

International Collaboration for Educational Change: The BA Project

Edited by
John Atkins, Martin Lamb and Martin Wedell

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Foreword

This volume represents the last of six research publications arising from the BA Project in Oman, 1999-2008. Of the previous five volumes, three were edited collections of BA (TESOL) degree dissertations by some of the best BA graduates, one an edited collection of MA critical studies by education professionals who had studied at Leeds and the other a collection of research reports by education professionals who had completed a 2 year advanced research skills course.

The overall aim of the present volume is to provide an overview of the BA Project as an example of an educational innovation based on international collaboration between the Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman and the University of Leeds. Stakeholders recognized from the very beginning that the exact structure and content of the Project and particularly the Programme would need to evolve over time in the light of experience. This volume is therefore more than just a description of some of the practices and processes that contributed to making the BA Project successful. It is also a showcase for some of the research that has been carried out into the Project by lecturers appointed by Leeds University, Regional Tutors and Project management appointed by the Ministry, and Omani researchers. This formally approved research, as well as independent external evaluations and ongoing informal monitoring and evaluation, played a key role in mapping out the route taken during the incremental evolution of both Project and Programme. It thus contributed greatly to the Project's ultimate success.

We believe that the contents will be of interest not only to readers who have direct experience of the BA (TESOL) Project, but also to other educationalists in Oman and to those worldwide, including ministry officials, project managers, academics, researchers and students, who are interested in the planning and management of educational initiatives and change.

Her Excellency Dr Muna Al-Jardania, Under-secretary for Education and Curriculum, , Sultanate of Oman

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List of Contributors

University of Leeds, UK

Martin Lamb, Martin Wedell and Penny Robinson are all Senior Lecturers in TESOL in the School of Education, University of Leeds, where *Simon Borg* is a Reader in TESOL and *John Holmes* was a Senior Lecturer until his death in 2008.

Simon Borg was BA (TESOL) Programme Director 2002-2005. *John Holmes, Martin Lamb* and *Penny Robinson* were successively Academic Co-ordinators on the BA (TESOL) Programme between 2002 and 2008.

Ministry of Education, Oman

John Atkins was the BA Project Manager for the Ministry of Education in Oman. Between 1999 and 2008 he managed a team of Regional Tutors including: *Clive Gracey, Ewen Arnold, Mark Wyatt, Simon Etherton* and *Simon Green*. *Saeed Mubarak Al-Hosni* was the BA Deputy Project Manager for the Ministry of Education in Oman.

Simon Etherton is Training Advisor for English in the Ministry of Education, *Simon Green* is Programme Director, English in the Ministry of Higher Education; *Clive Gracey* is self-employed, *Ewen Arnold* is with the British Council in Sri Lanka, while *Mark Wyatt* is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Portsmouth, UK.

David Griffiths is an Adviser in the Technical Office for Studies and Development of the Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman

Nawal Jawad Al-Lawatia is an Educational Researcher in the International Education Programmes Office of the Ministry of Education.

The following are graduates of the BA Educational Studies (TESOL) Programme.

Anwar Saleh Al-Balooshi and *Jassim Mohammed Al-Beloushi* (Cohort 2) are Regional English Supervisors in Batinah North Region, where *Nasra Saeed Al-Sa'adi* and *Talal Abdullah Al-Shiyakh* (Cohort 2), *Moza Abdullah Al-Bureikhi* and *Sabah Saleh Al-Shibli* (Cohort 4) are Senior English Teachers. *Shamsa Ali Al-Rashidi* (Cohort 2) is an English Lecturer at Sohar University.

Salim Ali Al-Khayari (Cohort 2) is a Regional English Supervisor in Dakhiliya Region, where *Othman Abdullah Al-Suleimani, Abdullah Mohammed Al-Bahri* (Cohort 2) and *Zainab Mubarak Al-Tobi* (Cohort 6) are Senior English Teachers.

Fatma Salim Al-Snaidi (Cohort 6) is a Senior English Teacher in Sharqiya South Region.

Ashraf Said Darwish (Cohort 5) is a Regional Teacher Trainer in Dhofar Governorate.

Hunaiza Nasser Al-Jahdhmy (Cohort 4) is a Regional Teacher Trainer in Muscat Region, where *Sarah Noor Al-Balushi* is a Regional English Supervisor.

Hafeedha Marhoon Al-Siyabi (Cohort 2) is Administrative Supervisor at the Education Museum of the Ministry of Education.

Maryam Mohammed Al-Jardani and *Salima Khamis Al-Sinani* (Cohort 4) are Teacher Training Specialists at the Training Premises in Muscat.

Editor

John Atkins has been the BA Project Manager since the BA (TESOL) Project started in 1999. He has previous experience of managing education projects in Bulgaria and Ethiopia. He has worked as a teacher and teacher trainer in Nigeria, Zambia, Malawi, Ethiopia and Bulgaria.

