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## From Tradition to Technology: Societal and Educational Impacts on Job Preferences in Oman

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores Omani undergraduate students' employment readiness, job preferences, and the impact of English language proficiency, within the framework of Oman Vision 2040. Through qualitative analysis of interviews with 43 first-year students, seven themes emerged: occupational preferences, influences on career choices, technology-centric careers, preference for government versus private sector jobs, English proficiency as a prerequisite for employment, societal valuation of English skills, and English for global integration and mobility. The findings reveal a strong preference for comfortable, less physically demanding white-collar jobs, underscoring the need for educational reforms that align curricula with modern job market demands, particularly in enhancing STEM education and digital literacy. English language proficiency has been seen as crucial for securing desirable jobs, highlighting the necessity for comprehensive English training programs across all educational levels. Societal expectations and personal ambitions significantly influence career choices, with a preference for prestigious white-collar jobs over traditional professions. The study recommends educational interventions to address these evolving job preferences, promote all forms of work, and support the critical role of English proficiency in employment and career advancement. These insights contribute to the broader goals of economic diversification and sustainability outlined in Oman Vision 2040, offering valuable perspectives for policymakers, educators, and researchers.

**Keywords:** Oman Vision 2040; Employment readiness; English language competency; Societal perceptions; Job preferences; Omanisation policy

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## 1. Introduction

The employment landscape in Oman is shaped by a complex matrix of cultural, educational, and economic factors. Particularly in the context of the Omanisation policy, which aims to increase the employment of Omani nationals and reduce reliance on migrant workers, these factors influence job preferences and readiness among young Omanis. While pivotal for national development, this policy intersects significantly with global trends, such as the increasing importance of English language proficiency in the job market and the shifting paradigms of job preferences towards more technologically oriented and less physically demanding roles. These shifts underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of how Omani youth navigate these changes, balancing traditional societal expectations with the realities of a globalised job market.

### 1.1. Overview of the Oman Vision 2040 and Omanisation

The Omanisation policy, which aims to increase the employment of Omani nationals in the workforce and reduce reliance on migrant workers, has various effects on the Omani population. Analogous policies have been adopted by all Arab Gulf countries, contributing to each nation's long-term socio-economic development. Oman's Vision 2040 is a strategic plan to transform the country's economy and society by emphasising diversification, innovation, and sustainability to reduce reliance on oil revenues and ensure long-term prosperity (Weshahi, 2022). One of the critical aspects of Oman Vision 2040 is the focus on education and human capital development, recognising the importance of enhancing skills, promoting research and innovation, and aligning educational curricula with the needs of a knowledge-based economy (Heckadon and Tuzlukova, 2020; Hammad and Al-Ani, 2021). The goal is to equip Omani citizens with the necessary competencies to thrive in a rapidly evolving global landscape (Hammad and Al-Ani, 2021).

Efforts have been made to evaluate and enhance educational policies and curricula to align with the Vision's objectives, ensuring that educational goals reflect Omani values, sustainable development principles, and future skills requirements (Al Balushi and Mai, 2023). Additionally, there is a recognition of the need to support scientific research, innovation, and capacity building in higher education institutions to foster national capabilities (Hammad and Al-Ani, 2021). The emphasis on leveraging cutting-edge technology, promoting e-learning, and improving educational infrastructure underscores the commitment to modernising the education sector in alignment with the Vision (Younas and Wahaibi, 2023).

Oman's Vision 2040 also focuses on societal development, aiming to stimulate entrepreneurial growth among young Omanis by fostering an entrepreneur-friendly culture and encouraging innovative business start-ups to empower the youth and drive economic progress (Muthuraman and Haziazi, 2019). Oman's Vision 2040 is a roadmap for the country's future development and Omanisation policy, encompassing economic diversification, education reform, innovation, and societal advancement. By aligning policies and initiatives with the Vision's objectives, Oman strives to create a sustainable and prosperous future for its citizens.

### 1.2. Significance of Study and Research Questions

The significance of this research lies in its focus on the subtle perspectives of Omani undergraduate students, regarding their preparedness for employment amidst these shifting paradigms. It explores their job preferences, motivations, and the factors influencing their career choices within the broader discourse of Omanisation and the global demands of the English language. This investigation is crucial for several reasons: it sheds light on the alignment (or misalignment) between educational outcomes and job market demands, provides insights into societal and cultural influences on job preferences, and highlights the critical role

of English language proficiency in employment within Oman. Furthermore, this study contributes to the ongoing dialogue on educational reforms and policy interventions needed to enhance employment readiness among Omani youth, ensuring that they are equipped to contribute effectively to the nation's socio-economic development in a post-oil economy.

Al-Mahrooqi and Denman (2018) found that Omani students face significant challenges transitioning from studying English as a subject to using it as the medium of instruction in higher education, affecting their employability. Despite increased emphasis on English education from the first grade, many students still lack the necessary proficiency for higher education and the job market.

