

Localising Professional Skills Development Strategies in the GCC: Research and Policy Considerations for Qatar

Vishanth Weerakkody

Zahir Irani

Tillal Eldabi

College of Business
Arts and Social Sciences
Brunel University London
Uxbridge, Middlesex, UB8 3PH
UK

Rajab Al-Esmail

Nitham Hindi

Mohamad Osmani

College of Business and Economics
Qatar University
Al Tarfa, Doha 2713
Qatar

Abstract

This paper examines the issues and challenges faced by Qatar, a developing Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) country, when localising established professional skills development strategies used in developed countries. The paper is based on the synthesis of viewpoint formed through the collective practical experiences of the authors. The paper posits that Qatar, a nation that is striving to move from an economy heavily reliant on oil and gas and the skills and competencies of foreign professionals to one that is knowledge driven and managed by its own citizens, needs to consider several micro, macro and policy level implications for implementing a meaningful professional skills development agenda. The unique demographic context as well as value and belief systems that are influenced by the social-cultural environment play a significant role in influencing the implementation of any performance assessment and management and the development of professional skills in the country.

Keywords: Qatar, Skills, Professional Development, Performance Assessment, GCC

1. Introduction

The Global Human Capital Trends report compiled by Deloitte (2015) identifies Learning and Development, Human Resources Management (HRM), Leadership, and Culture and Engagement as the top four talent challenges facing Middle East organisations. According to this report, and other studies conducted by Ernst and Young (EYGM, 2015), the readiness to address these challenges in the region is decreasing, raising the question of whether leaders are doing enough to prepare their organisations to respond to today's most pressing business and human capital needs. These studies go on to suggest that culture plays a significant role in the way companies compete, manage, develop and inspire people, and claim that the region lacks an understanding of how to manage HRM practices and develop professional skills required. The Ernst and Young and Deloitte studies urge for long term investment across all levels of organisation hierarchies rather than focusing on discretionary training expenditure when times are favourable; it goes on to suggest that there is a clear difference between training and education.

In this respect, developing economies such as Qatar are not managing to create the right environment for developing the skills (training based) and attitudes (underpinned by educational awareness) needed for the modern workplace in educational and workplace settings needed to match the ambition of their national visions (EYGM, 2015).

Although most governments in the Gulf Cooperation Country (GCC) region understand that investing in skills and training is critical to developing a sustainable local workforce and boosting the region's competitiveness, the skills gap continues to expand. Yet, the challenges of moving into knowledge economies from those that are built around specific industries (such as oil and gas) demand more advanced competences (EYGM, 2015). Moreover, if companies in Qatar are to remain globally competitive, employers need to develop their workforce continuously through structured training and professional development to ensure the attributes and behaviours needed to be competitive are embedded into workforce recruitment and development. According to the 2015 Ernst and Young survey, currently, 20% of GCC employers offer no training at all to new employees, and only around 6% have a graduate training program (EYGM, 2015). Therefore, a coordinated effort is required to improve human resource development centred on performance assessment and management and continued professional development (CPD). Performance Assessment and Management is usually the core of an employer's appraisal system and looks back against the preceding period and assesses how a person's performance has met up to expectations. Here we draw a difference between capability and performance. It usually involves initial objective setting (using say a SMART - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely - set of objectives) followed up by a process of self and line manager assessment against those objectives. A marking scheme may be used (e.g. one to five), and that may be absolute or moderated within a group to be relative to peers. Rewards or sanctions may be attached to outcomes. In organisations with sophisticated Human Resource Management (HRM) capability, it may even provide data for workforce planning.

Development Planning and Management may also be part of an employer's appraisal system but may be treated either alongside or separately from Performance Management. It is often based on a competency framework for the employer and the job roles, with the employee assessed against the relevant parts that align to their existing role and on-going development. Development needs are then identified and a development plan put in place for the next period that has embedded goals and aspirations. While the main focus is most likely related to on job-related training, it need not be, with wider personal development goals and activities being built in to the process. Management and supervision of development may be left to the individual's, line managers or mutual responsibility, or done by an HRM function (rare now except for mandatory corporate training and succession planning for talented individuals targeted for management/leadership positions).

