



هيئة جودة التعليم والتدريب  
Education & Training Quality Authority  
Kingdom of Bahrain - مملكة البحرين

# Directorate of Higher Education Reviews Institutional Review Report

Arab Open University  
Kingdom of Bahrain

**Date Reviewed: 13 – 16 January 2020**

HI001-C2-R011

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## Acronyms

AOU	Arab Open University
AOU Bahrain	Arab Open University -Bahrain Branch
BQA	Education & Training Quality Authority
BoT	Board of Trustees
CE	Community Engagement
CQAC	Central Quality Assurance Committee
CGPA	Cumulative Grade Point Average
CILO	Course Intended Learning Outcome
DHR	Directorate of Higher Education Reviews
HCSR	Higher Committee for Scientific Research
HEC	Higher Education Council
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HR	Human Resources
ICT	Information, Communication and Technology
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LMS	Learning Management System
LRC	Learning Resource Centre
MBA	Masters of Business Administration
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
OUM	Open University-Malaysia
OU-UK	Open University-United Kingdom
PC	Programme Coordinator
PILO	Programme Intended Learning Outcome
QA	Quality Assurance
QAAD	Quality Assurance and Accreditation Department
SER	Self-Evaluation Report

SIS	Student Information System
SRC	Scientific Research Council
T&L	Teaching and Learning
ToR	Terms of Reference
UC	University Council
VPAASR	Vice President for Academic Affairs and Scientific Research

## I. Introduction

In keeping with its mandate, the Education & Training Quality Authority (BQA), through the Directorate of Higher Education Reviews (DHR), carries out two types of reviews that are complementary. These are: Institutional Reviews where the whole institution is assessed; and Programme Reviews where the quality of learning and academic standards is judged in specific programmes. The DHR completed the first cycle of institutional reviews in 2013, and the second cycle is scheduled for 2018-2019, in accordance with the Institutional Quality Reviews Framework (Cycle 2) approved by the Cabinet (Resolution No. 38 of 2015). The main objectives of the institutional reviews are:

1. To enhance the quality of higher education in the Kingdom of Bahrain by conducting reviews to assess the performance of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) operating in the Kingdom, against a predefined set of Indicators and provide a summative judgment while identifying areas of strength and areas in need of improvement.
2. To ensure that there is public accountability of higher education providers through the provision of an objective assessment of the quality of each provider, which produces published reports and summative judgements for the use of parents, students, and the Higher Education Council (HEC), and other relevant bodies.
3. To identify good practice where it exists and disseminate it throughout the Bahraini higher education sector.

The institutional review process will assess the effectiveness of an institution's quality assurance arrangements against a pre-defined set of standards and indicators, and identify areas of strength and areas of improvement. Each Indicator will have a judgement; i.e. 'addressed' or 'not addressed', which collectively will lead to a Standard's judgement. A Standard will be given a judgement of 'addressed', 'partially addressed' or 'not addressed' depending on the number of indicators 'addressed' within a Standard, as detailed in the Institutional Quality Reviews Framework (Cycle 2). The aggregate of Standards' judgements will lead to an overarching judgement – 'meets quality assurance requirements', 'emerging quality assurance requirements', 'does not meet quality assurance requirements', as shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Overall Judgements**

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Meets quality assurance requirements</b>	The institution must address all eight Standards
<b>Emerging quality assurance requirements</b>	The institution must address a minimum of five Standards including Standards 1, 4 and 6 with the remaining Standards being at least partially satisfied.
<b>Does not meet quality assurance requirements</b>	The institution does not address any of the above two overall judgements

## II. The Institution Profile

Institution Name	Arab Open University
Type of the Institution	Private University
Year of Establishment	2003
Institution Approval Number	Based on Prime Minister's Decree Number [03-1617] on [Jan14, 2001]
Location	Street 3220 [Building 890, Block 732] A'ali 973
Number of Colleges	3
Names of Colleges	1. Faculty of Language Studies 2. Faculty of Business Studies 3. Faculty of Computer Studies
Number of Bachelor Qualifications	1. Business Administration [System Track] 2. Information Technology and Computing 3. English Language and Literature
Number of Postgraduate Qualifications	1 [Graduating Current students only, no admission]
Cross-Border Programme[s]	N/A
Number of Enrolled Current Students	2412
Number of Graduates since inception	3504
Number of Academic Staff Members	25
Number of Administrative Staff Members	40
Previous Institutional Review Date	November 2008
Date of SER submission	25 September 2019
Date of Site Visit	13-16 January 2020

### III. Judgment Summary

**The Institution's Judgement: Meets QA requirements**

Standard/ Indicator	Title	Judgment
<b>Standard 1</b>	<b>Mission, Governance and Management</b>	<b>Addressed</b>
Indicator 1	Mission	Addressed
Indicator 2	Governance and Management	Addressed
Indicator 3	Strategic Plan	Addressed
Indicator 4	Organizational Structure	Addressed
Indicator 5	Management of Academic Standards:	Addressed
Indicator 6	Partnerships, Memoranda and Cross Border Education	Addressed
<b>Standard 2</b>	<b>Quality Assurance and Enhancement</b>	<b>Addressed</b>
Indicator 7	Quality Assurance	Addressed
Indicator 8	Benchmarking and Surveys	Addressed
Indicator 9	Security of Learner Records and Certification	Addressed
<b>Standard 3</b>	<b>Learning Resources, ICT and Infrastructure</b>	<b>Addressed</b>
Indicator 10	Learning Resources	Addressed
Indicator 11	ICT	Addressed
Indicator 12	Infrastructure	Addressed
<b>Standard 4</b>	<b>The Quality of Teaching and Learning</b>	<b>Addressed</b>
Indicator 13	Management of Teaching and Learning Programmes	Addressed
Indicator 14	Admissions	Addressed
Indicator 15	Introduction and Review of Programmes	Addressed

Indicator 16	Student Assessment and Moderation	Addressed
Indicator 17	The Learning Outcomes	Addressed
Indicator 18	Recognition of Prior Learning	Addressed
Indicator 19	Short courses	Not Applicable
<b>Standard 5</b>	<b>Student Support Services</b>	<b>Addressed</b>
Indicator 20	Student Support	Addressed
<b>Standard 6</b>	<b>Human Resources Management</b>	<b>Addressed</b>
Indicator 21	Human Resources	Addressed
Indicator 22	Staff Development	Addressed
<b>Standard 7</b>	<b>Research</b>	<b>Addressed</b>
Indicator 23	Research	Addressed
Indicator 24	Higher degrees with research	Addressed
<b>Standard 8</b>	<b>Community Engagement</b>	<b>Addressed</b>
Indicator 25	Community Engagement	Addressed

## IV. Standards and Indicators

### Standard 1

#### Mission, Governance and Management

*The institution has an appropriate mission statement that is translated into strategic and operational plans and has a well-established, effective governance and management system that enables structures to carry out their different responsibilities to achieve the mission.*

#### **Indicator 1: Mission**

*The institution has a clearly stated mission that reflects the three core functions of teaching and learning, research and community engagement of a higher education institution that is appropriate for the institutional type and the programmes qualifications offered.*

#### **Judgement:** Addressed

The mission statement of the Arab Open University (AOU) Bahrain appears on the institution's website and also in documents such as the Strategic Plan. The Bahrain branch uses the same mission statement as the wider institution of AOU based in Kuwait. This mission statement is approved by the AOU Headquarters' Board of Trustees.

In addition to identifying the core functions of Teaching and Learning (T&L), research and community engagement, the mission contains a strong commitment to 'open' learning not constrained by time and space. This is in line with the aspirations of the Kingdom of Bahrain to engage with a global economy predicated on the availability of highly skilled 'knowledge workers'. The availability of multiple pathways to a higher education qualification through open and distance learning clearly paves the way for more Bahrainis to gain the skills necessary to contribute to economic productivity. This commitment to open learning stated in the mission offers the potential for AOU Bahrain to develop a unique niche for itself in the Bahraini higher education system.

Given the importance of opening learning opportunities to all sectors of the population in order to widen participation in the global economy, the Panel encourages AOU Bahrain to maintain focus on the unique role it has identified for itself as an open learning institution and to fulfil this role as it moves into the future by ensuring that its core function of T&L supports this mission.

From interviews, the Panel was only able to identify limited engagement from Bahraini stakeholders in the process of developing the mission statement of the wider institution. The Panel therefore recommends that AOU should consider ways in which more representation from the Bahraini branch could be ensured in any future revisions of the wider institutional mission statement.

The Panel was informed of plans to review the branch mission statement in the course of 2020. In the review process, the Panel recommends that more consideration could be given to the idea of tailoring, or extending, the local mission statement so that it takes more account of the local context

of the Bahraini branch. Overall, however, the Panel finds that the AOU mission is appropriate for the institution type and programmes and, thus, considers this indicator as addressed.

### **Recommendation**

- Ensure more representation from Bahrain when the wider institutional mission statement is next reviewed.
- Review the mission of the AOU Bahrain branch in order to ensure that the local context is adequately represented.

### **Indicator 2: Governance and Management**

*The institution exhibits sound governance and management practices and financial management is linked with institutional planning in respect of its operations and the three core functions.*

### **Judgement: Addressed**

The separation of governance and management of the wider institution of AOU is ensured through the existence of a Board of Trustees (BoT), the roles and responsibilities of which are stated in the institutional Statute.

Management of AOU as a whole is heavily concentrated in the headquarters in Kuwait. Whereas, the role of management in the branch, regardless of whether management is exercised *ex officio* or through committees, is focused on the implementation of bylaws emanating from the institutional headquarters and authorised by the institutional BoT. However, the Panel was informed that the Branch Director could extend these bylaws where necessary to accommodate local conditions and circumstances.

A BoT for AOU Bahrain branch was established following a requirement made by the HEC. The branch Director reports to the Bahraini BoT as well as to the University Council (UC) which, in turn, reports to the institutional BoT. The Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Bahraini BoT are stated in the Statute of the Institution and members of the BoT are inducted upon appointment, with minutes and records of attendance being kept at all BoT meetings.

The role of the local BoT is to exercise governance by overseeing and monitoring the implementation of policy and bylaws at the Bahraini branch. The risk in this arrangement is that the local BoT could function more in relation to management than governance with regard to the branch, especially if particular consideration is not taken to ensure that the Bahrain branch is sufficiently represented at the institutional BoT, so that branch governance issues can be voiced.

The Panel was informed of a period of approximately two years when the local BoT did not operate. Given that the local branch operated without a governance structure for this period of time, questions arise about understandings of the role of the local BoT in the governance of AOU overall. AOU Bahrain is therefore recommended to review the roles and responsibilities allocated to the local BoT and to consider the way these relate to the wider governance structure of the Institution as a whole, in order to ensure that the interests of the Bahraini branch are represented and ensured.

Although the local BoT is now operational once again, the Panel is concerned that only one member of the Board is residing in Bahrain. Given that the Bahraini BoT is charged with the governance of the Bahraini branch, more representation from the Kingdom would be desirable; although, the Panel understands that this limited representation is the result of having only one of several Bahraini nominees submitted over the years for approval to the HEC actually being approved. Nevertheless, the institutional BoT generally provides sound governance and strategically steers the branch to achieve the overall institution's mission statement.

