Directorate of Higher Education Reviews

Programmes-within-College Reviews Report

BA in Business Administration/Systems track

Faculty of Business Studies

Arab Open University – Bahrain Branch

Kingdom of Bahrain

Date Reviewed: 16 – 17 February 2014

HC026-C1-R026

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Acronyms

AMR	Annual Monitoring Report
AOU-Bahrain	Arab Open University-Bahrain
Arab OU,HQ, Kuwait	Arab Open University, Head Quarter/Kuwait
BEC	Branch Examination Committee
BQAC	Branch Quality Assurance Committee
CAC	Course Assessment Committee
CBM	Cross Branches Marking
CEC	Central Examination Committee
CICP	Centre for Inclusion and Collaborative Partnerships
DHR	Directorate of Higher Education Reviews
EEs	External Examiners
FBS	Faculty of the Business Studies
HEC	Higher Education Council, Kingdom of Bahrain
ILO	Intended Learning Outcome
LMS	Learning Management System
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MIS	Management Information Systems
MTA	Mid-term Assessment
OU UK	Open University, United Kingdom
OUM	Open University Malaysia

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OUVS	Open University Validation Services
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
QAAD	Quality Assurance and Accreditation Department
QQA	National Authority for Qualifications & Quality Assurance of Education & Training
SER	Self-Evaluation Report
SIS	Student Information Systems
TMA	Tutor Marked Assessment

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1.   The Programmes-within-College Reviews Process

1.1   The Programmes-within-College Reviews Framework

To meet the need to have a robust external quality assurance system in the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Directorate of Higher Education Reviews (DHR) of the National Authority for Qualifications & Quality Assurance of Education & Training (QQA) has developed and is implementing two external quality review processes, namely: Institutional Reviews and Programmes-within-College Reviews which together will give confidence in Bahrain's higher education system nationally, regionally and internationally.

Programmes-within-College Reviews have three main objectives:

- to provide decision-makers (in the higher education institutions, the QQA, the Higher Education Council (HEC), students and their families, prospective employers of graduates and other stakeholders) with evidence-based judgements on the quality of learning programmes
- to support the development of internal quality assurance processes with information on emerging good practices and challenges, evaluative comments and continuing improvement
- to enhance the reputation of Bahrain's higher education regionally and internationally.

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

Indicator 1: **The Learning Programme**

The programme demonstrates fitness for purpose in terms of mission, relevance, curriculum, pedagogy, intended learning outcomes and assessment.

Indicator 2: **Efficiency of the Programme**

The programme is efficient in terms of the admitted students, the use of available resources - staffing, infrastructure and student support.

Indicator 3: **Academic Standards of the Graduates**

The graduates of the programme meet academic standards compatible with equivalent programmes in Bahrain, regionally and internationally.

Indicator 4: **Effectiveness of Quality Management and Assurance**
The arrangements in place for managing the programme, including quality assurance, give confidence in the programme.

The Review Panel (hereinafter referred to as 'the Panel') states in the Review Report whether the programme satisfies each Indicator. If the programme satisfies all four Indicators, the concluding statement will say that there is 'confidence' in the programme.

If two or three Indicators are satisfied, including Indicator 1, the programme will receive a 'limited confidence' judgement. If one or no Indicator is satisfied, or Indicator 1 is not satisfied, the judgement will be 'no confidence', as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Criteria for Judgements

Criteria	Judgement
All four Indicators satisfied	Confidence
Two or three Indicators satisfied, including Indicator 1	Limited Confidence
One or no Indicator satisfied	No Confidence
All cases where **Indicator 1** is not satisfied	

1.2 The Programmes-within-College Reviews Process at the Arab Open University (AOU) – Bahrain Branch

A Programmes-within-College review of the Faculty of Business Studies was conducted by the DHR of the QQA in terms of its mandate to review the quality of higher education in Bahrain. The site visit took place on 16 – 19 February 2014 for the academic programmes offered by the college, these are: BA in Business Administration/Systems track (BA) and Master of Business Administration (MBA) offered by Open University Malaysia (OUM) and hosted by Arab Open University (AOU) – Bahrain.

This report provides an account of the review process and the findings of the Panel for the BA in Business Administration/Systems track (BA) based on the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) and appendices submitted by the Arab Open University (AOU) – Bahrain Branch, the supplementary documentation made available during the site visit, as well as interviews and observations made during the review site visit.

AOU was notified by the DHR/QQA on 22 October 2013 that it would be subject to a Programmes-within-College reviews of its Faculty of Business with the site visit taking place on 16 – 17 February 2014. In preparation for the review, AOU conducted its college self-evaluation of all its programmes and submitted the SERs with appendices on the agreed date on 22 December 2013.

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The DHR constituted a panel consisting of experts in the academic field of Business Administration/Systems track and in higher education who have experience of external programme quality reviews. The Panel comprised four external reviewers.

This Report records the evidence-based conclusions reached by the Panel based on:

(i)   analysis of the Self-Evaluation Report and supporting materials submitted by the institution prior to the external peer-review visit
(ii)   analysis derived from discussions with various stakeholders (faculty members, students, graduates and employers)
(iii)   analysis based on additional documentation requested and presented to the Panel during the site visit.

It is expected that the AOU will use the findings presented in this report to strengthen its BA in Business Administration/Systems track. The DHR recognizes that quality assurance is the responsibility of the higher education institution itself. Hence, it is the right of AOU to decide how it will address the recommendations contained in the Review Report. Nevertheless, three months after the publication of this Report, AOU is required to submit to DHR an improvement plan in response to the recommendations.

The DHR would like to extend its thanks to AOU for the co-operative manner in which it has participated in the Programmes-within-College review process. It also wishes to express its appreciation for the open discussions held in the course of the review and the professional conduct of the faculty members of the BA programme.

1.3   Overview of the Faculty of Business

The Faculty of Business Studies is one of two Faculties of the Arab Open University. The Faculty is part of one of eight branches of the AOU. The AOU-Bahrain branch has been operational since 2002. As such the Faculty operates within the broader framework of provision by the AOU and shares a mission and vision which broadly aims to develop and disseminate expertise to contribute to preparing human resources for development needs and to build the science and knowledge society in the Arab countries.

