



*Thesis  
Title:*

IMPROVING THE VOCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS' COMPLIANCE WITH  
THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS (NQF) STANDARDS:  
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES, FROM THE VOCATIONAL  
INSTITUTIONS PERSPECTIVES

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## ABSTRACT

The implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in Bahrain in October 2014 has introduced new requirements that higher education, general education and vocational education and training (VET) institutions are mandated to fulfil. In particular, VET institutions demonstrate less compliance with NQF requirements than other institutions. Compliance with NQF requirements has several implications at the operational and national levels, such as meeting the objectives of Economic Vision 2030, which are related to the development of human capital, and making the Bahraini citizens the number-one choice in the local and international labour markets.

The content analysis results reveal a gap in the literature on compliance with NQF requirements. Thus, this research aims to identify the challenges that hinder VET institutions from complying with NQF standards, explore the opportunities for overcoming those challenges and recommending a national-level proposal for improving the VET institutions' compliance with NQF requirements. The Nielsen–Parker holistic compliance model is used as a base for a qualitative-dominant mixed methods approach. For this study, face-to-face in-depth interviews and online survey are conducted among quality managers/specialists or others in charge of NQF compliance at VET institutions. The interview sample consists of eight participants from listed VET institutions. These participants are selected through the purposive sampling technique. Meanwhile, the survey is targeted at all public and private VET institutions in Bahrain (n = 130).

The study reveals several challenges that hinder VET institutions from complying with NQF standards. These challenges include the following: (1) The perceived costs of compliance are higher than its perceived benefits. (2) Some disagreement emerges regarding the content of NQF requirements and the manner of implementing NQF policies and procedures. (3) Some VET institutions are categorised as free riders who do not demonstrate respect for the requirements in general. (4) Placing the national qualifications on the NQF does not yet create a competitive advantage among VET institutions, which hinders the influence of other stakeholders on the facilitation of compliance. (5) The incapacity of the current VET system to facilitate compliance with NQF requirements is due to the overlapping stakeholder duties, demanding requirements and

absence of a regulatory framework that supports NQF processes. (6) The NQF requirements are 136 ambiguous and entail more interpretation. (7) The financial, technical and management capacities need to be improved. (8) The accuracy of judgement requires improvement. (9) Awareness of the consequences of non-compliance through the BQA review is lacking. (10) The appropriate severity of sanctions should be determined.

On the contrary, the main opportunities for improving compliance with NQF requirements could form a twining system of (enforcement and management) approaches for effectively deterring non-compliance behaviour. This system comprises six major steps: (1) rule interpretation and capacity building to prevent non-compliance resulting from rule ambiguity and capacity limitations; (2) provision of the appropriate financial incentives; (3) attainment of a satisfactory level of acceptance of NQF policies, procedures and processes to ensure psychological legitimacy; (4) confirmation that the current VET system and the environment encourage voluntary compliance with NQF requirements as a collective decision; (5) creation of a continuous monitoring procedure to enhance transparency; and (6) establishment of a clear sanction system as a final measure for deterring the non-compliance of ‘free riders’.

This study contributes to bridging the gap in the literature on compliance with NQF requirements. The action plan proposed in this study could contribute to improving the VET institutions’ compliance with NQF requirements and thus generate positive effects at the operational and national levels.

Future research could validate the feasibility of the action plan from the perspective of other stakeholders. Developing a national-level communication strategy for NQF could be another interesting topic for future studies, especially in the current era of globalisation and technological advancement.

### **Keywords**

National Qualifications Framework (NQF), vocational education and training (VET), compliance, enforcement, management