

Analysis of Institutional Review Reports of HEIs in the Kingdom of Bahrain: Identifying Components of Capacity-Building & Training

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Abstract

With the introduction of quality reviews by the national government in 2008, the Kingdom of Bahrain's higher education institutions (HEIs) have been developing more systematic, comprehensive, and explicit processes for demonstrating and monitoring quality. This paper looks into the quality and quality efforts of the HEIs: foremost, by analyzing their 'performance' using the Directorate of Higher Education Reviews (DHR) Review Reports in the first ever institutional reviews conducted in the Kingdom; secondly, by analyzing the 'progress' made by the HEIs in the follow-up visits; and finally, by looking into their capacity-building requirements, offering a thorough analysis of their quality assurance needs. The analysis of HEI 'performance' has been done by looking into the number of *Commendations*, *Affirmations* & *Recommendations* received by each institution in the first review. *Commendation* refers to a judgment given by DHR for every demonstrated good practice that goes beyond the expectations contained in a quality indicator; *Affirmation* refers to a judgment given for any action that has been initiated but still in early phase of implementation; while *Recommendation* refers to a very crucial aspect of academic operation which requires immediate attention, but has been apparently neglected by the institution. Meanwhile, the analysis of HEI 'progress' has been done by looking into the number of *Recommendations* addressed by the institution, either adequately or inadequately, based on the DHR Review Reports in the follow-up visits. An 'Adequately-Addressed' recommendation means that an action has been initiated and successfully carried out addressing fully a particular recommendation given in the first review. On the other hand, an 'Inadequately-Addressed' recommendation refers to an action that has been initiated and carried out by an institution, but only partially addressing such recommendation. A 'Not-Addressed' recommendation suggests the institution's inaction or inefficiency in addressing a particular recommendation. Based on DHR follow-up review reports, it is alarming to note that none among the 12 HEIs (0%) has made outstanding progress, where they should have been expected to demonstrate compliance to most, if not all, of the recommendations given in the first review. A vast majority of eleven HEIs (91.67%) has made good progress though, which means that most of the recommendations given in the first review were either adequately or inadequately addressed. Finally, one HEI (8.33%) has made poor progress, which means that most of the recommendations given by the review panel were either inadequately or not at all addressed.

Keywords: affirmation, commendation, recommendation, 'adequately-addressed', 'inadequately-addressed', 'not addressed', capacity-building

INTRODUCTION

Institutional Review identifies the strengths and weaknesses of a university and provides information for improvement. Review results set the benchmark for national investment on higher education. It is in this light that the Kingdom of Bahrain established its National Authority for Qualifications & Quality Assurance of Education and Training (QQA), mandated "to review the quality of the performance of education and training institutions in the light of the guiding indicators developed by the Authority" (Art. 4, Royal Decree No. 32 of 2008, amended by Royal Decree No. 6 of 2009).

In keeping with its mandate, DHR, a directorate under the QQA, conducts institutional reviews across HEIs in the kingdom. The review process assesses the effectiveness of an institution's quality assurance

arrangements against a pre-defined set of quality indicators and identify areas of strength and weakness. Such quality reviews have formative and summative components: formative in that the process assists HEIs to improve through self-reflection and evaluation; and summative in that the review judgements will state how each institution is performing with regard to international good practice and will comment on this performance in relation to licensing or accreditation by the Higher Education Council (HEC).

HEC is responsible for licensing private HEIs in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Institutional reviews assist HEC to determine whether its licensing regulations for private HEIs are being met and whether an institution should be accredited or continue to be licensed. DHR does not take these decisions itself, as

its purpose is to assess and report on the quality assurance arrangements of higher education institutions. The review process is designed to help HEIs to improve their quality. Although it involves an external review by an independent panel, the process is guided by each institution's own self-evaluation. It allows HEIs to identify for themselves areas for improvement, recognizing that quality and quality assurance are primarily their responsibility. The process respects the autonomy and identity of the institution and its specific mission, while applying externally determined standards.

