

Culture and Education: Oman's Soft Power Instruments

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Abstract

Oman is striving to promote good and equal relations with other states, and to adopt a policy of good neighbourliness and non-interference in others' internal affairs. Moreover, it is working in maintaining respect for international law, conventions and customs. Nowadays, the Middle East goes through remarkable changes that require the use of quiet diplomacy and in a way; soft power. This paper offers a comprehensive understanding of educational tools as a public diplomacy and soft power instrument through analyzing state and non-state actors of Oman. The paper examines the extent to which the practices of Oman have succeeded in wielding soft power. A great deal cultural assets, Omani universities, number of international students in Oman and their contributions and the Omani international cultural initiatives will be examined and assessed. The research adopts a qualitative approach, in which analyzing the current literature. Moreover, some secondary data will be examined. At the end of this paper, we formulate some recommendations to help Oman to adapt its foreign policy with the dynamic international environment.

Keywords: Education, Culture, Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy, Oman's Culture.

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1. Introduction

One of the most crucial instruments in the international arena is soft power. States are working to sharpen their soft power arsenal. In this study, education and its subcomponents will be discussed as public diplomacy and soft power tool. First rhetorical framework will be developed, then Oman's soft power elements level will be examined. This paper offers a comprehensive understanding of Oman public diplomacy as a soft power instrument through analyzing state and non-state actors in Oman. It examines the extent to which the practices related to education in Oman have succeeded in wielding soft power.

Education decision-makers in Oman might enhance Omani soft power by helping to build a better understanding of the nature of power hence increasing international students coming to Oman and improving exchange programs.

Oman seems to focus more on education, research and innovations in the coming years. The new Sultan, Sultan Haitham Bin Tariq, issued a new Basic Law of Oman in January 2021, in which highlighting these fields explicitly in a separate chapter (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2021). As such will give a solid foundation for higher education institutions to move toward the national goals of the state.

2. Literature Review

Soft power is the ability to influence others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction, not coercion nor payment (Joseph Nye, 2008, p. 94). Gallarotti claims that intangible assets are sources of soft power (Gallarotti, 2011). These can include culture (such as language) values and policies. According to Nye, there are three main sources of the soft power of a state. First, its culture, which might attract others. Second, its political values promoted locally and globally. Third, its foreign policies that are seen as legitimate and having moral authority (Joseph Nye, 2004, p. 11). Soft power is a dynamic process as it deals with intangible assets. Hereafter, it depends on

the mobilisation of soft power assets or resources as part of foreign policy and henceforth understanding the whole picture is important to anticipate the expected reaction and the expected change. Soft power is not about the amount of money a state devotes to influence and attract, but it is rather about both engagement and interaction.

Welding public diplomacy can be done by different means of. Leonard proposes a paradigm of three dimension for the British public diplomacy (Leonard 2002). Firstly, news management or daily communication in which explaining the context of domestic and foreign policy decisions (Leonard 2002: 12). Moreover, news management is vital to align them with the strategic goals. Secondly, strategic communication, which can include a set of simple themes such as political and advertising campaigns that promote UK as a whole not only one aspect such as politics, trade tourism (Leonard, 2002, p. 14). Creating such proactive news through activities and events that are designed to support core messages and perceptions is essential part of public diplomacy. Thirdly, the ability to establish lasting relationships that can be key individuals and that can last over years (Leonard, 2002, p. 18). Building relationships depends on earning a high trust, creating a neutral and safe environment. Examples of these are scholarships, seminars, students exchange, training, and conferences. All these three types of communication try to build and engage the community of the receiving state to be attracted to the other state. States have different approaches to achieve such engagement. Nye seems to agree with Leonard in this mix of direct information and long relationship. Being able to engage with the receiver means the success of public diplomacy.

It is important to mention that public diplomacy is not public relations nor a nation branding. Public diplomacy is going beyond this limit and is meant to shape a long-term relationship with another state (Singh & MacDonald, 2017, p. 12). As mentioned above, the long-term relationship is the second and the third dimensions of public diplomacy of Leonard, which he labelled as ‘strategic communication’ and ‘relationship building’.

Education is one of the tools of public diplomacy. Amirbek and Ydyrys, (2014) focus on education as a main tool of public diplomacy in the last three decades (Amirbek & Ydyrys, 2014). States are

increasingly considering education as the best tactic to promote their national interests. Great powers have increasingly promoted education as an effective tool and as a source of soft power. A well-established national education system has the power to create a favorable and positive global image in the international arena.

