

**Challenges involved in evaluating the National Training Programme at the Ministry of
Manpower, Oman: an insider's perspective**

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper contributes to bridging the gap between academic research and practice by proposing an evaluation framework, which will be tested in the real world of practice. The practice context is an insider evaluation of the National Training Programme (NTP) in Oman. The paper presents a culturally sensitive evaluation framework inspired by a Critical Human Resource Development (CHRD) agenda.

Approach

This is a theoretical paper based on a review of the evaluation literature, examining various frameworks of training evaluation, in particular at the national level. The literature is extended to include insights from an insider research perspective in order to explore the tensions and contradictions within evaluation processes and practices at the national level.

Practical implications

This paper presents a framework for evaluating national training programmes, which will be extended to evaluate different policies and governmental activities. Concomitantly, it demonstrates the challenges encountered by the researcher as an insider evaluator.

Originality/value

This paper considers the challenges of insider public sector evaluators, while providing a culturally sensitive evaluation framework.

Keywords: National Training Evaluation, Evaluation Frameworks, Critical Human Resource Development, Insider Research

Introduction

This paper contributes to bridging the gap between academic research and practice by proposing an evaluation framework, which will be tested in the real world of practice. The practice context is an insider evaluation of the National Training Programme (NTP) in Oman.

Fitzpatrick et al. (2012) highlight that formal evaluation in the public sector can be traced back to early 2000 B.C., when the Chinese performed civil service examinations to measure the proficiency of applicants for government positions. Within Western countries, a commitment to the systematic evaluation of programmes in education and public health was commonplace prior to World War I (Rossi and Freeman 1993). In addition, the evaluation of Vocational Education and Training (VET) has an established history within the US, UK and the European Commission (Grubb and Ryan 1999). However, despite these historical roots, Devins and Smith (2010) argue that evaluation is a relatively young discipline.

Within the context of this research, evaluation is an emerging discipline and is a practice which needs to be developed. This paper presents a review of the evaluation literature with a focus on the evaluation of national training. This literature is critiqued from the perspective of an insider researcher within the context of a Middle Eastern culture. In doing so, we present a more culturally sensitive evaluation framework which will be applied within the context of Oman.

Research Focus

Oman, like other Gulf Council Cooperation (GCC) countries, depends heavily on expatriate labour; at the same time, the number of unemployed citizens is increasing. In order for the government to reduce its reliance on expatriate labour and to reduce the dependence of Omani citizens on the public sector, the Economic Vision 2020 was introduced in 1996. This vision details the necessary strategies to achieve a stronger and more robust private sector and is focused on developing the Human Resource (HR) base of Oman (Al-Lamki 1998). Accordingly, the Omanisation Scheme has been initiated, which is a series of localised policies aimed to increase the number of Omanis employed in different sectors of the Omani private sector; the aim is to replace expatriates with suitably skilled and qualified Omani citizens, thus reducing the need for Oman to employ expatriates. While the government targeted the replacement of expatriates with young Omani adults, it was acknowledged that Oman had a shortage of skilled and qualified human resources. This was considered to be a major challenge regarding the implementation of Omanisation. Hence, the NTP has been initiated to contribute towards solving the shortage of skills and knowledge required by the private sector. Several stakeholder groups are involved in the NTP and these will be selected as participants for the evaluation study.

The stakeholders involved

The NTP programme is delivered by private sector training institutions but is financed and administered by the MoM. These programmes provide training courses which are integrated with appropriate employment experience, and the duration of a programme is between six and twelve months. The NTP consists of four main stakeholders: the Ministry of Manpower (MoM) (programme administrator), the job seeker (trainee), the training providers (training institute) and the employers (recruiting the trainees by the end of the programme). The NTP

in Oman is considered an integral factor in providing the prerequisite knowledge and skills for job seekers following their secondary and post-secondary education. The overall aim of the programme is to develop the skills of young unemployed Omani job seekers, to enable them to join the private sector with appropriate knowledge and skills. However, as discussed no evaluation has taken place.

