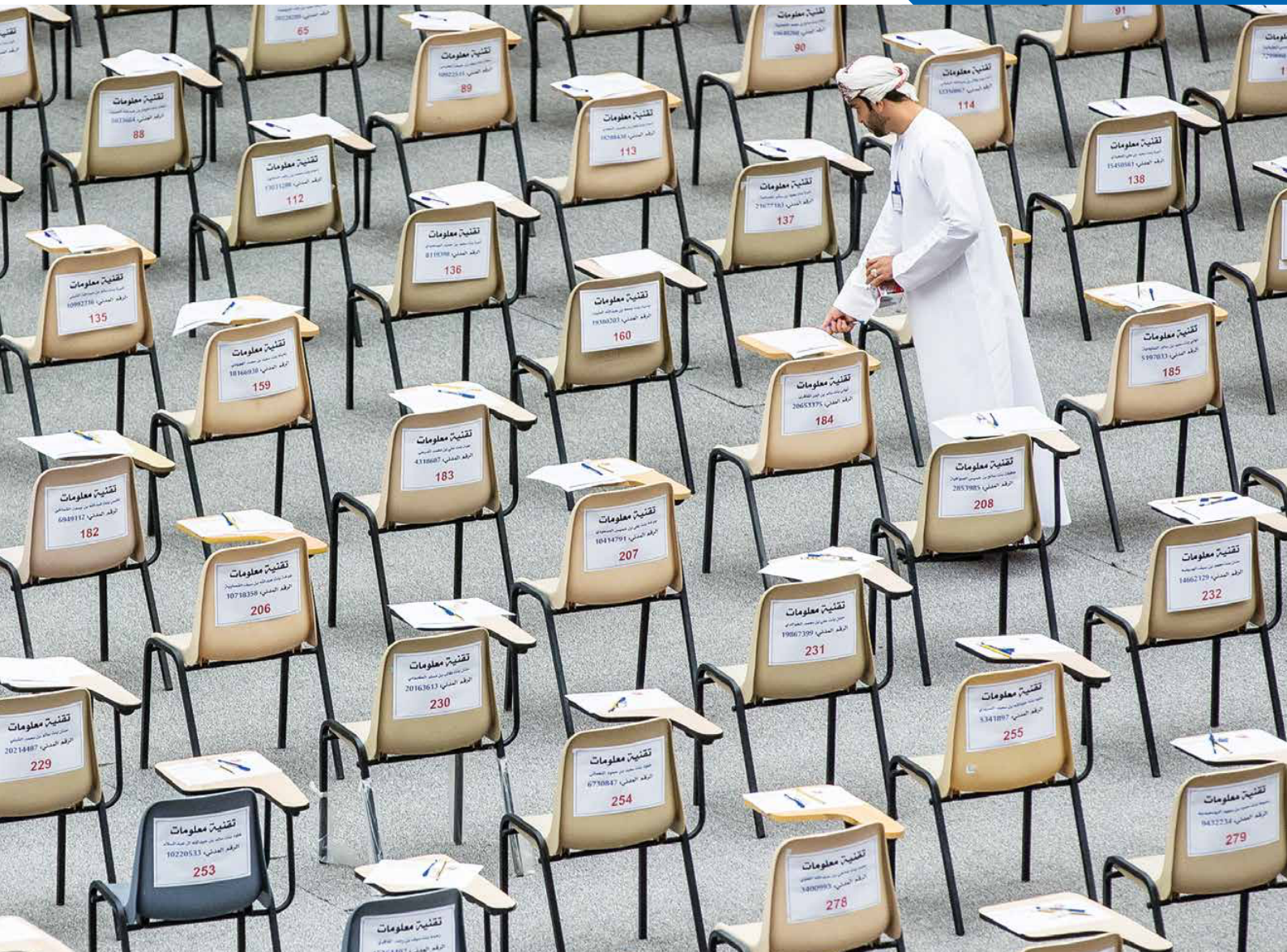




Ithraa News

The Public Authority for
Investment Promotion
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Education: Smart Opportunities
Creative Shift in Public Education
Building Tomorrow's Cities



Creative Shift in Public Education



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Creative Elements

Across the Sultanate of Oman there is a creative shift-taking place in public schools. Creativity, technology and the arts are taking centre stage. Omani New Teachers are applying active learning strategies and 'Learning Beyond the Classroom' approaches, inspired by international best practice, to engage, motivate and inspire their students to think critically, imaginatively and collaboratively.

As the workplace becomes increasingly automated and digitalised, employers require young people to be competent in soft skills such as problem solving and independent decision-making. The New Teacher Programme at The Specialised Centre for Professional Training of Teachers in Muscat, is addressing these needs by equipping the next generation with the necessary 21st century skills to deal with the sultanate's economic diversification and secure its commercial competitiveness in the years ahead.

A Space to Learn and Innovate

The Specialised Centre for Professional Training of Teachers (SCPTT) is part of the Ministry of Education's rigorous programme of educational reform. The Centre is committed to implementing new approaches to Leadership and Learning at every level of education across the country. It has a dedicated building and resources in Muscat. An exclusive group of over 50 specialist trainers, selected from across the Sultanate, disseminate innovative training programmes to the national workforce of Omani Principles, Supervisors, Expert Teachers and New Teachers. There are currently nine programmes that span either one or two years. Each programme involves face-to-face training, an online learning platform and project-based action research, where theory becomes practice and a space for teachers to innovate.

The New Teacher Programme

For two years, I was the Lead Consultant and Trainer on the New Teacher Programme, creating and developing content with international writers alongside mentoring and coaching 25 core Omani Trainers to deliver the ambitious year long programme. Since March 2015, over 3,000 New Omani Teachers have participated in the training programme. Trainers have delivered four face-to-face training weeks, provided guidance online and undertaken classroom observations during regional visits. This consistent and positive support has galvanised the next generation of teachers, inspiring many to enthusiastically lead educational reform in their classrooms and schools.

