

ATTITUDES TO PROSPERITY, PUBLIC SERVICES AND
WORK IN OMAN: A COMPARISON WITH UNIVERSAL
BASIC SERVICES

STUDENT NAME: ALEXANDER F BROWN

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IGP MSc COURSEWORK

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CONTENTS

Abstract.....	5
1. Introduction.....	6
2. Universal Basic Services: A Route to Social Equity.....	9
3. Covering the Basics: Oman's Public Provision.....	11
4. The Survey: Attitudes to Prosperity And Public Services Among Omani Citizens.....	17
a) Demographic.....	17
b) Attitudes to Prosperity.....	21
c) Attitudes to Public Services: Who Should Pay?.....	27
d) Attitudes to Work.....	34
e) Demographic Correlations With Opinion.....	40
5. Conclusions From the Survey.....	44
6. Post Script: UBS for Oman?.....	47
References.....	50
APPENDIX: Questionnaire Text With Translation.....	54

ABSTRACT

This dissertation supports the principles of Universal Basic Services as a policy proposal designed to raise the standard of living: equitably, not just for the poorest, but for all our essential human needs. It takes the Sultanate of Oman as an example of a more generous depth of public provision. Oman is also used because the stereotypes of the region are very similar to the more sceptical and conservative fears about giving more generous public services: that the will to work will be diminished if we can survive without it, and that there will be no aspiration to strive for success. The dissertation compares some key public services in Oman and the UK, explores the attitudes of Omanis to their own prosperity and public services, and also asks about their aspirations and expectations, especially in the field of work.

The dissertation is based around primary survey data, using the circular “IGP approach”: a set of assumptions and expectations based on experience and anecdote, taken through an explanatory quantitative and qualitative survey and then tested against the initial impressions. It finds that better services improve perceptions of prosperity, optimism, and perhaps social cohesion across the demographic. It also recommends that Oman move more closely towards the UBS model, especially in local governance and participation – in line with the country's own historical culture and traditions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The proposal for Universal Basic Services (UBS) as championed by the Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP) has a simple premise that equal access to the essential means of living is good for society. As Percy et al (2017) put it, “Expanding universal access to basic services is the most effective way to bolster the public goods on which both society and the economy depend.” To date the idea has escaped some of the more scathing criticism received by the Universal Basic Income (UBI) alternative, though as UBS has yet to hit the same headlines, perhaps it is only a matter of time. An article in the Financial Times claimed that UBI would divert resources from the needy to the rich, bankrupt economies and raged that “safety nets should be a lifeline towards meaningful work and participation in society, not a guarantee of a lifetime of dependence” (Goldin, 2018).

No doubt the same feelings will be aroused about UBS in some more conservative quarters, and over the same essential principle of the “social wage” – at which successive “government policies have chipped away...blaming the jobless and poor for their own troubles and urging individuals to help themselves” (Coote & Percy, 2020).

But, even if we accept the need for UBS as a human entitlement – a social wage -, what will society look like when we get it? What unforeseen negative externalities might there be, when we can all be certain of our basic needs? And can we anticipate them by looking at examples elsewhere?

Why Oman?

If we indulge the critical accusation that having broad social provision makes people less productive, then it is helpful to find a caricature to match the one they draw. No region is more often categorised as wealthy – and profligate – than the six states of the Arabian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. The cartoonish popular portrayal of their citizens is perhaps one of the last acceptable manifestations of racism (with a shot of Islamophobia), in polite British society. That applies very much to perceived attitudes to work and productivity: even in serious academic work, there is a hint of ethnocentric sneering, e.g. “the existing Arab work ethic does not seem conducive to development” (Sidani and Thornberry, 2010), as if “Arabs” were not a vastly diverse people over more than two dozen nations and the widest possible socio-economic range.

In reality, even within the GCC countries there is a significant diversity in wealth: official statistics put per capita GDP in a range of \$20,000 (Oman) to \$100,000 (Qatar), with Saudi Arabia at \$26,000. Compared to the UK hovering in the low 40s, the stereotype loses shape quickly. Only Kuwait and tiny Qatar have significantly higher numbers – small populations, lots of oil, much like Norway which has run a per capita GDP around \$80,000 in recent years (AGCC Stats, 2018; World Bank Data, 2021). But what these six nations do share to a degree, and for the purposes of this paper, is a history of providing more generously for their citizens than even most developed nations.

It would be interesting to survey all of them, or just the largest - Saudi Arabia - as a model. But in order to have a sample of people with a similar enough experience, it is more practical to pick a smaller population. Bahrain matches Saudi very closely in GDP, but its size and political and economic dependence on its neighbour make it less appealing as an analogue. But Oman, as the poorest country by the GDP measure, is close enough and makes a better candidate for two reasons: firstly, it has similarities of demographics, economic diversification policies and a certain independence from its neighbours; and secondly, Oman’s oil production has begun to falter as fields mature alongside a growing population. In a way, it is a peek into Saudi Arabia’s future, and eventually all of the Gulf states’: generous social provision meeting funding gaps for the first time.

Those funding gaps, and the fear of them, will be very familiar around the public services debate in the UK.

So, we can ask about Oman: what did generous provision do to society? How do people feel about their entitlement to services – are they asking for ever more? And how does this relatively secure life affect their attitude to work?

Primary Research

There are several resources for examining people's perceptions of their own wellbeing – their prosperity – around the world. The Global Happiness Index, carried out by Gallup for the UN, Legatum's Prosperity Index, based on a review of other indices, and the World Bank's Gini index that again aggregates various survey data. Unfortunately, none of those measures are particularly useful. Gini has insufficient information to produce a ranking for Oman and hasn't done so for over ten years. Legatum cites Global Happiness as its main relevant source. And the Global Happiness Report, though overall "based on face to face interviews", isn't: digging down into the data and methodology, Oman's current ranking is based on data last collected in 2011 by telephone, from another country. It does not distinguish between citizens and migrants – an important difference in entitlement to services.

We need new primary research because existing data is outdated and poor quality. Nobody has asked for a decade, and even then, half-heartedly.

The survey will include some basic demographic questions in case there are significant correlations of opinion with age, social status etc. It asks a series of questions as to whether various services should be free, subsidised or self-funded. It also asks about attitudes to employment. The methodology uses a simple online form, in Arabic, and anonymous. There are opportunities to make qualitative comments on prosperity, public services and work. None of the questions are required, in case respondents are unwilling to share e.g. personal salary details. As a nation where public opinion is never surveyed, and issues like these are more normally for an intimate conversation, the survey is designed to allow maximum candour with the least perceived sensitivity or risk.

The goal is to assess the depth of entitlement felt by recipients of a broader social provision, and how they might shape their attitudes to their own productive role in society: is this a soft trial for UBS, a useful analogue, or perhaps a cautionary tale?

Secondary Research

This paper will be indebted to the groundwork already laid substantially by Coote, Kasliwal and Percy in their literature review on UBS in 2019 (Coote et al, 2019), and their further writing referenced elsewhere. It is the basis for comparison of UBS as an ideal, with the public service and subsidy realities in Oman and the GCC.

To support the primary research, this paper will look at statistical and policy sources from Oman to show the types of government action aimed at supporting citizens, juxtaposed with the perceptions and wishes expressed in the survey. Using demographic and published data on entitlements, a picture can be built of what may be the nearest thing to UBS in practical existence: a generous provision in which a generation or more have now grown up.

When comparing the integral clarity of the UBS ideals espoused by IGP, public services in Oman may appear piecemeal and policy measures reactive. However, the question is not whether Oman has a perfect implementation of UBS. It is whether it amounts to something more like UBS in comparison to public services in the UK. The survey will ask whether Omani services *feel* like a broad, moral entitlement to the basics of life as a social wage. In order to contextualise that, we can compare some key areas of public policy empirically in their generosity or otherwise: the provision, the citizen contribution and the balance of the two, in Oman and in the UK.

2. UNIVERSAL BASIC SERVICES: A ROUTE TO SOCIAL EQUITY

As the name suggests, UBS has three essential principles: services, i.e. collective public provision of useful things; basic, as in essential – the bases for life and living; and universal, i.e. available to all regardless of status or ability to pay (Percy et al, 2017). Some services in the UK are already established on this principle – education to secondary level, and health being the obvious examples. UBS as advocated by the IGP seeks universal access to transport, housing, nutrition, information (internet/telephone access), and child and adult social care. There are individual cases for costing and comparison in each area, many of which depend on the valuing of social labour as well as gross financial impact (Coote et al, 2019).

The existence of some kind of public services, funded by taxes, is generally accepted in every economy. In the UK “A broad public consensus in support of free healthcare and education has endured since the 1940s”, and findings such as support for maintaining the NHS and a general confidence in a public system of education (Coote et al, 2019), are unsurprising. But Coote et al also find that “government policies since 1979 have chipped away at the post war consensus and at the scope and quality of public services”. These services have been diminished further over the last decade or more, “in the name of ‘austerity’, combined with cuts to a range of social security benefits and the failure of ‘universal credit’ to streamline or strengthen the income safety net”.

The outcome of this is a fall in real living standards, and a sustained high level of inequality. The UK's Gini coefficient rose starkly in the 1980s, and has maintained more or less this level ever since – despite three different parties enjoying time in government. Emphasising that inequality, the share of income enjoyed by the richest 1% rose from 3% in the mid 1970s, to 8% by 2000. Apart from a small dip after the 2008 financial crisis, it has stayed at that level (Cribb et al, 2018). Some argue inequality is a cause of poverty, others that they are related symptoms of the same, broader economic malaise. In either case, the UK reached a stage after the 1970s where for the first time, poverty was no longer in decline. Running at an average 15% in absolute terms, “the steep rise in relative poverty that occurred during the 1980s...has not been unwound” (Cribb et al, 2019).

If we are trying to use public revenues to give support where it is most needed, then the current system in the UK is not working. UBS puts forward an alternative model to “raise the floor” (Percy et al, 2017) and with it, elevate the lives of the most in need by offering basic provision for all. It is worth noting that although Cribb et al found some reduction in absolute poverty since 2000 among non-working or single-worker households, homes with two working adults had no improvement at all. “Around 56 percent of people in poverty are in a working family, compared to 39 percent 20 years ago” (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2020)

Coote et al (2019) found that the results of austerity in public services since 2009, amounted to a real cut of over 10%. If Universal Basic Services is to be used as a tool to decrease both inequality and poverty, it will need to be funded. The Government's expenditure or “Total Managed Expenditure” (TME) ran at 39.3% of GDP in 2019 (HM Treasury, 2020). The projected cost of UBS would increase this to 43.1% of GDP (Percy et al, 2017). There may also be savings elsewhere in emergency interventions – health, law and order – but the hypotheses are infinitely complex. Projecting a possible budget for UBS is inherently speculative, and beyond the scope of this study. However, as a starting point, it could be argued that UBS merely sets out to restore a previous level of spending on the basic needs of the people.

So, if we are citing Oman as an example of public services that are closer to UBS, do they spend more? Data for analysing Oman's public services expenditure is also limited. The separate and undisclosed budget for the Diwan of the Royal Court funds significant social activity, including contributions to social house building and education. This exists entirely outside the budgets of the

responsible ministries and under separate policies and chains of accountability. It would be futile to try to break down comparative budgets, current or hypothetical, based on current open-source information.

A moral basis

As a starting point for comparison, we consider instead the aspirations and attitudes around public services. In the UK, the model for public provision began in the 1940s and has been degraded through “a deliberate political campaign to alter the prevailing values of British society” (Coote et al, 2019) - most recently, a two term austerity programme. However, with continued public support for services like health and education, there must be some vestige remaining of a popular commitment to the social wage in the UK. As Percy et al (2017) put it, the solution proposed by UBS is that “moving from a primarily redistributive model for social security to a primarily service-orientated model meets needs more directly, increases efficiency, reduces costs, facilitates a vibrant private economy, and buttresses the institutional fabric of society. An enhanced services model is also likely to increase social cohesion” .

This paper begins with the assertion that Oman has a relatively generous set of public services compared to the UK, and therefore makes a partial analogue for UBS. Primary research then explores the feelings Omani citizens have about their own prosperity and entitlement to services. But, if we begin with the assumption that Oman's services are more generous, what is the root of that generosity?

Oman as a modern state is very young: public services as we know them only began with a new modernising leadership in 1970. However, the survey for this paper attempts to shed some light on attitudes not just of personal prosperity and entitlement, but on what Omanis think should be provided for all their compatriots. It is fair to assume that religious principles are an important part of personal and national identity, and culture in Oman. Whatever the moral reasoning, the idea of taking care of the needy seems to have strong roots. “Oman is a Muslim nation characterized with philanthropic practices to low income groups...there is evidence of a merger in Oman of traditional philanthropic traditions with strategic CSR practices integrating economic, social and environmental challenges” (Jamali & Safadi, 2019). The survey will indicate that these principles are indeed societal, rather than corporate pragmatism alone.

UBS may not be the system in Oman, but the idea of “raising the floor” and ensuring none fall below a certain level in their basic needs, appears to be entrenched.

3. COVERING THE BASICS: OMAN'S PUBLIC PROVISION

This paper does not set out to market Oman as the model of public services provision, but as a stark contrast to the UK in what is expected of the Government by the citizen, and a limited analogue for UBS. There are social and economic issues in Oman that are serious. The questions of the roles and rights of non-citizens in the economy and the society are among the most obvious, but too broad and divergent to address here.

The question is how the Omani citizen experiences and defines public services, and her rights to them. That is what provides the reference point for real-world UBS.

In contrast with the UK, Oman has no personal income tax (yet), no TV licence, very limited VAT coverage at a maximum of 5%, very low employee social insurance contributions, and no fuel duty. The social wage of free health and education is far more obviously a net gain over private provision, compared to the UK. The concept might not be expressed in those terms, but the expectations of the citizen are high as the study will demonstrate.

The following four sections illustrate contrasting examples of delivering the needs of citizens in Oman, against existing public policy in the United Kingdom.

Education: full provision

The availability of school education is analogous to the UK: all Omani children are entitled to free education from the age of six, to seventeen or eighteen. Government statistics for school enrolment in public schools are only available since 2011, but show a school population of around 720,000 in 2019 (NCSI, 2021). Published information on population does not break down exactly in accordance with school entitlement, but this seems consistent with virtually all children having access to education. The great majority of Omani children attend state schools, although the proportion in private schools appears to be rising. As of 2019, around one in six Omani children were in a private school (NCSI, 2021).

Alongside education itself, there is a mixture of governmental and charitable support for school meals, uniforms and equipment, but this is needs-based rather than universal entitlement.

The most significant divergence between the UK and Oman in this area is in higher education. In 2021, just over two thirds of Omanis who sat the General Education Diploma (secondary school/A level) received a passing grade, entitling them to apply for higher education. Just over two thirds of those were enrolled into higher education institutions – at government expense. Of the 25,000, just over half were admitted to public institutions, around 11,000 to private sector institutions within Oman on scholarships or grants, and 770 were given full or partial scholarships to higher education abroad, ranging from the US to New Zealand (HEAC, 2021).

Since 1998, higher education ceased to be a general entitlement in the UK (Murphy et al, 2019). As in Oman, around half of school leavers go into higher education but do so at their own expense (iNews, 2020). There is no general scholarship programme for private institutions, let alone international study: proportionally, the equivalent of Oman's 770 international scholars this year would have been 8000 from the UK.

Overall, the comparison is clear: with the majority of young people expecting a higher education, it cannot be said that there is “free education” in the UK as a universal basic service. The Omani model is much closer.

Utilities: subsidies versus taxes

In 1993, the UK announced the extension of the standard rate of VAT to domestic energy consumption. The motivation, though presented as an environmental incentive, was primarily to raise taxation. Domestic energy forms a larger proportion of expenditure of poorer households (Brechling et al, 1994). This makes energy a prime example of regressive taxation and the antithesis of the social wage.

Taxes on petrol for both private and commercial vehicles are punitive. Again, presented as part of an environmental agenda, fuel duties have usually ranged between 60-70% in recent years, reaching a peak of almost 74% during a period of lower oil prices in 2016 (RAC Foundation, 2021). The effect is deeply regressive, “with the poorest households spending an average of 3.1 per cent of their income on motor fuel taxes (including VAT on the duty) while the richest households spend only 1.9 per cent” (Snowdon, 2013).

In contrast, Oman has no taxes on utilities or fuel. Electricity and water have been subsidised continually. And, even as an oil producer with relatively cheap fuel, petrol was subsidised at the pump until 2014. As oil prices fell, hitting state incomes, the Omani Government took the opportunity to remove the subsidy from petrol. In the previous year subsidies had cost almost a quarter of the public services budget, with the vast majority on fuel. (NCSI, 2013; 2014)

These subsidies were as regressive as the taxes in the UK: wealthy citizens, non-nationals, businesses and even government organisations were receiving all of the subsidies, all of the time. However, as well as removing the fuel subsidy, by 2021, Oman had begun to remove the direct subsidies on electricity and water. To replace them, a new National Subsidies System (NSS) was established. The NSS set up a portal for citizens, to “provide them with a protective cover against the increase in related regular expenditure streams such as Fuel, Electricity & Water” (NSS, 2021). The NSS is aimed nominally at the needy, with enhanced benefits for the lowest income groups, paid to the head of the household based on a combination of their income and the number of their dependents. A pre-paid card allows for a certain amount of free monthly fuel, and a simple escalator system for electricity and water permits a basic amount of cheap utilities. In practice, the subsidy may be available for incomes up to OMR1,250 per month, or around £25,000 per year – an average income in Oman (NCSI, 2021) – if there is a large number of dependents (NSS, 2021).

Although this is not the same as a universal basic entitlement, the transparency of the subsidy and its progressive nature make it universally accessible to those on low incomes, regardless of whether they are in work, out of work, or even making the choice not to work.

