Review Article

Critical Analysis on Employment of Graduates in Oman

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Abstract

The dictionary meaning of the term 'Education' is the process of teaching or learning especially in a school or college or knowledge gained from a source of study. This being the case accepted and accredited learning centers around the world have formatted their own curriculum structures and methodologies to impart learning. However the most important question that needs to be answered here is whether or not this learning that students achieve in the learning centers are truly contributing effectively to them being placed in suitable positions. More often than not it has been noted that this is not the case. In a country like Oman where the process of education has of a sure certainty picked up its pace, the actual placement levels of the Omani graduates in suitable placements has not been really up-to the mark. This is because the gap between education and employability which is a continuing problem in Oman. This study aims at trying to find reasons why this is the case and what measures or methods need to be adopted to try change the existing scenario.
**Keywords**: Education, Placement, Graduates.

INTRODUCTION

HIGHLIGHT ON THE PRESENT SYSTEM OF EDUCATION IN OMAN

Introduction: The ascension of to the throne in 1970 by his Highness Sultan Qaboos brought with it his profound aim to educate the Omani population. Before his ascension to the throne there was a meager of only three schools in Oman, with a population of only 900 students being taught. A majority of nearly 66% of Oman's adults were illiterate.

It is common knowledge that education plays a key role in shaping society in addition to which it helps transmit the cultures and values and develops skills and capacities that serve to influence the lives of the citizens. Training the looking glass onto the country Oman we find that while not mutually exclusive, it can be noted that there were three distinct recognizable stages in the development of the school education system.
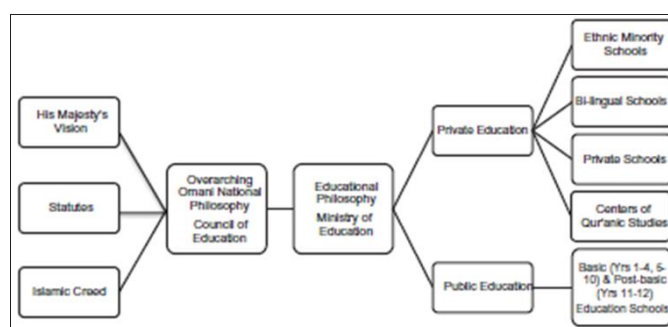
Source: Alternative education needs in Oman: accommodating learning diversity and meeting market demand. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02673843.2016.1179204

First stage: This stage, between 1970 and the mid-1990s, aimed to expand educational provision to all parts of the country and to all sections of society. During this said period the following statistics was noted:

During this stage the following were the goals:
- Develop a public education system that would reach all parts of the country and would include all sections of society by conducting a campaign to raise peoples' awareness of the importance of universal formal education.
- Attendance was encouraged by providing free education for all who wanted it and free textbooks for all classes.
- Free transport was provided from home to school and boarding facilities were provided for students who lived in rural areas.
- Both the government and the private sector provided school uniforms and free meals to children from low-income families.
- Providing the required infrastructure and staffing levels with the government committing itself to a prodigious investment for the building of schools.

Challenges Faced During the First Stage

By the mid-1990, however, new priorities were emerging. International organisations such as the World Bank and the United Nations were telling developing nations such as Oman that they now needed graduates who could work in the emerging "knowledge economy", in which knowledge resources such as know-how and expertise were more critical than other economic resources such as physical capital and natural resources. This meant that a new approach to education was required. This challenged was addressed by the Ministry of Education in the second stage.

Second Stage: The second stage: From the mid-1990s onwards, shifted attention towards introducing reforms to improve the quality of the school education system.

During this period the goals of the economy were:
- Embarking on a number of major reform initiatives aimed at achieving comprehensive improvements across the school system. The most ambitious of these was the Basic Education programme. The guiding principle behind the new Basic Education curriculum was to include relevant knowledge and skills-based content that would prepare young Omanis for life and work under the new conditions created by the global economy.
- New subjects, such as information technology and life skills, were introduced and increased emphasis was given to mathematics, science, Arabic and English.

