



## Views of Omani post-basic education students about religious and cultural tolerance

Ahmed Hamad Al-Rabaani

Curriculum & Instruction Department, College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman

### ABSTRACT

The study aims to investigate the views of Omani post-basic education students (Grades 10–12) about religious and cultural tolerance. The sample consisted of 1390 male and female students in grades 10, 11 and 12, from four of Oman's seven regions. A questionnaire was used to gather data, which consisted of 27 items divided into five domains. The results showed that students place a strong emphasis on the importance of religious and cultural tolerance, both within Oman society and worldwide. They are also not in favour of any type of aggression, religious and cultural symbols or the fuelling of disagreements between religions or cultures. The results also indicated that female students are more strongly concerned with tolerance than males, grade 12 students more concerned than those in grades 10 and 11, and students from Muscat more concerned than those in other less urban areas.

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### Introduction

Religious and cultural diversity is a global phenomenon in most societies today due to the widespread and long-standing movement of people from one place to another, caused by a number of factors. This movement has led to a wide multiplicity of cultures and religions within single societies, particularly in big cities. Some societies welcome religious and cultural diversity and view it as a source of wealth that creates an environment of innovation and development; others, however, see it as a threat to their own religion and culture. The fear of this threat has become a controversial issue for many governments, and in some cases this fear has led to violence, discrimination, instability, bloody massacres and even to military conflict, as, for example, in Kosovo, Iraq and Syria. The most recent and extreme example is Daish (ISIL) whose followers have committed crimes against humanity because of their intolerance towards people of different cultures, religions and even other groups within Islam; they have even targeted those from their own countries.

Due to the increase in violence caused by intolerance globally, societies need to foster religious and cultural tolerance among their people (UNHCR, 2015). Religious and cultural diversity has become the norm, particularly in developed countries and in those that depend on tourism. Diversity should be taught in schools in order to enhance students'

understanding and respect of differences in religion and culture among people in any society. Such understanding of the true meaning of diversity and its benefits would lead to more stability, sustainable development and enrich the mutual benefits among different people in society (Maria, 2010; UNESCO, 2003; UNESCO World Report, 2009). According to Emmanuel and Jolanta (2003), there are between 3000 and 7000 different national and ethnic groups in the world. Members of these groups move from place to place, taking their cultures and religions with them; they cannot be forced to abandon their religion or culture when they come to live in new places. Nor is it fair to force minorities from their original country, as has happened to the Yazidi in Iraq, simply because their religion or culture differs from that of the majority. We need to promote religious and cultural tolerance as one of the key solutions for hate, discrimination and conflict; such tolerance can also be a way to bring about reconciliation between those who are in disagreement or conflict.

There are a number of definitions of the general concept of tolerance. The Oxford Dictionary (2014) defines it as 'the ability or willingness to tolerate the existence of opinions or behaviour that one dislikes or disagrees with'. Stetson and Conti (2005) define it as 'a policy of patient forbearance in the presence of something which is disliked or disapproved of'.

Religious tolerance is usefully described by Newman (1978) as 'the tolerance of religious beliefs, religious actions, or people who hold a religious belief and engage in religious actions'. In this study, we will define religious and cultural tolerance as an acceptance by people of different religions, religious groups or cultures that they will live together peacefully and respectfully in order to cooperate in the development of their shared society, based on values of human rights, justice and equality.

Fostering religious and cultural tolerance is particularly crucial nowadays because every society runs the risk of being affected by extremists, who have many methods of communicating their ideologies and recruiting new members, particularly young people. Past and current events have created millions of victims, and, sadly, such events show no sign of ending. In 2014, for example, the number of refugees in the world reached 13 million (UNHCR, 2015) and in Syria alone, 191,000 people had been killed from the beginning of the conflict up to 2014 (UN News Center, 2014). In the Middle East, similar conflict exists in some countries such as Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya and Yemen, with many other parts of the world in similar situations, making it clear that the need to promote religious and cultural tolerance is extremely urgent.

According to UNESCO (1995) both international organisations like the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as well as many individual countries, are committed to spreading religious and cultural tolerance and thus fostering harmony both between nations and between ethnic and cultural groups. This concern reflects the seriousness of the effects of intolerance and the increasing need to use media, the internet, social media and education to foster people's awareness of the importance of tolerance.

