

# Higher Education in Oman

Johann GÜNTHER  
University of Buraimi, Oman  
Hauptstrasse 37  
A 2371 Hinterbrühl, AUSTRIA  
[Johann.guenther@aon.at](mailto:Johann.guenther@aon.at)

**Abstract.** *The education system in Oman is generally very young. Up to the beginning of the 70<sup>th</sup> of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were only three schools. With the seizure of power of Sultan Qaboos came large reforms. 1985 were created the first university and at the beginning 21<sup>th</sup> century also private universities certified. The higher education system is understood further in paging and in the structure. International relations will bring Oman to the global education system. Also new technologies are used increasingly. 135 countries were examined by the United Nations. Oman had the largest progress and the highest development in the last decades.*

*Austria made its biggest engagement in a foreign country and delivered programs and management for a new university in the city of Buraimi.*

**Keywords.** Oman, Higher Education, eLearning

## 1. Introduction

The Sultanate of Oman became with the today's Sultan Qaboos from a backward and conservative country to the 70's a modern nation. The monarch is popular with the population and even with the demonstrations of Arab spring its image was not scratched. On the contrary: the demonstrators wrote „Majesty we love you!“ The United nation development Program 2010 had Oman under 135 examined countries as that with the largest development. Politically that can be seen Oman as relatively stable, although it comes also here to changes. It is an absolutist monarchy, in which the parliament has partly only advisory function.

That Oman is geographically split and possesses directly at the point to the road of hearing mash the province Musandam, with whose assistance oil ship traffic can be controlled.

The country has a long history, whose hand archaeological find into the Stone Age.

The former sailor realm had territories in East Africa and also today still maintains these with countries such as Tanzania.

The Omanis was also one of the first trunks,



which followed the Islam and the teachings Mohamed. The religious community has - beside the government - the best functioning network. 95 per cent of the inhabitants are Muslims. Occupation by the Portuguese left castles, which are maintained today as historical buildings in many places of the country. Fights for the today's state borders found till to the 70's of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Particularly in the south and in the north for solutions one struggled. With support of the British army it came to a peace into the south and acknowledgment of the province Dhofar and in the north-east the oasis of Buraimi with Abu Dhabi was divided. The Saudi Arabia border was pushed back into the south. The oasis of Buraimi shows the dramatic growth of the last decades:

- In the 60's of the 20. Century several hundred inhabitants,
- at the beginning of the 21. Century 750.000. The majority is allotted to the city Al Ain in Abu Dhabi and 60,000

inhabitants to the original oasis city Buraimi.

Economically nearly everything hangs on gas and oil. End of the 60's began with the export of these goods. Sultan Qaboos developed this industry and brought so the prosperity in the country. In 1999 new oil fields were found in the south. Oman ranks with its gas and oil fields at 24. place of the world. In addition, most diverse minerals are diminished, whose development did not go yet fully of. Industrially the country is not yet very opened. Economically one wants to force the tourism due to climatic conditions (warm winters) and the beautiful landscape more strongly.

The majority of the work is made by foreigners. One million, workers from Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and Philippines face 2 million Omanis. Foreign workers earn monthly 200 to 300 Euro. The income of the native ones is legally regulated with a minimum of 500 Euro since the demonstrations in spring 2010.

## 2. The Education System

Until 1949 one did not know public education. The most common form of the education was the "Kuttab", a traditional instruction over the Quran. Boys and girls were informed in groups in mosques, private houses or in the shade of a tree. This instruction was organized few and dependent on the qualification of the teaching person. There were no chairs and no books. In 1970 the country had only three schools with less than 1000 pupils. Only as the Sultan Qaboos came to power - he studied in England - he made education to one of his emphasis and today there are more than 1000 schools with approximately 650,000 pupils.

The educational system is divided into three phases:

- Primary school
- Middle school
- Upper stage.

