

H.E. Dr Fawzia Nasser Al Farsi Under Secretary for Education and Curricula was recently interviewed for 'Forum' by Catherine Lonie.

This dynamic woman who has overseen so many innovative changes in education in Oman provides a role model for anyone who is struggling to combine a home life with a career. The key to which, she declares, is organisation and forward planning.

She wants everyone, but particularly women, to be able to achieve their ambitions through education and she strives towards that aim constantly.

What does she do to relax? She walks briskly along the beach for between six and ten kilometres as often as her busy schedule permits. She finds sea air has a calming and invigorating effect. In common with most busy 21st century women she makes time for reading, often on matters of education, but sometimes a novel or the latest book on personal development, astronomy, Information Technology, human Resources Development.

Catherine: *What do you see as the main challenges that will affect education in Oman over the next decade?*

Dr Fawzia Al Farsi: During the last three decades the main challenge faced by the Ministry was to provide the required infrastructure and staffing levels to ensure that all the country's citizens had the opportunity to be included in the education process. Now that this has to a large extent been achieved, and as the nation prepares for the new challenges of the future, the emphasis for the Ministry over the next decade has changed towards attempts to improve the quality of the present education system.

The introduction of Basic Education into the education system is, perhaps, the most ambitious of the Ministry's attempts to improve the quality of education, and it is recognised that the phasing-in of this new programme to all General Education schools will present a major challenge to the Ministry. The

Ministry is introducing reforms into the present General Education system and intends to reform the Secondary Education system. The Ministry is aware that the successful implementation of such far-reaching reform will, to a large extent, depend on the development of its human resources.

While it is relatively easy to devise educational reform innovations, it is much more difficult to win the hearts and minds of all the people who will be touched by the reforms. The Ministry is aware that change can be difficult and that people can often feel confused and threatened by the process. Another major challenge involved in the implementation of reform, therefore, is concerned with ensuring that all the major stakeholders are supplied with sufficient information on why the changes are being introduced and how the reforms are to be carried out. In order to carry out this task, the Ministry will have to work closely with policy-makers both centrally and in the regions, school headmasters/headmistresses, teachers, parents and students.

The Ministry is keen to implement various other projects, although before they can be introduced the Ministry will require the help and support of institutes such as the University of Sultan Qaboos, other Ministries such as the Ministry of Higher Education and the private sector. The Ministry has successfully cooperated with such outside bodies in the past and it hopes to strengthen these relationships in order to help meet the challenges of the future.

Catherine: *What factors and influences will affect decisions regarding education here in the next 5-10 years?*

Dr Fawzia Al Farsi: The first and most important factor that will affect future decisions regarding education is the level of financial support the Ministry receives over the next few years. The implementation of education reform is an expensive

business, and without sufficient funds the Ministry would find it difficult to take the reform process forward.

The Ministry believes that, as is the case in many other countries, the role of the private sector in helping to develop education should be increased. It is important, for example, that the needs of the private sector are considered fully before the Ministry embarks on the reform of Secondary Education. Many of the students coming through the reformed education system will end up working in the private sector. If the new education system prepares these students well, the private sector will require less time and expense to train their new recruits. It is hoped, therefore, that the private sector will see that it is in its own interests to support the reform process and to help the Ministry meet the challenges it will face over the next decade.

Catherine: *How is electronic technology being utilised in schools in Oman?*

Dr Fawzia Al Farsi: Within the school system, electronic technology is being used to the greatest degree in the Basic Education schools. All Basic Education schools have been provided with learning resource centres (LRCs). In the cycle one schools (Grades 1-4) the LRCs are equipped with a television, VCR, listening centre, overhead projector, multimedia projector, laminator, photocopier, as well as a pod of fifteen computers and peripheral equipment such as digital cameras, scanner and printers. In addition to the cycle one provision, the cycle two schools (Grades 5-10) have been provided with a computer lab containing twenty computers in order to allow for the more intense study of information technology. Moreover, teachers in Basic Education schools can make use of mobile televisions, VCR, slide projector and audio tape recorders in their ordinary teaching classrooms.

