

Recognition of Bahrain's National Qualifications Framework in the Wider World

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Abstract

Purpose: The focus of this research is on the experience of Bahrain's National Qualifications Framework (NQF) over the last decade and how it has related – and could relate – to the wider world. The three dimensions of this research are: (1) how the application of the framework can best facilitate recognition internationally and locally of the graduates of the kingdom's universities and training institutions; (2) the key principles, standards and processes that enable such recognition; and (3) how the recognition can be sustained.

Methodology: A qualitative interpretivist case study method has been adopted.

Findings: The research identifies key challenges encountered by higher education and training institutions in implementing the NQF requirements and the impact of the implementation on learning and teaching processes.

Originality/value: The lessons learned in implementing national qualifications frameworks worldwide have been examined and highlighted in the interests of supporting and improving the Bahraini experience.

Introduction

The questions underpinning this research paper have been:

1. How can the application of Bahrain's National Qualifications Framework (NQF) best facilitate recognition internationally and locally of the graduates of the kingdom's universities and training institutions?
2. What are the key principles, standards and processes that enable such recognition?
3. How can the recognition be sustained over the coming years?

In addressing the questions, there is reference to the relatively long history of education and training in Bahrain; the recent evolution of the kingdom's qualifications framework and its underlying principles, standards, and processes; existing international and regional relationships that are of

significance; networking initiatives; and impacts of the framework development on teachers and learners. There are concluding thoughts on what is known, what is yet to be known, and what should be.

Research Methodology

A qualitative interpretivist case study method was adopted. As indicated by Stake (2010), characteristics of qualitative research are *interpretivist* in that there is a focus on the meanings of human affairs as seen from different perspectives and, as such, the researchers are comfortable with multiple meanings and a respect for intuition. Other characteristics, applicable to the research underlying this paper, are that it is *experiential*, being empirical and field-oriented, *situational*, taking account of the uniqueness of the context, and *personalistic*, being empathetic in its understanding of human perception.

The qualitative data was extracted from documents, observations, interviews, discussion groups, and dialogue with experts. Surveys and group and individual interviews were undertaken to gather the views of university lecturers and other facilitators of learning as well as the perceptions of graduates. Analysis and synthesis of the data was informed by a review of relevant literature and ongoing reflections of the researchers during the initiating and ongoing stages of Bahrain's NQF development.

Background to Education and Training in Bahrain

The kingdom has the oldest public education system in the Gulf region (comprising the countries of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Oman together with Bahrain). The first modern school was established in Bahrain in 1919 – exactly 100 years ago – and the first girls' school in 1928 (Oxford Business Group, 2017).

Gulf Technical College was established in 1968 as the first tertiary education institution. In 1984 Gulf Technical College was combined with several other institutions to form the University of Bahrain, now the largest higher education institution in the country. It includes Bahrain Teachers College.

Arabian Gulf University opened in 1979, being co-owned by all states of the Gulf region and is accessible to any Gulf national. It has a French Arabian Business School established in 2007 in partnership with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Bahrain Training Institute (BTI), with recognition of the need for vocational training and development, was established by the Ministry of Labour in August 1992.

Ahlia University, Gulf University and The Kingdom University opened in Bahrain in 2001 as the first private universities. The University College of Bahrain, which had an early collaboration with McMaster University, Canada, opened in 2002. AMA International University, being a branch of the

Philippine-based AMA Computer University, also opened in 2002. Applied Science University opened in 2004. Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland Medical University Bahrain, with faculty predominantly from Ireland and the UK, also opened in 2004. The Royal University for Women was founded in 2005. It is “the first private, purpose-built, international university in the country that is dedicated solely to educating the women of Bahrain” (Royal University for Women, www.ruw.edu.bh). It has academic input from Middlesex University, United Kingdom, and McGill University, Canada. Bahrain Polytechnic – a public institution like the University of Bahrain and Arabian Gulf University – opened in 2008. It was established by a project team from New Zealand in collaboration with Bahrain’s Economic Development Board and has a clear focus on student-centred education together with problem-based learning. British University of Bahrain, 2018, working in partnership with the University of Salford, Manchester, UK, is the newest university to be established.

