

Potential Soft Powers of Oman: Chairs, Cultural Centers and Students

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Abstract

This paper explores Oman's potential soft power instruments such as international students, sixteen university chairs in the world, cultural centers, SQ Prizes, charity organizations contributions, and language centers. Oman has the highest number of university chairs abroad in comparison with the other GCC countries, but unfortunately, their benefits and contribution to Oman's soft power in those host countries is almost none despite some of them established forty years ago. Those should be put into force again by taking recommended steps in this study. Also, international students' numbers should be increased in the state and private universities and language centers by giving some visa and work privileges to the applicants from the beginning of their education in Oman. SQ Language Center in Manah and SQ Cultural center in Washington are the best two working institutions as public diplomacy tools and soft power components of Oman. However, unfortunately, the majority of the other instruments do not give enough contribution to Oman's soft power. That is why some necessary steps should be taken on the ground to resurrect those institutions as Oman's potential soft power instruments in the host countries.

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

I. Introduction

Education sector plays a vital role as soft power in domestic and international level. This paper tackles the different elements of education that contribute to Omani soft power and offers an inclusive understanding of Oman's public diplomacy as a soft power instrument through analyzing different components related to education. The first component is Omani universities, in which QS ranking will be considered for evaluation. Second is the Omani Program for Cultural and Scientific Cooperation, which is jointly established between the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that aims to attract international students coming to study in Oman to introduce Omani culture to the targeted countries. The third component is Oman Charitable Organization a semi-governmental organization that has a program for international students of specific countries. Fourth is Omani University Chairs in different universities abroad. There are scientific chairs in most of the continents in the

world, and they could be used as a soft power instrument of Oman. Two Sultan Qaboos (SQ) UNESCO Prizes are the other soft power components which very rare states have this kind of UNESCO prizes; it could be said that Oman has not implemented them as soft power components so far. The sixth important tool is Oman's International Cultural Centres in different countries. They were established with the aim of boosting cultural and educational relationships with different countries, which do not work well in the implementation of Omani soft power in those countries. Finally, SQ College of Arabic Language for non-native speakers, which is one of the best working ones effectively to attract international students from around the world to study Arabic and to experience the Omani culture and lifestyle. In the coming sub-titles, each element's statistics and numbers will be discussed, hence evaluating if they are succeeded in wielding soft power.

Soft power is the ability to influence others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction, not coercion nor payment (Joseph

Nye, 2008). 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 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 mobilization 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.

According to Leonard (2002), 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 a long relationship. Being able to engage with the receiver means the success of public diplomacy. Education is one of the tools of public diplomacy. Amirbek and Ydyrys, (2014) focus on education as the 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 favourable and positive global image in the international arena.

According to the 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) and it belongs to young generation's educational aspects. In the 19th and 20th centuries, culture was seen as the part of communication besides the language in a world, the 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). Culture can bring nations closer by showing its attractiveness to other nations as a soft power component. Soft power is the ability to influence others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction, not payment nor coercion (Nye, 2008).

Gallarotti argues that intangible assets such as culture, language, and values are the main sources of soft power in the hand of any state. Nye grouped the sources of the 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 (Nye, 2004). A great deal of discussion will be on making an attraction through culture. In addition to that, 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 (Nye, 2005).

2. Omani Universities and International Students

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 the top of Omani universities. SQU is the oldest university in Oman, established in 1986. Until recently, SQU was the only public university in Oman. A royal decree issued in August 2020 to establish the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, the second national university in Oman. 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 (Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs). This university is relatively new and is not be addressed. The rest of the universities in Oman are private

universities that we all established after SQU. Since SQU is the oldest one, it will be the focus.

According to the QS 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.

One more 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 provide double degree and British, German, American university certificates in Oman. Unfortunately, there is no reciprocal agreement between Oman and those countries, so there is no any Omani university abroad that could be a perfect soft power instrument for Oman. As a result, such public diplomacy tool is imbalances against Oman in soft power seesaw.

International students also are natural ambassadors and could be perfect instruments of Oman's soft power. Unfortunately, in comparison with the other regional GCC and European countries, international students number is very low in Oman. Now, the percentage of international students is less than 3% of the total number of students at the universities in Oman.

Table 1: Number of International Students in Oman

Year	Total Number of students	International Students	International Students' Percentage
2009	99964	1911	1.9
2010	106812	2108	2.0
2011	95146	2515	2.6
2012	115681	2568	2.2
2013	124906	3108	2.5
2014	135769	3778	2.8
2015	141790	4015	2.8
2016	129698	3043	2.3
2017	126086	3262	2.6
2018	127466	3384	2.7

(Oman National Center for Statistics and Information, 2020)

It should be taken into consideration that around half of those international students are the family members of the expatriates who are currently working in Oman. Although those are good for Oman's soft power, definitely exchange and international students should be increased gradually in Oman. Because there is no doubt that, those are very beneficial soft power

components as mentioned in the theoretical part. It is clearly seen that the percentage and numbers of international students have increased from 1.9 to 2.7 percent. It is decreased in 2016 because of oil prices and economic measures. The ideal percentage should be increased to a minimum of 15 percent as a soft power tool.

