

## Teacher Formation for Islamic Education: The Experience of Sultan Qaboos University

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### Abstract

Sultan Qaboos University is the prime address for teacher education in the Sultanate of Oman. The B.ed. for Islamic education is one of the core programmes of the College of Education, complemented by the M.A. and Ph.D. for Curriculum and Instruction, with a focus on Islamic education. The paper presents the College's particular pedagogical approach to the formation and training of Islamic education teacher candidates. It gives an overview over the development of educational institutions of the country, the vision and mission of the College of Education, SQU, and discusses challenges and prospects of Islamic education teacher formation in Oman.

**Keywords:** *Islamic education, teacher formation, Islamic studies, Oman, Islamic pedagogy, Sultan Qaboos University*

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## 1. Introduction

The development of Islamic education curricula and teaching methods in the Islamic and non-Islamic world has become a field of interest for academic scrutiny. This is particularly true with the duality of instruction that takes place in most parts of the Islamic world today, where scientific curricula are often imported or taught in a foreign language (Abdul Kabir, 2016). The assessment of teacher training and educational programmes is a point of major concern, not only in the developing world (Al-Ayasrieh, 2005). Changes in demography, societal and labour market demands, have, sometimes in unison with neoliberal privatization policies, led to calls for changes in the educational system over the last decades. Studies on students' performance worldwide and their discussions may be witnesses to these developments.

Teachers are regarded as agents of change and key to improving the quality of education (Chapman et al, 2012); probably more so in striving countries in the developing and Islamic world than elsewhere. Teacher education and commitment is a vital indicator for the success of the endeavors for improvement.

In this vein, this paper provides insight into the formation of teachers for Islamic education in Oman, more particularly at the College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University. It discusses the historical background of Islamic education in the Sultanate, its most important developments, the integration of Islamic education into the public school system. It details the Islamic education teacher programme at SQU and discusses various points of interest, related to degree plans, practical training, accreditation, employability, and others. In conclusion, it opens the discussion on possibilities for further development.

## 2. Background: Oman And Its Educational History

The people of Oman embraced Islam during the lifetime of the Prophet, p.b.u.h. The first mosque was built by Māzin b. Ghaḍūbah, who accepted Islam after meeting the Prophet, p.b.u.h. The mosque is still to be found in Samā'il, a small town between Muscat and Nizwa. Earliest mosques in the country show traces of two qiblas, alluding to their construction even prior to the changing of qiblah in 2 A.H. Many Sahabah are of Omani descent. The Tābi'ī Jābir b. Zayd, considered to be the first Imam of the *Ibadhi madhhab*, hails from Oman. Islamic scholarship therefore has a long tradition in the country. Becoming home to the Ibadhi school in Umayyad times, the region followed its own way in many aspects and was largely self-ruled either in independence from or formal affiliation to the Umayyad, Abbasid and Ottoman States. Omani history is also a history of numerous internal and external wars, impacting the educational system over the centuries (Al-Salmi, 2001, p.55).

The Sultanate of Oman had approximately 4.4 million inhabitants as of 2016, with an expatriate percentage of nearly 45%. About half of the country's inhabitants reside in the capital Muscat. Life expectancy at birth is 74.9 years for males, and 79.3 for females

(Statistical Yearbook 2017). Rapid Population growth and average age need to be taken into account upon planning future needs for teachers generally and Islamic education teachers in particular. In 2014, nearly 56% of the population were under 25 years of age (Ladewig, 2017, p.19).

