Educational challenges in Jordan and Oman

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Abstract: Recently, researchers have become increasingly interested in the concepts of first and secondary level education in Jordan and Oman. Educational challenges are seen as an essential cross-cutting issue. The objective of this paper is to provide an understanding of current trends. However, there is little literature available on good and bad practices. Thus, this comprehensive study makes use of the literature review and document analysis to focus on a review of the current status of public first and secondary level education in Jordan and Oman. The findings show that Oman still faces some educational challenges, such as fundamental cognitive skills, teaching methods, the curriculum and school year, the preparation for the labour market and gender issues. On the other hand, in Jordan, the review of literature shows that the Hashemite Kingdom faces educational challenges related to quality education, to teaching resources and to the sizeable influx of Syrian refugee children into the system.

Keywords: education; challenges; good practices; Jordan; Oman.


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1 Introduction

Recently, the advent of the knowledge economy has compelled governments in Jordan and Oman to prioritise educational quality, as well as lifelong learning. It is also important to mention the provision of equal opportunities for the citizens of Jordan and Oman (Ahmed and Osman, 2016). Education policy-makers take into consideration that improved access to and quality of education can help individuals to master the challenges of working in a global economy by creating skilled inhabitants and facilitating social mobility (Ahmed and Osman, 2016).

This article examines the educational systems of both countries with their current challenges and policy implications. A particular area of concern of both is children’s education, considered to be important for the future of Jordan and Oman. This paper is intended to contribute to the ongoing policy discussions among governments, donors and international organisations about the educational needs within the countries. It concludes by citing good and bad practices and outlines recommendations to tackle current educational challenges.

2 Educational situation and challenges

2.1 The case of Jordan

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan became fully independent in 1946 and was established as a constitutional monarchy (MoE, 2006). As a country with few natural resources, limited cultivated land and high population growth rates, Jordan has been looking increasingly to its human resources, taking into consideration the markets of the region, the prosperity, health, and security of Jordan (MoE, 2006; UNESCO, 2011).

A comprehensive review of its education system began in the mid-1980s in order to achieve a high level of productivity and modernisation by investing in human capital (MoE, 2006). While in 1979 the illiteracy rates were 49.6% for women and 19.9% for men, the literacy rate reached 97.83% and 98.61% for females and males aged 15 years and older, respectively, for an average of 98.23% (WDE, 2006; UNESCO, 2018).

Education policies have become a high priority for the Jordanian state, with Jordan now among the top Arab countries in terms of spending on education. In 2018, the Kingdom invested 28.5% of its total government expenditure in education, compared to 15.5% in Oman (2017), 7.2% in Bahrain (2017), and 8.5% in Lebanon (2013) (World Bank, 2017a).

The first National Conference for Educational Development in 1987 marked an important step in the process of gearing the Jordanian education system towards the vision of ‘education for all’, including better adjustment to and balance between individual and social needs (MoE, 2018).

One of the most important outcomes was the Provisional Education Act. No 27 in 1988 (MoE, 2006). Better known as Education Act. No. 3 in 1994 (after being passed by the legislative body), it regulates education and states educational philosophy and principles of education; outlines general objectives of education; provides a detailed classification of the educational cycle (shown later in this text); and defines the functions and activities of the Ministry of Education. After this important foundation was established, educational development plans were implemented, preparing the Jordanian
education system to align with the requirements of the twenty-first century in the terms of knowledge, globalisation and digitalisation (WDE, 2006; MoE, 2006).

For this purpose, the country has been pursuing reforms towards a knowledge economy, which was first manifested in the Education Reform for the Knowledge Economy Project (ERIKE). The component of reorienting the educational policy, objectives, and strategy through governmental and administrative reforms was aligned with changing the educational programs and practices to enhance learning outcomes. In addition, support for high-quality learning environments and readiness for learning through education during early childhood was provided. This was a landmark step in the progress of educational change in Jordan and its effects have thus far been notable (MoE, 2004, 2006).

Among other achievements the primary gross enrolment ratio increased remarkably under the first phase of ERIKE (2003–2009), from 71% in 1994 to 99% in 2010 (98% for girls and 99% for boys) (WDE, 2006; World Bank, 2017a, 2017b). However, not all children in Jordan have benefited equally from the progress in school enrolment. This is particularly true of children with disabilities and refugee children.

Despite many achievements in the past, the Jordanian educational system is now facing numerous challenges that will be outlined in more detail in the following chapters. Prior to this, the next chapter provides a brief overview of the current Jordanian education system.

