

ALIGNING EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS AND LOCAL LABOUR MARKET NEEDS IN THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC): THE NEED FOR HOLISTIC STRATEGIES

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Abstract

The inter-connection that exists between levels of educational achievement and workforce development in many countries has a very significant influence on economic development. The prioritization of educational development stimulates efficient workforce development, and consequently the creation of a high-skilled, knowledge economy. Most member states of the GCC have adopted a knowledge-based economic policy in the quest to achieve a set of social, economic and political objectives. The knowledge-based policy aims to enhance economic diversification, create job opportunities, and foster social development. The achievement of success in all these areas, however, demands the implementation of new educational policies in alignment with the countries' labour market needs. This paper focuses on the identification of possible policies that could be applied in these countries to achieve the desired success at all levels and in all spheres of development. To achieve this objective, the paper offers a critical overview of the educational systems within the GCC, the labour market needs, and the opportunities and challenges facing the GCC countries, and examines the inter-connection that exists between high quality education and economic development.

In addition, the paper identifies effective educational systems and policies from the UK and Germany, and offers guidelines on how such experience can be applied in the GCC in order to align the educational systems with the labour market needs. Further, the paper considers the issues of workforce development, demand/supply perspectives and the link between education and the job market. The challenges that the GCC countries might face in the implementation and integration of an aligned educational system, and the necessary response that stakeholders and policy makers must adopt, are discussed.

Keywords: Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), educational systems, labour market needs, knowledge-based economy, economic development, job growth, unemployment rates, skills mismatch, workforce development The 2015 WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings Barcelona

Introduction

In recent years, improvements in social, economic and political life experienced all over the world can be directly attributed to the development of education. With enhanced human interaction, society has experienced high-speed globalization, which has influenced all other aspects that define life. From career development and family life at the individual level, to the free flow of currencies and trade, and political engagement throughout the world, education has proved to be essential in the development of all spheres of life (Al-Misnad, 2012). Therefore, the prioritization of education across the international platform has triggered global development and has been widely acknowledged. Consideration of this fact has led different countries, organizations and individuals to consider in detail the development of educational systems that serve to promote education. With the understanding of the inter-connection between education systems and labour market needs, governments all over the world focus on the creation of strategies that assure a proper alignment of the two elements in order to ascertain success. The GCC must focus on the development and alignment of educational systems to meet labour market needs to ensure the achievement of a set of regional objectives; social, economic, and political.

Overview of the GCC and its Educational Systems

Gulf states is a suitable short name for the Arab states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Emirates in and Saudi Arabia. These countries are the six member nations of The Gulf Cooperation Council, and the states are usually called Gulf Cooperative Countries (GCC) (Achoui, 2009). As an intergovernmental economic and political union, the GCC was founded on 25 May 1981 with the purpose for the unification of the member countries economically, socially, and politically. It was formed to create regulations that would touch on issues such as legislation, religion, customs, finance and trade. Further, the establishment of a common GCC currency, the encouragement of the private sector to cooperate, and the development of joint ventures were key objectives (International Monetary Fund, 2009).

The Gulf States are known to have a common regional culture. Although their status and rate of development differ, these states share similar features that exemplify their economic and education sectors, for instance, overreliance on oil, a dominant public sector with an important economic surplus, a young and quickly growing national labour force and overdependence on expatriate labour. These countries also face similar problems and challenges to overcome, for example, they face difficulties in expanding their economies, addressing low production and labour force setbacks, increasing the non-oil private sector, and improving the ability of managerial and public sector organizations (Saif, 2009). The development of the GCC was strongly influenced by the need to promote education within the member states. It was assumed that this initiative would strengthen the region's development by enhancing the influence of education on skills and scientific research, and by the development of stronger ties between people from the various local and regional platforms (Saadi, 2012). The current GCC's objectives are to foster progress in science as well as in the technical sector in order to attain development in the exploration of natural resources. This process has revealed a need for the prioritization of local labour market needs such as the development of workforce, the alleviation of unemployment rates, skills mismatch, and the issue of job growth in the development of a knowledge based economy. The challenges that the GCC has faced in the quest for the achievement of the set objectives, such as the slower job growth, increased unemployment, and evident skills mismatch reveal the need for holistic strategies that would identify, take forward and confirm the necessary processes. Such strategies should focus on the promotion of alignment with educational systems in order to meet local labour market needs (Grainger, et al., 2012).

