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The Establishment of Bahrain Polytechnic: Assumptions Questioned, Myths Exposed and Challenges Faced

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Introduction

To enhance productivity and promote competitiveness in an increasingly globalized economy, Bahrain is striving to 'build solid and sustainable social, economic and technological bases appropriate to modern times and conditions' (Oukil, 2012, p. 8). Faced with depleting oil resources and an increasingly competitive trading environment, Bahrain's national strategy, *Economic Vision 2030* (Bahrain Economic Development Board [BEDB], 2014) has suggested means to achieve sustainability through growth and diversification of the economy. An analysis by the Bahrain Economic Development Board 'highlighted "gaps" both in the provision of education and in the skills required by employers' (Soman, 2008, para.18). The mismatch between the job market and graduate capability led to high youth unemployment, with one in eight Bahrainis out of work, at a time when two out of every three new jobs were going to expatriates bought in to fill the skill shortages (Polytechnics International New Zealand [PINZ], 2007, Section 3, p.13).

In response, Bahrain instigated a comprehensive series of national education reform initiatives across all sectors of education and at all levels: schools, vocational education and teacher training. The establishment of 'a range of new institutions designed to ensure standards and build-in a vocational focus to the learning process' (Soman, 2008, para. 23) aimed to make Bahrainis the employees of first choice.

Bahrain Polytechnic was a key reform initiative aimed at meeting industry requirements for graduates with technical and applied professional qualifications. Planning for this new higher education institute (HEI) was premised on the belief that a learner-centred, market-driven approach to the design and delivery of programmes was necessary for the provision of quality technical and professional education (UNESCO and ILO, 2002) and the assumption that it was appropriate for Bahraini youth and the local cultural context.

This case study examines the myths that posed challenges, which were themselves derived from beliefs that we call myths, in the Bahrain Polytechnic set-up and implementation, providing reflections that may contribute to a greater understanding of some of the problems faced in establishing a new HEI within a Middle Eastern context. These so-called myths relate to a wide range of factors, including the needs of the labour market, expectations of graduates' employability skills and transitions from school to career, as well as myths associated with the generational gap, second-language and mathematics learning and the effectiveness of using imported curriculum in an institutional start-up. But perhaps the biggest challenge of all for this new institution has been the 'taken-for-granted' beliefs about quality in education and the difficulties encountered in implementing a culture of continuous improvement. The analysis of how Bahrain Polytechnic is addressing and overcoming some of these myths to achieve work-ready graduates draws on a range of research conducted over the life of the project. The importance of this project and this chapter is to offer a set of insights to challenges and debates that are more familiar from Western points of view (including questions of quality and the assumptions of digital literacy among particular demographics) but where the voices of non-Western stakeholders are less often heard. The following is an account of assumptions questioned and responded to in innovative ways. While the focus is on Bahrain, the research and analysis has broader implications regarding the 'export' of education and the adaptation of borrowed resources to particular contexts.

Background to the Polytechnic's establishment

In Bahrain, approximately 80 per cent of high-school graduates go on to study at university, though many subsequently fail to find employment in a labour market evidencing skill shortages (Torr, 2011). To address the skills gap in Bahrain, a decision was made in 2006 to establish a new polytechnic (the Gulf Polytechnic founded in 1968 had since merged

with the university) as a key initiative under the National Education Reform Project Board chaired by the deputy prime minister and chairman of the education and training committee. A worldwide request for proposals resulted in the awarding of a contract for the polytechnic establishment project to PINZ in 2007. To meet the project implementation timelines, which saw a start-up within one year of the concept being approved, educational resources, including policies and curricula, were imported with the belief that these could easily be adapted and contextualized to suit the local situation for an efficient institutional start-up. The new Bahrain Polytechnic was formally established on 6 July 2008. It opened its doors to the first cohort on September 2008, with an intake of 235 Foundation Level students and 35 staff members. Since then the student population has grown to 1895 active students in 2013, supported by 402 staff, a mix of expatriate and Bahraini nationals.

