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# GULF FESTIVALS, SKILLS RESEARCH

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SUMMARY REPORT

BOP Consulting | February 2019



# INTRODUCTION

The Gulf countries are home to some remarkable festivals. Many feature traditional craft and heritage and others feature contemporary art and live performance. Today, festivals contribute to the sharing of culture and traditions, creating spaces for the celebration of a nation's heritage and sense of place and identity. They also offer socio-economic benefits to local communities, as they can be a source of employment and international attraction. In some cases, they encourage fresh thinking about urban planning, environmental issues and social inclusion.

The British Council has been working in the Gulf for over 50 years. Our arts work in the Gulf aims to find new ways of connecting with and understanding each other through creativity. We work in the areas of policy and research, capacity building, fostering collaboration and building networks. This research is part of our aspiration to contribute to the growth of cultural skills in the Gulf, and support people's capacity to innovate, collaborate and reach new audiences.

Our work on this project began with seeking to understand the needs of the context in each Gulf country. In November 2018 we commissioned BOP Consulting to undertake research into the skills needs for development of the festival sector in the Gulf. We hope this research will offer insights that support festival directors, artists and programme managers in the Gulf and in the UK to increase their ability to collaborate and share knowledge. Finally, research should not remain on the pages upon which it is published, so we hope that you will see it as a useful tool to support the development of training and policies, to nurture and strengthen the skills of the next generation of festival professionals and leaders.

**David Codling**

Regional Arts Director  
Middle East and North Africa  
British Council

Research took place between May and November 2018 and included extensive desk research, fieldwork in each Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) country and interviews with over 62 stakeholders. Interviewees included artists, government officials in culture, heritage and tourism ministries; festival organisers, both within government departments and in cultural organisations; cultural organisations that host or support festivals; and event managers. British Council staff in each nation and a range of UK-based organisations with experience of working in the Gulf with cultural organisations and festivals were also consulted.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Sharjah Light Festival.  
Image © Shutterstock.com

Each of the six GCC countries – Bahrain, Kuwait, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Oman, Qatar and United Arab Emirates (UAE) – is enacting ambitious plans for economic diversification. Festivals are an important element of these plans, both as a way to develop tourism, and to provide local populations with cultural events that bring new opportunities and celebrate national heritage and identity. Each country has a vision to increase the number of festivals and/or to raise the level of existing events. Exchange with other countries and sectoral development support is therefore highly welcome.

While festivals are seen as an important contributor to social and economic growth, they are also, in some cases, experiencing tightening budgets. Overall, festivals in the region are moving from a state-funded model towards business models with a greater reliance on earned income, including sponsorship, fundraising and event revenues. Adapting to this changing context will require changes in approach to business, operations (including audience development) and artistic programming. Developing a curatorial vision for events is increasingly important in a busy and maturing sectoral marketplace. The two priorities for development support at regional level are therefore business modelling and curatorship. Developing a culture of volunteering is also an important need for many countries.

Many interviewed in the course of the research commented on the lack of existing dialogue around the skills needs for festivals or festivals as a distinct sector. As a first step, therefore, there is an acknowledged need to support a festivals infrastructure through the creation of networks, knowledge sharing, and training at regional and at national level. Both regional and national are important: while there are commonalities across the GCC, each country is also very distinct with different strengths and challenges:

- **Bahrain** has well-established government-led festivals with high levels of attendance and a mix of heritage and contemporary programming, free and paid events, but is having to adapt to reduced budgets across government
- **Kuwait** has some of the longest-running festivals in the Gulf as well as two newly established events, and has a focus on children and young people; its sector professionals feel the need for new energy and external input
- **Saudi Arabia** is driving a dramatic growth in festivals and events with new capacity being created in both public and private sectors – but the scale of development places a strain on existing capacity, and skilled people are urgently needed in all areas, including a new youth cohort
- **Oman** sees itself as a young sector keen to expand its practice through international exchange; its festivals' key strengths are in their characteristic mix of contemporary and heritage elements, a vision which could be developed further through stronger curatorship
- **Qatar's** festival sector is benefitting from the infrastructure development and opportunities around the 2022 FIFA World Cup
- **UAE's** highly developed festival sector is concentrated in three of the emirates (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah); curatorship and creative production skills are the key areas of focus to take the sector on to the next stage of development within the private sector

## SUMMARY OVERVIEW OF GCC FESTIVAL STRENGTHS, CHALLENGES AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

Summary analysis of research evidence including stakeholder interviews and desk research, highlighting the key topics prioritised by festivals in each GCC nation.

