

Preparing for External Quality Review: Critical Success Factors for Vocational Institutions

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Abstract

This paper identifies the critical success factors which have led to an ‘Outstanding’ grade for vocational institutions in Bahrain. A checklist in preparation for Education and Training Quality Authority (BQA) review was designed in 2012 and has been used in six vocational institutions. Data gathered during the implementation of this checklist led to the identification of critical success factors that determine the achievement of an ‘Outstanding’ grade.

Nineteen success factors were identified. Thirteen of these relate to institutional results and six relate to institutional processes. At the core of these latter six critical success factors was the effective implementation of a learner-centred approach. The other five of the six institutional critical success factors related to: meeting diverse needs of learners; talented learners’ progress and achievement; the progress and achievement of learners with specific challenges; benchmarking of learners’ achievement against international providers; and evidence of planning and its positive impact on learners.

Introduction

The BQA was established in 2008. The authority has three main core businesses: performance review of educational and vocational institutions; managing the National Qualifications Framework and; conducting the National Examinations.

The vocational review framework focuses on five questions. (1) How well do learners achieve? (2) How effective are teaching/training and assessment in promoting learning? (3) How well do programmes meet the needs and interests of learners and stakeholders? (4) How well are learners supported and guided? (5) How effective are leadership, management and governance in raising achievement and improving the quality of the provision?

The evidences provided by an institution to answer these questions lead to the judgement on the overall effectiveness of the training provider and its capacity to improve. The main questions are underpinned by a series of criteria. Reviewers use the following four ranking categories, assessed from evidence obtained from the questions and matched against the criteria, to indicate the

provider's overall effectiveness and its capacity to improve: Outstanding, Good, Satisfactory, or Inadequate (Education & Training Quality Authority, 2015).

A comprehensive checklist was prepared for institutions to use as they prepared for review by the Education and Training Quality Authority (BQA). This checklist has been used in vocational institutions as a tool to identify gaps that pertain to the requirements of the BQA review framework. This study aims at identifying the critical success factors which led to gaining an 'Outstanding' grade. It also categorises the success factors into two groups, processes and results.

Vocational Institutions' Challenges as Reported in the BQA Annual Report 2016

The BQA Annual Report 2016 identified vocational institutions' challenges in five areas: learners' achievements; effectiveness of teaching, training and assessment; the extent to which programmes meet the needs of learners and stakeholders; learners' support and guidance; and effectiveness of leadership, management and governance. The report noted that a significant number of institutes face issues. These include: enabling the progress and improving the achievements of learners; the availability of comprehensive policies and procedures relating to internal quality assurance systems and the effective implementation of these policies; assessment tools that need to be improved and diversified, particularly formative assessment instruments; and assessments that need to have clear relationships to intended learning outcomes (Education & Training Quality Authority, 2016).

BQA also indicated that activities provided for trainees needed to be oriented more towards stimulating self-learning through life tasks and reality activities. These activities should instill a desire among trainees to take responsibility for their own learning experiences. It was also mentioned that greater attention needed to be paid to supporting programmes with a range of relevant extracurricular activities, particularly by those institutes in which extracurricular activities are considered a fundamental supportive element of the learning process.

In summary, BQA has identified key challenges that vocational institutions are facing according to their five main questions. To explore these challenges further from the perspective of institutions, a Checklist for BQA Review Preparation, which includes 96 elements, was designed. The following section discusses the developmental stage of this checklist and its main purposes.

The Development of the Checklist for BQA Review Preparation

The Checklist for BQA Review Preparation was designed for use by vocational training institutions in Bahrain that are about to undergo BQA reviews. It focuses on evidences that the BQA review team seeks during the review process. This checklist consists of 22 categories and 115 elements which are mapped to BQA's five main questions (refer to Appendix 1). There are two areas that need to be completed in relation to each element. The first relates to an institution's policies and procedures that apply to the targeted element. The second focuses on the evidence of implementing the related procedures effectively. Both are important to show that the 'right job is being done right'.