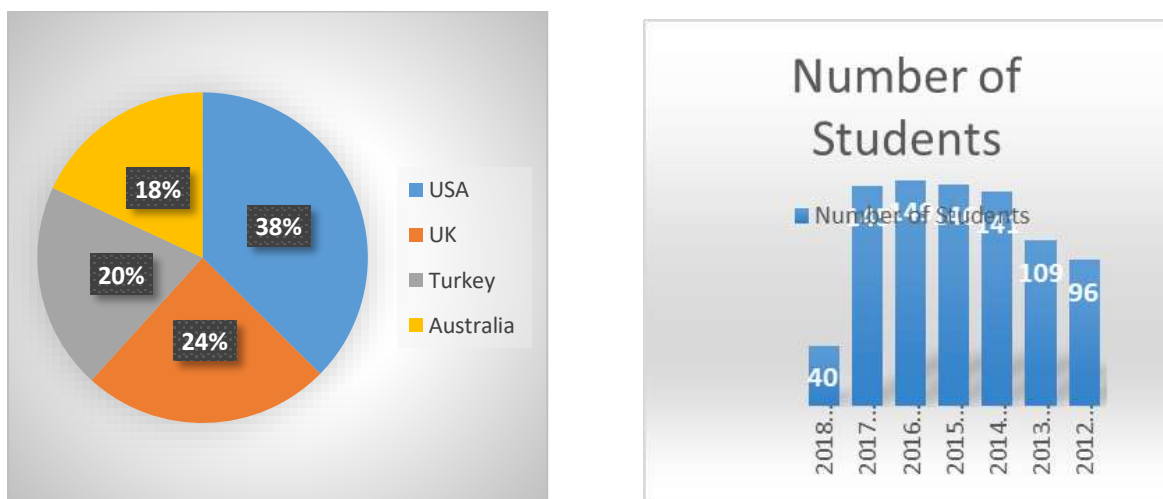
3. Sultan Qaboos College (SQC) of Arabic Language for Non-Native Speakers

SQC 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 in the Gulf. The college is meant to be outside the capital, Muscat, to give students more exposure to authentic Omani lifestyles. Normally it started to accept around 150 students in a year, but later because of economic issues and covid-19, it

decreased to lower numbers in acceptance. In general, the highest number of students are from the United States, United Kingdom, and Turkey. Students from these countries represent more than 1/3 of the accepted ones.

Within the SQC, the summer courses have also been implemented for the American students coming through Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center in Washington.

Figure 1. SQC Foreign Students' Numbers and Percentage



(SQC Arabic Language for Non-Native Speakers, 2021)

In 2020, Oman announced the exemption of 103 nationals from entry visas to the country for a stay of ten to fourteen days (Oman News Agency, 2020). Such a 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 the degrees in Omani higher education institutions. Unfortunately, the current student visa system in Oman does not allow students or their families to work while they are studying in Oman, like F-1 and F-2 visas in the United States. Giving the student the accidental to work while studying in the Omani universities will support students especially those are self-funded (Royal Oman Police, 2021) if Oman wants more international students from around the world.

4. The Omani Program for Cultural and Scientific Cooperation

The program was 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 scholarships 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 be 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 allocates scholarships for international students each academic year. It is worth mentioning that postgraduate programs in private universities are relatively new. To use those international students as soft power instruments, a kind of alumni should be established and annual gatherings should be implemented. Shortly, the communication with those international students should continue for life to use those Oman's soft power tool effectively.

Oman Charitable Organization (OCO) was established in January 1996 after the Royal Decree number (96/1996). It 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 directly, local donors, and the private sector indirectly. According to published data from OCO, students from Palestine and Yemen are the first targeted in the program. The below table shows the details of the number of the students.

5. Oman Charitable Organization in Education

Table 2: International Students under Oman Charitable Organization

Students from	Year Details	Number of Students
Yemen	2008-2013 = 20	60
	2014-2022 = 20	
	2018-2025 = 20	
Palestine	2014-2022	28
Total	2008-2025	86

(OCO, 2021)

In addition, Oman should have mid and long-term projects for those students to use its soft power in their countries in Yemen and Palestine, and abroad. Again, the alumni could be a good tracking and communication tool for the graduated students to continue their relations with Oman.

power in a host country. SQ Chairs exist in different countries around the globe and they are expected to play a crucial role in strengthening ties between nations. Moreover, another specific "Omani Studies Unit" was established at Al al-Bayt University, Jordan, in 1998. It was incorporated under the grant and patronage of Sultan Qaboos bin Said. The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, in particular, the Office of Ifta'a, supervise the Unit.

