QAA GLOBAL

International Quality Review

Mid-Cycle Review

American University
of Ras Al Khaimah

Review Report

September 2024

Contents

About this mid-cycle review

This is a report of a mid-cycle review conducted by The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the American University of Ras Al Khaimah. The mid-cycle review included a desk-based analysis and a site visit to the institution, and was conducted by a team of two reviewers, as follows:

- Ian Welch
- Dr Nadeem Khan.

The full International Quality Review (IQR) in September 2021 resulted in a [published report]. The QAA review team concluded the American University of Ras Al Khaimah met all 10 standards set out in Part 1 of the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)]. The team identified one feature of good practice and made twelve recommendations.

This mid-cycle review evaluates progress against the key actions since the IQR and considers any significant changes that may impact on the ability of the American University of Ras Al Khaimah to continue to meet the ESG standards.

Outcome of the mid-cycle review

1   From the evidence provided, the review team concludes that the American University of Ras Al Khaimah is making **satisfactory progress** since the 2021 International Quality Review and that the period of validity of the IQR be extended to December 2026.

Summary of IQR outcomes

Overview of the institution

The American University of Ras Al Khaimah (AURAK) is a public, non-profit, independent coeducational university. Located in the Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the campus is undergoing a significant redevelopment which started in 2015 and is due to be completed in 2025. It offers a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes through its three schools - Arts and Sciences, Business and Engineering. AURAK had 1483 student enrolments at the time of the review. AURAK has seen an exponential growth in student numbers in the past four years. 57 nationalities are represented in the student population with a gender split of 50/50. Faculty and staff come from 29 different countries.

AURAK has been licensed by the Commission of Academic Accreditation of the UAE Ministry of Education since August 2009 to award qualifications in higher education. Operating within the UAE regulatory framework, its academic programmes are accredited by the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) and mapped against the Quality Framework Emirates (QFE).

2   Since 2018, AURAK has been accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) to award bachelor and master's degrees. A number of its engineering awards are accredited by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) and the School of Business is pursuing accreditation with the Association for the Advancement of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB).

AURAK's Strategy was most recently revised in 2019 and sets out its mission - to be a leading institution in the Gulf Region, the American University of Ras Al Khaimah:

- Provides a transformational, student-centred learning experience based on the North American model of higher education enriched by attention to the culture of the region.
- Engages students, faculty, and staff in innovative undergraduate and graduate programs that generate high-impact research.
- Prepares future leaders and entrepreneurs through community outreach and creative initiatives involving local, regional, and global partners.

The Mission underpins the AURAK Strategic Plan 2019-2024 – the strategic goals of which are to:

- Strategic Goal 1 - Implement exemplary governance and organizational processes that ensure student excellence.
- Strategic Goal 2 - Attract talented students from around the world through a student-centred culture of success.
- Strategic Goal 3 - Offer leading-edge academic programs and community engagement initiatives that meet local, regional, and international needs and generate high-impact research.
- Strategic Goal 4 - Enhance faculty and staff excellence through improved recruitment, retention, and professional development.
- Strategic Goal 5 - Provide stellar support services that contribute to the institution's excellence and maximize benefits to university stakeholders.

Good practice identified by the 2021 International Quality Review

The original QAA review team identified the following features of good practice at the American University of Ras Al Khaimah.

- The developmental, discussive, reflective and non-punitive (for students and faculty) steps taken by the University to tackle grade inflation through the use of grading guidelines (Standard 1.3).