Although not for profit, the AOU operates primarily using a tuition-based revenue model. The governance is integrated throughout the branches with its headquarters located in Kuwait. There is a consolidated budget for all branches and the Bahrain branch has sufficient autonomy to engage in planning and delivery of its programmes within the local Bahraini context. The broader framework of quality assurance and regulatory framework and policies are common across all branches of the AOU.

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1.4   Overview of the BA in Business Administration/Systems track

The AOU operates an 'open learning model' for its course provision and to enable it to fulfil its mission. It has engaged collaboratively with other global providers of open and distance learning specifically with the Open University (UK) to develop and deliver a BA in Business Administration/Systems track accredited and validated by the Open University Centre for Inclusion and Collaborative Partnerships (previously the Open University Validation Services). On successful completion of the programme students gain a dual award – the BA in Business Administration/Systems track from the AOU (96 AOU credits plus 18 AOU elective credits in order to comply with HEC requirements) and a BA (Business Studies with system practice from the Open University (UK).

There are agreements with the Open University (UK) which cover licensing of materials, consultancies, accreditation and validation and this provided a significant body of additional evidence on which to review the programme. Whilst drawing heavily on materials from the Open University (UK) the Panel was satisfied that there was sufficient customization in the delivery of the material and integration of appropriately contextualized assessments to ensure that the programme was relevant to meeting the needs of learners based in the Gulf region.

1.5   Summary of Review Judgements

Table 2: Summary of Review Judgements for the BA in Business Administration /Systems track

Indicator	Judgement
1: The Learning Programme	Satisfies
2: Efficiency of the Programme	Satisfies
3: Academic Standards of the Graduates	Satisfies
4: Effectiveness of Quality Management and Assurance	Satisfies
Overall Judgement	**Confidence**

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2. Indicator 1: The Learning Programme

The programme demonstrates fitness for purpose in terms of mission, relevance, curriculum, pedagogy, intended learning outcomes and assessment.

2.1 The undergraduate programme, BA in Business Administration/Systems track offered at Bahrain-AOU is a dual award with the Open University, UK and comprises of 128 credit hours which can be completed over a four-year period of full-time study. In its SER, the Arab Open University-Bahrain clearly identifies and discusses relevant market intelligence and states that the University has developed the BA in Business Administration/Systems track programme which is aligned with its mission and vision to meet local requirements to enhance educational opportunities and make a positive contribution to develop the capacity of the workforce in Bahrain. In interviews with Senior Management, the Panel received confirmation that the programme was designed and delivered to take advantage of AOU's own and their partner institution's capacity to widen access to higher education by using a delivery mechanism which supports a pedagogical approach which allows learners to develop and demonstrate an appropriate range and level of understanding of theory and practice in business administration systems. The Panel appreciates that the aims of the programme are well aligned with the vision and mission of the Arab Open University.

2.2 The curriculum is based on the academic curriculum provided by the Open University (UK) which provides 96 credits which fully satisfy their requirements to award a BA Business Administration/Systems track degree. These parts of the curriculum are validated and quality assured by the Open University (UK). As described in the SER and the Student Guide, this is underpinned by an additional 18 credit hours of foundation level credit hours. These parts of the curriculum are used to deliver transferable skills and contextual studies which are required to support students' ability to engage effectively in a higher education course delivered in English and meet mandatory general Arab Open University requirements. The syllabus supports the staged development of knowledge and skills which are relevant to the award of a BA degree in Business Administration/Systems track. The subject content of the syllabus as presented each year reflects the development of more complex concepts which require the student to demonstrate increased critical thinking skills and the ability to integrate and synthesize new and prior knowledge. The inclusion of foundation level modules which respectively develop independent study skills (Module GR101), and skills required for learning online (TU170), provide an important underpinning for learners for whom blended learning is a new concept. As described in the programme specification, the Panel noted that student workloads for each module are appropriate and consistent with regional and international practice in terms of allocation of credits awarded for hours of study

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and assessment. The Panel further found during interviews with students, general satisfaction with the workload involved in undertaking the modules. The Panel appreciates that the curriculum is well organized to demonstrate progression and that the workload involved is appropriate.

2.3   The syllabus is drawn to a large extent from the syllabus of the Open University (UK). The description of the syllabus matches what would be expected in an undergraduate programme in the Business discipline. The Panel met with the UK Open University representative who is responsible for liaison with the AOU and was informed that the syllabus had been benchmarked against the Subject benchmark statements used by the QAA (UK) to provide a description of the characteristics of programmes in a specific subject area – in this case for General Business. The programme clearly meets the norms which would be expected for the discipline. The Self-Evaluation Report also notes that the curriculum is regularly updated by the Open University (UK) to maintain currency and relevance of the materials to support delivery of the syllabus. The Panel confirmed that the Arab Open University has a contract to give them full access to learning support materials produced by the Open University (UK). Documentation describes the syllabus, the indicative content and teaching materials and indicates how each part of it is supported by particular teaching methods and helps students to achieve the overall aims of the programme. There is also evidence from interviews with staff that tutors in Bahrain can contextualize the curriculum content by drawing upon case studies and examples which are directly related to business practice in the region. This is particularly well exemplified in module B300A, 'Business Behaviour in a Changing World'. Staff reported further examples used in other modules. It is important in the context of the mission of the Arab Open University and the aims of the programme that this is continued and extended. The Panel is thus satisfied that the syllabus reflects current norms and trends in the discipline but notes the importance of AOU-Bahrain continuing its efforts to ensure that this is aligned with the context in which the specific subjects taught on the programme are related to current or developing business practice and theory in the Gulf region.

2.4   Programme ILOs are described in the Programme Specification. These cover Knowledge and Understanding, Cognitive Skills, Practical and Professional Skills, and Key Transferable Skills – each sub-divided into more detailed sub-categories. An examination of these demonstrates that they are appropriately linked to the BA Programme Aims. In interviews, staff indicated that they were aware of the skills and competencies which the degree programme seeks to develop and the importance of demonstrating achievement of the programme learning objectives. The Panel appreciates that the aims of the Programme are appropriately aligned with Programme ILOs and that the Programme ILOs reflect the range of knowledge and skills which would be expected in a Bachelor's degree programme.

