BA teachers' hours and that the Ministry could recruit extra teachers to cover for BA participants. Unfortunately for budgetary reasons it was not possible to respond to these proposals or to provide the incentive of salary increments to those participating in the BA.

As the Project progressed and the bulge was passed, the regions found themselves able to provide an acceptable level of release more easily. For its part, ELCD (DHS) emphasised the importance of future students developing realistic expectations of the programme, and encouraged them to discuss the programme and the impact it would have on their lifestyles ahead of time with recent graduates, and also with their families and their headteachers (MoE 2007). Opportunities were provided for future participants to question BA graduate colleagues from their region. Participants were encouraged to develop time management skills. The regions were regularly reminded to be as supportive as possible; RTs and Project staff visited schools and held meetings with heads to encourage them to be committed to supporting teachers. In addition a booklet in Arabic was issued through the regions to head teachers to make them more aware of the demands, in general, of the BA on the students, and how headteachers could support participants.

While it is possible that teachers' workloads may have contributed in some cases to lower grades being achieved, particularly in the earlier cohorts, by the middle of the project participants knew what to expect, complaints about the adequacy of release from duties were relatively few and Cohorts 5 and 6 participants were accorded generously low workloads by their regions. Once on the programme, although many experienced language difficulties, almost all managed to obtain sufficient credits for a degree.

8 REGIONAL TUTORS

Here we will pay particular attention to aspects of the management and retention of RTs. An RT perspective on their role is the subject of another chapter in this volume (see Chapter 6).

The Project Manager was responsible for the mentoring and line management of RTs for administrative purposes, but also for reporting to the Ministry and the University on their professional competence, thus raising an implicit contradiction. While the mentoring of tutors was in itself potentially non-evaluative, the Project Manager had responsibility for evaluating a tutor's suitability for the academic role

of a tutor. It was therefore important to win the confidence of RTs to make this work, so that the mentoring process would be seen as far as possible as supportive in helping tutors to clarify what issues they recognised a need to focus on in the coming months. Fortunately most tutors were willing to reflect honestly and openly on their performance from the beginning of the process, which reflected the high calibre of appointees.

The necessity for the Project Manager to manage a team of RTs dispersed throughout the Sultanate over a three year degree programme on a daily basis presented numerous challenges. The Project Manager visited every tutor at least once a semester in their region, but RTs particularly in remote regions also needed almost daily e-mail and telephone contact. Sometimes they just needed pastoral care. At other times they needed academic support in interpreting the modules and assessment requirements. They would first share their concerns with other tutors, then later once a clear query had emerged by consensus, this needed to be forwarded by the Project Manager to Leeds. Tutors' meetings every six weeks in Muscat provided a further opportunity for creating a shared understanding of the assessment requirements for each module. All queries were forwarded to the university in faxes and fax responses from Leeds were similarly forwarded to RTs. Meetings also took place with Leeds staff during Winter and Summer schools at which assignment requirements were discussed and acceptable support discussed.

From the start of the project, it was considered important, and potentially challenging, for the Ministry to retain capable RTs in less attractive locations in the interior. The BA would require tutors willing to remain in rather remote locations in the regions for a full three years and it might be problematic for at least two reasons if any of these posts became vacant in mid-tour. Firstly, they could be difficult to fill because they were in less desirable locations. Secondly, any gap in provision of a tutor could disorient students, particularly if the incoming tutor was compared negatively to the previous tutor or to those of students in other regions. While gaps did occasionally occur, in most cases a combination of quick contingency action by the Ministry to secure a high quality replacement, and on occasion the willingness of a University staff member to offer him/herself as a supply tutor, helped to resolve the problem.

The Ministry and the University hoped that RTs would all remain for a period of three years and that a core of tutors would take up a second contract. Indeed ultimately two tutors completed three tours and one almost did, while several completed two contracts. As the years passed, the benefits of staff retention became steadily clearer in terms of quality of academic support and pastoral care to students. Equally the disadvantages of a change of incumbent were seen as cohort groups tended to go through a period of instability, which in some cases was reflected in academic performance. All except one of these tutors were male, mainly because most locations were considered unsuitable for females for extended periods, because of difficult living conditions, and also because females bringing in dependents would have been in a position where dependents could not work.

