Directorate of
Higher Education Reviews
Programme Review Report

Arab Open University
Faculty of Business Studies
BA (Hons) Business Studies (Systems Practice)
Kingdom of Bahrain

Site Visit Date: 4-6 April 2022

HA052-C3-R052

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Acronyms

ADAASR	Assistant Director for Academic Affairs and Scientific Research
ADAF	Assistant Director for Administration and Financial Affairs
AMR	Annual Monitoring Report
AOU	Arab Open University
AOU–Bahrain	Arab Open University – Bahrain
AOU-HQ	Arab Open University (Headquarter, Kuwait)
APE	Annual Programme Evaluation
ARE	Admission, Registration and Examination Department
BSS	BA (Hons) Business Studies (Systems Practice)
BCC	Branch Course Coordinator
BEC	Branch Examination Committee
BoT	Board of Trustees
BQA	Education & Training Quality Authority
BQAC	Branch Quality Assurance Committee
CAC	Course Assessment Committee
CBHE	Cross Border Higher Education
CBM	Cross Branch Marking
CEC	Central Examination Committee
CILO	Course Intended Learning Outcome
DHR	Directorate of Higher Education Reviews
EE	External Examiner
FBS	Faculty of Business Studies
FEC	Faculty Education Committee
FHEQ	Framework For Higher Education Qualifications UK
FLS	Faculty of Language Studies
GCC	General Course Coordinator

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HEC	Higher Education Council
HR	Human Resources
HRAA	Human Resources and Administrative Affairs Department
IAB	Industrial Advisory Board
IT	Information Technology
LMS	Learning Management System
LRC	Learning Resources Centre
MTA	Mid-Term Assessment
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
OOPT	Oxford Online Placement Test
OUM	Open University Malaysia
OUUK	Open University United Kingdom
OUVS	Open University Validation Services
PILO	Programme Intended Learning Outcome
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (UK)
QAAD	Quality Assurance and Accreditation Department (AOU-HQ)
QAD	Quality Assurance Department (AOU-Bahrain)
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SAG	Students Affairs and Graduates Department
SCU	Student Counselling Unit
SER	Self-evaluation Report
SIS	Student Information System
TCECS	Training, Continuous Education and Community Service Centre
TMA	Tutor Marked Assignment
VPAA	Vice President for Academic Affairs

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I. Introduction

In keeping with its mandate, the Education & Training Quality Authority (BQA), through the Directorate of Higher Education Reviews (DHR), carries out two types of reviews that are complementary. These are: Institutional Reviews, where the whole institution is assessed; and the Academic Programme Reviews (APRs), where the quality of teaching, learning and academic standards are assessed in academic programmes within various colleges according to specific standards and indicators as reflected in its Framework.

Following the revision of the APR Framework at the end of Cycle 1 in accordance with the BQA procedure, the revised APR Framework (Cycle 2) was endorsed as per the Council of Ministers' Resolution No.17 of 2019. Thereof, in the academic year (2019-2020), the DHR commenced its second cycle of programme reviews.

The Cycle 2 APR Review Framework is based on four main Standards and 21 Indicators, which forms the basis of the APR Reports of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

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

Standard 1: **The Learning Programme**

Standard 2: **Efficiency of the Programme**

Standard 3: **Academic Standards of Students and Graduates**

Standard 4: **Effectiveness of Quality Management and Assurance**

The Review Panel (hereinafter referred to as 'the Panel') decides whether each indicator, within a standard, is 'addressed', 'partially addressed' or 'not addressed'. From these judgments on the indicators, the Panel additionally determines whether each of the four standards is 'Satisfied' or 'Not Satisfied', thus leading to the Programme's overall judgment, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Criteria for Judgements

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

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The APR Review Report begins with providing the profile of the Programme under review, followed by a brief outline of the judgment received for each indicator, standard, and the overall judgement.

The main section of the report is an analysis of the status of the programme, at the time of its actual review, in relation to the review standards, indicators and their underlying expectations.

The report ends with a Conclusion and a list of Appreciations and Recommendations.

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II. The Programme's Profile

Institution Name*	Arab Open University
College/ Department*	Faculty of Business Studies
Programme/ Qualification Title*	BA (Hons) Business Studies (Systems Practice)
Qualification Approval Number	AQ21-007
NQF Level	8
Validity Period on NQF	Five years from alignment date
Number of Units*	Minimum number of units 24 unit (132 credits). * The number of units might increase depending on the credit hours of the elective courses selected by students.
NQF Credit	495
Programme Aims*	**This programme aims to provide students with:** • a Business Studies programme of study which specializes in one of the seven areas in Business; Management, Marketing, Accounting, Economic, Systems Practice, Finance/Micro Finance, and Human Resource Management; • an honours level 6 experience; • the knowledge, skills, business awareness and confidence that will enable them to succeed in the wider business world; • a high quality education in a stimulating environment, appropriately resourced; • an introduction to the world of business, including an understanding of markets and market economies; • an understanding of the structures, cultures and functioning of business organisations and the complex nature of key business functions and processes;

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	• a recognition of the processes and outcomes of organisational decision-making, how organisational strategies both develop and diversify and the nature and role of policies which impact on business; • a range of important business graduate skills which students can bring to their employment in businesses or organisations; • support and guidance to develop as independent learners. • Acquisition of basic skills in each track.
Programme Intended Learning Outcomes* (General)	**A. Knowledge and understanding of:** On completion of this degree, students will have knowledge and understanding of: **A1**. Understand the mission and purpose of the workplace and the environment in which it operates; **A2**. Draw upon previous knowledge and understanding gained from workplace practice and relate this to relevant management theory. **A3**. The development of systemic understandings of situations, using diagramming, modelling and other conceptual tools; **A4**. Actions to bring about situation improvement for stakeholders using processes designed with systems concepts, techniques and methods; and the use of critical reflection on student's own activities as a systems practitioner; **A5**. Core systems concepts (e.g. process, emergence, feedback, dynamism, interconnectedness, dependency, coherence), diagramming and modelling types and protocols; **A6**. How an action learning cycle can be used to guide practice and reflection; **A7**. The nature of messes and perceived complexity commonly experienced in organisations, technology and environment; **A8.** Group process and communication concepts.

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A9. The range, scope, and complexity of the issues and problems related to the management of technology and innovation;

A10. The "state of the art' of the management of technology and innovation;

A11. The range of situations in which information systems are used, the ways in which people interact with them and the ethical, social and legal problems that information systems can create.

B. Cognitive Skills

On completion of the degree, students will be able to:

B1. Use systems diagramming and/or modelling tools and techniques to engage with messes and perceived complexity for understanding and managing change.

B2. Appreciate the nature of problems where a systemic intervention can help and apply conceptual skills to analyse situations and formulate systems of interest.

B3. Appreciate the technical, economic, commercial, social, political, ethical and other factors that influence decisions and decision making.

B4. Compare, contrast and critically assess different approaches and techniques; interpret and critically analyse literature from a systems perspective and extract relevant information.

B5. Analyse and refine managing and practice skills according to different models; and design and evaluate situation-improving strategies in contexts of uncertainty and multiple stake holdings.

B6. Become aware of their own worldviews, values and epistemology.

C. Practical and Professional Skills

On completion of the degree, students will be able to:

C1. Apply the principles, concepts and techniques of systems thinking for understanding and managing in

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professional and personal situations of perceived complexity;

C2. Develop practical skills in the use of systems methodologies, methods, techniques and tools to understand and improve a range of problem/opportunity situations.

C3. Identify and handle the ethical, social and legal issues that may arise during the design and use of information systems

D. Key/Transferable Skills
On completion of the degree, students will have developed their:

D1. Ability to communicate effectively, as a student presenting evidence of learning, and as a systems practitioner engaging with stakeholders in situations perceived as complex learn more effectively, by engaging in reflection on their own practice;

D2. Ability to use information systems more effectively based on experience of using different problem-framing techniques appropriately;

D3. Ability to use appropriate numerical and business mathematical skills;

D4. Ability to work cooperatively with others.

