



هيئة ضمان جودة التعليم و التدريب
Quality Assurance Authority for Education & Training

Higher Education Review Unit

Programme Review Report

Master of Business Administration

Ahlia University

Kingdom of Bahrain

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1. The Programme Review Process

1.1 The Programme Review Framework

The *four* indicators used to measure whether or not a programme meets minimum standards are as follows:

Indicator 1: Curriculum

Indicator 2: Efficiency of the programme

Indicator 3: Academic standards of the graduates

Indicator 4: Effectiveness of quality management and assurance

Conclusions reached are in terms of minimum standards, and the summative judgment falls into one of three categories:

- (i) *The programme satisfies all four indicators and gives confidence, or*
- (ii) *There is limited confidence because up to two indicators are not satisfied, or*
- (iii) *There is no confidence in the programme because more than two indicators are not satisfied.*

1.2 The programme review process at Ahlia University

The programme review of the Master of Business Administration (MBA) of Ahlia University (AU) was conducted by the Higher Education Review Unit (HERU) of the Quality Assurance Authority for Education and Training (QAAET) in terms of its mandate to review the quality of higher education in Bahrain. This Report provides an account of the HERU programme review process and the findings of the Review Panel based on the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) and appendices submitted by AU, the supplementary documentation made available during the site visit, as well as interviews and observations made during the review site visit, which was conducted on 26-27 October 2011.

AU was notified by the HERU/QAAET in June 2010 that it would be subject to a programme quality review of its MBA programme with the site visit taking place during February-April 2011. In preparation for the programme review, AU submitted a SER with appendices on the agreed date in November 2010. With the site visit postponed to October 2011, an update was requested on 2 August 2011. It is expected that AU will use the findings presented in this Report to strengthen its MBA.

Ahlia University is a private university located in Bahrain. It was established in 2001 and was the first private university to be licensed by the government of Bahrain. It comprises six Colleges, namely: Arts, Science and Education; Business and Finance; Engineering; Graduate Studies and Research; Information Technology; and Medical and Health Sciences.

Ahlia University offers a wide range of undergraduate programmes in a variety of degree courses. It also offers postgraduate programmes in Mass Communication and Public Relations, Business Administration and Information Technology and Computer Science. The MBA programme, which is housed in the College of Business and Finance, was first offered in the academic year 2002-2003 with eight students. In collaboration with Brunel University (UK), Ahlia University also offers a PhD programme.

The MBA programme, which is housed in the College of Business and Finance, was first offered in the academic year 2002-2003 with eight students. In the academic year 2009-2010 there were 228 students registered for the MBA programme, and according to the SER, there are three full-time staff on the MBA programme and another ten for whom their MBA teaching is only a part of their overall teaching load.

2. Indicator 1: Curriculum

The programme complies with existing regulations in terms of the curriculum, the teaching and the assessment of students' achievements; the curriculum demonstrates fitness for purpose.

- 2.1 The aims of the MBA programme are clearly stated and overall are in line with the stated mission of Ahlia University and the College of Business and Finance. There is evidence of an attempt to achieve a suitable balance of the aims across theoretical and practical areas. The AU mission, the College of Business and Finance mission and the MBA programme aims are aligned.
- 2.2 The designated programme and course specifications are delineated through clearly stated intended learning outcomes (ILOs). ILOs are expressed in course structures and are differentiated according to course specifications, while ILOs are expressed in course specifications through subject themes. There is evidence of a range of appropriate teaching, learning and assessment methods. However, one limitation observed by the Review Panel is that the programme and course ILOs are not adequately aligned with, or address, current business practices. Moreover, in terms of curriculum content, AU is recommended to place greater emphasis on the incorporation of business ethics and social and corporate responsibility related ILOs for the MBA programme as a whole and for its individual courses.
- 2.3 The MBA curriculum is carefully planned and structured with clear course pre-requisites and programme entry criteria. The choice of learning pathways is appropriately delineated *via* the use of co-electives, and the option of alternative dissertation routes. It comprises six core courses (18 credits), two core elective courses (6 credits), and one of two dissertation tracks. Dissertation track 1 consists of 12 credits with Dissertation track 2 comprising 6 credits and two further elective courses (6 credits). Students choose their fields of specialisation for the dissertation with guidance from faculty members. Functional core courses provide a good mix of theory and practice, but the balance between knowledge and skills has not been made explicit. Workloads for students are commensurate with those of similar MBA programmes.
- 2.4 There is evidence of cohesion among course syllabus/specifications for all courses as they follow a standard template. The syllabus has been documented in terms of breadth, depth, and relevance, *via* the adoption of a standardised approach within which consistent articulation of ILOs has been adopted. There is clear evidence that regular reviews and updates take place, while curriculum content, textbooks and references are regularly reviewed.

