



Learning & Teaching Strategic Plan 2012-2017

Quality Assurance & Accreditation Department

Executive Summary

This document describes the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Enhancement Strategy.

The Strategy is designed to be benchmarking-aware and the revision process incorporates biannual benchmarking. The specific goals of the strategy are:

1. AOU to be a major user of and contributor to the global literature on how best to teach students at a distance in the Arab Region.
2. AOU to have recognized expertise on a global level on the use of Moodle as the basis for an e-learning system used on a large scale.
3. AOU to be a place of recognized and evidenced best practice on an international level.
4. AOU to be at the hub of a number of collaborative teaching arrangements to alleviate social issues of concern in the Arab Region and perhaps beyond.

Introduction

The Arab Open University was founded under an initiative from His Royal Highness Prince Talal Bin Abdul Aziz with the support of the Higher Education Ministries in the Arab Countries. It is considered to be one of the major projects adopted by the Arab Gulf Programme to support the United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND). The Board of Trustees of the University is chaired by His Royal Highness Prince Talal Bin Abdul Aziz.

It now has nearly 30,000 students and seven branches in the countries of Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman and Saudi Arabia. New branches are expected to open in Sudan, Yemen and Palestine; further branches are foreseen in the Arab countries in North Africa.

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University Mission and Goals

AOU seeks to offer opportunities of higher and continuing education, with high quality, to all who have the potential by adopting open blended learning, utilizing state-of-the-art information and communication technologies

The AOU is a non-for profit institution that aims to establish itself as one of the leading institutions of open and distance learning in the region, offering affordable access to higher education for currently disadvantaged groups and creating a forum of lifelong learning. The AOU intends to promote human resource development that is compatible with the demands and challenges of current and emerging information technology platforms and international socio-economic developments. In particular, the AOU hopes to achieve a number of goals, including:

- Ensuring the availability of undergraduate and graduate education for ambitious students in regard to specializations required urgently by the comprehensive development strategies of the various countries in the Arab region
- Offering opportunities of quality higher education to a large and diverse population of students.
- Developing as a centre of excellence for open and distance education
- Providing a forum for continuing education across the region to meet the needs of individuals and local society.
- Providing opportunities for professional training in response to market demands.
- Providing special opportunities in higher education to disadvantaged groups of potential students (e.g. females and those of special concern to Arab society).
- Promoting humanistic values and ethics.
- Organizing higher studies programmes and participating, as a contributing partner, in promoting research and scholarly activities deemed useful in development areas of special concern to Arab society.

The AOU's learning and teaching model is based on high quality learning materials, which, for the undergraduate programmes, are licensed from the Open University-UK. The model is essentially a form of blended learning as local accreditation requirements insist on a compulsory face-to-face tuition component comprising 25% of student study hours. Students are allocated to an individual subject tutor in the ratio 25:1. Learning is facilitated through a university wide learning management system (Arab Campus) based on the open source software Moodle.

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All Branches are equipped with multimedia and computing laboratories to support students who do not have access to a personal computer.

Assessment of students is via both continuous assessment (mid-term assessments – MTAs and Tutor marked assignments – TMAs) and formal end of semester examinations. Each component comprises 50% of the overall assessment score.

While tutors are expected to provide comprehensive teaching comments on student TMAs, it is important to note that the level of face to face contact with the tutor allows other methods of providing feedback and support not available in a totally distance education environment

The Agreement with the Open University-UK

As a new institution of open learning aiming to establish a reputation for providing quality higher education in an environment where open and distance education was (and is) seen as providing educational standards of a much lower level than campus universities, it was important to have a close relationship with an institution recognised as a world leader. Consequently, the AOU started its English language teaching following programmes with courses licensed from the OU-UK:

- B.A. Honors Program in English Language and Literature
- B.A. Honors Program in Business Studies: Economics track and Systems track
- B.A. Honors Program in Computer Science and Information Technology.

In order for a student to receive any of the above degrees he/she must successfully complete a minimum of 128 credit hours (480 credit points), 32 of which (120 credit points) comprise the general university requirements and 96 of which (360 credit points) comprise the core program requirements.

As has been mentioned earlier the majority of courses in the core program requirement are courses sourced from the OU-UK and adapted for delivery in the AOU environment. All such courses are covered by CACP validation. All courses above level 1 have External Examiners.