* Mandatory fields

III. Judgment Summary

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The Programme's Judgment: Confidence

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Standard/ Indicator	Title	Judgement
Standard 1	**The Learning Programme**	**Satisfied**
Indicator 1.1	The Academic Planning Framework	Partially Addressed
Indicator 1.2	Graduate Attributes & Intended Learning Outcomes	Partially Addressed
Indicator 1.3	The Curriculum Content	Addressed
Indicator 1.4	Teaching and Learning	Addressed
Indicator 1.5	Assessment Arrangements	Addressed
Standard 2	**Efficiency of the Programme**	**Satisfied**
Indicator 2.1	Admitted Students	Addressed
Indicator 2.2	Academic Staff	Partially Addressed
Indicator 2.3	Physical and Material Resources	Addressed
Indicator 2.4	Management Information Systems	Addressed
Indicator 2.5	Student Support	Addressed
Standard 3	**Academic Standards of Students and Graduates**	**Satisfied**
Indicator 3.1	Efficiency of the Assessment	Addressed
Indicator 3.2	Academic Integrity	Partially Addressed
Indicator 3.3	Internal and External Moderation of Assessment	Addressed
Indicator 3.4	Work-based Learning	Addressed

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Indicator 3.5	Capstone Project or Thesis/Dissertation Component	Not Applicable
Indicator 3.6	Achievements of the Graduates	Partially Addressed
Standard 4	**Effectiveness of Quality Management and Assurance**	**Satisfied**
Indicator 4.1	Quality Assurance Management	Addressed
Indicator 4.2	Programme Management and Leadership	Addressed
Indicator 4.3	Annual and Periodic Review of the Programme	Addressed
Indicator 4.4	Benchmarking and Surveys	Partially Addressed
Indicator 4.5	Relevance to Labour market and Societal Needs	Partially Addressed

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IV.   Standards and Indicators

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Standard 1

The Learning Programme

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

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Indicator 1.1: The Academic Planning Framework

There is a clear academic planning framework for the programme, reflected in clear aims which relate to the mission and strategic goals of the institution and the college.

Judgment: *Partially Addressed*

- The BA (Hons) Business Studies (Systems Practice) (BSS) programme was developed by the Arab Open University (AOU) based on its Bachelor Award Examination and Assessment Bylaws, and subsequently validated by the Open University in the United Kingdom (OUUK) based on its Regulations and Handbook for Validated Awards. The Panel confirmed in interviews that a clear planning process was followed and that the BSS programme is re-validated every five years by OUUK to ensure that it remains relevant and fit for purpose. The last re-validation took place in 2017 and the next one is due later in 2022. The re-validation process involves multiple stakeholders, including students. Annual Monitoring Reviews (AMRs) are also deployed to quality assure the programme and maintain its currency. To demonstrate that the BSS programme complies with existing local regulations, the University's license from the Ministry of Education was provided with the Self-evaluation Report (SER).

- AOU-Bahrain has a risk management system in place and maintains a combined institutional Risk Register which contains 52 academic and non-academic risks that may impact the University's provision. While the Risk Register is updated and cover a broad range of areas, including finance, Information Technology (IT), health and safety, faculty, quality, reputation and market conditions, there are no programme-specific risks related to the quality of the programme, its delivery and academic standards identified. The Panel explored this in interviews but did not find a robust awareness of potential risks that could impact the BSS programme. Therefore, the Panel recommends that AOU-Bahrain should identify relevant risks related to the BSS programme and ensure that these risks are monitored and mitigated using the existing institutional risk management system.

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- The BSS programme has not yet been placed on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and a submission was made to the NQF in October 2021 to recognise the BSS programme as a foreign qualification awarded by the OUUK, which is in compliance with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) in the UK, on the basis of a valid and current agreement between AOU and OUUK. The Panel found during the virtual site visit that the mapping of Course Intended Learning Outcomes (CILOs) to Programme Intended Learning Outcomes (PILOs) had not yet been completed and has made a recommendation in this regard (see Indicator 1.2). As such, the programme does not fully adhere to the NQF's qualification design requirements and a separate assessment will be undertaken by the NQF in due course.

- The title of the programme differs on the license and the AOU-Bahrain certificate where it is shown as *BA (Honors) Business Administration (System Track)* in Arabic, and the OUUK award where it is stated as *BA (Hons) Business Studies (Systems Practice)* in English. This divergence extends to institutional and programme documentation such as the Student Guide which has the programme title as 'BA Programme in Business Studies with Systems Practice', with no mention that it is an Honors degree, and also the University's website where the programme webpage has the AOU-Bahrain title but the Programme Specification document on the same webpage has the OUUK title. This inconsistency in the programme title causes confusion because it is not clearly indicative of the qualification's content. The title is also inaccurately documented because it is not always listed as an Honors award. Therefore, the Panel recommends that AOU-Bahrain should ensure that the Arabic and English titles are consistent, and correctly document the title on the AOU website and in all institutional and programme documentation.

- The ten aims of the BSS programme are clearly documented in the Programme Specification. The programme aims are reviewed and revised during the re-validation of the programme every five years, which involves internal stakeholders such as the senior management of AOU, the programme team and students. External stakeholders are not involved in the programme re-validation because this is not part of OUUK's processes, however, the Panel advises AOU-Bahrain to consult alumni, employers, internship providers and other external stakeholders on the programme aims as part of its wider efforts to amplify engagement with industry and the community (see also Indicator 4.5).

- AOU-Bahrain does not have its own Strategic Plan and relies on AOU's shared mission and strategic goals to guide its academic provision and activities. According to the SER, the BSS programme is 'in full compliance' with the general AOU mission since it is offered across multiple AOU branches. No evidence is put forward to demonstrate how this compliance is achieved, however the Panel explored how the BSS programme offered at AOU-Bahrain supports the achievement of the mission and strategic priorities during the virtual site visit and learned that one of the main aims of the programme was to prepare students for employment, which is consistent with AOU's mission to 'prepare manpower

for development needs'. The BSS programme also contributes towards several AOU strategic goals, including attracting more students to AOU and is instrumental in enhancing engagement with the labour market.

- The BSS programme is a CBHE programme offered by AOU and validated by OUUK. Students receive two certificates from both institutions when they graduate. The programme arrangements are governed by the latest Approval, Validation and Licensing Agreement which is a valid binding contract signed in February 2018. Three amendments were subsequently made to the Agreement in May 2019, October 2021 and December 2021, with the latter extending its expiry date from 31 December 2022 to 31 December 2023. The Agreement includes a review clause and this clause, along with the amendments that have been made, serve as evidence that the Agreement is regularly monitored and revised to ensure that it is effective and that both AOU and OUUK meet their contractual obligations.

- The Agreement indicates that the BSS programme is validated by OUUK, and interviews with OUUK staff confirmed that AOU is a validated partner of OUUK. The agreement also clearly states that the BSS programme and its associated courses (modules) will be taught by AOU and External Examiners will be appointed in accordance with the procedures stipulated in OUUK's Handbook for Validated Awards, which the Panel confirmed in interviews during the visit.

- The Agreement specifies the title of the degree as BA (Hons) Business Studies (Systems Practice). The awards issued to graduates must comply with OUUK's Handbook for Validated Awards which states that the award will indicate where the programme was delivered. This was verified by the Panel on the sample certificates provided which affirms that the BSS programme is is recognised in Bahrain and in the UK.

- The Agreement clearly specifies the responsibilities of AOU and OUUK in relation to academic planning, maintenance of academic standards and the delivery of the programme, including teaching, assessment, admission, learning materials and resources, and staffing, with AOU having the primary responsibility for delivering the programme in line with OUUK's validation requirements.

- The Handbook for Validated Awards expects AOU to demonstrate commitment to providing an appropriate learning environment which includes staff capacity building through having sufficient staff who are appropriately qualified and skilled, and professional development. Complete information about the BSS programme is provided in the Programme Specification document and the Student Guide.

Indicator 1.2: Graduate Attributes & Intended Learning Outcomes

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Graduate attributes are clearly stated in terms of intended learning outcomes for the programme and for each course and these are appropriate for the level of the degree and meet the NQF requirements.

Judgment: *Partially Addressed*

- AOU-Bahrain has not defined an explicit set of graduate attributes; however, the Panel was informed during the virtual site visit interviews that the generic skills and competencies graduates are expected to have are embedded within the BSS PILOs. These include cognitive skills such as constructing evidence-based arguments, professional competencies such as applying key skills in the workplace, and transferable skills such as self-reflection and the ability to work with others. In addition, the Programme Specification includes a list of outcomes, skills, qualities and abilities that all holders of a Bachelor degree with Honours will have. The Panel is satisfied that generic graduate skills have been identified, however, these should be stated more explicitly so that it is clear that they are applicable to all of AOU-Bahrain's graduates, regardless of their programme of study. Therefore, the Panel recommends that AOU-Bahrain should extract the graduate attributes embedded within the PILOs and use them to define a set of generic attributes that all of its graduates must achieve.

- There are two layers of PILOs for the programme. At the top layer there are 19 general PILOs which all graduates are expected to achieve, regardless of their chosen track. Below these are PILOs for each track, including the 'System Track', which has 24 PILOs and is the only track offered at AOU Bahrain. The Panel considers this number of PILOs to be excessive, with students expected to achieve a total of 43 PILOs in 3.5 years of study and 132 credit hours. Having the graduate attributes embedded in the PILOs has also contributed to the surplus of PILOs. The PILOs are not explicitly linked to the programme aims using a formal mapping and matrix. Although a general relationship between the PILOs and programme aims is apparent, they need to be formally linked to ensure that they are consistent.

