

3 The Design and Evolution of the BA Educational Studies (TESOL) Programme: Perspectives from Leeds

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1 INTRODUCTION

The first chapter presented the historical context for the BA Project, and explained how the Ministry of Education and the University of Leeds entered into collaboration to upgrade the qualifications of Omani teachers of English. It identified the broad aims of the project, and the conditions which the Ministry set for the degree programme component. In this chapter we describe how the University of Leeds attempted to meet these conditions in the design of the BA Educational Studies (TESOL) Programme. We also discuss how the programme changed over time, in response to formal and informal feedback from various stakeholders.

2 PROGRAMME DESIGN

2.1 Entrants

The following entry requirements for the programme were stipulated by the University:

- A recognized Initial Teacher Training qualification (usually a Diploma – those teachers already holding degrees were not required to join the programme);
- A minimum of four years teaching experience;
- A satisfactory level of proficiency in English. Proficiency was demonstrated by successful performance in a local version of the Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET), or a minimum grade of 4.5 in IELTS or its TOEFL equivalent.

These requirements are lower than those normally required for Leeds-based degree programmes, but language improvement modules were built into the course to compensate for this, including two compulsory-pass modules.

A small proportion of English teachers not already holding a degree did not meet these criteria and were excluded, while a few others nearing the end of their careers did not apply. Otherwise, nearly all Diploma-holding English teachers participated, and over 900 enrolled on the programme, organized into 6 cohorts as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Student participation in the BA Educational Studies (TESOL)

Year	Cohort	No. of students	Regions
1999-2002	1	68	Muscat, Batinah N (North)
2000-2003	2	250	Muscat, Batinah N, Sharqiya N, Sharqiya S (South), Dakhiliya, Dhahira, Dhofar,
2002-2005	3	123	Batinah S, Dhofar, Dhahira, Dakhiliya
2003-2006	4	244	Muscat (2), Batinah N (2), Sharqiya N, Sharqiya S, Dakhiliya, Dhahira
2005-2008	5	82	Dhofar, Batinah S, Dhahira
2006-2009	6	154	Muscat, Batinah N (2), Sharqiya N/S, Dakhiliya

2.2 Mode of Delivery

As it was not feasible for large numbers of teachers to be released for full-time study, the programme was delivered largely on a part-time basis, with intensive periods of input when the teachers were free from teaching. Since students already had a teaching Diploma and several years' teaching experience, they were granted (as per University regulations) exemption from Level 1 of the three level degree course. There was also an already existing infrastructure of in-service teacher education in Oman in the form of regional training centres, which the course could utilize to provide support for students and which would enable them to complete Levels 2 & 3 of the degree within three years.

The programme was therefore designed as a combination of:

1. Intensive Winter/Summer Schools (two and six weeks respectively), timed to coincide with school holidays, conducted in the main Ministry training centres (Muscat, Sohar, and Nizwa). These centres would be the primary sites for the delivery of modules by Leeds staff, assisted by UK-recruited Regional Tutors (RTs).
2. Once-weekly support sessions in regional groups, conducted in premises designated specifically for the BA, delivered by the RTs. The primary role of these Day Release sessions was to consolidate student learning of the modules delivered during the intensive schools, and to support students' work on module assignments. The regional premises were specially equipped with a library of course texts as recommended by the university, along with some IT facilities. In order to help students relate coursework to their classroom teaching, RTs were also responsible for observing students' lessons and discussing these with them, once a term.

Five lecturers were recruited in Leeds in 1999 to form the core 'BA' team, and all remained to the last year of the programme. Their contracts were intentionally written to include research duties and other non-Oman related teaching, so that they could be fully integrated into the academic department, though in the early years a very high proportion of their work time was dedicated to the BA Programme. Module design and materials writing was largely confined to this core team and to other academic members of staff in Leeds. However, teaching and marking was shared with a number of temporary Teaching Fellows who were specially hired for the intensive schools, as well as with the RTs based in Oman.

