

How Bahrain's higher education has developed over the years

By **Professor Yousef AbdulGhaffar**

President

Kingdom University



Bahrain was the first Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) country to establish formal education in the Arabian Gulf region, when it set up its first public school in 1919. The vocational training institution, Gulf Technical College, was established in 1968, followed by the Hotel and Catering Training Center in 1975 and the College of Health Sciences in 1976.

Higher education in Bahrain began in 1978 with the setting up of the University College of Arts, Science and Education. The Gulf Technical College became the Gulf Polytechnic in 1981 and offered degree courses in different fields of engineering and business administration, while the College of Health Sciences started to offer degree courses in 1984. The country's first university was formed in 1986 when the University College of Bahrain and the Gulf Polytechnic became full-fledged institutions and merged to become University of Bahrain. The Arabian Gulf University was an initiative of the GCC member countries back in 1984 and it serves only GCC nationals.

Today, there are four public-funded and 12 private universities, with a total enrolment of between 25,000 and 30,000 students. The proportion of secondary school students (totalling 32,000 in 2009 and 45,000 in 2011) progressing to higher education is about 65%.



Kingdom University is one of the first private higher education institutions in Bahrain. (Photo credit: Kingdom University)

No.	Name of Institution	Ownership
1.	University of Bahrain	State
2.	Arabian Gulf University	Gulf Cooperation Council
3.	College of Health Sciences	State
4.	Bahrain Polytechnic	State
5.	Ahlia University	Private
6.	AMA International University	Private
7.	Applied Science University	Private
8.	Arab Open University	Private
9.	Birla Institute of Technology	Private
10.	Delmon University for Science & Technology	Private
11.	New York Institute of Technology, Bahrain	Private
12.	Gulf University	Private
13.	RCSI-Medical University of Bahrain	Private
14.	Royal University for Women	Private
15.	Kingdom University	Private
16.	University College of Bahrain	Private



Bahrain is expecting to see further improvement in the quantity and quality of its university graduates. (Photo credit: Kingdom University)

In 2006, a study was carried out to evaluate Bahrain’s education system against standards of international best practice. It was found that graduates from Bahrain’s educational system performed below international benchmarks and below job-market expectations. In schools, student competencies in basic mathematics, science, Arabic and English were low. In vocational training and education, employability of the graduates was as low as 12% for technical school graduates. At the tertiary level, students’ performance was low and the private sector believed that graduates lacked core skills.

In order to address to these issues, a number of initiatives have been taken in the following areas with further initiatives to be launched in future. The initiatives were the results of visionary leadership by the chairman of the Economic Development Board, Crown Prince Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa.

The four priority areas are:

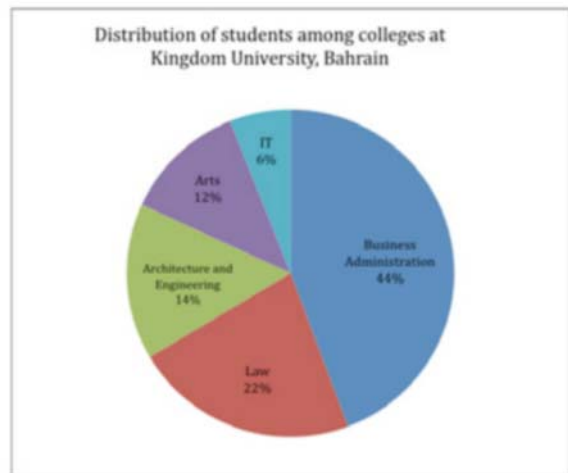
- Creating an independent Quality Assurance Authority;
- Strengthening the teaching profession through improved recruitment, training and employment conditions;
- Improving secondary vocational education; and
- Creating a polytechnic.

In line with the kingdom’s Vision 2030, it initiated an ambitious programme of economic and institutional reform in 2008, with the establishment of the Higher Education Council. The following year, the Quality Assurance Authority for Education and Training was formally launched. All 12 higher education institutions existing at that time were reviewed and reports were published. Institutional reviews in 2009-2011 had noted improved performance that resulted.

Increase in awareness concerning the culture of quality assurance in the kingdom’s higher education institutions has been noted. Quality assurance offices are being established in all universities and colleges, indicating their awareness of the importance of the developmental process and their commitment to quality improvement. Inspired by the guidelines set by the Quality Assurance Authority for Education and Training (QAET) of Bahrain, higher educational institutions (HEI) introduced “systems” and “standards” in their academic and administrative departments. More fund was allocated to research and training by the institutions. Some HEI that functioned as ‘degree mills’ came under tough scrutiny of the Higher Education Council and subsequently, they had to adhere to higher education standards.

The areas in which improvements were witnessed include governance and management, planning, budgeting and resource allocation. Improvements were also noted in academic standards - benchmarking, external examination, programme reviews, research to underpin teaching and learning, and academic professional development opportunities. Some of the institutions received commendations for benchmarking, consultation with employers and alumni on programmes meeting labour market needs, development of intended learning outcomes, development of staff performance management system, expansion of information system, appointment of more highly qualified staff and increase in number of support staff, implementation of professional development programmes, and support provided for researchers to participate in conferences.

However, not all the issues concerning quality are favourable. The QAET Annual Report 2010 pointed out that issues were still found in five broad areas with some of the universities: Mission, planning and governance; quality management and academic standards; teaching and learning; research; and community engagement.