- 2.5 A variety of teaching and learning approaches are employed, with teaching and learning approaches being tailored to the achievements of ILOs. A mix of a quantitative, problem-solving approach and a case-based approach, together with group discussions and debates is the dominant mode. An examination of additional material provided for the site visit showed that programme specification documents provide clear details of appropriate and relevant teaching and learning methods.
- 2.6 Course syllabus/specifications delineate clearly the range of assessment methods and marking criteria. The evaluation, assessment and ranking procedures for students' achievements are carefully explained in course syllabus/specifications. The relevant faculty members provide feedback to students about their achievements and performances, all of which are subject to appropriate rules and regulations. The balance between formative and summative assessments is outlined, but lacks adequate details. In contrast, the arrangements for the assessment of a dissertation are well-detailed. The Panel recommends AU to incorporate a policy on diagnostic, formative and summative assessment in the formal teaching, learning and assessment strategies across all MBA courses.
- 2.7 In coming to its conclusion regarding the curriculum, the Review Panel notes, *with appreciation*, the following:
- The designated programme and course specifications are delineated through clearly stated ILOs.
 - The choice of learning pathways is appropriately delineated *via* the use of co-electives and the option of alternative dissertation routes.
 - The syllabus has been documented in terms of breadth, depth, and relevance, and consistent articulation of ILOs has been adopted.
 - There is evidence of good practice in relation to the use of integrated synthesis of curriculum map across the programme that clearly outlined the alternative learning pathway associated with the track 1 and track 2 dissertation themes.
 - Assessments of dissertations/theses are well-detailed.
- 2.8 In terms of improvement the Review Panel **recommends** that the College of Business and Finance should:
- re-examine programme and course ILOs in order to ensure continued alignment with, or address, current business practice
 - incorporate a policy on diagnostic, formative and summative assessment in the formal teaching, learning and assessment strategies across all MBA courses.
- 2.9 **Judgement**
- On balance, the Review Panel concludes that the programme **satisfies the indicator on curriculum.**

3. Indicator 2: Efficiency of the programme

The programme is efficient in terms of the use of available resources, the admitted students and the ratio of admitted students to successful graduates.

