



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

Higher Education Review Unit

Institutional Follow-Up Review Report

Arab Open University

Kingdom of Bahrain

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1. Overview of the Institutional Follow-up Process

The institutional follow-up site visit by the Higher Education Review Unit (HERU) is part of a cycle of continuing quality assurance, review, reporting and improvement by the Quality Assurance Authority for Education and Training (QAAET) in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

At least one year after publication of its Institutional Review Report the institution submits to HERU a report which clearly shows how the institution has maintained and/or enhanced the commendations of the review report and specifies how the institution has met its affirmations and recommendations. The institution substantiates its claims with supporting documents, in the form of Appendixes. Details of how the institution is monitoring and evaluating the improvement activities should also be provided.

This follow-up review process applies to all higher education institutions that have had institutional reviews undertaken by HERU.

The Arab Open University, Bahrain (BAOU) submitted an Improvement Plan to HERU in the required time set out in the Handbook for Institutional Reviews. In this Plan, actions were identified to tackle the 15 Recommendations contained in the Institutional Review Report. In October 2010 BAOU submitted its One Year Report, which contained a narrative and documentary evidence about the progress the institution has made thus far in implementing quality improvements.

The Panel responsible for the Follow-up comprised the Executive Director of HERU and three Senior Directors, one of whom was the Director responsible for co-ordinating this site visit. The evidence base included: the Institutional Improvement Plan and the appendices submitted in August 2010 and the Institutional Review Report. The Institution also submitted supporting evidences on 20th April 2011. Interviews were also held during the site visit with a range of senior managers, academics, administrative staff, students, employers and alumni. These interviews allow the Panel to triangulate the evidence.

The Follow-up visit took place on 25th of April 2011, the purpose of which is (i) to assess the progress made in quality enhancement and improvement of the Arab Open University-Bahrain (BAOU) since the institutional review in November 2008, for which the review report was published in June 2009; and (ii) develop a report which outlines the progress made about the extent to which the Recommendations have been addressed.

This Institutional Follow-up Review Report sets out the findings with regard to the Recommendations contained in the published Review Report. For ease of reading the Recommendations made in the 2009 published Review Report are clustered together (in italics) at the beginning of each sub-section where a different theme is considered. The text that follows reflects the findings of the Panel during its visit in April 2011.

2. Brief Overview of Arab Open University-Bahrain

BAOU is a private university licensed by the government of the Kingdom of Bahrain. It is a branch of AOU and was opened with the signing of an agreement between H.H. Prince Talal bin Abdul Aziz and Dr Mohammad bin Jassim Al-Ghatam, then Minister of Education,

Government of Bahrain on June 26, 2002. Recruitment of tutors started from January 2003. Its first intake of 50 students was registered in February 2003. In 2011 BAOU has grown and has 1895 students and 32 academic staff members. It offers two programmes across three faculties.

3. Findings of the Follow-up Review by Theme

In the following sub-sections, the progress made in addressing the Recommendations under each theme is considered. The recommendations from the Institutional Review Report are clustered together in italics.

3.1 Mission, Planning and Governance

3.1.1 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.

3.1.2 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.

As part of the submitted evidence that accompanied the One Year Follow-Up report, BAOU provided a Strategic Plan for the 2010-2011 academic year. The Panel learned that this is for one year only as a new Strategic Plan is being developed by the parent institution for 2012-2017. This is being done through a collaborative effort with Vice Presidents, Directors of the branches, and Deans. Hence all AOU campuses participate in strategic planning. After this Plan has been finalized BAOU will develop its own strategic plan which will align with the overarching Plan.