Admittedly, external quality reviews are not neutral, but nevertheless help to construct definitions of quality and performance as well as monitoring them (Power, 1994). Institutional reviews in the Kingdom of Bahrain are carried out by a process of extended peer review: the term 'peer' means 'a person or group with similar knowledge, skills, experience and status in the relevant context' (Woodhouse, 1994). For external quality reviews, peer reviewers are usually senior people with wide experience in universities internationally and locally, or persons with substantial expertise in some aspects of quality assurance relevant to higher education. Peer reviewers bring their professional judgement to bear on the institution being reviewed.

The conduct of external quality reviews in the Kingdom of Bahrain is consistent with the Guidelines of Good Practice of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). The review process is well known internationally and, in addition to INQAAHE Guidelines, takes account of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

As noted earlier, the main activity of DHR is conducting quality reviews which will lead to the publication of a review report. As a result of which, each institution must develop an improvement plan detailing how it will address the areas in need of improvement identified in the review report. Such improvement plan must be submitted to DHR three months after the publication of the review report. DHR will analyse the Plan and engage with the institution on its findings regarding the plan.

Given the importance of achieving the highest possible standards of quality assurance (at all levels locally, regionally and internationally) particularly for those institutions targeted by this study, extensive trainings must be conducted. This may include how to develop training needs analysis plan, drafting strategic and operational plans, identifying Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and conducting extensive institutional research studies and other

related issues. This is where capacity-building comes in, which is necessary in order for the institutions to stay competitive.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This paper attempts to evaluate the quality and quality efforts of the HEIs in the Kingdom of Bahrain in terms of their performance in the first cycle of institutional reviews conducted by DHR. Specifically, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is the ranking of the HEIs based on their 'performance' in the first round of DHR institutional reviews measured in terms of the number of Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendation given by the review panel?
2. What is the ranking of the HEIs based on their 'progress' seen in the follow-up reviews measured in terms of compliance to the recommendations advanced by DHR in the first visit?
3. What are the capacity-building and training needs of the HEIs as revealed in the analysis of their review performance according to Quality Themes, i.e., Mission, Planning & Governance; Academic Standards; Quality Assurance & Enhancement; Quality of Teaching & Learning; Student Support; Human Resources; Infrastructure, Physical & Other Resources; Research; and Community Engagement?

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

During the period covered in this study, there were 14 HEIs operating in the Kingdom of Bahrain. This study, however, included only 12 of which because two of these institutions had shut down before completing the cycle of DHR institutional reviews. XYZ University and YZA University (not their real names) had undergone the first institutional review, but both HEIs had decided to cease operation before the conduct of the follow-up review; as such both have been excluded in this study. Meanwhile, KLM University (not its real name), has been included in this study because it had completed the institutional review cycle. However, it should be noted that the license of KLM University had been revoked by the Higher Education Council in 2013, and not long after, had been issued closure order by the courts.

MATERIALS & METHODS

The data used in this study have been based on DHR Review Reports in the first visit, which have been published in the QAA website starting 2011. In analyzing the "performance" of HEIs, and for purposes of interpreting data, each has been arbitrarily assigned a base value of 50 Points. Then looking into the specific institutional review judgments, each HEI has been given three (3) points for every Commendation, one (1) point for every

Affirmation, and a demerit of (1) point for each Recommendation.

Meanwhile, the following table summarizes the rubric used in evaluating the ‘progress’ made by the HEIs based on the DHR Review Reports in the

follow-up visits, where one (1) point has been given for each “adequately addressed” recommendation; half (.5) point for each “inadequately addressed” recommendation; and zero (0) point for each “not addressed” recommendation.

Table 1. Rubric used in Evaluating the ‘Progress’ of HEIs based on Compliance to DHR Recommendations