- 3.1 There is a clear policy, consistently applied since the inception of the MBA programme, for the admission of students to the MBA programme. The profile of admitted students is appropriate for admission to the programme. The overall profile of current MBA students is also consistent with that of the alumni group which was interviewed. Furthermore, it is evident that the IT system put in place to record student admission and student progression is being constantly improved internally to provide an effective mechanism for enhancing the matching of the profile of admitted students to the MBA programme aims and the available resources.
- 3.2 There were 13 faculty members associated with the MBA programme in the 2009-2010 academic year. These figures generate a 1:17.5 staff-student ratio for the MBA programme for this academic year. The faculty members were from diverse backgrounds, well qualified, holding relevant PhD degrees, with a number having relevant business experience. An examination of the faculty members' CVs shows a clear focus on scholarly activities and relevant research publications over the last three years that serve to underpin the MBA programme.
- 3.3 The Review Panel members undertook a tour of the main buildings, laboratories, teaching rooms, administrative and IT facilities. The classrooms, computer laboratories and IT facilities were found to be adequate and appropriate for the delivery of the MBA programme. However, there was no specific space allocated to the MBA students to allow or encourage them to meet, to exchange ideas, and to be used as a student-centred MBA learning resource. In an interview held with a group of current MBA students, it was evident that they would like to have a specific area on the campus dedicated to the MBA cohorts.
- 3.4 The Review Panel conducted a tour of the library and the e-learning resources available to the MBA students. The library is small and is fully utilised by all students registered in the University. There was no specific section allocated to the MBA programme materials and resources, but there are adequate copies of relevant text books and key journals in business and management. The Review Panel was given a detailed tour of the e-learning facilities by the library staff. It was evident that attempts are continually being made to enhance these key learning resources for the MBA students. In an interview held with the current MBA students, it was clear that students are satisfied with the library facilities, despite its small size and they appreciate the continuous improvements being made to enhance the e-learning resources.

- 3.5 In an interview conducted by the Review Panel with a group of current MBA students, the students pointed out that they tend to make full use of learning and teaching facilities available to them. In particular, the e-learning resources tend to be fully utilised by them. Furthermore, the students emphasised that they have access to the faculty members for academic consultation while they study. The MBA alumni group are in agreement with the current MBA students on the usage of the teaching and learning resources available to them while they were studying for their MBAs. In addition, the data on the student usage of learning resources made available during the site visit, testify to a high rate of utilisation of these facilities.
- 3.6 All newly admitted MBA students, including those transferred from other institutions, are given university-wide induction and orientation sessions at the start of each new academic year. Both the current and the alumni group of students confirmed these arrangements and indicated that they found these induction sessions useful.
- 3.7 Every MBA student upon admission is allocated an advisor who provides the student with support and guidance throughout the period of the MBA programme. Moreover, every MBA student is allocated an academic supervisor while preparing the dissertation who continues to supervise the student until graduation. It was evident, based on the discussion with the alumni group that the provision of academic supervision is of good quality.
- 3.8 Cohort analysis of the MBA students is carried out on an annual basis. It was evident during the tour of the facilities that the IT department has been able to improve its data collection and analysis procedures on an on-going basis and to improve the level of information collected on key activities of all students, including the MBA cohorts. There is, however, a need to use this information more effectively, both operationally and strategically. One example of this would be by setting targets for both annual admission and graduation, in order to improve the graduation rate of the MBA students. Out of the total of 547 students admitted to the MBA programme since its inception in the 2002-2003 academic year, to date only 146 students, i.e., 26.7%, have graduated. However, 440 students have been retained, giving a much higher retention rate of 80.4%.
- 3.9 In coming to its conclusion regarding the efficiency, the Review Panel notes, *with appreciation*, the following:
- Appropriate arrangements are in place for improving the matching of the profile of admitted students to MBA programme aims and resources.
 - The number of faculty members, their academic qualifications, professional experience and their recent research publications are appropriate to underpin the MBA programme.

- On-going improvements are being made to the MBA e-learning facilities to enhance students' learning experiences.
- Appropriate arrangements are in place for the induction of newly admitted students and for ensuring that all students receive continuing guidance and support.
- Cohort analysis of the MBA students is carried out on an annual basis.

3.10 In terms of improvement, the Review Panel **recommends** that the College of Business and Finance should:

- designate a specific area on campus as the MBA learning centre to foster and encourage student-centred learning
- give consideration to determining an annual admission target and an annual graduation rate target for the students of the MBA programme
- consider expanding the library facilities.

3.11 Judgement

On balance, the Review Panel concludes that the programme **satisfies the indicator on efficiency of the programme.**

4. Indicator 3: Academic standards of the graduates

The graduates of the programme meet acceptable academic standards in comparison with equivalent programmes in Bahrain and worldwide.

