Academia A publication of the
**Higher Education
Policy Network**

Resilience through Hybridization: The Development
of Higher Education in the Sultanate of Oman

Francesco Bigagli[1]
Independent Researcher

Abstract
This paper explores the challenges and opportunities that arise from the development of higher education in Oman in the wake of the knowledge economy. Firstly, it provides an overview of the country and its education system, with an emphasis on higher education. Secondly, drawing on Lyotard's perspective on postmodernism and Readings' critique of the postmodern University, it seeks to understand how the nature of knowledge has changed, and the implications of this transformation for higher education globally and Oman in particular. Through an analysis of the policies that regulate the provision of the tertiary sector in the Sultanate, the paper proposes to conceptualize the Omani "University" as an attempt to reconcile tradition with modernity. Both challenges and opportunities result from such a conceptualization, reflecting an underlying epistemic tension between the post-modern aspiration to align to the ubiquitous hegemony of the knowledge economy on the one hand, and the necessity of preserving deeply rooted traditional values as an expression of national self-knowledge on the other. The paper ultimately suggests that it is precisely by virtue of this constant binary tension that the Omani society as a whole, rather than in its individual components, might be able, through higher education as its main tool, to undergo change and respond to the imperatives of capital economy while retaining its cultural identity.

---

[1] frabigagli@gmail.com

Introduction

Oman is a high-income hereditary monarchy with an Ibadi-majority population, one of the schools of Islamic thought.[2] It is located in the Arabian Peninsula bordering to the northwest with the United Arab Emirates, to the west with Saudi Arabia, and to the southwest with Yemen and the Arabian Sea. The Sultan is the Head of the Monarchy, the highest authority. Despite the geopolitical tension affecting the Middle East,[3] the Sultanate has enjoyed stability for the past five decades and remains free from terrorism (Global Terrorism Index, 2018). The country is expected to show a GDP growth of over 3.00% in 2020, which is superior to previous years (World Bank, 2020). However, like most of its Gulf neighbors, it remains dependent on shrinking oil resources and their fluctuating revenues, currently comprising over 30% of its GDP (National Centre for Statistics & Information, 2019); although, in recent years, it has sought to diversify its economy in line with the 9th Five-Year Development Plan (DP 2016-2020).

The Plan, the latest of a series of economic policies, represents the last portion of the Oman Vision 2020, launched in 1990, and continues the Monarchy's drive towards the development of non-oil sectors and the creation of jobs, especially amongst the youth; young people's unemployment rate is just over 48% (UNDP, 2018), a growing challenge given that over 40% of the Omani population (totaling 2.5 million with a growth rate of 4-9% per year versus 2 million of expatriates) is under 25 (UNESCO, 2018, p. 8; World Bank, 2018). According to the Arab Human Development Report (2016), the phenomenon is common across the oil-rich GCC area, whose youth unemployment rate was more than twice the global average in 2014. At the end of 2017, over 60,000 university graduates were looking for a job in Oman (The National, 2018, January 22).

In January 2018, young Omanis took the streets protesting against unemployment and the high percentage of private sector jobs held by expats working in the Sultanate (88% according to the NCSI), most of whom come from the Indian sub-continent, the EU and the United States. The Government responded by banning the recruitment of foreigners in a number of private sectors to increase Omanization (Middle East Eye, 2018, January 29); a strategy launched in 1980, which is still to bear

---

[2] Often referred to as the "third branch" of Islam, Ibadism predates the Sunni and Shia schism emerging with the death of the Prophet Muhammad (Wilkinson, 2010).

[3] Over the last two decades the region has undergone a series of military conflicts, most notably, in Syria and Yemen.

fruit as only 12% of Omanis are employed in highly skilled private sector jobs against 84% working in the saturated and relatively low-skilled public sector (NCSI, 2019). As argued below, education and, more particularly, higher education plays a key role in sustaining the Sultanate's vision for the future and responding to the present challenges.

Oman has focused on modernizing its education sector for the past fifty years by gradually shifting from a Quranic school system of education, based on the teaching of Islam, Arabic language and mathematics, to one that includes English and other secular subjects (Nasser, 2019). The country has achieved almost universal enrolment rates both at primary (94% NER) and secondary (95% NER) levels with no gender disparities (UNESCO, 2018). In 2017, government expenditure on education amounted to 6.6% of the GDP (World Bank, 2018). While the priority has been the development of basic education, starting with the DP 2001-2005, the Government has sought to expand HE, that was once exclusively comprised of the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), founded in 1989, and which remains the only public provider. At present, there are 27 private colleges and universities with curricula that match labor market needs (MoHE, 2019). While private providers are almost entirely dependent on fees from Government scholarships (MoHE, 2019), they have contributed to the dramatic increase of access to HE from a 21.28% of total enrolments of college age persons in the 2006-2007 period to 44% in 2016-2017, with female rates double those of males (59.69% versus 32.77%; UNESCO, 2018). This is, however, still slightly below the 52% threshold of college age people envisaged by the Fifth 5-year Plan (2001-2005).

As in the rest of the GCC, the rationale behind the rapid expansion of HE has been driven by human capital theories of education and the increasingly crucial role of the tertiary sector in providing people with advanced skills (Hosni & World Bank, 2004; Nolan, 2012). The concept of human capital development has been at the core of all Oman's five-year Plans, Oman Vision 2020 (Al-Lamki, 2000) and the newly launched National Strategy for Education 2040, whose main objective is the creation of "productive human resources in the world of the knowledge economy" (p. 27).

