STUDENT EXPERIENCE NETWORK

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1.0   PREAMBLE

While the attention to student affairs at AKU is not new, the concept of a University-wide Student Experience Network (SE_net) marks an increased commitment in this area by the university. In presenting this discussion paper, we believe it is important to provide some background against which the new SE_net will be set, to supply information on the current state of student affairs and the student experience within AKU, and finally, to propose our plans and goals.

2.0   BACKGROUND

Over the first 25 years of AKU's history, services and activities associated with campus and student life, but ancillary to the University's academic programmes, have been in large part limited to the Medical College and the School of Nursing and Midwifery (SONAM) in Pakistan.

SONAM's Student Organisation had traditionally arranged non-academic events and, prior to December 2006, student activities for the Medical College undergraduate programmes were managed by the Associate Dean, Student Affairs, Faculty of Health Sciences. More recently, the Office of the Registrar and, currently, the Manager of Campus and Student Life have undertaken these responsibilities.

The Institute for Educational Development (IED), Pakistan began its programmes in 1993, and the Advanced Nursing Studies, Postgraduate Medical Education and IED programmes in East Africa commenced in 2002, 2004 and 2007, respectively. For all intents and purposes, no student service/student life activities have been offered to students in these programmes.

Student services and "pastoral care" at the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations have been the responsibility of the Office of the Registrar. Many of the services offered are provided under contract with a third party.

Until now the provision of services in areas such as academic success services, personal and psychological counselling have been entirely absent from the University's student services.

With a greater understanding of the need to provide intra- and extra-mural activities to our students, we must now undertake a concerted effort to respond to student requests and the clear need for an active, supportive and rich student experience while attending AKU.

3.0   CURRENT ACTIVITIES

3.1   Pakistan

Over the past three years, student and campus life on the Karachi campuses has changed demonstrably. Prior to December 2010, services to students had been managed by staff in the Office of the Registrar. The full-time position of Manager, Campus and Student Life, was

created to meet the needs for more and better communication with students, for a more personal relationship with the student community and to provide a first contact for campus and student life issues, not only for students but for all members of the University community in Karachi.

Mr Amin Lakhani was appointed Manager, Campus and Student Life, in December 2010. In addition to acting as a liaison between students and the University, he co-ordinates the social, student government and cultural activities that promote leadership and provide healthy entertainment for the student body.

3.2   East Africa

To date, there has been very little effort put into the ancillary student experience for our East African programmes. Given the nature of the Advanced Nursing Studies and Master of Medicine (MMed) programmes, students have indicated that they have little time for social activities. However, the need for other student support services, such as academic success skills (e.g., study skills, time management, academic writing workshops) and counselling services, is quite acute.

The Master of Education (MEd) programme in Dar es Salaam has little or no student services, activities or programming provided by the University. For the most part, whenever there has been a desire for student activity, this has been arranged by the students themselves. Additionally, the hostel life of students in the MEd programme requires support.

3.3   UK

The Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (ISMC) has always had tightly-knit cohorts of students. From the time the students commence their orientation activities, a sense of community pervades that class. Beginning with its first class, student support services have been well established and have received praise from the UK Quality Assurance Agency. As with all university students, ISMC students do not hesitate to provide feedback on the additional services they would like to have available to them. The Assistant Registrar, ISMC, working with the Associate Vice-Provost and University Registrar, communicates regularly with students in order to address newly identified needs.

4.0   PLANS AND GOALS FOR THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE NETWORK

4.1   Proposed Plans

Currently, the Student Experience Network is made up principally of staff from the Office of the Registrar, especially in East Africa and the UK. As part of the SE_net, these staff will continue to provide student support under the leadership of the Associate Vice-Provost (Student Experience) and University Registrar. In this way, we capitalise on the existing operations of the Office of the Registrar to provide both academic and non-academic support services to all of the University's students. Figure 1 below shows the SE_net's areas of service and responsibility.
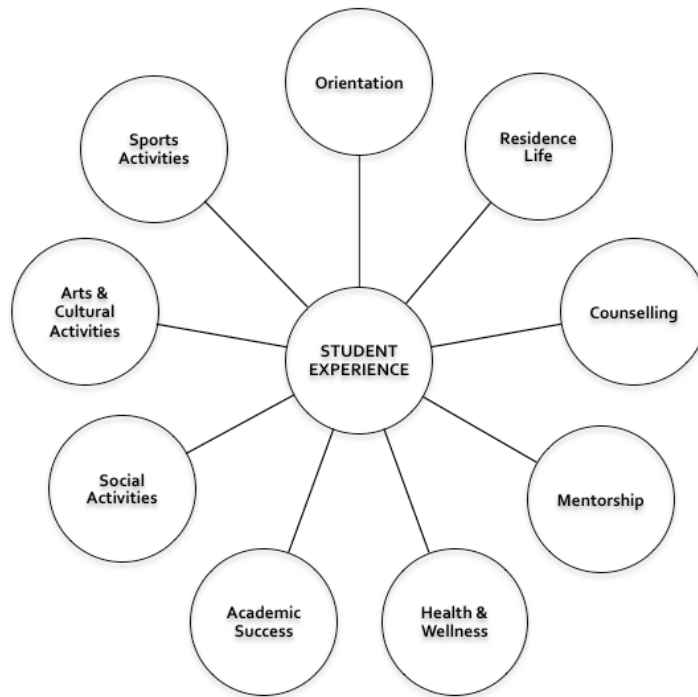
Figure 1. The Student Experience Network areas of service and responsibility