Recommendations of the 2021 International Quality Review

The original QAA review team made the following recommendations to the American University of Ras Al Khaimah:

- Consider the introduction of a programme of training and development for students and employees to reflect on and celebrate the full range of principles and aspects of equality and diversity (Standard 1.1).
- Make programme specifications publicly available (Standard 1.2).
- Develop a coordinated approach that sets out the University's direction in relation to student-centred learning, teaching and assessment, and establishes and implements means by which success will be measured (Standard 1.3).
- Develop procedures for moderation and second marking to achieve consistency in marking practice across the University (Standard 1.3).
- Develop and implement a scheme to ensure that decisions in relation to suspected academic integrity violations are made consistently (Standard 1.3).
- Establish systems to properly record and analyse student appeals, infringements and complaints, with appropriate reporting and actions (Standard 1.3).
- Develop and implement a plan to capture and share the good practice in learning, teaching and assessment that arises organically and through the University's various initiatives to secure standards and enhance quality (Standard 1.3).

- Review and strengthen the University's oversight of the admissions process, including the important role of the deliberative committee structure (Standard 1.4).
- Clearly outline the process for ensuring that any outstanding admissions documentation has been received in the relevant policy documentation (Standard 1.4).
- Develop and implement a scheme that facilitates the development of new faculty in learning, teaching and assessing in higher education (Standard 1.5).
- Revise the University's approach to the development of its teaching staff in learning and teaching and, where necessary, its management, to ensure that staff have ongoing access to a broad range of developmental opportunities commensurate with contemporary higher education and its pedagogy (Standard 1.5).
- Review and enhance the arrangements for professional support staff to enable them to develop their competencies (Standard 1.6).

Findings from the mid-cycle review analysis

3   In response to the IQR report, published in March 2022, the University created an action plan to address the twelve recommendations, with completion dates ranging from August 2022 to January 2024.

Good practice

4   In 2021, the original QAA review team identified one example of good practice. This concerned: The developmental, discussive, reflective and non-punitive (for students and faculty) steps taken by the University to tackle grade inflation through the use of grading guidelines.

5   In response to this the University identified two actions to capitalise on the good practice:

- Continue with the implementation of the Student Assessment and Moderation Procedure including the use of the grading rubrics by another faculty member to assess samples of students' work marked by any faculty member whose grading is being evaluated.
- Employ the School Curriculum and Assessment Committee to review rubrics for course assessments that contribute more than thirty percent (30%) toward the final course grade

6   This approach to tackling grade inflation has continued, with the Academic Policies Review Committee being charged by the Provost with the delivery of a pilot study on second marking and grade moderation. In line with this the deans of three schools have submitted their reports to the Committee.

Recommendations

7   In 2021 the original QAA review team made twelve recommendations to the University.

8   Noting the lack of evidence of any systematic provision to promote principles of equality and diversity across the institutional community, the original QAA review team recommended that the University should **consider the introduction of a programme of training and development for students and employees to reflect on and celebrate the full range of principles and aspects of equality and diversity.** The University response involved working with the Student General Assembly (SGA) to define the content and enlisting Mass Communications students to produce the training. AURAK developed a two-

phase action plan to develop awareness of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Justice, and Belonging (DEIJB).

9   The review submission explained that the first phase was planned to engage student leaders in a meaningful dialogue on DEIJB. The submission produced by AURAK for this mid-cycle review explained that this action was delayed by a UAE-wide shutdown of institutions due to adverse weather conditions. First-year students have been exposed to DEIJB concepts during New Student Orientation sessions in 2024. In addition, a major presentation on the initiative is included in the Faculty Professional Development programme. The second phase is intended to involve a working group of student leaders who expressed interest in DEIJB, identifying programmes for implementation in 2024-25 and who will be expected to lead in supporting and organising initiatives.

10   During the MCR visit, the President highlighted the growing diversity in student and staff population and the development of training opportunities for all stakeholders to capitalise on this strength. Students affirmed that they have participated in training and been active in developing a range of activities that celebrate diversity of the University community and were enthusiastic about the opportunity to mark the diversity of the student cohort. They commented that diversity was an attraction when applying to the University. The MCR Team consequently conclude that the University has satisfactorily addressed the recommendation.

11   Noting that programme specifications were available internally, the original QAA review team recommended that the University should **make programme specifications publicly available.** In response, the University review submission outlined two actions:

- Provost's Council to agree the most appropriate platform to make the Program Specifications available publicly.
- Implement the recommendation from the Provost's Council and publicize.