Teaching Profession is dominated by Young Women

A recent Newsweek article by journalist Lelia Hatoum highlighted that, "...Unemployment among females in the Arab world is a staggering 43.4% when compared with 12.7% globally."

Teaching is one profession in the sultanate that can guarantee employment for young female graduates. Internationally, the teaching profession is dominated by women, providing many with an opportunity to earn a living while balancing work and home responsibilities. It was no surprise that in Cohort 1, over 80% of the New Teachers on the one-year programme were women under 25 years of age. In light of this data, it became very clear while designing the New Teacher programme, that the content not only had to motivate and reflect the Millennials interests, it also had to provide opportunities for the young teachers to engage creatively with each other and provide a platform to innovate. By generating a feeling of ownership the teachers started to quickly adapt the new strategies to their own classroom context, share resources and enjoy the process of experimentation as it was starting to generate a cycle of positive behaviour and genuine engagement from their students'.

Programme Design

Textbooks, once a teacher's burden, were liberated and replaced with active learning strategies that were practical and relevant to real-life. Students' were encouraged to think collectively or independently to achieve the learning intention outlined in the curriculum as opposed to working through a textbook activity. Inquiry-Based Learning was introduced, a strategy that starts with an open question, sparking curiosity and research over an extended period of time. The teacher has to be a skilled facilitator and observe the students' interaction before asking questions to deepen the learning. This technique required New Teachers to move away from the traditional didactic teaching methods and really connect with each student to understand their learning needs and respond accordingly.

Integrating Smartphone Technology

The New Teachers are the Millennials generation, active social media users and confident creators of online content. Integrating smartphone technology into the programme was an immediate success and implemented with ease as teachers quickly observed an increase in student engagement. Trainers selected apps such as Padlet and Plickers to motivate students to participate in live online discussions and enable teachers to collect real-time formative assessment data without the need for a student device.

Value of Creative Partnerships in Education

However, it was the introduction of Creative Partnerships Pilot in September 2015 followed by the 'Learning Beyond the Classroom' initiative in 2016 that defined the programme's unique design. As the global economy shifts, an increasing number of job opportunities are emerging for young people in the creative industries. Internationally, leaders in these fields are campaigning and investing in evidence-based research to urge their governments to safeguard cultural learning and arts education, sighting it as essential element for developing 21st-century skills in young people. Award-winning filmmaker, Sir Lord Puttnam, advocates that learning through culture and arts enables young people to become, "the leading thinkers, innovators, creative business and community leaders of the future." (Cultural Learning Alliance, 2017, p8)

With these observations in mind, I wanted to create a distinct component within the year-long programme that would enable New Teachers to actively engage with the following prestigious cultural arts and scientific organisations in Muscat: The National Museum, Bait Al Zubair Museum and Gallery Sarah, The Royal Opera House Muscat, The Planetarium, EcoOman Centre, The Children's Museum and Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque.

The purpose of the 'Learning Beyond the Classroom' initiative was to expand the New Teachers' perception about how students' learn and to encourage them to look beyond the confines of a traditional classroom environment. Effective engagement with museums and arts organisations can prepare young people for the challenges of the 21st century. Cultural institutions provide teachers with ideal platforms to facilitate unique opportunities for students to explore and discover new concepts. By working outside of the classroom, the dynamic learning environment is a meaningful resource that can activate fresh ways of thinking and perceiving the world.

I developed a bespoke series of self-directed workshops that could be delivered by the Omani Trainers independently at each venue. A series of high-quality professional training sessions were delivered at each venue with the Omani Trainers to demonstrate through active

participation, how to activate learning in a museum or cultural setting. This collaborative process with the trainers, resulted in a unique fusion of facilitation strategies tailored for each cultural setting.

Impact of Learning Beyond the Classroom

At the Centre English Teachers had been exploring strategies to teach persuasive language. At the National Museum, they worked in groups to devise a 1-minute video advertisement to persuade tourists to visit. The activity was a huge success, combining technology, cultural heritage and oral storytelling. The self-directed workshop at The National Museum gave the teachers a real-life context for persuasive language and transformed theory into a purposeful, collaborative and enjoyable learning experience.

In regions where there is no museum, New Teachers adapted the 'Learning Beyond the Classroom' strategies to reflect their context, finding alternative environments such as a fort, a wadi or souq to explore new concepts and motivate students. During the action research process, Teachers observed their students growing in confidence, taking the lead in group situations and a distinct improvement in decision-making skills.

Sustaining a Creative Shift in Education

To date, over 950 English, Social Studies, Islamic Studies, Art, Science, Mathematics and Music New Teachers have participated in a self-directed workshop led by Omani Trainers in a museum or cultural setting. This year another 1,000 teachers are expected to participate in the 'Learning Beyond the Classroom' initiative.

In the immediate future, I am optimistic that the Centre and the Creative Partners will be able to move beyond their current transactional relationship. The annual interaction will lead to teachers and museum providers investing time in developing longer term learning experiences that provide meaningful interactions that cultivate critical thinking and innovation, awakening Oman's "leading thinkers, innovators, creative business and community leaders of the future." (ibid)

Looking further ahead, the notion that the creative industries in the Sultanate can provide undergraduates with a viable career path is relatively new thinking. However, as young people become more resilient and less reliant on public sector jobs, I believe their creativity and entrepreneurship spirit will start to open up new markets, locally and internationally, especially in the hyperlocal tourism field as international visitors seek out authentic and contemporary engagement with the Sultanate of Oman's arts and culture.