“This wave of higher education institution (HEI) development, starting at the turn of the 21st century can be linked to the Kingdom’s attempts to transition to a more knowledge-based economy.” (Oxford Business Group, 2017). Also riding the wave have been private training institutes. There were 20 or so at the turn of the century and the number is now approaching 100.

Bahrain is committed to be the preferred education hub for the Gulf region. To do this, the kingdom recognises it must ensure that public and private education has high standards and qualifications that are recognised internationally. The BQA was established in 2008; being part of the National Education Reform Project, encapsulated in Bahrain’s Economic Vision 2030. The main aim of the project is “to fundamentally improve the services provided in education and vocational training in the Kingdom of Bahrain, which will in turn ensure the professional advancement of Bahrain’s human capital” (Education and Training Quality Authority, 2019). BQA is tasked with the responsibility of establishing a quality assurance system with standards that all education institutions in Bahrain are required to achieve. The quality standards are rigorously enforced, leading to significant improvements for most institutions (Hasan & Alhayki, 2018).

Higher education in Bahrain aims, through the National Higher Education Strategy and National Research Strategy, to “strengthen the links between higher education and business and industrial sectors to drive innovation, foster collaboration, create and identify research needs and to close the gap between employment and higher education regarding curriculum and skills” (Higher Education Council, 2018).

There is a clear focus on further as well as higher education: “Vocational training is playing an important role as the Government pushes for greater Bahrainisation of the workforce. While the Government levies a monthly charge on employers for every expatriate worker, which goes to fund

training for Bahrainis, greater skills training is required to get Bahrainis ready for jobs currently occupied expats.” (Oxford Business Group, 2017).

Evolution of Bahrain’s NQF

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was launched in October 2014 by the National Authority of Qualifications and Quality Assurance for Education and Training (now renamed the Education and Training Quality Authority and commonly known as BQA). The developmental stage of the NQF began in 2009 with the assistance of expert advice from the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). The commitment was to develop a framework that would meet the culture and context of Bahrain, as well as comply with international framework standards.

Country culture and context is a significant factor to consider when developing a qualifications framework. It is inappropriate to import a ‘one model fits all’ approach. There do need to be similarities, but allowance should be given to meet local country needs and to fit within their context. Bahrain has been fully committed to developing an NQF and has provided excellent support in terms of finance and human resources. Consultants were able to suggest various models, methodologies, policies and systems for Bahrain to select or adapt to what was thought best to suit the needs. A major challenge, at the commencement, was that knowledge of qualifications frameworks was understandably limited and decisions were taken which in time may change as stakeholders gain operational experience.

In the initial development of Bahrain’s NQF, several questions warranted in-depth dialogue and decision-making. Among the most-discussed were those that follow.

Should there be one qualifications framework or several? Some countries have separate frameworks for vocational education and training (VET) and higher education. In other countries where there is significant development, decisions are made to enable the various entities to establish their own frameworks, as in Scotland, where the development was essentially independent of the rest of the UK but with input from VET competences developed in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a single framework is being developed but some of the devolved areas in the country would prefer to establish frameworks separately, which is challenging the current development. It is possible to develop more than one framework in a country, but administrative costs rise as multiple frameworks are developed and the consequential need for referencing can prove a very expensive undertaking. Ideally, one qualifications framework is preferable.

How many levels should the framework have? This varies across countries. Some have eight, some six, some ten, and some other possibilities. Whatever levels are selected, they need to cover the range of

qualifications being considered, and whether it includes secondary as well as post-secondary qualifications. Bahrain established a ten-level framework with entrance at the secondary level.

What descriptors should be established for each framework level? This is not an easy process, particularly in terms of covering all qualification levels and different types of qualifications. This is one of the reasons why some countries have developed separate frameworks for VET (e.g. Kenya, Botswana, and Mozambique). It has been found important, too, to understand that descriptors are a guide and not elements of a precise science. Application of the descriptors becomes easier over time as users become familiar with the levels. In Bahrain, the descriptors were developed first in English and then in Arabic. Descriptors by their nature will need to be adjusted over time as experience of their use is gained.

