



Directorate of Vocational Reviews Review Report

**Thinksmart for Development & Training
Zinj – Manama
Kingdom of Bahrain**

Date Reviewed: 22-24 March 2016

VO096-C3-R028

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Introduction

The Directorate of Vocational Reviews (DVR), which is a part of the National Authority for Qualifications & Quality Assurance of Education & Training (QQA), conducted this review over three days by a team of four reviewers. For this review, reviewers observed training sessions and other related activities, analysed data on the courses and qualifications learners achieve, examined learners' written and other work, examined documents and the materials provided by the provider and met with learners, employers, trainers, management and support staff.

In the previous review, Thinksmart for Development & Training (Thinksmart) overall effectiveness was judged as good. All main questions were judged as good except the effectiveness of teaching and training which was judged as satisfactory.

This Report summarises reviewers' findings and their recommendations about what the provider should do to improve.

Grading scale

Outstanding	1	Good	2	Satisfactory	3	Inadequate	4
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Table of review judgements awarded

Main Question	Judgement
Learners' achievement	Satisfactory (3)
Quality of teaching / training and assessment	Satisfactory (3)
Quality of programmes	Good (2)
Quality of support and guidance	Satisfactory (3)
Leadership, management and governance	Satisfactory (3)
Capacity to improve	Satisfactory (3)
Overall effectiveness	Satisfactory (3)

Review judgements

Overall effectiveness

How effective is the provision in raising learners' achievement and meeting the range of learners' and stakeholders' needs?

Grade: Satisfactory (3)

Thinksmart's overall effectiveness is satisfactory. All aspects of provision are satisfactory except the extent to which courses meet the needs and interests of learners and stakeholders which is good.

Most learners in the externally-accredited courses gain effective skills and knowledge and achieve the qualifications they aim for. However, these courses represent only a significant minority of the provider's enrolment for the last three years. In the local attendance certificate courses, which make up the majority, learners' achievement is adequate; a minority of learners do not achieve all course Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) and make minimal progress considering their prior attainment.

Trainers are knowledgeable and have professional experience in their fields, which they utilise effectively to enrich the learning experience with relevant vocational examples. They use a range of teaching methods and class activities to successfully engage and motivate learners. However, the assessment methods used are adequate. In a few local attendance certificate courses, post-course assessment does not always cover all course ILOs. Correction is not consistent and there is no prescribed marking scheme used by the trainers.

Courses are offered based on effective understanding of labour market needs, built on a survey conducted by Thinksmart, the outcomes of which are used effectively to inform the provision. The externally-accredited courses are regularly updated according to the awarding bodies' requirements, while the local attendance certificate courses are left to the expertise of the trainers. While the externally-accredited courses are well-structured and planned, other courses are only appropriate. Courses are well-resourced to meet the needs of learners and stakeholders.

Learners at Thinksmart receive adequate support and guidance. The learning environment is appropriate and learners and stakeholders have access to well-informed advice and guidance about the courses. Stakeholders are kept informed about learners' achievement through life cycle reports, and arrangements for delivery of courses are flexible to meet the needs of learners and stakeholders. An adequate SWOT analysis was used to develop the annual business plans. Qualified trainers are recruited and deployed effectively. Although

their performance is regularly monitored, internal lesson observations are insufficiently critical and the outcomes are not always shared with trainers to ensure continuous quality improvement. Quality assurance measures are adequate, but the provider lacks an effective verification system.

Capacity to improve

How strong is the provider's capacity to improve the quality of learning?

Grade: Satisfactory (3)

Thinksmart has satisfactory capacity to improve. Pass rates in the externally-accredited courses are comparable to international pass rates. Strategic planning is adequate and the provider develops annual business plans and regularly follows up their targets. Human and physical resources are sufficient to enable improvement. Thinksmart recently developed a Customer Relations Management (CRM) system and maintains and establishes direct partnerships with international bodies and IT vendors such as Accrediting Professional Managers Globally (APMG), CompTIA, RED HAT and Cloud Credential Council. Effective links are maintained with stakeholders. Partnerships were recently signed with major clients to conduct training for the entire year according to their needs. Repeat business is good for the last three years.