AOU sought institutional accreditation and validation from CACP so that the university could demonstrate a commitment to quality by accepting UK norms for academic and operational performance and service to students. Furthermore, graduates from the

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university would receive an internationally recognised UK qualification to go with their Arab Open University degree.

The AOU received institutional accreditation and validation in December 2003, renewed for five years in 2007, and is now at the point where it is seeking to renew both agreements for another 5-year period

Context

Since its foundation almost a decade ago the Arab Open University has become one of the Arab World's leading universities and is now one of the premier broad-based student-centered universities in Arab World.

The University is recognised regionally for the quality of its practice in particular fields and has a sustained reputation for excellence and leadership in teaching and learning across the broad range of diverse disciplines that it offers.

The funding constraints and restrictive policies within the Higher Education systems in the Arab World, in general, and the GCC in particular, in recent years have generated major challenges during a period marked by increased competition amongst higher education providers in a rapidly changing world. Against this background the University has continued to develop innovative programmes, courses and pedagogies. The significant increase in the numbers of students and staff drawn to the University, attests to the quality of the learning and teaching environment that it offers.

These achievements have been possible because of our willingness to back innovative ideas and to respond to opportunities that align with our Strategic Objectives.

Guidelines:

The AOU Strategy for Teaching and Learning is based on the following guidelines and principles:

- Mission of AOU
- AOU's unique system of university education where open and distance learning, face-to-face tutorials and electronic technology have blend together and created an effective teaching and learning environment.
- Centrality of students in all academic and administrative activities of AOU

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- QAA's code of practice.
- AOU's values
- Respect of the rules and regulations set by the authority of higher education in every AOU country.
- High quality education to its students so that the graduates can contribute effectively to economic prosperity and social progress in their countries.
- Honest assessments of quality and recognition and reward of innovation and prominent achievement.

Direction

AOU will focus on the following:

- Building on the unique interrelationship of its faculties to create an interaction between advanced enquiry and the student learning experience as a characteristic feature of the education offered at AOU.
- Enhancing the existing supportive and socially comprehensive environment provided for students and staff and aim to distinguish the University among its peers by the strength of the experience it offers.
- To be guided by the honest assessments of quality and to recognize and reward innovation and prominent achievements.
- Working to improve the productive use of all of the University's operational sites and financial and other capital assets, whilst looking for external funding support for existing areas of excellence and for new developments that are associated with the strategic objectives.
- Building strategic partnerships with other universities, industry, the professions and all levels of government at, and on consolidating broader relationships with our alumni and with the wider community, in the GCC and other Arab States.

The strategy

The components of this strategy for teaching and learning are described below. Each description begins with a policy statement followed by suggestions for steps to be taken in order to implement the Strategy.

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The educational system of AOU:

The educational system of the Arab Open University is based on a blended system where open and distance learning, face-to-face tutorials and electronic technology blend together to create an effective teaching and learning environment suited to the needs, hopes and aspiration of our students. This teaching and learning strategy is based on the belief that this unique system of education should continue and should inform the teaching and learning strategy of all faculties and study programmes of the University. The three steps below are essential for the viability of this educational system:

- AOU should continue to remain aware of the latest developments in the application of modern technology, hardware and software, to teaching and learning which facilitate open and distance learning.
- It should ensure, with sufficient rigor, that students attend tutorials and complete their continuous assignment and adhere to the relevant rule and regulation of the University.
- AOU should continue to build its faculties and staff and consider them as the University's major resource.

Teaching

The academic staff should be appropriately qualified, experienced, and trained to deliver the academic programmes within the blended education system of AOU. The University should provide them with training opportunities and ensure continuing professional development.

Steps to take:

- Faculties and programmes will ensure that those who teach modules (courses) have the necessary qualifications, knowledge and experience to do so.
- AOU will provide opportunities for PhD studies to a selection of current full time tutors who are likely to complete their PhD's in reasonable time.
- AOU will provide opportunities to its staff for improving their performance through specially designed workshops and peer advice.

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- Faculties will disseminate examples of good practice in teaching and learning, occurred anywhere in the AOU, among all tutors.
- AOU will reward good teaching.

Curriculum: choice and development

AOU faculties will offer flexible modules and programmes of study which are comparable to those offered by other reputable institutions, where the choice of such modules and programmes are informed by the needs of students and the requirements of stakeholders. AOU will update these provisions periodically to ensure their currency, relevance and their suitability to the requirements of the hyper competition in higher education.

