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**Ministry of Education Efforts in Providing Equal Educational Rights for Each Female Student in Government Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic to Ensure the Sustainability of Education**

**In the Sultanate of Oman**

**February 2022**

**Introduction:**

Providing quality education for all on an equal basis and facilitating its access is vital for achieving the goals of sustainable development. The future vision of the Omani economy 2020 and Oman Vision 2040 emphasize the importance of building the Omani individuals, as the main thrust who can contribute with confidence and awareness in the process of development. This can be achieved by enhancing technical and professional capabilities, stimulating their creative and scientific knowledge and refining their skills. The government of the Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Education (MoE), carried out a set of procedures and developed strategies and plans, where documents and regulations issued to ensure providing equal education opportunity rights for all male and female students based on:

* **The Basic law of the State:** The basic Law of the State: Issued by a Royal Decree No.6/2021 in January 11th 2021, Article (16) of the Basic Law stipulates the cultural principles, as follows “Education is a right for every citizen,” and Article (15) of the Social Principles, “Justice, equality and equal opportunities among citizens are pillars of society guaranteed by the State.”
* **The Omani Child Law:** Article (36) “The Omani child shall have the right to free education in government schools until the completion of Post-Basic education stage.”

The effects of the pandemic on education are extreme for every educational system around the world. Shifting from the normal face-to-face Education to distance learning was a challenging issue due to the lack of experience for such situation in many countries, including the Sultanate of Oman. MoE has striven to confront the challenges affecting the education sector due to COVID-19 pandemic by finding alternative solutions to ensure the continuation and the sustainability of the educational process in an efficient and comprehensive manner for all male and female students in the Sultanate of Oman, without any discrimination.

**MoE adopted several procedures to mitigate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to provide education for all, keeping the safety of all students, teaching and administrative staff as a priority; including:**

* Issuing health procedures document (**Health Protocol**) as a reference of prevention measures in schools.
* MoE prepared (3) scenarios to provide education according the situation of the pandemic: distance e-learning, blended learning and face-to-face teaching.
* Raising the awareness about school operation strategies during pandemic at all levels.
* Training all teaching and administrative staff of schools and supervisors in all educational governorates to develop their skills in e-learning and new educational frameworks.
* Implementing a supplementary program that aims to acknowledge learning-loss time during the pandemic.
* Adapting the Omani curricula to fit the time on task for all grades and the different needs of the students.
* Developing the General Student Learning Assessment Framework, and adapting Student Learning Assessment Documents for each subject to ensure the flexibility in implementing different assessment tools based on the type of lesson delivery (face to face or distance e-learning). It is also adapted for students with disabilities.
* Carrying out some amendments in the Student Affairs Regulations regarding student admission and registration, academic regularity and behavioral discipline for all male and female students in various levels.
* Launching e-learning platforms provided by MoE, such as the **Google Classroom platform for Grades (5-12)**, and **Al Mandhara platform for Grades (1-4)**. These platforms include various educational contents (Images, videos, texts, presentations, audio materials, assessment and interactive activities...).These tools facilitate communication between teachers and students in a synchronous and asynchronous manner and ensure accessibility for learning at any time and at any place, using a variety of resources that caters learners’ individual differences.
* Broadcasting Educational Lessons (Live Lessons) on two television channels (Oman Cultural Channel and Oman Live) to all students.

**The challenges and obstacles that female and male students faced during the pandemic at all educational levels in government schools, and the measures and solutions taken by MoE in the Sultanate of Oman:**

**Early Childhood Education**

***Availability* (including availability of online or remote education in case of school closures):**

The biggest challenge was to provide appropriate education for children (boys and girls) of the early stage of education, an education that fits their characteristics and age features. Accordingly, distance learning was adopted through e-learning platforms, and it faced the following challenges in various educational governorates:

* Weak internet services in remote areas.
* The lack of readiness of early childhood education institutions to provide distance education service for children because of the lack of e-learning platforms in these institutions.

To deal with these challenges, MoE has provided Google Classroom platform to many early childhood education institutions and provided training workshops on how to use the e-learning platform.