- Encourage teachers to use student-centred techniques wherein class sizes are reduced significantly.
- Promoting equal educational opportunities for girls and boys. Much has been achieved in terms of equal levels of inputs, but the resulting outputs are not the same. There is a consistent superiority of girls over boys in learning achievement and the size of the average difference is substantial.
- A new Post-Basic Education system was introduced at the beginning of the 2007/2008 school year. The curriculum was organised on a "core plus electives" model which gives students an element of choice in the subjects they study. A range of courses relevant to the varying abilities, interests and aspirations of students has been developed. This provides students with opportunities for specialisation, e.g. in science, IT, social studies, as well as for selecting general interest-type courses. The curricular model emphasises the learning of key skills which will enable students to operate effectively in a wide range of contexts.

Challenges Faced During the Second Stage

In spite of all measures the students were not competent to meet the challenges of globalization.

Third stage: The advent of the third stage involved reforming the present education system in order to make the students of the country competent to meet the effects of both the globalization and the global crisis which started in the west, whose effects was slowly but certainly going to affect the east. A small country like the Sultanate of Oman which still was depending on oil as it's only revenue producer needed to make its youth competent enough to branch out and diversify and make structural changes which would in the future contribute to the enhancement of new ideas and initiatives by its youth to make the county competent enough to face the challenges that were to come. This stage, which is now underway, involves a review of the education system to determine the future directions of its educational policy and to increase the relevance of the education system to meet the present world scenario.
- Participation in studies such as TIMSS and in the Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) has been encouraged.
- The World Bank was invited by the Government of Oman to collaborate with the Ministry of Education to undertake studies of the school education sector.
- The ministry of Education is presently collaborating with a New Zealand consortium. The ministry has also finalized a first draft of a new school Education law which will focus on teachers' career paths, incentives and

accountability issues and the decentralization of responsibilities to governorates and schools.

- The government has encouraged the growth of the private sector schools and colleges as well, though they must follow the same curriculum as those of the Government schools and hold the same examinations.
- The teaching of English has assumed increasing importance in order to make students competent enough to face the challenges of the outside world on the country.
- The Ministry of Education has been stepping up its efforts in terms of providing diverse education services and programs to cover all social groups. This was specially targeted to students with disabilities (motor, visual, hearing and intellectual) as well as the students with special needs(learning difficulties and speech-language impairment)
- Setting up the Career Guidance Centre whose mission was to promote the quality of educational and pedagogical services offered to students by enabling them to prepare for higher education and future employment according to their aptitudes and capabilities as well as supporting entrepreneurship and highlighting the importance of self-employment for students.

Challenges Faced During the Third Level

In spite of the measures adopted, the students who graduated did not show an inclination to take up jobs in the private sector and schools had not still equipped the students sufficiently enough by providing knowledge of English and work experience to face the challenges of the present day economy.

The aim of this study is to study:
- The problems faced by students in getting placement after completing their graduation.
- The problems of the employers with the present system of education and
- Measures to be adopted to equate the expectation of the employers from the present educational system in-order to increase Omanization.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE
- According to Omeira Al Hattali in his paper titled 'Towards finding a solution for Omani Youth' published in the Muscat Daily.com on February 20, 2017, the slump in oil prices has thrown up several problems especially for oil-exporting countries, the major one being unemployment. The Sultanate of Oman is no exception to this growing number of unemployed. Plummeting oil prices and declining revenues has put severe constraints on the employment front both in the

government as well as the private sector. The worst-hit are the fresh graduates who would have otherwise dreamed of a world of opportunities awaiting them once they graduate. While no government all by itself can provide employment to all those who are eligible, it is also important for the private sector to provide employment opportunities. Another major issue contributing to the rising number of unemployed graduates in Oman is that several colleagues and universities in Oman are offering courses which are not job-oriented. Students graduating with a bachelor's degree in abstract and outdated courses are naturally often left without any job prospects.

