

Arab Open University Peer Support Program (AOU)

Introduction

The Peer Support Program at the Arab Open University (AOU) aims to provide a **comprehensive educational and professional environment** that supports human communication and interaction within a flexible, interactive, and participatory learning framework. The program enables **students and staff to offer academic, psychological, and social support**, which helps enhance performance, cooperation, and a sense of belonging among university members.

The program serves as a strategy to foster shared responsibility and build a mutually supportive university community. It also contributes to graduating individuals who possess both academic skills and a sense of initiative and belonging, thereby supporting the AOU's sustained excellence.

Strategic Objectives of the Peer Support Program

The program is intended to be an **integral part of the university's strategy** for individual empowerment, rather than just a temporary activity. Its main objectives focus on the following areas:

- **Promoting Solidarity and Cooperation between Students and Staff:** This involves creating communication bridges that go beyond formal relationships and cultivating a culture of synergy and self-help across the campus and various learning centers.
- **Providing Targeted Academic Support for Students:** Offering effective assistance to **new students** or those facing **academic challenges**. This guidance is provided by high-achieving peers who have successfully navigated the same experiences, making the advice practical and realistic.

- **Supporting New Staff in Professional Adaptation:** Assisting new employees to **integrate quickly and effectively** into the work environment. This is achieved through guidance from more experienced colleagues to facilitate the exchange of **institutional knowledge** and practical procedures.
- **Building a Network of Psychological and Social Support:** Creating safe and reliable spaces for sharing ideas, experiences, and concerns to **alleviate psychological and social pressures** individuals may encounter in their educational or professional paths.
- **Developing Leadership and Communication Skills in Participants:** Providing an opportunity for mentors (peer supporters) to enhance their **leadership skills**, ability to explain and guide, and effective listening skills, which are fundamental for their personal and professional benefit.

Target Categories

The program covers two main categories within the university: **Students and Staff**, reflecting comprehensive support and a holistic vision for the university community.

- I. Students: Aiming to enhance academic and social success

Subcategory	Purpose of Support
New Students:	Assisting in the smooth transition from pre-university education, understanding the Open University system, and adapting to its requirements.
Students with Disabilities:	Providing additional assistance to ensure their full access to educational resources and university activities and helping to overcome logistical and academic obstacles.
Students Facing Academic or Social Difficulties:	Offering specialized support in specific courses, or assistance with time management, study organization, or social adaptation within the university.
High-Achieving Students Willing to Volunteer (as Mentors)	Benefiting from their expertise and skills, and developing their sense of responsibility and community participation, which reinforces the concept of " Leadership by Example ."

II. Staff: Aiming to improve institutional performance

Subcategory	Purpose of Support
New Staff	Facilitating the process of acclimation to the university's institutional culture [cite: 35], understanding procedures and policies, and becoming familiar with administrative structures.
Staff Wishing to Develop Their Professional Skills	Providing a platform for exchanging knowledge and skills in specialized areas (administrative, technical, communication) to raise the efficiency of job performance
Experienced Staff (as Guides/Mentors)	Activating their role as " Ambassadors of Institutional Knowledge ," contributing to internal capacity building, and promoting the value of cumulative experience.

Types of Support Provided

The support is centered around **three main dimensions** to meet the varied needs of individuals as an integrated approach:

1. Academic Support (for Students):

This is the cornerstone for ensuring educational success and includes:

- **Group Review Sessions:** Organizing structured meetings to review difficult concepts or prepare for exams, supervised by high-achieving peers in the same subject.

- **Exchange of Study Experiences:** Guidance on how to use open learning resources, effective note-taking methods, and preparation for e-discussions.
- **Organizing Study Groups:** Facilitating the formation of small, self-managed groups for deeper understanding and collaborative studying.

2. Social and Psychological Support (for All):

This focuses on the human and emotional aspect to ensure well-being within the university community:

- **Informal Listening and Guidance Sessions:** Providing a listening ear to cope with **academic stress or work pressures**. The support aims to give the beneficiary a sense of being heard and valued.
- **Activities for Relationship Building and Confidence Boosting:** Organizing simple events (online or physical) to **break social barriers** and strengthen bonds between individuals.

3. Professional Support (for Staff):

This aims to raise the efficiency of the work environment and enhance professional development:

- **Guidance in the Work Environment:** Helping new peers understand job roles, the sequence of administrative procedures, and priority setting.
- **Sharing Institutional Knowledge:** Transferring expertise on using internal systems, understanding administrative policies, and best practices for completing tasks.
- **Support in Developing Administrative and Technical Skills:** Practical guidance on using new software or technical tools or developing skills such as meeting management or report writing.

Implementation Mechanism

The program's success requires a **clear and organized operating mechanism** to ensure effective matching and continuous follow-up:

1. **Opening Registration and Participation:** Launching a comprehensive awareness campaign across all Open University branches to attract participants as **mentors (peer supporters) and beneficiaries**. Registration must include sufficient data on specialization, experience, skills, and the type of support required that can be provided.
2. **Conducting Short Interviews and Initial Training:** Interviews must be conducted to accurately determine the beneficiaries' needs and to verify the mentors' motivation and commitment. Mentors must receive initial training focusing on **active listening skills, maintaining confidentiality, and the limits of the mentor's role** (confirming they are not therapists or official academic advisors).
3. **Peer Matching:** This is the most important step to ensure the effectiveness of the support. Matching is based on:
 - **Specialization or Job Field:** (To ensure a common understanding of challenges).
 - **Interests or Cultural Background:** (For social support).
 - **Nature of the Required Support:** (Academic, technical, adaptive).
4. **Organizing Regular Meetings and Progress Follow-up:** Setting a proposed timeframe for the relationship (e.g., **4-6 weeks**) and determining the recommended number of meetings. The program coordinator should conduct **informal follow-up** to ensure the relationship is progressing positively.
5. **Periodic Program Evaluation:** To ensure the program's continuity and improvement, evaluation relies on:
 - **Satisfaction Surveys:** For mentors and beneficiaries to measure the achievement of objectives.
 - **Participant Feedback:** Collecting success stories and challenges faced.
 - **Performance Indicators:** Measuring the impact of the support (such as improved grades for beneficiaries or faster integration of new staff).

Expected Outcomes

Investing in the Peer Support Program is an **investment in the future** of the Arab Open University. The expected outcomes are:

1. **Improved Academic and Professional Performance:** A reduction in student failure and withdrawal rates, and an increase in staff productivity and the efficiency of administrative operations.
2. **Increased Satisfaction and Belonging Rates:** The feeling that the university cares about the individual as a person, not just a number, which **deepens loyalty** and reduces rates of resignation or attrition.
3. **Building a Cohesive and Supportive University Community:** Creating a strong network of positive relationships that contribute to a healthy and positive educational environment.
4. **Promoting a Culture of Volunteering and Initiative:** Transforming the concept of help from a duty into a value, encouraging individuals to **take the lead** and contribute actively to building their university community.