2.3 Goals

The stated aim of the BA Programme was "to upgrade teachers' existing qualifications and to equip them to teach English effectively through the school system from Year 1 upwards". While the programme was declared to "be compatible with and support the reforms of Education in Oman", it was also "equal in status and rigour to all undergraduate degrees accredited and validated by the University of Leeds", and it was claimed that good graduates would be "well qualified to undertake higher degree and research work" (School of Education, 1997:4).

In fact, as was recognised at the time (cf. Cameron & Al-Lamki, 2001), there was a potential tension between the goals of the course as a University of Leeds degree and its function as in-service teacher development. The Ministry's goals related to the capacity of teachers (see Chapter 1), while graduates of a UK degree programme had to measure up to the standards laid down in 2000 by the Quality Assurance Agency for higher education. These demanded that a degree course have much greater coverage of a subject area (in this case, TESOL) than in-service education normally would; they required a depth of understanding, such as the psycholinguistic or social theories that underpin an approach to teaching, beyond the appreciation of practicalities often demanded in INSET courses; a degree requires students to develop skills of critical analysis towards the subject area, whereas in-service programmes often aim to induct teachers into certain ways of working, pre-formulated by experts beyond the school and not always open to question; and finally BA graduates should be able to recognise, and cope with, ambiguity and the inherent uncertainty of knowledge, in contrast with the certainty that characterises many in-service programmes.

Additionally, it was imperative for the University that it remain in total control of the assessment of the programme. For this reason it was not possible to incorporate formal teaching practice. As noted above, students were observed by their RTs, but this did not contribute in any formal way to student assessment. However, this does not mean that the University was unconcerned with effecting changes in teachers' classroom practices; rather, from its point of view, these would be indirect outcomes of the enhanced cognition and confidence brought about by successful degree-level study. Wherever possible, students were encouraged to relate course content to their work as teachers. In particular, module assignments required students to analyse their own practice or their pupils' learning in terms of module content; for example, in the module on Initial Literacy, students recorded a child reading and analysed his or her miscues; in the module on Using Stories and

Themes, students produced and used a 'Big Book' for their classes. In such ways the programme tried to maximise the impact of degree level study on students' professional skills without compromising its primary academic goals.

2.4 Degree Content

As the Ministry requested, the programme was based closely on existing undergraduate programmes taught at the University of Leeds, including those which had been used successfully on a teacher development programme for the Malaysian Ministry of Education during the 1990s. To obtain an Honours Degree, students had to take 240 credits' worth of courses, and to gain at least 180 credits. The programme had three core strands:

2.4.1 Teaching Methodology

Eight modules were included in this strand, in Level 2 focusing on the teaching of young learners, in Level 3 concentrating on standard areas of EFL pedagogy such as the four skills, grammar and lexis. Although these modules were initially prefaced with the label 'methodology' (e.g. Methodology 3: Initial Literacy – the preface was later dropped), they were not 'teaching how to teach'; rather they taught "about teaching and how to think about teaching: in the example of teaching listening, a module would include concepts, principles and critical evaluation of ways of teaching listening; previous, current and innovative approaches in the field; links to learning listening etc." (Cameron & Al-Lamki, 2001:13). They were not therefore putting forward preferred methods (or at least not explicitly), but trying to enable students to assess the efficacy and suitability of methods for themselves. They were also encouraged to critique the existing curricula in a principled way. There were occasions early in the life of the programme when this created tension with local curriculum reformers and teacher trainers, whose primary role was to design ELT curricula for the Ministry and to train teachers to implement these. For instance, the module on initial literacy presented 'phonics' as one possible way of early reading instruction, but some local advisers felt this might undermine the Basic Education reforms which advocated a 'whole word' approach. These tensions eased after the first two years of the programme, when it became evident that BA graduates were actually quite articulate supporters of the Basic Education reforms.

2.4.2 Language Improvement and Description

As stated above, two modules on Advanced Communication Skills were made compulsory-pass modules, in order to ensure a minimum language proficiency for all graduates. Other language-based modules were aimed at helping teachers analyse the English language for the purpose of teaching, though many students found they learnt much about the language for themselves.