- According to Yasir Y *et al.*, [1] he analyzed the factors impeding Omanization policies in the selected sectors. The findings shows that there is a lack of coordination between government and the private sector in the formulation of Omanization policies contributing to sustained high level expatriate workers in Oman's private sector leaving a large gap between the Omani job seekers and job availability in the selected sectors. There is an urgent need to improve the alignment between the qualification and skills bestowed on nationals by education systems and the needs of the market through devising proper mechanisms.

- In an article published in Arab News, (September 20, 2017) provided a statistics on the number of job seekers in Oman rose by 11 percent and most of those are university graduates as reported by national daily Times of Oman. According to National Center for Statistics and Information (NCSI), there are 50,000 Omanis seeking work. Experts say graduates need to lower their wage expectations if they hope to find employment in their chosen field. Meanwhile, in a bid to generate some income, many Omani graduates are taking whatever work they can find, including waiting and driving. But they are prepared to take lower wages, if the right job is made available and matches their qualifications. Many graduate job seekers are returning to education to try and increase their chances of finding employment, in fields such as teaching.

- In his paper titled "Graduate attributes and employability skills: Graduates' perspectives on employers' expectations in Oman", Rakesh Belwal [2] finds that the domain of educational institutions in Oman is mainly restricted to the basic generic skills in developing the graduate attributes. The perspectives of students towards the employers' selection criteria reveal five important employability skills required in Oman - computing skills, the ability to work in

teams, English language proficiency, prior training, and the graduate's personality. Interaction among the higher educational institutions, alumni, and industry in Oman for boosting the employability of graduates is very less in the current situation.

- Amol Gulhane [3] mentioned in his article that there is a mismatch between the needs of the employers for skilled talent and the skills possessed by the workforce. He suggested that the best way to implement 21st Century skills like Robolab – a team shared facility that provides leadership, best practices, research, support and training for a focus area.

- In an article about Oman Employment published in Times of Oman (Dec 26, 2016), industry heads in Oman say that Omani graduates need to have training that aims to prepare them for a work environment they will face in the future, besides pursuing their regular studies and internships. "It's not just about technical skills but absorbing a work culture and inculcating an ability to understand what employees require," said Chris Clark, International Development Manager for MedServ Oman, a logistics company. Also in the same article, His Highness Dr. Sayyid Adham Al Said, Assistant Professor of Economics at the SQU and Managing Partner for a Business and Economics Consulting firm, said it's not about the lack of skills in Omanis, but the ability to apply the skills they have. "I am not convinced that it's the lack of skills as much as it is the lack of ability to apply whatever skills they have. So what we tried to do to bridge this gap was to create a platform which will help fresh graduates land appropriate jobs.

- In an article published in the Education and Training chapter of the Report: Oman 2016 explores the fact that the government has maintained a high level of expenditure on education, despite the decline in oil prices, is a testament to how important it considers the sector to be to Oman's future. This level of funding is likely to be sustained, even if the price of oil continues to drop, as there is a clear recognition in Muscat that education and training are fundamental to the success of the sultanate's wider economic, political and social aspirations. For international investors, Oman thus stands open to investment in a number of educational and training activities and products. These range from HEIs to private primary schools, and teacher training to course material development. At the same time, there is also an understanding that the sector has to adapt to more closely meet the needs of the labour market. This involves not only tailoring courses to teach the technical skills required by

employers, but also the process of instilling a culture of enterprise, which is especially important given that the current goal of many Omani graduates is to obtain a secure government job. Those jobs will likely be in much shorter supply going forwards, with colleges and schools now having to prepare new generation of workers to a more evolved job market. With all of this in mind, it seems as though there is plenty to do in Oman's rapidly expanding education and training sector.

- In a research of investigating the skill gap between graduating students and industry expectations from various software companies in the US and Europe, Alex Radermacher *et al*., [4] indicate that recent graduates struggle with using configuration management systems (and other software tools), effectively communicating with co-workers and customers, producing unit tests for their code, and other skills or abilities. The results also indicate that a lack of project experience and problem solving abilities are the most commonly cited issues preventing students from gaining employment.