What are the common criteria needed to place qualifications on a framework? This typically requires substantial training in how to provide intended learning outcomes (ILOs) for courses/modules and then in how to ensure that criterion-based assessment is used to cover the ILOs developed.

Should the systems and processes of the framework be centralized? In Bahrain it was agreed that this should be the case. As Bahrain is a small country, this was a logical choice. It enables quality alignment in an educational and training system that comprises state and private institutions. Only Bahrain-developed qualifications are being placed on the NQF but Bahrain undertakes quality inspections of all institutions with a presence in the country, many of which offer external qualifications, to ensure that they are fit for purpose. It expects the qualification owner (whomsoever it might be from another country) to conduct verification of the standards of their awards. Ideally, foreign qualifications will in the future be on the respective frameworks of the countries and will be able to be aligned to Bahrain.

What should be the value of a credit of learning? There has been agreement in Bahrain that 10 notional learning hours equate to one credit. Several universities in the country were using different credit systems, such as those prevalent in Europe or America. These institutions were not required to change their own credit system but, when applying for qualification placement on the Bahrain NQF, would convert their course/module credits to the agreed 10:1. However, for convenience, several institutions have now made the change to the credit system of 10:1.

How effective is verification? Once 'listed' – i.e. fit for purpose for conducting the educational processes professionally and appropriately – institutions in Bahrain map their qualifications by providing justification for level and credit before sending an application to BQA for verification. This is to ensure that they have followed procedures and provided information correctly. A verification panel (which is a standing committee of BQA) considers all qualification applications. Is the panel overly eager to find fault at this stage of the development of Bahrain's framework? Reports from applicants

suggest there is a tendency for this to happen. Perhaps as more experience is gained, the panel will have more confidence in simply confirming that processes have been correctly followed and will leave the mapping responsibility to the qualification owner.

How is conflict of interest avoided during the validation process? Once an applicant has everything in order, a qualification is validated by an independent panel. Because of the mixed and competitive nature of the Bahrain education and training system, it was considered important to ensure that there is no conflict of interest pertaining to a validation panel. In several other countries, validation is established by the owner of the qualification, an advantage being that it keeps central costs low. Consultants recommended that this be the case in Bahrain and that a member of BQA would have an observer status to ensure that everything was conducted correctly and met recommended procedures. Bahrain believed that it would be best for BQA to manage all procedures, which would ensure a tight control on standards despite being relatively expensive. In many other countries, validation would be conducted before submission to the framework authority. This would put the onus on equivalent peers to ensure that qualifications are fit for purpose and with appropriate levels and credits. Many universities use benchmarking as a method to ensure that their qualifications are meeting equivalent international standards.

What about currency? Validated qualifications are placed on Bahrain's NQF for an agreed time limit which, once reached, requires the qualification to be reviewed and resubmitted for consideration. The time limit varies depending on the qualification, the length of study time and the changing nature of the subject/knowledge/skill requirements.

Agreement on Principles, Standards and Processes

As has been the case in countries such as Scotland, England, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand, it was agreed that Bahrain's framework principles should focus on consistency and transparency, security and confidentiality, an appropriate code of conduct to encompass all activities, and capacity building. For example, in relation to the last-mentioned: "The [authority] is devoted to continuously developing its staff and training all experts involved in evaluating applications, ensuring that they are competent and equipped to carry out their roles and responsibilities" (Education and Training Quality Authority, 2017, p. 17).

Importantly, in establishing a network of frameworks with the wider world there is a recognised need for shared referencing principles. For example, those specific to the networking of the Bahrain and Scottish frameworks (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and the Education and Training Quality Authority, 2018, p.3), and relevant to such networking in general, with just a change of the names of the frameworks, are:

1. The roles and responsibilities of the relevant bodies and authorities are clear and transparent.
2. Comparison of the NQF and the SCQF demonstrates matching between the levels of the two frameworks.
3. The NQF and SCQF are based on learning outcomes and, where these exist, credit systems and the recognition of credit.
4. The policies and processes for the inclusion of qualifications on the NQF and the SCQF are clear and transparent.
5. Both qualifications frameworks are underpinned by quality assurance and are consistent with international quality assurance principles.