And yet, despite considerable progress, learning outcomes are still below expectations (UNESCO, 2018).[4] To borrow Pritchett's (2001) words, one might ask, where has all the (higher) education gone? As Wiseman, Alromi and Alshumrani (2014)

---

[4] In recent years, the drive for accountability in HE has led to the development of universal ways of measuring learning, although there is a growing lack of consensus as to what leads to a meaningful education (Evans, 2018; Steiner-Khamsi, 2006).

contend, there seems to be a paramount contradiction between the expectations of the oil-rich Gulf countries in developing a knowledge economy and their ability to achieve set goals. With regard to Oman, as noted, the problem, in fact, is not the lack of jobs, especially in the private sector, but rather, as Taderera (2018) and others contend (Al Shabibi & Silvennoinen, 2018), the unsuitability of its graduates. Beside any perceived flaws in content-specific knowledge, employers identify major deficiencies amongst graduates in fundamental 'higher order' skills such as critical/creative thinking and problem-solving (Taderera, 2018), that are considered to be at the very core of a knowledge economy (Araya & Marber, 2013). Wiseman et al (2014) claim that while teaching methodologies in GCC education systems follow "technically and functionally logical paths," socio-cultural bounds may inhibit the "knowledge transformation cycle" (p. 22). ICT-based education, for instance, construed as a potential critical enabler through the application of knowledge, would challenge the "rationalized limits of traditional schooling because of the broad and often unregulated access that it provides that may contradict Islamic ideology" (p. 22). Arguably, the challenges of creating "productive human resources" in line with a neoliberal rationality through an economy-based HE system would not be simply structural but also profoundly cultural.

Higher Education in the Knowledge Economy: Whose Knowledge?

Like its Gulf neighbors, Oman has repeatedly stated its aspiration to move away from a resource-based economy to a knowledge economy based on the formation of highly skilled human capital. As Hvidt (2015) argues, although the concept of knowledge economy has been utilised for decades, its definition remains vague, and it is often used interchangeably with new economy, intangible economy, and other variants (Nurunnabi, 2017). The nexus between knowledge and economy, however, clearly indicates a reframing of knowledge, which is no longer construed as Socratic self-knowledge, that is, as an 'inutile' element of subjects' own moral and intellectual development but is valued instead as a resource in economic growth embodied by human beings (Devetak). As pointed out by Hvidt, echoing Lyotard, "in this framework, knowledge (. . .) is a concept that is closely linked to the neoliberal economic paradigm within which states, people and cities worldwide compete for business and growth" (p. 28). With the publication of *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (1979), Lyotard prophetically envisioned a reification of knowledge in the transition from an

industrial to a postmodern age governed by global markets, by claiming that it "will be produced in order to be sold; it is and will be consumed in order to be valorised in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself. It loses its use-value" (p. 4).

In brief, Lyotard postulates a commodification of knowledge; a conversion to a borderless, non-referential object circulating just like a currency that is being constantly adapted, manipulated and re-invented by transnational knowledge workers; ultimately with the risk of a delegitimization of the nation-state "as the brain or mind of society" (Lyotard, p. 4), itself 'subjected' to the diktats of scientific advancement controlled by rootless corporations.

The aspiration to become a knowledge economy, therefore, would not only imply a shift to a knowledge society in which knowledge workers will represent the dominant group in society (Druker, 1994, p. 5), but could carry a threat to the role of the nation-state as a traditional socio-cultural organizer and protector of national identity (Smith, 1991, p. 74) and, with it, the weakening of the social bond that ties the state to its community. The fundamental question, therefore, is "who decides what knowledge is," as Lyotard puts it, since "knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question" (pp. 8-9).

As Stiglitz (1999) maintains, the shift to a knowledge economy would involve a radical change in the way people think and what they hold as truth, that is a change in people's mindset involving independent thinking, for which governments have a role: "A role in education, in encouraging the kind of creativity and risk taking that the scientific entrepreneurship requires" (p. 4). A knowledge economy thus requires a system that is conducive to its creation. In this regard, HE has come to play a crucial, albeit questionable, role in the post-modern society.

Inspired by Lyotard, Readings (1996) and others (Eagleton, 2015; Wright and Shore, 2017) postulate a crisis of HE with the advent of globalization and the weakening of the nation-state as guarantor of the idea of national self-knowledge. The concept that informs their work is essentially a transformation of the tertiary sector in its relationship, with the nation-state somewhat de-legitimized as "knowledge holder" by the process of globalized knowledge. Readings contends that the University nowadays has lost its canonical status of an institution charged with the mission of endowing individuals with an ideology of national culture and functions instead as a transnational entity centered on the production of applied, rather than cultural, knowledge.

The process of developing HE on the model of what Readings terms as a post-historical University pursuing "excellence" rather than culture as its only *raison d'être* in a highly structured country like Oman with deeply-rooted socio-cultural traditions could therefore have a profound impact on the relationship between the State, the religious authorities and citizens.

Research Purpose and Methodology

Drawing on Lyotard's perspective on postmodernism and Readings's critique of the postmodern University, this paper aims at investigating the challenges and opportunities that arise from the development of higher education in Oman in the wake of the knowledge economy, with potentially profound epistemological and socio-political implications. Through an analysis of the policies that regulate the provision of higher education in the Sultanate, of academic programs and of discursive strategies that emerge from the formulation of a sample of Universities' Mission and Vision statements, this paper attempts to conceptualize the transformation of the Omani "University" as a process of hybridization construed as a new paradigm, within which, aporetically, the principles of the knowledge economy are made to coexist, through constant adaptation and re-contextualization, with the values of a profoundly traditional society, originating from Islam as its logo-centric system of knowledge. Both challenges and opportunities result from such a conceptualization, reflecting an underlying epistemic tension between the post-modern aspiration to align to the ubiquitous hegemony of the knowledge economy on the one hand and the necessity of preserving deeply rooted traditional values as expression of national self-knowledge on the other.