- The PILOs have been benchmarked to OUUK's programmes through the existing validation arrangements, and the programme complies with the FHEQ in the UK. The Panel notes that the PILOs are appropriate for the award and measurable, with some exceptions. For example, general PILO C1 (Transfer and use relevant key skills in the workplace context) is difficult to assess in an academic setting. Also, general PILO D3 (Self-reflection and criticality) cannot be evaluated without reflective assessments, which are not currently used on the BSS programme (see also Indicators 1.5 and 3.1). Track PILO B2 (Appreciate the nature of problems) is also problematic to assess without an appropriate mechanism to evaluate 'appreciation'. Therefore, the Panel recommends that AOU-Bahrain should review and revise the PILOs to ensure that they are appropriate in number, measurable and linked to the programme aims.

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- The CILOs are benchmarked through the validation process, which ensures their appropriateness. The CILOs for each course are listed in the Module Specification document and course syllabi, and are generally appropriate for the courses and measurable, although, as with the PILOs, there are too many CILOs for one course. The mapping of CILOs and PILOs was also not provided with the SER and the Panel requested additional information about this. AOU-Bahrain responded that the programme relied on curriculum mapping of courses, rather than CILOs to PILOs and that the CILOs would be mapped to PILOs as part of the re-validation process in 2022. At the time of the visit, the CILOs of a couple of courses had been mapped. The Panel recommends that AOU-Bahrain should reduce the number of CILOs and expedite the mapping of CILOs to PILOs as a matter of priority to ensure that student achievement can be appropriately measured (see also Indicator 3.6).

Indicator 1.3: The Curriculum Content

The curriculum is organised to provide academic progression of learning complexity guided by the NQF levels and credits, and it illustrates a balance between knowledge and skills, as well as theory and practice, and meets the norms and standards of the particular academic discipline.

Judgment: *Addressed*

- The BSS study plan for the programme shows the courses that students have to complete over seven semesters to graduate. There is an appropriate progression year-on-year in terms of the NQF levels, starting with introductory University requirement courses in the first year, followed by introductory Faculty of Business Studies (FBS) courses in the second year and more advanced core courses and electives in the final three semesters. However, the Panel advises AOU-Bahrain to offer the Strategic Management (BUS310) course in the final year of study when students have grasped and understood all of the different areas of business.

- The BSS study plan shows an appropriate list of pre-requisites and co-requisites; however, they are not accurately listed in all programme documents. For example, BUS310 'Strategic Management' is a pre-requisite for SYS380 'Managing Systems Complexity' according to the Module Specification but students study BUS310 and SYS380 together in the same semester according to the study plan. Similarly, EL112 'English Communication Skills II' is shown as a co-requisite for B123 'Management Practice' in the study plan, but students take this course in the previous semester which makes it a pre-requisite. Furthermore, the Panel notes the uneven number of credits students have to complete in different semesters, with 16 credits in the first semester and 21 credits in the second semester. Students are also registered for 20 credits in three out of the total seven semesters, which is inconsistent with AOU-Bahrain's regulations that allow for a maximum of 19 credits per semester. The Panel recommends that AOU-Bahrain should ensure that students have a balanced workload

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across all semesters in the new BSS study plan and that the pre-requisites and co-requisites courses are correctly listed in all programme documents.

- The curriculum is updated according to the outcomes of the re-validation by OUUK every five years and based on the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) subject benchmark statements. The curriculum was revised during the last re-validation in 2017 and the draft study plan for the 2022 re-validation shows that further revisions have been made to the curriculum by replacing college electives with core courses in key business areas. The Panel was also informed about minor changes being made to courses in the interim period, between re-validations, based on the outcomes of annual reviews reported in the AMRs. For example, an internship course (INT300) was approved by the HEC in 2019.

- The Module Specifications and course syllabi indicate an appropriate balance between theoretical and practical CILOs. Students acquire knowledge through face-to-face classes and online learning, and put this knowledge into practice through assessments, interactive learning activities, case studies and, most recently, through an internship course which commenced in the 2020-2021 academic year. The Panel was provided with examples of practical, skills-based assessments in some courses, although students also expressed during the virtual site visit interviews the need for more applied learning opportunities to develop their employability skills [see also Indicator 3.6].

- The courses cover the expected topics in terms of depth and breadth, although there is some overlap in the course topics, which was confirmed in interviews with students. For example, B123 'Management Practice' covers similar topics to B207B 'Shaping Business Opportunities', and SYS210 'Managing Technology and Innovation' has some duplicate content with BUS310 'Strategic Management'. The Panel did not find this duplication to be systemic across the programme, but nevertheless advises AOU-Bahrain to replace any repetitive topics with new content.

- The textbooks and references in the Module Specifications and course syllabi are appropriate, but they are not always current. There are textbooks dating back to 2005 and the majority are almost 10 years old. Some courses do not have any lists of recommended readings or references which would introduce students to recent research findings and current professional practice. The Panel recommends that AOU-Bahrain should review and revise the textbooks and references in the BSS courses to ensure that they are current and appropriate and include relevant references and scholarly and professional articles to supplement the prescribed texts.

- The BSS programme adheres to the FHEQ level 6 descriptors in the UK which is assured through the validation arrangements with OUUK. It includes courses which are relevant to the Bahraini context and consider the 'cultural and linguistic' issues. These include two courses in Arabic communication skills (AR111 and AR112), a course on the history of Bahrain (GR131) and a course on human rights (LAW107).

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Indicator 1.4: Teaching and Learning

The principles and methods used for teaching in the programme support the attainment of programme aims and intended learning outcomes.

Judgment: *Addressed*

- AOU has a Teaching and Learning Policy which applies to all of its branches. The policy outlines the key principles of AOU's approach to teaching and learning which include a high-quality environment, interactive learning, highly qualified and committed academic staff, fair assessment strategies, and robust academic quality assurance. AOU-Bahrain utilises a blended teaching and learning approach with students studying online through the Learning Management System (LMS) and attending classes once per week for one or two hours depending on the credit hours of the module. Tutors also support students during their office hours. The Panel found these teaching methods to be generally appropriate for the delivery of the programme.

- The blended learning approach is consistent with AOU's 'Education for All' and open access philosophy. The approach is informed by research findings reported in a publication by an AOU faculty member. The PILOs are also mapped to specific teaching and learning strategies that have been adopted to facilitate their attainment.

- E-learning is at the core of AOU-Bahrain's teaching and learning approach and the primary method used to deliver courses and programmes. As a result, e-learning is embedded into AOU's pedagogical philosophy. Moodle is the virtual learning platform used to facilitate e-learning and contains a plethora of functions which allow students to learn, connect with their classmates, take examinations, view their assessments and marks and access resources, amongst others (see also Indicator 2.4).

- The use of a blended learning approach supports independent learning, with students expected to undertake the majority of their studies online through Moodle. This promotes their participation in learning and requires that they take responsibility for their learning. The Students Affairs and Graduates Department and the Training, Continuous Education and Community Service Centre (TCECS) also offer courses and training programmes to develop lifelong learning skills. Students are exposed to professional practice through the recently introduced internship course (INT300) which will further facilitate independent learning.

- AOU aims to foster creativity and innovation on the programme through the use of diverse assessments such as case studies and projects. However, this approach is yet to be deployed across the programme and the Panel learned from students and external stakeholders that there is a need for more applied learning opportunities which can be achieved through informal and non-formal learning methods. AOU follows a fixed

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assessment schedule consisting of Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs), Mid-Term Assessments (MTAs) and final examinations. While the Panel acknowledges efforts made to diversify the TMAs and introduce more case studies into examinations, it recommends that AOU-Bahrain should further enhance students' active participation by providing them with applied learning opportunities, including informal and non-formal learning, in line with the principles stated in the institutional Teaching and Learning Policy. This will also help develop students' employability skills and prospects (see Indicator 3.6).

Indicator 1.5: Assessment Arrangements

Suitable assessment arrangements, which include policies and procedures for assessing students' achievements, are in place and are known to all relevant stakeholders.

Judgment: *Addressed*

- AOU-Bahrain follows AOU's Bachelor Award Examination and Assessment Bylaws which outline the assessment framework and procedures for all the university's programmes. Assessment is unified across all AOU's branches and consists of TMAs, MTAs and final examinations. TMAs carry a weight of 20-25%, while tests and examinations comprise up to 80% of the assessment in a course. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the assessment structure was adjusted by replacing MTAs with in-class quizzes and adding a class participation and attendance component worth 5%. The Panel was able to verify the implementation of the assessment framework and regulations through access to the live courses on Moodle and the course files from previous semesters which contained samples of student work.

- Assessment policies, procedures and regulations are disseminated to stakeholders through various documents, including Programme Specification (Section 9), the Student Guide (Section 4), and Tutor Handbook (Section 4). Information about assessment policies and regulations is also provided when students log in to Moodle. New students and staff receive information about assessment procedures during their respective orientations. The Panel found a robust awareness of assessment processes amongst students and staff during the visit which confirmed the adequacy of the dissemination efforts.