Leonard looks at the ability to influence and attract from a different angle. He stated three different spheres; political/military, economic and societal/cultural (Leonard, 2002, p. 10). The interest of states is different according to their national agenda. For instance, the economic message of Singapore is more important. On the other hand, for Pakistan the political messages matter more. In Zimbabwe messages about British diversity acts as a counterweight to allegations of racist imperialism; whereas in European Union countries like France and Germany all three spheres will be important (Leonard, 2002, p. 10). Some international events might direct the interest of the whole states to the same direction. For example, September 11th puts the political and military sphere at the top of the agenda in most, if not all, countries (Leonard, 2002, p. 10).

Information is playing a big part in power. The number of the world's populations that has internet access is increasing. Countries will be required to increase their online presence to cope with this rapid expansion in the information era.

3. Theoretical Framework

Shedding light on both soft and hard power is important to get a clear picture. On one side, hard power is using coercion and inducement and this reminds us of military and economic powers (Joseph Nye, 2004, p. 8). Hard power can be achieved through sanctions or payment such as bribes. Context is one important element of this influence process.

The term soft power was first coined by Nye in the 1990s; other earlier scholars tackled different aspects of it. For instance, Bachrach and Baratz argued that power is associated to the behavior of individuals where agenda setting is playing the main role, naming it the 'second face of power' (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). Moreover, Lukes looked at the meaning of power from a different

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perspective and categorized power into three levels: making successful decisions, managing the agenda and manipulating the wishes of others (Lukes, 1974). Comparing these earlier conceptions of power with Nye's later definition of soft power, it could be claimed that Nye's soft power combines both Bachrach and Baratz's 'agenda setting' with Lukes's 'preferences of others'. However, the new concept of soft power has changed the concept of power and henceforth reflected on the means used by different states to influence the citizens of the other states.

The definition of culture is difficult and has developed over the years. According to UNESCO culture is a complex whole, including language, knowledge, arts, customs, beliefs, morals, laws, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a human as a member of society (UNESCO, 2017). Raymond Williams established a classical definition of culture by linking it to civilization, signifying or symbolic system and a way of life (Williams, 1985, pp. 62–66). In the 19th and 20th centuries, culture is seen as part of communication besides the language in a world that nation-state is the dominant form of the political community (Hall, 1997). The rise of 'supranational regimes', 'diaspora' and 'digital communication' makes the location and enactment of culture more complex in the 21st century (Gillespie et al. 2018: 9). Culture can bring nations closer by showing its attractiveness to other nations.

Soft power is the ability to influence others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction not payment nor coercion (Joseph Nye, 2008, p. 94). Gallarotti argues that intangible assets, can include culture (such as language) values and policies, are the sources of soft power. Nye grouped the sources of soft power of a state: its culture, which might attract others into three, its political values that are promoted locally and globally and its foreign policies that are seen as legitimate and having moral authority (Joseph Nye, 2004, p. 11). A great deal of discussion will be on making an attraction through culture.

One of the arguments raised by Nye that soft power is a more difficult instrument for the governments to wield than hard power. According to Nye, there are two main reasons. Firstly, many of its critical resources are outside the control of governments and there are external elements that can reflect on the function of soft power (Joseph Nye, 2004, p. 99). Secondly, soft power tends

to work indirectly by shaping the environment for policy and sometimes takes years to produce the wanted outcomes (Joseph Nye, 2004, p. 99). To see the result of soft power in the ground takes a long time. Foreign students after coming back from the host country will have acquired knowledge and personal relations; hence, they are expected to effective transmitters of both the language and the culture of the country where they had studied (J. Nye, 2005, p. 12).

4. Oman's Educational Tools as Soft Power

4.1 Omani Universities

Ranking of universities is one of the best tools to measure the performance of universities. There are different universities ranking around the world. One of the trusted ones is QS Ranking. According to QS ranking, SQU is coming to top of Omani universities. SQU is the oldest university in Oman, established 1986. Until recently SQU was the only public university in Oman¹. According to the same index SQU is moving steadily in the index for the last 4 years. For the year 2021, SQU is ranked 375 in the world ranking, while ranked 379 in the previous year. In 2018 and 2019 it was ranked among 451-460 and 450 respectively (QS Quacquarelli Symonds Limited, 2021).

