

Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Committee (DEI)

Introduction

Universities are considered micro-societies that reflect the diversity found in society at large. The role of academic institutions has evolved beyond the transmission of knowledge to include promoting the values of social justice, equality, and human dignity for all. The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) Commission is considered the central body responsible for implementing this commitment across all campuses of the Arab Open University (AOU).

Diversity and equality issues hold strategic importance in improving the quality of education and scientific research and enhancing the university's competitiveness. The diverse university community at the AOU, which brings together varied backgrounds and experiences—such as race, gender, religion, disability, and socio-economic background, contributes to enriching academic discussions, developing students' critical thinking skills, and qualifying them to work in an interconnected global environment.

The DEI Commission is responsible for translating these principles into practical procedures and daily experiences within the AOU branches. The Commission acts as a link between the vision of the university's Senior Management and practical requirements. It seeks to ensure that policies for admission, employment, curriculum design, and complaint procedures are based on standards of fairness and justice. The Commission strives to build an inclusive environment where all members of the university feel a sense of belonging, are able to realize their potential, and do not face unnecessary barriers or biases.

Strategic Objectives

The Commission aims to establish and sustain a university environment at the AOU that serves as a model for justice, inclusivity, and equity, ensuring the achievement of the following objectives:

- **Promoting Inclusion:**

- Creating a culture and academic climate where every individual, across all university branches, feels a sense of belonging, respect, and appreciation.
- Diversity here includes all individual and collective differences. It is not limited to visible differences such as gender, race, ethnicity, and disability, but extends to include hidden dimensions such as socio-economic background, work experience, geographic background (across different branches), family status, age, and way of thinking.
- The goal is to move beyond merely accepting variation to creating an environment that accepts and celebrates differences in all their dimensions, ensuring that every individual can achieve their full potential regardless of any of these characteristics.

- **Ensuring Equal Opportunities:**

- Working to remove systemic and cultural barriers that impede access, participation, and success for all members of the university community (students, faculty, and staff) across all university branches.
- This includes reviewing processes for employment, promotion, and access to academic resources and student services to ensure university-wide equity.

- **Combating Discrimination:**

- Eliminating all forms of discrimination, harassment, and violence based on unlawful grounds. This involves establishing clear and applicable policies to ensure accountability across all university facilities and branches.

- **Solidifying Human Rights:**

- Integrating human rights principles as an authentic part of the institutional values and daily practices at the AOU. This includes ensuring that academic standards serve the cause of social justice.

Commission Tasks

The Commission's tasks are divided into three core, integrated axes to ensure the realization of the vision of inclusion across the AOU's branches in the Arab world:

A. Advisory and Legislative Tasks (Policy Formulation)

- **Providing Advice to Management:** Offering recommendations and strategic support to the University President or Senior Management on all issues of diversity, inclusion, and equality, and linking them to the university's strategic plan.
- **Reviewing and Developing Policies:** Reviewing current university policies and procedures (such as admission, employment, evaluation, and academic conduct policies) across all branches to ensure they do not contain any unintentional bias or discrimination. This also includes proposing policies that promote active equity.

- **External Response and Compliance:** Advising on responding to national and international legislative developments related to equality and human rights in higher education. This ensures that the AOU aligns with the highest global standards in this field.

B. Executive and Programmatic Tasks (Implementation and Training)

- **Designing and Implementing Targeted Programs:** Developing and executing initiatives and programs to support underrepresented groups (e.g., increasing female representation in IT programs, or supporting students with disabilities). This includes increasing diversity in recruitment and admission across the university branches through mentoring, guidance, and special scholarship programs.
- **Organizing Training and Awareness:** Preparing and conducting mandatory and continuous workshops for all university affiliates (faculty, staff, and students) at the branch level to raise cultural awareness and provide training on unconscious bias and anti-harassment.
- **Managing Complaints and Conflict Resolution:** Establishing a clear, accessible, and confidential mechanism across the university branches for receiving complaints related to discrimination, harassment, or human rights violations. This involves supervising investigations in collaboration with competent authorities, while emphasizing the protection of the privacy and safety of those who report.

C. Monitoring and Evaluation Tasks (Measurement and Accountability)

- **Monitoring the Campus Climate:** Conducting periodic opinion polls and studies (such as an annual campus climate survey) to assess individuals' perceptions of equality and inclusion across all branches. This data is used to identify weaknesses and areas needing intervention.
- **Collecting and Analyzing Statistical Data:** Collecting and analyzing statistical data related to diversity (such as data on the representation of different groups in appointment committees, leadership positions, or the success rates of students from different backgrounds). This data is used to identify systemic gaps and set quantitative, scheduled goals to improve diversity levels.
- **Preparing Annual Reports:** Preparing and submitting a comprehensive annual report to the Senior Management and the Board of Trustees, detailing the progress made toward diversity and equality goals across the university, remaining challenges, and proposed action plans for the following year, to ensure institutional accountability and transparency.

