



Quality Assurance of the Arab Open University in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT :

Over the past two decades the Arab region has witnessed a remarkable development in the area of distance higher education. Arab Open University (AOU), with the main campus in Kuwait and branch campuses in Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, is distinct from other single mode universities in the Arab region, in terms of adopting broad regional educational goals. AOU has concluded agreements of cooperation and affiliation with the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU).

In the context of growing importance of ODL in the Arab region, Quality Assurance (QA) is fundamental to reinforcing the credibility, attractiveness and competitiveness of the distance higher education system in the Arab region. Each Arab State should establish a mechanism for evaluating the quality of its distance higher education at the systemic, institutional, programme, personnel and outcomes levels. However the research reveals that most of the distance education institutions in Arab region have not developed any scientific and systematic procedures for QA of their academic activities and processes. Having closer ties with distance and open universities worldwide, Arab Open University (AOU) has developed its own quality assurance mechanism with QA units set up at all the branches of the University. AOU quality assessment is conducted by academic assessment and accreditation commissions of the concerned Arab countries and OU Validation Service of UKOU that enjoys complete parity with all the universities in UK and other parts of the world. A considerable progress has been made in embedding a comprehensive quality culture across the University and all the stakeholders are clear as to the importance 'quality' has both for the AOU and the future of open or blended learning across the Arab world. AOU is therefore in a good position to offer guidance to other distance education institutions in the Arab Region, endeavoring to establish their own quality assurance frameworks.

After briefly highlighting the present scenario of ODL in the Arab region and the QA mechanisms followed by the ODL institutions in the region, this paper examines in detail the QA policies, procedures and accreditation system at AOU. A number of general lessons have been drawn out for the effective functioning of QA policies and procedures and creation of an effective culture of quality in ODL operations in the Arab world. The study is based on the information collected on main quality assurance parameters of AOU and other ODL institutions in the Arab world.

Keywords: Quality, Arab World, AOU, ODL

INTRODUCTION

The Arab world, which entered the twenty-first century burdened with over 70

million illiterates out of a population of 280 million and approximately 10 million out-of-school children, has witnessed a remarkable increase in higher education

enrollment over the past two decades, as a result of a constant increase in public demand for education, an enlarged population and the governments' commitments to make higher education as accessible as possible. As per the UNESCO Report 2006, 70% adults (aged 15 and above) and 85% youth (aged 15 to 24) are literate in the Arab World. The absolute number of tertiary students in Arab region more than doubled from 6 million in 1991 to 15 million in 2004 (UNESCO, 2006). The latest edition of the Guide of Arab Universities' Association (2003), lists a total of 233 universities in 21 Arab States, enrolling about 6 million students; 156 of these universities are state institutions and the remaining 77 private. Higher education in the Arab world has witnessed an accelerating proliferation of foreign universities, though some segments of Arab society see them as agents of 'cultural invasion'. Important also is the emergence of offshore campuses and virtual higher education institutions in the region.

In spite of the tremendous expansion recorded in its higher education system, the demand for higher education in the Arab world far exceeds the supply. Even now one-third of its adult population is illiterate and only about 25% of the eligible age group get enrolled in higher education. Confirming this UNESCO (1998) stated "higher education in the Arab States is under considerable strain, due to high rates of population growth and increasing social demand for higher education, which lead states and institutions to increase student enrollment, often without adequate allocated financial resources". Moreover, faced with the challenges of providing flexible enrollment and lifelong learning availability, Arab higher education institutions have not been able to meet the new demands and needs of their societies. In view of this, the Beirut Declaration of UNESCO called for harnessing modern information and communication technologies (ICT) to "contribute in the provision of courses and degree-awarding

programs through multiple and advanced means, thus breaking through the traditional barriers of space and time" (UNESCO, 1998). Having succeeded in providing accessible and diversified educational opportunities at an affordable cost worldwide, open and distance learning (ODL) system has the potential to alleviate the pressures on higher education institutions in the Arab region.

