



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

Higher Education Review Unit

Programme Review Report

Bachelors in Business Administration Programme

Arab Open University- Bahrain Branch

Kingdom of Bahrain

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1. The Programme Review Process

1.1 The programme review framework

Four indicators are used to measure whether or not a programme meets minimum standards. These 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

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 Arab Open University-Bahrain

The programme review of the Bachelors in Business Administration (BBA) of Arab Open University Bahrain (BAOU) 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 BAOU, the supplementary documentation made available during the site visit, as well as interviews and observations made during the review site visit.

BAOU was notified by the HERU/QAAET in January 2009 that it would be subject to a programme quality review of its BBA programme with the site visit taking place during 2009. In preparation for the programme review, BAOU conducted its programme self-evaluation and submitted a SER with appendices on the agreed date in July 2009. The quality review site visit took place on 30th September and 1st October 2009. It is expected that the BAOU will use the findings presented in this Report to strengthen its BBA programme.

BAOU started operations in February 2003 as part of the Pan-Arab operation of AOU which currently operates in 7 countries and is planned to start in 2 additional countries soon. The University graduated its first cohort of Bachelor students in March 2007 (128 students) in its three licensed programmes.

The three Bachelor programmes offered by the University are (1) Information Technology and Computing; (2) Information and Computing with Business; and (3) Business

Administration. Only the latter is covered in this report. There are currently around 600 students enrolled in the Bachelors in Business Administration.

The University operates on an 'open learning model' which is different from the conventional delivery model of other universities, with face-to-face (in-class) teaching delivery limited to only 25% of the total teaching time. This model, best popularized by the Open University UK (UKOU), enables a greater reach to 'a wide base of higher education seekers'. The model was clearly explained during the site visit and the Panel feels comfortable enough to evaluate the Bachelors in Business Administration programme based on the QAAET Programme Review Methodology.

QAAET has established guidelines and indicators for the evaluation of conventional programmes with no special provisions for Open Learning models like AOU's. Although the Review Panel is bound by the QAAET programme indicators, it has made an effort to adapt some of the indicators to the specific situation of AOU. This is particularly true for teaching and learning strategies, student retention and teaching load of faculty.

Though not for profit, AOU operates primarily based on a tuition-based revenue model. The governance structure is integrated throughout the branches with the headquarters located in Kuwait. As such BAOU is centrally regulated and controlled by the AOU-Headquarter (HQ). The AOU network is run based on a hybrid model where operations are run locally within the branches and academic planning operates centrally. There is a consolidated budget for all branches, yet BAOU has enough autonomy to run its own initiatives especially those mandated by the local Bahraini context.

The present programme review exercise is limited to the Bahrain operations of AOU, irrespective of its membership in a wider 'Pan-Arab' network. However, it was necessary to consider the activities of AOU-HQ because many key academic processes such as Quality Assurance for instance operate centrally as well as locally. For example, Course Chairs operate from remote nodes in the network.

The SER would have gained in clarity by following the formats of template 1 and 2 included in Appendix 4 of the 'Higher Education Programme Reviews' document by QAAET. Summary of the programme and data set was largely missing with related information mostly scattered through the large number of supporting documents. Having said that, BAOU was generally transparent in its approach to the review process and provided positive as well as critical information of its activities.

Other than *via* events such as the current QAA review, the Bachelors in Business Administration is subjected to the validation services of the UKOU through a formal process of external evaluation for courses and programme accreditation every five years. Agreements with UKOU cover licensing of materials, consultancies, accreditation, and validation. Therefore, this review exercise has greatly benefited from the ongoing OUVS (Open University Validation Services) as evidenced in the document on 'Annual Programme Evaluation of the BA programme for 2007-08' and several external examiners

reports that were made available during the site visit. A significant amount of data for this report was retrieved from such documents.

There are 4 full-time and 1 part-time staff teaching on the Bachelors in Business Administration Programme; 3 of whom hold doctorate degrees.