9 SELECTION, PARTICIPATION AND LANGUAGE ISSUES

9.1 The student selection process

The selection of students was carried out according to criteria agreed between the Ministry and the University to ensure that the process was seen to be impartial: a teachers' college diploma, a minimum of 4 years' teaching experience and a pass in a language proficiency test set by the Ministry and acceptable to the university. The language proficiency requirement was set at a pass in Cambridge PET (a qualification widely taken in Oman) or in the Ministry's in-house version of PET, or IELTS 4.5, on the understanding that the university would aim to raise students' language proficiency level to approximately Cambridge FCE level by the end of the programme. The Ministry then ranked candidates regionally according to their language proficiency scores, teaching experience and age, after which the regions were asked to invite a given number of teachers in rank order to join the next BA cohort for their region. This mechanism enabled the regions to "select" entrants as transparently and fairly as possible for the next cohort, while also providing a way of justifying lack of selection to unsuccessful candidates. Those who had not as yet achieved the required language proficiency level continued with language improvement throughout the period up to 2006 (see below). Leeds always had the final say over the acceptance of applicants, but in almost all cases accepted the applicants put forward by the Ministry.

9.2 Language proficiency

The Ministry's aim was to upgrade all diploma-holding teachers of English to degree level and it thus expected all such teachers to join the BA, so inevitably language proficiency played a major role not only in selection, but also in students' ability to handle the requirements of the programme.

Leeds were concerned about the process by which the Ministry assessed the language proficiency of teachers before the BA, fearing that some students could have their progress hampered by language problems in spite of the extensive language support which was offered within the programme. It was the Ministry's responsibility to get its teachers to an acceptable level of language proficiency before they started the BA (MoE, 1999) so early in 2000 it put in place a plan for administering a British Council Placement Test to all teachers who did not have any recognised language proficiency score, or whose score was below the minimum acceptable level. A subset of these teachers was thereafter provided with language training in the regions. Some teachers had acceptable language proficiency qualifications, but from several years before. However while the Ministry recognised that existing qualifications had a finite shelf life, it was not considered feasible in terms of time-scale and financial resources to re-test applicants with language proficiency qualifications prior to an intake (MoE, 2000). Ultimately the weakest students in each cohort struggled significantly, and poor language appeared to be a major factor in under-achievement (MoE, 2002).

9.3 Teachers declining to join

Around 100 eligible teachers did not see the benefits of doing the degree and declined to join. Some were reluctant to undertake a three-year course of study, citing family reasons, illness or other personal reasons. Their underlying reasons may though have been more complex and probably included concerns about the adequacy of their language proficiency for such a course, and thus fear of possible failure, the anticipated difficulty of combining work, study and family responsibilities, a lack of motivation for professional development, and for some, concerns about the difficulty of commuting long distances on a regular basis. From the Ministry's perspective, this created a tension between voluntary participation and ensuring completion of the programme by as large a number of teachers as possible. However, ultimately, none of those who were determined not to participate in the programme, was penalised.

9.4 Deferral, withdrawal, dropping out

During the course the Ministry also had to deal with a considerable number of cases where students sought to defer or to withdraw entirely from the programme, generally citing personal reasons. The Ministry always encouraged a student to remain in the programme and actively discouraged withdrawal, mainly because each participant represented a considerable financial investment by the Ministry.

Failing students were a particular concern for the Ministry. Leeds' responsibility to them was limited since such students could withdraw whenever they wished; their only problem was obtaining permission from the Ministry. The Ministry took the view that while it was important to hold to University of Leeds Quality Assurance Levels, and while it must not make it easy for students to withdraw from the course, it was also important to be flexible so that weak students did not suffer through no fault of their own. So for the Ministry it was important that weaker students could be advised about withdrawing in such a way as to limit embarrassment to them, but without the Ministry becoming liable in any way. In fact every case involving a failing student was considered on its merits against documentary evidence, to be as fair as possible to each student. It was decided that any student wishing to withdraw should write to the Ministry to explain his/her reasons for withdrawal, and that it must be the decision of the individual student not to continue with their studies. So while officially students were not normally allowed to withdraw of their own volition and no-one was permitted to do so unless absolutely necessary and without the agreement of the Ministry, in reality, some simply drifted away. Again of those participants who were determined to leave the programme, none was penalised financially.