12   Evidence provided by the University shows that the proposal was originally considered by the Provost's Council but this was overtaken by two initiatives. Firstly it was decided that Program Specifications had to be submitted with Annual Program Assessment Reports and be uploaded to a new section of the AURAK internal portal/intranet (IDAP) Secondly, in 2023, AURAK's website was revised with the strategy of providing prospective students and their families with key information to make decisions about joining the university. In its submission, the University reflected that whilst the programme specification provided highly detailed information useful for specialist stakeholders it might not be meaningful to prospective students/families.

13   Senior managers met by the MCR Team confirmed that, following consideration by the Provost's council, whilst programme specifications are posted on the website, the content is tailored to the needs of stakeholders who will use the information to inform their decisions. The MCR Team conclude that the University has satisfactorily addressed the recommendation.

14   Noting a risk to maintaining a student-centred focus to learning, teaching and assessment because of a lack of overall strategic direction in this regard, the original QAA review team recommended that the University should **develop a coordinated approach that sets out the University's direction in relation to student-centred learning, teaching and assessment, and establishes and implements means by which success will be measured**.

15   The University response involved convening a cross-office/department/school task force to develop a strategy and action plan for promoting student-centred learning, teaching, and assessment. The task force was charged with proposing an enhanced faculty

professional development framework, including sourced learning opportunities both internally and externally. The task force report included recommendations for scheduling on-campus faculty professional development sessions and making more external opportunities available. The review submission explained that some of these recommendations were implemented in Spring 2024. Additional external professional development programming was provided to faculty, such as courses on ChatGPT Prompt Engineering, mindfulness techniques, and robotics. Enhanced faculty professional development also included sessions on AI writers and the role of mentors in promoting academic integrity.

16   The University submission also outlined another initiative arising from the Student-Centred Task Force Report which focused on a renewed emphasis on student academic advising. Overseeing student academic advisement is another primary area of responsibility for the position of Associate Provost for Academic Affairs created in Autumn 2023. The Associate Provost organised and delivered faculty professional development sessions and reminders to equip advisors with the necessary tools and insights to enhance their advisory roles. Milestones achieved during 2023-24, included early assignment of faculty advisors and the creation of Course Registration Guidelines with the Office of Enrolment Management.

17   Faculty and staff met by the MCR review team confirmed that a range of professional development activities have been conducted with the aim of consolidating a student-centred approach towards teaching and measuring success and disseminating the impact of training. For instance, faculty have been able to attend activities and workshops focusing on the use AI as a teaching and learning tool whilst maintaining academic integrity. These workshops have been followed by student workshops, guidance, lectures, and activities which promote the use of AI as means of enabling learning without jeopardising academic integrity. Other examples of student-centred learning training events and opportunities cited by staff included the opportunity to research and develop active reading software to enable students to further engage with their learning. The University confirmed that the momentum of these professional development activities has been sustained through a more tailored approach to planning within individual departments through discussion between each Dean and the Provost. The MCR Team consequently conclude that the University has satisfactorily addressed the recommendation.

The original QAA review team noted that moderation of student works only takes place where there is non-adherence to University grading guidelines and recommended that the University should: **Develop procedures for moderation and second marking to achieve consistency in marking practice across the University**. In response, the University identified two actions which involved:

- exploring options through the Provost's Council and the Academic Policies Review Committee
- developing an action plan based on findings.

The review submission explained that the Academic Policies Review Committee conducted a pilot study on second marking, which was presented to faculty during the Faculty Professional Development Week programme. The Provost's Council developed an action plan based on the pilot study, requiring deans to provide a report containing the school's recommendations regarding the development of a second marking plan, which can span multiple semesters.

18   Senior staff met by the MCR team confirmed that University has developed and implemented procedures for moderation and second marking to achieve consistency in marking practices across the University. Academic staff met by the MCR team confirmed that they have been trained and are practicing second marking and moderation across all

schools. The MCR Team consequently conclude that the University has satisfactorily addressed the recommendation.

