



Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Education

Inclusive Education in the Sultanate of Oman

NATIONAL REPORT OF THE SULTANATE OF OMAN



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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: THE WAY OF THE FUTURE



HIS MAJESTY
SULTAN QABOOS
BIN SAID



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Message from His Excellency the Minister of Education

Since the ascension of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said to the throne in 1970, education in Oman has played a key role in the country's development process. This is clearly reflected in the Omani legal framework of education which considers education as the cornerstone for progress in society and strives to ensure that a quality education is accessible by all. Over the past three decades the Omani education system has undergone a remarkable transformation. During the early years of the Omani modern renaissance, the development plans focused on spreading education throughout the country and ensuring access to education for all. During this important period of quantitative expansion, the emphasis was on increasing enrolment rates. This period was characterized by a massive expansion in school buildings, teacher qualification programmes and curricula development. While carrying out these efforts the Ministry of Education was aware of the importance of providing for students with special needs. Special education schools were also established to provide educational vocational training to students with disabilities.

During the mid 1990s, Oman was aware of the challenges of globalization and the need to ensure that while the quest to make education accessible continues, sufficient attention was directed towards reforming the educational system to enable it to meet the challenges of a knowledge based economy. The Ministry of Education embarked on an ambitious and comprehensive educational reform programme that focused on the qualitative aspect of reforming education. A significant shift from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred pedagogy was at the cornerstone of the reforms. This was accompanied by educational policies that enhanced learner-centred instructional strategies based on a flexible curriculum and a policy encouraging formative and continuous assessment. These bold reforms paved the way for the expansion of inclusive education. New school buildings were designed to accommodate students with disabilities, policies were adopted to enable students with disabilities to be taught in mainstream classrooms, and the needs of students with learning disabilities were addressed through specialized teachers within a regular school setting.

Today, inclusive education has become an integral part of the Omani education system. The plan to provide special education services are expanding and the provision of specialized educational services to students with disabilities is now available in regular school settings. The Ministry has also given attention to developing professional development programmes in the field of special education.

The Ministry believes that its commitment to inclusive education is an important element in its quest to create a quality education for all. Creating a learning environment which addresses the diverse needs of learners is, indeed, the "way of the future".

Yahya Bin Saud Al Sulaimi

Minister of Education
Sultanate of Oman

Section 1

The Education System Facing the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century: An Overview

1.1 Major Reforms in the Education System

1.1a Legal framework of education

The legal framework and policies for all sectors in the Sultanate of Oman are based on the directives and decrees of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos. In the light of these directives, the government determines broad goals and policies for the country's development.

His Majesty's government realized that planning for the massive national developmental process required a clear vision with regard to priorities. Starting from 1976, national development was based on five year plans that included detailed areas of priority with regards to education (Box 1).

The Third Five Year Plan, for example, emphasised the need to plan for the implementation of the programme to Omanise the Sultanate's economy in order to reduce dependency on foreign labour. An important objective of the Ministry of Education during this and subsequent plans, therefore, has been to encourage and facilitate the employment of more Omani nationals in its workforce. As can be seen from Table 1, significant progress has been made with regard to the Omanisation of teachers and administrators employed by the ministry.

The legal framework of education thus reflects the directives of His Majesty the Sultan and the goals and policies specified by his government. Moreover, the findings of the conference "The Vision for Oman's Economy – Oman 2020" were endorsed by the government and became part of the legal framework within which the Ministry of Education has to work.

An important objective of the Ministry of Education has been to encourage and facilitate the employment of more Omani nationals in its workforce.



Box 1: Education priorities in the 6 five-year plans

- **First Five Year Plan (1976–1980)** – to continue the expansion of education services throughout the country, replace temporary schools (e.g. tents) with permanent concrete schools, and to establish teacher training institutes.
- **Second Five Year Plan (1981–1985)** – to continue to expand education services, to provide schools with library, laboratory and workshop facilities and to develop teacher training institutes to become intermediate colleges which admit secondary school graduates for two-years of study.
- **Third Five Year Plan (1986–1990)** – while continuing the expansion programme, give more emphasis to improving the quality of the services provided and to planning for the implementation of the Omanisation programme.
- **Fourth Five Year Plan (1991–1995)** – to continue improving the quality of services and promotion of the Omanisation of the teaching staff.
- **Fifth Five Year Plan (1996–2000)** – to develop appropriate quality programmes to prepare citizens for the 21st century, including the introduction of Basic Education.
- **Sixth Five Year Plan (2001–2005)** – to continue the expansion of education to make it available to all, expand the implementation of the Basic Education programme, and develop quality education services.
- **Seventh Five Year Plan (2006-2010)** – to continue increasing enrolment and literacy rates, enhancing the participation of the private sector in education and improving the quality of education.

Table 1: Omanisation of Ministry of Education staff, 1980-2007

Year	Teachers			Administrators		
	Total	Omani	Omanisation (%)	Total	Omani	Omanisation (%)
1980	5,150	423	8.2	696	183	26.3
1990	15,121	4,361	28.8	1,080	703	65.1
2000	26,416	17,766	67.2	2,472	2,299	93.0
2007	41,988	36,341	86.5	5,709	5,678	99.3

Source: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman (2007/2008).

Following another Royal Decree issued by His Majesty the Sultan (Royal Decree No. 101/1996), a Basic Statute of State came into force in November 1996, which has become a part of the legal framework for all government sectors. Article 13 of the Statute, which deals with matters relating to education, states that:

- “Education is a cornerstone for the progress of society which the state fosters and endeavours to spread and make accessible to all.”
- “Education aims to raise and develop the general cultural standard, promote scientific thought, kindle the spirit of research, respond to the requirements of economic and social plans, build a generation which is physically and morally strong and which takes pride in its nation and heritage and preserves its achievements.”
- “The state provides public education (basic and general education), works to combat illiteracy and encourages the establishment of private schools and institutes under its supervision and according to the provisions of the Law.”

1.1b Organization, structure and management of the education system

The Ministry of Education has responsibility for overseeing education from kindergarten level to grade 12. Kindergartens run by voluntary organisations and all private sector kindergarten providers are supervised by the Ministry of Education. As well as looking after all government schools, the Ministry of Education has responsibility for the technical and administrative supervision of all private schools. The Ministry of Higher Education has the responsibility for overseeing tertiary education.

The organizational structure of the Ministry of Education ensures that educational services and support are delivered with optimum efficiency. This structure has undergone several restructuring processes in order to meet the demands of the reforms taking place in education, to streamline and improve work systems and to promote intra-ministry communication. The latest amendment to the organizational structure was introduced in 2008.

While many decisions are made at the ministry level, coordination and collaboration with the eleven educational regions is also regarded as essential. The Ministry of Education recognizes the importance of encouraging decision making at the regional and local levels, and thus the organizational structure has been designed to reflect the ministry's decentralization policy.

The educational regions are represented through their respective Directorate Generals and their responsibilities include:

- Ensuring the implementation of all ministry policies and decisions.
- Applying the ministry's directives relating to issues such as student affairs, curricula, textbooks, assessment and the eradication of illiteracy.
- Preparing the educational plan for the region and setting the annual budget.
- Collecting statistical data to be sent to the appropriate departments in the ministry.
- Allocating teachers and supervisors to schools.
- Supervising and evaluating the performance of the teaching and administrative staff.
- Providing the support services required by the educational services in the region.
- Coordinating with the Ministry of Health to provide school health services.

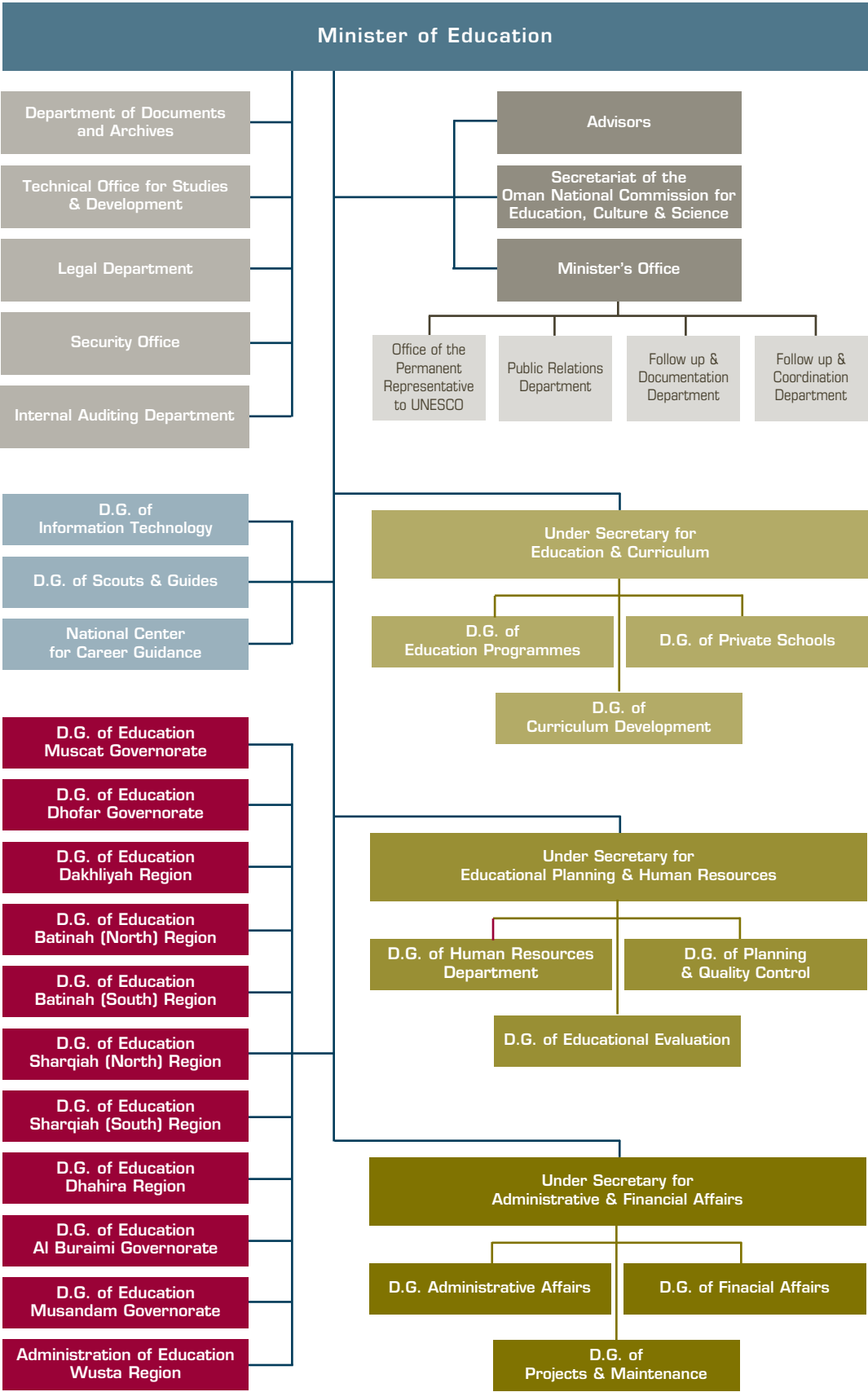
A centralised education system was adopted in Oman to ensure that national standards were being maintained in schools throughout the country and to allow for the deployment of strong accountability mechanisms. Schools have the responsibility of implementing ministry policies related to:

- The curriculum and teaching plan to be followed.
- The textbooks to be used.
- The assessment weightings to be employed.
- Teacher and employee qualifications.
- School staffing levels and teacher and employee work obligations.
- Distribution of financial resources.

The organizational structure of the Ministry of Education ensures that educational services and support are delivered with optimum efficiency.



Diagram 1: Organisational structure of the Ministry of Education



1.1c Aims and purpose of the educational levels

There are presently three programmes operating in government schools in Oman, i.e. General Education, Basic Education and Post-Basic Education. The Basic Education and General Education systems run from grades 1 to 10, while Post-Basic Education covers grades 11 and 12. Basic Education is presently being phased-in and will eventually replace General Education.

General Education was originally organised into three stages: elementary (grade levels 1–6); preparatory (grade levels 7–9); and secondary (grade levels 10–12). To encourage students to complete at least 10 years of education, it has now been organised into a unified system covering grades 1 to 10. Basic Education runs from grades 1 to 10 and is divided into two stages: Cycle One (grades 1–4) and Cycle Two (grades 5–10). Following the 10 years of study in either General Education or Basic Education, students are encouraged to move on to study grades 11 and 12 in Post-Basic Education.

