EXTERNAL REVIEW REPORT
National Authority for Qualifications and Quality Assurance of Education & Training

Kingdom of Bahrain
3-5th of March 2015

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A. Executive Summary

The National Authority for Qualifications and Quality Assurance of Education & Training (QQA) was reviewed against the Guidelines for Good Practice developed by the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). The review was conducted by the external panel of independent experts appointed by the INQAAHE.

The QQA was established by Royal Decree No. 32 of 2008 as a result of introduction of a broad education reform projects started in 2005. Its role is to be an independent national authority responsible for external quality assurance of the Bahraini education system. That means that the QQA's scope of activities cover every level of education and training, including kindergartens, primary and secondary education, vocational education and training and higher education. Moreover the QQA also coordinates development and implementation of the National Qualification Framework. Furthermore it sets and conducts national examinations. The latter initiative was introduced in order to provide independent assessment of performance levels for key stages of primary, intermediate and secondary education.

The INQAAHE Guidelines for Good Practice refer explicitly to External Quality Assurance Agencies operating in higher education sector. Therefore the external review panel's mandate was primary to look into the QQA's activities directly related to this area. However upon special request from the QQA'a leadership the scope of panel interests was broadened to cover also other activities undertaken by the QQA. This was motivated by the explicit declaration that the QQA follows the GGP standards in every area of its operations, whenever applicable. Thus the panel agreed to include the QQA's request the review agenda. Therefore the statements, conclusions and suggestions in this report refer generally to the QQA's practices, policies and scope of operations, unless indicated otherwise.

Standard 1.1 The Governance of the EQAA

The QQA has introduced explicit mission, vision and key values statements. Subsequently it developed and adopted a long-term strategy with clearly marked aims, objectives and key performance indicators. Based on this strategy, yearly operational plans are developed and executed. The level of achievement of particular objectives and KPIs is also a subject of regular monitoring.

Strategy development and implementation was supported by a number of capacity building initiatives and actions, i.e. trainings, strategic aims cascading exercises, etc. As a result the panel found the level of awareness among the QQA's staff of the strategy and commitments to its realisation very high.

The adopted organizational structure and implemented managerial practices provide suitable support for efficient fulfilment of the QQA's tasks.

A strong international drive is clearly visible in the QQA's actions, which is considered by the review panel as very beneficial for the agency's overall performance and achievements. Therefore the panel recommends establishing independent international advisory board in order to provide additional external perspective and counsel.

The panel considers all underlying principles of the standard 1.1 The Governance of the EQAA to be fully met. Therefore the QQA is **fully compliant** with this standard.

Standard 1.2. Resources

The QQA tasks are performed with full support of necessary resources. The panel found the human, financial and material resources of the agency fully adequate in the both qualitative and quantitative terms. Moreover a number of good practices were identified, including

broad engagement of international experts and induction programme. Therefore the panel considers QQA to be **fully compliant** with the Standard 1.2 Resources.

Standard 1.3. Quality Assurance of the EQAA
The panel found the QQA's commitment to internal quality assurance significant. The agency has developed an overarching internal quality assurance system, which was implemented accordingly into every department's main activities. In particular the internal quality assurance system emphasises the quality and consistency of the review procedures and their outcomes, including review reports approval.
The QQA's internal review processes are undoubtedly thorough, however the panel recommends their periodic evaluation to prevent unnecessary bureaucratic burden. The QQA should also consider inclusion of internal reflection mechanisms focused on internal structure and governance efficiency, which might be particularly important and useful in future development of the agency.
The overall assessment of the QQA's activities in the area of internal quality assurance is deemed to be align with the main principles of this standard. Therefore the panel considers the QQA to be **fully compliant** with the Standard 1.3 Quality Assurance of the EQAA.

Standard 1.4. Reporting Public Information
The panel found that the information policy of the QQA is explicitly formulated and consequently adopted. The agency uses multiple communication channels, including well-organized and regularly updated website, periodic training and dissemination events, annual reports, etc. The QQA makes every effort towards transparency of its activities also from international perspective, by providing vast majority of its documents in both Arabic and English language version.
However some of interviewed stakeholders expressed their concerns with the quality of some of the review reports. The panel recommends undertaking impact studies, with strong involvement of the QQA's stakeholders. The QQA should also consider development of system-wide analysis of the outcomes of reports, which might help identify areas for improvement in the Bahraini education system and the review procedures.
In the panel's opinion the QQA is **fully compliant** with the Standard 1.4. Reporting Public Information.

Standard 2.5. The Relationship between the EQAA and Higher Education Institutions
Due to Kingdom of Bahrain's legal framework, the QQA review procedures are clearly improvement oriented, with very limited accountability function. Within the given mandate, the QQA encourages higher education institutions under review to improve their quality by formulating sets of recommendations and follow-up procedure. Moreover the QQA on regular basis organizes various events for higher education institutions aimed for build capacity for improvement.
The QQA's stakeholders interviewed by the review panel confirmed that the review frameworks were subject to broad consultations and discussions prior their introduction. Therefore the panel assesses QQA to be **fully compliant** with the Standard 2.5 The Relationship between the EQAA and Higher Education Institutions.

Standard 2. 6. The EQAA's Requirements for Institutional / Program Performance
The QQA conducts programme and institutional review procedures according to well designed, implemented and documented frameworks. The panel found the adopted review criteria aligned with each procedures principles and purposes.
The agency released the frameworks in a form of complex review manuals, which provide all the information useful within each procedure.
The panel saw the review frameworks and their documentation as a very positive development. Therefore the QQA is assessed **fully compliant** with the Standard 2. 6. The EQAA's Requirements for Institutional / Program Performance.

Standard 2. 7. The EQAA's Requirements Institutional Self-Evaluation and Reporting to the EQAA

As mentioned above, the Panel found the QQA requirements for reviews of institutions to be fit for purpose and clearly explained in review manuals. The QQA also supports the institutions under review in self-evaluation process by organizing training events dedicated to this topic. The high value of this initiative was underlined by the interviewed QQA stakeholders. Thus the panel finds the QQA to be **fully compliant** with the Standard 2.7.