19   Noting the risk of inconsistent responses to suspected academic integrity violations, the original review QAA team recommended that the University should **develop and implement a scheme to ensure that decisions in relation to suspected academic integrity violations are made consistently**. The University developed an action plan to:

- Implement the recently revised Student Academic Integrity Procedure that provides more specific guidelines for ensuring a consistent approach to suspected academic integrity violations.
- Include a workshop on the reporting and sanctioning of academic integrity violations as part of the Faculty Professional Development week with faculty presenting examples of how they are implementing the Student Academic Integrity Policy and the recently revised Student Academic Integrity Procedure.

20   Evidence provided by the University showed that a revised Student Academic Integrity Procedure was implemented, with a new Academic Integrity Officer overseeing its implementation. A workshop on the revised procedure was conducted during Autumn 2022. Faculty Professional Development week programming, and the Academic Integrity Officer conducted follow-up workshops in each of the schools, as part of the Annual Operational Plan for the Provost's Office. In addition, the Academic Integrity Officer worked with Provost's Council to develop and implement a new Final Examination Protocol Fall Semester 2022 and Spring Semester 2023. Based on experiences with the final examinations using the new protocol, some revisions to the protocol have been made and were shared with faculty during Faculty Professional Development Week in August 2023.

21   Staff and students met by the MCR team confirmed that they are aware of the new procedures and guidelines that ensure that decisions regarding suspected academic violation are implemented consistently across all schools. Staff reported that they have received training that has enabled them to successfully implement the new procedures. The MCR Team consequently conclude that the University has satisfactorily addressed the recommendation.

22   Noting the lack of evidence to indicate how the University systematically analysed appeals, infringements and complaints to detect trends or other patterns that could be used through learning to reduce future instances, the original QAA review team recommended that the University should **establish systems to properly record and analyse student appeals, infringements and complaints, with appropriate reporting and actions**. In response the University has developed plans to:

- Formalise the system utilised by the Office of Student Affairs to record student appeals, infringements. and complaints.
- Ensure that the annual report of student appeals, infringement, and complaints is analysed each year by the Student Success Committee, including a review of the communication of the appeals system to ensure a wide understanding.

Evidence provided by the University shows that it has implemented a formalised process to track student complaints and grievances. The complaints raised by students are reviewed each year by the Associate Provost for Student Affairs with the Student Success Committee.

23   The MCR team met with staff and students who confirmed that University has established a system to track and analyse and record student appeals, infringements and complaints with appropriate reporting and actions. The MCR team also heard about the range of communication channels open to students that enable them to raise issues, such as

the regular 'Town Hall' meetings held by the President. Students noted that actions are timely and well communicated. The MCR Team conclude that the University has satisfactorily addressed the recommendation.

Noting the lack of a formal channel for the identification and sharing of good practice in relation to learning, teaching and assessment the original QAA review team recommended that the University should **develop and implement a plan to capture and share the good practice in learning, teaching and assessment that arises organically and through the University's various initiatives to secure standards and enhance quality**. In response the University developed plans to:

- Ensure that School, Department and Program meetings have time set aside to share good practice amongst faculty, and this is recorded for wider dissemination.
- Utilise examples of good practice as part of the Faculty Professional Development programme.

Evidence presented by the University shows that the Provost requires each School Dean's Annual Operating Plan to include time for faculty sharing. Furthermore, the annual Faculty Professional Development programme includes daily presentations on good practice by current AURAK faculty.

24   During the visit, the MCR team heard that departmental meetings shared good practices derived from student feedback, evaluations and faculty annual appraisals. The dissemination happens at school level as well as University level. The Provost at University level asks deans for examples from faculty with potential institutional dissemination as part of an ongoing quest to secure standards and enhance quality. The MCR Team was able to confirm that the institution has implemented formal and informal approaches to capture and share good practice in learning, teaching, and assessment. The MCR Team conclude that the University has satisfactorily addressed the recommendation.

