National Authority for Qualifications &
Quality Assurance of Education & Training

Directorate of Higher Education Reviews

Programmes-within-College Reviews Report

Master's Degree in Business Administration

College of Business and Finance

Ahlia University

Kingdom of Bahrain

Date Reviewed: 18 – 20 November 2014

HC057-C2-R057

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Acronyms

ADREG	Admission and Registration System
ATDC	Ahlia Training and Development Center
AU	Ahlia University
BSAF	Bachelor's Degree in Accounting & Finance
BSBF	Bachelor's Degree in Banking & Finance
BSEF	Bachelor's Degree in Economics & Finance
BSMIS	Bachelor's Degree in Management Information System
BSMM	Bachelor's Degree in Management and Marketing
CAQA	Centre for Accreditation and Quality Assurance
CEAB	The College External Advisory Board
CILOs	Course Intended Learning Outcomes
CME	The Centre for Measurement and Evaluation
CRC	Curriculum Review Committee
DHR	Directorate of Higher Education Reviews
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GPA	Grade Point Average
HEC	Higher Education Council of the Ministry of Education, Kingdom of Bahrain
ILOs	Intended Learning Outcomes
ISG	Institut Supérieur de Gestion

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MBA	Master's Degree in Business Administration
MIS	Management Information Systems
PILOs	Programme Intended Learning Outcomes
QA	Quality Assurance
QQA	National Authority for Qualifications & Quality Assurance of Education & Training
SER	Self-Evaluation Report
TLAC	The Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee
UC	University Council
UQAC	University Quality Assurance Committee

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1. The Programmes-within-College Reviews Process

1.1 The Programmes-within-College Reviews Framework

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

Programmes-within-College Reviews have three main objectives:

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

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

Indicator 1: **The Learning Programme**

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

Indicator 2: **Efficiency of the Programme**

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1: Criteria for Judgements

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

1.2 The Programmes-within-College Reviews Process at the Ahlia University

A Programmes-within-College Reviews of the programmes offered by the College of Business and Finance of Ahlia University was conducted by the DHR of the QQA in terms of its mandate to review the quality of higher education in Bahrain. The site visit took place in November 2014 for the academic programmes offered by the College, these are; Bachelor's Degree in Economics & Finance, Bachelor's Degree in Banking & Finance, Bachelor's Degree in Accounting & Finance, Bachelor's Degree in Management & Marketing ,Master's Degree in Business Administration and Bachelor's Degree in Management Information System.

This Report provides an account of the review process and the findings of the Panel for the Master's Degree in Business Administration based on the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) and appendices submitted by the Ahlia University (AU), the supplementary documentation made available during the site visit, as well as interviews and observations made during the review site visit.

AU was notified by the DHR/QQA on 12 May 2014 that it would be subject to a Programmes-within-College Reviews of programmes offered by its College of Business and Finance with the site visit taking place in 18–20 November 2014. In preparation for the review, AU conducted self-evaluation of all its programmes and submitted the SERs with appendices on the agreed date on 27 July 2014.

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The DHR constituted a Panel consisting of experts in the academic field of Business Administration, Economics & Finance, Banking & Finance, Accounting & Finance, Management & Marketing, Management Information System, and in higher education who have experience of external programme quality reviews. The Panel comprised eight external reviewers.

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

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

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

The DHR would like to extend its thanks to AU for the co-operative manner in which it has participated in the Programmes-within-College Reviews process. It also wishes to express its appreciation for the open discussions held in the course of the review and the professional conduct of the faculty in the Master's Degree in Business Administration and the AU staff in general.

1.3   Overview of the College of Business and Finance

The College of Business and Finance comprises four departments, that is Accounting and Economics, Management and Marketing, Banking and Finance, and Management Information Systems. The management structure of the College includes a Dean and an Associate Dean, and a Chairperson for each of the four departments. In addition to the Master's Degree in Business Administration (MBA), the College currently offers five undergraduate programmes, namely Bachelor's Degree in Management and Marketing (BSMM), Bachelor's Degree in Economics & Finance (BSEF), Bachelor's Degree in Banking & Finance (BSBF), Bachelor's Degree in Accounting & Finance (BSAF), and Bachelor's Degree of Management Information System (BSMIS). At the time of the visit, the total number of students in the College was 1437 and the College employed 46 faculty members.

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1.4   Overview of the Master's Degree in Business Administration

The Master in Business Administration programme was first offered at AU in the 2002-2003 academic year and graduated three students as its first batch in February 2004. The programme was originally based on the Brunel University MBA. While all other postgraduate programmes in AU are offered within the College of Postgraduate Studies and Research, the MBA is located in the College of Business and Finance, and is managed by a dedicated MBA Coordinator. The present curriculum was launched in the 2009-2010 academic year following a series of reviews. Currently, there are nine full-time administration staff within the College who contribute to the programme, which is supported by 12 full-time teaching staff as well as one part-time teaching staff. At the time of the site visit, there were 293 registered students in the programme. More than 80% of the registered students are Bahraini citizens, with the majority of the remaining students being citizens from the GCC countries, principally from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

1.5   Summary of Review Judgements

Table 2: Summary of Review Judgements for the Master's Degree in Business Administration

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

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2. Indicator 1: The Learning Programme

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

2.1 The College of Business and Finance has vision and mission statements that are appropriately aligned to the AU vision and mission statements. The programme aims are clearly set out in the Programme Specification, and are aligned with the vision and mission of the College which seeks to provide quality business education through experiential learning in a collegial and intellectually stimulating environment. The Panel appreciates the coherence of the academic planning framework, and how it has been applied to align the programme aims to the university and college vision and mission statements.