Standard 3. 8. The EQAA's Evaluation of the Institution and/or Program

The panel found the adopted review procedures and frameworks strictly followed and supported by the appropriate documentation. The reviewed institutions pointed out the great support offered by the QQA staff as well as the high quality of the review manuals.

The criteria for selection of experts and panel composition are clear and include the policy for avoiding conflict of interest. In particular, extensive use of international experts in the review procedures is considered a good practice. The QQA also offers necessary training for its reviewers.

The panel shares the opinion of the interviewed stakeholders that the QQA plays important role in encouraging education institutions to improve their quality. However the panel would suggest considering strengthening the accountability functions of the reviews. It might result in the future with closer link between the review outcomes and the administrative decisions regarding reviewed institutions.

The panel also recommends that the agency publish the length of its review cycles to avoid possible confusion and misunderstanding among reviewed institutions.

The panel considers the QQA to be **fully compliant** with the Standard 3. 8. The EQAA's Evaluation of the Institution and/or Program.

Standard 3.9. Decisions

The panel found the review reports produced by QQA clear, consistent and fully supporting the final judgements. The QQA is granted a sufficient level of institutional autonomy. However due to the legal constraints it is not granted with the mandate to make legally binding decisions, which hinders a full assessment of QQA against this standard. Therefore the QQA is considered to be **substantially compliant** with this standard.

Standard 3.10. Appeals

The QQA has developed and implemented the appeals policies in most of the areas of its activities. However the policy in the area of higher education reviews was developed only around the time of the INQAAHE review process. However, as mentioned above, the QQA reports have no direct impact on legal actions, which means that the appeal procedure related to higher education is not critical. Nevertheless, its omission means that, in the Panel's opinion, the QQA is **substantially compliant** with the Standard 3.10.

Standard 4.11. Collaboration

The panel was impressed with the agency's international activities. The QQA is actively engaged with cooperation within the QA networks and on a bilateral level with other agencies. However, the QQA might consider undertaking further cooperation initiatives with other quality assurance agencies aimed at preparing for the future challenges related to transnational education.

The Panel deems the QQA to be **fully compliant** with the Standard 4.11.

Standard 4. 12. Transnational/Cross-Border Higher Education

The QQA has a clear policy for reviewing all higher education, wherever and however it is offered. However, currently none of the Bahraini higher education institutions exports education.. It is, therefore not possible to evaluate the efficacy of the policy in the field of

exported education. The Panel considered the QQA to be **fully compliant** with this standard in relation to home and imported provision. QQA will need to monitor the efficacy of the policy in relation to exported education should the need arise.

The general conclusion of this review report is unquestionably positive. The National Authority for Qualifications and Quality Assurance of Education & Training was considered fully compliant with ten out of twelve standards, included in the INQAAHE Guidelines for Good Practice. The remaining two standards were met substantially. It also needs to be noted, that current national legal regulations might prevent or delay full compliance with all of them.

Overall, the panel would like to congratulate QQA on the strategic and well-organised approach to its work. The panel would also like to thank all members of QQA staff for their help, openness and honesty before and during the site visit.
In particular, the panel thanks Dr. Jawaher al-Mudhahki and Dr. Tariq Al-Sindi for their assistance at all stages of the review.
We wish QQA every success in its future work.

B. Glossary

AC	Academic Committee
ANQAHE	Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
QA-Islamic	Association of Quality Assurance Agencies of the Islamic World
CE	Chief Executive
CEF	Common European Framework
CSB	Civil Service Bureau
DAC	Directorate of Academic Cooperation
DFO	Directorate of Framework Operations
DGS	Directorate of Government Schools Reviews
DHR	Directorate of Higher Education Reviews
DNE	Directorate of National Examinations
DPS	Directorate of Private Schools and Kindergartens Reviews
DVR	Directorate of Vocational Reviews
EQAA	External Quality Assurance Agency
GDQ	General Directorate of Qualifications
GDR	General Directorate of Reviews
HCVT	High Council for Vocational Training
HEC	Higher Education Council
HERU	Higher Education Review Unit
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education's
KPAs	Key Result Areas
KPIs	Key Performance Indicators
MC	Moderation Sub-Committee
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoL	Ministry of Labour
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NEU	National Examinations Unit
NQF	The National Qualifications Framework
PC	Procedures Committee
PR	Public Relations and Media
QQA	National Authority for Qualifications and Quality Assurance of Education & Training
SC	Special Considerations
SEF	Self-Evaluation Form
SPC	Strategic Planning Committee
SRU	Schools Review Unit
VRU	Vocational Review Unit
WEM	Weekly Executive Management Meetings

C. Introduction

The Kingdom of Bahrain's National Authority for Qualifications and Quality Assurance of Education & Training (QQA) asked INQAAHE to undertake an evaluation of the Agency's compliance with the "INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice". Their purpose is to serve as a reference for the review of those agencies that want to demonstrate to the community of their own country and to their broader regional and global environment that they meet the standards set out in these Guidelines.

The QQA's scope of operations covers all of the Bahrain's education system and upon the special request of QQA the GGP were applied accordingly, with the special attention paid to the higher education area, in accordance with the INQAAHE mission statement and panel members expertise.

INQAAHE established a review Panel of three international experts (See Annex D.2). The composition of the panel reflects the expertise deemed necessary by the GGP. The QQA was informed of the proposed composition of the Panel and approved it. All panel members signed a statement of independence and confidentiality (See Annex D.3)

The review panel received a very comprehensive, well-written self-evaluation report, together with number of annexes on 13th of January 2015. The site visit took place from 3rd to 5th of March 2015. The planning, organization and coordination of the site visit by the QQA leadership and staff was exceptionally efficient and enabled the panel to complete its task comfortably.

The review panel studied the self-evaluation report and annexed documentation provided before the site visit. A teleconference between the panel and the QQA's leadership was organized on 23rd February and the panel organized a preparatory meeting the day before the site visit. The panel formulated its preliminary assessments immediately after the site visit. These were based on the findings of the site visit, and built on the assessment of the self-evaluation report and annexed documentation.