Secondary Diplomas exists since 1999. Nine colleges offer secondary two-yearly programs. 1998 there were 12.436 teachers with 217.246 pupils in the Secondary Schools and 411 Primary Schools with 313.516 pupils. The state gave 4 per cent of the gross of national product for education. But in the year 2000 there were still 28% illiterates. 19% of the men and 38% of the women could not read or write.

Under the high foreigner portion there are also foreign schools in the country, like an Indian, a Bangladesh, a Pakistan and a Sri Lanka School. In the capital city Muscat there are in addition the "American School", "The American British Academy" and "The Philippine School". In these 174 private schools about 37.000 pupils by 3.000 teachers are informed.

In the year 2011 the Omani educational system reached the third place within the Arab region. That is however far away from the international level; particularly in the technical subjects and in skills like "Leadership" and "criticism ability". There are first steps into eLearning offers. Because of the missing schools in the past, adult education has a special meaning.

Table 2. Number of schools and female students in Oman (Period 1970 onwards)

Year	No. of schools	No. of students	No. of girls	Proportion of girls (%)
1969-70	3	909	-	-
1980/1981	373	106,032	35,190	33
1995/1996	953	488,797	236,331	48
2001	993	554,845	270,344	49
2003	1,022	576,472	279,180	48
2005-2006	1031	596,257	288,045	48
2007	1055	554,289	271,602	49
2008	1050	541,482	265,326	49
2009	1,043	531,283	260,329	49

Source: Ministry of Education 2002a; Statistics provided by Shapour Rassekhi

## 3. The University System

1986 were created the first university - "the Sultan Qaboos University".

1998 there were 1,307 teachers and 16,032 students in Higher Education.

Beside the Sultan Qaboos University there are six national colleges for "applied Science", which report to the Ministry of Higher Education. The Ministry of Labor operates "a Higher College for Technology" in Muscat and six technical colleges in regional centers of the country. The Ministry of Health maintains institutes to the training of patient aids and pharmacists and the Ministry for Islam has a Sharia scientific institute. In partnership with international institutions the Omani Central Bank trains experts of financial politics in a college. A new national university is in Muscat in establishment.

1986 three academies were furnished for teacher training.

At the beginning of the 21st century followed the establishment of private universities. With the permission of private universities 2001 the

“Accreditation Council” was created. In 2010 there were 28 private higher educational institutions in Oman. Many of the private universities and colleges were received co-operation with foreign universities, like the tourism college in Muscat with an Austrian college.

The number of students in the first term increases constantly. In the academic year 2001/2002 20.8% of graduates of high schools went to a university. 2005/2006 there were 31.2%.

Defiance of all efforts has the higher education system in Oman still another large catching up need. Full and part time scholarships should animate young people to study. After the demonstrations in the spring 2010 these scholarships were continued to supplement. Following institutions and organizations promote the development of the higher education system (beside the Ministry for Higher Education):

- Higher Education Council - specifies the rules and strategies
- Accreditation Council - responsible for the permission of new programs and institutions
- National Commission for Education, Culture and Science - connects the three ranges
- Research Council – promotes research
- Higher Education Admissions Centre (HEAC)

#### 4. Language Skills

The national language is Arab. Due to the foreign workers there are other languages likewise represented. As a common lingua English became generally accepted. Alone that Omanis can inform themselves with their employees. English is very far common, but the level is generally low and shows up also with the incoming students at the universities. The Foundation Program puts a special focus on it.

#### 5. Science and Technologie

Research and Higher Education are neighbors. According to the Humboldt principle good teaching needs research. That Oman concentrates on the research fields:

- Agriculture,
- Water Management,

- Mineralogy and
- Government.

The 1985 created Sultan Qaboos University has faculties for medicine, science, engineering and agriculture. In the time of 1987 to 1997 13% of the students occupied the ranges Science and Engineering. The Sultan Qaboos University is also the outrider in the field of research. The minister calls it „the white elephant“. In 1992 the first research based study program begun. In the year 2000 guidelines for research promotions were compiled and in the strategy plan for the period 2009 to 2013 research is already a constant component.