Oman has a longstanding tradition in Islamic scholarship and education. Locally reputable schools and libraries date back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AH/ 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. Most reputable in the Islamic sciences were the schools of Maḥbūb b. Al-Ruḥayl in Sohar; Mūsā b.a. Jābir al-Izkawī; the school of Ibn Barakah in Bahla as well as the schools of Nizwa and Rustaq (Sultan Qaboos Higher Institute of Culture and Sciences, 2013, p. 340ff). Famous were also the Ya<sup>c</sup>rūbī school in the fort of Jibrin in the 17<sup>th</sup> century AD, or the school of al-Khalīlī in Samā'il in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the school of Nūr al-Dīn al-Sālimī in Biddiyah in the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century (Al-Salmi, 2001, p.65f). The latter have been influential on teaching Islamic sciences far into the twentieth century. Outstanding contributions have also been made in the fields of medicine, astronomy, history, geography and language, to name but a few. Many of these schools yielded a considerable educational outcome over the centuries (Sultan Qaboos Higher Institute of Culture and Sciences, 2013, p. 340ff). While basic Qur'anic education was traditionally present in any mosque, higher education was available in particular schools. Education was organized around two circles; the first comprised learning to read the Qur'an and write, dictation, principles of the Arabic language, fundamentals in 'Aqīdah (Dogma) and Fiqh (Law), as well as basic arithmetic, and memorization of poetry. The second circle comprised the science of 'aqīdah, tafsīr (Qur'anic exegesis), fiqh and uṣūl al-fiqh (Law and its theoretical foundations), rules of inheritance, and the sciences of Arabic language, as well as logic, history, sīrah and Sunnah (the life and example of the Prophet Muhammad). The student was only transferred from one study circle to the next if he had complete mastery of the subject (Sultan Qaboos Higher Institute of Culture and Sciences, 2013, p. 340). There was therefore no difference in the educational administration and conceptualization as compared to other parts of the Islamic world through the ages.

The traditional *ijāzah* system was active and functioning in Oman as well as in other places in the Islamic world. Education was holistic in that it corresponded to the exigencies of Islamic culture and concepts with the basic education in Qur'an and Sunnah, *Fiqh* and *Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, Arabic language and grammar.

Among the features of the traditional system of instruction of the Islamic sciences was that the sheikh or teacher, who was usually remunerated by the state or through the *waqf* system, had a small number of students. This enabled him to focus on both excellence and student needs. Education and scholarship were considered an *'ibādah* (an act of worship) in the first place and not subject to the commodified learning-against-diploma-against-job-transactional system to the extent we find it today. The educational methods used, rather than being only rote-learning with physical punishments (as is anecdotally repeated in parts of the contemporary literature) were guided by the Qur'an and Sunnah. The writings of earlier scholars, as well as

the teachers' biographies testify to this (Al-Salmi, 2001, p.72). Negative aspects of the system may have been the lack of accessibility for every child in some areas and a focus on memorization and dictation, at least in the earlier stages of education (Al-Salmi, 2001, p.73).

The advent of modernity in education, or rather, an interruption or sidelining of the traditional system of learning and teaching of the Islamic sciences may have had a different picture in Oman than it had elsewhere in the Islamic world, as accessible formal institutionalized modern education started only with the advent of Sultan Qaboos Bin Said in 1970. Oman, and more particularly the hinterland, used to be a largely secluded place up to the 1970s. In addition, there was no directly implanted colonial system of education comparable to North Africa under French rule. The incorporation of Islamic education into the system of formal education took place in a very succinct time period as compared to other countries in the Islamic world, due to the comparatively late exposure and exponential growth of the public school system. Problems and perspectives may, however, be comparable to some extent.

#### *Pre and post 1970 teacher education in the Sultanate of Oman*

The number of "modern" schools combining religious and secular knowledge in the Sultanate of Oman was only three schools (in Muscat, Matrah and Salalah) enrolling 909 boys in 1970, prior to the rule of Sultan Qaboos b. Said, with a staff of thirty male (mainly Palestinian) teachers. (Ladewig, 2017, p. 180). In the same breath, it is generally mentioned that there was only one modern hospital and only 10 km of paved roads (Al-Salmi, 2001, p.79). This is more than just a foundational myth. The Sultanate has seen mind-boggling developments, not only in the field of education, within the last four decades. While the World Bank Report of 1974 evaluates the educational programme in the Sultanate as being of "poor quality and with little relevance to the national needs" (Ladewig, 2017), the 2006 World Bank Report describes the Omani educational system as being "massive, unprecedented and unparalleled compared to other countries" (Al Barwani 2016, p.163). In 1972, 50% of teachers had never completed secondary education and a mere 8% held tertiary qualifications (Ladewig, 2017, p.189). It is vital to bear these facts in mind while talking about the modest beginnings of the introduction of modern schools which integrate different specializations from math and science to foreign languages, physical and musical education to Islamic education.

These developments need to be seen as against the larger background of decolonization, modernization and the economic possibilities of the oil boom as well as the establishment of nation states in the Islamic world. Upon the establishment of the Ministry of Education in 1971, a similar level of public schooling to that of other Arab countries was prescribed. Initially the Lebanese curriculum was adapted for other subjects, then replaced by the Qatari curriculum (Al-Salimi 2011, p.149).

