



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

Higher Education Review Unit

Institutional Review Report

Arab Open University

Bahrain Branch - Kingdom of Bahrain

Dates Reviewed: 09-12 November 2008

Table of Contents

1. The institutional review process	3
2. Overview of Arab Open University- Bahrain Branch.....	3
3. Mission, planning and governance.....	3
4. Academic standards.....	5
5. Quality assurance and enhancement.....	6
6. Quality of teaching and learning	8
7. Student support.....	9
8. Human resources	10
9. Infrastructure, physical and other resources.....	12
10. Research.....	13
11. Community engagement.....	14
12. Conclusion.....	15

1. The institutional review process

The review of Arab Open University, Bahrain (henceforth referred to as BAOU or the University) was conducted by the Higher Education Review Unit (HERU) of the Quality Assurance Authority for Education and Training (QAAET) in terms of its mandate. This report provides an account of the HERU institutional review process and the findings of the Expert Review Panel based on the Self-Evaluation Report (SER), appendices, and supporting materials submitted by BAOU, the supplementary documentation requested from the institution, and interviews and observation made during the review site visit from 9 to 12 November 2008.

2. Overview of Arab Open University- Bahrain Branch

BAOU is a private university licensed by the Government of the Kingdom of Bahrain in 2002. It is a branch of the Arab Open University (AOU) whose headquarters are in Kuwait. Recruitment of tutors started from January 2003. The first intake of 50 students was registered in February 2003. BAOU has grown considerably in the past 5 years and now has a total student enrolment of 1441.

3. Mission, planning and governance

The mission statement of AOU is clearly articulated and applies to all the Branches, the Panel was told during interviews with management that BAOU interprets the mission in the light of the context of Bahrain.

The Panel noted that while the mission explicitly engages with one of the core functions of a university, teaching and learning, the other two functions of research and community engagement are largely absent. Nevertheless, the mission statement underpins a number of distinctive features of BAOU: (i) ensuring services are student-centred; (ii) the provision of 'an innovative and relevant curriculum'. AOU uses tried and proven course materials produced by the Open University in the UK (UKOU) in accordance with the licensing agreement. BAOU provides (iii) the latest learning technology resources for its students. The intention is to promote the development of human resources that is compatible with the demands and challenges of current and emerging information technology platforms. In engaging with other branches, the Panel was pleased to note there are (iv) examples where the Bahrain branch has taken a leadership role in AOU and shared innovations and good practices with other branches. BAOU provides (v) advanced e-learning services that enhance communication between staff and students. Finally, (vi) BAOU uses a blended model of learning that provides academic support and promotes student learning, which can produce a distinguished professional and competent graduate with a particular approach to problem-solving as well as managerial skills.

While the Panel acknowledges the mission statement and found many examples where the institution is in fact meeting its objectives, it did not find clearly documented strategies that would ensure that these *desiderata* are met. The Panel encourages BAOU to develop and implement effective strategies that have measurable outcomes, for example to ensure that desired graduate attributes are achieved.

One of BAOU objectives is to “provide opportunity to every individual who has the potential and interest to pursue a university education”. The University provides access for those in employment or who cannot afford higher education in other private institutions. The Panel noted with appreciation BAOU’s commitment to providing access to higher education and the flexibility of the programs which have enabled people to continue to work or meet other family commitments as well as to study.

Commendation 1

HERU commends BAOU for meeting its stated purpose of providing opportunity for every individual who has the potential and interest to pursue university education.

There is an AOU university-wide strategic plan. Although BAOU does not have its own strategic plan, the Panel heard during interviews with the leadership of BAOU of plans to develop further the Bahrain branch. The Panel suggests that BAOU develop its own strategic plan that aligns with the AOU strategic plan as well as operational plans to assist in the next phase of development. This plan should be supported with clear Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure the University’s achievements against objectives.

Recommendation 1

HERU recommends that, in addition to annual operational plans, BAOU develop an institutional strategic plan, which has clear objectives and targets against which its performance can be evaluated.