Diagram 2: Structure of the Basic and General Education systems in Oman

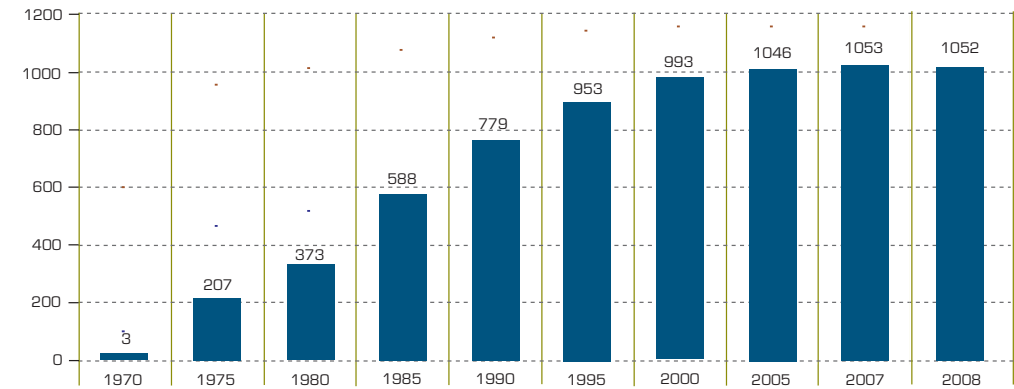
General Education		Basic Education & Post-Basic Education	
Grade level	Stages	Grade level	Stages
12	Post Basic Education	12	Post Basic Education
11		11	
10	General Education	10	Basic Education (Cycle Two)
9		9	
8		8	
7		7	
6		6	
5		5	
4		4	Basic Education (Cycle One)
3		3	
2		2	
1		1	

1.1d Objectives and principal characteristics of current and forthcoming reforms

Over the past three decades, educational development in Oman has undergone a complete transformation. In 1970 Oman had only three schools, with 30 teachers providing education to only 900 male students, and only to primary level; girls and students with special needs had no access to any form of formal education. Today, Oman has over 1,050 schools spread across eleven educational regions in both urban and rural areas, with nearly 42,000 teachers delivering a quality education to more than 550,000 students, approximately half of whom are girls (Graphs 2–4). It is little wonder that a report from the World Bank in 2001 described the development of Oman’s education system in the decades 1970–2000 as “massive”, “unprecedented”, and “unparalleled by any other country”.

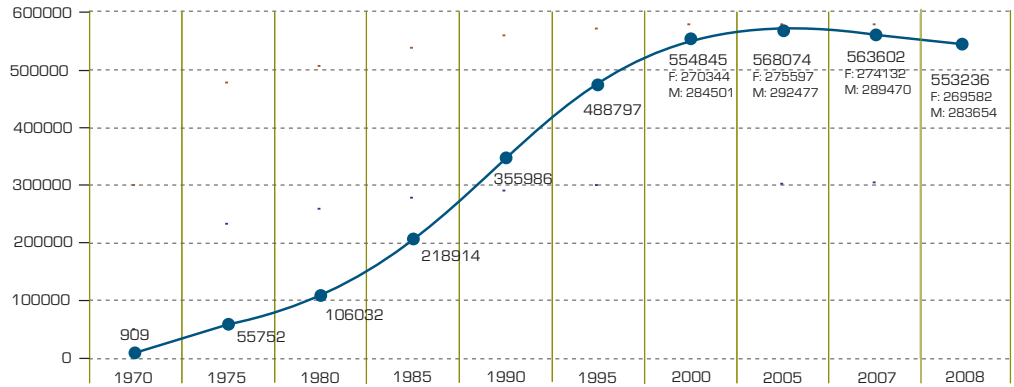
¹ The World Bank (April 2001) “The Sultanate of Oman: Cost Effectiveness Study for the Education Sector.” Technical Cooperation Programme, Middle East and North Africa Region.

Graph 1: Number of schools in Oman, 1970–2008



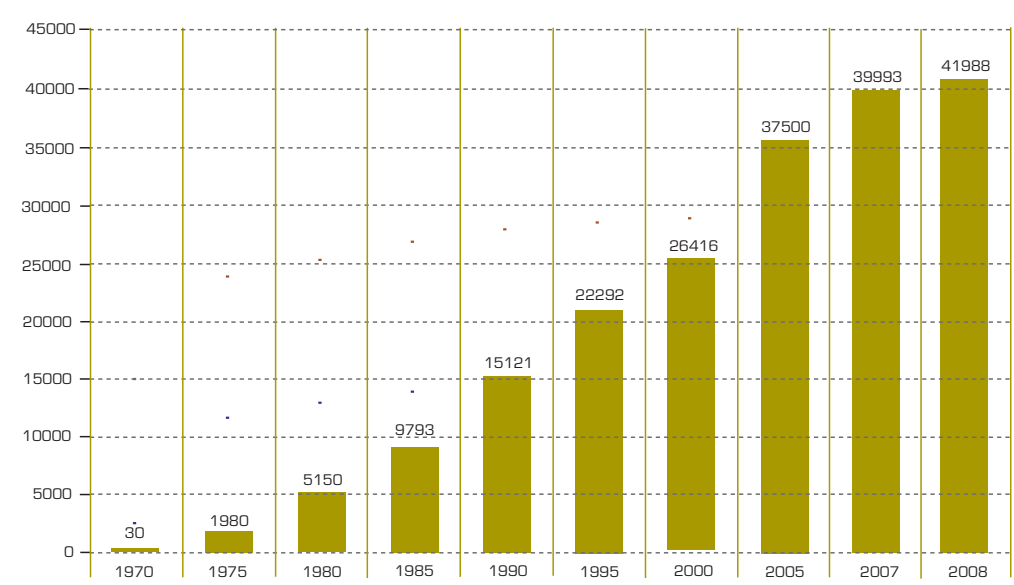
Source: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman (2008).

Graph 2: Number of students in Oman, 1970–2008



Source: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman (2008).

Graph 3: Number of teachers in Oman, 1970–2008



Source: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman (2008).

As can be seen from the Graphs 1 to 3, the substantive growth in both the number of schools and students occurred in the period between 1970 and 1995. The number of teachers employed in the education system, on the other hand, continued to show significant growth throughout the period and, indeed, their number nearly doubled between 1995 and 2007. This is a reflection of the attention that is now being given to improving the quality of educational provision by reducing class sizes (see Table 2 on page 27).

Several factors, including the impact of globalization and the need to expedite the government’s policy to Omanise the workforce, influenced the direction of the educational reform process. In 1995 under the directives of His Majesty the Sultan, a conference on *The Vision for Oman’s Economy – Oman: 2020* was launched. This conference set the strategy for achieving economic balance and sustainable development in the country. One of the key dimensions of this strategy was based on developing human resources and enabling Omanis to deal with global and local challenges:

“[The] Development of human resources, upgrading the potentialities and skills of the Omanis to cope efficiently with the technological progress and manage the changes that take place within it, and to develop the expertise necessary to face continuously changing local and global conditions.”
Vision 2020

This vision was reflected in the fifth five year plan (1996-2000) which emphasized a move towards creating a quality education service. The introduction of the new Basic Education system was at the centre of the Ministry of Education’s reform programme, but it also involved planning for a new Post-Basic Education programme, the piloting of a project to improve school performance and the creation of a National Centre for Career Guidance.

Basic Education

Basic Education has been defined by the Ministry of Education as “a unified ten-year education provided by the Sultanate for all children of school age.

Following extensive research, planning and programme design, a new Basic Education model was introduced in the 1998/1999 academic year in 17 schools. Basic Education has been defined by the Ministry of Education as *“a unified ten-year education provided by the Sultanate for **all** children of school age. It meets their basic education needs in terms of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, enabling them to continue their education or training based on their interests, aptitudes and dispositions, and enabling them to face the challenges of their present circumstances and future developments, in the context of comprehensive social development.”*²

The Basic Education system is organised into two cycles: Cycle One (grades 1 to 4) and Cycle Two (grades 5 to 10). Materials had been developed for all ten grade levels in Basic Education by the start of the 2006/2007 academic year. The number of schools involved in Basic Education has been gradually rising and, by the 2007/8 academic year, 661 schools were involved. This phasing-in programme will continue until Basic Education has been implemented in all schools.

Box 2: Main features of the Basic Education system

- The creation of a new educational system that remains firmly rooted in Islamic principles and Omani cultural identity, and follows international best practice.
- The strengthening of key subjects, such as science, mathematics, Arabic and English.
- The introduction of new subjects, such as IT (information technology) and life skills, into the curriculum.
- The development of teaching and learning materials that adopt a student-centred approach.
- The revision of courses, school textbooks and teacher guides in order to reduce theoretical content and increase real-life applications that are meaningful to students.
- The replacement of traditional book-based libraries with learning resource centres (LRCs), which provide students with access to a wide range of resources, including the internet.
- The use of a wide range of assessment and evaluation instruments, with greater emphasis given to continuous assessment.
- The reduction of class size in order to allow teachers to employ new teaching and learning strategies.
- The lengthening of the school year and school day, both to accommodate new subjects and strengthen existing subjects in the curriculum, and to allow more time for new teaching and learning approaches.
- The organisation of co-educational classes in grades 1-4.
- The “feminisation” of the teaching force and school administration in grades 1–4.

Post-Basic Education

The first group students completed the 10-year Basic Education programme at the end of the 2006/2007 academic year. To enable these students to benefit from a more relevant curriculum in grades 11 and 12, the Ministry of Education introduced a new Post-Basic Education programme in 2007.

The Post-Basic Education programme is designed to build on the reforms introduced in Basic Education. It is defined as a two-year programme which is designed to continue developing skills that will help prepare students for a variety of further education and career choices. To this end, the general objectives of Post-Basic Education focus on developing problem-solving analytical thinking and skills related to independent and continuous learning in carrying out research. They also stress the forming of positive attitudes towards all types of productive and voluntary work and to the issues of health, population and the environment. Finally, they focus on providing learners with the ability to interact peacefully with others and to contribute positively to social life.

The Post-Basic Education programme is defined as a two-year programme which is designed to continue developing skills that will help prepare students for a variety of further education and career choices.

² “Basic Education in the Sultanate of Oman: The Theoretical Framework”, Ministry of Education, UNICEF, (1998).

The Post-Basic Education programme has been designed to address national expectations and to draw on international best practice. Characteristics of the new system include the following:

- Entry into grade 11 is open to all students who have successfully completed grade 10 of Basic Education.
- The aim of the study programmes is to prepare students for **life after school**, whether this is for higher education or other further education, or for entry into the labour market.
- Personal **choice** is regarded as increasingly important in determining individual curricula at the grade 11–12 level. The curriculum is organised on a “core plus electives” model and students are given an element of choice even in the core subject areas.
- A **diverse** range of courses relevant to the varying abilities, interests and aspirations of students have been developed. These provide students with opportunities for **specialisation**, e.g. in science, IT, social studies, as well as for selecting general interest-type courses.
- The curricular model emphasise the learning of **essential skills**. In this model, all students are expected to acquire and develop a set of key skills, or fundamental competencies, which enable them to operate effectively in a wide range of contexts. The essential skills are delivered by integrating them into core subject-based courses taken by all students.
- The model is **flexible** in that it will provide students with the opportunity to change their study programme, depending on how their interests, abilities and aspirations have evolved.
- All students are required to complete a **Graduation Project**.

School Performance

As part of the overall reform process, the Ministry of Education is trying to encourage a shift in the culture of its schools. The aim is for schools to work towards the continuous improvement of the whole school. The ministry wants schools to be self-critical, identifying their strengths and weaknesses and taking responsibility for their own development.

The ministry wants schools to be self-critical, identifying their strengths and weaknesses and taking responsibility for their own development.

With these objectives in mind, the ministry commissioned a consultancy report on developing a system for reviewing the work of schools.³ Following consideration of this report, the ministry decided to modify the recommended model to suit Omani conditions, and its plans were introduced through the School Performance Evaluation System. The aim of this project is to establish national criteria and introduce a comprehensive system of school self-evaluation, which is complemented by occasional, thorough external evaluation. A pilot began in 2002/2003 with the involvement of 15 government schools and one private school, representing four of the country's 11 regions.

In the first year of implementing the new self-evaluation model, schools are concerned only with developing self-evaluation procedures. The focus of school self-evaluation, which involves 5 stages (Box 3), is on classroom practice, i.e. student learning. A set of clear criteria has been established for the evaluation of three main areas: the standard of student learning, the impact of teaching on learning and the impact of leadership and management on learning. School heads, senior teachers and teachers have all received training dealing with a range of skills, tools and strategies for effective school self-evaluation. Technical and administrative supervisors were also trained so that they can provide appropriate support to the schools.

Box 3 Procedures for school self-evaluation in Oman	
Monitor	by collecting data on performance at all levels in the school.
Analyse	the data and interpret standards throughout the school.
Evaluate	the quality of teaching and learning and leadership and management against agreed criteria.
Plan	by thinking about what needs to be done, and by when, to overcome weaknesses, identify priorities and set clear objectives and targets.
Act	by implementing the plan and monitoring implementation.

The school's first duty is to determine if the standard of student learning across the school is good enough, in terms of both the level of student attainment and the amount of progress students have made in their learning. The school does this by looking at indicators such as attainment levels, attitudes, behaviour, attendance and drop-out rates. Through monitoring and evaluation, the schools can identify strengths and areas that need improvement, whether this is at the classroom level, in subject areas or for the whole school.

Second, the school looks at the impact of teaching on learning. It must find out how well the students are learning and what it is that the teacher is doing that helps or hinders learning. The indicators for this include teachers' planning, particularly the setting of lesson objectives, management of student behaviour, and informal assessments and relationships with students. This is the most important aspect of school evaluation since the most effective way to raise learning standards is to improve teaching.

Third, the school examines how educational management affects student learning. It determines the extent to which the school, through planning, has established its strengths and areas for development,



The school's first duty is to determine if the standard of student learning across the school is good enough, in terms of both the level of student attainment and the amount of progress students have made in their learning.

³ "Reviewing the Work of Schools", Ofsted (1998).

identified priorities and targets, taken appropriate action, and is monitoring and evaluating progress towards these goals.

The principal aim of the evaluation process is to improve schools so that they can attain and maintain high standards of student learning.

In summary, the principal aim of the evaluation process is to improve schools so that they can attain and maintain high standards of student learning.

