

Policy Development of Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Oman: the challenges and opportunities

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It gives me great pleasure to give this introduction about TVET in Oman. I am truly delighted to be given this opportunity to talk on behalf of my colleagues from the Sultanate. I like to express my sincere gratitude to the UNESCO organizing committee for their wonderful arrangements. And I like to extend my thanks and appreciation to colleagues in the Chinese national commission and Ministry of education for their hospitality and generosity.

The Sultanate of Oman is a country of 309 thousands square kilometers with a population of approximately 3 millions. More than 50% of the population is under the age of 25. With the remarkable improvement of the health sector (lower infants mortality rate and high life expectancy) the demographic view draws future challenges.

One of the biggest challenges facing Oman today is the growing number of job seekers from its young population. The private sector jobs are predominantly occupied by foreign workers. Statistics in the Ministry of Manpower show that the percentage of expatriates in private sector is approximately 76 %, while it is 11 % in the public sector.

Statistics in the Sultanate also show a rapid increase in the private sector demand for labor. The number of Omanis working in that sector has increased from (137,423) workers in the year 2000 to (337,025) workers in 2011, with an average growth rate of (8.5%) annually. At the same time the private sector demand for expatriate labor has increased from (378,094) workers to (1,075,141) workers, with an average growth rate of (10%) annually. 32% of these workers with low level education and skills, while

58.2% is semi to skilled labor, and 9.7 % are specialist with higher educational level.

Studies also show that there is a huge mismatch between young Omanis graduating from higher educational institutes and the labor market needs.

To encounter this emerging and critical challenge the government launched the process of “Omanization” in 1985 which aims to increase the number of nationals working for the public and private sector. Omanization process is a multifaceted approach in which education and training play a substantial role. The government of Oman realizes that the enhancement of technical and vocational education and training TVET is a strategic choice for sustainable development and economic growth. Therefore, various actions were taken to improve technological and vocational education and training. These are: improving the quality of vocational education, developing a new policy for colleges of technology, establishing the Occupational Standards and Skill Testing Center (OSSTC), and implementing training programs for employment for job seekers.

Firstly; Vocational Education:

The development of technical and vocational education and training in the Sultanate began with the blessed renaissance in the year 1970. While the country primarily focused on vocational training sector in the first decade, a call for developing a comprehensive sector as "Technological Education & Vocation Training" was placed into action in the second decade. As part of the Oman's strategic planning in developing human resources, different plans and programs have been established.

The vocational education is considered as one of the primary pillars for preparing Omani youth to take up jobs in various occupations and to meet all aspects of development in the Sultanate and the growing needs of the labor market requirements in different skills' levels and fields. The government established a number of vocational training centers and fisheries training institutes across Oman. The vocational education is striving to become the main leader that contributes to the qualification and training of national workforce. Vocational education and training has become an integral part of the structure of Higher education in Oman. The Council of Higher Education

has approved the programs offered in the centers. The seven centers offer a vocational diploma in various fields, and are determined through joint committees with private sectors. Continuous efforts are made for quality assurance for institutes and programs

Secondly, Technological Education

Technological Education is based on competencies and learning outcomes. These outcomes have been designed and are periodically reviewed, modified and improved to equip students with the necessary skills and capacities to better meet the changing requirements of the labor market and the constant development in technologies. These outcomes are currently being reviewed by the Specialization Committees of each program whose members constitute of subject-matter experts and representatives from the labor market for each program. Other developments include the establishment of an On-Job-Training department whose dedicated team work closely with academic advisors in the colleges together with industrial supervisors to provide students with proper training opportunities and exposure in relevant industries and specializations prior to their graduation as part of the requirements of the completion of the study level.

Currently colleges of technology offer a total of 33 different specializations divided into four main programs including Engineering, Information technology, Business Studies and Science related Programs. With the exception of some science related programs, all specializations are offered at 3 different levels (Diploma, Higher Diploma and B.Tech) consecutively. The focus is on Diploma level, in order to meet the various requirements of the labor market. Students who wish to proceed to Higher Diploma and B.Tech levels need to secure a minimum CGPA along other requirements in English.

Technological education is delivered and facilitated through 7 College's of Technology (CoT) distributed in different regions of the country with a total of 31,550 students studying at different levels of specializations. From an organizational perspective- although it is within Ministry of Manpower- Technological Education is governed and overseen by a Board of Trustees chaired by His Excellency the Minister of Manpower and members representing public and private sectors. The Ministry of Manpower has adopted a collaborative approach in forming, enhancing and

managing technological education. All programs are approved by the Council of Higher Education through the Board of Trustees. As all other higher education institutes, quality of colleges of technology is controlled by the Quality Assurance Authority. This successful method helped the Colleges of Technology to become the "Colleges of Choice" for students and for the industry by providing high quality teaching, learning, and research that make significant contribution to ongoing national economic development.

Thirdly: Occupational Standards and Skill Testing Centre (OSSTC)

In order to empower vocational education and training to produce better trained Omani nationals on the level of skilled and semi-skilled work, the Ministry of Manpower has initiated the project “Occupational Standards and Skill Testing Centre (OSSTC)” in 2005 . The project is implemented in cooperation with the German Agency for Technical Collaboration (gtz).

OSSTC has developed 60 standards in collaboration with of a number of international experts. The standards have been established in close cooperation with companies in Oman. Partnership with the private and public units is a key component of the center’s activities. In addition, the mandate of OSSTC is to take charge of:

- 1- The development of Advanced Occupational Standards in an ongoing dynamic process with companies/ the private sector.
- 2- The development and administration of occupational competence tests based on the AOS and the development and operation of a national system for testing and certification.
- 3- The establishment of concepts and programs for Human Resource Development in TVET.
- 4- The planning and execution of scientific research in TVET with international relations for further enhancement of the TVET-System
- 5- The facilitation of an effective partnership between private sector companies and the Ministry of Manpower in all relevant areas of the OSSTC and vocational training in general.

Fourthly: Training for Employment “National Training Projects”:

As part of Omanization process, it is a priority for the Ministry of Manpower to reduce the number of job seekers and provide them with the guidance to appropriate jobs that match their qualifications. The Ministry has to take immediate actions by placing job seekers into training programs for specific jobs. Hence, a training program known as “National Training Projects” (NTP) was developed. The main objective of the NTP program is to provide job seekers with employment after successful completion of training sessions. The Ministry provides full support and fund for the training of selected job seekers according to the requirement of the employer. The training program is executed if the stakeholders: employer, job seeker, and the training provider are in an agreement and a triplet contract is signed between them with the ministry. The NTP has served most of the economic sectors, such as Tourism and Hospitality, Oil and Gas, Transport and Communication, and others.

In conclusion, through a systematic and progressive approach, Oman has managed to achieve a number of successes in areas of employment, and technical & vocational education. While Omanis enjoy such achievements, there is still more to be done in this very important front.