The site visit was held in the QQA's headquarters according to the agreed schedule. The Panel held a series of interviews with the QQA's key internal and external stakeholders (See Annex D.1). The Panel was also invited to an official, courtesy meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister Chairman of Supreme Council for the Development of Education & Training, H.E. Sh. Mohammed Bin Mubarak Al-Khalifa. This meeting took place in the Deputy Prime Minister's bureau.

The judgment is provided for each standard included in the Guidelines for Good Practice. All standards have the same weight in the overall recommendation formulated by the panel. The panel adopted four-point assessment scale: **Not compliant, partially, substantially or fully compliant**.

The draft version of this report was finalised taking into account the available information and relevant findings of the assessment. The panel finalised the draft report on 11th of May 2015 It was then sent to the QQA to review the report for factual considerations.
The panel approved the final version of the report on 1st of June 2015.

D. Evaluation of the National Authority for Qualifications and Quality Assurance of Education & Training adherence to INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice

S1. 1. The Governance of the EQAA

> The EQAA has a written mission statement or set of objectives that takes into account the cultural and historical context of the EQAA. The statement explicitly provides that external quality assurance is a major activity of the EQAA, and it requires a systematic approach to achieving the mission or objectives of the EQAA. There is evidence that the statement of objectives is implemented pursuant to a practical management plan that is linked to EQAA resources. The ownership and governance structure is appropriate for the objectives of the agency.

☐ Not compliant   ☐ Partially compliant   ☐ Substantially compliant   ■ Fully compliant

QQA is strongly driven by the principles explicitly formulated in its statement of vision, mission and key values. These declarations were developed at the very beginning of the QQA's establishment and are clearly oriented towards quality assurance and development. The long-term goals sketched out in the documents are ambitious. They are aimed at supporting the Kingdom of Bahrain's overarching strategic development plans, which was confirmed by the QQA's external stakeholders interviewed during the site visit.

The corporate mission, vision and values are reflected accordingly across all the QQA's Directorates. The Panel considered them to be a solid foundation for the QQA's internal integrity and consistency of its operations, which is particularly important taking into consideration the agency's complexity and scope of responsibilities.

The abovementioned statements have been transformed into QQA's corporate strategy and further cascaded to the Directorates. The strategy includes explicitly formulated aims, objectives, goals and key performance indicators. The strategic goals and objectives are operationalized into yearly operational plans. Fulfilment of the latter is monitored after each year by using predefined performance indicators. Since the first QQA strategy was formulated in 2013, the system of strategic goals accomplishment monitoring or revision has not yet been fully introduced. However QQA has built enough organizational capacity to execute these tasks.

The review panel recommends more involvement of the QQA Board of Directors into the strategy monitoring, review and update process. This very important body composed of nine individuals independent from the agency, was responsible for approving the QQA Strategy. However during the interview with the review panel, representatives of the Board admitted that they are not fully familiar with the progress made and goals and objectives achieved against the Strategic Plan. The Board of Directors as an independent body can provide QQA with external perspective, necessary for keeping the strategy up-to-date with current challenges for the Bahrain's education system.

The panel also found that international perspective plays important role in the QQA activities (see also S4.11). Therefore the panel suggests establishing an independent advisory board, composed of international experts with significant experience and expertise relevant for the QQA activities.

The Panel found number of good practices in the area of capacity building in terms of strategy development and realisation. Introducing so called "Strategic Planning Champions" (SPC) in each department can be considered as one of them. The SPCs are usually regular employees whose one of responsibilities is providing support for following the strategic objectives by their Directorate, including monitoring of the KPIs.

Numerous training sessions dedicated to "strategic planning and thinking" and "Balanced Scorecard", are considered by the interviewed staff members as very helpful in raising awareness and understanding towards strategic management of the QQA.

The Panel believes that the QQA approach to development and implementation of the institutional strategy is **good practice**.

The Panel finds the QQA dedication to internal capacity building most valuable. The strategic goals and objectives recognition and awareness among the employees is clearly visible. Every stage of the strategy development and execution has been fully documented and thus transparent.

The structure of the QQA is a direct consequence of its scope of activities and responsibilities determined by the national legislation. Internal governance and leadership relations are introduced accordingly, which provides appropriate support for realisation of QQA's current tasks and strategic goals.

The internal organizational, divisional structure provides efficient steering of the Directorates and departments. Horizontal information transfer, among the Directorates is provided mostly by the Weekly Executive Meetings, which are attended by QQA's Chief Executive (CE) and Directors of each directorate. This approach is considered by its leadership to be sufficient for efficient day-to-day management of the agency. The review panel fully supports this opinion, however recommends periodic management audits aimed at identifying potential improvements in this area.

S1. 2. Resources

> The EQAA has adequate and accessible human and financial resources to conduct external evaluation effectively and efficiently in accordance with its mission statement and its methodological approach. The EQAA's resources are also adequate for the appropriate development of the agency.

☐ Not compliant   ☐ Partially compliant   ☐ Substantially compliant   ■ Fully compliant

The QQA is provided with fully sufficient resources, in terms of staff, finance and infrastructure. Quantity and allocation of the resources, in the QQA's staff opinion, allows for efficient performance of the current tasks, including broad engagement of international experts in the reviews and other strategic activities.

The QQA leadership has introduced an efficient human resources management system. The Panel was provided with sufficient documentation related to the internal policies concerning periodic staff evaluations, motivation and professional development. They are composed of very precise set of requirements and conditions for rewarding employees for their achievements, including regular feedback. The implemented system was properly communicated and is well known by the staff members, who confirmed its efficiency during the interviews with the review panel.

QQA as a public entity is obliged to follow the national staff recruitment policy and procedures. The recruitment processes are conducted through the Civil Service Bureau, upon QQA's request. New employees are provided with a comprehensive induction programme, which is particularly thorough in the SRU. It comprises of intensive formal trainings, mentoring support and feedback system. Its main aim is to develop knowledge and skills of the newly hired staff members, prior and during their engagement in the evaluation procedures. The employee finishes the programme with successful accomplishment of all its stages and acquires "Independent reviewer" status. **The "induction programme" is considered by the review panel as good practice and therefore recommends development of programmes based on similar principles in other QQA's Directorates.**

The agency has spacious office facilities, which include all necessary equipment. Moreover, the execution of the QQA's tasks is strongly supported by dedicated IT resources, managed by the internal IT Department. This includes a well-organized web site.

