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Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Labor Market, Education and Generation Y Females: A Match or a Mismatch?

By Cameron Mirza¹ and Magdalena Karolak²

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the convergence between the current state of education, labor markets' preparedness, and expectations of Generation Y females taking Bahrain as a case study. Generation Y is defined as the group of people aged 30 years and under. Although Generation Y is a worldwide phenomenon and members of this generational group share certain characteristics globally, in Gulf Cooperation Council countries [GCC] they display strong pressure to succeed, a need of gaining a high salary but also to acquire knowledge and expertise; and a preference for a strong work-life balance. In addition, in the workplace they seek peer orientation of the superiors rather than sheer respect for hierarchy; the latter is especially visible among the female population. The quickly modernized and globalized world created a generation with worldviews distinctive from the generation of their parents and this is especially visible in the GCC region that has been undergoing profound changes in the last decades with more and more women entering the labor market. GCC countries are at a stage where the transformation of their labor markets remains of utmost importance; hence this paper will shed light on the current trends and provide recommendations for future reforms.

Keywords: Bahrain, Education, Women, Employment, Generation Y, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

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Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC] economies³ have relied heavily on oil profits for development; the rentier economic model (Luciani & Beblawi, 1987) has worked with an oil surplus, distributed among its citizens in the form of free services and subsidies (Hertog, 2010, p. 4). Recent economic constraints due mainly to falling oil prices and current demographic pressures, linked to a rapid population growth call for a holistic strategy to transform the GCC economies and societies. In the near future the likely dwindling oil wealth will have to be divided among a larger population, there will be considerable pressure on states' budgets to maintain the same level of social welfare (Gause, 1997, p. 67) or to rethink the current fiscal policy, in particular taxation. These demographic considerations are combined with a long-term need for economic diversification and gradual shift away from oil dependency (World Bank, 2004, p. 42). The drive towards a greater sustainability requires substantial economic contributions of the society. However, within the context of a rentier state, the majority of citizens display "low societal capacities" (Hertog, 2010, p. 5), which translate into low productivity and high expectations from state resources. Moreover, the population of the GCC presents specific characteristics compared to the rest of the world. More than 40% of the region's population are under 15 years of age (de Boer & Turner, 2007, p. 10). As these youths enter the labor market, the GCC national workforce is expected to increase by 30% in 2020 (Shediac *et al.*, 2010, p. 2). In the past, national workers would be easily absorbed in the public sector where their jobs would be secured indefinitely. At present, nationals must look for jobs in the private sector as the public sector is already saturated. This poses a problem for GCC labor market since foreign workers, who dominate the private sector, potentially offer better skills and have lower wages expectations (Kapiszewski, 2006, p. 13). Within this socio-economic context, the reforms of the educational systems of GCC countries carried out in the last decade ought to provide a solution to the burning problems of the low educational attainment and preparedness of GCC citizens entering the job market.

Indeed, according to recent studies, the region's human capital assessment falls significantly behind the world average. UNDP's Arab Human Development Reports and the two Arab World Competitiveness Reports (2002-2003 & 2005) stressed that education, research, and development are weak in the region, and that education systems lack relevance through systems focusing on inputs rather than outcomes. This serious shortage "exacerbates other problems associated with importing both foreign workers and technologies" (Davis & Hayashi, 2007, p. 2). The World Bank's report, *The Road Not Traveled: Education Reform in the Middle East and North Africa* highlights the fact that despite major investment, the Middle East and North Africa [MENA] region achieved minimal results in education. The latter were witnessed in international educational assessment tests such as TIMSS, PISA and PIRLS, whilst at higher education level, graduate employability is a key metric often cited. Indeed, there seems to be a critical mismatch between educational attainment, skills acquired and labor market expectations. Data from Ernst & Young Report 2015 suggests that lack of appropriate skills, among others, becomes a major deterrent in a broader participation of nationals in the skilled workforce. Moreover, students prefer humanities than technical fields of study that are most needed on the job market. Thus, those who graduate do not possess adequate skills and competency levels to compete with expatriates in the private sector. On the other hand, employment in the private sector is expected to rise and as the countries accelerate diversification away from oil, while the number of jobs created in the public

³ Gulf Cooperation Council countries include Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates

sector has been stagnating since years. Consequently, the GCC have already begun facing the problem of youth unemployment (Kabbani & Kothari, 2005, p. 4) and structural unemployment, which is unemployment “by choice” (McKinsey & Company, 2007, p. 6). As of 2015, Bahrainis comprise only around 23% of all employees in the country (Tamkeen, 2015). Education and innovation could pave the way to the region's sustainability by promoting a shift from oil to knowledge-based economy to which citizens actively contribute. The young GCC nationals entering the job market are part of Generation Y. Their expectations from the workplace are an additional factor to put in the picture.