The AOU has a University Council that functions as the policy-making body with regard to the educational programs offered by every branch. The Director of BAOU reports to the Rector of the AOU. Each Faculty is led by a Dean who is based at Headquarters in Kuwait. The BAOU organisational structure includes two Faculties: Faculty of Business Administration and Faculty of Information Technology. Each of these Faculties in Bahrain has a Head who reports to the Dean in Kuwait. The Panel heard during interviews with the Deans and with the Bahrain Heads that this organisational system functions well. Meetings are held either in Kuwait or in Bahrain at least on a monthly basis. BAOU staff talked of the support they receive from the Deans. The Panel found from a range of interviews with management and staff and perusal of documentation that the leadership and management of BAOU are robust.

BAOU has a suite of policies and procedures that govern the academic activities of the institution. The Panel endorses the availability of these policies but noted that they did not appear to be disseminated on a systematic basis. In addition the staff and faculty were not being oriented fully to these policies and were not aware of where to find them. As a result

the Panel found that there is inconsistent implementation of the policies across departments. The Panel urges BAOU to ensure that all staff members are familiar with the policies and procedures and to ensure that these are implemented consistently within the institution.

Recommendation 2

HERU recommends that BAOU develop a register of all central and local academic and administrative policies and procedures, and ensure awareness and consistent implementation of the policies and procedures.

4. Academic standards

BAOU has put in place a number of arrangements that are designed to ensure academic standards. The AOU has developed a sound agreement with the Open University in the United Kingdom (UKOU). This agreement covers three major areas: licensing of materials; consultancies; accreditation and validation. Through licensing the UKOU acts as the external reviewer for the AOU activities in all academic and administration aspects. UKOU not only provides the course materials and the program guidelines, but conducts comprehensive quality checks throughout the educational cycle. These range from the way the courses are delivered, the approval of examinations and grading system, the facilities and e-learning, to the administration methods and registration process. The Panel is of the view that this partnership provides enhanced learning opportunities for the students in the Kingdom of Bahrain, and also contributes to the reputation of AOU as an institution of quality in the Arab region.

Commendation 2

HERU commends BAOU for maintaining a strong partnership with UK Open University which established a strong foundation for the delivery of high quality programs, maintenance of high standards and rigorous assessment

All current programs at BAOU have been licensed by the Bahrain Higher Education Council (HEC) within the Ministry of Education; hence there is government approval of these programs. At the time of this quality review there was no national qualifications framework in Bahrain. However, the University's programs and credit hours are based on international standards, in particular the OUUK, and assisted by the University's affiliations with other international universities.

The Self-Evaluation Report indicates that BAOU conducts a number of surveys. As a result there is extensive feedback from students and graduates. Evidence was provided that where there are poor results, improvements are planned. However, the Panel did not find evidence of detailed analyses of the survey results or the reporting of these to teaching staff, appropriate faculty committees, and students. The Panel encourages BAOU to ensure firstly, that there are sufficient opportunities to identify areas for improvement, and secondly, that such improvements are implemented, monitored and evaluated. This will

assist BAOU in strengthening a quality culture in the institution. Furthermore, the data gathered could be used for trend analysis and comparison across branches.

The Review Panel investigated the course structures, course outlines and assessment requirements across courses. It found that learning outcome statements which are linked to assessment tasks need to be developed. This would facilitate the measurement of intended achievement and the development of generic skills.

Recommendation 3

HERU recommends that BAOU develop intended learning outcomes for its programs which are consistent with the program aims and reflect an appropriate level of knowledge and skills.

Assessment of students at BAOU is based on continuous evaluation comprising periodical tests, on-line quizzes, and practical and/or written assignments. Assessment is considered as a component of the total learning process and not just a means of evaluation. BAOU has adopted the policy of group marking for all courses. The Panel encourages the institution to ensure that there are varied marking processes across all courses. The Panel explored the management of examinations and was satisfied with the robustness of the examination system.

The University holds students' data on the management information system (MIS). This enables every enrolled student to access his/her grades, attendance and tutors' comments. It also allows staff members to monitor students' attendance and progress. However the Panel did not find any uniform student progress or retention data which are aggregated to show patterns, for example, of achievement of different groups of students. This also means that identification of at-risk students is not dealt with in a systematic way. The Panel encourages BAOU to develop and implement a consistent practice to identify and support at-risk students and to provide staff training in this regard.