6. University Chairs

University Chair perhaps is the most important tool in public diplomacy and implementing soft

Table 2. Sultan Qaboos University Chairs in the World

Chair name, University name	Establishment year
SQ International Fellowship in Literature, Humanities and Social Sciences at Oxford Center for Islamic Studies at Oxford University, United Kingdom	2004
SQ Bin Said Chair for Modern Arabic Studies at the University of Cambridge (Faculty of Oriental Studies)	2005

SQ Chair for Water Management & Economic Diversification at Roosevelt Academy in Utrecht University, The Hague, Netherlands	2005
SQ Chair for Information Technology at the University of NED Engineering Technology, Karachi, Pakistan	2005
SQ Chair for Arabic Language Studies at Beijing University	2007
Sultan of Oman Chair for Oriental Studies, Leiden University, the Netherlands	2008
SQ Professorship in Abrahamic Faiths and Shared Values, University of Cambridge, UK	2011
SQ Fellowship in Mathematics, Corpus Christi College, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom	2014
SQ Chair for Desert Farming, Arabian Gulf University, Bahrain	1994
SQ Chair for Information Technology at the University of Engineering Technology, Lahore, Pakistan	2004
SQ Chair for Oriental Studies, University of Tokyo, Japan	2010
SQ Chair of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Melbourne, Australia,	1999
SQ Chair for Arabic and Islamic Studies, Georgetown University, USA	1980
SQ Chair for Arabic Language, Georgetown University, USA	1993
The Sultan of Oman Chair in International Relations at Harvard University, USA	1999
SQ Professorship of Middle Eastern Studies, William and Mary College, USA	2011

(Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science, 2021)

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 the Arabic language, which any Arabic country can do, Islamic studies and oriental studies. Noted from the table the most of the Chairs are located in Europe.

It is a fact that Oman has the highest number of Chairs among the Gulf countries in the world. Those Chairs should act like volunteered ambassadors to establish bridges between Oman and the host country's people, because they are among them, on the ground. When we take a look at their activities, unfortunately, it is seen that they do not contribute to Oman and host country relations, although their all expenses go from Oman. In a survey conducted in 63 countries (Yenigun, AlSubhi, 2021), even in those SQ Chairs existed countries Oman is very weakly known. Even very simple questions like

Oman's location (49.4%), the capital city (30.4%) currency (25.1%) are not known in those countries. Even the name of "Sultan Qaboos" in those countries that have SQ Chairs is very little known by 17.2 % according to the survey. (Yenigun, AlSubhi, 2021) Deeper knowledge about Oman such as the existence of general elections in Oman (25.3%) or the existence of a bicameral parliamentary system in Oman (16.4%), or Omani mediation between regional countries and the Euro-Atlantic zone (23.1%) is very low. However, when we take a look at the establishment ears of those Chairs in the host countries, it is a fact that they are not newly established. Some of them were established 15-40 years before such as in the United States, Australia, Bahrain, Netherlands, China, and the United Kingdom and in the most prestigious universities, such as Oxford, Cambridge, Utrecht, Beijing, Melbourne, Georgetown, and Harvard Universities. Nevertheless, unfortunately, those Chairs did not do or publish any International Conference, book, or joint project with Omani universities.

If we take a look at some other Chairs such as Jean Monnet Chairs in Europe and the world, they should conduct minimum international conference, teach semester courses, several seminars, and a joint project with the home country institutions (Jean Monnet Action, 2021). Otherwise, their responsible persons are changed or the Chair is given to another university because there is a very intensive inspection system to check if they are working according to their mission.

SQ Chairs should have a vision, mission, and target in the host countries. A very serious inspection system should be established and 3-months and annual report system should be created. In each university that has SQ Chair, at least two elective courses should be implemented about Oman's politics, international relations, culture, history, and economic relations (Maani & Yenigun, 2021). All Chair representatives in those universities should be appointed by Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) or Oman Ministry of Higher Education and approved by the host country university. Those Chair representatives should be selected from expatriate faculties from SQU foreign/expatriate faculties who have ten years of working experience with the high publication and community service record in Oman. So, they can represent Oman as a natural ambassador in the host country with its two-eyes, external and internal perspectives. Those chairs should launch joint international conferences with the published proceedings; publish minimum of three books, and a minimum a joint project with the SQU. They should organize Public Open-Omani Cultural Day and at least an exhibition every year to represent Omani culture in those host institutions and publics.