On examining the 2010-2011 Strategic Plan the Panel found it to be lacking in many aspects that would normally be included in such a document. The Plan, for example, does not contain the vision and mission statements with goals and objectives that flow from the statements. There is no mention of a communication strategy or monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Furthermore, the Plan does not have key performance indicators to measure progress in achieving BAOU's objectives. Nevertheless, embedded within the Plan there is a detailed operational plan which clearly sets out the actions to be undertaken and measures of achievement. The Panel acknowledges that BAOU as one of several campuses of a multi-campus institution operating in the Gulf Cooperation Countries conducts its business and strategic planning in line with the overall organizational structure. Hence BAOU's five year strategic plan will emerge from the AOU's strategic plan; a process that has only begun in 2011.

Policies and procedures are available to staff members and students through the BAOU website. During interviews with staff members the Panel found that there is an awareness and understanding of the policies. A number of meetings have been held for staff members to discuss the policies and procedures prior to their approval. It was

too early for the Panel to reach a judgement concerning the consistency and effectiveness of their implementation.

3.2 Academic Standards

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

Intended learning Outcomes (ILOs) have now been developed for all programmes and courses taught. The course ILOs are mapped to the programme ILOs. Moreover, course ILOs are now linked to course content, teaching and learning methods and assessment methods. Ensuring that assessment is linked to the Course ILOs is the responsibility of the people setting the assessment, who are mainly located in the headquarters of AOU. There is some input from the BAOU to the headquarters through discussion and feedback.

3.3 Quality Assurance and Enhancement

3.3.1 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.

3.3.2 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.

3.3.3 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.

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

The University surveys all students every semester, the Quality Assurance Unit inputs this feedback into *Issuetracker*; an online tool that enables formal logging, and tracking of the implementation of improvements initiated as a consequence of the survey results. The online tool has a log for staff members and student suggestions or complaints so that feedback can be incorporated into institutional decision-making. *Issuetracker* is used also to log student grade appeals as well as disciplinary and plagiarism cases. The Panel met with staff members and students and found that most feedback provided to the institution is taken into account and dealt with in a consistent manner.

The University is complying with the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) quality improvement procedures through the institutional and programme validation of Open University Validation Service (OUVS). BAOU at this point does not perform any benchmarking activities. However once the University begins to develop some

autonomy from UKOU, the Panel encourages BAOU to consider benchmarking itself against similar institutions.

On May 2010 the University recruited a dedicated Quality Assurance Coordinator to integrate quality assurance in all its activities across the three core functions and to ensure a systematic implementation of quality assurance measures in all academic programmes. While the Panel heard during interviews with a range of staff of, and saw evidence of, many initiatives being undertaken by the Coordinator, it is too early to assess the impact.

The University conducted a number of quality assurance workshops to educate and train the staff members to ensure that the self-review approach is widely accepted and implemented within BAOU.

3.4 Quality of Teaching and Learning

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

The Arab Open University Alumni Association (AOUAA) was developed in 2008-2009 and functions across all the branches of the AOU. It sets the mission, objectives, and membership of the Association. However, the Panel did not find evidence that shows how active this Association is or the extent of BAOU's involvement. BAOU does have a register of its graduates and holds events to encourage networking between graduates and to garner support for the University. The Panel would like to see a robust system of conducting graduate surveys so that feedback can be used to strengthen the quality and relevance of its programme offerings.

The University has developed two surveys to collect feedback from alumni and employers. The surveys are uploaded on the university's website. Both alumni and employers are contacted via email to complete the survey. There is some feedback from alumni (more than 40) and their response is collated by the Quality Assurance Office. Only two employers responded to the survey. The two surveys were administrated only recently (April 2011) and there is no written plan that shows how the results will feed into the institution's decision-making. The use of surveys is at an early stage and so the Panel could not make any judgement regarding their use with respect to planning.

3.5 Student Support

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

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

BAOU has made significant efforts towards seeking students' input to improve the services provided to them and to involve them in formal decision-making. Students are now represented on various committees of the University. In this regard, the Student Council now plays a major role in communicating student issues to the university governance structures. During interviews, students expressed their satisfaction of their representation in university committees. They informed the Panel that they are able to propose matters for discussion at these committees, and are invited to discuss agenda items that concern them. Upon reviewing the minutes of several meetings of the Students Affairs with the Students Council, the Panel was pleased to find that issues raised by students are successfully addressed and resolved.