The Panel's overall assessment of the current resources is very positive, as they allow QQA for comfortable performance of its tasks and further development**.** However it is recommended that the agency carry out a strategic analysis of the resources. This should include alignment of the resources with the strategic goals and objectives, in particular those necessary for the long-term perspective. The panel was informed of a long-term objective of the agency to introduce fees for its services. This objective should be included in the analysis of resources.

S1. 3. Quality Assurance of the EQAA

> The EQAA has a system of continuous quality assurance of its own activities that emphasizes flexibility in response to the changing nature of higher education, the effectiveness of its operations, and its contribution towards the achievement of its objectives.
>
> The EQAA conducts internal self-review of its own activities, including consideration of its own effects and value. The review includes data and analysis.
>
> The EQAA is subject to external reviews at regular intervals. There is evidence that any required actions are implemented and disclosed.

☐ Not compliant   ☐ Partially compliant   ☐ Substantially compliant   ■ Fully compliant

The QQA has implemented a comprehensive internal quality assurance system. Its main principles are explicitly formulated in the appropriate policies and procedures. It is also rooted in the institutional strategy of the QQA. The system is overarching and embedded into every department's main activities.

The system is focused on two main principles: quality of the review process and quality and consistency of its outcomes. Quality of the review process is assured by strict procedures concerning the organization of review processes and conduct of site visits (see S.3.8). Quality assurance of the review process is provided through training for all external experts participating in the reviews (see more S.3.8).

The Panel met with a group of domestic and international QQA experts. In their opinion, the initial training was informative and useful in fulfilment of their tasks. However, they felt that, despite receiving and giving informal feedback about the process and their role in it, they would like to receive formal feedback on their performance. **The panel recommends that the agency consider offering formal feedback to HE review panel members. QQA might also consider further, tailored training for experts in order to provide them with development opportunities.** This however, should be based on regular, systematic analysis of the experts' performance and focused on identification of possible gaps in their evaluation skills.

QQA has also introduced very precise procedures for development and approval of review reports. For example, following submission by the panel chair, each review report concerning a higher education institution is checked and approved by: the review director, DHR Academic Committee and QQA Academic Committee. The opportunity for factual checking is also offered to the reviewed higher education institution. This process differs slightly for the reports concerning other levels of education. Nevertheless, it is a general rule that all review reports produced as a result of the QQA activities are checked and improved, if necessary, several times by different QQA bodies, before being released in the final form. This ensures that due process has been followed during the review and that the text of the report supports the judgements and conclusions reached by the review panels.

The QQA Academic Committee plays the key role in assuring the quality and consistency of the review reports. The AC is chaired by an executive director and consists of at least one representative of each Directorate's leadership member. This body is responsible for

assuring the quality and final approval of the outcomes of QQA's activities, including review and national examination reports.

Moreover, in order to increase capacity for internal quality assurance the Moderation Sub-Committee MC) was established, as a subcommittee of the AC. It selects review reports for the school or vocational level education at random for scrutiny. The MC also performs obligatory reviews of the reports in which there is a change of outcome of two points above or below, compared with the previous review's outcome.

The work of the MC is particularly relevant to the work of Schools Directorate and the Vocational Education Directorate as it provides an additional element of externality for the review teams.

The review panel finds the thoroughness of the current processes commendable but encourages the agency to keep them under review in order to prevent unnecessary bureaucratic burden within the review processes.

The internal quality assurance system of the QQA is mostly focused on the correctness of the process and coherence of the outcomes of the review processes. The panel found little evidence of the agency's systematic and complex reflection on its internal governance. **Taking into consideration the complexity, scope and variety of the QQA's tasks and responsibilities, inclusion of mechanisms for reflection on the internal structure and governance is recommended.** The main purpose of such procedure should be to evaluate the efficiency of the agency's internal processes, communication and cross-directorate cooperation. This would be particularly useful after successful implementation of the National Qualifications Framework in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

S1. 4. Reporting Public Information

The EQAA informs and responds to the public in accordance with applicable legislation and the cultural context of the EQAA. This includes full and clear disclosures of its relevant documentation such as policies, procedures and criteria.

The EQAA also demonstrates public accountability by reporting its decisions about higher education institutions and programs. The content and extent of reporting may vary with cultural context and applicable legal and other requirements.

If the external evaluation leads to a decision about the higher education institution or program, the procedures applied and the criteria for decision-making are public, and the criteria for review are transparent, public, and ensure equality of treatment.

The EQAA also discloses to the public the decisions about the EQAA resulting from any external review of its own performance.

☐ Not compliant ☐ Partially compliant ☐ Substantially compliant ■ Fully compliant

The information policy of the QQA is detailed and is explicitly specified in formally adopted and followed documents. The agency uses well-organized and regularly updated website as its primary communication media. Despite the very basic information about aims, structure and current activities of the QQA, it provides users with full review reports and their outcomes, summative examination reports, manuals for reviews and annual reports. Furthermore the website also contains information, policies and handbooks on the National Qualifications Framework currently under development by QQA.

The above-mentioned annual reports are an important source of information about QQA, which contain an exhaustive summary of QQA's achievements. They also contain a section called "success stories" which highlights particular education institution's outstanding performance in terms of quality improvement. **The panel considers this as good practice in building mutual trust between quality assurance agency and education institutions.**

QQA also maintains contact with the general public by producing well-attended and organized press releases. Moreover it also aims to build public recognition for other activities i.e. national examinations by regular public promotion campaigns.

