



Connecting
Cultures



Ten Year Social Impact Report
2004-2014

2004-2014 Welcome



The most important question anyone can ask us is 'does what you do on Connecting Cultures actually make a difference for the better'? This is a question that is simple to ask, but extremely complicated to answer.

The days we spend in the desert each year with such exceptional young people leave us inspired, and confident that despite the all-pervading atmosphere of 'doom and gloom', the future is in safe, capable and informed hands.

We believe that what we do here in Oman does make a positive difference. In this report we reflect on our first ten years, and share evidence with you that we hope helps demonstrate our effectiveness.

Mark Evans

Founder – Connecting Cultures



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The University of the Desert - *Our Approach*

As you will see on the front cover of this report, the logo of Connecting Cultures shows bodies sitting around a fire. This scene has its origins in the classic book 'The Seven Pillars of Wisdom', by TE Lawrence (of Arabia), in which he described the fireplace as the University of the Desert, where stories are told, news is exchanged and disputes are resolved. It embraces the atmosphere of constructive intercultural dialogue that takes place on a five day Connecting Cultures course at The University of the Desert here in Oman.

Working in close partnership with the Oman National Commission to UNESCO, and with support and funding from the Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science in Muscat, and the MBI Al Jaber Foundation in London, each winter we run three, five day journeys into the desert for 54 emerging leaders from European and Arab nations.

The people we seek to take part on a course are referred to as young opinion formers, young people who have the capacity to influence others in the future, and who ensure that the lessons learned on a Connecting Cultures journey in time reach out to a much greater audience.

Oman is the perfect home for our desert debates, and wild places, such as the desert, are key to the Connecting Cultures programme. With no access to showers,

toilets or mobile phones, the young people are able to engage in focused and uninterrupted dialogue over five days, a much more powerful learning environment than any hotel based conference, workshop or internet forum can ever produce. There are no doors to hide behind; defence mechanisms and facades gradually ease as trust grows. Stories are told, secrets revealed and pains are shared, encouraged by the trust developed through the cooperation required on a shared journey. The end of a journey is always a very emotional experience for all.

Each day involves working as a team to overcome challenges, and travelling on foot or with camel through the sands of Oman. The night is spent sleeping in small tents, or under the stars around the fire. The lunch-breaks and evenings provide opportunity for intensive debate, sensitively facilitated by Outward Bound Oman instructors, such as identifying shared values, thinking about how one's own culture might be perceived by others, identifying the causes of and solutions to cultural misunderstanding, and, most importantly, identifying what our responsibilities are in society when we all return home.

The end of the Connecting Cultures experience is only the beginning of the real journey that follows.

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2004-2014 Fast Facts

17

desert journeys for young opinion formers from the Arab and Western world since 2004

Connecting cultures was a unique learning school that provided me the perfect opportunity to make up my mind about where I stand at this moment and which way to follow to become who I want to be. The beautiful journey we shared provided me a mirror. I learned that I am getting so many possibilities to step up and make a difference. I now feel I have a certain kind of obligation to really do so. I'm absolutely sure that the end of the experience is the start of change in a positive way.

Rachida Abdellaoui – Morocco

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Twelve innovative, downloadable lesson plans for teachers with a cultural focus designed by EDEX-CEL, one of Europe's leading examinations group, can be found on www.university-ofthedesert.com

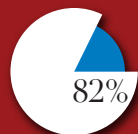
275 young opinion formers from 34 nations have attended the University of the Desert since 2004...