2.1.1 Management, structure and organisation of the public education system

The education system in Jordan is made up of three levels: early childhood education (ECE) or kindergarten, compulsory basic education from grades 1–10 (age 6 to age 15), comprising primary and lower secondary levels, and upper secondary education comprising both academic and vocational streams (World Bank, 2017b). After 12 years of schooling, those who pass the Tawjihi, the General Secondary Education Certificate Examination in Jordan, may apply to proceed to university. The pre-tertiary education system is managed by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR), with the latter supervising all higher education issues, managing tertiary institutions (universities and vocational colleges) and implementing the general policy in this field (MoE, 2006).

Public education is financed mainly through Jordan’s general budget (MoE, 2006). Additionally, International organisations such as United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the World Bank, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) finance and administer education for specific target groups (e.g., Jordanian children, children with disabilities, refugee children, and out-of-school-children) in the country.

2.1.2 Current educational priorities and challenges

The recent educational priorities are interlinked with some of the main challenges facing Jordan, including:

1. the slowing of economic growth, which has been amplified by the Syrian crisis
2. challenges related to shifting demographics following an influx of a large number of Syrian refugees
the fact that Jordan’s economic development hinges on the knowledge and skills of its people; however, the quality of the education system does not allow individuals to fully meet the requirements of the already-struggling labour market (World Bank, 2017b).

To tackle the above-mentioned challenges and improve the education system, the Ministry of Education developed the Education Strategic Plan with six priority domains (ESP) 2018–2022 (MoE, 2018). Each domain has its respective components and associated challenges. This article focuses on access and equity, quality, and human resources, specifically with regards to education for Syrian refugees, enrolment of students, and gender disparities (MoE, 2018).

2.1.3 Influx of Syrian refugee children into Jordanian schools

Jordan still faces external regional challenges with the crisis in neighbouring Syria having caused a sizeable influx of refugees since 2011. Within this context, the integration of refugee children into Jordan’s education system has strained the financial and human resources (MoE, 2018).

As of November 2018, 654,266 Syrian refugees were registered with UNHCR in Jordan, although some estimates place the actual number of refugees in the country at approximately 1.5 million (UNHCR, 2018a). Among the registered refugees, approximately 21% were between the ages of 5 and 11, and 14% were between the ages of 12 and 17 (MoE, 2018; UNHCR, 2018a).

As a result, the sharp increase in the number of children requiring education has stretched teaching resources. It has also reduced the hours of actual schooling for children in some public schools due to the need to accommodate a second shift of students in the afternoons. The requirement to establish additional schools in various governorates has been identified as a priority, but limited financial resources and a lack of availability of land have been cited as key barriers to mitigate the above-mentioned issues (MoE, 2018).

The Syrian refugee population in the Kingdom is rather poor (85% live below the poverty line of $96 per individual per month), and poverty, in turn, is negatively correlated with access to education (UNHCR, 2018a; Humans Rights Watch, 2016). The consequences of poverty on children in the context of education include reduced cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes, non-attendance, non-enrolment or even dropping out of the school system entirely. These consequences apply regardless of refugee status. However, while there are shared challenges between Syrian refugees and low-income host populations, such as high levels of economic insecurity, the former face additional challenges due to their legal status, which can affect their mobility and access to public services like education and health.

Additional challenges include integrating children who are suffering from conflict-related trauma. The MoE has stressed that a small percentage of Jordanian teachers have undertaken psychosocial support training, as well as training to support Syrian refugee children with disabilities, but many still have not participated (MoE, 2018).

2.1.4 Enrolment, out-of-school children and dropouts

Table 1 shows the gross enrolment rates for basic and secondary education level by gender and by nationality. As can be seen, universal enrolment is nearly achieved at basic and secondary education among Jordanian students (MoE, 2018).
Table 1  Gross enrolment rate (GER) by gender and nationality, 2015/2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All students</th>
<th>Jordanians</th>
<th>Syrians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary education</td>
<td>96.9%</td>
<td>97.3%</td>
<td>97.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary education</td>
<td>69.3%</td>
<td>80.7%</td>
<td>75.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MoE (2018)

However, children from certain socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to enrol and to attend school, and are also more likely to drop out of the education system (MoE, 2018). This is due to the need to work (child labour), family duties or the indirect costs of schooling, such as transportation, school material, clothing and stationary (MoE, 2018). The problems cited above are compounded by a problematic infrastructure in Jordan, including urgent maintenance needs in schools, a faulty public transportation system that is unaffordable for some groups, a lack of ramps or other facilities for persons with disabilities, and the absence of safe and stimulating school environments (MoE, 2018).