The review panel had the opportunity to speak to representatives from the Ministries of Education and Labour, from the Higher Education Council (HEC) and from the Economic Development Board (EDB).
The ministries were generally content with the reports they received. However, the EDB, whilst voicing no criticism, stated that reports need to be useful for multiple audiences (institutions, external agencies and the public) and the HEC representative felt that sometimes the reporting process was sluggish and some of the reports had some editorial shortcomings, e.g.the same phrases were to be found in many reports and that the same recommendations were repeated across reports. However all of them have agreed that the judgments in the reports are always evidence-based. The Panel's opinion on this issue is presented in the section S3.9.
The panel recommends that the agency begin to work on system-wide analysis of the outcomes of reports in order to publicly report on themes across the sectors and also to

highlight areas of work that might be undertaken to improve aspects of quality. **The panel also recommends that the agency make concrete its desire to do more work on impact studies** as this should also confirm improvements in the Education sector as a result of QQA's work and also highlight those areas where more work is needed.

The review panel noted that the QQA is now in the implementation phase of the work on the National Qualifications Framework. It encourages the agency in this very important work to provide a means of explicitly describing the levels and outcomes of education in Bahrain and as a means of facilitating comparison of standards of awards internationally. It encourages the agency to monitor the impact of the NQF on its review methodologies to ensure that the NQF is embedded as a national reference point.

The vast majority of the official documents, manuals, guidelines and reports are prepared in both Arabic and English language version. **The panel finds this practice particularly important, as it supports recognition of QQA's activities not only among local, but also international stakeholders.**

S2. 5. The Relationship between the EQAA and Higher Education Institutions

The EQAA:

• recognizes that institutional and programmatic quality and quality assurance are primarily the responsibility of the higher education institutions themselves;

• respects the academic autonomy, identity and integrity of the institutions or programs;

• applies standards or criteria that have been subject to reasonable consultation with stakeholders; and

• aims to contribute to both quality improvement and accountability of the institution.

☐ Not compliant   ☐ Partially compliant   ☐ Substantially compliant   ■ Fully compliant

QQA operates in the specific legal framework regulating the Kingdom of Bahrain's higher education sector which separates the licencing and external quality assurance bodies and limits the possibility of a stronger link between the outcomes of QQA external reviews and accreditation decisions. Therefore the accountability function of the QQA reviews is, to some extent, hindered.

At the same time the quality enhancement and improvement role of the QQA's reviews is emphasized. Each evaluation report includes a set of recommendations and suggestions to be considered by the HEI reviewed. QQA requires an explicitly formulated action plan aimed to improve quality according to the recommendations made. The approved action plans are subject to regular follow-up. **In the panel's opinion, this approach secures the institutional autonomy of the HEIs**, since the improvement plans are developed internally by the reviewed HEI. Thus they are adjusted to its organizational culture and specificity.

Respect for higher education institutions' autonomy and responsibility for the quality of education is also explicitly formulated as one of the main principles underpinning the review processes.

The panel met with representatives of the reviewed higher education institutions, and learned from them that QQA undertakes number of capacity building initiatives. Those include workshops organized by the DHR for HEIs on the standards and procedures of institutional and program accreditations, benchmarking, learning outcomes design and assessment. Moreover the QQA organizes a biannual conference for HEIs aimed at discussing current challenges in HE and also at sharing experience and good practice among participants in both the national and international context. The DHR also organises biannual events to encourage discussion.

The representatives of the reviewed institutions also confirmed that the QQA's review frameworks were subject to wide consultations. The views of national and international experts are sought.

S2. 6. The EQAA's Requirements for Institutional / Program Performance

The EQAA has documents that indicate clearly what the EQAA expects of the institution. Those expectations (which may for example be called standards or factors or precepts) are appropriate for the core activities of an institution of higher education or program. The standards should explicitly address all areas of institutional activity that fall within the EQAA's scope, such as teaching, learning, research, community work, etc. and necessary resources such as finances, staff/faculty, and learning resources. Standards may refer to specific areas, levels of achievement, relative benchmarking and types of measures, and may provide general guidelines. They may also include specific learning goals.

☐ Not compliant   ☐ Partially compliant   ☐ Substantially compliant   ■ Fully compliant

The Standards and procedures developed by the QQA for both institutional and programme reviews are well documented designed and implemented. They have been released in a form of manuals for reviews setting out not only the criteria, but also a comprehensive description of the aims of each review procedure, detailed description of each stage of the review process, principles for panel composition and templates used within the process. **The panel highly values the quality of these manuals.**

The external review panel finds the review criteria adopted by QQA to be broad and overarching. They comprehensively cover the area of assessment. For example, in higher education reviews, the QQA employs two different evaluation procedures: programme and institutional. The review criteria for each one of them are developed as a set of quality indicators.

In terms of institutional review there are 25 predefined indicators covering the following areas:
- Mission, Planning and Governance
- Academic Standards
- Quality Assurance and Enhancement
- Quality of Teaching and Learning
- Student Support
- Human Resources
- Infrastructure, Physical and Other Resources
- Research
- Community Engagement

The programme review criteria cover the following areas:
- The Learning Programme (including indented learning outcomes, curriculum and assessment policy)
- Efficiency of the Programme (including admission policy, staff composition, resources and student support)
- Academic Standards of the Graduates (including graduate population profile, benchmarking, programme effectiveness, completion rate and graduate career tracking)
- Effectiveness of Quality Management and Assurance

The panel considers the review standards and criteria as very well composed, covering the key elements of the education process.

S2. 7. The EQAA's Requirements Institutional Self-Evaluation and Reporting to the EQAA

The documentation concerning self-evaluation explains to the institutions of higher education the purposes, procedures, process and expectations in the self-evaluation process. The documents also include the standards used, the decision criteria, the reporting format, and other information needed by the higher education institution. Typically, an EQAA review process includes a self-evaluation through self-study by the institution or program, external peer review, and a follow-up procedure.

As necessary and appropriate, the EQAA guides the institution or program in the application of the procedures of the quality assurance process, such as self-evaluation, external review, or solicitation of assessment/feedback from the public, students, and other constituents.

☐ Not compliant   ☐ Partially compliant   ☐ Substantially compliant   ■ Fully compliant

As mentioned in S2.6, the QQA has developed review manuals for each review procedure. They include extensive and detailed guidance on writing a self-evaluation report and preparation of other supporting documents. The representatives of reviewed education institutions confirmed their quality and usefulness for self-evaluation purposes.

