



A man holds a sign as he participates in a rally commemorating Labour Day in Manama, Bahrain on 1 May 2013.

The Mismatch Between Higher Education and Labor Market Needs: A Bahrain Case Study by Hanin Bukamal & Cameron Mirza

Since the 2008 launch of the Bahrain 2030 Economic Vision, which outlined plans to make Bahrain's economy more sustainable, competitive and fair, there have been continuous efforts to ensure that Bahraini graduates are more employable in a 21st century labor market.¹ In particular, for graduates to have both the relevant technical knowledge and soft skills and attitudes that employers so often require.

The Higher Education Council, which launched the National Strategy for Higher Education (2014-2024), seeks to address the mismatch between higher education and the labor market. The strategy's main objectives are to facilitate problem-solving, critical thinking, communication and networking skills—attributes that are needed for success in today's world of work. As per the Skills for the Future theme, the National Strategy has identified five priority areas: (1) effective employer engagement with the higher education sector; (2) the alignment of graduate skills with professional skills required by industry; (3) the alignment of programs and courses with future national reform needs and growth sectors; (4) career guidance that is integrated across the higher education sector and (5) workforce readiness through integrating 21st century skills across all disciplines.²

But despite the National Strategy's clear goals, it's unclear how higher education institutions are expected to comply with this strategy. It's also unclear whether institutions are being monitored by the Higher Ed-

ucation Council to adopt its values. This could be a major cause of the slow results relating to employment that is generated by higher education institutions in Bahrain.

Employer concerns

Efforts to reform the educational system in Bahrain have not been fast enough to cope with changes in the industry and the changing needs of employers. Youth unemployment rates are expected to rise in most Gulf states, and Bahrain is no exception. Youth unemployment is projected to increase from 29 percent in 2014 to 31 percent in 2018.³

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According to a 2015 Ernst & Young report, the main challenges to hiring and retaining young Bahraini nationals is their high salary expectations, lack of work experience, communication skills and professional discipline. Although overall unemployment is high in Bahrain—which can indicate general economic sluggishness and job creation issues—the even higher youth unemployment rate suggests that graduates lack the skills required to enter the job market.

The 2015 Ernst & Young report notes that employers stated that the top reasons for hiring young nationals were their skills and qualifications, local knowledge and connections, commitment and professionalism.⁴ However, the least common reasons were communication and problem-solving skills. That's a region-wide trend, and one which should serve as a reminder and potential focus of higher education providers.

Other studies indicate similar findings. A 2015 Higher Education Council presentation shared survey results revealing that only 19 percent of employers said that the education system prepares students with the right attitudes and behaviors. Worse still, only 16 percent of employers said that the education system equips them with the core skills required in their industry. Sixteen percent also said that the curricula is in line with the private sector's needs.⁵ To address these shortcomings, employers are increasingly being encouraged to play a bigger role in designing university curricula and working alongside educators to make it more relevant to industry.

The case of Bahrain Polytechnic

Bahrain Polytechnic, which was established by the Bahraini government in 2008, aims to ensure graduates meet the labor market's needs and supply the domestic economy with a source of highly-skilled workers.⁶ The Polytechnic works in consultation with industry and has embedded eight skills across their curricula: (1) communication, (2) teamwork, (3) problem-solving, (4) initiative and enterprise, (5) planning and organization, (6) self-management, (7) life-long learning and (8) technology. The results have been a resounding success: 85 percent of recent graduates are now in paid employment.⁷

It's comforting to see the achievements of Bahrain Polytechnic, and that Bahrain is a leader among Gulf states in several domains: (1) highest rate of students who believe that their education is equipping them with the right training and skills for their chosen career; (2) second-place for students who have sufficient access to information about jobs and career paths; (3) second-place for students who know what qualifications they need to work on for their preferred industry; (4) second-place for students who feel they understand the job application process in their preferred industry and (5) highest percentage of students who prefer to work in the private sector.⁸

II. Analysis

But there is still a large margin for improvement. In order to tackle the issue of employability, the solutions will need to be both practical and sensible to the Bahraini context. Talent development should be a major focus for all higher education institutions and employers in the country. In fact, the recently published 2016 University of Bahrain Transformation Plan is a good example, mainly because it has a clear focus on developing talented future workers by emphasizing increased technology use, new programs that are focused on emerging economic areas and forging better ties to industry.⁹ There is currently a glaring gap between industry, teaching and research, and more collaboration between these three domains is necessary to lower the high unemployment rates in Bahrain and the wider MENA region. Graduates will also need to be skilled enough to cope with increasingly volatile and precarious work environments, in addition to being able to add more value to their current employers.

Practical solutions

One of many solutions is to make internships a mandatory part of all undergraduate degrees, as they can help bridge the gap between education and work. Only 34 percent of employers currently offer internships to students. While that percentage is slightly higher than the Gulf average of 27 percent,¹⁰ it could be vastly improved. What's more, these statistics show that the responsibility of high youth unemployment lies both with the higher education institutions and the employers who need to be more hands-on in welcoming youth into their sectors. Doing so would also improve the overall welfare of the economy.

Another solution is to have stronger alumni involvement in higher education. Alumni can mentor prospective graduates and offer realistic expectations about employment opportunities and salary prospects. In addition, policymakers and higher education institutions should encourage entrepreneurship in order to support employability and, in some cases, new job creation through graduate start-ups.

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¹ "The Economic Vision 2030 for Bahrain." *The Economic Development Board*. Accessed December 6, 2016. http://issuu.com/economicdevelopmentboard/docs/bahrain_vision_2030/.

² "National Higher Education Strategy: Putting Higher Education at the Heart of the Nation." *Higher Education Council*. Accessed December 7, 2016. <https://moedu.gov.bh/hec/UploadFiles/HEC%2010%20year%20Strategy%20Final-18-10-2014.pdf/>.

³ "How will the GCC close the skills gap?" *Ernst & Young*. Accessed December 7, 2016. [http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-gcc-education-report-how-will-the-gcc-close-the-skills-gap/\\$FILE/GCC%20Education%20report%20FINAL%20AU3093.pdf/](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-gcc-education-report-how-will-the-gcc-close-the-skills-gap/$FILE/GCC%20Education%20report%20FINAL%20AU3093.pdf/).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "National Skills and Employability Summit 2015." Presentation at the Higher Education Council, Manama, Bahrain. June 9th, 2015.

⁶ "Our Story." *Bahrain Polytechnic*. Last modified December 6, 2016. <http://www.polytechnic.bh/about-us/our-story/>.

⁷ "Annual Report." *Bahrain Polytechnic*. Last modified December 6, 2016. <http://www.polytechnic.bh/about-us/annual-report/>.

⁸ "How will the GCC close the skills gap?" *Ernst & Young*.

⁹ Hamzah, Riyad Y. "President's Message." *University of Bahrain*. Last modified January 15, 2017. <http://www.uob.edu.bh/en/index.php/about/president-message/>.

¹⁰ "How will the GCC close the skills gap?" *Ernst & Young*.