In line with countries such as those mentioned above, standards of Bahrain's framework relate to: (1) Access, transfer and progression; (2) Qualification development, approval and review; (3) Assessment design and moderation; (4) Certification and authentication; (5) Continuous quality improvement.

Among the key processes are: (1) Institutional listing; (2) Programme mapping, confirmation and placement; (3) Reviews – self and external; (4) Ongoing consultation. A set of policies were agreed and established, and educational institutions were required to meet what was termed "listing", which was compliance with the NQF policies and standards. Once listing was achieved, an institution was then able to submit their qualifications to the NQF for placement, which occurs if all necessary checks and procedures have been followed.

Qualifications are placed on the framework following the development of a qualification based on intended learning outcomes (ILOs) arranged in modules and applying criterion-based assessment to all the ILOs. Modules are mapped against level descriptors and given an NQF level. An application is sent to the BQA for vetting and then the full qualification is validated independently before being placed on the NQF for an agreed time limit. Review and resubmission to the BQA occurs cyclically.

The processes enable comparison between qualifications placed on the NQF in terms of level and learning "quantity" (i.e. number of credits) in the interests of quality assurance.

Individual foreign qualifications can be aligned to Bahrain's framework by means of a thorough examination of the qualification content and assessment arrangements. If the qualification meets the criteria necessary, it can be considered as equivalent to an appropriate level on the NQF.

To ensure that the NQF maintains its quality assurance commitments and standards, independent auditing by experts from a country with a mature and reputable framework should take place. There would be a rigorous review of processes and standards. These reviews should be at regular intervals (e.g. every five or so years) to ensure that quality standards are maintained. In this way, reliability and

continuous improvement will provide a guarantee of the level and standard of the qualifications on the Framework.

Existing International and Regional Relationships

Higher education institutions in various parts of the world have been influential in the establishment of universities and schools in Bahrain. Prominent among the countries involved are the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, the United States of America, France, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, India and Pakistan, as well as the states of the Gulf region. Predominantly these have been 'big brother' relationships. There is little evidence of recognition of prior learning or transfer of credit to or from institutions overseas. At best at this time, for example, is that a degree earned at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland Medical University Bahrain is internationally recognised but there is a likely need for a graduate wishing to practise in another country to sit local licensing exams and meet other specific requirements of that country.

An intention of the National Qualifications Framework is to rectify this. However, the framework as a priority in the government's reform project "has been developed and designed with certain aims, most of which are futuristic" (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and the Education and Training Quality Authority (Bahrain) (October 2018). The goal of achieving international recognition of Bahrain's framework and contributing to regional and global development of frameworks is partly achieved by alignment, in 2017, with the Scottish framework. Within two or three years, it is intended to have alignment with the Malaysian Qualifications Framework, the New Zealand Qualifications Framework, and the Irish Qualifications Framework – an initial comparison report being produced for the last-mentioned in 2014. Currently, Bahrain is "heavily involved" in a meta-framework for the Gulf region, and also in the Arab Qualifications Framework "which crystallises the efforts of ANQAHE (i.e. the Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, which was established in 2007 with the support of the World Bank, UNESCO and the British Council).

Impacts on Facilitators and Learners

As part of this research, a focus group of higher education lecturers and tutors addressed the questions:

1. In relation to your facilitation and assessment of learning, what do you understand to be the key requirements of Bahrain's NQF?
2. In what ways has your application of the requirements helped you?
3. In what ways has your application of the requirements created challenges for you?
4. What improvements should be made?

In relation to the first question, it is understood by the tutors that the key requirements are “to design and facilitate constructively aligned courses that have assessable learning outcomes set at the appropriate level, assessment tasks which assess the learning outcomes, and teaching and learning strategies that develop knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the discipline”.

In relation to the second question, application of the requirements were considered helpful in that:

- “It provides clarity to the learner of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are to be developed and assessed.”
- “It provides a focus for the teacher to design and facilitate teaching and learning strategies that will effectively and efficiently develop the required knowledge, skills and attitudes.”
- “It encourages dialogue, collegiality and consistency as educators are required to work together during the design, mapping and moderation processes.”