The Bachelors in Business Administration is a programme of the UK Open University. However it has been augmented to between 128 and 135 credits hours from the 96 required by UKOU; in order to fall in line with the HEC requirements. Programme regulations, regarding the aspects of compulsory course content, have been amended, during the academic year 2007-2008 in line with The Kingdom of Bahrain's Ministry of Education policy.

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 educational aims of the programme would appear to be broadly in line with the stated mission of the AOU and to comply with HEC regulations. There is clear evidence of an attempt to achieve a balance in the educational aims across theoretical and practical domains reflecting the need to provide participants with both the foundations for further studies and for the development of employability skills for use in the workplace.
- 2.2 The designated learning outcomes are appropriately delineated across 'knowledge and understanding, cognitive skills, key skills and practical and professional skills'. The utilisation of a range of appropriate teaching, learning and assessment methods was evidenced. Although these generic skills would appear to be broadly appropriate for the programme aims, there is no indication of how key 'soft' skills necessary for business will be developed in the programme. In terms of evidencing an overarching academic philosophy and framework for teaching and learning, there is considerable merit in the fact that the BAOU SER provided an integrated synthesis of curriculum across the programme and an outline of the aggregate linkage between the programme learning outcomes and courses.
- 2.3 The use of Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) in the design and communication of syllabus, teaching and learning strategies, and performance benchmarks is in general impressive. From the SER, it is evident that an effort has been made to utilise the course descriptors as a means of devising and communicating learning and personal development. In addition, attempts have clearly been made to 'adapt' (contextualise) some of the generic UKOU context to the local market, *via* consultation with key stakeholders. This is, in the view, of the Review Panel, evidence of good practice.
- 2.4 The use of ILOs in the communication of programme evolution and course syllabus, and in the teaching and learning strategies, reflect the differentiated performance benchmarks between levels reflecting the desire to deepen as well as widen students' knowledge and understanding. This approach is in general impressive, as is the perceived emphasis of the programme team to 'continuously improve' curriculum content, in order to ensure that it is in line with both institutional and QAAET guidelines. The use of material such as the Business Degree Plan - Bahrain Branch, was one notable example of a number of instances of the adoption of 'good practice', in relation to the communication to students of academic progression and the alternative learning pathways that they may adopt.
- 2.5 BAOU makes an impressive case for the attainment of Indicator 3.5. The aspiration to '... continuously improve' teaching, learning and assessment strategies, is evidence of good practice in relation to teaching and learning (SER: 19). Similarly, the development and

adoption of tailored courseware Arab Campus E-Learning System (ACES) are impressive illustrations of the proactive manner in which new learning technologies have been incorporated within the teaching and learning, and assessment strategy of the programme, with the aim of enhancing the students learning experiences.

2.6 One limitation identified by the Review Panel, is that the programme learning outcomes are not expressed in a manner which reflects the increasingly globalised context of Business and Management; e.g. in terms of cross-cultural understanding or cross-cultural management. The Review Panel, was, however, somewhat reassured during the site visit that the globalisation context was embedded in the delivery of the courses.

2.7 The SER has cited the use of ACES as the basis for content delivery, communication and assessment. There was evidence during the site visit of the implementation of this pedagogical approach in relation to its utilisation as an administrative 'hub' for student induction, information dissemination, and a platform for communication with BAOU lecturers and support staff. The examples cited to the Review Panel, e.g. the use of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for the tracking of students, the initiation of dialogue, and as the (potential) basis for feedback on formative and summative assessment during the site visit, was impressive. However, the development of learning communities, and communities of practice through the VLE, do not yet appear to have been fully realised on the programme. Overall, with specific reference to student performance monitoring and self- and tutor evaluation, it was evident to the Review Panel that there were numerous examples of good practice in relation to the selection and implementation of student assessment and feedback methods.