This paper will focus on the educational and skill preparedness of GCC female nationals to enter the post-oil labor market and future prognoses related to the labor market evolution and human capital development. We will take a holistic outlook at the intersections of the generation Y, labor market and human capital in GCC.

Literature review

Generation Y as a Phenomenon and its Implications for Bahrain

Sociologists refer to a generation as “an identifiable group that shares birth years, age, location, and significant life events at critical developmental stages” (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Mannheim ([1927] 1952; cited in Krahn & Galambos, 2014, p. 93) highlighted especially the importance of sufficiently large-scale social and economic changes in the formative years (childhood and adolescence) in the creation of a generation. Generation Y, also known as Millennials, is usually defined as those born after 1982 (Strauss & Howe, 1991) and before 2000. In Bahrain, the population of Millennials is estimated to be 221,000, which represents approximately 39% of all Bahraini citizens (data from the latest, i.e. 2010, population census).

Holt, Marques and Way (2012) analyzed these fundamental social and economic changes in Western societies that account for the formation of Generation Y. The majority of these characteristics apply with some modifications to the Millennials in GCC as well. Among others, Holt *et al.* mention that Gen Y represents a more economically stable cohort than the preceding Generation X. While in GCC societies, oil transformed the societies already in 1970's providing Generation X with greater wealth, access to foreign products and luxury goods as well as subsidized government services such as education, water, electricity, and healthcare, among others, Generation Y cohorts were brought up in this prosperity. Hence, their outlook may be that of entitlement to these benefits and economic stability. It is also true that Gen Y coincides with a demographic change with lower fertility rates⁴ and greater engagement of parents in children's rearing and parents' attention to their extracurricular activities. As a result, Millennials have strong bonds with their parents (Holt, *et al.*, 2012, p. 82). The latter is also a typical feature of GCC families, but in the Gulf the employment of domestic helpers has become common and the bonds with mothers may be somehow reduced as a result. Furthermore, Millennials are characterized by the use of digital technologies in which they are advanced. Dubbed “the first truly digital generation” (Holt, *et al.*, 2012), they multitask using more than one device at once and seek constant real-time connection to their peers and family. The digitalization of Generation Y is an important factor to consider in Bahrain where Internet connectivity 88% of Bahrain's inhabitants (Internet World Stats, 2010), the mobile phone penetration rates reached 158% (Gulf Daily News, 2012). It is especially the mobile phone that became the primary tool of connectivity, instant

⁴ Fertility rates for Bahraini women decreased from almost 7 in 1965 to 4 children in 1980 with further decline to less than 3 in 2000.

exchange of information and instant gratification. Access to the web has altered the patterns of information seeking with e-books and websites that offer immediate access to information replacing the traditional use of books and dictionaries. As a result, Millennials may find information quickly.

It is also true that Bahrain presents a case of its own among other GCC countries; hence, their Millennial population may present characteristics specific to the country. Bahrain is a multicultural society with more than half of its population composed of foreigners. Large numbers of expatriates continue to occupy low- to medium-skilled jobs that national workers are not willing to perform; due to the competition from low-cost expatriate labor, wages for this type of occupation are severely decreased (McKinsey & Company, 2007, p. 8). On the other hand, the cost of employing national workers in high-skilled jobs is lower than that of hiring an expatriate, local workers lack the appropriate skills. Ultimately, low wages and poor working conditions deter Bahrainis from employment in the private sector and are held responsible for structural unemployment among the native population. In 2001, unemployment reached a record level of 16% among local Bahrainis. Labor market reforms initiated in 2006 managed, however, to curb unemployment, bringing it down to 3.5% in 2009 (CIO, 2009). Nonetheless, the problem of future unemployment is still worrisome, as over the next decade 100,000 Bahrainis are expected to enter the job market (Bahrain Factsheet, 2009). Rising economic demands, and significantly lower oil prices are a major problem for this country that has already faced instability in the recent decades. As a result of economic conditions, Bahrainis perceived the level of their well-being much less favorably than other Gulf Arabs (Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, 2011) with 10% labeling their life situation as suffering, 64% as struggling and only 27% as thriving.