In relation to the third question, application of the requirements were considered challenging in that there was “tension between compliance and creativity for the facilitator”, “an increase in administrative paperwork”, “a need for reconceptualization of assessment”, “the added demands of planning and implementing effective strategies for diversity among learners”, “the need for development of a wider range of teaching and learning strategies”, and “some misunderstanding of NQF processes and requirements”.

In relation to the fourth question, suggested improvements were:

- “Share good practices in relation to the NQF within universities.”
- “Encourage dialogue within and between higher education institutions of NQF requirements.”
- “Get constructive feedback from NQF [i.e. from the NQF department of BQA].”
- “Use effective IT solutions to manage NQF requirements.”
- “Have genuine emphases on both quality compliance and improvement. Review the judgement categories that are being used by BQA – i.e. outstanding, good, satisfactory, inadequate – to give a more positive impression. Currently, it is skewed to the negative end of the scale. A rectification would be to place an additional category – ‘very good’ – between outstanding and good.”

Overall, from the learned experience of the researchers of this paper, higher education institutions in Bahrain are proactive in having teaching and administrative staff well versed in the requirements of the NQF. For example, one institution has three training initiatives. First, all academic staff members undertake a certificated teaching and learning programme in the first year of their appointment. This programme includes sessions on the framework, on writing learning outcomes at appropriate levels,

and on designing aligned assessment tasks. Second, an academic development directorate offers training in writing programme mapping scorecards and the confirmation process. Third, sessions on NQF issues are offered during the institution's annual training symposium. The impact of these training initiatives has resulted in successful placement of 20 academic programmes on the NQF register, with only two programmes remaining to be placed (Education and Training Quality Authority, 2019).

However, it is noted that major change is not always easily accepted. Some academics have found adapting to the stringent requirements of the NQF difficult. A comment from a programme manager of a well-established university in the country was typical of academics in other institutions: "In changing courses to learning outcomes and criterion-based assessment, we found that the existing curriculum was in need of change and updating. This proved time-consuming and required expertise to support us as we adapted their curriculum and assessment methods to the new NQF-required format."

Also, comment has been made by several managers of tertiary institutions that compliance with the NQF requirements for policies on recognition of prior learning and pathways for progression of learners has proved difficult. There have also been challenges in developing acceptable policies on admission, assessment, and special needs.

For learners, the new qualifications have been beneficial in that they are more transparent – it is clear what is needed to be achieved. However, as students now need to achieve all the ILOs of a course or programme, this proves challenging for some who previously would have passed a qualification by only a percentage of the required knowledge, understanding and competence.

Impacts on teaching have been:

- A need for the provision of and a clear focus on intended learning outcomes (ILOs) of courses and programmes;
- A need to align assessments with ILOs as well as alignment with content, resources, and teaching and learning styles;
- An emphasis on learner-centred education and training;
- Meeting the challenges of having courses and programmes that are contextually appropriate;
- An essential requirement to comply with standards;
- The need for acceptance of education and training as iterative, cyclical processes.

Impacts on learning have been:

- A need to focus on the ILOs that have been provided or negotiated for the course or programme;
- The need for acceptance of meaningful learned experience as being deep rather than shallow;
- Acceptance by the learner of devolved responsibility to be central to the learning;
- Critical questioning of the quality of facilitation of learning and assessment;
- Demands for contextual appropriateness of course and programmes content and facilitation;
- Evolving opportunities for learners to have a genuine 'voice' in education and training.

Case Study: The Arabic-English Translator

Ali, is one successful student who enjoys the opportunity of having a voice. A graduate of the University of Bahrain, he developed aspirations to become an Arabic-English translator while working as an IT technician for a higher education institute in Bahrain.

Thinking back throughout the years and up to the present, what have been the main influences in helping and motivating you to be a successful graduate? "First, as a graduate of the University of Bahrain, I had a passion for languages and cultures. It was also a challenge because my English then was at a basic level. But I accepted it as a challenge. Perhaps seeing an older brother taking the same path of studying English, then working, somehow motivated me and I looked at him as a role model. I have seen him reading a large volume of English books that I couldn't read! Or watching movies that I couldn't understand without subtitles! For a graduate of Binghamton University [as a sponsored Fulbright scholar], while working as a translator, I really wanted to go beyond language learning, to develop my translation skills and broaden my cultural perspective to both English and Arabic cultures. I had the great support of an expat mentor and an expat manager, at a Bahrain University where I was accepted as a translator, in pushing me out of my comfort zone and small-box zone. Perhaps I took a risk by resigning from work, but I have never ever regretted that. In fact, though I have no fixed salary, I feel grateful and happy for taking a lovely journey of learning and exploration."