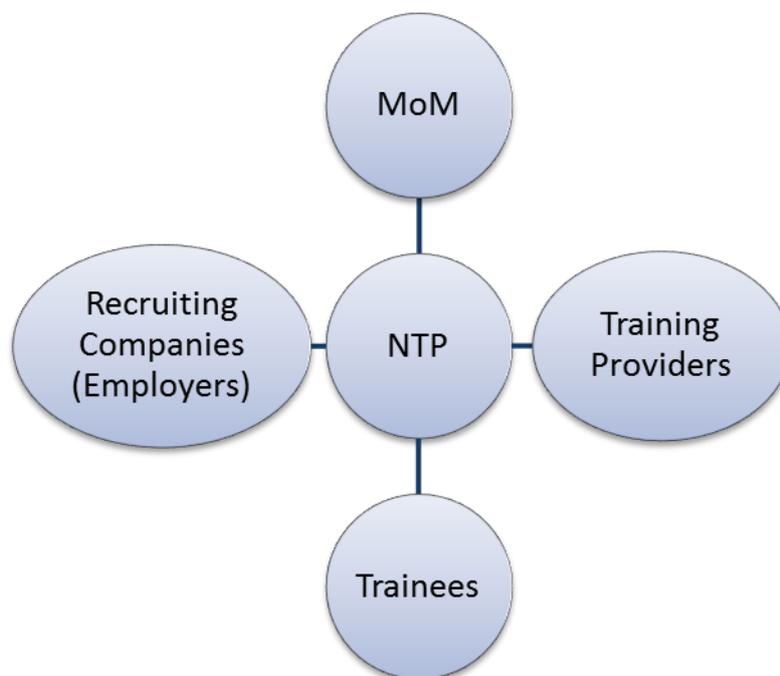


Figure 1: Omani NTP: Key Stakeholders

Research Problem

The MoM introduced the NTP in 2005 to elevate the skills of young Omani job seekers. The Omani government have invested considerably in the NTP, with the total allocation for this

programme in 2013 being OMR 26 million (€63 million), while OMR 95 million (€232 million) and a similar amount was allocated in the 2015 budget. This allocation constitutes almost 25% of the total budget allocated to the MoM (Naimi 2014).

However, despite continuous government investment in the NTP, information on its ‘value’ is limited. In addition, the current economic turbulence in terms of oil price reduction, which the Gulf Council Cooperation countries view as catastrophic, foregrounds the urgent need to evaluate the NTP.

In particular, there is an urgent need to address the following objectives:

1. To explore the perceptions of key informants within the MoM regarding the ‘value’ of the NTP and the evidence they have utilised to support these claims.
2. To identify the trainee’s expectations regarding the NTP and the extent to which these have been met.
3. To determine employers’ perceptions of the ‘value’ of the NTP in providing suitably trained and qualified Omani job seekers.
4. To explore the training providers perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the NTP and how it could be improved.

The evaluator is an insider, employed by the MoM but inspired by the emancipatory ideals of CHRD.

Insider Research

It has been acknowledged that insider research is in certain ways more politically complex than is common in other forms of research, and is “a risky business from an intellectual

point of view” (Alvesson 2009; p.166). Trowler (2012) highlights that the choices one makes in designing an insider research project are infused with political judgements and have political consequences. He discusses four related issues: first, the research focus, and which category or categories of participants are being selected for the study; second, the research problem, and whose concerns are being framed in the research objectives and design; third, the power structures within the system and the subordinate position of some categories of people; and fourth, the role of the researcher and what he/she is doing in the system. The research focus and research problem have been discussed above and provide some insight into the power structures within the system and the role of the researcher; highlighting the relatedness of these issues.

Indeed, Brannick and Coghlan (2007;p.14) argue that for the insider researcher politics is more explicit and that they must be prepared to work the political system by “balancing the organization’s formal justification of what it wants in the project with their own tacit personal justification for political activity”. As an employee of the MoM the evaluator is aware that the NTP in Oman is advocated as an integral factor in providing the prerequisite knowledge for job seekers following completion of secondary and post-secondary education. Programme objectives have not been developed particularly for the NTP. However, as an insider the researcher had access to a variety of documents including contracts with training providers and articles published in the local newspapers. These sources provided some insight into the espoused objectives for the NTP.

1. Develop the Omani workforce to meet the diverse knowledge and skills required by the private sector through learning programmes in occupational, technical and administrative disciplines.
2. Encourage the private sector to recruit trained and qualified Omani job seekers.
3. Increase the percentage of Oman citizens employed in all economic sectors in the private sector, also referred to as Omanisation.