2.4.3 Research core

A third strand of the course aimed at building students' research skills. One module taught basic research methodology, and then the final piece of work which students produced was a 6,000-word dissertation based on an original investigation

of an aspect of their classroom practice. Some of the best work produced by students over the six cohorts is now published in three volumes so that other teachers can benefit from their research (Borg, 2006, 2008, 2009).

Figure 1 presents the spread of modules over the three year course for the first three cohorts; the changes which were introduced for the last three cohorts are explained in Section 3 below. With the exception of the three optional modules in the final summer school (from which students chose one), all modules were compulsory. The lack of electives contrasted with most Leeds-based undergraduate courses, but the fact that the course was mainly taught in Oman, as well as the need for uniformity of provision (see below) precluded the possibility of offering students a wider choice of modules.

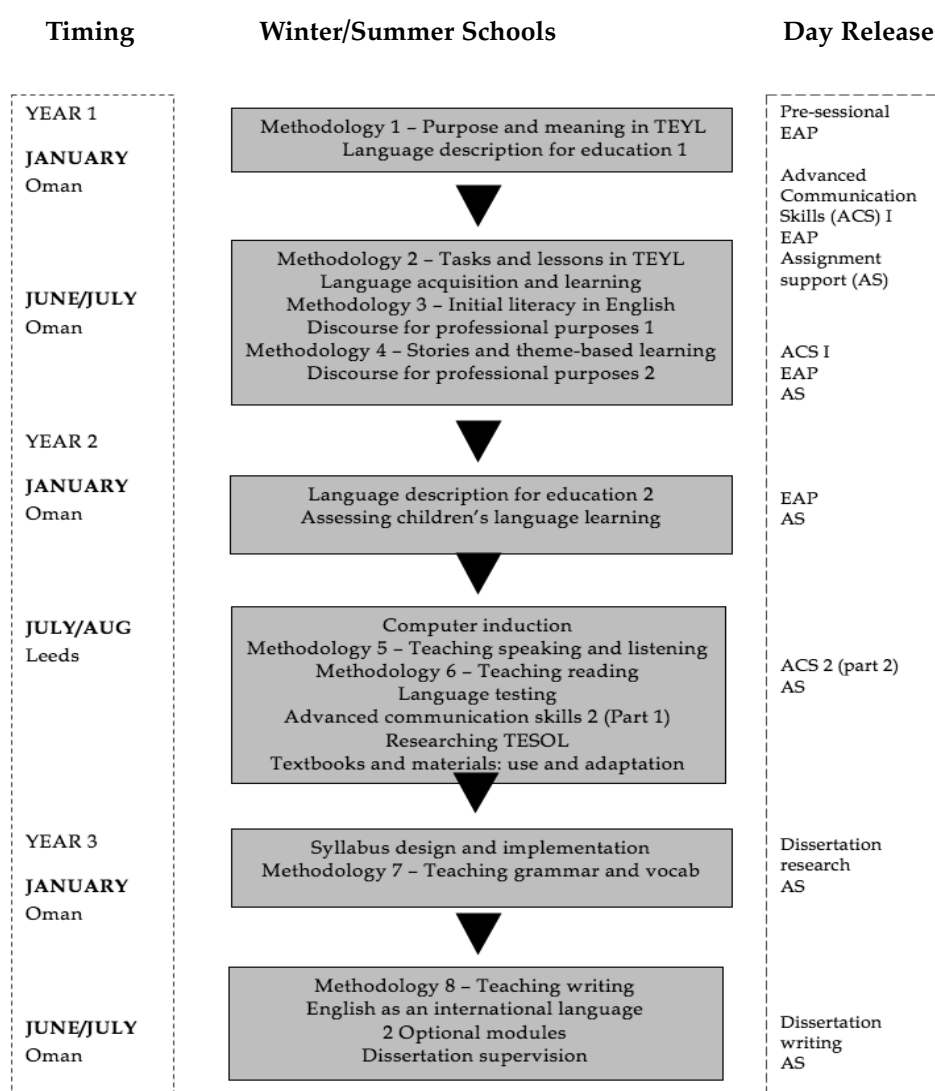


Figure 1: Outline of the BA Educational Studies (TESOL), for Cohorts 1-3

2.5 Course Materials

The need for uniformity of programme delivery had a major effect on course materials and the way they were taught. From a quality assurance point of view it was important that the University demonstrate that different groups of students being taught in training centres around the Sultanate were receiving comparable input. Given the large number of individuals involved in delivering the programme (e.g. in Winter 2001 there were 21 staff teaching two cohorts of students split into 10 groups across three sites) a key strategy in minimizing discrepancies across groups, especially in the following Day Release sessions, was the rigorous specification of module materials. This is not to imply that by standardizing the materials the university expected staff to teach 'unthinkingly'; consistency of coverage across all student groups, though, was essential; significant differences would have led (and sometimes did lead) to problems when students were being assessed and when RTs had to follow up the intensive Winter and Summer schools with their students on the Day Release blocks.

All modules were written by University staff and packaged in Tutor's Files containing all materials (including overhead transparencies) and detailed users' notes. These materials, together with photocopies of all student materials were couriered out to Oman before each intensive school (the scale of this undertaking should not be underestimated – if 300 students were studying six modules during a summer school, the photocopying did not fall far short of 100,000 pages). The Ministry's role in ensuring that the materials dispatched from Leeds reached their destinations on time was crucial and was fulfilled exceptionally well. Each module was also accompanied by a reading file of articles. Teaching staff attended induction sessions in advance of the intensive schools, and were then expected to follow the teaching guides closely in class. Teaching sessions were divided into 75-minute lectures to large groups of students (roughly 40 per class), followed by 75-minute seminars with smaller groups. Broadly speaking, the lectures introduced new material and the seminars consolidated learning through discussion and application of new ideas to students' personal and working context.