2.2 The MBA programme consists of 36 credits in total, and includes three non-credit bearing foundation courses, 18 credits of core courses, six credits of core elective courses in strategy and international business, six credits of 'specialisation' courses in accounting and economics, banking and finance, management and marketing, and management information systems. The curriculum demonstrates a good balance between knowledge and theory (eg. ECON520, MAGT550) and skills and practice (eg. ACCT520, FINC501, ITMA570). The curriculum also provides for a compulsory research component in the form of either a 12-credit dissertation or a 6-credit research project to be taken with extra 6 credits of specialisation courses. To ensure a suitable workload for students, full-time students are expected to enrol for a maximum of 12 credits (4 courses) per semester, whereas part-time students can only enrol for a maximum of six credits (2 courses). Progression is facilitated by the inclusion of clearly stipulated prerequisite courses in the curriculum. However, the Panel notes with concern that capstone courses like strategic management (MAGT 561) and leadership in organisations (MAGT 564) appear in the curriculum as elective/specialisation courses. The Panel recommends that the College revise the curriculum to include strategy and leadership as core courses.

2.3 As stated in the SER, and also detailed in the Programme Specification, the curriculum includes an appropriate range of both depth and breadth courses. The elective courses provide greater depth and breadth, and offer opportunities for students to specialize in different fields. The core courses include three depth courses and three breadth courses while the elective courses provide a variety of depth and breadth courses that are grouped in specialisations, being; accounting and economics, banking and finance, management and marketing and management information systems. The curriculum and syllabi are regularly updated to maintain relevance of the materials used. The Panel appreciates that the syllabus generally

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meets the norms and standards of an MBA programme, and adequately prepares students for the workplace by offering specialisations in relevant fields of study.

2.4   Programme Intended Learning Outcomes (PILOs) are clearly outlined in the Programme Specification and are classified into knowledge and understanding, subject specific skills, critical thinking skills, and general skills. The Programme Specification further illustrates how the PILOs are linked to the aims and objectives of the programme. Generally, the PILOs address a sufficient range of knowledge in the subject area, research, and skills that are appropriate to the level of the programme. During the site visit, the Panel noted from the sample course files and interviews with faculty that standard procedures and templates are utilised to map the PILOs to the programme aims and objectives. The academic staff were able to demonstrate knowledge of the PILOs and how they are mapped to the programme aims and objectives. This information is also made available to students through the Course Specification document included in the course files. The Panel appreciates that the PILOs collectively match the programme aims and objectives, and are appropriate to the level of the programme.

2.5   The sample of course files that were reviewed during the site visit confirmed that Course Intended Learning Outcomes (CILOs) have been specified for all courses. The Panel noted that a standardised template is used to map specific topics in each course to the course ILOs and the assessment methods that would be used to ensure achievement of these CILOs. The academic staff also confirmed during interviews that they have received training on how to match course and programme ILOs to ensure the attainment of appropriate graduate attributes. The Panel appreciates that the course ILOs are appropriate to the aims and level of the courses. The Panel however found that almost every PILO is mapped against every course in the Curriculum Skills Map, including but not limited to such examples as MAGT550, MAGT551, MAGT561, MAGT562 and MAKT511. The Panel is of the view that it is unrealistic to expect that each course in the curriculum would be able to give explicit attention to all the PILOs. The Panel recommends that the College revise the Curriculum Mapping Matrix to ensure a more selective mapping of the MBA courses to the PILOs.

2.6   The Teaching and Learning Plan contains the philosophy that underpins AU's teaching and learning methodology and the strategies used in its implementation. The SER lists a variety of teaching and learning methods such as independent problem solving, group discussions and debates, literature search using a variety of library resources including electronic databases and the internet, the use of guest lecturers from industry, and the application of research skills to solve practical problems in dissertations. Course files and interviews with both academic staff and students provided supporting evidence of the appropriate use of the variety of

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teaching and learning methods. The course files also show evidence of how teaching methods are linked to the learning outcomes. The students interviewed were particularly appreciative of the opportunity they are provided to actively participate in activities both in and out of the class, by for example reading and analysing technical articles for class presentations. The Panel appreciates that the principles and methods used for teaching the programme support the attainment of the programme aims and ILOs, and ensure that different learning needs of students are met.

2.7   The assessment arrangements pertaining to the MBA programme are documented in the University Assessment Manual, Guidelines for Good Practice in the Supervision of Master's Degree Dissertation and the University Catalogue, nonetheless, the Panel noted that the Student Guidebook does not include a section detailing all aspects of assessment. During the interviews, it was noted that the students are also aware of the appeal procedure in case they would like to challenge their grades. The reviewed course files during the site visit confirmed that a standardised template is used to map specific topics in each course to the CILOs and the assessment methods that would be used to ensure a match of what is assessed with the course ILOs and in turn, the programme aims. Course instructors submit model answers and marking rubrics for the final examinations. Course files provided evidence of these. Except for the final examination paper, assessed and marked work is returned to the students giving them the opportunity to discuss their performance as a form of feedback, which was confirmed during student interviews. The interviews with the academic staff provided a clear description of the steps taken to ensure that assessment is rigorous, accurate and secure. For example, there is an internal verification of final examinations in all courses including the dissertation. The interviews also confirmed the appropriate use of different types of formative and summative assessment, including the use of quizzes, presentations, class tests mid-term and final examinations. The Panel confirmed during meetings with students and alumni that students are always made aware of the assessment methods that would be used for each course, and prompt feedback is provided to students in class on tests and mid-term examinations together with model answers. The Panel appreciates that suitable and transparent mechanisms are in place for assessing students' achievement of learning, and these are known to all academics and students.

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

- There is a coherent academic planning framework that has been put in place for the MBA programme which ensures alignment of the programme aims and objectives to the university and college vision and mission.

