



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

Higher Education Review Unit

Institutional Follow-Up Review Report

Ahlia University
Kingdom of Bahrain

Date Reviewed: 26 March 2012

Table of Contents

1. Overview of the Institutional Follow-up Process.....	2
2. Brief Overview of Ahlia University.....	3
3. Findings of the Follow-up Review by Theme	3

1. Overview of the Institutional Follow-up Process

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

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

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

Ahlia University (AU) submitted an Improvement Plan to HERU in the required time set out in the Handbook for Institutional Reviews. In this Plan, actions were identified to tackle the 24 Recommendations contained in the Institutional Review Report. In March 2012 AU submitted its One Year Progress Report, which contained a narrative and documentary evidence about the progress the institution has made thus far in implementing quality improvements.

The Panel responsible for the Follow-up comprised the Executive Director of HERU and four Senior Directors, one of whom was the Director responsible for co-ordinating this site visit. The evidence base included: the Institutional Improvement Plan submitted in June 2011 and the appendices and the Institutional Review Report. The institution also submitted supporting evidences on 21 March 2012 and during site visit. Interviews were also held during the site visit with a range of senior managers, academics, administrative staff, students, employers and alumni. These interviews allow the Panel to triangulate the evidence.

The Follow-up visit took place on 26 March 2012, the purpose of which is (i) to assess the progress made in quality enhancement and improvement of AU since the institutional review in May 2010, for which the review report was published in February 2011; and (ii) develop a report which outlines the progress made about the extent to which the Recommendations have been addressed.

This Institutional Follow-up Review Report sets out the findings with regard to the Recommendations contained in the published Review Report. For ease of reading the Recommendations made in the 2011 published Review Report are clustered together (in italics) at the beginning of each sub-section where a different theme is considered. The text that follows reflects the findings of the Panel during its visit in March 2012.

2. Brief Overview of Ahlia University

Ahlia University (hereinafter referred to as 'AU' or 'the University') is licensed by the government of the Kingdom of Bahrain under the Cabinet Decision No. 03-1626 dated 25 March 2001. The University is owned by a private holding company 'the Arab Academy for Research and Studies' which is registered as a for-profit institution. However, AU operates on a not for-profit basis within that organisation.

AU accepted its first cohort of 50 students to its programmes in February 2003 and has increased its capacity to accommodate over 2000 students studying in 18 programmes at the time of the site visit, with the first batch of students graduating in 2006. At the time of the site visit, Ahlia University had 101 academic staff and 1763 students.

3. Findings of the Follow-up Review by Theme

The Review Report of AU was published in February 2011. AU submitted a comprehensive improvement plan that included activities and other actions including timelines to be undertaken to address all the Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations contained in the original Review Report. The one-year progress report submitted along with supporting evidence clearly shows the progress that has been made in implementing the improvement plan.

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

3.1 Mission, Planning and Governance

3.1.1 HERU recommends that Ahlia University develop and implement a formal process to review periodically its Vision and Mission statements that includes inputs from internal and external stakeholders.

3.1.2 HERU recommends that Ahlia University develop and implement a mechanism to disseminate and institutionalize its Strategic Plan across the University.

3.1.3 HERU recommends that Ahlia University develop and implement a formal policy development and review process that would include a periodical, scheduled review of its existing policies.

3.1.4 HERU recommends that Ahlia University develop and implement a risk management policy that includes risk assessment and mitigation.

3.1.5 *HERU recommends that Ahlia University separate its financial arrangements from its holding company to ensure the University's autonomy and independence.*

3.1.6 *HERU recommends that Ahlia University develop and implement a formal process for the monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of its Board of Trustees and Board of Directors.*

A formal process has been developed by the Strategic Planning Committee for the periodic review of the university's vision and mission statements. This entails the inclusion of a broad range of internal and external stakeholders in the reviews. The process will include a survey and to this end a questionnaire has been developed by the Centre for Measurement and Evaluation.

A mechanism was developed and is being implemented in accordance with AU's improvement plan to disseminate the strategic plan and to consider progress in achieving objectives. Academic and administrative staff have been involved. To ensure that the strategic plan remains a 'lived document', annual consultation meetings are held at all levels within the institution; all of which contributes to institutionalising the plan.

The Policy and Procedure Committee has drafted a policy for policy development and review. This will serve at the next meeting of the Board of Trustees. The policy includes a periodical scheduled review of all policies and procedures.