In the second year of implementation, a system of external evaluation is introduced. In each region, a trained team consisting of approximately 8–12 supervisors (except where the school has few students) is assigned the task of carrying out an in-depth external evaluation to provide an impartial collective judgement on the school's performance, and also help the school to draw up a comprehensive plan to tackle its priorities for development.

The work of the external teams can generate valuable information for the Ministry of Education, and assist it in setting its priorities and targets for further development. For example, by making comparisons between similar schools, the teams can highlight good practices, and provide the ministry with a school, regional and national picture of educational standards.

While only 15 schools participated in the performance evaluation system in 2002/2003, by the beginning of the 2008 school year, 610 government schools covering all eleven regions were involved. The number of participating schools is presently increasing by 20% every year and it is intended that all schools in the country will be doing evaluations by the beginning of the 2010/2011 school year.

National Centre for Career Guidance

In 2001, in cooperation with the British Council, the ministry commissioned a consultancy to deliver a report with proposals for the design and development of a career and guidance service for Omani schools.⁴ The report included a number of detailed recommendations on staffing,

training and resource requirements at both ministry and school level. It also recognised that not only the Ministry of Education, but a range of other ministries and bodies, have a strategic interest in, and contribution to make to, the development of a career guidance service in Omani schools.

The centre not only caters to the needs of students, but also helps adult job-seekers and offers specific employment support to women.

Following a period of discussions with interested bodies, the Council of Higher Education agreed to give the Ministry of Education the responsibility of setting up the Oman National Career Centre. In November 2005, the Ministry of Education began a 32-month project to set up the centre. The centre not only caters to the needs of students, but also helps adult job-seekers and offers specific employment support to women.

The introduction of elective courses in Post-Basic Education means that students require advice on these course choices and their implications on future employment and/or further education opportunities during grade 10. From the beginning of the 2006/07 school year, one career guidance counsellor was appointed in each Cycle Two school and each Secondary School as so as to assist students who will enter grade 11 in the 2007/08 school year. The Career Guidance Centre trains these counsellors along with the following services:

- Provides students with information about themselves through implementation of career assessment measures to ascertain their abilities, aptitudes and interests.
- Makes available a data base of careers and jobs relevant to academic levels and in accordance with the aptitude and readiness of each student.
- Projections of employment needs in different sectors, careers and jobs.
- Provides specific information on jobs in order to enable students to identify possible careers.
- Provides specific information on qualifications and educational requirements for particular higher education courses and careers.
- Encourages students to conduct research on job opportunities in public and private sectors.
- Informs students of entrepreneurship opportunities and management.



1.1e Curriculum policies, educational content and teaching and learning strategies

The Basic Education system involves a paradigm shift in teaching and learning from traditional receptive learning based on recall and rote memorization, to active learning emphasizing the development of analytical and problem solving skills. The education system has become learner centred rather than teacher centred. Students are encouraged to be active and life-long learners who are trained in the use of technology and other resources to inquire and develop.



Curriculum

Within the Ministry of Education, the Directorate General of Curriculum has responsibility for developing the national curricula that is taught in all public schools. Private schools have the option of either implementing the curricula developed by the Ministry or adopting curricula affiliated with international programmes.

One of the significant qualitative aspects of the educational reforms is reflected in curricula development. With the onset of the educational reforms, in the mid 1990s Omani curricula developers were trained by teams of international curricula experts in various areas of curricula development. Today most of the curricula areas are developed by local

One of the significant qualitative aspects of the educational reforms is reflected in curricula development.

⁴ Report from the Careers Research Advisory Centre (CRAC) and National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling (NICEC), Cambridge, United Kingdom, prepared for the Ministry of Education and the British Council in Oman (2001).

experts. Although the development of the Basic Education and Post-Basic Education curricula is almost complete as this academic year 2008/2009 witnesses the first 12th grade student cohort in the Post-Basic Educations system, curriculum development is an on-going process.

The Ministry of Education defines the curriculum as a series of processes, skills and attitudes that transcends the prescribed teaching curricula and is disseminated through classroom activities and out of class activities.

The Ministry of Education defines the curriculum as a series of processes, skills and attitudes that transcends the prescribed teaching curricula and is disseminated through classroom activities and out of class activities. The new curriculum concept is distinguished by two key characteristics:

- 1. It is learner centred with the expectation that students will be active learners who construct knowledge based on prior knowledge, experiences and attitudes.
- 2. It is comprehensive in nature, is not limited to textbook knowledge, and encompasses experiences relevant to the learner.

Care was taken to ensure that the Basic Education curriculum was relevant to the present and future needs of students. Although it will always be important for students to acquire factual knowledge, the body of knowledge in most subject areas is changing rapidly. Consequently, rather than merely remembering information, it is now more important for students to be able to find and use the information. The revision of curricular materials represents a shift away from content overloaded with theory and abstract concepts. Learning materials being developed today are based on practical and real-life contexts and applications, and provide students with opportunities for experiential learning. The emphasis is on the acquisition of transferable skills.

Teaching and learning methodologies

Teacher-centred approaches had been dominant in the General Education system. The Ministry of Education feels that over-reliance on such methods often encourages students to become passive learners, who are too dependent on the teacher to tell them what and when to learn. Research has suggested that teaching and learning approaches that allow students to merely read, listen and watch are not particularly effective in getting them to learn.

The ministry has, therefore, encouraged a shift away from teacher-centred learning to student-centred learning.

The ministry has, therefore, encouraged a shift away from teacher-centred learning to student-centred learning. Teachers have been trained in the new teaching methods and in how to adapt their classroom management techniques in line with current worldwide developments. Along with whole class teaching, teachers are now expected to use a variety of other teaching and learning methods, such as individual, pair, small group and out-of-school work. The strategies employed by teachers aim to develop skills and attitudes that encourage autonomous and cooperative learning, communication, critical thinking,

problem solving, research and investigative techniques, creativeness, innovation and the development of an aesthetic sense. The overall aim is to provide students with the required tools for life-long learning.

Student-centred approaches demand smaller class sizes and, in recognition of this, the number of teachers employed by the ministry nearly doubled between 1995 and 2007 (Graph 3). This has enabled a substantial reduction in student-teacher ratios to occur in recent years.

Table 2: Student-teacher ratios in Basic Education schools (2001-2006)

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Teachers	15,307	18,179	19,977	22,155	25,424	26,434
Students	303,512	301,402	293,081	283,331	272,307	261,316
Teacher/Student Ratio	1:20	1:17	1:15	1:13	1:11	1:10

Source: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman (2001/2006).

Resources

One of the major innovations of the Basic Education curricula is the introduction of resource-based learning. This represents a shift from using a single resource in the classroom, i.e. the textbook, to using a wide variety of print and non-print resources. The aim is to encourage students to learn how to use a variety of technologies, demonstrate an understanding of technological applications and apply appropriate technologies to solve different problems.

Textbooks and extensive teachers' guides for each subject are provided by the Ministry of Education. One of the major challenges in curriculum development is to ensure that the reforms show a consistency across all subjects. To help achieve this, the ministry has introduced a committee structure for curriculum development. Review committees for the development of textbooks have been established in each subject area. These committees, which usually comprise supervisors and teachers, as well as curriculum and assessment specialists, work together to ensure that the learning materials produced by the writers are pitched at an appropriate level and are consistent with the aims of the ministry's education policy. Moreover, an overall co-ordinating committee has been established to look at the development of the curriculum across and within all subjects in order to ensure that the content and skills included in the course materials are integrated.

All subject areas now have a range of teaching aids and students are able to get hands-on experience in the classroom with real equipment. In science, for example, students work individually and in groups to carry out experiments. Traditional book-based libraries have been replaced by learning resource centres in all Basic Education schools. These centres, which aim to develop student competencies in independent learning and creative and critical thinking, are equipped with 15 computers and a range of audio visual aids and print materials. In Basic Education second cycle schools (i.e. grade 5 upwards), a separate computer laboratory containing 20 additional computers is also provided.

One of the major challenges in curriculum development is to ensure that the reforms show a consistency across all subjects.





1.2. Main Policies, Achievements and Lessons Learned

1.2a. Access to education

The Ministry of Education’s responsibility with regard to access to education involves both students of school age and adult education and literacy programmes.

Students of school age

The Ministry of Education is committed to the principle that all children should have access to education, regardless of their gender, social status, cultural group or area of residence. The ministry’s policy has been to mount a sustained campaign to raise people’s awareness of the importance of education for their present and future well-being. To encourage school attendance, the government provides free education from grade 1 to grade 12, as well as literacy and adult education. Textbooks for all classes are provided free of charge. Schools have been built all over the country, even in areas with low populations and, where distance requires, children are transported from home to school. In addition, boarding facilities are provided for students who live in rural areas to enable them to attend more centrally located schools. These measures have helped Oman to make impressive progress in its aim to provide education for all.

The Ministry of Education is committed to the principle that all children should have access to education, regardless of their gender, social status, cultural group or area of residence.

Table 3: Enrolment of Omani students by gender and level of education, 2005/2006

Educational level	Gross Enrolment Rate			Net Enrolment Rate		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Grades 1–6	100.10	99.53	99.83	89.26	90.15	89.69
Grades 7–9	99.85	93.49	96.72	73.98	75.65	74.80
Grades 10–12	85.56	81.99	83.78	62.42	63.60	62.98

Source: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman (2005/2006).

The statistics presented in Table 3 refer to Omani students enrolled in both public and private mainstream schools. Although most students are 6 years of age when they enter grade 1, the entry age can in fact range from 5–8 years. The number of over-age and under-age students in the system means that the gross enrolment ratios are higher than the net ratios.⁵ While the gross enrolment rate is a good indicator of the holding capacity of the education system, the net enrolment rate tells us how far or how near we are from the ideal goal of every child entering school at the correct age.

⁵ The gross enrolment ratio refers to the percentage of students of all ages who are in school at a particular educational stage. The net enrolment rate refers to the percentage of students attending school who are at the official age for a particular educational stage.

Education has nearly been universalised at the lower grade levels.

The high percentage of children attending school, particularly at grades 1–9 (i.e. in the 6–15 age-group) is very encouraging. Education has nearly been universalised at the lower grade levels. However, full participation in the new knowledge economy will require young Omanis to complete as much education as possible. One of the major reasons behind the replacement of the elementary and preparatory stages with a 10-year Basic Education programme is to encourage students to remain in education until they are at least 16 years old.

Moreover, it is hoped that reforms being made to grades 11 and 12 will produce a more relevant educational experience and that this will help persuade more students to remain in school to the age of 18.

Literacy programmes and adult education

Prior to 1970, a significant sector of the Omani population was illiterate or under-educated due to insufficient, inadequate or inaccessible educational programmes. Figures from UNESCO indicate that in 1970, Oman’s adult illiteracy rate was a staggering 65.7%, with 43.9% of the men and 88.3% of the women being illiterate.

His Majesty the Sultan appreciated the difficulty of trying to develop Oman with a largely illiterate population and expressed his strong resolve to tackle the country’s lack of educational provision. Taking his lead, the government has targeted resources to remove barriers that are preventing Omani citizens from fully participating in the country’s educational opportunities.

The Sultanate set itself the demanding goal of reducing illiteracy in its citizenry through the implementation of a two-year programme to teach reading, writing and basic skills to the level of grade 4. Students attending centres for literacy are provided with a special curriculum, which includes studies in Arabic language, Islamic studies, mathematics, culture (which includes social studies, science and domestic studies dealing with childcare and nutrition). The ministry recently extended the length of the programme to three years and raised the level of literacy skills to grade 6. UNESCO sponsored a workshop to select topics and develop books for the third year of literacy classes and this new programme began in 2005-6.

In order to increase participation and open more literacy sections throughout the country, male and female grade 12 school graduates have been encouraged to volunteer to teach these classes under the supervision of Ministry of Education staff. People with visual impairments are also now

accepted into literacy classes in *Omar Bin Khataab Institute* for the blind and visually impaired. With support from both UNESCO and the government of Oman, the literacy programme continues to be renewed and updated.

Special emphasis on literacy education in Oman has yielded impressive results. From the inception of adult literacy centres in 1973 until 2005, nearly 70,000 adults had successfully completed the literacy programme and are now literate. The illiteracy eradication centres were delivering programmes to more than 10,700 students in 2005/2006.

From the inception of adult literacy centres in 1973 until 2005, nearly 70,000 adults had successfully completed the literacy programme and are now literate.