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- The syllabus generally meets the norms and standards of an MBA programme and adequately prepares students for the workplace by offering specialisations in relevant fields of study.
- The programme Intended Learning Outcomes collectively match the programme aims and objectives, and are appropriate to the level of the programme.
- The course Intended Learning Outcomes are appropriate to the aims and level of the courses.
- The principles and methods used for teaching the programme support the attainment of the programme aims and ILOs, and ensure that different learning needs of students are met.
- There are suitable and transparent arrangements and mechanisms in place for assessing students' achievement of learning.

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

- review the MBA curriculum to include capstone courses such as strategy and leadership as core courses
- review the Curriculum Mapping Matrix to ensure a more selective mapping of the MBA courses to the programme ILOs.

2.10   **Judgement**

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

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3.   Indicator 2: Efficiency of the Programme

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

3.1   AU has a general university admission policy for both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. In addition, the MBA Programme Specification states specific criteria that are required for admission to the MBA programme. The admission requirement for the MBA programme is an undergraduate degree with a minimum GPA of 2.5 in any field of study. Applicants without majors in business, economics or cognate fields are however required to take specific pre-MBA foundation courses. The selection process gives preference to applicants with work experience. In addition, according to the SER and the AU Catalogue, applicants who studied in institutions where the language of instruction is not English are required to demonstrate linguistic competency through an English language placement test. The Panel is concerned that no exact cut-off marks are specified for the English language placement test. Accordingly, the Panel recommends that AU clearly state its requirements for the English language placement test and make them available to all its stakeholders. The general admission policies are periodically reviewed by the Admission and Exemption Committee, which receives feedback from the various Colleges in terms of programme criteria for admission for deciding whether and in what ways to amend admission policies. AU has a clear policy for admitting transfer students from other institutions. Transferring students to the MBA programme require pass grades equivalent to an AU grade of C+ or higher, with a condition that no more than 18 credit hours of study can be transferred. The Panel acknowledges that there are clearly stated criteria for admitting transfer students.

3.2   The Panel noted from the data provided and also from the interviews with the staff that the majority of students are registered for the programme as part-time students because they are in full-time employment. For example, part-time students constituted about 75% of the total number of students who were admitted in 2013-2014. Almost all the student are local with some students joining the programme from the region. Students joining the programme came from varying disciplines ranging from business, information technology, science, engineering, arts, medical sciences. Their prior leaning degree GPAs ranges between 2.1, for a few, and 3.9 with a good number of them being above 3.0. Students from business foundation sequence are exempted from the admission requirement for the MBA of having a minimum GPA of 2.5. The Panel is satisfied that the profile of admitted students matches the programme aims and available resources, and also provides opportunities for a sizeable proportion of registered students in the programme to immediately apply the knowledge and skills they have acquired during their work experience. Nonetheless, the Panel recommends that the College adhere to its own

admission criterion stating that prior learning GPA of admitted students to the MBA programme should be 2.5 or above. The Panel noted that foundation courses are offered in Accounting, Finance and Quantitative Methods, and suggest that a course in general management be included for students who are admitted from non-management backgrounds to enhance the foundation courses and expose those students to basic management knowledge and skills.

3.3   The Panel notes that there are clearly defined lines of accountability with regard to the management of the programmes in the College of Business and Finance in accordance with the University By-Laws. Related university-level committees and structures that existed at the time of the site visit to complement the work of the Centre for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CAQA) included the University Council, University Quality Assurance Committee (UQAC), Teaching and Learning and Assessment Committee (TLAC), Curriculum Review Committee (CRC), and the Centre for Measurement and Evaluation (CME). Parallel committees also exist at the college and departmental levels, such as College and Departmental Councils, College and Departmental Quality Assurance Committees. The Department is managed by a Chairperson who reports to the Dean of the College. A faculty member also has been appointed as the MBA programme Director to oversee the day-to-day management of the programme. The College organisational chart shows that the MBA Director is currently located within the Department of Accounting and Economics, but the SER states that the Director reports directly to the Dean of the College of Business and Finance. The University Organisational Chart, on the other hand, shows that the MBA Director is accountable to the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies and Research. The Panel is thus of the view that there is ambiguity regarding the management of the MBA programme, nonetheless, interviews and meeting sessions with staff indicated they are satisfied with the mechanisms which are implemented to demonstrate effective management. The Panel recommends that, the University consider the possibility of relocating the MBA programme to the College of Graduate Studies and Research, and clarify the reporting lines of the MBA Director accordingly.

3.4   The MBA programme is currently staffed with a total of 12 faculty members who contribute to the programme, made up of three Professors, two Associate Professors, and seven Assistant Professors. According to the SER the institution calculates the student to staff ratio over the past four years to be 13:1 for the 214 part-time and 73 full-time registered students. The Panel scrutinised the CVs of the faculty members who are teaching on the MBA programme and confirmed that there is an appropriate range of specialisations for all the major fields of the MBA programme and that the topics of research papers conducted by academic staff are relevant to the discipline. The staff who are teaching on the programme are all PhD holders in appropriate fields of study and have practical experience in relevant sectors. The Panel is pleased

to note that the majority of the faculty members have several years of practical experience as well as academic experience in both teaching and research from countries within the region and beyond. The Panel appreciates that there are sufficient and suitably qualified academic staff with appropriate qualifications and specialisations to match the programme aims and curricular content.