As for financial management at AOU Bahrain, the Finance Department adheres to the headquarters policies and procedures, with customized procedures at the branch level in line with HEC regulations. The Department's operational plans are prepared on the basis of the institution's Strategic Plan and include the strategic dimensions with specific objectives, actions, targeted completion dates, responsible parties, achievement dates, financial resources, outstanding actions, and associated risk levels. Financial and accounting systems are in place, which appear to be robust, evidencing clear processes to prevent and detect financial mismanagement and fraud. Additionally, delegations of authority related to financial and management decisions are clearly laid out and it was apparent to the Panel during site visit interviews that members of staff were aware of these. Conclusively, based on the above, the Panel is of the view that this indicator is addressed.

### **Recommendation**

- Review the role of the Bahraini BoT in wider institutional structures, in order to ensure that its responsibilities regarding governance can be exercised in a meaningful way.

### **Indicator 3: Strategic Plan**

*There is a strategic plan, showing how the mission will be pursued, which is translated into operational plans that include key performance indicators and annual targets with respect to the three core functions with evidence that the plan is implemented and monitored.*

**Judgement:** Addressed

To date, AOU has completed three strategic planning cycles. The current, fourth, Strategic Plan spans the academic years 2017-2018 to 2021-2022. The preparation of the current Strategic Plan involved a SWOT analysis and consideration of institutional values, in order to develop a set of principles underpinning the planning process and a set of strategic objectives. Although planning processes were led by a committee in the institutional headquarters in Kuwait, the Panel was assured in interviews that consultation with numerous stakeholders in the branches did take place. Additionally, the Panel confirmed from reviewing the Strategic Plan that it includes pillars, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and annual targets relevant to the three core functions of T&L, research, and community engagement.

The development of an institution-level Strategic Plan allows for operational plans to be developed, in order to ensure that strategic objectives are achieved. These operational plans cascade down through faculties and divisions reaching branch levels. Responsibility for implementation of

objectives and monitoring and review of progress with timeframes is allocated at the operational plan level. Whereas, responsibility for overall monitoring and review lies with the Performance Monitoring Unit located at the institutional headquarters, with departments and divisions from the different branches submitting annual reports to this unit. AOU Bahrain also submits an Annual Monitoring Report, developed according to detailed procedures, on academic programmes as part of the validation procedures required by its affiliate, Open University-United Kingdom (OU-UK).

The Panel learned that it is usual for branches to develop their own strategic plans following the development of the institution level plan. AOU Bahrain is thus currently engaged in developing its own strategic plan to align with the fourth institutional plan. As the current institutional plan spans the academic years 2017-2018 to 2021-2022, the Panel recommends that the Bahrain branch should engage with its own planning processes swiftly, if it is to produce a plan that will be valid for the period of the fourth institutional plan.

As institution-wide planning processes at AOU are driven from the headquarters, the Bahraini branch is encouraged to engage with as wide a range of stakeholders at branch level as possible, in order to ensure inclusivity and buy-in to the local plan. In general, however, the Panel considers this indicator as addressed.

#### **Recommendation**

- Expedite the completion of the AOU Bahrain Strategic Plan.

#### **Indicator 4: Organizational Structure**

*The institution has a clear organizational and management structure and there is student participation in decision-making where appropriate.*

#### **Judgement: Addressed**

The Self-Evaluation Report (SER) provides details of the organisational structure of AOU in its entirety as well as the structure of AOU Bahrain. Both the institution-wide organisational structure as well as that of the branch show clear lines of reporting and decision-making.

AOU has an elaborate committee structure operating at both the institutional and branch levels. The formation of committees at branch level is governed by institutional bylaws. ToRs exist for committees, agenda are published, and minutes are kept. The function of committees at branch level tends to focus on ensuring that policies and decisions made by the headquarters are followed; although, the Panel was assured through site visit interviews that, should the need arise, these could be adapted for local circumstances.

As for job descriptions, these have been developed for all roles at AOU Bahrain and employees are familiar with them and the responsibilities they encompass. Additionally, the bylaws developed for AOU Bahrain allow for stakeholders' participation in decision-making, including student participation. AOU Bahrain has an elected Student Council which has been allocated a set of offices and a budget. Students participate in the branch Student Advising Committee and the Branch

Council. Through site visit interviews, the Panel was assured that members of the Student Council have adequate access to the Branch Director should any matters of concern require discussion.

Considering the above, the Panel finds that the AOU organizational and management structure is sufficiently clear and fit for purpose, with opportunities for stakeholders' involvement in decision-making where appropriate. Hence, this indicator is addressed.

## Recommendations

None

### Indicator 5: Management of Academic Standards

*The institution demonstrates a strong concern for the maintenance of academic standards and emphasizes academic integrity throughout its teaching and research activities.*

### **Judgement:** Addressed

Overall responsibility for academic standards at AOU lies with the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Scientific Research (VPAASR) to whom Faculty Deans, located at the headquarters, report. Deans manage the academic standards for programmes for which they are responsible *via* Faculty Councils. At branch level, some of this responsibility is devolved to Programme Coordinators (PCs) and Branch Councils. Also appointed at branch level is an Assistant Director of Academic Affairs & Scientific Research reporting to the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Scientific Research. It was evident to the Panel, during the site visit, that individuals involved with the management of academic standards were familiar with the roles and responsibilities of the positions they occupied in this structure as well as with the policies and procedures with which they were required to work.

AOU Bahrain offers three undergraduate programmes in conjunction with the OU-UK and one master's programme in conjunction with Open University-Malaysia (OUM). These arrangements have important consequences in relation to the management of academic standards. The arrangement with OU-UK allows AOU to offer programmes and courses developed by OU-UK, as well as relevant learning materials, adapted for the local context. Programmes offered at AOU Bahrain are also adapted to meet HEC requirements by including, for example, specific mandatory courses. OU-UK monitors programmes and provides external examiners. Students graduate with two degrees: one from AOU and one from OU-UK.

It was evident to the Panel that the maintenance of 'validated status' necessary to offer OU-UK programmes is of utmost importance at AOU. This results in rigorous adherence to the requirements set by OU-UK in relation to the maintenance of academic standards. The three programmes at AOU Bahrain were most recently revalidated in 2017 for a five-year period which will end in 2022.

The arrangement with OUM, which is elaborated on in Indicator 6 below, is slightly different in that AOU Bahrain is licensed by the HEC to offer the OUM Master's degree. In Malaysia, AOU Bahrain is recognised as a 'regional learning centre' by the Ministry of Higher Education.

In addition, AOU has at the institutional level a code of conduct for staff and a set of policies and procedures to deal with misconduct by students. This is in addition to a Student Guide developed at the AOU Bahrain branch level, which includes information on cheating and plagiarism as well as a section on commitment to the university's code of conduct. Staff and students are made aware of all information related to academic standards and integrity at induction, as was confirmed to the Panel through interviews with a variety of stakeholders.

The Panel also found evidence of a robust student complaint and appeals system at AOU Bahrain. The system operates online and begins with a submission by a student. The system automatically directs the complaint or appeal to the relevant officials. Should an appeal be rejected, or a complaint not receive the response expected by the system, it is possible to refer the matter to more senior authorities. Students receive feedback on appeals and complaints *via* the Student Affairs Office where officials are also available to advise on any further action that could be taken.

With the above arrangements and procedures in place for managing the academic standards, which the Panel finds satisfactory, the indicator is thus addressed.

### Recommendation

None

### Indicator 6: Partnerships, Memoranda and Cross Border Education [where applicable]

*The relationship between the institution operating in Bahrain and other higher education institutions is formalized and explained clearly, so that there is no possibility of students or other stakeholders being misled.*

### Judgement: Addressed

As mentioned earlier, AOU has entered into an agreement with OU-UK, a well-established provider of open and distance learning in Europe, to offer 'validated awards'. At AOU Bahrain, these awards apply to the three undergraduate programmes on offer. The OU-UK defines 'validated awards' as awards that are equivalent to those offered in the UK, made by an institution that had demonstrated satisfactorily its ability to quality assure its own provision. The requirements for an award to be validated are delineated clearly in the Handbook for Validated Awards published online by OU-UK, which also clearly delineates the relationship between AOU and OU-UK. This relationship is secured by an agreement signed by both parties and the Handbook contains an example of this agreement.

The Panel was able to identify abundant evidence of relevance for the maintenance of validated status and efforts to ensure it at AOU Bahrain. It was also evident to the Panel that students are aware of the status of the awards made to them and are indeed attracted to the pursuit of a qualification at AOU Bahrain because of the opportunity to receive two degrees, one from OU-UK and the other from AOU.

It was evident to the Panel that guidance from OU-UK in respect of validation and provided as part of the agreement between the two institutions served to build the capacity of AOU Bahrain and its

staff. The external examining and revalidation processes, for example, provide feedback on programme design as well as student performance.

As for the Masters of Business Administration (MBA) programme offered in conjunction with OUM, it is governed by a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the two institutions. This MoU identifies, among other things, which courses contributing to the programme will be offered in Bahrain and the number of credit hours required. A joint committee has been established at AOU Bahrain to oversee the provision of the programme. The MoU is subject to a yearly review involving a visit from officials at OUM to ensure adherence to the agreement. In addition, the MBA programme meets all the requirements of the HEC. In light of the above, the Panel finds this indicator addressed.

### **Recommendation**

None

**Judgement:** The Institution **addresses** Standard 1: Mission, Governance and Management

## Standard 2

### Quality Assurance and Enhancement

*There is a robust quality assurance system that ensures the effectiveness of the quality assurance arrangements of the institution as well as the integrity of the institution in all aspects of its academic and administrative operations.*

#### **Indicator 7: Quality Assurance**

*The institution has defined its approach to quality assurance and effectiveness thereof and has quality assurance arrangements in place for managing the quality of all aspects of education provision and administration across the institution.*

#### **Judgement:** Addressed

The Institution has a dedicated document covering Quality Assurance (QA) procedures that provides guidance, structures and policies related to all QA issues. AOU Bahrain follows the general approach to management adopted by AOU structure whereby policies and requirements are developed at the Kuwait headquarters and then disseminated to all branches. The Central Quality Assurance Committee (CQAC) at the headquarters supports the management of quality by providing all QA-related data, recommendations and comments. The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Department (QAAD) is a central body which oversees the implementation of both academic and administrative QA systems at the headquarters and branch levels. During interviews, the Panel was informed of the responsibilities of the QA committees and QA departments that exist at branch level as defined in the Quality Assurance Guide.

As for the development of policies, AOU follows a process articulated in a document entitled 'Writing Policies and Procedures'. Institution-wide policies and procedures are developed at the headquarters. Branches then adapt these to the local context and develop documentation necessary to allow for implementation. This documentation includes stakeholder surveys, peer reviews, appraisals, an Annual Monitoring Report as well as end-of-semester reports.

AOU Bahrain maintains compliance with the requirements and regulations of the governing body in Bahrain by communicating and seeking approval of the HEC on all matters, both academic and administrative. Academic and administrative staff of AOU Bahrain are kept updated on all policies and procedures by means of the intranet portal.

During meetings with representatives from OU-UK, the Panel was informed that OU-UK liaises with the QA Director at institutional level and that OU-UK conducts its own academic quality review as part of the validation processes required for the agreement between the two institutions. OU-UK then supports the AOU to deal with any gaps or problems identified.

During the site visit, the Panel noted that the role of the QA Department at AOU Bahrain is to act as a link between the institutional headquarters in Kuwait and the branch in Bahrain. The institutional level QA Office oversees all branches and provides support for quality-related processes and procedures, and the Panel was informed that even when local circumstances at

the branch level may require changes in headquarter policies, the branch is usually encouraged to try to give priority to complying with those policies, as much as possible, rather than changing them.

The Panel also learned that it was the prerogative of the local branch to make changes to surveys and other tools developed by the headquarters, in order to ensure that they were appropriate for local conditions. The Panel was not provided with any evidence of such changes, however, despite requesting them.