The combination of teachers declining to join, teachers not qualified to join and teachers withdrawing meant that the overall number of students joining the BA Programme in 1999-2008 was fewer than originally envisaged. However the shortfall resulting from later cohorts not being fully subscribed was utilised to provide MA and PhD opportunities, which provided an extra value-added dimension to the Project that is discussed below.

10 SUPPORTING QUALITY ASSURANCE

10.1 The rigour of the BA Programme

The Ministry had an impact on quality assurance on the BA Programme through the Executive Management Committee, which it chaired, and through its triennial appointment of External Evaluators.

The Ministry and the University had agreed prior to the contract being signed that the BA degree must be equal in rigour and status to all undergraduate degrees at Leeds, a position which the Ministry and the University maintained throughout. That the BA was indeed an international standard degree was subsequently confirmed by External Evaluators (Richards & Rixon, 2002), who placed it at the higher end of a notional scale of BA degrees judged in terms of level of difficulty. The vast majority of participants were eventually awarded degrees, 89% of those who joined Cohorts 1-6 (921) being awarded a degree, of whom 93% were Honours graduates. Thus of the overall total number of students who joined Cohorts 1-6, only 11% did not obtain a degree. This figure takes into account those who dropped out (see above), those who secured a Higher Diploma, failed or were excluded from the degree, and is a figure comparable with the 10% who would normally be expected to drop out of or fail an undergraduate degree in Leeds. Among the factors that may account for this pass rate are the Ministry's determined insistence (based on the fact that it was paying the entire fees for teachers for 3 years) that teachers could not defer or drop out without very genuine reasons, the generally high quality of teaching materials, the high quality of commitment by Leeds colleagues, the constant and high standard of pastoral and academic support participants received from RTs in Oman, and the strong motivation of students on the BA Programme to succeed.

10.2 Modules, module materials and quality assurance

Module materials prepared by the University provided a crucial element of consistency and thus quality assurance for a programme delivered in multiple locations simultaneously (see also Chapter 3).

RTs and students provided detailed feedback on their appropriateness and effectiveness and, unsurprisingly perhaps, versions for later cohorts were considered to be considerably more relevant to the local context and accessible to participants than those for early cohorts. In the Ministry's view the materials revision procedure was not always satisfactorily implemented, but the process was tightened up successfully in the later cohorts and it was generally agreed that all modules were improved during the lifetime of the project, that standards were maintained, and that materials were more made steadily more contextually appropriate and accessible. Researching TESOL was one module that was much improved during the programme. Students in later cohorts may have been helped in their performance by this overall improvement in module design.

While the Ministry recognised that the University was fully responsible for academic content of the programme, the process of materials development could

have benefitted more from the local knowledge and expertise in task design of RTs, a number of whom expressed their willingness to contribute. The view at Leeds was that while periodic comments on materials from RTs and from the Ministry were always welcome, as they fed into their own systematic review processes, it could not offer RTs a formal role in materials writing or revision or implement changes proposed by individual tutors, particularly where differing suggestions were made.

Some module-related issues proved impossible to resolve. Language Acquisition and Learning and Language Development For Education 2 were found rather difficult by all cohorts; Speaking and Listening and other 20-credit modules also proved challenging because poor performance could affect degree classification. The dissertation consumed disproportionate time and resources for the number of credits it received. If a similar programme was to be designed again, perhaps all modules should be 20-credit, and the possibility of spreading the programme over 4 years could be considered.

10.3 Guidelines for support and quality assurance

With RTs being responsible for interpreting university requirements and mediating university grades to students, there was some initial concern from Leeds about the possibility of competing interests, with RTs supporting students' claims regarding marking, rather than mediating the decisions of the university. More broadly the University might have considered that the Ministry (through RTs and the Project Manager) might urge Leeds to pass as many participants as possible. In fact, while RTs certainly did develop strong bonds with their students and were often keen to support individual students' causes, and there were some disagreements over decisions, the university were scrupulous in maintaining their independence over academic standards and rigorous in maintaining assessment standards throughout and the Ministry supported this position.