- The SER indicates that both formative and summative assessments are used in the BSS programme. However, AOU's definition of formative assessment, according to the SER, includes the continuous assessment components (TMAs and MTAs), whereas the final examination is considered a summative assessment. Traditionally, formative assessments are used for diagnostic purposes and to provide feedback to students without assigning a mark or grade, and summative assessments are used to evaluate learning. The Bachelor Award Examination and Assessment Bylaws does not contain specific references to formative and summative assessments. The Panel found that in-class quizzes were used

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as formative tools in some BSS courses, however, additional formative assessments need to be introduced to monitor students' progress. Therefore, the Panel recommends that AOU deploy a range of formative assessments on the BSS programme to help students identify areas of weakness and provide feedback for improving teaching. There are clear and standardised marking criteria and rubrics used to assess student performance, which are verified by External Examiners. Appropriate written and verbal mechanisms for providing students with feedback are in place.

- In addition to applying standardised marking rubrics and guidelines for all assessments, AOU uses group and double-marking, and cross-branch marking to uphold integrity and transparency in the assessment process. These mechanisms ensure that students' achievements are graded with fairness, rigour and consistency. There are also appropriate provisions for internal and external moderation as outlined in the Bachelor Award Examination and Assessment Bylaws, the implementation of which is verified by the Course Assessment Committee (CAC) at the end of every semester.

- Provisions for addressing academic misconduct are documented in AOU's Strategy for Combating Plagiarism. The University uses Ouriginality software as a plagiarism detection tool and all TMAs must be submitted through this software. The Students' Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures Bylaw details the process to be followed when academic misconduct cases are detected. AOU also has a Students Appeals and Complaints Policy to address student grievances which are dealt with by the Branch Appeals Committee and the Branch Re-Appeals Committee. Data on appeals and outcomes is reported in the AMRs.

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Standard 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.

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Indicator 2.1: Admitted Students

There are clear admission requirements, which are appropriate for the level and type of the programme, ensuring equal opportunities for both genders, and the profile of admitted students matches the programme aims and available resources.

Judgment: *Addressed*

- AOU has an Admission Policy and clear admission criteria which are published and communicated to students in the Student Guide and on the University's website. The University's Equal Opportunity Diversity Policy is applied to ensure that students are accepted on an equal basis. This is reflected in the student profile of the programme with female and male student enrollments being comparable (46% females and 54% males in 2020/2021). The Admission, Registration and Examination Department consistently implements the admission policy in line with the Higher Education Council (HEC) guidelines as evidenced by the sample admission application provided to the Panel and correspondence between AOU and the HEC.

- To enroll in the BSS programme, students must have a General Secondary Certificate and an IELTS score of 4.5 (or equivalent). Students who do not satisfy the English language requirement must take the Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT) and if they score less than 60% on the OOPT, they must register for EL099 which is an English language orientation course before they can commence their undergraduate studies. The Panel interviewed a number of AOU-Bahrain students and graduates and found their level of English proficiency to vary considerably, with some students being highly proficient and others less proficient. The variation in English language abilities has also been raised by External Examiners. Similarly, some AOU graduates were found to have low English proficiency despite completing the programme. Although there is no evidence that there is a systematic problem with students' English proficiency on the programme, the admission standard of IELTS 4.5 is lower than what is typically accepted for undergraduate study locally and internationally. The Panel was informed that the standard is consistent with AOU's 'open access' philosophy. This justification is accepted, however, there is also a clear need to re-assess the standard and benchmark the admission

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criteria because students on the programme typically take longer than the four years to graduate (see also Indicator 3.6). Therefore, the Panel recommends that AOU review the English language admission requirements to ensure students have English proficiency appropriate to the programme level.

- Students who do not meet the entry requirements are enrolled in a remedial course (EL099) to develop their English language proficiency before they can start the BSS programme. The course has been benchmarked at IELTS band 4-4.5, CEFR B1 and 4-5 on the Flesch-Kincaid Level in Listening and Reading to ensure that students have the required IELTS score to enter the undergraduate programme. Two additional English courses (EL111; EL112) have been integrated into the BSS curriculum to further strengthen students' English proficiency. AOU students also benefit from a robust and comprehensive orientation programme which is conducted every semester by the Students Affairs and Graduates Department (SAG). These remedial support measures support student retention on the programme.

- Being an 'open-access' university, AOU has appropriate arrangements in place for student access, progression, credit transfer and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), which are clearly stated in its Student Transfer Bylaws. Students can transfer across programmes and branches based on the Course Equivalency and Student Transfer Bylaws. The Panel was provided with examples of equivalency forms and meeting minutes. The procedure for RPL is documented in the Regulations for Validated Awards. Student progression is monitored and reported on in the AMRs, with support provided through academic advising.

- AOU has reviewed and revised its admission policies and procedures between November 2020 and December 2021 and has adopted a two-year revision cycle in the future. The review was initiated by the Branch Quality Assurance Committee (BQAC) and based on stakeholders' feedback that the previous policy was out of date. The Panel learned during interviews that the admission requirements are also benchmarked against QAA UK standards through the relationship with OUUK.

Indicator 2.2: Academic Staff

There are clear procedures for the recruitment, induction, appraisal, promotion, and professional development of academic staff, which ensure that staff members are fit-for-purpose and that help in staff retention.

Judgment: *Partially Addressed*

- AOU-Bahrain has appropriate policies and procedures to attract and retain qualified academic staff which are in line with HEC requirements. The recruitment procedures start

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with a need analysis at the department level, based on which the Human Resources and Administrative Affairs Department (HRAA) prepares a job advertisement and implements the recruitment procedure. Shortlisting of candidates is undertaken by the Department, following which a list of candidates to interview is sent to the Deanship for approval. Once approved, a committee is formed to conduct the interviews and a selection is made. The chosen candidate must be approved by the Vice President for Academic Affairs (VPAA) and the Branch Director. Sample recruitment files seen by the Panel confirmed that this process was consistently implemented in a transparent manner.

- New staff members are inducted through workshops in line with the New Staff Induction Procedure which includes checklists to ensure comprehensive coverage. The AMRs contain a copy of the filled in checklist for every new staff member. The Panel heard positive feedback about the staff induction in interviews, however, there is no formal evaluation of staff induction through mechanisms such as institutional surveys or feedback forms. This is particularly relevant when new appointments are made at the management level and an appropriate 'handover' needs to take place to ensure the appointee is fully informed of his or her responsibilities. Therefore, the Panel advises AOU-Bahrain to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the staff and management induction to ensure it is appropriate and useful.

- AOU's former performance appraisal system has been recently replaced with a new online system, which requires academic staff to set four objectives that are linked to the departmental operational plan, in addition to an assessment of performance, using the MenaME online system. Performance evaluation outcomes are used as basis for staff rewards, annual allowances, contract renewals, and promotions. The Panel was provided with the Regulations of Promotion of Faculty Members and sample promotion applications to view. The Panel notes that the promotion is not aligned with the performance appraisal because it focuses primarily on research outputs. Tutor surveys also show that there is dissatisfaction with promotion requirements and this is also noted in AMRs. To address this, the Panel recommends that AOU-Bahrain should align its performance appraisal system more closely with the University's promotion system to ensure that faculty members have appropriate access to promotion opportunities.

- AOU has a Policy of Scientific Research and Ethics and a Research Grant Policy and Regulations which are deployed and have resulted in research outputs by FBS faculty. Faculty members are expected to publish one paper every semester in addition to having course-coordination, quality assurance and community service activities. The Panel examined the list of faculty research publications over the past four years and found missing information (e.g., where the research was published), as well as a lack of contribution by some BSS faculty who have not published any research during this period (See the Recommendation below).

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- The Internal Regulations Governing Academic Faculty Members at AOU detail the staff workload, which is distributed between teaching and non-teaching activities. Faculty members teach up to 16 hours per week in accordance with HEC regulations and this is reflected in the teaching schedules provided to the Panel, which also show some faculty being on overloaded. The Panel also explored faculty members' academic advising responsibilities and found that most faculty had more than 100 advisees, and in some instances more than 200 which was confirmed during interviews. The Panel found that the faculty workload is excessive. A 2018 Branch Visit Report by OUUK contained similar findings, and although the report is more than three years old, the number of students has remained almost the same and academic staff responsibilities have not changed since then. Therefore, the Panel recommends that AOU-Bahrain should review the overall faculty workload to ensure that there is an appropriate and realistic balance of expectations related to teaching, research, academic advising and other tasks assigned to faculty members.

- A total of 18 faculty members contribute to the BSS programme. Of those, 12 (or 67%) have a PhD and the remaining six have a Master's degree. The Panel was provided with the CVs of all of the faculty teaching on the programme and found that they have appropriate educational qualifications, specializations, and professional experience. Some of the faculty are fellows of the Higher Education Academy UK.

- AOU has a Staff Development Policy and Procedures which are related to the performance appraisal process. Staff members specify their professional development requirements during their performance appraisal and these are aggregated into an overall professional development plan for the academic year. As clarified during interviews, depending on the specific need, staff training workshops are delivered by various units and departments at AOU-Bahrain, including the Quality Assurance Department (QAD) and the IT Department. The Training, Continuous Education and Community Service Center also has agreements with external providers to organise workshops and training for faculty and staff members.