Over 80% of students entering Omani higher education institutions (HEIs) require General Foundation Programmes (GFPs) to improve their English skills, aiming for a minimum IELTS score of 5.0 (Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes, 2008). However, more than 40% of students fail to meet these standards (Al-Mashani, 2011; in Alghenaimi et al., 2018), so pre-foundation courses have been introduced to bridge this gap. The high demand for foundational English education necessitates significant investments in resources, impacting HEIs' financial and academic structures (Al-Mamari, 2012).

Guided by the backdrop of Omanisation, the increasing importance of English proficiency, and the evolving job preferences among the youth, this research is driven by the following research questions:

1. How do Omani undergraduate students perceive their readiness for employment in the context of the Oman Vision 2040 and the global job market?
2. What are the job preferences of Omani undergraduate students, and what factors influence these preferences?
3. How do Omani undergraduate students perceive the role of English language proficiency in securing employment and advancing their careers?

4. To what extent do societal and cultural factors influence Omani undergraduate students' job preferences and motivations to learn English?

Through a qualitative exploration of these questions, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play in Omani youth's employment readiness. It offers insights that can inform policy, curriculum design, and broader societal discourse on employment and education in Oman.

## 2. Literature review

The Literature Review section delves into a comprehensive examination of existing research and scholarly discourse related to the multifaceted aspects of employment readiness and job preferences among Omani nationals, with a particular emphasis on the impact of Omanisation policy, the critical role of English language proficiency, and the influence of societal and economic factors on employment decisions.

### 2.1. Shortcomings of Omani employees

Based on the results of the International Labour Organisation's (2022) survey regarding the shortcomings of Omani national employees as seen by employers in Oman, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Job Characteristics and Expectations: A considerable portion of surveyed firms (60%) reported that Omani nationals expect higher wages than the firms can offer. Additionally, one-third of the firms indicated that nationals demand better work conditions. This suggests that there might be a mismatch in salary expectations and work conditions between employers and Omani job seekers.
2. Skills Gap: Employers also pointed out a lack of skills among Omani nationals as a major difficulty in hiring them. The identified skill gaps include:
  - Technical skills: 41% of firms highlighted this issue.

- Work experience: 36% mentioned the need for more practical experience.
  - Core / Soft skills: 25% noted the absence of essential soft skills.
  - Technical qualifications: 24% reported a need for more specific technical qualifications.
3. Pool of Applicants: Interestingly, the survey revealed that only 18% of the firms mentioned a shortage of applicants. This indicates a sufficient number of potential candidates, and the issue lies in their specific skills and expectations.

## 2.2. English language skills that Omani students need for employment in Oman

English proficiency significantly impacts Arabian Gulf graduates' job prospects (Pitychoutis, 2020), with parallels in Southeast Asia (Jawing and Kamlun, 2022). Omani graduates face difficulties due to insufficient English, particularly in oral skills and reading strategies (Al-Hooti, Al-Barwani, and Al-Mekhlafi, 2023; Endley, 2016). Similar challenges are observed in Saudi Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2022) and Sri Lanka (Rameez, 2019). Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova (2014) underscore English's role in global integration. Omani graduates' limited proficiency in research and communication affects their employability (Al Riyami, 2021). Aligning higher education with job market demands, especially in English courses, is vital (Al Riyami, 2021).

## 2.3. Omani students' motivation to learn English

Several factors influence Omani students' motivation to learn English. Al-Mahrooqi, Abrar-ul-Hassan, Cofie(2012) indicate that EFL teachers in Oman favour motivational strategies related to classroom performance, as Pitychoutis (2020) discussed in a higher education context in Saudi Arabia. Gender-based differences in language learning strategies and motivation were identified by Saidi and Al-Mahrooqi (2012). Al-Issa (2014)

analysed several ideologies held by instructors that affect EFL motivation. Abdullah, Hussin, and Ismail (2019) found the Flipped Classroom Model to enhance motivation in EFL speaking classes significantly. Isood and Yunus (2022) studied how teacher support, classroom environment, and cultural background affect learners' motivation and anxiety in speaking English. These insights suggest potential improvements in motivating Omani students to learn English. Mackenzie (2023) focused on how English language education affects the lives of higher education students from low-income backgrounds in Colombia. His study showed that English can significantly improve economic opportunities for graduates by enhancing job prospects. Proficiency in English facilitates greater sociocultural integration, fostering global social connections and opening up access to global knowledge and information. However, the expansion of capabilities through English is highly dependent on various factors, one of which is the individual's proficiency level.

## 2.4. Shift in job preferences

The shift in job preferences towards white-collar jobs over traditional roles has been a notable trend in recent literature. Studies have highlighted sub-themes such as an Attraction to White-Collar Jobs and an Avoidance of Traditional Roles (Wynendaele et al., 2021). Preferences for white-collar jobs have been associated with job satisfaction, charismatic leadership, and affective organisational commitment (Özgül, Karaca, and Zehir, 2022). Additionally, monetising non-salary benefits has influenced employment preferences, indicating a broader perspective on job attractiveness beyond monetary compensation (Whillans, Dwyer, and Perovic, 2018).

Research has also delved into the impact of job characteristics on professionals, emphasising the utility of models like the Job Characteristics Model (JCM) in understanding job preferences (Singh, A., Singh, S., and Khan, 2016). Furthermore, the role of individual preferences in job satisfaction has been explored in various contexts, such as nurse scheduling, where accommodating individual

preferences has been linked to increased job satisfaction (Rerkjirattikal et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2012).