The review manuals also describe each stage of review procedure, principles for formulating the final outcomes of the report, including judgements and the process for follow-up which reports on progress on the implementation of improvement plans (see also S2.5). They also provide the necessary templates used in the review process

The manuals are publicly available on QQA's website. The panel was also informed that the agency organizes workshops on self-evaluation process for education institutions. **The panel considered this as good practice.**

S3. 8. The EQAA's Evaluation of the Institution and/or Program

The EQAA has clear documentation concerning the external evaluation that states the standards used, assessment methods and processes, decision criteria, and other information necessary for external review. The EQAA also has specifications on the characteristics, selection and training of reviewers. The EQAA's system must ensure that each institution or program will be evaluated in an equivalent way, even if the external panels, teams, or committees (together, the "external panels") are different.

The system ensures that:

• The external reviewers meet the EQAA specifications, and the external reviewers are adequate to the tasks to be accomplished.

• External reviewers have no conflicts of interest.

• External reviewers receive necessary training

• External reviewers' reports are evidence-based and clear, with precisely stated conclusions.

When practicable, the EQAA should include at least one external reviewer from another country or jurisdiction in the external panel.

☐ Not compliant   ☐ Partially compliant   ☐ Substantially compliant   ■ Fully compliant

QAA is responsible for reviewing all educational provision in Bahrain: public and private schools, vocational education and public and private higher education institutions. The review panel saw a significant amount of documentation provided by QQA with regard to the reviews that it carries out, including Reviews Frameworks and Handbooks. This documentation was clear and coherent and set out the frameworks, standards and criteria by which reviews are governed. The review panel met with representatives from all education sectors who confirmed the clarity and usefulness of the documentation. **The review panel believes the clear and helpful documentation produced by the agency to support its review processes to be a feature of good practice.**

Documentation is backed up by workshops run by QQA for institutions. Institutional representatives spoke highly of these workshops and of the support that was offered to them by the agency in general. The helpfulness of QQA staff was a theme that ran throughout the review and **the review panel considers the approach of the staff to their work and the support that they offer institutions to be a feature of good practice**. Quality managers that the Panel met said that their interaction with agency staff was helping them to build their own internal systems. Given the currently evolving state of education in Bahrain at the moment, this is helpful. However, in future QQA may wish to consider how far its role in quality assurance might be compromised if it is seen as 'coach as well as referee' (See S2.5).

Quality managers felt that their views were taken on board in the development of review methodology; for example, the number of standards in the method for reviewing Vocational Education was reduced following consultation with the sector. Quality managers commented that their ability to participate fully in consultation will increase in future as the different sectors become more experienced in quality assurance and enhancement.

A representative from the more regularised side of Vocational Education was a little critical about the review framework for that sector but acknowledged that this was more to do with the lack of definition of vocational education in Bahrain than with the agency's framework. Nevertheless, QAA may wish to consider its methodology for reviewing highly regulated vocational education provision.

The review panel heard from some institutional representatives that they were unsure of when they would next be reviewed. **The panel recommends that the agency publish the length of its review cycles so that institutions have an approximate idea of when they will next be reviewed.**

The process for selecting reviewers differs across the directorates: the reviewers for schools and vocational education reviews are chiefly members of QQA staff. However, review panels for both of these sectors can seek external expertise if required.

Review panels for higher education are made up of local, regional and international representatives. Potential members of panels are invited to attend a training workshop during which they carry out various pieces of simulated review work. They are then selected according to their performance and their work during the workshop. Briefing is also provided for international reviewers in the form of an orientation day (called Day Zero). The panel met with various HE reviewers, all of whom, including an international reviewer, confirmed that the training and briefing that they received was useful. The panel considers the use of international reviewers as a way for increasing transparency of the review processes. **The panel believes the extensive use of international reviewers in QQA procedures to be good practice.**

The QQA has introduced a clear policy for avoidance of conflict of interest, which includes the need for external reviewers to sign to that effect before participating in an evaluation. Universities may comment on the composition of a review panel to alert the QQA of any conflict of interest that it may have with any reviewers. However, they are not permitted to have any other input into the panel composition.

A member of QQA staff acts as review manager for each HE review, but is not a member of the team. This is one of the mechanisms employed by the agency to ensure that there is consistency across reviews. The reviewers that the panel met were very happy with the support offered by review managers.

S3. 9. Decisions

The EQAA evaluations address both the higher education institution's own self-assessment and external reference points, such as judgments by knowledgeable peers or relevant legislation. An EQAA must be independent, i.e. it has autonomous responsibility for its operations, and its judgments cannot be influenced by third parties. The EQAA's decisions must be impartial, rigorous, thorough, fair, and consistent, even if the judgments are made by different panels. Consistency in decision-making includes consistency and transparency in processes and actions for imposing recommendations for follow-up action. The EQAA's reported decisions are clear and precise.

When the EQAA advises the government or other public bodies, the decisions made by each agency should be made as independently as practicable.

☐ Not compliant ☐ Partially compliant ■ Substantially compliant ☐ Fully compliant

Review reports produced by QQA are clear and precise in reporting decisions and outcomes of the various reviews and judgements are clear. The role of the AC and the MC in ensuring rigorous consistency and fairness of process for reaching outcomes is described in the preceding section of this report (See also S1.3). **The agency's reports set out transparently the reasons for its judgements**.

Members of staff at the agency told the review panel that institutions currently see QQA as partners and an agent for change and development. The agency is not feared by institutions as it does not have a legislative function. **However, both internal staff and external participants in the review told the panel that more alignment between the key bodies in terms of decision-making would help to avoid duplication.** Currently, particularly in relation to higher education, the HEC is the licensing body in terms of private universities. It also takes the decision as to whether or not an overseas institution can operate in Bahrain. It is also the decision-making body in relation to any action taken as a result of the reports it receives from QQA.

This leads the panel to conclude that the current legislative situation allows QQA to contribute to the quality improvement of institutions but not to accountability. See also S2.5 of this report.