Martin Lamb is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Education, University of Leeds. Previously he worked as an English teacher and teacher trainer in Sweden, Indonesia and Bulgaria. He served on the BA programme from 2000 onwards as a lecturer and later as Academic Coordinator and Programme Director.

Martin Wedell is a Senior Lecturer and Director of International Development at the School of Education, University of Leeds. Previously he worked as a teacher, materials writer, teacher trainer and educational change project manager in Kenya, Saudi Arabia, China and Hungary. He taught several BA Programme modules in the early years of the Project.

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Introduction: International Collaboration for Educational Change: The BA Project

Martin Lamb, School of Education, University of Leeds

Martin Wedell, School of Education, University of Leeds

John Atkins, Ministry of Education, Muscat

1 THE BA PROJECT

On 8th June 2009, in a ceremony at the Al-Bustan Hotel, Muscat, Oman, 205 Omani teachers of English received a Bachelor's Degree from His Excellency Sayyed Khalid bin Hilal bin Soud Al-Busaidi, Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers, and from Professor Michael Arthur, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leeds. These students were following in the footsteps of over 600 other teachers who had graduated in previous years. The event, widely publicized in the media in Oman, was the culmination of a 9 year Ministry of Education Project to upgrade the qualifications of its English teaching staff and thereby facilitate the implementation of a radically new English curriculum.

The 'BA Project', as it came to be known, was a large-scale educational change initiative with ambitious anticipated outcomes. As an example of such an initiative it was unusual in several respects. It was conceived as long-term, being designed to continue for almost a decade. It had consistent funding throughout its lifetime anticipated. There was ongoing participation and commitment over time by many key academic, management and student support staff. It was systematically monitored and evaluated on a regular basis. As will become clear in the chapters that follow, these factors all contributed to a further, even more unusual, feature of the Project; it was, in most respects, a success!

2 CONTENTS & ORGANISATION

This book is one volume in a series of six covering different aspects of the BA Project. It aims to provide an overview of the experiences of a range of stakeholders who worked or studied on the Project and is perhaps distinctive in having such a diverse set of perspectives - from academics, managers, instructors and students - on a single reform initiative. In interpreting their experience the reader needs to bear in mind the overall aim of the Project, which was to support the introduction of new

practices and behaviours in Omani English classrooms through the professional development of a cadre of Omani English language teachers. The book is divided into four main sections.

The first section provides an introduction to the Project from two different points of view. Chapter 1 introduces important features of the background to the Project, which was situated within the context of wider educational reform policies that were being implemented in the Sultanate of Oman at the end of the 1990s. It discusses how and where the BA Project fitted into these policies and considers what expectations the Ministry had for the Project.

As chapter 1 makes clear, the BA Project was both a change project in itself and also part of the wider national Basic Education Reform. Chapter 2 focuses on the idea of educational change. It introduces a number of planning and implementation issues that the current literature considers to have a particularly important influence on the extent to which plans for change are able to be implemented as hoped. We consider the extent to which such issues seem to have been considered on this project in the final chapter of the book.

The second section, comprising Chapters 3 to 10, concentrates on the academic programme that was the core of the 'BA Project', namely the BA Educational Studies (TESOL) degree offered by the University of Leeds to over 900 eligible Omani teachers of English, grouped in six different cohorts from 1999-2008. The course itself is described in some detail in Chapter 3, both its initial form at inception and the changes that were made to the design over the years in response to feedback from students, Regional Tutors and several formal evaluation procedures.

Ultimately the people most deeply affected by the BA Project were the students who took the course, and Chapter 4 is a study of their motivation. This is a major concern in all educational programmes, obviously, but particularly so when there is some external pressure on students to participate. We were especially concerned that the final cohort might have lower motivation because they were the last group to be persuaded to take the course. As it turned out, our fears were unfounded; the majority of students reported a high level of intrinsic motivation that was sustained for most of the 3 year programme.

The next two chapters (5 & 6) present the perspectives of students and their tutors, as they describe the experience of studying or teaching on the programme. The six students who contributed were admittedly all successful ones, earning very good degrees, so it is perhaps not surprising that their accounts glow with enthusiasm, and exhibit a sophisticated level of reflection and critical thinking. The stories of those who struggled on the programme may never be heard, but fortunately there was a happy ending for almost all participants, as almost 90% of those who started the programme did obtain a degree level qualification. Clive Gracey was already an experienced teacher and materials writer in Oman before he joined the project; he then served as a Ministry of Education Regional Tutor for nine years, with three different cohorts. No one is better placed than to describe the challenges faced by tutors in guiding students through the academic 'assault course' of the BA, and the tensions inherent in their mediating role between students and university.