The patterns described above points to a major discrepancy between labor market offerings, employability of nationals, their expectations, and social and economic stability of the country. These challenges led to the creation of the Bahrain Economic Vision 2030. This comprehensive program of national development published in 2008 by the Bahrain Economic Development Board [BEDB] is based on three pillars of reforms, namely economy, government, and people. Within the scope of social development, the vision stressed the importance of education. The program set a number of goals within the field. It emphasizes the need for education and training “to be relevant to the requirements of Bahrain and its economy”, thus it emphasizes the instruction of applied sciences. It stresses the importance of “accessibility” of education, while ensuring the need for “highest possible quality standards (by setting) standards for quality across the education sector, regularly review the performance of [...] educational and training institutions.” Finally, it aims at encouraging research as basis for development of knowledge-based economy (BEDB, 2008, p. 22). These principles led to tight control of educational institutions, their programs, and degrees offered. As a result, some institutions and programs not meeting the standards were phased out, while new institutions were created with new programs to fill in the gaps in the skills of Bahrainis (Karolak, 2012). Bahrainis could also receive governmental support in pursuing tertiary studies and professional training to increase their employability, among others, through the semi-governmental Tamkeen agency. In 2011, for instance, 8,500 Bahrainis used the opportunity for advanced skills training provided by Tamkeen. With regards to educational attainment, in 2002, tertiary enrolment accounted to 25.2% of Bahraini population, in 2008 it rose to 32.8%, while it is expected to reach 57.6 % by 2020 (Alpen Capital, 2010, p. 36). It is clear that Bahrainis have taken such opportunities seriously and their educational attainment is quickly rising. Within this context, the role of women is of a special importance. Indeed, economic empowerment of women holds special place in the Bahrain Economic Vision 2030. Given the fact that women account for 70%

of all university graduates, Bahraini authorities saw women's rising education attainments as a resource for the country's development. Various initiatives were established to promote female participation in the workforce (Karolak, 2014, p. 50), which rose over the past decades. In the 1970's women made up only for 4% of the total workforce; however, in 2010, female participation in workforce rose to 32.1%, while in 2014 it increased further to 39% (World Bank, 2016).

Furthermore, Generation Y approach to work and to education sheds additional light on the context of our study. Wessels and Steenkamp (2009), for instance, found out that in educational settings Millennials prefer teamwork, structure rather than ambiguity, image-rich environments, and orientation toward inductive discovery or making observations, formulating hypotheses, gaining an understanding of the rules and craving interactivity. It has been assessed that especially in GCC Millennials display a strong pressure to succeed, a need of gaining a high salary, but also acquiring knowledge and expertise and a preference for a strong work-life balance. In addition, in the workplace they seek peer orientation of their superiors rather than sheer respect for hierarchy; the latter is especially visible among the female population (Shoefield & Honore, 2015).

This preliminary overview provides us with a global but also country context for carrying our study.

Methodology

The purpose of this research is to assess the transition from educational institutions to workplace based on the perceptions of Generation Y university female graduates in Bahrain. This study adopted a qualitative, in depth-interviewing methodology as a method of choice for conducting the research on subjects' experiences and their opinions about the educational system preparedness and school to work transition. The aim of the in-depth interviews technique, is "to understand themes of the lived daily world from the subject's own perspective" (Kvale, 1996, p. 27). For the purpose of this research, interviews are especially useful as we aimed at discovering the experiences of the interviewees. The interviewing technique can "provide access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social worlds" (Miller & Glassner, 1997, p. 100). The researchers used an open-ended questionnaire as a guiding tool for discussion to gather data. In this manner, while starting with a structure, we emphasized spontaneity and freedom of expression of the participants. The flexibility of interviews allowed us to ask follow up questions.

