

*Full Length Research*

## View of Education development in Oman

Dr. Noor Al Najar

Department of Curriculum and instruction, College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University, PO 32 , PC 123, AlKoud, Sultanate of Oman, Fax: +968 2441 3817

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This article provides a description and analysis of the development of the education system and its stages in the context of Oman, at the level of formal school. This descriptive analysis constitutes three core objectives. First, to focus on the development of education in Oman; Second, to explore each stage of these developments, and lastly to evaluate the extent to which the developments are consistent with the intended aims of education development in Oman. I will meet these objectives by analyzing studies that evaluate the education system in Oman. In the beginning of this article, I focus on the stages of development undergone by the education system in Oman, in particular before and after 1970. This analysis found that despite changes implemented by the Ministry of Education (MOE) intended to improve the education system, no significant change has occurred. In fact many of the weaknesses of the previous system continue to exist. The main contribution of this evaluation is that it provides policy makers with the most up-to-date information and evidence on the condition of the current education system. Also, this research highlights some key obstacles which prevent the education system from improving. Subsequently it is hoped that the MOE can work to find solutions to overcome the obstacles that may prevent the further development of the education system in Oman. Whilst providing a robust evaluation, this article has two main limitations. First, it is based entirely on one data collection method which is a review of the literature. It has no supporting evidence which might corroborate or validate the literature review findings. The second limitation is that despite every effort made to be objective and systematic in the reviewing process, it is inevitable that the analysis and findings include an element of the author's biases.

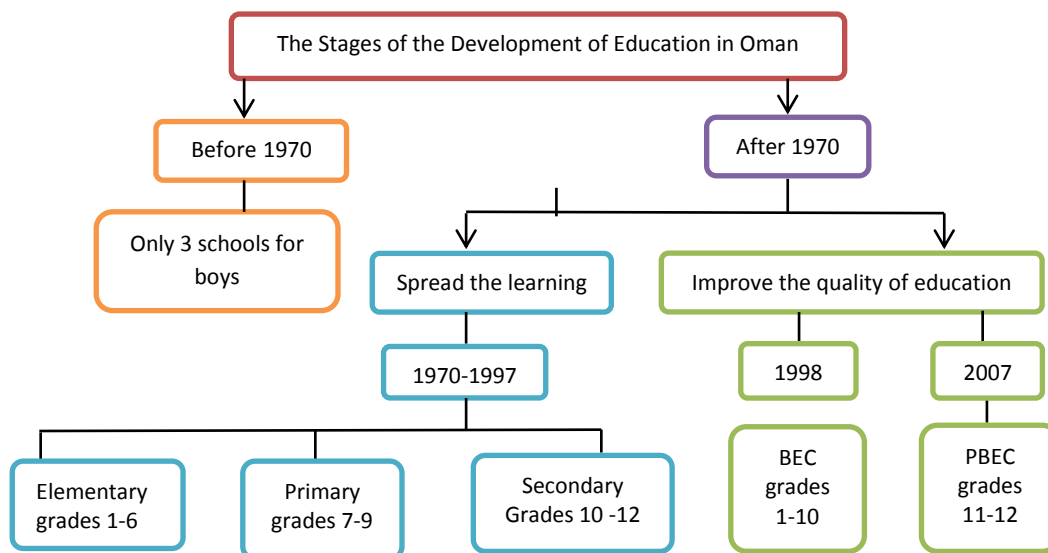
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### INTRODUCTION

The development stages of education in Oman can be divided into two main phases (see Figure 1); the pre-1970 phase, and that of the educational renaissance after 1970. The latter phase can be divided into two main

periods. The first period extends from 1970 to 1998, and marked the focus of the Omani government on widening access to education, (General Education System (GES) was then the mainstream education) (Al-Bulushi, Al-



**Figure 1:** The development stages of school education in Oman

Adawi, & Al-Kitani, 1999). The second period extends from 1998 to 2007, the highlight of which was the improvement of the quality of education, and the Basic education Curriculum (BEC) was then introduced. The application of BEC (grades 1 to 10) was followed later on by the introduction of the Post basic Education Curriculum (PBEC, grades 11 and 12), the curriculum designed for secondary level education (grades 11 and 12) (AlMaamari, 2009). The following section describes the education system in Oman prior to 1970.