Therefore, in order to satisfy the MoM, the proposed evaluation framework will need to address these pre-defined objectives and provide ‘proof’ that the NTP is effective. In balancing the MoM’s formal justification of what it wants from the evaluation the insider evaluator wants to undertake an evaluation which meets the needs of all stakeholders. This draws attention to the sometimes conflicting purposes of evaluation.

Purpose of evaluation

Evaluation is a process conducted to achieve a number of sometimes conflicting objectives; for example, satisfying pre-defined objectives, testifying the methods followed to deliver the intervention, informing different stakeholders about progress of intervention, improving quality of interventions and assessment of the return on investment (Rae 1991, Bramley 1996, Bee and Bee 2003, Devins and Smith 2010, Grubb and Ryan 1999, Thomason 1988). Moreover, according to (Farjad 2012; p.2838), “[t]he purpose of the strategic plan for training evaluation is to develop rigorous methods to assess and report effectiveness of training so that the findings can be used to improve training and training-related activities (such as mentoring and other transfer of learning supports)”. However, Elwood et al. (2005) argue that the essential objective of evaluation is to assist the management of the

organisation in making better decisions about the value of HRD investment, and this is particularly true of summative evaluation.

As discussed, evaluation can have conflicting purposes. Within the context of Oman, a key factor for the evaluation of the NTP is to provide information to the key decision makers regarding the effectiveness of the programme. However, academic research seldom plays a role in decision making in Omani public sector. Hence, the insider has an opportunity to review various evaluation approaches and propose an appropriate framework which meets the needs of different stakeholders and in doing so offers a more emancipatory form of evaluation.

Approaches to evaluation

There are many types of evaluation that have been developed to meet different groups and contexts. Through reviewing the literature, it is clear that most of the training evaluation is designed to evaluate workplace training effectiveness. Nevertheless, there is no specific evaluation framework for training conducted at the national level, although the researcher was able to critically revise the evaluation of public policy and evaluation of training conducted in the workplace.

It is based on either the measurement of the trainee's response or the assessment of his/her capability to apply what has been learned in the work place (Thomason 1988). Evaluation approached through several techniques (Pineda 2010, Eseryel 2002, Devins and Smith 2010, Scriven 1967) declares that evaluation is approached through one of the following methods:

- (1) Ex ante evaluation, at the start of the project/programme (also known as formative)
- (2) Interim evaluation, during the project/programme (formative and summative)

(3) Ex post evaluation, at the end of the programme (summative)

Bramley (1991) summarises the following different approaches: goal-based evaluation goal-free evaluation, responsive evaluation, quasi-legal approach, professional review, and system evaluation. Drawing on research findings, CIPD (2014) has developed the Relevance – Alignment – Measurement (RAM) approach, which focuses on learning and training outcomes rather than processes. This approach has a number of similarities in regard to the involvement of various stakeholders of the programme and the investigation of their expectations.

Stakeholder-based evaluation is, however, one of the larger recent trends in evaluation theory and practice, with the focus on stakeholder participation (Mark 2001). It includes various actors who are required to make decisions which might impact on the performance of the training initiative (Guerci and Vinante 2011). This approach helps in promoting the exchange of perspectives and experience among various programme stakeholders and encourages democracy (Mathie and Greene 1997, Bamberger et al. 2012, Mark 2001). Anderson (2008) found a trend away from ‘return on investment’ approaches to assessing the value of learning in favour of ‘return on expectation’ assessments. Organisations could achieve this assessment through four key steps:

1. Alignment between organisational strategy and learning strategy
2. Proactive dialogue with key decision makers in the organisation
3. A balanced set of measures of learning value, for example, key performance indicators and benchmarks

4. Engagement in a constructive dialogue with organisational stakeholders, and going beyond learning function efficiency measures

In order for empirical research to contribute effectively to knowledge development, a sound conceptualisation and operationalisation of stakeholder participation is needed (Daigneault et al. 2012). The belief is on collectivism and collective work emanating from the culture of the insider research.

Therefore, the framework proposed in this paper takes into account that the purpose of the evaluation is multi-faceted, and will be driven by different stakeholders' expectations and their power positions within a cultural context.