Although Leeds were cognizant of the varied language levels of Omani students and took this into account when marking, and although they were supplying common teaching materials for all taught sessions, it soon became clear that guidelines were needed to frame the nature and levels of assignment support that RTs could give and to deflect the danger of a tutor over-supporting students' written work. It was believed that if RTs were given clear guidelines defining the nature and level of support they could give, this, in the context of teaching materials supplied by Leeds, would guarantee a more equal standard of learning opportunity across all regions.

The Guidelines for Support, designed in Oman and vetted by the University, aimed to ensure that RTs provided a fair level of support across all regions. Support in relation to current modules was scrutinised at each RTs' meeting, to ensure a common understanding among RTs of how they could, within the guidelines, help students understand the assessment question and agree the limits of the support that could be given. Queries were raised with Leeds if necessary. Where claims of excessive support in one region or another were made, these were investigated and reminders were given of the importance of sharing the responsibility of keeping to

the agreed guidelines. Fortunately these cases were few. While the issue of differential support did arise occasionally throughout the programme and was never possible to resolve entirely, it seemed to be less of a problem in the later stages in the programme. Ultimately the combination of common materials and regularly scrutinised and updated guidelines proved the most effective way to assure parity of support.

11 RESEARCH

During the early years of the Project Leeds pressed for authorisation to carry out substantial research. Initially the Ministry was sceptical, concerned that research opportunities arising from the Project should accrue to Oman and for this reason the Ministry made agreement to research conditional upon Leeds identifying Omani co-researchers, who would be trained. Ultimately relatively few pieces of research were conducted and all were rather small-scale. Nevertheless the BA did contribute very substantially to the development of a research culture among Omani English teachers (see Chapter 9). All students, particularly in the later cohorts, were exposed to basic research skills through assignments that required the collection of data from small-scale pieces of research. All students also carried out a piece of individual research leading to submission of a dissertation, the best of which were subsequently published in three edited collections.

12 CAPACITY-BUILDING

The Ministry envisaged a strong capacity-building component to the BA Project. Though this aim had not been dealt with overtly in the original contract, the Ministry subsequently encouraged the University to show commitment to the Ministry's Omanisation drive by providing a series of MA scholarships. After discussion the University agreed to offer 3 MA Education (TESOL) scholarships per cohort for the best BA graduates, a policy that resulted in 19 of the best BA graduates gaining MA Education (TESOL) degrees by the end of the programme.

The Ministry also requested the University to identify ways of involving suitably qualified Omanis in the BA Project itself. A plan to train an Omani Regional Tutor was proposed by the Ministry, though Leeds was concerned that a QAA assessment might consider that this could affect the quality of the BA Programme. However a suitable candidate was identified and awarded an MA (TESOL) opportunity, after which it was agreed they would shadow a current RT, with a view to taking over full responsibility for 50% of the Cohort regional group. For various personal reasons the person identified was eventually unwilling to take up the position on their return from Leeds and the concept was not revisited.

When shortfalls in the numbers of students recruited for Cohorts 4, 5 and 6 occurred, the Ministry decided to use the balance to fund an additional 35 MA scholarships, 17 in TESOL and 18 in Science Education, International Education Management, Special Educational Needs and IT in Education, as well as 5 PhD scholarships. Most of these graduates have gone on to higher levels of management within the Ministry and represent a considerable value-added benefit of the project.

Nevertheless any future project should consider the extent to which capacity building can be more consciously built into its structure. Given the length of the project, if counterparts in various tutor and senior management roles had been appointed at the beginning of the BA Project, they could have taken over some aspects of the key roles during its later stages.

13 BA PROGRAMME ASSESSMENT

13.1 University and Ministry positions

It was inevitable that the BA Programme would be considered demanding in terms of assessment given a situation where students were taking 2 years of a full time programme, spread over 3 years while continuing in a full time job. In addition students were strongly focused on the assessed aspects of the programme, possibly due to their strong instrumental motivation. Leeds staff were therefore faced with the challenge of designing not only module materials, but also assessments, that would promote learning, while RTs, concerned about the washback effect of assessment, sought to redirect students' focus away from assessment onto learning, by creating a relaxed study environment, so that students could have more time to reflect and allow previous modules to influence future modules. Assessment, however, continued to feature strongly in students' minds throughout the programme. Thus it was not surprising that, in an environment perceived as assessment-driven, queries concerning assessment had to be regularly forwarded by the Ministry to the University, while students frequently pleaded individual cases through the Project Manager and the Director ELCD (DHS) to Leeds.