“Adequately Addressed”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An action that has been initiated and successfully carried out addressing fully the recommendation advanced by DHR. ▪ An action that has been implemented at once without the need to study its impact or after-effect, such as the “appointment of a full-time vice president”. ▪ Generally, a comment with expressions such as “the panel expressed its satisfaction”, “the panel was pleased to learn”, “the panel noted with appreciation”, or “the panel commends or affirms” is to be interpreted to mean that the DHR recommendation has been fully addressed by the HEI. ▪ When there is no comment or further remark given by DHR on a particular recommendation, or when the remark is neutral as to the “fitness” of the action/s undertaken by the HEI.
“Inadequately Addressed”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An action that has been initiated and carried out, but addressing only partially the recommendation advanced by DHR. ▪ A long-term action that has been initiated but still in its early phase of implementation, and that it needs some time to evaluate its impact, such as the “conduct of studies & surveys”. ▪ An action that has been carried out to address a particular DHR recommendation but lacks conformity with international good practice. ▪ An action, policy or mechanism has been adopted by the HEI but there is absence or lack of evidence of effective implementation. ▪ Generally, a comment with expressions such as “while it is true that”, “although”, “however”, “nevertheless”, or “but” is to be interpreted to mean partial compliance. ▪ Likewise, a comment which includes a remark such “the panel urges”, “the panel recommends”, or “the HEI still needs to” usually mean that the DHR recommendation has only been partially addressed by the HEI.
“Not Addressed”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If there is a DHR remark which explicitly or categorically says that the HEI has NOT yet addressed the former’s recommendation. ▪ If there is a DHR remark which implies that the HEI has NOT yet addressed the former’s recommendation. ▪ Generally, a comment with a phrase such as “has not” or “did not” is to be interpreted to mean that the DHR recommendation has not been addressed yet by the HEI.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

HEIs’ Performance

The overall performance of HEIs based on DHR Review Reports in the first visit is summarized in the following table, presented according to rank.

Table 2. Ranking of HEIs based on Performance in the 1st DHR Institutional Reviews

HEIs	# of DHR Commendations	# of DHR Affirmations	# of DHR Recommendations	Total Score	Rank
WXY*	15	12	17	90	1 st
GHI*	9	12	24	65	2 nd
CDE*	6	3	15	56	3 th
IJK*	7	3	18	56	3 th
QRS*	5	9	23	51	5 th
STU*	3	2	19	42	6 th
EFG*	2	7	35	28	7 th
KLM*	0	9	32	27	8 th
OPQ*	1	3	36	20	9 th
MNO*	1	4	40	17	10 th
UVW*	2	2	41	17	10 th
ABC*	0	0	47	3	12 th

*Names of HEIs withheld to protect their privacy and interest

It could be gleaned from the above table that WXY University, which is one of the oldest universities in the Kingdom of Bahrain, garnered the highest rank. The same institution is likewise the highest in terms of Commendations as well as Affirmations. WXY has a student population of 12,709 and receives an annual budget from the government amounting to BD 43,000,000.00 (USD 114,000,000.00), as published in the institution’s website.

It is worthwhile to note that out of the 424 judgment statements in the DHR Review Reports, only 44 were *Commendations*, which comprises 10.13% of the statements, 63 were *Affirmations* which is 14.52%, while there were 327 *Recommendations* taking the biggest share of the pie, which is 75.35% of the entire report.

It is likewise significant to note that in the bottom rows of the table are the five (5) private HEIs which had been given suspension order by HEC for the admission of new students in all their academic programmes effective AY 2008-2009. This reveals the Kingdom’s approach to quality review that is rather punitive instead of being advisory & regulatory in nature. HEC is then regarded as the ‘punitive arm’ of DHR playing a repressive policing role.

What does the ranking further signify? Are HEIs performing well or poorly as far as the criteria of DHR are concerned? With HEC being regarded as the punitive arm of DHR, and with such action as imposing admission ban among the five HEIs, this suggests that only about half of the HEIs in the Kingdom of Bahrain are performing on a par with international standards.

HEIs’ ‘Progress’

Despite the very short gap of only one to two years between the first and the follow-up visits, not to mention the numerous recommendations to be addressed by each of the HEIs, it is expected that the institutions would act positively in response to quality review findings about areas that need improvement, including the *Commendations* and *Affirmations*. To ensure that HEIs respond appropriately, each reviewee must produce an improvement plan to be submitted to DHR three months after the publication of the review report. The improvement plan states how the reviewee intends to address the findings, including each of the *Commendations* and *Affirmations* in the review report, and remedy areas for improvement which were identified.

Furthermore, one year after the publication of the review report, each HEI should submit to DHR a report outlining how the institution has met the goals and objectives of the improvement plan. This report should clearly show how the institution has

maintained and/or enhanced the *Commendations* and *Affirmations* of the review report and specify how the institution has met its *Recommendations*. The institution should substantiate its claims with supporting documents, in the form of appendices. Details of how the institution is monitoring and evaluating the improvement activities should also be provided. This report will be analyzed by DHR and a visit will be undertaken to verify the report. (DHR Institutional Review Handbook)

The following table shows the extent of progress displayed by HEIs based on the number of *Recommendations* that were addressed by them (fully, inadequately, or not at all) as extracted from the published DHR Review Reports in the follow-up visit.