All of the interviewees were female, participation was voluntary and all participants received full disclosure of the purpose of the study. The interviews were conducted in English, and lasted between 30 minutes to one hour. The interview notes were collected and transcribed into a Word document. These responses were printed out and analyzed by coding common themes. This thematic analysis allows interpretation of the interviews based on grouping information into themes (Robson, 2011).

Data Analysis and Discussion

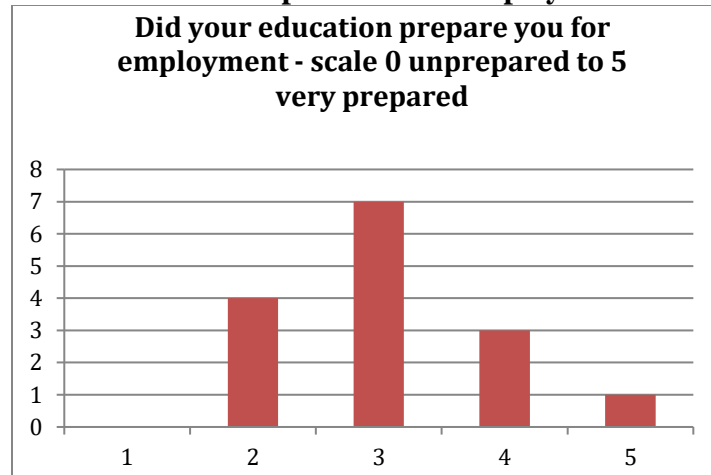
There were 17 female graduates interviewed from a variety of different educational backgrounds. The average age of the interviewee was 25 and the average amount of years since graduation was 4.5 years. The main degree qualification was a Bachelor degree (70%) with a few interviewees having a Master's degree, one having a professional qualification and one having a PhD. The most common degree was a Bachelor in Banking and Finance, followed by other business-related degrees. Other degrees included Engineering, Arts and ICT. All interviewees

worked in full time paid employment. 76% of interviewees worked in the private sector with the remainder working in the public sector. All interviewees had graduated from universities in Bahrain and some continued their education further in international programs abroad.

Reflections on Universities' Preparation for Employment

Interviewees were asked “did your education prepare you for employment?” Answers were given on a scale of 0 to 5 with 0 being unprepared and 5 being very prepared. The following graph outlines the quantitative responses.

Chart 1: Educational Preparation for Employment



The above chart would indicate that the interviewees felt they were *reasonably* well prepared for employment. No interviewees stated that they were very unprepared (0 or 1), but 4 interviewees stated that they felt they were somewhat unprepared (2). Overall, the responses to this question are medium to positive indicating that interviewees felt their education was appropriate for preparing them for employment.

The interview questions elaborated on these findings by asking the interviewees what was good about their education, what knowledge and skills were missing from their education in their employment, what could have been improved and if they experienced any internships or on the job experiences while studying.

One common theme about the preparation for employment is that many interviewees were not working in an area that directly related to their studies. For these graduates, their responses about how education helped in preparing for the workforce were more focused on how it helped their soft skills such as self-management, building work ethic and discipline rather than theoretical skills. Even those graduates working in their area of study, responses tended to focus on personal development and soft skills rather than theoretical knowledge. One of the respondents expressed surprise that the theoretical knowledge acquired at university was actually outdated once she entered the work force and she had to learn further by herself to catch up. The specific aspects of education that were mentioned as having been useful to prepare them for employment included: report writing skills, presentation skills, time management skills, using Microsoft Office programs and all practical application of theory. The need to meet deadlines due to assessment submission requirements was mentioned by a couple of interviewees as a skill that was particularly useful. A computing graduate mentioned that the technical skills learnt were very beneficial and she felt she had good knowledge for their job. One interviewee stated “*most of the skills I found helpful I*

developed through my engagement in extracurricular activities, not my education". This statement is supported by research on employability skills the emphasis the importance and value of extra curricula activities and part time work in preparing students for the work force.

When asked what was missing from their education and the challenges they faced upon employment, a number of common themes emerged. A key theme was the lack of practical or applied learning. As stated by the interviewees:

"Students need help to be more practical with practical courses rather than just theoretical studies"; "the challenges I faced in employment were the practical part and applying what I learn theoretically"; "I didn't get enough practical skills at university"; "at (university name) at least we are on a decent level from the academic knowledge, but we knew nothing about analytical and other skills."