- 4.1 The educational aims of the MBA programme are broadly in line with the stated mission of the AU aspiration for relevant education and educational excellence. There is clear evidence of an attempt to achieve a balance in the educational aims at Master's level, across theoretical and practical domains reflecting the need to provide MBA cohorts with the foundations for both further studies and for the development of key leadership, strategic decision making, and problem solving and related research, as well as analytical and 'soft' skills for use in middle and senior management roles locally, in the region and internationally.
- 4.2 The use of Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) in the communication of programme evolution and course syllabus, and in the teaching and learning strategies, indicates attempts at differentiating academic performance benchmarks between MBA courses reflecting the intention to deepen as well as widen the MBA candidates' knowledge and understanding. The approach adopted by AU for its MBA programme is, in general, appropriate for a Master's level programme, as is the perceived aspiration expressed by the AU programme team during the site visit to 'continuously improve' the curriculum and ILOs, in order to ensure that the MBA programme continues to be in line with institutional guidelines.
- 4.3 The use of material such as case studies, contextualised to Bahrain, the use of guest lecturers and the introduction of a research methodology course are three notable examples of a number of areas where the MBA programme team adopted creative techniques to enhance the student learning experience. This is a clear attempt to improve academic progression in the MBA and to follow one of the two alternative learning pathways that students may choose in the programme.
- 4.4 Ahlia University benchmarks its MBA course and programme content with equivalent institutions in the region and internationally; as a result of this activity more quantitative courses were introduced.
- 4.5 The detailed cohort analysis has highlighted that the number of actual graduates from the AU MBA programme is actually somewhat small, compared with those registered on the programme. It was not entirely clear why this was the case. The Panel welcomes the programme team's pursuit of international collaboration and accreditation of the MBA degree to assist in the external verification of academic standards across courses.

- 4.6 The grading criteria adopted for the sample of MBA courses are relatively transparent and are broadly appropriate for an MBA. However, quizzes and multiple choice class tests are part of the assessment strategy of a number of Master's level courses. Many faculty members were not able to explain why such assessment instruments had been adopted, nor the part played by diagnostic, formative and summative assessment instruments in the overarching MBA teaching, learning and assessment strategies within and across courses and levels.
- 4.7 Internal moderation of MBA course grades takes place at the end of the assessment cycle after the final examinations, thus on a reactive basis as a result of students appealing their grades. The Panel recommends that AU formalise a proactive internal moderation policy across all courses in the MBA programme.
- 4.8 External moderation was found to be adopted *via* the use of two external assessors, for the dissertation component only. The two external assessors also have a role in the supervision of the MBA candidate as well as an independent adjudicator of the grade awarded for the thesis. The Panel recommends that AU develop a more detailed policy for the appointment of external examiners, which includes the duration of formal appointment, and distinguish the independent role of the external examiner as an independent moderator of marks for all courses offered by the MBA programme.
- 4.9 The sample of dissertations reviewed during the site visit, for both streams, evidenced the academic standards expected of MBA candidates and were found to be broadly appropriate for the stated programme and course ILOs.
- 4.10 AU's key stakeholders were generally satisfied with graduate standards set and the levels of academic attainment associated with the AU MBA and viewed the AU MBA, overall, as being 'fit for purpose'.
- 4.11 In coming to its conclusion regarding the academic standards, the Review Panel notes, *with appreciation*, the following:
- The use of a wide range of teaching methods and materials.
 - Benchmarking its MBA course and programme content with equivalent institutions regionally and internationally.
- 4.12 In terms of improvement, the Review Panel **recommends** that the College of Business and Finance should:
- develop a formal policy for the appointment of external examiners both for the courses and the dissertation
 - formalise its internal moderation policy across all courses.

4.13 Judgement

On balance, the Review Panel concludes that the programme **satisfies the indicator on academic standards of the graduates.**

5. Indicator 4: Effectiveness of quality management and assurance

The arrangements in place for managing the programme, including quality assurance, give confidence in the programme.