Meanwhile, the lower enrolment rate observed among Syrian refugee children is often caused by boys entering the labour market at an early age, and early marriage for girls as a way to cope with poverty and economic insecurity (Humans Right Watch, 2016; MoE, 2018). As such, addressing the issue of out-of-school children has been a key challenge, not only among Syrian refugee populations but also among other groups.

As evidenced by an earlier study conducted in 2015, the profiles of out-of-school children include:

1. refugee children or children of migrant workers with illegal status
2. children with poor socio-economic backgrounds
3. child labourers

With regard to the last profile, disability was identified as a major barrier for school enrolment. As of 2016, the total number of children with special educational needs (visual, hearing, learning) receiving education was estimated at 20,600 students (MoE, 2018). However, this is estimated to be only 6% of the total estimated number of school-age children with disabilities, which is unknown. As a consequence, the number of out-of-school children with disabilities is unknown, resulting in a significant gap in data collection and reporting (UNHCR, 2018b); more broadly, the need for accurate, reliable and complete education statistics remains paramount. Despite the government’s efforts to increase access to education among children of all nationalities and all vulnerable groups, the quality of education provided remains a main issue.

2.1.5 Quality education and teaching resources

A key challenge facing the public education system relates to the quality of the services provided (World Bank, 2017b). The MoE recognises that the quality of education remains inconsistent and is shown to be not competitive by international standards, particularly in marginalised, poor and rural areas, and between male and female students. Gender disparities can be observed, especially with relation to the quality of education
provided schools for boys and girls, and the learning outcomes between male and female students (MoE, 2018)

Table 2  Gender equality in education, 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Gross enrolment ratio</strong></th>
<th><strong>Repetition rate</strong></th>
<th><strong>Dropout rate</strong></th>
<th><strong>Teachers</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female Male</td>
<td>Female Male</td>
<td>Female Male</td>
<td>Female Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic education</td>
<td>97% 97%</td>
<td>2% 3%</td>
<td>0.34% 0.41%</td>
<td>70% 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary education</td>
<td>82% 68%</td>
<td>2% 3%</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>54% 46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MoE (2018)

Recent statistics show higher repetition and dropout rates, and lower learning outcomes among boys (MoE, 2018). This is likely attributed to a poor learning environment in schools for boys, due to a lower quality of teaching, less value attached to education among male students (despite the cultural preference for males to continue their education as opposed to females), and higher incidences of violence or substance use than in schools. For girls, female students consistently and significantly outperform their male peers in national and international assessment studies (MoE, 2018). However, although better learning achievements are assessed among female populations, prevailing social norms in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan often compromise the education, career path and choices of girls and women.

Another problematic issue in Jordan relates to human resources. An education system is only as good as its teachers, but the teaching profession has been undervalued, which is also reflected in the average monthly salary of 450 Jordanian dinar ($630) (Al-Jazeera, 2019). Due to this issue, the teachers started to strike on 8 September 2019 (Al-Jazeera, 2019). Initially, the government did not agree to the teachers’ demand for a salary increase by 50%, threatening dismissal and arrest instead. After four weeks, GoJ reached an agreement with the teachers’ union to end the strike and disrupted schooling of more than 1.5 million children came to an end. The agreement will see salaries rise by 35% to 60%, beginning in 2020. However, despite the government and the teachers’ union having found an acceptable compromise, the issue is not solved yet; on the contrary, the payment incentive system is dependent on years of service rather than performance (MoE, 2018). As a consequence, talented and young people are less likely to pursue a teaching career, which will further exacerbate the current shortage of teachers in relation to demographic needs. Attracting new teachers, unlocking existing teachers’ potential, and ensuring that they are valued therefore becomes crucial in this phase. However, the existence of a weak pre-service and in-service teacher training, in addition to the very low salary, will continue to hinder the recruitment of additional qualified teachers and stress the education system should those issues not be addressed.

To summarise, policy changes and systematic efforts have been made over the past decade to improve the education system in Jordan and to address challenges, in line with national objectives to advance a knowledge economy (MoE, 2018; World Bank, 2017b). These include effective efforts to widen access to education for Jordanian children (male and female students), non-Jordanian children (including refugee children) and to improve the quality of education (MoE, 2018). Despite these efforts, the quality of the education system requires additional focus and investment. The current ESP 2018-2022 reflects these priorities, and through its components and activities Jordan can been seen as a
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country on the path to overcoming educational challenges and achieving progress towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals outlined in the Agenda 2030, particularly towards SDG4.