Although the Panel acknowledges that a multi-campus institution such as AOU requires direction from the top, the Panel recommends that the AOU Bahrain QA Department should go beyond simple compliance with the quality framework developed by the headquarters. A more proactive role on the part of the Bahrain QA Department can ensure that all stakeholders in Bahrain are involved in QA processes and decisions, which helps enhance the quality culture across the local branch. Overall the Panel is of the view that AOU meets most of the requirements of this indicator. Hence, the Panel finds this indicator addressed.

### **Recommendation**

- Expand the role of the AOU Bahrain QA Department, so it goes beyond simple application of QA procedures developed at the headquarters' level, to be able to take more proactive actions and ensure greater stakeholders' involvement in terms of managing and assuring quality locally, in order to enhance quality culture across the Bahrain branch.

### **Indicator 8: Benchmarking and Surveys**

*Benchmarking and surveys take place on a regular basis; the results of which inform planning, decision-making and enhancement.*

### **Judgement:** Addressed

AOU has developed an institution-level Benchmarking Policy and set of associated procedures. AOU Bahrain conducts benchmarking at two levels: internally with other AOU branches in the region and external benchmarking. Internal benchmarking involves comparing the administrative and academic performance of the branch against other AOU branches as well as the preparation of an Annual Monitoring Report which monitors performance at AOU Bahrain against strategic objectives and KPIs identified in the Strategic Plan.

External benchmarking entails comparing academic and administrative practices with OU-UK, examination and assessment strategies, and Bahraini students' academic performance with those studying at OU-UK. In addition, AOU conducts an institution-wide mapping exercise which involves comparing its core practices against the standards and expectations of the Quality Assurance Agency in the United Kingdom. The Panel also notes AOU Bahrain's efforts to benchmark the services offered by its Student Affairs Department to special needs students, involving local (the University of Bahrain and Ahlia University) and regional (Ministry of Education, UAE) comparisons. However, the Panel is of the view that the conducted

comparisons do not constitute a comprehensive benchmarking exercise; as, they were used only to guide the development of procedures relevant to special needs students. This is in addition to some benchmarking of AOU Bahrain's library also having been conducted as well, as will be elaborated on in Standard 3.

Additionally, the Panel notes, based on discussions held with faculty and management, that the benchmarking of academic programmes mainly involves other AOU branches and the OU-UK, and that leadership with respect to benchmarking practices at branch level appears to be absent. The Panel is therefore of the view that the current benchmarking employed by AOU Bahrain is mainly internal and very limited in scope, with some external benchmarking of its services also having been conducted. Hence, the Panel recommends that the Institution should adopt more rigorous benchmarking practices which are broader in scope and encompass all academic and administrative aspects of the operations of the Institution, as well as the different facilities and services offered by AOU Bahrain.

As for collecting feedback from both internal and external stakeholders, the Institution employs a number of surveys. These include Alumni Survey, Student Exit Survey, Employer Internship Feedback, Student Internship Feedback, Student Feedback on E-System Training, Tutor Feedback on E-System Training, Student Survey on E-Library Training, Student Survey and Tutor Survey. According to AOU Bahrain, the purpose of these surveys is to utilize feedback from various stakeholders to improve the quality of provision.

However, although the Employer Survey has been utilised by AOU Bahrain to gather information on the performance of the graduates, the Panel was informed that this survey has only been implemented recently and that a few responses were received. Nevertheless, in general, data collected from various surveys are analysed and the results are communicated to relevant parties electronically. Concerns arising from the process of eliciting feedback are discussed at Branch Quality Assurance Committee meetings in order to resolve issues. The Panel learned that suggestions for improvement made as a result of the administration of surveys are taken into consideration and that, as an example, an instructor in the MBA programme had been replaced following complaints elicited from students' surveys.

The Panel acknowledges the steps taken at AOU Bahrain to elicit feedback for the purpose of enhancing quality on an ongoing basis. Nonetheless, the Panel simultaneously recommends that efforts to use feedback elicited from the workplace to manage and enhance quality should be improved. Overall the Panel is of the view that AOU meets most of the requirements of this indicator. Hence, the Panel finds this indicator addressed.

### **Recommendation**

- Adopt more rigorous benchmarking practices, which are broader in scope and thus encompass all academic and administrative aspects of the operations of the Institution, as well as the different facilities and services offered by AOU Bahrain.
- Ensure that all areas of practice are covered when feedback is collected and used to manage and enhance quality.

### **Indicator 9: Security of Learner Records and Certification**

*Formalized arrangements are in place to ensure the integrity of learner records and certification which are monitored and reviewed on a regular basis.*

#### **Judgement:** Addressed

AOU has developed a Policy for Network Security IT, an Information Security Policy and has a detailed IT Disaster Recovery Plan 2019. Three systems are in place to ensure the rigorous management of all records at AOU Bahrain: a Student Information System (SIS), a Learning Management System (LMS), and shared drives which are used by both administrative and academic units for safeguarding students' records. Access to the online system is granted to relevant parties upon submission of an approved and authorised formal request to the IT Department. All students enrolled at AOU Bahrain are provided access to the intranet with a username and a password, with the latter being changed periodically as per AOU policy.

In addition to electronic copies of official documents, hard copies of students' personal data are kept on file, in alignment with the HEC requirement that institutions should keep a Unified Student File as well as students' academic achievements. During the site visit, the Panel noticed that students' records were kept on open shelves in a highly secured area, and was informed that the Institution is planning to acquire fire-proof storage cabinets for these in the near future.

Examination papers are processed using a standardised procedure throughout AOU Bahrain. An Exam Photocopying Committee is appointed by the Branch Director. The headquarters in Kuwait sends examination papers to this Committee, which is then responsible for making copies in a secure location. Access to this location is limited to employees of the Examinations Office. Copies of examinations are then secured in sealed envelopes and stored in fire-resistant cabinets. Envelopes containing copies of examinations are handed to the invigilator on the day of examination. Examination envelopes are opened only in the examinations hall after checks have been made to ensure its security. Upon completion of the examination, answer booklets along with the question papers are submitted by the invigilator to a representative of the Examinations Office who, in turn, submits them to the designated academic supervisor. During the site visit tour, the Panel noticed that marking of examinations is conducted in designated offices and involves group and double-marking as per the Examination Bylaws. Specific forms are used to ensure safe control of the marking process. The marked answer booklets are stored securely and, as per the Bylaws, are only discarded after two regular academic semesters have passed.

As a result, the Panel is of the opinion that procedures used to secure and back-up student records and other forms of personal data, enrolment details, and grades are satisfactory. Nonetheless, the Panel recommends that the planned acquisition of fire-proof storage cabinets should be expedited.

With respect to graduation and certification, the AOU Student Guide details requirements for graduation and the Panel was informed about the process of issuing certificates. This process

meets the requirements of AOU Bylaws and HEC regulations. All graduating students are required to submit updated copies of personal information. These records are used to provide proof of identity and are sent to the headquarters and then to OU-UK for endorsement. At the end of the semester, a list of students who have met the requirements for graduation is prepared and compared to a list of students expected to graduate to ensure accuracy. Later, a list of graduation forms is prepared and forwarded to the AOU headquarters for processing. At the same time, graduating students are requested to complete an endorsed clearance form and pay associated fees. The headquarters is responsible for making final decisions with regard to eligibility for graduation. As students graduate with two degrees: one from AOU and one from OU-UK, both AOU and OU-UK certificates are sent by the headquarters to the Admission and Registration Office. The HEC approval of the documents of graduating students is then sought out by AOU Bahrain.

In addition, the Quality Assurance Guide document notes that one of the functions of the QAAD is to undertake annual reviews of internal practices and unit functions, including those related to ensuring integrity of learner records and certification, and to provide feedback to the Branch and Faculty Councils. During the site visit interviews, the Panel was informed that regular reviews of the arrangements for ensuring the integrity of learner records and certification processes are conducted by the headquarters. Overall the Panel is of the view that the Institution meets most of the requirements of this indicator. Hence, the Panel finds this indicator addressed.

#### **Recommendation**

- Expedite the acquisition of fire-proof cabinets for the purpose of safekeeping of students' records.

**Judgement:** The Institution **addresses** Standard 2: Quality Assurance and Enhancement

## Standard 3

### Learning Resources, ICT and Infrastructure

*The institution has appropriate and sufficient learning resources, ICT and physical infrastructure to function effectively as a HEI, and which support the academic and administrative operations of the institution.*

#### **Indicator 10: Learning Resources**

*The institution provides sustained access to sufficient information and learning resources to achieve its mission and fully support all of its academic programmes.*

#### **Judgement: Addressed**

According to the SER, the Learning Resource Centre (LRC) at AOU Bahrain provides a physical library and an e-library for use by the student and staff community. Printed resources are available in the physical library as books and encyclopaedias, journals, periodicals, and newspapers, and final-year graduation and MBA projects. The LRC has a capacity of 74 seats and is accessible 'during working hours', that is Sunday to Thursday from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm for the library hall, in addition to access being available for the Kuwait e-library.

Electronic library services, which are accessible to all AOU students, are in the form of electronic books and journal databases (such as EBSCO, JSTOR, ProQuest, SpringerLink, etc.), electronic dictionaries, as well as video and audio learning materials. The Kuwait e-library has 60 seats and is equipped with 18 computers that are used for e-learning. In addition to the available resources, the student and staff community can make use of an inter-library loan system to request material from the University of Bahrain library or directly from publishers. Evidence was provided of faculty making use of the inter-library loan system. There is also evidence that the LRC facilities have been used by various English Language Learning staff members for workshops that make use of the learning resources and for other cultural activities. A document entitled 'Learning Resource Centre (LRC) Policies and Procedures' regulates the use of the LRC resources.

During the site visit, the Panel learned that the LRC has begun to move to the Koha Integrated Library Management System and that this system will be fully operational within three to four months. The Panel also learned that an anti-theft system will also be installed as part of this process. Although students and faculty members expressed their satisfaction with the library resources, the Panel finds the physical space allocated to the LRC and e-library as relatively limited. Consideration could be given to expanding the space in order to accommodate more students, particularly during examination periods. At the same time, the Panel encourages AOU Bahrain to consider extending the opening hours of the library to better serve the students during their presence on campus.

With respect to learning resources, the SER states that lists of books and textbooks are provided to students. In addition, a draft Collection Development Policy was developed in August 2018. The Panel was informed that this policy is currently being reviewed and that the LRC

systematically seeks input from faculty members and departments on their course needs. The Panel is of the view that this policy is fairly general and recommends that it should be made more specific particularly with regard to the mapping of library resources to programme learning requirements as well as to those of the national requirements.

According to the SER, the AOU Bahrain LRC, Information Communication Technology (ICT) resources and infrastructure are sufficient to support academic and administrative needs. Interviews with students and staff confirmed this assertion.

Moreover, informal benchmarking of library resources, services and policies has been conducted against those offered by local institutions (the University of Bahrain, Kingdom University, and the Isa Cultural Centre) and international library systems in the UK, USA, Canada, and Spain. This in addition to internal benchmarking conducted against other AOU branches such as AOU-Kuwait and AOU-Egypt. The Panel appreciates that effort has been made to consider external reference points. Nevertheless, the Panel suggests that more benefit would be derived from attempts to benchmark if specific criteria were used to guide the process.