There are some universal benefits in the UK worth mentioning in this area: one-off winter fuel payments to the elderly, and free local bus travel for the over-65s are important universal entitlements. But as they are age-specific, they can still be considered far less generous over a lifetime than the tax free, subsidised and sometimes free energy provision given to Omani citizens.

Housing: contrasting approaches to the market

The UK has a strong traditional of providing social housing, especially since the post-WWII period. But the neo-liberal Conservative policies of the 1980s changed the direction of that provision for generations: “by 2011, the proportion of the population in the social sector stood at around 16%, less than half its peak of around one-third in the early 1980s”(Adam et al, 2015). The role of private housing associations in that provision has also changed markedly, from virtually none in the 1970s, to around half of the total provision by 2013 (Adam et al, 2015).

The nature of the provision is also complicated: housing is provided as an opportunity to rent a property at a below market rate. Those unable to pay must then seek Housing Benefit as a social welfare payment, to meet the cost. “Sub-market rents are one of two main ways in which the state provides support for the cost of rented housing, alongside housing benefit” (Adam et al, 2015).

Although the role of social housing has become proportionally smaller since 1980, it remains a key piece of public provision. The public sector does not invest directly in housing stock on the same scale as it once did; as Adam et al explain, “There has been a long-term shift...away from central government grant funding and towards a combination of loans and revenue funding for new development... [I]mproving the affordability of housing for those on low incomes now seems to take priority” (2015).

Essentially, the UK government’s approach to providing social housing is to participate directly in the rental market – whether from local authority-owned stock, private housing associations, or individual private landlords. The government now pay around 3% of total public spending on housing benefit, over £25 billion per annum for around four million households (Johnson, 2019). Rented accommodation is a burden to the poorest, as found and asserted by Cribb et al, “In 2002–03, 15% of children living in the poorest 20% of households lived in private rented accommodation, and this figure rose to 36% in 2016–17. This has pushed up average housing costs because private renting is the tenure with the highest housing costs”(2019).

Oman's housing provision is markedly different in both approach and effect: 91% of Omanis live in their own homes, a rate that puts Oman in the top five for home ownership globally, according to the Minister of Housing (Times of Oman, 2021).

There are no integrated statistics published on social housing in Oman. Provision is piecemeal, from local authorities, charities and the quasi-governmental Diwan of the Royal Court that acts in a charitable capacity. The strength of traditional extended family ties and the wide availability of land for construction also make the housing problem very different to the UK. Homelessness among citizens is not considered a major problem, and rough sleeping is all but unheard of. There is not a perfect analogue available to compare to social housing in the UK. The Omani government do build social housing, and invest in housing projects.

However, on a national level, most housing provision is in the form of land grants and building loans (Oman Portal 2021). The Ministry of Housing stated that almost 450,000 building plots had been allocated since 2011. Women received around three fifths, due to a policy of prioritising the needs of widows, single mothers and female divorcees (Times of Oman, 2019). For context, the estimated number of Omani households in 2019 was c.305,000 (NCSI, 2021). The ministry can provide small interest-free loans or even grants up to c.\$50,000 to help build or repair a home for heads of household in difficult circumstances.

In addition to providing land, the state-owned Oman Housing Bank (OHB) can provide favourable loans to buy or build a home: those who are better off, earning around \$2,500 per month, can pay up to 4% - a reasonably competitive market rate, and those on lower incomes will pay progressively less, as low as 1% if they earn the minimum wage of just over \$1,000 per month. Loans are available up to approximately \$150,000 – a realistic budget for a family home on the outskirts of the capital – and with a nominal deposit. Commercial banks normally require a 20% deposit. OHB nevertheless reports an operating profit, up to its most recent annual report in 2019 (OHB, 2020).

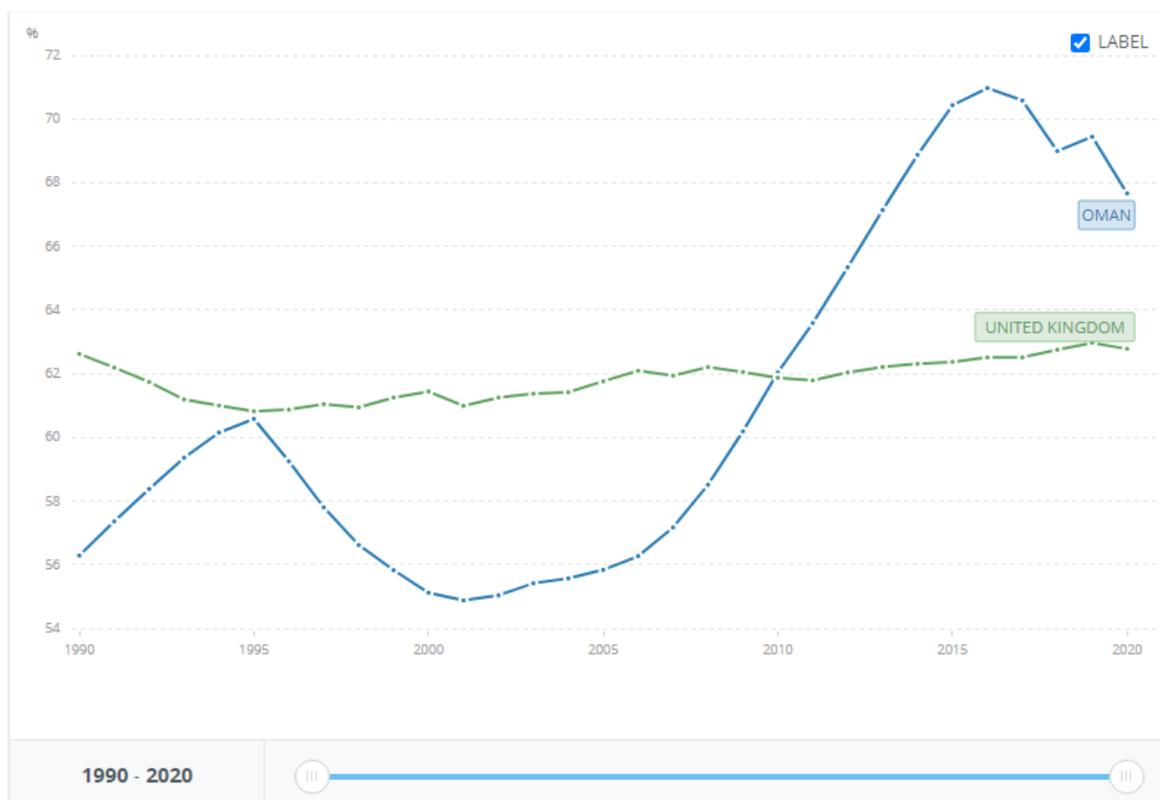
The Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that the average UK housing benefit recipient costs over £5000 every year (Johnson, 2019). Meanwhile, new land allocations in Oman are being sold on for a similar amount – roughly £5000 in the capital area – and well below that amount in other regions

(OLX, 2021). There is no public calculation of the cost of providing services to these pieces of land, or the process of allocation. But the market value would indicate that this is pretty good value for the government, with the cost of the land itself effectively zero. And, with the low-interest loans coming from a state-owned bank and still being profitable, there is some offset back to the public purse anyway. Overall, this appears to be a very cheap housing solution over a remarkably short term compared to paying everyone's rent indefinitely: the Omani citizen is all but guaranteed home ownership.

Employment: jobs for the boys

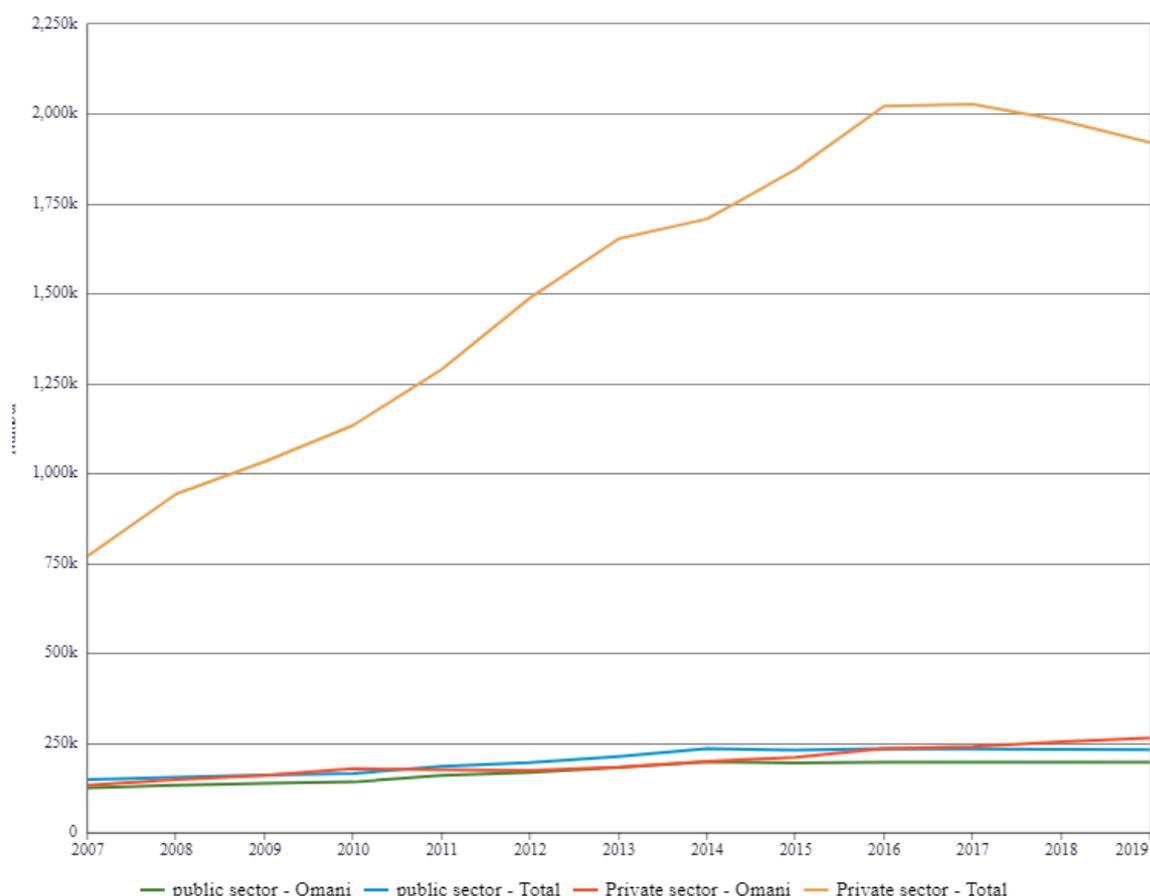
Of all the stereotypes around the Arab Gulf citizen, “no work ethic” is probably the most pervasive. It should be argued that people tend to live up or down to expectations, and that “people want to be useful. That is no more or less true of GCC nationals than it is of anyone else” (Brown, 2017). There are, however, some serious structural problems affecting labour market efficiency in Oman. Foremost is the vast dependence on migrant labour (Brown, 2017). On the face of it, employment in Oman seems high, with an admirable labour participation rate that would be expected of a relatively young population:

Figure 1: Labour Participation Rates in Oman and the UK (World Bank Data, 2021)



But, looking at employment of the Omani citizen in isolation, the issue is clear:

Figure 2: number of Omani and expatriate employees in public and private sector (NCSI, 2021)



Although there are roughly a million Omanis of working age, the graph shows fewer than half of them in employment. Fewer than one in seven private sector employees are Omani. Conversely, more than 90% of public sector workers are citizens, and at some points in recent years, more Omanis have worked in publicly funded jobs than in the private sector. As much of the private sector is also made up of state-owned enterprises, even this picture may be optimistic.

In such an economic imbalance, can public sector jobs be considered a social enterprise? Both the UK and Oman have a population that is around half of working age (NCSI, ONS, 2021). The UK has 17-18% of its workforce in the public sector, or just over 8% of the population (ONS, 2021). Oman has around 10% of its population working in the public sector, but that amounts to almost half of the Omani workforce (World Bank Data, 2021).

Public sector hires seem to have levelled off since 2014 - a budgetary crisis brought about by lower oil prices (Grigoli et al, 2017). But the reliance on public sector work for such a high proportion of Omani employees constitutes a social subsidy of sorts. A generous pension system allows retirement after no more than thirty years, and sometimes as few as twenty. Only 5% of Omanis are 65 or older, and yet almost the same percentage are receiving a public sector employee's pension. Only 8% of Omanis are paying into the scheme – a drastic shortfall (Civil Service Pension Funds, 2021). The UK has its own challenge in sustaining pension contributions for an ageing population – national insurance sometimes described as a pyramid or “Ponzi scheme” (Cowie, 2016). But, with a young population, Oman's demographics do not justify the problem. The structural pension issue could also be cited as a cautionary lesson for UBS.

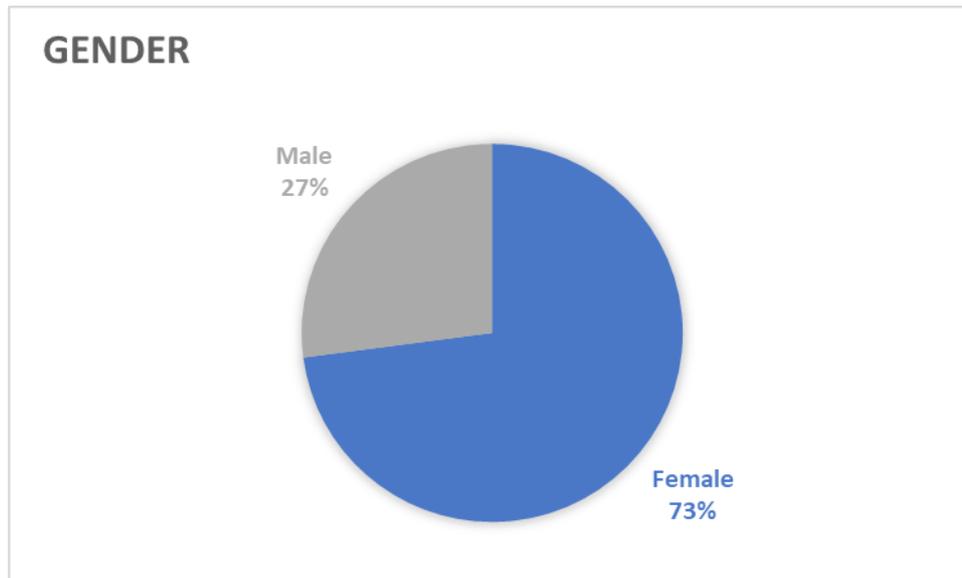
So, although Oman's public sector does not seem that much larger than the UK's, there are two big differences: firstly, it employs such a massive percentage of working Omanis; and secondly, their benefits are very generous and difficult to sustain. In the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings across the region, Oman had its own protests, mainly from young people seeking jobs. As the government “....promised to create 50,000 public sector jobs for its increasingly youthful population “ (Aboudi, 2014) as part of the solution, it is only fair to conclude that public sector employment is sometimes administered as a social service. After forty years dominated by neo-liberal politics, few would make that case for the UK.

Oman's generous public sector employment does not fit directly as an analogue for Universal Basic Services. UBS does not currently include a proposal for full employment, rejects Universal Basic Income, and suggests a freedom *not* to work for financial reward. But, the iron-clad job security and generous terms do amount to a parallel of sorts: the Omani civil servant in an invented or undemanding job, can have the freedom to take on other ventures – profitable or otherwise – with the business of making a living already taken care of. That is certainly a freedom envisaged by UBS: “that safety is a social imperative, not a kindness, as the ultimate purpose is to allow specialised capabilities and capacities to emerge in the population that benefit the whole society” (Percy, 2021).

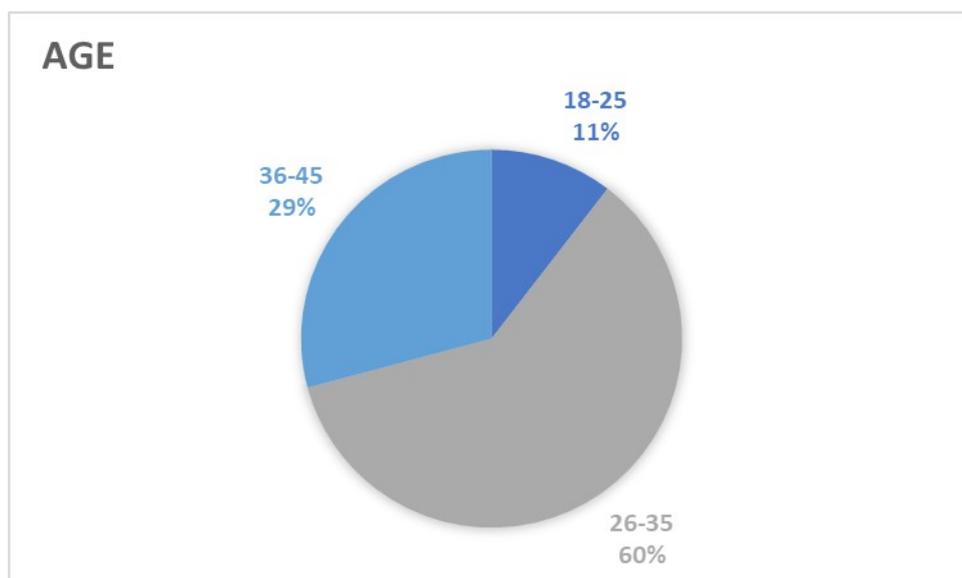
4. THE SURVEY: ATTITUDES TO PROSPERITY AND PUBLIC SERVICES AMONG OMANI CITIZENS

Over a period of two weeks in July 2021, a survey of fifty questions was circulated informally via social networks of friends and relatives in Oman. There were 48 valid responses of Omani citizens aged over 18. The respondents were asked a series of demographic questions, and questions related to prosperity, public services, and work. They were also invited to make qualitative responses in the latter three categories.