On the other hand, SQU has a high profile among the Arab world universities according to the same index. It is ranked the 8th top in the Arab region for the year 2021, while it was ranked 10 in the year 2019 (QS Quacquarelli Symonds Limited, 2021). The rest of the private Omani universities are not listed in the QS index. Improving the ranking of Omani universities will help in boosting their position in the international higher education institutions, and as a result attracting more foreign students.

¹ Royal decree issued on August 2020 to establish University of Technology and Applied Sciences. According to the Royal Decree, six colleges (Rustaq College of Education and Colleges of Applied Sciences in the Ministry of Higher Education and Higher College of Technology and Colleges of Technology in the Ministry of Manpower) will merge to establish the University of Technology and Applied Sciences. Reference <https://mola.gov.om/Download.aspx?Path=royal/2020-0076%20Formatted.pdf>

Another educational tool is national and international university branches and franchise universities and institutions. These are very low for the Omani side. The majority of private universities in Oman provides double degree and British, German, American university certificates in Oman. There is no Omani degree in any other countries. Unfortunately, such public diplomacy tool is imbalances against Oman. Omani universities have to be strengthen hence can compete and have present in the international educational system outside Oman.

Table 1: Number of international students in Oman

Year	Total Number of students	Number of Omani Students	% from the total number	Number of Expatriate/ Non Omani Students	% from the total number
2009	99964	98053	98.1	1911	1.9
2010	106812	104704	98.0	2108	2.0
2011	95146	92631	97.4	2515	2.6
2012	115681	113113	97.8	2568	2.2
2013	124906	121798	97.5	3108	2.5
2014	135769	131991	97.2	3778	2.8
2015	141790	137775	97.2	4015	2.8
2016	129698	126655	97.7	3043	2.3
2017	126086	122824	97.4	3262	2.6
2018	127466	124082	97.3	3384	2.7

Source: Oman National Center for Statistics and Information, 2019

The percentage of international students is less than 3% of the total number of students in the higher institutions in Oman. It is not clear from the data source (The National Center for Statistics and Information) if these international students are the children of the expatriate working in Oman or these are international students coming only to study in Oman.

There are a number of grants and scholarships provided for international students in some countries. Listed below some of these programs:

4.2 The Omani Program for Cultural and Scientific Cooperation

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This program established in 2009 in cooperation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation for undergraduate degrees only. It provides grants and scholarships¹ for international students of 69 countries. The number of students enrolled in this program until 2020 is 686 students (Ministry of Higher Education Research and Innovation, 2021). These students can come to Oman and get enrolled in any undergraduate program in the Omani universities and colleges (both public and private). Recently the program is extended to enroll non-Omanis living in Oman. In 2019 the program offers 100 grants and 75 scholarships (Oman Observer, 2019).

There is no national program for international students. Some universities are making their own programs. For example, SQU is allocating scholarships for international students each academic year. It is worth mentioning, that postgraduate programs in the private universities are relatively new.

4.3 Oman Charitable Organization

Oman Charitable Organization has a program to help international students to continue their studies; Educational Assistance Program (Oman Charitable Organization, 2020). The donation in this program comes from the Omani government, local donors and private sector. The Organization has no published numbers of this program.

4.4 University Chairs

University chairs is a good public diplomacy tool, especially among the elite people. Sultan Qaboos Chairs are existed in different countries around the globe and they are playing a role in strengthening ties between nations. Below is a list of these Chairs (Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science, 2021)

¹ Grants covers most of the expenses and includes a monthly allowance. Scholarships covers the tuition fees only.

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Table 2. Sultan Qaboos University Chairs around the World