According to the Ministry of Education (2010), School level education in Oman prior to 1970 was confined to Islamic studies represented in Quranic schools and mosque education groups, where the Holy Quran, the principles of Islam and Arabic language and Mathematics were the main unit of study. Thus, Quranic schools were the only means of providing education in Oman. There was a shift from the traditional education system to a more formal one in the 1930s when schools were established with limited content and multiple subjects that were taught by teachers appointed by the state. There was no infrastructure for formal education except in three schools that totaled 909 students, all of whom were boys. A general level of ignorance and lack of expertise prevailed as a result of the limited spread of education.

The turning point for the spreading of education provision throughout Oman at a more effective level, took place when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos took power in 1970, as that was one of the Sultan's priorities (Al-Ghassani, 2010). Accordingly, greater efforts were

exerted and money was invested to promote education in a balanced manner amongst the different sections of Omani society and according to its populated areas. Since then, enrolment in the education programme has become compulsory, and is free for all Omanis (Ministry of Education, 2008). The following section describes what is known in Oman as the Breakthrough era in learning, which began in 1970.

### Breakthrough in Education after 1970

The provision of education in the Sultanate underwent different stages and gradual evolution: from the provision of GES, which was prevalent since 1970; the BEC in 1998; up to the development of PBEC in 2007 (Ministry of Education, 2008). The real breakthrough in education however was made after 1970 when education was spread gradually throughout Oman. The number of schools increased from three schools (before 1970) to 1,040 schools with 517,053 pupils in 2011/2012 (Department of Statistics and Indicators, 2012). The focus of the Government of the Sultanate in the early years of the renaissance was on the dissemination of education in all regions of the Sultanate and all segments of society and the provision of qualified staff who could contribute to the social and economic renaissance of the country (Ministry of Education, 2010).

The MOE carried out the task of spreading and organising the education programme and the enactment

of its laws. The legal pupils' age – determined by the Sultanate – to first attend GES schools, is five years and ten months, while the age of enrolment in private education is five years and four months (Al Surkhawee, 2013). The realisation of the principle of equal opportunities in education remains one of the key priorities of educational policy in the Sultanate. It is considered to be amongst the most important principles of the renaissance as stipulated by the basic laws of the state. Thus there are now schools for girls and boys alike (Ministry of Education, 2008). The next section gives a brief description of this stage.

### General Education system (GES)

The General Education System was devised in 1970 and, in part, still continues to this day. GES consisted of three stages: the first was called the elementary stage and stretched for six years from the first grade to the sixth grade (ages 6 to 11 years), whilst the second stage, which was called the primary stage, stretched for three years from grade seven to grade nine (ages 12 to 14). The last stage, which was called the secondary stage, stretched for 3 years, from the tenth grade to the twelfth grade (ages 15 to 17 years) (Ministry of Education, 2010).

The government has provided free education for all Omani citizens since the inception of the education renaissance. The aims of the GES were defined as:

1. To improve mental abilities;
2. To strengthen and support Islamic education;
3. To improve pupils' physical abilities;
4. To enhance the effects of education;
5. To encourage education for earning a living and a respect of work;
6. To improve education for economic investment;
7. To emphasis civic and political education; and
8. To help to improve the effective use of spare time (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 23)

In the first three stages, the school year comprised 160 school days that were divided into two semesters; each semester lasting for 16 weeks. The methods and activities employed in the educational system during these stages were traditional with very few pupil-centered activities. The learning assessment was mostly confined to tests that assessed the minimum mental capacity of pupils (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Undoubtedly, the MOE official view is that the GES achieved its aims during that period of constructive

renaissance (Ministry of Education, 2008). By the 1990s, considerable expansion in the provision of education was largely achieved, despite the continuous need for a greater number of schools, in order to accommodate the increasing number of pupils (Al Minwaria, 2015). The government realized that, to catch up with global developments, there should be an effective system in place that would supply young Omanis with the knowledge and skills needed in an ever-changing labour market (Al-Barwani, 2002).

