

Arab Open University Student Retention Policy and Procedure

Policy Title:	Arab Open University Student Retention Policy and Procedure
Version Number:	3
Executive Owner:	Vice President for Academic Affairs and Scientific Research
Approving Authority:	University Council # 64
Policy Implementation:	Academic Programmes
Policy Monitoring and Compliance:	AOU Branches and Deanships
Next Review Date	2023

Note: A policy can be reviewed before the designated review date should there be a need to.

Policy Aim

The overall aim of this policy is to reduce the attrition rate of students in the institution and improve the graduation rate through well-planned strategies while maintaining the highest academic standards possible. The coherent strategy will address retention and its impact on student success and potential loss of university income.

Scope

This policy and procedure applies to all academic and administrative staff.

1) Policy Objectives

It is recognized that action to improve student retention will focus on the whole student experience from recruitment (pre-entry) guidance to measures to assist the development of the student and the transition to graduation and employment. The quality of student experience depends not only on good teaching, but on quality administrative systems, student support system and learning resources.

In order to achieve appropriate focus and targeting of effort in relation to student retention, the AOU branches shall:

- A) Seek to achieve improvement in retention rate
 - A) Encourage the adoption of a range of retention initiatives by designing targeted strategies, supporting and dedicating appropriate resources.
 - B) Designate specified responsibilities to different role players to develop robust monitoring and evaluation of initiatives to report on the success (or otherwise) of the adopted strategies.
 - C) Adopt an evidence based approach, through provision and analysis of information relating to student withdrawal (both quantitative data and qualitative feedback)
 - D) Promote appropriate staff development to support the retention initiatives.

- E) Share good practices among branches in relation to improvements in retention rates.

2) Student Retention Committee

The Student Retention Committee serves as an advisory committee appointed by the Branch Director to address key issues related to improving students' retention and academic success.

A) Formation:

For each academic programme, a respective student retention committee shall be formed comprising:

- The respective Programme coordinator
- Two academic advisors on the programme
- Admission and Registration Department Head
- Student Affairs Office Head
- Quality Assurance Unit Head

B) Duties and Responsibilities:

- Review and provide feedback on branch strategies for retention and assist with the implementation of strategies.
- Recommend and implement specific actions and steps to enhance retention.
- Develop a student success programme designated to assist students whom are academically at risk
- Prepare, plan and coordinate new initiatives and engage faculty in creating and participating in retention activities
- Conduct a thorough study on attrition per programme
- Provide support to the quality assurance unit in disseminating and training of best practices in relation to the University committee
- Provide a report to the Branch Director on retention on a semester basis.

3) Support for Policy Implementation

- A) Planning for student retention, accompanied with appropriate resource allocation should form part of the University strategic plan as well as the branch's action plan and budgeting undertaken by departments and other academic entities whose activities are related to student experience.
- B) The planning of the strategies and required action plan and the reporting of the outcomes, is the responsibility of the Student Retention Committee.
- C) Action plans which are directly linked to initiatives to promote student retention should be subjected to Quality Assurance monitoring and evaluation and should be part of the performance appraisals of those accountable at all levels.
- D) It will be important for retention objectives and action plans to be kept under regular review to track progress and detect early warning signs throughout the implementation for chances of developing the action plans further in the light of evaluation and feedback

4) Implementation Procedure

This plan is designed for all students registered at the Arab Open University. However, early intervention strategies should be put in place for potentially academically at risk students. The following are categories of potential academically at risk students:

- 1) First year students
- 1) Part time students (i.e. registering less than 16 credits per semester)
- 2) Students with large work commitments/ or family obligations
- 3) Students with financial problems
- 4) Students with language difficulties
- 5) Students who have not engaged in formal studies for a substantial period of time (more than 3 years)
- 6) Students enrolled in courses with historically high withdrawal rates
- 7) Students with low GPA in high school or a secondary school certificate
- 8) Students who have not engaged with their studies (more than 2 absences)

- 9) Students who do not submit or fail early assessment (TMA, MTA or quizzes)
- 10) Students with physical/mental/health challenges (disabilities)
- 11) Students with a different academic background (technical baccalaureate/degree)
- 12) Students with limited accessibility to technology to support virtual learning.

Note: enrolled students with GPA <2 are considered academically at risk.