Continent	Chair name, University name	Establishment year	Number of Chairs
Europe	1. Sultan Qaboos International Fellowship in literature, humanities and social sciences at Oxford Center for Islamic Studies at Oxford University in Britain	2004	7
	1. Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Chair for Modern Arabic Studies at the University of Cambridge (Faculty of Oriental Studies)	2005	
	2. Sultan Qaboos Chair for Water Management & Economic Diversification at Roosevelt Academy in Utrecht University, The Hague, Netherlands	2005	
	3. Sultan Qaboos Chair for Information Technology at the University of NED Engineering Technology, Karachi, Pakistan	2005	
	4. Sultan Qaboos Chair for Arabic Language Studies at Beijing University	2007	
	5. Sultan of Oman Chair for Oriental Studies, Leiden University, the Netherlands	2008	
	6. Sultan Qaboos Professorship in Abrahamic Faiths and Shared Values, University of Cambridge, UK	2011	
	7. Sultan Qaboos Fellowship in Mathematics, Corpus Christi College, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom	2014	
Asia	1. Sultan Qaboos Chair for Desert Farming, Arabian Gulf University, Bahrain	1994	4
	2. Sultan Qaboos Chair of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Melbourne, Australia	2003	
	3. Sultan Qaboos Chair for Information Technology at the University of Engineering Technology, Lahore, Pakistan	2004	
	4. Sultan Qaboos Chair for Oriental Studies, University of Tokyo, Japan	2010	
Australia	1. Sultan Qaboos Chair for International Relations, Harvard University, USA	1999	1
North America	1. Sultan Qaboos Chair for Arabic and Islamic Studies, Georgetown University, USA	1980	4
	2. Sultan Qaboos Chair for Arabic Language, Georgetown University, USA	1993	
	3. The Sultan of Oman Chair in International Relations at Harvard University, USA	1999	
	4. Sultan Qaboos Professorship of Middle Eastern Studies, William and Mary College, USA	2011	

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Total	16
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It is noted that all the Chairs are named after the name of the late Sultan of Oman; Sultan Qaboos, as the fund of these Chairs is considered as endowment gift coming from Sultan Qaboos and this fund is expected to run the expenses of these Chairs (Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science, 2021). Most of the above chairs focus on Arabic language, Islamic studies and oriental studies. Noted from the table the most of the Chairs are located in Europe.

Moreover, there is the Omani Studies Unit at Al al-Bayt University, Jordan, founded in 1998. It was incorporated under the grant and patronage of the late Sultan of Oman; Sultan Qaboos bin Said. The Unit is supervised by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs; in particular, the Office of Ifta'a.

4.5 Sultan Qaboos Prizes

Furthermore, there are a number of prizes and awards under the name of Sultan Qaboos. First, UNESCO Sultan Qaboos Prize for Environmental Preservation. It was first awarded in 1991 and it is awarded to 'outstanding contributions by individuals, groups of individuals, institutes or organizations in the management or preservation of the environment, consistent with the policies, aims and objectives of UNESCO, and in relation to the Organization's programmes in this field' (UNESCO, 2019)

Second, Sultan Qaboos Award for Culture, Arts and Literature. The Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science in the Royal Court Affairs is supervising and managing this Award. Each edition is either for Omanis only or Arabs only (Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science, 2017)

Such prizes register the presence on Oman in international events and in international organizations and focus on important values of preserving the environment and culture.

4.6 International Cultural Centers

International festivals, cultural events, and centers are necessary tools and practices in public diplomacy. Oman does some Cultural events in Washington, London, and Paris annually by the Sultan Qaboos Centers or ad hoc institutions

Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center (SQCC) in Washington which was established in 2005, carry the mission to share Omani culture with the American people. Moreover, SQCC promotes mutual respect and understanding and endeavors to educate a new generation of culturally sensitive and knowledgeable citizens in each society. These are all done through outreach programs, scholarships, lectures, educational resources, cultural partnerships (Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center, n.d.-a).

These is another center located in Belarus; Oman Centre for Arabic Language and Culture. The Center is in the Faculty of International Relations of the Belarusian State University in Minsk. The Centre aims to teach Arabic to non-native speakers and to disseminate the Arab culture and to conducting studies, research, conferences and other scientific events (Oman Observer, 2018)

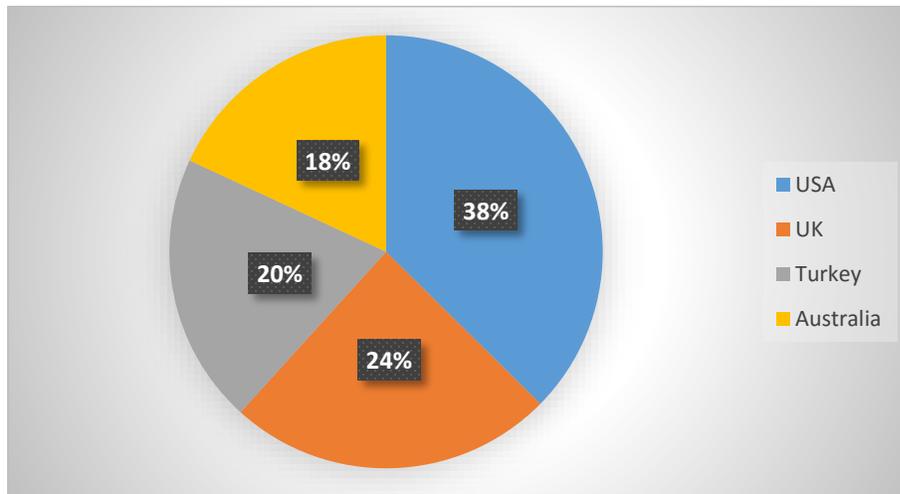
It is not clear to what extent these centers work together to share a unified public diplomacy of Oman. Furthermore, there is no explicit evaluation for the activities of these centers.