Different member countries of the GCC possess different educational systems, with varying detailed policies. All the systems and policies work towards the establishment of a knowledge-based economy, where education is intended to create a skilled workforce that can compete effectively in the job market and respond quickly and efficiently to changing local labour market needs. The overall vision is the achievement of economic, social and political development (mostly regional integration) through the provision of quality education. Quality education can only be achieved through the implementation and integration of well-aligned educational systems that seek to develop learners capable of advancing in all areas of societal development. Most of the countries within the region have experienced rapid and significant economic growth over the past decade, with minimal or no economic downturns (Al-Thani, 2012). Notwithstanding such progress, there is a need for the adoption of new educational systems and policies, and to learn from successful economies in order to align the GCC's systems with local labour market needs.

With the projection of a student enrolment of more than 11.6 million by 2016 from the recorded 10.2 million in 2011, higher education has grown rapidly within the GCC (Sawalel, 2012). The rapid growth is mainly associated with the development of new educational systems, the adoption of different policies and the increasing regulation of the systems by the GCC governments (Therin, 2011). The GCC states have concentrated on the regulation of higher education with the intention to realize a knowledge-based economy, which will ascertain constant economic growth and development. For instance, the UAE's Commission for Academic Accreditation regulates education within the country to ensure the release of competent graduates able to meet the labour market needs in existence. It accredits educational institutions after analysis of their academic programmes before admission of students to ensure their capability of offering quality education and training (CAA, 2015). Similar bodies exist in the other GCC countries, an issue which has triggered the development of quality education, the creation of a knowledge-based economy, and, consequently, economic growth.

The educational system of the region extends from kindergarten through primary education, secondary education, and into higher learning. Of great importance, institutions of higher learning comprise universities and colleges, technical institutes and technological schools (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2011, p. 7).

The regulation of education within the GCC has ensured constant development of the systems, with an increase in the number of students accessing higher education (through private and public institutions) to The 2015 WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings Barcelona more than 11 million, and the enhancement of teacher education within the region (Sawalel, 2012). The growth of higher education in the region is, therefore, significant. While citing the GCC Education Industry's report, Sawalel (2012) asserts that the number of students in institutions of higher learning will grow at a compounded annual rate of 2.7% by 2016. Such a growth rate will result to a rise of student enrolment from 10.2 million in 2011 to 11.6 million by 2016. However, the GCC will have to concentrate on the promotion of quality education, and the production of well-developed graduates (Sawalel, 2012).

Aligning Educational Systems and Local Labour Market Needs

Economic development is strongly dependent on workforce development, which is directly influenced by the level and quality of education (Karoly, 2010). Therefore, the co-existence of the job market, educational systems, and economic development is critical. The concurrent presence of these can assure a sustainable and continued development, locally, nationally, and globally (Vandal, 2009). While the GCC States have developed educational systems that cover all areas of learning effectively, there is a likelihood of a great economic challenge in the future due to the production of a generation of young job-seekers less well-suited to the new knowledge economy.

Whilst most members of the GCC prioritize education, and thus have high literacy levels, a deficit is still evident in comparison with the existing local labour market needs (Shah, 2013). In the past, the educational systems seem to have worked effectively towards the development of students in the quest to create a generation that can meet the local labour market needs. However, the systems now seem to be inefficient in responding to the present and future labour market needs within the region. Rates of unemployment have risen to 23.3% in the last three four years from 13.7% (Arab News, 2012), while graduates reveal an increasing inability to meet gaps in the labour market, thus creating the possibility of a retarded economy. The increasing unemployment rates reflect reduced job opportunities created by the inability of the educational systems to produce skilled personnel.

There is a need to adopt measures that focus on the unification of the different entities in order to produce a well-developed workforce that can respond to current and predicted labour market needs (Grainger, et al., 2012). The failure to produce such a workforce inhibits the GCC states from the achievement and maintenance of stable economic health. As a result, the GCC states do not experience optimum levels of economic prosperity. Therefore, there is a need for the alignment of educational systems with the local labour market needs in the quest to achieve both workforce and general economic development. According to Grainger et al. (2012) the relationship between the educational and training systems in the states of GCC and the economic and geo-political plans and ambitions do not balance; as a result, neither the educational systems and nor the labour market can promise a sustainable future (International Labour Office, 2011, p. 8). There is a need for the adoption of a strategy that will reverse the present trends and develop a new relationship. The 2015 WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings Barcelona

