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National HRD in Oman: a Stakeholder Perspective on the Implementation of the National Training Programme

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This paper is set within the context of Oman, where National Human Resource Development (NHRD) has been utilized to develop the knowledge and skills of the indigenous population, create job opportunities for a greater number of job seekers and reduce the nation's dependency on expatriate labour (Omanization). The National Training Programme (NTP) is the key initiative that aims to achieve Omanization and which provides the context for this paper. The NTP is overseen by the Ministry of Manpower (MoM) and involves a tripartite agreement between Trainees, Training Providers, and Employers. This "training mingled with employment" commenced in 2003 and has provided training for more than 36,000 individuals, in areas as diverse as commerce, industry, and craftwork. However, despite these encouraging figures, produced by the Ministry, there is a lack of empirical research that surfaces the voices of the other stakeholders involved in the NTP policy implementation. This paper addresses this void and illustrates how the key stakeholder groups: the Ministry of Manpower, Training Providers, Employers, and Trainees viewed the implementation of the NTP policy. In doing so, we highlight the complexities of the relationships involved and illuminate an emerging 'blame culture', which, if left unacknowledged, will hinder the implementation of the NTP, and impact negatively on Omanization. We conclude with implications for practice and argue that, in order to enhance the future implementation and success of the NTP, on-going participatory action research is required that includes all stakeholder groups, if the challenges of this emerging 'blame culture' are to be understood fully.

Key Words: national HRD, policy implementation, stakeholders, insider research

Introduction

This paper is set within the Sultanate of Oman, where National Human Resource Development (NHRD) has been utilized to develop the knowledge and skills of the indigenous population, with the concurrent aim being to reduce the nation's dependency on expatriate labour, and create work opportunities for young Omanis.

Since the 1990s, the governments of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have come to realize that their nationals need to diversify and move outside the public sector (Forstenlechner et al., 2012). However, in Oman, this trend toward the localization of labour emerged earlier than in other Gulf States, with the late 1970s seeing a radical modernization of the country (Beasant et al., 2002). Whilst the initial localization of labour concerned military and security jobs (Valeri, 2005), it was subsequently expanded to embrace other public sector and civil service institutions. With the rapid developments in technology, coupled with reaching a saturation of employees in the Oman public sector, the concept of labour localization was developed gradually and, in

1996, the policy was formally implemented within the private sector. Hence, the nationalization of jobs in the private sector was firmly placed within the broader policy of Omanization, with the National Training Programme (NTP) being viewed as central to achieving this overarching policy.

National Human Resource Development (NHRD)

National Human Resource Development differs between countries, depending on government priorities, but irrespective of such differences there are numerous approaches that a nation might adopt to satisfy their training needs. Devins and Smith (2013, p. 55) observe that the:

[g]overnment can play one of two roles to treat the market failure: voluntarism, which sees its role as the encouragement of organizations to take responsibility for skills acquisition and ... interventionism, where government seeks to influence decision-making on HRD in the interests of the economy as a whole.

The choice between interventionism and voluntarism is, however, dependent upon the socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of each country (Stewart et al., 2013).

In recent decades, National Human Resource Development has emerged as a strategic priority in many countries (McLean et al., 2012), with the contemporary requirements of globalization, rapid technological advancements, and internationalization of labour, being key enablers for an investment in National HRD (Gold et al., 2010). Indeed, the governments of many developing economies believe that a large and successful vocational education sector is an important, indeed necessary, element in their development strategies, as it equips citizens with the skills needed by industry, whilst at the same time helping to reduce unemployment (Wilkins, 2002, p. 5). NHRD is delivered in developed and developing economies to encourage societal development and economic promotion (Alagaraja & Wang, 2012), often through vocational training and development programmes.