Currently, what are your thoughts on the education system of Bahrain? What are the strengths? What improvements could or should be made? "The education system is traditional, I believe, in terms of the management of this system, to schools and students. Yes, it is mostly free, and available for everyone. There are real efforts by the leaders of the country to invest in it; however, there has to be root transformation. The mentality relating to this system has to be changed. They should stop thinking about extending school hours, adding more books to the already-heavy schoolbags, and filling students with much information and theory. Improvements? Student-focused learning! Encouraging

creativity! Letting students love what they learn rather than feeling forced to do so. There should be new minds involved in the decision-making of this sector and system.”

Looking ahead, in relation to work, what would be your ideal situation? “I love interpreting. I am enjoying it as a freelancer. It pays me ‘good’, but not fixed. Also, I love to motivate and inspire learners especially in the fields of languages, translation, and education. My ideal situation would be working as a permanent interpreter in a leading company where I can interpret, and also have a chance to provide written translation, and use my skills as an instructor on translation, languages, and cultures. I don’t know how that could happen, but I am just thinking what I would enjoy doing!” It is to be noted that Ali does not volunteer Bahrain’s framework as significant for education and training in the country. This is typical of successful graduates who have been interviewed. However, once prompted, they agree that the framework is a positive development. The key influences for Ali – like other high achievers – have been passion to take up challenges and fill gaps in knowledge, a supportive family environment, role models, and, in his specific instance, a United States scholarship.

Case Study: The Aspiring Female Astronaut

Jenan is another successful student who is appreciative of the opportunity to have a voice. She dreamed of being an astronaut when she was a teenager, achieving well at high school.

Thinking back throughout the years and up to the present, what have been the main influences in helping and motivating you to be a successful student? “My internal motivation to be extraordinary and do something more than just studying ‘extracurricular activities’.” “Being raised in an educated and achieving family which always provided me with care and attention.” “Going to good schools and being surrounded by an environment and models for success.” “Participating in both local and international events, competitions, conferences, activities, etcetera – which have always been new engines to new successes.”

Currently, what are your thoughts on the education system of Bahrain? What are the strengths? What improvements could or should be made? “Bahraini education is strong in the way it provides multiple curricula with newly updated information. However, some curricula still need improvement in their content and the way of teaching them.” “The extracurricular activities are varied and interesting in the way of improving skills and abilities in students.” “The assessment process mainly depends on written exams in some subjects. I think it should be more flexible in providing different types of assessment.” “The English language is not as strong as it should be. This is a major problem in college life, especially for students for whom school is their only way of practising the language.” “International exams and diplomas can be added to the system especially in high school – IB, IELTS, SAT, etcetera – because many students can’t get to the ‘uni’ they want without these certificates.”

Looking ahead, in relation to work, what do you aspire to be? “Hopefully, a successful surgeon – neurosurgeon maybe, or practising space medicine.”

Like Ali, Jenan does not refer to the framework without prompting but is aware that it is one of the initiatives in Bahrain. Upon leaving secondary school, she has been accepted by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland Medical College Bahrain and may well benefit from the networking of frameworks of Bahrain and Ireland.

Typically, in the case studies of Ali, Jenan and others that are being explored by the researchers, learners do not mention Bahrain’s NQF as something that has inspired them to achieve; rather, when they reflect on it once it has been referred to by the researchers, they see it as something they might miss if it was not there. They are all positive, on reflection, about the international opportunities that a network of frameworks would offer.

The framework, to learners, is not necessarily a motivator. In terms of the theory of Herzberg (1959), it is a hygiene factor.

Concluding Thoughts: What Should Be?

