



**Oman Academic
Accreditation Authority**

**Report of an Audit of
College of Applied Sciences
Sohar**

November 2010

Audit Report Number 013

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OVERVIEW OF THE QUALITY AUDIT PROCESS

This Quality Audit Report (the 'Report') documents the findings of a Quality Audit by the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA – formerly the Oman Accreditation Council) of the College of Applied Sciences, Sohar (CAS Sohar). It comments on CAS Sohar's Mission and Vision, and the appropriateness and effectiveness of its systems for achieving that Mission and Vision. Quality Audit is the first stage in Oman's institutional accreditation process. It is designed to provide a level of assurance to the public about the quality of CAS Sohar's activities, and constructive feedback to CAS Sohar to assist with its ongoing improvement efforts.

The Quality Audit commenced with CAS Sohar undertaking a self study of its Mission, Vision and systems. The results were summarized in their *Quality Audit Portfolio* (the 'Portfolio'). This document was submitted to the OAAA by the due date of 10 October 2009.

The OAAA appointed an external Audit Panel (the 'Panel'), comprising suitably qualified and experienced local and international reviewers, to conduct the quality audit. For membership of the Panel see Appendix A. The Panel met (international members by telephone) on 25 November 2009 to consider CAS Sohar's Portfolio. Following this, the Audit Panel Chairperson's representative and the Executive Officer undertook a planning visit on behalf of the Panel to CAS Sohar on 11 January 2010 to clarify certain matters, request additional information and make arrangements for the Panel's audit visit.

Prior to the audit visit, the Panel invited submissions from the public about the quality of CAS Sohar's activities. One submission was received and considered.

The audit visit took place over 21-23 February 2010. During this time, the Panel spoke with over one hundred people, including representatives of the governing authorities, staff, students and external stakeholders. It also visited a selection of venues and reviewed a range of additional materials.

No information provided after 23 February (being the last day of the audit visit) was taken into consideration for the purposes of this audit, other than one pre-existing item specifically requested by the Panel in advance.

The Report contains a summary of the Panel's findings, together with formal commendations where good practices have been confirmed, affirmations where CAS Sohar's ongoing quality improvement efforts merit support, and recommendations where there are significant opportunities or improvement not yet being adequately addressed. The Report provides a balanced set of observations, but does not comment on every system in place at CAS Sohar.

The Panel's audit activities and preparation of this Report were governed by regulations set by the OAAA Board. This Report was approved for release by the OAAA Board on 1 November 2010.

The OAAA was established by Royal Decree No. 54/2010 to replace the Oman Accreditation Council. Its responsibilities include conducting quality audits of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Sultanate of Oman. For further information, visit the OAAA website (<http://www.oac.gov.om>). Full details of the quality audit process are available in OAAA's *HEI Quality Audit Manual* (available from <http://www.oac.gov.om/qa/HEI/>).

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

Each OAAA Audit Report is written primarily for the institution being audited. The Report is specifically designed to provide feedback to help that institution better understand its own strengths and opportunities for improvement. The feedback is structured according to nine broad areas of activity and presented as formal Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations, or as informal suggestions, each accompanied with explanatory paragraphs. It is expected that the institution will act upon this feedback as part of its continuous efforts to provide the best possible education to students.

The Report is made public because it also may be of interest to students and potential students, their families, employers, Government, other higher education institutions in Oman and abroad, and other audiences. Students, in particular, may find this Report interesting because it provides some independent comment on the learning environment at this institution (particularly Chapters 2, 6 and 7). However, prospective students should still undertake their own investigations when deciding which higher education institution will best serve their particular learning needs.

Quality Audit is the first stage in Oman's two-stage process for institutional accreditation. Its focus is formative (developmental) rather than summative. In other words, although the audit addresses nine areas of activity which are common to all institutions, it does not measure the institution against externally set standards of performance in those nine areas. Instead, it considers how well the institution is attending to those areas in accordance with its own Mission and Vision and in the context of relevant legal regulations. Therefore, Quality Audit recognises that each institution has a unique purpose and profile; it does not directly compare one institution with all the other institutions in Oman.