Evidence of LRC training for new students and staff was provided along with surveys conducted to ascertain the satisfaction of those who had participated in these induction processes. While the provision of such training is important, the Panel, nevertheless, suggests that staff inductions should include training on the alignment of LRC resources with the academic programmes. Surveys intended to elicit feedback from students and staff with regard to library facilities and services and e-resources indicate high levels of satisfaction. Although attempts to elicit feedback are important, the Panel did not find evidence of sufficient use of information derived from surveys and other information gathering exercises to enhance quality. For example, information about the declining use of the library from the second semester of the 2016-2017 academic year does not appear to have been used to trigger action to address this phenomenon; although, later data does suggest that library usage has stabilised. There is little benefit in gathering and analysing information of this nature without using it to affect ongoing improvements of service.

Overall the Panel is of the view that AOU meets most of the requirements of this indicator. Hence, the Panel finds this indicator addressed.

### **Recommendation**

- Revise the Collection Development Policy so that it requires mapping of library resources to the learning requirements of the programmes as well as to national requirements, and expedite the approval of the Policy once this revision has been made.

### ***Indicator 11: ICT***

*The institution provides coordinated ICT resources for the effective support of student learning*

**Judgement:** Addressed

The ICT Department at AOU Bahrain consists of a staff of five including the Head of Department who is responsible for the overall management and administration of this entity. The remaining members of the Department have responsibility for the systems, network and security, the LMS, ICT support, and the SIS. There is evidence that tasks are fairly assigned amongst members of the Department and that duties are clearly defined. ICT staff members are experienced in relation to the positions they hold. Information about the role and responsibilities of the ICT Department is disseminated *via* the website, emails and other electronic means.

An Operational Plan is developed for each year in order to ensure a follow through on the institutional Strategic Plan. Operational plans include disaster recovery as well as the planned maintenance and replacement of ICT equipment. Yearly operational plans list actions to be undertaken, along with the timeframe for each, the person in charge, the allocated budget, as well as the KPIs to measure the status of implementation of the various actions.

In addition to yearly operational plans, an ICT Disaster Recovery Plan has been developed. This details all the backups that need to be done on a regular basis, along with their frequencies. Secured backups are stored in safe places at the University, and in the AOU SIS database in the headquarters in Kuwait as well as on cloud servers in the US and the UK using a secure VPN connection. Likewise, a Plan for Maintenance and Replacement of Physical ICT Resources has been developed. AOU Bahrain has entered into a 60-month service agreement for the support of RICOH photocopiers and a 12-month service agreement for CISCO networking services, with the renewals of the support contracts signed upon expiry. The Panel acknowledges that the monitoring of the implementation of the Operational Plan is sound and that disaster recovery plans are solid.

AOU Bahrain has two ICT laboratories of 30 personal computers and two language laboratories of 26 computers each, in addition to 28 computers available in the library, 13 in a research laboratory, and individual computers available for the teaching and administrative staff. Networked printers and scanners are also available to these users. The campus has a modern network infrastructure of wired and Wi-Fi access, an IP telephony system, RFID-based access control system, a CCTV system, a public address system for the sound system, and an Audio/Visual system for various meeting rooms and the auditorium. A set of servers and a 1 TB SAN storage server support the deployed solutions. AOU Bahrain enjoys a 50-Mbps internet service as a result of a three-year service agreement with ISP Batelco signed in April 2017. In addition to the software that supports this infrastructure, lists of other software deployed in the University are provided. All software used on the campus are licensed and samples of licenses (Nitro Pro, IBM SPSS, WinRAR, and Microsoft Office and servers) are available.

AOU Bahrain has a range of systems designed to address students' needs, such as: a SIS (for registration, payment, advising, complaints, etc.), a Human Resources (HR) System, a LMS and an Asset Tracking System.

The Panel was provided with access to all ICT facilities and resources during the site visit and appreciates that AOU Bahrain's networking, ICT infrastructure and other resources support the mission of the University and the needs of stakeholders, and offer the potential for fuller development of online learning experiences. The Panel is also of the view that the number of ICT

staff is adequate for the purpose of supporting T&L at AOU Bahrain. Evidence was provided of the modification of the working hours of ICT staff, in order to ensure that the needs of students and staff were served. There is also evidence that ICT staff benefit from ongoing training in order to ensure that they remain up-to-date with ICT infrastructure and networking developments.

A comprehensive student and staff satisfaction survey for the Second Semester of the academic year 2018–2019 was conducted. The results of the survey show high levels of satisfaction on the part of students and staff. ICT staff interviewed were able to provide specific examples of improvements made as a result of surveys, including the installation of telephone lines in classrooms in case the tutors need technical support during their lectures.

The SER states that the SIS allows the students to view marks when they become available. The SIS can also be used by students to submit complaints and appeals and make requests for postponements of examinations. Manuals have been prepared explaining the use of online services, online admissions, and requests for the postponement of examinations. Academic staff members use the SIS to follow up on students' attendance, manage students' grades and to advise students.

The Panel acknowledges that information systems available at AOU Bahrain are fit for purpose and, therefore, this indicator is addressed.

### **Recommendation**

None

### **Indicator 12: Infrastructure**

*The institution provides physical infrastructure that is safe and demonstrably adequate for the conduct of its academic programmes.*

### **Judgement: Addressed**

As per the SER and site visit interviews, AOU Bahrain has outsourced most routine maintenance work to contractors. Healthcare is also outsourced. According to the SER, the AOU Operation & Maintenance Department is in charge of monitoring, controlling, and evaluating services provided by contractors. Evidence of monitoring and evaluation of the work of contractors was provided to the Panel. Evidence was also provided of preventive maintenance schedules for the years 2018 and 2019 as well as daily maintenance reports for the month of November 2019. As a result of the site visit, it was apparent to the Panel that campus facilities of AOU Bahrain are well-maintained and fit for purpose.

AOU Bahrain is located in a five-storey building, built using state-of-the-art technology. Facilities available include a 270-seat auditorium, 16 classrooms, two computer laboratories, two language laboratories, seven meeting rooms, 73 offices for administrative and teaching staff, a LRC, parking with capacity for 199 vehicles, and sports facilities. Classrooms as well as computer and language laboratories are all equipped with smart boards, podiums, projectors, internal speakers and

lecture recording facilities. The library and e-library have 74 seats and 10 computers, and 60 seats and 18 computers, respectively. A signage system is in place.

During the site tour, the Panel was able to visit all the academic and administrative facilities and noted that all were in good order. The Panel also visited other facilities (sports, library, medical unit, etc.) and found that they were kept in good condition. As the area available for sports is outdoor, the Panel is of the view that some consideration could be given to arranging access at reduced rates for AOU Bahrain students at other sporting facilities nearby, for use during hot weather.

A Health and Safety Committee composed of 20 staff and faculty members from different departments and units has been formed. Members of this Committee act as Fire Marshalls. This Committee has drawn up a Health and Safety Measures Guidelines document, which defines the purpose and objectives of the Health and Safety committee and lists all the available health and safety equipment. The Committee organises awareness workshops, evacuation drills, etc.. As part of measures undertaken to ensure health and safety, AOU Bahrain has outsourced cleaning, pest control and security services. As already indicated, health services in the form of a medical facility staffed by a nurse have also been outsourced, just as the security on campus as well. Evidence of record keeping in respect of health and safety related incidents was provided. There is also evidence of monitoring of the Health and Safety Policy. The Panel acknowledges that AOU Bahrain has developed systems intended to ensure the on-campus health and safety of the university community.

Additionally, a student and tutor satisfaction survey is conducted every end-of-semester. The survey includes a few questions about the Library facilities, ICT resources, clinical and medical services. During interviews, the Panel was informed that various improvements have been made in response to students' feedback, including changes in the cafeteria and the provision of a Play Station 4 in the multipurpose hall. Overall, the Panel finds this indicator addressed.

### **Recommendation**

None

**Judgement:** The Institution **addresses** Standard 3: Learning Resources, ICT and Infrastructure

## Standard 4

### The Quality of Teaching and Learning

*The institution has a comprehensive academic planning system with a clear management structure and processes in place to ensure the quality of the teaching and learning programmes and their delivery.*

#### **Indicator 13: Management of Teaching and Learning Programmes**

*There are effective mechanisms to ensure the quality of teaching and learning provision across the institution.*

#### **Judgement:** Addressed

According to the SER, AOU Bahrain aims to provide high quality education through a comprehensive T&L strategy using blended learning. Two of the three undergraduate programmes offered by AOU Bahrain as well as the MBA programme offered in conjunction with OUM draw on blended learning. However, the BA Honours programme in English offers only a face-to-face T&L environment as per the requirements of the HEC. The focus on blended learning is appropriate given the mission of AOU Bahrain to 'disseminate knowledge...without time or geographical barriers'.

The Strategic Plan 2017-2018/2021-2022 addresses T&L *via* its strategic objectives and KPIs. The Strategic Plan also identifies those responsible for actions needed to achieve the objectives as well as the 'executive procedures' needed to guide progress towards them. Resourcing is also addressed in the plan insofar as action related costs are identified. As already indicated earlier in this Report, achievement of the Strategic Plan is monitored using operational plans developed by departments and divisions and annual reporting procedures.

The roles and responsibilities of those in charge of the management of academic programmes are specified in the Statutes of the University. Faculty Councils are responsible for programme delivery, teaching and learning supervision. They also share some academic responsibilities with the Branch Councils, which include making recommendations on academic programmes to the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Scientific Research. The SER provides a description of the roles and responsibilities of all involved in the programme management including the Assistant Director for Academic Affairs and Scientific Research, Programme Coordinators/Local Deans, General Course Coordinators, and Branch Course Coordinators. Tutor roles are also specified alongside those of all the other coordinators in the Tutor Handbook. During the site visit, it became clear to the Panel that responsibilities for managing T&L were understood by all at the different levels of the Institution.

AOU has developed a T&L Policy that is applicable for all campuses. Responsibility for monitoring the Policy lies with the Vice President for Academic Affairs using a range of performance indicators including student performance data, student feedback, external examiners' reports, academic reviewers' reports and graduate destination surveys. The Policy is implemented *via* the Deanships. Evidence of the implementation of the Policy was provided to

the Panel in the form of course files. However, during the examination of these files, the Panel noticed that some of them were missing information and were thus incomplete. The Panel therefore recommends that all course files should be reviewed and brought up-to-date with immediate effect.

According to the SER, only the BA Honours programme in Information Technology and Computing encompasses work-based training. During the site visit interviews, however, the Panel heard that plans were underway to introduce work-based training in the two other undergraduate programmes once students have completed 80 credit hours. Study plans provided to the Panel indicate the inclusion of a one-credit hour work-based training in each programme to take place over eight weeks.

The Panel was informed that, because the number of students engaging in work-based training is limited to those enrolled only in the Information Technology and Computing programme, implementation and monitoring of this type of learning is the responsibility of only one person at the branch. No AOU Bahrain training supervisors have been appointed and criteria have yet to be developed for the selection of training sites. Additionally, although attempts were made to elicit feedback from students on their experiences of work-based learning, it is not clear how this feedback is used to affect improvement, if at all. Moreover, of concern to the Panel was that little, if any, formal guidance is being provided to students on their work placement. Conclusively, the Panel recommends that arrangements for work-based learning should be improved with immediate effect, in order to accommodate the needs of the increased number of students who will be exposed to this type of experience once they have achieved 80 credit hours of learning in the BA Honours programmes in Business Studies and English Language and Literature.

Finally, AOU Bahrain has a system to evaluate the quality of T&L, and this is implemented in a number of ways. For example, feedback on teaching is elicited from students through surveys and a system has been developed by the QAAD to allow for programme coordinators to observe and provide feedback on the tutorials. Feedback resulting from the survey analyses and from peer observations is then provided to faculty as part of their formal appraisal processes and to help them enhance their practices.

