Alternative education needs in Oman: accommodating learning diversity and meeting market demand

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ABSTRACT

The gap between educational outcomes and labour market demand is one of the most important issues concerning researchers and specialists in the field of educational planning and policy-making. Innovation, entrepreneurship, diversity and creativity characterize the globalized, high-tech labour 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. Structured interviews with key figures in Oman were conducted to gauge the prospect of a vision of education which encompasses alternative schools, programmes and pathways to enhance opportunities for all students and facilitate outcomes that better match demands created by an increasingly sophisticated working environment. This paper is produced at a time when planning is underway for Vision 2040 and provides insight into the challenges and opportunities for alternative education in Oman.

Introduction

There is agreement that educational frameworks characterized by a teacher-centred pedagogy, rigid bureaucratic structures and standardized assessment instruments and practices are both inadequate and incapable of producing graduates who are well equipped to meet the needs of the contemporary labour market. This is reflected by the growth of alternative models and programmes of education which aim to facilitate the discovery and development of individual skills and abilities and to provide avenues to effectively deal with the world’s technological, economic and cultural changes (Young, 1990). The provision of alternative education enables educational leaders to fulfil the commitment of Education for All within the public education system, irrespective of individual circumstances or issues and has become a priority as the Millennium Development Goal of universal education moves into a ‘post-2015 commitment to learning’ (Barrett, 2011; Pritchett & Viarengo, 2015). Research indicates that alternative schools are very effective in improving academic performance, developing academic goals, changing target behaviour, increasing attendance and serving ‘at-risk’ students (Hosley, 2003; Wilkins & Bost, 2014).

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 February 2016
Accepted 13 April 2016

KEYWORDS

educational alternatives; diversity; educational outcomes; labour market

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differences, which are generally defined by educational, therapeutic or disciplinary options (Tissington, 2006; Woods & Woods, 2008). Effective practices which characterize alternative education settings are as follows: low student–teacher ratios, highly structured classrooms and behavioural management, positive strategies to reinforce desired behaviours, school-based adult mentors, functional behaviour assessment, social skills instruction, quality academic instruction, parental involvement and proactive behaviour interventions and supports (Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2011; Tobin & Sprague, 2000). Alternative programmes and schools are thus individualized to meet the needs of both gifted and talented students as well as students who are at risk or who have special needs. Around the world, the quest to satisfy the needs of diverse students has fuelled the development of innovative solutions. Educational alternatives which differentiate themselves based on their philosophy, as well as their methods, provide freedom of choice for teachers, parents and students in terms of pacing and non-competitive evaluation, for example, and include Montessori, Steiner and New Schools (Shankland, Genolini, França, Guelfi, & Ionescu, 2010; Tissington, 2006). Home Schooling, talent-based education programmes for students gifted in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) or art, music and performance, also fall into this category.

Originating in the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively, Charter Schools and Free Schools receive public funding and do not charge tuition fees, but are managed by a legislative agreement or charter which increases their autonomy in terms of modifying the pace and scope of the national curriculum to cater for students with diverse needs (Jha & Buckingham, 2015; Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009; Reckhow, Grossmann, & Evans, 2015). Such schools are further differentiated by whether teachers are given greater autonomy to develop flexible curricula and learning experiences such as textbook-free environments, high-tech connectivity with the adult world or project-based learning, and those which follow a prescribed curriculum, and often incorporate variation in the length of school days and strict disciplinary frameworks (Cable, Plucker, Spradlin, Indiana University, & Education, 2009; Martin & Mulvihill, 2015; Miller, 2014). Other countries, including Sweden, Chile, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Qatar, are pursuing the Charter or Free School model, thus providing for greater freedom, albeit with rigorous accountability (Brewer et al., 2011; Jha & Buckingham, 2015).