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2.5   The ILOs are described for the individual courses/modules which comprise the programme and also how these are mapped both to the overall programme aims and the assessments used to demonstrate the extent to which students have achieved the intended learning outcomes for particular modules. During interviews with staff, the Panel found that they were knowledgeable about both the procedures for doing this and the rationale for the approach. The Panel was satisfied that students can progress through the degree, and demonstrate, through satisfactory completion of the assessment at each level that they have accumulated the appropriate graduate attributes to support the award of BA in Business Administration/Systems track. The Panel appreciates that the academic staff have taken into consideration that this is demonstrated through appropriate mapping of the Course Learning Outcomes.

2.6   The course does not include any internship opportunities but an examination of the SER (Template 1 giving the student profile) shows that in 2012 more than 50% of enrolled students had work experience. During interviews with staff, it was confirmed that students could use this to integrate the theoretical knowledge gained during their studies and apply it in a working environment. Staff provided examples drawn from their approaches to teaching specific modules – notably in module T306B. In interviews with management and academic staff, the Panel received confirmation that the existing strategies were not enough to transfer employability skills for those students who were not employed whilst undertaking the course. This is being addressed through introducing internship as an elective in the final year as part of the curriculum. The Panel recommends that the Faculty expedite its plans to develop and implement a compulsory internship module as soon as possible for non-working students.

2.7   A teaching, learning and assessment enhancement strategy was made available to the Panel. The teaching principles and methods are based around the use of blended learning and flexible learning strategies which employ appropriate pedagogical approaches to allow students to demonstrate that they have met the intended learning outcomes. This is well documented and in interviews with staff the Panel was provided with examples of how these strategies were implemented. Examples provided included the use of face-to-face tutorials, dedicated office hours for consultation, encouragement to discuss issues and assignments informally in groups, short quizzes and tests to build student confidence and allow them to reflect on the progress of their learning and discussion forums on the LMS (Learning Management System). During interviews with staff, it was noted that they are trained in the use of the Learning Management System, which is used to manage communication with students, support student interaction and provide access to teaching materials. In addition, staff elaborated on how they were supported by their peers in using different approaches to teaching and learning. The Panel appreciates that the teaching staff apply a range of pedagogical approaches to support students who

have different qualifications and experience when admitted to the programme and the need to ensure the individual learning needs of students are met.

2.8   There is a clear policy for assessment arrangements and examination arrangements to ensure transparency and equity in the treatment of students. Furthermore, there are marking guidelines for all assessments, which was confirmed during interviews with staff. Staff also confirmed the use of double and group marking of assessments. An example of the use of blind marking in summative assessments to ensure that there is no bias towards the performance of students is documented. In reviewing all the evidence, the Panel is satisfied that there are transparent and fair policies for student assessment and that the assessments are set and assessed taking careful consideration of the ILOs. As described in the syllabus and course materials provided to the Panel at the time of the site visit, there is a blend of assessment which tests theory and practice. This includes mid-term and final term examinations and also assignments and projects. The Panel also noted from their meetings with academic staff that Tutor Marked Assessment (TMA) accounts for 20% by using case studies and informal group work whereas class examination such as Mid-term Assessment (MTA) and final exams account for 30% and 50% respectively. These three assessments are approved by the Dean of Business at Arab OU, HQ, Kuwait. The Panel noted the view expressed in interviews with External Examiners that more use of assessment through coursework assignments would be beneficial in order to give students the opportunity to gain more credits based on work which would allow them to demonstrate more easily the development of their critical thinking and communication skills. The Panel recommends that the Faculty monitor the application on all assessments and ensure that it is followed consistently.

2.9   During interviews with staff, the Panel noted that there were clearly communicated procedures for students to query their grades either on the basis of academic judgement in determining the grade or documented mitigating circumstances which can be used to support a case to allow the student to be given the opportunity to be re-assessed. Students are allowed to look at their TMA and MTA exam papers. They receive written feedback on their scripts along with guidelines on how to improve their grades. Furthermore, the academic committee is responsible to take actions if student wants to query his grade. During interviews, staff informed the Panel that students are given two chances to appeal and if there is a change in the grade, approval from Arab OU, HQ, Kuwait has to be granted. The Panel is satisfied with the current practice.

2.10   In coming to its conclusion regarding The Learning Programme, the Panel notes, *with appreciation*, the following:

- The aims of the programme are well aligned with the vision and mission of AOU-Bahrain.

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- The curriculum is well-organized and provides year-on-year progression which supports the attainment of appropriate graduate attributes.
- The aims of the programme are appropriately aligned with programme ILOs which in turn reflects the range of knowledge and skills required for a BA degree.
- There is depth of understanding and implementation of Course ILOs and PILOs as well as the mapping of both of them to the overall programme aims and objectives.
- Different teaching methods are used to support students learning needs.
- Written feedback is given on all student assessments.

2.11   In terms of improvement the Panel **recommends** that the Faculty should:

- Expedite the development and delivery of internships in the final year of the BA in Business Administration/Systems track programme as a compulsory module for non-working students
- Monitor the application of assessments to ensure they are implemented consistently.

2.12   **Judgement**

On balance, the Panel concludes that the programme **satisfies** the Indicator on **The Learning Programme.**

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3. Indicator 2: Efficiency of the Programme

The programme is efficient in terms of the admitted students, the use of available resources - staffing, infrastructure and student support.

3.1 The programme admissions policy is consistent with both the vision of the AOU-Bahrain and with the regulations of the HEC. Additionally, the general admission policy is approved by the OU (UK). In particular, the vision of AOU provides access to lifelong learning opportunities to those categories of applicants who did not previously get the chance to continue their studies immediately subsequent to completing their general school certificate. In interviews with academics and administrative staff, it was established that AOU-Bahrain has a high applicant to enrolment ratio as it is constrained on the number of students which it can enrol according to the HEC regulations. It was also established that for non-standard applicants (e.g. mature students) a system of recognition of prior experiential learning was not used and that all entrants must have, as a minimum, a general school certificate. As there is a potential inconsistency between the vision of AOU and the categories of enrolled students, the Panel recommends that AOU revise their admissions policy which clearly informs applicants of the criteria for admission to the BA Business Administration/Systems track programme and which is consistent with local regulations.

