

The BA (TESOL) Project 1999-2008

Upgrading English Teachers' Qualifications

1 Introduction

The educational process in the Sultanate is witnessing rapid and significant change in all areas. The Ministry of Education is keen that developments in the process of teaching and learning should be matched by a parallel focus on human resource development and is therefore implementing training policies aimed at equipping teachers with an understanding of the latest trends in education. Although the Ministry's training policies target personnel at all levels, teachers are given special attention as they are the cornerstone of the teaching and learning process. Officials in the Ministry realize that better training of teachers is the best way to achieve the targets of the educational reform initiative. Thus the Ministry of Education has initiated a number of projects aimed at improving the competencies of Omani teachers and upgrading their academic qualifications, to enable them to cope more effectively with the rapid and continuous process of change that characterises education today in the Sultanate of Oman. The BA Project, implemented by the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the University of Leeds, to upgrade the qualifications of Diploma-holding English language teachers to BA (TESOL) degree level, is one of these pioneer training initiatives.

The BA Educational Studies (TESOL) degree programme of the University of Leeds aimed to upgrade the skills and knowledge of Omani English language teachers so that they can use the language proficiently in teaching, in discussion, in analyzing what they read, in writing academic essays and carrying out research, and so that they can contribute to the development of English language teaching and research in Oman to an international level (University of Leeds, 2008). Various reports suggest it greatly enriched teachers' professional knowledge by introducing them to the latest trends in education and it enabled them to gain a degree, which is a stepping stone to higher studies.

Six cohorts of students, from all the regions of the Sultanate, completed the BA Programme. The reports of participants, tutors and lecturers and the four independent evaluations of the Project have indicated in different ways that the BA programme is achieving its goals successfully. Many graduates have declared that they benefited considerably from the BA Programme, as it was tailored to meet their needs in the classroom and in their daily life.

2 Studying on the programme

2.1 Organization

The programme lasted for three years. It commenced in January of the first year and ended in December of the third year. The study was shared between the Sultanate and the UK. Participants studied the BA on a part-time basis. They were released from teaching duties one day a week to attend lectures in the training centre in their region in groups of approximately 15 students. Training centres were fully equipped and each had a library containing books, journals and reading files. Participants were taught in these centres by Regional Tutors, native speakers of English, who were appointed by the Ministry. These Regional Tutors also provided individual tutorials and conducted group seminars. In

addition they visited participants in their schools to help them relate the concepts they encountered on the BA to their own experience in the classroom.

2.2 Winter and Summer Schools in Oman

In January every year, BA participants attended a Winter School at either Muscat, Sohar or Nizwa Training centre. Here they engaged in a period of intensive professional study, supported by lecturers from the University of Leeds, who came to the Sultanate specifically for this purpose, and by Regional Tutors. Each Winter School lasted for either two or three weeks.

In June and July of the 1st and 3rd years of the BA, participants attended another intensive study programme, this time for either six or five weeks. This was known as the Summer School.

2.3 The Leeds Summer School

In the second year of the BA, participants travelled to the UK to spend two months at the University of Leeds. While studying there, they were able to improve their language proficiency and to benefit from the libraries, technology and other resources available in the University. After completing the Leeds summer school, teachers resumed their studies in the Sultanate.

2.4 Graduation

Upon successful completion of the BA programme, students graduated in a ceremony organised by the Ministry of Education.

3 Impacts of the BA Project

3.1 Number of graduates

By June 2009, 805 students had officially graduated with a BA degree, the vast majority with Honours. A number of the best graduates have been provided with scholarships to study higher degrees at the University of Leeds through the project. So far, 36 have completed MAs in Education, of whom the great majority are amongst the best BA (TESOL) graduates. A final total of 40 MA graduates is expected, while an additional 5 research students are studying for a PhD, funded by the project. The project has also funded MAs in Special Educational Needs, Information Computer Technology and Education, Science Education, Teacher Education, General Education and International Educational Management.

3.2 Personal and professional change in graduates

Graduates developed their academic knowledge and understanding in a wide range of areas concerned with education and language, including teaching methodology, syllabus design and methods of assessment.

The BA also aimed to help participants' professional development as teachers of English. During the BA they were introduced to current trends in a wide range of fields including

initial literacy, assessment and mentoring. Research findings (e.g. Freeman, 2007) suggest that as a result they became more reflective and more skilful as classroom practitioners. They became more autonomous as teachers, more confident and more able to justify their own classroom practices. They now feel they know what they are doing, and why, and feel confident enough to innovate, for example in interpreting curriculum materials. Findings suggest they also developed their command of the English language, particularly their academic reading and writing skills and oral fluency and became more confident users of English as teachers. Most also developed a deeper commitment to the teaching profession and to their learners.

3.3 Capacity-building in schools and in the regions

The BA is having a much wider impact too. According to figures from 2009, at least 228 Senior English Teachers, 9 out of 20 Regional Trainers, 45 out of 112 Regional Supervisors and 2 Acting Senior Supervisors are BA (TESOL) graduates.

3.4 Support for the change process in the education system

The majority of BA participants took the course while also implementing a new curriculum and a large number seem to have recognised that the two experiences were mutually beneficial. i.e. the BA assisted in the reform process, while the reform process assisted students on the BA too (Freeman, 2007). BA graduates report that the programme has helped them understand the rationale for the curriculum reforms. Furthermore, questionnaire responses indicate changes in beliefs among BA graduates in line with the principles underlying Basic Education reforms and research suggests this alignment of BA (TESOL) and Basic Education reform is having a practical effect in various ways, e.g. in the field of assessment, where BA graduates are among the most enthusiastic users of new assessment techniques like portfolios and self/peer assessment, and among the most capable designers of progress and achievement tests.

3.5 Supporting the development of a research culture

The BA has been a major contributor to supporting the development of a research culture. Firstly, all BA students have had experience of carrying out a small-scale research project for their dissertation. The best ones are now contained in two published volumes and are available on the Ministry's web portal. Secondly, Project staff and students have carried out a number of joint research projects and a future publication will bring some of these reports together. Thirdly the Ministry and the University have provided two research methods courses for teachers, teacher trainers and supervisors, who have conducted their own research projects, which will in turn be published and distributed.

Overall, a series of 7 research books focusing on the best research carried out through the BA Project are being published. Volumes 1-3 summarise 60 of the best dissertations by BA graduates; Volume 4 comprises a series of articles by Ministry staff, Leeds colleagues and Omani co-researchers reflecting on key aspects of the project; Volume 5 summarises 16 of the best critical studies by MA graduates in various disciplines; Volumes 6 and 7 will be collections of advanced research methods course reports. All these publications, and the related conference presentations that have been made to promote them, have raised the profile of Oman in the academic field of TESOL and beyond.

The project has become increasingly well-known as a successful international collaboration.

References

Freeman, D. (2007). *Fourth evaluation of the Ministry of Education, Oman – University of Leeds BA Educational Studies (TESOL) Project*. Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman.

University of Leeds (2008). Some benefits of the BA Programme. Unpublished document. School of Education, University of Leeds.