Therapeutic alternatives are exemplified by community-based education programmes, such as those teaching multi-cultural minorities with the aim of assisting these youths to integrate more effectively into society (Hobbs, Sawer, & Oregon State Univ, 2009). More commonly, both therapeutic and disciplinary alternatives of education have targeted students who are described as ‘at-risk’, due to socio-economic or personal circumstances and include those who are consistently low achievers or those who have dropped out (Marshall et al., 2014). Whilst consistent use of programmes, such as School-wide Positive Behavior Support, has successfully effected meaningful behavioural changes, it is important to acknowledge that if left without educational alternatives, such students also pose a threat to social stability because they are ‘more likely to participate in risky behaviors, which might contribute to injuries and violence such as… criminal activity, and substance abuse’ (Cable et al., 2009; Simonsen, Britton, & Young, 2010). In New Zealand, alternative options for education have demonstrably mitigated the propensity for risky behaviour by focusing on constructive, productive, positive pathways (Headley, 2010). Failure to complete Year 12 and graduate with a High School Diploma is directly linked to unemployment, underemployment and poor social relationships (Newman et al., 2010). Alternative programmes, such as ‘service learning, job shadowing, internships and dual enrolment with technical colleges to keep students interested in school, while preparing them for life’, have proved useful strategies to meet with needs of otherwise disenfranchised youth (Genao, 2014). Alternative education is a term which encapsulates diverse characteristics, pathways and management strategies, all of which distinguish it from traditional or mainstream systems of education. In addition to the aforementioned, one of the most significant traits is the space or freedom of choice that alternative education affords to both students and families to specifically match particular needs with a tailored programme.

It should be noted, however, that the notion of alternative education is not without its critics. There is the risk of stigmatization, where students are branded as delinquents, low achievers or disabled (Conrath, 2001; Kim, 2006; Kim & Taylor, 2008; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009). Superficially, this may be
valid, but upon closer examination, stigmatization was the result of a mismatch between behaviour management, programme design and specific student needs (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009). Kim and Taylor assert that all too often, a ‘deficit thinking paradigm’ blames students for their failure, rather than acknowledging school quality, inequitable funding models, lack of curriculum differentiation and low teacher quality (Kim & Taylor, 2008). When teachers are equipped with the necessary expertise to promote student learning, increased self-esteem and the skills to make a meaningful contribution to society, the reverse is possible; even in the Arab world, where vocational and technical education has been traditionally stigmatized due to the lowly status of manual work and the notion that it is the last resort (Vlaardingerbroek & Hachem El-Masri, 2008).

**Alternative education—demonstrated achievements**

Around the world, a well-developed system of vocational and technical education is a feature of strong economies. In the case of Lebanon, Vlaardingerbroek and El-Masri found that enhanced employment prospects for youth in both the public and private sectors, as well as a slow but perceptible change in the idea that vocational and technical training is not easier than academic education; rather it is just different, has created new opportunities for the bulging population in the 15–25 age bracket (Vlaardingerbroek & Hachem El-Masri, 2008). Although it may be both semantics and prudent programming, linking vocational and technical skills with commerce or business has successfully enculturated students into this stream with practical avenues for entrepreneurship and most importantly enhanced links between self-efficacy and entrepreneurship (Maritz & Brown, 2013). In some countries, vocational and technical education also offers an alternative pathway to university study, which is particularly appealing to students who suffer from motivational issues in mainstream institutions (Tyler & Magnus Lofstrom, 2009; Vlaardingerbroek & Hachem El-Masri, 2008).

Alternative educational programmes are designed to meet both the needs of the individual and those of the workforce, thereby catering particularly for students often labelled as low achievers in the academic stream and who also occupy the fringes of the student population bell curve, because they may be challenged by socio-economic or personal circumstances (Smith & Thomson, 2014). These programmes aim to provide opportunities for students to create, innovate and express their ideas and by linking vocational or technical training with entrepreneurship and community or corporate partnerships, such programmes are re-constructing social capital for widespread benefit (Kraftl, 2015; Singh, 2013). Furthermore, educational options not only assist with individual decision-making, but they also inform the overall organization of the education system due to the demonstrated merits of a mixed educational path (Simone & Uschi, 2010).

Shankland et al. (2010) have conducted a quantitative study of academic self-efficacy, preferential use of problem-focused, coping strategies and perceived social support in French students attending Steiner, Montessori and New Schools in comparison with public school students (control). Shankland et al. demonstrated that the alumni from alternative schools were significantly more enabled than their public school counterparts when they progressed to higher education (Shankland et al., 2010). Martin and Brand examined the importance of governmental support in setting rules to support the qualitative aspects of the alternative education programmes (Martin & Brand, 2006). The results show the importance of this kind of support in providing facilities for alternative education programmes and eliminating the percentage of students who play truant, as well as establishing another avenue for students who leave school before obtaining their Year 12 Certificate, or General Education Diploma in Oman.