Overall the Panel is of the view that the Institution meets most of the requirements of this indicator. Hence, the Panel finds that this indicator is addressed.

### **Recommendation**

- Check course files for completeness and, where appropriate, bring them up-to-date with immediate effect.
- Improve arrangements for work-based learning to accommodate the increasing numbers of interns in the near future and to include specific mechanisms and criteria for the selection of training sites, appointment of training supervisors, and provision of relevant formal guidance to students.

### **Indicator 14: Admissions**

*The institution has appropriate and rigorously enforced admission criteria for all its programmes.*

**Judgement:** Addressed

Admissions at AOU Bahrain are regulated by bylaws which take account of its multi-campus, multi-national character. Accordingly, these bylaws state that prospective students should have obtained a general high school certificate or its equivalent and have fulfilled any other conditions determined by the relevant deanship or the country in which the AOU campus is located. Admission requirements are published on the AOU Bahrain website and there are also two clearly written documents detailing admission procedures and requirements to the institution's bachelor programmes and MBA programme. These include information on credit transfer, which is especially important for AOU Bahrain, as it has adopted an open learning philosophy. The transfer of credits to AOU Bahrain from other institutions of higher learning is governed by two sets of Bylaws.

As English is the official language of instruction at AOU, competence in the language is established using an institutional placement test or by using scores on one of two international tests of English: IELTS or TOEFL. Students who do not attain the English scores needed for admission are placed in the foundation programme. Like the admission requirements, information on English language proficiency needed is available on the university website.

AOU Bahrain benchmarks its admissions criteria and assessment of knowledge to OU-UK. The OU-UK subscribes to Chapter B2 of the Quality Code developed by UK universities under the guidance of the National Quality Assurance Agency, which details indicators such as recruitment, selection and admission to higher education. The Panel notes that the context in which this Quality Code was developed is very different from that of the higher education system in Bahrain. However, although not all of the indicators are entirely relevant to the Bahraini context (e.g. Indicator 1 is directed at the highly diversified UK higher education system), the Code identifies practice that is transparent and fair, to which AOU Bahrain subscribes.

What was not made clear to the Panel, however, was the way AOU Bahrain had aligned the knowledge competencies tested in the Bahraini general school certificate examinations with those tested in the UK school-leaving examinations. The Panel is of the view that as AOU Bahrain draws on programmes and learning materials developed by OU-UK (albeit adapted for the local context), it is clearly necessary to ensure that the outcomes tested at school-leaving level in the UK are aligned with those tested in Bahrain. A lack of alignment between these two sets of knowledge competencies could mean that Bahraini students would be at risk of not being ready to engage with the learning requirements of the programme. Alignment would require a relatively straightforward mapping exercise and it is recommended that AOU Bahrain should engage in this process as soon as possible.

As indicated above, students who do not attain requisite scores on the English language placement test set by AOU Bahrain or on the IELTS or TOEFL examinations are required to join the foundation programme. Until now, AOU Bahrain only offers foundation studies in English irrespective of the fact that some programmes require numerical competencies. The Panel learned that one of the reviews that the Admissions Committee has undertaken of the entry requirements of the three undergraduate programmes based on students' progression data, has resulted in a recommendation to include mathematics at the foundation level and that this recommendation was currently being considered. Consequently, the Panel recommends that AOU Bahrain - as part of the review of its admission criteria- should give serious consideration to ensuring that students, who are enrolled in programmes that require numerical proficiency, do indeed have the competency in mathematics that will allow them to engage in the learning required of them.

As for the admission requirements for the OUM-MBA programme, the Panel was informed that these were reviewed following a recommendation from the BQA's DHR in 2011, and now encompass criteria for proficiency in English, industry experience, and background knowledge of business.

Generally, in light of the above, the Panel is of the view that the Institution meets the requirements of this indicator and finds this indicator addressed.

### **Recommendation**

- Align the knowledge competencies tested in the Bahraini general school certificate with those tested in the equivalent examinations in the UK, to ensure equivalence of readiness to engage in the learning of AOU Bahrain undergraduate programmes.
- Expedite without delay the recommendation for the inclusion of mathematics at the foundation level for Undergraduate degrees.

### **Indicator 15: Introduction and Review of Programmes**

*The institution has rigorous systems and processes for the development and approval of new programmes - that includes appropriate infrastructure - and for the review of existing programmes to ensure sound academic standards are met. These requirements are applied consistently, regularly monitored and reviewed.*

### **Judgement: Addressed**

AOU Bahrain has developed a Process and Procedure for New Programme Assessment and Approval. This detailed document aims to ensure that proposals for new programmes take into account the needs of the labour market and society more generally and that elements such as the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels and credit hours and HEC licensing requirements are an integral part of the design. The document also requires those proposing a new programme to specify the resources necessary to run it. At AOU Bahrain such resources need to encompass the means to offer blended learning.

The Panel learned from senior management of wishes to introduce more programmes at AOU Bahrain. Additionally, interviews with students confirmed the need for a greater range of academic offerings from a university that offers open and distance learning.

The Panel was unclear with regard to the rigour of the analyses of the labour market needs informing proposals for new programmes, especially since it is mentioned in the SER that AOU Bahrain is still in the process of developing mechanisms to produce analyses that can inform such proposals. In interviews, however, the Panel did learn of a feasibility study conducted recently to identify the needs of the labour market in relation to a proposed new programme in Graphic Design. Given the fact that labour markets are subject to rapid change, the Panel considers the need for rigorous and sophisticated analyses of labour market demands to inform programme development and review as clearly imperative. As a result, the Panel recommends that AOU Bahrain should ensure the development and implementation of the mechanisms that will yield the information necessary for making educated and up-to-date decisions about programmes to be designed or reviewed.

AOU offers qualifications validated by OU-UK in addition to its own awards. AOU Bahrain is annually supplied with all new modules developed by OU-UK, as a way of ensuring that curricula remain up-to-date and relevant. The relationship with OU-UK also impacts on programme reviews. The process of offering OU-UK qualifications requires AOU Bahrain to undergo a validation exercise once every five years. This exercise aims to check the quality management processes in place at AOU Bahrain in order to ensure that they meet the requirements of the OU-UK. The last validation exercise was completed in 2017; although, OU-UK representatives make other additional visits to AOU Bahrain between these formal exercises. The most recent visit by OU-UK representatives to AOU Bahrain resulted in three main recommendations. These were related to the need for: more staff to be appointed to teach on the OU-UK validated programmes; a more consistent approach to peer-to-peer monitoring across all faculties; and all students to be offered the opportunity to draw on the services of the Writing Centre and to join the English Club. The Panel was presented with evidence of AOU Bahrain's response to these recommendations and noted the progress made towards meeting them. The Panel appreciates the steps taken by the Institution to implement the recommendations made by OU-UK. Validation processes involve checking the alignment of programme elements including the rationale and purpose, learning outcomes, assessment, approach to T&L, resourcing and so on. A specialist panel is appointed for purposes of revalidation. A revalidation panel makes a series of recommendations, progress against which is monitored by OU-UK.

In addition to validation processes, OU-UK also offers support that takes the form of developmental reviews. In the course of its site visit, the Panel was able to engage with reviewers appointed by the OU-UK who described their work in terms of offering support and advice to enhance and maintain quality. The work of reviewers is supplemented by that of external examiners, who also see their role as involving the review of curricula as well as assessment.

Overall, the Panel is satisfied with the institution's processes for developing, approving, and reviewing academic programmes and finds this indicator addressed.

## Recommendation

- Develop robust mechanisms for conducting labour market studies, in order to ensure the relevance of programmes offered by AOU Bahrain to local needs.

### Indicator 16: Student Assessment and Moderation

*There are implemented transparent assessment policies and procedures including moderation. Assessment of student learning is appropriate and accurately reflects the learning outcomes and academic standards achieved by students.*

### **Judgement:** Addressed

AOU has developed a set of bylaws related to assessment. Although the measurement of attainment against learning outcomes is recognised as a valid form of assessment throughout the Bahraini higher education system, the bylaws document is silent on the subject of outcomes-based assessment, focusing instead on issues such as the split between continuous and summative assessment and the allocation of marks..

However, the 'Matrix-Mapping of Assessment Components to CILOs' document provides evidence of the mapping of assessment tasks (in the form of questions) to learning outcomes in a sample of courses that were examined by the Panel. Nonetheless, the Panel notes that the utilization of learning outcomes in some types of assessment is not evident in course documents; as, for example, the Graduation Project Grading Criteria for the Course 'T471' does not mention outcomes, focusing rather on the allocation of marks to various assessment tasks. The Panel, therefore, finds that AOU Bahrain could benefit from greater consistency in the application of outcomes-based assessment and, as a result, recommends that as the Institution moves forward, it should place greater emphasis on faculty members' engagement with outcomes-based assessment principles in their task design and grading practices. Documents regulating assessment should also draw on these principles.

Although attention to assessment principles is lacking, it is evident that a great deal of importance is placed on assessment procedures, with documents such as the Assessment Bylaws regulating them closely. Assessment schedules and assignment submission dates are published at the beginning of each semester. Instruction about assessment is given to the students during orientation day every semester and the rules of progression and other information regarded assessment are outlined in the AOU Student Handbook. According to the SER, course guides also include descriptions of assignments, the breakdown of marks, submission dates and other relevant information. During the site visit interviews, the Panel learned that the use of the LMS as a teaching tool was uneven and dependent on the willingness of individual staff members to engage with it. The Panel also learned of the support available to staff members to develop their expertise in the use of learning technologies. The Panel believes that the use of blended learning offers AOU Bahrain the potential to occupy a unique niche in the Bahraini higher education system as well as more widely. As a result, the Panel urges the Institution to consider maximising the potential of this form of learning, to be used to enhance assessment, as well as teaching in

general, and to put mechanisms in place to ensure that all staff members use computer-based technologies for teaching and assessment.

AOU Bahrain has developed elaborate procedures for internal moderation. The development of assessments is the responsibility of the General Course Coordinator for each course. Internal moderators with specialist knowledge of the course to which they are assigned are appointed to check assessment tasks. Moderation is not limited to the development of assessment tasks. During the site visit, the Panel was able to observe marking processes conducted on the premises. Each script was subject to double-marking and was thus checked thoroughly. The group marking processes are regulated very carefully through a process involving keeping registers of attendance.

According to the SER and as reported in site visit interviews, internal moderation also involves cross-branch marking. This process involves the collection of scripts from branches which are then checked by those teaching the same course at other locations. Cross-branch marking is organised by the headquarters' Deanship. In light of the above, the Panel appreciates the rigorous internal moderation processes of the Institution.

In addition to internal moderation at the branch level, AOU has procedures for external moderation at pre-and-post assessment stages. External examiners are appointed for specific time periods for specific modules/programmes/awards. During the site visit, the Panel confirmed that although AOU nominates the external examiners, their appointment however is decided on by OU-UK. As external examiners, they bring their experience of teaching in other contexts to the assessment process. The roles and responsibilities of the external examiners are described as involving the endorsement of tutor-marked assignments, mid-term assessments and final examinations. External examiners approve assessment questions and tasks, check that there is adequate coverage of the curriculum, and approve marking guidelines and final marks. Recommendations made by external examiners regarding weaknesses, gaps or other issues are taken into consideration in order to enhance assessment overall. A sample of an external examiner's report provided to the Panel confirmed the role of the examiner as described in the SER.