Education is considered as a cornerstone in the development of people's knowledge, attitudes, values, skills and behaviour. A number of educators have shown that teaching about peace, stability, and the increasing acts of international violence will foster commonalities rather than discrepancies and differences (Kepenekçi, 2000; Matthews, 2002; Yilmaz, 2003). Other studies investigating the effect of education on promoting tolerance similarly showed that it does indeed reduce intolerance among students (Bullock, 1978; Vogt, 1997); it can also decrease ethnic prejudice in a wide variety of contexts (Monteiro, Franca, &

Rodrigues, 2009; Rutland, Cameron, Milne, & McGeorge, 2005) and increase tolerance among students (Al-Aajez, 2006; Al-Kateeb, 2006; Al-Mzin, 2009; Al Sadi & Basit, 2013; Bobo & Licari, 1989; Brady, Kay, & Sidney, 1999; Finkel, 2000; Osler, 2010; Rodden, 2001; Sebre & Gundare, 2003; Virgil, 2000; Williams, Hartley, & Graham, 1967).

These results give force to the call for education to pay more attention to the problem, through developing the curriculum and raising teachers' own awareness of the issue. Education can make a difference in changing beliefs and attitudes; this will enhance attitudes of tolerance and reduce the rising phenomenon of intolerance across the world. Education is a practical way of addressing the problem because it teaches students the importance of tolerance and – on the other side of the coin – the dangerous results of intolerance; it also develops their critical thinking and knowledge concerning extremist groups, making them less vulnerable to being recruited by them. The role of education is important as it helps the younger generation to face the challenges posed by extremist ideas; these may come from family members, religious groups, or national or international cultural groups.

The Sultanate of Oman, an Arabian Gulf country in the Middle East, is internationally known as a country where tolerance is a key feature of both the religion and the culture. According to the Global Terrorism Index Report, Oman scored zero in the global terrorism stakes in 2015, which indicates that Oman is doing well on its safety and security against terrorist threats (Institute for Economic & Peace, 2015). Oman has long upheld and promoted religious and cultural tolerance, which has protected it from experiencing the religious and cultural conflicts that are currently affecting the Middle Eastern countries around it. This culture of tolerance is supported both socially and governmentally; the country has laws that punish those who try to arouse hate, prejudice, criticism and violence against other religious, religious groups or cultures.

This religious and cultural tolerance has had a positive effect on peace and stability in Oman, where people of different religions and cultures live together in peace and mutual respect. The country has a population of 3.993 million (National Center for Statistics & Information, 2014), with the number of residents reaching 26.6% of the total population in 2010 (Ministry of National Economy, 2010) and jumping to 43.6% by the year 2015 (Al-Watan Newspaper, 2015); the majority come from Asia. Oman is a Muslim country, with its people divided into three groups, Ibadhi, Sunni and Shia, and many residents are Hindu or Christian (US Department of State, 2010).

In spite of the religious and cultural diversity in Oman, it is considered a place where people of different religions and different groups of one religion cohabit peacefully. Nobody asks others about their religion or religious group and everybody practises his or her religion freely without any interference from others. The Omani belief in religious and cultural tolerance was showcased internationally in an exhibition entitled 'Islam in Oman: Tolerance, Understanding, Coexistence', which was presented in a number of countries throughout Europe and the Americas in 2014 and 2015. This exhibition, featuring the practice of Islam in daily life in Oman, has received a warm welcome in many countries and is still being showcased around the world (Al-Shabiba Newspaper, 2014).

Oman is also deeply committed to promoting religious and cultural tolerance through education – considered a key arena for change – and the media. The education reforms in 1998 put a strong emphasis on developing students' knowledge, attitudes and skills so that they could participate effectively in a global society (Al Sadi & Basit, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2004). The reforms stressed the promotion of tolerance in school textbooks

(Al-Amri, 2007), which led to the inclusion of topics related to conflict, peaceful coexistence with others and other global issues (Al-Rabaani & Al-Salme, 2012; Al-Rabaani, 2009; Al-Rabaani, 2015; Salom & Al-Rabaani, 2010). A study looking at teachers' attitudes indicated that Omani social studies teachers felt positive about discussing controversial issues such as social unity and diversity in the classroom (Al-Rabaani, 2015).