As a result of their Connecting Cultures course



were more aware of similarities between their own culture and others



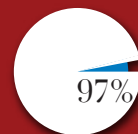
were more aware of how other people might view my own culture



stated that their attitude to other cultures had changed



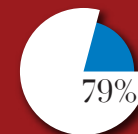
were more aware of the causes of and solutions to cultural misunderstanding



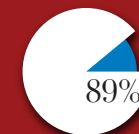
felt more inspired to go out and do something to make a positive difference in society



felt they had valuable time to consider and develop their core values



felt more positive about the future of society



felt they were now more able to work with people from other cultures more effectively than before



Were more aware of their responsibility to care for the environment and wild places

*...Connecting Cultures cited as a leading civil society initiative by
United Nations Alliance Of Civilisations in Madrid in 2008 ...*

Voices of support for Connecting Cultures



Everyday across the world UNESCO is working to promote respect and mutual understanding between societies and cultures. This is why Connecting Cultures is so relevant to strengthen the bonds between young women and men through inter-cultural dialogue. This is an important contribution to the international decade for the rapprochement of cultures 2013 – 2022 that UNESCO is leading, and I am pleased this initiative has received support from The Power of Peace Network. I wish to thank the Sultanate of Oman

for this initiative promoting dialogue and mutual understanding between young people from across the world, through short journeys into the desert of Oman. This is an initiative for peace to strengthen the ties of our single humanity.

Irina Bokova Director General - UNESCO

Connecting Cultures is an initiative of which we are immensely proud, and is one of several programmes organised by Oman's National Commission that contributes to the ideals of UNESCO and UNAOC. This report provides information not only on how the courses operate here in Oman, but more importantly it highlights the impact they have on the young people who have had the opportunity to participate in the courses. I would like to thank our fellow National Commission

offices and other partners for the significant part they play in ensuring that Euro-Arab intercultural dialogue takes place amongst our future leaders at a grassroots level here in Oman.

Her Excellency Dr. Madiha Al Shaibani, Minister of Education, Oman

The MBI Al Jaber Foundation has supported the Connecting Cultures programme from its beginning, and we have watched it grow from young boys facing the challenge of the Arctic wastes to the girls and boys learning about each other's cultures in the vast deserts of Oman.

The programme has grown and changed, but we have continued to be proud supporters since it embodies the values which we consider important, not only for the Middle East, but for the wider world. Together we are building bridges between cultures, and coming together to learn from each other through education and dialogue. The young people who have benefitted from our Foundation's scholarship programmes, and Connecting Cultures' journeys, will be ambassadors for mutual respect and understanding, and help us achieve a more tolerant and peaceful world.

Sheikh Mohamed Bin Isa Al Jaber Founder and Patron of the MBI Al Jaber Foundation





2004-2014 Promoting Euro- Arab Dialogue amongst young people

Since foundation in 2004, 275 young opinion formers from 34 nations have attended the University of the Desert here in Oman. To maximise our footprint, and to ensure as many people as possible are able to engage in intercultural dialogue and debate, all participants sign a pledge to deliver a presentation to a school, college or university before they come to Oman, and once they return home.



Norway

Lillestrøm videregående in Norway

I gave my second Connecting Cultures presentation at Lillestrøm videregående on the 16th of December. I was still in very high spirits from our journey so I was very excited to give this presentation. The group I was presenting to was a bit larger this time as some of the students had their mock exams last time, so my audience consisted of 30 students. I was also very lucky that the teacher let me have the whole lesson, so I had an hour and a half for my presentation. I started off with an introduction to how the Connecting Cultures project was formed, and about our expedition and the group. I then led them through our journey day by day, starting with a short introduction of Oman and the Bedouin culture, and bringing up the discussions we had through our journey.

Presentation in Iraq

I feel very happy after finishing my presentation successfully; I've never ever had such a purely interactive day. I did my presentation at Al-Markazia High School in Baghdad (one of the best and famous high schools in my city) for about 50 students aged 17 to 19 years old. I was especially excited to do my presentation of Connecting Cultures in this school because Al-Markazia was previously my high school. Both the students and teachers welcomed me warmly; we ran over time due to the enthusiasm and very positive atmosphere.



Iraq

Oman

Defining culture in Muscat, Oman

I held a presentation on the 21st of January at German University of Technology in Muscat Oman regarding the Connecting Cultures programme, and during my presentation, defining culture was a key topic to discuss about when Taif Al Bassam stated "Culture is the set of shared beliefs, ideas and customs between group of people at a set location" supported with " Culture is complex and vibrant and always changing and developing" stated by Maryam Al Balushi....'