The use of tightly pre-specified materials was not uncontroversial amongst Leeds staff. Like most lecturers in UK universities, staff were used to being solely responsible for their modules, to developing their own module materials from one session to the next (often a week apart) and to making spontaneous decisions in class about what to cover or omit. The approach to materials design on the BA removed much of this flexibility and sense of ownership, but most staff recognized the practical demands driving this approach and adjusted accordingly. A few of the more experienced teacher educators felt de-skilled by the requirement to teach from materials written by others or to provide others with pre-defined materials for their modules. Such resistance has been observed in other forms of distance higher education, arising partly from 'closure' of the curriculum through tight structuring of materials (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999). However, it is difficult to envisage how the BA could have been delivered without the kinds of materials that were developed. As already noted, the same modules were taught by several Leeds and Ministry of

Education staff to students around the country, and consistency of coverage was vital. Also, for less experienced lecturers and those required to teach outside their specialist areas, the availability of detailed tutors' notes worked well, facilitating preparation as well as broadening their knowledge of TESOL-related subjects. Staffroom discussions of materials were often intense, as individuals negotiated their understanding of module concepts in advance of (and sometimes following) engagement with students. More discussions took place by email between Leeds staff, the Project Manager and RTs during the Day Release period, which helped gradually to increase the coherence of the programme. Where a module was being taught in one training centre, there were occasions where decisions to modify the materials provided were made; but, importantly, such decisions were always made in advance and shared with all those responsible for the module.

Another key document was the Guidelines for Support, which was developed early on by RTs and the Project Manager as a way of standardizing the provision of help to individual students in the regions. This assured the university that students were not being given inappropriate support, while also helping RTs to quickly negotiate a *modus operandi* with each new regional group.

2.6 Assessment

When the programme was being negotiated, it was the Ministry's view that approximately half the modules should be assessed by examination. Omani students were used to this form of assessment in their own educational system, and it was felt that examinations added rigour to the programme. Thus at the start of the programme several modules were assessed by examination (though see below for revisions made to this policy as the programme developed). All 10-credit modules were assessed either by 3,000 word assignment or 2-hour examination. Students worked on the assignments, or prepared for the examinations, with the support of their RTs during the Day Release sessions. Work was submitted (to RTs at the BA Regional Training Premises) according to a detailed schedule, designed to spread the workload out evenly through the year; failure to meet deadlines however was met with the same penalties as UK-based undergraduates would suffer (the University's strict adherence to such penalties was an issue the first cohort of students reacted negatively to; however, by the time Cohort 3 students joined the BA there was a general acceptance of this practice).