Some previous research has been conducted on the effectiveness of the GES in Oman; however, those studies supported the need to develop the GES (Al-Barwani, 2002; Al-Ghassani, 2010; Al-Rawahi, 2002; Bwo Btana, 2003; Mohammed, 2004; Rassekh, 2004). The results of these studies indicated that GES provision did not effectively prepare pupils for a HE or a career. In a review of these studies, I identified some key weaknesses found in secondary education (GES) as follows:

1. Weakness in English language skills
2. Weakness personal and communication skills
3. Weakness in study skills
4. Inability to respond to the requirements of HE admission
5. There is a gap between the type of knowledge acquired by graduates of secondary education (GES) and the minimum academic skills and abilities required by HE. Each of these studies agreed that there is a lack of coordination between HE institutions and the MOE. The most important factors that led to the existence of this gap are summed up as follows:

1. Shortcomings in the preparation of curricula, teaching methods and evaluations, and poor contribution by the HE institutions on this preparation.
2. Al-Barwani (2002) has recommended the need to focus on the skills required by the university, while all of the above studies recommended the need to focus on strengthening the English language skills, and the need for co-ordination between HE institutions and the MOE in curriculum development and operations of assessment.

As for the efficacy of secondary education in preparing pupils for the job market, all of the studies that I was able to identify above reported that this preparation was insufficient. The studies also found that high school

graduates lack the necessary skills to prepare them for the different areas of work, including; personal skills (such as self-confidence), English language skills, Mathematics and Physics, as well as IT skills. Al-Barwani also found that despite the fall in the number of foreign workers in the private sector, this sector does not attract Omani high school graduates (GES) and this is due to the weakness of their skills.

Moreover, Al-Kindi (2007) explored to what extent the government's "Vision 2020" strategy on the development of human capital, had increased the number of Omani employees in the private sector. He detected that there are no effective links between government organisations, training providers and employers in the private sector. Also, there is a lack of communication and partnership work between them. This disconnectedness results in pupils being unprepared for the transition between one educational establishment to another.

These findings indicate the need for the further development of the education system in Oman. The MOE reported that they reviewed the GES evaluation studies and used those results as evidence to create BEC and PBEC. BEC and PBEC were thus created to overcome the points of weakness identified by these studies. The next section describes the BEC, which is the first stage of formal education in Oman.

### **Basic Education Curriculum (BEC)**

The MOE has been striving to achieve a significant improvement in the educational system, based on the intended vision of the Omani economy for the year 2020. The BEC is the system adopted by the Government of the Sultanate as a national strategy (Al-Ghassani, 2010). Amongst the most prominent education-related policies in this strategy is one aimed at identifying a suitable aspect of the education system in the Sultanate, which would accommodate the requirements of the next stage, so as to ensure that by the time pupils graduate they would be ready to engage in both academic life and the labour market (Ministry of Education, 2008).

In response to this strategy, the MOE implemented a number of key initiatives for the development of the educational system. The BEC Project, implemented in 1998, was one of the most important initiatives taken and was extended to form the secondary education curriculum (PBEC) in 2007 (Ministry of Education, 2009). As far as BEC is concerned, it is defined as:

*... a unified education programme that is provided by the government for all the children (of school age) of the Sultanate. BEC's duration is ten years and is based primarily on providing the basic needs for information, knowledge and skills, and the development of attitudes and*

*values that would enable the learners to continue in education or training in accordance with their preferences and their willingness and abilities* (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 23).

The development of all these fundamental elements was taken into consideration by the BEC in order to meet the challenges of the present and future while maintaining the religious and cultural identity and heritage of Oman, within the framework of overall community development (Ministry of Education, 2007).

BEC consists of two cycles: the first one stretches for four years from the first grade to the fourth grade (ages 6 to 9 years), while the second cycle lasts for 6 years, from the fifth grade to the tenth grade (ages 10 to 15 years). During these two stages, pupils study for ten years after which they move to the PBEC (Ministry of Education, 2007).

The MOE adopted the application of this gradual method in such a way so that the first ten grades of BEC were introduced in the nine-year period covering the three five-year plans for development, whereby the first group of graduates from the tenth grade, graduated at the end of 2006/2007 (Al Sunhoore, 2015). The number of BEC schools was gradually raised every year, from 17 schools in 1998, to 855 schools in 2011/2012. The number of pupils then reached 366,273. Table 1 shows the evolution of the number of BEC schools and pupils in the period between 1998 and 2011 (Department of Statistics and Indicators, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2008). It is expected that this gradual replacement with previous system (GES) will continue until BEC has been implemented in all schools by 2015 (Ministry of Education, 2008).