Prior to 1970, change occurred in Oman with the foundation of the Sa<sup>c</sup>diyyah school in 1940. While textbooks for other specializations were imported from Arabic countries, the Islamic

education still relied on Nūr al-Dīn al-Sālimī's Talqīn al-Şibyān as a basic text. Education in Oman prior to 1970 was available in four types of education: the Qur'an school, the mosque, the sheikh's (private) schools and modern primary schools. General education until 1970 was limited to the primary stage. There was no department or ministry of education to supervise these institutions, nor a teacher education programme. After 1970, state education was organized along four lines: general Islamic, technical, and further education, with the introduction of secondary schools from 1973-74 (Al-Salmi, 2001, p.74ff).

The first training programme for Islamic education was established in 1976-77. Length of study was one year for students who had completed grade 7; but only some 25 students graduated from this programme. In 1977-78, male and female secondary teacher institutes were established for students who had completed grade 9. The programme lasted three years, with graduates eligible to teach Islamic education in primary schools. Curriculum focused on Islamic studies and Arabic, but also started educational theory, science, math and physical education. Over the years, teacher programmes became more demanding and sophisticated. The initial programmes showed some development in organization and content; real breakthrough in pedagogical and administrative terms was made with the establishment of SQU and the College of Education (Al-Salmi, 2001, p.87ff).

Post-1970, teaching Islamic education was entrusted to Arab graduates of Islamic education institutions such as al-Azhar, and of Omani graduates of mosque schools. These teachers may have been lacking in their pedagogical training and attitude. For the female side, things looked even worse; there were only some three or four Omani female teachers for Islamic education in the early 1970s (Al-Salmi, 2001, p.85f).

The dearth of trained Omani teachers, however, remained during the 1970s. Expatriates from Arab countries such as Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia and Algeria filled the gap (Ladewig, 184).

In the academic year 1998-99 and with the goal of modernization, the Ministry of Education introduced the current educational system, which is based on a primary stage of ten and a secondary stage of 2 years (Al-Salmi, 2001, p.82f). This system was not initially introduced country wide, but rather gradually, beginning with 17 model schools. It emphasizes science, mathematics and IT, with English being introduced in primary grade 1.

Currently, there are some 1,000 schools under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, enrolling over 600,000 male and female students and a total of 43,000 teachers, most of them being Omani, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education (Al Barwani 2016, p.63.) Al Barwani (2016) aptly summarizes: "Over the forty-year history of formal education in Oman, the recruitment of teachers evolved from being an open access job to being a highly selective one and from being a job that needed practically anybody who was willing to teach, to being a job that requires qualifications with highly specialized knowledge and skills" (p. 162).

The challenges in quantitative terms give way to qualitative concerns. As Al Barwani (2016) states, “Oman experienced a decline in the quality of its graduates as the system continued to rapidly expand” (p.163). Major reforms attempted to accommodate these changes, starting with the 1998 reform process *Vision 2020* which involved professional development programmes, with limited achievements in student outcomes. In its wake, employment examinations were put in place for teacher candidates (Al Barwani, 2016, p.164). The newly developed *Vision 2040* reinforces the need to prepare students with the necessary skills needed to survive the challenges of a rapidly changing world (Al Barwani and Bailey, 2016).

With the passage of time, ministerial educational policies have changed. *Vision 2020*, a national strategic plan aiming at the economic development of the country, called for modernization of the educational system. Shifting from the general education programme effective prior to 1994, which largely emphasized on teacher-centered instruction and rote-learning, the basic education system focused on a new curriculum and improving instruction in grades 1 and 2 (Chapman et al, 2012, p.393). Critics state that secondary school teachers in the country lack professional capacity. In this sense, SQU graduates are in a better starting position than other school teacher preparation programmes due to the intake requirements (Chapman et al, 2012, p.394).

### **3. Integration of Islamic scholarship into the modern system of education**

Abdurrahman Al-Salimi (2011) gives an interesting account of the integration of Islamic studies in the public school system under initial continuation of the traditional system of Islamic scholarship and teaching in Oman, mainly after the ascension of Sultan Qaboos to power in 1970, which he calls a “turning point in the development of religious learning in Oman” (p.148).