This electronic technology has two primary uses within the Basic Education schools. Firstly, teachers can use the equipment to prepare and present material to their students. Secondly, and more importantly, students are taught how to use the equipment in order to enhance their learning. In the LRC, for example, students work on individual projects by performing research, discussing their findings with others and preparing various types of presentations (text, graphic, multimedia). This more “child-centred” approach to learning encourages the development of higher thinking skills and involves students in decision making and problem solving strategies. It also encourages students to develop skills such as collaboration, cooperation and assessing their own learning styles and abilities. Electronic technology, therefore, becomes just another tool in facilitating student learning.

The approach the Ministry has taken to the study of information technology has been to attempt to provide activities that are meaningful to students. To achieve this, the activities are integrated with topics covered in the different subject areas. During the planning of these activities, teachers from the various subject areas meet in a parallel planning process to try to ensure that concepts, skills and values for each of the disciplines are combined to create “real” learning situations for students. The provision of portable multimedia projectors and laptop computers facilitate classroom presentations by both students and teachers.

Catherine: *What proportion of teachers in secondary education will be Omani in the next 5 years?*

Dr Fawzia Al Farsi: The Omanisation of the teaching staff has been quicker at elementary and preparatory levels than it has been at secondary level. Nevertheless, in the present school year (i.e. 2002/2003) approximately 65 % of secondary teachers

are Omani and it is expected that this figure will rise to about 90% in five years time.

Catherine: *What major changes do you expect to see in Omani secondary education in the next 5 years?*

Dr Fawzia Al Farsi: The Ministry is aware that while the present secondary education system has served the country well over the last 30 years, it is now in need of reform. As mentioned earlier, a Basic Education system is being introduced for Grades 1-10 and it is important that students who go through this new system receive an appropriate education when they move into the secondary stage.

As a result, the Ministry recently commissioned a report from consultants to offer suggestions on the future pattern of secondary education following the end of Basic Education. In an attempt to get the views of the major stakeholders in Oman, the Ministry is organising regional and national conferences on the future of secondary education in the country and, in cooperation with UNESCO, an international conference on the issue titled “Secondary Education for a Better Future” is planned from 21st to 23rd December 2002. The Ministry intends to take all these views into account before making a final decision on the reforms to be introduced.

What is clear, however, is that the new secondary system will have to reflect and build on the reforms introduced under the Basic Education programme. It is likely, therefore, that among the changes we would expect to see in the new system would be the introduction of a wider range of assessment instruments, which would include an element of continuous assessment, moves away from the assessment of memorisation towards the assessment of higher thinking skills and the inclusion of a much wider range of content areas such as information technology.

Catherine: *Traditionally in Oman, student attainment has been measured by means of examinations. Why have the Ministry's recent educational reforms introduced an increased emphasis on continuous classroom assessment?*

Dr Fawzia Al Farsi: The Ministry believes that formal examinations and written tests still have an important part to play in the assessment of students. However, experience from other countries has shown that there are a number of advantages in giving an increased emphasis to continuous classroom assessment.

Firstly, continuous classroom assessment helps to overcome some of the problems of obtaining valid assessments. Compared to examinations or written tests, classroom assessment can use a far wider range of assessment instruments and produce very different assessment evidence. For example, in a paper and pencil exam or test, students can be asked to tell what they can do in a given situation, while in continuous classroom assessment students can show what they can do. This means, for example, that in continuous classroom assessment the skill of speaking can be assessed in Arabic and English Language and the skills of measurement through the handling of real equipment can be assessed in Science. Such a range helps to provide a more valid picture of a student's attainments and needs.

Secondly, it is felt that continuous classroom assessment is a fairer way of assessing students than using only examinations. A common consequence of formal testing for many students is an increase in tension. A student's fear of failure can easily result in anxiety, which in turn affects performance. On the other hand, when assessment arises naturally out of classroom activities, students are often unaware that they are being assessed and can display what they know without feeling any anxiety.