Some students mentioned that they would have liked more case studies and projects, but most referred to the benefits and importance of internships and work experience. Responses regarding internships will be discussed in a latter section of the analysis.

Another common theme about what was missing was around career guidance. A number of interviewees mentioned that they feel they would have made different choices of study if they had proper career guidance either prior to entering university or during their studies:

"There was no career advice at all, you don't have anyone at the university to rely on and ask such questions that can help you determine what you exactly want to do in your future"; "we are way behind in terms of career guidance, whether in school or university. I personally wouldn't have majored in Banking & Finance if I had proper career guidance."

This theme is also a consistent theme in the recommendations made by the interviewees who state that high school career guidance needs to improve in Bahrain.

Other themes around what was missing from their education included a lack of teamwork, lack of English language training, and a lack of focus on character development. While teamwork skills were cited by some interviewees as something they believe their university prepared them well for, other interviewees felt that this was lacking in their education and they were unprepared when entering the workforce: *"I was unprepared for working so close with others"; "at university I was confident because I only had to rely on me to finish work, now I am working I have to rely on others"*. One interviewee made an interesting observation about the interdependence of the workplace rather than the university experience: *"dealing with other people's work as it directly affected mine. [There is a] different kind of independence in my work than in the university"*.

English language training was cited as both a positive and a negative, depending on the university experience. One interviewee stated the gap between the level of English taught in the public high school and the level of English needed at a private university:

"I think that governmental schools need to improve English teaching in order to be ready for university because if I did not have a foundation course that include English courses, I would not have a good level of knowledge in English language which is very essential to my job."

Another interviewee spoke about the lack of English language support at her university and that she had to take a lot of extra English classes outside university to catch up.

Lack of personal development subjects at university was mentioned directly by a couple of interviewees, but also mentioned indirectly when elaborating on soft skills by a few interviewees. Interviewees discussed that they did not feel they acquired the skills how to deal with conflict or negotiate what they need while at university. In mentioning character development specifically one student said: *“there wasn’t much focus on building students’ characters and enhancing their communications skills, innovation or creativity. The entire focus was on theory”*. One interviewee mentioned the benefit to character development having a part time job gave her. Another interviewee mentioned that she felt unprepared *“engaging with older and more experienced people on the field”*.

While some interviewees did not have any internships or industry based projects during their studies, most did. However, there was mixed feedback on the benefits of this. Most felt it was a positive experience stating the benefit of practical experience:

“They were valuable to get our hands dirty in a real world job”; “I got the chance to meet clients and CEO’s”; “(the) internship overseas for 6 weeks was a great experience”; “I had 3 internships during my studies. They added so much value to my knowledge and they were great experiences”; “the internship was valuable, but not enough.”

But some interviewees mentioned they did not see their internship as beneficial: *“(the internship) was useless because most of companies they deal with internship students as a student not as an employee”; “university internship was very bad, I learnt nothing, no plan or structure”*. Interestingly, one interviewee mentioned that it would have been beneficial to have had more practical work experience prior to starting a master’s degree: *“practical work, or work experience before going on to doing my master’s would have enabled me to understand the industry further”*. This interviewee explained that she went straight from a Bahrain university, where she did not undertake an internship, to a master’s degree program overseas and believes the lack of work experience put her at a disadvantage in her master’s.

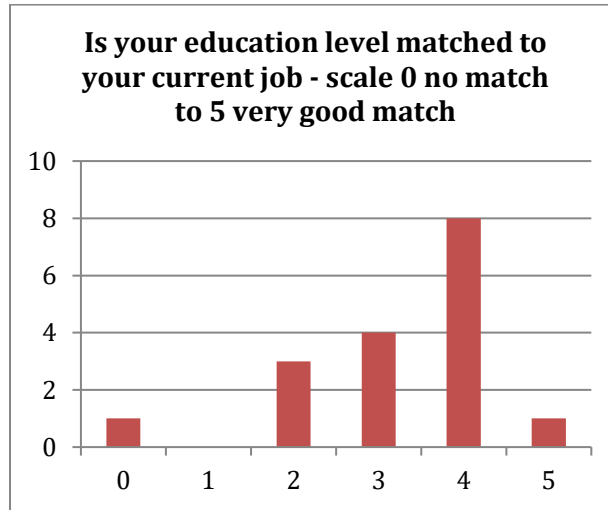
Some interviewees mentioned the emphasis placed on good grades rather than learning:

“In school and college we were led to believe that grades were all that mattered. So the teaching focused on getting as much information as possible into students brains in order to answer all the exam questions... not much attention was paid to building skills”; “not enough emphasis is placed on the process of learning, everyone is just concerned with a good final grade”; “increase education activities rather than exam based assessment only... the focus is on exams and good grades which rarely adds any benefits to employment later on.”

Reflections on Current Employment

These questions asked the interviewees about whether they felt their education matched their job level, what they do for ongoing professional development and if they intend to stay in their current role. The responses also provide an overview of the interviewees' level of job satisfaction.

Chart 2: Educational and Job Level Match



The majority of respondents stated that they felt there was a very good match between their education level and their current job. This would indicate that despite aspects of their education that left them feeling somewhat initially unprepared as outlined in the previous section, the interviewees have been able to achieve a level within their employment that they feel is suitable for someone with their education background. However, there was one interviewee who did not feel their education matched at all with their job and there were three people who felt there was only a weak match between their level of education and their job.

When asked if interviewees felt they benefited more from on the job training or their formal education nine stated on the job training, two stated formal education and six stated both. The responses to why, gave insight into the different educational and job experiences. Some of those who stated that on the job training was more beneficial referred to mentoring and shadowing jobs as a significant part of the learning:

“On the job training was very beneficial as I got to learn everything from scratch customized to the processes and business needs of the company... in addition, having a mentor all these years guiding me, investing his time in me to improve my business sense and knowledge in order to benefit the company as well as myself”; “I learned and still am learning how to perform tasks. It definitely takes experience but the will to learn and take on new challenging tasks, basically being thrown in the deep end to perform at your best”.

There is a strong correlation in interviewee responses between those who were doing a job unrelated to their education and those who felt on the job training was more beneficial than formal education. The students who stated that formal education was more beneficial said: *“formal*

education has made me work-ready since it has given me the skills and the experience required for the job". This interviewee also stated that she had received extensive industry involvement in her education through projects and case studies. An interviewee working as a computer programmer stated: *"in my job I use the programming language I learnt at university"*. It is apparent that this type of technical computer job is closely related to what the interviewee learnt at university. Of the interviewees who stated both as being equally beneficial reasons given included:

"Training helped more to familiarize myself with the environment of the workplace, my education helped me more in understanding the systems";
"Both equally beneficial. Report writing, assessments, developing recommendations is all due to formal education. But on the job training has been critical in developing my communication skills mainly".

Interviewees were asked if they engage in any ongoing development to improve knowledge or skills. The majority of responses indicated that there was a culture of lifelong learning among the respondents. Various types of learning were cited from formal training courses, to self-directed reading. Only one interviewee stated that they did not do any form of ongoing development due to time constraints of the job. Interviewees cited a range of different development mechanisms. Workshops and training courses were the most common form of development, but most did not elaborate on what type of workshops and training courses. Two mentioned professional certifications specifically, and one mentioned a leadership workshop. A few interviewees mentioned online courses or MOOCs as a major source of ongoing education. A few referred to personal reading and talking to business leaders. In addition, conferences and watching/reading the news daily were also considered forms of ongoing development by the interviewees.

When asked if they intend to stay in the job and the reasons why they would leave, many interviewees referred to the development they are doing as being a key reason to stay in the job. Only two mentioned they would leave for a better salary. One mentioned the intention to open her own business and another one is already working for himself. Another interviewee mentioned they are working for their family business and will not be leaving indicating loyalty as the main reason.