Divan of Royal Court
Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science



Our Key Partners

The University of the Desert would not exist without several key organisations who believe in what we do, and whose support has enabled the programme to grow so effectively over the past ten years

The Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science

The SQCC was set up to promote the understanding of the culture and heritage of Oman. It was established in 2005 to provide educational resources and outreach programmes that build a greater public understanding and awareness about Oman and other nations of the gulf region. Thanks to the continued support of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos' government, through the Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science in Muscat we are now able to run three courses in Oman each winter.

The MBI Al Jaber Foundation

The MBI Al Jaber Foundation focuses on educational and cultural projects and forging partnerships to promote better understanding between the peoples of the Middle East and the wider world. Through its many activities, including a long-standing scholarship programme, the Foundation strives to bring people together to create respect and awareness of one another's cultures. The MBI Al Jaber Foundation has supported Connecting Cultures since 2005.

The Oman National Commission to UNESCO

Mohammed Al Yaqoubi and Amna Al Balushi and their hard working staff at the Oman National Commission for Education, Culture and Science are an integral and key part of the Connecting Cultures team. They liaise with UNESCO, ISESCO,

ALECSO and other National Commissions in Europe and the Arab states, and help identify and select the young participants, in addition to arranging visas to make the arrival as smooth as possible for the young people. This is a real partnership without which Connecting Cultures could not function.

The Ministry of Education, Oman

The Ministry of Education (MOE) is the governmental body in the Sultanate of Oman responsible for the educational system preceding university education (which is supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education). The MOE has been instrumental in supporting Connecting Cultures in Oman, by providing the channels through which to communicate with Omani schools, and select the young people who will represent Oman as the host nation.

Outward Bound Oman

Established in 1941, Outward Bound is the global leader in experiential education. Set up to use the outdoors to challenge and develop the skills of young people throughout Oman, and beyond, Outward Bound Oman/Tahaddi is the first and only Outward Bound school in the Arabic speaking world. It works in close partnership with the Connecting Cultures programme; courses are delivered and facilitated by the hard working Outward Bound Oman staff.

Impact – *does it make a difference?*

In addition to trying to measure the short term learning outcomes at the end of a course, we contact our alumni several years later to try and identify the long term impact of the experience. This is what some of them had to say ...



I can say, quite simply, that Connecting Cultures taught me that we are all the same, and no matter where you are from, or what ever your religion, we are all humans in the end of the day. So here I am, almost one and a half years after Connecting Cultures, and I don't what I would have done if I wasn't in this project. It just gave me the power that I needed to move on in my life, and I know now that I am able to do more that I can imagine. Now, I am trying to help my community as much as I can so they can have an idea of what I have learned in Connecting Cultures, and I hope that I will be able to share my ideas and my experience with the world.

Hamzeh Wael – Jordan

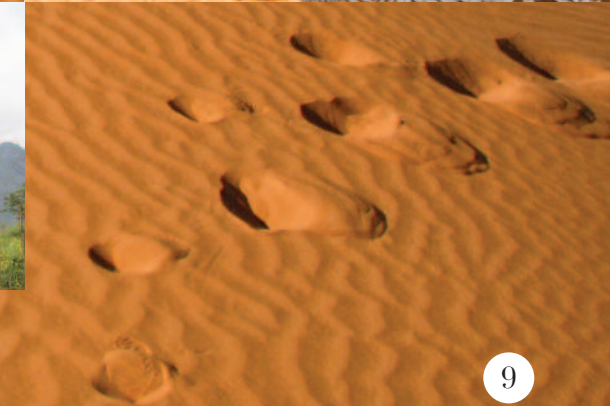
The impact of Connecting Cultures on me has been both unquantifiable and difficult to put into words. It materially impacted my life through altering my plans for study and employment. It provided the inspiration for a new nuance in my interests and hobbies, it increased my engagement with debates and issues from different parts of the world, it widened and diversified my friendship group, and it gave me a much needed confidence in my ability to challenge myself, to articulate myself to others, to examine and develop my own perspectives and to contribute to debates and discussions.