25   Noting a breakdown in institutional oversight around admissions, the original QAA review team recommended that the University should review and strengthen the University's oversight of the admissions process, including the important role of the deliberative committee structure. The University has initiated two activities:

- Change the Admissions and Enrolment Management Services Committee with a review of admissions processes in light of the QAA recommendations.
- Implement improvements detailed in the review.

Evidence presented by the University shows that a review of admissions processes has been conducted, and several recommendations have been implemented. These include the identification of documents that have to be collected from all entering students and establishing timelines for provision of such documents with actions specified for students not meeting the deadlines, and blocking conditionally admitted students from online registration for courses and requiring them to provide "undertaking" letters and proof of registration for required tests in order to complete manual registration. In addition the University has implemented on-campus placement testing to substitute for some required national admissions tests.

These initiatives were corroborated by staff met by the MCR team. Based on the evidence provided, the MCR Team conclude that the University has satisfactorily addressed the recommendation.

26   Further to this recommendation the original QAA review team also recommended that the University should clearly outline the process for ensuring that any outstanding admissions documentation has been received in the relevant policy documentation.

The University's response involved the development of plans to:

- Charge the Admissions and Enrolment Management Services Committee with a review of admissions processes in light of the QAA recommendations.
- Implement improvements detailed in the review.

Evidence provided by the University shows that regular reviews are conducted by the Office of Enrolment Management, with reports to the Provost and Associate Provost for Academic Affairs. The Admissions Department produced a list in July 2023, proposing actions to block students with missing documentation from registering online for courses. Students must present an "undertaking" letter and proof of registration.

27   These initiatives were corroborated by staff met by the MCR team. From this evidence, the MCR Team conclude that the University has satisfactorily addressed the recommendation.

28   The original QAA review team could find no evidence that new faculty are required to undergo any training in learning, teaching and assessing as they develop their academic practice and recommended that the University should **develop and implement a scheme that facilitates the development of new faculty in learning, teaching and assessing in higher education**. In response the University developed plans to devise and introduce a professional development framework for new faculty, including an initial assessment of prior knowledge and skills needs analysis, and implement individualised professional development plans for new faculty based on the initial needs analysis. The MCR team saw evidence that a cross-school task force has been formed by the Provost to develop proposals for student-centred learning. The University reported that a questionnaire was developed to assess faculty 's knowledge and skills in effective teaching, which will be used to develop future professional development programmes. This was corroborated in meetings with staff.

29   From this evidence, the MCR Team conclude that the University has satisfactorily addressed the recommendation.

30   Noting concerns around overall staff development offer relating to learning and teaching the original QAA review team recommended that the University should **revise the University's approach to the development of its teaching staff in learning and teaching and, where necessary, its management, to ensure that staff have ongoing access to a broad range of developmental opportunities commensurate with contemporary higher education and its pedagogy**.

31   The University's response involved convening a cross-school task force to explore professional development opportunities and faculty needs and creating an enhanced faculty professional development framework. The University supplied evidence showing that the Provost formed a cross-school task force to develop proposals for promoting student-centred learning, teaching, and assessment, and propose an enhanced faculty professional development framework. The Task Force report included recommendations for scheduling on-campus sessions and making more external opportunities available. Further evidence showed that in Spring 2023, AURAK faculty participated in a multiple session series of online sessions regarding "transformative learning". Some of those faculty shared with their colleagues in internal faculty development sessions how they are implementing suggestions

from the transformative learning courses. Further recommendations regarding scheduling of internal professional development sessions were implemented in Spring 2024.

32   Faculty and staff met by the MCR Team corroborated this evidence and highlighted that concrete efforts are in place to support faculty and staff for continuous professional development opportunities that commensurate with contemporary higher education practices, that systematic support is available to faculty development throughout the year and staff can request support to address their specific professional development needs. The MCR Team conclude that the University has satisfactorily addressed the recommendation.