Table 4: Learners’ enrolment in literacy programmes, 2001/2002–2005/2006

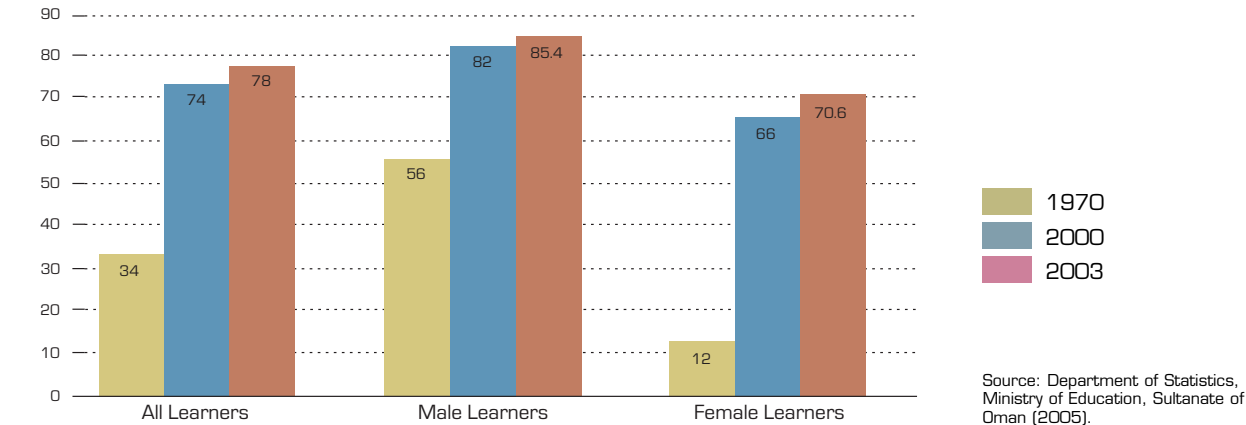
Academic year	Number of students		Total
	Male	Female	
2001/2002	418	5,214	5,632
2002/2003	302	5,823	6,125
2003/2004	384	6,238	6,622
2004/2005	313	7,328	7,641
2005/2006	482	10,244	10,726

Source: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman (2005/2006).



Illiteracy data derived from UNESCO and Oman’s national census of 2003 confirm the level of success achieved by the Ministry of Education in its fight against illiteracy. Between 1970 and 2003, Oman’s adult illiteracy rate was reduced by 44% and, most significantly, adult women’s illiteracy was reduced by nearly 60%.

Graph 4: Adult literacy rates in Oman, 1970-2003 (in percent)



Until the early 1980s, attendance rates for men at the literacy centres were far higher than those for women. Since then this trend has dramatically shifted, with women now far outnumbering men. The reasons for this change are not hard to find. For one thing, since nearly 86% of Omani men are now literate, compared to just over 70% of women, fewer men are in need of literacy classes.

In order to give those who have succeeded in overcoming illiteracy, as well as those who have dropped out of formal education, the opportunity to pursue schooling, the ministry has set up centres for adult education. Those who cannot or do not wish to attend adult education centres are given the opportunity to continue their learning by themselves and are provided with a free set of 30 books designed for adult self-study to help them remain literate.

In order to give those who have succeeded in overcoming illiteracy, as well as those who have dropped out of formal education, the opportunity to pursue schooling, the ministry has set up centres for adult education.

While the literacy centres were regarded as the cornerstone of its policy to fight illiteracy, the ministry has looked to apply a wide a range of methods. At an Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS) Conference held in Medina in Saudi Arabia in May 2004, member countries were asked to make concentrated efforts to eradicate illiteracy in one of their villages. The aim was to involve all villagers over the age of ten who could not read, write or do basic arithmetic, and who were not enrolled in any educational institute. Another aim of initiative was to raise social and economic awareness among the participants and to foster a spirit of civic cooperation by inviting local people and non-governmental agencies to work together.

By 2008 learning villages had been established in nine educational regions.

The Omani government eagerly supported this “Learning Village” initiative, and the fishing village of Miraisi in the Batinah South region was selected. Encouraged by the success of this initiative, it was extended and by 2008 learning villages had been established in nine educational regions (see paragraph 2.3.c).

Data derived from the Omani national census carried out in 1993 and in 2003 have shown that substantial progress has been made in the ten-year period in tackling illiteracy, particularly in the 15-49 age range, and most especially among the female population. Despite this impressive progress, the ministry regards the level of illiteracy rates in the two age groups as being still too high – particularly among women – especially since these age groups represent the most productive section of the population.

The ministry is now focusing its literacy drive on the 15 to 44 age group, with the general objective of reducing illiteracy in this population by 50% between 2003 and 2015. In 2003, 9.1% of the 15-44 age group were illiterate, of whom 3.7% were male and 14.6% female.

Table 5: Number of learners in adult education centres, 2001/2002 - 2005/2006

Year	Grades 5-6			Grades 7-9			Grades 10-12		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
2001/2002	503	2,395	2,898	2,762	2,058	4,820	10,101	9,417	19,518
2002/2003	541	2,341	2,882	3,435	2,224	5,659	12,255	10,521	22,776
2003/2004	529	2,497	3,026	3,604	2,094	5,698	13,240	10,760	24,000
2004/2005	429	2,938	3,367	3,170	1,987	5,157	13,897	11,390	25,287
2005/2006	176	2,452	2,628	3,378	1,927	5,305	11,841	4,610	16,451

Department of Statistics, Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman (2005/2006).

Table 6: Number of and percentages of illiterates in the (15-44 years) age group among Omani population: 2003 Population Census

Age Group	Males	Females	Totals
Population in the 15–44 years Age Group	424,645	419,845	844,490
Number of Illiterates in the 15–44 years Age Group	15,703	61,329	77,032
Percentage of Illiteracy in the 15–44 years Age Group	3.7 %	14.6 %	9.1 %

Source:
Oman National Census Reports:
1993 and 2003.





1.2b. Early childhood intervention (as a means to support children's development, transition to primary education and learning)

The ministry is aware that quality early childhood education can generate a wide range of significant benefits, both for the individuals concerned and for society as a whole. These benefits include facilitating the transition of children to formal schooling, enhancing their capacity to learn, longer-term improvements in educational performance, private returns to individuals (both financial and developmental) and social and economic returns for society.

Until recently, only private institutions, some government agencies and voluntary organisations, such as the Royal Omani Police, Oman Women's Association, and Women's Development Centres, provided pre-school education in Oman. Five different types of early childhood care and education services are provided in Oman, i.e. nurseries, childhood day-care centres, home care centres, Madrassas or Qur'anic schools and kindergartens.

Until recently, only private institutions, some government agencies and voluntary organisations provided pre-school education in Oman.

Nurseries cater to children aged between 3 months and 3.5 years. In 2003/2004, there were 33 nurseries in Oman, 28 of which were located in the Muscat area, with a total of 1,400 children being enrolled in these facilities.⁶ The Ministry of Social Development provides technical support for these nurseries in the form of rules, regulations, standards and advice. Monitoring of the nurseries by the ministry is done two or three times per year.

In addition, there are 30 low-cost childhood day-care centres in Oman, which also fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Development. Care assistants attend to children aged between 6 months and 3 years, with three-year olds and above receiving kindergarten classes. There are also 36 "Children's Corners", of which 21 are run by Oman Women's Associations and 15 are affiliated with women rehabilitation centres. Government units that provide pre-school facilities for the children of their employees include the Royal Oman Police and the Royal Navy of Oman.

In some areas where there are no Women's Associations, houses are turned into home care centres in order to provide some pre-school education services. 39 home care centres were in existence in 2005, some of which were linked to Women's Development Centres.⁷

The Qur'anic schools cover children aged between 3 and 6. These fall into two categories, one supervised by the Ministry of Awaqaf and Religious Affairs and the other by the private sector. In 2004, it was estimated that there were 105 schools supervised by the ministry and that over 7,300 students were enrolled in these schools.⁸

⁶ Education For All, 2003-2005, 5th Draft, Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman.

⁷ Early Childhood Care and Education Policy in Oman, Abrar Hasan, UNESCO Office Doha, 2005

⁸ Ibid

Kindergartens (KGs), which cater to children aged between 3.5 years and 5.5 years, are the most formal of pre-school services. Between 1995 and 2005, the rise in enrolments in KGs made this the fastest growing sector of the education system, achieving an average annual growth rate of 7.3%. At present, some 9,500 students enjoy the benefits of KGs education, which represents about 8% of four and five year-old children in Oman.

While the Ministry of Social Affairs supervises KGs run by voluntary organisations, all private sector KGs providers are supervised by the Ministry of Education. The ministry regulates the quality and standards for facilities, equipment, materials, training of teachers and supervisors. The KGs follow a curriculum designed by the ministry with UNICEF support and all materials are provided to the KGs at production cost. In order to provide pre-school teachers with the training they need, the Ministry of Education convened a training workshop for a core group of kindergarten teachers. UNICEF provided technical support secured through Sultan Qaboos University. These teachers, in their capacity as Resource Team Trainers, were then given the responsibility of training other teachers. The ministry has also begun the process of developing minimum standards for pre-school education.⁹

Many of the KGS in Oman provide a very high level of service with well trained teachers drawing upon advanced pedagogy and with favourable teacher-pupil ratios. The quality of education provided by some of the other early childhood care and education services, however, is somewhat uneven.¹⁰ A recent report recommended that the Ministry of Education should assume responsibility for the supervision of all early childhood education in order to ensure consistency of policy, the setting of minimum standards for provision, including qualifications of teachers, student ratios, hours of operation, quality of curriculum and resources, as well as standards for equipment and facilities.¹¹

The Ministry of Education began to pilot a Pre-School Classroom Project in 2004.

The Ministry of Education began to pilot a Pre-School Classroom Project in 2004. Aware of the inequitable provision existing in the country, the idea behind this project was to provide pre-school facilities to areas where no ECCE provision presently existed. The main features of the project are that:

- It is open to children aged between 4 years and 10 months to 5 years and 9 months.
- A maximum class size of 30 children has been stipulated.
- Each class has two teachers, one for Arabic and one for English.
- Volunteer teachers (secondary or diploma graduates) are recruited for the project.
- The teachers' training consists of a 6-week training course run by the private school department and a 3-week shadowing exercise in private schools supervised by the headmaster and a supervisor.

When the project began in 2004 only one school was involved, i.e., Qantab General School. In 2005, the project was extended to 14 schools covering all 11 educational regions; in 2006 to 17 schools and in 2007 to 28 schools. In 2007 a total of 495 children were enrolled in classrooms covered by the project.



⁹ UNICEF Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, Annual Report 2004.

¹⁰ Early Childhood Care and Education Policy in Oman, Abrar Hasan, UNESCO Office Doha, 2005

¹¹ Strategic Plan for Education in the Sultanate of Oman, 2006-2020, Ministry of Higher Education, 2005



1.2c Learning outcomes, particularly concerning the efforts to improve learning achievement (how well are students performing at various levels?) and reduce inequalities (how have disparities in achievement been reduced?)

Measuring student achievement

A national goal of Oman is to ensure that all students are being provided with high quality education. It is important that steps are taken to check whether or not this goal is being achieved. This requires setting Omani educational standards that match recognised international educational standards, and measuring if these standards are being met.

A national goal of Oman is to ensure that all students are being provided with high quality education.

Are students in Omani schools achieving the targets that have been set for them? Are there differences between regions, schools, boys and girls or over a period of time in the levels of student achievement? Teachers, managers and ministry officials need answers to these questions for a variety of purposes. Reliable data on students' progress and attainment helps:

- schools and/or regions to evaluate the performance of their students in comparison to other schools and/or regions;
- schools and/or regions to evaluate the performance of their students in comparison to students in previous years;
- schools and/or regions and the ministry to set targets for raising attainment levels;
- the Ministry of Education to evaluate the quality of the education programme; and
- demonstrate whether or not the ministry is getting value for money.

Indicators that can provide data on the quality of education being provided include drop-out and repetition rates, class size, instruction time and teacher qualifications. Perhaps the richest source of information, however, is obtained by testing students in selected subject areas and at different grade levels, and using the results to measure student performance against international educational standards. To date, the Ministry of Education has already participated in two such exercises and a third is at the planning stage.

The richest source of information on the quality of education being provided is obtained by testing students against international educational standards.

The first exercise was Oman's participation in the UNESCO/UNICEF sponsored *Monitoring Learning Achievement of the Goal of Education*

for All (MLA). Between 1993 and 2001, the ministry participated in four MLA studies, one each for grades 4, 6, 9 and 10. At grades 4, 6 and 9, student achievement levels were tested in Arabic, mathematics, science and life skills, while at grade 10, student achievement was tested in Arabic, mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology. All of these studies have provided the ministry with important baseline data on teaching and administrative practices in Oman, and on factors relating to the background of students, such as socio-economic status and family and student aspirations, and the effect these have on student achievement.

The findings from the studies indicated low student achievement levels in all four of the subjects included in the MLA project (particularly in mathematics at grade 6) and highlighted significant differences in student performance levels between regions, schools and gender. These results were one of the determining factors that persuaded the ministry of the necessity to undertake major educational reforms. In a project recently agreed with UNICEF, the Ministry of Education has pledged to try to increase the average score of students' correct answers in the MLA tests from the current 51.1% to a minimum of 60% by 2006.¹² The data provided by these studies not only assisted the ministry in drawing up its reform programme in general, but also in the restructuring of its in-service teacher training programmes and the reorganisation of Parent Councils.¹³

The second exercise was the *Evaluation of Basic Education Cycle One*. Following six years of delivering the Basic Education Cycle One programme, the ministry wished to evaluate the success and effectiveness of the system. In 2003-2004, an international company was commissioned to carry out a review of the programme to date and to offer advice on future priorities.

Part of the mandate of the study was to measure the achievement of grade 4 Basic Education students in Oman and to determine ways of bringing student achievement levels up to international standards. A total of 189 lessons were observed and evaluated, and tests were administered in Arabic, English, mathematics and science to approximately 7,700 grade 4 students in all regions of Oman. Questionnaires, and in some cases interviews, were administered to 7,700 students, 7,300 parents, 147 senior teachers, 61 school principals, 106 learning resource centre teachers and over 600 Ministry of Education staff members.

The test results indicated that Omani Basic Education students were on average approximately one year behind international standards. Compared to international norms, there were approximately three times as many students in Oman with difficulties in reading. There was a significant difference between the performance of boys and girls, with girls doing much better, especially in Arabic. Boys also performed less well in other subjects. This was probably due to boys' poorer reading skills which, in turn, were affecting all other academic performances.