2.2 The case of Oman

Modern education reforms in Oman began in 1970 and can be broadly divided into two stages. The first period lasted from 1970 to 1998 and focused on widening access to education. The General Education System (GES) was introduced to mainstream education. It is important to mention that there were, in total, 909 male students being educated in three schools, prior to 1970 (Al-Najar, 2016; Gonzalez et al., 2008). The second period started in 1998, focusing on the improvement of the quality of education (Al-Najar, 2016). A new basic education model organised into cycle one (grades 1–4) and cycle two (grades 5–10) was introduced in 1998 (World Bank and MoE, 2012). This Basic Education Curriculum (BEC) replaced the general education system (elementary, preparatory and secondary education). Its purpose was to provide a unified grade 1–10 program for all school-age children to improve learning outcomes through the development of new curricula and textbooks (World Bank and MoE, 2012).

In 2007, the government introduced the Post Basic Education Curriculum (PBEC), the curriculum designed for secondary level education (grades 11–12) (Al-Najar, 2016). While access for female and male inhabitants has almost been accomplished, quality is still an issue. This is problematic since weak performance of the general education system negatively affects any path of further learning. Oman’s publicly funded education system (grades 1 through 12) has gone through a number of changes since the ascension of Sultan Qaboos to power (Gonzalez et al., 2008).

While the literature widely agrees on the impressive achievements in terms of educational enrolment, it also sets out a number of quality challenges that appear to persist despite the reform efforts. Since quality challenges in the basic education system affect any form of further learning and are therefore crucial for understanding the skills dynamics in Oman, they will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

2.2.1 Low achievement in terms of cognitive foundational skills

The joint World Bank and MoE Report (2012) summarises the findings of numerous national, regional and international performance assessments. Overall, results remained below expectations and pointed to weaknesses in core subjects such as mathematics, science, Arabic and English. The low performance in foundational cognitive skills is outlined in a number of publications (Al-Shabibi and Silvennoinen, 2018; Gonzalez et al., 2008; Rassekh, 2004). Al-Najar (2016) states that low learning achievements persist also after the introduction of the basic and post-basic education curricula in 2007. Interestingly, girls have outperformed boys and continue to do so in all subjects. Underlying reasons for low learning achievements are primarily seen in teaching methods, insufficient studying time in schools as well as assessment capacities.

2.2.2 Teaching methods

Historically, education in Oman has focused upon memorising and repetition, to the detriment of opportunities for questioning, critical thinking and independent pursuit of
knowledge. This negatively affects students’ ability to create, innovate and adapt to change (Al-Ani, 2017). Although Oman has a large and qualified teaching force, and its achievement in building teacher numbers and qualifications is good, there are challenges in terms of pedagogical competencies that go beyond impartation of factual knowledge (World Bank and MoE, 2012). Teachers experience difficulties in applying learner-centered methods and teaching practices that focus on students’ individual levels of performance and abilities (Al-Najar, 2016; Al-Shabibi and Silvennoinen, 2018; World Bank and MoE, 2012). In addition, as Issan and Gomaa (2010) points out, teachers often do not apply the teaching methods they are taught and trained to apply in initial preparation.

### 2.2.3 Curriculum and school year

However, a major problem is that the curriculum is not always appropriately applied in the schools. Lessons are restricted to theoretical knowledge Gonzalez et al., 2008) Moreover, they are not closely linked to the concept of work (Al-Shabibi and Silvennoinen, 2018).

In addition, the school year is short and instruction time less than in other countries, due to school closures for national holidays, religious events, public examinations and some adverse or unusual circumstances (Benavot and Amadio, 2004; World Bank and MoE, 2012).

### 2.2.4 Girls outperform boys

Assessments (Table 3) show that girls outperform boys in virtually all grades, subjects as well as regions. It is evident that is irrespective of whether achievement is measured by teacher ratings, national assessments, international assessments or public examinations (World Bank and MoE, 2012).

#### Table 3 Oman grade 12 examination results by nationality and gender, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Omani</th>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Omani</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of entries</td>
<td>21,174</td>
<td>22,451</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of passes</td>
<td>19,386</td>
<td>19,648</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass rate (5)</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: World Bank and MoE (2012)*

The reasons for this gender gap are still not completely assessed. Studies point to a very different behaviour in using time outside of schools, with girls being much more likely to spend their time on homework and reading while boys prefer watching TV or playing computer games [World Bank and MoE, (2012), pp.77-83].

### 3 Good and bad practices

Good practices serve to improve the efficacy of education policies as well as to add value to the education sector. This paper has identified one best practice in Jordan which has
had a nationwide, visible impact on the learning outcome of students over the last five years.