The World Bank argues that Vocational Education and Training in developing economies is best left to individuals, enterprises, and private sector training institutions, with government interventions being kept to a minimum (Bennell & Segerstrom, 1998). None-the-less, various governments, such as South Korea and China (Yang et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2009; Alagaraja & Wang, 2012), underpin their NHRD initiatives with the appointment of a Minister who has a key role in establishing national HRD policy, and their related strategies. It is, however, important to note that a NHRD programme needs to adopt a 'best fit' approach, rather than a 'best practice' perspective, and one that is sensitive to institutional and cultural characteristics (Murphy & Garavan, 2009).

In Oman, NHRD is driven by the need to reduce the high unemployment rate in young Omanis and achieve a pre-defined percentage of Omani citizens being employed in the private sector. Here, Omanization refers to the localizing of Omani labour; a process that coincides with similar implementation practices in other Arab nations (Robbins & Jamal, 2016), with the aim being to enhance national skills development and economic prosperity (Hoeckel & Schwartz, 2010). Financial commitment in the Sultanate of Oman personifies the development of its Human Resource, with the budget allocation for education and training comprising 13 percent of the total national expenditure (Ministry of Finance, 2016). This allocation has led to a rise in national improvements, such as an increase in the number of schools in Oman, which exceeded 1,000 in 2015 (NCSI, 2016), compared with 1970, when only three schools existed. Another

improvement is the Government's sponsorship of local and overseas scholarships, with 30,421 such scholarships being awarded (HEAC, 2016). These investments reflect Oman's advancements in NHRD, which were acknowledged in a United Nations Development Programme publication: *The Human Development Report* (UNDP, 2015).

The National Training Programme, which is overseen by the Ministry of Manpower (MoM), provides the central initiative that aims to achieve the goals and aspiration of NHRD in Oman, and which provides the context for this paper.

The National Training Programme in Oman

In seeking to discharge their obligation under Omanization, the Ministry launched the National Training Programme in 2003, as a vehicle for equipping job-seekers from secondary and post-secondary education with the pre-requisite knowledge and skills for work. The NTP, which the Ministry developed, comprises the key NHRD policy, which seeks to provide Oman's occupational sectors with appropriately trained and skilled job-seekers. The NTP does not appear as a discrete policy document, rather, it is a collection of key documents and reports from several employment seminars, held during 2001 and 2003, which provided the impetus for the subsequent Ministerial decree; the commencement of Omanization.

The NTP represents a Government-introduced mechanism, designed to achieve Omanization and is described as "training to make Omanis employable". Essentially the goal is political, aimed at alleviating the situation whereby large numbers of expatriates comprise the private sector workforce, while Omanis populate the public sector. This situation is not sustainable as there are insufficient jobs in the public sector for Omanis, which has resulted in unemployment amongst Omani youth. The Government's solution was to provide a NTP that equipped Omanis to undertake those private sector jobs that have traditionally been occupied by foreign workers.

The Ministry also refers to the NTP, which is funded and regulated by them, as "training mingled with employment". Whilst the strategy follows the trend in many European countries, of supporting vocational education (Kyriakidou et al., 2013), in the Omani context, the primary outcome is to replace the large numbers of expatriate workers in the private sector with trained and skilled Omani jobseekers. Thus, there exists a relationship between the Ministry and the private sector, wherein the Employers articulate the labour demand, whilst the Ministry supplies the Trainees and oversees the training. Employers initially identify labour needs, after which a sequential process is followed, involving Training Providers, the Ministry and Trainees, which culminates in Trainees being placed with the Employer (see Figure 1).

This paper illustrates how key stakeholder groups: the Ministry of Manpower, the Training Providers, the Employers and Trainees viewed the implementation of the NTP policy, and addresses the following questions:

- What do key stakeholders perceive are the key factors influencing the implementation of the NTP policy in Oman?
- What are the implications of this stakeholder analysis for NHRD policy and practice; specifically the NTP within Oman.