2.8 In coming to its conclusion regarding the curriculum, the Review Panel notes, with appreciation, the following:

- There is evidence of a balance between knowledge and skills sufficient to meet programme needs; the application of theory to practice, and adoption of a critical perspective in the academic domain
- There is evidence of academic progression and learning from year to year
- The breadth of integration in the curriculum shows evidence of good practice
- There is evidence of a significant effort in fostering autonomous and self-learning by students
- There is a clear attempt to implement the Learning Outcome approach to curriculum development and delivery
- There is a clear attempt to achieve both formative and summative assessment
- There is some evidence of a balanced approach to contextualization

- Evidence was presented to show the fulfilment of blended learning requirements through appropriate self-learning and teaching facilitation
- There are clear efforts by faculty and staff to keep students engaged in the learning process
- The standardization of content and a common evaluation and quality assurance approach across the AOU network facilitates student mobility.

2.9 In terms of improvement, the Review Panel **recommends** that the College should:

- Address the lack of orientation towards soft skills in terms of programme ILOs
- Increase the level of external stakeholder engagement in curriculum design
- Address the absence of sufficient internationalization of the curriculum beyond the UK context
- Enhance the incorporation of local contextualisation of academic provision in relation to syllabus content and overall student learning experience
- Enhance and improve the consistency of the academic performance feedback to students in terms of scope, depth and detail
- Develop a policy for addressing the over dependence on generic UK – centric ‘pre-packaged’ academic material and content in relation to teaching materials
- Develop a revised teaching and learning strategy which is more effective in encouraging students to engage more fully in the on-line learning process.

2.10 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 The student handbook includes clear guidelines for admission in the programme and transfer of credits although it lacks the usual content that one expects in a student handbook, such as all academic policies that dictate student life in the University. Moreover it is not tailored to Bahrain but applies across the branch network of BAOU (e.g. Rules of visa sponsorship if any). All enrolled students have to take a placement test, 60% of whom are working professionals. The number of newly admitted students into the BBA is roughly the same between 2006-07 (284) and 2007-08 (291). Demographics and profiles of admitted students in 2007-08 were provided as part of the material for annual programme evaluation done by the UKOU. Two thirds of those admitted in 2007-08 came from either a Science or Commercial high school track with a preponderance of 2 to 1 for the former. If one considers that the majority of new university entrants are within the age group 17 to 25, then BAOU has succeeded in reaching those above 25 as they constituted 43% of new enrolments in 2007-08. On the other hand and though BAOU purports not to put restrictions on student admissions, only a third of those who have applied for the academic year 2007/2008 were admitted. This guarantees a better quality intake of students for BAOU and denotes the model's attraction to a significant number of people.
- 3.2 The SER reports that the University is not meeting the HEC requirement of PhD to Master holders for its Business Administration faculty and that there will be an attempt to do so by September 2009. This was indeed verified at the time of the visit as BAOU recruited two new faculty members with doctoral degrees and removed two part-time lecturers from its roster. The student to faculty ratio remains nonetheless relatively acceptable for a balanced learning model (4 full-time faculty for 600 students). This could be interpreted in the context of the delivery model of AOU which relies on faculty as facilitators with support provided by other type of staff and the sharing of additional staff resources through the AOU network (Course Chairs for example operate from a remote node in the network).
- 3.3 The teaching load of faculty is between 4 and 6 courses amounting to 8 and 12 contact hours as class facilitation entails only 2 hours of contact per week for each course. Moreover, faculty have to be available both on-line and off-line (office hours) for student support.
- 3.4 Quality of the faculty could be another issue as BAOU runs on a low-cost model and therefore could be tempted to save on its most expensive resource, namely the faculty. The Panel was told during the visit that for the longest time, it was difficult to hire

qualified business faculty given the opportunities and higher pay offered by the private business sector. While this could be true, BAOU faculty requirements are relatively limited and the University ought to exert supplementary effort to keep attracting the most able faculty.