3.2 The majority of students entering the programme have professional experience, enhancing their learning potential across a range of areas such as managing in the workplace, business functions, managing complexity. For those students who had been absent from study for a number of years, the AOU-Bahrain Foundation courses in communication and transferable skills provide an opportunity to refresh and refine the requisite study skills in preparation for the AOU-Bahrain designed business-related courses offered in the programme. In interviews with academic, administrative staff, and students and alumni it became clear that the flexibility offered by the programme delivery and the provision of the e-library allowed time-constrained students to progress their studies in a way which would not have been possible with more traditional delivery systems. Additionally and importantly, the quality of the OU (UK) material combined with the academic and professional expertise of staff, encouraged students to engage with the material, enhancing their likelihood of success. The Panel appreciates the profile of admitted students and the steps taken to induct students into a higher education learning environment are suitable for the programme.

3.3 There is an efficient line management structure and academic committee structure in operation for the programme. There is a Programme Coordinator supported by full-time and part-time academic and administrative staff in a sophisticated matrix structure enabling horizontal and vertical communication. As the modules on the

programme are delivered also within the wider AOU branch network, liaison between AOU-Bahrain staff and Head Quarter, Kuwait is important. Various electronic methods (email, Skype, WebEx and Virtual Chat) are used to enable interaction and communication. Accountability to students enrolled on the programme is facilitated through the Student Care Centre and the Registration Office and student feedback and complaints or exam appeals can be logged via the SIS. Students are able to evaluate formally course delivery and this feedback becomes part of the formal staff appraisal system. Discussions with academic and administrative staff and with the OU (UK) confirmed that the OU (UK) employs a partnership model for the delivery of the BA Business Administration/Systems track programme and it has appointed two course-related external examiners who report through the annual monitoring process, provide moderation and feedback on a range of issues from double-marking policy to support for academic writing. The Panel's interview with the external examiners confirmed satisfaction with responses from AOU-Bahrain staff on examiner recommendations. The Panel also noted that the Student Council is active in progressing the interests of the student body for the AOU-Bahrain branch. The Panel appreciates that there are clear lines of accountability embedded in the structures and processes surrounding the programme.

3.4   The programme is supported by four full-time staff and 10 part-time staff for 981 enrolled students and the maximum number of students in each class is set at 30. Interviews with full-and part-time academic staff indicated that their workload was manageable for teaching although it did not allow much time for research related activities. Staff informed the Panel that part-time staff could be deployed relatively quickly, given the network and contacts of the programme team. However, the view of the OU (UK) towards the staff to student ratio is that it is comparatively high. The Panel recommends that number of full-time staff faculty be increased.

3.5   Evidence was sought on the current CVs of all the 14 academic staff currently teaching on the programme and a review of these confirmed the appropriateness of their academic qualifications and professional experience. All staff are required to undertake an induction programme and course specific training programmes and are encouraged to engage in academic research and continuing professional development. Interviews with academic and administrative staff, students and alumni indicated that the reported accessibility, engagement and commitment of staff greatly enhanced the quality of programme delivery. Furthermore, the contribution of staff in providing inputs based on their professional expertise encouraged deep learning and confidence building on the part of students. The Panel appreciates the professionalism of staff and their commitment to the successful delivery of the programme.

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3.6   There is a process of recruitment in which existing full-time tutors short list candidates for interview with the process being managed and evaluated by the HR department with the involvement of the Arab Open HQ Interview Committee. All staff are involved in a formal appraisal system comprising personal development planning, and this is supplemented by ongoing review by the Programme Coordinator. Support is provided as courses are delivered and student feedback is received through end of semester formal course evaluation. Peer review has been used since 2010-2011 and formal documentation on the process is completed. Interviews with staff confirmed the adoption of these processes and evidence on the promotion of staff for 2013 and 2014 was supplied to the Panel. The tenure of BA full-time faculty has been increased to four years from two years to enhance loyalty and contracts of underperforming staff are terminated at the end of a semester. In interviews, it was clarified that the staff development policy on training and enhancement of academic qualifications applies to both full-time and part-time members of staff. All staff are required to undertake an induction programme and course specific training programmes. With particular reference to the retention policy, an Internal Review Questionnaire in 2012 provided by the Quality Assurance Department indicates that the average length of stay for part-time tutors is four semesters, whereas for full-time tutors the duration is five years. Part-time staff have short-term contracts, with the contracts being renewed at the start of each semester. In light of the amount of work required to recruit appropriately qualified part-time staff, their induction and course specific training, it is recommended that the ratio of full-to-part-time staff be reviewed and enhanced in favour of recruiting more full-time staff. The Panel appreciates AOU implemented procedure for staff development plans and training for full-time staff.

3.7   There are effective information flow processes embedded in the Management Information Systems (MIS) and confirmed during interviews with the programme team. The System Information System (SIS) provides a sophisticated means of integrating data to maintain accurate student records, record student transactions and produce reports on student progress. The SIS is integrated with the LMS and a Human Resources Database System and a Work Flow system is being developed to replace the existing system recording staff attendance and staff payroll preparation. Staff have access to the AOU-Bahrain intranet through the email system and students have restricted access being able to login to the student domain only and prevented from installing additional software. Internet browsing is filtered by a web security system. During the campus tour the Panel met the IT staff and were impressed with their knowledge and availability to deal with IT server and systems issues including the possibility of malfunction and cyber threats. Interviews with support staff and academics confirmed that the information reports they received were effective and comprehensive. The Panel appreciates the use of the MIS, SIS and LMS to support the management of AOU-Bahrain in its decision making.

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3.8   During the campus tour, the Panel visited support departments such as the Registry, the Exams Office and the Student Care Centre. Discussion with staff during the course of the campus tour confirmed evidence provided in the SER that compliance with the security policy for the SIS is a condition of employment and non-compliance can result in disciplinary action or termination. Interviews with academic and administrative staff confirmed that once data is entered, it is checked and validated before further processing. The security of the systems was confirmed and administrative staff confirmed that there were a range of access privileges which were applied appropriately. Student grades are entered by academic staff and, again, checked and validated by administrative staff before further processing. Assessments are received in sealed packages, stored and provided for the requisite exam by the Examinations Department under the supervision of the Assistant to the Director for Academic Affairs. Electronic exchanges relating to assessments are encrypted. Surveillance cameras are in use for areas near the server room, examination control room and assessment storage area. The Panel appreciates the rigour of the implemented policies and procedures to ensure the security of learner information and accuracy of results.