Approach to the research

Research by case study (Stake, 2000) was selected as the most appropriate research design to identify what myths posed challenges to the Bahrain Polytechnic set-up project. This analysis is informed by relevant literature and complemented with observations from selected informants, both students (all Bahraini) and staff (Bahraini and expatriate). To give weight to the stories told by these key informants, what they said is presented as verbatim quotes, recognizable by the use of italics. In brackets beside the quotes is the unique identifier (ID) to give some degree of anonymity. The ID includes type of respondent (Academic Staff [A], Student [S], Industry representative[I], Careers Advisor [C]) signified by the first letter and date (year, month and day), though in some cases, for ease of narration, a pseudonym is ascribed.

Myth 1: Imported curricula are easily adapted

The curriculum developed by the new Polytechnic was specifically designed to provide graduates with the attitude, knowledge and skills that will make them employees of choice. Bahrain Polytechnic adopted a broad conceptualization of curriculum, incorporating the notion of both product and process, so planning for the new Polytechnic encompassed the identification of the knowledge and skills to be acquired, the specification of the content of courses and programmes to be delivered, the process of delivery and the design of the learning environment based on six guiding principles: collaboration, lifelong learning, relevance,

innovation, internationalization and excellence in education (PINZ, 2007, Section 3).

Bahrain Polytechnic selected staff for their subject expertise, industry experience, familiarity with innovative teaching methods and their flexibility (Coutts, Huijser & Almulla, 2012). A learner-centred approach that engaged students through the application of technology in educational delivery was based on a belief, challenged later in this chapter and elsewhere in this book, that today's young people, being globally connected 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001, p. 1), have similar characteristics around the world.

Specialist programmes from diploma to degree were proposed in Engineering, Business, Office Administration, and Information and Communications Technologies in the start-up phase. Design, Transport Freight and Logistics and Health and Science were areas identified for future development (PINZ, 2007, Section 3). PINZ also concluded that a foundation study programme was required to bridge the gap between high school and tertiary study until the first lot of graduates to have studied under the post-school reforms enters tertiary education.

To ensure an efficient start-up, PINZ opted to purchase the intellectual property for programmes which were accredited elsewhere. A worldwide request for tenders resulted in degree programmes being purchased from Australia and New Zealand. Because these programmes then had to be contextualized, with wide-ranging stakeholder input to meet Bahrain's needs, each purchase contract included ongoing support from the source institution, in the form of an annual review by an external programme monitor and external moderation of assessment. From the outset, questions of local impact on imported content were raised, including the need to assure stakeholders that the programmes were of at least the same standard as in the original institutions.

In initial iterations, the specialized technical knowledge and skill components closely resembled those from the imported curricula, though local problems and Bahrain industry examples were used in the adaptation of the learning resources. However, within 18 months significant changes to both qualification structure and teaching content were sought and approved. As one of the curriculum-development specialists explained:

> The original staff who set the criteria and selected the successful tenders really believed that the curricula purchased would meet the requirements well. Senior teaching academics [appointed later] criticized and agitated to make changes to the imported curricula.

> They stated that some was unworkable and out-of-date. As a result the structure and content of the qualifications have been modified greatly. The issue appears to be more about ownership... None of the teaching academics came from the institutions that supplied the curricula. They had a need to put their own imprint on a brand new qualification and so take ownership of it.
>
> (A2/20130928)

Lees argues, 'it is essential that any changes to the curriculum are owned by the staff delivering the modules' (2002, p. 5). Employability skills is one of the main drivers underpinning continuous reappraisal of the curriculum at Bahrain Polytechnic and the stories of the introduction of employability skills are provided to give insights into some of the myths that prevailed and the challenges Bahrain Polytechnic faced in developing curricula to meet local needs.

Three myths surrounding core curriculum elements can be adduced out of the general myth that curricula can be imported:

- The ability to speak English is correlated to academic skills.
- Teaching traditional mathematics courses improves numeracy in pre-degree students.
- What employers want is more or less the same, globally.

Myth 2: Ability to speak English is correlated to academic skills

For English-language instruction in particular, there is a significant gap between school learning and what is expected of students studying in an English-medium institution such as the Polytechnic. To address this gap, an integral part of the Polytechnic's Certificate in Academic Preparation (CAP) course is an intense English-language study course that involves both individual support and formal classes designed to develop and enhance a range of competencies from listening and comprehension to speaking and writing. Gulf cultures are inherently oral cultures (Torstrick & Faier, 2009), so this process was not without its problems. In particular, the notion that high levels of proficiency in spoken English correlate with equally strong levels of academic literacy is a myth. These skills need to be explicitly taught, as 'Dana's' story illustrates:

> I came to the Polytechnic really confident about my English because I always received nearly full marks on exams. The exams were too easy and the books were really bad... same content questions, layout and even the same level every year. But when I got my first writing back the tutor wrote with red all over it and said even 'I can't understand this' or 'unclear' on many sections. It was so depressing for me. I know my writing is not strong but how can I go from writing about 'my holidays' and childish stuff like that to writing about strategies for marketing with technology with many new vocabularies and 'academic language'? The English tutors help us but there is a big gap – how can I go from doing everything in Arabic even the English lessons to studying everything in English?
>
> ('Dana', 19, first year Business student: S11/20130203)

Dana's story is representative of the range of intersecting challenges faced by many students entering the Polytechnic. To put her comments into context in terms of standard and the complexity of tasks, here is an example of a first-year Business assignment: 'From your research, describe a recent trend in technology. Analyse how this technology would benefit your (fictional) company. Identify at least two risks and describe how you would minimize the risk of implementing the technology. Identify and describe how competitors currently use the technology mentioned.'

This is a written question calling for a written response and thus presents significant challenges in the use of written English. As 'English is the dominant lingua franca of this very multicultural island' (A4/20130203) students often possess very strong speaking skills. However, as Dana's story illustrates, for students transitioning from Arabic-medium secondary education to English-medium instruction, where they must use English at a sophisticated and often abstract and conceptual level, the challenges are considerable. Students who are proficient oral communicators present written work that is often grammatically inaccurate, disorganized and hyperbolic.

To make sense of this gap in skills, it is necessary to explore the learning context, particularly differences between Arabic and English students' previous language-learning experiences and the demands of developing academic literacies in an additional language. Most non-Arabic expatriate tutors are unaware of the many grammatical and rhetorical differences between Modern Standard written Arabic and English. For example, Arabic does not have firm rules about punctuation; sentences often begin with conjunctions and paragraphs feature a repetition of ideas and frequent use of synonyms. There are also cultural differences in teaching and learning. Consequently, as Kharama

and Hajjaj (1997) point out, Arabic teachers of English (the majority of English teachers in Bahrain) have different expectations of what constitutes 'accurate' writing in English and not only tend to focus on spelling, capitalization and punctuation issues but also exhibit a 'tolerance for errors', particularly for problems with grammar and paragraph structure.

As 'Dana's' narrative shows, students are not usually required to write critical analysis or argumentative essays. English writing needs to be considered as a holistic communicative medium and attention given to both meaning and content, as well as to the creative-writing process itself, using students' own knowledge and ideas to motivate them. This concept is explicitly articulated in the *English-Language Curriculum for Secondary Education* which aims to represent the interests of all learners. However, emerging findings from a review of selected technical high schools in Bahrain (Thomas & Roberts, 2013) seems to suggest that the great diversity of learners, the lack of appropriately tailored resources suitable to the level of the majority of these learners and teachers who have not yet developed the special skills required to teach in this new way are some of the factors that are frustrating the Ministry's efforts to implement a new curriculum that would see a bridging of the gap between the English level of school graduates and the entry level of degree courses at the Polytechnic.

The way forward in dispelling the myth that ability to speak English is correlated to academic skills would be for both specialist English-language tutors and content tutors to work together with students to unpack how academic knowledge is constructed and legitimated in their respective disciplines. The following communication from an Information Technology (IT) tutor illustrates this need:

> In terms of graduate capabilities I want to produce graduates that can read and apply complex technical information (usually written in English). I think we need to go to an approach where the language teaching is integrated with the content. Students really do feel that they are doing enough English. I want graduates that can solve problems, not write an excellent email describing the reasons they cannot get it done. My students seem to be able to understand instructions very well, and the written work has been adequate at a technical level, however, they often get tripped up on vocabulary that has a very technical meaning, I think that will be best learned in IT.
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> (A8/20090414)

Myth 3: What employers want is more or less the same, globally

Employability skills

Bahrain's labour market anomaly was the main driver for the establishment of the Polytechnic and for its focus on developing employability skills for its graduates.

Resulting from the 'high competition for employment in the global knowledge economy' (Beetham, McGill & Littlejohn, 2009, p. 3) a 'broad consensus on the skills relevant to employability' has emerged internationally (Blades, Fauth & Gibb, 2012, p. 11). However, given today's uncertain economic environment and the rapid pace of social and technological change, it is fair to say that what employers want is more or less the same across the world is a myth.