Table 3. Ranking of HEIs based on ‘Progress’ displayed in the Follow-Up Reviews

Name of HEI	Percentage of Progress	Rank
QRS*	70.53%	1 st
MNO*	65.97%	2 nd
STU*	58.12%	3 rd
KLM*	56.35%	4 th
IJK*	55.56%	5 th
GHI*	55.29%	6 th
EFG*	54.25%	7 th
OPQ*	53.98%	8 th
ABC*	52.03%	9 th
CDE*	51.38%	10 th
WXY*	51.04%	11 th
UVW*	45.02%	12 th
Overall Percentage of Progress	55.79%	

*Names of HEIs withheld to protect their privacy and interest

If similar to a college student who must score at least 75% in order to pass a course, then none among the HEIs has passed the standards of DHR, based on progress displayed from the first review visit to the follow-up visit. If, however, the grading is to be made less stringent making at least 50% a passing mark (albeit substandard), then the HEIs can have a sigh of relief for having “passed” the DHR institutional review follow-up visit, except for UVW University.

Notice that WXY University which has been ranked 1st in the first round of institutional reviews has now been ranked the “2nd poorest HEI” in terms of compliance to the DHR recommendations given in the first review. Out of 17 DHR recommendations, only four (4) were “fully addressed” by the said institution, eight (8) were “partially addressed” and alarmingly, five (5) were “not at all addressed”.

Moreover, UVW University has been ranked the “poorest HEI” with only 45.02% compliance to the recommendations given by DHR in the first review. Out of 41 recommendations, only seven (7) of which were “fully addressed”, 27 were “partially addressed”, and seven (7) were “not at all addressed”.

Indeed, the results of DHR Institutional Reviews of HEIs in the Kingdom of Bahrain are not impressive as shown by the findings in the follow-up visits. Out of 327 Recommendations given in the 1st visit, only

82 (25.08%) have been adequately addressed by the institutions, while a majority (212 equivalent to 64.03%) have been inadequately addressed. Still, a significant number of recommendations (33, which is 10.09%) have not been addressed by the HEIs.

The following table further shows the extent of progress displayed by the HEIs in terms of the nine quality themes.

Table 4. ‘Progress’ displayed by HEIs in the Follow-Up Reviews based on Quality Themes

QA Themes	Percentage of HEI Progress Across Themes												Average % Progress
	ABC	CDE	EFG	GHI	IJK	KLM	MNO	OPQ	QRS	STU	UVW	WXY	
MPG	45.45	50	55	75	75	72.22	78.57	65.00	64.28	90.00	50	75.00	65.50
AS	50	100	50	66.66	-	60	57.14	62.50	100	50	53.57	33.33	62.11
QAE	66.66	62.50	33.33	50	50	50	50	66.66	50	25	100	54.92	54.92
QTL	33.33	50	100	66.66	50	50	55.55	50	33.33	25	60	25	43.89
SS	50	25	50	-	100	50	90	33.33	100	50	33.33	50	48.33
HR	80	50	50	50	50	75	62.50	75.00	100	50	58.33	50	63.71
IPOR	42.85	100	66.66	100	25	50	100	50	-	50	50	-	55.41
R	50	0.00	33.33	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	25	75	43.93
CE	50	25.00	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	0.00	43.18
AVERAGE	52.03	51.38	54.25	55.29	55.56	56.35	65.97	53.98	70.53	58.12	45.02	51.04	55.79%
Overall Progress of the HEIs													

*Names of HEIs withheld to protect their privacy and interest

***MPG** – Mission Planning & Governance/ **AS** – Academic Standards/ **QAE** – Quality Assurance & Enhancement/ **QTL** – Quality of Teaching & Learning/ **SS** – Student Support/ **HR** – Human Resources/ **IPOR** – Infrastructure, Physical & Other Resources/ **R** – Research/ **CE** – Community Engagement

Again, if we were a little bit lenient in analyzing the results of the intuitional reviews by looking at the number of Quality Themes where each HEI has made more than 50% progress, it could be concluded that all of the institutions have at least made it somehow. Looking more closely into the data, it is worth mentioning that WXY University and CDE University both failed to register at least 50% progress in three out of nine areas (Academic Standards, Quality of Teaching & Learning, and Community Engagement for WXY; while Student Support, Research, and Community Engagement for CDE). However, as noted earlier, it is UVW University which has recorded the lowest percentage of progress since the first review visit by DHR.