- Staff turnover in the FBS is monitored and the data shows a stable and low turnover rate. Over the past six academic years, only one or no faculty left the FBS with the exception of 2017-2018 and 2019-2020 when four and three staff members left, respectively. The Panel learned during interviews that the turnover in 2019-2020 was mainly due to the global pandemic. Exit surveys are deployed to collect data about the reasons staff leave and develop retention strategies if needed.

Indicator 2.3: Physical and Material Resources

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Physical and material resources are adequate in number, space, style and equipment; these include classrooms, teaching halls, laboratories and other study spaces; Information Technology facilities, library and learning resources.

Judgment: *Addressed*

- AOU-Bahrain has a spacious campus spread out over five floors with sufficient classes and laboratories to support the delivery of its academic programmes. There are 20 classrooms with capacities ranging from 16 to 55 students equipped with projectors and smart screens; two language laboratories and two computer laboratories which seat 30 students each; and an auditorium with a capacity of 270. There are also 80 academic and administrative staff offices, a library and an e-library. The Panel was provided with a video tour of the campus and its facilities. The campus facilities are evaluated by OUUK as part of its institutional review of AOU and have been deemed adequate and sufficient.

- There are two computer laboratories on campus with 30 computers in each, and the Library has an additional 28 computers. Students have access to a Wi-Fi network and a range of applications and systems to support the delivery of the BSS programme, including the Student Information systems (SIS), the LMS, and Microsoft and Adobe software suites. Special equipment, software and support are also available to students with disabilities. The IT Department has developed Business Continuity and Disaster Recover plans to ensure uninterrupted provision of IT facilities to students and staff.

- AOU's Learning Resources Centre (LRC) is the main library which provides access to print and electronic resources required by BSS students. It has a capacity of 74 students with individual and group study spaces and 28 computers. In addition to the LRC, AOU-Bahrain has an e-library which can fit up to 60 students and provides access to a range of electronic databases including EBSCO. Usage of the LRC and e-library are monitored, and a policy has been drafted to support the development of the collection with relevant and current resources.

- The adequacy of the library and IT resources is evaluated through student and tutor surveys. The most recent results show that AOU-Bahrain students were satisfied with the IT facilities, rating them 3.60 on a 5-point scale. FBS students gave the library resources an average rating of 3.38 on a 5-point scale, which represented a marginal improvement over previous years. A help-desk is available to provide technical support to staff and students and the use of IT facilities is monitored so that upgrades can be made when required. The Operation and Maintenance Department is responsible for maintaining the classrooms. FBS tutors are generally satisfied with the classroom facilities, rating them 3.77 on a 5-point scale on the most recent survey. Overall, the Panel appreciates the physical and online resources that AOU-Bahrain offers on its campus to meet the needs of staff and students.

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- AOU has a Health and Safety Policy and associated Health and Safety Measures, and has formed a Health and Safety Committee. The University complies with the civil defence requirements. Evacuation drills are practiced and an Emergency Evacuation Plan has been developed. Third parties have been contracted to test the fire equipment and provide security on campus. A nurse is available on campus between 10am and 7pm every weekday providing students and staff with access to first aid and primary care. The Panel was satisfied with the arrangements in place to ensure health and safety on campus.

Indicator 2.4: Management Information Systems

There are functioning management information and tracking systems that support the decision-making processes and evaluate the utilisation of laboratories, e-learning and e-resources, along with policies and procedures that ensure security of learners' records and accuracy of results.

Judgment: *Addressed*

- The SIS is used to record students' data throughout their enrollment at the University. The Panel noted during the SIS demonstration that it is comprehensive and covers all aspects of the student lifecycle from admission to graduation, including course registration, grades, fees payment, academic advising logs, appeals and completing surveys. The system also generates a range of different reports which facilitate decision-making, prepare QAD reports and generate data for the AMRs. In addition to the SIS, the AOU LMS is used to provide students with access to course materials, LRC resources and learning support. During interviews, the Panel confirmed that students' satisfaction with both systems is generally high. The Panel appreciates the robust and functional student information and LMS available to students and staff at AOU which are used to effectively manage students' data and records, and support the delivery of courses and programmes.

- AOU-Bahrain monitors the utilization of its computer laboratories and its library and e-library resources. The Panel learned from interviews that this data is used to inform decision-making such as selecting the LRC resources to be acquired and upgrading IT equipment. Data generated through the SIS and LMS is also used to generate management reports.

- AOU has a Data Protection & Record Retention Policy and Procedures which includes a Code of Practice. Amendments to the agreement with OUUK were also made in 2019 to include data protection provisions in response to the introduction of General Data Protection Regulations. The Policy on Dissemination of Information ensures that information is disseminated only to those individuals who are entitled to access it. All of AOU's learner's records and assessment results are stored securely on the SIS which can only be accessed by users with privileges assigned in accordance with the AOU IT systems User Privileges Review Policy. Regular data back-ups are made and disaster recovery

arrangements have been developed. Exam security is managed in accordance with the Security of Examination Materials Process and Procedures. Overall, AOU-Bahrain has appropriate policies and procedures in place to ensure the security of its data and records.

- The Panel was provided with samples of the certificates and transcripts awarded to students. Since the BSS is a CBHE programme, students receive a certificate from AOU and OUUK. As previously noted (see Indicator 1.1), the title of the programme which appears on the two certificates differs, however, both are accurate in describing the level of learning achieved by students. Although the Panel did not find systematic problems with certificates being issued in a timely manner, feedback from students points to some delays in receiving the certificates, which is to be expected since neither certificate is issued locally in Bahrain. Nevertheless, the Panel advises AOU-Bahrain to ensure that the process is expedited so that students can pursue their further education or employment.

Indicator 2.5: Student Support

There is appropriate student support available in terms of guidance, and care for students including students with special needs, newly admitted and transferred students, and students at risk of academic failure.

Judgment: *Addressed*

- BSS students have access to appropriate support services which facilitate the development of their academic skills and offer them access to social and professional opportunities. These include a range of services, workshops and counselling provided by the SAG, Student Counselling Unit (SCU), the LRC, the TCECS, the IT Department, the Writing Centre and Speaking Skills Centre. Feedback collected through student surveys shows that these services are readily available and generally well-received. This was confirmed by the Panel in interviews during the virtual site visit.

- Students on the programme are provided with career guidance by the SCU, the TCECS and the FBS. Career-relevant activities, such as the internship, are built into the BSS curriculum. The SCU organises a variety of training workshops to develop students' interview, CV writing and entrepreneurial skills. A Careers Day is also organised every year to link students with prospective employers. The TCECS connects students with employment opportunities through partnerships with various organisations and employability development sessions.

- The SAG conducts a formal student orientation at the beginning of every academic semester for all students, including transfer students. This is done in liaison with other units and departments, such as the LRC and the IT Department, to ensure students are informed about all of the support services available to them. A detailed review of the

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student orientation is reported in the AMRs and the Panel found during interviews that students were satisfied with the induction arrangements in place.

- AOU has an Academic Advising Policy and Procedures. All faculty are assigned students to advise and provided with training by the SCU. Students are expected to meet their academic advisors at least once every academic semester and the outcome of the meetings are recorded using academic advising forms. The SCU prepares an annual Academic Advising Activity report which tracks and monitors students who receive academic advising. The data in this report and the list of advisees assigned to every BSS faculty member show that faculty members had between 45 and 50 advisees in 2021-2022. The Panel has already made a recommendation related to faculty workloads (see Indicator 2.2) which needs to take into account academic advising workloads.

- AOU's Equal Opportunity and Respect for Diversity Policy contains provisions which ensure equal opportunities for both genders, and Special Needs Procedures to support students with disabilities and special needs. The Special Needs Committee and the SCU provide this support to students in co-ordination with faculties. A specific form is used to identify the needs of these students and they are given access to appropriate IT resources and physical facilities such as access ramps and disabled toilets. Faculty are informed about special needs students and the students are flagged on the SIS so that they are easily identifiable. The AMRs include a section on students with special needs.

- At-risk students are identified using the SIS, provided with support by academic advisors and the SCU, and their performance and progress are monitored and tracked. The number of at-risk students on the BSS programme ranges between 4% and 5% of the total enrollments on the programme. It was clarified during interviews that these students are given additional academic advising, in addition to being referred to the SCU for counselling and the Writing Centre for academic support. The adoption of these measures has resulted in the number of students who received warnings for poor academic performance to drop by 61% in 2020.

- Student support services are regularly assessed using student and tutor surveys. Results are reported on in the AMRs and the Annual Programme Evaluations (APEs), which are also submitted to OUUK. OUUK responds to the APEs and makes recommendations in its Annual Institutional Overview Reports. OUUK also conducts additional reviews when a specific need arises which may include an assessment of support services. The BQAC, in cooperation with the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Department at Arab Open University Headquarter (AOU-HQ), Kuwait is responsible for overseeing that all recommendations made by OUUK are implemented and improvements are made.

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Indicator 3.1: Efficiency of the Assessment

The assessment is effective and aligned with learning outcomes, to ensure attainment of the graduate attributes and academic standards of the programme.