Marking was carried out under the supervision of module coordinators in Leeds, and usually involved all Lecturers and Teaching Fellows who had taught the module. Markers were required to attend a moderation meeting at the University at which scripts were selected for analysis and benchmarks were established. A proportion of scripts were second marked following the School of Education's Assessment Code of Practice, and throughout the programme two independent External Examiners – TESOL experts from other UK universities – had to approve all final marks and degree classifications.

2.7 Quality Assurance

It was extremely important for both parties that the quality of the BA Programme was monitored and maintained – important to the Ministry because it was a public contract of high profile within the Sultanate, to the School of Education because it was accountable to the university for assuring the quality of their academic ‘brand’, and publicly accountable to UK government agencies for assuring the reputation of British higher education. Quality was enhanced on the BA through a number of mechanisms (described in detail in a report prepared as part of an internal review of the BA conducted by the University’s Quality Management and Enhancement Unit (School of Education, 2002), and from which some of the material below is taken).

At School level, teaching quality and enhancement of programmes was managed through two committees which met regularly throughout the year. The Chair of the Academic Standards Committee had formal responsibility for all aspects of teaching quality in the School. Module leaders were responsible to this committee through the programme coordinators (including the overall Academic Coordinator for the Oman programme) for the successful management of individual modules, which included the collection of student feedback, tutor feedback, and review of modules after each occasion on which they were taught. This committee also received external examiners’ reports and documentation concerning the development or modification of teaching programmes. The Teaching Committee dealt with issues such as student recruitment, uptake of modules and initial proposals for new teaching programmes and modules.

In the case of the Oman programme, as with other programmes in the School of Education, individual modules were reviewed by staff and students at various points in the programme; staff and students provided feedback during or shortly after the module; these evaluations then formed the basis of the review of the module which appeared in the relevant Winter or Summer school report. A further, separate forum for feedback were the regular meetings of RTs held in Muscat under the chairmanship of the Project Manager (more than 80 of them over the period of the Project); usually taking place while RTs were helping students prepare for module assignments, the minuted discussions were extremely valuable in providing insights into what students had gained from the course, and what they had found particularly challenging. Once assessment for the module had been completed, the tutor in charge of the module wrote a report on students’ performance; and when student marks had been confirmed, a formal module review was written which drew on all the earlier sources of feedback on the module.

An annual internal programme review was also compiled which drew together the reports on the constituent modules of the programme, and which provided a systematic assessment of teaching and recommendations for enhancement of the student learning experience. Under the terms of the Project contract, a more general Programme Review was also conducted every two years. This was compiled by Leeds and Oman and was presented for discussion at the annual Executive Management Committee.

The BA Project received four highly positive independent evaluations, commissioned by the Ministry of Education in accordance with the quality assurance measures agreed in the project contract. The evaluators conducted a detailed analysis of all aspects of the academic and administrative sides of the programme and project, both in Leeds and Oman. The recommendations emerging from these reviews provided the basis of ongoing programme development.

In addition to the management systems detailed above, the BA had two other committees which met on a regular basis in order to ensure the quality of learning and teaching on the programme. The Oman Academic Committee was made up of key staff at Leeds. In Oman, the Executive Management Committee, consisting of three representatives from the Ministry of Education in Oman, and three representatives from the University, met annually.

Students were involved in quality issues through module review and staff-student committees at Summer and Winter schools, which provided them, via elected representatives, with the opportunity to raise and discuss matters related to their learning experience. Suggestions were acted on directly or referred to one of the committees mentioned in the previous section. A revision of the order in which modules are delivered and their mode of assessment (see below) was partly prompted by student reflections on their learning experience.

Comparability of educational standards with other institutions in the same subject area was ensured by paying close attention to external examiners' reports, and where necessary introducing appropriate changes in response to comments by the examiners.