There is now a risk management register which not only identifies risks but also indicates the steps to be undertaken to mitigate against the risks. A decision was made by the University Council to establish a Centre for Risk Management, which will be led by a Director who will Chair the Risk Management Committee and take responsibility for developing the risk management policy. AU is now in the process of recruiting a Director.

The financial arrangements of Ahlia University have been separated from that of its holdings company, thus ensuring autonomy and accountability. In line with the timelines specified in its improvement plan a formal process is being developed for the monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of the Board of Trustees and Board of Directors. This includes a process for surveying shareholders and the development of a self-evaluation questionnaire for the members of the two Boards. At the time of the site visit a pilot of the questionnaire had been carried out and the responses are being analysed.

In its improvement plan, AU developed a nuanced approach in addressing the Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations contained within the original review report. This is reflected in the activities that have been completed thus far and the progress that has been achieved which is generally in line with the plan.

3.2 Academic Standards

- 3.2.1 *HERU recommends that Ahlia University develop and implement formal criteria for the assigning of additional courses to students entering the MBA programme and monitor their performance.*
- 3.2.2 *HERU recommends that Ahlia University benchmark its assessment policies and practices with other regional and international institutions to ensure consistency and enable it to monitor the standards of its marking levels.*
- 3.2.3 *HERU recommends that Ahlia University provide explicit guidelines and moderate the comments from external examiners given on the prescribed feedback forms in order to ensure consistency across the criteria used by external examiners of Masters Degree Project Dissertations.*

A guiding template, which will be used for assigning the pre-MBA courses for students entering the MBA programme whose first degree is not in Business, has been developed and approved by the MBA committee. The template also takes into consideration any professional certificates that an applicant may have. The MBA coordinator together with the MBA committee are responsible for the review of all new applications and the decisions on pre-MBA courses are communicated to the registration department. During interview sessions, MBA students informed the Panel that depending on their background, some of them have been required to attend pre-MBA courses which has assisted them in pursuing their studies.

The University has evaluated the progress and achievements of the MBA students who attended pre-MBA courses against their peers who were admitted directly to the programme for three consecutive semesters and have concluded that there is evidence to support the effectiveness of these pre-MBA courses. However, to have a sound statistical analysis, the University is in the process of continuous collection of data. The Panel encourages AU to expand these studies to look at the effectiveness of each individual pre-MBA course.

A formal benchmarking process has been developed which was approved by the University Council on 12 January 2011. The different aspects of all AU programmes, including assessment, will be benchmarked against pre-identified institutions. There is also now a university-level assessment committee, which had its first meeting on 13 October 2011. The committee's scope is to evaluate, benchmark, revise, and monitor the 'assessment system of students' performance of all the colleges of Ahlia University'. During the site visit, the Panel was informed that assessment procedures have been compiled and that the assessment committee has identified four regional and international institutions with which to benchmark AU's assessment policies and practices. The one-year progress report submitted

to HERU indicates, with clear timelines, the steps needed to be undertaken in order to benchmark AU's assessment policies and practices and use the output of the benchmark exercise to improve assessments in all courses delivered by the University.

External examiners assigned for the assessment and evaluation of Master's dissertations are provided with a document titled: 'Master's Dissertation: External Examiners Guidelines' that clearly states the master's examination process and the roles and responsibilities of each participant, including the external examiner, the internal examiner and the supervisor in the examination process. This information is extracted from AU's Guidelines for Good Practice in Supervision of the Master's Degree Dissertation, which has been revised twice in the last two academic years. During different interview sessions with faculty members and external examiners, the Panel was informed that these changes have occurred as a result of discussions and informal feedback received from external examiners. The recent version (v.2.4) includes a new moderation process that is to be used in the event that there is more than a 20% difference in marks awarded by the different examiners. Moreover, the guidelines provide templates for examiners' reporting that includes justifications for the awarded mark, which on completion are forwarded to the respective programme director/chairperson and reviewed periodically by the Centre for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CAQA). The University has developed also a questionnaire to seek external examiner's feedback. The Panel encourages AU to continue with the monitoring of the implementation and the effectiveness of the guidelines it provides to the external examiners.

