

Establishing Foreign Higher Educational Institutions in Bahrain

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All higher education institutions in Bahrain, both private and public, are regulated by the Higher Education Council (“HEC”) which was formed according to Law No. (3) of 2005, to regulate, promote and monitor the higher education sector.

In line with Bahrain’s 2030 vision, the HEC in 2014 approved the first National Strategy for Higher Education and Scientific Research, [a ten-year plan that aims to transform Bahrain into a regional hub for quality private higher education](#). Bahrain has traditionally enjoyed popularity as a higher education destination in the GCC region owing to its strategic location, quality of life, competitive tuition and living costs, and liberal culture.

Applications to establish Private Higher Education Institutions (“PHEIs”) in Bahrain must be made to the Secretariat General of the HEC. The application is the first step towards starting new programmes or launching a new institution and the HEC’s criteria for such applications includes the quality of education provided, meeting the economic needs of Bahrain, the quality of faculty staff, the curriculum and the method of teaching. The HEC usually decides upon the application within four (4) months upon submission.

All foreign private education institutions with headquarters outside Bahrain must be in compliance with laws and regulations applicable in their home countries, in addition to those applicable in Bahrain.

PHEIs in Bahrain may be established in the following forms:

- Institute – an institution that awards a diploma, associate diploma or both that are less than a BSc. Degree.
- College – an institution that awards a university degree or more and may award other higher educational qualifications.
- University – an institution that comprises a number of colleges or institutes, or both, provided that they are not less than three (3).

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In line with the national strategy to establish quality assurance mechanisms for higher education within the Kingdom, the HEC recently introduced its institutional accreditation system.

PHEIs must obtain accreditation from the HEC through the Academic Accreditation Committee, formed of members recommended by HEC and approved by the Prime Minister of Bahrain. An institution that holds a full license to operate must submit its application for accreditation within twelve months of coming into operation. The accreditation is awarded on the basis of the institution meeting standards established periodically by the HEC. The process entails an on-site inspection that focuses on the quality assurance processes of the institution in areas like governance, academic management, research, student welfare and support, teaching and learning facilities, amongst others. Accreditations are usually awarded to institutions for a period of 4 years (or lesser at the HEC’s discretion), before the expiry of which the institution must apply for re-accreditation and undergo the entire evaluation process again.

Bahrain is expected to attract more than 20,000 students into its higher education system over the next decade, of which almost 35% are expected to be international students. There is a need to increase Bahrain’s higher education capacity, thus making it a ripe time for investments in the higher education sector. Foreign higher education providers in Bahrain can benefit from the neighbouring key markets of Saudi Arabia (particularly its eastern province) and Kuwait, from where most international students in the GCC hail.

Traditionally, the majority of students in Bahrain have enrolled in business, finance or IT related courses. However, enrolment trends across the GCC indicate an increasing interest in science and technology courses due to higher job opportunities arising from the oil and gas industry, increasing infrastructural and construction activities as well as the rising interest in sectors like space exploration. There remains immense scope for foreign higher education providers to venture into engineering, sciences and technology as countries across the GCC look to diversify their economies and boost innovative competitiveness.