2. Methodological Approach used to form Viewpoint

This paper is based on the views of the authors and grounded around several discussions held amongst the authors to critically examine current challenges facing Qatar. This is sought in an effort to introduce performance management and assessment, professional development and accreditation practices that are based on experiences and good practices of Europe and North America. The authors are all highly experienced and represent both Local (Qatari) and International perspectives of these areas. Two of the authors are Deans of colleges that represent Business in Qatar and the UK, two are directing employability skills and professional development programmes in Qatar and the UK respectively and one author is directing a doctoral programme in the GCC that is accredited to a leading UK university. Therefore, the authors bring over 50 years of combined experience to the thought-process and discussion that resulted in this paper. This methodological approach was focused on answering the research question that is reflected in the title of the paper: *What are the research and policy considerations for Qatar when localising professional skills development strategies.* In order to answer this question, two methodological approaches were evaluated. The first is based on qualitative case study based research where interviews with professionals in companies, education institutes and professional associations would allow the synthesis of views and opinions of individuals. The second is the synthesis of the authors' viewpoint. We selected to follow the latter and validate our viewpoint with secondary evidence from studies conducted by large consultancy companies and public bodies such as Ernst and Young, Deloitte and OECD. The rationale for doing so lies in the reasoning that the authors collectively represent the profile and demographics that mirror any potential external interviewees. Furthermore, the use of secondary sources allowed us to validate our viewpoint using empirical evidences that were gathered by these sources, thus ensuring that our viewpoint was objective and free of any bias.

3. Localising Professional Development and Training: Issues and Challenges Facing Qatar

When developing appraisal systems and performance management and development (AS-PMD) strategies in organisations, it is interesting to look at the socio cultural influences both within the organisation as well as the wider national context. For example, more traditional companies such as IBM, Unilever or British Petroleum will approach AS-PMD differently to Google or Amazon. While the former are likely to use staff evaluation matrices that are more conventional and have been well established for years, the latter will be more innovative and flexible in their approach to appraisal and performance management – often focused more on staff capacity to deliver innovative outcomes rather than continuous improvement based capacity building. When such systems are moved or copied to different countries or organisational contexts (i.e. AS-PMD methods used in the UK or US organisations when moved to Qatar), there are several additional dimensions that need to be taken into consideration. For example, staff appraisal and HRM approaches that work well in Western Europe or North America may not fit GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates) whose culture and social values are very different.

In the same vein, training methods and topics that are delivered by chartered professional institutes to meet the Continued Professional Development (CPD) needs of employees working in a traditionally British organisation will not suffice the needs of a traditional Qatari organisation. This is also true when AS-PMD methods are compared between private and public organisations within the same country. Private sector organisations (i.e. MNCs, MSEs or SMEs) in the UK or Qatar will have a different set of operational procedures, management practices and values compared with public institutions of the same country. Often private enterprises are less influenced by the national culture or social values whereas the opposite is true for the public sector. Interesting, the public sector is seen as offering security in lieu of financial reward whereas the private sector sacrifices recognises reward but offers limited job security. As such, it is important to recognise the unique dimensions that need to be considered when developing AS-PMD frameworks for countries such as Qatar where culture and traditions often dominate human behaviour and actions. Therefore, assuming that HRM practices and CPD frameworks used by professional bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD), British Computer Society (BCS) or the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) in the UK or American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) in the US can be applied as part of a personal development plan to Qatari employees is not feasible. Nevertheless, the growing economy and opportunities for human capital development has enticed many European and American training providers to exploit the emerging training opportunities in the GCC region without due consideration for the local culture or values.