The research indicates that education and training has expanded over the last two decades as a result of government initiatives. There is a need to change to a knowledge-based country, rather than one overly dependent on oil. Encouragement of both public and private education and training that adheres to the principles and processes and meets the standards that apply to the NQF should be continued.

There is an appreciation that the introduction of the NQF with its underlying principles, standards and processes has improved the quality of education and training in Bahrain. There have been lessons learned from the implementation of qualifications frameworks throughout the world that provide strategies for the strengthening of Bahrain’s NQF. The perceived best examples are being used as role models – e.g. Scotland, England, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand. Pitfalls of others are being avoided e.g. certain Asian countries (Bateman & Liang, 2016; Chowdhury, 2017). However, quality management, compliance and improvement should be both contextually appropriate and recognised as world-class in terms that can be understood and owned, as appropriate, by all parties.

Bahrain is making arrangements that will enable international recognition of its qualifications. The NQF is being referenced against the well-established frameworks of other countries. This is a rigorous process ensuring compatibility and quality assurance of the qualifications placed on the respective frameworks. There should be appropriate, coordinated relationships with international agencies and other quality-focused organisations. Networking with other frameworks – few in number at this stage

– will facilitate recognition internationally and locally of the graduates of the kingdom’s universities and training institutions.

Also, the importance of having a significant number of graduates earning qualifications that are recognised locally and internationally is acknowledged. There is agreement that the needs of all parties involved should be kept well in mind – the learners, the institutions, industry, the wider community, the country, regional institutions, agencies and organisations throughout the world.

Among academics and increasingly appreciated by learners is the importance of having strong relationships among the various aspects and components of learning and teaching processes – e.g. intended learning outcomes, methods of teaching, assessment, technological resources, and creativity applied to programme and course development.

There is general acceptance that the links should be kept strong between the various stakeholders in education and training – learners, facilitators of learning, industry, government agencies, communities. It is important to provide opportunities for multiple voices to evaluate and contribute to the developments – especially the voice of learners. Ensure they are listened to, acknowledged, and acted upon as appropriate.

There are many unknowns at this stage. The framework initiative is essentially young and futuristic. Ongoing research will be required to establish the effectiveness of certain aspects.

Will Bahrain become a hub for education and training in the Gulf region, or, at the very least, be a strong member of the evolving networks of qualifications frameworks? Will referencing approval from another country enable significant numbers of students of Bahrain to be given credit for what they have achieved at home to gain credits for modules achieved in the partner country? Will networking of frameworks affect the mobility of workforces – both from and to Bahrain? Will Bahrainisation of the workforce be in conflict with talent mobility or will there be significant positive influences from, for example, Bahrainis studying specialisms overseas and returning to the kingdom to offer their expert services? Will the new learning and teaching processes influence the aspirations and achievements of learners? Will present actions sustain recognition over the coming years?

Other points of significance in supporting and improving the Bahraini experience include:

- Encourage rather than police framework-related participation. Seek out what is being done well by institutions and promote and publicise it; indicate how improvements can be made to aspects that as yet are not being done well.
- Develop a genuine emphases on both quality compliance and improvement.

- Ensure that significant training and support enables education institutions to adjust and comply with the major reform requirements is offered widely and has continuing provision.
- Be reminded of and take pride in appreciating the relatively long history of formal education and training in Bahrain for both genders.
- Continue Bahrainisation of the workforce but not at the expense of expertise from off-shore that can better achieve national goals.
- Encourage an ongoing quest for ‘pockets of enthusiasm’ within the education and training communities so that they can be widened and deepened (Hasan, 2015). To help sustain the effectiveness of the framework, it should be a matter of finding the pockets of enthusiasm, fostering them as pockets of excellence, and then having them seen and copied as pockets of exemplarism.

Importantly, in sustaining the initiative in dynamic local and global environments, Bahrain’s National Qualifications Framework should not be accepted chiselled in stone. It should be revisited frequently to evolve its appropriateness and to consider how it might be further refined or improved.

Complex educational change takes considerable time and effort. However, with strong leadership and commitment the rewards can be a highly valued and respected qualifications system that is recognised internationally, and that enables increased student recruitment and greater global mobility for qualification holders. Such is the prospect for the graduates of Bahrain.

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