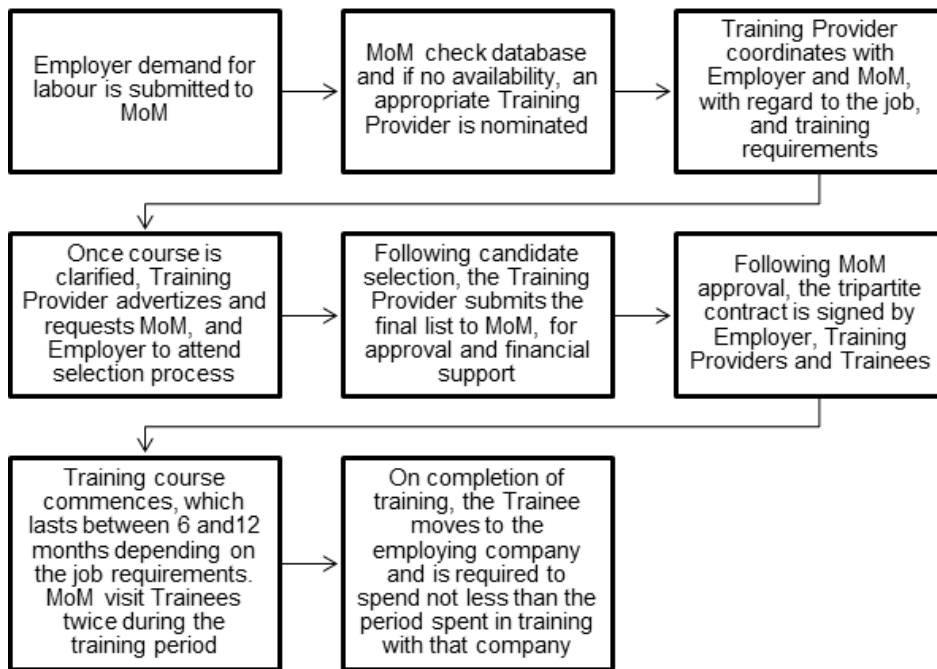


Figure 1: NTP Process Involving the Key Stakeholder Groups

The tripartite training contract

The NTP process involves establishing a tripartite contract between Employers, Trainees and the Training Providers. The relationship between the three parties directly involved in the NTP, is encapsulated in the Ministry-administered training contract, which comprises the only written document that manages the relationship. The contract is divided into two main parts, with the early sections covering general biographical and commercial details, whilst the second part contains the rights and responsibilities of each of the three stakeholder groups.

Employers are expected to hire the Trainees within one month of the completion of their training programme, with the Trainees' financial entitlement being stipulated in the employment contract. Employers are expected to accept the Trainees for on-the-job training, according to the programme provided by the Ministry and to monitor their progress and performance. There is also an obligation to comply with Omani employment regulations. In addition, penalty clauses are stipulated, for example, if the Employer fails to employ the Trainee following completion of the programme, or terminates the contract within a stipulated period, then they are obliged to reimburse the Ministry with the training fees.

Trainees are required to follow their assigned training course and comply with regulations concerning behaviour, and discipline. In return, a monthly allowance and other non-financial compensations are provided, with this being followed by a guaranteed job on completion. Trainees have to accept the job offered and remain in that work for no less than the duration of their training course; otherwise they are liable for the training fees.

Training Providers are obliged to supply Trainees with training materials, facilities, and training. The training content is approved by the Ministry and the Employers, whilst Training Providers are required to update the Ministry on any issues that arise during the course. In addition, Training Providers are 'requested' to follow up each trainee's progress during their first three months of employment. Thus, the tripartite training contract provides broad guidelines for those involved in implementing the NTP, with the process being formally approved by the Ministry.

The NTP courses last for between six to twelve months and whilst being delivered by private training institutions, they are sponsored, regulated and administered by the Government. Official statistics for the NTP uptake are encouraging and demonstrate a yearly increase since the programme commenced in 2003. To date, the NTP has provided training to more than 36,000 individuals in areas as diverse as commerce, industry, and craftwork. However, despite these encouraging figures, produced by the Ministry, there is a lack of empirical research that surfaces the voices of those stakeholders involved in the NTP policy implementation. This paper addresses this void and provides a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding the NTP process, by adopting a stakeholder perspective and exploring their perceptions of the key factors that influenced the implementation of Oman's NTP policy.