- 5.1 There is clear evidence of a well-structured and full-bodied approach to quality assurance. Detailed policies, procedures and regulations are published in the AU Catalogue, on the website and the 'SharePoint' intranet. There are manuals and handbooks that articulate these policies, guidelines and procedures. There is a central repository for policy, procedure and regulation documents. Procedures exist for the dissemination of current policies, procedures and regulations and for the orientation of new faculty members. The implementation of policies, procedures and regulations is monitored by the Centre for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CAQA) and senior staff. Working groups exist that facilitate the enforcement of policies, procedures and regulations.
- 5.2 From an examination of minutes of meetings and other quality assurance material provided during the site visit, there was evidence of a quality approach to the MBA programme. Regular reviews take place between the Dean of the College, the MBA Director and faculty members. Minutes of the MBA Committee meetings are circulated to all faculty members. Programme reviews, MBA ILO reviews and course reviews are conducted. Internal reviews on quality aspects are carried out by CAQA and relevant Deans and Chairpersons. Reviews include auditing of programme and course files. Changes to curricula, programme specification and course syllabus/specification are dealt with through a specified process.
- 5.3 There is a system in place to collect relevant data from all key stakeholders to inform decision making processes for the MBA programme. In terms of internal reporting and monitoring, there is adequate detail supporting the willingness to accommodate feedback from stakeholders. Satisfaction surveys are conducted among stakeholders on an annual basis. These include faculty members, students, alumni and potential employers of the MBA graduates. Results are analysed by the Centre for Measurement and Evaluation and are then channelled to AU management for more informed decision-making. There are procedures for providing feedback from the surveys to the stakeholders. Although the survey results show a high level of satisfaction from graduates with the learning experiences, there was little evidence that feedback from employers to enhance the MBA programme was utilised effectively.
- 5.4 Quality assurance is a continuous process. There is a comprehensive University Quality Enhancement Plan (UQEP), while the College of Business and Finance has

developed an operational plan that deals with benchmarking procedures. There are mechanisms for monitoring continuous improvement of teaching and learning, curriculum revision and development, and faculty research enhancement. The UQEP has enhanced several areas through improvement planning. The College improvement plan has enabled the implementation of several improvement initiatives.

- 5.5 There are comprehensive arrangements for identifying the on-going development needs of the MBA faculty members. In-house training is offered as part of its staff development programme. This includes workshops, lectures and seminars. There is a University Award and Incentive Scheme to encourage academic research and conference attendance. Good performance in teaching, community engagement and administration is recognised through semester and annual performance reviews. Leave is provided for staff to attend conferences and for faculty sabbaticals. Financial rewards are offered to faculty for publications in reputed journals.
- 5.6 In coming to its conclusion regarding the effectiveness of quality management and assurance, the Review Panel notes, with appreciation, the following:
- There is clear evidence of a well-structured and full-bodied approach to quality assurance.
 - There is a system in place to collect relevant data from all key stakeholders to inform decision making processes for the MBA programme.
 - There are mechanisms for monitoring continuous improvement of teaching and learning, curriculum revision and development, and faculty research enhancement.
 - There are comprehensive arrangements for identifying the on-going development needs of the MBA faculty members.
- 5.7 In terms of improvement, the Review Panel *recommends* that the College of Business and Finance should:
- establish a more effective internal review and reporting process for the MBA programme
 - make more effective use of key stakeholders, in particular employers of the MBA graduates, to enhance the MBA programme.

5.8 Judgement

On balance, the Review Panel concludes that the programme **satisfies the indicator on effectiveness of quality management and assurance.**

6. Conclusion

Taking into account the institution's own self-evaluation report, the evidence gathered from the interviews and documentation made available during the site visit, the Review Panel draws the following conclusion in accordance with the *HERU/QAAET Programme Review Handbook, 2009*:

There is confidence in the Master of Business Administration Programme offered by Ahlia University.