March 20, 2015

Nabil Ibrahim  
Vice Chancellor  
Abu Dhabi University  
P. O. Box 59911  
Abu Dhabi  
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Dear Chancellor Ibrahim:

At its meeting February 18-20, 2015, the Commission considered the report of the Seeking Accreditation Visit team that conducted an on-site review of Abu Dhabi University (ADU) September 23-27, 2014. Commission members also reviewed the Seeking Accreditation Visit report submitted by the institution prior to the visit and its November 20, 2014, response to the visiting team report. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the visit with you and with Dr. Heather Lynn Friesen, ALO and Director, Institutional Research and Strategy. Your comments were very helpful in informing the commission’s deliberations.

This visit was scheduled to evaluate the institution’s status with regard to the Commission’s Standards of Accreditation in order to determine whether to grant Initial Accreditation; the team’s findings are addressed below. The team also inquired into the institution’s response to issues identified for attention by the Eligibility Review Committee as communicated in its letter. The team determined that the institution had responded appropriately by refining its policies on credit hour and academic freedom; by improving student services, particularly in support of improving retention; by revising governance bylaws to more fully comply with WSCUC policies; and by enhancing upper division general education courses.

Based on the team’s report and the other information sources as identified above, the Commission has determined the following with regard to the institution’s compliance with each of the WSCUC Standards of Accreditation.
Standard 1: Defining Institutional Purposes and Ensuring Educational Objectives.

The Commission has determined that the institution has met this Standard.

The Commission commends the institution’s achievements under this Standard for developing – with significant faculty involvement – learning outcomes at the course, program, and institutional levels, and for identifying key achievement indicators by which student progress can be verified. The Commission also notes that the institution enrolls students representing 55 nationalities, who are in turn served by staff and faculty from 25 nationalities – an indication of ADU’s commitment to diversity.

Standard 2: Achieving Educational Objectives through Core Functions.

The Commission has determined that the institution has met this Standard.

The Commission commends the institution’s achievements under this Standard for its rigorous program design process. The quality of its programs is verified by achieving accreditation from regional agencies as well as by obtaining ABET accreditation for its three engineering degrees and by being in the final stages of obtaining AACSB accreditation for its business programs. The Commission also notes the team’s finding that “the University’s approach to, and support for, the assessment of teaching and learning [is] exemplary.”

While the institution has largely met the criteria for this standard, the Commission noted concern with regard to CFR 2.11 and 2.13. The Commission was pleased to learn from the institution’s response to the team report that ADU will be adopting the Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) as a framework for assessment of co-curricular programs and student services. The Commission will look forward to seeing progress on this important process. The Commission was also pleased to learn in the panel interview that the institution had hired a new director of Student Life. However, that person was not expected to begin employment for several months. With the new leadership in place, it is hoped that the institution will be able to expand its student services to relieve the overload on administrative staff noted in the team report.

Standard 3: Developing and Applying Resources and Organizational Structures to Ensure Quality and Sustainability.

The Commission has determined that the institution has met this Standard with minimal compliance.

The Commission commends the institution’s achievements under this Standard for bringing together a qualified, competent, and committed faculty. The Commission notes the broadly participatory budget process and the achievement of nine years of unqualified external audits. The Commission also notes the very recent revisions to the Independent Governing Board Policy. The Commission commends ADU for providing a very suitable physical plant and technical infrastructure in service of student learning.

With regard to financial stability (CFR 3.4), the team report notes that there is in place a good system of committees that ensure broad university input to the budget with five years of operational and capitol financial projections driven by the strategic plan. At the
same time, the team report also notes the complexity and challenges facing the financial stability of the institution and the “significant potential problems with the strategic and financial plans.” The report raises concerns regarding the institution’s dependence on the Military Program for 30-40% of the total University tuition, the increasingly highly competitive market of the UAE, which now supports over 100 colleges and universities, and the investments required for increased faculty research. As the report notes, the institution is further challenged by the annual payment of more than 31 million AED for rental of facilities and another 65 million AED due to offset financing of capital requirements to another related party. As the report states, “the net effect of these and other financial interactions is to limit the funds available for investment in enrollment and research growth.” Because of these challenges and in addition to the fact that current finances produce modest surpluses, the Commission queried the institution during panel discussion regarding the annual management fee of 10% of net profit to the Board of Directors Chairman noted in the team report. The specific question was whether or not any Board members were compensated. The institution responded that this was not the case. The Commission panel was puzzled by this response and requests clarification of this issue. The issue is particularly of concern not only because of the impact on institutional investments but also because of the complexity of the Board structure and the questions raised in the prior review with regard to the independence of the Boards. (CFR 3.9)

Standard 4: Creating an Organization Committed to Quality Assurance, Institutional Learning, and Improvement.