3.5   There are well documented policies regarding recruitment, appraisal and promotion for staff, as well as mechanisms for their consistent implementation, as evidenced in AU's By-Laws. As per the SER, recruitment is typically initiated at the department, where the Chairperson forwards the Department Councils recommendations of human resources needs to the College Council, after which the names of the selected candidates are forwarded to the Appointment and Promotion Committee for review and vetting. According to the SER, faculty appraisal is conducted annually based on Process of Overall Annual Faculty Evaluation document. The appraisal process incorporates self-evaluation by the faculty, student and chairperson evaluation as well as the evaluation of the faculty member's contribution to research, teaching and other contributions to the University and the community. The AU promotion process is documented in the By-Laws of the Academic Promotions which mentions that 'A faculty member who has spent five years in his/her academic rank is eligible to apply for promotion to higher rank according to the rules and criteria specified in these Bylaws. Faculty promotions are generally based on a number of elements including evaluations by students as well as the Chairperson on the quality of teaching and research, and contributions to the college development and the community at large. The Panel found evidence that there were four promotions within the College in recent years, including the promotion of an MBA faculty member from the rank of assistant to associate professor. During the past four years, the number of full-time staff has gradually risen but the Panel noted that there is no exit documentation to track staff retention while it is noted in the SER that the retention rate of the MBA faculty in the last three year was 87.5%. Interviewed staff members expressed their satisfaction with the arrangements in place for the implementation of staff-related policies and confirmed that they are implemented consistently and in a transparent manner. All newly-appointed staff undergo an induction process, during which both full-time and part-time academic staff in particular learn about the assessment policy and other academic policies before commencing teaching. Staff interviewed expressed the view that the induction process has been very effective and is generally well organised. The Panel appreciates that there are adequate mechanisms to ensure consistent and transparent implementation of the wide range of staff-related policies, which are complemented by a well-functioning induction process for newly appointed staff.

3.6   The University has an Admission and Registration software system (ADREG) which consists of subsystems for managing applications, admissions, withdrawals and

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transfers, timetabling, assessments, graduations, alumni affairs, and general student activities including complaints. The Panel confirmed during interviews with staff members that ADREG is used effectively in generating reports to inform decision making in relation to programme management, student progression and also for facilitating the early identification and support of 'at-risk' students. Students also confirmed that they are given training on how to use the ADREG system to manage their registrations online and access assessment results and feedback from staff. The Panel appreciates the robustness of the ADREG system, and how it is effectively used by both staff and students to enhance students learning experience and as a functioning management information system to inform decision-making.

3.7   AU has appropriate policies and procedures for ensuring the security of learners' records and accuracy of results. Electronic records, transcripts, course attendance and other personal information, are reposed solely in ADREG in which all records are password-protected and are backed-up on two levels. The Panel confirmed during the site visit and from interview sessions that on the first level, records are backed up on a daily, weekly, monthly and yearly basis with respect to different services; and on the second level, records are backed up remotely off-campus. The Panel also confirmed during interviews with academic staff that accuracy of results (grade entry and changes in grades) is ensured by multi-level verification through the instructor, the Chairperson, the Dean of the College, and also the Dean of Student Affairs in the case of grade changes. In addition, there is a Quality Assurance (QA) officer specifically charged with verification of accuracy of students records, who carries out audits of results to assure data integrity. Security of academic records is ensured by various means including an anti-virus software, firewalls, and secure connections *via* a server. The Panel also found that AU has a disaster recovery plan in place. It is common practice at AU that all examination scripts are kept for a period of two years in a secured place in the college's custody. The Panel established during the site visit that the security arrangements are functioning effectively. The Panel appreciates that there are adequate procedures in place to ensure the security of learners' records and accuracy of results.

3.8   Following a tour to the university campus during the site visit, the Panel visited a number of lecture halls and computer laboratories, the university library, and other facilities. The Panel found a reasonable collection of hardcopy and electronic titles and electronic databases in the AU library and the Panel encourages the College to continue increasing the library holdings in relation to the MBA programme. The library opening hours are from 8:00 am to 8:00 pm during the weekdays and from 10:00 am to 3:00 pm on Fridays, which provides reasonable access for working MBA students. During the campus tour, the Panel met with some staff in the library, who explained the services that are provided to students. The Panel noted that the university library includes limited private study spaces for students and that the

bookshop for selling textbooks to the students is located inside the library. Therefore, the Panel recommends that AU move the bookshop from the library to allow more space for students in the library and to ensure that the library is not crowded especially at the beginning of the academic semester. The College has made provision for 'free hours' in some computer laboratories where students can have access to the laboratories to perform research and work on their assignments. During interviews with staff and students, the Panel confirmed that the University provides adequate internet services including free Wi-Fi access on campus, email services, troubleshooting support, software installation, and access to the university services to all registered students and faculty. During interviews with the management and the staff members and while touring the facilities, the Panel noted that students with special needs are catered for but it emerged that only certain disabilities are currently covered where reasonable adjustments could be made. During interviews with management and staff and while visiting the resources, the Panel noted that special measures are taken to support students with certain disabilities by providing ease of access. The Panel is satisfied with these arrangements in place to ensure that sufficient resources are available to all students.

3.9   The Panel noted that the ADREG system is used by the Admission and Registration Directorate to track the usage of resources in computer laboratories as well as classroom. E-resources (including usage of electronic databases and 'Moodle') are also tracked through the database logs in the library that are generated by the library staff, and used to inform decisions on whether to renew subscriptions to databases. The Panel is satisfied that the tracking system is adequate in determining the usage of laboratories and e-resources and allows for the evaluation of the utilisation of these resources.

3.10   During the site visit, the Panel noted that support is provided for students in the laboratories and the library. The services that are in place to provide support for students include documented library information leaflets which are distributed to students during library orientation sessions to provide guidelines on the use of library and e-resources. Interviews with students also confirmed that the ICT staff and appointed IT assistants are always available to provide technical support to the students in computer laboratories. The students interviewed also confirmed that the courses in the MBA programme are made available on 'Moodle', with accompanying e-learning support provided by both faculty and the ICT staff. There is an academic advisory service in terms of which every student is assigned an academic advisor who provides continuous and necessary support to the students in the course of their studies, as well as a Students Counsellor who is available to address non-academic problems on which students may require guidance. The students interviewed expressed general satisfaction with the support services. The Panel appreciates that the range of student support services is appropriate for the MBA programme.