Another important consideration that needs to be taken into account is the appraisal culture in organisations that are situated in countries with value systems that are influenced by the socio cultural settings. In addition, in a relatively small country such as Qatar, employee appraisal and progression as well as performance management and development may often be influenced by the appraiser's relationship with those who he/she is appraising, although this is not necessarily culturally restricted to any specific geographic territory. It is quite common for Qatari nationals working in the same organisation to be socially acquainted or even be related to each other. In this context, it is challenging to ensure a fair and unbiased system of appraisal and CPD needs assessment. A potential solution could be the use of key performance indicators and an outcome based assessment carried out by an independent team and/or anonymising the individual's identity during the appraisal process. Such practices may allow a fairer appraisal leading to better needs assessment and subsequent CPD led training to bridge any gaps in skills and competencies in Qatar. However, such practices may also cause practical and logistical difficulties in organising, particularly across larger organisations. The On the extreme case, there are also organisations that do not have any practices for CPD or skills development. Interestingly, according to the *2014 Talent Management, Rewards and Global Workforce Study*, most employees working in the GCC region rarely have the opportunity to advance their skills. This study points to an urgent need for employers to strengthen their career management and development processes and focus specifically on creating career advancement opportunities for their employees (Tower Watson, 2014).

Of course, when selecting and introducing professional development activities, it is important to consider the arguments set out above and adapt professional training courses based on local context (considering religion, culture, local regulatory practice etc). A classic example can be the introduction of professional development in the accounting field for Qatari professionals working in the field based on the ACCA framework used in the UK. In this instance, tax and other financial regulations that apply to the UK is not relevant to Qatar.

Similarly, recruitment laws in the field of HRM will vary in Qatar compared to the UK, and as such, any CIPD training will need to be adapted, incorporating Qatar HR labour laws, to satisfy these criteria. The same may apply to professionals working in the ICT field, but the variations here would be far less compared to accounting and HRM. Moreover, a common requirement that will apply across all disciplines will be the need for translation of training material to Arabic (in the case of Qatar). Given this context, any certification offered in Qatar will need to reflect such localised elements of the training. Furthermore, the professional trainers who will deliver the training will need to be multi-skilled with a good command of English and the local language as well as knowledge of both the local and international standards, regulations and practices in their respective professional fields; finally, the trainers should be aware of the culture and customs in the environment in which they operate. This may of course present a new challenge for the professional bodies as well as the organisations as some employees may wish to seek the standard certification (rather than the localised version) because this may present them better opportunities in the international employment market. Some may also see the localised version of the certification as limiting their options to Qatar. For the professional bodies, localising international certification will require them to work together with Qatari organisations to ensure that the localisation is done not only to suit the Qatari context, but also meets the needs of the organisations. More importantly, the recognition of the localised certification will be a two way process which needs the buy-in of the Qatari organisations and public institutions as well as the international professional institutes such as the ACCA, BCS and CIPD in the UK and AICPA in the US or IPA and ICA in Australia. Therefore, there is a substantial role to be played by the professional bodies in ensuring that any localised training and certification offered in Qatar or similar countries is recognised by other countries (i.e. ACCA certification taken by an employee in Qatar has the same level of recognition as the ACCA certification taken by an employee in the UK).

Another important consideration when identifying appropriate professional development and training is the GAP analysis of what is needed by the local organisations versus what is offered by the international trainers and/or professional bodies. In this respect, fundamental questions that organisations should ask themselves are:

- a) What are the available skills and capabilities at present?
 - What do they need to be aligned too?
 - Is there sufficient capability and equity in application and selection?
- b) Are they adequate to support the organisation's mission, strategy, goals and objectives?
- c) What further skills and capabilities does the organisation need to support its corporate mission and vision?
- d) What are the relevant professional institutes that can help in delivering these skills and capabilities; and,
- e) How can these skills and capabilities be developed through localised training?
- f) What evaluation process exists and needs to be adopted?