In 1977, the Omani Ministry of Education developed its own curriculum. Islamic education was made compulsory from grades 1 to 12. The Ministry implemented the new curriculum by utilizing but also updating traditional teaching methodologies, as “education in Oman already preserved a strong connection between teacher and pupils, and the Ministry of Education sought to preserve the positive aspect of the system” (Al-Salimi, 2011, p.149). A specialized department in the Ministry of Education initially controlled mosque schools (for the elementary level) in five towns, namely Nizwa, Bahla, Izki, Sinaw and Bididiya. Those schools, up to their closure in 1996, offered a different curriculum for Arabic and Islamic education and no music or art lessons. The goal was to preserve the traditional structures while modernizing “so that tradition was not discarded too suddenly in those cities” (Al-Salimi, 2011, p.150). A number of Islamic education institutes in the country, as in Khasab, Sohar, Ja’lan and Salalah, functioned between 1988 to 1998. They taught both secondary school classes and four-year university degree courses and were closed due to the provision of other higher education options in the country (Al-Salimi, 2011, p.150). In the new millennia, curriculum shifted the focus “from dogma and doctrine to Islamic culture and civilization”

(Al-Salimi, 2011, p.155), favoring a cultural rather than religious approach. As compared to other countries in the Arabic and Islamic world, the Sultanate's policy has succeeded in integrating traditional scholarship (with the establishment of institutes and colleges of Islamic sciences) while modernizing the Islamic education curriculum without considerable resistance from traditional scholarship (Al-Salimi, 2011, p.151).

#### *Teacher Education at Sultan Qaboos University, College of Education*

Teacher education for Islamic education takes place under the auspices of the College of Education at Sultan Qaboos University and a number of teacher training institutes. Institutional developments relevant for teacher education in the field of Islamic education have been in favor of SQU (Al-Salimi, 2011, p.150f).

Tertiary academic teaching in Oman started with the establishment of Sultan Qaboos University in 1986 and the establishment of six intermediate colleges for male and female teachers in 1990 under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education with a teacher formation programme of two years, which have been transformed into university colleges awarding bachelor's degrees (Al-Ayasrieh and Mustafa, 2009, p.368). Prior to the establishment of these institutions, Omani teacher candidates (not only for Islamic education) studied abroad in Arab countries to pursue academic studies, e.g., in Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait, and UAE. The first master's degree in education in Oman was awarded in 1995 at the College of Education, SQU (Al-Ayasrieh and Mustafa, 2009, p.369), in the specialization of Islamic education. As of now, secondary school teacher preparation programmes can be pursued at Sohar, Nizwa and Dhofar private universities, at Ajman University, or at SQU, the only university with public status in Oman (Chapman et al, 2012, p.394). In 2010, the number of SQU graduates of teacher preparation programmes teaching in secondary schools in Oman was 2,733 (Chapman et al, 2012, p.395). The total number of students at the College of Education in semester 2015-2016 was 1874, of which 1188 were females.

The high demand for teachers in Islamic education in the country is still to a large extent met by an expatriate working force, where Islamic education teachers for private and government schools are still recruited from other Arabic countries, mainly Egypt. By 1980, 92 percent of teachers in Oman were expatriates (Chapman et al, 2012, p.392). Omanisation of the sector took effect with domestic teacher programmes, with 38,000 Omani teachers or 89 percent of teachers in Oman (Chapman et al, 2012, p.392). Due to the excess of teacher supply, recruitment into the profession after graduation is no longer automatic (Chapman et al, 2012). MoE qualifying tests prove to the advantage of SQU Islamic education teacher graduates with a 100%, success rate of SQU teacher candidates in Islamic education.

#### **4. Tabulating Ministry of Education employment test results**

*Programme: Islamic Education*

	Graduates in 2012		Graduates in 2013 A		Graduates in 2013 B		Graduates in 2014 A	
	SQU	others	SQU	others	SQU	others	SQU	others
number of graduates who took the test	21	232	3	20	14	111	3	83
number of graduates who passed the test	21	158	3	16	14	101	3	54
% of graduates who passed the test	100%	68.1%	100%	80%	100%	91%	100	65.06

Source: Accreditation Report for NCATE, Islamic education programme, 2015, p.41.

**Intake requirements** for SQU are highly competitive. While female students currently need a general high school diploma of more than 90%, male students may be accepted from 85% onwards. It is the university’s policy to have a 50/50 intake distribution between male and female students per year. Female high school graduates have had a higher percentage over the years; therefore, affirmative action for the male graduates is one of the university’s policies. Upon registration at SQU, the student registers the specialisation of his choice. The Deanship of Admission generally distributes students on the basis of the percentage acquired in the general high school diploma rather than proclaimed interest, with the highest percentage needed for Medicine. Anecdotally, this policy leads to students being admitted who may have chosen Islamic education as a last resort; while excellent students wishing to become Islamic education teachers may be absorbed by other specializations.