For these reasons, a Quality Audit does not result in a pass or fail; nor does it provide any sort of grade or score. It should also be noted that the precise number of Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations that an institution receives in its Audit Report is not as important as the substance of those conclusions. For example, some Recommendations may focus on critical issues such as assessment of student learning, whereas others may focus on issues such as the maintenance of teaching equipment in classrooms which, while important, is clearly less critical. Therefore, it is neither significant nor appropriate to compare the Audit Reports of different HEIs solely on the numbers of Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations.

The second stage in the institutional accreditation process is Standards Assessment. This stage, which will take place about four years after the Quality Audit, does provide a summative assessment against external standards in the same nine areas of activity. It should be noted that Oman also operates a system of accreditation/recognition for academic programmes, separately from the institutional accreditation process. For more information on Oman's System of Quality Assurance in Higher Education please visit www.oac.gov.om.

This Report contains a number of references to source evidence considered by the Audit Panel. These references are for the HEI's benefit in further addressing the issues raised. In most cases this evidence is not in the public domain.

CONCLUSIONS

This section summarises the main findings and lists the Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations. They are listed in the order in which they appear in the Report, and are not prioritised. It should be noted that other favourable comments and suggestions for improvement are mentioned throughout the text of the Report.

Executive Summary of Findings

The College of Applied Sciences Sohar (CAS Sohar) was originally one of the Teacher Training Colleges established in 1990, which later became Colleges of Education. In 2005, the six Colleges of Education became Colleges of Applied Sciences, under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), in order to align with Oman's planned economic and social developments. The six Colleges are based in Sohar, Rustaq, Nizwa, Ibri, Sur, and Salalah, and offer the following programs: Information Technology, Communication Studies, Design, and International Business Administration, with each College in the network having a specific discipline focus.

CAS Sohar is located 200 km north of Muscat and 200 km south of Dubai, in an area which is becoming a significant centre of industrial and business development. CAS Sohar has been designated by the MoHE as a Centre of Excellence for IT and Engineering. The first cohort of CAS network students was admitted in 2005 (Portfolio, p.4) and its first batch of graduates will complete their studies in 2010.

The Portfolio submitted by CAS Sohar was predominantly descriptive. The College claimed that it used the ADRI model (see Appendix B) in the preparation of the Portfolio but the Panel found a lack of explicit reference to areas of strength or opportunities for improvement. The College is encouraged to develop a more reflective approach to reviewing its activities in the future.

The governance structure of all Colleges in the CAS network is set out in Royal Decree 62/2007. The Vision and Mission statements were established for all CASs by a committee appointed under this Decree. In the Portfolio, CAS Sohar reflected that "the experience is still new and CAS Sohar is yet to graduate the first batch of students" (Portfolio, p.10). Thus, the systems currently in place were seen by the Panel as very much work in progress, undergoing consistent and continuous review, both across the CAS network and within CAS Sohar itself. The overall governance and management of the College seems to be committed and consultative in nature, with opportunities for staff to input in the decision-making process at a number of levels. The Panel felt that at times, however, the CAS Sohar management tends to operate in a reactive manner and is dependent on centrally-developed directives from the MoHE. The Panel is of the view that CAS Sohar should have comprehensive leadership capability development programmes that are based on needs analysis in order to support staff in their management roles.

CAS Sohar is undergoing a significant reconfiguration of its programmes from Education to Applied Sciences, ultimately specializing in IT and Engineering. Achieving this shift has required significant reorganization from Ministry level through to individual College level in terms of teaching and support. Recognizing the need produce graduates of a high caliber able to operate in a local and global market, the CASs entered into an agreement with the New Zealand Tertiary Educational Consortium (NZTEC) in order to develop appropriate programmes and sought to recruit staff capable of contextualizing and delivering these programmes in an Omani context.

The learning environment at CAS Sohar appears to be stimulating and collegial. Teaching staff work hard to support and enthuse students and to promote a sense of community both academically and in terms of extra curricula activities. Support staff, too, put much effort into giving formal and informal guidance and while resources are not yet particularly extensive, morale among and between students and College staff seems to be high. However, in relation to the coursework programmes, there is a lack of a

unified, defined, commonly understood and applied approach to benchmarking and system of quality assurance. The Panel noted that in terms of research, the College needs to develop a plan in line with its Vision and Mission and that this is an area for future growth.

