

Paper title: **The Impact of the National Authority of Qualifications and Quality Assurance for Education and Training in Bahrain Higher Education**

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Theme 3: Impact of QA and the effects of external and internal QA: regional perspectives to a shared issue

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The Impact of the National Authority of Qualifications and Quality Assurance for Education and Training in Bahrain Higher Education

Abstract

The Kingdom of Bahrain has put in place a quality assurance system to evaluate the higher education status in the Kingdom as part of the national education reform project led by the Education Reform Board (ERB). The project aims to increase the skills level of Bahrainis by developing education and training to enhance their abilities to meet the requirements of the 21st century labor market.

Two types of reviews have been conducted by the Higher Education Review Unit (HERU) of the National Authority of Qualifications and Quality Assurance for Education and Training (NAQQAET): Institutional reviews and Program reviews. The first institutional review cycle started in September 2008, followed by the first program review cycle commencing January 2009. To date, HERU/NAQQAET has conducted 14 institutional reviews and 30 program reviews. These reviews reveal major challenges facing the higher education sector operating in Bahrain both on the program level and in the institutional governance and management level.

This paper provides an insight into the higher education sector in the Kingdom of Bahrain and the work of the NAQQAET in reviewing the quality of the higher education institutions themselves as well as their programs. It discusses some of the main challenges facing higher education institutions and the impact of the reviews as institutions strive to meet the recommendations contained in the review reports.

1. The Need for Independent Quality Assurance Mechanism

Since the 1990s quality assurance has become a major issue for higher education in many countries in the world. Governments, and the public generally became concerned about the quality of the output of the higher education institutions and whether society is getting good value for its investment in higher education. Furthermore, the quality of programs and courses has become a vital issue as higher education is expected to respond to the social and economic demands of society. In universities, the quality of courses depends on several main factors: the standards set for students' admission, the learning resources available to students, the facilities institutions are able to provide, the participation of students in their learning programs, and the cultural and academic environment to which students are exposed. Quality, then, is defined as a combination of characteristics obtained by students in western higher education (Harvey and Green, 1993).

2. Governance Structure

Higher education is governed by the Ministry of Education through the Higher Education Council (HEC) and its Secretariat General. The NAQQAET is independent of the HEC and performs institutional and program reviews.

2.1 The Higher Education Council (HEC)

The HEC is the regulatory authority of higher education in Bahrain. It is a licensing and regulation authority and was given the responsibility to implement the proposed Higher Education Reform Strategy that was prepared by the ERB.

2.2 The National Authority of Qualifications and Quality Assurance for Education and Training

The NAQQAET comprises five Units: the Schools Review Unit; the National Examinations Unit; the Vocational Review Unit; the National Qualifications Unit; and the Higher Education Review Unit.

3. The Review Process

3.1 Institutional Reviews

All 14 higher education institutions operating within Bahrain have been reviewed; two of which are public, and 12 private. These were seen as developmental reviews and as such did not contain summative judgments. However, the reports contained commendations, affirmations and recommendations. Follow-up reviews are being conducted to verify the claims made by institutions about how they have addressed the recommendations and thus enhanced their quality.

3.2 Program Reviews

Program reviews at present forms the dominant component of NAQQAET work as it seeks to cover all programs at bachelor and master levels offered by the higher education institutions. These provide summative evaluations that deliver a judgment on the program along a three level assessment: full confidence; limited confidence; or no confidence.

4. Impact of NAQQAET Reviews on Bahrain Higher Education

The impact of the external quality assurance reviews on higher education is difficult to assess due to reasons described in the following section. However, effects of these reviews can be observed at six different levels: governance and management; quality assurance; academic standards; infrastructure; teaching and learning; and program diversity. These will be discussed in some detail.

4.1 Impact on Governance and Management

The results of the institutional reviews show that private higher education institutions are weak in planning and governance. A total of 88 recommendations were given in this regard. Among the issues identified in need of action are: the blurring of governance and management roles, with the former being involved in the day-to-day running of the institutions in some cases and in other cases the owner being both the chairperson of the Board and the president of the institution; the lack of good corporate governance where the Boards of Trustees did not meet regularly or fulfill their responsibilities; incomplete strategic plans which meant that institutions were to some extent directionless; a lack of benchmarking activities in key areas of provision, including programs.

NAQQAET Impact

On conducting the follow-up institutional reviews it was found that all institutions had taken steps to address these issues; for instance, the roles between the Board of Trustees and management had generally been delineated

4.2 Impact on Quality Assurance

There was a lack of mechanisms and systems to support good quality provision. When the NAQQAET commenced institutional reviews in 2008, few institutions had quality assurance systems, offices – a total of 32 recommendations were given in the institutional reviews.

NAQQAET Impact

As a clear impact of the NAQQAET reviews, most institutions have established some form of internal QA system.

4.3 Impact on Academic Standards

In the private institutions admission requirements are generally weak which results in some students being underprepared for higher education study. This would not be an issue if the institutions had programs in place that academically weak students could

take, such as foundation programs or an extended curriculum in order to provide them with the opportunity of successful higher education study.

NAQQAET Impact

The NAQQAET has recently approved a new review framework – Programs-within-College Reviews – which means that the universities’ actions in establishing and implementing student academic support mechanisms and academic standards will be scrutinized in all colleges within the institutions. To date programs reviews have been completed in the fields of Medicine and Health. Programs are now being reviewed in the field of Computer Science and Information Technology.

4.4 Impact on Infrastructure

In nine of the 12 private providers, it was found during the institutional reviews that higher education is taking place in inadequate buildings. In some cases the buildings are cramped, there is a lack of recreational as well as sufficient library space. Needless to say, this is not conducive for a quality student learning experience. Changes are being introduced as a result of the NAQQAET reports.

Indirect impact

The HEC has started to enforce its regulations about the infrastructure requirements of higher education institutions. Most institutions now have or at least partly have building plans. Some have extended their teaching and learning spaces.

4.5 Impact on Teaching and Learning

The quality of teaching and learning is weak in a number of institutions; a total of 54 recommendations were given in this theme. There is a paucity of varied and innovative teaching strategies; a lack of different types of formative and summative assessment that ensure students acquire critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In the institutional reviews it was found that little research is being undertaken and when done it was typically an individual effort with no institutional support (30 recommendations were given) Yet research underpins teaching at higher education level.

NAQQAET Impact

In the follow-up institutional reviews it was found that institutions have acknowledged that research is one of the core functions of a higher education institution. Most have taken some steps to stimulate a research culture.

4.6 Impact on Program Diversity

As there was an unregulated higher education environment in the early 2000s, private higher education institutions were allowed to start up offering any programs that they wished. Many did not do an assessment of the labor market needs in the country and even more did not take into consideration the programs being offered in other institutions.

Indirect impact

The NAQQAET has participated in the development of the Higher Education Strategy. In this strategy the role of higher education will be clarified and it will establish the link between the programs that can be offered and the needs of the economy.

5. In sum:

It is evident from the results of reviews that the higher education institutions operating in Bahrain are at different stages with respect to the quality of provision; some institution reached acceptable level, others still have a considerable way to go to reach a good standard both at the program and institutional levels. Nevertheless, there are signs that improvement in all areas is beginning to emerge as a result of the external quality reviews.