AOU has developed a Policy on Appeals against grades. This document outlines the process to be followed and indicates individuals or groups of individuals who are responsible for making related decisions. In interviews, the Panel heard from students who had submitted appeals and who were able to attest to the efficiency of the process. AOU procedures also allow for students to apply for a postponement in taking an examination on submission of evidence supporting the application. If the application is accepted, students are allowed to sit for the examination the next time it is offered. If the application is rejected, a mark of zero is awarded. The Panel received confirmation from students that this process was available and administered efficiently.

With respect to academic integrity, plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct are defined in the Bylaws on Assessment. Another document, the Students Conduct and Disciplinary Procedure Bylaws details the way misconduct is dealt with and outlines penalties for offenders. Students are informed about plagiarism and its consequences during induction, course

introduction, by means of the LMS and on the front page of the Tutor Marked Assessment files. Information about plagiarism is also available on the institution's website.

Plagiarism is addressed using 'Turnitin' text-matching software. In interviews, the Panel learned that percentages of text-matching (i.e. similarity percentages) considered inappropriate differed across departments and that students are required to sign a 'Declaration of No Plagiarism' on submission of their Tutor Marked Assessment files. However, for clarity purposes, the Panel recommends that the Institution should set across all departments an upper limit for the accepted Turnitin similarity percentage, one which is comparable to what is allowed internationally.

Overall the Panel is of the view that AOU Bahrain addresses most of the requirements of this indicator. Hence, the Panel considers this indicator addressed.

### **Recommendation**

- Place greater emphasis on faculty members' engagement with outcomes-based assessment principles in their task design and grading practices, and ensure that documents guiding and managing assessment draw on these principles.
- Set across all departments an upper limit for the accepted Turnitin similarity percentage, one which is comparable to what is allowed internationally.

### **Indicator 17: The Learning Outcomes**

*The institution ensures that all programmes and courses have clearly formulated learning outcomes and there are effective mechanisms to ensure that graduates achieve the learning outcomes of the programmes.*

### **Judgement: Addressed**

The relationship of AOU Bahrain with OU-UK means that learning outcomes are available for all courses and are aligned with those of the programmes, as course design at OU-UK proceeds from the identification of outcomes. Additionally, perusal of course files provided as evidence during the course visit showed that learning outcomes were listed as part of the documentation and that the mapping of Course Intended Learning Outcomes (CILOs) to Programme Intended Learning Outcomes (PILOs) is available, although not shown in all courses offered at AOU Bahrain. The Panel is of the view that this omission requires urgent attention. The Panel thus recommends that AOU Bahrain ensure that the mapping of CILOs to PILOs is documented in all courses. The Panel is also of the view that the mapping of CILOs to PILOs needs to be part of the process of ensuring that course files are up-to-date and contain all the information necessary to ensure that they are fit for purpose.

With respect to opportunities for learners to exit a programme, the SER mentions that AOU Bahrain does not provide any. However, Article 27 of the Bachelor Degree Award Requirements Bylaws deals with transfers. Article 27 states that a student is able to transfer between i) tracks within a programme, ii) programmes, and iii) AOU branches. Transfers are regulated by a set of bylaws called the AOU Principles of Student Transfer Bylaws. Any student who is not able to meet transfer principles set by AOU is able to withdraw from a programme of study and reapply

for admission to another. Transfers allow for credits earned in one programme, track, or branch to be transferred to another, on condition that a student's Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) is not less than two points. During the site visit, the Panel was informed of instances where students had transferred to other programmes at AOU Bahrain.

As for approval processes for the submission of students' data and results for certification purposes, this has already been addressed above in the Panel's response to Indicator 9 and judged satisfactory.

While with respect to procedures used to monitor student progression, these are identified in the SER. Academic departments prepare Annual Programme Evaluations every year. These reports include analysis of data on student performance including progression. The analysis at departmental level allows academically at-risk students to be identified and advised accordingly. However, analysis of graduate destinations is still relatively new at AOU Bahrain. A survey has, nonetheless, been developed and administered. A second survey, the Student Exit Survey has also been designed to explore students' understandings of the way they have been prepared for the world of work. The Panel thus encourages the Institution to continue with work on graduate destinations and readiness for the workplace.

Finally, in relation to benchmarking, the learning outcomes of most courses offered by AOU Bahrain are designed and revised by OU-UK. AOU has also developed procedures for internal benchmarking amongst branches using student performance data. These are coordinated by the headquarters in Kuwait. However, as mentioned earlier in this Report, the benchmarking of academic programmes is limited in scope and involves mainly the OU-UK. The Panel was not provided with sufficient evidence to demonstrate the use of benchmarks to verify the equivalence of learning outcomes with other similar programmes in Bahrain, regionally and internationally. No reference was made in any of the submitted evidence or interviews to any other external reference points or occupational standards that the learning outcomes can be linked to. Moreover, the Panel learned that the Programme Advisory Boards have not been in operation for some time and that AOU Bahrain is only now currently in the process of re-establishing them. Hence, the Panel recommends that AOU Bahrain should ensure the equivalence of the learning outcomes with other similar programmes in Bahrain, regionally and internationally and their relevance to the local market needs.

Overall the Panel is of the view that AOU Bahrain addresses most of the requirements of this indicator. Hence, the Panel considers this indicator addressed.

### **Recommendation**

- Ensure that the mapping of CILOs to PILOs is documented in all courses.
- Ensure the equivalence of the learning outcomes with other similar programmes in Bahrain, regionally and internationally and their relevance to the local market needs.

**Indicator 18: Recognition of Prior Learning [where applicable and legislation permits]**

*The institution has a recognition of prior learning policy, and effective procedures for recognizing prior learning and assessing current competencies.*

**Judgement:** Addressed

The recognition of prior learning is addressed by means of Article 26 of the Bachelor Degree Award Requirement Bylaws. In this document, prior learning is understood in relation to transfers between programmes, tracks within programmes or other branches of AOU. As a result, learning is understood in terms of credit hours and NQF levels and not in relation to, for example, that which may have been achieved outside formal learning environments. As a result, AOU Bahrain has no mechanisms to allow for the recognition of prior learning other than that achieved by transfer students. On this basis, the Panel finds that the Institution satisfies this indicator.

**Recommendation**

None

**Indicator 19: Short courses**

*The institution has effective systems in place for the management of its short courses [where applicable].*

Not applicable

**Judgement:** The Institution **addresses** Standard 4: The Quality of Teaching and Learning

## Standard 5

### Student Support Services

*The institution has an efficient and effective student administration and academic support services.*

#### **Indicator 20: Student Support**

*The institution provides efficient and effective student administration and academic support services and encourages the personal development of students.*

#### **Judgement: Addressed**

AOU Bahrain has a number of student support services all of which fall under the direction of the Department of Student Affairs. The Student Life Cycle Procedures of Student Affairs brochure elaborates on AOU Bahrain rules and describes the services available to students throughout their journey in the Institution.

Services offered to students include: academic support through, for example, the Writing Centre, the induction programme, and the orientation day; student counselling; a clinic with nursing services in partnership with Bahrain Medical Centre; security; and an annual career day. The Student Affairs Department is also responsible for assisting in coordinating activities of the Student Council, the Alumni Club, and the English Club, in addition to various sports activities as well.

Student Affairs is also in charge of maintaining the alumni database, which keeps track of the alumni by identifying their work destinations after graduation. According to the SER, a survey for new graduates has been developed. Administration of this survey will allow AOU Bahrain to gather information about its graduates and to upload their details on the alumni database. The Student Affairs Department also provides students with career guidance and maintains a bank of curriculum vitae of graduates to allow for their recruitment by prospective employers.

As for special needs students, AOU Bahrain's Equal Opportunity and Respect for Diversity Policy addresses the commitment of the Institution toward them by confirming their right to equal treatment and access to learning at the University. This policy is accessible to all stakeholders and published both in the Student Guide and on the institution's website.

In addition, AOU Bahrain has established a Special Needs Committee reporting directly to the Branch Director. This Committee deals with admissions, enrolment, the use of facilities and services and all other issues relevant to students with special needs. A dedicated guide, Students with Special Needs at AOU Bahrain, has also been developed. This document provides details on types of disabilities with which the University is able to assist, services provided, rights, and responsibilities. Special Needs cases are identified on the application form at the time of admission and these forms are forwarded to the Special Needs Committee, which then determines the best method to accommodate each student and identifies which services would need to be adjusted to support them. During its campus tour, the Panel noticed that

accommodations had been made in several areas to allow access for physically disabled students. These accommodations include wide corridors, doors, elevators, ramps and special classroom furniture. However, the Panel was unable to identify any information related to the reviewing, monitoring and follow-up of support provided to students with special needs at the branch level. The Panel recommends that the Institution should improve documentation related to reviewing, monitoring and follow-up of support services provided to students with special needs.

AOU Bahrain has a Students' Advising Committee which was established in 2015 and which is responsible for the development of strategies and mechanisms related to student advising. This committee meets periodically to monitor student advising processes and to identify further action needed for enhancing available support.

Academic advising is available for all undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in the Institution. An academic advisor is assigned to each student in order to monitor their progress and offer guidance in the course of their studies. AOU Bahrain has developed a Policy on Advising that defines advising and outlines the processes involved. The duties and responsibilities of all parties involved in advising are also delineated. The Tutor Handbook also addresses the subject of advising by identifying it as one of a tutor's responsibilities.

The academic advising process at AOU Bahrain starts with assigning academic advisors to new students. Advisors monitor the courses taken by students, the courses completed, their CGPA, and assessment results as well as their overall performance. Based on the information they have access to, academic advisors offer advice, in order to address problems and generally encourage and support students so as to allow them to maintain satisfactory progress. Advisors receive reports at the end of each assessment period that enable them to identify students in need of academic assistance and guidance before the next registration period.

Students with a CGPA falling below 2.00 are identified as being academically at-risk. AOU Bahrain provides four warnings to students before placing them on the 'at-risk' list. Once identified as at-risk, students are denied access to the SIS until they have met with their respective advisors. The aim of advising sessions at this point is to guide students in raising their CGPA. Failure on the part of the student to improve their academic status (indicated by the CGPA remaining below 2.00) results in a fifth warning and dismissal from the academic programme. During the site visit, the Panel learned that students who had been dismissed from an academic programme were given the opportunity to change to another programme of study, if they wished to continue studying at AOU Bahrain.

Evidence provided by the Institution identifies a large number of students deemed to be academically at-risk. Several reported reasons for these numbers include lack of proficiency in English and work schedules, as many of the students are employed while studying. Still, however, the Panel recommends that the Institution should conduct an in-depth, research-based study of the large numbers of at-risk students, in order to identify ways in which their academic progress could be improved.

Additionally, although the Panel learned, during interviews with undergraduate students, that they are satisfied with their advisors and that a student who successfully completes 32 credit-hours can minimize their interaction with their advisor and complete registration online without

any assistance; still, students expressed their dissatisfaction with the rate or time it takes for their grades to be issued, noting that delays hinder their registration for courses. The Panel, therefore, recommends that AOU Bahrain should investigate delays in the publication of grades and should ensure that they are made available to students in time for them to make relevant decisions about course registration for their following semester.

As part of the support provided to students, AOU Bahrain recognises the importance of technology in enhancing their learning experiences. The LMS allows students to build personal webpages with access to grades, quizzes, and a communication channel with tutors. The LMS also provides a means for information and news to be disseminated. A practical demonstration during the site visit allowed the Panel to see how the LMS links to the SIS in a way that facilitates students' access to their courses, grades and CGPA status. The interface between the LMS and the SIS also allows students to print unofficial transcripts.