5. Quality assurance and enhancement

One of the main tasks of the Quality Assurance (QA) unit at the branches is to undertake a survey of student and tutor opinion every semester; report the survey results to the QA committee of the branch; monitor the effectiveness of any action taken in response to these surveys, as well as other QA performance indicators. The QA committee at BAOU monitors the process of quality assurance according to the established criteria. The committee receives feedback from a range of reviews, evaluations, committee reports, recommendations from meetings of staff tutors, other formal and informal meetings with tutors and students, as well as external reports and evaluations. However, the Panel found from interviews with staff that the range of feedback is not dealt with in a consistent manner. The Panel encourages BAOU to ensure that areas identified for improvement are systematically implemented across the programs, and that such improvements are monitored and evaluated.

Recommendation 4

HERU recommends that BAOU develop mechanisms to ensure that the findings of surveys, evaluations and reports are consistently analysed and acted upon in order to enhance the quality of provision at the institution.

The Review Panel heard that BAOU is intent on building and sustaining a culture of reflective practice through its internal processes and quality systems. The feedback cycle has not as yet been fully implemented as the quality assurance systems are still in the early stages of development. At present there is little evidence that any self-reflective practices in teaching and learning are feeding into the academic planning and development process of BAOU. Moreover, actions taken in response to feedback appear to be more in the spirit of compliance and correction rather than as a process of continuous quality improvement grounded in critical self-reflection.

To facilitate Quality Assurance processes and enhance quality there is an urgent need for BAOU to improve significantly its collection and analysis of data, and to ensure that its quality assurance system is supported by feedback mechanisms. The University should also consider using these data to benchmark itself against other similar institutions. These would provide reliable forms of information that could meaningfully inform review as well as provide evidence to support University claims of quality provision. The Panel encourages BAOU to strengthen this area.

Recommendation 5

HERU recommends that BAOU utilize data that it collects to inform decision-making for quality improvement as well as use it to benchmark itself against selected institutions.

BAOU claims that quality is at the heart of its operations. Although much remains to be done to systematise quality assurance at the University, the Panel notes that there is an emphasis on quality characterises many features of BAOU's operations.

The Panel found examples of quality improvement processes being implemented. However, at the present time the improvements stem mainly from individual staff commitment to BAOU and other *ad hoc* initiatives. The University now needs to introduce systems which efficiently and effectively provide means for monitoring results and sharing ideas through a quality assurance and improvement cycle. In addition, BAOU should position its efforts in such a way as to ensure that the work of the Quality Assurance Committee is integrated with the core functions of the University. Such integration will ensure that the work of the Committee has a positive impact on the institution and its processes.

Recommendation 6

HERU recommends that BAOU develop an approach to quality assurance which is integrated into all activities of the institution and which is centred on continuous quality improvement rather than compliance.

The Panel found the Self-Evaluation Report did not follow the guidelines in the Higher Education Review Manual for Institutional Reviews, and so did not cover a wide enough scope for this review. Further the Panel felt that it was not written in a way that reflected the real quality of the Branch nor did it provide evidence of self-critique and identification of improvement opportunities. However, the Panel found during their visit to the Branch evidence of good practice in a number of areas. The Panel encourages BAOU to take the process for self-review for both internal and external purposes seriously in the future. This will assist the institution in its endeavor to enhance the quality of its education provision.

Recommendation 7

HERU recommends that BAOU develop a more sophisticated approach to self-review and ensure that this approach is widely understood within the Branch.

6. Quality of teaching and learning

The philosophy of AOU is to provide flexible teaching and learning which allows access for those students who are working, who are not eligible for entry to another university or who are unable to afford to pay high fees. BAOU promotes flexibility through providing open learning opportunities that are structured around a range of tutorial schedules, providing learning material packages, and providing access to distance learning facilities through the internet.

The Panel acknowledges the flexible timing of study opportunities at BAOU. Every learner is permitted to join a section that suits their needs as most of the students are in employment. This is an important factor in their being able to engage in higher education study. The Panel learned from their interviews with the students that all academic staff members have office hours, which allows students to have personal consultations with their tutor at a time that suits students.

Commendation 3

HERU commends BAOU on its approach to open learning which provides access and flexibility in learning for those students who would otherwise not be able to engage in higher education studies.