COUNTRY	STRENGTHS	SECTORAL NETWORKS AND TRAINING	CURATORSHIP	NEW BUSINESS MODELS	VOLUNTEERS	SKILLS DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES
<b>Bahrain</b>	Mix of heritage and contemporary programming	Limited; keen to develop	More skills required	Required; government arts budget already reduced	Unknown	Short courses in country at mid-career level; international experience
<b>Kuwait</b>	Festivals for children and young people	Limited; keen to develop	More skills required	Required; the independent cultural sector needs support	Yes; existing training in-country	Short courses in country at mid-career level; international experience
<b>Kingdom of Saudi Arabia</b>	Heritage sector festivals	Limited; keen to develop	More skills required	Required; ambition to grow festival sector exponentially includes creation of new private enterprise	Required; limited current culture of volunteering	Short courses in country at mid-career level; international experience; accredited training for new entrants
<b>Oman</b>	Mix of heritage and contemporary programming	Limited; keen to develop	More skills required	Required; state funding reducing	Yes; training provided at very local level on small events	Short courses in country; experience abroad
<b>Qatar</b>	Mix of heritage and contemporary programming	Limited; keen to develop	More skills required	Required	Yes; training programmes being developed	Short courses in country at mid-career level; skills training for juniors
<b>United Arab Emirates</b>	Visual arts	Partial; keen to develop	More skills required	Required	Yes; growing culture of volunteering	Short courses in country; experience abroad

Source: BOP Consulting 2018

It is hoped that the evidence base of this report enables a positive shift towards developing the festival infrastructure in these six countries and taking each towards its vision for future success.

# BAHRAIN

**BAHRAIN'S FESTIVAL SCENE BENEFITS FROM BEING RUN LARGELY IN-HOUSE WITH THE GOVERNMENT LEADING THE WAY ON CULTURAL INITIATIVES.**

Bahrain has a festival offer led by two government departments, Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities (BACA) and the Bahrain Tourism and Exhibitions Authority (BTEA), with support from other government agencies and from cultural sector organisations.

As well as being the main governmental festivals organiser in the region, it is the role of the BACA to oversee the region's cultural sector, seeking to engage with other cultures on an international scale, and enhance cultural engagement at a local level, particularly through heritage related activities. BACA staff regularly visits international festivals to identify performances and artists, and to invite new talent to Bahrain. Curatorship and event management are chiefly delivered from within government departments, and programming mixes international and contemporary acts with traditional Bahraini activities. BACA has an in-house team (including a curator) to run its six major festivals. It was noted that the press has not responded favorably to the use of external contractors by BACA.

Financial support for culture at state level is under pressure, and festivals will need to seek new sources of revenue. BACA is the smaller successor to the Ministry of Culture – delivering to much the same strategy but with a smaller budget.

## KEY FESTIVALS

The Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities organises the following annual festivals:

- Spring of Culture – described as 'the biggest cultural event in the country' and co-organised by BACA, Sheikh Ebrahim Cultural Center, Bahrain Economic Development Board and the Albareh Art Gallery.
- Food is Culture
- Heritage Festival
- Bahrain Summer Festival
- International Music Festival
- Ta'a Al Shabab
- as well as National Day celebrations, an Annual Fine Arts Exhibition and the International Book Fair (not strictly festivals but with festival-like elements).

The Bahrain Tourism and Exhibitions Authority organises the following festivals:

- Shop Bahrain Festival (in its fourth edition) in collaboration with Tamkeen, with the festival programme including live performances, an outdoor market and games.
- Al Ayam Cultural Fair (book sale with events programme).

Al Riwaq Art Space was established as a non-profit designed to support contemporary art. From 2010 until 2018, it ran a small biennale – The Nest Festival. The festivals programme included public art, workshops, live music performances, outdoor film screenings and a designated children's area. The festival aimed to 'foster creativity, cultural and artistic talents', activating the local streets. Al Riwaq, unfortunately, closed in 2018.

## Industry professionals voiced a need for audience development and raising awareness about the importance of Heritage, Culture and the arts.

### CURRENT STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

The main Bahraini festivals benefit from policy support and connectedness through being government run. Events are largely run in-house rather than through external contractors, bringing curatorial vision and event management together. This contrasts with practice in other GCC countries.

Festival attendance is high – though, as one interviewee commented, this is partly due to lack of competition: “there aren’t as many options for things to do as in the USA, UK and Europe.”

Falling levels of state funding, however, are having an impact. The closure of Al Riwaq brings a loss of an independent voice championing creativity and working closely with local communities. Interviewees also expressed challenges around routes to employment and the status of arts and culture jobs socially.

