

Oman's Academic Dreams

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Oman, a small country of 3 million at the tip of the Persian Gulf, seeks to upgrade its main university so that it can join the ranks of world-class institutions. It is now engaged in a planning process to make this possible. The Sultan Qaboos University, with an enrollment of 14,700 students—almost half female—and a state-of-the-art campus on the outskirts of the capital, Muscat, has performed remarkably well since its founding in 1980. The university feels that it can now “go to the next level” and is developing a master plan for that purpose.

Oman itself is a remarkable place. The current ruler, Sultan Qaboos bin Said—whose name is not only on the university but also on the main mosque, a key highway and many other things—is celebrating his 40th year on the throne in November. He literally brought the country out of the Middle Ages in 40 years. When he deposed his father, there were exactly three schools in the entire country, symbolic of the previous ruler's distrust of anything modern. Now, Oman has a reasonable literacy, generally good infrastructure, a growing higher education system, and enlightened policies concerning women.

Sultan Qaboos University is the only public university in the country. The rest of the public higher education sector consists of vocational colleges. The country has chosen to permit the private sector to develop the rest of the higher

education sector. New private universities, which are given significant government support to get started—including free land and government scholarships for students once they are established—seem to be somewhere between nonprofit and for-profit. Most are backed by major business enterprises, and it is unclear whether the universities will make money once fully functioning. The country has a few foreign transplants offering specialized degrees in engineering and some other fields. These institutions do not seem to be top-class institutions in their home countries.

Sultan Qaboos University faces some significant challenges in its path to world-class status. The university has engaged in a fairly successful effort to “Omanize” the faculty. Now, almost half are Omanis, most of whom have been educated abroad, largely in the United States and United Kingdom. The university’s policy consists of having about a quarter of its faculty as international members once localization is complete. Local staff are offered permanent appointments when hired, making it impossible to fire any Omani from the faculty and problematical in terms of ensuring productivity. Expatriate staff receive renewable three-year contracts but can never achieve permanent status. Building an academic culture based on research and teaching productivity is not an easy task, and the combination of permanent appointments and little accountability and limited term contracts for foreigners make the job more difficult. Yet it is of central importance if the university is to become a research-intensive institution.

Location is also a challenge. While Oman is a stable and peaceful place with well-functioning infrastructure of all kinds, it is not exactly at the center of the academic firmament. Further, Oman faces competition from the glitzier

academic enterprises elsewhere in the Gulf area, including the highly publicized branch campuses in Qatar and elsewhere. Among the Gulf's indigenous public universities outside of Saudi Arabia, Sultan Qaboos University may be the best of the lot. But attracting top scholars from abroad will be hard to accomplish. The university is starting to build meaningful linkages with overseas universities—probably a better strategy than simply subsidizing branch campuses which have little impact on local development and may siphon off many of the best students and faculty.

The university is in the midst of goal setting and planning for the coming decade or so. Some lack of clarity exists about the goals—should Sultan Qaboos University make the major effort required to be a full-fledged research university, or should it have more modest aims? The answers to this basic question will shape the future of the institution in the coming decade or more.