A Stakeholder Perspective

Stakeholder theory, often attributed to Freeman (1984), highlights the need to involve a broad range of people in decision-making processes, rather than it being the sole preserve of management. The theory has various interpretations, although a founding principle highlights that overlooking other stakeholders is unwise, imprudent or unjustified ethically (Phillips, 2003). The approach embraces how management or governments 'ought' to engage with stakeholders, with Donaldson and Preston (1995) arguing that moral guidelines on how to behave and manage are at the core of the theory.

A stakeholder perspective can be used to investigate wider philosophical views (Friedman & Miles, 2002) and illuminate differences in power between stakeholders (Mitchell, et al., 1997). This approach draws attention away from a narrow focus on "return on investment" and enables a richer conceptualization of "return on expectation" (Anderson, 2007). The intention is not only to improve programme understanding, but to transform programme-related working relationships, through broad local participation (Greene, 1997). A stakeholder perspective provides a space for different stakeholders to voice their concerns and contribute to programme improvement. This process can engender a sense of ownership and empowerment, which fosters continuous learning. However, the process may be seen as threatening, as there is a danger that senior officials can be exposed to criticism.

This study was sensitive to these criticisms and aware that there is a noticeable absence of stakeholder approaches in the Arab context. One particular aspect of Omani culture refers to the connotations that surround 'evaluation', or any terms perceived to be associated with this. For example, 'investigation' is perceived as being associated with a negative police agenda. Similarly, the concept of 'success' in evaluating a programme is deemed commercially sensitive, particularly when dealing with Training Providers and Employers. Hence a direct evaluation of the NTP was avoided.

Insider research

This paper draws on data from a larger study which involved insider-research by the lead author, who (when the data was collected) was a senior employee at the Ministry of Manpower of Oman and a full time PhD student sponsored by the Ministry. His position within the Ministry and the Omani community enabled access to key documents and key informants. It is unlikely that an outsider would have accessed this wealth of material (key documents, attendance at meetings, and interviews with 36 key informants). However, a key challenge for insider-researchers is to retain closeness, whilst maintaining a distance. The need to question the ‘insider’s’ taken-for-granted assumptions are equally essential to conducting ‘robust’ research (Trowler, 2012). Therefore, throughout the research process the second and third authors have undertaken this role (Al-Harthy & Lawless 2015) enabling the lead author to question his taken-for-granted assumptions and to maintain a ‘distance’.

We acknowledge that the lead author was an ‘insider’ with twelve years’ experience and, as a ‘Ministry Man’, key informants will have been aware of his position. However, our interpretation of the data is not being presented as an ‘objective truth’, but an analysis that is underpinned by a stakeholder perspective. Therefore, within the findings section, we present a ‘coherent’ argument that provides ‘transparent’ reasons for the inclusion of certain quotations and explanations of context, so helping the reader to judge our interpretation of the data. Our analysis has been systematic and rigorous, with the rich data set being analyzed through template analysis (King, 2012), and, with the emergent themes presented in this paper, illuminating how key stakeholders identified factors that influenced the implementation of Oman’s NTP policy.

From an ethical point of view our role is to ensure the anonymity of our informants, which is especially important when undertaking insider research (Milano et al., 2015). For this reason unnecessary identifying information has been removed from the presentation of the data. Key informants are identified only by referencing to the stakeholder group they represent.

Findings

This paper illuminates how the four stakeholder groups: Ministry of Manpower (MoM), Employers (E), Training Providers (TP), and Trainees (T), viewed the implementation of the NTP within Oman. In total, thirty-six individuals participated in the interviews, with this paper highlighting the four factors that informant groups identified as influencing the NTP policy implementation, which are: clarity of the policy, cultural preferences, cultural tensions and an unbalanced tripartite contract.