The influence of psychosocial factors and job resources on work enjoyment and early retirement intentions has been studied, shedding light on the importance of a sustainable working environment (Gyllensten, Hagberg, and Söderberg, 2020). Moreover, the potential effects of technological advancements on white-collar jobs have been a subject of interest, with studies suggesting a realignment in task assignments across occupations due to technological adoption (Dillender and Forsythe, 2019). Concerns about the future of white-collar jobs have been raised, with predictions indicating a significant risk of computerisation for a substantial portion of employment in the USA (Chelliah, 2017). These discussions underscore the evolving landscape of job preferences and the need for continuous adaptation in response to technological changes and societal shifts.

## **2.5. Influence of society and culture on job preferences**

The influence of societal and cultural factors on job preferences has been extensively studied, revealing the impact of stigma, prestige, modernisation, changing values, and other sub-themes (Peng, 2023; Huang, B., Ma, and Huang, L. 2022). Research has shown that occupational stigma can affect employees in high-prestige occupations, potentially diminishing perceptions of skill variety and task significance (Huang, B., Ma, and Huang, L. 2022). Additionally, the relationship between internship experiences, career adaptability, and occupational stigma has been explored, emphasising the importance of addressing stigma and identity issues for students in hospitality management (Peng, 2023).

Studies have also investigated the broader implications of societal and cultural influences on job-related outcomes. For example, the relationship between job resources and strain has been studied in societal individualism-collectivism and uncertainty avoidance. This research highlights the impact of

cultural dimensions on how individuals respond to job resources (Jang et al., 2017). Another study examined how societal culture affects job satisfaction in Europe over time. The research emphasises the consistent and long-term impact of cultural values on subjective well-being in the workplace (Pacheco et al., 2016).

Moreover, research has explored the effects of childhood victimisation on occupational prestige and income trajectories, demonstrating how early life experiences can shape individuals' occupational outcomes (Fernandez et al., 2015). The influence of power distance and communication on Mexican workers has also been studied, emphasising the importance of cultural congruency between societal and organisational cultures for organisational commitment and knowledge management (Madlock, 2012). From the impact of occupational stigma and prestige to the role of societal values in shaping job satisfaction and career trajectories, understanding these influences is essential for organisations and policymakers aiming to create inclusive and supportive work environments that accommodate diverse cultural backgrounds and societal norms.

## **2.6. Influence of economic factors on job preferences**

The literature on economic factors and expectations about job preferences reveals a nuanced interplay between individual choices and external financial conditions. Sub-themes such as economic downturn, job security, and income expectations have been highlighted in the research (Burks et al., 2009; Margalit, 2013).

Studies have shown that cognitive skills can influence economic preferences and job attachment, shedding light on the cognitive underpinnings of decision-making in various economic domains (Burks et al., 2009). Furthermore, the personal experience of financial hardship, particularly job loss, has significantly impacted support for welfare spending, indicating the profound effect of economic circumstances on social policy preferences (Margalit, 2013).

Research has also explored the relationship

between job satisfaction and economic factors, emphasising the need to consider job satisfaction as a crucial aspect of labour market behaviour (Clark, 1996). Additionally, studies on the job preferences of undergraduate nursing students have demonstrated the influence of economic and non-economic factors on job choices, highlighting the multifaceted nature of decision-making in career selection (Liu et al., 2019). Moreover, the role of economic circumstances in shaping preferences has been investigated, with evidence suggesting that significant changes in economic conditions can significantly impact individual preferences (O'Grady, 2017).

Furthermore, the literature has delved into the mechanisms of application segregation in job markets, revealing that workers are more likely to apply for jobs that align with their valued rewards, underscoring the importance of economic considerations in job application decisions (Barbulescu and Bidwell, 2013). Studies on job expectations of college students have also highlighted the evolving nature of societal and economic influences on career aspirations, indicating the need for continued exploration of these dynamics (Tomkiewicz et al., 2011). Research on job preferences of business and economics students has emphasised the significance of intellectual challenge, ethical considerations, and social responsibility in determining job selection preferences (Cabrera and Mariel, 2023).

### **3. Methodology**

The study employed a qualitative research approach, utilising thematic analysis, to explore Omani undergraduate students' perspectives on employment readiness, job preferences, and the role of English language proficiency in the context of Oman Vision 2040. This approach was chosen to gain in-depth insights into the factors influencing their job preferences and to identify emerging themes from the participants' responses.

#### **3.1. Research design**

The research design involved conducting semi-structured interviews with 43 first-year students with bachelor's degrees in English language from a rural university in Oman. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they allow for flexibility in exploring participants' perceptions and experiences while ensuring that key topics related to job preferences were covered (Lazazzara, Tims, and Gennaro, 2020; Holmberg, Caro, and Sobis, 2018; Bozkurt and Aktaş, 2022; Honda et al., 2019). Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to have a guided conversation with participants while allowing for open-ended responses (Bozkurt and Aktaş, 2022). This approach will enable participants to express their thoughts and opinions in their own words, providing rich and detailed data (Lazazzara, Tims, and Gennaro, 2020; Holmberg et al., 2018; Bozkurt and Aktaş, 2022). Additionally, semi-structured interviews offer the flexibility to explore specific topics of interest while allowing unexpected insights to emerge during the conversation (Lazazzara, Tims, and Gennaro, 2020; Holmberg et al., 2018; Bozkurt and Aktaş, 2022).