The BAOU utilises the course material produced by the UKOU for its programs. This process of accreditation and validation through the Open University Validation Services (OUVS) is of vital significance to BAOU, its present and potential students, and its credibility in the market place. The Panel notes that the AOU achieved full institutional accreditation from the UKOU on the 18th October 2004, which covers the headquarters in Kuwait and all six branches. In addition the three licensed programs were given validation.

AOU provides a virtual learning environment for students, tutors and coordinators through the University's Learning Management System (Arab Campus E-Learning System - ACES) which was developed by BAOU in cooperation with one of the leading ICT companies in the Middle East. This online learning management system enables the learner to interact, participate in discussions, and make enquires on any matter related to course content with the tutor as well as the other course participants. It is designed to fulfil the needs of students and teachers in four major features: content, communication, assessment, and education. The Panel notes that BAOU is recognised as the centre of excellence in e-learning for the Arab Open University.

Commendation 4

HERU commends BAOU for being recognised as the centre of excellence in e-learning for the Arab Open University.

The policies of BAOU with regard to teaching are in accordance with the AOU policy. Undergraduate students met by the Panel were satisfied with their learning programs and the support available to them. While students indicated that they are satisfied with the quality of teaching, the Panel found that there is little systematic use of the data obtained from surveys. There need to be formalised systems that firstly ensure that data is used to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning programs and secondly that students are informed of the use which is made of their feedback.

BAOU does not conduct exit surveys of graduates. Although there are as yet only a small number of alumni, no effort so far has been made to conduct a follow-up survey with them. It would be useful for BAOU to monitor graduate employment rates and students who continue to study. There is an opportunity to follow up alumni to seek their views on the appropriateness of the programs as a preparation for work.

Recommendation 8

HERU recommends that BAOU develop graduate, alumni and employer satisfaction surveys and utilise the results of these surveys to inform planning.

7. Student support

BAOU keeps students' records in an automated system known as the Students Information System (SIS). BAOU has enhanced the student learning experience by providing a range of technological support. Students are provided with personal web-pages where they have access to their TMA grades, quizzes and attendance through the ACES system. All administrative news is on the website. BAOU also provides support services in areas such as course advice before enrolment, financial assistance and support, assistance for students with disabilities, and special needs of international students. The students met by the

Panel, were satisfied with the course-related services and general support services available to them. There is strong staff concern for the pastoral care of students.

The Panel heard from the students that there is a high level of satisfaction with the quality of teaching and support they receive and indicated that tutors were accessible and offered good support and guidance through their office hours and via email and telephone (including weekends).

Commendation 5

HERU commends BAOU for the effectiveness of its range of student support services and its culture of responsiveness to individual student needs.

While there is a Student Council, there is no student representation on the University Council. The Panel encourages BAOU to appoint a student representative to serve on this body. The institution might also like to consider strengthening student participation on key committees within the institution. This would ensure that the needs of students are taken into account in formal decision-making. It would also ensure student involvement in the preparation of the Self-Evaluation Report.

Recommendation 9

HERU recommends that BAOU provide for student participation on the governing body as well as appropriate committees in the institution.

The Panel noted during interviews with members of the Student Council that there is no allocated budget to support its activities. This compromises the student learning experience as non-curricula campus activities can be an important opportunity for individual development and so contribute to the quality of the student learning experience. The Panel encourages BAOU to consider allocating a budget to the Student Council so that it can provide a range of activities for students.

Recommendation 10

HERU recommends that BAOU allocate a budget to support the work of the Student Council.

8. Human resources

The recruitment practices at BAOU appear to have been successful as there are a number of well and appropriately qualified academic staff members. Advertisements for full-time and part-time staff are placed in local newspapers. A process of selection from the applicants is carried out by BAOU and recommendations for appointment are sent to Headquarters for approval. Most academic staff members are employed on a full-time basis which has many benefits both for staff and students, such as staff being accessible to provide extra support for students.

There is a formal induction program for new staff. Staff members attend individual sessions conducted by the Head of the Department who outlines their roles and responsibilities and provides an overview of key human resources policies. For any course taught for the first time in BAOU, the tutors involved are required to participate in an induction program at either BAOU or the Headquarters in Kuwait. This program is offered by UKOU expert tutors who have considerable experience of teaching the course. BAOU has also offered training for tutors on how to use the Learning Management System and the Faculty Information System.