Thirdly, continuous classroom assessment gives credit for the students' performance throughout the school year. This should help to motivate the students since they will know that their work in class will be credited in their report cards.

Fourthly, continuous classroom assessment can help teachers to identify particular learning needs in their students. Teachers can collect and record information on individual students' strengths and weaknesses and use this information to focus their teaching on the needs of the students in order to build on their strengths and remedy their weaknesses.

Finally, continuous classroom assessment can help teachers to evaluate their own teaching. Teachers can gain constant feedback from the students by observing their reactions as well as from what they say and write. If it is apparent that students are having difficulties during a particular lesson, the teacher may decide to present the information in a different way or to modify their lesson plans or teaching approaches.

Catherine: *Aspirations among young Omanis are rising. Do you feel confident that the education system can meet these aspirations?*

Dr Fawzia Al Farsi: One of the major reasons for the Ministry embarking on its educational reform initiatives has been to produce new educational goals and curriculum and assessment systems that will help prepare young Omanis for life and work in the new conditions created by the modern global economy. These new conditions will require a high degree of adaptability and a strong background in subjects such as mathematics, science and computing. The educational reforms have been designed to achieve the knowledge, higher thinking skills and attitudes that young Omanis will need to learn and adapt to future circumstances. The Ministry intends to carry out regular evaluations of its new programmes in an attempt to ensure that they are appropriate to the needs of its students.

Catherine: *Could the traditional Omani values of tolerance, acceptance and cooperation survive a more competitive education system?*

Dr Fawzia Al Farsi: While the Ministry wanted to create a reformed educational system that followed international best practise, it was also insistent that the new system should be firmly rooted in the Omani context. The Ministry was very keen, therefore, to ensure that traditional Omani values such as tolerance, acceptance and cooperation retained a prominent position in the new educational goals of the reformed system.

Furthermore, it could be argued that the new system is no more competitive than the previous system. Under the old system, students were awarded a percentage mark and ranked in order, and those who failed a subject were denied the right to promotion to the next grade. Under the new Basic Education system, on the other hand, students are measured against criteria outlining what they know and can do, they are awarded letter grades rather than being ranked in order and amendments have been made to the criteria for grade retention. The Ministry is confident, therefore, that the traditional Omani values cannot only survive, but can flourish within the new system.

Catherine: *Are secondary school students being given enough training in study skills and life skills, higher order thinking, e.g. problem solving.*

Dr Fawzia Al Farsi: As mentioned above, the Ministry accepts that the present secondary system contains certain deficiencies. For example, with regard to the curriculum, the present system fails to provide adequate opportunities for students to study subjects such as life skills and computing. Also, the assessment system is too reliant on examinations that assess memorisation of content from the student textbook at the expense of assessing higher thinking skills such as analysis, problem solving, synthesis and evaluation. As was also mentioned in the answer to question 5 above, the Ministry is presently planning to address deficiencies such as these in time for students moving from Basic Education into secondary schools.

Due to the phasing-in arrangements for Basic Education, however, it will be a number of years before all students in Oman receive the benefits of this reformed system. As a result, the Ministry is presently carrying out a project called the Examinations Reform Project. Among the aims of this project are to introduce a wider range of assessment instruments and to encourage the assessment of higher thinking skills. To date, work in this project has been confined to elementary and preparatory schools, although the Ministry is presently considering a proposal to extend its application to secondary schools.

Catherine: *What kind of liaison is there between schools and the tertiary sector? Could it be improved?*

Dr Fawzia Al Farsi: The Ministry of Education is responsible for schools, but other Ministries have responsibility for colleges in the tertiary sector. With regard to the proposed reform of the secondary system, however, it is recognised that all the main stakeholders in education reform in Oman will have to be

consulted. These stakeholders include pupils, teachers, inspectors, Regional Directors General and their Directors, Ministry officials, employers and the tertiary sector. Indeed, of all these stakeholders, the Ministry regards the tertiary sector as one of the most significant and as such, will be regarded as an important participant in the consultation process. There is a joint committee between SQU and the Ministry of Higher Education which liaise between school and tertiary sectors.