Steps to take:

- Faculties will ensure that the recommendations of external examiners are fully implemented.
- Faculties will continue to remain informed about the learning needs of current and potential students and take them into account in the design or acquisition of new modules and programmes of study.
- Faculties will conduct periodic evaluation of their academic programmes to ensure their currency and relevance, on the basis feedback from various stakeholders (for example employers, graduates, community).
- Modules and programmes of study will be designed by AOU in the long run or acquired from OU-UK (or other entities), by a committee of specialists in the field, from inside or outside the AOU.
- Faculties will put in place rigorous systems for course approval, which are flexible to allow modifications to be made whenever necessary within reasonable time.
- AOU will support the faculty initiatives which are likely to enhance academic standards and student satisfaction.
- AOU will support the efforts of QAD to embed the QA & Enhancement Strategy and the code of practice into its academic and administrative practices, rules and regulations.
- Faculties will ensure that the results of surveys and monitoring activities of QAD inform the design of course delivery, course development, continuous and final assessment.

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Assessment

Assessment should inform the University about the effectiveness of its teaching and learning, be appropriate to the level of study as identified by QAA benchmarks, promote deep level learning, provide feedback to students and teachers about their performance, be comparable with relevant standards set at other institutions, be fairly and consistently applied across branches and distinguish appropriately between different levels of ability.

Steps to take:

Ensure that assessment has both summative and formative components.

Assessment materials should cover the learning outcomes of the module.

Assess only what has been taught.

Give constructive feedback to students.

Ensure the endorsement of external examiners.

Take into account the feedback of both module teachers and students about the assessment.

Assessment should be consistent with AOU ethical standards

Research and its synergy with teaching and learning

AOU should continue to promote research and scholarship in academic fields and encourage research-based initiatives designed to enhance teaching and learning.

Steps to take:

- AOU should continue to fund approved research projects and scholarship activities.
- Faculties will ensure that research and scholarship is encouraged and properly recorded in the staff annual Appraisal form.

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- AOU will specially fund research and scholarship projects which are designed to improve teaching and learning.

Electronic and other teaching and learning resources

AOU will provide teaching and learning resources, including state of the art electronic facilities, which are appropriate to the needs of students, staff and are relevant to each study programme.

Steps to take:

- AOU will continue to support those applications of electronic technology which are likely to improve and enhance its blended system of education.
- AOU will improve its technology-based facilities, such as labs and libraries, in order to enhance teaching, learning, research and post graduate studies.
- AOU will develop policy and procedures for updating all its computing and ITC facilities, especially those available to students and staff.
- AOU will continue to support and update the LMS across all branches.
- AOU will promote the use of e-library and other repositories of knowledge.
- AOU will encourage staff to produce video recorded versions of their tutorials so that students can view them anywhere and anytime.

Students as independent learners

AOU will continue to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning and become independent learners, both during their studies and as lifelong learners beyond graduation.

Steps to take:

- AOU will promote teaching and learning methods and practices that promote deep level learning.
- AOU will ensure that all teaching and assessment materials offered to students include appropriate and clearly defined learning outcomes.
- AOU tutors will be encouraged to act as 'facilitators' of learning and 'interveners' when student reaches his/her zone of proximal development.

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- AOU students will promote its Personal Development Planning as a step towards becoming an independent and reflective learner.
- AOU will provide resources that support students as individual learners, including library and ITC facilities.
- AOU will promote the use of e-resources, including the internet, in the completion of continuous assessment and other academic activities.

Graduates and employment

AOU will continue to provide opportunities for the acquisition of competencies that are likely to help graduates in seeking employment and make them aware of the importance of these opportunities in the development of their careers.

Steps to take:

- Establish a 'careers office' in each branch in order to offer a range of advice and assistance to those students who are seeking employment, including information about competencies which enhance job finding and detailed information about job openings, and update these regularly.
- Identify areas in the academic programmes, modules and assessment materials where there are opportunities for acquisition of different competencies; in particular, make the key skills more transparent through modules descriptions and programme specifications.
- Careers office, with contribution from the AOU Alumni Office, should establish a network of connections between employers and the AOU for the purpose of finding employment for AOU graduates.

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