As this paper aims to show, hybridization, as a way to reconcile tradition with modernity, should be considered as a tool of "progressive" resistance or, better yet, resilience against the idea of a University as a mere "point of capital's self-knowledge" (Reading, p. 40), and, to a larger extent, against the perceived threat of the neo-liberalist epistemology in its inclination to alter the way societies are structured. As Bracke (2016) argues, although the original meaning of resilience refers to the capacity of absorbing a shock "by resisting stress and returning to a prior state," it can also be perceived as the ability to adapt to a "new situation through adjustment, negotiation, and compromise, and finally by seizing the occasion by 'creatively' responding to the challenge of the shock or trauma" (p. 55, in Butler, 2016).

While it does not draw on any specific theoretical framework, this paper employs a post-structuralist method of enquiry to challenge existing structures of knowledge in the form of texts and discourses that are often taken for granted and in which authority/authorship is enforced as normal with implications for the way cultural and socio-political identities are formed (Williams, 2005). Text and discourse analysis (i.e., policies, curricula, frameworks and linguistic strategies) are therefore key methodological elements of the investigation.

In this regard, a post-structuralist approach was particularly suitable. This is because of the importance assigned by post-structuralism to the critique of texts and discourses construed as codified narratives made up of "assumptions and conventions of knowing" (Bleiker & Chou, 2010, p. 9) that serve as tools of "self-assertion or self-legislation" (Devetak, 1999, p. 5) prescribing a particular worldview and delineating fixed identities (Derrida, 1976; Foucault, 1980).

The following section seeks to explore how the process of education reforms has been legitimated - and negotiated by way of hybridization - in the wake of the global economy through an analysis of aspects of transnational policy-borrowing, academic programs, elements of the "hidden curriculum" (Apple, 2004) and linguistic strategies within the framework of the Omani Philosophy of Education, approved in 2017 by the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said, which contains the main sources and principles for guiding educational reforms and policies in the Sultanate.

Oman's Education Reforms

Oman's education reforms have been a top-down led process with the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said as the driving force and the Education Council as the supreme body charged with the formulation of policies and strategies. The Council, established in 2012 to replace the HE and the Accrediting Councils, was entrusted with devising the National Strategy for Education 2040 on the directives issued by the Sultan in his 2012 annual speech in which he emphasises the importance of arming students with "awareness, knowledge and the abilities required for worthwhile work" (Qaboos bin Said, p. 3, 2012).

As noted, the country has sought to expand HE through privatization following the promulgation of a Royal Decree in 1999 (MoHE, 2019). With it, co-education was introduced and English was adopted as the main medium of instruction along with

Western academic programs, preeminently taught by expats (Al-Harthi, 2011, p. 357). Like in the rest of the GCC, as a result of a process of educational borrowing of (mainly) Western practices, as "quick fixes in the delivery of results" (Romanovski, Alkhateeb & Nasser, 2018, p. 19), the employment of student-centered pedagogies was also encouraged "in an effort to shift learners away from the rote memory system that has been their custom for centuries" (Romanovski et al, p. 20). The majority of private providers, like Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), follow the American and UK models of HE and have been established through partnerships with American/UK institutions (Al-Harthi, 2011). However, while the term 'privatization' would suggest a certain degree of autonomy, this is not the case in Oman. As Al-Harthi (2011) maintains, there are in fact no major differences between SQU and private providers. This is not only because licensing, curriculum approval and financing remain dependent on the Ministry of Higher Education, but, throughout the HE system, modernization goes hand in hand with tradition. University hallways and buildings are, for instance, designed to prevent male and female mixing and students are required to respect the traditional Omani dress code (pp. 357-358). The presence of aspects of a "hidden curriculum" (Apple, 2004) is clearly dictated by the need to preserve national values and religious ideology. The adoption of Western educational practices, construed as the expression of "deterritorialized," marketable knowledge (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014, p. 160) that informs the intangible economy, inevitably translates into the necessity of dealing with potential social consequences, such as the undermining of the Arabic language and the weakening of cultural traditions (Romanovski et al, 2018).

Significantly, a Google search across a variety of academic programs on offer at some of the main universities in the Sultanate reveals the presence of Arabic language courses along with what one might term as civic education modules. At Sur University, for instance, the curriculum for a degree in Engineering requires students to undertake a course titled "Oman Society and Culture" in semesters I and II. Similarly, a student pursuing a degree in Business at Sohar University is required to pass "Arabic Language Skills" and "Oman and Islamic Culture" modules in the first and second semesters. "Arabic Language" and "Islamic Civilization" are college requirements at Nizwa University in the first, second and third semesters while at Dhofar University "Omani Society" and "Writing in Arabic" are program requirements across all disciplines. Likewise, "Arabic Language," "Islamic Culture" and "Oman Society" are college requirements at Al Buraimi University.

Hence, it is assumed that regardless of the program a student decides to undertake, Arabic language and courses about Islamic culture and Omani society are not simply mandatory but, in a way, propaedeutic in that they are somehow meant to "ground" and "frame" the acquisition of further knowledge in whichever discipline one has chosen within specific cultural bounds and with constant references to meta-diegetic knowledge (e.g., Islamic epistemology). The question here, to paraphrase Apple (2004), is why curricula are organized in this way, who has decided this and on what basis (p. 6).