While offering valuable insights, this study has limitations. Its foundation lies in a qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with a specific group of undergraduate students from a single university in Oman. This factor may restrict the findings' applicability to the larger Omani student population or other environments. However, this study presents numerous opportunities for future research. Upcoming investigations could implement a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, to verify the findings across a more extensive populace and thoroughly comprehend the underlying dynamics.

#### **3.2. Interview questions**

The semi-structured interviews comprised eight core questions designed to explore various aspects

of the participants' beliefs and preferences related to employment readiness and job preferences. These questions were crafted based on a thorough review of the relevant literature (Lazazzara, Tims, and Gennaro, 2020; Holmberg, Caro, and Sobis, 2018; Bozkurt and Aktaş, 2022; Honda et al., 2019), the specific research objectives, and the research questions. The interview questions focused on the following areas:

- **Factors Influencing Job Choice:** Questions aimed to understand what factors participants consider when choosing a job. For example, "What factors do you consider when choosing a job?"
- **Perceptions of English Language:** These questions probed the role of English in accessing prestigious employment within Oman and the societal valuation of English skills. For instance, "How do you perceive the role of the English language in accessing prestigious employment within Oman?" and "Does society value English language skills and job prestige?"
- **Job Preferences:** Questions in this category explored the types of jobs participants find prestigious or desirable. Sample questions include, "What types of jobs do you consider prestigious or highly regarded in society?" and "What work environments and conditions do you prefer?"
- **Career Advancement:** Questions focused on participants' views on career progression and the potential for future improvement in their lives through their job choices. An example question is, "What types of jobs do you see as having potential for future advancement and improvement in your life?"
- **Societal and Cultural Influences:** These questions examined the impact of societal and family expectations on job preferences. For example, "Do family and societal expectations influence your job preferences? How?"
- **Multicultural Work Environments:** This area explored participants' comfort and motivation

to work in multicultural settings. A relevant question is, "How do you feel about working in multicultural environments?"

Finally, the four research questions guided the crafting of these interview questions, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the themes related to employment readiness, job preferences, and the importance of English language proficiency to probe into various aspects of the participants' beliefs and preferences:

**Research Question 1:** How do Omani undergraduate students perceive their readiness for employment in the context of the Omanisation policy and the global job market?

**Interview Question:**

- What factors do you consider when choosing a job?

**Research Question 2:** What are the job preferences of Omani undergraduate students, and what factors influence these preferences?

**Interview Questions:**

- What types of jobs do you consider prestigious or highly regarded in society?
- What types of work environments and conditions do you prefer?
- What types of jobs do you see as having potential for future advancement and improvement in your life?

**Research Question 3:** How do Omani undergraduate students perceive the role of English language proficiency in securing employment and advancing in their careers?

**Interview Questions:**

- How do you perceive the role of the English language in accessing prestigious employment within Oman?
- Does society value English language skills and job prestige?

**Research Question 4:** To what extent do societal and cultural factors influence Omani undergraduate students' job preferences and motivations to learn English?

**Interview Questions:**

- Do family and societal expectations influence

your job preferences? How?

- How do you feel about working in multicultural environments?

The interview protocol was reviewed and refined based on feedback from an Omani colleague in the academic field and three pilot interviews to ensure clarity and relevance.

### 3.3. Participant selection and recruitment

In this study, a convenience sampling technique was employed to select participants who were first-year students at a private university in Oman. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Unit of the authors' affiliation. First-year students were informed about the scope of the research during their midterm exams. Those who wanted to participate voluntarily signed consent forms and scheduled interviews, which took place in the researchers' offices. As the researchers worked at an institution in a different country, participation was entirely voluntary, ensuring no obligation to participate.

The researchers held interviews with 43 first-year students of the BEd programme. These 43 students participated as a convenience sample. The students who participated are 23 females and 20 males from different places in Oman, most of them from Al-Dhahirah, Al-Dakhilyia, and Al-Sharqiyah North, while their age average is  $M=19.73$  years old. Since the students have graduated from the General Foundation Programme, their English language level should be a minimum IELTS of 5.0. Convenience sampling is based on availability and accessibility and is non-probabilistic (Abdou, Hassan, and Dief, 2020). This sampling technique is commonly used when randomisation is not feasible due to limited resources, time constraints, or a large population (Abdou, Hassan, and Dief, 2020), and it allows for a focused investigation into the factors influencing career decision-making among this particular group (Fosu-Ayarkwah, Fosu, and Awortwe, 2022; Prasodjo and Sally, 2022).