It could be said that there are two key factors that drove and motivated the reform of the education system in the Sultanate: the first factor is that of globalisation, which is taking place in the world economy. States must prepare human cadres, trained in the use of modern techniques and with the appropriate mental and analytical capabilities, in respect of the demand for universal communication skills. The second is the Omanisation policy currently pursued by the government in order to decrease its reliance on expatriates (Ministry of National Economy, 2007).

The main aims of BEC were to reduce the dropout rates of pupils and provide them with basic skills during their time in BEC, a period which lasts for 10 years. After that, successful pupils may move to the PBEC which lasts for two years (grades 11 and 12). The aim of the renovated BEC in Oman is rooted in the following principles:

1. The comprehensive development of the learner's personality to be integrated within the framework of the principles of the Islamic faith and culture of Oman.

**Table 1:** Development of school numbers and students (BEC) from 1998-2011 (Department of Statistics and Indicators, 2012; National Center for Statistics and Information, 2012)

The year	School numbers	Student numbers
1998	17	11,400
2002	288	108,764
2007	661	283,137
2011	855	366,273

2. Encouraging the national, Arab, Islamic and humanitarian affiliations, and the development of learners' ability to interact with the surrounding world.
3. The provision of an opportunity for the learner to actively participate in the overall development of the Omani society.
4. Providing equal opportunity in education for all.
5. The provision of a learner-centered education that gives the learner life skills such as communication competencies, self-learning, the ability to use methods of critical scientific thinking and the dealing with science and contemporary technologies.
6. Ensuring the preparation of learners for the requirements of HE and the labour market and life in general.
7. The reduction of the dropout rate among pupils.
8. The eradication of illiteracy and raising the pupils' awareness and knowledge (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 16).

It is worth noting here that the foregoing aims focus on personality, attitude, skills, and other factors. The BEC considered skills to be an essential phase to prepare pupils for different orientations, whether academic or professional. To achieve these aims, changes were made in all aspects of the educational system. These include the philosophy of education and its aims – through the length of the school year and the school day, the school building, the classroom density, the administrative structure – and the regulatory framework for school materials and activities that are included in the curriculum; textbooks, materials, resources, teaching methods, means of evaluation and the study plan (Ministry of Education, 2008).

The first significant change was implementing mixed classes of boys and girls in all grades of the first cycle of BEC (grades 1 to 4). The MOE follows a policy of appointing women as teachers during this period to

encourage psychological and emotional convergence between the teachers and children (Al Minwaria, 2015), and to provide learners with psychological security and ignite their drive to learn in an environment which takes into account the psychological conditions of learners. . Women were also appointed as school directors to work in such schools (Al-Ghassani, 2010).

In the second cycle of school (BEC), boys and girls attend separate schools, although school regulations are identical and applied equally in both. In addition, textbooks and other educational materials – prepared by the MOE – are identical for both boys and girls (Ministry of Education, 2008).

The application of BEC and the implications, which accompanied these changes through the improvements made to the curriculum and evaluation methods, were recognised by the MOE. The application of this way of education – which addresses the pupils' needs and future acquired skills – necessitated the allocation of additional time for teaching and learning. For this purpose, the number of annual days devoted to teaching and learning in the BEC system was increased to 180. The school day was also increased from four hours a day to more than seven hours. As a result of these changes, the time allotted for teaching and learning increased significantly (Ministry of Education, 2008).

This change was, however, reversed in 2012 by a decree (N 432) from the Minister of Education in December, 2011 (Ministry of Education, 2012). This decision was reached because there was a considerable number of complaints from teachers, pupils and parents about the length of the school day and the school year due to the heat, especially during the summer (The Seventh Day Newspaper, 2012).

I think another contributing factor to the adoption of this resolution was the demonstrations that took place in Oman at the start of what has become known as the "Arab Spring", which might have prompted the newly-appointed Minister to respond to people's and their parents demands and, consequently, the school day and year lengths were reduced to match those that were used in the system known formerly as GES.

