

The Development of Bahrain's Education System

- Manama, Bahrain

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Bahrain is often recognized as the arbiter of modernization and liberalism within the GCC. The Kingdom boasts the oldest public education system in the Gulf and literacy rates are cited to be among the highest in the Arab world. As per the latest figures published by UNESCO, Bahrain's literacy rate was a staggering 99.77% in 2015. The basis of this high literacy rate is that Bahrain's laws make education compulsory between ages 6 to 15, and parents who do not admit their eligible children to school may be referred to the general prosecutor and even face criminal punishment.

The Ministry of Education (MoE) maintains four key tenets at the core of its over-arching role in regulating and overseeing all education-related activities in Bahrain. It lists these as "learning to be, learning to know, learning to work and learning to live with others". In order to help facilitate these principles, the MoE has taken several steps to shape the Kingdom's young minds into worldly and active members of society. Technology, in particular, is increasingly revolutionizing the education system in a vast array of ways. For example, the convenience of carrying laptops, smart-phones and iPads has enabled students of the present day to be further engaged with creating their own knowledge, whilst making academic research far more accessible than ever before. The principle to learn to "live with others" is no longer merely applicable to a person's immediate surroundings. To ensure that students in Bahrain's public schools are familiar with electronic education, public schools have been provided with computers through projects like the 2004 "King Hamad Schools of the Future". The MoE has also implemented a large scale project to train thousands of teachers, administrators and specialists on the use of IT. Some of its potential measure of success include independent quality reviews, national examinations and scores in international tests of school performance (i.e. TIMSS, PISA and PIRLS).

A Brief History of Education in Bahrain

The first public school for boys was established in 1919 "Alhedayah AlKhaleefeyyah School". Following in 1928 the first public school for girls "Khaddeejah AlKobra School" was established. In a 2015/16 report issued by the MoE shows that there are currently a total of 208 government schools, 75 private schools and 14 universities within the Kingdom.

As a testament to the country's rich diversity, the MoE provides free education for both Bahraini and non-Bahraini students in public schools. Education has always been compulsory in Bahrain, and so as a means of encouraging people to take advantage of the public schools presented to them, the MoE has also provided textbooks in all subjects free of charge at the beginning of each academic year.

The Growth of National and International Private Schools and Education Institutions

The first international school to open in the Kingdom was the 'American Dutch Reformed Church', in 1892. As evidence of the country's long-standing acceptance of multiculturalism and respect for freedom of religion, the school's syllabus was primarily shaped around English, Mathematics and the study of Christianity.

Initiated as an immediate response to educate the children of a growing expatriate community in Bahrain, St Christopher's school tells an interesting narrative of how a small Church School of 39 pupils has developed into an internationally acclaimed institution; considered to be one of the top 10 international schools in the world (according to English newspaper The Guardian in 2008) – the only school in the region to make it on the list.

Setting Up

Of the 75 private schools in Bahrain, 35 are international. In order to set up a private institution there are certain requirements that must be met including a prior approval and a final site inspection from the Private Education Directorate within the MoE, examining set building specifications which include site approval from the Municipality, Civil Defence approval in relation to fire safety, and Traffic Directorate approval for parking and road accessibility to the premises. The investors themselves must also meet a range of personal requirements, such as being a minimum of 25 years of age, having a General Secondary School Certificate or its equivalent and not being civil servants or employees of any private institutions or public organizations. Additionally, there is a minimum capital requirement of BHD50,000. Unlike the rest of the GCC, educational and higher educational institutions (HEI's) in Bahrain can be 100% foreign owned, which may be a key factor in the success and growth of the Kingdom's many international institutions. There are various forms of activities that a school or institution may choose to conduct under the umbrella of 'education.' For instance, within the private education sphere, founders may choose to establish a National Private School (which teaches up to secondary school) or a National Educational institute.

Private Higher Education Institution

Bahrain's first university, the Gulf Polytechnic, opened to both national and international students in 1968 as a public Gulf Technical College. Alongside the four main public universities in which international students can study, there are several private institutions for them to enrol in. The Application Procedures and General Conditions for setting up a private higher Educational Institution ('HEI') in Bahrain is identical to that of any national private school or national educational institute.

The Kingdom's track record of being a leading financial hub of the region for the last 40 years gives it outstanding potential to attract students from the GCC. Its attractive quality of life and key geographical location are some of the factors being considered by the MoE in an effort to introduce new quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms, which are likely to significantly reduce concerns from neighbouring countries over the quality of private HEI's. This was addressed in the National Higher Education's Strategy of 2014 – 2024, and the implementation was reflected in the Ministerial Decree no. 38 of 2015 defining the framework of the institutional review of higher education institutions by the National Authority for Qualifications and Quality Assurance of Education and Training, setting eight standards for the review; mission and governance, quality assurance, information technology and infrastructure, teaching and learning quality, students supporting services, human resources, research and community participation.

Conclusion

From the wave of new universities that marked the beginning of the millennium, to the clear efforts made in public and private institutions to incorporate technology in ways that create a far more interactive and engaging learning experience for students, Bahrain's successes in the development of the education system hint at a very promising future for the sector.