5) General Retention Guidelines

A) Student Categories

1) First-year (New/Freshmen) Students

<i>Objective</i>	<i>Policy</i>	<i>Action</i>
<u>Pre-Entry</u>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Retention to be promoted by ensuring compatibility between student's expectations of programmes/and AOU and their actual experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students will have access to accurate information concerning courses, programmes, financial considerations and support offered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student Affairs office to provide accurate information about programmes offered/courses and available student support services both academic and non-academic. This information and contact details needs to be clear and accessible on the website and marketing material.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students shall receive all relevant information that will help them plan and make informed choices about future study. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support should be available prior to study where problems are predicted. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student affairs office to collect information on students at pre-entry (through a questionnaire "a" in the appendix-section B) to identify potentially academically at risk students with information collected to be available on SIS for use by the advisors and course coordinators. In

		<p>addition, information on English level (based on OOPT results to indicate language difficulty) to be available on SIS for use by the academic advisor and tutors.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student affairs office to collect and record in the SIS information on disability (disability declaration form)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All New students upon acceptance shall receive a customized letter from their respective advisor explaining his role and contact details.
Advising		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advisors and students to reflect on early signs of risk and sort out any difficulties. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All students will be assigned an academic advisor to provide academic support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One to one meetings to be held with academic advisor prior to semester start.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advisors to identify the student's preparedness for study and identify potential risk factors to success. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students to be informed of the important role of the advisor, the various forms of assistance and the support services available to them.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First year students to be offered a chance to enroll in Learning Communities (LC) that are peer assisted so as to facilitate the transition

		and experience in higher education. (more information on the learning community in Appendix- section A).
<u>Induction</u>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To familiarize students with AOU rules and regulations, types of assessment and support services available. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All new students will receive an adequate induction to promote inclusion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Induction sessions to be held for all new students during the first two weeks of the semester. • New students to be provided with the link to the induction online videos.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students to be well informed of the procedures and deadlines for withdrawing from a course/university and of sources of support and advice that are available to them in relation to these steps. Information to be posted on website and course LMS
<u>Learning and Teaching</u>		
<i>A) Teaching</i>		

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To achieve a balance in the use of experienced full time staff to give first year students a firm foundation and focused support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The branches to appoint and allocate academic staff to take full responsibility for the first year student experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full time academic staff to teach on first level courses to offer support for first year students. • All tutors involved in first year courses should undergo development in areas such as effective teaching techniques; how to identify academically at risk students; where and how to refer students to forms of academic and personal support.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To create a culture where first year students engage and support each other in the learning process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need for advisors to identify academically at risk students and allocate them in sections based on their needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academically at risk students to be placed in Learning Communities (LC) were they will find support in other students enrolled in the same section.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To offer peer led support sessions to aid students to develop study skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need to train and utilize student volunteers as Peer Assisted Student Support (PASS) coaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering PASS sessions in first level courses with historically high withdrawal and fail rates. (more information on PASS in Appendix-section A)

B) Assessment

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To concentrate resources on the first year students, providing formative feedback and encouragement on assessments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programmes to ensure that formative assessment is utilized at an early stage to provide feedback and identify any weakness in the required study skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A mock online assessment to be provided in the curriculum of first year courses and courses with high withdrawal and failure rate during week 4. This tool is to be used to identify students who have not engaged in the assessment and/or those who failed the assessment. These students will be contacted by the course coordinator to assist them in identifying factors which are inhibiting their studies and success.
C) Skills Development		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To provide additional support to students and to coordinate the delivery of study skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need to provide Study skills support sessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PASS support sessions to be offered in order to share appropriate study skills to pass a course

2) Students with Language Difficulties

Objective	Policy	Action
Advising		

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advisors and students to reflect on early signs of language difficulties 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advisors to orient students who would benefit from additional language or other study skills support. • Extra English language support sessions to be provided for students with language difficulties
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3) Students who have missed more than 2 tutorials and/or students who failed early assessments (MTA or TMA)

Objective	Policy	Action
Student Tracking		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To record student’s engagement through contact with tutors, attendance, log into the LMS/or online student services, library borrowings and submission of assessment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an automated tracking system to ascertain the engagement of students within their programme and whether they require additional support and intervention. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted intervention by tutors /advisors for those students who have not engaged with their studies by the third week in the semester and/or who fail early assessments. • Feedback (through questionnaire “b” in the appendix- section B) to be collected from those students in order to ascertain their reasons for not engaging in courses and what available support options they have.

4) Students who drop a course

Objective	Policy	Action
<u>Student Tracking</u>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback to be obtained from those who drop a course, in order to make use of all available information to propose an adequate action plan. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course coordinators/ advisors to intervene when students drop a course during a semester (through questionnaire “c” in the appendix- section B).

5) Students who Withdraw from AOU

Objective	Policy	Action
<u>Student Tracking</u>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback from students who do not return to the university/ withdraw in order to make use of all available information to propose an adequate action plan 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intervention by course coordinator/ advisor when a student withdraws from a semester (retreat/referred) (through questionnaire &”d” in the appendix- section B). • These students should be offered an interview and should be well informed of any available option to change their enrollment.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To have a well-established withdrawal procedure which allows opportunity for students to receive advice and make fully informed decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrawal procedure to be disseminated to all programmes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The advisor shall contact the students who have withdrawn from the semester and have not re-enrolled before the next semester enrollment date.
<p><u>Retention Data</u></p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To gather detailed analysis of retention data on a semester basis, with academic staff, student affairs, registrar and the Quality assurance offices engaging with the data to take measures related to retention rates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The university to provide appropriate staff training which permits analysis of retention data at the programme level. • The university to identify areas in which retention targets to be set. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The analysis of retention data to be disseminated to all stakeholders to assess the action plan and proper enhancements to be implemented.