Without wanting to enter into a discussion about narratology and, more specifically, Bal's (1985) post-structural theory of narratology, it would be helpful, at this point, coherent with Lyotard's argument, to construe the conceptualization of educational reforms as a multi-layered narrative with a logo-centric hierarchical structure [(extra-diegesis)-metadiegesis-diegesis)] according to which a whole world-view is sanctioned. The bottom level of this diegetic (narrative) structure would be comprised of the people entrusted with the realization of the strategies, plans and documents that draw from the so-called Philosophy of Education (PoE) as the overarching document for the development of all aspects of the education sector that has been reviewed cyclically since 1978. The following section provides an overview of the 2017 PoE and its objectives as this has relevant pedagogical implications.

The Philosophy of Education

As Halstead (2004) contends, both 'philosophy' and 'education' are problematic terms from a Muslim perspective. The term 'philosophy' is problematic because it rests on the Aristotelian doctrine of the "pursuit of truth with the help of human reason" which would challenge the idea that "rationality is valid only within the boundaries defined by religion" (p. 518). However, Halstead maintains that, across all schools of Islamic thought, religion has come to reassert its dominance over reason with the primacy of revelation as an unquestionable source of knowledge (p. 518). The acquisition of further knowledge by knowledge workers would thus be agreed to "only insofar as they remain loyal to the divine injunctions contained in the Quran and the Sharia" (p. 520). Besides, as Issan (2010) argues, the Ibadist exegesis of the Quran encompasses all aspects of life (i.e., spiritual, moral, socio-economic and educational; pp. 121-122). The translation of the term 'education' is also semantically charged with the principles of Islamic

normativity: "At the heart of the Muslim concept of education is the aim of producing good Muslims with an understanding of Islamic rules of behaviour and a strong knowledge and commitment to the faith" (Halstead, p. 520). This is reflected in the formulation of the 2017 PoE which is structured according to 10 sources from whence all ongoing reform processes are meant to originate (p. 14). These are postulated in a hierarchical order as follows: "The Islamic Religion," "The Thoughts of the His Majesty the Sultan," "The Basic Statute of the State," "Omani Civilization," "Omani Society," "The Future Vision of the State," "Modern Educational Thought," "Characteristics of Learners," "International Conventions and Charters," "Contemporary International Issues."

The "Islamic Religion" is set as the main source. This is relevant not only because it provides an anchoring point within Islam as a matrix narrative to which the content of all ensuing sources is to be attached and ordered by hierarchical continuity, but also the first source, as truth in its unmediated firstness, somehow intervenes to predicate the grounding of any discourse related to educational reforms and the knowledge economy on the basis of the Islamic epistemology and normativity, while strengthening the coherence of the PoE as a hierarchical discourse structure. For instance, the "Modern Educational Thought" proposition reads: "The Omani Philosophy of Education is based on current educational research and studies on modern educational thought, and in identifying the values, attitudes and knowledge that are consistent with those practiced in Omani society" (p. 16). Like other propositional descriptors, this passage seems fraught with an underlying tension to legitimise, in a self-assured and self-justifying (rhetorical) way, the discourse on "modern education thought." The reference to Omani values and, by the same token, to the Islamic meta-diegesis, thus authorizes it while calling for commitment by way of reassurance.

Arguably, the PoE as a comprehensive framework can be said to serve two main purposes. Firstly, it aims at validating the discourse around the knowledge economy and the need to equip individuals with modern skills while reinforcing the values of belongingness, national unity, and devotion to Islam with constant reference to its epistemology. Secondly, it calls for 'action' through adherence to a 'newly' re-configured worldview. It is an attempt to manage change by reconciling modernity with(in) tradition or, better yet, re-thinking tradition through modernity.

In this respect, it is useful to analyze how the propositions formulated in the PoE have been operationalized and instantiated across the HE system. As previously noted,

Arabic language courses and civic education modules are framed across various academic programs in such a way as to suggest their prerequisite and intrinsic value, ensuring adherence to the epistemological and normative role of Islam and its tradition and, by implication, subordinating the acquisition of 'modern knowledge' within a "transcendental signified," to use Derrida's terminology, that is posited outside of questioning. The underpinning tension that seems to characterise the re-configuration of a whole philosophy of education is also at play in the formulation of Universities' Visions and Missions statements whose discursive strategies serve to legitimise institutional change. We have limited our research to 3 institutions, but similar patterns are to be found across the Omani HE system. The University of Nizwa's Vision and Mission, for instance, read as follows:

> *The University of Nizwa aspires to be a beacon (minaret) of knowledge and enlightenment as a prominent higher education institution of excellence.*
>
> *It shall promote positive thinking, preserve the nation's Islamic and cultural heritage and identity, faith in Allah and loyalty to the country and His Majesty. Its purpose is to broadly educate students and equip them with values, knowledge and life skills. (University of Nizwa, n.d.)*

As for Muscat University, it envisions "to transform individuals and communities through industry-engaged teaching and learning that is both rigorous and relevant" by serving as "a beacon of excellence in innovation and entrepreneurship and delivering high-quality teaching" (Muscat University, n.d.).

Finally, A'Sharqiyah University "aspires to be a leading higher education institution in Oman that promotes authentic values, innovation and socio-economic development," while its Mission statement reads: "ASU advances knowledge through innovative learning and applied research that will contribute to the economic and social development of the region" (A'Sharqiyah University, n.d.). The Universities' Values/Graduate Attributes are similar and include, *inter alia*, "Moral Integrity," "Tolerance," "Accountability," "Citizenship," next to "Critical Thinking" and "Excellence."