- Alex Radermacher *et al*., [5] in a study about the gaps between industry expectations and the abilities of graduates presents the results that graduating students are lacking in many different areas, including technical abilities (design, testing, configuration management tools, etc.) personal skills (communication, teamwork, etc.) and professional qualities (e.g. ethics). By raising awareness of these areas, it is possible for educators to become aware of areas where students most frequently fail to meet expectations and to make curriculum changes or adjustments to address these problems.

- When comparing the industry expectations of recent graduates with student perceptions of requisite knowledge and skills for professional success Suchismita *et al*., [6] finds that the perceptions of the students showed high agreement on required construction knowledge, but weak agreement on the necessary interpersonal skills. Also the study provides important feedback for the construction programs to evaluate and revise their curricula to better prepare the students for professional success in the industry.

- Vinod Bidwaik [7] mentioned that Industries expect Personal Behavioral Competencies, Interpersonal Thinking & Planning, Knowledge, Interpersonal Skills, Team skills, Communication skills, Self-motivation, dedication and commitment, Result orientation, EQ, Problem solving capabilities, Leadership Qualities, Value and ethics driven,

Thrust for success, Strategic thinker, Patient, Tolerant & Able to work under stress, Positive thinking, Risk taker, Proactive and self-starter, Change agent, Influencing people and Visionary.

- Investigations revealed that there is ample gap between the academic output and industrial requirement. In the study undertaken by Neeraj K Dubey *et al.*, [8] identified 12 factors namely-soft skills, leadership qualities, suitability, analytical power, ethical component, dressing sense, language, appearance, manageability, training needs, industry's view and professional commitment. Out of the all factors, soft skill was found as the most important contributing factor. They also suggested that the gap between academic output and industrial requirement must be bridged to improve the employability of the students and enhance the quality of higher education.

- In a study conducted among the requirements of information systems professional groups and compared with current IS academic programs reveals that despite a shared vision of the future IS professional, there is an "expectation gap" between industry needs and academic preparation. Industry and universities must work together to close this gap. Universities need to place more emphasis on the integration of technologies, applications, data, and business functions and less on traditional and formal system development. Firms need to send consistent messages to universities about their expectations while recognizing that the mission of university business programs is career education, not job training.

- In a study conducted at Swinburne University of Technology about the Stakeholders' expectations and perceptions of expectations among the employers, students and academic mentors revealed four gaps: a means-ends gap of expectations between employers and students, a gap in students' perceptions of the other stakeholders' motivations, a service expectations gap of the university, and a gap in recognition of the university's role in the partnership. Innovation, entrepreneurship, diversity and creativity characterize the globalized, high-tech labor markets. Whilst striving for a sustainable future, Oman is still grappling with entrenched, traditional methods of education. These educational methods are incapable of meeting diverse learning needs or producing young people, equipped to readily take their places in the workforce.

- In a book prepared by the Ministry of Education and The World bank [9] about the " The Education in Oman – The Drive for Quality" reports that Oman's labor force size and labor demand volume are not likely to change radically in the next 10 years, Oman's labor market is undergoing a gradual but irreversible shift in qualitative terms, reflecting the changes in the economy. The way production and workers are organized is undergoing profound transformations. In the service sector, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) will continue to dominate (more than 85 percent of registered Omani companies have less than 100 employees). In SMEs, there are fewer layers of management and specialized occupational positions and fewer pre designated career paths. Workers are expected to design, develop and implement total solutions rather than provide limited services to the client. In SMEs, rules and regulations are understandably loose. People are working more in teams toward delivering the final product rather than according to protocols. There is a greater demand for self-discipline, self-confidence and self-management. Likewise in large modern organizations, functional departments and lower layers of management are increasingly replaced by task forces, product teams and project groups/teams. Work performance is organized in the form of projects, programs and portfolios. Workers are no longer simple implementers of procedures and solutions handed down from the top. The MOE is acutely aware of the relevance issue and has started to tackle it through a variety of initiatives and instruments. These include (1) the introduction of basic and post-basic education; (2) curriculum innovations; (3) introduction of research skills; (4) introduction of computers in schools; (5) research methodology; (6) graduation projects; and (7) creation and expansion of the NCGC. The complexity of the problem, however, requires a more radical and comprehensive approach.