***Accessibility* (including physical accessibility, affordability, and access without discrimination):**

MoE has obligated the early childhood education institutions to implement a number of measures to ensure the safe return of children to schools based on the Health Protocol, as following:

* The number of boys and girls in each classroom has been reduced so that the allocated space for each child is 2 square meters.
* Allocating a specific table and chair for each female and male child.
* Ensure that children are registered in the educational portal.
* Students with Special needs were followed up and monitored without discrimination based on each child's ability and needs.

***Acceptability* (including quality of education):**

Boys and girls are accepted and registered in early childhood institutions equally at a specific age in each grade. A child must be 3 years and two months to be enrolled for nursery, and 4 years and two months for the kindergarten.

**Basic Education and Post-Basic Education:**

***Availability* (including availability of online or remote education in case of school closures):**

Technology has been used effectively in Omani schools, especially when learning switched to distance education, which ensured the continuity of learning for all male and female students' at all different levels. Two e-learning platforms were activated effectively by MoE; **Al Mandhara** Platform for Grades (1-4), and **Google Classroom** Platform for Grades (5-12).Some schools faced challenges of having a weak internet connection while working online, which sometimes prevented the activation of e-learning properly. MoE worked hard in reducing the challenges resulting from technical and network weakness problems by cooperating with telecommunication companies to strengthen the network in these schools. Moreover, lessons were recorded and uploaded into CDs to be distributed later to male and female students.

***Accessibility* (including physical accessibility, affordability, and access without discrimination):**

MoE has adopted a gradually safe return of students to schools based on the pandemic situation in the country, taking into account the school operation guidelines, procedures and strategies as stated in the General Framework for School Operation document.

Class size (number of students in each classroom) has been reduced in all Omani schools, provided that the number of students does not exceed 16 students in each classroom in order to keep the social distance of one and a half meters between each student and another. For schools with less than 16 students in each classroom, they continued operating fully 100% face to face teaching, 5 days a week for all subjects according to the weekly lessons plan, in addition to the use of the e-learning platform.

***Acceptability* (including quality of education):**

MoE provides fair admission opportunities for all new students (first graders) in various Omani governorates by announcing the registration dates and urging parents to electronically register their children in the educational portal.As mentioned above, the Sultanate of Oman has made great effort to address the challenges affecting the education sector during the Pandemic by implementing effective measures to ensure the continuity of providing quality education for all male and female students.

***Adaptability* (adapted to the needs of students and of societies):**

Flexibility has been granted to the educational directorates in the governorates so that they operate schools according to their capabilities (financial and human resources and transportation) taking into account the commitment to implement procedures and guidelines given in the General Frameworks for School Operations. In case of 100% face to face teaching, parents of children with chronic diseases or weak immunity, can choose to homeschooling their child. Provided that they follow these procedures:

* Parents submit a request to the school administration to exclude their son/daughter from daily face-to-face attendance.
* Parent officially undertake full responsibility of homeschooling their child as the child will have to seat for the exams given to all students.

**Special Education**

**Special Education Programs and Curricula**

MoE has implemented a comprehensive education policy for all. It ensures delivering education for children with disabilities (hearing disability, visual disability, intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, speech and language disorder and learning difficulties) without discrimination. Nevertheless, equal services and carrier path opportunities are provided for both genders. All students are involved based on their abilities in various activities, events and national and international awards. During the COVID-19 pandemic, all female and male students with disabilities who are enrolled in special education programs were able to access to e-learning platforms. They were trained on how to use these platforms and were provided with the necessary support.

**The following tables show the number of students enrolled in the Special Education schools and in the Special Education programs within the Basic Education schools:**

|  |
| --- |
| **Number of students in Special Education schools for the academic year 2021/2022**  |
| **Special Education schools** | Total number of students | Male | Female |
| Al Tarbiyah Al Fikriya School(Intellectual Disability) | 163 | 97 | 66 |
| Al Amal School(Hearing Disability)  | 161 | 88 | 73 |
| Omar bin Al-Khattab Institute (Visual Disability) | 210 | 121 | 89 |
| **Total**  | **534**  | **306** | **228** |

|  |
| --- |
| **Number of students in Special Education programs in Educational Directorates for the academic year 2021/2022** |
| **Special Education Programs in Educational Directorates**  | **Total number of students** | **Males** | **Females** |
| inclusive program for students with Hearing Disability  | 456  | 266 | 190 |
| inclusive program for students with Intellectual-Disability  |  1219  | 638 | 581 |
| Learning Difficulties Program | The Learning Disabilities Program provides its services to (12,786) male and female students |
| Speech and Language Program | 490 | 300 | 190 |

***Availability* (including availability of online or remote education in case of school closures):**

Special Education schools have provided education through e-learning platforms, with the challenge of teaching lessons by using sign language during the online classes. To overcome this challenge, MoE has adapted a set of measures to make the lessons interesting by providing some interactive class activities.