3.1 Background and description

On the one hand, the access to early grade schooling in Jordan is high. On the other hand, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) supported the national Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) financially. Evident outcomes are that only 17% of grades 2 and 3 students were able to read with comprehension at grade level in 2012 (RTI International, 2015). Moreover, the Early Grade Math Assessment (EGMA) showed that a lot of students have difficulties understanding the current math concepts (RTI International, 2015; USAID, 2017). To address these gaps in the education system, USAID and partners developed the Early Grade Reading and Mathematics Initiative (RAMP). In detail, the goals are to increase the quality of teachers and administrators with a service learning supervision, to invite communities in the education sector to take part and to support the Government to implement early grade reading and math policies, i.e., through standards and assessment tools (USAID, 2017).

Her Majesty Queen Rania Al-Abdullah formally established RAMP to improve the quality of education in Jordan. The implementation was conducted by the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) as well as the Queen Rania Teacher’s Academy (QRTA) (RTI International, 2015; USAID, 2017).

3.2 Results

The following table provides a comparison of results from the November 2017 and 2018 Lot Quality Assurance Sampling (LQAS) activities. The three key indicators below (reading comprehension, oral reading fluency, and mathematics) demonstrate the change in performance among a sample of more than 39,000 grade 2 and grade 3 students in 2,076 schools in Jordan, providing measurable evidence of the gains made by RAMP schools over one school year (USAID et al., 2018).

Even though the RAMP model did not achieve all of its targets, for example to enrol 400,000 students in the program, the nationwide and multi-donor-based project has the potential to further improve the Jordanian education system. This could take the form of advocating for the EGRA and EGMA scores to be included in the MoE’s strategic plan for education. The EGRA and EGMA assessment models are designed to provide simple, low-cost measures of literacy and numeracy and can be useful in education policies. An important next step could be increased coordination between implementing partners for this project and other actors in the education sector. This would also pave the way for replicating successful initiatives in other Middle Eastern countries facing similar challenges in early grade education. On the other hand, in Oman, there are substantial skills gaps between the education received in schools and colleges and the requirements of the private sector. Al-Najar (2016) and Samman (2010) report as most commonly referred to the lack of knowledge of English language, behavioural, attitudinal and communication skills, work ethics, mathematics and science. In the private sector, skills for operators and technicians are missing, i.e., mechanical, electronic and instrumental skills (World Bank and MoE, 2012).
Due to these skills gaps, secondary school graduates need a foundational year at any type of post-secondary education (Al-Rawahi, 2017) and extensive re-training in companies (Belwal et al., 2016). However, various studies suggest that foundation programs are less effective than expected (Al-Mamari, 2012; Baporikar and Ali Shah, 2012).

As a bad practice and consequently, in Oman, significant challenges were considered in how teachers undertook the classroom teaching. The instructional practices are pervasive on very traditional rote methods (Nasser, 2019).

In addition, the teaching of mathematics and science in English should be updated to new curricula. It is important to mention that communication skills, public speaking, problem solving, and critical thinking should be part of it (Al-Ani and Hamad, 2016; Nasser, 2019).

Last but not least, Oman has one of the lowest numbers of school days when compared to some of the industrialised countries, i.e. Japan (240 days) or Singapore (200 days) (Nasser, 2019).

4 Recommendations

The economic and innovative potential emerging from the high performance of women and girls at schools and colleges is partially lost in Jordan and Oman. However, specific educational offers combined with labor market and social policies incentivising female employment could introduce such a change and capitalise on women’s higher skills in these countries.

4.1 Women

- Introduce awareness-raising campaigns with the goal to increase female employment.
- Build up and improve the quality of early child care opportunities in Jordan and Oman.

4.2 Learning

- Take more learner-centred and participatory teaching as well as learning methods into consideration.
- Strengthen the performance in analytical, creativity-based, social and communication skills.
- Offer quantitatively and qualitatively more human and material resources to students.

4.3 Teacher

- Implement tools for professional development of teachers.
- Encourage teachers to make evident efforts in all aspects of school improvement.
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- Inform employees and parents about the importance of quality in school performance.
- Take broader use of technologies and modern methods of teaching into consideration.

5 Conclusions

This study has set out to analyze current educational challenges and processes in Jordan and Oman in order to facilitate an understanding of dynamics, with a focus especially on women.

In conclusion, to draw up effective educational development policies in Jordan and Oman, further research is required. To do so, research should go beyond quantitative studies to employ qualitative and transdisciplinary methods in order to gain an understanding of social and cultural processes related to educational challenges in Jordan and Oman. This has clearly been an under-researched topic so far.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Dr Margarita Langthaler for her very helpful suggestions during my research internship at ÖFSE.

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