The Commission has determined that the institution has met this Standard.

The Commission commends the institution’s achievements under this Standard for implementing core quality processes such as maintaining the Balanced Scorecard, supporting an extensive institutional research function, and extensively using data in support of improvement-related decisions. The Commission notes that the strategic plan grows out of a clear commitment to the mission, is linked to benchmarks and metrics, and is consistently tied to Scorecards at every level.

In view of the above, the Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Special Visit Report and grant Candidacy for a period of five years
2. Schedule a Special Visit at a time determined by WSCUC staff to review progress related to the financial strength of the institution, the progress on enrollment growth, continued development in governance structures, the improvements in co-curricular programs and assessment, and the implementation of the strategic plan.

In taking this action to grant Candidacy, the Commission confirms that Abu Dhabi University has satisfactorily addressed the Core Commitments to Student Learning and Success; Quality and Improvement; and Institutional Integrity, Sustainability, and Accountability. The Commission also confirms that the institution has successfully completed this review conducted under the 2013 Standards of Accreditation. Between this action and the time of the next review, the institution is expected to maintain its
compliance with WSCUC Standards and its commitment to continuous quality improvement. It is also expected to continue its progress in the following areas:

Development of Student Services with a particular focus on appointing qualified leadership dedicated to the areas of responsibility identified in the team report (CFRs 2.11; 2.13)

Implementation of the Strategic Plan, with the allocation of realistic resources in support of the development of the university’s research capacities (CFR 3.4)

The deployment of initiatives in support of enrollment management, including growth, retention, and new program development to achieve tuition-based financial stability (CFRs 2.2; 2.7; 2.10-14; 3.4; 4.6-7)

Review the financial commitments required to recruit and retain qualified faculty and staff in the context of the ADU’s competitive environment (CFRs 3.1-3; 4.7)

Clarification of the structure and membership of the Boards and Board member compensation (CFR 3.9)

Review and evaluate the effectiveness of the recently established governing board structure (CFR 3.7 and 3.9)

Candidate status is not granted retroactively. Institutions granted the status of Candidacy must use the following statement if they wish to describe the status publicly:

Abu Dhabi University has been awarded Candidate status by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission, 985 Atlantic Avenue, Suite 100, Alameda, CA 94501, (510) 748-9001. Candidacy is not accreditation and does not ensure eventual accreditation; it means that an institution is progressing toward accreditation.

The Commission stipulates that this action encompasses the degrees offered by Abu Dhabi University at the time of this action, as listed in the attached Consolidated List of Currently Confirmed Degrees. In keeping with the WSCUC Policy on Degree Level Approval, Abu Dhabi University is designated as having an "I" (Individual) status for each of the degree levels currently being offered. This means that all new degree programs initiated by the institution will require prior approval through WSCUC's Substantive Change process. Degree programs that have been reviewed and included under this action may be extended to other campuses of the institution without prior Substantive Change action.

Institutions granted Candidacy are required to:

1. Submit an Annual Report in the format required by the Commission.
2. Keep the Commission informed of any significant changes or developments, especially those that require prior approval according to the Commission’s Substantive Change Policy. The University is approved to offer only the degrees listed in the attached consolidated list of degrees at its current locations. Please consult the Substantive Change Manual and confer with your WSCUC liaison about any proposed new degree programs, off-campus sites, online offerings, and/or changes in governance or ownership, to determine if these matters should be approved in advance by WSCUC.

3. Pay Annual Membership Dues calculated on the institution’s student FTE and prorated from the date of this action. An Annual Dues statement will be sent under separate cover.

In accordance with Commission policy, a copy of this letter will be sent to the chair of Abu Dhabi University’s governing board in one week. The Commission expects that the team report and this action letter will be widely disseminated throughout the institution to promote further engagement and improvement and to support the institution's response to the specific issues identified in these documents. The team report and the Commission’s action letter will also be posted on the WSCUC website. If the institution wishes to respond to the Commission action on its own website, WSCUC will post a link to that response.

Finally, the Commission wishes to express its appreciation for the extensive work that the University undertook in preparing for and supporting this accreditation review. WSCUC is committed to an accreditation process that adds value to institutions while contributing to public accountability, and we are grateful for your continued support of this process. Please contact me if you have any questions about this letter or the action of the Commission.

Sincerely,

Mary Ellen Petrisko
President

MEP/rw

Cc: William Ladusaw, Commission Chair
    Heather Lynn Friesen, ALO
    HE Ali Saeed Bin Harmal Al Dhaheri, Board Chair
    Members of the Special Visit team
    Richard Winn