There were no Omani scientific publications in the year 1986. In the year 2009 over 500 papers were shown. Out of this over 400 came from the Sultan Qaboos University. In the period of 2000 to 2009 the scientific coworkers produced 294 „peer reviewed“ books.

The “Institute for Health Sciences” was created in 1982 by the Ministry of Health and stands under its line. That is a peculiarity of Oman that not all educational facilities reports to one of the two education ministries (education and higher education).

The 1984 created “Higher College of Technology” has departments for Computing, Mathematics, Laboratory Sciences, Electrical and Mechanical Engineering.

The Nature-Historical Museum of Oman - based 1983 - has a national Herbarium and a national shell collection.

Most scientific mechanisms are settled in the region of Muscat.

The enormous desserts of Oman made it possible that about 20% of the meteorites determined world-wide were found, among them also rare meteorites of Mars. They serve the scientific research of the conditions of the solar system. Like the education system in the 70<sup>th</sup> of the 20. Century, also the health system was very rudimentary. Still 1999 on 1000 inhabitants came 2 hospital beds. 1993 89% of inhabitants had entrance to the health system. Ten years later were it already 99%. In 2001 Oman was already on 8. place of the World Health Organization System.

#### 6. University Campus

It is scientifically proven that the infrastructure and the environment of a university, of an educational facility have large influence on teachings and research and their quality. The first

university - the Sultan Qaboos University - established in the country, was exemplary for the entire Gulf region. A generous and extensive campus with complete infrastructure was set up. The central administration building is interlaced with the individual faculties. Student hostels - special for girls - are separated and for the external world unreasonable. Girls live almost exclusively at the campus. Boys only to a small percentage. This is on the one hand because of the fact that boys may study also abroad, which is not yet so common with girls and boys may move also in the environment of the university freely.

Classrooms and faculty infrastructure is clearly separated. Seminar areas and lecture-rooms are accommodated in own buildings and are to the faculties as infrastructure at the disposal. This produces larger ways for the students and reduces the communication between students and teachers.

Universities in Oman are generally separated of any urban infrastructure and usually outside of the cities delighted. It does not take place an integration with the local population. This mono functional settlement structure is also used with new buildings, like it at the University of Buraimi. The new campus is set up many kilometers outside of the city. Accordingly the entire necessary infrastructure must be present such as business, service facilities and leisure centers at the campus.

Sport has a great importance both in schools, and at universities. The corresponding mechanisms and football fields are present. Women and men practice sport separately.

Prayer areas must be available for both sexes. The regular prayer has also with young humans a high value.

## 7. New Media

Considering its that the educational system is still very conservatively and not yet interactive, the main emphasis of the architectural adjustment is seminar area and lecture-rooms. The quality of nearly exclusive frontal instruction is increased by a legal regulation of the listener numbers with maximally 25 students per seminar.

The students have a similar behavior in handling new media as their European or American colleagues. Internet is however censored, which means that several services and information are not available. Language services such as SKYPE

are forbidden. Many internet pages cannot be called up, whereby the user is requested to prove to the censorship authority that the inquired side is necessary.

Classrooms are generally equipped with internet. Computers are available at public places like the library. People in Gulf read less than in other regions. Libraries have not many books. Internet search is dominant.

A positive factor when using internet is the Foundation Program. It is one transition year from the high school to the university. Apart from foreign languages and mathematics also data processing technology is taught. This prepares the students still better for medium-supported learning. Often the Foundation Program finishes with the „Computer Driving License“.

Oman has very high telecommunication costs. This is hindering the development of distance learning. Internet costs often hundreds times more than in Europe. The reason is in the missing competition of the telecommunications market. Technologies like „Cloud Computing“ are not applicable under these conditions and it exist the danger of the technological uncoupling. The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) installed its own „Educational Portal“, which goes in the period 2009-2013 into its second phase. Students can visit lectures on-line and download their curricula. Training material is available in digital form. Reports about the learning progress are available for students, parents and educate-entitled. This reflects the intensive integration of the family again. In a third phase (2014 to 2016) it is to be integrated into a financial system.