As previously explained, after completing the BEC, the

MOE expects the learner to have an educational level that is in line with that of his/her peers in most developed countries (in terms of acquiring knowledge, competencies and skills, attitudes and values). One may ask, then: has BEC in Oman achieved its desired aims? The results of some studies indicate that the expected aims and skills of this education programme did not actually materialise (Al-Ajmi, 2008; Al-Barznje, 2006; Al-Bloshia, 2007; A-Hagri, 2010; N. Al-Lamki, 2009; Al-Salmi, 2005). I identified some of the weaknesses observed in BEC as follows:

1. BEC pupils showed a weakness in Arabic language skills (Al-Ajmi, 2008; Al-Barznje, 2006; Al-Bloshia, 2007);
2. This weakness is not limited to the mother tongue (Arabic), but was also found for abilities in the English language, which is considered to be one of the most important skills that should be provided by the BEC. This finding seems to agree with the findings of Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2011), Al-Lamki (2009) and Al-Salmi (2005);
3. The pupils' overall performance was found to be much lower than that of the international group in terms of their abilities, specifically in Mathematics and Science (Ministry of Education and the World Bank, 2012).

The above studies agreed that the reasons behind the pupils' weaknesses in their skills and abilities were teaching methods and the BEC content. Al-Hagri (2010) believes that the changes that accompanied the BEC have not provided quality output.

BEC is the first stage in which pupils are taught the required skills to prepare them for the second stage (PBEC). Also, the application of BEC was the beginning of the development of secondary education (PBEC), so that it became consistent with the aims and aspirations of the education programme of the stage that preceded it.

### Post Basic education PBEC

A secondary education curriculum was required to prepare a curriculum for grades 11 and 12, designed to allow pupils to make a variety of career options available to them. The development of such a curriculum would meet the national aims set for education, regardless of whether or not graduates are willing to continue on to university education, enrol in training programs on a professional and semi-professional basis, or enter the labour market (Ministry of Education, 2003). The development process began by setting appropriate targets and ambitious plans for BEC to be achieved through the development of the secondary education process.

The PBEC was designed to have the potential to meet national and international standards and expectations, the most desired of which, according to the MOE (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 5), are:

1. Establishing curricula and evaluation criteria that are universally recognised and are based on learning outcomes, and holding genuine pupil evaluation.
2. Designing learning activities that are pupil-centered. These activities are supposed to enhance pupils' critical thinking and problem-solving skills that can be transferred and used effectively in various challenging situations.
3. Acknowledging individual differences and emphasising the development of personal talents and special abilities.
4. Emphasising the development of vocational skills and overall capacities in pupils.
5. Emphasising the development of skills in pupils which will help them adapt to social change.

The above points highlighted that the new curriculum for secondary education (PBEC) must adopt a new education trend. This new trend was based on the following components: effective evaluation criteria; pupil-centered learning; pupils' skills development; the development of individual talents and abilities; and the development of vocational skills. According to the above points, the PBEC seemed to be consistent with those trends which would make each element of the education process pupil-centered.

The MOE (2007a, p. 5) defines PBEC as:

*... a two-year post-Basic Education phase that follows BEC (which takes ten years of study) and aims to continue to develop basic skills and work skills and vocational planning for pupils including preparing them to be active members of society and enabling them to take advantage of opportunities for education, training and employment after school studies.*

PBEC seeks to complement and build upon the subjects and knowledge covered in the first and second BEC cycles. The specific aims of the PBEC are outlined as follows (Ministry of education, 2007, p.5):

1. Promoting loyalty to the homeland and His Majesty Sultan Qaboos.
2. Affirming Oman's belonging to the Gulf community, the Arab nation, and the Muslim world.

3. Affirming the principles of Islam, instilling faith and spiritual values among pupils, and equipping them with the ability to implement religious standards of conduct in their lives.
4. Enhancing and expanding Arabic language education through mastering its arts and nuances and also through linguistic competencies learnt from other foreign languages such as English.
5. Raising awareness of global cultural trends and learning from others' experiences.
6. Refining cognitive and problem-solving skills, and providing guidance on how to implement practical knowledge in personal life.
7. Enhancing positive attitudes towards productive work of all kinds including voluntary work, environmental preservation, and property protection.
8. Encouraging life-long learning including how to search for knowledge through the use of computer and self-directed learning.
9. Encouraging peaceful and productive interaction with others within the norms of social duties, rights, and responsibilities.
10. Raising awareness of health care, the environment, and issues related to population.

