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An assessment of the current Vocational Education and Training in the Government Vocational Training Centers in the Sultanate of Oman

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Vocational Education and Training (VET) includes practical activities, vocational skills and specific knowledge which are provided by vocational centres to prepare trainees and qualify them for admission into the labour market for specific jobs, trades or occupations that are based on manual works. In Oman, the significance of VET is realised in order to deliver skilled human resources to meet the shortage in the labour market needs and to cope with the national development plans. Thus, there has been increased interest in attending VET centres and the number of trainees who enrol in these centres has increased considerably. However, despite this evident government support, VET still faces some problems. Thus, this existing study uses the literature review and documents to focus on a review of the current status of VET and identifying the challenges that face the trainees in Government Vocational Training Centres in Oman. Additionally, this paper investigates several solutions that could help to meet these challenges.

Summarising from the literature review, the overall understanding of VET is essentially what was being considered under this umbrella was the preparation of low and middle level skilled and semi skilled technicians for quite specific occupations that are required in order to ensure the social and economic development of Omani labour market. The findings show that the VET still faces several challenges such as social conceptions, lack of vocational training guidance and counselling, lack of awareness of VET importance and high dropout rate from Government Vocational Training Centres (GVTCs). Another main finding that the key solutions could meet those challenges are establishing a close relationship between general academic education and VET which will help to provide information about VET programs, and society' attitudes towards VET ought to be changed through designing programmes in the media.

Key words: *Vocational Education and Training, Vocational Training Government Centres, Challenges, the Sultanate of Oman.*

1. Introduction

VET has a crucial role to play in meeting the socio-economic, demographic, environmental and technological challenges facing Oman and its citizens today and in the years ahead. Without this kind of training the country may not achieve its development plans. It could be said that the

government and private sectors owe much of their achievements and prosperity in most developmental fields to successful programmes in VET (Ministry of Manpower “MoMP”, 2009). In this respect, the Ministry of National Economy (2009) reports that the efficient investment in human capital through VET is an essential component of Omani's strategy to deliver the high levels of sustainable, knowledge-based growth and jobs that lie at the heart of Oman, at the same time as promoting personal fulfilment, social cohesion and active citizenship. In addition, the Ministry of Manpower (2010a) stated that Oman has placed emphases on VET depending upon several educational, social, economic and political considerations. Thus, from 1970 the Sultanate of Oman, when the country moved towards a new policy in developing the country, realised the significance of VET in order to deliver qualified and skilled manpower to meet the shortage in its workforce and meet its development plans.

This article defines VET as the practical activities, vocational skills and specific knowledge which are provided by Government Vocational Training Centres (GVTCs) in Oman to prepare trainees (who are in year ten and above) and qualify them for admission into the labour market for specific occupations that are based on manual works (MoMP, 2008; UNSCO and ILO, 2002; Calhoun and Finch, 1982). It is therefore intended to highlight the background, education and economy of Oman. It also deals with the GVTCs in Oman: development, aims, stages, levels and programmes. Furthermore, this article identifies the challenges that face the trainees in Vocational Training Centres, particularly in Oman. Finally, this paper suggests some solutions could be meeting those challenges and concludes with several recommendations.

2. Background of the Sultanate of Oman

Oman is the second largest country in size and population in the Arabian Peninsula, with about 309,000 square kilometres (120,000 square miles), which is equal to the size of the United Kingdom and Ireland and about the size of Kansas State in the USA (Al Nabhani, 2007). The country's economy is dominated by oil and the total GDP is \$35.7 billion (Ministry of National Economy, 2007a). Oman has a coastline which extends for 1,700 kilometres. Oman has access to many different countries: to the west the country borders Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, to the south Yemen, to the north the Strait of Hormuz, and to the east the Arabian Sea (Wilkins, 2002; Ministry of Information, 2007). Figure 1 shows the location of the Sultanate of Oman.

The people of Oman are predominantly Muslim as Oman was one of the first countries to embrace Islam during the lifetime of the Prophet Mohamed. Islam has given Omanis their religious character and provided them with a political and legal system upon which the foundations of their society are based (Ministry of Information, 2007). The official language in Oman is Arabic; however, English is commonly spoken, most especially in private companies. Oman has a population of about 2,743,000 in 2007, growing at a rate of about 3.3% annually (Ministry of National Economy, 2008). Table (1) shows population density percentage distribution of Oman's population per region.



