

## Further Education Sector and Gulf countries

Many Gulf countries have over recent years developed national visions and roadmaps for developing sustainable economies. Education and training strategies are key pillars of these strategies – and many reforms of basic, secondary, technical and higher education have been implemented. These initiatives focus on developing and reforming national institutions and curricula – but international involvement continues in the form of funding for English-language, technical and higher education overseas. UK education, training and qualifications are well regarded in the Gulf; in 2013/14 more than 20,000 students from the Gulf were studying for degree level or higher qualifications in the UK.

So why do so few Gulf students make it to the UK's FE colleges? According to figures compiled by the British Council (accessible via the [SIEM](#) website), only 1275 students from the Gulf countries were registered at FE institutions in the UK in 2014. On the face of things, the market environment in the Gulf looks positive; English language levels are generally lower than considered desirable, either for access to UK higher education programmes or for business; 11-year national education systems mean that many students require foundation programmes before accessing HE; and there is an ongoing need for technical training as countries continue their efforts to nationalise skilled technical roles in key industries.

However, a number of challenges balance the opportunities. Gulf governments maintain lists of approved providers for Foundation programmes; they have been increasing investment in developing technical and vocational education programmes provided locally (although international expertise is often used to develop these); and a large part of the Gulf EFL market consists of younger learners, who cannot access programmes in FE colleges, and students following pre-sessional English programmes, which are subject to funding constraints by government scholarship providers. Nevertheless, opportunities do exist; we examine some below and make some suggestions as to how colleges in the FE sector can best plan their engagement in Gulf countries.

### EFL courses

Statistics collected by English UK suggest that there are three significant markets for EFL courses in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia is the third largest market globally for EFL courses in the private sector, both in terms of student weeks and student numbers – and students tend to stay for longer, with an average stay of 10 weeks. Kuwait, Qatar and Oman are also in the top 20 sending countries. Detailed statistics are not available for the state sector, but the private sector figures quoted above are indicative of general preferences and trends in each country.

The governments of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait offer financial support (with some conditions) for EFL programmes offered by providers which are accredited by Accreditation UK. They do not differentiate between private and state sector providers.

Checklist : Accreditation is the driver for ministry or employer funding so check if your EFL portfolio is accredited by Accreditation UK or another accreditation programme. The British Council has organised successful EFL recruitment events in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in previous years and is planning more in Saudi Arabia for Spring 2016.

The British Council and English UK have jointly commissioned a detailed market report into EFL opportunities in the Gulf countries – this is expected to be published in February 2016.

### **Foundation programmes**

The national education systems of many Gulf countries are only 11 years, and so there is considerable demand for pre-degree foundation programmes. However, as most students from the Gulf, with the exception of Bahrain, are funded either by their Ministry of Education or a corporate sponsor, their choices are limited to lists of approved institutions. Since 2014, foundation programme providers (both public and private sector) have been required to demonstrate direct progression opportunities or academic affiliations to universities which are approved by each country's Ministry or equivalent body. (These lists vary from country to country, and can change frequently). However, while Ministries still give preference to University-run programmes, it has been difficult to apply this rule consistently, as there are simply not enough programmes which meet these criteria and to fulfil demand. Demand for foundation programmes should mirror the increase in the total number of students from the Gulf – which has almost doubled over the last five years.

Colleges offering foundation programmes should explore options for joint marketing with their affiliated university (and check the university is approved in a particular country – SIEM colleagues in country can share these lists.) This has been a successful strategy in the past. Students can often apply and have funding approved on a case-by-case basis.

### **Pre-degree level vocational or technical training courses**

There appears to be little demand from Gulf nationals for full-time vocational programmes in the UK. This is partly attributed to funding policies which focus on higher education, and the greater availability of accredited vocational and technical training programmes in-country.

### **Short courses**

British Council colleagues across the Gulf countries suggest there is still demand for short, specialised courses; these tend to focus on key industries such as oil and gas, banking and finance, healthcare and aviation. However demand can be variable, and timeframes for fulfilment very tight. The recent drop in oil prices also appears to have impacted on in-service training budgets across all sectors. We recommend talking to colleagues in country to evaluate if your college has an offer which would be of interest in each specific market. We suggest considering the following points:

Examine your programme portfolio closely – does it match the key industries in each country? Can you deploy trainers, or programme courses within short timeframes? Can you customise to meet specific requests? Can you demonstrate strong industry affiliations and high-specification labs or technical facilities? Are the qualifications offered clearly articulated?

## Beyond mobility - Partnerships

One output of the proliferation of education and training reform projects has been renewed investment in domestic technical colleges offering basic skills in English and Maths, as well as sector-specific technical and vocational education. Many national employers will work with local colleges as preference, and while this reduces the need to send employees overseas for training, it also brings potential for partnerships. Saudi Arabia's [Colleges of Excellence](#) programme was one of the largest examples of reform to technical and vocational education, and a number of UK FE colleges are involved in consortia delivering college projects across the Kingdom. A third phase of tenders is expected, but no timeframe has been announced for this. As these tenders are considered high-value opportunities they have been handled by [UKTI Education](#) who can provide further information. Bahrain has also developed ambitions to become a hub for vocational training and in 2013 [Tamkeen](#), an agency funded by the private sector to promote skills, employability and enterprise in Bahrain, signed a cooperation agreement with [TVET UK](#) to widen Bahrain's access to the UK's expertise in technical and vocational training.

## Summary of opportunities – Gulf Countries

Country	Partnership	Foundation	EFL	Short Courses
Bahrain	Yes	Yes – self sponsored students	Yes – self-sponsored students	Yes
Kuwait	Yes	Yes if guaranteed progression to approved institution	Yes if accredited by EnglishUK	Yes: Healthcare and oil and gas
Oman	Yes	Yes with conditions	Yes if affiliated with “approved” institution	
Qatar	Limited	Yes if guaranteed progression to an approved institution	Yes if accredited by English UK	Some
Saudi Arabia	Yes	Yes with conditions	Yes with conditions	Yes
United Arab Emirates	No	No	Self-funded students only	Yes