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However, the Panel noted that the Student Counselling Support Unit is located in an exposed area which might not maintain student privacy. The Panel recommends that AU relocate the Student Counselling Support Unit to another more appropriate location to maintain the privacy of the students.

3.11 Orientation is provided to all newly admitted students as well as those transferring from other institutions at the beginning of every academic year. The orientation programme includes sessions on university-wide processes where aspects of the AU Student Guide and AU Catalogue are discussed, as well as college-level and programme-specific processes and requirements, including a discussion of the MBA Programme Specification. Students expressed satisfaction with the efficacy of the orientation programme in providing valuable information about AU's policies and regulations. The Panel was informed that students who are unable to attend the orientation programme usually receive copies of the Student Guide and other documents to read on their own. The Panel encourages the College to put proper arrangements in place to ensure that all newly-admitted and transferring students undergo the orientation process prior to the commencement of lectures.

3.12 AU has mechanisms in place to track students' progress and provide academic support for students, particularly at-risk students. The AU academic advisory service includes monitoring the academic progress of students at risk and students with special needs. According to AU's student at risk policy, students are to be monitored when their GPA falls within a specified GPA range which, in the case of the MBA, is 3.0. All at-risk students are identified (red flagged) by the ADREG system and notifications are sent by email to their academic advisor, course instructors, the Students Counsellor and, the Chairperson of his/her department. In the case of the MBA, students with good GPAs who inexplicably stop attending classes are also identified for counselling. During interviews with students, it was noted that at-risk students are required to meet with their academic advisor and the Students Counsellor to agree on an action plan. The Panel found evidence of minutes of meetings and interventions that have been taken to support identified at-risk students. The Panel appreciates the mechanisms that are in place to timely identify and support MBA students who are at risk of failure.

3.13 AU offers a number of opportunities for informal learning to undergraduate students; however, not all of these are extended to the MBA students. Representative of the Student Council participate in the College Council meetings; however, this is normally filled by an undergraduate student. MBA students participate in seminars, lectures and workshops as well as engage in other community activities involving the public, banking and finance, and other private sectors. However, during interviews with the MBA students, the Panel noted that MBA students generally do not partake in almost all of the available initiatives, due to them being in full

employment. The Panel is satisfied that the learning environment in the College is generally conducive to expanding student experiences and knowledge through informal learning and yet suggests that efforts should be made to encourage MBA students to participate in these initiatives.

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

- There are sufficient and suitably qualified academic staff with appropriate qualifications and specialisations to match the programme aims and curricular content.
- There are adequate mechanisms to ensure consistent and transparent implementation of a wide range of staff-related policies, which are complemented by a well-functioning induction process for newly appointed staff.
- There is a robust student information system, known as ADREG, that is used effectively by both staff and students to enhance students learning experience.
- There are adequate procedures in place to ensure the security of learner records and the accuracy of results.
- There is a range of well-functioning student support services provided by qualified staff.
- There is an effective mechanism in place to timely identify and provide academic support for students at risk of failure.

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

- state the requirements for the English language placement test and make them available to all stakeholders
- adhere to the university's own admission criterion which states that prior learning GPA of admitted students to the MBA programme should be 2.5 or above.
- consider the possibility of relocating the MBA to the College of Graduate Studies and Research, and clarify the reporting lines of the MBA Director accordingly
- relocate the commercial shop for selling textbooks to students that is currently located in the library
- relocate the Student Counselling Support Unit to another more appropriate location to maintain the privacy of the students.

3.16   **Judgement**

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

4.   Indicator 3: Academic Standards of the Graduates

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

4.1   A set of generic graduate attributes are specified in the AU Teaching and Learning Plan for programmes offered by the University. The Panel found that the aims and objectives for the MBA programme have been crafted to include most of the stated attributes such as independent and life-long learning skills, problem-solving skills, presentation and communication skills, and teamwork among others. However, these graduate attributes are not explicitly mapped to the PILOs although they are covered through various means of assessments. Course Specifications also state the course intended learning outcomes and associated assessment methods which are invariably mapped to programme aims through the programme intended learning outcomes, making use of a standard layout. During the interview sessions, the Panel confirmed that the graduate attributes that have been incorporated in the aims and objectives of the MBA programme are successfully developed and assessed as students progress through the programme. The Panel notes with appreciation that the graduate attributes of Ahlia University are consistent with international standards, and appropriately match the MBA programme aims and learning outcomes, yet the Panel encourages the College to explicitly link the graduate attributes to the PILOs.

4.2   AU has a benchmarking strategy that uses internal and external reference points to determine and verify the equivalence of academic standards with similar institutions locally, regionally and internationally. The Panel found evidence that the MBA programme was initially benchmarked against the MBA programme offered by Brunel University. The Panel also learned from interviews with the academic staff that subsequent desktop benchmarking initiatives have been undertaken to ensure equivalence of the AU MBA programme to similar programmes offered by some selected local, regional and international universities. These comparisons have been done internally *via* internet searches, and rely mostly on publicly available data. The SER reports of some outcomes that have resulted from these internal desktop benchmarking activities. The Panel did not find any formal external benchmarking activity has taken place recently in respect of the MBA. The Panel recommends that the College undertake a more formal and comprehensive benchmarking of the AU MBA programme against selected local, regional and international institutions.

