BRITISH ACCREDITATION COUNCIL INSPECTION REPORT

MID-WAY PROBATION REVIEW
(Independent Higher Education)

INSTITUTION: Unicaf University

ADDRESS: UNICAF Building
Old International Airport
7130 Larnaca
Cyprus

P.O. Box 42572
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Cyprus

HEAD OF INSTITUTION: Dr Nicos Nicolaou

ACCREDITATION STATUS: Probation Accreditation

DATE OF INSPECTION: 3 September 2020

ACCREDITATION COMMITTEE DECISION AND DATE:

1.   Background to the institution

Unicaf University (UU/the Institution) is a privately owned, independent university that offers Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate degrees via distance learning, as well as through a blended learning option. The administrative office of Unicaf University Federal is based in Larnaca, Cyprus, and all provision is centrally managed including the development of programmes. The Institution has teaching campuses in Malawi and Zambia, and learning centres offering enrolment advice and access to computer laboratories, internet and other student services in Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Morocco, Nigeria and South Africa. A new campus is being developed in Uganda. In addition, a new university licence has been awarded in Zimbabwe to support blended and online learning developments. BAC's accreditation and this inspection cover only the provision in Malawi and Zambia.

The vision of UU is to become a lead provider of higher education, combining e-learning with face-to-face instruction, and to contribute to relevant scientific research that serves the interests of local countries and communities across sub-Saharan Africa. The Institution aims to contribute to the educational and sustainable economic development of communities through the provision of accessible, internationally recognised education programmes that focus on developing professional and digital skills. Programmes are made accessible and affordable to low-income groups through scholarships.

The mission of UU is to assist students to become educated individuals, to achieve their academic and career goals, and to assume responsible roles in a changing world of international co-operation and interdependence.

Unicaf University is owned by Unicaf, with investment from the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) Group, which is the United Kingdom (UK) Government's development finance institution, and from Goldman Sachs, EDEX and University Ventures in the United States of America (USA).

The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Institution is supported by heads of academic, support and finance departments and the Vice-Chancellor of Unicaf University Federal. The CEO reports to the Unicaf Board of Directors. The Senate is the senior academic body and the University Council has oversight of administration and budgets across all centres. Governance and management links are clearly articulated within the organisation's structure.

The campuses in Malawi and Zambia have their own Vice-Chancellor and Pro-Vice-Chancellors, who operate in line with their local regulatory authority requirements, with oversight of standards and the administration functions provided through the administrative office of Unicaf University in Cyprus . The staff at the administrative office include the Deans of Faculty, academic programme development teams, finance and administration departments, and online library management staff as well as student support services.

Unicaf was founded in 2012 as the e-learning extension of EDEX to specialise in online provision. Unicaf's university brand was established in Malawi in 2016, and in Zambia in 2017. The administrative office and the campuses work together to provide admissions services, online course access, student support services and administrative support.

Changes have been made to the senior management, with new Vice-Chancellors appointed for both the Malawi and Zambia campuses.

2.   Brief description of the current provision

All UU programmes are offered online, with a blended learning option available for students enrolled on Unicaf University in Malawi and Unicaf University in Zambia accredited programmes. The blended learning option includes face-to-face tutorials and some additional subject-based classes to support students' understanding of the module content.

In Malawi, seven undergraduate programmes are offered. These are a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Business Administration, BA in Hospitality Management, BA in Economics and Business, and a Bachelor of Science (BSc) in Computer Science, BSc in Supply Chain Management and Logistics, BSc in Accounting and BSc in Finance. The postgraduate provision includes Master's degrees in Business Administration with seven specialisation streams including general, management information systems, oil, gas and energy management, management, health management, finance and marketing. The provision also includes Master's degrees in Education, Organisational Psychology and Public Administration.

In addition, the Institution offers Doctorate degrees. These are Doctor of Business Administration (DBA), Doctor of Education (EdD), and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Marketing Management, Information Technology (IT), Education, Business Administration, and Accounting and Finance.

Unicaf University in Zambia offers undergraduate programmes in Accounting and Finance, Hospitality Management, English Language and Literature, Law and Business Administration. Postgraduate programmes are offered in a wide range of subject areas including Business Administration, Business Administration in Management, Business Administration in Finance, Business Administration in Oil, Gas and Energy Management, Business Administration in Health Management, Business Administration in Management Information Systems, Law, Education, Educational Leadership and Management, English Language and Literature and Web Design and Development. Three Doctorates are offered in Philosophy, Business Administration and Education.