Clarity of the policy

It is heartening to note that three of the four stakeholder groups, the Ministry, Employers, and Training Providers, evidenced an awareness of the underlying objectives of the NTP. This is illustrated by one Ministry informant who stated that:

The objectives of the NTP revolve around two main issues; first, developing the skills of the young jobseekers according to the requirements of the private sector and second, securing and finding jobs for Omani youth after training.

Despite the informant's iterations, there is no specific policy document entitled "NTP", with the above objectives only functioning as a form of tacit knowledge of the programme objectives. Indeed, another Ministry informant stated:

... objectives are general and we as MoM employees face difficulty in assessing our achievement; the main objective is clear to us — training and then employment, but we need to be given much more detailed tasks like, targeting a specific number of Trainees and clearly identifying the specialization of training.

In terms of clarity of the policy, the Employer informants were also clear about the underlying goal of the NTP, although the lack of detail surfaced concerns as to how 'quality' was assessed. This is highlighted by the following Employer:

... the NTP contributes in developing the basics within the Trainees as the objective is to develop Omani jobseekers, but the MoM does not consider the quality of the Trainees, they are just looking to achieve the numbers in employment that meet the Omanization targets.

The concern with assessing achievement of the NTP goals was mirrored in interviews with Training Providers, as presented below:

The numbers who have completed the training is satisfying, but the question is — how many of these Trainees are effective in the workplace and implementing the training we delivered to them in the workplace? I am sceptical; we need research on that.

The Training Providers were also clear with regard to the underlying NTP goal and, interestingly, added an additional perspective concerning a: "culture of job respect". This was eloquently voiced by one of the Training Providers:

The objectives of the NTP are to develop and employ Omani job seekers in order to achieve Omanization. In addition, one of the other roles is to enhance the culture of job respect and love of work in the private sector. Each one has a role concerning the training and enhancement of the job respect culture among the citizens — the family, the community, and the Trainees themselves.

The challenge involved in enhancing a "culture of job respect" and a "love of work in the private sector" has, we argue, been absent from the NTP policy implementation. Indeed, none of the Trainees interviewed demonstrated an awareness of the underlying goals of the NTP. Interestingly, many of them reported that, contrary to the formal process, rather than applying for the training, they had received a call from a Training Provider, inviting them to apply. They decided to join the programme in order to: "fill the gap in time we experienced during our job search".

Several Trainees reported joining the training with friends, to offer support, whilst all Trainees expressed a preference for public sector work, as evidenced by the following informant: "to be frank with you, I have the ambition to work in the Government, and therefore, if any opportunity comes, I will move".

In summary, it is pleasing to note that three out of the four stakeholder groups expressed clarity on the objectives of the NTP: to train and employ young Omani jobseekers and then employ them in the private sector. Interestingly, one Ministry informant stated:

we don't need any further complicated details, we achieved this objective and this is evidenced in the numbers who have joined the private sector.

However, as illustrated above, this point of view was not held by all Ministry informants or the other stakeholders. Indeed, the overreliance on simple quantitative measures hides the cultural tensions and preferences that this paper reveals; in particular, the overwhelming preference of Trainees to seek work in the public sector.

Cultural preferences and certification

Several Trainees discussed family reservations about the suitability of private sector work, as surfaced by one female Trainee:

The cultural reservations of my family in respect of jobs that required me to work with men was the main reason why I reject certain jobs, I think this will affect me as well in my current job.

Indeed, all stakeholder groups were very aware of the cultural preferences for public sector employment. This is illustrated by the following Ministry informant:

The desire of the young Omani jobseekers to work in the private sector is very weak; this is due to the opportunities offered by the Government, particularly in the military and security sector.

Further, most Ministry informants acknowledged this preference and one informant commented that:

The motivation of young people to join the programme and undergo training that leads to work is almost non-existent. For them, the NTP is not a choice. They join it just because there is no other opportunity with better incentives offered to them.