The College clearly recognises the need to forge strong links with communities, businesses and industry. Activities and initiatives such as exhibitions; job, talent and trade fairs; industry representation on the CAS Board of Trustees; input from industry on degree programme curricula; internships and on campus job recruitment are helping to embed a culture that recognizes the importance of partnerships between higher education and industry. In addition, the establishment of a central Career Guidance Department with an office at CAS Sohar is proving to be an effective interface between the College and its business community. CAS Sohar is still developing frameworks, processes and procedures and will need to have in place mechanisms that clearly identify industry requirements in order that graduates entering the job market possess the key skills and core competencies that are required.

Academic support services at CAS Sohar are provided by the Learning Resource Centre (LRC) and the Department of Admission and Registration (DAR). The Panel noted that the DAR was one of the strengths of the College, along with its academic advising system. The College has recognised the need to upgrade its IT infrastructure and teaching resources to support the new programmes. The Panel, however, found that the Library investment policy needs to be reviewed, especially in order to provide English language learning resources. In the area of student support services, the Panel found that although the College runs a number of surveys, it needs to develop and implement a range of tools to provide information to support management decisions. The recently introduced Careers Guidance Centre is seen as a positive step in supporting the career preparation and placement of the forthcoming graduates. The Panel was impressed with the range of extra-curricular activities offered to enhance the overall student learning experience.

The College has undergone a shift in its staff profile as it has moved from an Arabic-language based College of Education to an English-language based College of Applied Sciences. In acknowledgment of this, the Panel recommends that the College develop a local human resources strategy in order to support its recruitment, induction and professional development activities. The College also needs to develop a mechanism for monitoring and responding to the level of satisfaction amongst its staff. In light of its bilingual community, the College needs to develop a communication policy that ensures that all staff are able to access the necessary documents.

It should be noted that although there are many areas of commonality between the six Colleges of Applied Sciences, each College undergoes its own separate Quality Audit. Therefore, the conclusions in the resulting reports may vary from one College to another.

Summary of Commendations

A formal Commendation recognises an instance of particularly good practice.

1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the College of Applied Sciences Sohar for developing a management culture which promotes engagement from staff at all levels..... 11
2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the College of Applied Sciences Sohar for establishing a number of successful initiatives to strengthen its relationship with the community at large. 25
3. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the College of Applied Sciences Sohar for its registry systems and services and for the level of support provided to students in this area..... 26

4. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the College of Applied Sciences Sohar for its proactive academic advising system which recognizes and responds to student needs..... 28
5. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the College of Applied Sciences Sohar for its active engagement with students to support a wide range of extracurricular activities..... 33

Summary of Affirmations

A formal Affirmation recognizes an instance in which CAS Sohar has accurately identified a significant opportunity for improvement and has demonstrated appropriate commitment to addressing the matter.

1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar needs to review its current Mission, Vision and strategic direction and supports its efforts in this area. 10
2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with College of Applied Sciences Sohar that the Strategic Plan needs to be revised with the involvement of main stakeholders in order to provide a clear strategic direction for the College's activities and supports its efforts in this area. 12
3. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with College of Applied Sciences Sohar that care should be taken in assessing entry standards and supports its efforts to support stronger entrants through the introduction of the challenge test..... 17
4. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with College of Applied Sciences Sohar that the Foundation Programme needs to be aligned to Oman's General Foundation Programme Standards and supports its efforts in this area..... 17
5. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the College of Applied Sciences Sohar that workplace learning is an integral part of its programmes and supports the College's efforts to improve work placement opportunities for its students..... 19
6. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with and supports the College of Applied Sciences Sohar's efforts to improve the quality of its IT infrastructure to support student learning. 28
7. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar needs to review its current teaching resources in line with the recent introduction of new programmes and supports its efforts in this area. 29
8. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar needs to broaden its approach to monitoring student satisfaction and supports its efforts in this area. 30
9. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the College of Applied Sciences Sohar that it needs to improve its current career guidance strategy and supports its efforts to develop its Career Guidance Department and to engage local employers in this initiative. 31
10. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with and supports the College of Applied Sciences Sohar's efforts to develop awareness of accident prevention and to introduce a first aid training programme. 32

Summary of Recommendations

A Recommendation draws attention to a significant opportunity for improvement that CAS Sohar has either not yet accurately identified or to which it is not yet adequately attending.