***Accessibility* (including physical accessibility, affordability, and access without discrimination):**

MoE attempts to ensure that equal learning opportunities are provided for all Special Education students (male and female). Therefore, MoE ensured involving male and female students in different activities, providing textbooks and delivering same support from the career guidance specialists.

***Acceptability* (including quality of education):**

Admission of female students in Special Education school activities contributes significantly to increase their skills and abilities. Therefore, female students are encouraged to participate in school activities like their fellow male students.

***Adaptability* (adapted to the needs of students and of societies):**

It takes a number of forms represented in practicing activities, tasks and hobbies that fit their needs and abilities. This is achieved through the introduction of adaptation of the content, teaching methods, strategies and activities that suit these students and community needs. This initiative helped in attracting students to school; furthermore, it increased their motivation in their academic performance.

**Lifelong Learning**

***Availability* (including availability of online or remote education in case of school closures):**

The two main challenges that face lifelong learning students during the pandemic were:

* The closure of regular classes and centers in adult education.
* The closure of illiterate classes that are not located within a school building

MoE established an educational channel called **Mawrid** which was provided to male and female students enrolled in adult education centers.

***Accessibility* (including physical accessibility, affordability, and access without discrimination):**

Regular face-to-face attendance at schools and access to education without discrimination. Learning was granted in illiterate classes in schools, with the attendance of female students with equal rights.

***Acceptability* (including quality of education):**

Male and female students have equal rights to register in adult education classes and are provided with online educational services on an equal basis without discrimination.

***Adaptability* (adapted to the needs of students and of societies):**

* The extent to which education was adapted according to the students and society needs.
* Curriculum content in adult education system has been accommodated to suit the current situation during pandemic.

**General Statistics:**

**The following table shows the percentage of female students entering the e-learning platform during the academic year 2020/2021 by Governorates:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Student**  | **Governorates**  |
| **Percentage**  |
| **98.7%** | A'Dakhiliya |
| **99.3%** | A'Dhahirah |
| **86.6%** | Al Wusta |
| **98.7%** | Al Batinah South |
|  **98.6%** | Al Batinah North |
| **95.2%** | Dhofar |
|  **98.7%** | Musandam |
| **97.5%** | Al Buraimi |
| **97.1%** | A'Sharqiyah South |
| **97.7%** | A'Sharqiyah North |
| **98.8%** | Muscat  |

**Statistics for Google's e-learning platform entry during the academic year2020/2021:**

1. The number of active users of the platform was more than 415 thousand students, according to the following:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Number** | **Percentage** | **Gender** |
| **204908** | **49,3** | **Females** |
| **211040** | **50,7** | **Males** |

*The ratio is very similar between male and female users of the Google e-learning platform*

1. Google Meet students attended virtual sessions during online classes:

Monthly about: 418,212

Weekly about: 383,925

The active entry ratio for male students is about 43%.

The active entry ratio for female students is about 57%.

*That is, the average entry of female students is greater than the male students in the synchronic online classes*

1. The percentage of Interaction with learning contents such as documents, spreadsheets, presentations, graphs, charts and forms in Google classroom e-learning platform (asynchronous) was 56% of female students compared to 44% of male students.
2. The number of users of Al- Mandhara e-learning platform (Cycle One, Grades (1-4) is about 129,700 users for female students, and about 132,600 users are for male students, and the entry ratio is about 98% for both genders.

**Note:** A small percentage of students did not login to e-learning platforms. Students in these areas received face-to-face teaching in schools; due to the class size in their schools (the number of students in the classroom is less than 16), also some learning contents has been provided via CDs. Those students faced challenges in Internet connection because of the limitation of the internet coverage in those remote sites. MoE has coordinated with all the concerned telecommunications authorities, organizations and ISP’s to connect those schools and sites with internet in all the governorates and launched the Satellite Internet connection project to install internet via satellite to 96 schools.