There is also a sense that cultural practice in Bahrain has not benefited as much as it could from external input, artists are keen to collaborate with international partners. One interviewee described a lack of originality and confidence in the sector:

“There is a limited history of collaboration with or learning from international peers.”



Image © Bahrain Spring of Culture

“We are well known as a rich country – nobody supports us at the moment – but exchanges with people abroad will help create and carve a way, it will help to build the right structure.”

“Nobody takes working in the arts or festivals sector seriously here – they think it’s easy! But they don’t realise it burns you out. We have a strong consumer mindset, but few people are fully aware of the creative field.”



Bahrain Light Show 2017  
Image © Stephen81/Shutterstock.com

### BUILDING FESTIVAL SKILLS

There are currently no local skills development opportunities to support work in festivals directly, or in cultural skills. Interviewees described learning on the job as their primary training, supported by networking amongst local colleagues.

### KEY SKILLS NEEDED TO SUPPORT FESTIVALS DEVELOPMENT

The key need identified was for discourse and understanding around the cultural role and practices of festivals. Interviewees pointed to the lack of awareness of festival work as a career, or of any sense of a career path once within the festivals sector.

“It’s a mindset issue, not a skills issue”

The support of sectoral networks locally, regionally and internationally is required in order to develop the sector. Networking and knowledge sharing were identified as being key ways to develop the sector, potentially through the creation of a festivals forum.

Technical skills were mentioned as an existing strength, with an established internal on-the-job training system achieving high levels of expertise.



Bahrain International Music Festival  
Image © Dr Ajay Kumar Singh/Shutterstock.com

### VIEWS ON POTENTIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OFFER

Training support would be highly welcomed, with the priorities being international exchange, audience development and curatorship.

International exchange was a key component of the discussed potential training offer and should function with Bahrainis both visiting external events and hosting international peers e.g. to lead workshops or do residencies.

Whilst audience numbers have been shown to be high, there is a need for audience development – educating audiences in what a cultural offer might be and how to engage with it.

Such training would be targeted and delivered as CPD for mid-career level professionals, with suggestions made for a one-week course either in-country or elsewhere in the GCC.



Bahrain Summer Festival 2018  
Image © www.culture.gov.bh

# SAUDI ARABIA

SAUDI ARABIA'S TRANSFORMATIONAL PLAN EXTENDS TO ITS ENTERTAINMENT AND CULTURAL SPHERE WITH GROWING INTEREST IN DEVELOPING THE FESTIVALS AND EVENTS SECTOR.

Saudi Arabia is currently undergoing a period of economic diversification and transformational change embodied in 'Vision 2030'. This extends to the Kingdom's entertainment, leisure and cultural sectors. The Saudi Arabian government has responded to a growing enthusiasm towards attending festivals and events by establishing both the General Entertainment Authority (GEA) and the General Culture Authority (GCA) to deliver growth in the sector.

The GEA leads on providing entertainment opportunities for the local community. At the beginning of 2018, the GEA announced its entertainment calendar, consisting of over 5,000 events – more than double the number of activities seen in 2017. The GEA are also working to develop a network of event professionals and event management companies to help deliver their vision.

The GCA is actively growing the numbers of cultural and arts-based festivals across the key areas of film, literature, music, visual arts and theatre, as well as pop-up events focused on education. They are equally concerned with importing artists and supporting local talent, e.g. developing 'cultural days' in each region.

The private event management sector is therefore burgeoning in response to this government initiative, with many event management companies founded around the same time as the GEA.

## KEY FESTIVALS

The festivals sector in Saudi Arabia can be roughly divided into heritage-focused festivals and arts and entertainment festivals.

**Heritage-focused festivals:** grassroots festivals, the Haj, National Day and Eid celebrations. These showcase Saudi's cultural heritage and are mainly government supported and run, especially through organisations such as the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Heritage and the Saudi Arabia Society for Culture and the Arts. Examples include Al Janadriyah, Cultural and Heritage Festival and Al-Ahsa Festival of Dates.

**Arts and entertainment festivals** are being developed in line with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 to:

- 1) develop the social and economic policies that are designed to free the Kingdom from dependence on oil exports and build a prosperous and sustainable economic future by focusing on the country's strengths and policies
- 2) contribute to improving the lifestyle and social cohesion among the Saudi Arabian community, promoting culture and entertainment as 'indispensable to our quality of life' (Vision 2030, KSA, 2016).

Examples include 21,39 Art Festival and Saudi Design Week.



Challenges include keeping up with the rapid growth in new sectors while local infrastructure still needs further development.