It is clear that the creation of the concept of PBEC was justified and founded the vision of giving pupils the chance to prepare them to pursue the different career options that make up the national aims that are set for this type of curriculum. However, from the PBEC aims, I can conclude that PBEC could not be classified as a vocational education curriculum because it does not have the two basic components of VE, which are; training for work skills or work experience, and a distinct link with economic and industrial needs (Boateng, 2012; Catts, Falk, & Wallace, 2011; Cavanagh, Shaw, & Wang, 2012; Khilji, Kakar, & Subhan, 2012). Instead, PBEC is, as such, an education curriculum which is concerned mainly with providing pupils with basic skills in general.

Moreover, some studies identified that the PBEC does not effectively prepare pupils for HE and the labour market (Issan & Gomaa, 2010; Al-Mashani, 2011 & Ministry of Education and the World Bank, 2012). Issan and Gomaa's (2010) study, which analysed the difficulties that the PBEC might face, found that the PBEC did not meet the desired output with regards to vocational skills, competence or the specific knowledge that is required for entering the labour market. They argued that this shortcoming is due to two reasons: first, the PBEC school environment does not reproduce the guidelines set out for PBEC implementation, for example, the buildings and

facilities (labs and workshops) are not well enough developed to meet the requirements of the new curriculum (PBEC). The second reason is that the teachers are not aware or properly trained in how they can effectively apply modern pedagogy and teaching methods towards vocational skills. In addition, Al-Maashani's (2011) study revealed that some issues within HE include the lack of communication between HE and the PBEC in determining a consistent set of requirements to support and prepare students for HE. Also, a survey study conducted by the Ministry of Education and the World Bank (2012) found that the HE students who graduate from PBEC in Oman were weak in research methodology skills, abilities, systematic skills and communication skills. This study recommended to review the PBEC content and should be coupled with a reduction in the number of subjects taught, otherwise students may struggle to sustain focus and learn effectively. This reduction should be planned whilst keeping in mind that there should also be a diverse range of subjects to meet their needs and preferences. Also, this study recommended establishing better links between HE programmes, the needs of the labour market, and training in the workplace.

## CONCLUSION

Education in Oman, as in other countries, faces many challenges that comprise demographic, geographic, socio-economic and, political issues as well as the challenges that arise out of huge and rapid technological developments (Al-Nabhani, 2007). All of the key stakeholders in these challenges have a duty to support the MOE to determine a clear strategic plan to overcome all of these challenges if it is to improve the quality and access to education as well as the outputs it aspires to reach as a necessary step to being able to achieve the overall development of the nation.

Through the above discussion of education in Oman, I have found that education provision in Oman started late compared to other countries. The real education process began in 1970 through the implementation of the GES, which was aimed at spreading education throughout Oman for both boys and girls alike. After three decades, the MOE made significant steps towards improving the quality of education through the implementation of BEC and then PBEC. Both approaches are focused on the acquisition of adequate skills necessary to prepare pupils for the next education stage.

The argument for the development of education in Oman is to reduce the number of foreign workers in the private sector and to provide jobs for Omani citizens. The MOE has a responsibility, in conjunction with ministry of Manpower, to achieve this aim and this is apparent through the attention given to vocational education and

further, through the creation of the new secondary education curriculum (PBEC) and through the expansion in the number of students who are admitted to Technical Colleges. Hypothetically, there should be close links between school education and vocational training centers which, in turn, should be linked to the Technical Colleges. Al-Mashani (2011) detected there is a mismatch between PBEC and the HE. Moreover, Ministry of Education and World Bank study (2012) detected there is mismatch between PBEC and the HE and the world of work.

Remarkably, most of the discussed aforementioned studies in this article detected that there are weaknesses in pupils/students' skills. Further, most of these studies found that the main reasons behind poor pupil skills are weak and insufficient teaching methods and the content. The MOE has not overcome the obstacles of the previous education stage and this means that it did not benefit or learn from the evaluation studies. I think if one stage of education is not effective, this means that the outcome of this stage affects the output of the subsequent stage and the same problem continues forward into the next stage. This may be a sign that there are problems between the planning of education and how the aims of the curriculum are effectively translated into reality.

There is an urgent need of studies that evaluate the efficacy of educational developments to detect the obstacles that may prevent education in Oman from becoming more effective. When we define these obstacles we can also suggest solutions to overcome them. The solutions and results of these investigations can suggest solutions for all stages of education as a whole because each stage of the education system is affected by the previous stages, and because the responsibilities of formal education are linked.

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