## 8. Informal Places

With informal places, the quality of the output increases. This informal learning can happen in Oman only within the same sex. Also in the library a separation takes place. Informal learning outside of the campus is also not possible.

Leisure activities such as theatre performances, poet readings, music meetings bring however different sexes and students from different semesters together.

Boys like traditional Arab dances.

Foreign students can increase the level of informal learning. Native speakers increase the learning speed of foreign languages as English.

## 9. Employability

Particularly for the private universities the rule of the “Employability” applies, that their students get a job after the study.

Already with the permission of new educational programs market studies must be submitted to the responsible Ministry, which prove, how the respective market many graduates can accept. Not only the program and its contents are approved, but also the number of certified studying per year, in order not to overheat the corresponding labor market.

It is considered as success factor, if a majority of the graduates gets a job at the labor market. Statistics are published annually, which create so a new form of the competition between the universities, which is output oriented.

That has also an influence on the form of instruction. In the past it was negative, if the university had contact to the economics. The device was: „Science should be free by business ideas “. In the new instruction plans and educational programs of Oman industrial projects are an integrated component. Students ones write work over problem solutions, which are applicable for the material economy. In Universities of Applied Science students spend - under guidance and instruction of the teaching staff - increasingly one term in the economy. For most young humans this is the first contact with the economy and their ideas. Many of them work then also later in that company, where they completed their first practical course. The companies have the chance to test the young coworkers.

The integration of economical philosophy in the universities has also an influence on the student organizations. Students operate own business at the Campus, where they sell scripts and books. Also this is training for the later working life. The effects of this philosophy can be proven within the range health service statistically:

for 10.000 inhabitants	2000	2005	2007
Medical doctors	13,6	16,7	18.7
nurses	32,6	37,0	39.6
dentists	1,1	1,8	2
pharmacists	2,1	3,0	3,5

The national language is Arab. Due to the foreign workers there are other languages likewise represented. As a common lingua English

## 10. Female Gender

Since the assumption of the government by Sultan Qaboos the role of the women changed in principle. Before 1970 - despite generally low school participation - girls were not allowed to go to school. There were only three schools with less than 1000 male pupils.

One of the first educational measures Sultan Qaboos was the establishment of schools for girls. Since that time the integration of the girls increased rapidly. For Sultan Qaboos was important that women take an important role in the society. Female represent more than 50% of the inhabitants and the state should not missing them.

The religion and the Islam are not restraining for the women, how often in the west one accepts.

The rights of the women in the Islam are equivalent to those of the man. The women of prophet Mohammed - Khadijah and Aisha – motivated women for education.

Khadijah was a successful business woman. The second woman - Aisha - was guide in the military.

By the measures of the Sultans the number of the female employees in the private and public sector increased continuously. Apart from the education for women institutions also promoting were created like „The Directorate for Women's and Children's Affair” and “Omani Women´s Association “. The first one offered education programs, in order to improve the Skills of the women for the working sphere. The second one is a „Non Profit Organization“, which offers activities for women such as manual work, family and education programs.

„In addition there is a multiplicity of associations and societies, which worry about affairs of woman and with the training as well as the development of the abilities are entrusted by women.“<sup>1</sup>

Women took over so increasingly leading positions and leadership, although it is not yet so common compared with western democracies:

- In the 6<sup>th</sup> Five Years Plan (2001-2005) was brought by the Ministry of Labor a program (SANAD) into being, which was assigned to 37% at women.

---

<sup>1</sup> POPP, Georg: “Religiöse Toleranz. Der Islam im Sultanat Oman. Der gelebte Islam in einer modernen arabischen Gesellschaft“ (Religious tolerance. The Islam in the Sultanate of Oman. The living Islam in a modern Arabic society), Munich 2006, Page 18

- The American Embassy and United Nation organizations offer small programs, which bring women into guide rollers.
- The oil company „SHELL“ helps young women with the program „Intilaquah“ (Arabic for `rapidly take off’).