Nevertheless, the current quality assurance arrangements are only adequate and the provider lacks an effective verification system. Although the provider has adequately addressed some of the previous review recommendations, others are yet to be fully addressed including improving the assessment methods in the local attendance certificate courses, improving the rigour of the internal lesson observations, and introducing an effective verification system.

Learners' achievement

How well do learners achieve?

Grade: Satisfactory (3)

Most learners in the externally-accredited courses gain effective knowledge and skills relevant to the courses they attend, and achieve the qualifications they aim for in a timely manner. The pass rates in these courses are either comparable to or above international pass rates. However, these courses constitute 27% of the total enrolment. The remaining 73% of learners are in local attendance certificate courses where they generally acquire appropriate knowledge and skills. Most learners and stakeholders interviewed expressed their satisfaction with the training outcomes, particularly in the externally-accredited courses such as the Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL), Project Management Professional (PMP) and Android. Moreover, learners' testimonials about Tamkeen Exhibition Management Skills (TEMS), a short local attendance workshop, show that learners develop effective practical skills that enable them to present their products in local exhibitions. Learners enrolled in the local attendance certificate courses generally achieve their course ILOs and make adequate progress from their prior attainment, as evidenced by samples of learners' performance tracker and the results of the pre- and post-course assessments kept by the trainers. In 2014, Thinksmart conducted the eGovernment 'Qudurat' course which aims to raise Bahrainis' IT skills and enable them to use the e-government portal. This course constitutes 53% of the total enrolment since 2013. The record kept by the provider for this course is limited to the trainers' evaluations of learners through the learners' performance tracker, which is solely subjective. These, along with learners' and stakeholders' feedback about the course, show that learners' achievement in this course is not better than satisfactory. Overall, in the local attendance certificate courses a minority of learners do not achieve all course ILOs, or make only minimal progress considering their prior attainment.

Thinksmart's learners are self-motivated and have positive attitudes towards their learning. Most learners enrolled on the externally-accredited courses are professionals in their fields and have the ability to reflect critically on their learning through class discussion, activities and assigned projects. On the local attendance certificate courses such as TEMS, learners are able to reflect on their areas for improvement and what they have benefited. Generally, learners are able to work independently and collaboratively when given the opportunity.

The provider has a clear attendance policy which is shared with learners and stakeholders. Attendance and punctuality are recorded; the overall attendance rate is high for the last three years. However, lesson observations conducted by the reviewers and the records kept show that a few learners arrive late to their classes.

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching/training and assessment in promoting learning?

Grade: Satisfactory (3)

Trainers are knowledgeable and have theoretical and practical command of their specialisms. They provide accurate explanation of concepts, respond professionally to learners' questions, and utilise their experience to provide relevant vocational examples. Trainers in the externally-accredited courses are certified in the courses they teach.

Lessons are managed well. Trainers usually start by sharing the topics to be covered and recapitulating on the previously covered material, in which the majority of learners participate effectively. However, lesson plans used by trainers are more like standard agendas which include the topics to be covered and are distributed on the training days, and the class activities that will be conducted during the course. Most plans do not show how the topics are linked to the course ILOs or the time allocation of tasks. In the observed lessons, the accommodation of learners' individual needs was fit for purpose, as the learning groups are homogeneous with little individual difference. Generally, no differentiated activities are used by the trainers.

A range of training methods and class activities are used to engage and motivate learners effectively. These include discussions of relevant work-related examples and scenarios, questions and answers, and sharing experience between learners. Appropriate formative and summative assessment methods are used to evaluate learners' understanding and measure their achievement of the course ILOs. These include class activities and pre- and post-course assessment. Summative assessment in the externally accredited courses is relevant and follows the awarding body requirements. However, in a few of the local attendance certificate courses the post-course assessment does not cover all course ILOs, and there are cases where the pre- and post-course assessments are the same for different course levels. Also, assessments are not always corrected and marking schemes used by the trainers are not clear.