The conclusion of the study was that the Basic Education programme is progressing outstandingly well.

In looking for an explanation, the consultants reported that many schools were attempting to complete courses designed to be covered in 180 days in fewer than 160 days. Taking this into consideration, along with the fact that students in Oman started their education approximately one year later than students in most other countries, the consultants regarded the results as surprisingly positive. Indeed, the conclusion of the study was that the Basic Education programme "is progressing outstandingly well and at the present rate of progress Omani students' achievements could equal and ultimately (surpass those of) international students in a short time span." The report included 78 recommendations, which are presently being considered by a committee set up by the Ministry of Education.¹⁴

Finally, Oman is one of 60 countries that has participated in the fourth cycle of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 2007. Carried out every four years at grades 4 and 8, TIMSS allows participating countries to compare the performance of their students in mathematics and science to that of students in other countries. Oman's participation will be limited to grade 8, and will involve the testing of 4,000 students. The ministry believes that its involvement in this study will provide important evidence on whether or not Oman's students are meeting international standards.

In addition to international testing the Ministry of Education adopted National tests in four main subjects: Arabic, English, Mathematics and Science. The implementation started in the academic year 2006/2007 and targets students in grades 4, 7, and 10.

Reducing grade level repetition and school drop-out rates

The Ministry of Education is aware that high repetition and school drop-out rates are strong indicators that not all was well in Oman's schools and that it has to give priority to both of these related issues in its reform programme. A joint study was conducted by the ministry and UNICEF to determine the principal causes for the high drop-out rates for boys in grade 7, which was an area of particular concern. The study concluded that one of the main causes was the difficulties boys were facing in maths and science classes. In 2004, UNICEF organised a symposium on the development of a new vision for teaching and learning mathematics, which included sharing successful experiences from other countries.¹⁵

While it is hoped that improving the quality and relevance of the educational experience of students will help to significantly decrease both repetition and school drop-out rates, the Ministry of Education has decided also to introduce a number of dedicated measures to address these issues. For example, it has:

- **Established "Attainment Follow-up Committees"** in all government schools. One of the most important tasks of these committees is to identify students who are facing difficulties with their school work, devise "Individual Programme Plans" for them and monitor individual student progress throughout the year. In this way, it is hoped that students at risk of falling behind in their school work can be identified and supported at an early stage.
- **Introduced new pass/fail regulations.** In the past, students who failed one subject at the end of the year, and who then failed the resit examination, were forced to repeat the year. Following advice from the Scottish Qualifications Authority, new and less severe arrangements were piloted in the Examinations Reform Project. In 2001, the Ministry of Education introduced a policy that all students at grades 1-4 in all Basic and General Education schools would progress from one grade to the next. This means that, though some students may not have achieved all of the objectives specified for the grade level in

Oman is one of 60 countries that has participated in the fourth cycle of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 2007.

¹² "Master Plan of Operations and Programme Plan of Operations between the Government of Oman and UNICEF 2004-2006" (2004).

¹³ "Monitoring of Learning Achievement Project: Assessment of Learning Achievement of Grade 4 Students in Oman" (1997).

¹⁴ "Final Report for Evaluation of Cycle One Basic Education", Canedcom International Corporation (2004).

¹⁵ "UNICEF Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, Annual Report 2004".

a subject or subjects, they can nonetheless move to the next higher grade. At the next grade level, they are given more time to work on the objectives that they did not achieve in the previous year. In grades 5-11, students who fail two or more subjects have their cases reviewed by the school's Attainment Follow-up Committee to decide whether retention or progression to the next grade is in the student's best interest.

- **Reduced the number of double-shift schools.** This has helped to increase the number of instruction hours, thereby improving the quality of the education that students receive.
- **Implemented a programme for students with learning difficulties.** Recognising that difficulties in the learning process can lead to grade-level repetition and dropping out of school, the Ministry of Education has designed programmes to address these problems and has trained teachers to identify students with learning difficulties.
- **More focus on learning to read.** Educational research shows a close relationship between students' reading skills and their abilities in other subjects. The ministry is, therefore, giving special emphasis to reading in the early years of schooling.
- **Reformed student assessment and evaluation methods.** New assessment, evaluation and promotion policies have directly and considerably reduced the problem of high repetition and, indirectly, drop-out rates. The use of formative assessment techniques, in particular, allows teachers to better identify and meet their students' needs.

These measures have helped to greatly improve the situation both with regard to grade-level repetition and drop-out rates.

Repetition rates decreased significantly between 1995 and 2005. A large decrease occurred at grades 1–6 in 2001/2002, which can largely be explained by the ministry's decision to allow all students to progress through grades 1–4. Similarly, the substantial decrease that occurred at grades 7–12 in 2004/2005 was the result of a combination of factors, including the introduction of Attainment Follow-up Committees and new pass-fail regulations.

Drop-out rates have also shown a significant decrease, particularly at grades 7–12. Despite the improvements, a continuing matter of concern to the ministry is that at grades 7–12 the drop-out rates for boys continue to be approximately twice as high as those for girls.

Table 7: Repetition rates in government schools, 1995-2005 (in percent)

Year	Grades 1-6		Grades 7-9		Grades 10-12	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
1995/1996	11.4	7.7	22.1	9.4	12.5	6.6
2000/2001	5.4	3.4	12.3	4.4	10.1	5.0
2004/2005	0.7	1.0	0.7	0.7	1.4	0.5

Source:
Department of
Statistics, Ministry of
Education, Sultanate of
Oman (2004/2005).

Table 8: Drop-out rates in government and private schools, 1995-2005 (in percent)

Year	Grades 1-6		Grades 7-9		Grades 10-12	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
1995/1996	1.1	1.2	8.6	5.4	10.8	7.0
2000/2001	0.7	0.8	3.8	2.0	5.8	3.8
2004/2005	0.2	0.2	2.3	1.1	4.2	2.0

Source:
Department of
Statistics, Ministry of
Education, Sultanate of
Oman (2005).

1.2d. Pre-service teacher training, recruitment, deployment, working conditions and in-service professional development.

Pre-service training

How well teachers are prepared for teaching has direct bearing on the quality of an education system. Pre-service training for Omani teachers is presently carried out by the Ministry of Higher Education, which oversees “teacher colleges”, Sultan Qaboos University, a number of private universities in Oman and some institutions outside the country.

Many newly qualified teachers admit that they require additional training to help prepare them for work in the classroom. They state that they began their teaching career with little knowledge or understanding of the changes that were being promoted by the Ministry of Education's reforms.

The ministry has entered into discussions with the Omani pre-service teacher training providers in an attempt to ensure that student teachers receive practical rather than theoretical preparation. Two joint committees have been established: one between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education and the other between the Ministry of Education and Sultan Qaboos University. It is hoped that these discussions will lead to a substantial increase in practice teaching time in classrooms and that this will enable student teachers to acquire appropriate classroom management skills and training in the subjects that they will be teaching.

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School staff and teaching conditions

The Ministry of Education provides finance for the staffing of schools according to a set formula. At grades 1–9, the amount of finance provided is based on supplying 1.9 teachers for each class of 35 students in girls' schools, and 1.7 teachers in boys' schools (the higher ratio for girls' schools is to compensate for maternity leave for female teachers). At grades 10–12, the ratio is increased to 2.7 teachers for each class of 35 students. This means, for example, that a school with 350 students at grade 11 and 350 students at grade 12 would be assigned 54 teachers, 27 for each grade. In addition, all schools are provided with non-teaching staff, e.g. the school principal, administrators, technicians for laboratories, computers and learning resource centres, social and guidance counsellors, secretaries and security staff.

Compared to many other countries, teachers in Oman enjoy a generous allocation of non-teaching time. At grades 10–12, for example, most teachers are expected to teach approximately 20–21 of the 35 periods allocated for the week, which amounts to 57%–60% of their working time.

In-service training

The successful implementation of any reform initiative depends on a well-trained and well-informed staff. Moreover, in a rapidly changing world, teachers need to update and improve their own knowledge and methods throughout their career. This, along with the perceived inadequacies of pre-service training, has convinced the Ministry of Education that devising an appropriate model for the high quality professional development of teachers is an essential component of the reform process.

The ministry has adopted a cascade organisational model for in-service training. This has involved identifying trainers situated in all regions of the country, training these trainers centrally at the Ministry of Education, and then instructing them to go back to their regions to replicate the training programmes with all teachers, headmasters and subject supervisors.

The main aim of these in-service training programmes is both to help prepare teachers before they begin teaching in the new reformed environment and to offer on-going support when they are involved in the reform process.

The main aim of these in-service training programmes is both to help prepare teachers before they begin teaching in the new reformed environment and to offer on-going support when they are involved in the reform process. The training courses concentrate on practical issues, such as assisting teachers to adopt a more student-centred approach; this may include helping teachers to focus their lessons on encouraging their students to think, reflect and solve problems more autonomously.

One of the advantages of the cascade training model is that it allows for the efficient use of resources and for large numbers of staff to be trained. Research indicates that traditional top-down teacher training alone is insufficient, and that supplementing this type of training with job-embedded staff development can bring substantial benefits. For example, teachers who are encouraged to determine their own professional development priorities can help to increase the relevance of training programmes.

Teachers in one school, for example, might decide that their main training priority is to receive help on how to increase their students' reading and writing skills. School staff could draw up plans on how the teaching of these skills could be integrated across subject areas and what kinds of professional development activities they would require to help their students achieve the new desired targets. Teachers in another school, on the other hand, might decide that training in formative assessment techniques is their main priority while, in yet another school, teachers may want training on classroom management methods for differentiated learning. A school-based staff development programme would allow such differing priorities and needs to be satisfied.

School principals and supervisors will need considerable assistance in how to organise the delivery of quality school-based teacher training. To begin this process, the ministry introduced a participatory project for professional development in 2003. The project began in 30 schools in 6 educational regions and by 2005 it had been extended to 100 schools in all 11 regions.

The aim of the project is to encourage schools to become training units through the creation of a learning environment conducive to the teaching of teachers as well as to students. This is facilitated by a training programme carried out with school principals, assistant principals, senior teachers, teachers and supervisors. The training covers topics such as the importance of reflective practices and collaborative

action in schools, the development of thinking skills, the identification of training needs and priorities, training skills and how to conduct training workshops, research methodology, statistical analysis, and report writing. Schools are expected to provide opportunities for their staff to work together to analyse, discuss, reflect on, plan and act to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning in their classrooms. All staff in schools are encouraged to collaborate to carry out research, develop their ideas, put them into practice in the field, and to report back on their findings. The ministry hopes that this approach will help both to improve classroom practise directly and provide valuable input for the national policy process.

To further support school-embedded staff development, the ministry is exploring the possibility of developing a central database containing the names of trainers and packages of training materials which could be issued to schools. The Human Resource Development Department (following consultation with relevant departments such as the Curriculum, Educational Evaluation and Supervision Departments) would then submit a detailed plan on how materials could be developed and schools supported in order to deliver a school-based training model.

In order to meet growing training needs in the future, the ministry is aiming to allocate a greater percentage of its human resource training budget to the regions and to individual schools. Such a move would, of course, have the additional advantages of being consistent with the aims of the School Performance Evaluation Project and the ministry's support for greater decentralisation of the education system. The ministry is considering the possibility of establishing a pilot project whereby a selected number of schools would be presented with a special budget to spend on school-directed professional development activities. The school principal would be responsible for allocating these funds and would have to provide evidence of quality improvements achieved in the school.

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1.3. The Role of the Education System

Combating poverty as well as other forms of social exclusion and cultural marginalization (how is it envisaged? What kind of contribution is expected? What kind of strategies should be implemented?)

Equal access to education

Promoting equality of access to education has always been afforded top priority by the government of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos. Shortly after ascending to the throne, His Majesty the Sultan directed that all Omanis would be treated equally before the law and would receive the same right to equal opportunities. This directive from His Majesty has been written into the basic Statute of the State.

Article 12

“Justice, equality and equality of opportunities between Omanis are the pillars of the society guaranteed by the State.”

Article 17

“All citizens are equal before the law and they are equal in public rights and duties. There shall be no discrimination between them on the ground of gender, origin, colour, language, religion, sect, domicile or social status.”

Source: Basic Statute of the State

Education in Oman is, therefore, considered to be a fundamental right of all citizens. The government is committed to the principle that all children should have access to education, regardless of their gender, social status, cultural group or area of residence. It believes that education can help to increase both regional equality and equality among all individuals.



The Ministry of Education's policy has been to mount a sustained campaign to raise people's awareness of the importance of education for their present and future well-being. To encourage school attendance, the government provides free education from grade 1 to grade 12, as well as literacy and adult education. Textbooks for all classes are provided free of charge.

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Full participation in the new knowledge economy will require young Omanis to complete as much education as possible. In the past, a significant number of students withdrew from education at the end of the elementary stage in grade 9 and one of the major reasons behind the replacement of the elementary and preparatory stages with a 10-year Basic Education programme is to encourage students to remain in education until they are at least 16 years old. Moreover, it is hoped that reforms being made to grades 11 and 12 will produce a more relevant educational experience that will persuade more students to remain in school to the age of 18.