- 3.5 The only faculty résumé included in the SER was of a highly qualified faculty member operating out of AOU-HQ with no indication of what her role was in relation to BAOU. Résumés of BAOU faculty revealed a lack of consistent research output. This combined with the heavy work load would almost thwart the laudable attempt to create a research dynamic as evidenced by the large amount of money that will be infused into university research as part of a new research plan. Indeed 3% of the operating budget will be earmarked for research throughout the AOU network although it is not clear how this will be done exactly within the current situation of overload.
- 3.6 New hires are trained to become blended learning facilitators by UKOU trainers, however, faculty development seems to be reduced to functional training in course facilitation. There are regular workshops and training sessions for courses, and all the teaching staff for a particular course are invited to participate. An additional number of workshops were held in Kuwait and Cairo but these are corrective rather than developmental as they are primarily based on problematic topics identified by external examiners. The Review Panel was also told about a recent initiative to train personnel in the UK. Moreover staff are encouraged to pursue their doctoral studies and given some support to do so.
- 3.7 BAOU is located in a uniquely shaped pyramidal building in Sehla. It offers adequate physical amenities although it has come under increased pressure for space as the number of enrolled students increases (parking problem in particular). It was quite apparent during a tour of the facilities that space was relatively limited. However, the University uses its existing limited space optimally. The place was efficiently organized. The University will soon commence building a new campus on land that has already been allocated.
- 3.8 There are many resources available to students, including a Learning Resource Centre (LRC) where they can access the e-Library and language laboratory. IT resources and infrastructure are abundant with many home grown systems such as the student information system, the faculty information system, Administration and Registration System. The University has also started experimenting with a mobile learning system, which was demonstrated during the visit. BAOU has developed ACES, a Moodle-based Learning Management System (LMS), in collaboration with a local integrator and has been designated as an Excellence Centre for providing LMS services within the AOU network. It has also garnered an e-content award in Bahrain for the quality of its virtual presence.

- 3.9 The library is contained within the LRC but its collection of books and journals is very limited and does not have borrowing facilities for students. On-line databases for journals, e-books and other learning resources are available through the ACES portal. The LRC along with additional rooms are used as examination rooms, further restricting the use of the premises by faculty and student alike. A number of computer laboratories are scattered throughout the building along with a number of smart classrooms.
- 3.10 BAOU offers a number of on-line resources enabling student interaction including tutoring, on-line forums, LMS and e-library. However, access statistics provided during the site visit demonstrated that relatively little use is made of the e-library through the ACES system by either students or faculty. It was not clear to the Review Panel whether students could access any on-line databases outside of ACES. At any rate, the learning process would appear to be almost entirely based on the packaged content provided through the courses. Given the peculiar delivery model of AOU, this under-utilisation of on-line resources is considered to be an important weakness in terms of the overall teaching and learning strategy for the BBA programme.
- 3.11 ACES plays a central role in the student learning process. Students are trained on how to use ACES during induction and provided with support documentation for further reference. ACES statistics show 1781 access instances during a single day though it is difficult to benchmark this figure. Generally, the quality of available resources as demonstrated during the site visit is testimony to the adequacy of resources made available to students.
- 3.12 Overall and as expected from a university running an open learning model, BAOU seemed to be efficiently organized and systematic in its provision of 'e-services' to students on the programme. Demonstrations of student on-line interactions provided a picture to the Review Panel of the emergence of a dynamic virtual learning community. Nonetheless, the apparent content of these interactions, including in discussion threads within courses, seemed to be concerned with administrative and organizational issues rather than academic and intellectual substance *via* the use of 'e-tivities' and scaffolding. This, in the view of the Review Panel should be addressed by the teaching team in order to optimise the benefits for the students' learning experience.
- 3.13 AOU has a formal induction programme organized by the student affairs department which is quite comprehensive including an address by the Branch Director, an explanation of the University's admission and registration process, meeting with their future tutors, and an induction programme with the ACES team. During an interview with a sample of students, the Review Panel gathered an impression of a very satisfied student body who praised the University's culture of friendliness and support.
- 3.14 A cohort analysis of AOU admissions and graduation rates shows that less than a quarter of enrolled students graduate, which would signify a high level of attrition. This

percentage was 23% for the batch of 2002-2003, 24% for 2003-2004 and 27% for 2004-2005 with further dropouts expected as many students have not yet completed their studies (percentages not provided by AOU but computer-based on data provided in the SER). The University provided aggregate numbers for the AOU contradicting the above computations. This is supported by the UKOU validation services in their annual programme review where they mention that the 'student progression and retention rate is very healthy across the four levels'. Given that this conclusion is based on global numbers across the AOU network and not on a more detailed and BAOU-specific cohort analysis, the Review Panel holds that its own analysis above provides a more accurate picture. When further examined during the site visit, the programme team acknowledged that the departure of 500 students from BAOU to join the newly established branch of AOU in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia, had produced this volume of student withdrawals (from Bahrain). Other than the mass exit of Saudi students, which is skewing the drop-out statistics, there has been a consistent decrease in the number of drop-outs from 2003 until 2007 as students became more familiar with the model of blended learning.