Power structures within the system

There is evidence that politics and culture is being embedding in the practice of Human Resources Management (HRM) and Human Resources Development (HRD), and understanding of these is crucial. According to Aycan et al. (2007), there is a clear link between value orientations and preferences for particular HRM policies and practices in Oman. As an insider, this link is noticeable in the execution of different HRM/HRD functions and practices within the public sector of Oman. Middle Eastern specialists have long invoked rentierism as a critical reason for the authoritarianism, poor government performance, lagging economic development, severe social disparities, and periodic outbursts of political insurgency and repression that characterise the region (Pratt 2006; Schwarz 2008; Elbadawi & Makdisi 2011; cited in (Jenkins et al. 2011)).

The economist Mahdavi (1970) assumes, however, that Middle Eastern countries' economies depend mainly on the external rent of the country resources to companies or individuals, and he calls these countries rentier states (ibid.). In the rentier states, the

relationship between the government and its people is money entitlement (salaries, grants, housing, etc.) to citizens instead of the latter paying taxes to the government (Luciani 1990). This is to achieve long-term stability and legitimacy. Arab monarchies have thus ‘bought off’ their legitimacy from the citizens through securing jobs, health services, financial loans, education and so on (Gray 2011). After this allocation, the government has the right to do whatever it decides is suitable with that wealth and has the right to decide priorities of development. On the other hand, Ross (2001) argues that rentier governments deliberately reduce interest in education, which will end in high and continuous reliance on the government and reduced pro-democracy tendencies. Through this argument, it is obvious that education in rentier states is not achieving the objectives of HRD to establish economic stability and sustainability; conversely, it is assumed to be as a grant from the monarchy government to retain the throne. Considering the development of this theory in the early seventies, Gray (2011; p.37) assert that the “rentier state theory of early decades is no longer sufficiently detailed, sophisticated, or adaptable enough for the task of understanding the rentier bargains that have underpinned state power in the Gulf since the 2000s”. This leads to the development of late rentierism. which requires deep attention on factors such as population change, technology, globalisation and business pressure (Gray 2011).

Oman, as one of the Middle Eastern countries, has responded to the Arab Spring through many economic, social and political reforms. Education and training is one of these reforms, represented by increasing numbers of students being accepted in vocational, technical and tertiary education. Moreover, the number of jobs created in the public sector in 2011 (post-uprising) is considered as unprecedented in Oman since the renaissance of the country in 1970. However, even before 2011 the country’s Economic Vision 2020 assumed HRD as a national and urgent requirement for economic sustainability, and while education and training is directed towards employment, which aims to nationalise private sector jobs,

alignment of these objectives lacks evaluation. Through this study, the NTP objectives will examine the alignment between the strategic goals of HRD in Oman and to what extent education programmes have been reasonably designed. The NTP evaluation is developed to assist government officials in identifying the effectiveness of the training and validate the value of this initiative to other stakeholders and decision makers.

However, within insider research, it is hard to hide behind techniques and procedures for controlling 'subjectivity'. Also, by being personally involved one may be less able to liberate oneself from certain taken-for-granted ideas or to view things in an open-minded way (Alvesson 2009). Problems can arise when the insider researcher is too forthcoming in revealing sensitive information about the system; this can be very serious for those in vulnerable positions. It needs to be remembered that not all respondents have equal latitude in respect of what they say and how they say it. Scott (1991, p.19) discusses "infrapolitics", which he describes as "a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name". Insider researchers add to their organisational membership role when they adopt the role of the researcher. This can lead to role conflict, loyalty concerns and identification dilemmas (Brannick and Coghlan 2007). The lead author of this paper is positioned as an insider within the MoM with access to data, this paper contributes by proposing an evaluation framework which will be explored with outsiders, including the second author of this paper, prior to being 'tested' in the real world of practice.

Participatory evaluation

The researcher as an insider will be expected to present the findings of this paper to the Minister and concerned officials at the MoM. The potential impact will be an evaluation framework, which can be adapted to evaluate future government policies and activities while taking into account different stakeholders' expectations.