Bahrain Polytechnic's employability skills framework

In many countries, employability frameworks have faced challenges in implementation associated with, among other issues, a 'lack of explicit focus on Employability Skills in workplaces and in education and training' (ITHACA Group, 2012, p. 6). Although many graduates had adequate technical skills and knowledge, they were not able to apply these and the ability to communicate, participate in a team, use initiative, solve problem and think critically were of particular concern (PINZ, 2007, Section 3, pp. 14–16).

The Polytechnic integrates Work Integrated Learning across all degrees to go some way in addressing industry's experience requirement: a mandatory co-operative industry project worth 60 credits and a 15-credit work experience elective for programmes without a mandatory work experience component are offered. Based on international best practice (Burden-Leahy, 2005, p. 132), industry consultation has resulted in a graduate profile specific to each programme and major, while using a student-centred, problem-based learning approach.

In developing an employability framework then, there are some important factors to consider in the Bahraini context, the first of which relates to the cultural context. The social structure of the region is characterized by strong family values, and trusting relationships and networking are very important in business operations, including the business of managing educational institutions. In the Arab world, deep connections of kin and obligation provide a pervasive foundation for important decisions and information sharing (Rabaai, 2009, p. 5, citing Hutchings & Weir, 2006). Using this particular cultural strength has

broadened and deepened the industry collaborations to the benefit of both students and staff.

In summary, there is a need to develop over time a trusting relationship with industry personnel before one can hope to get more precise (or more 'honest') information about what employers really want. As companies expand their markets globally, the employability skills drive broadens, but what these actually mean in a local context requires thorough consultation. While employer demands have some general similarities globally, what for example 'good communication' or 'problem-solving skills' may mean in local contexts can be very different. This makes consultation more time-consuming than may be the case in a Western context, where there are usually specific industry training organizations and other structures established to perform such research. It is necessary for Bahrain Polytechnic to have continuous dialogue with different sectors of industry and the business community not only to design a set of common employability skills but also to 'top up' this general framework with specific skills and knowledge required by graduates for each occupational group, which may change quite quickly with technological applications and a dynamic local operating environment.

Myth 4: Bahraini youth are similar to their Western counterparts

Today's young people, being of a similar age and life stage and shaped by the events and experiences of similar times and technologies, are similar over the world according to McCrindle (2009, pp. 2–3). He calls them 'Generation Y', characterized as 'tech-savvy', 'family-centric', 'team-oriented', 'achievement-oriented' and 'attention-craving' (cited in Kane, 2013). However, that Bahraini youth are similar to their Western counterparts is a myth: while Bahraini youth do have some characteristics in common with Generation Y elsewhere in the world, there are also significant differences relating to the cultural context, as illustrated in the following section that focuses on just two of these.

Family-centric

One of the key markers of adulthood commonly cited in literature on youth development is moving away from home but Watt's case study of mentoring at Bahrain Polytechnic found that most students still live at home due to financial dependency, even after marriage (2012). She also found that the values and beliefs of the family are a major influence in a Bahraini student's life, a claim supported by Al Hajeri, Al Thukair and Sarhan (2009). However, while Bahraini students can be considered strongly 'family-centric', this is an intergenerational cultural characteristic, not a recent phenomenon associated with Generation Y.

In the Arab world, the extended family is still the norm (El-Haddad, 2003) and, as one Bahraini tutor explained: 'families influence students' lives and have a say in most of their future discussions... from choosing a [university] specialization to choosing their future marriage partners'. (A/10/20130413)

The effects of a didactic education system and high levels of parental support are that many students are not independent learners when they join the Polytechnic. This is illustrated by the results of the effective life-long learning inventory (ELLI), a self-survey that assesses lifelong learning through seven dimensions (changing and learning, critical curiosity, meaning making, dependence and fragility, creativity, learning relationships and strategic awareness) collectively known as an individual's 'Learning Power' (Deakin Crick & Yu, 2008; see also Chapter 2 in this book).

ELLI profiles for Bahrain Polytechnic students show development over most of the lifelong learning dimensions between the initial profile produced at foundation level and later ones completed at degree level. Typically, there is under-development in the resilience dimension for most Bahraini students. They have a tendency to give up easily when faced with problems. These findings support the Polytechnic's adoption of the PBL approach, which is aimed at strengthening their learning development and problem-solving skills and thereby specifically addressing the resilience dimension.