B) Common to All Other Student Categories

Objective	Policy	Action
1. Advising		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advisors and students to reflect on early signs of risk and sort out any difficulties • Advisors to identify the student's preparedness for study and identify potential risk factors to success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All students will be assigned an academic advisor to provide academic support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One to one meetings to be held with academic advisor prior to semester start. • Advisors to provide opportunities to develop the necessary skills needed for success at AOU. • Advisors to orient students who would benefit from additional language or other study skills support.
2. Learning and Teaching		
a. Teaching		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To offer peer led support sessions to aid students to develop study skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need for advisors/ tutors to identify academically at risk students and allocate them in support sections based on their needs. • The need to train and utilize student volunteers as Peer Assisted Student Support (PASS) coach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering PASS sessions in courses with historically high withdrawal and fail rates. (more information on PASS in Appendix-section A)
b. Skills Development		

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To provide additional support to students and to coordinate the delivery of study skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need to provide Study skills support sessions for all students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PASS support sessions to be offered in order to share appropriate study skills to pass a course • Job interview skills and CV writing techniques to be offered by the student affairs office to prepare students for employment
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6) Reporting

- 1) Regular retention data and analysis at the course and programme level should be disseminated to student affairs, registrar, quality assurance unit and programmes.
- 2) Student retention is to be a standing item on the agenda of the branch quality assurance committee across the university.
- 3) Reports on progress regarding retention and implementation of policy shall be provided annually to the respective Branch Director.

Appendix

Section A

Learning Communities (LC)

The Learning Communities (LC) program is designed to improve the transitional experience for first-year students and academically at risk students. It provides enrolled students with the opportunity to meet classmates, develop friendships, form study groups, and develop academic and personal skills, as well as introduce them to the resources and available support services. Students enrolled in LC sections will be learning together with their classmates in at least two shared courses and will benefit from academic support programs. Each LC group (section) is facilitated by an upper-year student “LC coach”, under the guidance and close supervision of the course coordinator. The LC coach is to be remunerated and awarded a certificate of appreciation upon supporting an LC group.

Peer Assisted Student Support (PASS)

PASS is a peer-led support program that targets difficult courses and courses with high withdrawal and failure rates. The scheme is successful in increasing the grades and academic success of participating students. The sessions are led by a ‘PASS coach’, usually a student who has recently completed the target course with an “A” grade. The PASS coach is trained and supervised by the course coordinator. The sessions do not focus on lecture content but instead on sharing study skills thus making this model distinct from the traditional tutorials generally led by the tutors.

The PASS coach is to be remunerated and awarded a certificate of appreciation.

Section B – questionnaires (B, C and D) to be available on SIS

- A) **Questionnaire to be completed by the student affairs office for new students upon submitting the application form.** (This questionnaire aims

to identify potentially academically at risk students). Information to be entered into the SIS to be used by academic advisors.

Question	✓
1. Do you work? (already available in the application form)	
2. Do you have any family obligations? (already available in the application form)	
3. Do you have any financial difficulty?	
4. Have you not been engaged in formal academic studies for more than 2 years?	
5. Do you have any health/physical challenges?	
6. Do you have any family/social challenges? (Such as going through a divorce/separation, living away from your family, etc.)	

B) Questionnaire to be completed by the course coordinator/ advisor for students who did not engage in studies for the first 3 weeks of the semester

Reasons	✓
1. Workload	
2. Personal/health problems/family	
3. Academic difficulties	
4. I didn't like the course/tutor	
5. I will drop the course	
6. Other reasons - specify:	

C) **Questionnaire to be completed by the course coordinator/ advisor for students who Drop a course**

Reasons	✓
1. Workload	
2. Financial	
3. Personal/health problems/family	
4. Academic difficulties	
5. No MTA	
6. No TMA	
7. Failed continuous assessment	
8. I didn't like the course/tutor	
9. Missed a lot of sessions	
10. Other reasons - specify:	

D) **Questionnaire to be completed by the course coordinator/ advisor for students who withdraw (drop all courses) from the semester** (and did not submit a formal withdrawal form)

Reasons	✓
1. Workload	
2. Financial	
3. Move to another University	
4. Travel	
5. Academic difficulties	
6. Personal/health problems/family	
7. Need to change major	
8. Intend to return in the next semester	

9. University did not meet student's expectations	
10. Other reasons - specify:	