However, this long experience of religious and cultural tolerance cannot protect Oman from the influence of events in neighbouring and nearby countries like Yemen, Iraq and Syria, nor from the extremist groups that use the media, the internet, and social media to spread their ideas. This is a critical time for the Middle East; Oman is surrounded by violence in neighbouring countries and there have been recent terrorist attacks, in Kuwait in July 2015 and in Saudi Arabia a month later. It is also possible that the recent increase in the number of residents working in Oman could fuel prejudice (Adida, Laitin, & Valfort, 2010; Algan, Dustmann, Glitz, & Manning, 2010; Firth, 1981). All these factors make it crucial to investigate Omani students' views regarding religious and cultural tolerance, not merely from an academic but also from a social standpoint.

The current study aimed at doing precisely this, investigating Omani post-basic education students' views about religious and cultural tolerance. This age group, students in their last two years of secondary school, was selected for the study sample because evidence shows that extremists and those hoping to fuel rising prejudice within society tend to target teenagers (BBC, 2015). We need to protect our society from extremist groups and ideas and enhance stability and peaceful and cooperative coexistence between different religious groups, religions and cultures in Oman, especially at this time.

## Purpose of the study

The aims of the study were to:

1. Examine the views of Omani post-basic education students about religious and cultural tolerance.
2. Measure the effect of gender, class grade and region on the students' views about religious and cultural tolerance.

## Research questions

1. What does the concept of tolerance in general mean for Omani post-basic education students?
2. What do Omani post-basic education students think about the importance of religious and cultural tolerance?
3. What does the concept of religious tolerance mean for Omani post-basic education students?
4. What does concept of cultural tolerance mean for Omani post-basic education students?
5. What do Omani post-basic education students think about the results of religious and cultural intolerance?

6. Do Omani post-basic education students' views differ according to their gender, class level or province?

## Methodology

### Sample

Data were gathered by a questionnaire in April 2015 from 1390 students from four provinces of Oman. These students were selected from grades 10, 11 and 12, from both boys' and girls' schools, as shown in Table 1. The students were selected randomly from schools in four regions, two from coastal areas (the capital, Muscat, and Al-Batinah) and two of them from the interior of Oman (Al-Dakiliah and Al-Sharqia). Three independent boys' schools and three girls' schools were selected randomly from each coastal and interior area. Then three classes in each school were randomly selected from grades 10, 11 and 12. The random selection of the sample resulted in some difference in the total number of males and females due to the difference in number of students in selected classes. The questionnaire was distributed by the researcher in cooperation with the school teachers.

**Table 1.** Study sample.

Variable		<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Males	534	38.4
	Females	856	61.6
	Total	1390	100.0
Grade	10	614	44.2
	11	290	20.9
	12	486	35.0
	Total	1390	100.0
Provinces	Muscat	376	27.1
	Al- Batinah	408	29.4
	Al- Dakiliah	342	24.6
	Al- Sharqia	264	19.0
	Total	1390	100.0

**Table 2.** Students' views about the concept of tolerance.

Items	M	SD
Coexisting with others regardless of differences in religious, culture and nationality	4.11	1.096
Respect for the religious and cultural diversity of people across our globe	4.21	0.978
Respect for the human rights of all people, regardless of their religion and culture	4.08	1.163
Building relationships between countries and people from different religions and cultures	4.05	1.040
Respect for the accomplishments of others regardless of their religion and culture	4.13	1.109
Avoidance of the causes of religious and cultural conflict.	3.99	1.227
Average	4.09	0.706

**Table 3.** Students' views about the importance of religious and cultural tolerance.

Items	M	SD
Fosters cooperation between people within society and achieves justice and equality	4.60	0.795
Fosters charity and brotherhood between people and avoids causes of disagreement and hate in our society and worldwide	4.54	0.844
Prevents society from being split, with violence and conflict	4.28	0.970
Enhances security, peace and stability	4.45	0.891
Benefits from all human potential in the society for its development	4.13	1.00
Average	4.39	0.646

**Table 4.** Students' views about the concept of religious tolerance.

Items	M	SD
Respect for and recognition of different religions of the people who live in my country and other countries	4.33	0.964
Non-aggression towards and non-abuse of religious symbols for all religions	4.12	0.974
Cooperation between people within one religious group and avoiding discrimination	4.36	0.921
Non-aggression against holy places, buildings and books	4.41	0.926
Avoiding disagreement and conflict between people within one religion and between people of different religions	4.28	1.02
Average	4.29	0.671