It is essential to acknowledge that convenience sampling has certain drawbacks. A notable limitation

is the possibility of selection bias since the sample might not accurately reflect the broader population (Abdou, Hassan, and Dief, 2020). In this study, convenience sampling may limit the generalisability of the findings to other populations beyond first-year students in other Omani universities and male students. However, this study focuses on understanding this specific group's career decision-making process rather than generalising to a larger population.

### 3.4. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, with each interviewee answering eight questions designed to explore factors influencing their job preferences. These questions encompassed financial considerations, perceived value, prestige, family expectations, social status, cultural factors, work environment, health and safety conditions, communication and cultural concerns, lack of job opportunities, career progression, and future outlook.

The study took place in the English education department. More specifically, first - year students were informed about the scope of the research during their midterm exams. Those who wanted to participate voluntarily signed consent forms and scheduled interviews. The 43 interviewees were invited to the researchers' offices for the interviews, which took approximately twenty minutes each. The students had to answer eight questions, and depending on their answers, follow-up questions were added. The interviews were recorded as MP3 files, while the researchers kept light notes to record certain paralinguistic features that could not be audio-recorded.

After the round of interviews, the audio files were transcribed, and ATLAS.ti 8 Mac was used for coding and thematic analysis. All participants were asked to sign the informed consent.

### 3.5. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected data from the interviews (Wang et al.,



2021; Singer et al., 2013). Thematic analysis represents a methodical technique encompassing the identification, examination, and presentation of themes found in the data (Wang et al., 2021). This method allows researchers to comprehensively understand the participants' perspectives regarding their job preferences (Singer et al., 2013). By transcribing and coding the data collected from the interviews, researchers can identify patterns and themes that emerge from the participants' responses (Wang et al., 2021; Singer et al., 2013). This systematic approach ensures that critical topics related to job preferences are covered and allows for a thorough exploration of the participants' perceptions and experiences.

The transcripts were copied on the ATLAS.ti 8 Mac programme, and themes emerged according to the transcripts. In exploring the perspectives of Omani university students toward their future careers and their views toward English, a clearer understanding emerges through seven distinct themes.

Firstly, "Occupational Preferences" reveal a discernible trend among students: they favour less physically demanding jobs. This reflects a broader cultural shift from traditional labour-intensive roles to more contemporary, office-based positions, indicating a transformation in the job market's perceived value and desirability.

The second theme, "Influences on Career Choices," delves into the factors shaping career paths. Here, financial motivations, societal expectations, social status, and personal ambition intertwine, highlighting the complex interplay between individual desires and external pressures in career decision-making.

The third theme, "Technology-Centric Careers," captures the growing inclination of youth towards sectors enriched with modern technologies. This preference for careers in programming and technical fields underscores a pivotal generational shift towards embracing the digital era.

The fourth theme, "Government vs. Private Sector", reflects a strong preference for government

jobs, motivated by perceived advantages in job security, retirement benefits, and post-retirement income. This preference underscores a deeper understanding of employment stability and long-term financial planning among Omani university students.

The fifth theme, "English Proficiency as a Prerequisite for Employment," documents the unanimous perception that English language proficiency is advantageous and a prerequisite for securing better jobs in Oman's corporate and government sectors.

The sixth theme, "Societal Valuation of English Skills," indicates a robust societal value for English language skills, closely tied to educational achievement, job prestige, and social respect.

Lastly, the seventh theme, "English for Global Integration and Mobility," shows how English is valued for its role in international communication, enabling coexistence and interaction with speakers from other countries. Furthermore, English is essential for job acquisition and academic and professional development, including pursuing higher degrees, often taught in English.

These themes provide a comprehensive picture of the Omani youth demographic's evolving career aspirations and decision-making processes. To ensure the rigour and validity of this thematic analysis, the authors employed the 'critical friend' approach, a method widely recognised for its effectiveness in qualitative research (Fletcher, 2019). A critical friend, a colleague from the Arab World with expertise in applied linguistics and, more specifically, in curriculum design and long experience in the field, but not involved in the initial analysis, was engaged to review the identified themes. This colleague scrutinised the themes for coherence, consistency, and alignment with the data. Their independent assessment involved thoroughly examining the themes against the raw data, ensuring that the interpretations accurately reflected the students' perspectives and were not biased by the researchers' preconceptions. This process not only reinforced the credibility of the findings but also provided an opportunity for reflexive critique, enhancing the

depth and richness of the analysis. The validation by the critical friend confirmed the robustness of the themes of Occupational Preferences, Influences on Career Choices, Technology-Centric Careers, and Government vs. Private Sector as reflective of the career aspirations and decision-making processes among Omani university students.

This methodology allowed for a comprehensive exploration of Omani students' beliefs and preferences concerning their preferred jobs in Oman. The findings generated from this research provide valuable insights that can inform policies and programmes aimed at addressing the needs and aspirations of Omani students in the job market, ultimately contributing to developing a more tailored and practical approach to job opportunities and career development in Oman.

## 4. Results and discussion

Work is essential to individuals' lives, shaping their well-being and contributing to societal development. This qualitative research study aims to explore the perspectives of Omani undergraduate students regarding their preparedness for employment. The study gathered insights from 43 participants through interviews (S 1 - S 43), focusing on their preferences, motivations, and the factors influencing their career choices. The participants expressed a strong preference for comfortable jobs that require minimal effort. They were less inclined towards physically demanding jobs and emphasised the importance of a job that offers an excellent salary and financial stability.