Another indicator of job satisfaction is how well utilized the interviewees feel in their current positions. All interviewees were asked to rank on a scale of 0-5 how well they feel their skills are being drawn upon in their current job. The scale is 0 not at all utilized to 5 very well utilized. The following graph outlines the responses:

Chart 3: Utilisation of Skills



The majority of the interviewees indicate a positive view of how their skills are being relied upon the job. However, there are two interviewees who strongly feel their skills are not being relied upon. This could indicate some of the interviewees feel they have more to offer their employer than they are able to demonstrate in their current position. In addition, there are five interviewees who responded neutrally indicating that they are not being used to their full potential. The qualitative responses to this question outline reasons for this:

“I believe I can do more yet the current situation is now allowing me to”;
“Because I have so many skills which I couldn’t use in my current work and I have so many innovative ideas which I didn’t get the chance to apply due to the company strategy”; *“in a small job market like Bahrain’s there aren’t many opportunities for employees to develop and climb the career ladder. You often reach the maximum grade possible at one institution”;*
“my knowledge is still not fully maximized at the workplace, the company is lagging behind my own knowledge and skills”; *“Can’t make final decisions in terms of how to proceed with projects. An informal type of organization where they empower employees utilizes one’s skills is much better”.*

A Banking & Finance graduate states her job dissatisfaction: *“I’m interested in design and anything to do with creativity. If I could go back in time I would have studied architecture.”*

What Would You Do Differently?

Interviewees were asked if they could go back in time would they have chosen to go directly into employment rather than higher education. They were also asked if they recommend young people to go into vocational and technical learning rather than traditional universities. In recent years, the implementation of strategy for the educational sector in Bahrain saw, among others, the creation of Bahrain Polytechnic in addition to the already existing Bahrain Training Institute, which offers vocational programs since 1992. Bahrain Polytechnic offers higher education degrees in addition to vocational courses.

When asked if they would choose to go into higher education or employment from high school, fourteen of the interviewees stated higher education. Some of them stated that they would

have chosen different fields of study. One interviewee mentioned that she would look for a more applied institution to study at and two mentioned that they would work part time alongside studies to gain further practical experience. Two interviewees stated they would have like to have started their own business:

“I would have gone into higher education if I would not have started a business. Higher education is a serendipity for better opportunities (business, networking and research), more so abroad”; “noooo I would run my own business and I will change my major and study abroad.”

Only two interviewees mentioned that they would not go into higher education again. One interviewee who did not have a university degree and had professional certification felt that her path was better in terms of learning practical skills: *“the more time I spend around graduates the more I realized that an undergraduate degree was not the answer to every professional undertaking.”*

When asked if they would recommend vocational or technical education to young people over traditional education, most stated that they would recommend traditional universities. Reasons stated include:

“Universities give the fundamentals and the mindset of a certain field, without those one would have a steeper learning curve. Although from a technology point of view at least, continuous learning is critical”; “I recommend young people to study in traditional universities because it provides the student in depth knowledge since it is for longer period it provides them with a variety of course other than their major courses. As a result, the student gains a broader knowledge and will be qualified to work.”

One interviewee made the observation that the culture of industry is such that without a university degree she would be disadvantaged: *“Until the culture is changed, I wouldn’t encourage people to do without university degrees. People in this part of the world still regard a university degree as a necessity and consider technical education to be of less value”*. Of those who mentioned vocational education, the reasons given were:

“It is all about getting hands on and practical for experience while studying. It would further help young people not only the background and degree but also the work environment”; “yes, I would recommend vocational. It is better preparation for career and life. For most people applied skills and on the job training are better suited to the real world and available jobs.”

A number of interviewees also stated that they would recommend vocational training or that they would only recommend traditional universities if they became more closely aligned to the needs of the job market. Yet, the responses tend to lean more toward embedded elements of vocational training into traditional universities as discussed in responses to previous questions.

Data analysis

The interviews confirm overall that Bahraini women take their education seriously and see it as a stepping stone to their future careers. It is clear also that Bahraini women feel that their place is in the labor market. Women who were interviewed sought to benefit from the education to a high extent. As a result, their expectations from the educational sectors were high. Looking from the perspective as employees, the interviewees were able to provide us with important reflections on their educational experiences.

The benefit of the university experience versus the benefit of the knowledge gained while at university was highlighted in interviewees' responses to many of the questions. Interviewees discussed the benefits of learning to work to deadlines and the soft skills that were developed while at the university. As many of the interviewees studied at different institutions there was a wide variety in answers about how their university experience prepared them for some of these soft skills. Learning to work interdependently through teamwork was identified as an important part of learning and either cited as having been part of the university experience or missing from the university experience, depending on where the interviewee studied. Extracurricular activities and part time work were recognized as offering students important personal development elements, as well as specific job-related skills. Overall, there was a significant recognition, and expectation, that soft skills and personal development *should* be part of the university education experience.