**Table 5.** Students' views about the concept of cultural tolerance.

Items	M	SD
Respect for people's customs and traditions regardless of their nationality or culture	4.46	0.933
Respect for the contribution of different cultures to worldwide civilisations	4.23	0.925
Benefiting from the cultural accomplishments of others in our culture	4.25	0.931
Avoiding causes of disagreement between people of different cultures	4.29	0.958
Enhancing cooperation between different cultures within our society	4.27	0.986
Respect for cultural diversity within our society and considering it as a source of strength	4.17	1.08
Average	4.27	0.688

**Table 6.** Students' views about the results of religious and cultural intolerance.

Items	M	SD
Spreads antipathy between people within society and between nations	3.58	1.63
Promotes prejudice and extremism, which lead to military conflict and destruction	3.52	1.56
Reduces the ability to benefit from all the human resources in the society	3.60	1.42
Absence of peace, unity, and security and an increase in violence and crime	3.62	1.53
People engage in conflict instead of developing their society	3.57	1.56
Average	3.59	1.41

**Table 7.** Results of t-test regarding students' views according to gender.

Domains	Gender	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig.
Concept of tolerance	Male	3.99	0.751	6.698	1388	0.000
	Female	4.24	0.593	7.067	1313.072	
Importance of tolerance	Male	4.31	0.698	6.284	1388	0.000
	Female	4.53	0.525	6.703	1340.609	
Concept of religious tolerance	Male	4.24	0.704	3.106	1388	0.002
	Female	4.36	0.607	3.214	1252.466	
Concept of cultural tolerance	Male	4.22	0.736	3.807	1388	0.000
	Female	4.36	0.593	4.000	1300.850	
Consequences of intolerance	Male	3.64	1.38	1.747	1388	0.081
	Female	3.50	1.44	1.729	1093.273	
Average	Male	4.08	0.617	3.723	1388	0.000
	Female	4.20	0.527	3.860	1259.607	

### Instrument

Data were gathered through a five-point Likert scale, which was developed by the researcher due to difficulty in finding a ready questionnaire that fitted the purpose of this study and covered the five domains that this study targeted. The development of the questionnaire was based on reading of the related literature (Al-Aajez, 2006; Al-Kateeb, 2006; Sebre & Gundare, 2003) and other related documents on current events in the Middle East area such as newspapers and reports (Pew Research Center, 2014; U.S. News, 2014).

**Table 8.** Results of ANOVA regarding students' views according to class level.

Domains		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Concept of tolerance	Between groups	22.741	2	11.371	23.533	0.000
	Within groups	670.166	1387	0.483		
	Total	692.907	1389			
Importance of tolerance	Between groups	2.754	2	1.377	3.305	0.037
	Within groups	577.801	1387	.417		
	Total	580.554	1389			
Concept of religious tolerance	Between groups	23.961	2	11.980	27.618	0.000
	Within groups	601.672	1387	0.434		
	Total	625.633	1389			
Concept of cultural tolerance	Between groups	17.156	2	8.578	18.581	0.000
	Within groups	640.317	1387	0.462		
	Total	657.473	1389			
Consequences of intolerance	Between groups	190.342	2	95.171	51.284	0.000
	Within groups	2573.974	1387	1.856		
	Total	2764.316	1389			
Average	Between groups	29.146	2	14.573	44.876	0.000
	Within groups	450.415	1387	0.325		
	Total	479.562	1389			

**Table 9.** Results of ANOVA regarding students' views according to provinces.

Domains		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Concept of tolerance	Between groups	92.992	3	30.997	71.614	0.000
	Within groups	599.915	1386	0.433		
	Total	692.907	1389			
Importance of tolerance	Between groups	30.465	3	10.155	25.587	0.000
	Within groups	550.089	1386	0.397		
	Total	580.554	1389			
Concept of religious tolerance	Between groups	73.624	3	24.541	61.619	0.000
	Within groups	552.009	1386	0.398		
	Total	625.633	1389			
Concept of cultural tolerance	Between groups	75.069	3	25.023	59.550	0.000
	Within groups	582.404	1386	0.420		
	Total	657.473	1389			
Consequences of intolerance	Between groups	135.385	3	45.128	23.792	0.000
	Within groups	2628.931	1386	1.897		
	Total	2764.316	1389			
Average	Between groups	70.824	3	23.608	80.054	0.000
	Within groups	408.737	1386	0.295		
	Total	479.562	1389			

The Likert-scale questionnaire including 27 items divided into five domains: the concept of tolerance (6 items), the importance of tolerance (5 items), the concept of religious tolerance (5 items), the concept of cultural tolerance (6 items) and the effect of intolerance (5 items). The questionnaire items include five response options: Strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree, and strongly disagree (5, 4, 3, 2, 1).