A further study examined the importance of increasing the number of alternative schools to accommodate children who could not be enrolled in formal government schools or join non-governmental organizations to study. The study recommended strong cooperation between governmental schools and non-governmental organizations to guarantee its continuity (Rose, 2007). Another study identified a set of desired teaching qualities and examined the resultant capacity for enabling teachers to deal with a range of student needs. The results indicate the importance of using different tools and
measures when evaluating students in alternative education schools, in that teachers should deal with each student as a special case (den Brok, van Eerde, & Hajer, 2010). Another study aimed to reduce the percentage of students who dropped out in the USA by designing innovative education programmes that exemplified the merits of alternative education. The study’s results indicate that the percentage of students who dropped out reached 22–25% because of students’ economic and social problems. These problems forced them to leave school early. Therefore, the rapid establishment of alternative education schools and institutes, which consider students’ conditions and support their education was recommended (Tyler & Magnus Lofstrom, 2009).

**Problem statement**

In the Sultanate of Oman, the *Education for All* initiative, which stemmed from the Dakar conference (2000–2015) and also reflected the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals for universal primary education and equal education opportunities for girls, has effectively raised the percentage of students who enrol in Basic Schools (Years 1–10) to 98% (Ministry of Education, 2012). Whilst this is a remarkable achievement, the dropout rates, numbers of repeating students and the significant proportion of students who fail to reach the low international benchmarks for reading, mathematics and science suggest that consideration of alternative models of education is warranted (The World Bank, 2016). Historically, education in Oman has depended upon memorizing and repetition and was devoid of opportunities for questioning, critical thinking and independent pursuit of knowledge. Al-Surooti asserts that this practice negatively affects student ability to create, innovate and adapt to change (Al-Surooti, 2009). Addressing this embedded model has been a challenge for the Ministry of Education and in the light of Oman’s increasingly sophisticated economy and the desire to sustain Oman’s economic well-being in a post-oil environment, employers are calling for Omanis who are equipped with the knowledge, practical skills and technical expertise to meet global standards.

**The scope and role of the Ministry of Education in Oman**

In 2012, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the World Bank produced an extensive report about the status of education in Oman. The report recognized that there were a significant number of actors providing various types of education and training in Oman and in order to manifest a cohesive broad-based educational policy and strategic plan, the establishment of the National Council of Education with overarching responsibility for policy development pertaining to education, training and human resource development was established (The World Bank, 2016). In Oman, the Council of Education represents all interest groups, comprising private and public groups and the ministers from all ministries with a stake in education in Oman (The Educational Council, 2012).

Responsible for the administration of education in Oman, the Ministry of Education stipulates in its Vision and Mission statements that in addition to overseeing a high-quality system of education, its key role is to engender patriotic citizens devoted to lifelong learning, responsibility and commitment to community and who are capable of ‘carrying the nation’s economic and social development duties’ (Ministry of Education, 2003). Two major concerns about the current efficacy of education in Oman are the gap between educational outcomes and labour market demands and the threat to social stability given the significant numbers of students who dropout and fail to attain a General Diploma. The strategic planning document, Vision 2020 also cites the need to ensure that students are prepared to effectively engage with rapidly developing technology (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009).

Throughout the governorates of Oman, continuing adult education is also managed under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. The willingness of the Ministry of Education to initiate alternative programmes is exemplified by a variety of coordinated ventures and partnerships aimed at eliminating illiteracy in the 15–44 age bracket (Table 1). These have manifested in the form of Adult Education programmes, enhanced school–community relationships and efforts to maximize school resources after hours. Centre and programmes for the eradication of illiteracy are staffed by General Education Diploma
graduates in a bid to reduce the rate of illiteracy to 4.5% by 2015. The ministry’s main concern is that illiteracy should reach 4.5 by 2015. Collaboration with the College of Education at SQU has witnessed the planning and development of a Bachelor of Special Education, to prepare specialist teachers of students with learning difficulties. Such students are currently catered for in Inclusion classes. Qualified Special Needs teachers or alternative education teachers are very important because they have specific expertise to enhance the learning outcomes of different learners. A Bachelor of Special Education was established in the College of Art and Social Science at Nizwa University in 2006.

The Child Friendly Schools is a joint initiative between UNESCO and the Ministry of Education. Although UNESCO usually works with developing countries, the development of Oman’s Child Rights’ Law was so closely aligned with the philosophy of child-friendly schools that a partnership was forged. With the child as the primary focus, six principles inform a child-friendly learning environment:

- Reinforcement of Child Rights
- Health, Safety and Protection
- Learning Effectiveness
- Societal Participation
- Gender Responsiveness
- Inclusiveness (including students with Special Needs) (UNICEF, 2009a)

The UNESCO programme and Oman’s educational vision for quality, equity, sustainability and demonstrated outcomes are facilitated by the UNESCO programme. Pilot schools have been established in all governorates with each school community, with the involvement of all stakeholders identifying two principles to target initially. These schools offer an alternative model of education, whereby school communities identify their individual goals, devise their own solutions, test, evaluate and revise, whilst maintaining the best interests of every child as the modus operandi.