Students at a higher education fair in Bahrain. (Photo credit: Kingdom University)

Market trends have pointed to greater privatisation in the higher education sector, with the government increasingly emphasising centralisation and quality assurance. Among tertiary students, more are choosing finance, accounting, marketing and economics (FAME) subjects. In terms of fields of study and programmes, business studies, accounting, finance, media and public relations, architecture and interior design, law and information technology are gaining popularity. On the other hand, fewer students are taking up courses in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects. The younger generation is attracted to fast-track education that leads to easy degrees, rather than taking up more challenging fields or prolonged higher education programmes such as engineering and medicine. Coupled with lack of job opportunities for less popular fields like biology and physics and lack of government incentives, higher education tends to gravitate towards professional education.

As a policy, the government encourages participation of private investors in higher education. The ongoing reform is an inclusive cross-agency initiative created in 2006, with the Economic Development Board, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour working together. Steps are being taken to form a national qualification framework to facilitate recognition of qualifications and ease mobility.

One of the first private universities in Bahrain is the Kingdom University (KU), which commenced its classes in September 2004. It has nearly 1,200 students. KU's target market, for the time being, is limited to Bahrain only.

However, about 3% of its students are from neighbouring GCC countries (1.7%) and Asian nationals living in Bahrain (1.3%). Its five colleges are: Business Administration; Architecture, Engineering and Design; Arts; Law; and Information Technology. It is the first and only signatory to the Magna Charta Universitatum from Bahrain. In addition, KU has received accreditation for exemption from the Association of Certified Chartered Accountants (ACCA) for the highest number of subjects (five) among all the universities in Bahrain in accounting and finance subjects. Its College of Law and College of Architecture and Design have proven to be very popular among students and the community.

As of 2010, employability of KU's graduates averaged a high 90%. The quality of its programmes is also reflected in its highly qualified multinational faculty, with nearly 65% of them holding doctoral degrees. The international faculty comprises Arab nationals from Egypt, Jordan and Iraq, and Asians from India, Sri Lanka and Philippines. Starting from the current academic year 2011/12, the university will have a few Western nationals as well.

As a forward-looking nation, Bahrain is committed to improving the lives of its people through improvement in its educational system. Its higher education sector is expected to see further development in terms of quantity and quality, boosted no doubt by continued investments in the sector by stakeholders who have found it to be a growth sector. There are opportunities for established European universities to set up campuses in the kingdom. Even though foreign investment is encouraged and incentives are given, the higher education sector has become more challenging because of the ongoing QA measures and tough rules introduced by the HEC on new licences to establish higher education institutions.

Professor Yousef AbdulGhaffar obtained his PhD from the University of Leeds, UK in 1983 and is a professor in renewable energy. He was formerly Professor and Dean in the Engineering College of the University of Bahrain, where he had also served as Director of Planning and Development. Professor Yousef won the Crown Prince Award in engineering research in 1988, and has published or delivered more than 60 research papers in refereed international journals and at conferences. He has also published more than 25 books for children, and has attended international conferences as keynote speaker and chair of sessions. He is also a member of: Board of Trustees, German Orient Institute, Berlin, Germany; Board of Director, International Universities Council, Turkey; Board of Trustees, Ittihad University, UAE; International Advisory Board, Indo-Global Education Summit 2011; International Association of University Presidents; and International Solar Energy Society.

Saudi Arabia invests in more universities to meet demand

John O'Leary reports on the latest developments in higher education in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia is ploughing some US\$2 billion a year into higher education in order to develop a knowledge economy that will augment and eventually exceed its oil revenue.

With 24 government and eight private universities, in addition to more than 500 colleges, the kingdom has the largest and most successful higher education system in the Arab region. But even the 26 new campuses completed since 2005 now struggle to meet the demand for places – particularly from female students, who now account for 60% of admissions.

Dr Abdullah Al-Othman, President of King Saud University (KSU), argued recently that Saudi Arabia needs at least 80 universities to become a “first-world country”. KSU has been given a special role in the transformation of higher education, charged with developing world-class doctoral programmes and conducting cutting-edge research in nanotechnology, medicine, biochemistry and engineering. The university is aiming to become financially self-sufficient by 2020.

In a keynote address to the first QS Middle East and Africa Professional Leaders in Education (QS-MAPLE) conference in Dubai, Dr Mohammad Al-Ohali, Saudi Arabia's Deputy Minister for Educational Affairs, said a 25-year strategic plan aimed to produce a world-class higher education system by 2025. The initial focus had been on science and technology, followed by a broader emphasis on research and development. The current task was to raise the universities' international visibility, while differentiating between them so that they had distinct and complementary missions.

Saudi universities have established more than 200 research chairs with the support of individuals and private organisations. The chairs focus on social, economic, medical and industrial topics. They are present in most of the government universities, although more than half of them are at KSU.

The country has already signalled its intent in relation to research with the opening of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology,

50 miles north of Jeddah. Now it is planning a major distance learning university in Riyadh to address the demand for undergraduate and professional courses.

The latest major project is the opening of the 2,000-acre campus for the Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University, in Riyadh. Construction will be complete in 2012. Princess Al-Jowhara bint Fahd, the university's president, said the 30,000 places would double the admission capacity of women students and represent “the world's largest centre of higher learning for Arab women”.

Prince Naif Bin Abdul Aziz, Second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior, has asked Saudi universities to draw up a strategy to secure “jobs matching the needs of the labour market for every Saudi graduate”, as well as researching the problems of young people. It is clear that challenging responsibilities will come with Saudi universities' generous funding levels.



The new King Abdullah University of Science and Technology aims to become one of the world's great institutions in research.