Like many other countries, the private sector is far more advanced than the public sector in Qatar in terms of business practices, HRM methods used and exposure to AS-PMD as well as associated training methods used. In this respect to support capacity building at a national level, these two sectors must work together, a difficult proposition, to achieve synergy. Indeed, the public sector in Qatar has much to learn from the private sector. To facilitate this, the Ministry of Administrative Development, responsible for oversight of the implementation of law regulating governmental HR, including job localisation, must work in conjunction with the Ministry of Labour to enforce the employment of Qataris in the private sector. On the other hand, the private sector should do their part to attract potential graduates with competitive pay scales and facilities while graduates should also be willing to consider careers in the private as an alternative to the more traditionally preferred public sector employment. According to the 2015 Ernst and Young study, most graduates in the GCC region, apart from Bahrain, show an overwhelming preference for public sector jobs. This mind-set has to change to enable the successful diversification of the economy away from dependence on oil and gas revenues in the region (EYGM, 2015). Therefore, collaboration within these two sectors together with the secondary and higher education sectors is imperative for defining the needed technical and soft skills, as well as the behaviours and attitudes that a 21st century graduate needs to have (EYGM, 2015; Shediak and Samman, 2010).

4. Potential Directions for a National Skills Strategy and Policy in Qatar

From a broader sense, the government of Qatar will need to consider guidelines currently in force in the country that stipulate certain requirements to the private sector when recruiting their workforce.

For example, the guidelines that require private sector organisations (such as banks and financial organisations) to ensure 20% of their workforce is Qatari nationals may create an environment where job roles are filled to satisfy the criteria rather than the skill requirements. Indeed, a better approach would be to evaluate private sector needs based on a competency assessment framework and working towards designing and delivering graduate and professional development and training programmes that can fulfil these needs in the longer term and certainly to support the Qatar National Vision 2030. In fact, the current system of recruitment has created an imbalance in the Qatari workforce as the majority of the highly skilled, strategic and professional job roles are carried out by non-Qataris as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Typical Distribution of the Workforce in Qatar

Economically active population (15 years and above) by nationality, sex & occupation

	Qatari			Non-Qatari			Total		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
Legislators, Senior Officials and Managers	6,574	1,598	8,172	24,771	2,283	27,054	31,345	3,881	35,226
Professionals	10,383	13,846	24,229	81,379	22,919	104,298	91,762	36,765	128,527
Technicians and Associate Professionals	9,386	3,971	13,357	57,473	7,209	64,682	66,859	11,180	78,039
Clerks	13,991	7,033	21,024	39,966	7,992	47,958	53,957	15,025	68,982
Service Workers and Shop and Market Sales Workers	4,619	351	4,970	74,425	13,448	87,873	79,044	13,799	92,843
Skilled Agricultural And Fishery Workers	34	0	34	9,857	0	9,857	9,891	0	9,891
Craft and Related Trades Workers	4,619	0	4,619	467,065	81	467,146	471,684	81	471,765
Plant and Machine Operators and Assemblers	1,292	0	1,292	146,890	486	147,376	148,182	486	148,668
Elementary Occupations	4,843	273	5,116	215,906	86,230	302,136	220,749	86,503	307,252
Total	55,741	27,072	82,813	1,117,732	140,648	1,258,380	1,173,473	167,720	1,341,193

Source - Qatar Statistics Authority (2012)