Vocational Education does not come under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. As in other parts of the Arab world, manual labour, technical and vocational skills are not highly regarded, particularly as programmes associated with business development and entrepreneurship and trained, specialized teachers are not integral to this option as it currently exists. This is in spite of Sultan Qaboos exhorting Omani youth make a conscious effort to work in the national interest because ‘work, whatever its nature, is a virtue’(UNICEF, 2009a). In 2009, a UNICEF report noted that legal offences committed by children in

### Table 1. Types of alternative education in the Sultanate of Oman.

| Programme | Aim | Application |
|-----------|-----|-------------|
| Adult Education | Erasing illiteracy classes – law and environmental sustainability, drug prevention, fisheries, as a valuable resource, entrepreneurship, family values | Teaching process takes place in school classes (7–12) as an evening class or using the facilities in mosques |
| Cooperative School Programme Educated-Village Programme | Erasing illiteracy for people aged between 15 and 44 | To benefit from educational facilities out of school hours. The number of cooperative schools reached 99 in 2009/2010 |
| Inclusion Education classes | Eliminating alphabetical illiteracy and catering for adults with learning difficulties | The programme was applied in Al-Murasi Village in Bharca County in 2004–2005 then in Burkat Almoz County in 2005–2006 |
| Child-Friendly Schools | Joint initiative between UNESCO and the Ministry of Education | Selected schools across all Governorates, designed to be tailored to the specific needs of each school community |
| Vocational Education | To cater for students who do not continue with Post-Basic education and who seek training in handicrafts, fisheries management, Islamic studies, for example | Run by the Ministry of Manpower, free vocational education is open to Omaniis (girls and boys) in one of four Vocational Training Centres or via fully funded scholarships at private colleges |
| Special Education Schools | Learners with specific disabilities | Located on in Muscat at the time of writing |
Oman amounted to 7% of the sentences passed in 2003 and were in relation to crimes such as assault, robbery, motor vehicle theft, arson and illicit drug use (UNICEF, 2009b). Whilst the Ministry of Justice aims to rehabilitate and reintegrate such youth into society using a holistic approach comprising the police, judiciary and families along with prison and social services, it is unclear what role interventions, inspired by alternative education options, might play in circumventing such behaviour. Clearly, evidence from the United States suggests that alternative education programmes with teachers committed to working with troubled youth and their families were able to reduce the risk of recidivism and promote social responsibility (Flower et al., 2011; Genao, 2014; Pang & Foley, 2006).

Special Education and catering for the needs of children with diverse abilities and impairments has become a focus for both the Education Council and the Ministry of Education in Oman. In 1996, Oman ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child with a caveat that Islamic Law would not be contravened. Royal Decree 22/2014 heralded the introduction of a law pertaining to the rights of children in Oman, placing the Sultanate ‘well ahead of its Western counterparts on child rights advocacy’ (Tekin, 2015; UNESCO, 2009). A disabled child is defined as:

’a child who suffers from a limited sensory, physical or mental abilities caused by congenital or hereditary factors or as a result of illness or accent, or limit his/her ability to perform his/her role in normal life and participate fully and effectively in society at an equal level with other’ (UNESCO, 2009).

Articles 25–38 and 51–53 stipulate that the social rights of children are protected, irrespective of disability and include the right to education, survival and growth in the context of freedom, human dignity and social security (Tekin, 2015). This new law bodes very well for the expansion of Special Needs schools which are currently only located in Muscat and which provide for limited numbers of students who are autistic, deaf, blind or intellectually impaired.

The system of education in Oman

In Oman, there are two streams of education: public (national or government) schools which are free to all Omani citizens and privately run institutions which are for-profit, as illustrated by Figure 1. Inspired by the vision of His Majesty, Sultan Qaboos and embodying the nation's Islamic Creed and Code of Law, the overarching educational philosophy of Oman is developed by the Council of Education, which provides direction for the scope and operation of the Ministry of Education. Importantly, the Ministry of Education oversees both private and public education, thereby preserving the primacy of Islamic values, pride in the Omani identity and the ongoing promotion of citizens who are devoted to the well-being of their country.