1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop and implement a systematic approach to evaluating the effectiveness of its governance structures and processes. 11
2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar ensure that its operational plans are more clearly focused on the delivery of its strategic goals in the medium and longer term, and measured against performance indicators which reflect achievement against these goals. 12
3. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar review its financial management mechanisms in order to ensure budget allocations are capable of supporting and sustaining its strategic direction. 13
4. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop and implement a rigorous approach towards risk management, internal quality audit and continuous quality improvement in order to support its strategic objectives. 13
5. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar review its current student grievance policies and processes to ensure that they are transparent, clearly communicated and effective. 14
6. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop and implement comprehensive health and safety policies and processes which are clearly communicated to staff and students. 14
7. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop a strategy to incorporate graduate attributes into the curriculum, communicate them to all key stakeholders and to monitor students' progress and achievements in these areas. 15
8. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop and implement a process for a regular in-house review of programmes that also monitors local market needs. 16
9. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop and implement a strategy to ensure a consistent approach to the enhancement of teaching quality, such as clear processes for peer observation, and systematic mechanisms for the analysis of student evaluations. 18
10. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop a shared and consistent approach to promoting academic integrity, including ensuring the College community has a shared understanding of plagiarism and how to avoid it. 18
11. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop a clear research strategy in line with its Mission, Vision and strategic goals. 22
12. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop and implement an overall strategy to engage with industry and the community that informs operational planning in this area. 24

13. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop a purchase and investment strategy which will act as the basis to increase access to a wider range of reading and research resources in English. 27
14. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop and implement a human resources strategy to ensure that the areas of staff recruitment, induction, probation, development and reward are aligned. 34
15. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop a targeted leadership development strategy to be implemented in the first instance for Heads of Department in order to build management capability. 35
16. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar establish a staff performance planning and review mechanism which recognises areas of achievement and identifies priority areas for further development. 36
17. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop and implement regular staff satisfaction surveys in order to inform management decisions. 37
18. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar adopt a planned approach to infrastructure development and renewal which will fully support its strategic development. 38
19. The Oman Accreditation Council recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar review its current communications policy to maximise understanding within the College community and for the development of internal and external communication strategies. 39

1 GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

CAS Sohar has been undergoing a significant change as it shifts its activities from a College of Education (CoE) to a College of Applied Sciences (CAS). Therefore the systems currently in place were seen by the Panel as very much work in progress, undergoing consistent and continuous review and enhancement, both across the network of CASs within CAS Sohar itself. This Chapter considers the Mission, Vision and Values that underpin the College, the governance and management structures and the overall approach to planning within the institution.

1.1 *Mission, Vision and Values*

Following the Royal Decree 62/2007 concerning the conversion of the Colleges of Education into Colleges of Applied Sciences (CASs), the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) constituted a committee to develop a common Mission, Vision and Strategic Plans for all the Colleges. The committee developed the following Mission and Vision:

Mission

CAS's responsibilities are the transfer and creation of current knowledge through cooperation, practical orientation and intensive collaboration with students, communities and businesses which will provide the foundation to underpin Oman's development and its success in the global economy.

Vision

CASs will play a vital role in taking Oman forward in the world as a modernised nation, through their contribution to applied sciences and to the advancement of civilisation in a knowledge society consistent with the Omani cultural values. (Portfolio, p.10)

The Mission and Vision statements are underpinned by common values of: commitment, partnership, excellence, the adoption of a needs-driven policy, and reliance on knowledge transfer (Portfolio, p.10). The Panel found that as CAS Sohar is in a state of transition from being a CoE to a CAS, it was difficult to find evidence of actual research that could contribute to the creation of current knowledge. In terms of the focus on industry and community engagement, as indicated in the Mission, the Panel found that this was an area that needs further strengthening (see Chapter 5). As they stand, the current operations and activities do not fully support the Vision and Mission of CAS Sohar. However, the Panel was informed that these statements are being revised. The Panel supports the College's current efforts to review its Vision, Mission and the overall strategic directions.

Affirmation 1

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar needs to review its current Mission, Vision and strategic direction and supports its efforts in this area.