Catherine: *How are schools inspected and evaluated?*

Dr Fawzia Al Farsi: Both public and private schools are subject to inspection and evaluation.

With regard to public schools, the Department of Regulations and Performance Evaluation within the Ministry has responsibility for evaluating their administrative performance against agreed criteria, which include aspects such as the number of teachers and administrative staff, equipment and academic standards.

The inspection of schools has been reorganised within the education development programme. A post of senior subject teacher has been created in each subject in every school. Senior subject teachers work closely with subject inspectors who, in turn, provide senior inspectors with feedback. Senior inspectors have the role of liaising between the schools and the Directorate General of Curriculum through general technical inspectors who represent each curricular department within the Directorate of Curriculum. These departments cover Islamic Studies, Arabic Language, Social Studies, English Language, Science and Mathematics, IT, Life and Environmental Skills, Physical Education, Art and Music. When visiting schools, the supervisors are expected to focus their evaluation on teaching and learning and to identify teachers' development needs. In

order to achieve this, they discuss with the teacher the teacher's planning, observe lessons and provide feedback

In addition, committees of Ministry officials make regular evaluation visits to schools in the regions.

However, the whole issue of improving school effectiveness and how to monitor it is one of the matters that is currently under review in the Ministry. An Assessment and Development of School Performance Project is being implemented in a number of schools during the present school year (2002/2003). Among the aims of this project is the establishment of a mechanism for a systematic follow-up and assessment of school performance and effectiveness, the provision of a unified database to assess the operations and effectiveness of schools' performance, the formation of teams of evaluators to carry out an external assessment of schools and to develop training programmes on school self assessment in order to raise performance.

Secondly, with regard to the private schools, Counsellors from the departments of Supervision and Kindergarten conduct monthly visits to the schools where they meet with teaching board members and attend classes to assess, direct and develop programmes for the teachers. Moreover, personnel from the Student Affairs Section of the Private Schools Department carry out regular school visits in order to determine matters such as the conformity of enrolment records to Ministry standards, how well records relate to student files and the appropriateness of examination systems.

In addition, specially trained teams from the Private School Department are conducting comprehensive assessment visits to private schools in Muscat. These teams, which are led by the Head of the Supervision Department, arrive at a school early in the morning and spend the entire day assessing the operation of the school. Their assessment covers matters such as the suitability of the school building, the organisation of the school

team, the planning and preparation of the classroom programmes and the achievement of the students.

Attempts at ensuring quality control include the following. Firstly, the Private School Department convenes professional development workshops for cadres of administrators and teachers from private schools. Secondly, during every school term, the department prepares assessment instruments to ascertain how well students are performing. Test items are generated, assessments are carried out and marked and the results analysed. Trends and anomalies are determined and action plans developed which aim to provide enrichment to students who are doing well and remedial programmes for weaker students.

Finally, during the present school year, accountability reports will be prepared which will rank private schools according to student performance on their tests and examinations, as well as specific categories related to the operation of each school.

Karuna: what to do about this gap?

Catherine: *How much opportunity is there for teachers' professional development?*

Dr Fawzia Al Farsi: The Ministry considers the professional development of its teachers to be vitally important to the improvement of the education system. As a result, workshops and seminars are organised on a regular basis both regionally and centrally. Further, as mentioned in the reply to question 12 above, all teachers receive regular visits from subject supervisors who are expected to identify teachers' development needs. Teachers also receive visits from members of the Ministry's Directorate General of Curriculum.