Trainers' maintain records on learners' performance through the Life Cycle Reports (LCR). These reports mainly include results of the pre- and post-course assessment in all courses except 'Qudurat' and the learner performance tracker, where the trainer evaluates individual learner's performance in terms of participation and commitment. However, this evaluation is subjective and solely left to the trainer's discretion as there is no clear rubric. In addition, the individual comments provided to learners are generic, although during the observed lessons they were provided with constructive verbal feedback.

In some courses, the teaching methods used stimulate self-learning and encourage analytical thinking. For example, in the technical courses trainers use a further questioning approach and relevant scenarios to challenge learners and promote analytical skills.

The available resources are effectively utilised to promote learning. These include PowerPoint presentations, white board, flip charts, and a learners' booklet in the ITIL course.

How well do programmes meet the needs and interests of learners and stakeholders?

Grade: Good (2)

Thinksmart offers a range of externally-accredited and local attendance certificate courses in the fields of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), management and soft skills. The externally-accredited courses include the Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL), Hyper Text Mark-up Language (HTML5), Android, I Phone Operating System (IOS) and Lean Six Sigma. The local attendance certificate courses include 'Qudurat', which has represented more than half of the provider's total enrolment since 2013, and other management and soft skills courses such as basic and advance sales and marketing and stress management. The Project Management Professional (PMP) and Certified Associate in Project Management (CAPM) courses are preparatory courses for the external examinations, which are not conducted in the institute.

The provider conducted a useful survey and skills gap analysis to identify the market's training needs and utilises the outcomes and the links they maintained with the ICT sector to inform the provision effectively. In May 2014, Thinksmart conducted a 'Business breakfast' event where they invited human resources and training managers and discussed their training needs. The provider is currently focusing on mobile technology courses, ITIL and PMP based on the outcomes of all the above. Moreover, there are some courses which are customised to meet the specific needs of learners and stakeholders.

A clear mechanism is in place to design, approve, update and review the courses. While externally-accredited courses are updated according to the external body's requirements, the locally designed attendance courses are left to the trainers' discretion. The externally-accredited courses are well-planned and structured in terms of content and assessment. Nevertheless, some learners find these courses intensive. Local attendance certificate courses are adequately structured and planned. However, the assessment structure in a few of these is not well-focused to cover all the ILOs, and there are cases within these courses where the

assessment is the same for different course levels, such as in basic and advanced stress management and basic and advanced sales and marketing.

The provider has clear requirements and mechanisms for access and entry levels to courses, which are effectively implemented. Course outlines are detailed and clearly indicate the ILOs and pre-requisites or the targeted audience. In the professional courses such as ITIL, PMP and CAPM, pre-requisites are clearly identified to ensure learners' eligibility to attend these courses. In other local attendance certificate courses the pre-course assessment is used to evaluate learners' prior attainment and knowledge. Courses are well-resourced to meet the needs of learners and stakeholders; a checklist of all required resources for the course is prepared to ensure their availability.

Courses are supported with adequate extra-curricular activities to enrich the learning experience, particularly in the TEMS workshop where learners are provided with the opportunity to present their products in a boot camp prepared by the institute.

How well learners are supported and guided?

Grade: Satisfactory (3)

Learners at Thinksmart are provided with appropriate support and guidance to help them achieve the best outcomes. Trainers, administrative staff and management are helpful and approachable. Before the start of a training course, learners and stakeholders have access to well-informed advice and guidance about course selection through the informative course outlines, social media, and the adequate website. At the start of a training course the staff provide learners with clear instructions on health and safety aspects and share with them brief information about the course. Learners enrolled in the externally-accredited courses are provided with extensive mock examinations and access to rich bank of questions. They are also provided with useful guidelines on how to register for online examinations. Nevertheless, the support and guidance provided is *ad hoc* and the provider lacks a formal mechanism.

Useful Life Cycle Reports (LCRs) are regularly shared with employers upon course completion. LCRs include information about learners' attendance, the results of the pre- and post-course assessment, the performance tracker which contains the trainers' evaluation of individual learner participation and commitment, and the analysis of their feedback about the course. Flexible arrangements are in place for the delivery and scheduling of courses to suits learners' and stakeholders' needs in terms of the venue, timing and the language of delivery. Courses are held either at the providers' premises, hospitality venues or at employers' work premises when requested. The provider's learning environment is suitable, with sufficient learning resources and facilities.