3.15 The Review Panel recognises that it can be difficult to derive precise retention figures in an open learning model because students may opt not to register for as many as four successive semesters and have the option to complete their degree requirements within a lengthy period of 10 years. This renders the task of tracking student progress and exit a challenging one.

3.16 Although the SER ascribes the high turnover of students to the English language factor in the early stages of study (first year), the statistics evidence that the drop-out rate remains high in year 2 (between 15 and 25% for the first four cohorts) and even for the third year (between 15 and 20% for the first three cohorts). The student drop-out rates are 35%, 25%, and 15% in the first, second, and third years of study, respectively. While this could be interpreted within the 'open learning' model of AOU as stated above, it may also signify an issue of retention and progression due to reasons beyond the 'open-learning' explanation that could require urgent remedial action on the part of BAOU. Such data could also, however, reflect the adoption of rigorous standards on the part of BAOU. Feedback from the programme team to the Review Panel, during the site visit, suggested that these data could also be the result of a deliberate policy of preventing weaker students from proceeding to higher levels in the BBA programme. However, it is the view of the Review Panel that this should be addressed at an early stage during admission or by the latest at the end of the first academic year. BAOU did not provide any survey information concerning student 'drop-outs' nor does the University appear to have in place a system of identifying potential student dropouts and other at-risk students in order to facilitate early intervention and provide timely academic support from academic staff.

3.17 BAOU does not seem to maintain any data about graduating students and their exit destinations. This could be due to the limited number of students who have already graduated and the geographical dispersion of its graduates as can be seen from the make-up of its student body. Indeed, 44% of newly enrolled students in 2007-08 were from Saudi Arabia.

3.18 In coming to its conclusion regarding the efficiency, the Review Panel notes, with appreciation, the following:

- The student admission policies and practices are in line with the overall mission of the University
- The University appears to have addressed the HEC requirements for the number and profile of faculty members through additional hiring
- Faculty are generally provided with appropriate levels of support, for example *via* a system of 'para-academic assistantships', to support blended learning delivery
- The University appears to utilise its existing (physical teaching) and learning space optimally and makes efficient use of related physical resources
- IT resources and infrastructure appear more than adequate and are augmented by a number of internally developed systems such as the student information system, the faculty information system, Administration and Registration System
- There is clear evidence of student induction and orientation and further ongoing support within the open learning programme
- There is some evidence of staff induction and training in the blended model of learning delivery
- There is a strong evidence of the adoption of a number of effective (technical) systems to support the implementation of the blended learning teaching and learning strategy (e.g. ACES, FIS and SIS.)
- Despite the limited physical space, the University premises contain adequate learning resources that are deployed on an optimal basis
- BAOU seemed to be, generally, efficiently organized and systematic in its provision of 'e-services' to students on the programme. Demonstrations, during the site visit, evidenced an emerging virtual learning community.

3.19 In terms of improvement, the Review Panel **recommends** that the College should:

- Develop a formal policy for the career development of academic staff; particularly in the area of the enhancement of opportunities for increased research activity and output
- BAOU should consider hiring more faculty who combine expertise in their academic field, with experience in the implementation of the pedagogy in an open and blended learning context
- Due to the blended learning context the overall workload of teaching staff appears to be relatively high. The programme management team should consider including teaching contact hours, on-line facilitation hours and staff (off-line) student availability hours in the formal workload allocation model for individual academic staff
- The programme team should address, *via* ongoing training, the developmental needs of academic staff beyond initial induction and specific course training
- BAOU is encouraged to improve its procedures for tracking its graduates
- The programme team should request that BAOU address the (very) limited (physical/hardcopies) library journal and textbook collections in order to provide a better resourced library
- Consider developing and implementing a mechanism to track student progress and success rates.