The Panel concluded that BAOU has begun acting to meet an identified need for more structured and formalised human resource management, but that improvement is required in several areas, including performance management and promotion. At the same time, BAOU appears to have a supportive culture, as exemplified by the amount of informal mentoring that occurs. BAOU may like to consider formalising the mentoring process.

BAOU encourages academic and administration staff to study for undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications relevant to their post. The Panel read in the Self-Evaluation Report and heard during interviews with management and staff that most of the Branch staff members have taken the opportunity to improve their academic qualifications. Staff members interviewed by the Panel were enthusiastic about the support that BAOU provides to their professional development. It is also suggested that AOU consider making provision in the budget to support PhD scholarships for top students with a view to their being recruited as faculty members after graduation.

Commendation 6

HERU commends BAOU for the level of encouragement and support given to staff to pursue further studies, including higher degrees.

The Panel acknowledges BAOU efforts to offer a range of academic staff development interventions and encourages the institution to take measures to ensure that the existing levels of capacity are not only sustained, but also improved, and to ensure that the development needs of staff are met. In this regard, the Panel noted the recent introduction of a staff appraisal policy and procedures. The Panel commends this initiative, but notes that further development is required to ensure that the process includes staff development planning as well as performance appraisal.

Affirmation 1

HERU affirms the introduction by BAOU of a staff appraisal policy for academic staff.

The University has not yet established a systematic approach to gather and evaluate staff satisfaction data. Moreover, there are no staff development policies and procedures for general staff. General staff review and performance appraisal are at present conducted informally. The Review Panel encourages the institution to develop and implement a

formal staff development and performance appraisal system for administrative staff. The introduction of such a system will enhance the quality of the student learning experience.

Recommendation 11

HERU recommends that BAOU introduce a formal staff development system for all levels of staff.

9. Infrastructure, physical and other resources

BAOU is currently housed in a rented building and has adapted the facilities to meet its immediate requirements for teaching, learning and research activities as well as administrative functions. The University's current physical infrastructure is appropriate for a young, small institution. However BAOU has recognized that there are pressures on the current building especially during peak times. Recently the Government of Bahrain issued a decree allocating a substantial piece of land to the institution. Planning is underway for a new, purpose-designed campus to provide for its longer term needs, although construction has not yet been started on the site. Once the building project is completed BAOU will have a better facility to support its planned expansion.

Affirmation 2

HERU affirms the plans by BAOU to construct a purpose-built campus which will provide students with a quality teaching and learning environment.

BAOU's income consists mainly of student fees and the budget process consists of bids from the seven Branches. The final budget approval is given by the Board of Trustees. The Panel formed the view that the institution is financially viable and sustainable.

The Branch has an Information and Communication Technology (ICT) centre which provides support to staff and students and also provides the liaison point with headquarters in Kuwait. BAOU operates two separate local networks for staff and students. There is reasonable provision of computers in the institution. In interviews with tutors and students the Panel heard that the IT provision and support are adequate. All teaching venues are equipped with data/video projectors and computers.

BAOU has a Learning Management System (LMS). This is a system for students, which provides details of courses, programme materials, and activities. Students can access the system either on campus or through their own computers off-site.

Overall, the Panel is of the view that the infrastructural needs of BAOU are well-managed.

The Panel was concerned to note that back-up data is not only stored in the same area as the system servers but in the same room. Although regular back-up procedures are in place and the systems incorporate a measure of redundancy that provides some protection, the Panel was unable to establish that BAOU has an ICT disaster management and recovery

plan. This constitutes a serious risk for the institution. As a matter of urgency BAOU needs to develop and implement an ICT disaster plan which includes the storage of back-up data in a separate location, preferably off-campus in order to ensure business continuity.

Recommendation 12

HERU recommends that BAOU develop and implement an ICT disaster plan that includes the storage of back-up data in a separate location.

10. Research

Most of the BAOU staff members who hold PhD degrees are responsible for providing training and mentoring support for tutors and they also monitor tutors' performance with respect to their teaching responsibilities. The institution has begun to develop a similar approach to research and research training. The Panel found that there is a generally sound understanding of research among senior faculty members, some of whom are active researchers.