The university took the view that while the implementation of the assessment system on the BA could never be perfect, it did its best to maintain very high standards in assessment, within the constraints imposed by the contract, the local context and University regulations. It took the view that on those occasions when students or Ministry RTs had concerns about marking, these were generally considered to be attributable to lapses in implementation of systems by individuals, rather than to a lack of systems. The Ministry recognised the independence of the university in all matters concerning assessment, considered BA assessment systems and procedures were appropriate and overall had confidence in the quality of marking by the University.

13.2 Regional Tutors' and students' concerns

Sometimes however, RTs felt there was a lack of sympathy from Leeds for what they perceived as genuine doubts about the justice of aspects of the assessment regime and it was important that their concerns were raised to Leeds and that they received considered responses either by fax or through the Executive Management Committee.

In many cases the University were able to respond positively to such concerns, as the following examples illustrate. In the early years, concerns were frequently expressed by RTs and students about the clustering of assessments and thus about the tightness of deadlines, while there were also concerns about significant delays

between teaching and assessment of other modules. However, by Cohort 4 the university had found ways of adjusting assessment schedules which avoided clustering of assessments, and minimised delays between teaching and assessment of modules. Leeds also responded supportively to requests for a postponement of a deadline or individual students' requests for periods of extension, where legitimate reasons were given. Furthermore, concerns about the nature of feedback on assignments led to a greater focus by the University on training markers to provide strategic, generic feedback, aimed at helping the student to bridge the gap between actual performance and the required standard. As a result in the later cohorts markers generally linked their feedback closely to the criteria, and ensured it was as explicit, helpful and sensitively written as possible.

The range of assessments in the early cohorts was considered by RTs and by the Ministry to exhibit an overuse of examinations. In 2002 Leeds responded swiftly to recommendations, in particular those of RTs and External Project Evaluators (Richards and Rixon, 2002) to expand the range of assessments, introducing a shift away from exams (the number of examinations was reduced from 12 to 5) towards a more balanced profile that included portfolios as well as other assignment types. Unfortunately the reduction in the number of assessment points did not in the views of students or RTs make a significant difference to the overall burden of assessment.

Other sources of concern were less easy to resolve. While RTs were generally able to clarify the criteria/ characteristics of a 'good assignment answer', with the help of module notes, meetings with Leeds staff during Summer or Winter Schools, meetings with the Project Manager, and from e-mail and fax responses to queries, they felt more disadvantaged in preparing students for examinations because they did not know their content in advance. Eventually it was agreed that information regarding the number of questions, number of topics and kinds of questions could be given to students, but not the actual question or rubric. Unfortunately weaker students continued to face difficulty in interpreting criteria for assessment when they had failed and wished to resubmit, as they often did not have sufficient language proficiency to interpret the criteria precisely because they were weak.

One concern in particular proved difficult to resolve. RTs often found themselves in the difficult position of having to mediate grades, feedback and assessment decisions they did not necessarily agree with, which gave rise to concerns about marker reliability and feedback. Leeds, however, argued that substantial differences between markers would be picked up by the marking coordinator, that procedures were in place for maintaining high standards of marking and that they had full confidence in their markers.

13.3 Plagiarism

Plagiarism in assignments became a problem in later cohorts, particularly in the later stages of the three years of each programme (MoE, 2003; MoE, 2005; MoE, 2007). It tended to take two forms, some students including material from the internet without attribution, others taking materials from the work of other students. While University of Leeds and Ministry staff made transparently clear

what constituted plagiarism and what the penalties were and while students had to sign a statement of academic integrity before submitting any assignment, offenders often complained that they did not know they were plagiarising or that they had not done so intentionally. Nevertheless as the BA was set within the British academic system, assessment could not be tolerant of plagiarism.