Furthermore, it is significant to note that the three areas where the HEIs have made the least progress are Community Engagement (43.18%), Quality of Teaching & Learning (43.89%), and Research (43.93%). Additionally, one area which has somehow been neglected by the HEIs, as evidenced by a poor percentage of progress, is Student Support (48.33%).

Indeed, it should be emphasized that the 55.79% overall progress displayed by the HEIs from the first

visit to the follow-up visit, is far below international standards.

CONCLUSION

After evaluating the ‘performance’ of the HEIs in the first round of institutional reviews, and likewise analyzing the ‘progress’ made in the follow-up visits, the challenge now is to look into their capacity-building potential offering a thorough analysis of their quality assurance needs. In its 2013 Annual Report, DHR reported that while most of the institutions have made some progress in managing the quality of their academic provision, the extent of improvement has been varied. As the HEIs did not start from the same baseline, for some the climb to become a quality provider of higher education is very steep. For some HEIs this can only be achieved through incremental improvements that will take a considerable time to get to a minimum threshold of quality. Although HEIs may have made adequate progress in addressing the recommendations, it has to be recognized that coming from a very low baseline may mean that they still do not come close to offering quality learning experience for their students. Evidence of this can be seen in the continuous receiving of ‘No Confidence’ or ‘Limited Confidence’ judgments in reviews of their programmes, which is intensively covered in another paper by this same author. These poor performing HEIs are likely to have a negative impact on the lives and careers of young Bahrainis.

The following sets out key areas that need to be addressed if HEIs in Bahrain are to flourish and deliver high quality education:

Quality of Teaching & Learning. Teaching and learning needs to be seen in its broadest sense. It refers not only to the learning programmes, pedagogy and assessment but also includes admission requirements, staffing, professional development, student support, library and ICT, as well as the learning environment in general. The quality assurance arrangements for all these components is also important. These should not be seen as disparate activities. Indeed this is a case where 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'. For students to have a high quality learning experience, HEIs need to develop and implement a comprehensive teaching and learning strategy that is appropriate for their programme qualification mix and which encompasses all aspects of teaching and learning.

Research. Given that the higher education sector in Bahrain is young with the private HEIs only beginning operations in the last decade, it is important that achieving high quality teaching and learning is a priority. However, research is a core function of higher education. This is what differentiates an HEI from other tertiary institutions. It is essential that academics keep abreast with the latest findings in their discipline, which means that research needs to underpin teaching at higher education level. Thus there needs to be a scholarly endeavor in this regard.

Community Engagement. Sustainable community outreach programmes that are linked to the learning programmes not only benefit students and other stakeholders but contribute to the flourishing of a vibrant civil society at ease with itself. A clear conceptualization, development and implementation of community engagement that has its basis in mutual respect and trust between all stakeholders will contribute to a flourishing and prosperous citizenry.

As final note, the three major targets of the Kingdom of Bahrain (Economic Vision 2030 - EDB, 2008) – sustainability, competitiveness, and fairness – are ones that can be equally applied to HEIs in the kingdom. To be sustainable, institutions need to provide a quality learning experience across all their programmes. They will be competitive if they are offering programmes that meet the knowledge and skills required to compete successfully in the 21st century global economy. To achieve these desired outcomes, HEIs need strong, ethical, academic and administrative leadership. Quality assurance arrangements that are robust and transparent are needed with academic staff who are committed to the scholarly enterprise. Learning programmes should have appropriately designed curricula, assessment

and intended learning outcomes which, when achieved, ensure the proper academic standards of graduates. When these aspects come together, Bahrain will have a higher education sector that enables all Bahrainis to fulfill their ambitions.

Meanwhile, the first cycle of DHR Institutional Reviews has since ended in 2013. HEIs have been investing on serious capacity-building and training exercise in preparation for the Cycle 2 reviews which are set to kick off in no time.

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