The BA was subject to very rigorous levels of accountability. This contributed in no small way to strengthening the programme. Many examples of the positive way in which the BA was evaluated could be quoted here; one is the following, from the second independent evaluation of the project:

The Ministry of Education/Leeds degree is an ambitious and complex project and one that is unique in the region. Personnel involved in the project are of a very high caliber. There is a very high level of commitment and dedication to the success of the project by all those involved in it. Students are benefiting greatly from the project and express a high level of satisfaction with it. The project is proceeding very satisfactorily and the evaluators would like to congratulate all those involved in its successful design and implementation (Richards & Rixon, 2002:4).

The Ministry of Education also monitored the quality of programme delivery in Oman. The BA Project Manager, as the line manager of RTs, was central to the process. It was largely his responsibility to ensure that RTs were fulfilling their duties appropriately, to provide support where RTs needed it, and to liaise with the Ministry and with Leeds on cases where concerns about the quality of an RT's work were raised. Such cases were, over the life of the Project, rare.

3 CHANGES IN THE PROGRAMME

The basic structure of the BA Programme, as described above, proved fit for purpose and remained in place for the 10 years of the Project. However, in response to both the recommendations of formal reviews (particularly the second

independent evaluation of the Project in 2002), student and RT evaluations, and informal feedback, some modifications were made between Cohorts 3 and 4, and other more incremental changes occurred as the programme evolved. The remaining part of this chapter will describe these changes, their causes and effects. While the independent evaluations of the BA were authored by the respective consultants, the latter drew on input from everyone involved in the Project. In particular, the Project Manager and RTs provided substantial input into the second independent evaluation, which, as already noted, led to significant revisions to the BA.

3.1 The introduction of 20-credit modules

Along with most other UK HE institutions during this decade, the University of Leeds was moving towards offering 20 and 30-credit modules, rather than the shorter 10-credit modules. From Cohort 4, four 20-credit modules were introduced to replace eight 10-credit modules. This brought the programme more in line with other programmes in the School, and it also allowed more time to be dedicated to certain core modules such as Language Acquisition and Learning, and Teaching Speaking and Listening (see 3.3 below).

3.2 Changes in assessment

Probably the most significant motivation for the move towards 20-credit modules was to reduce the number of assessment points from 23 to 19. A prevalent theme in student feedback in Cohorts 1-3 had been the pressures of taking examinations and submitting assignments. RTs reported that for many students the struggle to meet assignment deadlines, often following each other at monthly intervals during Day Release, overcame their intrinsic interest in the programme. Their studies became more a survival exercise than an opportunity for professional development. The reduction in the number of assessment points from 2003 onwards mollified, but did not eradicate, this problem.

External Examiners also called for diversification of assessment formats, again reflecting trends in UK HE more generally. Portfolio assessment was introduced in one module, and spoken presentations became part of the assessment of two other modules. By replacing written examinations, these changes played to students' strengths. Moreover, a more concerted effort was made to relate module assignments to students' work as teachers, for example by basing them on the trial and evaluation of a classroom innovation.

A further change in assessment procedures was the involvement of RTs from Cohort 2 onwards in the marking of dissertations and occasionally other module assignments. Originally the University had intended that all assessment be carried out in Leeds, for quality assurance purposes. However, most RTs already had extensive local contextual knowledge, and as they gained a deeper understanding of the BA programme it was clear that their involvement in assessment would only enhance its quality. Marking moderation meetings were therefore held during Summer/Winter schools while Leeds module coordinators were in Oman. Further RT involvement in assessment was limited by workload considerations.

3.3 Course content and teaching method

Some formal changes in programme content were made between Cohorts 3 and 4. As noted above, some modules which students had found useful but challenging were expanded to become 20-credit modules, while others which were found less useful (e.g. Syllabus Design) were dropped entirely. Some modules were combined e.g. Language Testing joined with the study of Young Learner assessment to become Assessing Children's Language Learning. A module on Technology in Language Learning was introduced; this addressed the absence of any formal reference to technology in language teaching on the BA. The number of optional modules was increased from a choice of one from three, to two from four. There was also an ongoing effort across the programme to address modules where content was considered to be too dense and where the level of academic challenge was considered excessive. Modules were also revised to ensure that the Day Release sessions in which RTs reviewed content from Summer and Winter schools provided opportunities for consolidation rather than providing additional new input.