Female teachers constitute 75 percent of the teaching force in grades 1-6, due to a MoE policy demanding that primary schools should be co-educational and staffed by female teachers only (Chapman et al, 2012, 392).

B.ed. programmes in the College of Education are available in Arabic Language, Art Education, Education in Early Childhood, Educational Administration, English Language, History, Technology of Teaching and Learning, Islamic Education, Physical Education, Science Education (Chemistry), Science Education (Mathematics), Science Education (Physics). Previously offered courses in Geography and Biology are currently inactive. In addition, the College offers a number of diplomas and Master and PhD programmes in the



same specializations. The department of Curriculum and Teaching at the College offers six programmes in the Masters: Islamic Education, Arabic Language, English Language, Science (Chemistry - Physics - Biology), Mathematics and Social Studies. The Department also offers five programmes at the PhD level: Islamic Education, Arabic Language, Science (Chemistry - Physics - Biology), Mathematics and Social Studies. The department of Islamic sciences offers, next to the B.ed. in Islamic education, a Masters programme for the specialisations of Fiqh and Uşūl al-Fiqh and Uşūl al-Dīn and Da'wah.

**Numbers of students** As SQU intake is linked back to the demands and capacities of the job market, approximately 20 students are taken in every year for the bachelor of Islamic education yearly. The same number is taken in for the M.A. specializations of Fiqh and Uşūl al-Fiqh and Uşūl al-Dīn and Da'wah, while the M.A. curriculum programme with specialisation in Islamic Education takes in some 6 students per year, and some 2 for the PhD programme in the same time period.

General studying conditions are quite conducive; female students are accommodated on campus, while male students—with the exception of special needs students who live on campus—receive a monthly stipend and live off campus. Transport on campus and outside is provided. Students receive a monthly stipend of 120 OMR, have free access to WIFI, sports halls (male and female) and other facilities. There are several libraries on campus, including the main library, The Omani studies library, the mosque library and libraries in each college, among them the College of Education. The main library is open 24 hours a day during exams; and reduces hours to 8 am-1pm during the summer break. Textbooks are provided for free. SQU students and staff generally are highly esteemed in the country.

#### *Degree plan and Instructors of the Islamic education teacher training programme*

The degree plan for the B.A. in Islamic education combines content knowledge (core subjects) and pedagogical, psychological and administrative subjects.

Students generally have to go through foundation courses before they enter their specialised studies in the colleges, where they are to take courses in English, Math and IT in the first semester, followed by foundations of research methodology in the second semester. Year one of college studies (which generally corresponds to year 2 at SQU) includes in its first semester Recitation, Memorization and Recitation of the Qur'an I, (2)<sup>1</sup>, Educational Foundations (3), Introduction to Fiqh (2), Sciences of the Qur'an and exegetical methods (3), Sciences of hadith (3), Contemporary Omani Society (1), in addition to a university elective (2). The second semester stars Recitation, Memorization and Recitation II (1), English for Educational Purposes (3), Islamic 'aqīdah (3), Family Law (3), Fiqh al-'Ibādāt (Rules of Worship): Purity and Prayer (3), Prophetic biography (3). Year 2, semester 3 comprises Memorization and

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers in brackets give the credit hours per course.

Recitation of the Qur'an III (1), Fiqh al-<sup>ʿ</sup>ibādāt II (Fasting, Zakāt, Hajj) (3), Psychology for educational purposes (3), Arabic language (3), University Elective (2), Functional Grammar (2). In semester 4, the student takes Recitation, Memorization and Recitation of the Qur'an III (1), Analytical exegesis (Sūrat al-Aḥzāb, al-Raḥmān) (3), Takhrīj (Identification) and Study of asānīd (chains of narrators) (3), departmental elective (3), consultative psychology (3), Uṣūl al-Fiqh (Theoretical foundations of the law) (3), University elective (2). Semester 5: Memorization and Recitation of the Qur'an IV, Analytical exegesis (Sūrat al-Nūr, al-Ḥujurāt) (3), Rules of Inheritance (3), Introduction to Instructional Technologies (3), School Methodology for Islamic Education (3), Oman and Islamic culture or Islamic culture (2). Semester 6: Memorization and Recitation of the Qur'an IV (1), System of Governance (2), Analytic hadith (3), Methods of Instruction, Islamic education (3), Criminal Law in Islam (3), Measuring and Assessment (dep. of psychology) (3); The Educational System in Oman and the Gulf countries (3). Semester 7: Memorization and Recitation of the Qur'an V (1), department elective II (3), Law of transactions (3), Tawḥīd (3), Methods of Instruction in Islamic education II (3), Introduction to school administration (2). Semester 8: Practical education (field training) (9).