The Purposes of the Checklist for BQA Review Preparation

The Checklist for BQA Review Preparation has been used for different purposes. First, it has been used as a gap analysis tool to identify elements that are missing and, consequently, are addressed

in improvement plans to close the gaps. The second use of this checklist has been to review the documentation of institutes in the light of the checklist elements. In many cases this had led to the redesign of an institute's documentation system so that it is aligned with the BQA five questions and uses the same 'language' (words, terms) as that used by BQA. The third use of the checklist has been to have institutes focus on the critical issues that are likely to affect their overall grade. These elements are marked in red in the checklist. Typically, it has been found that institutions need to focus on developing a more learner-centered approach and put in place strategies to support talented learners and learners with difficulties (refer to the checklist, Appendix 1, to see the full list of critical issues). The fourth use of this checklist has been as a vital aid in the process of undertaking the self-review activity. It has been used to lead the collection of evidences provides a base for the writing of supportive narrative and judgements. This has made the self-review process simpler yet comprehensive and, importantly, evidence-based.

In summary, one of the key challenges that vocational institutions have faced during the review visits is related to their capacity to prepare the evidences required by a BQA team, particularly during the first and second review days. Failing to provide evidence leads to losing trust and impacts negatively on the review results.

Methodology

This study aims at answering two questions: (1) What are the critical success factors which lead to an 'Outstanding' grade in relation to vocational institutions reviews undertaken by BQA? (2) Do the success factors relate to an institution's processes or results?

The Checklist for BQA Review Preparation (refer to Appendix 1) has been designed and used to identify critical success factors of vocational institutions in Bahrain in the light of BQA's five questions. This checklist includes 96 elements. The data gathered for six institutes over the last five years were used to identify the top critical factors that lead to an 'Outstanding' grade. The following section discusses the data collection procedure.

Several procedures were used to collect data for this study. First, a checklist for BQA review preparation was designed in 2012. This checklist was developed according to the BQA Review Framework. Second, training was provided to staff members to undertake each institution's review using this checklist. Third, the Checklist for BQA Review Preparation was used in six vocational institutes as a gap analysis tool. The outcomes were used to develop improvement plans to enhance the institutes' practices. Fourth, the Checklist for BQA Review Preparation was used several times to measure progress made by the institutes and ensure that each institute was ready for BQA review. Finally, the data gathered for the six institutes was analysed to identify critical success factors that led to an 'Outstanding' grade.

This study is limited to the elements that are included in the Checklist of BQA Review Preparation, the six vocational institutes that participated in this study, and the period over which this study was carried out.

Study Findings: Question One

What are the critical success factors which lead to an 'Outstanding' grade in relation to vocational institutions reviews undertaken by BQA? The Success and Effect Diagram was adopted to analyse

successful factors for vocational institutions in Bahrain to meet BQA expectations for an ‘Outstanding’ grade. As indicated by the American Society for Quality, too often organisations ignore successes while they focus on problems that need immediate attention. Quality improvement tools and techniques are used extensively to solve problems, but those same methods can also be used to analyse successful processes. Using the success and effect diagram to understand what makes vocational institutes successful shines a light on the good work an institute does, not just the areas that fall short (American Society for Quality, 2017).

Figure 1 shows the 19 success factors of vocational institutions that were identified using the Checklist for BQA Review Preparation. These success factors are classified according to BQA’s five questions.