Judgment: *Addressed*

- AOU-Bahrain follows a standard assessment schedule in each of its courses consisting of TMAs, MTAs and final examinations. A variety of assessment methods is deployed through these instruments, including multiple choice questions, short answer questions, applied questions and case studies. All assessments are aligned with QAA-UK standards and governed by AOU policies and regulations. The Panel viewed the full range of assessments in the course files and in live courses on the LMS and found that they are generally aligned with current practices in terms of level and complexity. The validity and reliability of the assessments is assured through External Examiners who review the assessments before they are released to students and post-assessment based on student's performance. The Panel learned from multiple stakeholders that the diversity of assessments needs to be improved because the same assessments are utilised on a number of courses. Specifically, during interviews, students expressed their wish to see more practical assessments which would provide them with opportunities to apply their knowledge in real-world settings, while External Examiners have advocated the use of portfolios. The Panel notes that the introduction of the internship course will help in this regard, however, it recommends that AOU-Bahrain should review the current assessment methods with a view to introduce more diverse applied assessments on the BSS programme.

- The assessments in each course are aligned with and mapped to the CILOs using a matrix which is documented in the Module Specifications. To further enhance alignment, the Panel learned from interviews that there are plans to map every assessment question to relevant CILOs, thus ensuring that every part of an assessment is purposeful. Currently, only BSS courses are mapped to PILOs and AOU-Bahrain is working on mapping the CILOs to PILOs (see Indicator 1.2), to ensure there is an appropriate alignment of assessments with learning outcomes and the embedded graduate attributes.

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- The absence of a mapping matrix of CILOs to PILOs in each BSS course precludes a robust assessment of graduates' achievements. Although assessments are mapped to CILOs, CILOs are not currently mapped to PILOs. There is a curriculum map in the Programme Specification which shows the BSS courses that contribute to each PILO, but this needs to be extended to a formal mapping of CILOs to PILOs (see Indicator 1.2).

- Assessments are implemented and reviewed in accordance with the the Bachelor Award Examination and Assessment Bylaws. Assessments are marked by tutors who follow cross-branch marking and group marking rules and the Branch Course Coordinators (BCCs) review samples of marked assessments. The End of Semester Assessments and Exams Report provides a record of how assessments were implemented in every course in a particular semester. Marks are approved by the Branch Examination Committee (BEC) and the CAC at AOU-HQ level to ensure that assessments have been appropriately deployed. The use of internal moderation and external examination procedures result in improvements being made based on feedback from moderators and examiners. These practices enable AOU-Bahrain to evaluate its performance against OUUK standards as well as compare it with all other AOU branches.

Indicator 3.2: Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is ensured through the consistent implementation of relevant policies and procedures that deter plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct (e.g. cheating, forging of results, and commissioning others to do the work).

Judgment: *Partially Addressed*

- The policies and procedures relating to academic integrity have been discussed in Indicator 1.5. AOU also has a Policy of Scientific Research and Ethics which includes provisions for ethics in faculty research. These policies are widely disseminated in relevant publications such as the Student Guide and the Tutor Handbook. The LRC also organises workshops on plagiarism for students and faculty and information about plagiarism is included in course syllabi and TMAs. The QAD Head also shares information about plagiarism procedures *via* e-mails with faculty and there are meetings about dealing with academic misconduct. However, these efforts have not had an impact on the number of academic misconduct cases recorded, with 766 full and partial plagiarism cases recorded in the take-home Final Examination in Fall 2021. While the Panel acknowledges that plagiarism cases are being detected, it recommends that AOU-Bahrain should reinforce the importance of academic integrity and implement additional measures to educate students about how to avoid plagiarism.

- AOU-Bahrain requires that students submit assessments through the Ouriginality software tool which is used to deter and detect plagiarism. The use of the tools is

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consistently applied to assessments as evidenced by the course files and live courses on the LMS. The number of academic misconduct cases reported clearly shows that the detection arrangements are effective, however, they are not deterring students from plagiarising (see the Recommendation above).

- Faculty record plagiarism cases using the Plagiarism Recording Sheet and an aggregate record of cases in a course is documented in the Template for Recording Cases of Plagiarism in TMAs and Cheating in MTAs. The End of Semester Assessments and Exams Report also details how academic misconduct cases were detected, and the AMRs report all instances of plagiarism in the programme in a given year. The Panel was provided with data about plagiarism cases in BSS courses and notes that they are high, particularly in final examinations which students are doing at home during the Covid pandemic. The Panel learned from interviews that plagiarism penalties are not applied consistently across courses and the 'acceptable' similarity index ranges between 25% and 30% which is higher than in most local and international institutions. Furthermore, although a Scheme of Penalties to be applied is documented, the SER states that 'the module tutor uses his/her judgement to deal with the flagged cases' and 'the attributed penalty may be imposed on a case-by-case basis'. The Panel is of the view that these issues have contributed to students continuing to plagiarise despite AOU-Bahrain's efforts to combat academic misconduct. Therefore, the Panel recommends that AOU-Bahrain should develop more rigorous penalties for plagiarism and ensure that these penalties consistently applied in all BSS courses and clearly communicated to students.

Indicator 3.3: Internal and External Moderation of Assessment

There are mechanisms in place to measure the effectiveness of the programme's internal and external moderation systems for setting assessment instruments and grading students' achievements.

Judgment: *Addressed*

- Formal procedures for internal moderation of assessments and the selection of internal moderators are detailed in the Bachelor Award Examination and Assessment Bylaws. Internal moderators are selected from AOU branches which offer the same programme, and the moderation reports are stored in the course files. Internal moderators are provided with the guidelines for internal moderation and a checklist to ensure that assessments are appropriate. The Panel notes that internal moderation checklist is comprehensive and covers the clarity, content and coverage of assessments, in addition to the marking rubrics.

- To ensure consistent assessments and fairness of grading, the Branch Course Coordinators (BCCs) moderate a selection of marked assessments internally to confirm that they have been marked correctly. The outcomes of the internal moderation are discussed at CAC

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meetings before the grades are released to students to ensure that the grading has been fair and consistent across AOU branches.

- The Quality Assurance Guide indicates that quality assurance monitoring procedures are scrutinized and revised as required. This includes the procedures for internal moderation which are discussed in CAC meetings. The BQAC also monitors the implementation of internal moderation locally in Bahrain.

- External moderation of assessments is undertaken by External Examiners who are appointed by AOU-HQ to moderate and evaluate assessments before they are released to students and after they are marked. External examination procedures are detailed in the Bachelor Award Examination and Assessment Bylaws and the Quality Assurance Guide. The Handbook for Validated Awards contains the Regulations Relating to External Examiners and their appointment. While the Examiners are appointed by AOU-HQ, they must use OUUK's templates and follow OUUK's guidelines. The Panel was informed that a copy of the External Examiners report along with the tutor's response is sent to OUUK.

- The Panel examined samples of External Examiner reports and found them comprehensive. It was clarified during interviews that these reports are considered by the tutors, BCCs and GCCs and used to review and make improvements to courses. For example, in response to the External Examiners' feedback, more reflective assessments were introduced in the programme. The reports also contain information about the fairness of grading and provide assurances that academic standards on the BSS programme are maintained.

- The AOU-HQ oversees the external examination process to ensure that it is effective, and issues raised by External Examiners are responded to. The reports are discussed at CAC meetings and monitored locally by the BQAC. The Panel learned from interviews that External examination regulations are also monitored by OUUK which is responsible for reviewing them and ensuring that they are being implemented consistently at AOU.

Indicator 3.4: Work-based Learning

Where assessed work-based learning takes place, there is a policy and procedures to manage the process and its assessment, to assure that the learning experience is appropriate in terms of content and level for meeting the intended learning outcomes.

Judgment: *Addressed*

- Prior to 2021, the BSS programme did not have any formal work-based learning components. During interviews, the Panel learned that in response to a directive from the HEC, an internship course, INT300, was introduced in 2021 and students commencing their studies in Spring 2022 will have to do this course by undertaking work-based

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learning consisting of 200 hours over eight weeks. The arrangements for the internship are detailed in the Module Handbook. The assessment scheme consists of feedback from the academic and industrial supervisors and a final report of 1500 words. The Panel noted that in addition to the internship course, students have access to optional internships and training opportunities through the Internship Unit and TCECS.

- The Internship Unit is responsible for overseeing student internships together with academic departments. The roles and responsibilities of industry supervisors, academic supervisors and students are clearly set out in the INT300 Module Handbook. It was explained during interviews that the Head of the Internship Unit visits the interns on site and they are also monitored by their academic and industry supervisors. The Panel found that everyone involved in student internships had a clear understanding of their role and responsibilities.

- The internship course has defined CILOs for students to achieve, which have been mapped to assessments. The mapping of CILOs to PILOs has not yet been undertaken [see Indicator 1.2] and the contribution of the INT300 course to the achievement of PILOs will need to be considered and identified as more students enroll in the course. Currently, students are given a pass or fail mark for the course, which is worth one credit hour, however, to ensure constructive outcomes and incentivize students, the Panel advises AOU-Bahrain to consider a full grading scale in the future.