Apart from these formal changes, more subtle modifications were made to modules as they were revised from Cohort to Cohort:

- From student feedback, it was clear that the sessions and activities which were most appreciated, and which arguably had the most learning value, were those which related subject matter to the Oman teaching context (see Chapter 8). As teaching staff became more familiar with students' teaching practice and institutional context, module content could be made more accessible by linking it to local issues and perspectives. In fact, staff continuity in Leeds (the five staff members originally recruited to work on the programme in 1998-9 remained in post almost to the end) meant that incremental improvements could be made in course materials from Cohort to Cohort, as staff revising module materials always had direct experience of teaching it, as well as the benefit of extensive feedback from RTs, other tutors and the students. Improvements in the accessibility of programme content were recognized in the second and third independent evaluations (Richards & Rixon, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2004).
- The new module Technology in Language Learning, introduced from Cohort 4 onwards, was aimed at enabling the students to use technology to develop their pupils' language proficiency, but for students from more remote areas of the country (where access to technology remained limited and internet connections were unreliable) its main benefit was in increasing their own IT literacy, such as familiarizing them with email and the internet. This in turn meant that the materials could carry links to relevant information on the web, which undoubtedly supported student learning in some modules.
- An unfortunate side-effect of students' IT literacy was an increase in web-based plagiarism. This was always more common than print-based copying, possibly because students considered the web less sacrosanct as 'intellectual property', or because it was simply easier to 'copy and paste' text. Whatever the reason, the increase in cases of plagiarism necessitated the provision of more practice in the skills of academic referencing, which had always been a challenging aspect of the course.

- Another significant change in the programme relates to the point made above about the quantity of content. In the very first Summer School of the programme, contact hours were maximized – students had four sessions a day, five days a week, for six weeks. Private study time was not at that stage of the programme conceived as a valuable use of the investment the Ministry was making. Over time, however, it became clear that, especially in the long summer schools, such an intensive workload was not productive for students (or for tutors). Gradually, private study time began to appear on the timetable, providing students with space to review module content or to do some reading in the library. Experience suggested that students made most productive use of this time when a set task was assigned. Nonetheless, a comparison of timetables from the start and end of the programme would highlight obvious differences in the space provided for students to reflect on their learning.

3.4 Changes in roles and relationships

Working relationships between Leeds staff and RTs became more collegial and flexible as the programme developed. At the start of the programme each party had clearly defined roles: As defined by the project contract Leeds staff were to lead the academic delivery of the programme, with RTs in a supporting role. Thus, for example, RTs were not expected to take a leading role in the ‘lecture’ inputs which constituted the first part of each session on the assessed modules. The dynamics of the relationships between Leeds staff and RTs were thus initially complex and delicate; some of the latter, after all, had more experience than the Leeds staff of working with teachers in Oman. Over time, however, relationships became more relaxed and RTs were gradually encouraged to take on more significant roles in input sessions. Working relationships among Leeds staff and RTs also improved in time; one factor here was undoubtedly continuity of personnel on both fronts, allowing for the development of personal relationships over a number of years (see also Chapter 6).

4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have provided an overview of the BA TESOL Programme by highlighting some its design features and reviewing ways in which it evolved over a period of 9 years. Our brief account cannot do justice to the scope and complexity of such a large-scale project; even in pure organizational terms, the running of the programme presented staff in Leeds and Oman with challenges of the scale that are unlikely to be encountered again. What matters, ultimately, though, is not how logistics were handled but whether all the effort and investment that went into the programme made a difference to the teachers involved. On that count the university can be unequivocally positive, a point supported not only by the many different evaluations and reviews the BA was subject to, but also by the subsequent career progress enjoyed by many of the BA graduates. There is a clear sense in the Ministry too that the BA has impacted on what teachers do in the classroom and also laid the foundation for the growth of a research culture in ELT in Oman. Some of these themes are explored elsewhere in this volume.

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