Figure 1. Educational Structure in Oman.
The public school system comprises Cycle 1 (Years 1–4) and Cycle 2 (Years 5–10) of Basic Education and Years 11 and 12 as Post-Basic Education, all of which rely upon the national curriculum and syllabi authorized by the Ministry and Education. Although Basic Education is not compulsory, it is free for all Omani children and 85% of children attend public schools with the balance attending fee-based private schools (Ministry of Education, 2012). Operating as businesses, private schools use foreign curricula and are staffed by expatriate teachers and administrators. They are granted approval in order to cater for niche markets, such as ethnic minorities and those who seek private or bilingual environments. Affluent Omani parents are choosing a private education for their children, based on the perception that such schools are better quality. In contrast, Centers of Qur’anic Studies generally operate outside normal school hours and during vacations, with the greatest attendance during the long summer holidays when parents encourage concentration on the skills of Qur’anic recitation. Although there is some choice for parents and students in the Sultanate of Oman, these options are neither free, nor entirely accessible, geographically, economically or culturally, and thus are unable to provide an equitable strategy to reduce the gap between educational outcomes and labour market demands.

Overview of selected outcome

The mission of the Ministry of Education is to enhance the educational level and opportunities for all Omanis, irrespective of age. By achieving the Millennium Development Goals of universal primary education and equal opportunities for girls in education, Oman is to be highly commended. Concerns, however, exist for the significant percentage of students who drop out; some before they even finish primary/elementary schooling, others after Year 10 or before attaining their General Degree Diploma (GED) at the end of Year 12 (The Supreme Council for Planning report, 2012). Whilst attendance is not mandated, it is expected until at least the completion of Year 9 (Ministry of education, 2012). Prolonged absenteeism results in a meeting between the local Wali, or governor and parents, with the aim of encouraging the young person to return to school. A report is sent to the Ministry of Education with details of the individual circumstances. Where there is outright refusal to attend school, there is no punitive response; rather there is an open invitation to return to school within two years or after that period, the person is welcome to join an Adult Education Centre.

Of the job seekers in 2014, 40% had not achieved a GED, some 65% were aged under 25, 28% between 25 and 39, with only 7% over 40, giving cause for concern (Ministry of Economics & Trade, 2012). Whilst numbers fluctuate, the unemployment data shown in Table 2 highlight the correlation between low skills and the inability to find work (Ministry of Manpower, 2015). This relationship varies inversely as job seekers increase their skills. Despite some opportunities for Vocational education, there are no statistics to indicate whether students who pursue such training succeed in finding gainful employment or if those numbers are lost in those job seekers who have not attained their GED.

Table 2. Number of job seekers from 2012–2014 by educational qualification.

| Qualification                        | Year 2014  | Year 2013  | Year 2012  |
|--------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
|                                      | M   | F   | Total | %  | M   | F   | Total | %  | M   | F   | Total | %  |
| Elementary and Below Secondary       | 6500 | 8182 | 14,682 | 10.2 | 6299 | 8013 | 14,312 | 9.5 | 4086 | 5457 | 9543 | 6.2 |
| General Degree Diploma               | 19,416 | 11,878 | 31,294 | 21.7 | 18,804 | 10,605 | 29,409 | 19.5 | 19,653 | 11,094 | 30,747 | 20 |
| Intermediate Diploma                 | 21,681 | 63,272 | 84,953 | 58.8 | 25,863 | 65,682 | 91,545 | 60.8 | 26,644 | 67,152 | 93,796 | 61 |
| University                           | 1260 | 4269 | 5529 | 3.83 | 1443 | 4603 | 6046 | 4 | 1989 | 5064 | 7053 | 4.6 |
| Postgraduate Degree (High Diploma & MA & Ph.D.) | 1232 | 5928 | 7160 | 4.96 | 1631 | 6664 | 8295 | 5.51 | 2522 | 8038 | 10,560 | 6.9 |
| Total                                | 50,192 | 94,255 | 144,447 | 100 | 54,177 | 96,408 | 150,585 | 100 | 55,164 | 98,162 | 153,326 | 100 |
This becomes a serious question, when one considers that the GED is designed to prepare students for enrolment in higher education and lacks the flexibility to cater for students who might flourish in an alternative, vocational or blended setting. The USA, Germany, India, Japan and the UK, for example, successfully incorporate alternative education programmes to reduce the percentage of students who drop out by more effectively matching programmes to individual needs and thus provide a pathway to meaningful participation in the labour market (N. Martin & Brand, 2006; Simone & Uschi, 2010; Vlaardingerbroek & Hachem El-Masri, 2008). Evidence suggests that the Basic Education programme as it currently exists needs to consider additional alternatives to more adequately meet current and future demands. Thus, this study seeks to highlight the importance and opportunities for alternative education in Oman in order to more effectively meet the needs of individual students as well as promoting social well-being.