3.3 Quality Assurance and Enhancement

3.3.1 *HERU recommends that Ahlia University develop and implement a monitoring system that systematically evaluates and reviews the effectiveness of its Quality Assurance system.*

3.3.2 *HERU recommends that Ahlia University, through a university-wide debate, develop a shared understanding about the role of the administration units in managing quality within the institution as a whole and within their own units in particular.*

Various quality assurance methods have been implemented to evaluate and review the effectiveness of its quality assurance system; such as internal quality reviews, external quality review, standardisation of documentation, and benchmarking of quality assurance performance at AU against other institutions based on the evaluation process and published reports. The University has also conducted a number of quality assurance workshops, presentations and follow-up meetings with various administrative units to broaden their understanding of their role and responsibilities to carry out the quality assurance process of Ahlia University Quality Management System (AUQMS).

The Centre for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CAQA) has started to distribute forms to identify the role and involvement of all administrative staff in the QA process. Each form will be filled by the Director and the concerned staff member, and will then be forwarded to the University Quality Assurance Committee. These forms will collect information and data to enable the Directorates, CAQA, as well as senior management to measure the quality of the performance of the staff according to a pre-determined schedule and performance indicators, which are linked to the University Strategic Plan. The Panel acknowledges the development of this initiative and suggests that a mechanism be developed and implemented to monitor its effectiveness.

In January 2012, the University began developing a performance management system (PMS) to monitor the effectiveness of AUQMS by the CAQA in coordination with an external consultant to ensure that the academic, administration staff, and programme review coordinators are adopting the quality assurance process within their Colleges and departments.

During the site visit, the Panel heard of plans to develop a questionnaire in coordination with the Centre for Measurement and Evaluation (CME) to evaluate the effectiveness of the AUQMS. It also saw the many surveys distributed and analysed to identify the needs and assess the understanding of the academic and administrative staff regarding the extent to which AU staff members are aware and involved in the quality assurance process. The Panel found in the minutes of meetings that some issues have been addressed and actions have been taken. It is too early to measure the effectiveness of the monitoring system.

3.4 Quality of Teaching and Learning

- 3.4.1** *HERU recommends that Ahlia University put in place a long-term review schedule to ensure that all programmes have regular and consistent cycles of review that leads to continuous improvements.*
- 3.4.2** *HERU recommends that Ahlia University develop and implement a strategy to operationalize its Teaching and Learning Plan and develop and implement a mechanism to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Plan.*
- 3.4.3** *HERU recommends that Ahlia University strengthen the mechanisms to maintain a coordinated overview of the Teaching, Learning and Research Committee, the Curriculum Committee and the E-Learning Committee.*
- 3.4.4** *HERU recommends that Ahlia University provide faculty members with development opportunities and appropriate levels of support to ensure that full advantage is taken of its e-learning facilities in enhancing teaching and learning.*

3.4.5 *HERU recommends that Ahlia University clearly develop and implement a process through which students on internship and practical placements are evaluated by well-defined assessment criteria.*

3.4.6 *HERU recommends that Ahlia University develop a mechanism to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of its academic advising mechanism and to ensure that faculty members are well informed about the scope of their role as academic advisors.*

A policy on the Long-term Program Review Schedule (LPRS) was approved by the University Council on 5 March 2012. This policy, developed by the Teaching and Learning Committee (TLC), aims at ensuring that all programmes are subject to regular cycles of review leading to continuous quality improvements. The Panel was provided with a copy of the LPRS policy detailing the required review procedures and guidelines as well as the review schedules for all colleges in the first review cycle for the period 2012-2014. A University Programme Review Committee (UPRC) has been established in order to implement the LPRS and evaluate its effectiveness on a regular basis. Moreover, a sub-committee comprising members of the TLC was formed to develop detailed procedures and templates for the programme review process. During interviews the Panel was informed that, as per the LPRS, the College of Medical and Health Sciences is the first to undergo programme review commencing in February 2012. The Panel also learned that a College Review Committee (CRC) was formed to oversee the review of all programmes within the college and to provide the UPRC with a comprehensive report of review findings by October 2012. The Panel applauds AU on its implementation of the LPRS policy and encourages the University to utilise the findings and recommendations of the first college reviews in improving the next reviews of the first cycle.

In November 2011, the Teaching and Learning Committee (TLC) constituted a sub-committee with a mandate to revise the current Teaching and Learning Plan (TLP) and develop an operational plan for the revised TLP as well as procedures for its monitoring and evaluation. The sub-committee has since met and commenced the process of gathering evidence for the review of the goals and objectives of the current TLP. During interviews with members of the TLC, the Panel was informed that the revised TLP will be completely developed and ready for implementation by December 2012. At the site visit, the Panel learned of various initiatives that AU has undertaken to operationalise the current TLP. These include: the institution of professional development of faculty in pedagogy; the updating of courses syllabi to integrate research and case studies; and the survey of assessment methods across colleges. The Panel encourages the University to build on these initiatives and to incorporate them within the revised TLP.