The Student Council is responsible for organizing a range of student activities and events; the University encourages the students to obtain local sponsorship to support these activities. In interviews with senior management, the Panel learned that there is no allocated budget for the Student Council (as received from the Kuwaiti headquarters); however, the University is planning to request the allocation of such a budget from headquarters starting September 2011. Evidence presented at the site visit revealed that student's activities are mainly supported by local sponsors (up to B.D. 1000/semester, with a minor contribution by BAOU). There was some indication from students met by the Panel that the former are satisfied with the financial support they currently receive from the University for the Student Council. However, they indicated that an allocated budget would enable them to expand the range of non-curricula campus activities. The Panel affirms BAOU's decision of allocating a budget to the Student Council's activities, as this would enhance their members' learning experience and individual development.

3.6 Human Resources

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

BAOU has allocated two per cent of its operating budget for staff development. The Institution provides a variety of training opportunities for its staff. These take the form of workshops, seminars, supporting conference attendance, and partial payment of tuition fees. The Panel received confirmation during various interviews that participation in these events is open to faculty, support staff and administrative staff members. While these initiatives are appreciated the Institution still needs to create a formal staff development system.

3.7 Infrastructure, Physical and Other Resources

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

BAOU implemented a disaster recovery plan to recover the critical IT services in order to test, review, and update on a regular basis. One copy of the backup media is stored inside the Bahrain campus and another copy sent to external party every Tuesday. The Panel was pleased to find that storage of back-up is now done in a separate location.

3.8 Research

3.8.1 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.

BAOU allocated three per cent of its operating budget to Research and Development as required by the Higher Education Council regulations. The University did not develop a comprehensive research plan with appropriate policies and procedures. The Panel urges the University to develop and implement a plan which indicates how this budget will be allocated and what the appropriate management structure will be that is responsible for implementing, monitoring and reviewing this research plan.

3.9 Community Engagement

3.9.1 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.

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

BAOU considers the Kingdom of Bahrain as its community where every sector is a stakeholder and hence has training programmes to engage with the education, government and private sector. During the site visit, however, the Panel did not find evidence of a deep understanding of the definition of community engagement, and it became evident from interviews with various stakeholders that community events focus mainly on fee-generating contractual courses and training programmes. While the Panel acknowledges the importance of these programmes, it is of the view that BAOU needs to expand on its community activities in order to build stronger links with the community.

Upon reviewing the documentation provided at the site visit, it was evident to the Panel that BAOU does not have a formal policy on community engagement. This was confirmed in interviews with senior managers and academic staff. Nevertheless, the Panel was provided with some examples in which academics and students interact

with the local and regional community; these initiatives, however, need to be formalized and integrated within an overarching framework. The Panel also noted with concern that community engagement is not taken into account in the workload allocation of academic staff. Moreover, the staff interviewed by the Panel were not aware of the contribution of community engagement to their academic promotion. The University needs to take a systematic approach to community service by developing a community engagement policy and framework that enables the coordination of community events, the monitoring of their quality and the reporting of their outcomes.

Being a non-profit organization, BAOU aims to diversify its income by conducting a number of fee-generating activities. During interviews with senior management, the Panel learned that the University has been conducting diverse activities to serve the Bahraini community since 2008; these include e-content development, academic programme hosting, academic working partnership, e-testing as well as professional studies and training programmes. While the Panel appreciates these activities, it is concerned that the University has not yet developed any policies or procedures to regulate them. The University has taken initial steps towards assessing the trainee's satisfaction with these programmes by conducting a number of surveys. The Panel supports this initiative and encourages the University to take a concrete and coordinated approach towards the development of policies and procedures to assure the quality of its income generating activities.