Figure 1: location of the Sultanate of Oman

Source: Ministry of National Economy (2006)

Table 1 Percentage Distribution of the Sultanate's Population by Governorate and Region

Governorate/Region	Percentages of total population
Muscat	26.1
Dhofar	9.2
Al Batinah	27.0
Musandam	1.2
Al Buraimi	5
Al Dakhliya	10.3
Al Sharqiyah	12.4
Al Dhahira	7.8
Al Wusta	1.0
Total	100

Table (1) shows that the most densely populated regions are Muscat and Al Batinah, and this means they need more VET facilities and the access to education is easier. On the other hand there are some regions that have some remote places in the desert with much less people such as Al Wusta where people are leading a nomadic life which make VET services very difficult to access. This forms one of the major challenges for VET in Oman. The most noticeable feature of Oman's indigenous population is that more than 51.6 per cent of them are under 15 years of age. This signifies that more than 1,371,500 nationals will enter the workforce within the next 4 to 18 years. In addition, around 51.6 per cent, or about 1,371,500 of the national population are already part of the workforce in the country. Oman is, therefore, predominantly a young population country as depicted in Table (2).

Table 2 Percentage Distribution of Population by Age Group and Sex

Age group	Male	Female
0-14	51.6%	51.7%
15-64	45.4%	45.4%
64+	3.0%	2.9%

3. The Education in the Sultanate of Oman

The education has undergone rapid development. It has developed significantly in terms of quantitative issues; the number of schools increased from 3 before 1970 to 1055 in 2008 (Ministry of Education, 2009). The quality also increased from religious focused schools to a much wider curriculum using advanced technology in teaching. Al Nabhani (2007: 33) argues that the history of education in Oman can be divided into four main stages:

- 1. The pre-renaissance stage (pre-development): it is the period before 1970. There were only three formal schools and some Quranic schools.*
- 2. The quantitative stage: it is the period between 1970 and 1980. The focus in education was on the rapid quantitative development of education.*
- 3. The qualitative stage: it is the period between 1981 and 1995. This stage emphasized the improvement of the quality of education and the diversification of education.*
- 4. The future stage: it is the period started after the “Oman 2020, The Vision Conference for Oman’s Economy”, many educational reforms such as the Basic Education started to address the educational requirements of the future.*

Although the Oman’s education system has gone through many changes and innovations, its underlying philosophy and general aims and objectives have remained largely unaltered (Al Hammami, 1999). He also claims that there is a discrepancy between the inputs and the intended outcomes of the system (*ibid*). Similarly, Al Ghafri (2002) and Al Mamari (2002) argue that the number of graduates, who join the labour market or join to VET, not having the required skills to meet the demands of the economy. This problem is connected with the weak relationship between the labour market and the education system and GVTCs.

4.0 The Sultanate of Oman’s Economy

Oman’s economic development has been assessed as a successful process that in just 40 years has transformed the country from an agriculture and trade dependent society to a modern economic system. This was mostly due to the discovery and exportation of oil and gas as the chief economic activity which accounted for 79 per cent of the government’s budgetary revenue in 2006 (Ministry of National Economy, 2007b). At the same time, while globalization of the domestic economy are essential steps implemented by the government since the inauguration of its strategic economic plan (Oman 2020) in 1996, the nature of the new challenges is going to be centred on the development of human resources. This is supported by the fact that Oman, irrespective of its location, geographical and demographical sizes, and abundance of natural resources, has achieved miraculous results (Ministry of National Economy, 2009).

Oman's economy is mainly based on oil income, but the Sultanate's policies have consistently given attention to creating appropriate conditions for investment, providing infrastructure and developing the national manpower to help the growth of the economy (Ministry of Information, 2010). These achievements create diversification of the sources of income and focus on the productive sectors such as gas-based industries, information technology, mining and tourism (Ministry of Information, 2003). Moreover, copper production and its export to neighbouring countries within Arabia and outside played a prominent role in the economy of Oman during the ancient time. Additionally, concentration is now focused on eco-tourism, adventure tourism, culture and heritage attraction, water sports, tourism, coastal and leisure resorts (Ministry of Manpower, 2009).

5.0 The Development of Vocational Education and Training in Oman:

Prior to the 1960s, VET was represented in many handicrafts such as aromatics (Public Authority for Craft Industries, 2008; Ministry of Heritage and Culture, 2002). VET can be dated back to the year 1967, when the Petroleum Development of Oman attempted to train its lower level vocational and clerical staff. A centre was opened in Darsait in the capital area, mainly to improve the standards of specific members of the clerical labour force. Since 1973 significant changes have taken place with regard to the development of VET in the whole country, and these have been drawn up in order to fulfil the demand for manpower training (Ministry of Manpower, 2009). In 1975 the Darsait Institution witnessed changes in terms of the provision of facilities including the establishing of a cultural library and the preparation of new curricula for the technical and commercial subjects, and it had (70) trainees only (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 1979).