Gemma Turnbull – UK



As someone who has had the privilege to participate in a CC expedition I can tell you that the aims and objectives of the program are not only noble but they are remarkably effective. The 5 days of deep dialogue with youths of different backgrounds, faiths and cultures was a life-changing experience, one that has colored and informed my personal and professional choices since, and to an extent that no other course would have been able to. Given the unique conditions you cannot help but build a bond with those sharing the same challenging yet rewarding experience.

Aisha Al Kharusi - Oman



Outcomes – *sharing the experience...*

According to ASDAA Public Relations in UAE, our 2008 journeys had an estimated media reach of 28 million people within the Middle East region, and coverage on BBC News on-line has carried news of the University of the Desert to a global audience on several occasions. Our participants have appeared on prime time TV in Jordan, Estonia and Oman, and some, like Domhnall O'Sullivan from Ireland, have written about their experience; the article below appeared in 'Your Middle East' in January 2014.

The Butterfly Effect: Euro-Arab Dialogue in the Omani Desert

What future is there for the relationship between Europe and the Arab world? Can small gatherings of young people lead to real changes in the corridors of power? Big questions indeed, yet grassroots might be the way to answer them.

Much current commentary focusing on the Arab world presents a bleak picture. The carnage in Syria shows no sign of abating, with divisions inside the rebel movements the latest indication of Arab disintegration. Lebanon, on edge at the best of times, is dangerously close to its own Syria-inspired civil strife. Egypt's path to sustainable democracy remains shaky, while violence in certain parts of Iraq has hit levels not seen in several years.

As for the relations of the Arab world with the West, and with Europe in particular, the outlook is complicated. If pre-Arab Spring philosophies were morally suspect but politically simple (tolerate an autocratic Middle East for the sake of stability) and post-revolution ideology offered glimmers of hope (dialogue and acceptance of democratically elected Islamist parties), the current situation is one of perplexity. Who should the EU support in the vacillating confusion of Egypt, Libya and Syria? How can Europeans understand the aspirations of the Arab peoples if these peoples seemingly keep changing their mind? Is it worth making the effort to understand or should we revert to pre-Arab awakening approaches?

Happily, at the human level certain initiatives are still taking place which aim to bridge the gulf between cultures. I have just returned from the Sharqiya Sands in Eastern Oman, where for five intense and inspiring days, food, tents and ideas were shared by 17 youths from across Europe and the Arab world. The Connecting Cultures

programme, organised by the global educational organisation Outward Bound, brought together future political and social leaders from nine European and six Arab nations with the goal of increasing mutual understanding and finding shared values.

It worked. From the moment the group met in Muscat, through the sometimes physical journey through the Omani desert, until the final send-off after Mutrah Souq, the atmosphere was not one of distrust but one of unqualified openness, respect and curiosity about the others.

Exchanging views on pressing issues around an evening campfire brought the realisation that although different opinions and stereotypes persist, the overall goal of peaceful coexistence remains the same for all. Pausing a game of rugby for Islamic prayers demonstrated the pervasiveness of religion for many among us; yet the prompt restart post-prayer showed that religion is just one part of a multifaceted and much broader daily existence. Pitching tents together and sharing personal space hammered home that idiots and extremists exist in every country and every culture - what matters is the human, not his nationality or cultural background.

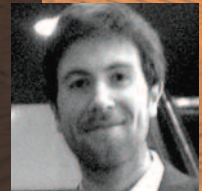
Each of the participants flew home deeply moved and inspired by the experience, with an increased understanding of each other and of our common heritage, a heightened sensibility regarding the vicissitudes of cultural stereotyping and misunderstanding, and a newfound love for the hospitality and natural beauty of Oman.