We propose that the University's SE_net be marshalled under three headings:
1. Campus and Student Life
2. Counselling and Development
3. Residence Life

Each of these will provide support/services as follows:
1. Campus and Student Life
   a. Social & sporting activities
   b. Arts & cultural activities
   c. Student leadership/liaison with student government
   d. Student clubs and associations
2. Counselling and Development
   a. Academic success
   b. Student health & welfare
   c. Mentorship
   d. Counselling (personal, academic, career)
3. Residence Life
   a. Hostels management
   b. Hostel life

It will be important for members of the SE_net to work closely with professional and administrative staff at each of the University's campuses in order to provide excellent student services. For example, we will work closely with the IED's Manager of Administration in order to provide hostel services in Dar es Salaam; with transportation services in Karachi for students living in off-campus hostels; and with the student health physician and student health nurse to respond to the health and welfare issues of our students in Karachi. As a final example, we believe it will be critical to liaise with members of the AKU academe in East Africa and the UK to provide academic success seminars and workshops, as well as continuing support services to our students.

Beginning in February 2013, the SE_net took on responsibility for residence life across the University. The Office of the Registrar had long been responsible for the Faculty of Health Sciences' male and female hostels in Karachi. The new SE_net be responsible for these hostels as well as IED's hostels in both Pakistan and East Africa and for residence life at ISMC.

In Karachi, discussions are currently underway that would see a shift of counselling services from the academic entities to the SE_net. At present, the counselling services are considered to be inadequate, with one full-time counsellor at the Medical College and a half-time position at each of SONAM and IED, all reporting directly to the academic entity head.

4.2   Goals: A Five-Year Plan

4.2.1   Short-Term Goals

Within one year (December 2014):
1. Conditional upon budgetary approval, creation of a Counselling and Development Centre in Karachi.
2. In order to determine our current needs, conduct a student experience / student services audit to establish baseline services at each of the University's campuses.
3. As identified by our students, introduce a set of academic success events, including time management, study skills and writing workshops.
4. Create a Student Experience Committee on each of the campuses under the leadership of a member of the SE_net with the goal of meeting quarterly with the AVP in order to identify student services needs.
5. As per local legislation, meet with students to respond to needed student governance requirements.
6. Development of a University-wide hostel operations manual and University-wide set of hostel regulations.

4.2.2   Medium-Term Goals

Three to four years:
1. Develop a student co-curricular transcript.
2. Develop robust entity-based student mentorship programmes including both faculty-student mentorship (face-to-face and online) and a peer mentorship programme whereby current students act as mentors and guide new students through the first six weeks of their studies.
3. Develop a University-wide Student Honour Code.
4. Create the position of Manager, Campus and Student Life, East Africa.
5. Create a Counselling and Development Centre in Nairobi.
6. Under the leadership of the Manager, University Residence (Pakistan), develop a cadre of student residence assistants thus creating a system of peer counselling and mentoring.
7. Commence student engagement surveys.

4.2.3   Long-Term Goals

By the end of five years:

1. Adopt the Quality Assurance Agency's "Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education" in the areas of:
    a. Career education, information, advice and guidance
    b. Appeals and complaints
2. Establish AKU as a leader in the National Survey of Student Engagement (North America) and/or the National Student Survey (UK).

5.0   CONSULTATON PROCESS

How can you provide feedback on the Networks discussion papers?

The discussion papers on QAI_net and TL_net, SE_net, and BDL_net will be distributed to academic entity heads and other members of the Academic Council at its November meeting.

Deans, academic directors and programme heads will be asked to distribute these papers widely within their units to faculty, staff and students and to table the documents at their respective faculty council or similar meetings for discussion in December 2013 and the first two weeks of January 2014. Group discussions should provide an opportunity for interested students and staff as well as faculty to contribute responses.

Entity heads will be asked to summarize the comments, suggestions and questions that arise from these group discussions and submit them to Vice Provost Kweku Bentil.

Although we do not wish to limit the range of issues addressed in feedback, consideration of the following questions would be useful:
- Do the networks meet the needs of students, faculty and academic programmes?
- Are there areas not mentioned in the discussion papers that should be emphasized?
- What specific expertise already exists in AKU's academic entities and among members of faculty that could contribute to the work of any of the networks?
- Are there areas of ambiguity that require clarification?

We also encourage individual members of faculty, staff and students to submit their own feedback for consideration by the network leaders and authors of the papers.

Please submit all feedback to Vice Provost Kweku Bentil (kweku.bentil@aku.edu) by the end of the day on Friday, January 31, 2014.

Once these responses have been reviewed we will consider the possibility of creating a discussion forum for community members and the network directors to engage in a dialogue regarding issues raised in the discussion papers. In addition, should the response warrant it, we will also explore the possibility of holding one or more virtual town hall meetings.

The feedback received from the university community will shape the final versions of these papers, set the directions for the networks and shape the priorities for the network leadership and their advisory committees. As a result of this process, QAI_net, TL_net, BDL_net and SE_net will be better able to serve the needs of our programmes, faculty and students in our collective efforts to establish the very best learning and teaching environment at Aga Khan University.