When the Government drew up the First Five-Year Development Plan (1976-1980), great consideration was given to VET. For example, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour became more active and it established the whole body of the administration and the structure of VET, and developed the relevant curriculum and the centres. In 1980, there were four government institutions established in different regions, in Al- Seeb, Saham, Sur and the fourth one was in Salalah, and total trainees in those institutions was (789) (Ministry of Manpower, 2010f). Following guidelines of Second Plan (1981-1985), the government opened four institutions in Al-Musana'a, Nazwa, Ibri and Ebraa (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 1982). These institutions all followed the same methods, principles, regulations and curriculum which were Diploma for preparatory technical and commercial (Development Council, 1987). Additionally, four of these institutions have been transferred to the technical colleges and the other four have been renamed to vocational centres and Darsait Institution transferred to the private sector (Ministry of Manpower, 2010f; Ministry of National Economy, 2001; 1995). Moreover, the Sixth Plan (2001-2005) first priority shall be given to raising the rate of enrolment ratio in GVTCs (Ministry of National Economy, 2006). Furthermore, Ministry of Manpower (2010b) points out that the priorities for national growth such as upgrading the GVTCs and increasing VET opportunities to provide employments for the Omani nationals. In the Seventh Plan, the government established three centres, Al Khabourah and Salalah for fishing, and Shinas. It can be seen from Table 3 that the number of trainees in 1967/1968 was 22 trainees. This number increased steadily every year. There were 1633 trainees in the academic year 2000/2001 and 3330 trainees in the academic year 2009/2010. It cannot be denied that since then great progress has been achieved in terms of quantity. But the aspirations for greater achievement in the field of

VET became vital to Government policy, and it became recognised that the trainees should improve in terms of quality as well as quantity.

Table 3 Number of Trainees in GVTCs during 1967-2010

The year	Trainees
67/68	22
70/71	44
80/81	789
90/91	1729
2000/ 2001	1633
2009/2010	3330

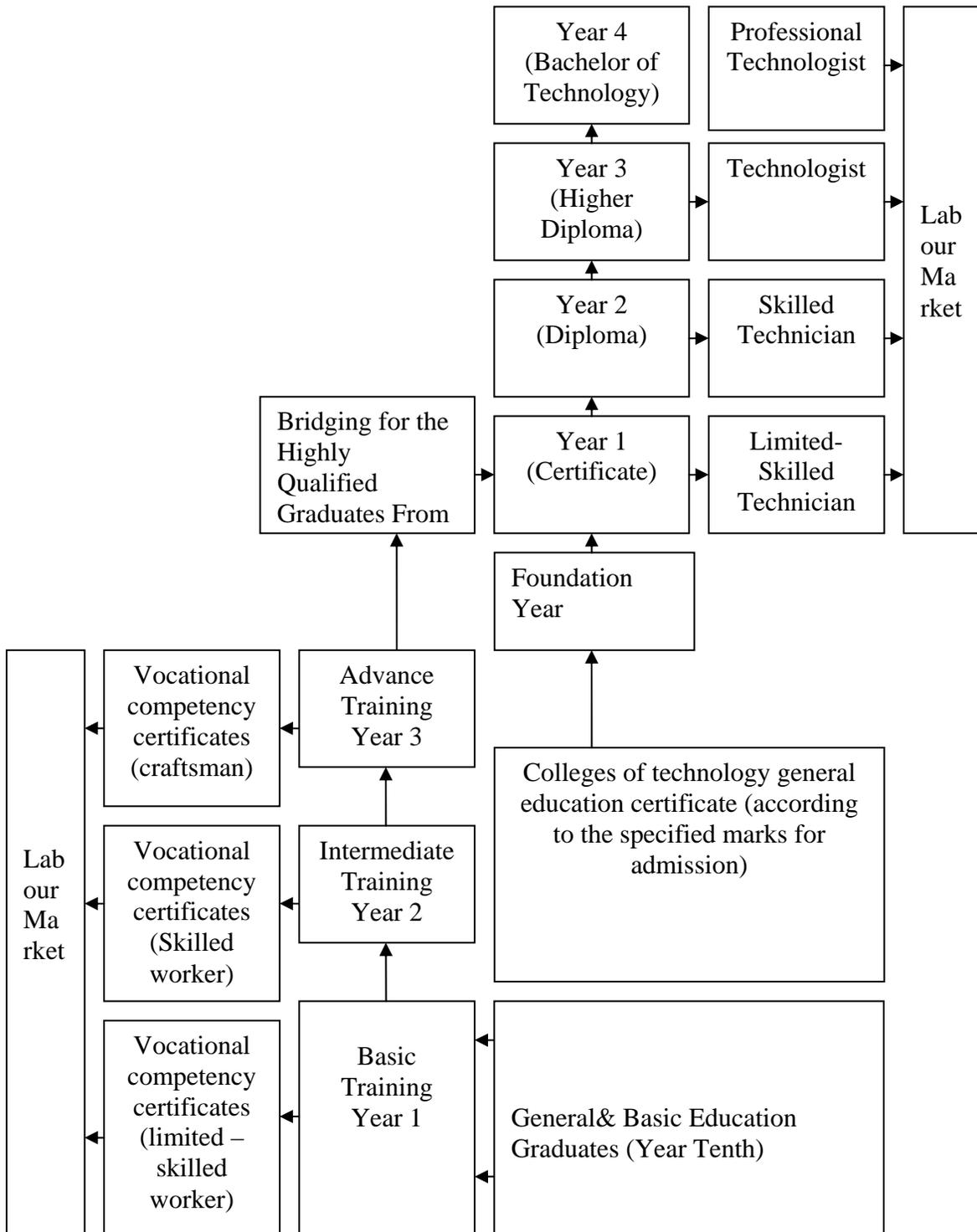
Source: Ministry of Manpower (2010c: 4) Ministry of Manpower (2010f: 99)