Producing students who are better equipped to meet labour market expectations has become a high priority for public policy-makers in the Sultanate of Oman. In order to gauge the consideration and potential implementation for alternative educational programmes and schools in the Sultanate, this research is guided by the following questions:

RQ1. What is the perception of the school curriculum in Oman, and to what extent does it meet the national and global market needs?

RQ2. To what extent has the reformation of the educational curriculum in Oman helped schools and higher institutions to prepare Omanis for the globalized market?

RQ3. What are your perception regarding alternative education and the challenges concerning implementation in Oman, as well as the government's preparation and planning?

RQ4. To what extent has alternative education benefited Omanis; how fruitful are the existing programs in terms of outcomes; and how well have the programs prepared students for the workforce?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

As a basic premise, this research is underpinned by the understanding that education in Oman functions to:

- Develop the Sultanate's cognitive and creative capacity
- Sustain the political status quo thereby promoting social cohesion and stability
- Transmit and reinforce Islamic norms and values
- Stratify learners based on meritocratic beliefs about success and failure
- Promote social solidarity through notions of a shared Omani identity
- Produce an educated workforce, equipped with high level technological, collaborative and thinking skills, who can contribute to the nation's economic well-being.

Free, state-managed education, in the Durkheimian sense, is regarded as the primary vehicle for socialization, given its legislated authority, widespread integration, accessibility and its emphasis on collectivism (Durkheim, 1956, 1977; Mannion, 2014). This theoretical perspective, however, does not take into account the contested space between globalization and nation states keen to maintain their autonomy, nor does it acknowledge diversity. The convergence of functions that endorse a set of social norms, a collective identity and a defined purpose can also be explained by social constructivism (Solingen, 2008). The term ‘constructivism’ also connotes the change and continuity which exists in any society and enables the problematization of normative perceptions (Haimi Adnan & Smith, 2001). In Oman, education is the culmination of His Majesty’s shared vision and the laws of the Sultanate, both of which are informed by the Islamic Creed. Constructivism acknowledges the role of both the Council and the Ministry of Education as the approved agencies, entrusted by Sultan Qaboos with the responsibility for manifesting the endorsed principles embodied by the United Nations goal of Education for All.
The conceptual framework (Figure 2) encapsulates a constructivist vision for alternative pathways to employment and meeting market demands, acknowledging that learners make meaning, i.e. construct knowledge, differently. This is based on differentiated individual and socio-cultural contexts as well as the variety of ways that learners acquire, select, interpret and organize information (Adams, 2006; Fleury & Garrison, 2014). Given the pressing need to better match market demands with school outcomes, alternative schools and programmes offer the scope and flexibility to meet the needs of families, rural, regional and urban communities and more broadly the national interest. The need for alternative schools and programmes exists because of their built-in capacity to ‘provide options for students with particular needs, special interests, and learning styles in order to increase the likelihood of engaged learning’ (Tissington, 2006). Without a General Education Diploma, the likelihood of poor social outcomes such as poverty, welfare dependence and poor health increases significantly (Wilkins & Bost, 2014). By promoting the merits of either a Vocational or Academic Diploma or a combined stream with a new pathway to higher education, the individual talents of young people could be nurtured to serve all stakeholders: individuals, families, communities and the Sultanate.

Figure 2 depicts one possible conceptual framework, in which education could be organized coherently to enhance the quality and scope of educational opportunities in the Sultanate by considering alternative strategies. With the success of mainstream curriculum reform processes, and the graduation from Millennium Development Goals to Millennium Learning Goals, the time is ripe for Oman to review the way in which educational opportunities are delivered across the Sultanate. Such a framework seeks to encapsulate a model wherein alternative education becomes a strategic response to the 2014 Child Rights Law, the demands of the labour market and calls for growth in entrepreneurship and the private sector in Oman.