33   Noting that opportunities for professional support staff to develop their competencies were limited, the original QAA review team recommended that the University should **review and enhance the arrangements for professional support staff to enable them to develop their competencies**.

34   In response, the University developed plans to produce a professional development framework for professional support staff to develop their competencies based on ongoing needs analysis. Evidence presented by the University showed that The Office of Human Resources sent out a Training Needs Analysis Questionnaires to the Office of Student Affairs and SAQR Library to initiate the plan for Professional Development in these areas. The questionnaire, focused on generic competencies such as timekeeping, change management and the leadership. The Office of Human Resources prepared a report of the outcome of the TNA and has been tracking delivery of the associated training.

35   This evidence was corroborated in meetings with staff. In addition, the MCR Team heard from students and staff met on the site visit that the university has increased the number of student employment positions offered on campus to support university students seeking additional financial resources, and that the Office of Student Affairs and the Human Resource Department offers a training programme for staff and faculty who supervise student employees. The MCR Team conclude that the University has satisfactorily addressed the recommendation.

Development of quality assurance and enhancement procedures

36   AURAK has undergone several strategic developments since its IQR review which underpin the development of quality assurance and enhancement, including reaffirmation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) and renewal of licensure through the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA).

37   AURAK proposed a Quality Improvement Plan, which focuses on English achievement and English for Academic Purposes. The University also pursued accreditation for the Biotechnology programme and the Bachelor of Architecture through the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB). AURAK advised the QAA about the School of Business's accreditation process with AACSB, which has since been accepted. AURAK also employed a consultant to assist with its rankings by organisations like Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) and Times Higher Education (THE), highlighting the importance of rankings and the strategic decision to host the QS Higher Ed Summit: Middle East (2024).

38   The University's new leadership revisited its Strategic Plan, which expires at the end of August 2023, and is being implemented in the new Academic Year. AURAK is also reviewing its portfolio of programmes, focusing on profitability, sustainability and appropriateness, to enhance the student learning experience.

39   The University has developed its portfolio of collaborative partnerships in order to improve the quality of the student learning experience. AURAK is an active participant in the SUNY COIL Global Network, offering collaborative online international learning and resources to its accredited Higher Education Institutions. The COIL collaboration between Wayne State University and AURAK began in AY 2020-2021 under a grant from the U.S. Embassy in Abu Dhabi. The collaboration has resulted in paired courses, faculty visits, and summer research internships. AURAK has also entered into a new collaborative agreement with Universiti Teknologi Petronas in Malaysia, forming the basis for a 3+2 agreement between AURAK and UTP. Undergraduate Chemical Engineering students at AURAK will complete three years of study at AURAK and transfer to UTP for two years of master's level study.

Findings from the observations of facilities and learning resources

40   The MCR team had the opportunity to tour the AURAK campus and were able to meet with a range of staff and students.

41   During the meeting with senior managers, it was highlighted that the campus is undergoing significant investment in order to better cater for the expansion of student numbers and the modifications to the curriculum offer.

42   The University has invested significantly in physical classrooms and laboratories. All are well equipped and feature a range of computing equipment, specialist equipment and smart boards emphasising the crucial role of technical and IT support. Additionally, the team visited the library facility and spoke with students who expressed their satisfaction with the Library and Learning Support Hub, praising the accessibility of its enthusiastic staff and resources and the accessibility of flexible study and research spaces. This view was corroborated by students met by the MCR team. The MCR team were also able to visit a range of student support resources, which enable students to better access their courses. They were able to establish that campus facilities are accessible for the students of determination and support for students with learning difficulties is in place. This was corroborated in meetings with students and staff.

43   The University has health and fitness facilities, sports facilities as well as a clinic with a full-time nurse. University accommodation on the Campus is sufficient to meet the current demand. The University has plans for expansion of its facilities as the student numbers grow.