4.3   AU's assessment policies and procedures are contained in the University Assessment Manual. The Panel confirmed from interviews with the staff that the implementation of the assessment policies and procedures is monitored by the CAQA, in coordination with the College, using a standard template. Moreover, one of the

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responsibilities of the University Teaching and Learning Committee is to regularly review the assessment policies, and there was evidence that this has been done. Interviewed faculty members indicated to the Panel that feedback is provided to students on all types of evaluations, and that there is a software used to check students' work with regard to plagiarism. This was confirmed by interviewed students. The Panel found in general, from the course files that assessment strategies in the courses are designed with due regard to the course ILOs, and would typically include both formative and summative assessment in the form of assignments, projects and a written mid-term and final examinations. Interviews with students and alumni confirmed that it is standard practice for students to be made aware of the assessment tools and strategies that would be used in a particular course at the beginning of each course through the Course Specification. The Panel appreciates that the assessment policies and procedures relating to the MBA are consistently implemented and made available to students. However, while the SER states that the Student Guide, Website and University Catalogue make the assessment policy and procedure known to students, the sample of Student Guide provided does not contain such information. It is suggested that this information to be included in the next version of the Student Guide.

4.4   A systematic process to align the assessments with the course intended learning outcomes has been developed and implemented where a standard ILO Assessment Matrix is used to align assessment tools with learning outcomes and ensure the achievement of the academic standards. In addition, an internal verifier is assigned to 'verify' final examinations in each course, using a template, to ensure that the syllabus and examination questions are aligned to the course ILOs. The Panel confirmed the efficacy of the internal verification process in ensuring the alignment of the assessment with the course ILOs, but noted that the process applies only to the final examinations which account for a fraction of the total assessment. The Panel also did not find any evidence to show that the verification is collaborated by external examiners. Moreover, even though assessment methods are specified in the Course Specification, they do not clearly state which CILOs the methods are designed to measure. The Panel recommends that the College institute a mechanism to ensure that all forms of assessment are clearly aligned to specific course learning outcomes.

4.5   The internal moderation process is described in the AU Assessment Manual. The policy provides for both pre-assessment moderation by an internal verifier, and a post-assessment moderation that is undertaken by a three-member internal moderation committee which usually includes the course instructor and Chairperson. While the former focuses on the verification of the alignment of the syllabus and the assessment methods to the course ILOs, the latter seeks to validate the marking process. The Panel established that the post assessment moderation

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process involves selecting and reviewing samples of scripts from high, medium and low score categories to ensure consistency of the grading. The Panel notes that the current internal moderation system is only applicable to the final examinations, and that assignments and mid-term examinations which account for 40-50% of the marks are generally not moderated. The Panel recommends that the College establish a more robust internal moderation system to cover all forms of assessment.

4.6   According to the SER, an annual external moderation occurs at the programme level. The Assessment Manual provides for the appointment of an external examiner by the University Council (UC) for each programme, upon nomination by the relevant College. The Panel found evidence that an external examiner has been appointed for the MBA programme, and also interviewed the external examiner. There is also evidence to show that recommendations of the external examiner are given due consideration by various committees at both the programme and college levels. The Panel is, however, of the view that one external examiner is insufficient to cover the range of courses in the MBA programme, which covers several specialisations. The Panel also found that there is a reciprocal faculty arrangement for the external moderation of programmes at the external examiner's institution. The Panel recommends that the College amend its external moderation policy to specifically exclude the possibility of making reciprocal arrangements with institutions for the moderation of its programmes, and ensure the appointment of external examiners to cover the full range of courses constituting the MBA programme.

4.7   The Assessment Manual incorporates a process for evaluating the performance of students by requiring external examiners to comment on students' performance in relation to programmes offered in Bahrain, regional and international universities. Moreover, the Panel found that the diverse background of the faculty who are teaching in the programme is making a positive contribution in ensuring that standards are comparable to Bahrain, regional and international. The Panel reviewed a sample of students' assessed work which included a wide range of assessment tools and found that the levels of the assessed work are, in general, comparable to similar programmes internationally. The Panel is satisfied that the level of achievement in the MBA courses is appropriate, and equivalent to similar programmes locally, regionally and internationally.

4.8   The Panel examined some final results and grade distributions to confirm that the grade point average in respect of the 243 students who have graduated from the MBA programme since its inception has averaged more than 3.4 with a standard deviation of less than 0.3. The staff and alumni who were interviewed cited the high GPA results achieved by graduates and the consistency of their performance, as well as students from the programme who are currently employed in management capacity to demonstrate that the level of achievement of the graduates meets the

programme aims and learning outcomes. Furthermore, on average, more than 80% of the graduates of the MBA programme improve their employment prospects. Evidence was also provided of graduates from the MBA programme perusing their further studies in appropriate postgraduate programmes. The Panel generally appreciates the consistency and level of performance of the graduates.

4.9 The data presented in the SER show that out of 880 students who have been admitted to the MBA programme since its inception, 243 (27%) have graduated and 236 (26.8%) have discontinued their studies. The Panel found evidence that the length of study has typically been less than four years. The job prospects in appropriate employment for the graduates in the last three years has ranged from 71% to 88% indicating that the majority of students who graduated from the MBA programme have progressed at a good rate and found employment in their field of study. The Panel concluded, on the basis of the evidence provided, that the ratio of successful students to admitted students and the length of study are comparable to those achieved on similar institutions internationally. The Panel, however, did not find any evidence of a systematic methodology to monitor the retention, progression, graduation and dropout rates. The Panel recommends that the College establish a methodology to regularly monitor the retention, progression, graduation and dropout rates.