6.0 The current status of Government Vocational Training Centres in Oman

GVTCs play an important role in preparing citizens to meet the Omani Regions requirements for a national labour force in variety of vocational areas. To achieve this goal, the Ministry of Manpower has developed a VET which will keep abreast of the requirements of the Omani labour market for a skilled and semi skilled national workforce. Nowadays, there are seven GVTCs: Al Seeb, Saham, Sur, Ibri, Shinas, Salalah and Al Khabourah. These centres have many aims such as preparing the national manpower to meet the Sultanate's development needs for occupational skills; providing the Omani youth with VET opportunities, to upgrade their efficiency and enable them to take up available jobs in various technical fields and cooperating with the private sector to develop VET programmes according to the occupational standard and the development taking places in work systems (Ministry of Manpower, 2010d). According to the Ministry of Manpower (2010b), there are three levels are being implemented at the GVTCs. According to Figure 2, these stages realize the complementary role of both the VET and the Technological Education in Oman through activating the relationship between the GVTCs and colleges of technology (Masri, et al., 2010).

However, despite this government support, VET still faces several challenges. Section (7) will use the literature review and documents to focus on some of these challenges.

Figure 2 The Vocational Training System in GVTCs in the Sultanate of Oman



Source: Ministry of Manpower (2010e: 24)

7. Challenges face Vocational Education and Training

In this section, the researcher will consider the most common challenges which affect VET in Oman, as identified from a review of GCC countries literature. Firstly, despite the social and economic change in Oman, many misguided social attitudes, often legacies of the past, still hinder the development of GVTCs' trainees, especially with regards to manual work (Bahaon, 1999; Ali, 1999; Al Balushi, 1999; Al Shanfari, 1991; 1990). Therefore, a negative view of manual and industrial work still prevails to a large extent in Oman and most of the GCC countries; to the extent that the majority of planners of educational programmes, especially those who work in the field of VET, rank this as the main challenge face VET graduates (Al Marzooki, 1994). Secondly, several previous studies have been conducted regarding VET in Oman and some GCC countries, and their results emphasise that there is a lack of vocational guidance and counselling, thus leading to low enrolments in vocational jobs in the labour market (Al Ghamdi, 1994; Al Bonyan, 1991; Ali and Turkey, 1984; Gibril Foundation for Training and Consultancy, 2003). Thirdly, Smith (2002) and Al Lamki (2000) argue that the shortage of VET skills emanates from four main factors: stagnation in apprenticeship numbers; an ageing workforce; the effects of privatisation, outsourcing and downsizing; and increasing reliance on unqualified labour. Additionally, the changing nature of today's employment picture is creating new challenges for VET employers and employees alike, leading to those employers being faced with a shrinking labour pool, and encountering many applicants who have minimum job competencies (Lankard, 1990; General Directorate of Vocational Training, 2004).