Responding to above challenges, most of the Arab countries have of late adopted radically new measures for preventing Arab societies from lagging behind other advanced nations in the field of education. Prominent among them is the modern ICT enabled open and distance education system. The first traces of formal distance education in the region date back to the early 1960s when a distance education center was established at the Arab University of Beirut (Al-Harhi, 2005). Since then a substantial progress has been reported in the field of ODL in the Arab region during the last two decades. The region has witnessed the development of three modes of ODL institutions: traditional higher education institutions (dual mode) offering distance or open education programmes, open education institutions (single mode), and virtual universities (virtual mode).

The Open Learning Center in Egypt established in 1989 is one of the first and prominent dual mode institutions in the region. Second generation distance education, using a total system approach by establishing open universities, began in Arab world during the 1980s. The traditional and open universities are slowly adopting the third generation distance education, using electronic media. In addition, some Arab countries such as Sudan, Syria, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia use radio and television broadcasting for teaching and learning. The Arab Network for Open and Distance Education (ANODED), established in Cairo in 1996, aims to make a major contribution to the development of open and distance education in the Arab World. In many countries governments actively promote and financially support distance

learning initiatives as a means of widening access to higher education and help produce the resources for human resource development. Some ODL institutions in some Arab countries have developed links with overseas universities to deliver and assess courses initially and help to build local expertise in course design and assessment.

A perusal of ODL experiences of various Arab countries reveals many obstacles hindering the development of open and distance education in the Arab region. In most of the Arab states the policy towards distance education is vague. Majority of these countries are skeptical of the practice of distance education programmes taking it as a process of teaching and learning by correspondence and not an innovative approach to instruction. This belief has serious implications for the development of ODL mode in the region as most of the ODL programmes in the region rely heavily on print media to disseminate information to learners. Many programmes still rely on outdated delivery methods of linking students and tutors. The openness of most of the ODL institutions in terms of access and equity has been somewhat limited. Educational experts have criticized the planning and administration of ODL in Arab countries with respect to their objectives, policies, delivery systems, self-study materials, and student support services (Alsunbul, 2002; Mohamed, 2005). If Arab States were to benefit from distance education, these issues need to be handled both at the individual and governmental levels. To overcome most of these problems, it is vital to assure high quality of ODL programmes and to ensure their suitability to Arab students. ODL system of education can play a vital role in widening access and contribute to higher cultural achievements of Arab citizens, if they are provided with the means to ensure quality

What follows is an account of the quality assurance framework of distance higher education in the Arab region and a detailed examination of the quality assurance mechanism followed at the

Arab Open University (AOU).

QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK IN ODL IN THE ARAB WORLD

In response to the diverse and ever-growing systems of higher education, the issues of quality, quality assessment, quality assurance (QA) and accreditation and recognition of qualifications have become the key themes for higher education in the Arab Region since the 1990s. A number of experts meetings, conferences and workshops on the issues concerning quality and QA, mostly initiated and funded by UNESCO and the Association of Arab Universities (AAU), have been held. The Ministers responsible for Higher Education in the Arab States, adopted in their regional conferences held between 2000 and 2003, a series of resolutions calling all Arab States to establish national agencies for QA and all higher education institutions to establish institutional frameworks for QA. An expert committee set up by the Association of Arab universities has developed guidelines for self-assessment and accreditation of higher education institutions in the region.

Several broad trends have contributed to the growing interest in establishing policy mechanisms to ensure quality and accountability in higher education among Arab Countries. Recent policies have sought to strengthen QA arrangements including: creating a new independent Arab Higher Education QA, restructuring the existing Accreditation Councils to incorporate all stakeholders, specifying that programmes must be evaluated in-house and externally, tying financial aid to public universities to comply with accreditation standards, amending the accreditation process so that new programmes are reevaluated according to need, feasibility and job opportunities for graduates, relating accreditation directly to a new national electronic test (NET) of student achievement, ranking all programs and universities and making these rankings public. Other capacity-building

exercises have been implemented in various institutions as preparation for the implementation of QA mechanism or as part of self-assessment for international accreditation exercises.