Tech-savvy

Given the youthful age of Polytechnic students, the Polytechnic Curriculum Model incorporated a flexible delivery strategy, with a mix of online and face-to-face tuition. However, various reviews conducted by the Polytechnic since 2012 suggest that although Bahraini Generation Y feel confident about their technical abilities, they may not be 'tech-savvy' 'digital natives' (and for a cross-cultural comparison, see Chapter 9 in this book), and they do not display the trait characteristics of 'digital natives' to the extent some research would claim. Similar results have been found in other national contexts, for example Australia (Kennedy et al., 2008; Chapter 9 in this book).

An end-of-year review involving the 200 participating students and their tutors indicated 'students lacked confidence in self-directed study

methods and preferred face-to-face lessons', findings 'consistent with the anxiety users experience when faced with new online learning technologies' (MacMahon, Renewal of Intuition Licence, 2014). Students said: 'It was difficult to understand its content'; 'I found it very hard... difficult and boring'; and 'It's so hard... it is really hard to study online' (MacMahon, 2012, p. 17). Considering the range of challenges staff and students faced, including difficulties with the level of English required (discussed in Myth 2), all 'coped remarkably well' MacMahon said, evidenced by the academic outcomes of courses using online delivery.

Of the available learning technologies, mobile applications and video/podcasts seemed the most engaging technologies by students, but others highly ranked included simulations, the use of e-Portfolios and recorded lectures. A specific question asked students about their interest in learning in a virtual world ('Virtual world interaction sounds epic! I'd love to participate in that' *(SX/2014/04/07)*), but once again, it was stressed that this was not to be at the expense of face-to-face interaction:

- 'However, I still enjoy classroom to interact' (SX/2014/04/07).
- 'It is effective to have a virtual world for some of the courses only, as other courses may need face-to-face communication and practical teaching' (SX/2014/04/07).

In general students were motivated to learn by

- 'Anything that will let us participate and move around' (SX/2014/04/07).
- More practical less theory' (SX/2014/04/07).
- 'Work placement and real industrial training' (SX/2014/04/07).

Arab cultures are 'high context', whereby 'meaning is integrated within the environmental context and is dependent on non-verbal cues' (Al-Harthi, 2005, p. 2). In online learning, the primary mode of communication is still often through written text, disadvantaging students who are second-language learners and those from the Middle East, where culturally face-to-face communication is much more important than written communication. This may explain the attractiveness for many Bahrainis of avatars, simulations and other forms of visual virtual world tools for learning.

Bahrain Polytechnic's findings suggest that although contemporary learners have grown up in a technology-rich environment, it is a

mistake to assume that they are as 'tech-savvy' as suggested by much Generation-Y literature. Students in Bahrain, like their Western counterparts, need to be supported by tutors to build on the platform of their existing knowledge to enhance their skills and technology capability to become more self-confident technology users. This discussion of a digital divide and the evidence of family centricity suggests that considerable caution should be exercised in applying Generation-Y 'myths' to the Middle Eastern context.

Myth 5: Quality is an internationally transferable quality

As a new institution, one of Bahrain Polytechnic's critical challenges was to establish its reputation as a quality-education provider. This goal has not been without its problems, which are encapsulated by the myth that quality in higher education is internationally transferable. It was assumed at the outset that a well-defined quality assurance system (QAS) in line with international best practice would assure the quality of the Polytechnic's education and support services. However, establishing a quality culture and developing a sustainable QAS was more difficult than anticipated.

Local and regional quality context

In Bahrain, the signing of a free-trade agreement with the United States in 2006 saw a rapid expansion in private 'for-profit' education providers 'amid claims that some of them were "purely commercially motivated and had no respect for international academic standards" ' (Toumi, 2008). Some universities in the Gulf Cooperation Council nations refused to acknowledge qualifications awarded by private universities in Bahrain on the grounds that they did not meet international academic standards (Torr, 2008).