- In an article about the Educational Developments in Oman, Ahmed Al Barwani (August, 2016) outlined the regulatory framework in terms of the legal and administrative structures of private schools and universities is clear which is to be adopted in order to run educational activities in the Sultanate. Although the fact that the number of students in Oman is comparatively low to other countries. The Education and Higher Education Councils have been continuously proposing and formulating new policies which ensure development of education sector in Oman since their formation. The main projects that are being undertaken by the education councils include the formulation of national education strategy 2040, restructuring of

education system and school education law will ensure transformation of education in Oman in the near future which will open Oman market for more players in the educational sector. The recent issuance of the Protection of Competition and Prevention of Monopoly Law in Oman will further ensure that opportunities for investment in educational sector are offered equally to all types of investors either locals or foreigners as well as there will be no monopoly in this sector in Oman market.

PROBLEMS FACED BY STUDENTS IN GETTING PLACEMENT AFTER GRADUATION

- Language proficiency: lack of English communicative skills.
- Insufficient understanding of basic concepts.
- Lack of employment opportunities in the government sector.
- Organizations insisting on experience even for fresh job-seekers
- Jobs available do not match with their qualifications which they obtain from the colleges and universities.
- Most employers prefer expatriates.
- The work environment was tough to adjust to due to cultural differences and lack of the necessary communication skills.
- Returning to education with a view to get a better and higher degree (Post graduation) carries its own obstacles as they are facing high educational costs as well as having to spend four years in the university.
- The gap between education and employability.
- Students not interested in working for the private sector due to excessive labor turnoverism.

PROBLEMS THAT EMPLOYERS FACE WITH THE PRESENT SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

- The lack of in-depth understanding of technical information, and concepts.
- Lack of client-handling skills and insufficient knowledge.
- Lack of Proper training in the skill taught.
- Low analytical and quantitative skills
- Problems with English language along with issues in computer programming make these students ineligible for employment. The difference in English and cognitive skill modules may only be a function of the input quality of the students. There is a consistent trend that the maximum gap is in computer programming, followed by cognitive skills and English and least in other domain skills."
- The ability to apply the concepts learnt to constantly develop innovative things and find solutions to complex problems are main factors working behind the employability of an engineer.

- What are lacking in our system is proper training and development methodologies, which could be implemented right from the first year, when a student enters college. The principle applies to all (management, engineering, IT etc.)
- Most fresh graduates lack in business environment experience and key skills in business software, leadership and writing. Moreover they do not have enough interview experience
- Universities and colleges in Oman do not give much weightage to industry experience and this is a serious deficiency as it impedes the flow of practical wisdom into classrooms.
- Major issue contributing to the rising number of unemployed graduates in Oman is that several colleagues and universities in Oman are offering courses which are not job-oriented.
- Students graduating with a bachelor's degree in abstract and outdated courses are naturally often left without any job prospects.
- Employers feel that the work force is educated but educated enough to meet the expectations relating to the working environment
- Students lack enough interview experience.
- There is a difference in the level of knowledge arising from where they finished their education.
- Employers feel that universities and college in Oman do not give much weightage to industry experience and this is a serious deficiency as it impedes the flow of practical wisdom into the class room

SUGGESTIONS ON MEASURES TO BE ADOPTED TO EQUATE THE EXPECTATION OF THE EMPLOYERS FROM THE PRESENT EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AND TO ERADICATE THE PROBLEMS THAT STUDENTS FACE IN GETTING EMPLOYMENT AFTER THEIR GRADUATION

- English language should be taught right from their basic level of education.
- The system of education should be on par with international levels.
- Critical thinking skills should and must be a part of their forum of education.
- The learning process should be thought provoking with more of projects done by the students to enhance the learning and application skills.
- Conceptual understanding of the subjects should be provided with emphasis on the global learning rather than the national alone. Not that the national level should be avoided but that both should go hand in hand.
- Knowledge of the market situations and improvement of entrepreneurial skills should be specified at the secondary level of education.
- Guest lectures should be given by the professionals to help students understand what the expectation of the employers in the market is.