With the growing acceptance of Open and Distance Learning system as a means of providing equity and access to higher education in Arab world, the development and maintenance of QA process has become increasingly important. However in spite of a growing interest in the potential of ODL, Arab states are falling short of ensuring quality distance higher education programmes. Mohamed (2005) argues that there is no evidence that either dual mode universities or single mode universities have any procedures for ensuring the quality of distance higher education programs. More worrisome is the persistence of this state of affairs, the inevitable consequences of which include poor programs and unrecognized credentials. A comprehensive mechanism of quality review of distance learning does not exist in most of the Arab countries, either because of a traditional lack of distance learning or because of the development stage of quality review arrangements. The universities, which adopt distance education mode, have undertaken no efforts to establish national standards to assure the academic quality of all processes conducted by the university, particularly with regard to the course materials and their relevance to the Arab world context (Alsunbul, 2002). Instead, individual institutions of distance education often achieve quality standards for their academic activities such as course production, evaluation and delivery by a trial and error procedure. A study conducted by UNESCO in this regard also argues that higher education authorities seem to be absent from regulating providers of higher learning that are outside the mainstream of the education system, such as corporate institutions and providers of education opportunities through non traditional delivery means, i.e. open learning, e-learning, virtual universities etc.

(UNESCO, 2002). In the last decade, QA movements have begun to take some shape, with efforts being exerted at the state and universities level. Moreover, recent efforts have been witnessed at the regional level, whereby Arab institutions of higher education are attempting to develop a certain form of regional agency for accreditation and QA.

QA of distance higher education in the Arab region is to be taken seriously if Arab countries want this mode of education to thrive. Developing a QA framework for distance higher education would be helpful in guiding those responsible for implementing such models in the region, and it would be a major step towards attaining accreditation of such institutions and their programmes by internationally recognized bodies (Mohamed, 2005). The Arab region encompasses a reasonable number of regional and sub-regional organizations, such as the Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND), the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD), the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS), and the Association of Arab Universities, which can take meaningful steps to ensure the quality of distance higher education. These organizations can strengthen Arab cooperation by establishing a pan-Arab accreditation agency that would have the responsibility of securing the quality of distance education region wide. They should be actively involved in sustaining the Arab Network for Open and Distance Education (ANODED).

Having closer ties with distance and open universities worldwide via UK Open University and being provided consultation by the, AOU is in a good position to develop its own QA policies and frameworks. It could also develop into a leading center of excellence in ODL in Arab world that can provide

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consultation to other open and distance education institutions in the region endeavoring to establish their own QA frameworks and can thus help in creation of a culture of quality in ODL institutions in the region.

ARAB OPEN UNIVERSITY: AN INSTITUTIONAL PROFILE

The first steps towards establishing the Arab Open University (AOU) were taken in 1980 by H.R.H. Prince Talal bin Abdel-Aziz Al-Saud, the chairman of the Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND). The concept was presented to a UNESCO regional conference in Beirut in March 1998 and at a UNESCO international conference in Paris in October 1998. The AOU was formally established under the umbrella of AGFUND in September 2002 at Kuwait with branches in Kuwait, Jordan and Lebanon. Three more branches were opened in Bahrain, Egypt and Saudi Arabia in February 2003. The seventh branch commenced operations in Oman in September 2007.

Adopting broad regional educational goals, the AOU's mission is to establish itself as one of the leading institutions of open learning in the Arab world, offering opportunities for independent study and creating a forum for lifelong learning. Making use of modern information and communication technologies, AOU aims to make higher education and continuing education accessible to every willing and capable Arab citizen with the aim of contributing to the training of highly qualified Arab human power in fields which are essential for national and regional development, conducting research studies, and consultations in these fields. The Arab Open University (AOU) is a pan-Arab non-profit institution established as an open access university providing higher education to the underprivileged irrespective of gender, ethnicity, disability, and socio-economic status particularly those who didn't have the chance to continue their higher studies

for economic, social or geographic reasons. It focuses on widening access, especially for women (Awadat, 2002) and uses a mix of textbooks, videos, audiocassettes and educational CD-ROMs (Khader, 2002). The University is being connected through a VSAT on-line connection. The AOU employs 214 full time and 579 part time academic staff. In addition 326 management and administrative staff and 72 support staff are on its rolls.

To achieve its objectives, the AOU has concluded agreements of cooperation and affiliation with the United Kingdom Open University (OU) that cover licensing of materials, consultancies, and accreditation and validation. AOU offers three OU-based honours degree programmes in Business Studies, English Language and Literature and IT and Computing. All OUVS validated course are taught and assessed in English. Currently 19,124 students are enrolled in the three programmes. The AOU projects a total student body of 70,000 within 10 years and 200,000 at maximum capacity. In March 2007 the AOU held a graduation ceremony for its first cohort of 526 graduates from the three programmes on offer.

QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM AT AOU

The following case study addresses and comments on the mechanism of quality assurance followed at AOU from various interrelated perspectives

Quality Assurance Structure

AOU follows a dispersed QA system where its HQR at Kuwait is responsible for designing, monitoring and improving the overall internal process of QA; specific QA activities are assigned to all its Branches. A Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) is entrusted with the responsibility of creating a QA system within the university. The main tasks entrusted to the QAC are to establish and administer a coordinated university-wide

programme for quality improvement in support of tutoring, research, and student services. QAC is a university level committee reporting directly and exclusively to the University Council (UC) to ensure that all issues concerning QA are handled at the highest level in the university. While the UC has the authority to act, the QAC does the detailed work that leads to the assurance of quality. Each branch has a QA Committee headed by a QA Coordinator. Its main function is to supervise the extensive surveying of student and tutor opinion on a wide range of matters relating to the student learning experience, consider the results with a report subsequently forwarded to the central committee and monitor the effectiveness of action taken in response to the results of the survey e.g. supporting the work of Staff Tutors in monitoring the work of tutors, identifying the under-performing tutors and taking appropriate remedial action.

Quality Assurance Policy

At the institution level QA policies and regulations have been well set but their degree of elaboration and integration with the general university policy framework and the national QA framework vary across the branches. These branches have developed their QA policies and regulations in compliance with the national guidelines. The QAC delegates institutional quality policy to the faculties and branches and receives reports, regular reviews and audits carried out in these functions, which are then assessed at the institutional level. The overall policy of the QAC is to assist members of the AOU's management in the effective conduct of their responsibilities by providing them with objective analyses, appraisals, recommendations and pertinent comments concerning activities reviewed. Ownership of the AOU QA Policy by individual employees has been achieved through the extensive consultation and participation processes. This has also led to employees' understanding their roles clearly.

Quality Assurance Process

Since its inception the Arab Open University (AOU) has launched a comprehensive programme of QA, which manifests its commitment to quality education. The assessment programme is an ongoing process of reviewing performance and achieving goals across the range of all AOU's functions. The common QA procedures used in combination at AOU include :(1) self evaluation, (2) peer review by an external expert panel, (3) use of relevant statistical information and performance indicators such as student completion rates, overall grades etc, (4) survey of key stake holders such as students, tutors and the employers, and (5) external assessment and review by UK OUVS.

The procedural steps of the QA process at AOU include: setting of quality objectives, planning activities to meet these objectives, laying out the standards, collection of data on the quality of performance, reviewing assessment of how effectively the activities were performed, documentation of the quality plans, and identification and correction of any deficiencies.

Quality Assurance Measures

Providing quality work, especially in the academic components of the University's operation, is of paramount significance at the AOU. This is manifested in the following ways:

- Appointment of faculty is made with a conscious awareness for well-qualified and experienced individuals. The quality of the academic staff is a primary factor in providing a high quality education for the students.
- In collaboration with the UKOU, programmes of training on methodologies of open learning and other aspects of faculty development are organised.
- Faculty members are encouraged to engage in serious scholarly activities of interest to the University's educational and developmental plans.

- On-going monitoring of the performance of the learning and assessment processes, during course delivery, is a major feature of QA at AOU
- End of session evaluation of courses and tutors by students is an integral part of the AOU quality control schemes.
- The employment of external examiners adds another measure of quality assurance at the AOU.
- The performance of the AOU is assessed and monitored using a number of measurable indicators of quality, which are reliable, meaningful, and deliver consistent information.
- *Academic Programmes:* objectives, management, and outcome, course contents, delivery and learning support
- *Staff:* staff recruitment, tutor responsibility, review and development, research
- *Learning Centers Resources*
- *Academic Governance*
- *External Examiners:* principles of appointment and performance , responsibilities of the external examiner at the AOU, criteria for the appointment of external examiners

Setting the Quality Standards

Academic standards describe the level of achievement a student has to reach to achieve an academic award. The Academic Standards Committee (ASC) has been formed to improve and monitor academic standards and to propose appropriate actions and recommendations regarding examinations and assessment and the enhancement of the student learning. Taken together, these changes to University statutes and practices have resulted in very significant improvements to uniformity of grading and greater comparability across Branches (AOU, 2007).