At the time of the inspection 9,821 students were enrolled, with 3,055 studying at the Unicaf University in Malawi and 6,766 registered with Unicaf University in Zambia. The significant majority of students are enrolled on postgraduate programmes. The majority of students are male and students are drawn from a wide range of countries, including Nigeria, Zambia, Malawi, Kenya, Ghana, Jamaica, Botswana, South Africa and Egypt, as well as further afield in Europe, Asia, the Caribbean and South America. No students under 18 years old are accepted.

Students are enrolled on a continuous basis for all provision, and the large majority of students are in employment. The entry requirements for all programmes are published on the Institution's website and are included in the clear and accessible programme descriptors, along with the English language requirements for both undergraduate and postgraduate provision.

3. Inspection process

The inspection was conducted online over one day by a single inspector. Meetings were held with senior managers and academic staff as well as with administrative and student services staff. A wide range of documentation was provided electronically and scrutinised in advance of the meetings. The Institution co-operated very positively with the inspection.

4. Inspection history

Inspection type	Date
Full Accreditation	7, 9 & 11 October 2019

PART B – JUDGEMENTS AND EVIDENCE

The following judgements and comments are based upon evidence seen by the inspector during the inspection and from documentation provided by the institution.

1. Significant changes since the last inspection

New Vice-Chancellors have been appointed at the Institution's campuses in Malawi and Zambia as both previous post holders have retired from full-time employment. The former Deputy Vice-Chancellor has been appointed Vice-Chancellor for Unicaf University Malawi, and the former Vice-Chancellor has been appointed as Non-Executive President Emeritus. The former Vice-Chancellor of Unicaf University Zambia has been appointed its Chancellor and a new Vice-Chancellor has been appointed.

The Unicaf University in Malawi has received full institutional accreditation from the Malawi regulatory authorities for higher education, and most programmes have been fully accredited, while the remaining programmes will be accredited in due course. The programmes at Unicaf University in Zambia are accredited by the regulatory authority, and the Institution submitted 10 programmes for accreditation.

2. Response to actions points in last report

1.1 The Institution must make information on the organisation's structure and responsibilities available to all staff and students to promote a broader understanding of management responsibilities.

Clear and appropriate information about the senior management and their roles and responsibilities is available to all stakeholders through the federal and country-based websites. The information effectively supports a broader understanding of the organisation and its management structure.

2.3 The Institution must introduce mechanisms to ensure that the strategic plan objectives are clearly communicated to all stakeholders to enhance their awareness of the development priorities of the organisation.

The strategic priorities and objectives of UU are made available to all stakeholders through the Institution's website. The information effectively promotes awareness of the Institution's priority development areas and updates are made as appropriate. A local five-year strategic plan is currently being developed for UU Malawi to support local priorities and skills needs and will also be made available online when finalised.

4.1 The Institution must provide clear information about the structure and responsibilities of key post holders and the remits of committees to all staff and students to ensure that they understand the responsibilities within the Institution.

Clear information on key post holders and the committee structure is provided through the Institution's website. This effectively supports stakeholder groups including governors, management, staff and students to understand senior roles and responsibilities and the broader decision-making processes. However, the remits of committees are not easily accessible through the available information on the committee structure.

9.1 The Institution must develop a clear policy and procedure to support staff to engage in research activity to support their subject knowledge and the work of Master's and Doctorate students.

A clear research policy has been developed and shared with staff, and the appointment of a new Research Officer will enable information on research opportunities and external events to be shared across the Institution. The regular meetings of the Research Degree Committee ensure that appropriately qualified staff are allocated to support the research work of Master's and Doctorate students. However, no research forums or groups have yet been established to promote sharing of research and collaborative opportunities.

11.5 Training must be provided for academic staff to ensure staff have an understanding of how to support students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to enable them to achieve their qualifications.

A new manual has been developed that effectively promotes an understanding of how students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities can be supported, and online training delivered. Staff materials and training enable an understanding of the most common learning difficulties and disabilities and identify a range of appropriate support strategies. The student support department works alongside the academic staff and is also able to provide advice, guidance and support for individual students.

12.4 A clearly structured approach must be introduced to ensure the consistency, clarity and constructiveness of feedback to all students.

New guidance has been developed and made available to all academic staff on providing good-quality feedback and to support the consistency and constructiveness of written feedback. Programme leaders and the quality assurance department monitor assessment feedback to ensure that students are provided with appropriate guidance to enable them to improve their work.

13.5 The Institution must ensure students have access to all study resources throughout their period of study, including access to resources linked to completed modules.

The Institution is working to develop its online library system and capacity to enable all students to have access to all resources and materials. The current system allows students to download module materials whilst they are working through an individual module, and these materials can be stored by students on their own systems for ongoing access. Once a module has been completed, however, the materials are no longer accessible although they may be requested and made available to individual students.