Bahrain Polytechnic's quality journey

The fact that quality issues associated with private HEIs in Bahrain were aired publicly at the very time that Bahrain Polytechnic was being established was a significant factor in the development of its approach to quality assurance. A founding staff member's impression of the context in which the Polytechnic was set up was that

> In the local context there were few national standards of academic behaviour and performance, few national school exams, no national qualifications framework, no government-directed

> performance targets, like completion of qualifications, or graduate employment success, little external benchmarking.
>
> (A9/20120428)

This situation posed a challenge for many expatriates who had previously worked in countries where sophisticated systems to ensure the maintenance of academic standards had been developed and where quality was 'taken for granted' across the education sector:

> A culture of compliance with rules, whether good or bad, exists [in Bahrain]. This appears to come from a limited pedagogical appreciation for those designing and enforcing the rules.
>
> (A9/20120428)

The concerns associated with the lack of consistent quality across Bahrain's higher education sector, coupled with a lack of understanding of the Polytechnic's curriculum model, necessitated the early adoption of an effective QAS (Coutts & Leder, 2010), in which 'Quality' was defined as 'delivering what we promise to a recognized professional standard' (Bahrain Polytechnic, 2012, p. 2). Bahrain Polytechnic's QAS included an internal quality management system, with policies and procedures, supported by an Evaluation and Audit Cycle (EAC) to maintain standards.

The EAC involves an internal review system as well as external audits required by government agencies and professional accreditation bodies. These measures have been implemented in response to the challenge of maintaining reputation, a challenge that arose from the mythic idea that quality transfers. The EAC evaluates how well the Polytechnic meets stakeholder requirements in accordance with policy guidelines. In the first five years of its operation, the Polytechnic was subjected to more than a dozen audits and reviews, leading to a questioning of their value. An analysis of these found little time between panel visits to work on the opportunities for improvement identified or to consolidate good practice.

While the QAS and its components were based on best-practice models proposed by PINZ (2007, Section 8: Quality), implementing the quality framework was challenging. This was not only because of a lack of critical mass of staff with the requisite expertise but also because the Polytechnic model was very different from what local teachers had experienced before: *'What had been known and practiced in the past was not necessarily applicable at the Polytechnic'* (A9/20120428). These implementation problems arose because the Polytechnic's quality

philosophy and associated assurance system were not designed for the local environment and educational context.

The problems identified by Bahrain Polytechnic staff and the Quality Assurance Authority for Education & Training (QAAET) reviews are common across the Arab Gulf States because 'the knowledge that is being consumed in these countries is being produced elsewhere' (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010, p. 155); the 'new organizational forms in higher education, "accreditation", "quality assurance", qualifications frameworks, transform the regional-local education systems of the Gulf and replace them with structures, systems and processes which are located elsewhere'. (p. 24). Donn and Al Manthri maintain this results in a homogenizing of education under the influence of the ' "magistracy" ... a cohort of people, key players, policy makers who travel between countries and create options, define agendas and deliver products ... [which] may, or may not, be to the benefit of an individual region' (2010, p. 156). They question whether the education reforms that many countries are instituting in order to compete globally are in the best interests of the host country and highlight the dangers of privileging economic development over other forms of development, such as cultural and social development. The solution recommended is to forge partnerships with locals to ensure that, in gaining the benefits associated with a more international standard of education, local ownership of knowledge and knowledge production are retained. This approach moves past any assumption of the easy transfer of 'quality'.

In response, the Polytechnic has included as part of the Audit and Evaluation Cycle, an Annual Programme Review (APR) process. With the aim of ensuring that all its programmes were fit for purpose, it used a programme-review template from the host institution of one of the expats in the review of programmes for the first two academic years (2008/2009; 2009/2010). The APR system comprised 11 questions designed to stimulate critical self-reflection. However, a retrospective analysis of these early APRs showed there was poor completion by the due date and that many responses were descriptive rather than analytical, written by programme managers in isolation. Requests were being made to the Academic Quality-Assurance Committee to approve significant changes to both qualification structure and the teaching content of many programmes, yet there was little evidence of the need for these changes apparent in the APRs. It was clearly time for a review of the APR process.