### CURRENT STRENGTHS OF THE SECTOR

The GEA and GCA are recently established with new teams who have dedicated resources at their disposal to deliver on their missions and visions. Festivals are very much to the fore of the country's key document (Vision 2030), both as a way to meet the cultural needs of the youth population and to build economic strength through tourism and are funded accordingly.

There is a huge opportunity here in the local youth population, for whom it is hoped that work will be found in the growing events sector. The ambition is to create 160,000 jobs, and over 200 events companies. They are also introducing a new professionalism to the sector, including KPIs, pre-event auditing and licensing.

Each local municipality is very engaged with its local festivals, aiming to bring tourists to each region. There is a well-developed and diverse heritage festival sector, with high levels of community collaboration and varied, localised content.



Souk Okaz festival in Taif city.  
Image © Shutterstock.com

### CURRENT CHALLENGES OF THE SECTOR

The rapid pace of growth in the festivals sector is exciting and well-supported at policy and funding levels. But there are, nonetheless, challenges, including the quality of delivery and need to develop the local infrastructure required.

"The government sector tends to hire people from abroad to do big festivals. We need to start small and be professional. We need both expertise from outside and also to develop local talent."

The lack of a culture of volunteering is a specific area of challenge referenced by interviewees. This was linked to the lack of a sustainable workforce, with no career path through volunteering to e.g. gallery assistant or visitor experience roles.

### BUILDING FESTIVAL SKILLS

Current methods of skills acquisition and routes into the sector are very varied, but there is a tendency to favour individuals with university education, often international universities. Within KSA there are some university level courses in tourism, and some training at lower level for tour guides.

Many referenced that they had developed skills on the job, and there are occasional opportunities for CPD through conferencing or internal courses (not festival-specific).

### KEY SKILLS NEEDED TO SUPPORT FESTIVAL DEVELOPMENT

Skills needs were principally around breadth – a need to grow the size of the skilled workforce – but with particular needs in depth, areas identified in both cultural and event management areas.

One government department discussed two priorities for festivals: to develop a more curator-led approach, and to gain an understanding of the mixed business models for festivals that is common in the UK.

Specific skills gaps were highlighted by interviewees in cross-cultural awareness; curating and programming; creative event and exhibition design; and talent management.

The events sector is a high need area. The training that exists is typically not specific to the cultural or public event sectors, and the workforce is therefore in need of training to develop 'most key skills needed to deliver events'.

Interviewees referred to skills needs in people and customer management, budgeting, fundraising and sponsorship, event safety and security and crowd management. There was also a desire to develop production and technical skills, including 3D mapping and virtual reality.



Image © General Culture Authority

### VIEWS ON POTENTIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OFFER

There was an acknowledged wish to internationalise outlooks, with interviewees suggesting residencies, study trips and collaboration with international peers as potential training models. This would be in addition to domestic training and training opportunities in regional centres to allow for greater equality of access.

The development of university-level accredited courses was recognised as having the potential to help greatly in bringing young people into the sector to ease levels of youth unemployment.

Training at all levels in both cultural and event management skills is eagerly sought, with middle and entry level groups benefiting from cohort-based training, whereas leaders and senior level groups would require a more individualised approach such as mentoring, of which there is currently little evidence.



Image © General Culture Authority



# KUWAIT

WITH A KEY FOCUS ON THE YOUTH, KUWAIT HAS A BURGEONING FESTIVAL SECTOR WITH A GREAT POTENTIAL.

Kuwait's festival sector is long established. It has recently developed a strong focus on children and young people and in 2017 added two new internationally-facing events. The Kuwait National Development Plan outlines how the government will 'transform Kuwait into a financial, cultural and institutional leader in the region', enhancing its presence in spheres including 'diplomacy, trade, culture and philanthropy' by 2035.<sup>1</sup>

Festivals are run by external agencies, international residents and Kuwaitis.

There are three main festival stakeholders:

- **National Council for Culture Arts and Letters (NCCAL)**, established 1973, which runs both locally-focused and international-level events with two key attributes: their events reflect the nation's Islamic and Arabic culture and identity; and they nurture cultural relations through multicultural festivals.
- **Events management companies**
- **Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI)**, a cultural organisation which sits under the NCCAL umbrella with a small dedicated state budget, additional private funding, and a separate operation from its parent body.

There are currently 20 festivals in Kuwait (including 7 National Days/religious festivals), with a strong emphasis on work with young people: four out of the ten festivals delivered by NCCAL have a youth focus.

"New festivals have been emerging for young people... the government is starting to see the impact of investing in the young generation, there are talented artists and designers that are very young and very fresh, and this talent was not previously given a platform."