Regional equality

Schools have been built all over the country, even in areas with low populations and, where distance requires, children are transported from home to school. The ministry's commitment to achieving education for all by reducing regional inequalities is underlined by the fact that it spends a very high proportion of its annual recurrent expenditure, about 6%, on funding pupil transport. In addition, boarding facilities are provided for students who live in rural areas to enable them to attend more centrally located schools. These measures have helped Oman to make impressive progress in its aim to provide education for all.

Gender equality

In all Basic Education Cycle One schools (i.e. grades 1–4), the classes are co-educational. At these grades, the Ministry of Education's policy has been to appoint female teaching staff and administrators. In General Education and in all other grades in Basic Education, separate schools have been established for boys and girls. School regulations, however, apply equally to both boys and girls. Moreover, the courses developed by the ministry and the materials issued to the schools are identical for both boys and girls and have been designed to cater to the needs of both.

In recent years, the Ministry of Education has introduced some special measures to promote gender equality. For example:

- Previously, the subject "Domestic Economics" was studied by girls only, while the subject "Vocational Training" was studied by boys only. The ministry decided that these subjects should not be included in the Basic Education curriculum. Instead, it has introduced a course on "Life Skills", which is studied by all students. The course aims to develop skills related to daily living that are relevant to both boys and girls.
- Committees have been formed to produce textbooks for all subjects and another to check the textbooks and other teaching and learning materials before issuing them to schools. One of the most important tasks for these committees is to ensure that the stereotyping of gender roles is avoided.

As is the case in many countries, girls are beginning to out perform boys in Oman. Statistics show that once girls start attending school, they are less likely to repeat years or to drop-out of school, and by the end of year 12 their achievements are higher than those of boys.

The three schools that existed in the country in 1970 did not offer any places for girls. By the end of 1970, there were 1,136 girls receiving education, all at elementary level. By the end of 1974, girls were enrolled at all three levels – elementary, preparatory and secondary. The percentage of female school students increased from 12.7% in 1971/1972 to 48.7% in 2007/2008, when the number of girls attending school totalled nearly 270,000.

The efforts made by the Sultanate to close the gender gap were recognised in the United Nations Children's Fund's report, "The State of the World's Children", published in 2003. The report commented that the country is clearly seeing the benefits of its policy of, and investment in, providing universal access and free basic education for both boys and girls.

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Section 2

Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future

2.1.Approaches, Scope and Content

2.1a How is inclusive education conceptualized?

What is the current vision of inclusive education in your country?

In most countries, the traditional view of inclusive education was that it related specifically to the provision of education for students with special educational needs, most usually those with physical and/or mental disabilities. The most usual response was to adopt a remedial approach by, for example, establishing special schools, employing special education teachers or developing separate curricular tracks.

This is the response that was adopted in Oman. Al-Amal School (for students with a hearing impairment) was established in 1979, Al-Fikryah School (for mild to moderately mentally challenged students) was established in 1984, and Omar Bin Khataab Institute for students with a visual impairment was established in partnership with the private sector in 1999. In the 2007/2008 academic year, a total of 705 students were receiving education in these three schools.

The advantage of schools such as these is that they can provide a service which is appropriate to the educational needs of these students. The Ministry of Education was aware, however, that research evidence suggests that placing children in various forms of special provision away from mainstream educational provision can also bring disadvantages. Special schools segregate and isolate individuals with disabilities and, when given the opportunity, many of these students achieve better results in inclusive settings. Inclusive education also provides students with special needs with opportunities to interact, communicate and build social networks with ordinary peers and encourages norms of reciprocity, mutual assistance and trustworthiness.¹⁶



¹⁶ Nordstrom, K (2004), Richler, D (2004), Magrab, P.R, (2004), Wormnaes, S (2004); background paper on "Quality Education for Persons with Disabilities" for EFA Global Monitoring Report (2004).

In 1978/1979, classes for students with special needs were opened in some General Education schools in Muscat.

Consequently, in 1978/1979, classes for students with special needs were opened in some General Education schools in Muscat. Also, the ministry started a pilot project in 2001 to provide support to students with learning disabilities in mainstream schools (see paragraph 2.3.c).

In recent years, efforts have been made to broaden the definition of inclusive education. UNESCO, for example, has defined inclusion as “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education.”¹⁷

The Sultanate accepts the relevance of this broader definition of inclusive education. It implies the need to provide opportunities for **all** young people to have learning opportunities in mainstream schools regardless of their cultural and social backgrounds or differences in abilities and capacities. The focus is on those who are currently excluded and on those who are in school but who are not learning. Moreover, it points to the need to establish a school culture and curricular and to develop pedagogical methods aimed at promoting success for all students by catering for their diverse learning needs. It also implies that inclusive education should address the needs of **all** learners, i.e. adults as well as young people.

The overall aim of the Sultanate’s inclusive education approach is to create a learning environment which addresses learners’ diverse expectations and needs.

The overall aim of the Sultanate’s inclusive education approach is to create a learning environment which addresses learners’ diverse expectations and needs and, in so doing, helps to promote life-long learners. Accommodating learners who have been excluded from the mainstream educational system contributes to the Millennium Development Goals of eradicating poverty and marginalization and achieving universal primary education. It also helps to promote the broader goals of social justice, social inclusion and collective well-being. In other words, including all learners in education is seen as an important way of including all members of the society.



2.1b What are seen as the most important challenges for ensuring educational and social inclusion? How have these challenges changed in recent years?

If the Sultanate is to effectively embrace this wider definition of inclusive education, it will need to adopt practices which allow its education system to “reach out” effectively to all young people and adult learners. The Ministry of Education has taken a number of positive steps to make education more accessible and inclusive, although a number of important challenges still remain.

Over the years, there have been inadequate services and programmes in mainstream schools in Oman to meet the needs of students with special educational needs. In an attempt to make programmes in schools more responsive to the needs of inclusive education, the ministry established a Special Needs Education Section in 1974 which was later expanded into a full Department (Diagram 2). As a result, the ministry is now in a position to better deliver appropriate programmes and provide teachers with professional help and guidance as well as to students with special needs.

The ministry established a Special Needs Education Section in 1974 which was later expanded into a full Department.

An inclusive education approach requires the recruitment of sufficient number of appropriately qualified staff, such as special education teachers and assistant teachers. The shortage of qualified Omani special needs teachers and the lack of pre-service dedicated special needs qualification programmes and appropriate in-service courses have proved to be a major challenge for the ministry. To combat these deficiencies, several initiatives have been taken at both ministerial and national levels. Firstly, in 2006 Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) took the positive step of introducing a special education (learning disabilities) diploma course. Secondly, the ministry in collaboration with UNICEF, organised a number of workshops to help teachers deal with students with learning difficulties. The topics of these workshops included the identification of students with learning difficulties, dealing with students with emotional and behavioural difficulties, preparing individual educational plans, facilitating interaction between students with learning difficulties and their peers, and minimising psychological barriers, stigma and discrimination.¹⁸

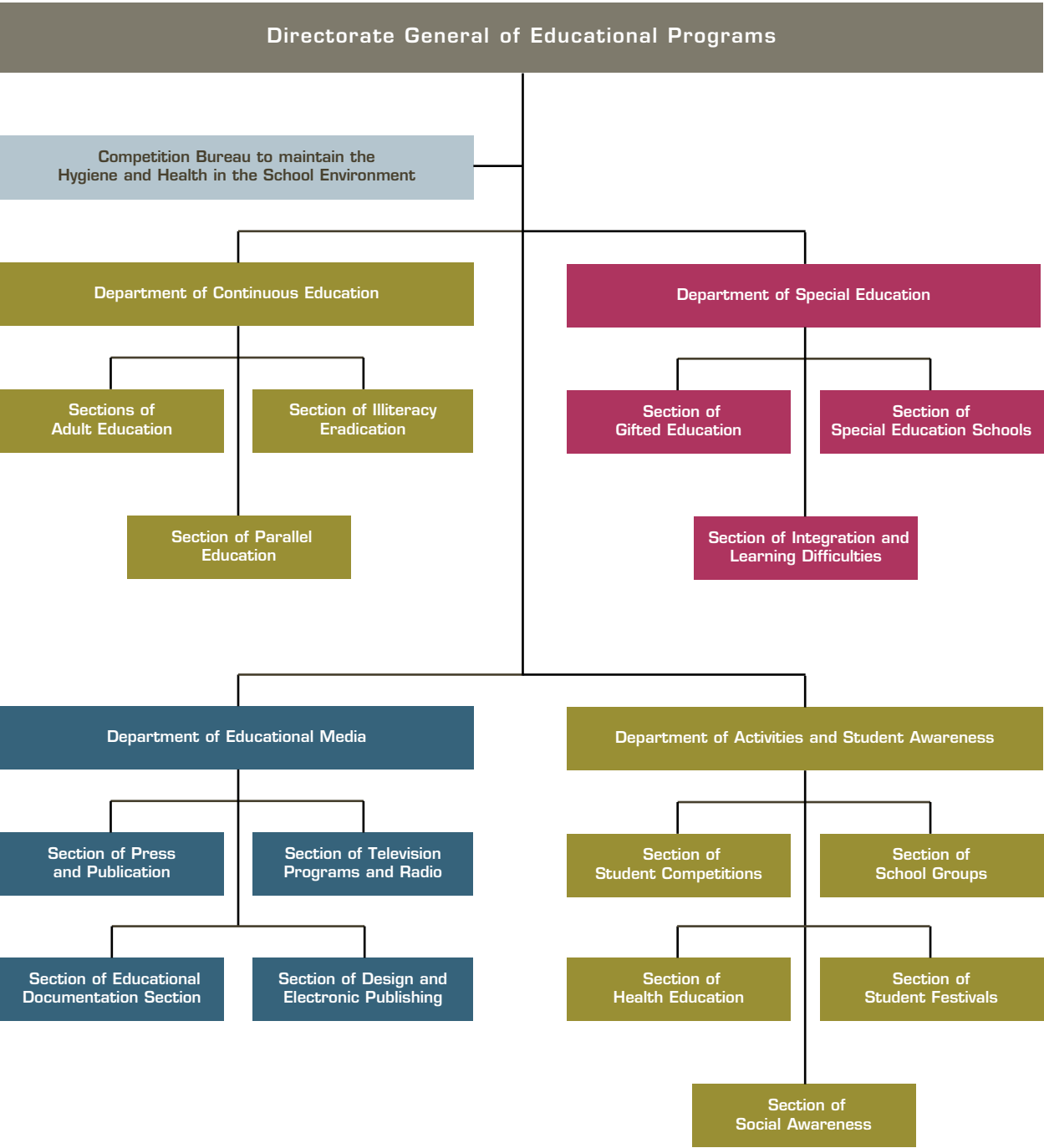
There has also been an issue with regard to a lack of awareness among parents and other members of the community about the right that students with disabilities have to educational and social inclusion. As well as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Development and other non-government agencies also provide services for these students. These providers are working together to spread awareness on this issue so that parents will be better informed on how to seek



¹⁷ Booth, T. (2000). *Inclusion in Education: Participation of Disabled Learners*. Retrieved October 27, 2008 from UNESCO Education for All – EFA 2000 Assessment website

¹⁸ “UNICEF Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, Annual Report 2004”

Diagram 3: The development of the organizational structure for Special Education



appropriate support for their children. Many service providers have established a counselling service for parents before placing children in a special education programme.

As referred to above, the broader definition of inclusive education implies catering not only for those with special education needs but for the diverse need of **all** learners. Over the last ten years, the ministry has been carrying out a comprehensive reform of its school system, from grade 1 to grade 12, involving curricular, pedagogical methodologies and assessment practices. The curriculum has been updated to include practical and real-life contexts and applications which encourage the acquisition of transferable and life-long skills. Student-centred teaching and learning methodologies and a range of assessment techniques have been introduced with the aim of catering for the diverse needs of all students.

Throughout its school building programme, the ministry emphasised the need to establish schools which created a welcoming atmosphere for students and their families. All schools are equipped with spacious classrooms and multi-purpose halls (all supplied with air-conditioning), bathrooms (with access for special needs students), a store, a

Throughout its school building programme, the ministry emphasised the need to establish schools which created a welcoming atmosphere for students and their families.

Box 4: Towards inclusive education in Oman

- **Wheelchair accessibility** is now included in all new schools being built by the ministry. This facilitates access to education and gives a clear message of acceptance and welcome to the physically disabled.
- The role of the school social worker is being redefined to provide **more social care in schools** and more effectively meet the needs of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Assistance to low-income families** is provided. Both the government and the private sector offer assistance to low-income families, such as providing school uniforms and one free meal per day for each student.
- **A nutrition programme**, focusing on the importance of providing students with nutritious food, was carried out in pilot schools in each region during 2003/2004 in coordination with the Ministry of Health. The programme targeted students in grades 1, 5 and 10, and it is planned that the programme will be extended to all schools across the country.
- **A health programme** has been introduced in schools. In cooperation with the Ministry of Health, all schools in the country offer the services of a nurse and, on occasion, of a doctor, who provide medical assistance and information on student health issues. Emphasis is on hygiene, nutrition, the facts of life (including information on sexually transmitted diseases), basic medical tests and immunisation, as well as treatment of simple illnesses and provision of first aid.



The ministry is aware that good-quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) is not only the first of the EFA goals, but is a major contributor to the realization of the other five EFA goals since it lays the foundations for subsequent education.

canteen and a room for the visiting nurse. Further more, due to the ministry's commitment to inclusive education, a number of specific measures have been taken to make the school system more accessible to the more marginalised sectors of the population (Box 4).