Harvey and Williams's overview of quality research (2010a, 2010b) suggests that programme review can be very effective when conducted within the bounds of context and purpose, where those teaching the

programme are also part of designing and conducting the review. Building on these recommendations, a case study of Bahrain Polytechnic's search for an effective programme review framework (Hasan, 2014) involved a high degree of stakeholder consultation, based on the premise that tutors are part of the problem and also the solution. Findings showed that the APR was 'seen as a compliance issue rather than an opportunity to improve programmes' and indicated an 'absence of a clear process' resulting in inconsistencies in the way review was undertaken across the programmes (Hasan & Coutts, 2014, p. 9). Indeed, in the APRs 'statements were often unsupported by data or evidence' (Hasan & Coutts, 2014, p. 8) which made it difficult to evaluate risk and to develop appropriate action plans: 'Issues were identified but in some instances no action was documented to address them... previous years actions were not always reviewed for completion' (Hasan & Coutts, 2014, p. 9).

The template itself did not reflect the unique aspects of the Polytechnic's curriculum model (such as problem-based learning) and neither did it comply with the Polytechnic's policy guidelines nor incorporate links to the national quality indicators. These factors contributed to the finding that 'it was initially difficult to get "buy-in" to the APR system because of the complexity of the process, and also because quality requirements were new to many staff, especially those who had worked extensively in the Gulf Region' (Hasan & Coutts, 2014, p. 8).

Building on these findings, a Contextualized Programme Review Framework (CPRF) was developed comprising a streamlined APR together with a periodic review to prepare for the third component, External Audit Review. The CPRF was developed from an analysis of the critical components that require annual consideration to ensure programmes meet their specified aims, in contrast to those for which a periodic review would suffice. These critical components were identified from international best practice, an analysis of the Polytechnic's strategic direction and a matching of the indicators across relevant audit agencies. Feedback from the first application of the new APR indicated that the 'process for this year was robust' and consequently 'Faculties have designed and implemented an improvement process to improve practice' (AlBuainain, 2014, pp. 2–3).

There were clear differences in the way that quality was conceptualized and applied, between the founding staff and more recently appointed staff (both locals and expatriates). The challenge of building and maintaining commitment to the concept of continuous improvement remains. The Polytechnic has the best chance of successfully

embedding a sustainable quality-improvement model by expatriate staff engaging with Bahraini to develop an understanding of the deep-rooted values and beliefs that pose challenges in establishing a quality culture.

Conclusion: Lesson learned

Bahrain Polytechnic was created specifically to meet the gap in the local labour market for applied professional and technical education, as part of the Kingdom's strategic plans to address the issues associated with the depletion of oil resources and the need to diversify the economy. Although considered one of the 'success stories' of Bahrain's national reform strategy, the Polytechnic project has had its challenges.

One of the most significant challenges in the set-up of this new HEI has been the 'taken-for-granted' beliefs (or 'myths') about quality in education. Quality concepts are complex and multifaceted and need to be culturally contextualized to develop a sustainable QAS that facilitates continuous improvement. Building trusting relationships and equal partnerships between Bahraini and expatriate staff has been identified as critical in constructing and embedding an efficient and effective, and most importantly, a culturally specific and sustainable QAS, within Bahrain Polytechnic.

Despite young Bahrainis being subjected to a greater degree of parental influence than their international counterparts, there is no doubt that the 'digital revolution' has had an impact on young Bahrainis and this should be considered when developing curricula and designing learning experiences. However, the situation in Bahrain shows that underlying cultural structures and frameworks do not simply disappear in its wake, but rather interact in complex and often unpredictable ways with the affordability of new technologies.

What has not worked at the Polytechnic has been the importation of educational policies, procedures and curricula without modification. Differences in culture, religious belief, business systems and teaching and learning philosophies make the use of imported educational resources fraught with difficulty, a finding supported by research conducted across the Gulf (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010), which suggests that such practices 'homogenize' the educational delivery.

The Polytechnic's success in achieving its mission and vision depends on it being able to work through the myriad challenges posed by false assumptions and erroneous beliefs that commonly beset establishment projects such as this. Five years on, there is a heightened awareness of

the need to consider the local context and to actively engage to create a deep understanding of people, places and paradigms in order to develop a sustainable education system that builds on the experience of what went before.

The case study presented here reveals key myths and assumptions that posed a significant challenge to the Polytechnic during the establishment phase. A major lesson learned is that if educators from different cultures are to achieve a full understanding of each other's philosophies and practices, it can only be by creating a new discourse which incorporates elements from each tradition and their unique contexts but which is not reducible to either. In this process, the educators themselves are transformed as they achieve partnership and take ownership of new systems, be they related to the curriculum or the quality management system that underpins it.

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Part III

Myths about Digital and Online Education