The Panel was pleased to note that although BAOU is an undergraduate university, research is carried out by academic staff members as good teaching is underpinned by research. The outcome of this research leads *inter alia* to the development of teaching and learning materials. The Panel also noted that tutors who have Masters' degrees have been engaged in PhD research study with recognized international universities. Final year undergraduate student projects are supervised by tutors. These are typically community-related research with the results of the research from the best projects being posted on the AOU web site.

BAOU is turning its attention to ways of strengthening its research profile. The Review Panel found evidence of commitment to the research enterprise in that AOU has allocated 5% of its operational budget in the coming year to strengthen the research effort in the institution. However, it was not clear to the Panel what the criteria would be in allocating these funds.

Affirmation 3

HERU affirms the allocation of 5% of the operating budget to BAOU to develop the core function of research.

At present research at BAOU is regarded as an individual activity. There is now a need for the institution to develop a strategic direction for its research activities. This might include consideration of the establishment of research groups around common and strategic research themes. The development of such groupings would also provide a basis for the development of research mentoring, and the sharing of research findings through research seminars and general collegial support for the dissemination of research findings.

The Panel is of the view that BAOU needs to develop a comprehensive research plan which includes a conceptual framework, and which is aligned to the institution's mission; appropriate policies and procedures, including an ethics policy. There needs to be an implementation plan which will indicate how the financial resources available will be allocated. This Plan should include a budget for the library to strengthen its journal holdings. BAOU also needs to identify an appropriate management structure which will be responsible for the implementation, monitoring and reviewing of the research plan.

Recommendation 13

HERU recommends that BAOU develop and implement a comprehensive research strategy with implementation plans including resource allocation and that makes provision for monitoring and evaluation of outcomes.

11. Community engagement

BAOU directors and academics contribute to a type of community engagement through presenting lectures and taking part in societal debates organized by private and public organisations in the Kingdom of Bahrain. While the efforts of the individuals involved are appreciated by the Panel, the institution needs to consider formalising these activities. There are important opportunities for BAOU to expand its work considerably in this regard.

The Panel encourages BAOU to develop an overarching framework for this core function in which it defines its understanding of community engagement, integrates community engagement into the other core functions of teaching and learning and research as well as into the planning, budgeting, tutor workload, and quality assurance arrangements of the institution. In addition, the institution might like to consider developing a policy on community engagement which has clear guidelines for implementation, monitoring and evaluation. There should also be a strategy for communicating this framework to staff and students.

Recommendation 14

HERU recommends that BAOU develop a clear conceptual framework for community engagement and its relationship with the other two core functions; as well as policies, procedures and resource provision for staff to develop and participate in community engagement activities.

There is no doubt that BAOU plays a significant educational role in the community while building strong links with business and industry, but the Panel noted that these activities seem to be solely fee generating rather than community engagement. Nevertheless, the

Panel encourages the institution to develop and implement policies and procedures to assure the quality of such income generating activities since not doing so constitutes a reputational risk for the institution.

Recommendation 15

HERU recommends that BAOU develop and implement policies and procedures to assure the quality of its income generating activities.

12. Conclusion

Bahrain Branch of the AOU is achieving its stated vision and is a member of which the AOU can be rightly proud. There are examples where the branch has taken a leadership role in the AOU and later shared innovations and good practices with other branches. However, the Panel encourages BAOU to develop and implement effective strategies with measurable outcomes to ensure that desired outcomes are achieved. The panel recommends that AOU empower the branch council to have greater decision making responsibilities concerning academic and administration issues.

The Panel believes that the branch needs to think about an approach which is more about continuous quality improvement than compliance. To facilitate Quality Assurance processes and enhance quality there is an urgent need for BAOU to improve significantly its collection and analysis of data, and to ensure that its quality assurance system is supported by feedback mechanisms. The University should also consider using these data to benchmark itself against other similar institutions. These would provide reliable forms of information that could meaningfully inform review as well as provide evidence to support University claims of quality provision. The Panel encourages BAOU to strengthen this area.

For a young institution the Panel think that BAOU have made considerable progress and are serving an important market niche in the social context of the region.

The Panel trusts that BAOU engagement in this process will assist the University in moving forward to the next stage of their development, especially with regard to quality assurance and quality improvement.