In recent years, the Ministry has placed particular emphasis on its professional development programme with teachers involved in the Basic Education reforms and in the schools implementing the Examinations Reform Project. In both of these reform initiatives, trainers situated in all regions in the country were

identified, were trained centrally in the Ministry and were then asked to carry out the training programmes with all teachers, headmasters and subject supervisors involved in these reforms. Details of the training carried out by the Department of Training are shown in the following table.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of Programmes</i>	<i>Number of Trainees</i>
1997	46	614
1998	96	2,316
1999	112	3,884
2000	145	4,328
2001	239	6,851
<i>Total</i>	<i>648</i>	<i>17,993</i>

In another major Ministry initiative, Leeds University in the UK is supervising the studies of selected Omani English Language teachers in order to enable them to upgrade their qualifications to a Bachelor of Arts (BA). The majority of the teachers involved in the “Leeds Project” teach in elementary schools, although some teach in preparatory and secondary schools. This project began in 1998 and is expected to continue until 2008. There are 1,060 teachers involved in the project and the first are due to qualify in December 2002.

Similarly, the Ministry has completed the study of a project on how to upgrade the qualifications of over 10,000 teachers in subjects other than English Language.

Catherine: *Is there opportunity for classroom research?*

Dr Fawzia Al Farsi: Over a period of a number of years, the Ministry, in cooperation with UNESCO, has been implementing a programme on monitoring achievement of learning in schools. To date, the programme has been carried out on the 4th, 6th, 7th and 10th grades, and it is intended that it should be extended to all the remaining grades. The results of this programme are being used to upgrade the standard of instruction and students' performance. In addition, the Ministry carries out occasional classroom research into topics of interest. A recent example of this was research into students' perceptions of the effect of different teaching methodologies on their attainment. Moreover, classroom research is also carried out by Doctorate and Masters students.

Catherine: *How much management training do school heads get in Oman?*

Dr Fawzia Al Farsi: All those selected to be school heads receive administrative training at Sultan Qaboos University. This consists of one-year's full-time training. All successful candidates receive a diploma in education with the best students being given the opportunity to continue their studies for a Masters degree. Inspectors are given a similar opportunity to upgrade their qualifications.

Catherine: *Can you see E-learning making an impact in schools in Oman?*

Dr Fawzia Al Farsi: Internationally, it is now widely accepted that electronic learning has a critical role to play in helping to prepare students for the rapidly changing circumstances of the 21st century. When students leave school, either to continue their studies or into the world of work, they will be expected to be literate in e-learning. Moreover, e-learning is playing an increasingly important part in peoples' leisure activities. It is for these reasons that the Ministry has put such a strong emphasis on electronic learning in its educational reform programme.

The Ministry recognises, however, that the introduction of e-learning into schools will have many implications for teachers and students in Oman. As implied in the response to question 3 above, the emphasis being placed on e-learning in the Basic Education schools is on "learning" rather than on "teaching". As a result, it is believed that the technology and materials should be designed to aid learning as identified by the end-users.

As the supporting infrastructure is developed and made available to schools, several approaches to more remote electronic learning are being considered. One of the most successful implementations of e-learning systems has been through the development of so-called communities of collaborating learners. In such a system, students throughout the country are electronically connected to each other and each member of a community is able to identify topics, concerns or issues to which the other members provide knowledge, expertise and insights. This is achieved through the use of features such as electronic mail, on-line faxing, palm computers and GSM text messaging, discussion groups, private and public conferences, library access and tutorial courses. The Ministry is currently negotiating with organizations in the private sector in

order to establish the hardware and application support for such a collaborative system.

The Ministry is also working with organizations in the private sector for the supply of locally monitored on-line courses in more than four hundred topic areas that will be of interest to both older students and staff. For younger students, the Ministry is looking at establishing student learning communities through the use of a research tool called “Journal Zone” which links students with common interests and uses prompts to lead them through a collaborative process whereby they assist one another to enrich their investigations. Other e-learning projects using networking and the Internet are at the planning stage and the Ministry will be in a position to implement these once access to the Internet is made available to government schools.

All of this is new to the education system in Oman. The Ministry believes that it should begin the e-learning process by providing successful experiences for a core group of teachers. It is hoped that this will enable them to feel comfortable with the processes involved and will encourage them to promote the system to others.