S3. 10. Appeals

> The EQAA has appropriate methods and policies for appeals. Appeals should be conducted by reviewers who were not responsible for the original decision and who have no conflict of interest, but appeals need not necessarily be conducted outside the EQAA.

☐ Not compliant   ☐ Partially compliant   ■ Substantially compliant   ☐ Fully compliant

At the time of writing the SER, appropriate policies for appeals were in place for the Schools and Vocational Education directorates. One of the outcomes of the drafting of the SER was recognition that there was no appeals process for the Directorate of Higher Education. The panel also finds this situation partially explained by the fact that the outcomes of the QQA reports have no direct legal or administrative consequences for the higher education institutions. Therefore the independent appeals process was not a necessity, taking into consideration local legal framework, but nevertheless the review panel considers it as one of important ways of building partnership between the agency and higher education institutions.

A policy is now in place but representatives from universities that the review panel spoke to appeared to be unaware of the policy. **The review panel therefore recommends that the appeals process for higher education be formalised and publicised as soon as possible.** Evidence provided to the panel confirmed that the extant processes for appeal were appropriate and were conducted externally to the directorate responsible for the review under appeal.

S4. 11. Collaboration

The EQAA collaborates with other EQAAs, if possible, in areas such as exchange of good practices, capacity building, review of decisions, provision of transnational education, joint projects, and staff exchanges.

☐ Not compliant   ☐ Partially compliant   ☐ Substantially compliant   ■ Fully compliant

The QQA is actively engaged in cooperation with other external quality assurance agencies both bilaterally and through QA/E networks on local, regional and international levels. The QQA CE is the elected President of QA-Islamic and ANQAHE and is a Board Member of INQAAHE. International activity is seen by CE and QQA leadership as one of ways of fulfilment of the adopted mission statement which is becoming *"leader in fostering sustainable quality enhancement for world-class education and training sectors in Bahrain".* The panel was also provided with significant number of examples of international activity of QQA staff related to sharing good practice i.e. on currently developing National Qualifications Framework.

However the panel found quite limited number of initiatives concerning collaboration in the area of transnational education. According to the evidence provided during the site visit, there is some number of programmes in Bahrain offered by foreign education institutions (see also S4.12). Therefore the panel recommends strengthening international cooperation of the QQA related to the incoming transnational education.

S4. 12. Transnational/Cross-Border Higher Education

The EQAA has policies relating to both imported and exported higher education. These policies may be the same as those for domestic providers and domestic provision. In formulating its policies and practices, the EQAA should consider relevant guidelines issued by international agencies and other associations. All EQAAs should consult with appropriate local agencies in the exporting or importing countries, although this might not be possible or appropriate in situations such as those involving distance learning or small enrolment.

□ Not compliant   □ Partially compliant   □ Substantially compliant   ■ Fully compliant

The QQA has a clear policy for reviewing all higher education, wherever and however it is offered. However, currently none of the Bahraini higher education institutions exports education.. It is, therefore not possible to evaluate the efficacy of the policy in the field of exported education. The Panel considered the QQA to be fully compliant with this standard in relation to home and imported provision. QQA will need to monitor the efficacy of the policy in relation to exported education should the need arise.

The HEC takes a decision on whether or not a higher education provider can operate in Bahrain based on the QQA's review report.

The review panel met with external reviewers for higher education. In their view, the agency deals appropriately with transnational provision but they suggested that QQA consider having someone from the home country's agency on the review panel to provide local knowledge.

The review panel also met students from one imported programme. It was impressed with the level of awareness among those students of how, for example, the equivalence of their award and programme is ensured between Bahrain and the home country. The students described the information they received about the programme and its home location, processes for double marking and lectures by visiting staff from the home institution and were very satisfied with their experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the panel would like to congratulate QQA on the strategic and well-organised approach to its work. It hopes that the information contained in this report will assist the agency in further enhancing the work that it carries out in the education sector of the Kingdom of Bahrain.

The panel would also like to thank all members of QQA staff for their help, openness and honesty before and during the site visit. In particular, the panel thanks Dr. Jawaher al-Mudhahki and Dr. Tariq Al-Sindi for their assistance at all stages of the review.

We wish QAA every success in its future work.

D. Annexes

D.1. Site visit schedule

Day 1 – 3rd of March 2015

Time	Session Outline	Attended by
08:45 – 09:00	Welcome and Introduction by Panel Chair	Dr. Jawaher Al-Mudhahki
09:00 – 09:30	Meeting with: QQA Board Members	Dr. Mohamed Ali Dr. Baheya Al Jishi Dr. Aisha Salem
09:30 – 10:00	Meeting with: QQA Chief Executive	Dr. Jawaher Al-Mudhahki
10:30 – 11:00	Meeting with: Meeting with External Review Committee	Chair and Members of the Committee
11:15 – 11:45	Meeting with: QQA Strategic Planning Committee	Ms. Esmat Jaffar (Committee Member – Deputy Chair) Ms. Lulwa Mohamed (Committee Member) Adel Hasan (Committee Member)
12:00 – 12:45	Meeting with Directorate of Higher Education Reviews (DHR) Directorate of Vocational Review (DVR)	Dr. Haya Al Mannai (GD) Dr. Wafa Al Mansoori (DHR) Dr. Hala Obaid (DHR) Mr. Adel Hassan (DVR) Mr. Jamal Dahneem (DVR)
13:45 - 14:30	Meeting with Directorates of Government & Private Schools Reviews (DGS) & (DPS) Directorate of National Examinations (DNE)	Dr. Haya Al Mannai (GD) Dr. Khaled Al Baker (DGS) Dr. Hasan Al Hammadi (DPS) Ms. Wafa Al Yaqoobi (DNE)
14:45 – 15:30	Meeting with: Senior Staff Responsible for: Quality Management at QQA Level, Internal Quality Assurance (IQA), Moderation Committee (MC) QQA Appeal (QP)	Dr. Wafa Al Mansoori (Chair) (IQA, AC) Mr. Hamad Mohamed (IQA) Mr. Jamal Dahneem (MC) Mr. Ahmed Al Badri (MC, QP) Ms. Asma Al Mehza (IQA)