The lexicological interplay that emerges from the formulation of Mission and Vision statements between words and concepts that belong to modernity on the one hand and tradition on the other (e.g., "beacon/minaret" of "excellence") creates a

hybrid, heteroglossic inter-textual discourse characterised by metalepsis whose main objective is that of containing, by way of constant negotiation and re-contextualization, the idea of "modern educational thought" whose 'validity,' through reference to the Islamic epistemology, is ultimately guaranteed in order to institutionalize change. What is even more remarkable, however, is the configuration of the University. To recall Reading and his compelling thesis regarding the transformation of the ontology of the postmodern University, whose unifying principle has purely become that of 'excellence', as a "moment of technology's self-reflection" (p. 39), serving "nothing other than itself" (p. 43) and therefore being detached from the nation-state and the idea of national culture, one might argue that, while 'excellence' appears as one of the driving principles across Omani Universities, the cultural discourse and underlying values of the Islamic meta-narrative are retained; ultimately offering an alternative model to conceive the University in the age of globalization away from its "anti-heroic role" (Reading) as an exclusive commodity of capital economy.

Arguably, hybridization can be said to constitute the (dialogical) form of the Omani University and, as such, it can be said to represent a form of resilience against the consumerist ideology and its economic paradigm embodied by the post-historical University precisely as it retains the idea of (national) culture and the intrinsic formative mission of the University, evocative of the Humboldtian *Bildung* (Reading, 1996, p. 62), based on the ethical development of individuals through the cultivation of values like those described just above along with the overarching modern idea of 'excellence.' Hybridization as a form, as that which baffles the arrogance of the paradigm, to paraphrase Barthes (1977, p. 6), does not, in this sense, exclude what is other than itself, the principles of the knowledge economy, but in fact postulates the coexistence of two antagonistic models and their underpinning epistemologies, working, in a seemingly impossible simultaneity, through constant negotiation and compromise within a newly configured paradigm.[5]

The problem, however, seems to be preeminently political, as hybridization, as a mode of progressive resilience, works counter to the "ontopological" (Derrida)[6] threat

---

[5] While the concept of hybridization draws inspiration from Hegel's dialectics of social development through R. Barthes (1977) and M. Bakhtin's dialogic theory (1981), it is worth recalling that in the Muslim philosophical tradition, Ibn Khaldun in his Muqaddimah conceptualizes a social theory of education integrating behavioral programs with subject-specific ones: e.g., calculation provides logical training while requiring self-discipline (see, Dajani, 2015, p. 309).

[6] I owe the reference to Derrida's concept of "ontopology" ('being'+'topos'/'territory') to Butler (2013, p. 18).

inherent to the logic of globalized knowledge, against the authority of the nation-state as holder of national self-knowledge and the foundational meta-diegesis that underpins it, which ties individuals to a prescribed (cultural) identity. Finally, the next section explores the challenges deriving from the introduction of critical thinking pedagogies as an example of transnational policy borrowing in education (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016), and the cultural implications (de-territorialization/de-contextualization) that a "semantics of globalization" (Schriewer, in Steiner-Khamsi, p. 5, 2004) inevitably generates within an indigenous context.

Critical Thinking: An Impossible Task?

With the promulgation of the Oman Vision 2020 which sets the socio-economic objectives of the country in the next twenty-five years, including, *inter alia*, the necessity to strengthen the skills of the national work-force, and the approval of the 2017 Philosophy of Education which further reiterates the need to "develop high order skills" among learners and "provide learning environments that stimulate thinking, exploration, researching and innovating" (p. 26), critical thinking is gradually emerging as a new mantra in the context of Oman's education reform process and a key word in the formulation of policies and procedures. This is also attested by an increasing number of publications in the area of CT pedagogy at all levels of the Omani education system, including higher education. In this regard, recent research raises concerns ranging from teachers' competences to implement the kinds of learning environments that promote independent thinking (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018), and students' ability to apply the critical skills that are used in the classroom in other contexts (Tuzlukova & Prabhukanth, 2018), to the extent to which students are effectively capable of developing critical thinking skills (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2020). Yet very little has been said on the practicability and sustainability of critical thinking pedagogies within the framework of the Islamic ontology and epistemology. In other words, if critical thinking is construed as a social (best) practice as a way to empower and emancipate individuals as agents of change in the context of the knowledge society, what could be the epistemological, political but also ethical consequences of learning to think critically in Oman in particular and the Arab world in general?

In the preamble to *The postmodern condition*, Lyotard defines "postmodernism as an incredulity towards metanarratives" (xxiv). Postmodernism is a critique of the

philosophy they univocally expose, and it is, in this sense, essentially anti-philosophical. This is because the scientific discourse peculiar to the knowledge economy "questions the validity of narrative statements and concludes that they are never subject to argumentation or proof" (p. 27). The question is, therefore, a question of legitimacy and, by implication, to recall Foucault (1994, p. 351), one of power and its relation to knowledge as this is legitimated as truth by those in control through constant reference to meta-diegetic content that remains outside of questioning. As contended, what is at stake is always the authority of the State in its relations with people in society and, thus, a certain construction of their identity and view of the world based on legitimised knowledge (i.e. metanarratives). Arguably then, can one posit the development of students' critical thinking skills in order to progress towards the acquisition of new knowledge without questioning one's self-knowledge, that is, knowledge anchored within the Islamic meta-diegesis and its normativity? If this is the case, would this not systematically result in questioning the status quo and, by the same token, the forces that regulate a certain worldview? But, also, would the critical acquisition of an entirely new perspective of the world without the comfort offered by a set of fundamental beliefs and collective epistemology create, as suggested by Romanovski et al (2018, p. 23), "epistemological conflicts"? Ultimately, would not the world as one knows it start losing its familiarity, becoming suddenly *unheimlich*, in the Freudian sense, thus leading to confusion and discomfort?