A look at the Qatari labour market clearly shows that the current imbalance is further compounded by discrepancies in pay between organisations in the private sector such as oil and gas and other sectors as well as between private and public sectors. These issues are further compounded by the maturity level and pace of growth in some industry sectors and professions compared to others. For example, while oil and gas is leading in Qatar, the service industry is still in its infancy in the country. Likewise, when looking at the different professions, accounting, finance and ICT are still growing while engineering is already established as a leading profession in Qatar. Therefore, this market environment has largely influenced the graduate education setting where engineering subjects have taken precedence over professions such as finance and ICT. Collectively such a setting has influenced and contributed to the imbalance in the labour market. Moreover, the reliance on expatriate workers and talent in Qatar and generally the GCC has created a lack of urgency and desire to develop critical skills internally in organisations and instilling a strong work ethic among citizens (Shediac and Samman, 2010). According to Shediac and Samman, the GCC region has low skills in math and sciences compared to the rest of the world, which has resulted in the lack of adequate analytical and science-related skills among job entrants. In this context, more research is needed not only to study the labour market and organisational practices in HRM, AS-PMD and skills training but also the gaps that exist between the labour market and Qatar National Vision 2030. To do so, drawing from international best practice in HRM and AS-PMD as well as graduate attributes, skills and competency trends becomes imperative to provide a frame of reference by which countries such as Qatar can learn from and adapt. Furthermore, public policies need to support and offer incentives to both employees and employers to invest in skills development to meet the requirements of skilled jobs such as accounting, finance and ICT (OECD, 2012).

At a micro level, organisations will need to balance the politics between different departments in the same organisation, where for instance marketing and corporate planning will be considered to be more important than the accounts, ICT or administration functions. Such changes will of course be only possible with strategic level commitment and change of organisational culture and structure. In this respect, organisations that have a process oriented structure that is focused on customer needs, rather than a silo departmental structure with boundaries and barriers, are likely to be in a better position to embrace new AS-PMD and trainings methods that are impartial and able to support growth and diversity.

5. Concluding Comments

This viewpoint paper has presented the collective views of the authors about the current context of Qatar in relation to human resource practices of how performance management and development is carried out in the country. It has highlighted the potential challenges that Qatar will face in terms of adopting international best practices in AS-PMD due to the inherent unique topography of the social-demographics of the country, its people and culture. The discussion presented in the paper stems specifically from the in-depth local experience and knowledge of two of the authors as well as the wider international experience of all the authors whose collective experience in delivering graduate education and professional skills development spans well over 50 years. Indeed, the discussions presented in the paper make it clear that transferring good HRM practices and methods from one context (country or organisation) to another is not as straight forward as it seems from the outside. The socio-cultural and demographic makeup as well as beliefs and value systems have a huge influence on which practices are possible and which are likely to be difficult to implement and administer. Localisation and adaptation is considered as imperative in this context and presents the professional accreditation bodies, training institutes, organisational decision makers (including CEOs and HRM professionals) and policy makers at both national (in Qatar) and international level several challenges and questions to answer in terms of relevance, recognition and fit for purpose. While there are no doubt that Qatar needs to implement more diverse industry-facing skills development strategies to support their transition towards a knowledge economy, international competition and dynamic market conditions on the other hand is forcing the country to react quickly. Therefore, acknowledging the various challenges discussed in this paper (and outlined in table 2) and enabling the right conditions in which professional bodies, organisations, educators and policy makers can work together to tackle these challenges are imperative for Qatar and indeed the wider GCC region.

Table 2: Taxonomy of the Key Challenges for Localising Skills Development Strategies in Qatar

Challenge	Description	Acknowledged and/or Evidenced by	
		Deloitte (2015)	Ernst & Young (2015)
Gaps in the Secondary Education System	School curricular need to embed employability skills into their programmes to ensure young people are prepared for university programmes that will carry forward a similar employability agenda	Yes	Yes
Gaps in the Higher Education System	Local university programmes need to keep up to date with leading universities in the world and diversify their offering in terms of programmes that are competitive and able to deliver graduate attributes that will make Qatari graduates globally competitive.	No	No
Failure to diversify Graduate Specialisations	While the mind-set of Qatari students have always pushed them towards traditional engineering and business subjects, universities are not helping the situation by being slow to diversify and offering only a limited choice of programmes for specialisation.	No	No
Reliance on Oil/Gas	The strength of the oil and gas industry offers limited motivation for Qatar and GCC countries in general to diversify their economies.	Yes	Yes
Reliance on the Public Sector for employment and the role of private sector in employment	Many Qatari nationals prefer to join the public sector after graduation due job security, high salaries and less demanding performance appraisal systems compared to the private sector. Conversely, the private sector is not taking a proactive role to change this trend by creating new jobs, offering employees new skills through CPD and career progression planning.	Yes	Yes
Outdated HRM Practices in Organisations	Most Qatari organisations have no strategies for AS-PMD, CPD and there is limited collaboration between public and private sectors, particularly multinationals, to share good practices in HRM	No	No
Influence of culture on Education and Work systems	The national and regional culture and belief systems seems to impede logic preventing diversification and global outlook in secondary and higher education systems (i.e. limited use of English in education)	No	No
Social Dynamics in the	The close knit social relationships in Qatar and similar GCC	No	No