The Academic Coordination Committee (ACC) was established recently to act as an oversight authority coordinating among the various academic committees including the Curriculum Committee, Teaching and Learning Committee, e-learning Committee,

Assessment Committee, Internship Committee and the Academic Advising Committee. The ACC is chaired by the VP for Academic Affairs and comprises a representative from each academic committee, as well as the Dean of the Postgraduate Studies and Research Council to advise on research issues. The Panel was provided with a copy of the proposal for the establishment of the ACC outlining its membership, organisation and hierarchy in addition to its roles and responsibilities. The Panel heard in different interviews that the establishment of the ACC enhanced the communication among the committees as well as among the Academic Forum. Upon examining the minutes of the ACC's first meeting, it was evident to the Panel that the extensive discussions have enhanced the effectiveness of addressing common academic issues. To enhance further the coordination among the academic committees, they have been restructured so that there is common membership among them. Evidence of the reconstitution of these committees was provided to the Panel. The Panel was pleased to learn that communication among the committees was strengthened by circulating the meeting minutes and related information among them.

The University has commenced the development of an e-learning action plan aimed at enhancing the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) facilities and supporting the AU staff and students in using these facilities. A copy of the proposed action plan, detailing the main goals and various strategies employed to achieve these goals, was provided to the Panel. During interviews with members of the e-learning committee and Information and Communication Technology Centre (ICTC), the Panel learned that some of the proposed activities have been completed; these include the upgrading of Moodle into a higher version, and the integration of ADREG and Moodle systems to enhance students' use of the VLE. Moreover, several Moodle training sessions have been conducted by the ICTC to support all faculty utilisation of the VLE. The Panel was informed during a range of interviews with staff that Moodle training sessions are compulsory and conducted on a regular basis. Based on the provided evidence, the Panel noted that two and six Moodle workshops were scheduled in 2011 and 2012, respectively; however, only five of these workshops were conducted. Furthermore, only 32 (out of 98 AU faculty members) have attended these workshops. Nevertheless, the University provided evidence of the integration of Moodle as a pedagogical tool in one of the academic programmes. Academic faculty interviewed by the Panel indicated that while they have attended the Moodle training, they are at different stages of integrating e-learning as part of their teaching. The Panel encourages the University to complete the development of its e-learning action plan and implement the proposed strategies in order to continue enhancing the quality of teaching and learning at AU.

An Internship Committee was established in September 2011 to improve the AU internship programme and evaluate its effectiveness. The Committee has since reviewed the current status of the internship programme (INTR 400) and identified six main areas for its improvement. Among these goals is the development of an enhanced assessment template, containing defined criteria, for the AU supervisor and site supervisor; a copy of this

template was provided to the Panel. However, the Panel noted that most of the faculty members and students are not aware of the enhanced assessment template. The Panel encourages the University to implement the actions stated in its IQIP with regard to the enhancement of its internship programme and to disseminate all the relevant information among all its staff and students.

An Academic Advising Committee (AAC) was established in September 2011 with a mandate to review its student advisory mechanism and develop detailed advising policies and procedures. At the site visit, the Panel was informed that a number of functionalities have been added to the ADREG to enable advisors to carry out their advising responsibilities more effectively; these include the absence reminder reports and 'students-at-risk' alerts. The Panel also learned that two workshops on 'Advisor and Counsellor Roles at Ahlia University' were conducted in March 2012 and were attended by 48 faculty members. A student counsellor was also recently hired to act as a link between the students and academic faculty and to help students overcome personal difficulties that can negatively impact on their academic achievement. Most students interviewed by the Panel expressed their satisfaction with the improved advisory system, indicating that the advisors are now more approachable and are keeping track of their advisees' progress. Although a survey was developed to evaluate the advisees and advisors' satisfaction with the AU advisory procedures, it has still to be implemented. The Panel encourages the University to prepare an Academic Advising Handbook containing all the updated policies and procedures and to ensure its proper dissemination among staff and students.