But is this enough? Will the lessons learned by 54 youths (there are 3 such trips annually) eventually "trickle-up" to affect the mentalities in the corridors of power or to broaden the often blinkered horizons

of mainstream media? How can the majority of the populations of Europe and the Arab world - who do not have access to the luxurious opportunities of cultural exchange programmes - be persuaded that their neighbour is not an unassailable and unknowable stranger?

This is an unanswerable question. The factors which play upon cultural misunderstandings - and ultimately, stereotypes - are numerous, intertwined and often unsolvable. History plays a part. Human nature, constantly searching for simplicity, for black-and-white characterisations in order to understand the world, can also naturally tend towards subjectivity. Media is shaped both by history and humans, and as such cannot ever be free of bias, as much as it may try. Education, perhaps the most promising solution to cultural misunderstanding, simply cannot provide an intellectual overview of every world affair; especially to young minds naturally more attracted to their immediate surroundings.

But, as a starting point for change, programmes such as Connecting Cultures are the most promising initiatives we have. As Europe managed to socialize a generation of young citizens through free movement and the Erasmus initiative, face-to-face contact is key to breaking down barriers. And as we return home more enlightened, we take our ideas with us, influencing countless more in our native countries through the butterfly effect of socialisation. Despite what the history books tell us about glorious revolutions and devastating wars, the most profound changes in human history have been incremental; and the incremental change which begins with a Palestinian and a Briton sharing a joke around a desert campfire finishes in the future handshakes of world leaders.



Domhnall O'Sullivan
Domhnall holds a MA in EU International Relations and Diplomacy from the College of Europe, Bruges. He is a researcher specializing in MENA issues and will be based in Beirut from February 2014.

Day 1 - A wonderfully talented team from 14 nations arrive in the desert

Despite the storms in Europe, and car bombs in Yemen, our team of inspirational young people has arrived safely in the desert. Today they have been doing various exercises designed to help get to know each other as quickly as possible, and they have just arrived after a quick 4km walk through the sands to our camp location for the night. Our camels arrive tomorrow!

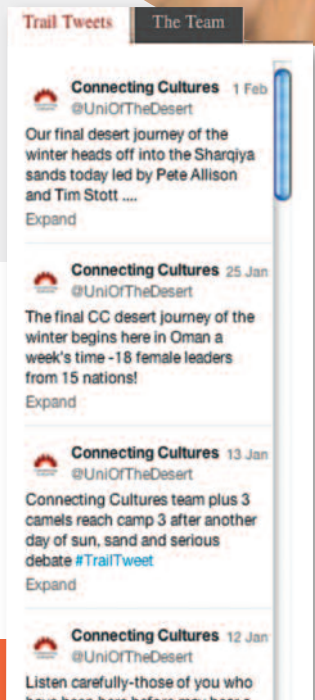
Day 2 - First encounter with camels and the discussions begin in earnest

The team's first full day in the desert kicked off at 06:30, and those still groggy from long flights were soon heartened to see a pot of Nutella waiting for them at breakfast, along with fruit, corn flakes and coffee. Though the team had got ready for breakfast quickly, the walking was slightly delayed by the girls taking a photo opportunity with the 3 camels that joined us this morning, but we were soon underway.



*The Digital Campfire
using social media to
share the experience...*

Whilst the course participants have no access to their own mobile phones for the duration of the journey, we do use technology briefly at the end of each day to communicate and share our progress and experiences via social media such as Twitter and Facebook, and 'Trail Notes', a short daily blog, so enabling others to join us around the campfire ...



Day 3: Riding the dunes

A combination of Southerly winds and sand that had been cooling rapidly overnight brought a start to the day that some of the team may not have expected from the desert: a thick blanket of fog and some very wet sand, sleeping bags and tents! After enjoying breakfast served up from the back of the support vehicle, and a quick photo opportunity in the morning mist, the fog soon gave way to a searing heat that almost invariably follows a wet morning.



**Connecting
Cultures**

"This journey has made me see the real faces and voices of Middle East people, and I can say right now that they're quite different to the news about this region that we watch in our western media."

Santiago Lopez Lozana – Spain

Ten Year Social Impact Report *2004-2014*

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