4.7 Sultan Qaboos College of Arabic Language for Non-native Speakers

Sultan Qaboos College of Arabic language for Non-native Speakers in Manah. The college is working to becoming a regional and international leader in the teaching of Arabic as a second language. The college is meant to be outside the capital, Muscat, to give students more exposure to authentic Omani lifestyle. Each course Students from around the world are enrolled in the College.

The Summer course is allocated for students coming through Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center in Washington (Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center, n.d.-b)

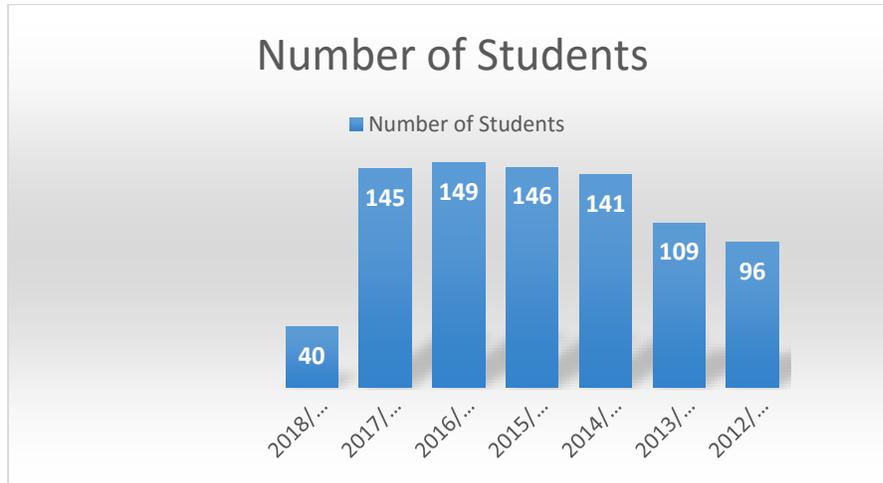
Figure 1. Percentage of Foreign Students as per Country



Source: Sultan Qaboos College of Arabic Language for Non-native Speakers, 2021)

As seen in Figure 1, highest numbers of foreign students are from the United States. It a credible result of good relations between Oman and the US. The second highest number of students in Oman is from the UK. This is a natural result of the historical ties in between two countries. Interestingly Turkey takes the second place in foreign students ranking. This shows that Turkey, Oman relations have been developing intensively, and these good relations reflect to the foreign students' area too. The fourth highest number of students come from Australia.

Figure 2. Number of Foreign Students per Academic year



Source: Sultan Qaboos College of Arabic Language for Non-native Speakers, 2021

Oman has announced recently the exemption of 103 nationals from entry visa to the country for a stay of ten to fourteen days (Oman News Agency, 2020) . Such procedure will help in posting the number of international students coming to Oman. Students might come for a short visit to explore Oman before enrolling in one of degrees in Omani higher education institutions.

The current student visa system in Oman does not allow students to work. Giving student the accidental to work while studying in the Omani universities will support students especially those are self-funded (Royal Oman Police, 2017).

Universities and colleges in Oman are required to assess their internal foreign enrollment policies and evaluate whether that enrollment is high enough to meet the needs of the global society.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined the use of educational programs means to increase soft power attraction toward Oman and increase cultural attachment. Arabic language seems to be one of the most vital component of attraction.

There are some scattered efforts of Oman in the public diplomacy, yet it lacks the central coordination to secure the optimum results. The educational system of a state is one of the indispensably important spheres in the international arena. It is worth mentioning that the efficiency of university education as a soft power instrument can only be measured in the longer term. The results that can establish for a two-way relations with different states around the world. Culture and values take time to take root, nonetheless once they do, they remain deeply rooted for a long period of time. Both patience and hard work are required to make such foreign policy tool more effective.

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