3.5 Student Support

No recommendation was given under this theme

3.6 Human Resources

3.6.1 *HERU recommends that Ahlia University develop and implement a systematic and coordinated approach for the development of faculty members, in order for them to remain up-to-date in teaching, and learning and research.*

3.6.2 *HERU recommends that Ahlia University further develop and implement a mechanism to connect its faculty professional development process to the staff performance assessment.*

A Faculty Development Committee was established in August 2011 with a mandate to ensure that there is a systematic approach to the academic and professional development of faculty. However, the responsibilities as shown in the Institutional Quality Improvement Plan, are spread over seven different entities with no clear lines of reporting between them, for example, the task to monitor and evaluate the implementation of faculty development is

shared by four entities with no clear specification of the role of each entity. This matter needs to be addressed. An Advisor to the President in the area of Academic Staff Development was appointed in January 2012. This role has yet to be approved by the University Council. The Panel encourages AU to continue with developing a coordinated approach to staff development.

Since February 2012, the institution has included faculty's professional development needs in its staff performance appraisals. This has not yet been implemented. Other perspectives, such as the results of student surveys could also be considered to gauge professional development needs for faculty members. While this initiative has not yet been implemented it is expected that a successful implementation will ensure the link between staff performance and staff development.

3.7 Infrastructure, Physical and Other Resources

3.7.1 HERU recommends that Ahlia University expand its learning resource area and its library facilities.

3.7.2 HERU recommends that Ahlia University further develop its physiotherapy laboratories to provide students with an appropriate teaching and learning experience.

The University signed an agreement to lease an area of 200sqm to expand its library, physiotherapy and interior design laboratories and provide more space for study rooms and laboratories in order to accommodate the needs of the students. During the site visit the Panel toured the physiotherapy laboratories and saw the new physiotherapy equipment which will enhance the student teaching and learning experience.

Recently the University increased the number of text books from 4754 to 6304 and subscribed to new online databases to increase the number of electronic databases. During interviews with students, the Panel heard that they are able to access the digital library both *via* Wi-Fi within and outside the institution. The interviewed students expressed their satisfaction with the available on-line learning resources.

3.8 Research

3.8.1 HERU recommends that Ahlia University (i) develop and implement, through a University wide-debate, a comprehensive research plan that identifies the University's niche research areas and which includes a conceptual framework and an implementation plan that is aligned with the institution's Mission and its Strategic Plan, and (ii) identify the appropriate governance and management structure responsible for the implementation, monitoring and reviewing of the Plan.

3.8.2 *HERU recommends that Ahlia University develop and implement clear policies and procedures for research proposals and implementation and that includes a research code of ethics, an ethics committee, and intellectual property rights.*

In its Improvement Plan, AU anticipated organising a university-wide debate that would assist it in developing a conceptual framework and expanding the current research management plan, which was approved by the University Council in February 2010. Deans recently began the debate regarding niche research areas within their colleges. Meanwhile, the College of Graduate Studies and Research developed a Research Road Map, which was approved by the College Council on 1 March 2012. It requested the establishment of an independent research committee for each college, which will have a number of responsibilities, amongst which is organising research within each colleges and annually reporting on all their research activities. The Panel encourages the University to expedite its activities in this regard so that it can expand its existing research plan to include ‘university niche areas, conceptual framework and management plan’ as stated in its Improvement Plan.

In AU’s effort to review its existing policies and procedures governing research activities, all policies and procedures included in the Rule and Regulations of Research document were submitted in February 2012 to the Centre for Accreditation and Quality Assurance. The Centre is expected to review and finalise these policies by June 2012. In its progress report the University stated that it has developed a document entitled ‘Code of Ethics at AU’, which was approved initially by the University Council on 5 March 2012. A committee has been established to finalise the document.

A new standing committee named ‘Ethics Committee’ was established by the University Council on 5 March 2012. The Panel was informed during the site visit that the Committee is meeting to develop clearly its remits and objectives. Hence, the operation and effectiveness of this committee cannot be assessed.

3.9 Community Engagement

3.9.1 *HERU recommends that Ahlia University develop and implement a community engagement plan to operationalize its policy, and to develop clear lines of reporting, budgeting, and a monitoring system.*

A university Community Engagement Committee was established in March 2012, which is responsible for the development, implementation, and monitoring of the institution’s community engagement plan. This committee reports to the University Council. The committee is headed by the deanship of student affairs and is represented by a number of deanships, directorates, and centres. A draft plan has recently been developed, approved by

the committee, and submitted to the University Council for approval. The plan identifies four main themes for community engagement, and sets the key performance indicators for each. There is also a draft budget, however there is allocation for only some of the theme items. In interviews with faculty members and students the Panel heard of their satisfaction with the financial support they receive to carry out approved community engagement activities.