

# Toward More Skilled Foreign Workers in the GCC Region

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## A. General Overview

The GCC region is a hub for foreign workers migrating from different countries and occupying diverse technical and vocational professions. However, work visas are currently granted to foreign workers without verifying their skills and adherence with industry professional standards.

The existing situation has called for an intervention to regulate technical and vocational professions by verifying workers' skills in line with industry standards. Skills verification is envisioned to be performed by conducting a certification process through licensed test-centers and developing training infrastructure and policies to develop labor force competencies. This intervention has necessitated the establishment of an entity that would be mandated to develop a skills verification regulatory framework and ensure alignment of the technical and vocational ecosystem with different stakeholders.

The entity had a goal to lay down an approach to develop and pilot the program and make strategic decisions while considering social and political constraints locally and internationally.

This article highlights the main dimensions that were taken into consideration during the decision-making process to setup the skills verification program (Exhibit 1).

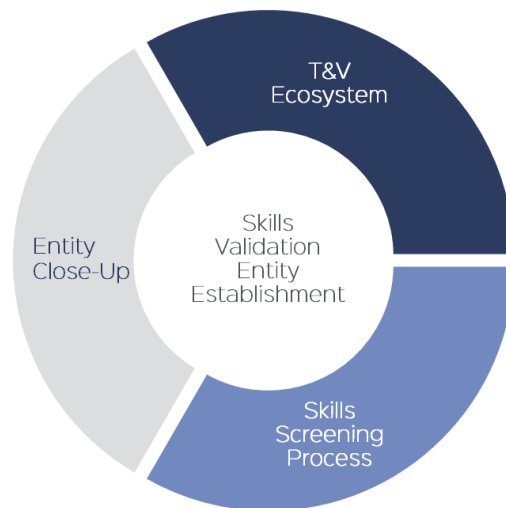


Exhibit 1: Decision Making Dimension Framework

## B. Dimension 1: T&V Ecosystem

### 1. Certifier Appointment

A certifier is mandated to manage the program's operations. Certifiers should be thoroughly examined through a process of Request for Proposal (RFP) and selected based on a clear set of criteria. Worldwide, certifiers are selected based on their reputation, expertise, services provided and professions covered. In addition, to operate in the GCC region, more specific criteria should be considered as well to ensure successful implementation of the program. In particular, the certifier should have a footprint in the GCC region to ensure understanding of the region's complexity, an interest in the program to ensure creativity and motivation for success and the ability to tailor and customize worldwide best practices and T&V assessments according to local industry standards.



### 2. Interactions and Buy-in

One of the major challenges to implement the program is to get approval of all stakeholders within the entity's ecosystem and address their needs to ensure their buy-in and collaboration. The entity must create open channels early on with public entities such as government departments and private entities such as corporates, recruiting firms, training centers and most importantly test takers. For example, the entity would need to incentivize corporate firms to send their employees for skills assessment.

On the other hand, the country should avoid conflict of interests with foreign governments and therefore ensure alignment of skills screening processes through memorandum of understandings and bilateral agreements

## C. Dimension 2: Skills Screening Process

### 1. Professions Selection

Given that a large number of workers are considered in such program, it would be practical and financially viable to control the number of professions requiring verification during the implementation period.

5 different criteria would define the profession selection process:

- **Number of workers per profession:** Professions with highest number of foreign workers' enrollment to economically justify the setup of the program
- **Hazard level:** Professions that entail interaction with other human beings and have a direct impact on collective safety with respect to society and workers
- **NOSS existence:** Professions assigned to National Occupational Skills Standards (NOSS)
- **Localization of professions:** Professions that might be occupied by locals once trainings and certifications are developed
- **Profession exposure:** Professions that are mainly occupied by expatriates and would lead to a critical situation if all expatriates leave the country for any reason

### 2. Test Locations

In order to decide on test location, a study should be made based on best practice countries. The study focuses on whether these countries conduct skills validation processes in workers' home countries or upon their arrival based on the test type (written or practical).



Furthermore, a cost benefit analysis should compare both options. . As such, conducting tests inside the country allows to inject test revenues to drive the country's economy forward, control the quality of skills validation processes and avoid conflict of interests with foreign governments. On the other hand, conducting tests outside the country poses doesn't require major modifications on the visa application process and alleviate recruiting fees on employers.

### 3. Fees and Allocation

Benchmarking best practice countries might provide an insight about test fees, yet, this should not be taken for granted without reflecting GCC unique conditions. A quantitative analysis should be made on test fees in different best practice countries where resulting numbers should be adjusted based on consumer price and cost of living indices.

## **D. Dimension 3: Entity Close-up**

### 1. Governance

The entity should be positioned as an independent entity under the Ministry of labor and governed by a board of directors. The board should include members from different backgrounds representing the various key stakeholders, e.g., Government, T&V authorities, industry experts, business leaders and employers in order to ensure strategic alignment between shareholder objectives and the entity's mandate.

### 2. Organization

The components of the organization structure should be defined based on the entity's mandate. The entity would require a strategy department to conduct business development activities and initiate public-private partnerships.

Positioned at the center of skills validation ecosystem, the entity requires a standalone department in charge of standards and policies, an accreditation department to deal with test center and certifier approval and an inspection department to conduct investigations. Furthermore, a data analytics department is required to collect assessment information and exert close oversight of the skills validation process.

On the other hand, the entity would require support functions such as marketing, HR, accounting, legal and IT.

### 3. Manpower Plan

The entity should develop a clear manpower plan based on workflow data and responsibility parameters for every function. The manpower ramp-up should account for number of certifiers and test centers approved, number of professions assessed and number of countries included in the process.

On the other hand, during the first years of implementation, the manpower plan should focus on recruitment for core functions. As the entity reaches steady state operations, the plan should shift focus toward support functions.

## **About PACS**

PACS is a regional boutique strategy and management consulting firm covering the MENA region with offices in Dubai, Riyadh and Beirut.

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