The most recently established are the Kuwait Film Festival and Arab Theatre Festival, launched in 2017. Kuwait also benefits from some of the longest running festivals in the region: Kuwait International Book Fair was established in 1975; Kuwait Theatre Festival in 1989; Al Qurain Cultural Festival was established in 1994; and the Gulf Jazz Festival, established in 1997. The DAI Cultural Season has been running since 1995.

<sup>1</sup> <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/kuwait-population/>

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When it comes to skills development, interviewees highlighted the need to focus on expats as well as nationals.

### CURRENT STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

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Work for children and young people and the ecosystem approach of DAI – mixing industry, public and training events – are notable strengths.

Interviewees, however, highlighted issues with the festival sector's overall infrastructure around culture and creativity:

“We have a strong belief in our people, human capital, but there are some artistic works which our people/staff are not educated in. We select other organisations to work with, to get the talents from them through an open call.”

### BUILDING FESTIVAL SKILLS

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There are no university-level festivals or courses around events within Kuwait, though Kuwait University has a long-established Arts Department, which reflects the role of arts education in supporting the development of the ‘modern emerging civic society’ and includes courses in ‘mass communication,’ which includes many skills relevant to cultural management.<sup>2</sup>

The government offers some ongoing general work skills training to its employees, and is committed to ongoing review of current best practice in Arab and international arts and culture, particularly through their theatre and arts teams. Some government-based festival organisers have also benefitted from some regional sectoral initiatives in the form of workshops and conferences.

DAI runs volunteer training as part of their cultural season.

As an example of how technical event skills are developed, one event management company takes up training from vendors on new equipment and encourages staff to research their own training in specific areas, e.g. graphics packages or lighting courses.

### KEY SKILLS NEEDED TO SUPPORT FESTIVALS DEVELOPMENT

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Interviewees prioritised audience development and continued support for festival networks as training needs. They also reflected on the need to embed training in a wider approach that considered the cultural sector as a whole, rather than just festivals management.

As elsewhere in GCC, interviewees reflect on a lack of established career development paths as part of the wider issue of recent loss of momentum across the sector.

Event management skills were low priority. NCAAL do not hire externally as they have their own technical (and artistic) teams, and other organisations noted that technical staff would not be needed year-round and so could not be guaranteed work – though it was also noted that recruitment in this area is a challenge due to low numbers of local skilled people available.

### VIEWS ON POTENTIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OFFER

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International residents account for approximately 70% of the population, and interviewees reflected that it is important to direct training at them as well as Kuwaiti nationals.



Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI)  
Image © www.darmuseum.org.kw

<sup>2</sup> <http://kuweb.ku.edu.kw/COAR/AboutArtsCollege/Aboutcollage/index.htm>

# OMAN

OMAN'S STRENGTH LIES IN ITS APPROACH WHICH INCLUDES CONTEMPORARY ELEMENTS IN ITS FESTIVALS WHILE ALSO SHOWCASING OMANI HERITAGE.



The Sultan's policy is for Oman to develop as a modern, outwardly-facing nation whilst maintaining and celebrating its Omani heritage and identity. Omani festivals are strong in mixing contemporary elements with traditional cultural heritage. Oman is hoping to grow and develop its festival sector and is keen to learn from more experienced international peers. There are three tiers of festival activity in Oman:

- **Muscat and Salalah Festivals:** Described as twin highlights of the Omani cultural calendar, both are hugely well attended by the Omani population and also promoted to tourists. The Ministry of Tourism is therefore keen to create a third major festival for the country to help expand the visitor calendar.
- **Regional cultural festivals:** The state is committed to an equal opportunities policy for all regions: though some areas are sparsely populated, they have the right to the same cultural offer as cities. To meet this need, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture runs three cultural festivals per year, aiming to provide a cultural scene for local populations and support local artists.
- **Private/state events:** No evidence of grassroots festival activity organised by communities was found, but several events initiated by specific sectors and strongly supported by the state merit consideration as festivals, for example: the Muscat International Book Fair, Muscat International Film Festival and numerous championships run by the International Tent Pegging Federation.

Industry professionalisation appears to top the agenda with calls for greater coordination within the sector as well as more formal training.

### CURRENT STRENGTHS OF THE SECTOR

The distinctive mix of modern and heritage activity is common to all festivals and celebrated as a clear strength, corresponding to the Sultan's overall policy directive for the country in ensuring both a distinct Omani identity as well as novelty and cultural exploration. This strength is recognised by other Gulf festivals who have, on occasion, consulted with the Muscat Festival on this programming approach.

Marketing for the major festivals was said to be good, though less so for the regional events which had not always achieved the audience numbers that had been hoped for.