14.8 The Institution must develop appropriate mechanisms to raise staff awareness of the dangers of radicalisation and extremism and prevent students from being radicalised.

A clear memorandum highlighting the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism has been drafted and circulated to staff. The dangers are highlighted and links for additional information and guidance are provided. However, no information on the dangers of radicalisation and extremism has been produced for students to raise their awareness.

26.3 The Institution must fully implement mechanisms to inform stakeholders of actions taken in response to their feedback.

Students are made aware of actions taken in response to their feedback through a range of appropriate mediums, including use of e-mails, newsletters and information placed on the website, as well as through tutors and the students' union. A Student Engagement Officer post has been created to further monitor, support and enhance student communications.

3.   Response to recommended areas for improvement in last report

It is recommended that the Institution implements performance reviews for staff across all countries to help identify staff development needs and to inform the provision of Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

Performance reviews are conducted at departmental level and the current paper-based format can be customised to individual countries and departments, with a focus on informing individuals' CPD needs. However, there is limited sharing of outcomes across the whole Institution to inform a broader staff development programme effectively. A new electronic appraisal process linked to a recently purchased programme is being put in place and will be managed centrally by the human resources department. The new system will provide an organisation-wide system and also be used to inform professional development priorities.

The Institution should consider including the duration of programmes and number of modules to be completed each year as part of pre-course information to enhance transparency.

Website information has been revised and updated to include clear information on the number of modules to be studied each year for each programme and the duration of individual programmes. This has effectively enhanced transparency for applicants and other stakeholders.

It is recommended that the Institution develops a framework and procedures for the consistent and effective management of dissertations and to provide clear information to the research committee.

The Research Degree Committee monitors the management and submission of dissertations and theses effectively. The Research Ethics Committee ensures that all proposals are ethical and sit within the approved protocols. The research policy clearly sets out the Institution's expectations around the management of research, and minutes of the Research Degree Committee clearly record decisions linked to the management of dissertations. Students may proceed with research, subject to the approval of the Research Degree Committee.

It is recommended that the Institution ensures that the percentage guidance on similarity scores is consistently implemented across all provision and campuses, and that similarity scores are included in the feedback rubrics to highlight plagiarism incidence and risks to students.

Robust guidance on academic malpractice has been developed and distributed to all academic staff. Guidance includes advice on dealing with percentage similarity scores and the nature of feedback students should receive to alert them to the risks of plagiarism and the subsequent penalties. Commentary on similarity scores is also transparently provided through online plagiarism software used for student submissions and highlighted in rubrics and feedback commentary.

The Institution should consider only using channels for formal communications with students that utilise safe messaging services and provide a reliable record of communications.

Staff have clear guidance on the use of formal and official channels for communication with students. This is transparently set out in the communications policy, which emphasises the requirement to maintain accurate records of communications with students. Students are also made aware of formal channels in their handbooks and by staff.

The Institution should consider developing information, advice and guidance for all students on careers and further studies to support their progression into further study or employment.

Information, advice and guidance for students on possible careers and options for further study are clearly set out in the student support services guide. Students can approach advisors and their academic tutors for information and guidance, and also have access to careers events organised in both Malawi and Zambia.

It is recommended that a complaints register be instituted to support the management oversight of issues identified by students and to support enhancements.

Complaints registers are kept for students enrolled on the programmes at Unicaf University in Malawi and Unicaf University in Zambia. The complaints registers include a clear record of the issues and actions taken, responsible staff and whether the issues have been resolved. Registers are monitored by senior managers and appropriate actions are taken in response to recurring concerns.

PART C – SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

FURTHER WORK TO MEET OUTSTANDING ACTIONS

None	☐ High ☐ Medium ☐ Low

FURTHER WORK TO MEET OUTSTANDING RECOMMENDED AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

It is recommended that the federal committee diagram is supported by information about the terms of reference of individual committees to enhance the transparency of the decision-making processes.

The Institution should continue to develop the online library platform to support broader access to material and resources from all modules for all students.

It is recommended that the outcomes of performance review and appraisal systems are shared and used to inform professional development themes, as well as individual needs.

ADDITIONAL ACTIONS REQUIRED

None	☐ High ☐ Medium ☐ Low

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT *(to be reviewed at the next inspection)*

The Institution should continue to develop systems for sharing research outcomes, including research forums to promote a research culture and collaborative initiatives.

It is recommended that information on the dangers of radicalisation and extremism be developed and included in student material to raise awareness of the risks.