The most common themes in this section were the need to include practical education and career guidance in their university experience. This was mentioned specifically in relation to their employment preparation and what they felt was missing. The interviewees repeatedly stated the benefits of a good quality internship or work project of their education. They also made comments about the benefits of any work-related opportunities including working part time and work place awareness type of training. Some students had such positive experience in an internship or project experience that this was felt to be the most critical learning element of their whole degree studies. While some students had a very good experience doing internships and projects, others students mentioned that these were not valuable because they were not well organized or the employers did not support the students learning. These responses indicate the importance of quality and structure in the internships and that simply having internships available does not necessarily mean they will add value to the students learning. Research on work integrated learning would indicate that there are some critical elements that are necessary to ensure the work experience adds value to the student's educational experience and is integrated to draw on prior learning. This research concludes structure and specifically stated outcomes are necessary to ensure mutual benefit between the employer and student.⁵ There was a strong correlation between those students who felt their university was old-fashioned and the lack of practical education available.

The interviewees mentioned the importance of career guidance at both high school and university to help them choose the right course of study. Many interviewees felt this was missing and some stated that they ended up in a career they did not particularly like. These types of reflections are consistent with international research on job satisfaction and productivity in the GCC context. GCC graduates have significantly lower levels of engagement in employment compared with international data. Dissatisfaction with career choice is cited as one of the key reasons. This is often due to the influence of family and parents and the perceived value of specific careers over other careers (Jones & Punshi, 2014).

⁵ See further the Irish government report '*Work placement in third level programmes*' http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/rap_work-placement-report.pdf

Interviewees' responses indicated that they felt an overall satisfaction with the level of job and the skills they are utilizing on the job. As a group, these interviewees demonstrated a high level of commitment to lifelong learning and an understanding of the importance of continuous development to their career. They elaborated by stating the value of mentoring and on the job training to improving their job-related skills. There was a strong correlation between reflections on career choice and how well the interviewees feel they are being utilized on the job.

The majority of interviewees stated that they would still go into higher education, but would like to see higher education become more practical and closer aligned to work skills. It is also possible that the term vocational education did not necessarily have the same meaning to all the interviewees as many stated they would like to do both. These responses might indicate that they would like to see higher education become more vocational in nature.

Limitations of the Study and Final Conclusions

Given the qualitative approach to our research and the background of the interviewees, we may conclude that educated Bahraini women see themselves playing an active role in the Bahraini labor market. They undertook their education as a way of securing access to employment and they were able to reflect on their educational processes from the perspective of employees. As a result, we received a number of important reflections and perceptions from their side. The Bahraini higher education system is co-educational, unlike public governmental schools of a lower level. None of the women interviewed alluded to difficulties or recommendations they had specifically as women students. Thus, we may conclude that gender does not constitute a deterrent to education and that women feel to be at par with men in this area. This is an encouraging finding given the opportunities female employment may bring to the Bahraini economy. Indeed, international studies suggest that low participation of women in the workforce has a direct negative impact on the country's GDP (Löfström, 2009). Moreover, case studies assert that female participation in business ownership has an even stronger correlation with GDP growth (Weeks & Seiler, 2001). Bahraini Generation Y females offer a unique opportunity for economic growth given their approach towards education and employment if tapped into. It is also clear that at the same time their expectations from the education and the workplace are high and in line with the characteristics of the Generation Y members. Our recommendations aim at filling the gaps between the educational processes and the passage to the workforce taking into account the characteristics of Millennials.

Given the design of the research, the interviews were conducted in English and therefore, all interviewees were English speakers indicating a certain international focus and possibly high standard of their education attainment. Although many Bahrainis have a working English knowledge, language proficiency is required in most if not all higher education programs. Many degrees are delivered only in English.

In addition, all interviewees are involved in full-time employment and most have been in full-time employment for a number of years. Therefore, it could be concluded that the interviewees represented here are considered employable. A further study of both female and male graduates who are no longer in employment or who cannot find employment would add to these findings.

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