- The Panel was provided with samples of assessments on the internship course and found them to be consistently implemented, appropriate in terms of content and level and comprehensive, involving input from all stakeholders involved in the internship. Upon completion of the internship, students are required to fill in a Student's Internship Feedback form and evaluate their experience. This information, along with feedback from employers, is used to evaluate the effectiveness of the internship arrangements and ensure that the course contributes to the achievement of the PILOs, and programme aims and goals.

Indicator 3.5: Capstone Project or Thesis/Dissertation Component

Where there is a capstone project or thesis/dissertation component, there are clear policies and procedures for supervision and evaluation which state the responsibilities and duties of both the supervisor and students, and there is a mechanism to monitor the related implementations and improvements.

Judgment: *Not Applicable*

Indicator 3.6: Achievements of the Graduates

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The achievements of the graduates are consonant with those achieved on equivalent programmes as expressed in their assessed work, rates of progression and first destinations.

Judgment: *Partially Addressed*

- The Panel viewed samples of students' work in the course files and found them to be appropriate. However, there are some variations in the students' work which have been noted in External Examiners' reports. These variations in the Panel's opinion could be attributed to several reasons noted in interviews. Students' English language proficiency, the use of a standardized assessment schedule across all AOU courses coupled with limited utilization of applied and reflective assessments. To improve students' achievements and enrich their experience at AOU-Bahrain, these pedagogical weaknesses need to be addressed (see the Recommendations under Indicators 2.1 and 3.1).

- The Cohort Analysis Report shows that approximately 50% of BSS students graduate in each cohort. In 2021, there were still students from the 2014, 2015 and 2016 cohorts enrolled indicating that students are taking more than the three and a half years needed to complete the programme. The Panel finds this consonant with other 'open access' programmes and institutions. Student retention and progression data is monitored and reported in the AMRs and vary from year to year, although the Panel notes that in recent years the number of student withdrawals has increased.

- Progression and graduate destinations data are tracked and monitored, with a view to using these as mechanisms for assuring academic standards. The progression data is reported and analysed in AMRs, while alumni surveys provide a useful insight into the employment status of graduates. The Panel notes that the employment rate of BSS alumni is low and has not improved over the last five years. While this was attributed during the virtual site visit interviews to a number of reasons, including the economic environment and limited job opportunities, the Panel is of the view that more needs to be done by AOU-Bahrain to help students prepare for work. The Panel recommends that AOU-Bahrain should develop targeted strategies and initiatives to enhance the academic standards of graduates and their employment prospects.

- Employer surveys indicate that they are generally satisfied with BSS graduates' profile. Interviews with external stakeholders confirmed this view, however, a need for graduates to have more soft skills and access to real-world training were identified as areas needed to improve students' employment prospects (see the Recommendation above).

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Standard 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.

Indicator 4.1: Quality Assurance Management

There is a clear quality assurance management system, in relation to the programme that ensures the institution's policies, procedures and regulations are applied effectively and consistently.

Judgment: *Addressed*

- AOU-Bahrain has a range of policies, procedures and regulations in place to manage and quality assure the BSS programme. These have been developed by AOU-HQ, AOU-Bahrain and OUUK, and principal amongst these are the Bachelor Award Examination and Assessment Bylaws, the Regulations for Validated Awards, and the Teaching and Learning Policy. The policies and regulations are regularly revised as noted from their version numbers and they are communicated to stakeholders through staff and student handbooks, SharePoint and email.

- AOU has a well-developed quality assurance system which functions at the local branch and AOB HQ levels. The BQAC and QAD are responsible for quality assurance locally, while the Central Quality Assurance Committee and Quality Assurance and Accreditation Department (QAAD) at AOU-HQ have oversight of all of AOU's quality assurance arrangements and processes which are detailed in the Quality Assurance Guide. The Panel viewed a range of instruments used for quality assurance purposes including stakeholder surveys and survey reports, course files, External Examiner reports, AMRs and re-validation reports, along with minutes of the BQAC meetings, all of which showed that the quality management system at AOU is being consistently implemented.

- The BQAC and QAD are responsible for ensuring the consistent implementation of policies and procedures at AOU-Bahrain as evidenced by the BQAC meeting minutes and reports produced by the QAD. This was further confirmed during the site visit interviews.

- From interviews, the Panel noted that FBS academics and support staff understand quality assurance and their role in ensuring the effectiveness of provision. Staff are provided with training and an induction in quality assurance processes and have access to relevant documents on SharePoint and through e-mails. The Panel notes with appreciation the

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initiative by the QAD which established a Quality Circle that aims to improve academic staff involvement and representation in the quality assurance process and systems.

- The Quality Assurance Guide states that quality assurance monitoring processes are scrutinized and periodically revised. The Panel learned from interviews that this is driven by the QAAD but can originate at branch level, too. Policies are developed and revised with the consent of all of AOU's branches, ensuring that policy development, which is the cornerstone of any quality assurance system, is an inclusive and collaborative process.

Indicator 4.2: Programme Management and Leadership

The programme is managed in a way that demonstrates effective and responsible leadership and there are clear lines of accountability.

Judgment: *Addressed*

- The BSS programme is offered by the FBS, which is under the purview of the Assistant Director for Academic Affairs and Scientific Research (ADAASR). This is reflected in the organizational chart of AOU-Bahrain and clearly detailed in the AOU statutes. In addition, the FBS Deanship at AOU-HQ is involved in overseeing the delivery of the programme across all AOU branches and GCCs located at different AOU branches are responsible for specific courses on the programme.

- There are clear reporting lines at AOU-Bahrain with BSS faculty reporting to the FBS Dean, and the FBS Dean reporting to the ADAASR. BCCs and GCCs across AOU branches also work together on course delivery with oversight from the Deanship at AOU-HQ. There are regular meetings between all staff involved in the delivery of the programme and open communication through AOU committees. Communication with OUUK is through AOU-HQ.

- The terms of reference for management posts and committees are stated in the AOU Statutes and the roles of the academic and quality assurance committees are described in the Quality Assurance Guide.

- The Panel found that the custodianship of academic standards is distributed across the AOU academic structure. At the institutional level there are clearly defined regulations for academic awards and assessments, which are implemented at the local level in AOU branches. GCCs are responsible for developing assessments for all branches based on these regulations, while BCCs oversee the delivery of courses locally. The QAD and QAAD at HQ work together to monitor the quality and standards on the programme alongside assessment and examination committees.

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- Despite operating under a complex, cross-border organizational structure, the programme is effectively managed through clear reporting lines and committees. The Panel noted that all staff involved in the programme have a sound understanding of their role within the local branch and AOU. There is appropriate co-ordination between branches and with the HQ to facilitate the programme delivery and quality assurance arrangements.

- OUUK is responsible for ensuring the equivalent quality of education on the programme through the institutional and programme validation arrangements with AOU, ongoing annual monitoring of the programme using AMRs and External Examiners reports. These mechanisms include oversight of teaching quality and access to OUUK resources where required. OUUK also endorses faculty who teach on the BSS programme and undertakes non-routine reviews of the academic provision and support services. The Panel noted in interviews that students chose to study at AOU primarily because of its affiliation with OUUK.

Indicator 4.3: Annual and Periodic Review of the Programme

There are arrangements for annual internal evaluation and periodic reviews of the programme that incorporate both internal and external feedback and mechanisms are in place to implement recommendations for improvement.

Judgment: *Addressed*

- AOU has appropriate arrangements in place for evaluating the BSS programme internally using AMR process and other mechanisms such as stakeholder surveys, which are described in the Quality Assurance Guide. The AMRs are all-inclusive reporting tools which provide a detailed account of every aspect of the programme over the course of one academic year. The APE report, which forms part of the AMR, contains programme data, including progression and retention, reflections on student feedback, comments from faculty and an action plan for improvements. The AMR also contains information related to HR procedures, student survey results and an internal review of programme resources and support services. OUUK commended AOU for the comprehensiveness of the AMRs in its last re-validation report and for addressing all of the issues raised in the AMR.

- APE reports are submitted with the AMR and discussed at HQ before being sent to OUUK. The action plan containing recommendations for improvements in the APE is monitored by AOU-HQ, while OUUK prepares a report in response to the AMR with their own observations and recommendations, including issues requiring immediate action. The Panel learned from interviews that the AOU-HQ follows up with the branches to ensure OU's recommendations and the action plan in the APE are implemented and the outcomes are reported in the subsequent APE.

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- OUUK re-validates the BSS programme every five years by applying the processes in the Regulations for Validated Awards, which represents the periodic review of the programme. The re-validation is done through AOU-HQ for all branches offering the programme; but also involves students, faculty and staff from the branches. The last re-validation was in 2017 and AOU-HQ is currently preparing the documentation for the institutional and programme re-validation cycle (2022-2027).