The adoption of effective practice drawn from educational systems and policy from other countries where better alignment has been achieved is one way to support the alignment of the GCC educational systems and local labour market needs (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010, p. 54). Some educational systems and policies applied elsewhere in the world have proved to be effective in the alignment of the workforce development, and in achieving social and economic progress. The British educational system is widely and globally acknowledged as highly efficient in terms of alignment (Wilkins, 2001). The GCC might adopt new policies based upon British experience to ensure that its systems produce individuals who can meet the challenges of the job market, efficiently deal with the difficulties within the workplace, and help their employers to compete effectively leading to economic development (Alzu'be, 2012). A study of the relevance of the British higher education system in Oman and the UAE, both members of the GCC, indicated that the system is effective in the development of competent persons who can perform efficiently at the workplace, due to their sufficient skill and character development (Wilkins, 2001). As such, it is suggested that the GCC should adopt some of the system or policies within it, or other similar educational systems, in order to ensure certainty in the development of alignment. In some cases, lessons from the UK or from other systems might be adopted in a modified form recognising the different cultural background of the GCC countries.

The development of educational systems through the provision of quality education can lead to effective alignment with the labour market needs (Abdulrahman, et al., 2012). As identified by Wilkins (2001), a critical factor that makes the British educational system effective in the alignment of education and the labour market needs is its ability to create flexible, knowledgeable, well-motivated, and career and development oriented students. The GCC can focus on the development of the educational systems to ensure the achievement of similar results with its students. However, this can only be achieved through the adoption of different programs and educational policies.

Programs are needed that motivate students to focus on furthering their education after the completion of secondary education; higher education is crucial in career development of their careers and in meeting the needs of employers in GCC states (Alzu'be, 2012). In addition, there is a need for the states of GCC to concentrate on the development of students in such a way that they develop a variety of skills and techniques, and acquire a successful attitude that prepares them for challenges and a successful performance within the workplace, while minimising the present skills mismatch (Coughlan & Hunt, 2011).

The GCC - Strategies for Aligning the Educational Systems to Respond to Local Labour Market Needs

To align the educational systems with the local labour market needs in GCC States, a reform of the existing educational system is important. Effective reform can be achieved through the adoption of elements from well-aligned educational systems from across the world, such as the British educational system and Germany's higher education system (Hertog, 2012). For instance, the GCC might adopt and implement British educational policies that focus on the development of learners with the capability to meet the requirements of the job market. The The 2015 WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings Barcelona system should enhance workforce development, which can be achieved through the establishment of several pillars of learning, to reveal the link between higher education and work (Fasih, 2008). In addition, the system must unearth the demand and supply perspectives of education, in the quest to understand the job market's demand for skilled personnel necessary for the development of a knowledge-based economy. Moreover, the development of the educational systems to sufficiently supply the required workforce is critical, and demands for effective alignment with the labour/job market.

Strategies from the UK's Educational System

Workforce Development

The application of some aspects the UK's educational system within the GCC educational systems can enhance the process of workforce development. The educational systems within the GCC must adopt measures to develop learners who are not only focused on acquiring jobs, but who aim throughout their educational life to acquire values that enable them to lead sustainable lives (Little & Arthur, 2010). In this respect, fundamental principles include ideas of self-directed learning and lifelong learning, and the view of education as broader than preparation for employment. The major purpose of the education should be the development of citizens who focus on their personal development, and on the development of society. Such a generation of individuals can be created through the encouragement of humane values in students. As such, the GCC educational systems should concentrate on adopting measures that will ensure that students are not only prepared to enter the job market, but can also lead sustainable lives.

An all-round well-developed workforce should possess a broad range of skills that enable it to undertake different duties proficiently, meeting the labour market needs. The UK educational system emphasises nurturing talent, capturing skills, and triggering the development of creativity throughout all levels (Saracho, 2014). Similarly, the GCC should adopt and integrate the strategy in its educational systems to ensure the creation of a properly and effectively prepared workforce. As the population of the GCC countries rises, the major challenge in the future will be the creation of employment for the population, and the assurance of sustainable development (Shediak & Samman, 2010). Whilst, at the moment, unemployment is high within these countries, the future that the countries face may be bleaker if there is no readjustment within the educational systems to meet the needs of the local labour market. Adopting measures that promote creativity, enhancing programs that nurture talents, developing skills and preparing students to compete in the workplace and to develop self-employment skills require a new view of the importance of education generally and of higher education in particular (Scott-Jackson, 2010).