The validity was checked through a jury panel while internal consistency and reliability was calculated by piloting the questionnaire with 47 male and female students and using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which was found to be 0.883. Also, the reliability for the whole sample of study was 0.927 and for each sub scale (domain) it was 0.923 for first domain, 0.924 for the second domain, 0.923 for the third domain, 0.924 for the fourth domain, and 0.924 for the fifth domain (Tables 2–9).

## Descriptive results

### ***What does the concept of tolerance means for Omani post-basic education students?***

The results indicated that Omani students believe strongly that tolerance means living together with other people, regardless of differences in religion, culture or nationality. Their beliefs reflect their recognition of human rights for all and their respect for religious and cultural diversity. They agree that tolerance means valuing the accomplishments of others, regardless of their religion and culture, as well as seeing a strong need to avoid all causes of religious and cultural conflict.

### ***What do Omani post-basic education students think about the importance of religious and cultural tolerance?***

The results showed that Omani students realise the important of tolerance in ensuring the stability, security and unity of society and their country. Their realisation is reflected not only in terms of a local perspective but they also stress its global importance. They recognise its importance in the development of society, in that tolerance allows society to benefit from the strengths of all its members, regardless of their nationality, religion, culture or other factors. They also agree that promoting tolerance enhances human rights, justice and equality.

### ***What does the concept of religious tolerance mean for Omani post-basic education students?***

The results demonstrated that post-basic education students have a clear and mature understanding of religious tolerance. They agree that it is important to respect and recognise different religions in Omani society and worldwide, underlining their belief that people should be free to embrace any religion, as stated in Islamic principles. They also reject any type of religious prejudice or behaviour that negatively affects believers from other religions, such as aggression against religious symbols, holy places, buildings and holy books. Their views show their positive support for cooperation between people of different religions.

### ***What does the concept of cultural tolerance mean for Omani post-basic education students?***

The post-basic education students showed great respect for the customs and traditions of different cultures in their society and worldwide. They also respect the contribution of different cultures in developing the world's civilisations. Their school textbooks have widened their knowledge of world cultures and have helped them to understand that the environment and social norms have created differences from one culture to another. The students therefore value all the cultures in their society and worldwide, and see them as enhancing cooperation and respect for cultural diversity.



### ***What are Omani post-basic education students' views about the results of religious and cultural intolerance?***

The results indicated that post-basic education students are extremely aware of the seriousness of intolerance and its effects in spreading hate, prejudice, crime, violence and conflict, and thus in inhibiting development.

### ***Do Omani post-basic education students' views differ according to their gender, class grade or province?***

#### ***Gender***

The results showed that there are significant differences between male and female students in six domains, with female students having a stronger awareness of the value of tolerance. The only domain where male and female results were equal was in their agreement about the negative effects of intolerance.

#### ***Class level***

The results showed that there were significant differences due to students' class level, with the Scheffe test showing that the grade 12 students had the most positive attitudes to tolerance.

#### ***Provinces***

The results point out that there were significant differences due to students' provinces, as shown in Table 9. The Scheffe test showed that students living in the capital, Muscat, had the most positive attitudes to tolerance.

### **Discussion of results**

The results portray that the experience of religious and cultural tolerance in Oman, the education system and other methods of developing people's awareness have effectively developed students' understanding of and appreciation for religious and cultural tolerance. The students showed a high level of understanding of the meaning of religious and cultural tolerance and also its importance for people, society and development. They also showed a strong belief in the need for cooperation between different religions and cultures within each society and also internationally, because they believe that such cooperation prevents conflicts and boosts peace, cooperation and stability. The students also value the contribution of different religions and cultures to the development of civilisations. They also supported the idea of positive interaction between different religions and cultures, both within their own society and worldwide.

As noted in the results, Omani students are also do not agree with any type of religious prejudice, and oppose any abuse of religious books or symbols; they also reject all activities that provoke disagreement and hatred between religions or religious groups. These results indicate that the Omani culture of tolerance seems to be holding firm against the spread of extremist ideas, in spite of the numerous threats it faces. These threats include religious prejudice and the resultant instability in many areas of the Middle East, as well as the influence of extremist ideology spread by extremist groups through social media, the media and

the internet; these channels are used to stir up conflict between different religious groups and to incite hatred between different components of society.