Many mentioned the important role that festivals play in meeting audience need. Festivals are important as "there is not much to do in Oman", one interviewee commented.

### CURRENT CHALLENGES

Since the economic downturn, a need has arisen to develop more sustainable business models in the new economic climate.

Coordination within the cultural sector was highlighted as a challenge, as events are often scheduled in the same time period. The Ministry of Tourism has now created an events calendar to combat this problem and try to spread activity over a longer period.

A number of interviewees mentioned the need for new energy and ideas in programming. One events company suggested that awarding contracts over a number of years rather than annually would support more innovative programming, as high-quality ideas could be developed over time.

The need and desire for external input and experience was expressed by interviewees in every group – ministries, festival organisers, event managers, educationalists. The absence of regional networks and low level of international networking was also noted.

### BUILDING FESTIVAL SKILLS

Opportunities for developing cultural management/ festival-related skills in-country are recognised as being limited by three factors:

- limited formal training opportunities;
- limited CPD opportunities;
- overall need of the festivals sector.

A government scholarship scheme offers places to study abroad at university level, including in the arts. Many of those interviewed – for whom this scheme had not been available – attributed their key skills (especially in English) to studying abroad.<sup>3</sup> The Omani Tourism College offers both hospitality and event management programmes and has recently started a course in festivals management and has run some student placements with the Muscat Festival.

CPD is acknowledged as important to a sector where entrants have only limited training before starting their jobs. On-the-job training is, however, limited. There was no evidence of any short course or similar training opportunities for festival managers – though the potential value of such a course was recognised by interviewees.



Image © Muscat Festival

### KEY SKILLS NEEDED TO SUPPORT FESTIVALS DEVELOPMENT

Interviewees identified a wide range of skills gaps, including both event-specific needs (e.g. technical skills for film events) to broader needs across the sector.

Five closely interlinked priorities emerged:

- a need for professionalisation, the core theme of which being that the sector requires greater recognition of festivals management as a sector with specific needs and skills requirements.
- English language (general and specialist)

"If you are not speaking English, you have a lot of problems, especially in technical. If you want to approach someone from outside, everyone speaks English. If you don't have the language, you can't invite or collaborate."

- arts education;
- experience of the global festival sector

"People who have studied events or festivals management can't put together a festival if they haven't been to or participated in festivals."

- the need for networks and exchange to be established regionally and internationally.

### VIEWS ON POTENTIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OFFER

The idea of training support for festivals was eagerly welcomed across the Oman research, with an offer to co-fund received from one Ministry-level interviewee.

Priorities reflected the skills gaps above and were therefore typically high level ("exchange") rather than specific hard or soft skill elements of cultural management (e.g. evaluation, project management or developing partnerships).

Three clear priorities emerged however:

- to learn from peers outside the Gulf region;
- to invest in widening the experience of sectoral leaders;
- to offer short course CPD for existing staff.



Image © Muscat Festival

<sup>3</sup> Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Australia and a British Council-run short course in the UK were explicitly referenced by interviewees.

# QATAR

QATARI CULTURE AND HERITAGE REMAIN AT THE FOREFRONT ALONGSIDE STRONG INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS IN THE FESTIVAL CIRCUIT.

There are roughly 37 festivals in Qatar, which can be divided into two main groups: large, entertainment-based events organised through government departments; and smaller, artform-based or thematic events organised by cultural organisations.

#### Government-organised festivals:

- five large-scale festivals organised by the National Tourism Council (NTC) – the Shopping Festival, Summer Festival, Food Festival, Al Enna Festival and two Eid festivals – promoted to tourists across the GCC and to the 80 countries whose citizens can enter Qatar without visas;
- festivals / events organised by the Qatar Culture and Heritage Events Center, an offshoot of the Ministry of Culture and Sport: the National Day of Qatar; Darb El Saai; International Doha Book Fair and the Al Baraha programme.

#### Cultural organisation-led festivals:

- mini-festivals/themed events programmes put on by the burgeoning museum sector, including the Museum of Islamic Art, under the leadership of Qatar Museums<sup>4</sup>, and the Sheikh Faisal Bin Qassem Al Thani Museum;
- the annual programme of festivals and industry events organised by the Doha Film Institute, including the Doha Film Festival, the Ajyal Film Festival and the annual Qumra industry event;
- the Qatar-British Festival, run by the British Council in partnership with the British Embassy as a legacy of the Qatar UK 2013 Year of Culture, and involving a wide range of cultural partners, including other festivals.