Responding to the Skills Mismatch

The UK's quest to respond to the mismatch in skills experienced in past years prompted the development of an educational system aligned with the labour market. The education sector in the UK focuses on the quality preparation of all-round students, to support the The 2015 WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings Barcelona development of a knowledge-based economy (Mysíková & Večerník, 2013, p. 539). To ensure that students develop all the necessary skills, not only academically but also those that can guide them throughout life and employment ("life skills", the government has adopted different strategies. The most effective measure was the creation of commissions/bodies that foster skills development. Moreover, there is recognition of the need for both specific, hard skills, such as computing, languages, literacy and numeracy, and broader, soft skills, including human interaction, presentational skills and time management (Weert, 2011). The GCC can create similar commissions to encourage and support skills development in schools. Success in the establishment of a skilled workforce can be achieved by increasing the number of students, acceleration of progress towards a closer employer-education relationship, and the encouragement of student participation, talent identification and development.

Engaging Employers in Quality Assurance

The UK aims to ensure labour market participation in the development of education through the establishment of a distinct relationship between employers and the higher education sector in the region. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), a UK body responsible for quality and standards in UK universities, fosters the development of employer participation/engagement and encourages a relationship between the higher education sector and employers. The collaborative relationship works towards the development of awards that respond to both academic expectations and the practical needs of the labour market. Throughout the UK, employers have in the past revealed a close inter-connection with the educational system, showing extensive engagement, which has created a basis for the development of further healthier relationships (Weert, 2011). Such relationships constantly lead to effectiveness in aligning the educational system with the labour market needs. It is suggested that the application of this strategy within the GCC would foster the development of closer alignment. The GCC member states might look to create a similar body to the QAA that concentrates on the assurance of educational quality, while promoting employer engagement. This engagement would lead to the development of a healthy relationship between employers, the educational institutions, and employees (both current and prospective).

Improved Academic Infrastructure

In the recent past, the UK has focused on the improvement of its academic infrastructure in the quest to align its educational system with labour market needs. The assurance of an improved academic infrastructure includes the adoption of different measures of performance that focus on the improvement of quality and standards of education within the institutions of learning. The QAA in the UK has established four elements that enhance the educational infrastructure. The elements include articulate codes of practice, quality management and assurance, teacher education, and examinations and curriculum frameworks (Cohen & Bhatt, 2012). The creation of a similar body within the GCC would create a platform for the development of an enhanced educational infrastructure. An The 2015 WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings Barcelona improved infrastructure within the countries would help to promote the process of aligning educational systems with the labour market needs.

Strategies from Germany's Higher Education System*Well-Defined Labour Market Qualification*

The effectiveness of Germany's education system in the production of well-developed learners, who can compete effectively, and respond to the labour market needs of the country, reveals another opportunity/strategy applicable in the GCC systems. Germany has well-defined labour market qualifications that any individual must meet in order to secure a chance in the labour market. The educational system within the country has been aligned with the labour market needs in order to respond efficiently towards issues of workforce development, employee and employer relationship, and unemployment among others within the market (Renderee, 2012). In addition, due to the labour market shortages experienced across the world, the German educational system has adopted a policy that creates a strong interest among students at school and in higher education in the technical occupations, nature and technology. Such programs include practice-oriented programs. The development of such programs in the GCC states would help to align the educational systems with labour market needs. While learners would develop the competences needed to develop a knowledge based economy, like in Germany, the development would also respond specifically to the labour market shortages in the technological, technical and innovative fields (Weert, 2011).

Embracing the Four Pillars of Learning

Another effective strategy for aligning the educational systems with the local labour market needs in the GCC countries, as Agarwal (2006, p. 37) asserts, would be the inclusion of the four pillars of learning. The four pillars of learning emphasise the development of students with understanding, tolerance, and creativity, and who focus on continuing education development (Karoly, 2010). The GCC might implement educational systems which emphasize ideas of learning to do, learning to know, learning to be, and learning to live together. Such a system would create a generation of skilled, but independent persons, who would respond to the needs of the labour market. In addition, such individuals will not be affected by the high rate of unemployment as they will focus on the creation of job opportunities through the utilization of the opportunities the GCC offers.