3.9   Physical resources are appropriate for the delivery of the programme. There is a functioning Student Care Centre, lecture rooms, the computer laboratories and other facilities such as cafeteria, bookstores and educational materials department and health clinic/first aid room on the first floor are appropriate to meet student needs. The Panel was shown a model of a new campus building and facilities which will be occupied by June 2014 and this investment confirmed the continuing commitment on the part of the AOU to support the capacity to deliver programmes in Bahrain.

3.10   There is evidence that tracking is conducted using the LMS to provide data on student access to electronic systems - indicating the number of user sign-ins, daily resource views, and most popular collections broken down by categories of users. The Panel is satisfied that this data was well utilized.

3.11   A Student Care Centre provides the major medium of student support, complemented by the Registration department staff who jointly provide responses to student queries during office hours. The LMS also provides student support and academic advisors offer academic advice and assistance during registration on courses as well as overall monitoring to identify students at risk. The SIS allows students to log complaints electronically and the Student Council and course tutors can also be approached by students who can additionally communicate their views using social media. The potential confusion which may be created by the multiple ways in which students can be supported was discussed during Panel interviews with administrative and academic staff and it was established that the Student Care Centre, is responsible for co-ordinating the provision of support. During interviews with students and alumni, the Panel found that they were complimentary about the

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support systems in place and were not confused by the variety of ways that help could be sought. In particular, current students reported that they received support proactively and noted a number of communications received from the Student Care Centre in this regard. The Panel appreciates the work of the Student Care Centre in providing accessible support for students enrolled on the BA Business Administration/Systems track programme.

3.12   An orientation and induction programme is offered for all new students and Student Orientation Day is organized at the commencement of every semester by the Student Support Centre where the opportunity to undertake a campus tour, to meet administrative and academic staff is available and the Student Guide is distributed. A good feature of the orientation discussed during interviews with students was the involvement of senior students in the orientation day and the support given to these students in assisting them to do this effectively. Training in the use of the LMS was also noted as an important part of the process. Given the nature of the blended online delivery process, the Panel considered that the face-to-face orientation day is an important part of the process and sought confirmation through a variety of meetings of the content of the orientation/induction day and reporting on the same. The Panel also found that students not attending the orientation programme day were contacted and provided with a further opportunity to do so. Students confirmed this process and added that course tutors in their first contact sessions reiterated the importance of training for LMS access and demonstrated to students how this could be achieved for their course. The Panel concluded that the orientation day was fully supported and all staff worked to ensure its successful delivery for new students.

3.13   There are a number of ways in which academic support for at-risk students (defined as those with a cumulative GPA which falls below 2.0) is provided including the continuing involvement of the academic advisor, accessed through the Online Registration system. In interviews, the Panel found that both course tutors and academic advisors counselled students ahead of time that their GPA was at-risk. The Panel appreciates that appropriate support is in place to identify at-risk students and intervene where necessary.

3.14   There is a study space provided in the library, additional one-to-one tutorial sessions, and peer-to-peer tutoring is facilitated by the AOU-Bahrain Student Council. The Panel confirmed these support mechanisms in its tour of the facilities and interviews with students. In addition, the Panel noted that a Business Club had been formed and this provided extracurricular activities which facilitated sharing student experience of the programme in an informal setting. The Panel appreciates the overall learning environment.

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3.15   In coming to its conclusion regarding the Efficiency of the Programme, the Panel notes, *with appreciation*, the following:

- The profile of admitted students and steps taken to induct them are effective and suit the nature of the learning environment at AOU.
- There are clear lines of accountability embedded in the structures and processes surrounding the programme.
- There are enthusiastic and dedicated academic and administrative staff which is reflected in the healthy productive working environment.
- AOU has a sound implemented procedure for staff development plans and training including full-and part-time staff.
- There is a well-organized Student Care Centre that provides a variety of services and support to students from the time they enrolled to the time of their graduation.
- There is a robust orientation day for all newly enrolled students during which senior students are also involved.

3.16   In terms of improvement, the Panel **recommends** that the Faculty should:

- revise and disseminate the Admissions policy for the BA in Business Administration/Systems track programme at the AOU-Bahrain branch to clearly inform applicants of the characteristics of the student body it seeks to attract
- develop and implement a retention strategy for academic staff
- enhance the ratio of full-time to part-time staff to provide a balance in favour of full-time staff.

3.17   **Judgement**

On balance, the Panel concludes that the programme **satisfies** the Indicator on **Efficiency of the Programme.**

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4.   Indicator 3: Academic Standards of the Graduates

The graduates of the programme meet academic standards compatible with equivalent programmes in Bahrain, regionally and internationally.

4.1   There is clear evidence that the courses offered through the programme are appropriate for achieving the learning outcomes and enable the students to acquire the necessary skills to enter the labour market. In interviews, staff clarified that there are five business functions of graduate attribute which are composed around Marketing, Human Resources, Production, Accounting and Finance. Furthermore, transferable skills and soft skills are also enhanced throughout the programme. Reviewing the course files for each course, it was also evident that the assessment methods used were valid and reliable in terms of the learning outcomes. The Panel appreciates that assignments for each course are developed by using a mapping between ILOs of the programme and ILOs of the courses and are of an appropriate standard.

4.2   AOU-Bahrain BA in Business Administration/Systems track was validated by the UK Open University Validation Services (OUVS) in 2003 and validation has been subject to review at five years intervals since 2007. This integrates the prescribed norms and standards set by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK in its internal QA system and evaluates implementation of these norms and standards constantly with the help of external reviewers. Interviews with the academic and administrative staff clarified to the Panel that this provided international benchmarking of the programme. However, the external benchmarking process is not clearly stated. The Panel recommends the institution benchmark the BA in Business Administration/Systems track programme against other external institutions at the local, regional and international levels.