### 4.1. Themes

Through a thematic analysis of interview responses from the 43 participants, seven significant themes emerged and aligned with the research questions:

#### *Occupational preferences*

Related Research Questions:

- RQ1: How do Omani undergraduate students

perceive their readiness for employment in the context of the Omanisation policy and the global job market?

- RQ2: What are the job preferences of Omani undergraduate students and what factors influence these preferences?

This theme encompasses the avoidance of physically demanding jobs and the shift in perception of traditional employment. Conversely, there was an apparent avoidance of roles in agriculture, fishing, or manual labour. "Farming and fishing is not for young people anymore. We're looking for jobs away from these old jobs" (S 15), illustrating a move away from occupations historically significant in Oman. On the other hand, the interviewees presented an allure of modern, office-based roles. As an interviewee put it: "The thing with jobs is a big problem for us. There are not many jobs...we want comfortable job... not many hours.... Office work is good... I like to be manager; I don't want hard work..." (S 1). The evidence above reflects how Omani youth prefer comfortable, less physically demanding occupations that offer security and better pay.

#### *Influences on career choices*

Related Research Questions:

- RQ2: What are the job preferences of Omani undergraduate students and what factors influence these preferences?
- RQ4: To what extent do societal and cultural factors influence Omani undergraduate students' job preferences and motivations to learn English?

This theme captures the influence of financial considerations, societal expectations, social status, and ambition on the career choices of young Omanis. One interviewee commented:

In Oman, many university students want a job they studied.... Sometimes you can't find the easy job you want... sometimes you must take hard job that you don't like... like cashier or driver. These jobs are low, not good for society, not good money and many hours... men don't like these jobs, they are ashamed... these jobs are embarrassing in front of family

and society... (S 4)

The quest for higher-paying jobs was a recurring theme. “It’s not only to find a job; the job should give high salary” (S 41), reflecting the critical role of monetary expectations in job preferences among Omani youth. Another interviewee makes it more straightforward as he gives specific examples of professions to be avoided by college graduates:

There are many jobs in Oman, but we don’t want them... the jobs are taxi driver, salesman, plumber, cleaner, but these jobs have low salary... salary is not enough until the middle of the month... These jobs are not for Omanis... these jobs are good for foreigners... My family and my friends will laugh if I get these jobs... I will feel shame. (S 12)

The above evidence emphasises their preference for jobs that align with their education, provide higher salaries, and are highly regarded by society.

### ***Technology-Centric careers***

Related Research Questions:

- RQ1: How do Omani undergraduate students perceive their readiness for employment in the context of the Omanisation policy and the global job market?
- RQ2: What are the job preferences of Omani undergraduate students and what factors influence these preferences?

This theme underscores the inclination of the younger generation toward modern technology-related occupations, such as programming and technical roles. One interviewee recognises the importance of technology in choosing their profession: “...we want comfortable job... I don’t like jobs with hard work... I like technology and work with modern devices....” (S 22). Another interviewee clearly says, “... we like jobs with technology... AI is very important... we must know a lot about AI... I want a job with AI because I like technology and it’s easy.... All young people in Oman like business with technology and communication....” (S 24). Finally, another interviewee also suggests that certain professions should be avoided, as AI can perform them better:

“...some jobs will disappear because we have ChatGPT....” (S 39). The above evidence highlights the importance of digital knowledge, especially in artificial intelligence, and technical skills for career success in the current era.

### ***Government vs. Private sector***

Related Research Questions:

- RQ1: How do Omani undergraduate students perceive their readiness for employment in the context of the Omanisation policy and the global job market?
- RQ2: What are the job preferences of Omani undergraduate students and what factors influence these preferences?

This theme focuses on the preference for government sector jobs over the private sector due to retirement benefits, job security, and post-retirement salary. An interviewee exemplifies it:

...the job must give me what I want.... I don’t like jobs that don’t have benefits... I want a job with good pension ...I would like a job in government sector because it has more benefits, also they cannot fire you, private sector is not safe.... (S 21)

The above evidence also highlights concerns about job security and the lack of proper retirement plans in the private sector, especially in small enterprises.

### ***English proficiency as a prerequisite for employment***

Related Research Question:

- RQ3: How do Omani undergraduate students perceive the role of English language proficiency in securing employment and advancing in their careers?

The data clearly indicate that English language proficiency is perceived as beneficial and a prerequisite for securing white-collar positions in Oman’s corporate and governmental sectors. One student succinctly captured this sentiment: “All jobs want English. Always they ask about English... With good English, you get a better salary” (S 2). This view is corroborated by another respondent, who

emphasised the universality of this requirement: “It’s about where you are working; most of the jobs they do want English language” (S 23).

Further, the analysis revealed a consensus among participants that higher levels of English proficiency tangibly enhance job prospects and salary potential. This is exemplified by the observation that “... government and private jobs in Oman ... say you must have a good level of the English language” (S 37), underscoring the criticality of English skills in the contemporary Omani job market.