The pedagogy–content knowledge ratio is a contested field within the department of Islamic sciences. The ratio is currently 60:40 including practical training. While this ratio corresponds with international standards such as NCATE, academic staff in the department frequently complain that the high percentage of pedagogical courses are offered at the expense of specialized content knowledge. An additional twist is to be found in the fact that the pedagogical knowledge courses are taught at different departments in the College of Education and not linked to any Islamic approach. The Islamic vision of education, educational history, the role of the teacher in Islamic culture are not part of these courses. Criticism is internally being vocalised that the relative loss in specialized content knowledge finds reflection in a resulting weaker teacher personality.

Although the *Ibadhi madhhab* is the majority Islamic school in the Sultanate, the B.ed. programme does not focus on the school but rather follows, in its content knowledge courses, a comparative approach.<sup>2</sup> This corresponds to the MoE vision (Al-Salimi, 2011, p.149) and is also reflected in faculty, Omani and non-Omani staff from diverse backgrounds. The department currently has nine Omani and five international faculty members who range from full to assistant professor; there are only two female academic staff. Omani faculty have been trained both in Oman as well as abroad, with academics taking their M.A. and/ or PhDs from Jordan, Egypt, Tunis and the UK.

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<sup>2</sup> The authors of this paper have previously researched the Islamic education school curriculum regarding the consideration of diversity. *The Islamic Education Curriculum in the Sultanate of Oman: Integrating diversity. With Dr. Mohsin al-Salimi.* 2nd Annual Australian Islamic Schooling Conference 11-12 July 2017, Mount Lofy House, Australia.

### *Accreditation*

With the new millennia, the college administration envisaged raising teacher education standards through international accreditation (Al Barwani, 2016, p.164f). The college sought accreditation through NCATE, an American based teacher formation association represented by the follow-up organisation CAEP. This organisation was chosen for a number of reasons, among them NCATE's previous presence in the Gulf region, and that leading college administrators had received their degrees from American universities (Al Barwani and Bailey, 2016, p.147f). First contacts and preparations started in 2008; the final cycle was completed in 2014 and accreditation awarded to college programmes through 2020.

The accreditation process for the Islamic education programme (as well as Arabic language) through NCATE is unique in that the programme coordinators set up their own programme standards and do not link back to educational systems abroad. "Accreditation for the CoE at SQU is a significant milestone in the Arab world because it is the first time a nationally administered university with an indigenous leadership and programmes, has achieved this recognition of excellence. The Deanship of the College of Education, with one exception, and six of the eight department heads, are all Omani. Other accredited universities such as Zayed University in the UAE are aligned with American universities, courses and qualifications and have predominantly expatriate faculty" comments Ladewig (2017, p.197). This, however, does not completely deny the possibility of outside interference through accreditation, as the foreign body is perceived as both identifier and measurement of what excellence means, and programmes and standards may have been channeled accordingly.

Time and further research is needed to assess the extent to which the accreditation procedure affects the quality of teacher candidates, and in how far this change may materialise in better standards of education in schools if it yields positive results, or whether it affects the academic achievements of teacher candidates and students at school at all. This is true for student development in schools generally, as incorporating teaching of Islamic education. Though acknowledging positive aspects of the process, critical voices may see in the procedure a mere focus on formalities, a change in shape, rather than development in content (Bouzenita, 2015).

As a positive by-product of teacher education at SQU, degree plans changed in that the teaching practice period has been raised from 150 to some 420 hours during the student teachers' final semester (Al Barawani, 2016, p.165). Even if we suggest an enhancement in the teacher training process, a weak spot may remain in the stability of teachers after graduation (Al Barwani, 2016; p.165; Chapman and Al Barwani: 2012). Induction and performance at schools and general job satisfaction may be dependent on factors the college programme cannot tackle as they are dependent on Ministry directives.