4.3   AOU-Bahrain assessments are done through different methods. Each course requires students to complete one TMA which accounts for 20% of the total course grade. MTA measures the progress of the students during the course and accounts for 30% of the total course grade. The final examination accounts for 50% of the final grade. Students are informed about assessments policies and procedures through various methods, such as the Induction Week, first face-to-face meeting with their tutors, and the course calendar. All the assignments and the final examination are graded by the grading guidelines provided by the Arab OU, HQ /Kuwait. The assessment of the students in terms of programme aims and ILOs is monitored and reviewed by the External Examiners. There is also an appeals process in place where students can apply through the SIS appeal system for grade reconsideration. The students receive a response within two weeks. The Panel appreciates from a perusal of documentation and from the interviews that this process is efficient and effective

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and that there are different levels of ensuring student assessment is conducted fairly and thoroughly.

4.4   AOU's Examination Board structure including: Branch Examination Committee (BEC), Course Assessment Committee (CAC) and Central Examination Committee (CEC)—ensures that the advice from External Examiners with respect to the assessment procedures are rigorous and consistently implemented. The assessment process is valid and objective, and it was confirmed during the interviews with the external examiners that it is open and accessible to them. Based on the evidence provided in on-site interviews and the additional evidence the academic and administrative staff of AOU-Bahrain has provided, the Panel reached the conclusion that there is an alignment of assessment with outcomes to assure the graduates' academic standards. The Panel reviewed assessments and is confident that they are robust in ensuring that successful completion of assessments provides an assurance that course learning outcomes have been met, which is appreciated.

4.5   AOU-Bahrain has mechanisms for internal moderation, setting assessment instruments and grading students' performance. In addition, the Cross Branches Marking (CBM), Group Marking, Blind Marking and Double Marking have been introduced as additional quality assurance grading mechanisms to ensure fair student assignments' grading and grade distribution. Plagiarism detection software ('Turnitin') is used to ensure that assignments are not based on copying of published material. Documentation and interviews with academic staff confirmed the view of the Panel that appropriate internal mechanisms are in place to assure moderation of assessment instruments and of student performance in the assessments.

4.6   External Examiners (EEs) are carefully chosen based on their background and expertise in the field and are appointed by the Open University (UK). They are actively involved in all aspects of the assessment process. The MTAs, TMAs and final examinations are send to the EEs for feedback and comments. The EEs write their reports and provide constructive comments and recommendations for improvement which the Panel were able to access. During telephone interviews with EEs and from documentation the Panel is of the view that the AOU-Bahrain process for external moderation of assessment and the mechanisms in place for allowing feedback on assessment are satisfactory. During interviews with staff, the Panel was satisfied that there are processes to ensure that comments from external examiners are disseminated and acted upon. The Panel encourages AOU to have a more systematic process to assure the implementation of EEs feedback and comments.

4.7   AOU utilizes the External Examiners' expertise and experience to compare AOU-Bahrain students' performance with other OU (UK) students. In addition, the Panel had the opportunity to review samples from TMAs, MTAs and final exams across a range of modules and appreciates that the level of difficulty and the level of

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achievement in these assessments are comparable with similar programmes regionally and internationally. Furthermore, the Panel appreciates that appropriate monitoring of standards is regularly conducted.

4.8 There is thorough scrutiny of final results conducted through the Group Marking, Blind Marking and Double Marking at the branch level. The academic committee in AOU-Bahrain agrees on MTAs and final examinations requirements and ensures the smooth conduct of MTAs and final examinations. The Panel confirmed from documentation and interviews that approval of grades is the responsibility of the Faculty of the Business Studies (FBS), and meetings are arranged to discuss and verify the appropriate assessment instruments to test course learning outcomes which collectively assure that the Programme Learning Outcomes are met. After the grading is completed, the grades are submitted to the HQ via the SIS grading system. The CAC in HQ holds an official meeting for each course with the all Arab Open University branches along with the FBS Dean and takes into account External Examiner feedback for that course. After all the grading evaluation is completed and approved, then the Arab OU HQ/Kuwait examination department develops a report for each course, for all the branches. The Panel appreciates this rigorous examination process.

4.9 The retention statistics and reasons for student withdrawals were not evident and clear. The Panel examined data regarding the number of students admitted, graduated and withdrawn. The Panel concluded that retention was not satisfactory. AOU-Bahrain needs to monitor carefully the retention and progression rates for students enrolled in the BA in Business Administration/Systems track programme to ensure that the reasons for student withdrawal from the programme are clearly understood and are known whether it was due to external or internal circumstances. More accessible transparent tables and figures need to be used to demonstrate trends in recruitment and retention. The Panel recommends that the programme team introduce a concise student retention strategy based on the student's journey from admission to graduation and implement a monitoring system to track the reasons of students' withdrawal.

4.10 The BA in Business Administration/Systems track does not provide internship where direct work-based learning is assessed. Student assessments may allow them to integrate their own work-based experience but work-based learning is not in itself subject to assessment nor provided with credit.

4.11 The senior BA project (T306) is the students' graduation project and students are assigned a project advisor who guides the students during the project. There are two parts to this course. The first 306a which is a case study and students are assessed on the basis of their analysis of the case. The second part of the graduation project 306b, is a written project, where students select their topics based on their own experience

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and/or work background. Students submit a report upon the completion of the project. This project requires students to integrate and apply prior knowledge and skills from other courses which they have undertaken as part of the programme. During interviews with staff, it was noted that formerly students had a great degree of freedom in selection of the topic for their project. More recently students have been constrained to selecting topics which have a clear business/management focus and are more closely aligned to the award being conferred. Students are given two semesters to complete the project. The Panel noted in interviews with staff that students are given clear guidance on supervisory arrangements. The Panel concluded that the project is well managed and gives students valuable exposure to using critical and analytical skills. Moreover, students are able to apply these skills to a realistic problem which they may face in the work place. The Panel appreciates that the project is a robust assessment instrument to test a range of knowledge and skills and clear arrangements were in place to show the respective roles of the supervisor and the student.