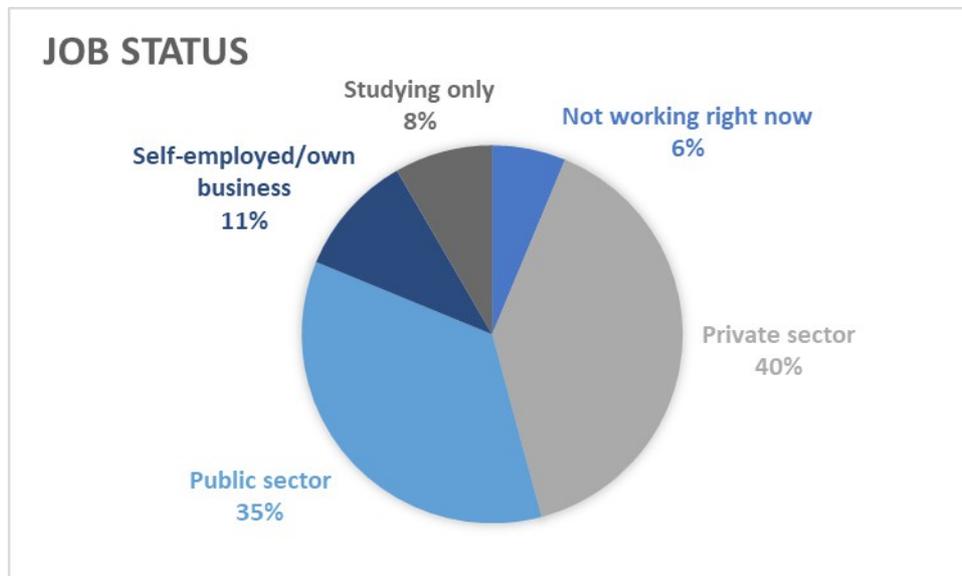
a) Demographic



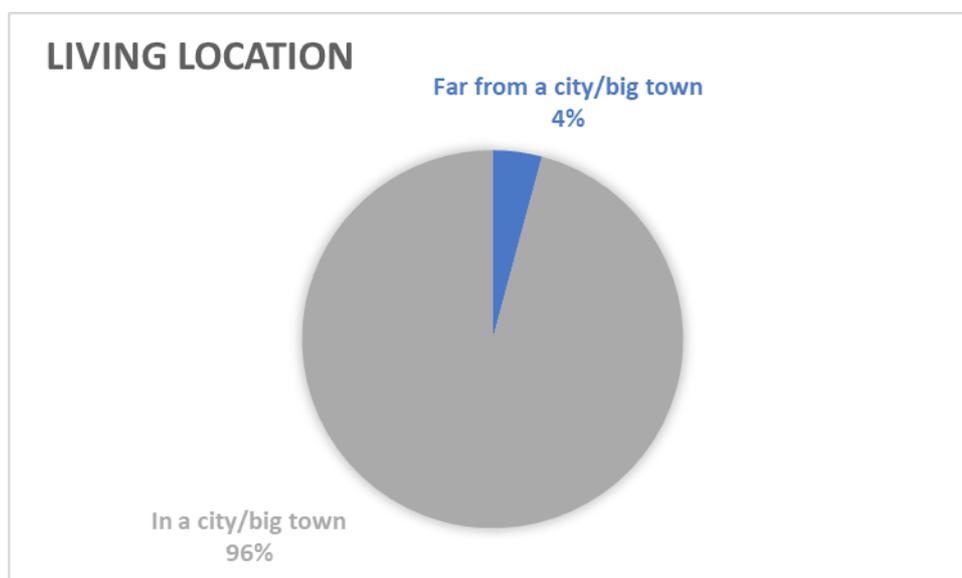
Gender: The survey was promoted through informal social groups, and clearly women were more receptive! Part of the analysis below has been divided according to gender, to account for this discrepancy.



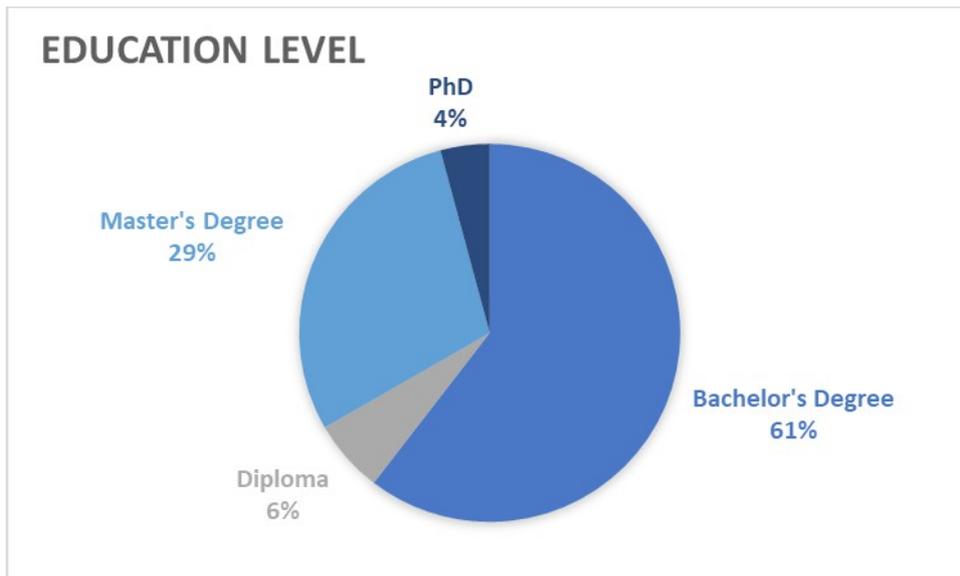
Age: Respondents were all aged under 45. Although this leaves an important demographic unrepresented, it nevertheless represents the vast majority of Oman's working population (NCSI, 2021).



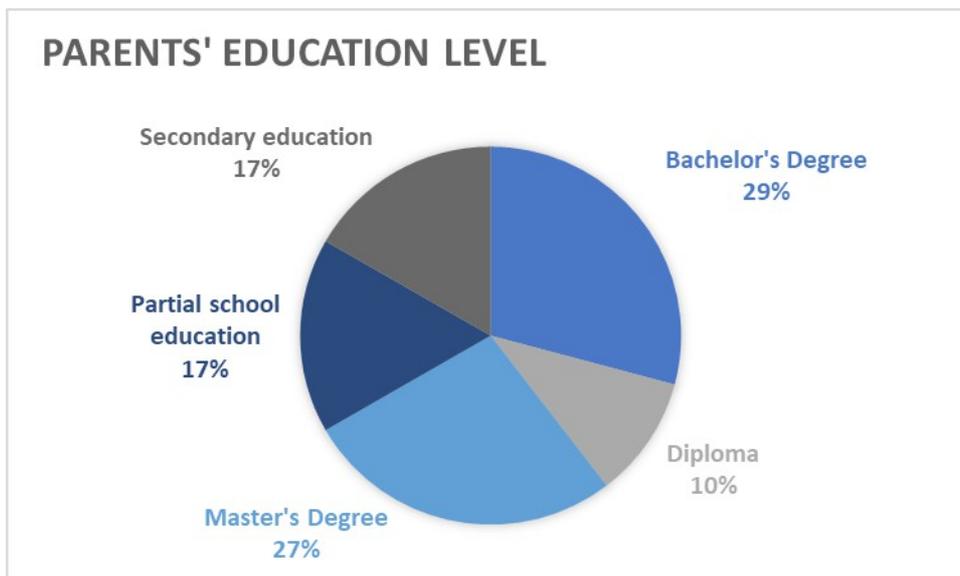
Employment status: This corresponds fairly neatly with the actual breakdown of public versus private sector employment. The percentage not working sits somewhere between the official unemployment figure of c.4% and the youth unemployment figure of 11% (NCSI, 2020).



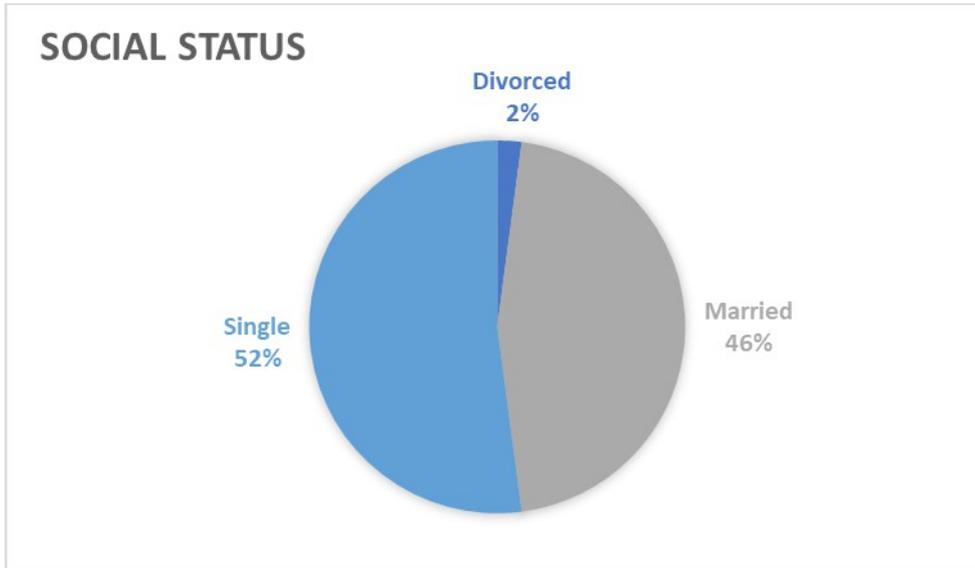
Urbanisation: The vast majority reported living in a large town or city. There is some distortion in the demographic with this, but Omani society is highly urbanised. The question was deliberately specific, asking “where do you live most of the time?”. The mixture of strong traditional roots and rapid urbanisation means that many Omanis identify their home “*bilad*” as a provincial village that their family came from, whether or not they have ever lived there much, or at all.



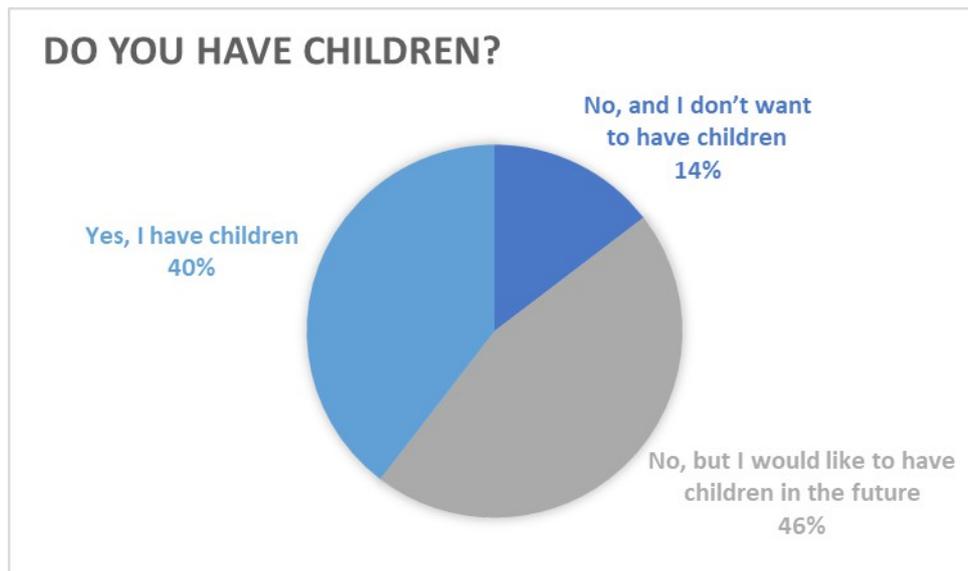
Education: with only around half of Omani school leavers moving into higher education, this survey is clearly lacking in the school leaver/school dropout demographic. However, we will see that lower income groups are still represented in part. We should not assume that less educated and poor are the same thing, especially with the social and educational support in place.



Parents' Education: There is a clear indicator here of social mobility through education. Some of these parents will have been educated before Oman had any domestic higher education at all. It is striking that over a third of the parents only attended school, and only half of those completed it, but all of their children have gone on to higher education.

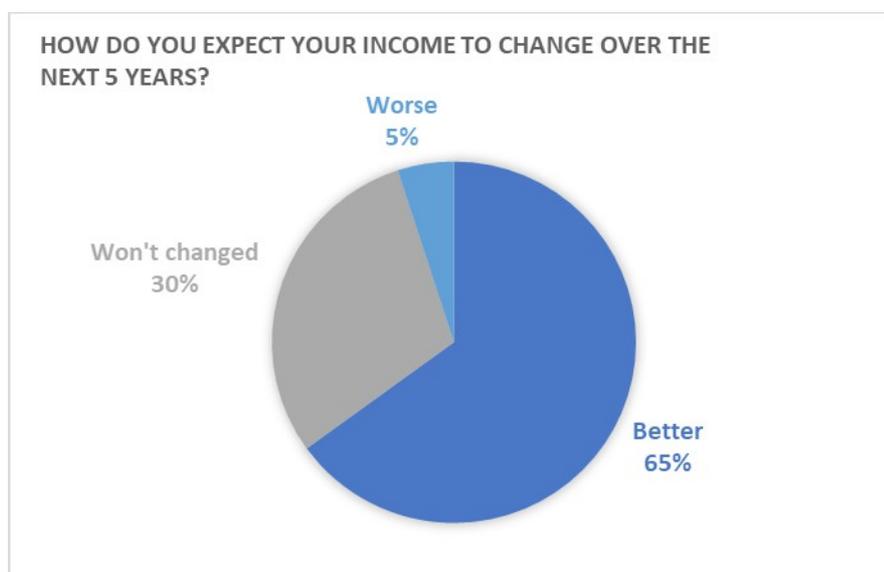
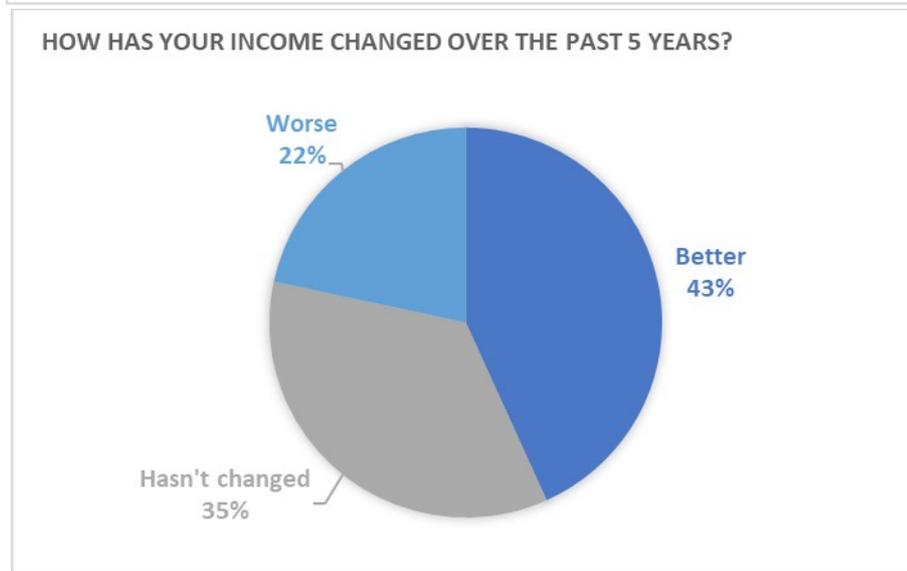
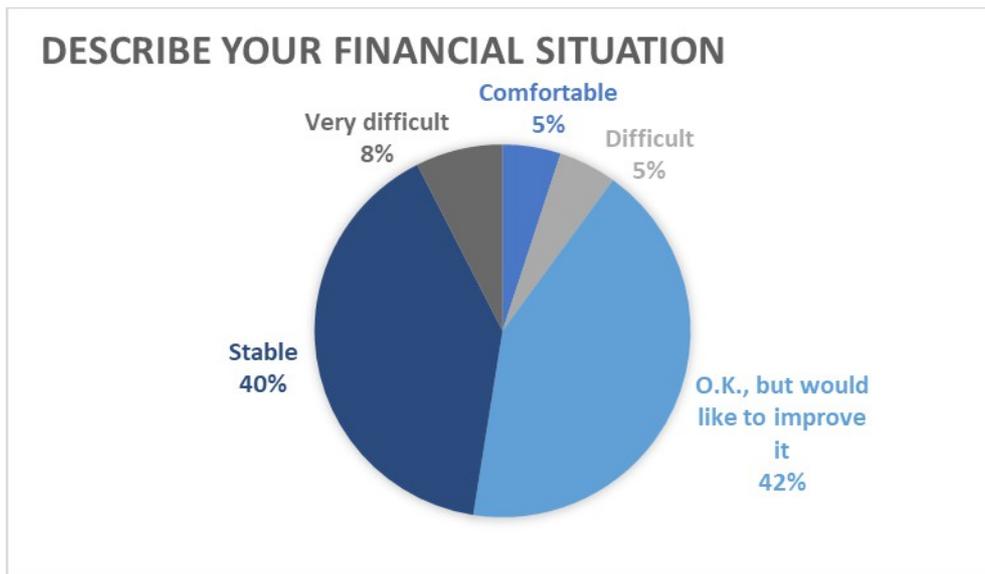


Marital status: This is perhaps a predictable breakdown of a group of younger people. Three statuses are represented, offering the possibility of an unexpected correlation. The term “social status” is a direct translation of the vernacular, and how this was couched in the survey.