It seems that a combination of tiredness and carelessness led an unfortunately high number of students to put themselves at risk, by giving insufficient time to scrutinising their work before submitting final versions, particularly when under time pressure and in the latter stages of the programme. Many were penalised and some lost their chance of a degree entirely. It is difficult to know whether the number of cases in the last three cohorts was due to increased detection or increased incidence, but by Cohorts 5 and 6 the number of plagiarisers who escaped notice was considered to be low. The treatment of plagiarism cases was according to University regulations and was generally considered fair by the Ministry. That it often resulted in a student not being able to graduate at the official ceremony with their friends was perceived as a source of embarrassment far greater than the damage done to the student's eventual degree class.

Regarding other modes of assessment, school visits by RTs were recognised to be very important to the Project and consideration was given to the possibility that they might be able to contribute to assessment within the Programme. However ultimately it was not considered possible to assess classroom practice directly. Nevertheless by the final two cohorts of the programme all methodology modules and module assignments were connecting theory with students' professional classroom experience, through the use of Omani course book materials in activities, through activities which required reflection on practice, or through activities which required planning for the Omani classroom. A form of self assessment was present in several methodology modules where students were required to plan, implement and then evaluate some kind of teaching in their classrooms. The University are to be commended for this.

From the above it is clear that assessment, as with other aspects of the BA Programme, evolved incrementally over time and it is very important that the opportunity for this to happen did exist. Ultimately much progress was made during the project to address Ministry management, Regional Tutor and student concerns over assessment.

14 COMPUTERS AND TECHNOLOGY WITHIN THE BA

A key aim of the BA was for all students to achieve computer literacy by the end of the programme, but the importance of providing new equipment and training in using the technology did not feature explicitly in the contract and the project suffered as a consequence.

From the beginning of the BA, IT played an important part in the Leeds Summer School, but as internet access was not available to all participants in Oman, it was never possible for modules to be web-based.

During the 1999 and 2000 Summer Schools, the Ministry offered some basic training in word processing (MoE, 1999), but these had limited success. By 2002, internet access was available to students in Regional Centres and an increasing number of students were gaining access either at home or at internet cafés. Nevertheless, provision of internet services in the regions remained rudimentary.

From Cohort 4 the University decided to introduce a module focusing entirely on computers and technology in ELT. It would have been convenient if this module could have been taught in Oman, as it would have enabled teachers to learn about the technology available in schools in Oman and to develop technology for use with their own learners. However access to adequate facilities in the regions could not be guaranteed and the university therefore taught the module in Leeds.

While the Ministry could have no impact on the quality of IT resources available through the service provider in the regions, the module did provide an impetus for the Ministry to improve computer resources in BA premises (MoE, 2003). By 2006 some Regional Training Premises had broadband internet access via LANs, which RTs needed to be linked up to. In other regions Omantel continued to face problems making broadband available outside a 5 km radius from the Omantel centre. Right up to the end of the BA Programme in December 2008, access speeds in many parts of the country remained so slow as to deter students from using electronic resources, including the vitally important virtual library in Leeds.

By the time of the final two cohorts the majority of students viewed IT competency as an essential life skill, which the BA contributed to improving. Nevertheless, the lack of provision of an environment in which IT skills could be thoroughly developed was very much a missed opportunity, and the BA Project IT resources in Oman and student access in the regions remained limited throughout the project lifetime.

15 CONCLUSION

Implementing the BA Project was a challenging task. Inevitably with hindsight, some things, such as placing more emphasis on capacity-building and on the use of technology, could have been done differently, yet there is no doubt that the overall picture is one of very considerable achievement. The project benefited from a robust framework, set out in a Project contract that defined responsibilities clearly, especially financial responsibilities. It benefited from a clearly defined management system within the Ministry, consisting of strong-decision-making bodies with clear mandates. Trust and goodwill were developed and were critical to the success of the Project, which benefitted from clear channels of communication and effective implementation of communication systems both within Oman and between Oman and Leeds. The Project was successful in retaining staff in Oman and in Leeds; continuity of high quality staffing was crucial to quality assurance and thus to the success of the BA. Assessment, as with other aspects of the BA Programme, evolved incrementally over time and a balance was retained between the need for change and the importance of consistency and quality assurance. More than 800 teachers gained degrees, many went on to complete Masters and together they have contributed very substantially to developing the human resource capacity of the

Ministry of Education. This project can in many ways offer a model for teacher education projects elsewhere in the world (see Chapter 17).

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