Leadership, management and governance

How effective are leadership, management and governance in raising achievement and improving the quality of the provision?

Grade: Satisfactory (3)

Thinksmart has clear vision and mission statements which emphasise human capital development and quality training. An adequate SWOT analysis was carried out in 2014, and is utilised to develop brief annual business plans which focus mainly on business growth and expanding the range of the courses offered. These plans are followed up through regular meetings with the top management. The provider's organisation structure is fit for purpose, with clear roles and responsibilities identified in the job descriptions. However, the distribution of work between the staff is not well balanced.

A number of quality assurance policies and procedures have been developed and appropriately implemented. Adequate procedures are in place to assess learners' prior attainment, however, the outcomes are insufficiently used to inform lesson planning. In addition, the provider lacks effective and holistic moderation and verification processes. Learners' achievement is adequately monitored through the life cycle reports (LCR) in the majority of courses, except 'Qudurat. In 'Qudurat', the only record kept on learners' achievement is trainers' evaluations of their performance, which are subjective. Suitable analysis is carried out by the management to monitor trends over the years.

Qualified trainers are recruited, inducted and deployed effectively. Although their performance is regularly monitored through internal lesson observations conducted by the quality staff, the completed forms are insufficiently critical and the feedback is not always shared with trainers to ensure continuous quality improvement. In addition, the form used focuses more on what the trainer does. The performance of staff is regularly monitored through weekly action plans and the annual appraisal, and they are provided with relevant training and development opportunities.

Links with the international awarding bodies and local stakeholders are well established. Learners' and employers' feedback is regularly collected and analysed and, where needed, actions are taken for improvement. Recently, Thinksmart has signed a number of partnership agreements with major employers to conduct annual training events based on their specific needs.

Thinksmart premises are free of obvious hazards and the essentials of health and safety are in place. The provider has relevant policies which are shared with learners, who are provided with clear instructions on aspects of health and safety at the start of their courses.

The self-evaluation form (SEF) that the provider completed in preparation for this review is fairly informative and identified some areas for development. However, the grades are overestimated.

The provider's key strengths

- Most learners enrolled in the externally-accredited courses gain effective knowledge and skills and achieve the qualifications they aim for in a timely manner.
- Trainers are qualified and experienced in their fields.
- Links with awarding bodies and stakeholders are well established and utilised effectively.

Recommendations

In order to improve, Thinksmart should:

- ensure that learners in the local attendance certificate courses achieve their course ILOs and make sufficient progress
- enhance the quality of training by:
 - improving and informing lesson plans by learners' prior and continuous assessment, for better accommodation of learners' individual needs
 - improving assessment in the local attendance courses and ensuring that marking is systematic and consistent
- improve leadership and management by:
 - establishing an effective verification process
 - ensuring that trainers are effectively monitored in the classrooms and follow-up actions are taken for improvement.

Appendix

Description of the provision

Thinksmart for Development & Training (Thinksmart) was established in 2011. It is licensed by the Ministry of Labour to provide vocational training in a range of information and communication technology (ICT), project management, leadership and management and soft skills. All courses offered are short or very short, and the majority are non-accredited. 27% of learners are enrolled in externally accredited courses such as the Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL), Hyper Text Mark-up Language (HTML5), Android and Lean Six Sigma. This also includes preparation for external examination courses such as Project Management Professional (PMP) and the Certified Associate in Project Management (CAPM). The remaining 73% of learners are enrolled in local attendance certificate courses.

The provider operates from one centre located in the Zinj area. It is headed by a managing director, who is also the owner. He leads a full-time management team comprising a general manager and two administrative staff, one of which is in charge of the training operation and the other being responsible for administration and quality. There is also a marketing and sales staff member, an accountant and a care taker. Thinksmart has a pool of 19 part-time trainers who are utilised as and when needed. Since its last review conducted on May 2013 the provider has enrolled 358 learners in 2013, 1,668 learners in 2014, 327 learners in 2015, and 53 learners in 2016 up to the date of this review. Most learners are sponsored by their employers or through the Labour Fund (Tamkeen).