The Student Counselling Unit of the Student Affairs Department is another channel of support at AOU Bahrain, as it provides students with psychological, social, academic, career and special needs guidance. During interviews with representatives of the different units of the Student Affairs Department, the Panel concluded that although some of these units have been established fairly recently, the Institution provides adequate support to students as they progress through their academic careers.

What helps in providing students with the kind of support they need is that students at AOU Bahrain are represented by an elected Student Council, which is supervised by the Student Affairs Department. The Panel learned that the Student Council interacts with senior management in order to make officials aware of students' concerns. When asked about their interactions with, and the responsiveness of, the senior members of staff, the response of the Student Council members was generally very positive although, as will be explained later, other students reported otherwise. In general, however, the Panel finds that AOU Bahrain provides students with an environment that is conducive to learning and that supports their academic progress.

Finally, the Student Affairs Department at AOU Bahrain is responsible for arranging extracurricular activities that enhance students' learning experiences as a result of engagement in social, recreational and community pursuits. During the site visit, the Panel was provided with evidence of the preparation of an Activities Plan by the Student Affairs Department at the beginning of each semester. This plan lists events, dates and venues and allows for the monitoring of activities that take place. Activities include the hosting of conferences discussing issues related directly to the community, extracurricular activities both on-and-off campus and an English Club and Writing Club open to all undergraduate students.

The Department also arranges events in celebration of, for example, National Day, National Charter Day, Labour Day, Women's Day, and Health Day. Voluntary work is also encouraged by the Institution. Activities performed by students include the preparation of Ramadhan Baskets, Iftar, and clean-ups along the coast. Students at AOU Bahrain also participate in works aimed at self-development and lifelong learning such as the 'Ajjal Entrepreneurship and Leadership Program' in cooperation with the International Association of Students in Economic

and Commercial Sciences. This programme is held on campus over a period of three weeks in order to target large number of student participants.

During the site visit, the Panel was informed that the Institution uses surveys to monitor students' satisfaction with administrative processes and services offered to them. Both students and tutors are requested to complete a formal survey at the end of each semester, covering areas such as the adequacy of training on the use of e-library, the SIS and the LMS. The QAAD uploads questionnaires on the LMS in order to evaluate the quality of the learning support offered by AOU Bahrain. Learning support is provided through the courses offered, tutors and tutoring, branch resources and facilities, technical services, admission and registration processes and Personal Development Planning. Data collected from these surveys are analysed and a report is prepared with recommendations, so that action can be taken by relevant parties at both the branch and the headquarters levels. During meetings with the Panel, students expressed their concern that although the management of the Institution is responsive to complaints, suggestions aimed at providing a better learning experience are not always taken on board. Nevertheless, the use of tools intended to measure stakeholders' satisfaction constituted, to the Panel, an indication that AOU Bahrain is concerned with monitoring the effectiveness of activities and services provided by the Student Affairs Department. The Panel thus considers this indicator as addressed.

#### **Recommendation**

- Improve documentation related to reviewing, monitoring and follow-up of support services provided to students with special needs.
- Investigate and address delays in the publication of grades, so as to prevent course registration complications for students.
- Conduct an in-depth, research-based study of the large numbers of at-risk students, in order to identify ways in which their academic progress could be improved.

**Judgement:** The Institution **addresses** Standard 5: Student Support Services

## Standard 6

### Human Resources Management

*The institution has appropriate human resource policies and procedures including staff development in place that demonstrably support and enhance the various operational activities of the institution.*

#### **Indicator 21: Human Resources**

*The institution employs human resources that are sufficient in number and appropriately qualified to achieve the mission and to provide good quality higher education.*

#### **Judgement: Addressed**

As indicated earlier in this Report, the practice at AOU Bahrain is for divisions and other entities to develop annual operational plans which aim to ensure that progress made against the strategic goals can be monitored. The HR Operational Plan guides departments towards achieving HR-related goals and associated KPIs identified in the Strategic Plan.

During the site visit, the Panel was informed of Bylaws for Academics which govern the appointment of all faculty members in all branches of AOU. The bylaws cover recruitment, renewal of contracts, holidays, sabbaticals, secondments, resignations, terminations and salary scales. In addition, AOU Bahrain has a 'Recruitment and Selection Procedures' document guiding appointments, which has been approved by the HEC. During meetings with staff and as a result of a review of evidence, the Panel noticed that faculty recruitment is a problem embodied in a shortage of staff in some faculties, which may impact quality of offerings. The Panel was also informed during interviews that each faculty maintains its own data on staff turnover rates and a related document providing an analysis for the entire institution was provided to the Panel during the site visit. Despite this, the Panel is of the view that staff shortages are an area for improvement; as, they not only result in remaining members of staff having to carry high teaching loads- a problem noted in exit surveys with faculty- but also in the employment of large numbers of part-time faculty members. The Panel therefore recommends that AOU Bahrain should implement a system that more effectively monitors staff turnover rates for the entire institution and identifies problems related to staff retention and areas where turnover is high. In addition, the Panel recommends that AOU Bahrain should develop and implement a long-term recruitment strategy or plan, in order to more efficiently fulfil its mission.

When new members of staff join AOU Bahrain, the HR Department of the Institution runs induction sessions for them. Induction sessions are monitored by the QAAD and include a set of workshops introducing the newly appointed staff members to AOU Bahrain policies, bylaws, the LMS, the SIS, the e-Library and Quality Assurance and Accreditation requirements. A template with a checklist is prepared for the purpose of evaluating the workshop and is completed by attendees. In the event that a newly appointed faculty member cannot attend any

of the workshops, make-up sessions are conducted. The Panel appreciates the comprehensive induction process for newly appointed staff and concludes that it is fit for purpose.

The HR Department is responsible for the safekeeping of all staff records with a file opened for each staff member. Hard and soft copies of records are kept with back-ups in soft-copy format. During the campus tour, the procedure used to store and update the records of all members of staff was demonstrated to the Panel. In 2012, a circular from the headquarters instructed that all staff files should include, in addition to personal information, updated CVs, original contracts with decisions to renew (if applicable), copies of qualifications, and all appraisals in addition to any other documents relating to the employees.

AOU Bahrain conducts annual performance appraisals for both administrative and academic staff. Part-time faculty members are also evaluated on the basis of feedback from students, tutorial and Tutor Marked Assignments monitoring sheets and the course coordinator's assessment of an individual's performance and work record. The results of staff appraisals and recommendations made by the direct supervisor, in conjunction with the AOU Internal Bylaws for Administrative Staff 2018 and Criteria for Granting Annual Allowances 2018, guide the promotion of administrative staff. As for academic staff promotions, these are guided by the AOU Bylaws, through the establishment of requirements in three areas: academic research (70%), teaching (20%), and community service (10%).

During the site visit, the Panel was informed that AOU Bahrain has implemented a workload allocation system which ensures adherence to the requirement that staff should work 35-40 hours per week. The hours required of academic staff are distributed between in-class and out-of-class hours (covering activities such as advising, research, committee work and community service). The Panel was informed that, following the bylaws, the average teaching load is 12 hours per week for an Assistant Professor and 10 hours per week for Associate Professors. A reduction of one hour is given for every administrative responsibility. The Panel also noted and appreciates the satisfaction expressed by academic staff with regard to the practice of not allocating teaching hours on Thursdays, in order to allow for research to be conducted.

AOU has a system in place for the investigation of complaints, grievances and appeals, related to both academic and administrative decisions. This process is governed by AOU's Complaints and Appeals Bylaws. Ad-Hoc Branch Complaint Committees are established depending on the nature of each complaint and decisions taken are forwarded to the branch senior management. In the event that the staff member is not satisfied with the outcome of the Branch Complaint Committee, the Centralized Appeal Committee at the AOU headquarters can be approached. Decisions of the Appeal Committee with justifications are submitted to the President for final evaluation and judgement. The QAAD ensures that complaints and appeals policies and procedures are updated and circulated to all staff members.

Finally, academic staff satisfaction at AOU Bahrain is measured at the end of every academic semester by means of 'Tutor Surveys' which concentrate on three major areas, namely: courses taught, facilities, and duties and operational aspects. The Institution also uses other surveys to evaluate training provided to staff. Staff members leaving the Institution are asked to complete an 'Employee Exit Survey', which gathers information on issues of concern to employees, their experience of working at AOU Bahrain and reasons for ending their service with the Institution.

In addition to Exit surveys, the Panel was informed that the HR Department also conducts interviews with all outgoing employees to discuss issues related to their work experience.

In conclusion, the Panel is of the view that overall this indicator is addressed.

### **Recommendations**

- Develop and implement a system that monitors turnover rates for the entire institution and which identifies problems related to staff retention and areas where turnover is high.
- Develop and implement a long-term recruitment plan that is based on a monitoring of staff turnover rates for the entire institution, in order to more efficiently fulfil the University mission.

### **Indicator 22: Staff Development**

*The institution has a systematic approach to staff development and provides opportunities for all staff to remain up-to-date in their areas of teaching, research and administration.*

### **Judgement: Addressed**

The Training, Continuous Education, and Community Service Department of AOU Bahrain is responsible for coordinating the professional development programmes for academic and administrative staff. The Institution also has a 'Staff Development and Procedures Policy' guiding staff development, and the Training Department has formulated a set of operating procedures aligned with this policy and other relevant rules and regulations.

Following HEC guidelines, 2% of AOU Bahrain's revenue is allocated to staff development. Based on a review of evidence submitted, training needs at AOU Bahrain are identified using the Training Needs Analysis form, which is completed on the basis of the appraisal process that encompasses student feedback surveys and peer reviews. Deans make recommendations for training on the basis of these analyses and these are forwarded to the HR and the Training Department in order to inform future training plans.

Performance Appraisal is conducted using an 'Academic Staff Appraisal Form' completed following a meeting between the appraisee and the appraiser. During the meeting, an 'Agreed Development Plan for the Coming Year' of the 'Performance Appraisal Form' is completed by the appraiser after discussion with the faculty member. Staff members are also encouraged to identify their own training needs and are encouraged to apply for membership for the Fellow of Higher Education Academy -currently known as Advance HE- in order to enhance their teaching.

Academic and administrative staff informed the Panel that they are also encouraged to attend conferences that contribute to their professional development. The Scientific Research Council (SRC) funds conference participation resulting in publication of papers in conference proceedings, while participation in a conference without presenting a paper is funded by the Training, Continuous Education and Community Service Department. The Panel was informed

that AOU Bahrain is in the process of developing appropriate mechanisms to share knowledge gained from professional development activities (e.g. conference attendance) among other faculty members, an action which the Panel recommends expediting. Additionally, the Institution facilitates participation in training workshops targeted at familiarizing faculty with the NQF requirements. AOU Bahrain also collects feedback on all training sessions using a specially designed form. Insights derived from this feedback are used to inform planning for future staff development activities. In conclusion, the Panel is of the view that efforts taken by AOU Bahrain to support professional staff development activities are proceeding in a satisfactory manner and contribute to the achievement of the mission of the Institution, by encouraging commitment to teaching, intellectual endeavour and community service. As a result, the Panel considers this indicator as addressed.

### **Recommendation**

- Expedite the development of measures to share knowledge gained at conferences and other intellectual events.