More and more Omani women are in leading positions. Today they are to be found in all industries and levels. In industries such as health, education and banks women are most frequently represented.

Women have active and passive right to vote for „the Majlis A' shura“, the parliament. Generally women are more engaged with the study and bring also the better evaluations. An exterior indication of the open-mindedness is it also that carrying of a face masking at universities is forbidden.

## 11. Literature

Bertelsmann Stiftung: „BTI 2010, Oman Country Report“, Gütersloh 2009

Country Report on Technical Education and Vocational Training. Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Vocational Training, Manpower Planning Office, Muscat, April 1999.

GÜNTHER, Johann: „Demonstrationen trotz Treue zum Sultan - Beispiel Oman“ (Demonstrations despite loyalty to the Sultan - example Oma), in „Furche“, Vienna 29. 3. 2011

HADRAHMI, Mohammed bin Suleman al: „Oman. Years of Progress and Development (Masirat-Al-Khair), Muscat 2005

HAFEEDH AL-DHAHAB, Dr. Mohammed bin, Deputy President, Vocational Training Authority (Sultanate of Oman), paper at the Conference "National-Building in the Modern World: Technological Education and National Development"; organized by the Higher Colleges of Technology, United Arab Emirates (Abu Dhabi), 6–8 April, 1997.

KABASCI, Kirstin: „Kultur Schock. Kleine Golfstaaten / Oman“ (Culture Shock. Small Gulf States / Oman), Bielefeld 2006

KAMOONPURI, Hasan: „Oman’s 180 Greatest Brands, Oman Daily Observer“, Muscat 2011

KELLY, J.B.: „Eastern Arabian Frontiers“, London 1964

LANCASTER, Pat (Editor): „Oman 2009-2010“, Muscat 2011

Ministry of Development, The Fifth Five-Year Development Plan (1996/2000), July 1997.

Ministry of Health, Annual Statistical Report 1997. Prepared by the Directorate General of Planning, 1998.

Ministry of National Economy, Statistical Year Book 1997, Issue No. 26, August 1998.

Model Schools Training Plan, Based on the Reform and Development of General Education. Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman, September, 1995

NN: „Research at Sultan Qaboos University 1986-2009“, Muscat 2010

NN: „The Report. Oman 2011“, Muscat 2011

NN: „Concise Guide to Batinah, Sultanate of Oman“, Muscat 2006

NN: „Higher Education Admission Statistics for the Academic Year 2009/2010“, Muscat 2010

NN: „Passage to Higher Education. Learning at the Heart of Higher Education“, Volume One, Issue 3, Muscat October 2010

NN: „Building a sustainable Future. Annual Report 2009 to his Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, Sultan of Oman, Petroleum Development Oman“, Muscat 2009

POPP, Georg: „Religiöse Toleranz. Der Islam im Sultanat Oman. Der gelebte Islam in einer modernen arabischen Gesellschaft“ (Religious tolerance. The Islam in the Sultanate of Oman. The lived Islam in a modern Arab society), Munich 2006

RASSEKH, Shapour: „Education as a Motor for Development: Recent education reforms in Oman with particular reference to the status of women and girls, INNODATA MONOGRAPHS 15, Educational innovations in action, International Bureau of Education, UNESCO, Genf 2004

Report of the Sultanate of Oman on the Theme of "Enhancing the Role of Teachers in a Changing World". From the 45<sup>th</sup> Session of the International Conference of Education, 1996.

YAQOUBI Al, Mohammed Saleem: „The EFA 2000 Assessment Country Reports OMAN“, Muscat 1999 [http://www.unesco.org/education/wef/countryreports/oman/rapport\\_1\\_1.html](http://www.unesco.org/education/wef/countryreports/oman/rapport_1_1.html)