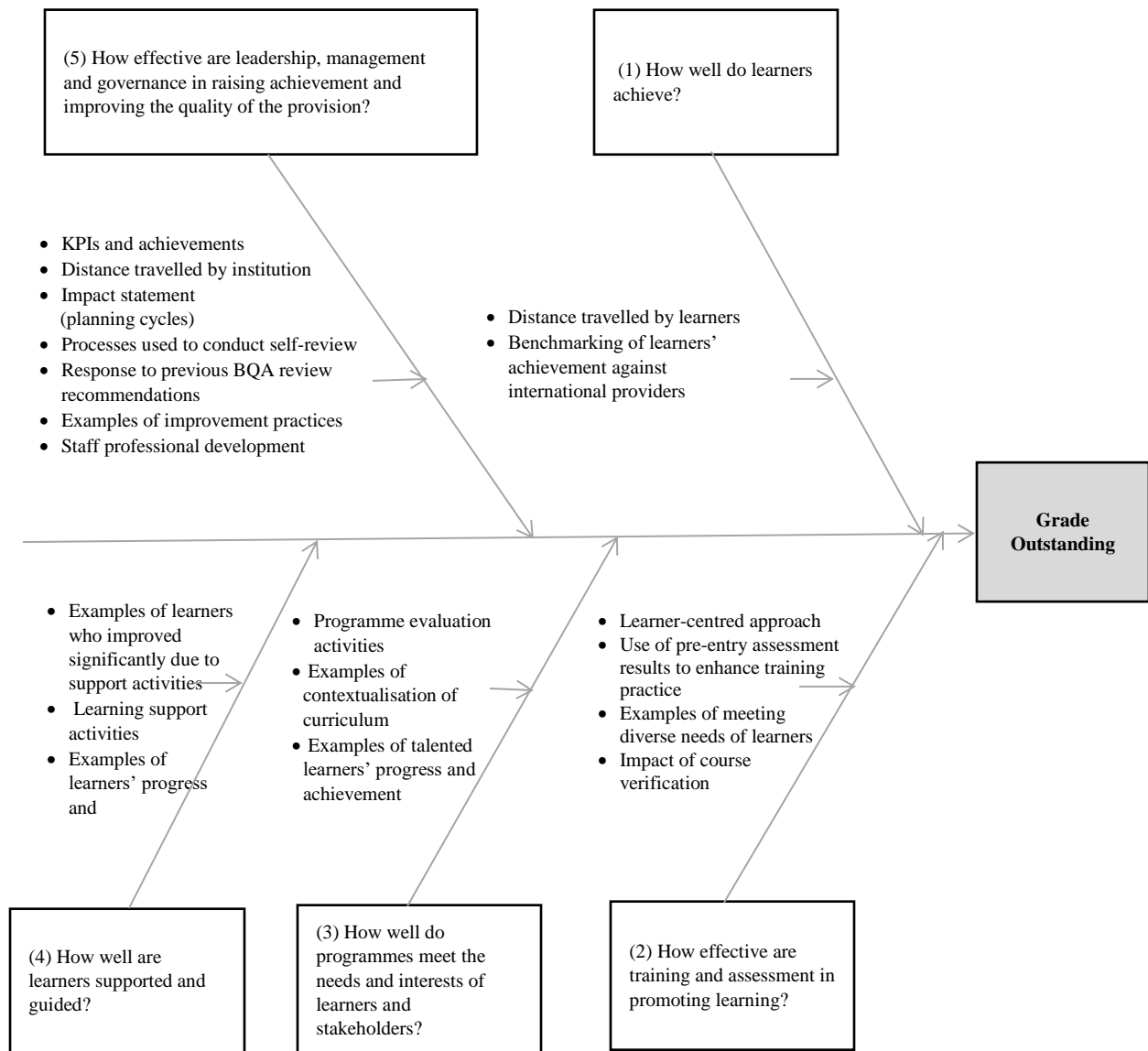


Figure 1: Success and Effect Diagram for the 19 Success Factors

Study Findings: Question Two

Do the success factors relate to an institution's processes or results? The Baldrige Performance Excellence Program defines process as the linked activities with the purpose of producing a product or service for a customer (user) within or outside the organisation. It defines results as outputs and outcomes achieved by the organisation (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2017).

The 19 success factors may be divided into two groups. The first group relate to an institution's processes and the second group relate to an institution's results. Process refers to the methods the institution uses to address and improve the elements that relate to BQA's five questions. Results refers to an institution's outcomes in achieving the requirements of BQA's five questions.