### *Teaching diploma*

The educational qualification diploma programme is an educational programme offered by the College of Education in which graduates of different disciplines qualify as teachers in two semesters. The candidate takes 36 credit hours, distributed over a variety of courses in curriculum and teaching, psychology, educational administration, and educational technology. The second semester is devoted to field training with 7 credit hours and a 2-hour graduation project.

Practical training units in teacher education constitute the vital link between theory and practice. The implementation of the practical training units vary from university to university in the Arabic world. At SQU, the student teacher candidate used to be exposed to the school reality one day of the week in semester 7, and two days in semester 8 (Ayasrieh, 2005). Lately, the full last semester (semester 8) has been devoted to practical training. Student teachers are supervised during this time by a member of the department of Curriculum and Teaching Methodologies as well as a cooperating teacher in the school. The student teacher candidate is assessed with 80% by the college of education supervisor, and 20% by the cooperating teacher. On an anecdotal note, both staff and students involved with the Islamic education teacher programme point out that students feel without academic and spiritual guidance during their field training.

Student teacher training in Gulf countries and beyond has been the focus of numerous studies (Ayasrieh, 2005, p.216). Dr. Mohammed Abdulkareem Al-Ayasrieh (2011), associate professor at the department of Curricula Development, has conducted research on the level of Omani Islamic education teachers in using classroom questioning strategies. Preceding research exists on the Islamic education student teachers' evaluation of the teaching practice programme at SQU. The study of Al-Ayasrieh, published in 2005, relates to the practical training student teacher candidates receive in the last semesters of their formation in SQU. The study found an average effect on developing positive attitudes toward the teaching profession. Most difficult problems faced were related to the lack of facilities and timetable. Interestingly, the study found no significant differences between SQU student teachers and college of education student teachers in the dimensions of difficulties and attitudes.

A focus on student-centered and e-learning is part of the SQU strategic plan (SQU Strategic Plan 2016-2); Aspects of critical thinking in teacher education generally have been a major focus of contemporary research (Neisler et al 2016, Ladewig 2017). Traditionally, teacher education focuses on content knowledge and content related pedagogical skills (Neisler et al, 2016, p.2). International accrediting agencies, such as NCATE (now CAEP) do not list critical analysis for the acceptable level, but the target level only (Neisler et al, 2016, p.2). With critical thinking and analytic skills being part and parcel of the Islamic sciences particularly, it may be asked why students of these sciences and teacher candidates seem not to be endowed with them. Ladewig's analysis suggests that female Islamic education teacher candidates are, among other College of Education teacher candidates, least inclined "to endorse SQU's understanding of Critical Pedagogy or to demonstrate a preference for learning experiences

that require critical thinking.” (Ladewig 2017, p.337). Chances are that the teacher candidates identified critical thinking as a Western, non-Islamic concept, rather than a concept that may be contextualised Islamically. While previous teacher centered rote learning experiences may have contributed to this evaluation, it should be taken into consideration that international evaluations on these skills may be decontextualised or distorted by cultural ambiguities. On another note, the teaching of Islamic sciences itself may have become decontextualized through its adaptation into a hybrid system. It is therefore questionable if the focus on conveying these skills through the educational system can be successful without prior analysis of the root problem. Ladewig suggests an Islamic framing of the intended reforms so as to make them acceptable to the stakeholders (Ladewig, p.384f).

Exigencies of the job market are increasingly voiced in the discussion on teacher formation. As Chapman et al (2012) state, there used to be a tacit understanding that graduates of the teacher formation programmes at SQU were to be employed by the Ministry of Education. As a matter of fact, the programme was so bound by the demand of the workforce that two specialisations of the programme were closed over the years due to lack of teachers. In turn, concerns about the employability of CoE graduates with regard to growing demands in view of internationalisation and globalisation are raised (Al Barwani 2016). A generally declining economy and sinking oil price contribute to this insecurity. Can our graduates compete internationally should the need for it arise? It may be a good idea to have them prepared. But there should be a discussion on along *which lines*. By endorsing “international” criteria under gradual discarding of models of Islamic education? Or by trying to re-formulate an epistemology that reflects innate authentic Islamic values?