### ***Societal valuation of English skills***

Related Research Questions:

- RQ3: How do Omani undergraduate students perceive the role of English language proficiency in securing employment and advancing in their careers?
- RQ4: To what extent do societal and cultural factors influence Omani undergraduate students’ job preferences and motivations to learn English?

Participants also highlighted a robust societal value placed on English language skills, associating proficiency with educational attainment, job prestige, and societal respect. One participant articulated, “English is very important. All people with good education must speak good English... If you speak English, people respect you more in the work” (S 19). This perception reflects a broader societal trend where English proficiency is not just a personal asset but a marker of social standing.

Moreover, the societal valuation of English emerges as a significant motivational force for individuals to learn the language. The encouragement from family and societal structures, coupled with the perceived necessity of English for professional advancement, propels individuals towards acquiring proficiency. “... English became like having a degree... Society pushes Omanis to learn this language” (S 41), indicating the profound influence of societal expectations on language learning motivations.

However, one participant revealed, “I want to speak good English, but not very high... you know

I don’t want to be an Englishman... I am a proud Omani... I don’t want to get white-washed...you know... people would make fun of me if I get a high level of English” (S 35). This might show a notable trend where a high level of English proficiency may not always be welcomed by society.

### ***English for global integration and mobility***

Related Research Question:

- RQ3: How do Omani undergraduate students perceive the role of English language proficiency in securing employment and advancing in their careers?

An overarching recognition of English as a vehicle for global integration and mobility was evident across the responses. The language’s role as the lingua franca in facilitating international communication and coexistence was highlighted, as one student noting, “In Oman we think English is the very important language ... for the future of the children ...and... speak with people from other countries” (S 30). Several students mentioned the importance of English to travel, “... when we travel we need English” (S 5). This underscores the perceived necessity of English for engaging in the global community and accessing international opportunities.

Additionally, English proficiency is deemed essential for academic and professional development, particularly in pursuing higher degrees, frequently taught in English. As one respondent put it, “To get a higher job, sometimes you need a higher degree, but these degrees are in English” (S 41), illustrating the critical role of English in educational and career advancement.

## **4.2. Discussion**

This study explored Omani undergraduate students’ perspectives on employment readiness, focusing on their job preferences, the importance of English language proficiency, and societal views toward English for employment. The thematic analysis yielded insights into students’ occupational preferences, the influence of various factors on their

career choices, and their perceptions of English language skills in the context of employment within Oman. When juxtaposed with the literature, several convergences and divergences emerge, underscoring the complexity of these issues.

### ***Occupational preferences and influences on career choices***

The literature highlights a shift towards white-collar jobs driven by job satisfaction, charismatic leadership, and organisational commitment (Özgül, Karaca, and Zehir, 2022; Whillans, Dwyer, and Perovic, 2018). The findings resonate with this narrative, indicating a pronounced preference among Omani students for less physically demanding and more comfortable office-based roles. This preference is motivated by perceived job security, better pay, and societal values that stigmatise certain occupations and elevate others in prestige. The avoidance of traditional roles in agriculture and manual labour, mirrored by a fascination with technology-centric careers, signifies a generational shift towards the digital era, a trend also evident in the broader literature (Dillender and Forsythe, 2019).

### ***English proficiency as a prerequisite for employment***

The results underscore the critical importance of English language proficiency in securing white-collar jobs, a sentiment strongly echoed in the literature (Al-Hooti, Al-Barwani, and Al-Mekhlafi, 2023; Endley, 2016). The unanimous perception among participants that English is a fundamental prerequisite for better job prospects aligns with studies emphasising the role of English in global integration and employability (Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova, 2014). Mackenzie (2023) highlighted that English language education can significantly enhance economic opportunities for graduates by improving job prospects, which supports the findings of this study. Moreover, Mackenzie's study indicated that English proficiency facilitates greater sociocultural integration, fostering global social connections and opening access to global knowledge and information, which aligns with the perceptions of the participants

in this study. However, these studies add a nuanced dimension by highlighting the societal valuation of English skills, not just for employment but as a social standing and respect marker. This societal push towards English proficiency, driven by prestige and practical necessity, underscores a complex interplay between cultural values and economic realities.

### ***Societal and cultural influences***

The literature on societal and cultural influences on job preferences (Peng, 2023; Huang, B., Ma, and Huang, L., 2022) finds a counterpart in the findings, which reveal a profound impact of societal expectations, financial motivations, and personal ambition on career choices. The stigma associated with specific low-prestige jobs and the quest for higher-paying positions reflects a deeply ingrained cultural narrative that equates job prestige with social status. This societal pressure not only shapes individual career aspirations but also motivates language learning, reinforcing the societal valuation of English proficiency, as discussed earlier.