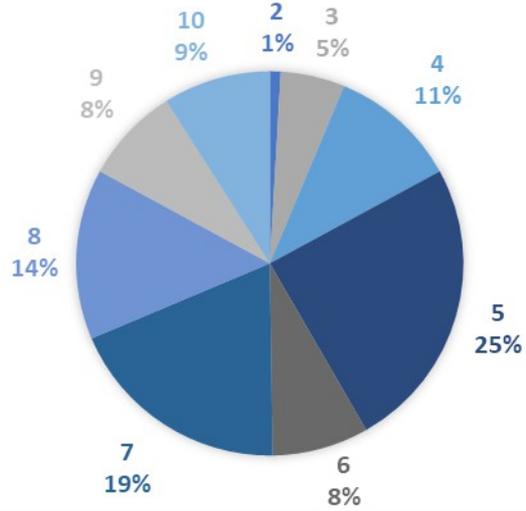


Children: Again, perhaps expected of a younger age group, and representing all. It is a little surprising to see roughly one in seven say that they do not want children at all. A UK poll showed that on average among the same age group, 28% of those who did not already have children, didn't plan to (YouGov, 2019). The proportion in the Oman survey is just over 23% - not as big a difference as might be expected, and confounding the stereotype of the traditional, conservative, Muslim, Arab family-based society.

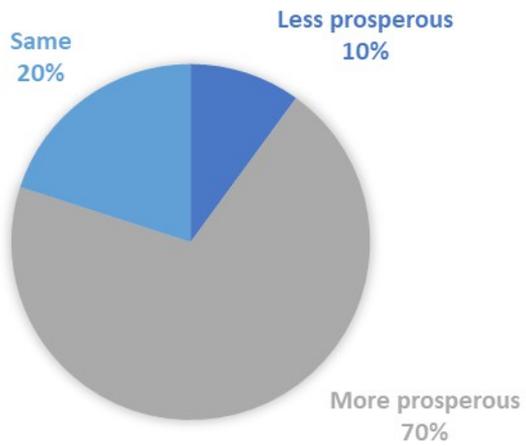
b) Attitudes to Prosperity



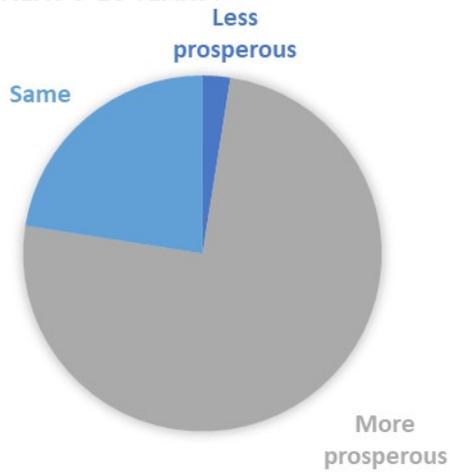
ON A SCALE OF 1-10, HOW PROSPEROUS DO YOU FEEL?



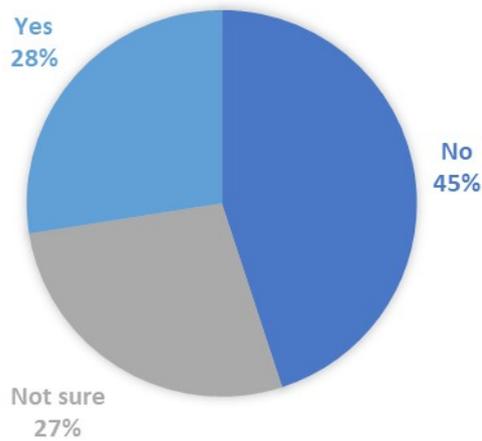
HOW PROSPEROUS DO YOU FEEL NOW COMPARED TO THE PREVIOUS 10 YEARS?



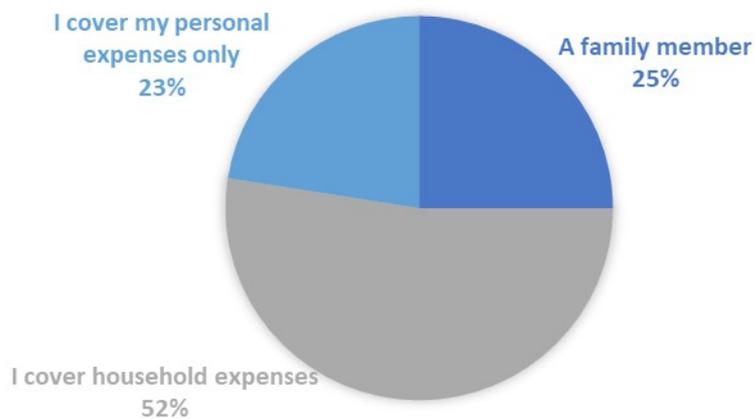
HOW DO YOU THINK YOUR LEVEL OF PROSPERITY WILL CHANGE OVER THE NEXT 5-10 YEARS?



ARE YOU SATISFIED WITH YOU CURRENT LEVEL OF INCOME?



WHO PROVIDES FOR YOUR FAMILY FINANCIALLY?



Qualitative comments on prosperity

Respondents were invited to give their own definitions of prosperity:

- *Excellent, vast knowledge, high standard of living, modernity, innovation, justice, humanity*
- *Improving the economic situation that results in the improvement in living standard for the citizen in general*
- *Prosperity is scientific, economic and cultural abundance and the satisfaction of the population on the circumstances, government and the future outlook of the country*
- *For an individual to live in a city that meets all his needs along with meeting his entertainment/luxury needs... For a place to be safe/secure*
- *A life of luxury*
- *I didn't understand the question*
- *To live a decent life that is in line with what the country has in terms of resources*
- *When I depend on myself*
- *To be modest and accepting of what comes to you*
- *Complete financial stability with no debts... Ownership of a home*
- *Living a decent life and meeting of familial requirements*
- *Progress, comfort, development*
- *Increasing productivity leading to improvements financial and personal situations*
- *Development*
- *Growth and financial, mental and psychological development so that one is in a better position in the future and the future generations can live in comfort*
- *Growth and development*
- *Achievement*
- *Development and progress*
- *Development growth civilisation/modernity*
- *Development*
- *For an individual to have personal income separate from his job, and to not depend on his job as his sole financial source and this would contribute as well to the country's economic and social prosperity in the long-term*
- *Development*
- *Prosperity is to have my own business*
- *Prosperity on a personal level is financial stability, and having long-term investments with emergency funds. Psychological stability by having the mental and psychological flexibility to*

deal with constants and variables as well as having a supportive and loving environment that participates in preferred activities

- *Financial mental and health stability*
- *Improvement*
- *Emergency fund sufficient for one to two years*
- *Development and a change in stereotypical outdated thinking that does not belong to reality*
- *Development in all aspects of life*
- *Where you progress yourself and your country in return.*
- *Increase, notable/significant development*
- *Having security and comfort without external pressures and progress in an attractive environment*
- *To have an educated population*
- *To grow professionally and financially. Live without debt, living comfortably with savings ..*
- *The ability to meet living expenses and to spend on non-essentials. And the ability to pay for private schools for my children and to travel etc.*
- *The ability to live in comfort and security, without fear of an unknown future.. The ability to control my future more than it is controlled for me.. The ability to make fateful decisions without fear of consequences that can't be accounted for*
- *A decent life, which has some luxuries, and in continuous financial, social, intellectual and cultural development and growth with the ability to save as well as spend time doing hobbies*
- *The ability of an individual to adapt to changes and develop themselves in line with their personal outlook and ambitions and the ability to achieve knowledge as well as spread knowledge and benefits to their surrounding environment to facilitate participation in social improvement*
- *Capacity to have enough sleep, spend time with friends and family, and do creative things on a daily basis. That is to say, not have to prioritise work or earning money over any of the above.*

The top three phrases used were:

- Comfortable life (3)
- Emergency fund (3)
- Financial stability (2)

The first phrase is more ambiguous in Arabic "*Heyaat kareema*", literally a "generous life", but also relating to the concept of personal dignity ("*karaama*"). With the word cloud below, we have a picture of financial and aspirational themes in interpreting prosperity:



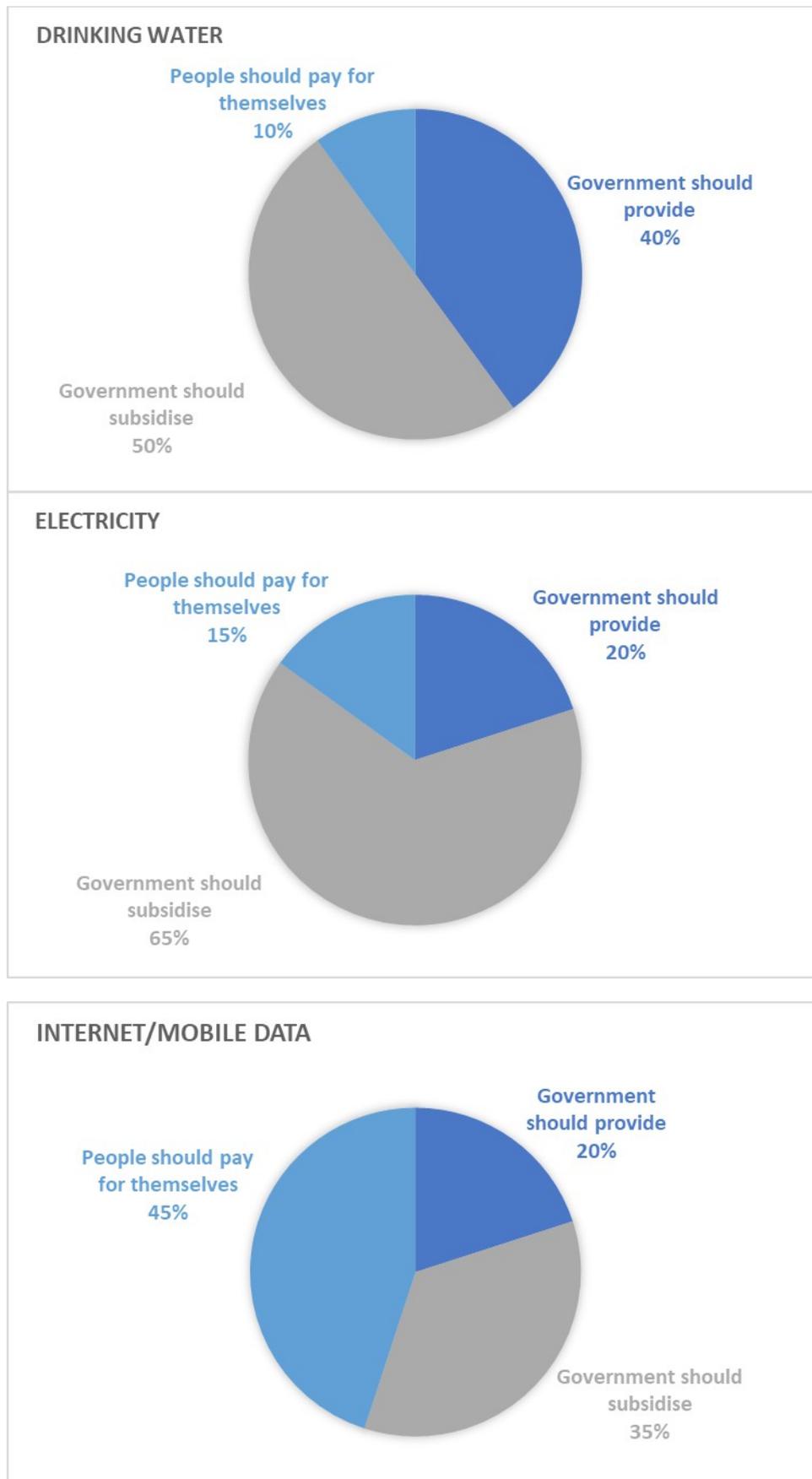
The 2021 World Happiness Report (WHR) shows a good outcome for the UK (Oman is not measured), as measured by the Report's unique wellbeing index - "WELLBYs". This might seem unusual after a period of economic recession and a global pandemic, but the perception of well-being coincides with the most generous Keynesian intervention by a British Government since the Second World War (CNBC, 2020). The mass furlough scheme, tax holidays, even subsidised dining, as well as a successful vaccination programme, could be responsible. The UK ranked fourteenth, with a 33% increase in "WELLBYs" since 2009. Other strong performers seem also to have done well with COVID19, e.g. Israel and New Zealand, both of which rank higher (WHR, 2021).

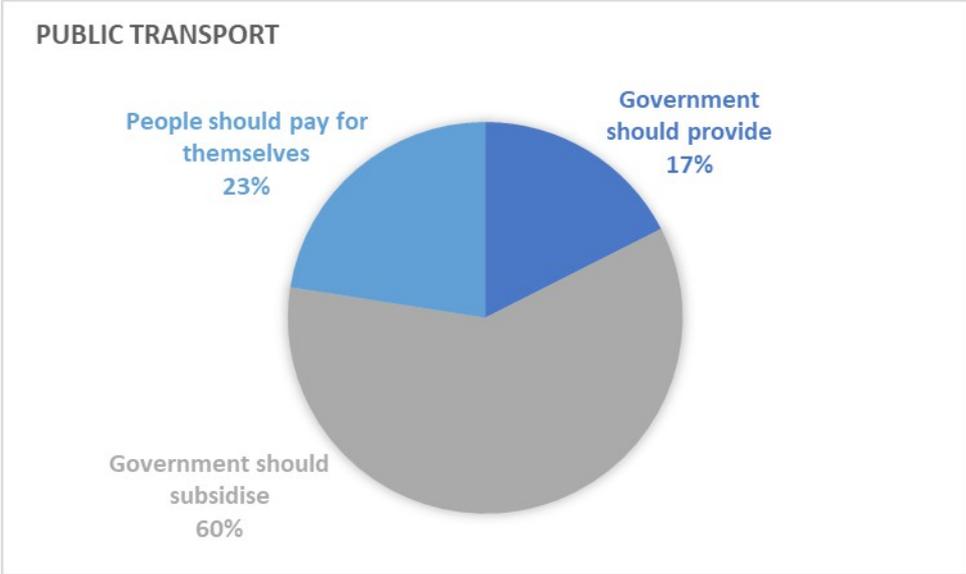
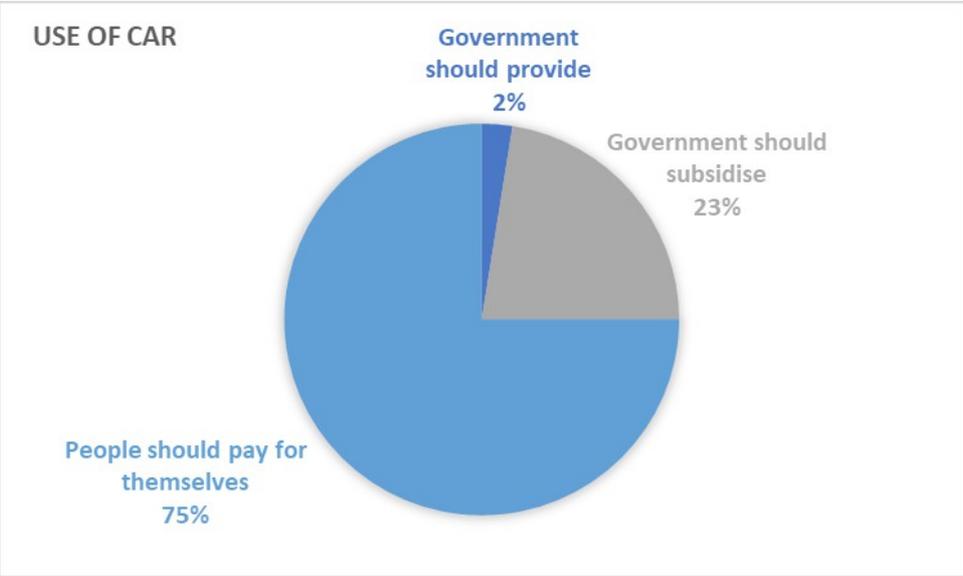
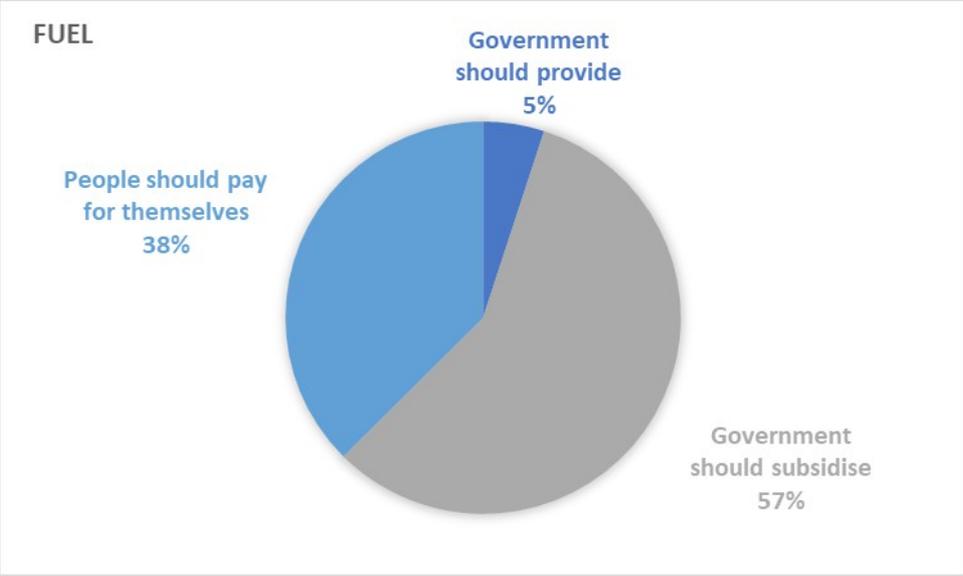
In other surveys, the sense of well-being is less emphatic: in YouGov's well-being themed trackers, a steady 50% of Britons reported feeling "stressed", compared to around 40% feeling "happy", and "content" fluctuating in the 20s. In "Life Satisfaction" - perhaps the closest analogue to self-defined prosperity, the average over the last two years is just under 6/10. Omanis in our survey ranked their current prosperity at an average of 6.25.