Challenges and Dual Impact

Challenges Facing the Arab Open University:

- **Resistance to Cultural Change:** The Commission's work may face resistance from some parties who perceive diversity initiatives as conflicting with "merit". Countering this requires continuous communication efforts to clarify how diversity and inclusion enhance merit, rather than detracting from it, especially in a multicultural environment like the AOU.

- **Securing Resources:** The Commission requires a sufficient budget and dedicated staff to translate policies into effective and sustainable work programs across the regional branches.
- **Measuring Success:** It is difficult to measure the "sense of belonging". The Commission must develop qualitative measures (such as analyzing stories and narratives) alongside quantitative measures (statistics) to accurately assess the impact of its work.

Dual Impact:

The Commission's success achieves a critical dual impact at the Arab Open University:

- **Enhancing Academic Excellence and Innovation:** Research confirms that diverse teams produce more innovative solutions and deeper critical thinking. When students and researchers from varied backgrounds interact, established ideas are challenged, and problems are viewed from multiple perspectives, which enhances the quality of research and education.
- **Human Development and Community Leadership:** The university prepares graduates capable of leadership in a diverse world. By instilling values of equity, the AOU contributes to graduating global citizens who embrace social responsibility and promote justice in their communities and professions.

The Diversity and Equality Commission acts as a guardian of the core values at the Arab Open University, moving the university from mere adherence to regulations to institutional leadership in building a just and inclusive society. Its work is not just an ethical add-on but a strategic investment that elevates the quality of research, enhances the university's reputation, and ensures its readiness to face the challenges of the twenty-first century. The Commission's success greatly depends on continuous and clear support from Senior Management, and the cooperation of all colleges, departments, and branches to integrate the principles of diversity and equity into the core of the university's educational and research mission. An AOU that embraces diversity is a university that chooses the future and innovation.

Commission Formation and Core Members

The Commission is formed by a decision of the University President and includes the following members to ensure comprehensive representation and the ability to make decisions:

نائب رئيس الجامعة للتخطيط والتطوير
Vice President for Planning and Development

Role/Position	Suggested Representative	Reason for Representation
Chairperson (Committee Head)	Vice President for Planning and Development	To ensure the Commission's work is linked to the university's strategic plan and to secure financial and executive support from Senior Leadership.
Vice-Chairperson	Director/Head from the University Branches (Rotated)	To ensure the integration of the perspective and local needs of the different regional branches.
Executive Coordinator	Director of the Quality and Accreditation or Human Development Department/Section	To ensure procedural follow-up and link diversity issues to quality standards and accountability.
Academic Member (Dedicated)	Dean of one of the Colleges	To ensure the integration of diversity principles into the curricula and university education.
Representative Member (2)	Representing the Countries of the Branches	To cover geographical, social, and economic diversity across the university branches.
Administrative Staff Member	Director of Personnel/Human Resources Department at the Main Headquarters	To handle issues of employment, promotions, staff complaints, and ensure institutional equity.
Representative Member for Disability/Special Needs	Representative from the Student Support Center or an interested Faculty Member	To ensure that university policies serve the segment of people with special needs, especially in the open and blended learning environment.
Student Representative (2)	Representing students in the countries of the branches (Male/Female Student)	To represent the voice of the student base and convey their daily experience and observations.

Governing Principles for the Commission's Work

To ensure the Commission's effectiveness, it must be based on the following principles:

- **Comprehensive Representation:** Commission meetings are held periodically via video conference to ensure everyone's participation and standardize procedures at the university level.
- **Explicit Mandate:** The formation decision must stipulate that the Commission has the right to review and propose amendments to the university's internal policies related to admission, employment, handling complaints, and curricula.
- **Confidentiality and Neutrality:** Commission members must possess complete integrity and impartiality. The procedures for handling complaints must ensure the complete confidentiality of those who report and those against whom complaints are filed.

Membership Duration and Meetings

- **Membership Duration:** The term of membership is two years, renewable once, to ensure the continuity of institutional work and accumulated experience.
- **Meetings:** The Commission holds its meetings once every trimester (quarterly). It meets exceptionally when necessary or upon the President's invitation.
- **Reports:** The Commission submits a comprehensive annual report to the University President and the Board of Trustees, detailing the progress made in achieving diversity and equity goals.