Stakeholder-based evaluation assumes one of the types widely used in training evaluation. “It is one of the larger recent trends in evaluation theory and practice focus on stakeholder participation” (Mark 2001;p.462). It includes various actors who are required to make decisions which might impact on the performance of the training initiative (Guerci and Vinante 2011). In some literature, they call it participatory monitoring and evaluation. “Participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM & E) is part of a wider historical process which has emerged over the last 20 years of using participatory research in development” (Estrella and Gaventa 1998;p. 3). It is any evaluation intended not only to improve programme understanding, but also to transform programme-related working relationships through broad local participation in evaluation processes (Greene 1997).

This approach helps in promoting the exchange of perspectives and experience among various programme stakeholders (Mathie and Greene 1997). It allows different stakeholders to identify evaluation questions, continuous programme improvement, sense of ownership and empowerment, strengthening of evaluation skills among stakeholders, team development and continuous learning (Zukoski and Luluquisen 2002). Simply put, the differences between this approach and other conventional approaches are explained in the table below.

Differences Between Participatory and Conventional Evaluation		
	Participatory	Conventional
Who drives the evaluation?	Community residents, project staff and other stakeholders	Funders and programme managers

Who determines indicators of programme progress?	Members of community groups, project staff and other stakeholders; evaluator	Professional evaluators and outside experts
Who is responsible for data collection, analysis and preparing the final reports?	Shared responsibility of evaluators and participating stakeholders	Professional evaluators and outside experts
What is the role of the local evaluator?	Coach, facilitator, negotiator, *critical friend*	Expert, leader
When is this type of evaluation most useful?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are questions about programme implementation difficulties - There are questions about programme effects on beneficiaries - Information is wanted on a stakeholder's knowledge of a programme or views of progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is a need for independent judgment - Specialised information is needed that only experts can provide - Programme indicators are standardised rather than particular to a programme
What are the costs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time, energy and commitment from local residents, project staff and other stakeholders - Coordination of many players - Training, skills development and support for key players - Potential for conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consultant and expert fees - Loss of critical information that only stakeholders can provide
What are the benefits?	- Local knowledge	- Independent judgment

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Verification of information from key players (validity) - Builds knowledge, skills and relationships among community residents and other stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Standardised indicators allow comparison with other research findings
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Source: (Zukoski and Luluquisen 2002)

While general trends encourage democracy, involvement and engagement of stakeholders in evaluation practices, criticism of negative manipulation of this involvement is viewed as threatening to the validity of evaluation (Bamberger et al. 2012, Mark 2001).