Chapters 7 to 9 are also written by former Ministry of Education Regional Tutors and describe the various ways in which they worked to enhance students' skills. Simon Green looks at the processes through which a single BA student began to develop her academic literacy over the course of the first year of her studies, where 'academic literacy' is defined as the ability to produce and consume genre texts at a level appropriate to her participation within her community of practice, that is, the community of Leeds BA undergraduates. The primary text they needed to master was the 'module assignment', work on which probably constituted the biggest challenge, and the biggest learning opportunity, for BA students. In Chapter 8 Mark Wyatt presents evidence of how the BA developed the practical teaching knowledge of students, producing change in both their teaching practices and their cognitions with regard to teaching. Findings reveal that the programme supported change by providing opportunities for reflection and by embodying other features of a constructivist approach to teacher education. Wyatt suggests that such design features could be incorporated in other teacher education programmes in other contexts. Increasing teachers' capacity to investigate aspects of their own is a current priority in many education systems, and in Chapter 9 two top BA graduates, Salima Al-Sinani and Fatma Al-Senaidi, write with Simon Etherton about how the programme developed the students as researchers. Their chapter examines the different elements and modules of the programme which contributed to their ability to think critically about their work, and to design and carry out their own independent small-scale empirical study. The products of students' research work are presented in other volumes of this series.

The final chapter in this section is a dispassionate account of student performance on the degree programme. Martin Lamb from Leeds and Nawal Al-Lawatia from the International Education Programmes Office of the Ministry of Education, analysed results in the first two cohorts and correlated them with certain background variables to identify which type of students were doing well. In a follow-up study they surveyed several 'improvers' – those students who scored higher marks in the final, more challenging part of the programme than in the earlier part – to see what features they had in common, in the hope that lessons could be passed on to students in subsequent cohorts.

The third part of the book, chapters 11 to 16, explains how the BA Programme and BA Project were implemented and evaluated, and then considers different stakeholders' perceptions of ways in which, and the extent to which, it impacted on Project participants and on the wider ELT system.

Given the two different educational cultures within which the Project and the Programme were situated, its implementation, especially at the beginning, was a complex process. In Chapter 11 John Atkins and Saeed Al-Hosni provide an overview of the many factors that those leading the Project at different levels needed to deal with during the Project lifetime, and gives a sense of the pivotal role taken by the central Project Management Office in Muscat in ensuring its smooth running. Being variably accountable to both the Ministry of Education in Oman and to the University of Leeds in the UK, Project personnel were subject to numerous formal evaluations. These are described in Chapter 12 and the argument is made that, while

burdensome, these evaluation procedures did 'assure quality', and contributed greatly to the ultimate success of the Project.

The remaining chapters in this part of the book consider the impact of the Project on different aspects of the English teaching landscape in Oman. During the BA Programme participants had the opportunity to acquire a range of new pedagogical, critical thinking, study and 'life' skills, which could support their professional development. Chapter 13 reports on an impact study which asked a group of graduates from one region of Oman about their perceptions of the value of the BA for their professional development. In addition to the professional development components of the BA Programme, participants also had to develop high level academic writing skills in order to cope with the assessment demands of the Programme. Chapter 14 reports on the extent to which and the way in which a subset of BA students developed as academic writers, over their period of study.

While students are one important source for evidence of BA Project impact, it is also interesting to consider how others perceived its effects. Chapter 15 reports on how the project was perceived by a group of key, albeit indirect, stakeholders, namely headteachers in schools from which Programme participants came and to which they returned. The last chapter in this part of the book, Chapter 16 considers ways in which the Project, through its graduates, contributed to and supported the Omanisation of those responsible for providing in-service support to English teachers, the Supervisors and Regional Teacher Trainers, and the wider changes in the structure, content and goals of in-service language teacher development that are beginning to be evident across Oman.

The final part of the book, Chapter 17, returns to the planning and implementation issues characteristic of more successful educational change initiatives that were introduced in Chapter 2. The focus here is on the extent to which these issues seem to have been directly or indirectly addressed in the planning and implementation of the BA Project. In the light of what has been reported in the intervening chapters, it is clear that many such issues were, more or less consciously, considered and acted on throughout the Project implementation process. This undoubtedly contributed greatly to the overall perception of its success. The chapter concludes by highlighting some of the most important features of the Project in this regard.

One well-recognised principle of educational change management is that a successful reform initiative has to be in harmony with the zeitgeist, and with its sociocultural context. This volume, we believe, describes one such reform. By the same token there are no easy lessons to be learned from the BA Project because reforms in different times and places will all require their own forms of contextualization. Nevertheless, our hope is that readers may be inspired by this example of intentional change, and by the spectacular levels of collaboration which produced it.