Omanis in this survey identified their prosperity more clearly with finance, but the very mixed response to their feelings of prosperity could be influenced by the pandemic too. At the time of writing, Oman is still struggling with the pandemic and only began allowing migrant workers to return on 1 September. Whether through the economy or public health, the pandemic can be expected to have a downward influence on feelings of prosperity in Oman. But, overall, Omanis felt that their lives had been improving both in earnings and by their own definitions of prosperity. They were broadly optimistic about further increases in wealth and prosperity, and with over 40% feeling financially comfortable, and over 40% more feeling they were "OK" financially even though they wanted more, the sense of well-being is strong.

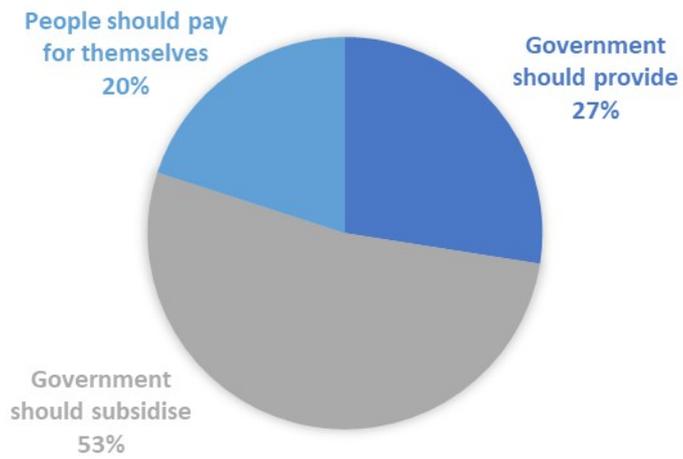
It is a fair conclusion from these results that Omanis should rank reasonably well in "happiness", had they been surveyed by the WHP.

c) Attitudes to public services: who should pay?

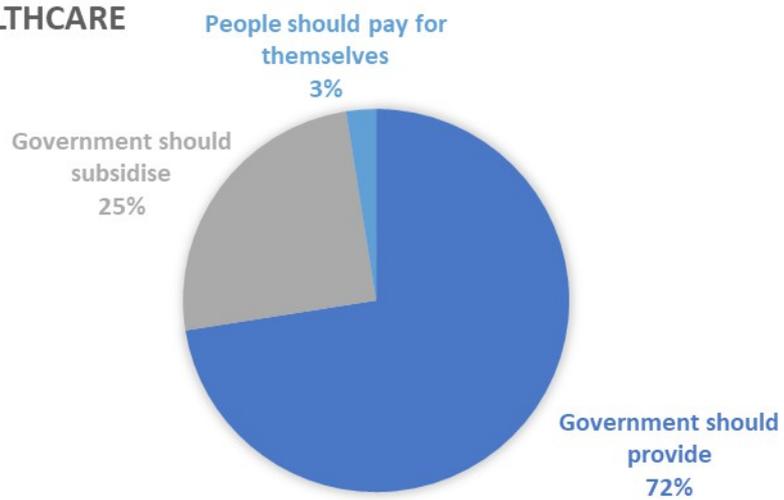




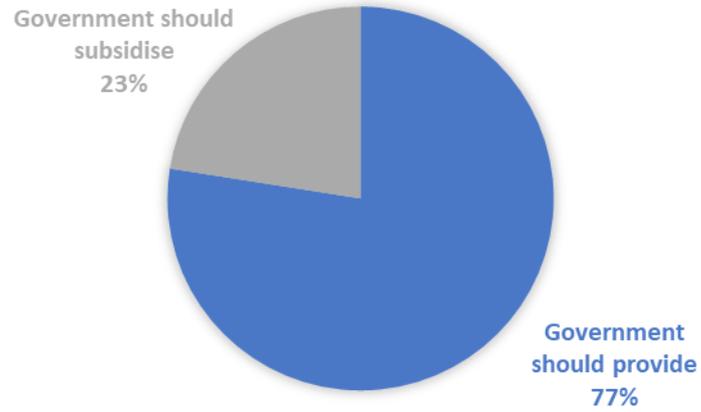
HOUSING



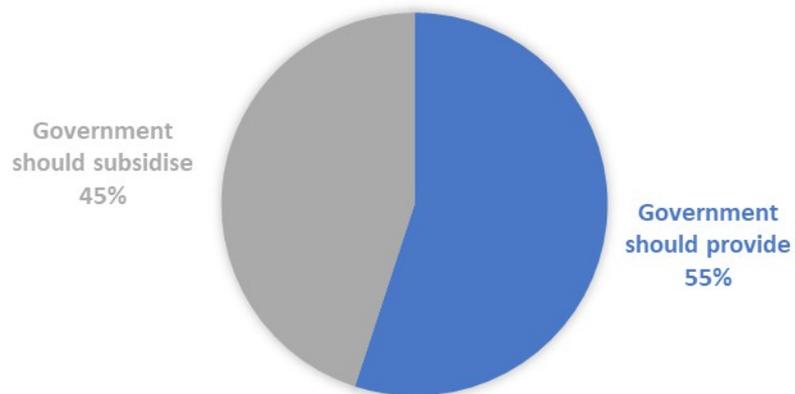
HEALTHCARE



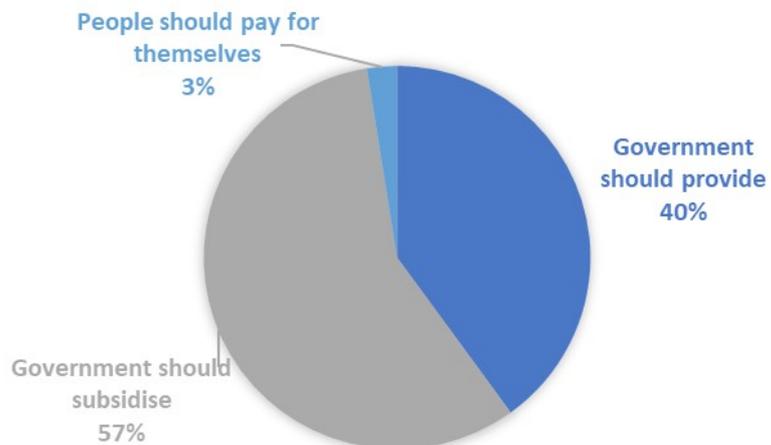
SCHOOL EDUCATION



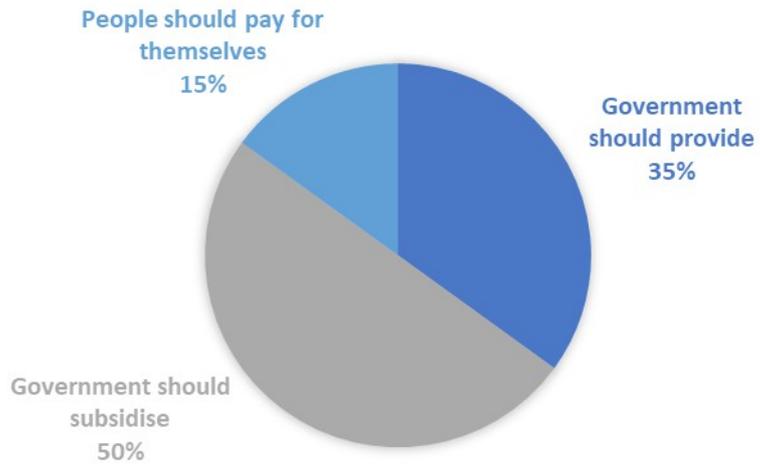
HIGHER EDUCATION (LOCAL)



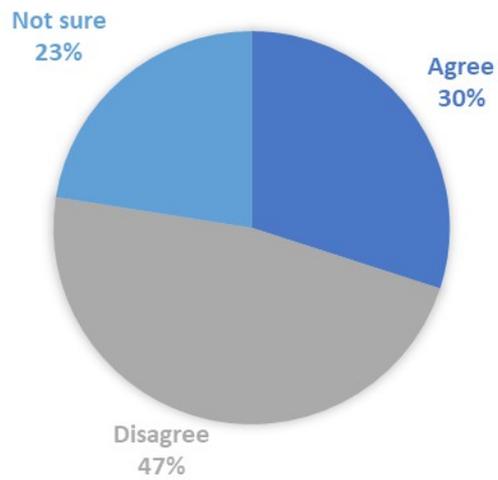
HIGHER EDUCATION (INTERNATIONAL)



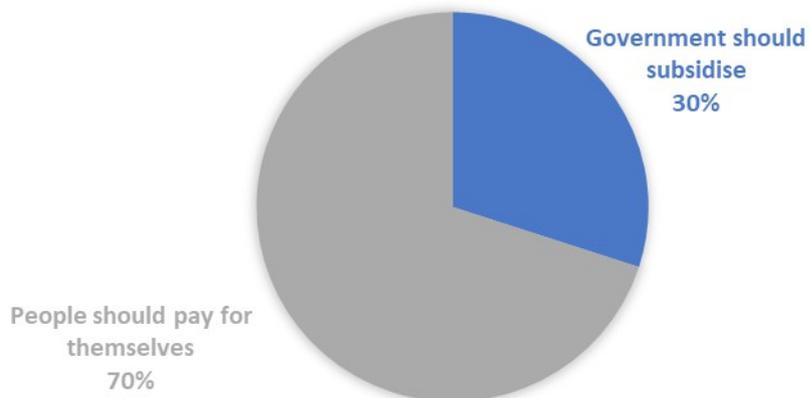
BASIC INCOME OR JOBSEEKER BENEFIT



THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD EMPLOY ANY JOBSEEKING CITIZEN



GETTING MARRIAGE COSTS



There is a clear mandate for basic services to be provided or subsidised by public funds: at least three quarters of respondents thought that basic services should be free or subsidised, including utilities, public transport, housing, health and education to a higher level – even if that meant studying abroad.

The expectation that public funds should provide, does have some limits. A clear majority of respondents rejected the idea that the Government should pay for private vehicles or weddings. But, 25% of Omanis still thought that private car ownership should be subsidised, and 30% wanted subsidised marriage costs. 30% also expected public sector jobs for any unemployed citizens, and fewer than half opposed that idea completely. Over 60% thought that fuel should be at least subsidised, and 55% said the same of access to information technology (internet, telephone etc).

The strength of sentiment on fuel subsidies could be ascribed to the fact that it has been present for most of the last forty years.

Qualitative comments on public services

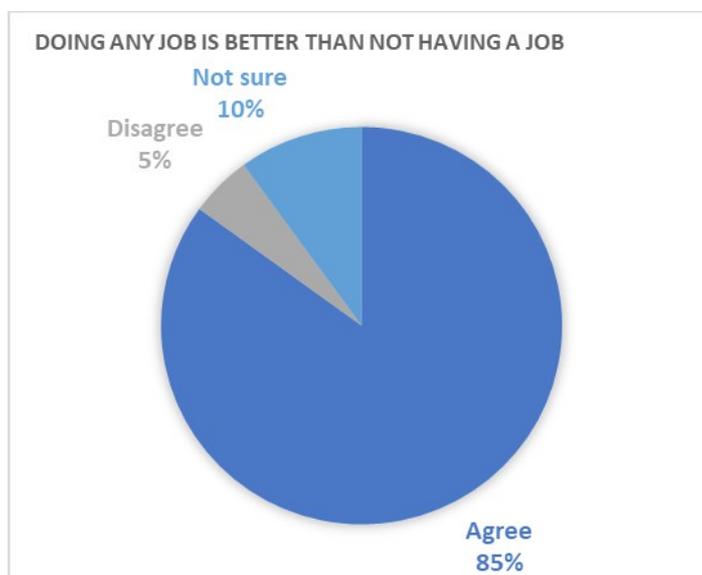
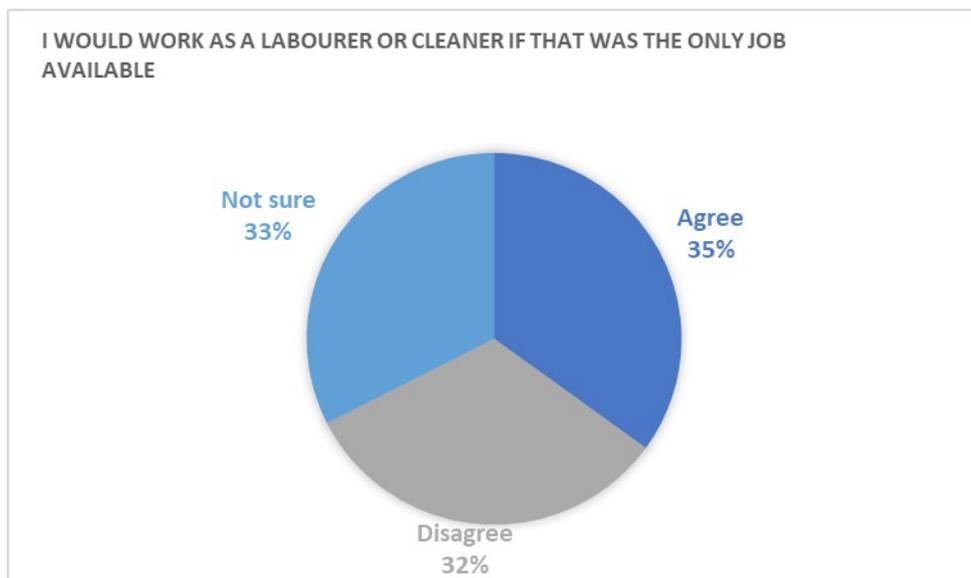
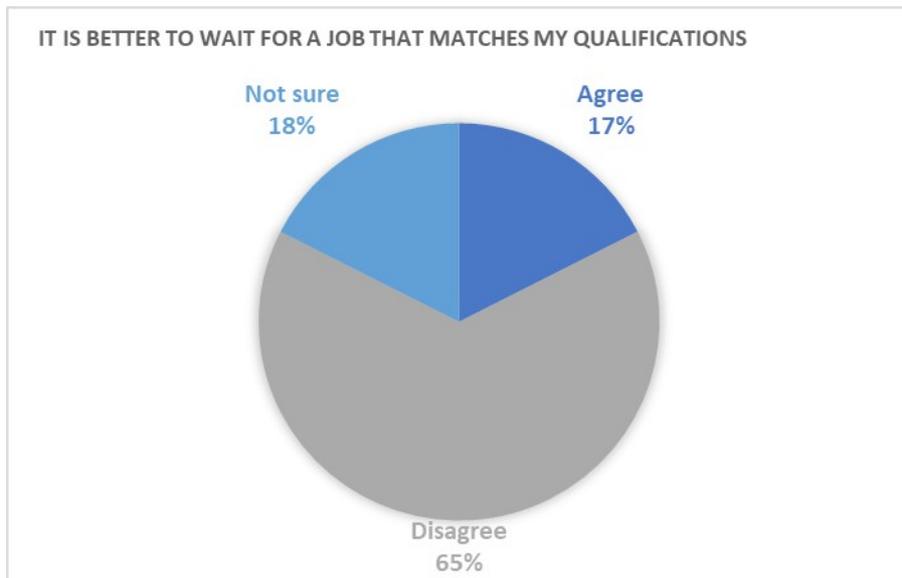
- *A return to the previous land distribution law and abolish the current law*
- *The governments of GCC countries are rich and they should therefore aspire to be in the same league as developed countries such as the Scandinavian countries, which are very advanced in service systems and they should not look to austerity measures in the Gulf as a response to the fall in oil prices, GCC countries should safeguard their prosperity by focusing on the prosperity of their citizens*
- *Public services should progress from education to offering better services in the health and transport sectors*
- *The government must share with the citizens the payment of public services such that the government subsidises these services*
- *Offering green spaces and fields for public activities in residential areas, facilities for those with creative ideas and projects walkways for pedestrians and cyclists*
- *What public services?? Oman in terms of average individual income pays the highest rate for electricity and water and internet and in some houses these have become more expensive than buying monthly groceries*
- *Everyone should be considered and those entitled to benefits should be provided with monthly rewards that suit the standard of living in general*
- *Government should encourage responsible use by subsidising essential utilities and creating alternatives to slowly reduce dependencies with excellent service*
- *The majority of my previous responses in my opinion such as basic services for example basic health provided for free in government hospitals outside of government working hours in particular*



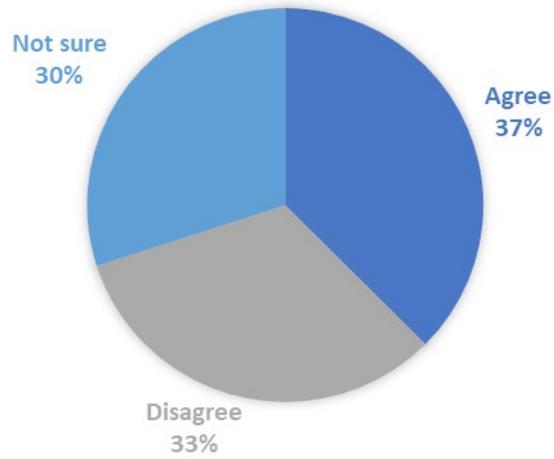
The word cloud analysis shows the prominence of “government” and “public services” at the core of respondents' commentary. The idea is also present that as a “wealthy” GCC country, Oman should be able to provide well for its citizens before all else. The specific comment on reform of the land law refers to a prior system of a lottery by universal entitlement, with less comprehensive prioritisation by need than the current model.

Overall, the sentiment that the Government should take responsibility for the basics of life, perhaps even lifestyle, is pronounced.