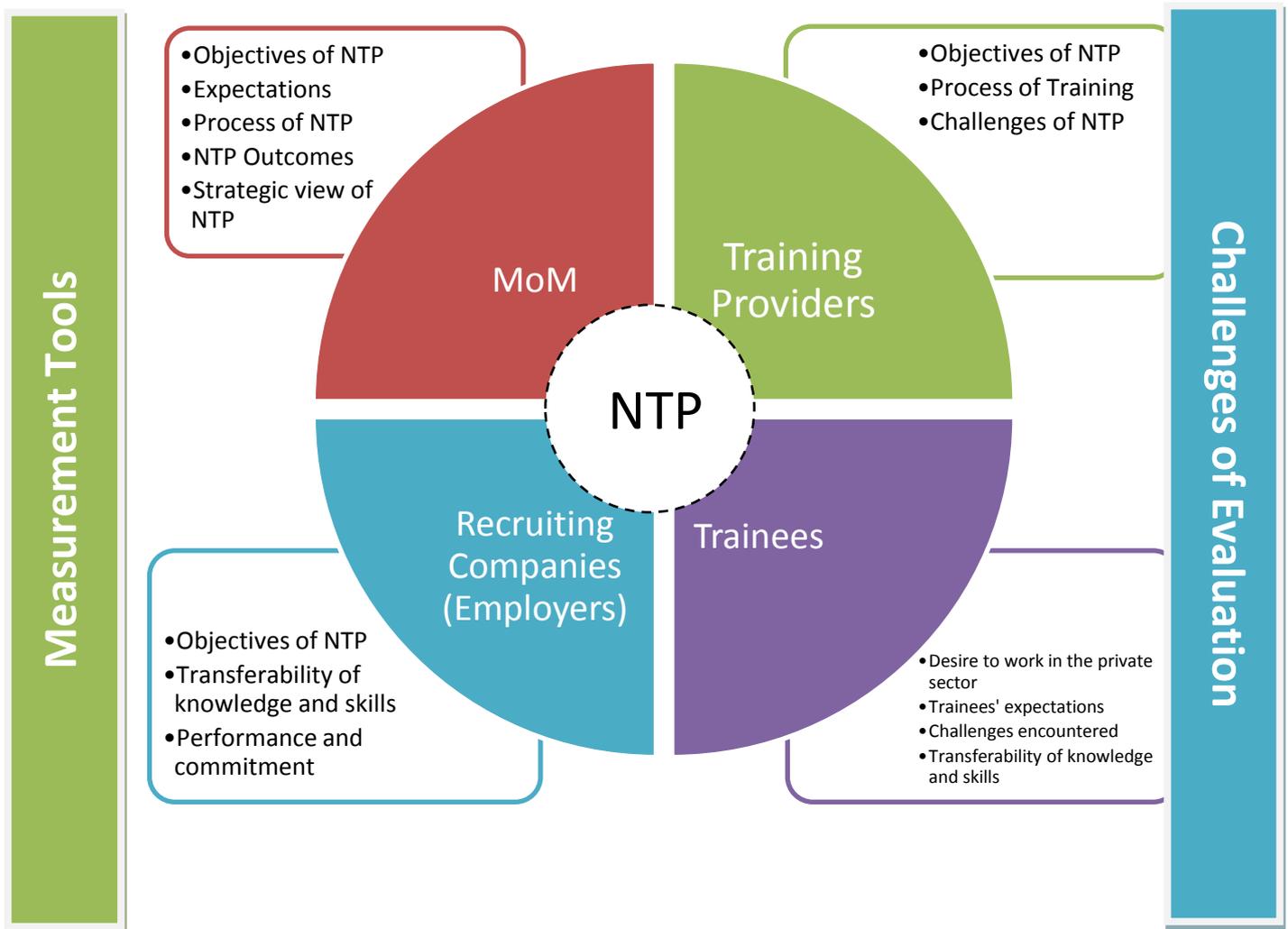
However, the proposed evaluation framework is inspired by the ‘potentially emancipatory project’ which is CHRD (Stewart et a. 2014).

Proposed evaluation framework

This study adopts a stakeholder-based evaluation in which all the NTP participants will be involved in the evaluation.

Hence, to understand the key factors and elements of this evaluation and extent that various stakeholders view the NTP, the following proposed framework was developed to approach the objectives of this study.

Type and Nature of Evaluation



Through this framework, the researcher will explore the perceptions of the key NTP stakeholders. This culturally sensitive evaluation framework is informed by a CHRD agenda and acknowledges the role of power, identity, emotion and reflection within the evaluation process. Each of the stakeholders will be asked to reflect on a particular area which is considered relevant to them. Through the four rectangles attached to each of the stakeholders, the perceived ‘value’ of the programme will be explored from different

perspectives. This highlights that the choices made and the interpretations of the data are political issues, while also reinforcing the importance of ‘transparency’ (Ezzy 2002) about oneself as a researcher, one’s location in the system and the motivators for doing the study. Trowler (2012) highlights that ‘insiderness’ is not a fixed value as the researcher may be investigating aspects of the system previously unknown to them, collecting data from strangers. What counts as ‘inside’ also depends on one’s own identity positioning, and how one sees oneself in relation to the system being researched and the purpose of the evaluation being undertaken.

Summary

HRD has become an imperative due to the global transitions witnessed, which place an urgent need on organisations, societies or nations to develop their human resources. Wang (2008, p.79) argues that “globalization and transitioning economies received increased attention from HRD scholars in recent years”. As a result, several countries have moved beyond the traditional 5-year development plan, to adopt NHRD plans that meet the requirements of global fluctuation (McLean 2004b). Understanding the importance of national human resources development in Oman and particularly the effectiveness of the government’s investment is vital.

Currently, as Middle Eastern governments are experiencing a reduction in oil prices which will probably lead to cuts in expenditures (Shaibany 2014), evaluations will play a role in making informed decisions. This paper contributes an evaluation framework, which has been developed by an insider and which will be tested in the real world of practice. This evaluation framework can be developed and expanded to evaluate different government policies.

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