4.10 The MBA curriculum includes a compulsory research component in the form of either a 12-credit dissertation or a 6-credit research project. In both cases, there is a requirement for students to complete 21 credits of study before they are allowed to register for the research course. Guidelines for supervision of research are provided in the AU Guidelines for Good Practice in the Supervision of Master's Degree Dissertation, which includes the respective roles and responsibilities of both the student and the supervisor, as well as provisions for the appointment of supervisors and examination committees. The procedure for assessing the dissertation involves assessment of a first draft by an appointed internal examiner before submission of final bound copies to be examined by an appointed external examiner, after which the student makes an oral presentation to the examination committee. The Panel learned during interviews with faculty and students that the ADREG system assists in managing the supervision process by requiring regular written reports to be submitted and sending reminders if this was not done timely. Moreover, all dissertations are submitted through a software to detect plagiarism. The students and alumni who were interviewed were very appreciative of the support they receive from their supervisors. The Panel reviewed a sample of student dissertations and found them to be of an acceptable standard. The Panel appreciates the arrangements for monitoring the supervision of dissertations.

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4.11　A College External Advisory Board (CEAB) has been constituted since 2013 and consists of a cross-section of experienced business leaders from the private and public sectors. The Panel found from the CVs of the Board members that the qualifications and experience of the members are appropriate for the MBA programme. Terms of Reference, sample of minutes of meetings and interviews with members of the Board suggest that the Board is active and that the University takes its role seriously. The Panel learned from interviews with some of the Board members, and also confirmed from minutes of meetings, that regular meetings have taken place in the last year in particular. The Panel found evidence of feedback provided by the CEAB which were acted upon. The Panel appreciates the enthusiasm and active participation of the members of the CEAB and the constructive way in which the College engages with the Board.

4.12　The Centre for Measurement and Evaluation is responsible for conducting two surveys, one for the graduates and one for the employers. The SER states that recent alumni and employer surveys have resulted in 87% of alumni who have expressed satisfaction with the contribution of the MBA programme to their personal development, and 84% of employers who have expressed satisfaction with the work performance of AU MBA graduates. In interviews, the employers reflected on the surveys and expressed satisfaction with the quality of the AU MBA graduates, and the graduates in turn were highly complementary of the standards and reputation of the AU MBA programme. The Panel appreciates the high regard that the alumni and employers have for the AU MBA programme.

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

- Graduate attributes of the MBA programme are consistent with international standards, and are appropriately matched to the programme aims and learning outcomes.
- Assessment policies and procedures relating to the MBA programme are consistently monitored and implemented, and made readily available to students.
- The level of achievement of the graduates, as demonstrated in the final results and grades, meets the programme aims and learning outcomes.
- There are satisfactory arrangements for the monitoring of dissertations and research projects.
- There is an active College External Advisory Board that provides feedback in a constructive way and the College engages with.
- The alumni and employers have high regards for the MBA programme.

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

- undertake a more formal benchmarking of the MBA programme against selected local, regional and international institutions
- institute a mechanism to ensure that all forms of assessment are clearly aligned to course learning outcomes
- establish a more robust internal moderation system to cover all forms of assessment
- amend the external moderation policy to specifically exclude the possibility of making reciprocal arrangements with other institutions and to appointment sufficient external examiners to cover the full range of courses and areas of specialisation
- establish a methodology to regularly monitor the retention, progression, graduation and dropout rates within the MBA programme.

4.15   **Judgement**

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

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5. Indicator 4: Effectiveness of Quality Management and Assurance

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

5.1 The AU Policies and Procedures Manual contains a wide array of institutional policies and procedures ranging from HR, accounting, purchasing, ICT and safety, to general administration. The Centre for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CAQA) has the overall responsibility for monitoring the implantation of policies and procedures across the University. The Faculty Handbook summarises the University policies and procedures while the 2010 University By-Laws provides more details of these policies. The Quality Assurance Manual includes policies and procedures on admissions and development, review and closure of academic programmes, as well as regulations pertaining to academic study. From submitted documents and interviews with academic, administration and QA staff members, the Panel is satisfied that the institution's policies are applied effectively with the involvement of the staff. The Panel appreciates that the quality management system and arrangements at AU ensure consistent application of the policies and procedures across the College.

5.2 From the SER and interviews with senior faculty members, the Panel learned that the MBA programme is managed by the MBA Director with the help and support of the MBA Council that comprises the Dean and the Chairperson of all the departments within the College of Business and Finance, and the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies and Research. At the university level, there are measures to manage the quality of the MBA programme by implementing and monitoring its policies through CAQA. The Panel also interviewed academic and administrative staff, including representatives from the CAQA, who provided evidence of the effective leadership of the programme. The Panel acknowledges the measures in place to achieve effective and responsible leadership of the MBA programme.

5.3 AU has developed a comprehensive Quality Assurance Manual in 2012 to provide 'a one-stop shop' for policies and procedures relating to quality assurance. As previously noted the CAQA has the overall responsibility for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the quality management system at the University to ensure consistent implementation and quality delivery of programmes and is supported by an array of university-level committees and structures that complemented the CAQA's work. The Panel found that both the College Council and the MBA Council play a significant role to complement the work of the CAQA. The Panel was provided with evidence of several meetings to show the involvement of these structures in monitoring and evaluating the quality management system in

relation to the MBA programme. The Panel appreciates that the quality management system is consistently implemented, monitored and evaluated.

5.4 The CAQA conducts regular training workshops to acquaint staff with the policies and procedures pertaining to the programmes offered by the College in particular, and best practice approaches in teaching and learning in general. The Panel established that the training workshops that were conducted between 2011 and 2014 were very well attended by staff. The Quality Assurance policies and procedures are also made available on the university intranet for easy access by staff. During interviews with the academics and support staff, the Panel noted that they have a good understanding of the implemented quality assurance arrangements in the College and their role in ensuring the effectiveness of the provision. The Panel appreciates the commitment of the AU staff in ensuring the quality of delivery of the MBA programme.