For government-organised events, much of the work is contracted out. The National Tourism Council has an events team responsible for curatorial direction and content selection, but they contract delivery to event management companies. The Qatar Center for Culture and Heritage has an in-house team of experienced media and event professionals, but likewise contract out other elements of delivery. The cultural organisations, by contrast, manage everything in house, with small, multi-skilled teams.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.qm.org.qa/en/our-purpose>

## The cultural sector benefits from strong government strategic support and the championship of H.E. Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani.

### CURRENT STRENGTHS

The cultural sector benefits from strong government strategic support through Ministry of Culture and Sports and the championship of H.E. Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, chairperson of Qatar Museums and of the Doha Film Institute. All cultural organisations interviewed articulated ambitions for significant development, with several mentioning international activities from which they had drawn inspiration and best practice in developing new strands of work, including education and outreach. Organisations mentioned a range of international contacts and were well networked with global practice.

The ‘Year of Culture’ initiative, focusing on a different nation annually (recently Britain and Russia, and now India) has prompted new festival activity.

All interviewees were clear that their programming aimed at celebrating Qatari culture and heritage.

### CURRENT CHALLENGES

While the country is in the process of diversifying its economy, there is some financial constraint at government level. Cultural organisations reported that resources were tight – but nonetheless had confidence in their abilities to maintain delivery.

There are practical and social challenges to growing the sector. All non-national employees or companies have to have a Qatari sponsor, which can make hiring non-nationals difficult. All interviewees strongly supported the drive to employ nationals as opposed to importing talent as a way of strengthening their sector and creating a learning legacy from events. But hiring nationals is difficult in the event sector due to the relatively low prestige of technical or vocational careers amongst Qatari nationals:

“You’re very limited with what you have and what you can offer because it’s not a very big population.”

Whilst bringing in high profile international talent is part of the festival role, there are some reservations about different cultural norms. A number of imported acts (dances, circus) have had to be cancelled or altered, and some are not widely promoted to avoid controversy.

### BUILDING FESTIVAL SKILLS

There are no festival-specific training courses offered within Qatar, though the Stenden University offers a number of high-level qualifications around tourism and events, and the Josoor Institute also offers a range of short and part-time courses around event management and business leadership, very much in the context of 2022.

Interviewees had developed their careers either through formal training in media and events, or through experience abroad in the cultural sector. This division was reflected in their prioritisation of skills needs: those with event backgrounds prioritised training in creative areas, those with creative backgrounds prioritised organisational and management skills.



### KEY SKILLS NEEDED TO SUPPORT FESTIVALS DEVELOPMENT

While a shortage of local technical skills (e.g. in AV) was noted – and the growing number of events suggests there is a market for such skills – the interviewees suggested that training in this area would not be a popular offer.

There is a shortage of high-quality local events management companies to meet demand, and, likewise, a gap in creative marketing and communications. The highest priority for interviewees was to improve communications skills in order to find new and wider audiences.

“The main issue in this country is finding the audience for the event you’re organising, how you find your public.”

Awareness of the events can be low and audiences limited to an older demographic. Good practice in using social media exists in other government departments, which could be brought into the festivals sector.

There was an acknowledged need for volunteers to support large-scale and cultural events. The lack of consensus suggests that this may be an area in which training may be beneficial.

Project management skills were highlighted as a current gap by interviewees. Partnership management training would also assist in solving some of the issues reported around communication between organisations.

### VIEWS ON POTENTIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OFFER

Interviewees raised a number of issues around training in a Qatari context:

- training is seen as the exception rather than the norm, with many interviewees only ever having developed skills on-the-job.
- Qatari nationals are disinclined to take on technical/practical roles, which are generally allocated to international workers;
- the lack of creative skills overall, linked to lack of arts education;
- and the absence of a culture of career development.

A CPD offer delivered in-country for those already working in the festival sector is the clear priority, with interviewees keen to extend the skills of existing teams rather than broaden the skills base or increase the workforce.

The idea of training of “juniors” in a specifically event management context was also welcome.



# UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

THE UAE BOASTS INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED FESTIVALS, THANKS TO A STRONG NETWORK OF EVENT MANAGEMENT COMPANIES, TOURISM AND CULTURE AUTHORITIES AND TRAINED PROFESSIONALS.

The festivals sector across the UAE, particularly in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah, is recognised as being highly developed with a wide range of events and existing infrastructure, including networks, sense of career paths, research, analysis and discussion. The other emirates (Ajman, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Umm al-Quwain) have had little activity in terms of festivals, although work is being done to try to spread festival/event activity and develop skills throughout the region.