4.12   An Advisory Board was established in 2013 and meets twice a year on a regular basis. It comprises three members who are knowledgeable about Bahrain's economic, cultural, social, and political environment. The Panel was of the view that their collective expertise was valuable to inform AOU-Bahrain's business programmes. During the interview, it was evident that the Advisory Board has already provided the academic and administrative staff with a number of recommendations and suggestions to align the course with contemporary practice in the context of business practice in Bahrain. It has also given advice and suggestions on the development of new programmes. Based on the interviews, it was clear that the Board's contribution to the programme would be substantial and valuable if used by the AOU-Bahrain leadership. The Advisory Board members demonstrated a genuine interest in the programme and were willing to assist in increasing the visibility of the programme, in curriculum development, recruitment strategies, marketing and advising on themes which could form the basis for the introduction of new programmes, e.g. in Insurance and in Strategic Management. The Panel recommends that senior management of AOU-Bahrain ensure that the Advisory Board feedback is integrated into other mechanisms to provide AOU-Bahrain with market intelligence on educational developments in the region. Moreover, AOU-Bahrain is encouraged to establish a formal mechanism to ensure the Advisory Board that deliberations feed into all management committees.

4.13   The Panel conducted interviews with employers and alumni and was pleased to note the very enthusiastic response from both groups of stakeholders. Employers were interviewed and provided very positive feedback on the quality of the graduates and the academic preparation and skills which students acquired to prepare them for the world of work. The employers also indicated that the students are very competent in terms of analytical, communicative, and leadership skills. The alumni were

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positive when reflecting on their education experience on the BA Business Administration/Systems track programme and complimentary of the efforts of the academic staff who provided them with an excellent learning experience. Survey instruments used to gather employer feedback were of limited value because of the very low response rate achieved. Interviews with employers and alumni were unclear as to the manner in which their comments and feedback contributed to the ongoing development and improvement of the programme. The Panel recommends that the AOU develop mechanisms to provide more systematic feedback to their external stakeholders to provide them with an assurance that their inputs and comments are having an impact on the manner in which the programme is developed.

4.14   In coming to its conclusion regarding the Academic Standards of the Graduates, the Panel notes, *with appreciation*, the following:

- There is well-documented evidence that student assessment is conducted fairly and thoroughly.
- Rigorous procedures are adopted to set assignments which test the students' ability to demonstrate the assessed learning outcomes and the processes used to moderate the marks the students are assigned.
- External Examiners are used for the BA in Business Administration/Systems track programme to get their feedback to the management who in turn takes their suggestions seriously and act accordingly.
- There is thorough scrutiny of TMAs, MTAs, and final exams at the local level and at the AOU–Bahrain and Arab OU, HQ/ Kuwait.
- Student project is a robust assessment instrument which tests a range of knowledge and skills and arrangements are in place to ensure its effectiveness.
- There is a well-functioning Advisory Board.

4.15   In terms of improvement, the Panel **recommends** that the Faculty should:

- extend the range of institutions against which the programme is benchmarked
- put in place a strategy for dealing with student retention and progression rates after examining students journey from admission to graduation
- systematically review and implement recommendations from alumni, employers
- incorporate the Advisory Board's feedback and suggestions to enhance the delivery of the programme to cater for labour market needs.

4.16   **Judgement**

On balance, the Panel concludes that the programme **satisfies** the Indicator on **Academic Standards of the Graduates.**

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5.   Indicator 4: Effectiveness of Quality Management and Assurance

The arrangements in place for managing the programme, including quality assurance and continuous improvement, contribute to giving confidence in the programme.

5.1   The quality management system at AOU-Bahrain together with the quality assurance policies and procedures are largely adopted from the AOU-Kuwait quality assurance framework. There is a Quality Assurance Manual which clearly stipulates the guiding principles and standards for quality assurance on matters relating to teaching and learning. Quality assurance standards at AOU-Bahrain are benchmarked against QAA-UK standards. There are a number of mechanisms for assuring quality and inculcating a quality culture at AOU-Bahrain.

5.2   The Panel met with academic and administrative staff, including representatives from the Quality Assurance Unit, who confirmed that quality assurance policies and procedures are effectively applied and well communicated. Staff interviewed showed a clear understanding of the quality management system, and were able to demonstrate many ways in which the policies and procedures are applied to enhance the quality of the BA in Business Administration/Systems track programme. The Panel appreciates that AOU-Bahrain has developed and implemented an effective quality management system with clear policies and procedures, which are appropriately benchmarked.

5.3   The BA in Business Administration/Systems track programme at AOU-Bahrain is managed by a Branch Programme Coordinator in conjunction with a number of Branch Course Coordinators. The Branch Programme Coordinator takes overall responsibility for the delivery of the programme, and reports to the Faculty Dean at AOU headquarters in Kuwait on academic matters relating to the programme. There is also a reporting line to the Branch Assistant Director for Academic Affairs on administrative matters that are dealt with at the Branch level. Branch Course Coordinators are responsible for coordinating the delivery and assessment of specific courses that are taught at AOU-Bahrain. In order to ensure consistency of quality standards across branches, each course is assigned a General Course Coordinator at Head Quarter's level. The Panel was pleased to note that some AOU-Bahrain academic staff were assigned as General Course Coordinators. The Panel noted during interviews with management and the academic staff that there is general satisfaction with the arrangements of AOU-Bahrain has in place for the management of the BA Business Administration/Systems track programme. The Panel appreciates that the arrangements demonstrate effective leadership in managing the programme.

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5.4   AOU-Bahrain has a Quality Assurance Unit that is responsible for conducting regular stakeholder surveys, monitoring the professional development of staff and staff appraisal processes. In interviews with staff, the Panel noted that the Head of the QA Unit coordinates with the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Department (QAAD) at AOU headquarters in Kuwait through monthly videoconference meetings together with Branch QA coordinators from other branches of AOU to ensure proper alignment of quality assurance processes. In order to ensure inclusivity in its quality processes, AOU-Bahrain has set up committees such as the Branch Quality Assurance Committee (BQAC) that has oversight responsibility for quality assurance and improvement. The BQAC is chaired by the Branch Director, and includes the BA Business Administration/Systems track Coordinator and representatives of academic and administrative staff as members. The Panel learned during interviews with management and staff that the BQAC functions well and has been effective in enhancing the quality of provision of the BA Business Administration/Systems track programme. The Panel was pleased to note the effectiveness of the QA Unit in supporting the development and implementation of quality assurance processes at AOU-Bahrain. However, the Panel also noted that the QA unit comprised only two staff and this puts considerable pressure on them to support quality assurance.