workplace preventing objective management, leadership and HRM practices	countries makes it challenging to ensure a fair and unbiased system of appraisal and CPD needs assessment		
Immature CPD Environment	The limited exposure to CPD and the work of professional bodies means most organisations and policy makers are not aware of the benefits of professional development, accreditation – professional qualifications and individual career enhancing contributions that can benefit organisational competitiveness	No	No
Language Constraints	The national policy to use Arabic as the main education language imposes many constraints on the competitiveness of both the education institutes and students / graduates of the future in Qatar.	No	No
Cost of Recruitment	Recruiting local Qatari Nationals is more convenient and cost effective during the initial recruitment process (compared to overseas workers) but, on the job, there are huge disparities in salaries between local and foreign workforce.	No	No
Lack of clear policies for HRM at national and organisational levels	There is a clear need for Qatari organisations and policy makers to draw from established HRM policies and practices that are used by leading organisations across the world and region.	Yes	Yes
Lack of a detailed roadmap for transition into a knowledge economy	At present, there is no coherent strategic framework or policies to support the aspirations to become a knowledge economy and the term knowledge economy is superficially in the region and Qatar without comprehending the challenges and complexities	No	No
Lack of clear engagement strategy with professional bodies	Although universities and industry are beginning to engage with professional bodies such as CIPD, ACCA, BCS, AICPA, there are no policies or clear directions either from the government, industry or higher education institutions as to which professional bodies Qatar should engage with	No	No
Ad-hoc CPD and skills development strategies	The ad-hoc skills development practices adopted by both public and private sector organisations in Qatar has allowed non-accredited organisations and individuals to run training courses that are not regulated for quality or certified.	No	No

For Qatar, there are several policy related implications that surface when digesting the analysis presented in this paper. *First*, we posit that decision makers will need to undertake a high level appraisal of all the HRM practices used in the country across both private and public sector organisations against the national vision of Qatar to move towards a knowledge economy and “qatarisation.” *Second*, a policy implementation framework will need to be formulated with strict implementation protocols and guidelines for AS-PMD and HRM practices to support the national vision, far beyond the present model that allows loose implementation and enforcement.

In doing this, Qatari education institutes, organisations and policy makers will need to work closely with the professional accreditation bodies such as ACCA, CIMA, AICPA, BCS and CIPD to adapt professional training frameworks that are fit for local purpose and at the same time relevant and recognised in an international context. *Third*, senior business leaders and professionals representing core areas such as accounting and finance, information and communication technology and human resource management will need to subscribe to such a framework and policies as well as openly commit and support their implementation and adaptation. Any strategy or journey towards localisation of professional development practices that does not take into consideration these important practical implications is likely to be posed with risks that would hinder Qatar from achieving its 2030 vision of moving the country from one that is heavily dependent on the skills and competencies of foreign professionals to one that is built on the knowledge and skills of Qatari citizens.

The discussion offered in this viewpoint article is based on the authors’ own combined experience and therefore should be interpreted accordingly. The authors propose to conduct further empirical research to examine and validate the arguments presented here (and summarised in table 2), which will be reported in forthcoming articles.

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