The Demand and Supply Perspectives

Demand and supply perspectives are issues that must be considered in order to develop holistic strategies for workforce development and to meet the labour market needs. The educational systems within the GCC region can adopt different strategies in response to demand and supply perspectives, thus aligning education systems more effectively with the job market (Karoly, 2010). The UK and German educational systems have experienced significant success in this matter, revealing the possibility of success in the GCC. By The 2015 WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings Barcelona understanding the labour market shortages, the issues of unemployment and the poor development of the workforce, the governments of the GCC should focus on financing higher education to meet the demands from students and employers (Kabbani, 2013). In doing so, aligning demand and supply is critical. The GCC should focus on the development of students with the capability to meet the present shortages and the future needs in the labour market. The development of demand/supply led systems can be achieved through the implementation of the strategies and measures discussed above (Weert, 2011).

Financing Higher Education

In the broadest sense, the establishment of an effective educational system that aspires to provide quality education and to meet the full development of learners requires significant financing. Governments that allocate additional funds for the educational sector consequently record levels of performance to ensure increased effectiveness and a quality educational output. The German government ensures ease in funding of its educational systems in order to assure quality service delivery in all levels of its system. Ease in access to state-sponsored loans and other loans, scholarships, and public sources like political foundations are some of the ways students fund their education in institutions of higher learning. In addition, the German Federal Government avails 1.1% of its GDP in higher education (HRK, 2013). Over the years, this has encouraged massive enrolment of students, quality teaching and the development of a workforce effective enough to meet the labour market needs within the country. The GCC may need to adopt similar measures to respond to the challenges faced by the countries in the development of the educational systems. Though almost all countries have concentrated on funding the education sector in the quest to develop a knowledge based economy, there is a need to adopt measures and policies to manage and evaluate the use of education funds.

Testing the Applicability of the UK/Germany Strategies in GCC States

Implementing aspects of the different strategies and measures adopted in the UK and Germany for the promotion of quality education and for aligning the systems within the labour market needs poses different challenges for the GCC countries. The improvement of education quality, the development of the workforce and the promotion of employer engagement would require the involvement of different sectors and bodies. Different bodies are needed within the GCC which foster employee development, protect their wellbeing and stand for the needs of the workplace. These must work together with the education sector to promote employer engagement and assure quality education. It remains a great challenge to unite different bodies within specific countries and across the region in general. In addition, another challenge is the time that it would take for the alignment of the educational systems in order to effectively incorporate the measures in a way that would foster workforce development, and meet the demand and supply issues that the regions face presently. Notwithstanding these issues, the implementation and integration of the strategies within the system would work effectively to create the conditions necessary for change. The 2015 WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings Barcelona

Conclusion

Education is the most significant pillar that underpins economic and societal development today. Globalization, the development of ideas, innovations in technology, free trade, financial and accounting operations, military strategies, and the development of all the specifics that improve livelihood and promote humanity are tied to education. In addition, whilst directly influenced by education and educational systems, local labour markets play a critically significant role in shaping society's way of life. Therefore, the two, and their interaction, are crucial for the development of society, for fostering local, national and global interaction, and for the promotion of humanity. Moreover, education hugely influences global politics and economics. As such, there is a need for all countries to concentrate on the alignment of educational systems to meet societal objectives. While doing so, the need for education to respond to the labour market needs is crucial. The GCC member states have, over the years, focused on the achievement of specific objectives. The alignment of educational systems to meet the requirements and the needs of the local labour market seem to be the most significant process towards the attainment of the goals. The application of the discussed strategies can assist the states of GCC to achieve the objectives through the alignment of the systems of education in the different countries to meet the local labour market needs. The adoption,

implementation and integration of the strategies would support future development in the GCC States. Such development would lead to the production of a generation of educated individuals who possess the abilities and skills demanded by the local labour markets.

This paper has emphasised the need for the alignment of education systems and the labour market; in particular, the importance of understanding both demand and supply for education is stressed. A number of specific initiatives have also been identified:

- Increasing emphasis on skills development within degree programs
 - Increasing range of vocational programs
 - Further involvement of employers and external bodies in program and curriculum development
 - Further emphasis on the development of lifelong learning
 - Increased focus on the encouragement of humane values
 - New funding arrangements, including the evaluation of performance and incentives to ensure quality education
 - Creation of new structures and organisational bodies for quality assurance and development
 - New qualifications to enhance the status of programs in science, technology and engineering
- The 2015 WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings Barcelona Most important, perhaps, the paper argues that the GCC countries can learn from the experiences of other countries. Systems can rarely be transferred in their entirety, but it is important that good practice from whatever source is identified, adapted and applied if the future development of the GCC states is to be sustained.

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