7. Sultan Qaboos Prize and Award

Furthermore, there are a number of prizes and awards under the name of Sultan Qaboos. First, UNESCO Sultan Qaboos Prize for Environmental Conservation. It was first initiated in 1989 and started to be given in 1991 by the initial donation of almost \$1 million (Statutes, 2021). The main aim of the prize is to award individuals and organizations for their protecting the environment and culture. (UNESCO, 2021). So, it is seen that SQ Prize directly serves UNESCO's vision and mission.

Oman donates money with no demand or footnote, but it can put a reservation to do those activities in Oman after now. Because Oman also has been suffering environmental issues, such as degradation, desalting, river pollution, and developing dam capabilities. In addition to that, Oman can ask an institutional favor to introduce Oman to the world peoples at least by using the UN's advertorial in different countries, not just only on its website.

Another Award is 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). Unfortunately, this award also is not well known at the international level. At least it should be announced among the people in the Arab countries. So, it can be a good public diplomacy instrument, if it is well advertised in the Arab League members, not just in the interstate level but, on the ground, among the people.

8. Cultural Centers

International Cultural Centers perhaps are the most important public diplomacy instrument among the host country people. According to several kinds of research, people trust and believe in civil society groups more than the news and governments. Among the others, cultural centers are the loveliest ones because the majority of their activities include music, food, ethnic festivals in addition to their seminars, training activities, and publications. Oman had chosen three main capital cities to orchestrate its public diplomacy almost 15 years ago, Washington, London, and Paris. In Washington, the permanent Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center (SQCC) was established in 2005. In Paris and London, ad hoc festivals are conducted annually as public diplomacy instruments although there are no permanent cultural centers.

SQCC-Washington is working the best among the SQU Chairs and the other SQ Cultural centers. It promotes mutual respect and understanding and endeavors to educate a new generation of culturally sensitive and knowledgeable citizens in each society. It provides post-doctoral scholarship, lecture, and

poetry series, manage mini-exhibits and educational visits, and SABLA- 5 weeks intensive language program. SQCC is in contact with SALAM, maybe the best working fully-funded study abroad program. It is held in Manah, Oman to teach the Omani language and culture for two months. Our master programs (SQU, Political Science, International Relations and Security Studies) receive applications from some students who have very satisfied with the Salam Program and would like to come back to Oman again.

Another Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center is located in Belarus with the title of "Oman Centre for Arabic Language and Culture". The Center was recently established three years before, 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 conduct studies, research, conferences, and other scientific events (Oman Observer, 2018). Unfortunately, there is no activity heard from this center, so it should be activated in practice immediately.

9. Conclusion

Cultural centers, Chairs, scholarship benefited students, international students, prizes, and language center s are the soft power instruments in the favor of home countries. Oman has all of those instruments in its hand at the domestic and international levels. Actually, Oman has the highest number of University Chairs in the Gulf area and it is one of the highest countries in the world with its 16 university Chairs worldwide from China to the United States. Unfortunately, it cannot be said that those soft power instruments have given expected results in the host countries although some of them had been established 40 years before.

One of the two best working two instruments is SQCC in Washington. Although the SQCC should intensify its international conferences at least, once a year, in comparison with the other University Chairs, it works not ideal but, at the best level. However, the other University Chairs in the world should coordinate with each other, communicate with the Omani MOH, and work together with the SQU in the joint projects, conferences, exhibitions, and publications. Unfortunately, 16 University Chairs did not

contribute to Omani soft power in the host countries except being a symbolic post despite high-paid expenses. Those university chairs should be assigned from foreign SQU professors with 10-year work experience with a high level of publication about Oman and community service in Oman. They should be inspected and given mandatory work of annual conferences, publications, and exhibitions. Otherwise, those should be replaced with another successful candidate like Jean Monnet Chairs which are very effective in Europe.

International students' quantity is very weak in Oman with the percentage of 2.7. Those are natural and volunteered ambassadors of the next generations; that is why they should not be underestimated. SQU and the other private universities in Oman should be encouraged by the MOHE to increase their international students in their institutions. Scholarships and tuition fee waiving should be increased in quantity and amount to trigger it. Charity organizations also could be supported to increase their scholarship numbers for international students.

The second Best working instrument is the SQC of Arabic Language for Non-Native Speakers in Manah. Although it is far from the city lights of Muscat and a little short and limited with 8 weeks, in comparison with the others instruments and spend-benefit formula, it works perfectly. Guest students normally would like to come back to Oman and learn a lot more than the expected one. Because of Covid-19, it decreased acceptance numbers, but it is being planned to go back to the normal program soon. Perhaps program length increasing to three months will give better benefits for the students and Oman

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