The ministry is aware that good-quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) is not only the first of the EFA goals, but is a major contributor to the realization of the other five EFA goals since it lays the foundations for subsequent education. There have been two difficulties with ECCA in Oman; the first has to do with standardisation of programmes and the second with access.

The responsibility for supervising ECCA programmes has traditionally been shared by a number of agencies. The Ministry of Education, supervises kindergartens in private schools and other readiness programmes, the Ministry of Social Development, looks after nurseries and children's corners, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Awqaf, is in charge of Quranic pre-schools, while other organisations, such as The Royal Oman Police and the Army, have their own kindergartens. While most of these programmes delivered a quality service, the ministry was aware of the benefits of standardising provision under a national framework. As from the start of the 2008/2009 academic year, all the Quranic schools, children's corners and programmes supervised by the Royal Oman Police and the Army have come under the administrative and technical supervision of the Ministry of Education. This will allow for national standards to be applied to policy, the qualifications of teachers, student ratios, hours of operation, the quality of curriculum, resources and facilities.

Table 9: : Distribution of Pre-school Pilot Project in the regions

Region	2005/2006			2006/2007			2007/2008		
	Schools	Volunteers	Children	Schools	Volunteers	Children	Schools	Volunteers	Children
Muscat	1	2	33	1	2	19	2	3	30
Batinah North	1	1	15	2	4	59	3	5	70
Batinah South	1	2	23	1	2	27	2	3	40
Sharqiah North	1	1	18	-	-	-	1	1	20
Sharqiah South	1	2	23	1	2	24	2	3	35
Dakhiliah	2	6	40	2	6	40	3	7	60
Dhahirah	2	2	24	2	2	43	3	3	60
Buraymi	1	3	32	2	3	31	3	4	45
Dhofar	2	5	25	2	5	34	3	6	50
Musandam	1	2	20	2	3	37	3	4	45
Wusta	1	2	24	2	3	28	3	4	40
Total	14	28	277	17	32	342	28	42	495

Source: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman (2007/2008).

The ECCE programmes which presently exist in Oman, however, are unequally accessible with provision being biased towards urban dwellers and against the poor and the marginalized. In other words, those who tend to be excluded are the very people who would likely benefit the most from participation in such programmes.

Aware of the inequitable provision existing in the country, the ministry introduced a Pre-School Classroom Project in 2004 (see paragraph 1.2.b). This pilot, which has been extended annually, has enabled the ministry to deliver pre-school services to students who would otherwise have been excluded (Table 9). The long term aim of the ministry, however, is to be in a position to make ECCE programmes accessible to all pre-school age children.

Illiteracy rates in Oman have been reduced significantly in recent years. However, there continues to be low literacy rates among certain sections of the adult population, especially among women. The socially marginalized population groups, from which the illiterate population is mainly drawn, are largely found in rural and hard-to-reach areas under-served by conventional educational delivery modes. Non-formal education programmes and activities can play an important role in helping to address adult literacy needs (see paragraph 2.4.e).





2.2.Public Policies

2.2a What specific legal or regulatory frameworks refer to inclusive education issues?

As mentioned in paragraph 1.1.a, the legal framework and policies in the Sultanate of Oman are based on the directives and decrees of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos. In one of his earlier speeches, His Majesty made clear his resolve to make education accessible to all:

“We aim to extend education throughout the Sultanate so that everyone may have the chance to study according to his or her abilities.”

H.M. Sultan Qaboos Bin Said
26 November 1975

Article 12 and 17 of the Basic Statute of the State codified His Majesty's views into law (see paragraph 1.3). As a result, a free quality education is available for all students, both boys and girls, wherever they may live and from all socio-economic levels. In 2008, Royal Decree 63/2008 on the law of the disabled extended this right by specifying that individuals with disabilities have the right to education and training.

2.2b What are the current dimensions of the phenomenon of exclusion from and within education?

As described earlier, the Ministry of Education conducts an ongoing campaign to raise people's awareness of the importance of education and has encouraged school attendance through a raft of measures, including the provision of free school and adult education and the supply of free textbooks. Moreover, the ministry encourages access by offering assistance to low income families and providing social care facilities in its schools. Statistics gathered by the ministry relating to the number of students enrolled in both public and private mainstream schools indicate that these measures have helped Oman to make substantive progress in its aim to provide education for all young people (Table 3 on page 29).

The Ministry encourages access by offering assistance to low income families and providing social care facilities in its schools.

The evidence suggests that the small minority of school age children who remain excluded from formal education tend to live away from the main population centres. The ministry has responded by building schools all over the country, even in areas with low populations and provides free transportation from home to school and, when required, free boarding facilities.



The ministry has begun work on standardising a battery of diagnostic tests to help identify children who are experiencing learning difficulties. A national team has been formed to create these instruments and teachers and school psychologists use the results of the tests to plan and develop appropriate programmes to enable their students to improve their learning.

Illiteracy rates have been reduced significantly and this is likely to be further reduced by the availability of universal basic education. However, low literacy rates among the adult population, especially among women, persist. The ministry regards the continuing gender gap in adult literacy as a crucially important issue since research evidence suggests that the education level of mothers plays a determinant role in children’s participation and attendance in school. The national plan for eradicating adult illiteracy is therefore being carried out with the utmost priority.

2.2c Which inclusive education issues are relevant for educational policies in your country?

Among the categories of people in Oman deemed to be the most vulnerable to exclusion are children with disabilities and learning difficulties, illiterate women, those living in less populous areas and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. All of these groups have received particular attention, although issues remain with all categories.

At present, special schools and increasingly mainstream schools are providing educational services for children with disabilities. Some students with severe physical or development disabilities, however, continue to be excluded from the education system. The ministry is taking measures to ensure that additional resources are made available to allow schools to support the delivery of programmes to this particular group of students. Indeed, as can be seen from Box 5, there have already been some individual successes.

In 1970 there were no schools for girls and efforts were immediately taken to ensure that females had equal access to education. Today, Oman has an approximately equal number of boys and girls in the education system, and the number of female adult learners exceeds that of males. Data derived from the Omani national census show the substantial progress made in tackling female illiteracy between 1993 and 2003 and the high female enrolment rates in the school education system will mean that female illiteracy will through time be eradicated. However, adult female illiteracy rates are still too high and reducing them remains a top priority for the ministry. By providing free education and equally funding schools in all regions, students in less populous

Table 10: Gross enrolment rates in grade 1

Year		Male (%)	Female (%)
2000	97.5	96.6	97.1
2005	98.9	98.6	98.8

Source: Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman (2007).

areas of the country have equal access to education. Some students require transport to enable them to attend school and the ministry provides this service free of charge. The ministry’s commitment to achieving education for all by reducing regional inequalities is underlined by the fact that it spends a very high proportion of its annual recurrent expenditure, about 6%, on funding pupil transport. Despite these measures, a minority of students are still not enrolled in school and the ministry is exploring non-formal learning approaches as a way of accessing these students (see paragraph 2.4.e).

The ministry provides special assistance to students from disadvantaged backgrounds in order to support their attendance at school (see Box 4). Often, however, students from such backgrounds experience learning difficulties within school. The Attainment Follow-up Committees, referred to in paragraph 1.2.c, play an important role in identifying and designing individual programme plans for students who are not performing at their targeted grade level. Maintaining high retention rates and ensuring that all students are able to perform to the best of their abilities is a key aspect of inclusive education. As a result, developing additional ways to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds is another priority for the ministry.

The Attainment Follow-up Committees play an important role in identifying and designing individual programme plans for students who are not performing at their targeted grade level.

Box 5: Inclusion in Practice: The Story of Bayan and Balqees

These two female students have a developmental disability that has effected their physical growth. Both girls have normal intellectual function. Bayan was placed in Al-Kawther basic education school where she completed cycle one and later moved to a private school to complete cycle two. Balqees is currently attending cycle one in the Al-Kawther basic education school. Both girls are very ambitious and are planning to complete their schooling and seek the highest degrees. This is one of the successful inclusion cases where the Ministry took measures to ensure that these students were placed in a conducive environment to their learning.



2.3. Systems, Links and Transitions

2.3a What are the main barriers to inclusive education?

The main barriers to inclusion can be characterised under the broad headings of political, economic, social and cultural. Developing an effective inclusive education policy requires a significant political and economic commitment.

From the very beginning of the Renaissance in Oman, His Majesty's Government has displayed strong political will and leadership towards the development of education in the country. Year-on increases in government funding for education have enabled the Ministry of Education to significantly improve both the physical infrastructure and the quality of provision which, in many other countries, act as significant barriers to access and inclusion.

It is likely that moves towards educating special needs students in mainstream schools will be less costly than maintaining separated schools providing specialist education for different groups of students. Other areas involved in the development of inclusive education will, however, have financial implications, in particular making ECCE accessible to all pre-school age children and tackling illiteracy through the creation of bridging links between formal and non-formal education (see paragraph 2.4.e).

Social and cultural factors, on the other hand, are likely to prove be more important barriers to change. Until recently, children with special needs were educated in separate institutions and the practice in mainstream schools was to cover a common curriculum by means of whole class teaching. In this system, little recognition was given to the provision of differentiated approaches to cater for diverse student needs.

Society at large needs to be persuaded that it is a fundamental human right that all learners should receive a high-quality equitable education and that all schools have a moral responsibility to provide an effective education for all children in their communities. The student-centred approach to the ministry's educational reforms has begun the process of changing the culture within schools which is so essential for the development of inclusive education. Teachers need to be encouraged to question the beliefs they hold about the potential of all their students for learning. When a teacher believes that each student has a fixed innate intelligence, they fail to create a classroom environment which encourages learning; the blame on to the students (they "lack ability", "are lazy" or "are uninterested") when learning fails to take place. An inclusion approach demands that teachers create a positive rather



Society at large needs to be persuaded that it is a fundamental human right that all learners should receive a high-quality equitable education and that all schools have a moral responsibility to provide an effective education for all children in their communities.



than a negative culture in their classrooms by focusing on the belief that ability is not fixed but is a complex of skills that can be learnt, i.e. improvement is possible for everyone regardless of their ability. To achieve this requires that pre-service teacher programmes provide mandatory courses on teaching in inclusive learning environments and give ample opportunities for teachers to conduct practice teaching in differentiated learning contexts.

Society in general, and teachers in particular, need to be convinced of the positive aspects of diversity. An inclusive school is one in which teachers and students learn how to interact with people with diverse needs and, at the same time, learn from people who are different. Educating all children together plays an important contribution in the creation of just and non-discriminatory society.

2.3b What are the most important facilitators of inclusive education?

The transition to inclusive education requires policy makers to agree on the principles that will guide the process towards change. To do this they need to have a clear vision for development which identifies those who can facilitate inclusion.

Research suggests that a culture of collaboration is an important element in the development of inclusive education. While policy may emanate from the centre, many inclusive initiatives start at the local level. These need to be supported and, where appropriate, disseminated throughout the country. This means that the Ministry of Education will need to work closely with the educational regions, schools, parents, the media and with ministries and organisations involved in the delivery of inclusive provision, such as the Ministry of Health. Within schools, school principals will be required to develop a collaborative school culture in which students support students, teachers support teachers, and parents and communities support schools.



2.3c What specific approaches and measures have been adopted to make the education system more inclusive?

Within the narrow definition of the term inclusive education, the Ministry of Education has begun moves to ensure that special needs students are, wherever possible, included in mainstream schools. To help achieve this, the ministry started a pilot project to provide support to students with learning disabilities. The project began in 2001 in two Basic Education schools and by 2005 it had been extended to 94 schools in all educational regions and had been afforded the title of a fully recognised programme, by 2008 the programme has expanded to serve over 11,050 students in 393 schools. (Table 11)

The schools in the programme have all been assigned a trained special education teacher who works with grades 1–4 classroom teachers to help identify students who require assistance, particularly with regard to their literacy and numeracy skills, i.e. Arabic and mathematics. They then work with these students both in the regular classroom setting and through pull-out programmes.

The aim of this work is to raise the skills of these students so that they can be successfully reintegrated into their classrooms. Moreover, the ministry's policy for inclusive education was further extended in



Table 11: Number of students benefiting from the learning difficulties programme in Basic Education schools

Academic year	Number of students
2000/2001	50
2001/2000	150
2002/2003	375
2003/2004	750
2004/2005	1,500
2005/2006	2,350
2006/2007	4,500
2007/2008	7,700
2008/2009	11,050

Source:
Department of Statistics,
Ministry of Education,
Sultanate of Oman (2008).

Table 12: Students in special education programmes in basic education (2007/8)

Programme	Number of Students Enrolled
Integration of students with mental disabilities	218
Integration of students with hearing impairments	191
In-school programmes addressing the needs of students with learning disabilities	7,700



Source:
Department of Statistics,
Ministry of Education,
Sultanate of Oman (2008).

2005 by the adoption of a programme into some schools for students with mental and hearing disabilities. The evidence gathered so far from both programmes suggest that they are having a very positive effect in helping to improve the skills of special needs students.

The ministry has also taken a number of measures to accommodate the wider definition of the term, i.e. that inclusive education implies the creation of a high quality equitable education which recognises diversity amongst all learners. As mentioned earlier, the new Basic Education system covers ten grade levels and the General Education system, which was originally organised into three stages: elementary (grade levels 1–6); preparatory (grade levels 7–9); and secondary (grade levels 10–12), has now also been organised into a unified ten-year system. Moreover, the ministry has introduced a number of measures to address the issues of high repetition and school drop-out rates (see paragraph 1.2.c). The effect of these measures has been to encourage retention rates and, indeed the great majority of students in Oman now stay on at school until the end of grade 12 when they are aged eighteen.