Furthermore, the foreign workers have helped in the rapid transformation of the infrastructure as well as institutional development in Oman and other GCC countries (Gokhale, 2006; Samman, 2010; Bahaon, 1999; Al Lamki, 1998). However, it has been making statements about the need for indigenisation of the labour force and a reduction in the percentage of the expatriate population and workers (Vocational Training Centre in Sur, 2009). In Oman, during the last decade, due to the rising level of unemployment among VET graduates, other difficult economic and political issues have arisen leading to the country having more concrete policies for enhancing indigenisation and reducing the numbers of foreign workers (Ibid). Moreover, high dropout rate from GVTCs which has increased to (840) trainees in 2009/2010 (Ministry of Manpower, 2011). Another main challenge is that most of the trainees in these centres do not have English language which it is very important for the private companies (Ministry of Manpower, 2011; Samman, 2010). Also, Samman (2010) points out that some of the VET trainees in Oman and some of the GCC countries have lack of some academic subjects such as Maths and Science. This reflects the fact that education in the earlier stages is theoretical and does not serve development goals, and also students' preference for theoretical academic education and practical subjects (Tilak, 2002; Al Dhahab, 1997; Ali, 1990). Finally, the ILO (2010) estimates that unemployment has risen by more than 30 million worldwide since 2007 while the number of unemployed youth increased by 8.5 million between 2008 and 2009, the largest year-on-year increase in at least ten years. Against this sombre economic background, VET is under pressure to deal with a host of employment and workplace challenges (Samman, 2010; Shah, 2006; Shah, 2005; Metwally, 2003). These issues affected VET in Oman which lead to increase the number of unemployed graduates from GVTCs. The author in next section will provide some solutions could be help to meet those challenges.

8. Some Solutions to meet the Challenges

From the point of view of the author, there several solutions can be provided to meet the challenges in section seven. These solutions are following:

- Mass media can play a major role in persuading Omani families to advice their sons and daughters to enrol in VET programs and choose the area which is related to their interest.
- Because the GVTCs are suffering from a large number of trainees who drop out, the GVTCs' staff should follow up those trainees and find the reasons behind the dropout rate in order to try to reduce it.
- Careers and VET counsellors should be available to direct trainees to an appropriate specialisation and occupation.
- Encouraging a linkage between private companies and GVTCs to achieve the objectives of increased communication, co-ordination and collaboration for the purpose of developing VET.
- The Ministry of Information, in co-operation with Ministry of Education and Ministry of Manpower, should establish programs on VET to attract more students to enrol to GVTCs.
- The Omani Government should encourage the ministries and private companies to employ the GVTCs' graduates.
- Involving all parties who are responsible for VET in Oman to help find a solution for the problems facing VET programs.

9. Conclusion

With all rapid transformation of Oman society in political, education, and economic spheres, there has been a change in the perspectives on the need for and nature of VET in Oman. There are strongly believes in the vital role of human resource in the development of nations, awards special attention to VET. In this respect, this paper showed that the current status of the seven GVTCs: Al Seeb, Saham, Sur, Ibri, Shinas, Salalah and Al Khabourah play an important role in preparing citizens to meet the Omani Regions requirements for a skilled and semi skilled national labour workforce in various vocational areas. The main aim of these centres is preparing the national manpower to meet the Sultanate's development needs for occupational skills. However, in spite of this obvious aim and government support, VET still faces several challenges for instance negative views of VET and manual work, lack of vocational training guidance and counselling, lack of awareness of VET importance, high dropout rate from GVTCs, and shortage of VET skills and lacks in academic level. Furthermore, there are some negative perceptions by employers in private companies towards the employment of VET trainees in Oman. Regarding to most of those challenges, this paper recommended that closer formal and informal relationships between academic education, private companies, media and GVTCs, it will assist to find solutions for the challenges facing VET programs and will help to provide information about VET programs. Furthermore, the importance of VET and the need to link it with the labour market in meetings its needs and developing and broadening plans to ensure enough supply of qualified and specialized manpower are main objectives of Omani development plans. Additionally, due to the lack of counselling and guidance in VET, this study showed that there needs to be careers guidance and responsible vocational choice about careers. Finally, from the discussion in section three about educational changes, it seems that changes

starting from school require support and help to solve any problem or misunderstand between students and GVTCs.

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