**Methodology**

This study uses qualitative analysis of structured interviews with senior and influential figures in the Ministry of Education, Oman, conducted during 2014. Purposeful sampling was used to identify and interview five key officials, whose identity is denoted numerically as Person One (P1) through to Person Five (P5). The questions were designed to gauge the status of educational planning and development as it relates to educational alternatives (Table 3). Raw data were openly coded before converting to axial coding and grouping into categories guided by the key research questions. The grouped data enabled the identification of themes or meaningful units comprising:

1. Education for All
2. The Concept of Alternative Education
3. Teachers
4. Benefits of Alternative Education for Oman
5. Strategic Planning.

**Figure 2.** The Conceptual Framework of Education in Oman.
Results and discussion

Education for all

The notions of Education For All and educational equity stem from the World Education Forums, convened by UNESCO in Jomtein, Thailand and Dakar, Senegal, in 1990 and 2000, respectively (UNESCO, 2000). Since ascending the throne in 1970, His Majesty’s enduring commitment to education has ensured that the subsequent principles for action, the objectives and orientations for implementation and the designated priorities reflect international goals for best practice. Oman has worked assiduously to shape its own educational vision based on universal access, with a focus on the development of knowledge, skills and core values. All respondents affirmed this commitment, best summarized by Person Three (P3):

Many plans for reform have been introduced by the Ministry of Education to create or initiate schools to produce good outcomes (students) that can compete in the labour market for the Sultanate of Oman to apply the principles of the World Education Forum, Dakar 2000 as education for all.

Mindful of equity and diversity, Persons Four and Five (P4 and P5) also noted that:

In Oman, the Ministry of Manpower has some intermediate colleges and institutions that offer these types of alternative education. They are called Vocational schools and some specifically target skills in the Fishing Industry. They accept students who graduate from 10th Grade and the courses run for two years, especially designed to prepare students work in a range of industries. (P4)

The Ministry of Education in its Curriculum Directorate Offices conducts a range of workshops designed to reform curricula and respond to the demands by employers for an enhanced skill set. (P5)

The concept of alternative education

Given the breadth and depth of the variation throughout the world and an education system which has grown from only three schools for some individually selected 900 boys, to a universal system embodying primary, secondary and tertiary educational institutions, interviewees affirmed that:
In Oman alternative education has different names and styles, such as disabled schools, illiteracy centers, learning difficulties schools, preparatory classes (classes prepared for children before entering basic education first circle schools) and Inclusion Schools. Many of these schools have been opened in many of the provinces in Oman. All such schools are administered by the Ministry of Education. (P4, P5)

However, the term ‘alternative education’ is somewhat problematic because it is not used in Oman per se. P1 observed that:

Currently the Ministry of Education is still working on developing the two tracks of post basic education schools, one for the science, and the other for humanities. Students will have to choose the tracks according to their desire and disposition.

P2 and P3 added that:

In Oman, we only have one type of education, which is mostly formal and those alternative education schools that are mentioned in the literature are not available in Oman.

Despite this observation, P4 and P5 referred to opportunities which currently exist beyond the purview of the Ministry of Education.

There are many types of school offered by the Ministry of Manpower that are considered as alternative education types of institution, such as bilingual schools, Qur’an recitation schools, adult literacy centers, religious schools, and fishermen training schools.

P5 also highlighted that:

The Ministry of Education considers Adult literacy centers as a type of alternative education in Oman. We try to hire high school graduates after short training courses on teaching methods, to be ready to teach and direct these centers. These centers can be found in every city and village in Oman.

**Teachers**

Whilst the concept of ‘alternative education’ engendered different responses and perceptions, further discussion established consensus between Persons 1, 2, 3 and 4, that educational choices and expansion required specifically trained teachers with designated expertise. These interviewees noted that:

Colleges of Education in Oman are still preparing teachers for formal public schools, which is not a suitable strategy for the alternative education schools mentioned in the literature.

The development of a Bachelor of Education programme in Special needs was also identified as another step towards responding to diverse needs.

The College of Education at Sultan Qaboos University is beginning to prepare candidates, especially those holding an Intermediate Diploma (two year qualification), for teaching students with specific learning difficulties. This program began in 2011

School graduates with a General Education Diploma are given intensive training to prepare them to teach Adult literacy. Whilst this decision expedited the establishment of adult literacy programmes and developed community partnerships, there is still an opportunity such ‘teachers’ to be professionally developed even further or supported by Omanis with postgraduate qualifications in adult literacy.