This rather depressing view that the NTP is: “considered as the last choice” was also evident during interviews with the other three stakeholder groups, as one Employer illuminated:

The biggest challenge is the shared idea within the community, among children and parents, that it is shameful to work in the private sector, and with such an idea in their heads, I don’t expect any of these plans will find their way to success.

Training Providers equally shared such reservations, as evidenced by the following informant:

The dominant culture in Oman among the young jobseekers is to want to work in the Government and this trend is stimulated by friends and families.

As a final point, Training Providers also highlighted the lack of international recognition for the training which, if present, would help Trainees: “gain a job abroad”. Whilst certification is not the primary aim of the NTP, it is useful to note that one Ministry informant acknowledged that the lack of accreditation was detrimental to the Trainees.

... the weakness is that the Certificate is not recognized as equivalent to an apprenticeship and is not accredited. Therefore, Trainees might not be able to make use of it in the future, without already having some experience to show they can do the job.

In summary, all stakeholder groups acknowledged the cultural preference for young Omanis to work in the public sector. The perceived higher status of public sector employment was the primary rationale for this preference, along with the perceived unsuitability of private sector employment. If this situation is left unchallenged, then cultural tensions between the four stakeholder groups, and within the public and private sectors, will continue to ferment as a blame culture.

Cultural tensions: an emerging blame culture

Whilst all stakeholder groups acknowledged the preference of young Omanis to work in the public sector, the rationale given for this preference varied. Indeed, there was evidence of an emerging 'blame culture', with stakeholder groups blaming each other. This is illustrated by one Ministry informant, who stated that:

The leaders in the private sector, specifically individuals who come in direct contact with Omani workers, are to blame for the fact that Omanis do not want to work in that sector.

This point of view found support amongst other Ministry informants and surfaced a concern that some Employers were fearful of Omanization: "they fear that Omanis will take over their positions once they gain experience". This Ministry informant continued: "Indeed, the whole point of the Omanization scheme is to achieve that".

Interestingly, this perceived fear of Omanization was shared by several Trainees, who expressed concern that they had been employed in a company where 'real' jobs were not available to them. They were hired purely to enable the company to meet its Omanization percentage, indeed, one trainee reported:

... after we completed the training programme, we were recruited by this company; the HR manager stated clearly "we hired you to meet the Omanization percentage and to hire expatriates".

Further, the perception that some Employers 'manipulated' the NTP was recognized by several Training Providers, as surfaced in the following informant's statement:

The absence of planning drives the private sector to manipulate the NTP to import expatriates; their recruitment of Omani [Trainees] is only to achieve the Omanization percentage.

This shared perception that Employers are manipulating the NTP is troubling and several Trainees, along with Ministry informants, attributed this manipulation to the lower salaries paid to expatriates; as one trainee outlines:

The differences between the salaries paid to the expatriate, compared to those given to Omanis, is the core challenge, because even though the Labour Law in Oman has stated the minimum salary to be OR 350, the expatriates, particularly the labour, are given less than this.

The cost of Omani employees to the Employer was acknowledged by one Ministry informant, who explained that:

... Omanis are costly to the company. Now, the salary of an Omani (after raising the minimum wage) is equivalent to the salary of the expatriate supervisor, but the companies do not want to equalize the salaries, even though the law doesn't allow them to differentiate.

Interestingly, several Employers acknowledged a preference for hiring expatriates and blamed the Trainees for wanting immediate gratification: "... like salary increments, promotion, and other incentives". This conflicting view of the work ethic was compounded by the Employers' perceived lack of legitimate power in the NTP relationship, as one informant expressed:

One of the clauses allows the trainee to resign whenever he/she wants, and whilst that in itself is good, as it protects the trainee, I, as the Employer, do not have the same right to terminate that trainee's service if he/she is not performing well. The Trainees are dealt with too sympathetically.