AOU maintains that the concept of consistency and fairness is central to the operation of a good QA system. Setting standards is a primary goal for the QAC where it recognizes that national, regional and international calibration is the primary standard for the awards. Some areas directly reflect the AOU's performance and, thus, setting their standards becomes a primary task for the QAC.

The following list itemizes the constituent of these standards.

- *Student Quality Standards:* student Recruitment, admissions, learning performance, student services

Use of Quality Assurance Results

In addition to self-improvement, an important driver in all the QA activities at AOU is external in nature where QA results are used for acquiring national accreditation in host countries as well as programme validation and institutional accreditation by UK based OUVS.

Self-evaluation for Quality Improvement

In order for AOU to understand the existing level of quality, it is important to self-evaluate perceived notions of 'quality' in each sub-process within the university's larger operations as formulated and articulated in the QA Policy. All courses, programmes and awards are subject to self-evaluation following comprehensive internal review processes and services to students are also reviewed annually. This internal review is supported by a range of monitoring processes including student recruitment, retention, performance and progress; student satisfaction with awards, courses and services; external assessors, external examiners and external advisors; feedback from course team members, branch staff and tutors; monitoring of the quality of teaching and assessment of tutor marked assignments. Branches are also required to carry out an annual review of their key and share the outcomes with each other and HQR.

The quality self-evaluation at AOU is carried out using a consensus approach and conducted step-by-step, starting at the

lowest unit level (e.g., academic department) and moving higher up the university hierarchy. At each level the QACs consistently self-evaluate their processes on each quality indicator. The purpose is not to 'point fingers' but realistically identify the strengths, weaknesses, achievements, or mistakes of any particular unit. Results of quality self-assessment are reported and discussed at length. Viewed in this context, 'quality' is on everyone's mind at AOU.

Local Accreditation

The Higher Education Councils (HEC) of various Arab countries did not recognize degrees obtained solely through distance learning. However, this stance is changing now under pressures to develop distance and on-line learning. All educational institutions in Arab region must be licensed and may subsequently apply for accreditation for their courses, thereby achieving formal validation of their certificates, diplomas and degrees in accordance with the standards set by Recognized bodies. All the six branches of AOU have received local institutional accreditation from Ministries of Higher Education in their respective countries. In each case the process has involved a detailed examination of staffing and facilities and critical assessment of the curriculum presented in each of the OU programmes by a team of reviewers drawn principally from local universities. Considering that open education as a concept is not well understood or recognized throughout the Middle East and Gulf region, local accreditation has been achieved with a limited number of conditions. To meet concerns raised by local Ministries of Higher Education the AOU requires its students to devote 25% of study hours to face-to-face contact. Local accreditation agreements in each of the member states serve to further the interests of its students in securing recognition of achievements in their home countries.

OUVS ACCREDITATION AND VALIDATION

As a part of the planning and development process, international partnerships are formed between the AOU –represented by its QA system– and internationally recognised organizations in the area of organizational quality, which have extensive knowledge and experience in applying the quality approach, e.g. the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), UK, and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the Netherlands. This partnership aims to support the AOU in its quality initiative. In order to establish the University's strong academic standing, integrity and reputation as an institution of academic excellence, the AOU obtained Institutional Accreditation as well as Validation of its programmes from UK Open University Validation Services (OUVS) in 2003. It is required to subscribe mainly to the QA precepts of the national Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and make available information on the institutional context, student admissions, progression and completion, and internal procedures for assuring academic quality and standards. Practices and procedures (subject-based and institutional) within the AOU are however, informed by subject benchmark statements, qualifications framework and the QAA Code of Practice. AOU integrates the prescribed norms and standards set by QAA in its internal QA system, and evaluates implementation of these norms and standards constantly with the help of external reviewers. The external assessment is done through desk evaluation of the university's portfolio, the Study Program's Self-Evaluation Report and completed accreditation instruments, as well as site visit that includes observations and interviews with representatives of the university's and the faculty's top management, support staff, tutors, and students. The review mechanisms, visits to all branches and audits conducted by the OUVS are probably some of the best mechanisms of QA.