Day 2 – 4th of March 2015

Time	Session Outline	Attended by
09:00 – 09:30	Meeting with: Directorate of Human Resources and Financial Affairs	Mr. Khalid Al Mannai (Director) Ms. Ameera Jaffer (Finance Manager) Mr. Faisal Al Moosa (HR Specialist) Ms. Thajba Al- Jowder (IT Manager)

Time	Session Outline	Attended by
09:45 – 10:15	Meeting with: External Reviewers of Directorate of Higher Education	Dr. Nadia Badrawi (National Quality Assurance in Egypt) Dr. Ebrahim Malalla (Ahlia University) Dr. Yousif Al-Bastaki (University of Bahrain) Dr. Amal A.Wakil (University of Bahrain)
10:30 – 11:15	Meeting with: Quality Managers or Equivalent with Responsibility for the QA Portfolio from Different Institutions	HEI/ UoB: Dr. Hesham Al Ammal HEI/ Ahlia University: Dr. Ahlam Hassan Vocational/Gulf Aviation: Mr. Hussain Bushehri Vocational/ MoE: Dr. Ahmed A.Ghani
11:30 – 12:15	Meeting with: Representatives from other assessed Institutions	Private School/ Modern Knowledge School: Ms. Narjis Dashti MoE/ Directorate of Curricular for National Examination: Ms. Reem Al Aradi
12:30 – 13:00	Meeting with: Directorate of Communications	Dr. Ahmed Khudair (Director) Ms. Duaa Sharafi (Head of PR) Ms. Zainab Noor (Head of Reports)
14:00 – 14:45	Meeting with: Students (HEIs) Representatives	University of Bahrain (UoB) Royal University of Women Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland - Bahrain Ahlia University Bahrain Polytechnic
15:00 – 15:45	Meeting with: Specialists of Review Directorates and Directorate of National Examinations	Ms. Shaikha Al Kaabi (Higher Education) Ms. Zahari Mahfoodh (Vocational) Ms. Ameera Al Baluchi (Schools) Mr. Somay Asheer (National Examinations)

Day 3 – 5th of March 2015

Time	Session Outline	Attended by
10:00 – 10:30	Visit to Deputy Prime Minister Chairman of Supreme Council for the Development of Education & Training	HE Sh. Mohammed Bin Mubarak Al-Khalifa
11:30 – 12:00	Meeting with: Key Stakeholders representatives / Licensing Bodies	Ministry of Education: Naeema Gholaam Higher Education Council: Dr. Riyadh Hamza Ministry of Labour: Mr. Redha Hubail
12:15 – 12:45	Meeting with: Key Stakeholders representatives/ Supportive Bodies	Economic Development Board: Mr. Jeff Hanckok Tamkeen (Labour funds):

		Ms. Amal Al Khooheji
14:30 – 15:00	Call- back Session	
15:00 – 15:30	External Review Panel Feedback	Dr. Jawaher Al-Mudhahki Senior QQA Staff

D.2. Review panel

Ms. Fiona Crozier - Director of the Quality Promotion Unit, University College Cork, Ireland – Panel chair

Prof. Abdullah Al-Musallam - Secretary General of the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment, Saudi Arabia

Mr. Maciej Markowski – International Policy Advisor, Polish Accreditation Committee, Poland – Panel secretary

D.3. Statements of independence

INQAAHE
INTERNATIONAL NETWORK FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE
AGENCIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

STATEMENT OF
INDEPENDENCE AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Form for Experts

I, (name and country),

FIONA CROZIER

IRELAND

invited by INQAAHE to take part in an expert panel that will review the operation, along the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice of the following agency:

National Authority for Qualifications & Quality Assurance of Education and Training (QAA), Bahrain

hereby declare,

— that I maintain no relationship or ties, neither private nor business, with the above mentioned agency that could exert a positive or negative influence on my independent judgement of the quality of the operation of the agency;
— that I have not had such relationships or ties with the agency for the last four years;
— that I will report any conflict of interest that appears during carrying out the review which could inhibit my independence, to the INQAAHE secretariat;
— that I will appropriately protect any confidential information or data from the agency under review to which I may have access

At: UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CORK, IRELAND   Date: 18TH DECEMBER 2014

Signature:

Please fill in this statement and send a scanned copy to secretariat@inqaahe.org

STATEMENT OF
INDEPENDENCE AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Form for Experts

I, (name and country),

PROFESSOR ABDALLAH A. ALMUSALLAM

KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

invited by INQAAHE to take part in an expert panel that will review the operation, along the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice of the following agency:

National Authority for Qualifications & Quality Assurance of Education and Training (QAA), Bahrain

hereby declare,

- that I maintain no relationship or ties, neither private nor business, with the above mentioned agency that could exert a positive or negative influence on my independent judgement of the quality of the operation of the agency;
- that I have not had such relationships or ties with the agency for the last four years;
- that I will report any conflict of interest that appears during carrying out the review which could inhibit my independence, to the INQAAHE secretariat;
- that I will appropriately protect any confidential information or data from the agency under review to which I may have access

At: *RIYADH, KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA*   Date: *16 DECEMBER, 2014*

Signature:

Please fill in this statement and send a scanned copy to secretariat@inqaahe.org

STATEMENT OF
INDEPENDENCE AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Form for Experts

I, (name and country),

MACIEJ MARKOWSKI

POLAND

invited by INQAAHE to take part in an expert panel that will review the operation, along the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice of the following agency:

National Authority for Qualifications & Quality Assurance of Education and Training (QAA), Bahrain

hereby declare,

- that I maintain no relationship or ties, neither private nor business, with the above mentioned agency that could exert a positive or negative influence on my independent judgement of the quality of the operation of the agency;
- that I have not had such relationships or ties with the agency for the last four years;
- that I will report any conflict of interest that appears during carrying out the review which could inhibit my independence, to the INQAAHE secretariat;
- that I will appropriately protect any confidential information or data from the agency under review to which I may have access

At: WARSAW   Date: 18TH DECEMBER 2014

Signature: _____

Please fill in this statement and send a scanned copy to secretariat@inqaahe.org