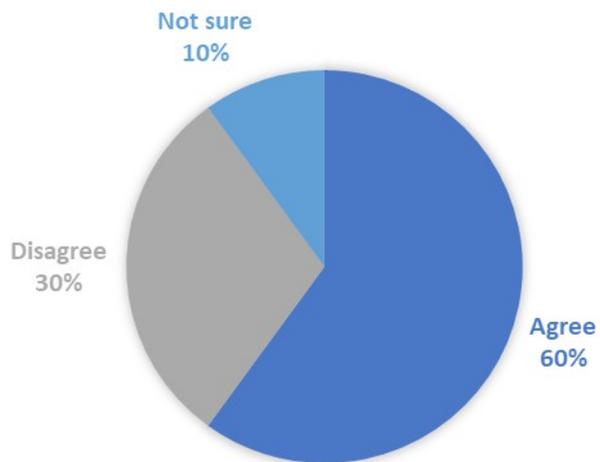
d) Attitudes to work



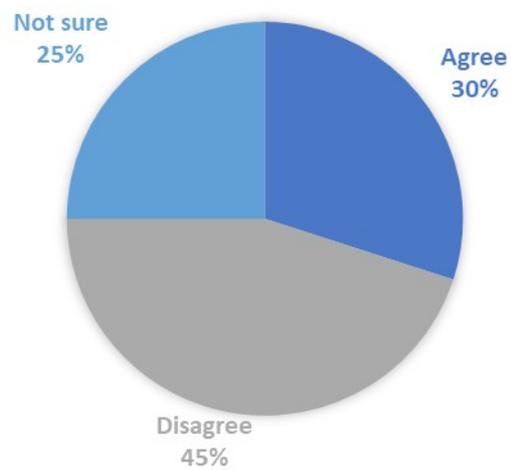
MY FAMILY WILL SUPORT ME IF I DON' TFIND A JOB I LIKE



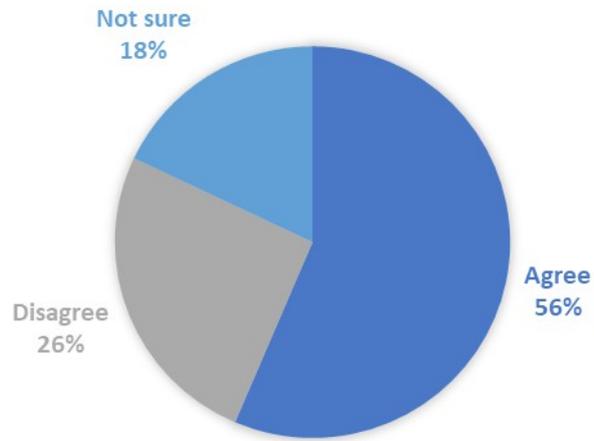
IT IS EMBARRASING TO BE JOBLESS



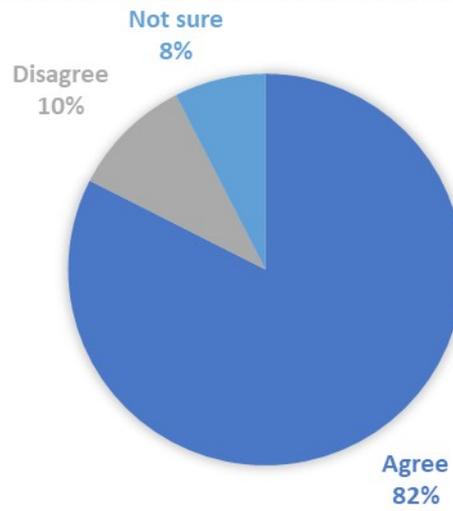
SOME JOBS AREN'T SUITABLE FOR CITIZENS



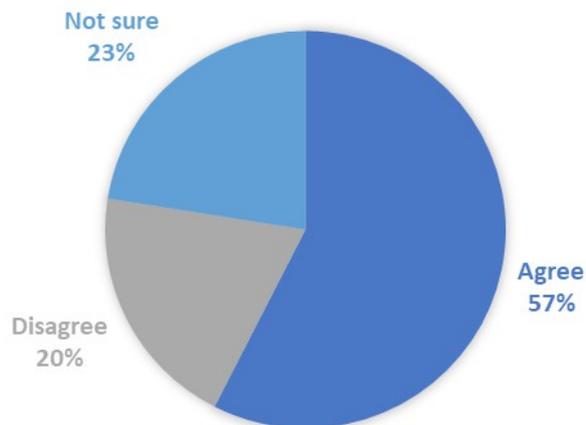
MY FAMIL SUPPORTED ME WHILE I LOOKED FOR A JOB



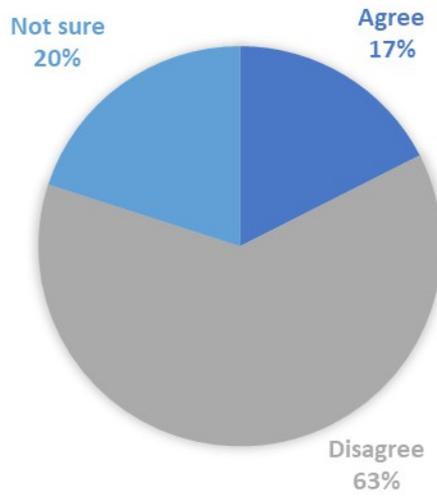
IT IS DIFFICULT TO GET MARRIED WITHOUT A JOB



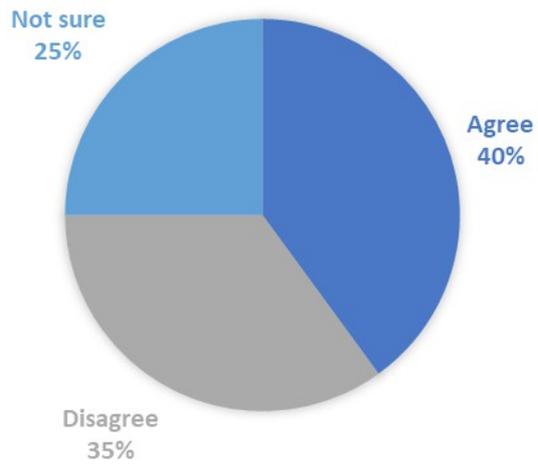
I WOULD NOT ACCEPT TO MARRY SOMEONE WHO DOESN'T HAVE A JOB



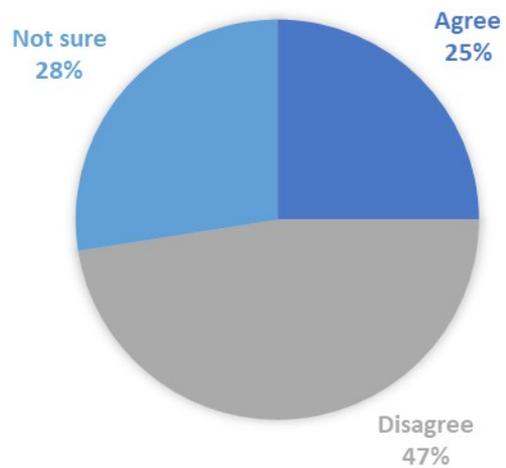
IT IS IMPORTANT TO HAVE A CAR THAT IS NO MORE THAN 5 YEARS OLD



IT IS IMPORTANT TO BUILD ONE'S OWN HOME



IT IS IMPORTANT THAT FAMILY AND FRIEND KNOW I HAVE A SUCCESSFUL CAREER



The survey questions on work address directly the stereotype of the entitled and work-shy Gulf citizen. The first questions clearly contradict that stereotype, with a strong majority in favour of working in any available job, and against sitting and waiting for the right one. Very few disagreed that any job is better than no job.

But, the further questions show more nuance. Larger sections – around a third – said that they would be supported by family if they were waiting for a suitable job, and more than half had been given such support while job seeking, though that does not necessarily mean they were overly choosy. Only just over a third said they would work as a cleaner if that were the only job available, and a quarter said that some jobs were just not suitable to be done by Gulf citizens (see qualitative commentary).

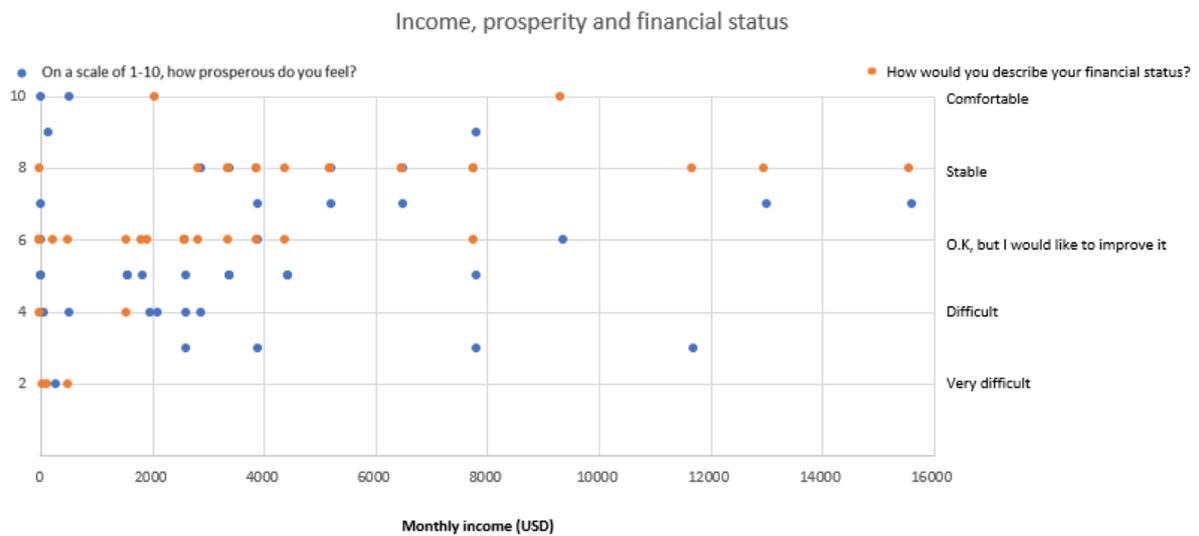
As all of the sample were educated beyond secondary school, the moderation of idealism with higher expectations is not unexpected, but the basic principle that it is good to work is consistent.

Qualitative comment on attitudes to work

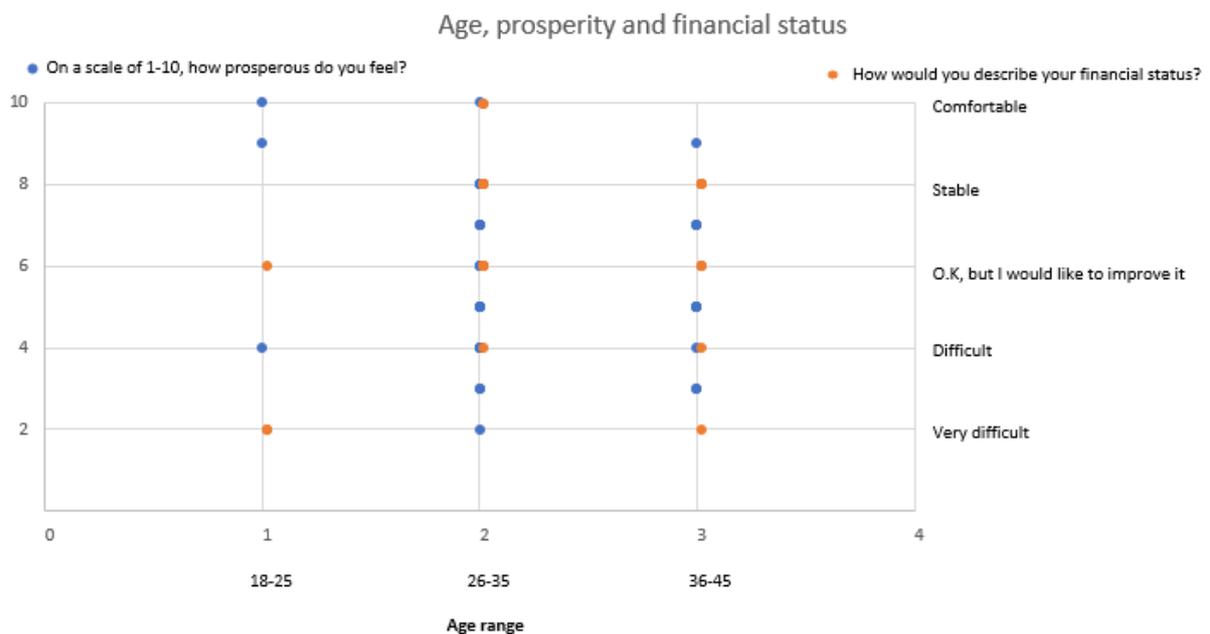
- There is no shame in work. However, as a [female] Gulf citizen, I hope to not see my fellow citizens so desperate and in need that they resort to cleaning the streets. Even though there is no shame in it, it is not a job that offers opportunities to prosper in the long term, and we should wish prosperity for all residents of the country.
- If I studied and worked hard in the best universities and obtained good grades then I deserve to get a good job that suits me
- There is no shame in work, and if a person is in need then they would strive to get what they can from any job or provide a trade or service
- For clarity, governments in the Gulf are responsible for employing citizens due to the rentier economy and the non-interference of the citizen in the political and economic decisions
- There should be monthly benefits provided to job seekers
- Labour laws should encourage local employment without affecting 1. Quality 2. Creating artificial jobs
- Society's perception of rewarding professions is very limited (doctor engineer lawyer accountant etc.) and does not accept other vocations which leads to there not being a market that generates non-traditional jobs and a reliance of jobseekers on specific job in addition to a reluctance by many to working in the private sector

e) Demographic correlations with opinion

I) Prosperity

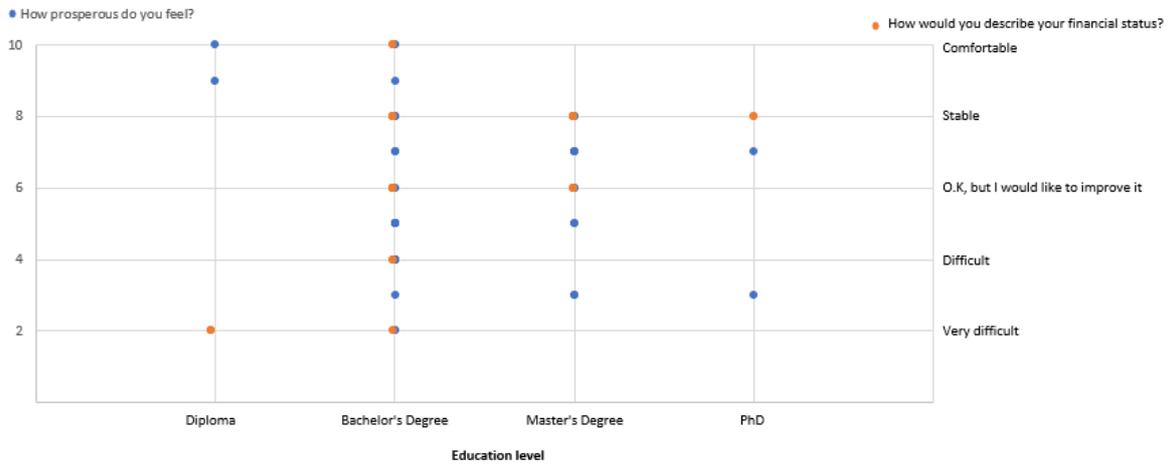


Unsurprisingly, the graph shows that as income increases, respondents report a better financial situation. However, there is no corresponding increase in the broader sense of prosperity. When scaled to match for this graph, most respondents gave more positive answers on their financial status than their prosperity. Those with the lowest incomes felt more prosperous than financially stable.

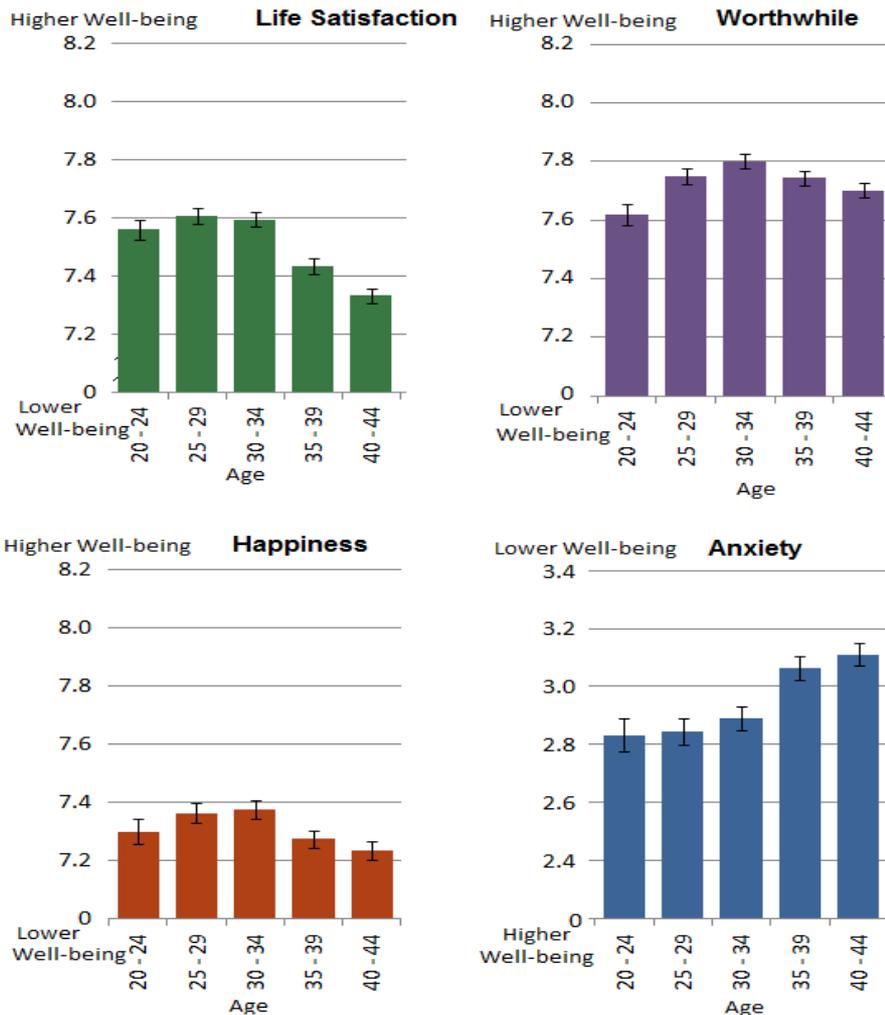


The youngest group seem to correspond exactly with the lowest income. In the two older age groups, there is a wide range of sentiment and no clear correlation of financial stability or prosperity.