AOU considers the external quality

audit as important as the internal QA process. Recognition, accreditation and validation of the programmes are done at all the levels of OU's network to ensure that the product the student eventually gets at the end of their programmes of study is of a superior quality. The most important part of the accreditation process is not in the obtainment of the validation but more in the course of action of getting it. The process of getting accreditation has enforced all parties involved to follow the quality principles and assure that all the services and products satisfy the main stakeholders (Belawati and Zuhairi, 2007).

QUALITY ASSURANCE METHODS

Monitoring and Feed back Process

The initial accreditation was granted to the University on the condition that "the AOU review the process of QA to encompass the collection of performance data, its evaluation at branch and organizational level and responsibility for decision-making and action". In response to this condition the University has reviewed the process of QA and improved the collection of performance data by developing a Survey Research Unit. The University has also re-focused the work of branch quality assurance committees to emphasize the importance of properly evaluating and reflecting upon performance indicators and to ensure that the results are fed back to the central QAC. This work was further enhanced by the creation of the Academic Standards Committee.

AOU conducts surveys of student satisfaction with their programmes of study and perceived learning outcomes, student retention and dropout surveys end of course surveys and faculty satisfaction surveys periodically, the results of which are shared internally as a basis for improvement. At present the main formal mechanism for obtaining student and tutor feedback is a set of three questionnaires, which are completed towards the end of each semester. Student comments are

sought on the performance of their tutors, programmes of study and branch facilities. Tutors are asked to comment on aspects of course presentation and delivery and on teaching facilities including training support. If a tutor is found to be performing below expectations he/she is counseled and carefully monitored. If insufficient improvement is identified the tutor's contract is terminated. The annual monitoring process has been extremely valuable in enabling the University to improve quality systems and a whole range of procedures and operations directly linked to delivering and supporting the programmes. Importantly, this annual engagement with the process of a range of key administrative and academic staff has helped the university to embed an appreciation of the standards required to meet QAA requirements.

Use of External Examiners and Moderators

Part of the strategy adopted by the AOU for QA and for promoting the credibility of its programmes among the general public and the stakeholders is the use of external examiners and moderators drawn from UK OU. They are appointed on a course-by-course basis. Their role in the maintenance of quality standards at benchmark levels with other local universities has been extremely important. They monitor the marking of examination scripts and assignments submitted in satisfaction of continuous assessment requirements, and also review and comment on the examination question papers, attend Award Board meetings and approve examination results. This has helped in convincing the skeptics that the AOU programmes are subjected to the same rigorous processes of QA as those of open and formal conventional universities in the Arab region and as such the quality of its education is comparable with that of these universities.

Staff Development

Central to quality improvement at

AOU is the training of its staff. As most of its employees are unfamiliar with open or blended learning, both generic and course-specific training is undertaken for staff development. The University organizes regularly Tutor Programme Briefing workshops at different branches on a rotational basis. Course specific training also requires Staff Tutors and staff at each Branch to meet every fortnight to discuss teaching and learning strategies for each course. To assist Staff Tutors in their training role and to improve consistency of the content of training programmes across Branches, a resource pack has been produced and circulated to all relevant staff. The University recognizes that a robust system of staff appraisal is a key factor for both successful staff development and for effective quality assurance and enhancement. A comprehensive system of staff appraisal has been introduced. Its focus is not only on job performance but also job enhancement, personal development and career planning. Though appraisal of this kind is not embedded within the Arab culture yet AOU management is enthusiastic about its benefits.

Research and Development

At AOU research is seen as an integral and necessary part of creating a robust and dynamic academic environment, both from the institutional perspective and from the perspective of personal and professional development of staff. However, in common with many new institutions in the early phases of development, other priorities for staff time have restricted opportunities for research at AOU. The 2003 OUVS Panel had recommended that “processes be put in place to maintain research in the AOU over the next five years while course implementation and increase in student numbers is intense”. Again, the 2007 OUVS Panel recommended its reaccredited subject to the condition that a “strategy and plan for research, development and scholarship be prepared within one year, specifically to support

the development of new programmes of study”.

