

# Chapter 21

## Expansion of the International School Industry in Muscat, Oman

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### **ABSTRACT**

*An international school system has emerged in many countries, initially as a means of serving a transitory expatriate population, but evolving significantly in both purpose and design. There are variations in the way the system operates depending on the specifics of the context in which each institution is established. This chapter showcases the findings of an examination of the international school sector in Muscat, Oman from the perspective of individuals associated with the sector, as gleaned from semi-structured interviews conducted between April and May 2022. It is argued that Oman's international schools industry, although less advanced than that of many GCC counterparts, has experienced noticeable growth in recent decades. The conclusion formed is that while there is currently a healthy level of competition which benefits consumers (overseas as well as local students and families), the state of Muscat's international school sector should be monitored over time to ascertain the extent of the threat to existing institutions.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Alongside the government (state) school system in many countries, there exists another category of institutions known as private (independent) schools of which international schools are a subset (Hill, 2016). These international institutions emerged to serve the market of globally mobile families, but now attract an increasingly large host country student population (Kim and Mobernd, 2019; Alfaraidy, 2020; Bunnell, 2021). Despite the contention of some critics that the sector is under-researched (Fahey, van Rensburg and Ganguly, 2021; Bailey, 2021), the range of literature that is currently available regarding the dynamics of the sector in some parts of the world suggests that it appears to be drawing increased attention within the scholarly community which could be owing to the increased visibility of international

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schools. Evidence of this growth can be seen in Independent Schools Council (ISC) Research data according to which there are currently over 12,000 international schools in operation worldwide reflecting a 59% growth in the sector between 2012 and 2022 (ISC Research, 2022). Close to 7 million students are expected to be enrolled in international schools by 2023 (Morrison, 2019).

The aim of the study was to investigate the factors that are perceived within the educational community to be contributing to the increase in the number of the international schools in Muscat, the capital of Oman. It assessed the potential impacts of the growth of the international school's market, including the degree to which these new institutions could pose a threat to some of the established international education providers as well as implications for the student and parent population in Muscat.

The project is focused exclusively on K-12 institutions to facilitate a balanced comparison across schools. The ISC's criteria of what makes a school international would potentially incorporate the vast number of schools offering country-specific curricula in Oman. This includes institutions such as the French, Finnish, Indian, Bangladeshi and Philippine schools which typically offer a bilingual programme, that is, instruction in English as well as the language of the stated country. However, for the purpose of this research, the focus was on English-medium rather than bilingual schools and those which are deemed 'international' by virtue of the range of nationalities they seek to enrol.

The research incorporated as its central focus the perspective of various stakeholders within the education sector in Muscat. The aim is to add to the literature on international education, specifically in the Gulf region for which Bailey (2021) asserts that there is a gap in the existing research. This is particularly apparent for Oman which is under-researched compared to other GCC countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

In light of the aims and objectives outlined above, the questions addressed by the study are as follows:

- What factors are perceived to be driving the increase in the number of international schools in Muscat?
- What are the possible implications of the rise in the number of institutions providing an international education?
- To what extent do new entrants to the international school market pose a threat to the three main incumbents?

## **BACKGROUND**

The expansion of the international school sector has been evident across continents (Mackenzie, 2010; Hayden, 2011; Brummit and Keeling, 2013; Morrison, 2019; Bunnell, 2021). Figures from ISC research indicate that the growth trend has been reflected in a global increase in student numbers and has remained unabated despite the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic (Stacey, 2020).

Asia is currently the continent with the largest number of international schools, including GCC countries such as the UAE with over 700 and mainland China with over 500 international schools (GESS, 2022). The Asian region possesses what Machin (2017) refers to as '*gold rush*' market conditions (rapid increase in the number of players entering a lucrative market) present not only in southern and eastern Asia but also within Middle Eastern countries such the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Even more recent evidence of the continuing growth trend is presented by Bailey (2021) who specifically characterises the

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