The festival sector has tended to be mainly government-led with key players being the tourism and culture authorities, notably Dubai Tourism and Commerce Marketing, Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism and Sharjah Commerce and Tourism Development Authority. Specific organisations have also played pivotal roles: Flash Entertainment in developing the live music and entertainment industry, for example, or the Sharjah Art Foundation in developing visual arts and cultural exchange.

Because of the maturity of the sector relative to other GCC nations, there is also a strong network of event management companies and a mature supply chain servicing the many festivals and events that happen in the region.

The UAE's festival sector also benefits from its internal variety and breadth, with major, internationally-known events including:

- Emirates Airline Festival of Literature
- Sharjah Biennial
- The Mother of the Nation Festival
- Dubai International Film Festival
- Sharjah Light Festival
- Abu Dhabi Festival

The festival sector is in search of new models, with the current trends moving away from heavily publicly subsidised festivals, often managed from overseas, to developing more grassroots festivals like Qasr Al Hosn in Abu Dhabi, and towards aiming to educate and develop local festival staff and volunteers.

Like much of the GCC, the UAE aim to enable the festivals sector to flourish, independent of government funding.

### CURRENT STRENGTHS

The UAE's festival sector is well-established, diverse and well-networked. Interviewees listed a range of existing strengths – pointing to the high confidence of the sector overall and the existence of a pre-existing festivals discourse. Existing strengths included collaboration and partnerships, including support of both the Culture and Tourism ministries, and the diversity of UAE's population, giving both a huge audience and multi-cultural input. 'Brand Dubai' was also noted as significant.

### CURRENT CHALLENGES

Festivals increasingly need to become self-sustaining – having to rely more on ticket revenues, sponsorship and fundraising than on state support. Dubai Tourism has an explicit goal for the private sector to adopt and take over the large-scale festivals and is currently incentivising this with revenue allocation schemes.

In this crowded events marketplace, there is also a need to improve marketing and audience development techniques. While content production was described as an area of strength, interviewees also felt that events could be better promoted.



Qasr Al Hosn Festival, Abu Dhabi  
Image © Ali Suliman/Shutterstock

### BUILDING FESTIVAL SKILLS

Many leading festival organisers are non-nationals, or nationals whose key work experience and training was received abroad. Interviewees see training abroad as the standard route to work at senior level in the cultural sector.

Beyond on-the-job training, there is currently no formal cultural management training – but some local opportunities are emerging:<sup>5</sup>

- the Ministry of Education runs some 'action research' exchanges, which might work for the festivals sector.
- the Dubai College of Tourism is being set up to deliver operational level training, and has been developing short courses based on the Festivals and Events Masters programme with Edinburgh's Napier University.
- there are some fledgling networks developing in Dubai for cultural workers.

There is strong local awareness of the work of international peers and where best practice resides.

"We know we have some struggle so if someone manages to crack something then that's great. For intangible heritage, we look East, especially to Japan. For craft, to North Africa. Heritage planning and interpretation – we look to France; interpretation, historic sites and cultural management, look to the UK. Policy and regulation – Canada and Australia, both quite flexible and adaptive."

<sup>5</sup> Note: some MBAs already include arts management, but this is about business management of artists not cultural roles.

### KEY SKILLS NEEDED TO SUPPORT FESTIVALS DEVELOPMENT

Many staff working on festivals in the UAE are non-national, and there remains a need to develop new talent at local level.

Skills and training needs are very similar to those of KSA, although the UAE (in particular Dubai) has greater access to the technical and production skills it requires. Interviewees cited a wide range of core cultural management skills in which training would allow the sector to develop depth, covering areas such as curatorship, programming and curatorial management, sponsorship and fundraising and business management skills, including budgeting and finance.

Furthermore, there was a wish repeatedly expressed to develop better sectoral relationships. In order to provide support, suggestions were made for a platform through which knowledge sharing might occur.



Mother of the Nation Festival, Abu Dhabi  
Image © Mother of the Nation Festival

### VIEWS ON POTENTIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OFFER

Training should be offered both locally and abroad, where trainees can experience other festivals and cultures. Mentoring by international peers and exchange programmes were each described as potential training options.

All levels of festival workers should be included in training programmes, but with some reservations around the timetable for training new entrants:

"We need to start higher up and then look at fresh graduates."

Training should be free, both for accessibility and to keep it distinct from the expectations imposed by government funding, but participants should be asked to pay a refundable deposit to demonstrate commitment. Those looking to transition into the festival sector from other careers may be more motivated to pay.



Emirates Airline Festival of Literature, Dubai  
Image © www.emirateslitfest.com



### **Acknowledgements**

The British Council would like to thank all the people who kindly contributed their time in helping to complete this festival skills needs research.

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