5.5 The policy and procedures for the development of new programmes are contained in the Policy on Developing, Reviewing and Closing Academic Programmes and an accompanying Process for Developing, Reviewing and Closing Academic Programmes. The process of developing new programmes is typically initiated at the department or college level, following a needs assessment and feasibility study, and recommendations thereafter go through a series of approvals which eventually culminate at the University Council for approval before submission to the Higher Education Council (HEC) for licensing. The Panel established that the College did not identify the need for new programmes since the establishment of its current programmes and rather concentrated on improving the existing programmes. The Panel acknowledges the procedures that AU has put in place for the development and approval of new programmes.

5.6 The SER states that internal programme evaluation is conducted at the beginning of each semester in collaboration with CAQA and the constituent departments in the College that contribute to the MBA programme. The process involves 'validation' of Programme Specification and course syllabi in terms of learning outcomes, teaching and assessment methods, textbooks and references, with the use of an Internal Verification of Course Syllabus/Specification template. 'The MBA Committee serves as an Internal Programme Review Committee' while the 'Dean of the College of Graduate Studies and Research holds final responsibility for the MBA programme'. From interviews, the Panel learnt that student evaluations are conducted at the end of each semester to generate feedback on teaching and learning. Evidence provided indicated that the Chairpersons of the constituent departments are involved in providing feedback towards internal moderation as well as the external assessors. Moreover, the end-of-semester student evaluations compliment the course and programme validation system to generate feedback on the quality of teaching. The

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Panel acknowledges the adequacy of the arrangements for internal evaluation of programmes.

5.7   The AU Policy for Developing, Reviewing and Closing Academic Programmes requires programmes in the College of Business and Finance to be comprehensively reviewed every three years. In terms of the policy, programme reviews are the remit of the Curriculum Review Committee with support from the TLAC and other related committees such as the MBA Committee, and are overseen by the CAQA. The process for reviewing the programme provides for the incorporation of internal and external reference points such as feedback from course tutors, alumni and employer surveys, benchmarking and market research studies, student evaluations, and input from the CEAB into consideration in programme reviews. The Panel found evidence that the programme was last reviewed in 2013-2014 following an earlier review in 2009-2010 and found instances where programme review recommendations have been implemented to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The findings of the 2013-2014 review are yet to be implemented. The Panel established from interviews with various stakeholders, and also from the wide range of supporting documents made available during the site visit, that the present curriculum was launched in the 2009-2010 academic year following a series of internal and external reviews that involved changing the contents and titles of some courses, replacing some compulsory and elective courses with new ones, and reclassifying some compulsory courses as elective courses. The Panel appreciates the frequency with which programmes within the College are periodically reviewed.

5.8   The Center for Measurement and Evaluation (CME) periodically conducts surveys of AU students and alumni, and employers of alumni. The student satisfaction surveys tackle the quality of course offering and evaluation of the instructors. Feedback collected from the students surveys flows to the University Council, College Council and Department Council meetings for discussion. The alumni surveys collect information on the quality of the MBA programme and their learning experience. The CAQA implements a Quality Periodic Programme Review and Utilization of Feedback procedure in order to ensure that feedback is utilised in improving the programme. During the site visit, the Panel was provided with some of the recently conducted surveys and follow-up meetings and action plans that have emanated from these surveys, which were highlighted previously. The Panel is pleased with the dedication and enthusiasm of the CME staff in conducting these surveys.

5.9   AU has a dedicated unit, namely the Ahlia Training and Development Center (ATDC), which is responsible for the professional development of both academic and administration staff members. The Panel confirmed that the Center has designed a formal staff development plan that seeks to identify the training and development needs of staff, and respond with the design and delivery of appropriate professional

development workshops to address any gap. The Panel noted that the training programmes are also geared towards attainment of different staff needs, and hence staff are able to attend courses in areas that are unrelated to their normal course of duty. The ATDC has furthermore developed a template for evaluating the effectiveness of the workshops that are presented. The Panel found evidence that many academic and administrative staff members of the College of Business and Finance have attended workshops on topics such as the use of 'Moodle', design and mapping of programme and course ILOs, teaching and learning and assessment methodologies, among others. Furthermore, AU has an Annual Professional Development Plan (2013-2014) which helps staff to attend external workshops and participate in conferences as mentioned earlier. Interviewed staff showed full awareness and clear understanding of these policies and procedures and indicated that they benefited from the workshops organised by the University. The Panel appreciates the arrangements in place to identify and meet the different and professional development needs of both academic and non-academic staff.

5.10   The Panel found evidence that surveys have been conducted with alumni and some employers with an aim to gather intelligence about the labour market and ensure the currency of programmes offered by the College of Business and Finance. Other sources that have been relied upon to scope the labour market include the expertise within the CEAB. The Panel, however, did not find any systematic approach that is used to target and collect data from specific segments of the labour market that are directly related to the MBA programme. For example, there has not been any attempt to gather intelligence from, say IT experts on emerging ICT skill requirements of MBA graduates. The Panel is concerned that the current methodology has the potential of overlooking relevant organisations and market segments in which no alumni are employed. The Panel recommends that the College routinely and systematically scope the labour market by targeting and collecting market intelligence from appropriate segments of the labour market.

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

- There are suitable institutional policies and procedures that are consistently applied across the University.
- The quality management system at AU is consistently implemented, monitored and evaluated.
- Both academic and non-academic staff are committed to ensuring the quality of delivery of the MBA programme.
- There is a policy for the periodical review of the programme that is implemented orderly and frequently.
- There are effective arrangements in place to identify and meet the different and professional development needs of both academic and non-academic staff.

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

- routinely and systematically scope the labour market by targeting and collecting market intelligence from appropriate segments of the labour market.

5.13   **Judgement**

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

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6.   Conclusion

Taking into account the institution's own self-evaluation report, the evidence gathered from the interviews and documentation made available during the site visit, the Panel draws the following conclusion in accordance with the DHR/QQA *Programmes-within-College Reviews Handbook, 2012*:

There is confidence in the MBA programme of the College of Business and Finance offered by Ahlia University.

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