Table 1 shows the 19 success factors categorised as processes and results. Thirteen elements were categorised as results and six were categorised as processes. This indicates that vocational institutions need to put more attention to results as they are critical to achieving a high BQA review grade.

Table 1: The 19 Success Factors Categorised as Processes and Results

BQA Review Questions	Success Factors	Group
How well do learners achieve?	Distance travelled by learners	Result
	Benchmarking of learners' achievement against international providers	Result
How effective are training and assessment in promoting learning?	Use of pre-entry assessment results to enhance training practice	Process
	Learner-centred approach	Process
	Examples of meeting diverse needs of learners	Result
	Impact of course verification	Result
How well do programmes meet the needs and interests of learners and stakeholders?	Programme evaluation activities	Process
	Examples of contextualisation of curriculum to Bahrain	Result
	Examples of talented learners' progress and achievement	Result
How well are learners supported and guided?	Examples of learners who improved significantly due to support activities	Result
	Learning support activities	Process
	Examples of learners' progress and achievement	Result
How effective are leadership, management and governance in raising achievement and improving the quality of the provision?	Key performance indicators and achievements	Result
	Impact statement related to planning cycles	Result
	Distance travelled by institution	Result
	Processes used to conduct self-review	Process
	Response to previous BQA review recommendations	Result
	Examples of improvement practices	Result
	Action plan for staff professional development	Process

The Critical Success Factors of Vocational Institutions

The table below shows the 6 critical success factors, drawn from the original 19 which led to the achievement of an 'Outstanding' review grade. Institutions which are aiming at achieving an 'Outstanding' grade are advised to focus on these factors.

Table 2: The Critical Success Factors of Vocational Institutions

BQA Review Question	Critical Success Factors
How well do learners achieve?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benchmarking of learners’ achievement against international providers
How effective are training and assessment in promoting learning?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learner-centred approach Examples of meeting diverse needs of learners
How well do programmes meet the needs and interests of learners and stakeholders?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examples of talented learners’ progress and achievement
How well are learners supported and guided?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examples of learners with learning difficulties progress and achievement
How effective are leadership, management and governance in raising achievement and improving the quality of the provision?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impact statement related to planning cycles

Relations among the Critical Success Factors

The relations diagram shows cause-and-effect relationships. The process of creating a relations diagram helps a group analyse the natural links between different aspects of a complex situation (American Society for Quality, 2017). Figure 2 shows the relations among the critical success factors as cause-and-effect relationships.

Implementing the learner-centred approach (cause) will result in the achievement of: having examples of meeting diverse needs of learners, examples of talented learners’ progress and achievement, examples of learners with learning difficulties’ progress and achievement, and benchmarking of learners’ achievement against international providers (effect).