Education, prosperity and financial status



The youngest and least financially stable respondents correspond again with the lowest level of higher education. It is not surprising that the respondents with PhDs report good financial stability, and in this very small sample there may be a trend towards greater financial stability with greater education. But all groups, bar the least educated, have a wide range of responses. Aggregating these three tables, the striking observation is of the correlations that do *not* appear:



(Table: ONS, 2016)

Research by the UK's Office of National Statistics shows two trends that make an interesting parallel to this survey. Firstly, the youngest group – 20-24 – had lower indicators of well-being overall, though they also had less anxiety. Secondly, and more strongly identified, was a sharp decline in well-being as respondents approached middle age(ONS, 2016)

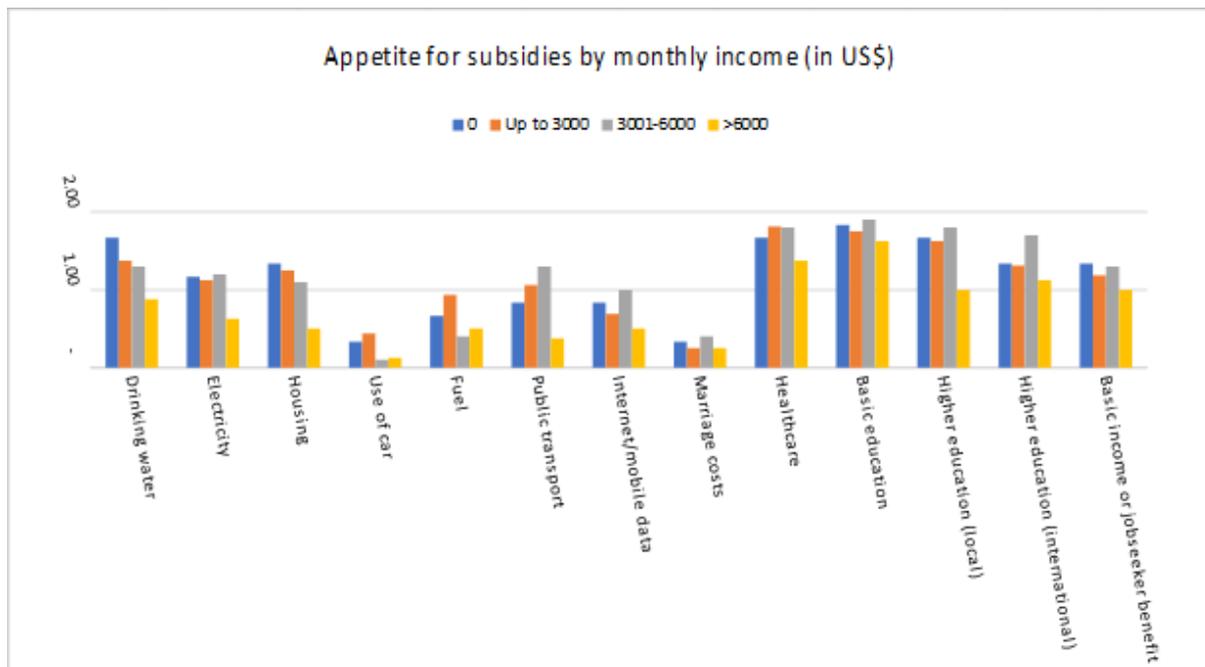
“... those in their middle years may have more demands placed on their time and might struggle to balance work and family commitments. Evidence shows that people are having children later. Therefore, another possible reason for lower scores for the middle age groups could result from the burden caused by having to care for both parents and children at the same time.”(ONS, 2016)

The Oman survey does not show these trends. The youngest report high levels of prosperity even without an income. The older age group do not show a drop in their own feelings of prosperity.

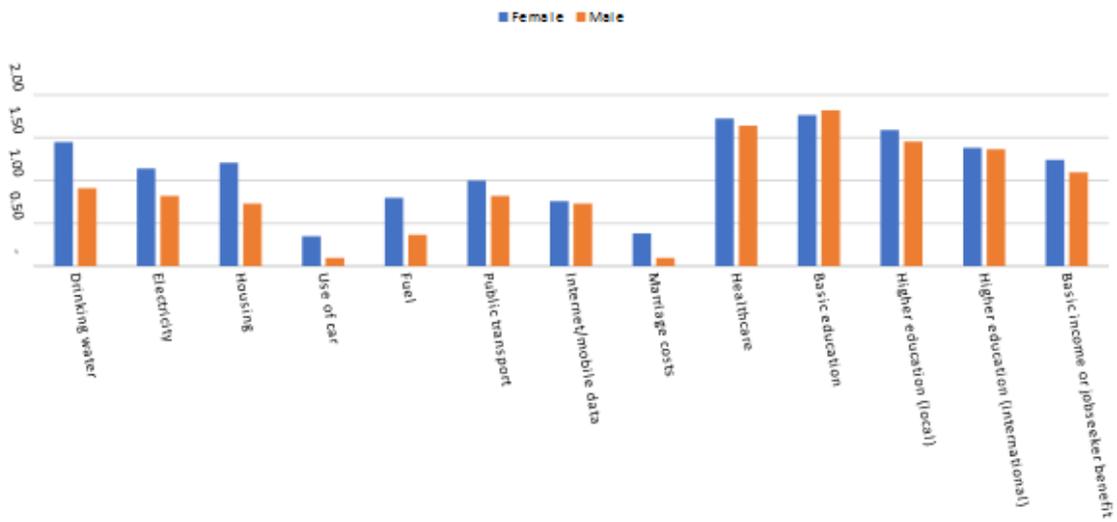
There are caveats to this comparison: the age categories are slightly different, though within a year. The data were collected at different times – the ONS range was 2012-2015, the Oman survey in 2021. And the Oman sample is extremely small, and has not captured a very wide demographic range. But, based on the data we have, the appearance is that in Oman where public services are more generous, the challenges of being young and on a low income, or more mature and with family responsibilities, may be eased. Omanis in these age groups appear to feel more prosperous than their British counterparts.

ii) Public Services

The survey as a whole shows a high appetite in Oman for all kinds of public services. The tables below aggregate the responses to all the public services questions into a quantitative score: “people should pay themselves” scores zero, “government should subsidise” scores one, and “government should pay”, scores two. The average score is then divided by the number of respondents to each question. Most of the questions scored between 0.5 and 1.5; none scored zero.



Appetite for subsidies by gender



These tables show two more clear trends: women have a slightly higher appetite for subsidies than men; and, appetite for subsidies declines with a higher income.

5. CONCLUSIONS FROM THE SURVEY

a) Limitations and comparisons

Oman and the UK are not the same. They have a similar land mass, but otherwise differ in every way: system of government, culture, history, economic development, etc. That does not invalidate the comparison – the intention was to look at a different way of doing things, and learn how that different reality in every day life might correspond to different attitudes.

It would be worthwhile to ask the same survey questions of younger and working-age people in the UK, as an indicator of how culture and public policy have formed their opinions in comparison with Omanis.

The elephant in the room is tax. Without direct personal taxation, it can be argued that every Omani can ask for subsidies because they don't expect to pay for them. However, one comment in the survey gives a clear pragmatic assessment of the social compact, referring to a “rentier economy” in which [jobs] must be provided in exchange for the citizens' passive acceptance of the leadership. Omanis may not pay tax, but they are well aware that their significant natural resources are owned and controlled by the state. The idea of a transaction is still present – the state takes, the state gives. It maybe resources rather than a share of earnings, but the feeling of proprietorship does not seem different.

I) Education

The increasing proportion of private students raises a question as to whether more parents would choose private schools if they were available and/or affordable. We did not make any analysis of the quality of public services on offer.

In retrospect, it would be been interesting to ask whether survey participants had a private or government education, and see how this might have affected their attitudes, earnings, etc. Also whether and how they were able to obtain a scholarship to their institution of choice.

A poor standard of public education and/or just a limited capacity, explain the appetite for international scholarships that might seem far-fetched in the UK. But the comparison remains valid: they want to be educated, highly, and they do not expect to pay.

II) Housing

Oman has a low population density and undeveloped, non-agricultural land is generally owned by the state. Grants for building plots are therefore a low cost option, with the related investment in transport and utilities infrastructure then falling on other ministries. The model of assisting people in building their own houses also has a huge cost in urban sprawl and perhaps environmental impact that is worthy of study. But, although more densely populated, there is evidence that the UK has plenty of suitable room to build more houses. A report by the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) claims that there is available brownfield land (land that is previously built on but now unused or derelict) for the construction of over one million new homes (CPRE, 2020).

No doubt the UK housing market would look very different if the government provided unused land and easy loans for basic housing, instead of sustaining a private rental (and with it “buy-to-let”) market, on such a massive scale. However, it is worth noting that the Omani housing market remains strong, with premium land plots in the capital selling for a million dollars or more (OLX, 2021). As foreigners are unable to buy property in all but a handful of designated developments, the

higher end of the market is unquestionably driven by people – Omani citizens - who could have a house very cheaply if they wished. Therefore, the ubiquitous availability of housing has destroyed neither social aspiration, nor the market.

III) Services and inequality

The survey did not show any sense of class distinctions in Oman. Even taking into account the small and relatively educated sample, the commentary from respondents was notably devoid of any blaming or “othering” of parts of their own society. The message was consistently in favour of entitlement and a dignified life for all citizens. With a majority of the working population made up of foreign migrants, there is perhaps an obvious explanation for this.

However, putting that bigger question aside, it is still worth looking at how inequality among Omani citizens affects their attitudes to state services. The aggregated opinion data on government services showed that women were slightly more demanding of services and subsidies than men, and that the appetite declined slightly as income increased.

The two may correspond as women have a lower average income, not least because they are less likely to reach higher grades in the public sector (NCSI, 2021). But also, “women and girls aged 15+ spend 18.9% of their time on unpaid care and domestic work, compared to 7.9% spent by men “ (UN Women, 2018). Omani subsidies and services may be starting to address this part of the social wage – unpaid work at home. That would be consistent with the principles of UBS envisaged by Percy, Coote et al, etc.

In the UK, a poll showed almost two thirds of Britons wanting more public spending, even if that meant higher taxes (Ipsos MORI, 2018). But, as Orton and Rowlingson (2007) reported, “it is easy for people to say that there should be higher taxes if they believe that the costs of these taxes will be met by others”. Bromley (2003) reported different attitudes to inequality between social/income groups: 74% of the higher earners in her study thought that the gap between rich and poor was too large, against 84% of the lowest earners.

Orton and Rowlingson (2007) and Bromley (2003) were looking at inequality rather than subsidies, and the calculation of the respondents related to their own personal taxation as much as to increases in public services. As noted previously, there are no personal income taxes in Oman as of 2021. The higher earners are less interested in universal support that would benefit the poor the most. But Omani respondents are still broadly in favour of a wide range of generous public services. Perhaps also because they are used to them.

b) Lessons for UBS?

The comparison of education, utilities, housing and employment has demonstrated that Oman has a fundamentally more generous approach to public services. They are not a perfect analogue for UBS, but they are universal, basic, and free at the point of delivery in more cases than the UK. What is clear, and reinforced by the survey, is that providing a social safety net to citizens is expected as part of national identity and culture. All income groups and backgrounds seem to generally believe that everyone should receive the basics. Alongside that is the idea that personal, human dignity and the availability of a decent lifestyle are essential. It is not clear whether the more generous provision is based on this culture, or whether the culture is born of the entitlement. But the in-built presumption that all must have what they need, makes a good reference for UBS.

So what is the impact of this more generous provision on society? Are there negative externalities that might be a cautionary lesson for UBS in the UK?

i. Negative

- The sense of entitlement among citizens is strong. Once in place, citizens assume that they deserve to have the services they need.
- Broad support for public services is not the same as a support for social justice. The wealthier care less than the poor, still. The status of non-citizens is not addressed.
- There is no direct or progressive personal taxation and very limited accountability to elected representatives. This is a long way from the spirit of UBS, where direct citizen involvement in devising and managing services is fundamental.

ii. Positive

- The presence of a better social wage is linked with a higher sense of prosperity, and more consistently across age groups and social classes than in the UK.
- The culture of entitlement – if that is considered pejorative - is paired with a genuine assertion of human dignity. People feel entitled in themselves, but are also sincere in expecting these entitlements for their neighbours.
- Oman demonstrates that broader provision does not create a nation of layabouts. Those surveyed expected to be helped in finding a job, and to have a job that reflected their education and achievements. But, they also expected unanimously to work, and many expected to work below their ideal position if necessary while seeking the best job.
- Along with the aspiration for work, qualitative responses in the survey reference art, expression and creativity. As intended by UBS, Omanis are able to choose to work but feel that they have room to pursue other dreams as well.
- The Omani economy also shows that a well-resourced set of public services can exist alongside aspiration and capitalist gain: the availability of the minimum, even a good minimum, does not discourage the citizen from wanting more. Omanis emphasised financial independence as a measure of success and prosperity, and still sought it. The specific case of the housing market shows a strong sense of personal aspiration even with generous support for the basics. Building a million houses for the homeless and trapped renters would perhaps not be the end of the UK private housing market: even if they were given those home to own.

6. POST SCRIPT: UBS FOR OMAN?

This research has shown indications that having a broader public provision and a culture of meeting basic needs, increases well-being. The sample is small and the opinions subjective, but they are nevertheless consistent: higher feelings of prosperity, greater optimism and a sense of human dignity. All should have the things they need. The research also shows that having a strong sense of social responsibility does not change the more materialistic aspirations of people or a society. Omanis care about money. There is a demand for premium property and consumer goods. Cars are important.

More generous public services are not a mythical socialist Utopia, and they do not lead to a disastrous collapse in capitalist enterprise – or even detract from the desire for a good job. Oman, and the GCC more widely, has all the trappings and problems of a modern capitalist society. But it also gives land and soft loans for housing, free higher education and subsidised utilities. There seems to be room for social responsibility and personal aspiration to exist in one philosophy.

The Sultanate is facing national economic difficulties, even before the Covid-19 pandemic. But, if anything, Oman's recent move to an escalator pricing system for utilities with a free basic amount for most, is getting closer to the UBS ideal. UBS is not simply giving more, but also demonstrably more efficient than what it is replacing – at least in this instance. Subsidies in 2014 reached 11% of the discretionary national budget (Brown, 2017). Fuel cards and a little water and electricity for low-income citizens only – not corporations, the wealthy or migrants – will cost a lot less and impact more. By spending less overall but targeting lower income citizens effectively, the system actually saves the state money, while the proportional benefit is far greater to those recipients. This is an ideal scenario for UBS. “The value delivered by services to individual recipients most often exceeds the cost of the service provision” (Percy et al, 2017).

But there are other arguments for Oman to bring its public policies closer to the UBS model set out by IGP. In the survey, several respondents complained about changes in policy from which they clearly felt detached. One referred to the social compact of a “rentier state” in which political participation was traded away for generous provision. “The rentier government distributes accrued wealth to society through services, social benefit programs, and favorable governmental jobs in exchange for the society’s refrain from obtaining political power” (Kaya et al, 2019). Rather than making a philosophical argument for parliamentary democracy, UBS emphasises the need for local control over local services, addressing need at the point of delivery:

“An important aspect of UBS would be the opportunity it could give to rejuvenate local democracy and local involvement in the design, financing and delivery of local services. Almost all public services are, necessarily, delivered locally, but there is an inevitable tension between national standards and local autonomy and control.... Responsive, effective and accountable local government – with financial autonomy – will be necessary for the practical implementation of UBS.” (Percy et al, 2017)

Oman's oil minister, as far back as 2013, railed against the wastefulness of both subsidies and irresponsible consumption. “What is really destroying us right now is subsidies...in some countries in our region electricity is free and you leave your air conditioning for the whole summer when you go on holiday...our cars are getting bigger, our consumption is getting bigger and the price is almost free. So you need to send a signal to the pockets of the public” (Gulf Times, 2013). Whereas previous subsidies were wasteful, local delivery and accountability through new and traditional representation, could help efficiencies both economic and environmental. The steps to address subsidies are already begun, and local councils are now elected. Traditional local leaders are also in place, and the culture of community “sabla” (sitting/talking area) is already there. With UBS,

“Modern societies can develop flexible and responsive democracy that allows the locus of decision making to move up and down a multi-layered structure” (Percy, 2021).

Oman has an absolute monarchy, with a constitution and an elected assembly that is able to suggest policy initiatives. There is also an appointed assembly and a plenary assembly, but all major decisions require (actual) royal assent. More popular representation has been increasing with the establishment of elected municipal councils in 2015. Elections in 2016 saw a turnout over 40%, hardly exceptional but a respectable level of interest. Incumbency was low, suggesting that the electorate were far from apathetic (Weiner, 2017). Participation in national elections in 2019 was higher at 49%, but with a downward trend (Gulf States Newsletter, 2019). It is ironic that the interest in the national body, which is advisory, remains higher than the more executive municipal bodies. Critics of Oman's limited political participation contend that “in a traditional political culture such as that of Oman, power emanates from the top of the social hierarchy and grows weaker as it moves down” (Al Haj, 2000). Countering this trend and encouraging local engagement would be a positive step in bringing a sense of control to the populace, and making use of existing systems rather than confronting them.