5.5   The Quality Assurance Unit at AOU-Bahrain is responsible for 'permeating a quality assurance culture across all levels of academic as well as administrative staff.' Mechanisms for inculcating a quality culture and making staff aware of quality assurance policies and procedures include a staff/faculty induction programme for new staff. Quality assurance policies and procedures, including a comprehensive Quality Assurance Manual, Examinations and Awards Byelaws, and a Guide to Quality Assurance document, are also made available on the AOU-Bahrain intranet which can be accessed by staff. The Panel in interviews with staff confirmed the evidence presented in the Self-Evaluation report on how induction is conducted. In meetings with staff, the Panel was informed by newly-appointed staff that they were all taken through an induction programme when they were first appointed. The Panel was impressed with the level of understanding that both academic and support staff showed of the quality system at AOU-Bahrain. The Panel is satisfied that there are sufficient arrangements in place at AOU-Bahrain to ensure that both academic and support staff have an understanding of quality assurance and commends the staff for their active involvement in quality assurance.

5.6   There is an approval process for the development of new programmes, and 'new programmes are intended to be introduced after moving to the new building'. The programme approval process includes internal considerations by the Faculty of Business and the Advisory Board and Board of Trustees, as well as external approvals by the Higher Education Council and validation by the Open University –

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UK in some instances. The Panel is satisfied that appropriate policies and procedures are in place for the approval of new programmes.

5.7   The arrangements for internal programme evaluation include 'end of semester course and tutor evaluations' to generate feedback on teaching. The Panel met with students and alumni who confirmed that they were able to provide feedback on various aspects relating to the quality of provision. The academic staff also confirmed that the process of student evaluation has led to improvements ranging from "revision of contact time for some courses" to "non-renewal of some part time staff contracts". The Panel noted that the student evaluation system is an effective tool for generating ongoing feedback on the quality of teaching. This is complemented by employer and alumni feedback using appropriate questionnaires. The Faculty of Business uses Annual Monitoring Report (AMR) to report on matters such as student progression and faculty performance. The AMR is then submitted to AOU headquarters in Kuwait and also to the Open University (UK), together with recommendations from the Branch management on improvement plans. The Panel appreciates the structured manner in which AOU-Bahrain reviews the BA Business Administration/Systems track programme annually through the Annual Monitoring Report. On examining the Annual Programme Evaluation Report provided, the Panel did not see evidence that appropriate mechanisms were used for analyzing all of the sources of data nor of recording recommended enhancement actions and implementing and reporting on these recommendations. The Panel recommends that AOU-Bahrain develop appropriate mechanisms for reporting on and implementing recommendations from the Annual Monitoring Report.

5.8   The Self-Evaluation report comments on periodic internal and external review in terms of two main reference points – the processes undertaken as part of the CICP (UK) for validation and accreditation, and the local quality review by the QQA/DHR in Bahrain. The Panel found in interviews with staff, that the programme was subject to periodic review (normally every five years) by the QAA (UK). The Panel noted that the procedures adopted and implemented by the AOU-Bahrain QAA Unit with respect to auditing transnational collaborative provision are effective. The Panel appreciates these arrangements.

5.9   AOU-Bahrain periodically conducts surveys of its alumni and employees. Evidence was provided of some 2013 surveys. The Panel noted during interviews with representatives from employers, from Alumni and with the Advisory Board that while this is indeed the case, they receive no feedback from the University on how their recommendations have been implemented. The Panel recommends that AOU-Bahrain adopt more robust procedures to analyze and respond to the issues identified from the data collected from alumni and employer surveys, and provide feedback to the stakeholders on actions taken to address the identified issues.

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5.10   AOU-Bahrain operates within a broader AOU-Kuwait Staff Development Policy. The policy provides for staff to earn higher degrees through signing partnership agreements with other universities, and for staff to attend training workshops and conferences. A number of the academic staff and administrative staff who were interviewed confirmed that they have been beneficiaries of the staff development programme. The Panel, however, also noted that the staff development policy does not include the part-time academic staff. In view of the large proportion of part-time academic staff teaching on the BA Business Administration/Systems track programme, the Panel encourages AOU-Bahrain to consider including the part-time staff in its staff development programme.

5.11   During interviews with staff, alumni and employers the Panel was informed that there are clear mechanisms through which the AOU gathers intelligence about the local labour market needs. One strong indicator is the personal experience of its part-time staff, many of whom are in employment and are thus able to contribute directly to conditions pertaining in the local labour market. In addition, AOU-Bahrain has clear links through employers and its alumni to market intelligence and this is complemented at a strategic level by advice and guidance which is provided by its Advisory Board. The Panel is satisfied that there are mechanisms used to scope the labour market but recommends that the AOU-Bahrain adopt an approach to provide a systematic formatted system.

5.12   In coming to its conclusion regarding the Effectiveness of Quality Management and Assurance, the Panel notes, *with appreciation*, the following:

- There are well-established and embedded quality assurance management policies and procedures.
- There are robust arrangements that reflect the effectiveness of the leadership in managing the programme.
- The QA Unit plays a vital role in supporting the development and implementation of quality assurance processes at AOU-Bahrain.
- Staff play an active role and are fully engaged with quality assurance procedures.
- The variety of survey instruments used to elicit feedback from external and internal stakeholders that are in place to enhance the continuous development of the programme.

5.13   In terms of improvement, the Panel **recommends** that the Faculty should:

- ensure that recommendations derived from the Annual Programme Evaluation of the BA Business Administration/Systems track programme are implemented
- adopt and implement robust procedures to analyse data collected from multiple sources, triangulate the data, and clearly discuss the implications of the data

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- formalize processes to scope the local labour market needs for the programme.

5.14 **Judgement**

On balance, the Panel concludes that the programme **satisfies** the Indicator on **Effectiveness of Quality Management and Assurance.**

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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 Panel draws the following conclusion in accordance with the DHR/QQA *Programmes-within-College Reviews Handbook, 2012*:

There is confidence in the BA in Business Administration/Systems track offered at the Arab Open University–Bahrain Branch.

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