There are numerous reasons why Oman has been able to stand up to such extremism: its people's experience of religious and cultural tolerance; an education system that rejects discrimination; the values with which families raise their children; the law and the moderation in the mindset of both government and the public when dealing with such issues. Oman's strong resistance to intolerance can also be seen as the result of the integration of its Ibadi, Sunni and Shia communities, and the interaction of individuals from all three groups in the social, economic, cultural and religious aspects of daily life. In addition, Omani law strongly prohibits any activity or message that incites hate or conflict; it also enshrines the right of people of all religions and religious groups to practise their beliefs freely.

The results of the study also indicated that Omani students are strongly committed to promoting all possible cooperation between different religions, religious groups and cultures within the society, in order to strengthen its unity and avoid any sources of conflict. This concern reflects the students' awareness of the advantages of social unity for stability, security, peace and development; this attitude has been strengthened as they see how conflict has destroyed so much in nearby Arab countries such as Iraq, Syria and Yemen. They also realise that cooperation between different groups within Omani society contributes to development and stability. The attitudes shown in these results could also be a result of the positive interaction between different religions and religious groups in Omani society, where people of all groups, cultures and religions participate and cooperate to develop and unify the society.

The results also indicate that Omani students are highly aware of the value of the variety of cultural customs of different groups, both within Oman and worldwide; these customs reflect their wider civilisations and their ways of life. Respect for customs is extremely important for Omani students because it leads to cooperation and avoids conflict and hatred. They think it is important to benefit from different cultures at all levels – locally, regionally and globally – and to have interaction between the cultures so as to achieve mutual respect. These beliefs could be due to what the students see in daily Omani reality, where people from different cultures practise their customs freely, and where those from one culture often participate in the cultural activities of another. In Oman there are people from African, Asian, European, American and other cultures, with each cultural group valuing its own customs but also respecting those of others. The students' awareness regarding the value of respecting all cultures could also have been influenced by the content of their school textbooks, particularly in social studies; the books include topics on world civilisations and world cultures and view them positively.

The students' respect for different religions and cultures is also a reflection of the tolerance within Omani culture and the government's belief in the value of peace and stability in local, regional and international spheres. The government has actively pursued a regional peace policy and has been engaged in trying to resolve political and other conflicts through dialogue. One fruitful example is the case of the negotiations around the Iranian nuclear programme, in which Oman played a major role in bringing about an agreement. The success of such a policy has increased Omanis' understanding of the value of pursuing discussion and peaceful solutions instead of conflict.

The students' appreciation of the advantages of tolerance can also be attributed to the values taught within most Omani families. Parents generally try to teach their children to

respect those who come from different countries and contribute to the development of Oman. Oman has a large number of such workers in many fields; there are construction workers, teachers, doctors, nurses, college professors, consultants and many others who help the country to grow. This attitude within the family, and the general family upbringing, also contribute to the way that Omani students value peaceful coexistence with people of different religions and cultures.

Another result of the study portrays that Omani students are well aware of the serious effects of religious and cultural intolerance. They realise that the rise of intolerance will only lead to the destruction of what societies have built; it will also destroy peace and stability, and create hatred, division and violence which, once started, is not easy to stop. This attitude could be due to students' sense of stability and peace in their society, where the culture of tolerance means that there is no fear of being attacked by anybody. They also compare Oman with nearby countries which suffer from crime, violence and war, and where the rise of prejudice has caused enormous suffering, death and destruction.

Students understand that it is easy to arouse religious and cultural prejudice, but that, once aroused, it cannot easily be controlled and its effects are far-reaching. His Majesty Sultan Qaboos has frequently stressed the importance of unity in Oman, and has condemned hatred and intolerance. His speech on the occasion of the 24 National Festival in 1994 (YouTube, 2016) was a key example of this when he emphasised that prejudice and extremism of any type are completely unacceptable in Oman, and that the land of Oman refuses to nurture the seeds of affliction. His addresses and talks are always widely discussed in all the media; His Majesty always stresses that Omani society can only be protected from the unacceptable extremist ideas currently being marketed in the Middle East by actively following a path of unity and tolerance

The students' recognition of the importance of religious and cultural tolerance, and their opposition to intolerance, may be also due to the influence of education, a factor which studies in many different context have found to play a major role in promoting tolerance (Al-Aajez, 2006; Al-Kateeb, 2006; Al-Mzin, 2009; Al Sadi & Basit, 2013; Bobo & Licari, 1989; Bullock, 1978; Finkel, 2000; Kepenekçi, 2000; Matthews, 2002; Monteiro, Franca & Rodrigues, 2009; Osler, 2010; Rodden; Rutland et al., 2005; Sebre & Gundare, 2003; Virgil, 2000; Vogt, 1997; Williams et al., 1967; Yilmaz, 2003).