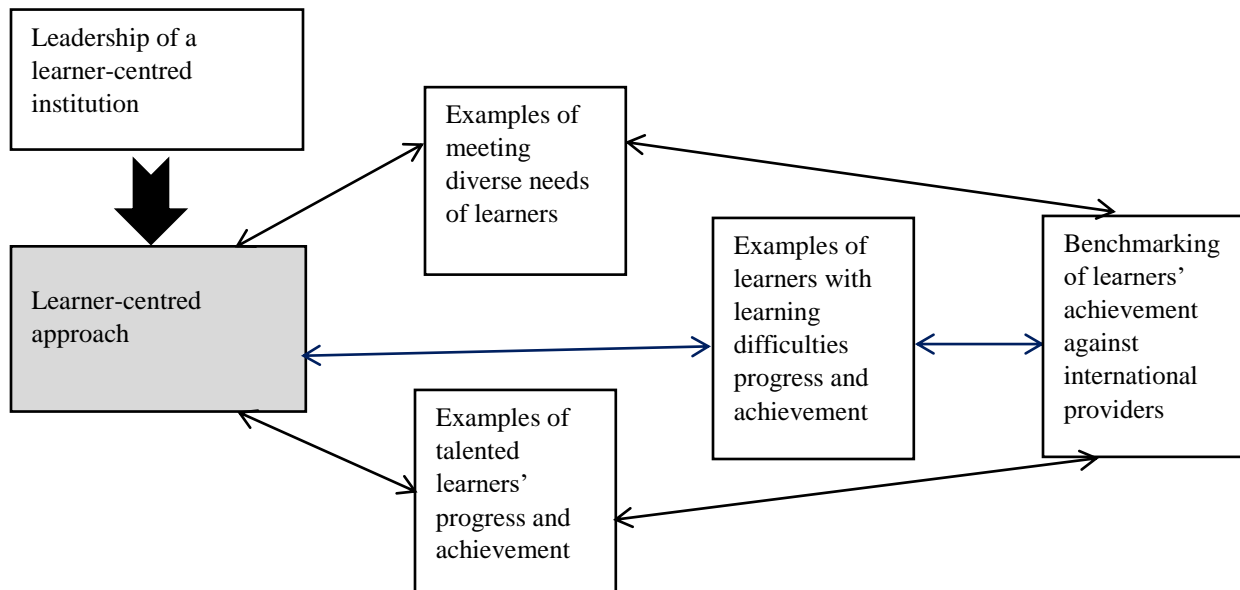


Figure 2: Relations among the Six Critical Success Factors

The sixth critical success factor, impact statement related to planning cycles relates to the effective leadership of a learner-centred institution which successfully implements the other five critical success factors.

Bennison (2017) comments on the relationship between the trainer and trainees. He indicates that institutions have reported that developing an effective response and appropriate actions to the following question is crucial to achieving a high review grading: How effective are training and assessment in promoting learning? He adds that in answering this question the focus should be on what the trainees are doing and achieving as a result of the strategies of the trainer. In this way, the relationship between the trainer and trainees is strengthened. The trainees feel engaged and that they are progressing. The trainer feels successful in his or her endeavours.

The learner-centred approach is the most challenging element. It can be easily observed by BQA reviewers and an institution's grade will often depend on this element. Most of the institution's effort should focus on implementing a learner-centred approach. The learner-centred approach enables the development of higher-order thinking skills and meeting the diverse needs of learners. It is an approach that has learners wanting to learn and wanting to be in environments (including classrooms and training rooms) where learner-centredness is felt and enjoyed.

Conclusion

Five of the critical success factors in relation to the achievement of a 'Outstanding' review grade are related to the learners. This indicates that BQA Review Framework strongly focuses on classroom practices and their results.

To achieve the six critical success factors, vocational institutions need ongoing dialogue among internal and external stakeholders and an ability to find pockets of enthusiasm within their organisations that are exemplars of accountability and quality improvement. Effective management then supports the widening and deepening of such pockets. Successful institutions develop ownership of their quality review frameworks and their quality systems overall (Hasan, 2015). As a result, the BQA Review Framework provides a focus for ongoing quality improvement rather than something that is imposed and treated as no more than a matter of begrudging compliance.

Appendix 1: Checklist for BQA Review Preparation

This checklist guides the institution in collating appropriate documentation for a BQA review. The emphases are on: (1) Documented policies and procedures, and (2) Documented evidence that these policies and procedures are being effectively implemented.

Learners' achievement How well do learners achieve?			
Category	Element	Documentation	
		Policies and procedures	Evidence of implementation
Learner Achievement	Analysis of learners' achievement		
	Examples of success stories from current and former trainees		
	Distance travelled by learners		
	Benchmarking of learners' achievement against international providers		

The quality of provision How effective are training and assessment in promoting learning?			
Category	Element	Documentation	
		Policies and procedures	Evidence of implementation
Learning Strategies	Policy and procedures		
	Lesson observation -recommendations and follow-up activities		
	Pre-entry assessment		
	Examples of effective lesson plans		
	Use of pre-entry assessment results to enhance training practice		
	Learner-centred approach		
	Examples of meeting diverse needs of learners		