In keeping with these requirements a budget of \$350,000 is now available annually for attendance at conferences / workshops and start-up funding for small research projects with the emphasis on institutional research. A Research Committee has been constituted and a Research Director has been appointed to look after the research endeavours of the University. The University on the whole lacks a formal research strategy and plan, which it needs to rapidly develop to support the developments taking place in the area of ODL.

Student Support Services

The challenge for ODL institution is not only to ensure learner support that is both accessible and relevant, but also to encourage students to participate in and use of support systems that ensure quality learning (Belawati and Zuhairi, 2007). In addition to the SIS implementation, a common Learning Management System (Arab Campus) has been installed across the University so that the AOU can itself host all of the OU courses with an electronic component. The electronic library has also been linked to Arab Campus. This system is based on MOODLE, open source software that the OU has also adopted for its LMS. More steps are aggressively being taken to enhance the positive results obtained from VC, LMS, VoIP, chat rooms, video streaming, e-library etc. Efforts are being made to enforce ITC by having e-admission, e-registration, e-text books, e-TMAs, and building on virtual classes. The idea is to deliver open learning based on an IT-driven platform. The geographical and cultural aspects make this type of computer-mediated communication a great necessity. AOU believes that proper support for student services is one of the main factors driving better student retention. It seeks to improve student retention and progression ratios by devising more effective academic advising and student performance monitoring schemes,

including reexamining student workloads. A comprehensive analysis of pass percentages, completion rates and comparison with conventionally trained graduates is being conducted.

The future performance of the successful students of AOU in local job markets will enable the outside world to judge the quality of AOU graduates. The university already has some measure of this from Jordan where graduates for all universities, are required to take a national University Achievement Examination in order for their degrees to be recognized locally. This enables comparisons to be made between graduates from different academic institutions. AOU Business Studies students were ranked first in the examination, students of English Language and Literature programme obtained excellent marks within the second ranking and those from the Information Technology and Computing programme fell within the third rank – a very satisfactory overall result for the University and the one which is expected to change the poor perception of ODL across the Arab region.

Towards a Culture of Quality

QA does not merely mean a set of procedures to be followed. Commitment to quality ought to be a part of an organization's culture. There is more to achieving a quality culture than simply establishing QA mechanisms. Ideally, an institution may be considered to possess a quality culture when the need to achieve better outputs becomes an internalized passion for each and every employee. This need must be so deeply ingrained in every individual that it should guide further activity regardless of the external setting—favourable or unfavourable (Koul and Kanwar, 2006). Creation of this kind of need to improve continually is key ingredient in developing a culture of quality in an institution. The mature institutions need to make quality “everyone's business.” The maintenance of a culture of quality requires vision. Quality must continue to be championed from the top. In a vibrant quality culture,

QA arrangements need to be under constant review so that they meet current needs.

At AOU considerable progress has been made in embedding a comprehensive quality culture across the University and all the stakeholders are clear as to the importance ‘quality’ has both for the AOU and the future of open or blended learning across the Arab world. There have also been “push” factors driving the culture of quality at AOU. These include increasing competition from foreign universities, a regional focus on quality assurance and accreditation and the demands of a more informed and vocal stakeholders. AOU management has sought to embed a culture of critical self-reflection— a culture not commonly found in institutions of higher education in the Arab World. The University has addressed the poor perception of open learning in the Arab world by convincing the local ministries of education about the quality of the open and blended learning it offers to students. This quality is evidenced by meeting the requirements of internationally recognized benchmarks such as those of the QAA and of universities with an international reputation in the field of ODL such as the UK Open University.