**Judgement:** The Institution **addresses** Standard 6: Human Resource Management

## Standard 7

### Research

*The institution has a strategic research plan appropriate for its mission that is translated into a well-resourced operational plan, which is implemented and monitored.*

#### **Indicator 23: Research**

*The institution has implemented a plan for the development of research [e.g. disciplinary specific, scholarship of teaching and learning] appropriate for its institutional type that includes monitoring its research output, together with policies and processes to ensure the ethical and effective conduct of research.*

#### **Judgement: Addressed**

Research features in AOU's mission statement, and the encouragement of research and the sourcing of additional funding for research activities is identified as an objective in the fourth institutional Strategic Plan 2017-2018/2021-2022. The Strategic Plan goes on to identify a set of performance indicators in relation to the realisation of this objective. These include numerical targets such as the number of papers produced as a result of research funding, the number of staff members presenting papers at refereed conferences and the average number of papers published by faculty employed at the Institution, as well as other 'softer' targets measured qualitatively. These include the degree of satisfaction expressed by researchers with research policies and the benefits accrued from collaboration with external research partners.

Research activities are managed by the Higher Committee for Scientific Research (HCSR), which is responsible for developing policy and identifying strategies intended to promote research. As already indicated in this Report, the practice at AOU is for individual entities to develop annual operational plans, in order to monitor progress against relevant KPIs in the Strategic Plan. The Panel was provided with a copy of a draft operational plan for the 2019-2020 academic year prepared by the HCSR. This is an indication of the intention on the part of AOU Bahrain to plan and monitor research production actively. The Panel, thus, encourages the HCSR to continue with these efforts.

AOU Bahrain maintains a database that records the research activity of academic staff members. The database follows HEC guidelines in recording research activity in the following categories: i) article publications, ii) books and book chapters, iii) copyrights/patents, and iv) postgraduate thesis supervision. A screenshot of the database was provided to the Panel as evidence.

A set of bylaws guide funding for participation in conferences and research activities. Research is one of the criteria used for promotion at AOU counting for 70% of the score used to evaluate applicants. In addition, it is incentivised using an Award for Excellence in Scientific Research.

Development of research capacity is promoted through the provision of workshops and other forms of training. Workshops have covered topics such as the SPSS software programme used for statistical analysis. AOU Bahrain has also participated in the workshop series offered by the HEC in conjunction with the British Council intended to build research capacity.

Following HEC regulations, AOU Bahrain allocates 3% of the revenue to research. Funding for research is managed by the HCSR according to a set of bylaws. Details of spending on research provided in the SER, however, show significant underspending of the amount available over a three-year period. For example, of the total budget available for research in the 2017-2018 academic year, only about 22% was spent. Clearly, funding is not a problem in relation to the objective of increasing research activity. However, the Panel recommends that AOU Bahrain should investigate the underspending on research funding more closely in order to try to ascertain the reasons why it is not being allocated to more researchers. The investigation may link amounts spent in different faculties to the KPIs in faculty operational plans as a means of monitoring their achievement. This would allow the Institution to finetune its strategy for increasing research activity and provide closer monitoring of its implementation.

As for the ethical and safe conduct of research, there are effective implemented policies. Ethical approval for research projects is governed by bylaws and follows HEC requirements. In interviews, however, the Panel was able to confirm that, although the bylaws require the establishment of an Ethical Research Committee, ethical approval was currently being handled by the HCSC. In addition, during the site visit, the Panel did not find evidence to show that ethical approval processes were being applied when grant proposals or MBA research projects were reviewed. For instance, one project used data mining (and big data analytics) in higher education to evaluate students' performance. There was no evidence that the HCSR checked the way in which the project aimed to protect the privacy of students' data at the proposal stage.

Accordingly, the Panel thus recommends that an Ethical Research Committee at the AOU Bahrain level should be established without delay and that clear procedures for the process of applying for and granting ethical approval should be developed with some urgency. The Panel also urges the Institution to consider activities to ensure that faculty members understand the need for ethical practice in research and how this can be best achieved.

Overall the Panel is of the view that AOU Bahrain addresses most of the requirements of this indicator. Hence, the Panel considers this indicator addressed.

### **Recommendation**

- Conduct an investigation into the ongoing underspending on the research budget along the lines of faculties, in order to identify obstacles preventing faculty members from doing research.
- Establish an Ethical Research Committee at the AOU Bahrain level and develop mechanisms to expedite the process of applying for and providing ethical approval for research projects.

### **Indicator 24: Higher degrees with research [where applicable]**

*Where the institution offers higher degrees that include a research component, it provides effective supervision and resources for research students and ensures that its research degrees are of an appropriate level for the programme.*

**Judgement:** Addressed

AOU Bahrain offers an MBA programme in conjunction with OUM. This programme encompasses courses requiring research. Examples of such courses include: 'Technologies for Digital Media' (T325) and 'Business Research Methods' (BMBR5103). In order for the MBA degree to be awarded, students also need to complete the 'MBA Master's Project' course (BMPP6106). The MBA Programme Specification provides a list of all courses comprising the MBA programme with intended learning outcomes shown for each course.

As the MBA degree is awarded by OUM, the policies and procedures of the partner institution governing supervision apply. These are detailed in OUM's Postgraduate Handbook and Administrative, and Academic Guidelines. The supervision of research students is carried out by academics from AOU Bahrain and others from the Kingdom as well as academics from OUM. The SER notes that the allocation of MBA research projects to supervisors is dependent on the rank of the supervisor, with professors taking up to five students, associate professors up to four, and assistant professors up to three. The Panel was informed that supervisors from OUM supervise students virtually/online. A draft policy on advising and supervising has been developed at AOU Bahrain. This document, which is undated, notes that the policy awaits approval from the Branch Council, which will take place 'next month'.

The AOU Bahrain Appointment of Supervisors for Postgraduate Research Committee is responsible for allocating supervisors and monitoring the supervisory process. MBA students are required to submit progress reports at the end of each semester. These reports are then reviewed and approved by their supervisors. A dedicated subcommittee of the AOU Bahrain Appointment of Supervisors for Postgraduate Research Committee is appointed to oversee each student's progress. Examination Committees are also appointed for each project. As for capacity building, MBA students at AOU Bahrain are provided with opportunities to participate in workshops and events organized mainly for the professional development of academics. In light of the aforementioned, the Panel is satisfied with these policies and procedures in place at AOU Bahrain and finds them sufficient to ensure the effective supervision of research students and to contribute to their capacity building.

MBA students benefit from the available IT and Library (and e-library) resources and from other facilities such as laboratories. During the site visit, both staff and students associated with the MBA programme indicated their satisfaction with the facilities and resources made available to them.

The MBA programme requires a research project to be completed over two semesters. The results of the research are presented in the form of a report and students are also required to provide

examiners with an oral presentation on their work. Details of the research report format are provided as a set of guidelines in the MBA Research Project Specification document. The Master's Project Evaluation Form also provides details of what is expected in the report.

The MBA thesis examination committee consists of three members: the supervisor, an internal examiner from AOU Bahrain, and an external examiner, though it is not explicitly clear if the latter should also be from outside OUM or not. Although details of examiners are provided in the Final Project Evaluation Forms/Examinations, these details do not include the examiners' institutional affiliations. Also, although external examiners are formally appointed by the HR Department, the Panel could not find evidence of the procedure whereby an external examiner is selected. Furthermore, the Panel notes that the document entitled 'Nomination of Supervisors' Submission of Master's Project' offers a different account of the flow than that followed at AOU Bahrain, which includes the appointment of an examination committee with an external examiner, and an oral presentation. Hence, the Panel recommends that this document should be revised to reflect the AOU Bahrain reality and a clear procedure for the selection of external examiners should be developed. Nonetheless, the Panel acknowledges the existence of a sound mechanism for the examination of research theses.

Overall the Panel is of the view that AOU Bahrain addresses most of the requirements of this indicator. Hence, the Panel considers this indicator addressed.

#### **Recommendation**

- Revise the document entitled 'Nomination of Supervisors' Submission of Master's Project' to reflect the current practice at the Institution and develop a clear procedure for the selection of external examiners.

**Judgement:** The Institution **addresses** Standard 7: Research

## Standard 8

### Community Engagement

*The institution has a clear community engagement plan that is aligned with its mission and which is operational.*

#### **Indicator 25: Community Engagement**

*The institution has conceptualized and defined the ways in which it will serve and engage with local communities in order to discharge its social responsibilities.*

#### **Judgement:** Addressed

According to the SER, Community Engagement (CE) is at the core of AOU's purpose as an institution committed to open and distance learning. CE appears in AOU's mission, and the latest Strategic Plan covering the academic years 2017-2018 to 2021-2022 identifies two values in this regard: (1) '... boosting the relationship between the university and the local community... contributing to its growth and development', and (2) '... to enable our human resources to cope with progress and advancement in human knowledge...'.

The Strategic Plan forms the basis for AOU's Framework for Community Engagement and Outreach. This framework, developed in 2015, defines CE and Outreach, explains the possible classes of relevant activities, and presents a strategy and plan for possible activities along with the assessment of their effectiveness. In 2017, the AOU Community Engagement and Outreach Policy was developed. This identifies responsibility for CE-related activities, the way the policy should be implemented, monitored and reported upon.

Annual Operational plans for 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 have been produced along with two half-yearly plans for the same period as well as for the academic years from 2017-2020. Having perused these reports, the Panel is of the view that previously some confusion existed between activities that could be considered as training and extracurricular activities involving staff and students on the one hand and those that could constitute CE on the other. In interviews, the Panel learned that, previously, CE activities tended to be *ad hoc* and based on ideas emanating from faculty, administrative staff and students with little planning. A total of 39 activities are reported for the period under consideration.

From the academic year 2019-2020, however, CE appears to have taken a new direction, mainly due to the development of the AOU Bahrain Community Engagement Plan in December 2019. This plan clearly defines areas constituting CE, identifies strategic themes for this core endeavour, and details processes to be used to plan and monitor activities. In addition, the Panel learned that about 20 public and private institutions have been consulted with regard to their needs and a CE action plan is being prepared that takes these into account. The Panel is of the view that, conceptually, CE and Outreach is now well-defined at AOU Bahrain and that policies provide clarity on how it should be managed and monitored. The Panel also acknowledges the

creation of the new CE framework at AOU Bahrain and recommends its implementation immediately.

The AOU Framework for Community Engagement and Outreach and the AOU Community Engagement and Outreach Policy refer to a branch Community Engagement and Outreach Advisory Council, a branch Community Engagement and Outreach Committee, and a Training, Continuous Education & Community Service Department. At the start of the 2019-2020 academic year, a new Head of Training, Continuous Education & Community Centre was appointed. The Panel learned that the responsibility for CE rests solely with this individual. The Panel recommends that more human resources should be made available for CE activities, as the amount of work to be done is clearly beyond the scope of one individual.

Although a number of CE activities were organised during the period of 2016–2019, no feedback was collected on them from participants, apart from some letters of appreciation. In addition, the Panel found no evidence of the use of satisfaction surveys or other instruments used to gauge the effectiveness of CE activities. Nonetheless, the Panel is satisfied that the monitoring and evaluation of CE activities now form a part of the CE processes defined in the AOU Bahrain Community Engagement Plan. Still, however, implementation of the plan is strongly encouraged.

Finally, The AOU Bahrain CE Plan now includes a CE Activities Log. The Panel notes the existence of this log and recommends it should take an electronic format that encompasses the identification of clear mechanisms for the monitoring of the effectiveness of all AOU Bahrain CE activities.

Overall, given the newly developed CE framework and considering that AOU Bahrain has started taking steps in the right direction with regard to CE activities, the Panel finds this indicator as addressed.

### **Recommendation**

- Immediately put into effect the newly developed community engagement framework and provide additional human resources to effectively support community engagement activities.
- Implement the Community Engagement Activities Log in an electronic format and ensure that it includes the identification of mechanisms used to monitor effectiveness of all community engagement activities.

**Judgement:** The Institution **addresses** Standard 8: Community Engagement