- The re-validation process is comprehensive and systematic, and involves feedback from different stakeholders across all AOU branches where the programme is offered. The re-validation report is prepared by OUUK and covers all aspects of the programme. The External Examiner reports also contribute to the programme reviews by providing an insight into how it compares to similar programmes in other institutions.

- The QAAD at AOU-HQ has oversight of all programme reviews at AOU along with OUUK which receives detailed annual reports about the programmes. During interviews, the Panel found the quality assurance team at AOU-HQ and in Bahrain to be rigorous in their approach, as evidenced by the follow up of actions and recommendations for improvements raised in various reports discussed previously, and well-versed with the importance and impact of the University's quality assurance system. Their approach has resulted in an effective and robust system of internal, external and periodic reviews of the BSS programme through AMRs, re-validations and External Examiner reports, which the Panel appreciates.

Indicator 4.4: Benchmarking and Surveys

Benchmarking studies and the structured comments collected from stakeholders' surveys are analysed and the outcomes are used to inform decisions on programmes and are made available to the stakeholders.

Judgment: *Partially Addressed*

- The BSS programme is benchmarked to the QAA's Subject Benchmark Statement for Business and Management, since the programme is validated by OUUK which aligns its Bachelor (Honours) programmes with the FHEQ Level 6 Descriptors. The Panel requested evidence of any additional benchmarking of the PILOs and the curriculum and was referred to the Programme Specification which is based on the benchmarking with OUUK. The BQAC has identified the need for more benchmarking which the Panel agrees with. The BSS programme would benefit from comparing academic standards and outcomes on the BSS programme with other similar programmes in Bahrain and the region so that benchmarking outcomes can be utilised more extensively to inform decision about changes to the BSS programme, which are currently made only during the re-validation. Therefore, the Panel recommends that AOU-Bahrain should enhance benchmarking on

the BSS programme using appropriate reference points and by comparing its outcomes with other similar programmes.

- Formal mechanisms for collecting feedback from stakeholders are detailed in the Quality Assurance Guide which calls for regular and documented internal and external stakeholder consultation to improve the quality of the provision at the AOU and its branches. The main mechanisms include Student Surveys, Tutor Surveys, Internship Students Surveys, Employer Surveys, Alumni Surveys, and Student Exit Surveys. The Panel learned from interviews that the response rate from external stakeholders, including employers and alumni, has been low historically and AOU-Bahrain is trying to improve its engagement with these stakeholders by increasing their survey participation rate. The Panel concurs and recommends that AOU-Bahrain should improve its engagement with external stakeholders to routinely collect structured feedback about the BSS programme.

- The QAD prepares comprehensive reports based on the results of various surveys which are discussed at BQAC meetings and included in the AMRs which have action plans based on stakeholder feedback, amongst other things. The survey data is also available to the QAAD at AOU-HQ which develops and administers most of the surveys. The data is used to make changes to the BSS programme as documented in the AMRs.

- The Panel discussed the mechanisms for implementing improvements and communicating outcomes to stakeholders at length in interviews with staff, students and the quality assurance units. The QAAD at AOU-HQ monitors the implementation of changes that are applicable to all branches offering the programme, while the QAD at AOU-Bahrain oversees local changes to support services and resources. Students are informed about changes through direct channels, such as e-mail or phone, if they affect them personally, and through social media, newsletters or by tutors if they affect a larger group of students. Students expressed their satisfaction with the way their concerns are handled as evidenced by the written comments made in Student Surveys which were largely positive.

Indicator 4.5: Relevance to Labour market and Societal Needs

The programme has a functioning advisory board and there is continuous scoping of the labour market and the national and societal needs, where appropriate for the programme type, to ensure the relevancy and currency of the programme.

Judgment: *Partially Addressed*

- The Industrial Advisory Board (IAB) was reinstated in 2019 to enable external input into the programme. The IAB has clear terms of reference and consists of the Head of the

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Academic Unit (the Dean in the case of the BSS programme), the Head of the Internship Unit, one alumni from the programme and four discipline experts from industry.

- The IAB meets twice per year to discuss the FBS programmes. The Panel noted from the meeting minutes that the IAB expressed informed views about the FBS programmes, including mapping the BSS to industry needs, and made a number of relevant suggestions for improvements, which the FBS is considering. For example, the IAB suggested conducting more activities involving the FBS alumni. The Panel concurs with this suggestion and urges AOU-Bahrain to engage the IAB in helping provide advice on diversifying the assessments on the BSS programme so that they are related to real-world issues (see Indicator 3.1) as well as on providing advice on enhancing graduates' employability.

- There is a strong demand for the BSS programme which currently has 1546 students enrolled. While these numbers would be expected to reflect labour market demand and national needs, the employment outcomes of BSS graduates are low. In 2020-2021, out of 63.77% graduates only 7.2% were employed. This indicates the need for formal studies to scope the labour market and investigate the reasons for the poor employment outcomes of BSS graduates. AOU-Bahrain has not conducted this type of study since the initial feasibility study for the programme in 2002 and relies on the IAB to ensure the relevancy and currency of the programme. The Panel agrees that the IAB is a valuable source of information about the need for the programme, however, it is not representative of all the different fields and careers that BSS graduates can work in, according to the Programme Specification. A more comprehensive formal study with targeted data is needed to ensure that the programme meets the needs of the Bahraini labour market and the graduates' employment aspiration. Therefore, the Panel recommends that AOU-Bahrain should develop formal mechanisms for scoping the labour market which are routinely implemented and reviewed, in order to enhance graduate employment outcomes and ensure that the programme remains relevant and up-to-date.

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V. Conclusion

Taking into account the institution's own self-evaluation report, the evidence gathered from the interviews and documentation made available during the virtual site visit, the Panel draws the following conclusion in accordance with the DHR/BQA *Academic Programme Reviews (Cycle 2) Handbook, 2020*:

There is Confidence in the BA (Hons) Business Studies (Systems Practice) of the Faculty of Business Studies offered by the Arab Open University-Bahrain.

In coming to its conclusion regarding the four Standards, the Panel notes, *with appreciation*, the following:

1. The physical and online resources that Arab Open University-Bahrain offers on its campus to meet the needs of staff and students

2. The robust and functional student information and learning management systems available to students and staff at Arab Open University-Bahrain which are used to effectively manage student data and records and support the delivery of courses and programmes.

3. The initiative by the Quality Assurance Department of Arab Open University-Bahrain, which established a Quality Circle that aims to improve academic staff involvement and representation in the quality assurance process and systems.

4. The effective and robust system of internal, external and periodic reviews of the programme through Annual Monitoring reports, re-validations and External Examiner reports.

In terms of improvement, the Panel recommends that the Arab Open University-Bahrain should:

1. Identify relevant risks related to the programme and ensure these risks are monitored and mitigated using the existing institutional risk management system.

2. Ensure that the Arabic and English titles are consistent, and correctly document the title on the Arab Open University website and in all institutional and programme documentation.

3. Extract the graduate attributes which are embedded within the programme intended learning outcomes and use these to define a set of generic attributes that all of its graduates must achieve.

4. Review and revise the programme intended learning outcomes to ensure that they are appropriate in number, measurable and formally linked to the programme aims.

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5. Reduce the number of the course intended learning outcomes and expedite the mapping of course intended learning outcomes to programme intended learning outcomes as a matter of priority to ensure that student achievement can be appropriately measured.

6. Ensure that students have a balanced workload across all semesters in the new BSS study plan and that the pre-requisites and co-requisites courses are correctly listed in all programme documents.

7. Review and revise the textbooks and references in the BSS courses to ensure that they are current and appropriate and include relevant references and scholarly and professional articles to supplement the prescribed texts.

8. Enhance students' active participation in applied learning opportunities, including informal and non-formal learning, in line with the principles stated in the institutional Teaching and Learning Policy.

9. Deploy a range of formative assessments on the BSS programme to help students identify areas of weakness and provide feedback for improving teaching.

10. Review the English language admission requirements to ensure students have English proficiency appropriate to the programme level.

11. Align its performance appraisal system more closely with the University's promotion system to ensure that faculty members have appropriate access to promotion opportunities.

12. Review the overall faculty workload to ensure that there is an appropriate and realistic balance of expectations related to teaching, research, academic advising and other tasks assigned to faculty members.

13. Review the current assessment methods with a view to introduce more diverse applied assessments on the BSS programme.

14. Reinforce the importance of academic integrity and implement additional measures to educate students about how to avoid plagiarism.

15. Develop more rigorous penalties for plagiarism and ensure that these penalties consistently applied in all BSS courses and clearly communicated to students.

16. Develop targeted strategies and initiatives to enhance the academic standards of graduates and their employment prospects.

17. Enhance benchmarking on the BSS programme using appropriate reference points and by comparing its outcomes with other similar programmes.

18. Improve the engagement with the BSS programme external stakeholders to routinely collect structured feedback about the programme.

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19. Develop formal mechanisms for scoping the labour market which are routinely implemented and reviewed, in order to enhance graduate employment outcomes and ensure that the programme remains relevant and up-to-date.

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