1.2 *Governance*

The six Colleges in the CAS network are directly and collectively supervised by the MoHE through the Directorate General of the Colleges of Applied Sciences (DG CAS). The governance structure shared by the Colleges consists of the Minister of Higher Education, the Board of Trustees (BoT) and the Academic Council. The BoT has nine members and includes representatives from government and industry. The BoT meets four times a year and is responsible for developing and approving the general policies and plans of the Colleges (Portfolio, p.11).

The Academic Council is chaired by the Undersecretary of the MoHE and comprises the Director General of CAS, the Deans of the Colleges and three academic staff members (Portfolio, p.11). The Council considers the decisions and proposals made by the six College Councils (see Section 1.3) and, after consideration, forwards these to the BoT. The Panel was informed that minutes from the BoT meetings are passed to the DG CAS and the Deans for action. Although there seemed to be a general sense of satisfaction with the current governance system, the Panel found no evidence of a formal mechanism in place to evaluate the effectiveness of the governance structures.

Recommendation 1

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop and implement a systematic approach to evaluating the effectiveness of its governance structures and processes.

1.3 Management

The College is managed by the Dean supported by the Assistant Dean and other Heads of Departments (HoDs) and Sections. The Dean reports to the Director General who plays a role of “Vice-Chancellor of all CASs” (Portfolio, p.13). The Panel was informed that the dependence on centralized decision-making occasionally resulted in delays in the smooth running of operations. This is an area the College needs to consider when it reviews its governance structures (see Recommendation 1).

The Dean chairs the College Council, comprised of the HoDs of both academic and non-academic areas, which meets once a month to discuss the main operational issues (Portfolio, p.13). The Panel noted that the Dean’s performance is monitored by the Director General and is based on the annual report and the College’s performance against its strategic goals. The Panel was informed that there was a positive working relationship between the College management team and the DG CAS. The Dean has a degree of autonomy in relation to the day to day running of the College. The Panel heard evidence of a relaxed and consultative management style which created a pleasant working environment in the College. Involvement of staff at different levels in planning, reviewing and implementing operational plans was evident showing that CAS Sohar clearly benefits from this collegial approach to management.

Commendation 1

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the College of Applied Sciences Sohar for developing a management culture which promotes engagement from staff at all levels.

1.4 Institutional Affiliations for Programmes and Quality Assurance

The MoHE has a Memorandum of Co-operation with the New Zealand Tertiary Education Consortium (NZTEC) to provide all CASs with academic programme content, recommendations for teaching resources, supporting materials and quality assurance for the programmes (Portfolio, p.15). NZTEC has conducted several visits to evaluate the programmes and produced reports where it has raised quality assurance issues for the Colleges to take necessary action. The Panel found evidence that a number of actions have been taken as a result of these reports. However, there are still recommendations from the 2008 review (carried out by MoHE, OAC (prior to becoming OAAA) and NZTEC) that need to be addressed.

CAS Sohar would benefit from developing a more coherent approach to monitoring the quality of programmes at College-level. The Panel was pleased to note that, during the audit period, a Ministerial decision was issued stating that all Colleges within the CAS network should establish

their own Quality Assurance (QA) office. This initiative will need to be supported through the recruitment of staff and adequate training provision.

Whilst the degree programmes originate from and are quality assured by NZTEC, the awards are made by the MoHE. Each programme is overseen by a Programme Director based in Oman who is responsible for monitoring and supporting the implementation of the programmes. As the programmes develop, and become further tailored to the local market, strategies will need to be developed to enhance the ownership and responsibility for academic standards within the CAS network (and within CAS Sohar).

1.5 Strategic Plan

Currently, CAS Sohar is operating under the 2008-2013 Strategic Plan which was developed for all six Colleges and approved by the Academic Council (Portfolio, p.16). The current Strategic Plan includes ten goals with specified strategies to achieve each one. The Panel noted that no key performance indicators (KPIs) or key performance measures had been included in the current Strategic Plan. The Panel was informed that all the Colleges are developing a revised plan to be put into operation from 2011-2015.

The Panel found that there was limited involvement of stakeholders in the first strategic planning process. It was clear that the strategic goals were developed at the higher level of management in the CAS network and the Panel found little awareness of the Strategic Plan amongst the staff. The College advised the Panel that there were plans to include three teams from across all Colleges and have wider College representation in the development and dissemination of the revised Strategic Plan. The Panel considered the draft version of the 2011-2015 Strategic Plan which includes indicators and targets. The new 2011-2015 plan is evidently more comprehensive and will provide a useful strategic basis for the College's future activities. The Panel supports the College's efforts in this area.