3.20 Judgement

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

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 There is evidence of good practice in relation to the communication of ILOs at a programme and course descriptor level. The clear mapping of ILOs in relation to academic standards cited in the SER are clear examples of good practice in line with institutional and quality assurance guidelines. The documentation and the use of evidence-based self evaluation is of considerable merit. The Panel expected that there would be in place some form of (new) staff training or induction at a local level to ensure that standards are both understood and applied consistently. There was some evidence of this provided during the site visit and an indication that an explanation of the academic standards and examples of good academic practice, were provided to students on the BBA programme.
- 4.2 There was evidence provided to the Review Panel during the site visit that staff training and the use of induction sessions at a local level to ensure that academic standards are understood and applied.
- 4.3 BAOU showed evidence of good practice in respect to indicator 5.2 of the HERU handbook. This would appear to be the result of the external institutional accreditation and validation by the UKOU Validation Services (UK OUVS). There would appear to the Review Panel, to be currently little formal benchmarking of standards with other institutions in Bahrain, or elsewhere in the Gulf region. Similarly, there appeared to be a paucity of evidence in the SER and during the site visit, of direct external stakeholder contributing to the determination of academic standards or syllabus content.
- 4.4 Compliance requirements stemming from UKOU programme validation regulations and the QAAET, in tandem with the adoption of subject bench-mark statements and participation in the OUVS every 5 years, including the incorporation of a formal external examinership system has evidently required the programme to be subject to comparator evaluation on a systematic and on-going basis. The Panel's teleconference during the site visit with the UKOU Chief External Examiner in the UK, combined with the formal material provided before or during the site visit show evidence of systems in place for rigorous and systematic external academic standards moderation. Indeed both the UKOU External Examiner and the faculty appear aware of the danger of script and coursework 'over-marking' and grade inflation overall. The Panel was impressed with the thoroughness with which this issue had been addressed, both by the representatives of the UKOU and BAOU.
- 4.5 Level of achievement as expressed by samples of assessed work is equivalent to other programmes elsewhere. Based on the External Examiners reports accompanying the SER, the additional External Examiners reports provided to the Review Panel during the

site visit, the comments made by the UKOU Senior External Examiner, and the samples across course and levels of assessment material scrutinized, by the Review Panel during the site visit, it was evident that the level of academic achievement as expressed is of a standard equivalent to similar programmes elsewhere.

4.6 In coming to its conclusion regarding academic standards of the graduates, the Review Panel notes, with appreciation, the following:

- There is significant evidence of the attainment of programme ILOs by graduates
- There is clear evidence of the adoption of internal and external benchmarks for determining academic standards through the OUVS
- The incorporation of internal and external moderation reflects acceptance on the part of the programme team of the importance of grade monitoring and awareness of the importance of maintaining assessment marking consistency
- The quality of student written work is evidence of acceptable comparability of academic standards with equivalent programmes in similar institutions
- There is clear evidence of the use of consistent marking schemes for student work
- The assessment instruments adopted appear to be appropriate methods of verification of student attainment of learning outcomes.

4.7 In terms of improvement, the Review Panel **recommends** that the College should:

- Review, and if necessary, adjust the mechanisms adopted for maintaining grading standards across courses and *via* the use of formal mechanisms for internal and external moderation in order to ensure a more robust implementation of academic standards
- Devise and implement a strategy to address the relatively little evidence of the continuous formal involvement of key local external stakeholders in providing input to the determination of academic standards and professional benchmarks.