## **5. The question of the pedagogical vision**

Primary and secondary schools in Oman do not necessarily follow a holistic Islamic pedagogy. They are modern secular schools in terms of the worldview they have come about in; however, Islamic education with five weekly lesson units from grades 1 – 12 is considered to be one of the core subjects expressing the importance of Islamic culture and Islamic education in the Sultanate at large. We may state that the Islamic approach is realized through societal background and the Islamic belief of the stakeholders rather than a particular pedagogy. Islamic concepts are naturally translated into action without being theorized. MoE visions, as well as the College of Education conceptual framework, relentlessly emphasise the importance of the particular Omani Islamic Arabic identity and Islamic and Omani values. The MoE, in 1978, published “The Philosophy and Objectives of Education in the Sultanate of Oman”, outlining its philosophy in 14 principles, among them the promotion of new instructional strategies; encouragement of lifelong learning and critical thinking abilities. Emphasis, however, is on the preservation and promotion of the Omani Islamic identity. Arabic language and Islamic education therefore remained an integral part of the curriculum (Ladewig 2017, p. 184).

The B.A. programme for Islamic education is embedded in the general conceptual framework of the College of Education. The conceptual framework was developed in view of the accreditation process and needs to be understood against the background of MoE strategies, university vision and the country's demands. It already reflects and is a result of the preceding developments and official visions and guidelines. The conceptual framework focuses on five key areas, 1. Academic Rigor and Specialized Experiences; 2. Diversified Teaching; 3. Dispositions and Values; 4. Research Culture & Lifelong Learning; 5. Technological Skills. These are further broken down; the diversified teaching, for instance, states: "Graduates of the College of Education diversify their methods of teaching in a way that takes into consideration all learners who are central in the learning process. They believe that every child is capable of learning. They continuously reflect on their teaching and utilize findings of current research in pedagogy and learners' characteristics to improve their work." The distinguished graduate, according to this concept, "is a leader who is empowered with specialized knowledge, expert skills, values of the field and society, and has the ability to utilize contemporary research findings to maximize self-learning through reflective practice and life-long learning in order to provide diversified optimal learning experiences for all students." (CF for CoE, [www.squ.edu.om](http://www.squ.edu.om)) Due to the accreditation process, all programme outcomes and course outlines need to be aligned with this conceptual framework. Students are exposed to the conceptual framework in the beginning of the semester with the introduction of the course outline.

Al-Ayasrieh and Mustafa (2009) analysed the research directions in the masters programme for Teaching Methodology in Islamic Education at SQU, on the basis of 62 M.A. theses that have been produced in that specialisation since its inception in 1995 to 2008. The study recommends, among others, that the masters thesis be more in line with the demands and societal priorities and be designed to aid the development of the curricula. It also recommends broadening the scope of the theses from the narrow service application to an epistemological focus. This is indicative of what is amiss. We have to rely on newer studies covering the last decade to assess in how far change has taken place here.

## **6. Possibilities for further development: specialization**

In the past, the teaching of Islamic sciences occurred within an overall Islamic culture. There was no specialisation as we have it now; in fact, the most outstanding Islamic scholars had a firm knowledge of all the available sciences at their time and age, rather than being "experts" in one field of knowledge. Incorporating Islamic education into modern teacher training is part of a general emphasis on a special field. This may be one of the exigencies of our time and age, given that the sheer bulk of available knowledge surmounts individual capacity. However, to avoid the negative backlashes of specialized cocooning in education (and elsewhere), it is advisable that the education student is exposed to contemporary knowledge and general societal developments so as to enable him to understand his role in society. The

current degree plan provides exposure to general knowledge but could be developed accordingly.

As far as educational, psychological and administrative background knowledge is concerned, the degree plan seems to provide the necessary foundations. The cooperation between the departments of curriculum and instruction and psychology at CoE attests to this fact. What may be missing, however, is a general introduction to the history, vision and mission of Islamic education or education in Islam and the function and responsibilities of the Mu'allim. This induction is being informally taken care of by the department's academic staff.

## 7. Conclusion

Islamic education teacher formation and training at SQU is embedded in and needs to be understood against the background of demographic, socioeconomic and political developments in the Middle East and cultural and historical particularities of the region. The future of training programmes for Islamic education teachers in Oman and beyond is likewise dependent on internal and external factors.

Improving teacher education is considered to be one of the highest priorities of countries across the Middle East (Chapman, 2012, World Bank Report 2008). However, efforts have not always paid off (Chapman, 2012). Academics who are critical of current developments in the educational systems in the Islamic world may find fault in the initial analysis and methodology. The question may be in how far imported solutions, standards as represented in the accreditation process will lead to an overall improvement of teacher education programmes generally and Islamic education teacher programmes in particular, or in how far a new epistemology is needed. Previous research has already alluded to this missing link.

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