The Omani school social studies curriculum and textbooks include topics related to global issues, and promote the concept of tolerance (Al-Rabaani, 2009; Al-Rabaani & Al-Salme, 2012; Salom & Al-Rabaani, 2010). Islamic education textbooks also include topics related to religious and cultural tolerance; this trend is reinforced by the use of teaching methods such as critical thinking, current affairs discussions, the CORT thinking programme, historical thinking and a problem-solving methodology. All these factors work together in developing students' understanding of the importance of religious and cultural tolerance, and their awareness of the serious dangers posed by intolerance.

The study also looked at whether there were any differences in the attitudes of students of different gender, grade or region, with the results showing that female students had a greater understanding of the value of religious and cultural tolerance than male students. This could be due to the teaching methods used by female teachers, particularly in social studies classes, such as discussing current affairs. Another reason might be that women are more sensitive to the human aspects of conflict than men and relate more to the suffering of

women in conflict zones, especially to those who have lost their children or become refugees as a result of, for example, military conflict between people of one nation.

The results also point out that students in grade 12 have a greater understanding of religious and cultural tolerance than those in grades 10 and 11. This is both because they are perhaps more mature and also because they have been more exposed to global issues in their studies in grades 11 and 12, where they also work on many case studies concerning current affairs.

The results point out that students' provinces also affected their views. Although students from all regions indicated the same level of awareness of the serious dangers of intolerance, there were differences in the levels of positive appreciation of tolerance. Here, students in the capital Muscat, which has the highest percentage of residents in the country, showed greater awareness of the value of religious and cultural tolerance than those from other regions. This is an interesting result in that it differs from much of the literature, which shows that people in other big cities with high proportions of immigrants usually have reservations about them because they come from foreign countries and have different religions and cultures; these feelings often lead to prejudice (Algan et al., 2010; Firth, 1981). In Oman, however, the capital Muscat has far more than the national average of 44% of expatriates, while other regions have a much smaller percentage.

There are a number of reasons that might account for this surprising result. First, it could be due to the effect of family values; families raise their children to respect others regardless of religious and cultural differences. In addition, Muscat students interact on a daily basis with people of different religions and cultures, in schools, government offices, companies, markets and shopping centres, coffee shops and restaurants, parks and cinemas, as well as at festivals and on beaches. Such daily experience of interaction and friendly and positive communication increases positive attitudes towards diversity and develops the students' awareness of the importance of diversity in development. Muscat students also see tolerance in action, with interaction between people of different religions, Muslim, Christian and Hindu, living together in a peaceful environment; all of them freely practise their faith in mosques, churches and temples around the city. These experiences of friendly communication and integration may well lie behind the students' very positive views towards religious and cultural tolerance. Moreover, Omani themselves are from a mix of cultures; while their religion is the same, there is a sizeable Zanzibari and Blushi community, and even different regions have varied traditions, so their own unity as a nation has given them a positive experience of integration and tolerance. This of course is more prominent in the capital, which attracts people from all over the country, than in other regions, which are much less diverse.

## Conclusion

The study showed that Omani post-basic education students are highly positive about religious and cultural tolerance. They recognise its importance for their society and the world and they are also aware of the negative effects of intolerance. It also showed that female students, grade 12 and Muscat students have the most positive attitudes to tolerance. These results are in line with the literature, which indicates that actively teaching about the value of tolerance and the danger of increasing violence can contribute positively to the enhancement of tolerance among students. It also shows the effect of religious and cultural

tolerance already existing in Oman and the importance of promoting such cultural values throughout the world.

### Recommendation

The study recommends that the active promotion of religious and cultural tolerance among young people in Oman be continued, especially in order to counteract the influence of any extremist ideas coming from outside the country. It also recommends that another study be conducted to investigate the views of the wider public concerning religious and cultural tolerance.

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