The quality of provision How well do programmes meet the needs and interests of learners and stakeholders?			
Category	Element	Documentation	
		Policies and procedures	Evidence of implementation
Curriculum	MOL courses approvals		
	List of course and programme approvals by awarding bodies		
	Enrichment activities		
	Extracurricular activities		
	Programme evaluation activities		
	Examples of contextualisation of curriculum to Bahrain		

The quality of provision			
How well do programmes meet the needs and interests of learners and stakeholders?			
Category	Element	Documentation	
		Policies and procedures	Evidence of implementation
Course Verification	Policy and procedures		
	External verification reports		
	Samples of learners' assessment		
	Internal verification reports		
	Impact of course verification		
Talented Learners	Talented learners' policy		
	Extracurricular activities		
	Enrichment activities		
	Examples of talented learners' progress and achievement		
Learners with Learning Difficulties	Learning difficulties and diagnosis policy		
	Learning support activities		
	Examples of learners' progress and achievement		

The quality of provision			
How well are learners supported and guided?			
Category	Element	Documentation	
		Policies and procedures	Evidence of implementation
Learner Support	Support and guidance policy		
	Learners' induction process		
	Career guidance process		
	Training Centre brochures		
	Learner roles and responsibilities (code of conduct)		
	Learner appeal policy and procedures		
	Attendance records		
	Examples of learners who improved significantly due to support activities		
Learning Resources	E-learning facilities and electronic course material		
	Classrooms, learning spaces and their facilities		
	Library facilities		
	Records of borrowing books		
Staff Induction	Induction programme		
	Induction survey		

Leadership, management and governance			
How effective are leadership, management and governance in raising achievement and improving the quality of the provision?			
Category	Element	Documentation	
		Policies and procedures	Evidence of implementation
Institution Plans	SWOT analysis		
	Vision, mission and values		
	Strategic objectives		
	Strategic plan (detailed)		
	Operational plan (detailed)		
	Improvement action plan (general)		
	BQA post-review action plan		
	Key performance indicators and achievements		
Capacity for Improvement	Impact statement related to planning cycles		
	Recent development initiatives		
	Plan for future projects		
	Courses and programmes expansion over the last 3 years		
Review and Improvement Activities	Distance travelled by institution		
	Self-review report		
	Dissemination of self-review outcomes		
	Self-review improvement plan		
	Processes used to conduct self-review		
Improvement Actions	Response to previous BQA review recommendations		
	Trainers' survey and reflections		
	Learners' feedback and suggestions		
	Stakeholders' surveys and reflections		
	Learners', trainers' and staff members' feedback		
Staff Recruitment	Examples of improvement practices		
	Recruitment policy and procedures		
	Job descriptions		
Partnership	Employment agreements		
	Employers' corresponding documentation		
Repeat Business for the last 3 years	Letters of appreciation		
	Client list		
	Course list		
	Programme list		
Meetings	Number of learners		
	Staff meetings		
	Committee meetings		
	Meetings with stakeholders		

Leadership, management and governance			
How effective are leadership, management and governance in raising achievement and improving the quality of the provision?			
Category	Element	Documentation	
		Policies and procedures	Evidence of implementation
Health and Safety	Health and safety policy		
	Risk assessment reports		
	Fire drills and evacuation arrangements		
	Health and safety checklist		
	Maintenance form and records		
Quality Management System	Quality Manual that covers NQF five standards		
Trainers' Professional Development	Trainers' appraisal		
	Professional development plan for trainers and employees		
	Staff courses attendance records		
	Training needs analysis		
	Action plan for staff professional development		
Learner Registration	Registration forms		
	Enrolment forms		
	Registration software		
	Learner documentation		
Staff Induction	Updated trainers' and staff members' profiles		
	Induction programme		
	Induction survey		

Comments

Name

Designation

Prepared by:

Checked by:

Date:

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