According to Lewis and Smith (1993), while the use of critical thinking as a term has been semantically inconsistent in the way it has been employed to refer to problem solving, creative thinking and evaluation skills, the idea that prevails is the interdependence of these skills in practice (p. 134). As Ennis (1987) argues, "critical thinking is reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (in Lewis & Smith, p. 134). Fundamentally, critical thinking is about questioning, evaluating the authenticity of knowledge, including self-knowledge, through doubt. Critical thinking challenges one's own beliefs as a way forward to the creation of new knowledge and (self) transformation. In this sense, it is skeptical towards meta-narratives which become available for scrutiny along with those who legitimize them precisely because "narrative knowledge does not give priority to the question of its own legitimization in that it certifies itself in the pragmatics of its own transmission without having recourse to argumentation and proof" (Lyotard, p. 27). Ultimately, critical thinking is about the empowerment of the individual construed as an agent of change.

Arguably, considering its emancipatory and, therefore, essentially radical character, one could ask what kind of critical thinking is envisaged within the discourse of hybridization and its performative strategies. This is because, to recall Stiglitz, there must be a commitment from governments to create the conditions for critical thinking and the "risk-taking" it involves through the establishment of a climate conducive to questioning, which would also entail willingness to doubt personal epistemologies amongst administrators, teachers, students and parents (given the latter's involvement in the university education of their kids in Oman; see Thuwayba & Al-Barwani, 2012). In a nutshell, critical thinking requires a commitment to undergo change at all levels of the society.

Following similar lines of thought, Romanowski and Nasser (2012) attempt to respond to the question posited just above with regard to the type of critical thinking employed in Qatar by drawing on the differences between a weak and strong sense of critical enquiry as formulated by Paul (1994). The *distinguo* is crucial. According to Paul, individuals instilled with a weak sense of critical enquiry, although still capable of engaging in logical processes and questioning the validity of opinions and facts, find it "very difficult, in some cases traumatic, to question those in which they have a personal, egocentric investment." Reversely, they find it easy "to question just and only, those beliefs, assumptions, and inferences that have already been 'rejected'" (p. 3). As Romanowski and Nasser (2012) claim, "the weak sense of critical thought is also used to maintain their own positions and controversies are avoided or dismissed especially if these arguments challenge the current discourse" (p. 121). They aptly conclude that the weak sense is instrumental to the maintenance of the status quo. Considering the way HE has been conceptualized and operationalized in Oman, it is perhaps safe to argue that the weak sense of critical enquiry rules. This could also go some way to explaining deficiencies amongst graduates in fundamental 'higher order' skills.

Neo-liberal beliefs in the form of critical thinking skills would then again be negotiated, and its threatening effects somehow offset, at least temporarily. Ultimately, the question is not simply epistemological, as preservation of some fundamental truth, or onto-political, as preservation of the status quo, but it is also ethical in that change, in the form of educational reforms, is a process and must be a process and, as such, requires, through ongoing negotiation, a gradual and, therefore, non-threatening exposure to what is new, different, which does not preempt the possibility of moving

further on by creating, for example, the conditions to develop a strong sense of critical thought.[7]

Conclusion

This essay has sought to examine the challenges and opportunities stemming from the development of higher education in the Sultanate of Oman in the wake of the global economy. It has attempted to do so by providing both an historical and contextual dimension to the critical analysis of texts and (often veiled) discursive strategies that inform the current education reform process. It has been argued that the development of higher education in Oman has been shaped around what we have called hybridization as a new paradigm wherein the principles of the knowledge economy are to co-exist, through constant negotiation and compromise, with the foundational values of Islamic ontology and epistemology. We have also proposed to conceive hybridization as a tool of progressive resilience against the idea of the post-modern University as formulated in Readings's work and, to a larger extent, against the perceived threat of global capitalism in its tendency to change the moral culture of societies and the way they are structured. The Omani University intended as a political subject, as a community of subjectivities, has ultimately been called to adapt and reorganize itself by creatively responding to the impact of the knowledge economy and the unsettling epistemic violence that it carries (see Butler, 2013). This call for action on adaptation and resilience is underpinned both by a feeling of apprehension for the future that can be sensed between the lines of all the policies, speeches and strategies that made up educational reforms in the Sultanate and, ultimately, by a sense of "preparedness" (Bracke), that is intrinsic to resilience, under whose auspices (of transformation and survival) individuals are being mobilized and disciplined. However, whether hybridization as a way to pursue resilience and overcome the challenge of neo-liberalism will work cannot be answered. And yet, is there a viable alternative?

---

[7] From a different perspective, this is also auspicated by Romanowski and Nasser (2012) with reference to Qatar.

References

A'Sharqiyah University. (2019). About ASU. Retrieved from
http://portal.asu.edu.om/about-asu/vision-mission/

Al-Ani, W. (2017). Alternative education needs in Oman: Accommodating learningdiversity and meeting market demand. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, *22*(3), 322-336. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2016.1179204.