4.8 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 On the basis of the SER, additional written and oral evidence provided during the site visit, and interviews conducted with key staff and students, there is clear evidence of a structured and robust approach to quality assurance at BAOU. There are clear lines of responsibility between the HQ in Kuwait and the local branch in Bahrain and between Kuwait and the UKOU. Evidence of good practice exists in the operation of the Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) which operates at the University level. There are also examples of good practice in, for instance; self-evaluation; peer-review by external expert panel; and external assessment and review by the UK OUVS. The programme is strengthened by a strong input from external examiners, one of whom was contacted by tele-conference during the site visit. In essence, there is a strong culture of quality assurance at the BAOU. It could be said that quality cascades effectively within the institution and also within the programme team for the Bachelors in Business Administration.
- 5.2 An examination of departmental minutes and other quality assurance material provided during the site visit, showed that there was good evidence of staff embracing a quality approach in relation to the degree programme. This was evident in terms of both systems and culture (e.g. as shown in the ACES LMS systems and its extensive use by staff and students alike). In both the SER and other documentation provided during the site visit, it was clear that the course team and senior members of the Faculty have adopted an honest and reflective approach in highlighting possible areas for future improvement.
- 5.3 In the area of internal reporting and monitoring there was a clear willingness to accommodate feedback from a variety of sources, especially from students. For both student and staff feedback there is an established process in place and significant engagement on the part of the Faculty, the Dean and other senior Faculty members.
- 5.4 The SER and other evidence provided during the site visit demonstrated a strong commitment by the branch to embed the blended learning approach, which of course is a *sine qua non* of the Open University philosophy. Adequate staff training exists in this area as part of the regular induction and course training process of faculty. A resource pack to assist teaching staff in aspects of blended learning is commendable.
- 5.5 In the area of research and scholarly activity, the SER (and in discussions during the site visit), indicated that this was a growing commitment on the part of senior staff. Based on the recommendations of an OUVS report of 2007, staff research has been given added

emphasis in the allocation of a budget of \$350000 which is intended to be used for conference attendance, further PhD registrations, the contracting of research assistance, and the possible introduction of an in-house scholarly journal. A Research Committee has also been established, a Research Director appointed, and a Strategic Research Plan has been written, all of which are commendable. Of course, these aspirations have to be put in the context of ever-rising student numbers and the need for a flexible approach to staff workloads. Moreover, no tangible output has yet been produced to illustrate any positive output of this new research orientation in BAOU.

5.6 In the general area of Improvement Planning, the SER identified a number of areas which need attention, for example, in highlighting the opportunities open to students (and staff) to access the e-Library. From a staff demonstration of the e-Learning facilities on campus which the reviewers viewed during the site visit, it was clear that there is a considerable amount of expertise available *in situ*. Similarly, on the aspect of recording discussions within the teaching team on programme improvements and enhancement, there is good evidence demonstrated here. For example, in the development of new programme tracks, enhanced variety in programme assessment tools (i.e. TMA's, quizzes, and final examinations), as well as in greater consistency and uniformity in the grading schemes. Such improvements have been implemented in close coordination with the OUVS.

5.7 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 structured and robust approach to quality assurance, and there is a strong culture of quality assurance at BAOU
- There was good evidence of staff embracing a quality approach in relation to the degree programme
- There is an established process in place and significant engagement on the part of the Faculty, the Dean and other senior Faculty members to accommodate student and staff feedback
- There is a strong commitment by BAOU to embed the blended learning approach in its academic operations including teaching delivery, staff training, e-services, etc
- There is a clear orientation in BAOU to position research at the centre of the academic evaluation system by providing additional resources and increasing accountability for research output amongst faculty.

5.8 In terms of improvement, the Review Panel *recommends* that the college should:

- Develop structured approach to identifying the needs of staff for continual professional development, especially in research and scholarly activity

- Continue to invest in adequate resources to maintain vigilance against plagiarism
- Reinforce linkages between teaching, pedagogy and scholarly activity
- Reinforce the consistency of standards in the content of the written material available to students (teaching packs) especially in relation to the locally developed content
- Continue to develop enhanced systems for monitoring and responding to student and other stakeholder feedback (e.g. employers).

5.9 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 unanimous conclusion, in accordance with the *HERU/QAAET Programme Review Handbook, April 2009*:

There is confidence in the Bachelors in Business Administration Programme offered by Arab Open University-Bahrain.