### ***Oman Vision 2040***

The preference for technology-centric careers and the emphasis on English language proficiency align with the Vision's focus on enhancing skills, promoting research and innovation, and preparing the workforce for a knowledge-based economy (Heckadon and Tuzlukova, 2020; Hammad and Al-Ani, 2021). The societal and cultural factors influencing job preferences highlighted in this study resonate with the Vision's objective to foster an entrepreneur-friendly culture and to empower the youth, driving economic progress through innovative start-ups (Muthuraman and Haziazi, 2019). The alignment of educational curricula with market demands, particularly in enhancing English language training, emerges as a critical area for policy intervention. This need is underscored by Oman Vision 2040's emphasis on education and human capital development as foundational pillars for economic and societal advancement (Al Balushi and Mai, 2023). As revealed in the findings, the societal

valuation of English skills further underscores the importance of educational reforms that enhance language proficiency and address the stigma associated with certain occupations, advocating for the dignity of all forms of work.

### ***Implications and future directions***

When contextualised within the existing literature, the findings underscore the need for policy interventions and educational reforms that address the evolving job preferences of Omani youth and the critical role of English language proficiency in the job market. There is a clear imperative for aligning educational curricula with market demands, especially in enhancing English language training and technical skills relevant to the digital era. Additionally, societal attitudes towards certain occupations require gradual transformation, advocating for the dignity of all forms of work and reducing the stigma associated with traditional roles.

Future research should explore the interplay between cultural values, educational policies, and employment trends, particularly in Oman's diversifying economy and digital transformation. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for policymakers, educators, and researchers to develop tailored strategies that address the needs and aspirations of Omani students and facilitate their successful integration into the job market.

## **5. Conclusions**

This study has illuminated the evolving job preferences among Omani undergraduate students, underscoring a pronounced shift towards technology-centric careers and the paramount importance of English language proficiency. These findings resonate deeply with the ambitions laid out in Oman Vision 2040, which envisions a transformative leap towards a diversified, innovation-driven economy underpinned by a highly skilled Omani workforce (Heckadon and Tuzlukova, 2020; Weshahi, 2022).

This study aimed to explore Omani undergraduate students' perspectives on employment readiness, job preferences, and the role of English language

proficiency, in the context of Oman Vision 2040. The findings offer valuable insights and significantly impact educational policies and practices. The study highlights students' preference for comfortable white-collar jobs, emphasising the need for educational reforms to align curricula with the modern job market. It stresses the importance of enhancing STEM education and technology-related skills, as well as developing technical and soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving to improve employability. The findings indicate that financial stability, job security, and societal prestige significantly influence students' job preferences. There is a notable preference for government jobs due to perceived benefits and security. The desire for higher-paying, prestigious white-collar jobs reflects the societal values and expectations that shape career aspirations. The findings highlight the significant influence of societal norms and expectations on job preferences. The preference for prestigious white-collar jobs over traditional roles suggests a need to destigmatise certain occupations and promote the dignity of all forms of work. English proficiency emerged as a critical factor for securing desirable jobs. This implies the necessity of comprehensive English language training programs across all educational levels, focusing on professional contexts to prepare students for real-world applications. Emphasising English language proficiency in professional contexts ensures that students are well-prepared to use English effectively in their careers.

The study also underscores the importance of English proficiency for global integration and mobility, facilitating international communication and opening up global opportunities. English proficiency is also linked to societal respect and job prestige, highlighting the need for policies that support and enhance English language education across all levels of schooling.

In light of the findings and the strategic objectives of Oman Vision 2040, the following recommendations for educational policy and practice can be proposed:

- English language proficiency has emerged as a critical determinant of employment success and social prestige among Omani youth. Policymakers could explore the integration of comprehensive English language training programmes across all levels of education is recommended to align educational outcomes with the linguistic demands of the global job market. These programmes should focus on linguistic proficiency and communicative competence in professional contexts (Al-Hooti, Al-Barwani, Al-Mekhlafi, 2023; Al Riyami, 2021). Furthermore, pedagogical strategies should be diversified to include experiential learning and technology-assisted language learning tools, mirroring the emphasis on innovation and technology within Oman Vision 2040 (Younas and Wahaibi, 2023).
- The marked preference for technology-centric careers among Omani students signals a need for curriculum reforms that align more closely with the knowledge and skills required in the digital era. Educational institutions must enhance their STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) offerings and integrate digital literacy and IT skills across the curriculum. This approach aligns with Oman Vision 2040's focus on fostering innovation and preparing students for a diversified economy (Heckadon and Tuzlukova, 2020; Muthuraman and Haziazi, 2019).
- This study's findings also highlight the impact of societal expectations on career choices, with a noted stigma against certain occupations. To address this, educational institutions, in collaboration with HR departments and career counselling services, could include awareness classes, integrate career education into the curriculum from an early stage, and partner with industry leaders to provide students with exposure to a broad spectrum of career paths.

In line with Oman Vision 2040's emphasis on entrepreneurial growth, educational policies should foster an entrepreneurial mindset among

students. This can be achieved by incorporating entrepreneurship education into the curriculum. Business incubators should cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset by offering mentorship programs and providing students with opportunities to engage in start-up projects and innovation challenges. Fostering such a culture from an early educational stage will empower the youth, drive economic progress, and support the Vision's goal of creating a sustainable and prosperous future for Oman (Muthuraman and Haziazi, 2019).

## Authors Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the study's conception and design.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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