Al Barwani, T., Al Beely T., & Al Suleimani, H. (2012). Parental involvement in higher education in Oman. *Malaysian Journal of Education*, *37*(1), 13-24. Retrieved from http://ejournal.ukm.my/jpend/article/view/13275/4201

Al Buraimi University College. (2019). Academic affairs and departments. Retrieved from https://buc.edu.om/academic_affairs.php

Al Harthi, H. (2011). Education in the Sultanate of Oman: The conflict and the harmony of modernity and traditions. In Y. Zhao (Ed.), *Handbook of Asian Education: A Cultural Perspective.* New York, NY and London: Routledge.

Al-Lamki, S. M. (2002). Higher education in the Sultanate of Oman: The challenge of access, equity and privatization. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, *24*(1), 75-86. https://doi.org/10.1080/13600800220130770.

Al-Mahrooqi, R., & Denman, C. J. (2018). *English education in Oman: Current scenarios and future trajectories*. Singapore: Springer Nature.

Al-Mahrooqi, R., & Denman, C. J. (2018). Assessing students' critical thinking skills in the humanities and sciences colleges of a Middle Eastern University. *International Journal of Instruction 13*(1), 783-796. https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2020.13150a.

Al-Najar, N. (2016). View of education development in Oman. *International Journal of Academic Research in Education and Review, 4*(1), 10-18. Retrieved from https://www.academicresearchjournals.org/IJARER/PDF/2016/January/Al%20Najar.pdf

Al Shabibi, A. S., & Silvennoinen, H. (2018). Challenges in education system affecting teacher professional development in Oman. *Athens Journal of Education*, *10*, 1-22.

Apple, M. W. (1992). The text and cultural politics. *Educational Researcher*, *21*(7), 4-19.

Apple, M. W. (2004). *Ideology and curriculum*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Araya, D., & Marber, P. (2015). *Higher education in the global age: Policy, practice and promise in emerging societies*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination*: *Four essays*. Austin: University of Texas

Press.

Bal, M. (1985). *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Barthes, R. (1968). *Writing zero degree*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang.

Barthes, R. (2005). *The neutral: Lecture course at the College de France (1977-1978)*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Bleiker, R., & Chou, M. (2010). *Nietzsche's style: On language, knowledge and power*. London, UK: Routledge.

Butler, J., & Athanasiou, A. (2013). *Dispossession: The performative in the political.* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Butler, J., Gambetti, Z., & Sabsay, L. (Eds.). (2016). *Vulnerability in resistance*. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press.

Dajani, B. A. S. (2015). The ideal education in Ibn Khaldun's Muqaddimah. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *192*, 308-312.

Derrida, J. (1976). *Of Grammatology.* Baltimore, MD & London, UK: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Dhofar University. (2019). Academic programs and degrees offered. Retrieved from https://www.du.edu.om/programs-and-degrees-offered/

Devetak, R. (2015). Theories, practices and postmodernism. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 12*(2), 61-76. DOI: 10.1080/09557579908400243

Druker, P. F. (1994). The age of social transformation. *Atlantic Monthly*, *274*, 53-80.

Eagleton, T. (2015, April 6). The slow death of the university. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Slow-Death-of-the/228991/

Education Council, (2018). *The national strategy for education 2040*. Retrieved from https://www.educouncil.gov.om/downloads/Ts775SPNmXDQ.pdf

Education Council, (2017). *The philosophy of education in the Sultanate of Oman*. Retrieved from https://www.mohe.gov.om/userupload/PDFs.pdf

Evans, C., Howson, C., & Forsythe, A. (2018). Making sense of learning gain in higher education. *Higher Education Pedagogies*, *3*(1), 1-45.

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum Publishing Company.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge*. New York, NY: Pantheon.

Foucault, M. (2000). *Power: Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984*. London, UK: Penguin Books.

Global Terrorism Index. (2018). Retrieved from http://globalterrorismindex.org/

Guibernau, M. (2007). *The identity of nations*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Halstead, M. (2010). An Islamic concept of education. *Comparative Education*, *40*(4), 517-529. https://doi.org/10/1080/0305006042000284510

Hosni, D., & World Bank (2004). *Higher education in developing countries: Peril and promise*: *The task force on higher education and society.* Washington, D.C.: The World Bank. Retrieved from http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTAFRREGTOPTEIA/Resources/Peril_and_Promise.pdf

Hvidt, M. (2015). The State and the knowledge economy in the Gulf: Structural and motivational challenges. *The Muslim World*, *105*, 24-45. https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12078

Ibn Khaldun. (1978). *The Muqaddimah*. London, UK: St. Edmunds Press.

Issan, Y., & Abdullah, S. (2010). Preparing for the women of the future: Literacy and development in the Sultanate of Oman. *Hawwa*, *8*(2), 120-153. https://doi.org/10.1163/156920810X529967.

Lewis, A., & Smith, D. (1993). Defining higher order thinking. *Theory Into Practice*, *32*(3), 131-137. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849309543588

Lyotard, J. F. (1979). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge.* Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.

Middle East Eye (2018, January 29). *Oman jobs protest spreads to other cities as arrests reported*. Retrieved from https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/oman-jobs-protest-spreads-other-cities-arrests-reported

Ministry of Higher Education (2019). *Private HEIs in Oman*. Retrieved from https://www.mohe.gov.om/InnerPage.aspx?id=9767b8ed-876e-4dfc-9707-c2c3e337c078

Ministry of Information (2015). *The royal speeches of his majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said*. Retrieved from https://www.omaninfo.om/english/files/Book/royal-speech.pdf

Muscat University. (2019). *Mission and vision*. Retrieved from https://muscatuniversity.edu.om/mission-vision

Nasser, R. (2019). Educational reform in Oman: System and structural changes. *Intechopen*. Retrieved from DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.84913

National Centre for Statistics and Information (2019). *National centre for statistics and information*. Retrieved from https://www.ncsi.gov.om/Pages/NCSI.aspx

Nurunnabi, M. (2017). Transformation from an oil-based economy to a knowledge-based economy in Saudi Arabia: The direction of Saudi Vision 2030. *Journal of the Knowledge Economy*, *8*(2), 536-564. DOI 10.1007/s13132-017-0479-8.