In summary, there was an emerging lack of trust amongst the four stakeholder groups. The Employers were accused by the other stakeholders of ‘manipulating’ the NTP in order to employ expatriates. However, the Employers drew attention to the unequal and untenable employment relationship inherent within the tripartite contract. This ‘unequal relationship’ was also evidenced and considered problematic with regard to the design and training content of the NTP, which is now discussed in detail.

An unbalanced tripartite contract

The starting point of the NTP is employer led, whereby the Employer submits a request to hire labour for a specific job. When there is an absence of qualified local labour, the Ministry informs the company of the necessity to commence a training programme, and requests the Private Training Department, within the Ministry, to initiate the process (see Figure 1 earlier). The course content is determined by utilizing information from the Employer who initiated the job vacancy and the job descriptions contained within the Gulf Arab Manual of Common Vocational Classification. From the Ministry’s perspective, it is argued that both the Employer and Training Providers are fully involved in designing the learning content. As one Ministry informant stated:

The company has interviewed the candidate, set the training course in co-ordination with the Training Provider, and recruited the candidate; thus it is supposed that the output meets their requirements, as they contribute in the entire process of hiring the Trainees.

None-the-less, several Training Providers criticized the Gulf Arab Manual for its outdated course content. Further, despite several Ministry informants stating that Employers were involved in designing: “the training course in co-ordination with the Training Provider”, many Training Providers perceived a lack of Employer involvement in the training design, which was illustrated by the following informant:

The exclusion of Employers in the design of training content leads to a mismatch between the actual demanded skills and the supplied candidates, and this is considered a waste of resources.

This view was supported by most of the Employers interviewed, with the Ministry being criticized for focusing more on costs, as outlined by one Employer from the tourist sector:

The MoM considers the cost more than it thinks about the return from the training programme. We are in tourism sector and the majority of guests and customers are foreigners, who speak English, but unfortunately, the MoM reduced the total number of English teaching hours on the training programme and the Trainees can’t speak the language well enough.

Some Trainees questioned the adequacy of the training provided, with one key informant commenting:

The training duration is not adequate to learn all the required skills for the workplace. After joining the workplace, I realized the need to learn how to use different software.

It appears that the formal process may not have been followed, because having the Employer involved in the training design would have forestalled this particular problem. However, it is encouraging to note that the majority of Trainees were “very happy” with the content of the training provided, with several stating that the training was “good”. Indeed one informant felt that: “we learned many things which we didn’t know before”. Another Trainee, who worked in the insurance centre, commented: “I have transferred so many things I learnt in the training

institute to the workplace, almost 60% or even more”. However, not all Trainees were satisfied with the content of the training, as one informant shows:

We learned English language during the training course, however, the most demanded language for the job is Urdu, this is because of the customers utilizing our services.

This is another example where Employer involvement in the training design could have avoided such a problem. Interestingly, one Trainee highlighted the benefits of including Trainees in the training design and suggested that: “we need much more systematic training that identifies our aspirations and matches them with the offered opportunities”.

In summary, despite the Ministry perceptions that Employers and Training Providers were adequately involved in the training process design, this perception was not shared with the other stakeholders. Indeed, the three other stakeholder groups expressed dissatisfaction with their involvement in the design and content of courses. However, the stakeholders did identify with a continuing support for the NTP, which is heartening.

Implications for Practice

We have identified four main factors that key stakeholders perceive to have influenced the implementation of Oman’s NTP policy. Having considered the implications of the stakeholder analysis for NHRD policy, we now address the implications for practice, which are offered to other practitioners for debate and discussion.

Clarity of the policy

The principal objective of Oman’s NTP is to train Omani jobseekers for employment in the private sector; although this aim has not been codified in a discrete policy document.

The findings highlight the need for the NTP to be articulated as a definitive and robust policy, with clear aims and objectives, and a detailed description of the roles and responsibilities for each stakeholder group.

Practice could be improved if the policy document clearly outlined the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders, and codified the Ministry’s role as the coordinator of the NTP process, as opposed to steering it. The policy document could be further enhanced by incorporating an implementation plan that stipulates specific indicators of success and provides guidelines for on-going monitoring and review.