Central to the ministry's reform process is the commitment to providing an education system which is more relevant to the needs of students. This has involved a shift from teacher centred and receptive learning to learner centred and active learning. The curricular materials have been revised to reduce content overloaded and to include practical and real-life contexts and applications which emphasis the acquisition of life-long transferable skills. Formative assessment techniques which help students to find out where they are in their learning and to indicate what steps they need to take to improve have also been introduced. The Post-Basic Education curriculum has been organised on a “core plus electives” model and a diverse range of courses relevant to the varying abilities, interests and aspirations of students have been developed.

Inclusive education also includes meeting the needs of adult learners and the Omani government has adopted a community-based approach to the eradication of illiteracy. It actively followed up a recommendation emanating from an Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS) Conference held 2004, to make concentrated efforts to eradicate illiteracy in one of their villages. A “Learning Village” was established Miraisi in the Batinah South region and voluntary teachers received a training course involving lectures, workshops and classroom observation. The initiative was launched in September 2004 and, within a very short period of time, over 250 people in the village were attending classes in reading and writing skills, basic mathematics and life skills. This core literacy course was supported by a series of lectures on different issues (e.g. environment, nutrition and childcare), and was offered by various bodies such as the Ministries of Auqaf and Religious Affairs, Health, Agriculture and Fisheries and Social Development and the Royal Omani Police.

The high participation rate, especially among the women of Miraisi, suggests that there is great demand for an initiative such as this. Feedback from participants on the quality of the literacy course and the supporting lectures has been very positive. Moreover, the initiative has created a cooperative community spirit and a sense of identity among the citizens of Miraisi. The Batinah South region has now expanded this initiative to include the whole region under the logo of “A Region without Illiteracy” Encouraged by this success, the initiative was extended to the village of Birkat Al Moz in Dakhliyah Region in 2005 and, in the following year, it was implemented in 4 more villages. By 2008 learning villages had been established in nine educational regions.

2.3d What specific approaches and measures have been adopted to make the education system more flexible in order to offer additional educational opportunities to those who have dropped out or have not attained an appropriate level of qualifications?

The government has committed significant resources to help the Ministry of Education reduce illiteracy rates. In recent years, the ministry has attempted to increase participation in literacy centres throughout the country, male and female grade 12 school graduates have been encouraged to volunteer to teach these classes under the supervision of ministry staff. People with visual impairments are also now accepted into literacy classes in Omar Bin Khataab Institute for the blind and visually impaired. With support from both UNESCO and the government of Oman, the literacy programme continues to be renewed and updated.

While much has been achieved, it is clear that more needs to be done, particularly with regard to reducing illiteracy among women. It is likely that formal educational experiences will continue to be the main focus in the drive to create a fully literate population. However, the deployment of non-formal education programmes and activities can play an important role in helping to address adult literacy needs.

Indeed, the Omani government has eagerly supported the “Learning Village” initiative (see paragraph 1.2a). The high participation rates, especially among women in these learning villages, suggest that more consideration needs to be given to the extending and widening the use of informal initiatives such as these. In addition the education system encourages students who have not succeeded in completing their formal education to return to the system when they are adults.





2.4. Learners and Teachers

2.4a What new approaches to teaching and learning are being implemented to increase educational opportunities for all, improve student learning outcomes and reduce disparities?

For inclusive education to become a reality, it is essential to create a flexible and diverse educational environment. The ministry has encouraged a move away from the traditional teacher-centred methodologies to a learner-centred approach which can better respond to the diverse needs of all learners. In all relevant documents relating to Basic Education and Post-Basic Education, the ministry has included clear statements that it expects all teachers to adopt student-centred and formative assessment approaches to teaching and learning. Along with their traditional role as instructors, teachers are now also expected to be facilitators with the aim of encouraging their students to become actively involved in their own learning.

Indicators from national tests and from tests associated with the Programme for Cognitive Development in Science Mathematics and Environmental Studies have provided evidence that students in Basic Education are out performing their counterparts in General Education. The ministry is aware, however, that these new approaches make much greater demands on teachers and that they require considerable levels of support to implement them effectively. In-service training courses have been carried out but, it has to be admitted, there has been a disappointingly slow and uneven uptake of these new methodologies. In recognition of this, the ministry in cooperation with an international consultancy company began working on a project in the 2004/2005 school year to further develop child-centred methodologies in the first cycle of Basic Education.

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2.4b In what ways is the curriculum being designed and organized to respond to the diversity of learners?

Under the General Education system, teachers in Oman were used to a clearly defined curriculum which was defined by centrally produced textbooks. The lessons tended to be taught in a rigid fashion with teachers of a given subject being expected to be teaching similar lessons from the textbooks wherever they were in the country.

When the Basic Education curriculum was being developed it was agreed that while the ministry wanted to introduce a more flexible system, it had to recognise the needs of its teaching force. As a result, it was agreed that a common curriculum with a clearly defined structure should be developed and that the ministry would provide textbooks and extensive teachers' guides for each subject. Teachers would, however, be encouraged to move beyond the mere use of a single text-book by providing differentiated teaching and learning materials which cater for a range of learning styles. The expectation is that not all students will be at the same point in their learning, so they should be given opportunities to learn at their own pace and in their own way within a common framework of objectives.

This is also true for the new Post-Basic Education programme. Under the previous system, students in grades 11 and 12 were organised into separate Arts and Science streams with very little opportunity for movement between the two streams. The new Post-Basic Education programme, on the other hand, has been organised on a "core plus electives" model with students being given an element of choice even in the core subject areas. A diverse range of courses relevant to the varying abilities, interests and aspirations of students have been developed.

Table 13: : Classes per week for Basic Education, grades 1-10

Grade	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Subject										
Islamic studies	6	6	6	5	5	5	4	4	4	4
Arabic language	12	12	10	7	7	7	7	7	7	7
English language	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Mathematics	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7
Science	3	3	3	5	5	5	7	7	7	7
Social studies	0	0	2	3	4	4	4	4	4	4
Life skills	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Information technology	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Physical education	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1
Art	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
Music	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40

Source: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman (1998).

Table 14: Comparison between Basic Education and General Education teaching plans for the first 10 years of schooling

Subject	General Education total hours	Basic Education total hours	Difference
Arabic language	1,381	1,992	+611
English language	541	1,200	+659

Source: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman (1998).

2.4c In terms of curricular time, how many instructional hours per year are dedicated to learning reading in the early primary grades?

When developing its Basic Education reform, the Ministry of Education decided that certain subject areas required strengthening. In particular, it was agreed that Omani students required greater proficiency in both Arabic, their mother tongue, and in English, the language of the global economy as well as in mathematics and science. In comparison to students in General Education, Basic Education students in grades 1–10 now spend 44% more time on Arabic and 122% more time on English (Tables 13 and 14). In both of these subjects, the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking are given approximate equal weighting.

2.4d How can teachers be trained and better equipped to meet the learners’ diverse expectations and needs?

The quality of teaching in classrooms is essential for the successful delivery of an inclusive education policy. The ministry is aware that the moves it is taking to make mainstream schools more inclusive will make the role of teachers more complex and demanding. They will require training and ongoing support on, for example, how to diagnose weaknesses in students’ learning, how to differentiate the curriculum in order to reduce barriers and increase student participation and how to introduce appropriate classroom techniques to enable them to manage differentiated learning.

The provision of inclusive education within the setting of mainstream schools is likely to have long-term implications for the country’s three special education schools. As mainstream schools increase their capacity to become more inclusive, it is likely that the need for separate special education schools will become less obvious and, as a result, that the role of teachers within these schools will change.

A major future challenge for the ministry will be to devise procedures to enable the expertise and resources within the special schools to be utilised to support the moves towards inclusion within the mainstream schools. The special schools could, for example, be turned into resource centres which mainstream schools could use to enable them to become more inclusive. Since all three special schools are situated in Muscat, there are limitations to this idea, although the dissemination of ideas and interactive communication could be built into the ministry’s electronic portal system.



2.4e How can the formal and non-formal learning environments be more effectively organized in order to ensure the inclusion of all learners?

The Ministry of Education is keen to explore how to create bridging links between formal and non-formal education. For example, procedures for the formal recognition of prior learning and competencies are used on a limited scale in some countries in the region and these have been shown to be effective in creating additional educational opportunities for certain groups of the population. Moreover, the ministry is presently reviewing the role of ICT in helping to eradicate illiteracy. It believes that it is important that ICT impacts not only on knowledge and skills but, more importantly in this context, on how it can promote social inclusion and how to link literacy programmes to national development strategies.

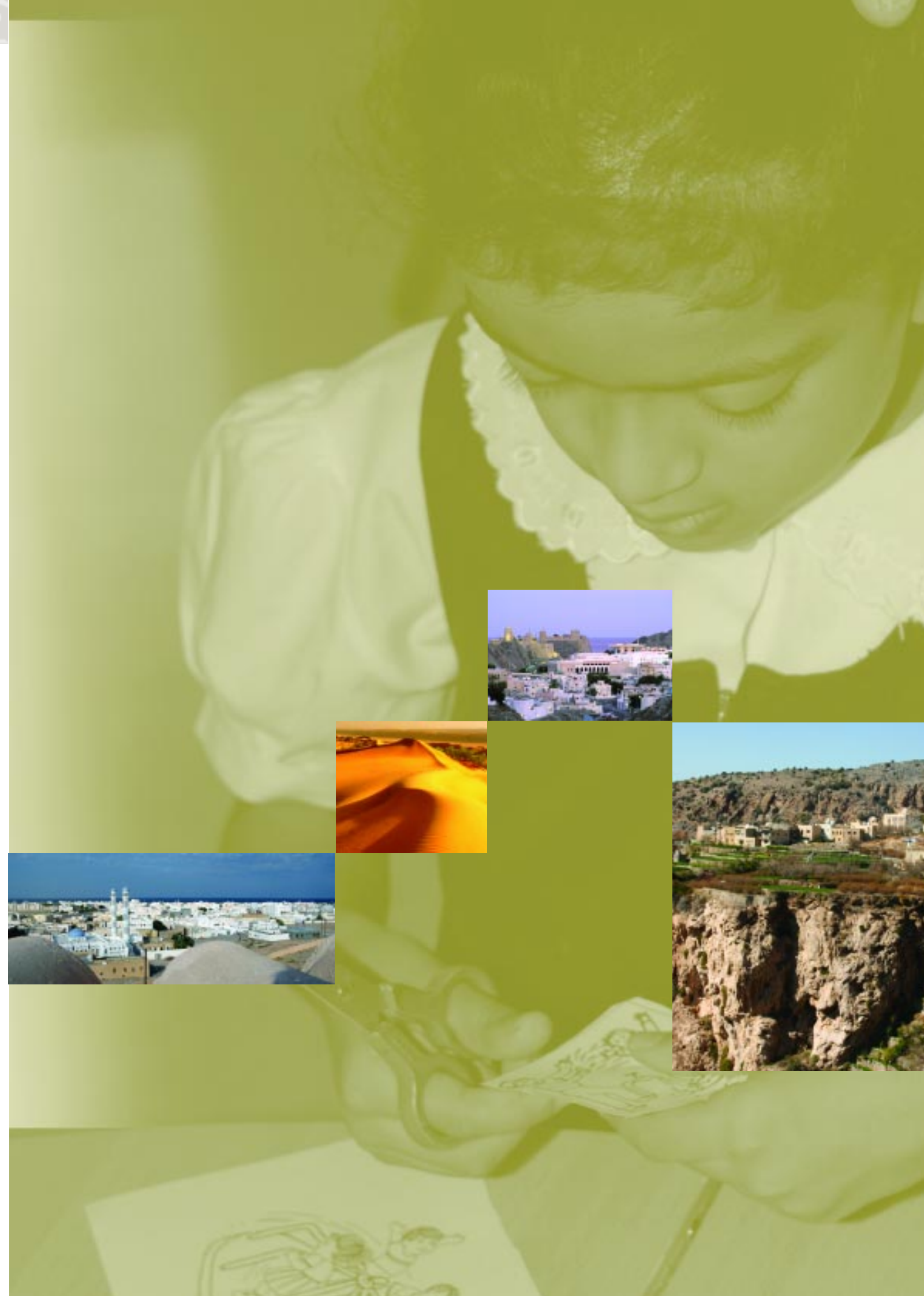
The ministry is keen to increase accessibility to early childhood care programmes and, in November 2008 in collaboration with UNICEF, it began a one-year campaign on the issue (Box 6). Formal pre-school provision is the most costly form of early childhood care and education, but cheaper options, such as mobilising parents, can also bring impressive benefits. One such solution, for example, might be to integrate a child-development component into a multi-purpose community service. Early childhood education could also be integrated into community education programmes for parents, such as the "Learning Village".



Box 6: Marketing campaign for the National Early Childhood Project

The objective of the campaign is to spread awareness among families and the community about the importance of early childhood education with the aim of increasing enrolment in nurseries and kindergartens. It also aims to improve the quality of ECCE programmes. This is to be achieved by concentrating on families, early childhood teachers, private schools, women's association and the community overall.

The campaign has adopted a national logo and is using appropriate marketing strategies that utilize the local media, the internet and mobile phones, publications and other written materials to spread the message about the importance of ECCE to all sectors of the community. The campaign includes seminars, workshops, conferences focusing on ECCE and encourages research in this area. A national team will travel around the country to market the campaign.



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