The following focused institutional efforts may further contribute to creating, promoting and sustaining a quality culture at AOU:

- While the central QAC has ambitious future action plans it is at present essentially a re-active body and insufficiently pro-active. The University needs to develop a more systematic approach to monitoring and evaluating quality against specific requirements defined by the QAA Code of Practice and agreed Performance Indicators. A broader set of approaches to QA be developed, further embedding, for example, annual monitoring and periodic review, in order to deepen the process from quality control to assurance and

- continuous enhancement.
- While the University has put considerable efforts into devising a system of committees concerned with QA and enhancement, it needs to pay sufficient attention to mapping the processes of quality control and establishing their effectiveness as there appears to be a degree of confusion as to the functions of the various committees and the reporting lines are also not always clear.
 - An evaluative and enhancement-led approach to QA (including staff and student feedback) should be followed as a self-critical academic community. Every quality review should be conducted against institutional mission, teaching quality assessment (subject review) against subject objectives and quality audit against national framework and mission. It should undertake a thorough review of the existing programmes and identifying new programmes of study keeping in view local market requirements
 - QA implementation requires shared responsibility of all AOU staff and management. Everyone has the responsibility of enhancing, maintaining and owning the quality of their services. The challenge for leadership is to carefully manage the innovations and changes taking place, and transform existing culture to the one that is highly supportive of QA as a daily work goal. Implementing QA policy necessitates constant commitment, strong perseverance, and solid support, to ensure it can have the greatest and most positive internal and external impact. This takes highly visible and vocal leaders committed to providing and instilling QA in all staff members (Belawati and Zuhairi, 2007).
 - A key factor in developing the appropriate set of attitudes, ideas and beliefs that will promote and sustain quality is institutional leadership (Koul and Kanwar, 2006). It needs to developed a student support philosophy, which is based on the “culture of care.” which means staying in touch with the students .Top management at AOU must demonstrate their firm commitment to quality assurance and must motivate their staff at HQR and Branches to have a high level of awareness of how their activities and attitudes effect the quality of management and delivery systems of the University.
 - Achieving an institution-wide commitment to QA requires not only good leadership and adequate funding, but also a model of programme management that appropriately decentralizes decision-making processes so that all the levels of staff feel that they are part of the processes to the extent that prompt action is taken to address any problem that may arise at any point in the system. This is necessary particularly if the clientele is spread across the country and the centralized management model is prone to delayed reaction to problems in the system.
 - QA should not be perceived as an end in itself but as a means to an end which is the improved quality of life of its stakeholders (government, employees, employers, students, their parents etc.).To meet the challenges of implementing QA, organizations must be ready and willing to adapt, change, and innovate. QA activities must be clear,

transparent, achievable and able to meet customer expectations. Internal and external audits of AOU must therefore, continuously take place so that university can track its performance, address any weaknesses, and build upon its successes.

- To establish strong academic standing, integrity and reputation as a centre of excellence in the Arab world and elsewhere it should reinforce the quality assurance standards across all the AOU branches thus enhancing the operation and business process. AOU needs to expand international affiliation and bilateral cooperation through the diversification of academic links with reputed institutions.

CONCLUSION

QA and accreditation of higher education in general and distance higher education in particular are relatively new to the Arab world. QA movements have begun to take shape during the last decade, with efforts being exerted at the regional and institutional levels. AOU's basic QA systems were imported from the OUUK in an attempt to quickly demonstrate externally that quality systems were in place. Now it has developed its own QA frameworks depending on its vision and mission. A comprehensive quality culture has been embedded across the University as a result of ever increasing internal and external competition, a regional focus on accreditation and the growing demands of stakeholders.

It takes effort and commitment to make 'quality' happen. It can only happen when all stakeholders from students and frontline staff, to university leadership and government contribute to its accomplishment. QA requires everyone within the AOU to contribute by

appreciating, respecting, and applying 'quality' everyday. For maintaining a sustained quality culture in the university all the stakeholders have to contribute to the creation and maintenance of the process and purpose of such a culture and appreciate and apply 'quality' everyday. The leadership in particular needs to be highly supportive of QA.

Since AOU clientele is spread across the country and the centralized management model is prone to delayed reaction to problems in the system, achieving an institution-wide commitment to QA requires a model of programme management that appropriately decentralizes decision-making processes. Since the ultimate goal of QA is to improve the quality of life of its stakeholders, the QA activities need to be clear, achievable and able to meet student expectations. AOU's student support philosophy should be based on the "culture of care." Continuously Internal and external audits would go a long way in tracking the University's performance, address its weaknesses, and build upon its successes. Developing research capacity of the AOU with special emphasis on research in Open Learning and Distance Education, student-oriented learning and technology-based student support services should be the priority areas of research at AOU. The development of a research culture within the University needs to be a focus of attention in future.

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