Cultural preferences and certification

The findings highlight that Trainees ‘value’ work in the public sector and perceive a lack of value in private sector work. Further, the skills acquired on the NTP did not receive proper accreditation within the country’s overall vocational qualification system. Therefore, the Trainees’ level of competency went unrecognized within the national qualifications framework. This lack of formal recognition can present a barrier to the foundation of a Nation’s trained and skilled manpower, and demotivate those Trainees’ already on programmes, whilst equally acting as a possible deterrent to initial participation.

Practice could be improved by the introduction of a ‘credential’ system, as certification has been shown to add value (Stewart et al., 2013).

Cultural tensions

The findings illustrate an emerging tendency for each stakeholder to ‘blame’ the ‘other’ for the problems that existed.

Practice could be improved by creating a Stakeholder Forum, where cultural tensions and concerns can be voiced in a ‘safe space’. Such a forum would enable alternatives to emerge from those directly involved in the NTP, and help ensure that policy implementation was more sensitive to these cultural tensions.

One example of cultural tension is evident in the tourist sector, where Trainees are required to handle alcohol, with this being viewed as ‘off-limits’ for many young Omanis Trainees. The route of this anomaly is apparent in the NTP’s current configuration and practice, which places a clear emphasis on a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. Following a more liberal approach would help ensure that all business sectors are not forced to Omanize their workforce for the sake of political expedience, especially when the economic outcome could have devastating consequences for both individual employers and the nation.

A more balanced tripartite contract

The study, in addressing interactions between key stakeholder groups illustrates a partnership, which is referred to in Arabic as “Sharaka”, whereby the Government and private sector collaborate within a network relationship, characterized by interdependency.

The findings reveal that, despite an emerging ‘blame’ culture, each stakeholder found sufficient in the arrangement to maintain their continued involvement, although, within this situation of mutual dependency, some were perceived to gain more than others.

Practice could be improved by the Ministry engaging in greater collaboration with the private sector, particularly through the use of diverse communication channels and information-gathering activities. In addition, the Ministry could co-ordinate with other Government institutions, such as the Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Higher Education, to establish a database of manpower availability, along with relevant qualifications possessed.

In summary, we suggest that the above implications are discussed with all the stakeholder groups to ensure a genuine partnership, where all stakeholders participate and have a voice. The Labour Union could serve as an additional voice for the Trainees.

Conclusion

One clear challenge for developing economies is to balance the process of satisfying the demand for national skilled workers, by providing development opportunities for those jobseekers who are willing to acquire such skills. Indeed, many countries around the world are attempting to balance this particular equation (Griggs & Holden, 2013). This paper contributes by providing a stakeholder perspective on the challenges involved in implementing the NTP policy in Oman.

Further, whilst the drive to localize labour is common within the Arab world, the area is under-researched. In particular, the views of those stakeholders who have been affected by policy implementation have remained silent. This paper has provided a space to surface the voices of those with power (the Employers), those who are responsible for delivering the training (the Training Providers), and those in power (the Ministry). In addition, we surface the voice of the end users of the NTP policy, the Trainees; a stakeholder group who are often overlooked in policy implementation studies. In doing so, we provide evidence of a complex picture and an acknowledged, but unresolved, cultural problem, which highlights the perceived divide between the private and public sector; in particular, the expressed preference for Omani youth to secure permanent employment within the public sector.

We argue that it is the sector divide in employment opportunities and status, which lies at the core of the NTP problems, and which will continue to impact negatively unless steps are taken to bridge this divide. We have produced several implications for practice and consider these as a first step in opening further dialogue between all stakeholder groups, with our intention being to continue our collaboration and research. Indeed, as researchers and practitioners who are passionate about the value of “education mingled with employment”, we have planned further research to connect the stakeholder groups, both to discuss the issues presented in our paper and to provide a springboard for further action.

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