- Industrial link programs and on the job training methods should be a part of the curriculum itself.
- Projects should form a part of the learning process.
- Vestibule training should be arranged at the college level for students acquiring technical qualifications to enable them to face the requirements of the employment scenario.
- KSA tests should form part of the learning process.
- The students should be inculcated with the knowledge that jobs in the private sector or no less than that of the government sector.
- Aptitude tests should be conducted to know the students' problem-solving skills, how efficiently they can work to solve a problem in the given time.
- Have academia incorporate more soft skills into their programs like Problem-solving, troubleshooting, safety, and teamwork skills which are particularly important.
- Students must be given the space and scope to think and innovate, to question and come up with solutions.
- Open Centre of excellence which is a shared facility or an entity that provides leadership, best practices, research, support and/or training for a focus area should be provided. Herein they can learn what exactly the employer's needs can be obtained through learning skills; sharing knowledge etc. can be done.
- The students at the post graduate level should be sent on exchange programs to neighboring countries to help students understand global market expectations.
- Employers and education providers must work together to prepare students sufficiently for the workplace.

- There is an urgent need to improve the alignment between the qualification and skills bestowed on nationals by education systems and the needs of the market through devising proper mechanisms.
- Graduates need to lower their wage expectations if they hope to find employment in their chosen field.
- One of the possible things is to prepare virtual training. As the main problem that graduates face is the lack of experience and competency, companies can help by offering free certified online training frequently in different areas to help graduates enhance their skills and experiences that would eventually strengthen their resumes.
- Another thing is to build co-working spaces in different regions of Oman. The aim of those spaces is to offer inspirational environment and continuous guidance for free in entrepreneurship for young job seekers who are interested to have businesses.
- The main focus which one was creating school infrastructure should now change to focus on quality and innovation in delivery and content, which would aim employer expectation.
- According to Ahmed Hassan Al Balushi, Dean of Celedonian College of Engineering academia and industry are inherently different, and there is currently no mechanism to harmonize the two sectors. "A body to synchronize coordination between the academia and industry would go a long way towards supplying the appropriate manpower for the sultanate's development needs."
- An effective teaching force with strong pedagogical skills is the key to increasing education quality.
- Last but not the least the key for efficiency driven economies is provided below:

Figure 1: The Global Competitiveness Index framework
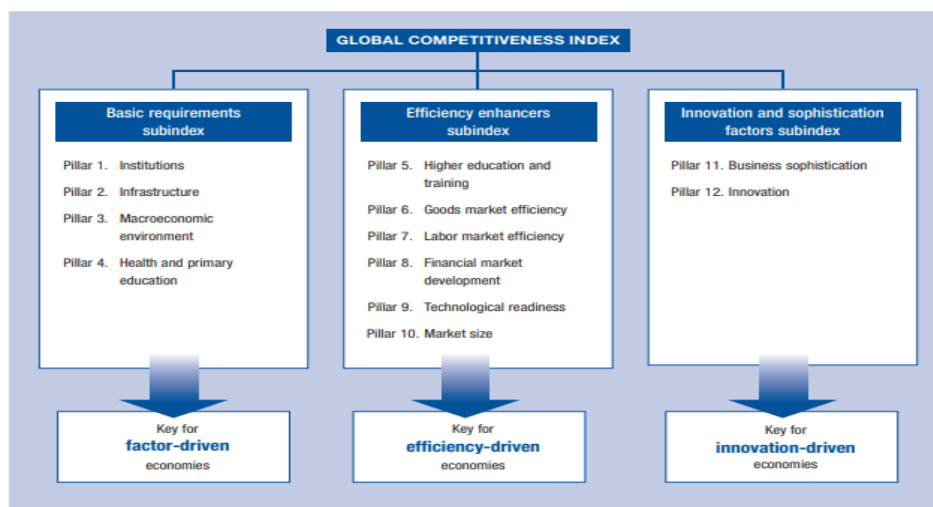
Source: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GlobalCompetitivenessReport_2014-15.pdf

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