**Benefits of alternative education**

The educational priorities in Oman have been deliberately targeted at enhancing teacher quality, promoting the principle of a learner-friendly environment whilst keeping pace with advances in technology. The capacity of Basic and Post-Basic Education to evolve with this vision, along with the ongoing efforts to develop Omani curricula and textbooks, is a remarkable achievement in such a short space of time. Efforts to assimilate students with diverse needs have been largely addressed by mainstream classroom teachers in the first instance and by external agencies. Evaluating developments and responding strategically has been a cornerstone of Oman’s success. P1 and P5 affirmed this process, commenting that: *The Ministry of Education, in the Directory of Curriculum Development, is now applying a comprehensive curriculum in schools and waiting to find out the effects of this on students’ performance.*
The framework for a comprehensive education system, with the capacity to incorporate an Omani version of Alternative Education was mooted by P3 and P4, when they said that: *Alternative education is considered to be a new concept so the Ministry of Education needs to understand the concepts first and then we can assign the right groups or team to work together to establish a vision for alternative education schools in Oman.*

Effective practices which characterize alternative education are as follows: school-based mentors, quality instruction, parental involvement and proactive behaviour interventions and supports, and are implied in this salient observation by P2 (Flower et al., 2011; Tobin & Sprague, 2000). *This type of education needs more effort from other ministries and social partnerships since the Ministry of Education is now working on the project to raise the quality of education.*

**Strategic planning**

With an eye to the future and based on the decades of experience, working to bring His Majesty’s vision to fruition, strategic planning is embedded in the scope of the Ministry and the Council of Education. Collaboration, active participation, evaluation and review are hallmarks of this process. P4 and P5 noted that: *The Ministry of Education is now working to create a new strategic plan for 2030 for General Education Schools and for Technical Education, and many committees are now working in order to reform the overall educational system in Oman.*

Whilst refinement and development point to overall reforms which may include alternative education, P1 and P2 both pointed out that: *The Ministry of Education in the Continuing Education Directorate are now working hard to eradicate illiteracy among adults aged 15–44 to reach the target of no illiterates in accordance with the World Education Forum, Dakar 2000 recommendation, as the percentage in Oman is still 4.5%.*

This ambition is in keeping with the principles of *Education for All*, but belies the achievements in literacy in the 15–25 year age bracket, where UNESCO reports Oman as registering 97.4 and 98.2% for males and females, respectively, in 2012. These figures emphasize the importance of adult literacy programmes and the enduring commitment to this section of the population.

**Conclusions**

Alternative Education, in all its permutations and combinations, is widely regarded as a vital complement to mainstream, publicly funded systems of education and manifesting benefits to local communities, the broader society, the economy and health care systems. Furthermore, Alternative Education, in the form of vocational or technical training, is a feature among developed, thriving economies, given its demonstrated capacity to engender entrepreneurship and provide skills for a diverse population. This study set out to discern the precise nature of alternative education, because it is a relatively new concept for consideration in Oman. This point was born out by the analysis of interviews with key, senior figures in the Ministry of Education.

Coincidental pressures exist. Brought about by the needs of a post-oil economy, there are also concerns for climate change and sustainability, a demand for employment and life skills which enable Omanis to effectively interact in a globalized world where labour markets transcend national borders. Technology has become ubiquitous and increasingly sophisticated, and a quantum of knowledge is no longer enough – it is what one is able to do with that knowledge that counts. Amidst all of this is the new Child Rights Law and Oman’s commitment to its Islamic values, its people and its future.

The time is ripe to envision a broader model of education, to enable Oman to enhance the scope and quality of its education for all. This paper aims to contribute to the conversation, to inform the strategic development and to provide input regarding the choices that exist and how further development might be implemented. Bringing together disparate programmes under the auspices of one authority offers an opportunity for a targeted, efficient use of funds to establish alternative education programmes and schools, build complementary partnerships and to provide Omani students with greater choice in their
pathways to success. An integrated, broad model of education for all, wherein alternative education is able to match particular learners to targeted programmes which best suit their needs and potential and which also serves the interests of Oman, is worthy of consideration. The serious issue of school dropouts and the alarming statistics of job seekers, who have failed to attain a General Education Diploma, is a strain on families and society, which calls for action.

Considerable scope exists for further research including research into why students drop out of school and what possible success might be engendered by a pilot school which offers a combination of academic and technical subjects with the emphasis on the latter being about business and entrepreneurship. Alternative schools have very effectively helped to modify delinquent behaviour, build self-efficacy and fuel creativity and innovation and they offer a valuable strategy to ensure that education in Oman produces students who take pride in their work, recognizing that whatever its nature, it is a virtue.

Notes on contributor

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