New York Times (2011, April 6). *Oman offers some lessons to a region embroiled in protest*. Retrieved from
https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/07/world/middleeast/07iht-m07-oman.html

Nolan, L. (2012). Liberalizing monarchies? How Gulf monarchies manage education reform. *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*, *4*, 7-36. Retrieved from
https://www.brookings.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2016/06/0229_liberalizing_monarvhiesng.pdf

Paul, R. W. (1981). Teaching critical thinking in the "strong" sense: A focus on self-deception, world views, and a dialectical mode of analysis. *Informal Logic*, *4*(2), 2-7. https://doi.org/10.22329/il.v4i2.2766.

Paul, R. W. (1992). Critical thinking: What, why, and how? *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 77, 3–24. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/cc.36819927703.

Panjwani, F. (2004). The 'Islamic' in Islamic education: Assessing the discourse. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, *7*(1), 1-11. Retrieved from
https://iis.ac.uk/academic-article/islamic-islamic-education-assessing-discourse

Pritchett, L. (2001). Where has all the education gone? *The World Bank Economic Review, 15*(3), 367-391. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/3990107

Readings, B. (1996). *The university in ruins*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Renjith, K., & Rajani, J. (2015). Evaluation of critical thinking in higher education in Oman. *International Journal of Higher Education*, *4*(3), 33-43. DOI:10.5430/ijhe.v4n3p33

Romanowski, M. H., Alkhateeb, H., & Nasser, R. (2018). Policy borrowing in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries: Cultural scripts and epistemological conflicts. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *60*, 19-24. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2017.10.021.

Romanowski, M. H., & Nasser, R. (2011). Critical thinking in Qatar's Education for a New Era (EFNE): Negotiating possibilities. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, *4*(1), 118-134. Retrieved from

http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/viewFile/300/262

Smith, A. D. (1991). *National identity*. London, UK: Penguin.

Sohar University. (2019). *Management program matrix*. Retrieved from
https://www.soharuni.edu.om/index.php/en/study/undergraduateprograms/business/2016-06-02-08-15-57/management

Steiner-Khamsi, G. (2014). Cross-national policy borrowing: Understanding reception and translation. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, *34*(2), 153-167. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2013.875649.

Steiner-Khamsi, G. (2006). The economics of policy borrowing and lending: A study of late adopters. *Oxford Review of Education*, *32*(5), 665-678. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980600976353.

Steiner-Khamsi, G. (2004). *The global politics of educational borrowing and lending*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Stiglitz, J. E. (1999). *Public policy for a knowledge economy*. Washington DC and London, UK: The World Bank and Center for Economic Policy Research. Retrieved fromhttp://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.123.9173&rep=rep1&type=pdf

Schwalje, W. A. (2011). Knowledge-based economic development as a unifying vision in a post-awakening Arab world. *MPRA Working Paper* 30305. Retrieved from https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/30305/1/MPRA_paper_30305.pdf

Supreme Council for Planning (2016). *Oman 9th Five-Year Development Plan and the Strategic Economic Sectors 2016-2020*.

Sur University College. (2019). *Bachelor in Mechanical Engineering study plan*. Retrieved from
http://www.suc.edu.om/images/fichier-pdf/Final_Mechanical_study_plan.pdf

Taderera, F. (2018). Managing constraints in teaching and learning in higher education in Oman: understanding market orientation and quality service delivery. *International Journal of Management Excellence*, *10*(3), 1355-1376. DOI: 10.17722/ijme.v10i3.424.

The National (2018, January 22). *Oman protest: Hundreds demand jobs*. Retrieved from https://www.thenational.ae/world/gcc/oman-protest-hundreds-demand-jobs-1.697750

Tuzlukova, V., & Prabhukanth, K. U. (2018). Critical thinking and problem solving skills: English for science foundation program students' perspectives. *Collection of*

papers of the faculty of philosophy of the University of Pristina, *37*(3). DOI:10.5937/zrffp48-18664

UNDP (2016). *Arab Human Development Report*. New York, NY: United Nations Development Program.

UNESCO (2018). *Country strategy for the Sultanate of Oman 2019-2023*. Doha: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

University of Nizwa. (2019). *About UoN*. Retrieved from https://www.unizwa.edu.om/index.php?contentid=1

University of Nizwa. (2019). *College and institutes/study plans*. Retrieved from https://www.unizwa.edu.om/index.php?contentid=1834

Wilkinson, J. C. (2010). *Ibâdism: Origins and early development in Oman.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Williams, J. (2005). *Understanding poststructuralism*. Chesham, UK: Acumen Publishing.

Wiseman, A. W., Alromi, N. H., & Alshumrani, S. (2014). Challenges to creating an Arabian Gulf knowledge economy. *International Perspectives on Education and Society*, 24, 1-33. Retrieved from https://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/pdfplus/10.1108/S147936792014000002402

Wright, S., & Shore, C. (eds) (2017). *Death of the public university? Uncertain futures for higher education in the knowledge economy*. New York, NY and Oxford, UK: Berghahn.

World Bank (2019). *Oman's economic update - October 2019*. Retrieved from https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gcc/publication/oman-economic-update-october-2019.