Alongside local elected councils, there is a traditional system of tribal leaders (a “tamima” or simply “sheikh”) who represents tribal interests to the government. He is elected by approbation from within his own tribe. More formally, there is an appointed “wali” who has a status akin to major over a district or town. On a more local scale in turn, an area within the wali's “walaya” can have its own “sheikh of the area”. These positions are salaried, but do not govern significant services. They are a bureaucratic layer charging small fees for something equivalent to notarial services. In a sense, they are a scheme of job creation for traditional local leaders whose authority has been diminished by a more comprehensive central government. It is notable that Oman's Ministry of Interior controls the appointment of these offices, rather than oversee the police or immigration services.

However, they can also play a role in identifying and assessing community needs. It would be ignorant to dismiss the role of these positions, especially outside the major cities. They have a deep-rooted tradition that has been of the most essential practical use in governing local services through history in at least one way: Oman's ancient “falaj” system of irrigation has been locally administered for centuries, allocating needs-based use of a common and priceless water resource for homes and for agriculture. The traditional structures that are now vestigial in the office of the wali or sheikh, alongside the new systems of election, could be revived and reinvigorated to good effect: “Organisation of village life may be viewed as a pyramid of socio-political institutions and cultural values built on an economic base the form of which is determined by environmental, demographic and technological constraints” (Wilkinson, 1980). Wilkinson bemoaned the degradation of these systems of accountability and community sharing in the early years of Oman's modernisation. Moves towards UBS could give them new purpose, and not just in irrigation. It should not be a great stretch of the imagination that local communities could also allocate, even generate, their own power, or share some transport facilities.

Another area of UBS that has not been compared between the two countries, is social care. As in other countries, the burden of social care falls disproportionately on women. But the GCC countries also have their own cultural characteristics that reinforce traditional and patriarchal gender disparities. Oman and the GCC have a paradox in women's education and work: “Women are graduating from university in higher numbers than their male peers, maternal health risks are low, child care and family support services are affordable and plentiful. However, women in the Gulf, particularly citizens, are marginalized, and in some sectors nearly invisible, in the labor force” (Young, 2016).

This phenomenon will be exacerbated as the famously young populations of Oman and the region, begin to age. Birth rates are falling, women are marrying and having children later. As the population bubble begins to age towards (early!) retirement, social care will become an issue. Extended families and migrant domestic workers would usually be responsible, but will there be enough and will they be affordable? Some kind of community social care may be necessary. People are opting for “a smaller family size in order to maintain a reasonable quality of life” and, “the traditional close proximity of living or co-residing within extended family arrangements is declining and expected to decline further “(Khan et al, 2017). As the GCC begin to consider income taxes and balancing increasingly stretched budgets, they will also begin to face the same problems as the UK and other developed economies: will there be enough young, working tax-payers to support the old? Using and developing their existing community structures to coordinate local services could be a great help.

Oman is, albeit by other names, further down the path of UBS than the UK. By applying the UBS principles, Oman might find greater efficiencies that are well suited to its culture, systems and needs. The ideals of UBS are universal, but Oman might be better placed than most to be a leader in the field – and an even better model for the UK in improving public services and social justice.

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APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE TEXT WITH TRANSLATION

Survey: Prosperity and Public Services in the GCC

استبيان: الازدهار والخدمات العامة في دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي

What is this survey for?

This survey is part of a research project at the Institute for Global Prosperity at University College London. We want to understand how people in the GCC perceive their own prosperity, and how they feel about public services.

The Institute for Global Prosperity advocates "universal basic services", a more generous version of public services. The outcomes of this survey could be used as an example for other countries to use.

ما هو الهدف من هذا الاستبيان؟

هذا الاستبيان جزء من مشروع بحثي في المعهد للازدهار الدولي في كلية لندن الجامعية. نسعى من خلاله فهم نظر الانسان الخليجي لمستوى الازدهار الذي يعيشه، وشعوره تجاه الخدمات العامة.

المعهد للازدهار الدولي يدعم مفهوم "الخدمات الأساسية العمومية"، التي لها نطاق أوسع من الخدمات العامة. نتائج هذا السبيان قد تستخدم كمثال تستخدمه دول أخرى.

Why should I do it?

This is an academic project at a leading university. Participation is voluntary. You are invited to help build a picture of how Gulf citizens feel about their lives and how public services can help people. This information can contribute to improving public services around the world.

ما فائدة مشاركتي لهذا الاستطلاع؟

هذا مشروع أكاديمي في جامعة رائدة. المشاركة طوعية تماما. أنت مدعو للمساعدة في تكوين صورة عن شعور مواطني الخليج تجاه حياتهم وكيف يمكن للخدمات العامة أن تساعد الناس. يمكن أن تسهم هذه المعلومات في تحسين الخدمات العامة في جميع أنحاء العالم.

What about my privacy?

We will not collect any personal data about participants and the answers on this form are completely anonymous. The "Survey Monkey" platform is an independent company and we do not receive any electronic data or tracking cookies from them. Your name and location will not be known to us, ever.

ماذا عن خصوصيتي؟

نحن لن نجمع أي بيانات شخصية عن المشاركين، والإجابات في هذا النموذج مجهولة الهوية تماماً. منصة "Survey Monkey" هي شركة مستقلة ولا تتلقى منها أي بيانات إلكترونية أو ملفات تعريف الارتباط التتبعية. لن يكون اسمك وموقعك معروفين لدينا على الإطلاق.

Participant Statement:

"I am a citizen of a GCC country aged 18 years or more" (yes/no)

"I am answering these questions voluntarily and understand that my answers will be combined with others in academic research" (yes/no)

"I understand that I do not have to share my identity and the survey is anonymous" (yes/no)

Please continue only if you have answered "Yes" to all of these questions.

بيان المشارك

" أنا مواطن من إحدى دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي وعمري ١٨ عاماً أو أكثر " (نعم/لا)

" أنا أجيب على هذه الأسئلة طواعية وأفهم أنه سيتم دمج إجاباتي مع إجابات أخرى من خلال البحث الأكاديمي " (نعم/لا)

" أفهم أنه لا يتعين علي مشاركة هويتي وأن الاستبيان يحافظ على مجهولية الهوية " (نعم/لا)

يرجى المتابعة فقط إذا كنت قد أجبت بـ "نعم" على جميع الأسئلة.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Which country are you from?

Bahrain

Kuwait

Qatar

Oman

Saudi Arabia

United Arab Emirates

من أي بلد أنت؟

البحرين

الكويت

قطر

عمان

السعودية

الامارات

What is your gender?

Male

Female

ما هو جنسك؟

نكر

أنثى

How old are you?

18-25

26-35

36-45

46-55

56-65

Over 65

كم عمرك؟

٢٥-١٨

٣٥-٢٦

٤٥-٣٦

٥٥-٤٦

٦٥-٥٦

فوق ال ٦٠

What is your employment status?

Private sector

Public sector

Not working right now

Self employed/own business

Studying only

ما هي حالتك الوظيفية؟

موظف في القطاع الخالص

موظف حكومي

لا أعمل حاليا

ذو مهنة حرة

أدرس

Which kind of area is the home where you spend most time?

In a big town/city

Near a big town/city

Far from any big town/city

ما نوع المنطقة التي فيها مقر منزلك الذي تقضي فيه معظم الوقت؟

في مدينة/بلدة كبيرة

قرية من مدينة/بلدة كبيرة
بعيدة من مدينة/بلدة كبيرة

What is your Education Level?

Partial Schooling
Graduated secondary
Diploma
Bachelor's Degree
Master's Degree
Doctorate

ما هو مستواك التعليمي؟

تعليم مدرسي جزئي
الثانوية العامة
دبلوم
شهادة بكالوريوس
شهادة ماجستير
دكتوراه

What was your Parents' Education Level?

(Father or Mother, please choose the highest)

Partial schooling
Graduated secondary
Diploma
Bachelor's Degree
Master's Degree
Doctorate

ما هو المستوى التعليمي لوالديك؟ (الأب أم الأم. الرجاء اختيار أعلى مستوى)

تعليم مدرسي جزئي
الثانوية العامة
دبلوم
شهادة بكالوريوس
شهادة ماجستير
دكتوراه

Are you single/ /married/ previously married?

هل أنت أعزب/متزوج/متزوج سابقاً

Do you have children? don't want children/intend to have children/have children

هل لديك أطفال؟ لا، ولا رغبة لي في إنجاب الأطفال/ لا، ولكن لي الرغبة في إنجاب الأطفال في المستقبل/نعم لدي أطفال

How would you describe your financial situation? very difficult, difficult, manageable, stable, comfortable

كيف تصف وضعك المالي؟ صعب جداً/صعب/ حسن، لكن أتمنى تحسينه/مستقر/وثير

What is your average monthly income over the last two years, in your own currency? (number)

ما هو متوسط دخلك الشهري خلال العامين الماضيين بعملتك الخاصة؟ (رقم)

How has that changed over the last five years? worse, about the same, better

كيف تغير ذلك خلال السنوات الخمس الماضية؟ ساء/لم يتغير/تحسن

How do you think your income will look in five years' time? worse, about the same, better

كيف تعتقد أن دخلك سيبدو بعد خمس سنوات؟ أسوأ/لن يتغير/أحسن

Who supports your household financially? a family member pays for us/I pay just my personal expenses/I pay the household expenses

من الذي يعول أسرته مالياً؟ أحد أفراد الأسرة/ أنا أدفع مصاريفي الشخصية فقط/ أنا أدفع مصاريف المنزل

"Prosperity" can have different meanings: in a few words, describe what real prosperity would be like for you personally. [open text box for comments, max 100 words]

"الازدهار" له معاني مختلفة: في بضع كلمات، صف كيف يبدو الازدهار الحقيقي بالنسبة لك شخصياً.

By the same meaning you gave above, how prosperous do you feel today on a scale of 1 to 10? [insert scale 1-10]

بنفس المعنى الذي ذكرته أعلاه، ما مدى شعورك بالازدهار اليوم على مقياس من 1 إلى 10؟

By the same meaning you gave above, how prosperous are you now compared to ten years ago? less/about the same/more

بنفس المعنى الذي ذكرته أعلاه، ما مدى ازدهارك الآن مقارنة بعشر سنوات مضت؟ أقل/نفس المستوى/أكثر

How do you think your prosperity will change in the next 5-10 years? worse, about the same, better

كيف تعتقد أن مستوى ازدهارك سيتغير في السنوات الخمس إلى العشر القادمة؟ أقل/نفس المستوى/أكثر

Are you happy with how much you earn? unhappy/not sure/happy

هل أنت راض بالمبلغ الذي تكسبه؟ لا/غير متأكد/نعم

Basic Services

الخدمات الأساسية

Please give your opinion on how the following services should be provided:

يرجى إبداء رأيك حول كيفية تقديم الخدمات التالية:

Drinking water

People should provide for themselves/Government should subsidise/Government should provide free

مياه الشرب

يجب على الناس إعالة أنفسهم/يجب على الحكومة أن تدعم الخدمة/يجب على الحكومة أن توفر الخدمة مجاناً

Electricity

People should provide for themselves/Government should subsidise/Government should provide free

الكهرباء

يجب على الناس إعالة أنفسهم/يجب على الحكومة أن تدعم الخدمة/يجب على الحكومة أن توفر الخدمة مجاناً

Housing

People should provide for themselves/Government should subsidise/Government should provide free

الإسكان

يجب على الناس إعالة أنفسهم/يجب على الحكومة أن تدعم الخدمة/يجب على الحكومة أن توفر الخدمة مجاناً

Use of a car

People should provide for themselves/Government should subsidise/Government should provide free

استخدام مركبة

يجب على الناس إعالة أنفسهم/يجب على الحكومة أن تدعم الخدمة/يجب على الحكومة أن توفر الخدمة مجاناً

Fuel

People should provide for themselves/Government should subsidise/Government should provide free

وقود

يجب على الناس إعالة أنفسهم/يجب على الحكومة أن تدعم الخدمة/يجب على الحكومة أن توفر الخدمة مجاناً

Public transport (buses and trains)

People should provide for themselves/Government should subsidise/Government should provide free

النقل العام (الحافلات والقطارات)
يجب على الناس إعالة أنفسهم/يجب على الحكومة أن تدعم الخدمة/يجب على الحكومة أن توفر الخدمة مجاناً

Internet access/mobile data

People should provide for themselves/Government should subsidise/Government should provide free

توفر الإنترنت/باقات الإنترنت لهواتف الجوال
يجب على الناس إعالة أنفسهم/يجب على الحكومة أن تدعم الخدمة/يجب على الحكومة أن توفر الخدمة مجاناً

Wedding payment (either mahr, or a grant for expenses)

People should provide for themselves/Government should subsidise/Government should provide free

أموال الزواج (المهر أو منحة للمصاريف)
يجب على الناس إعالة أنفسهم/يجب على الحكومة أن تدعم الخدمة/يجب على الحكومة أن توفر الخدمة مجاناً

Healthcare

People should provide for themselves/Government should subsidise/Government should provide free

الرعاية الصحية
يجب على الناس إعالة أنفسهم/يجب على الحكومة أن تدعم الخدمة/يجب على الحكومة أن توفر الخدمة مجاناً

Basic Education (to secondary)

People should provide for themselves/Government should subsidise/Government should provide free

التعليم الأساسي (إلى مستوى الثانوي)
يجب على الناس إعالة أنفسهم/يجب على الحكومة أن تدعم الخدمة/يجب على الحكومة أن توفر الخدمة مجاناً

Higher Education (in your country)

People should provide for themselves/Government should subsidise/Government should provide free

التعليم العالي (في بلدك)
يجب على الناس إعالة أنفسهم/يجب على الحكومة أن تدعم الخدمة/يجب على الحكومة أن توفر الخدمة مجاناً

International Education (scholarships)

People should provide for themselves/Government should subsidise/Government should provide free

التعليم العالي (منح دراسية خارجية)
يجب على الناس إعالة أنفسهم/يجب على الحكومة أن تدعم الخدمة/يجب على الحكومة أن توفر الخدمة مجاناً

Basic Income or Job-Seeker Benefit

People should provide for themselves/Government should subsidise/Government should provide free

الدخل الأساسي أو بدل باحث عن عمل
يجب على الناس إعالة أنفسهم/يجب على الحكومة أن تدعم الخدمة/يجب على الحكومة أن توفر الخدمة مجاناً

Do you have any other thoughts about public services? . [open text box for comments, max 100 words]

هل لديك أي أفكار أخرى حول الخدمات العامة؟

Importance of Work and Earnings:

أهمية العمل والدخل المالي:

The Government should employ any citizen without a job

disagree/not sure/agree

يجب على الحكومة أن توظف أي مواطن بدون عمل
لا أوافق/غير متأكد/أوافق

It is better to wait for a job that suits my qualifications

disagree/not sure/agree

من الأفضل الانتظار للوظيفة التي تناسب مؤهلاتي
لا أوافق/غير متأكد/أوافق

It is better to work in any job than to be without work

disagree/not sure/agree

العمل في أي وظيفة أفضل من أن تكون بلا عمل
لا أوافق/غير متأكد/أوافق

I would work as a labourer or cleaner if that was the only job available

disagree/not sure/agree

سأقوم بالعمل كعامل أو عامل نظافة إذا كانت هذه هي الوظيفة الوحيدة المتاحة
لا أوافق/غير متأكد/أوافق

My family would support me if I could not find a job I like

disagree/not sure/agree

عائلتي ستدعمني إذا لم أجد وظيفة أحبها
لا أوافق/غير متأكد/أوافق

It is something embarrassing to be without a job

disagree/not sure/agree

إنه لأمر محرج أن تكون بدون عمل
لا أوافق/غير متأكد/أوافق

Some jobs are not suitable for citizens

disagree/not sure/agree

بعض الوظائف غير مناسبة للمواطنين
لا أوافق/غير متأكد/أوافق

I am proud of the job I have

disagree/not sure/agree

أنا فخور بالوظيفة التي أمتلكها
لا أوافق/غير متأكد/أوافق

My family have supported me while I wait for a job

disagree/not sure/agree

لقد دعمتني عائلتي بينما أنتظر وظيفة
لا أوافق/غير متأكد/أوافق

It is hard to get married without a job

disagree/not sure/agree

من الصعب الزواج بدون عمل
لا أوافق/غير متأكد/أوافق

I would not marry someone who does not have a job

disagree/not sure/agree

لن أتقبل الزواج من شخص ليس لديه عمل
لا أوافق/غير متأكد/أوافق

It is important to have a car less than five years old

disagree/not sure/agree

من المهم أن يكون لديك سيارة لا يزيد عمرها عن خمس سنوات
لا أوافق/غير متأكد/أوافق

It is important to build your own house

disagree/not sure/agree

من المهم بناء منزل الخاص
لا أوافق/غير متأكد/أوافق

It is important that family and friends know you are successful in work

disagree/not sure/agree

من المهم أن يعلم أفراد العائلة والأصدقاء أنك ناجح في العمل
لا أوافق/غير متأكد/أوافق

It is important to have a healthy lifestyle

disagree/not sure/agree

من المهم أن يكون لديك أسلوب حياة صحي
لا أوافق/غير متأكد/أوافق

Do you have any other thoughts about work? [open text box for comments, max 100 words]

هل لديك أي أفكار أخرى حول العمل؟

Thank you for your time! You can now see the results of the survey so far!

شكرا لك على وقتك! يمكنك الآن مشاهدة نتائج الاستبيان!