Affirmation 2

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with College of Applied Sciences Sohar that the Strategic Plan needs to be revised with the involvement of main stakeholders in order to provide a clear strategic direction for the College's activities and supports its efforts in this area.

1.6 Operational Planning

Operational Plans are developed by the Heads of academic and non-academic Departments and submitted to the Dean on an annual basis (Portfolio, p.16). The Panel considered a number of operational plans and found that, despite CAS Sohar's claims (Portfolio, p.16), these were not clearly aligned with the Strategic Plan.

CAS Sohar needs to develop and implement mechanisms to ensure that its operational planning system clearly links to and supports its strategic goals. These operational plans need to also have relevant KPIs and targets.

Recommendation 2

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar ensure that its operational plans are more clearly focused on the delivery of its strategic goals in the medium and longer term, and measured against performance indicators which reflect achievement against these goals.

1.7 Financial Management

CAS Sohar states that it works in conjunction with the MoHE and the Ministry of Finance to acquire the resources necessary to support the Strategic Plan and that the College tries to make appropriate use of its budget (Portfolio, p.16). The Panel was informed that the College has two types of budgeting plans: operational and developmental. The operational budget is managed over a twelve-month period and controlled by the College. The developmental budgets are the responsibility of the Department of Projects at the MoHE and are awarded for particular activities, such as the transition from CoEs to CASs.

The Panel was informed that, following a consultation with the HoDs, the operational budget is prepared on an annual basis. It is then sent by the Dean to the DG CAS for approval. The budget is linked to different categories of expenditure and funds can be moved from one category to another in order to meet priorities, such as salaries and educational needs. The Panel found that there is a lack of long term financial planning. As an individual entity, CAS Sohar needs to conduct a comprehensive needs analysis taking its strategic needs into account so that its requirements for achieving its ultimate goals are fully resourced. The annual budget planning processes needs to be aligned with the strategic goals of the College.

Recommendation 3

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar review its financial management mechanisms in order to ensure budget allocations are capable of supporting and sustaining its strategic direction.

1.8 Risk Management

The College states that it is “committed to avoiding and minimizing the likelihood of unexpected risks such as operational risks, financial risks and strategic risks” (Portfolio, p.17). The Panel found no evidence of a sound risk management system in place that considers a range of potential risks at CAS Sohar. Although the centralized system of the MoHE may consider the financial risks of the Colleges at a network level, CAS Sohar needs to develop and implement its own independent system of risk management. Effective risk management can enable the College to identify future challenges in such a way as to ensure it is able to meet its strategic goals. The Panel recommends that, in establishing its QA office (see Section 1.4), CAS Sohar ensures that this includes processes for risk management, internal quality audit and continuous quality improvement.

Recommendation 4

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop and implement a rigorous approach towards risk management, internal quality audit and continuous quality improvement in order to support its strategic objectives.

1.9 Policy Management

Policies are formulated at different levels: MoHE, BoT and the Academic Council (Portfolio, p.18). The College has developed an Academic Regulations Handbook which it claims is made available to all staff and claims that this has made teachers more aware of the regulations and policies (Portfolio, p.18). However, in interviews, the Panel found little awareness of the Handbook or of policies in general. The College needs to ensure that its policies are well disseminated to all stakeholders and that it monitors the effectiveness of its efforts to communicate these. The establishment of the new QA office (see Section 1.4) should support this.

1.10 Entity and Activity Review Systems

Under the terms of the Memorandum of Co-operation (see Section 1.4), regular network-wide reviews of the programmes are carried out by teams sent by NZTEC. The resulting reports are sent to the Colleges and action plans are prepared. A major review was carried out in 2008 by the MoHE, former OAC and NZTEC which resulted in a number of improvements in response to recommendations made in the review Report. However, as noted in Section 1.4, there are still issues to be addressed. A second major review is planned when the first cohort of students graduates (Portfolio, p.20).

The Panel noted that the majority of current entity and activity review systems are initiated by the Ministry at the network level. As the terms of reference and scope of activities of the QA Office are developed, CAS Sohar would benefit from implementing a regular College-level entity and activity review system which includes as well as administrative as well as academic departments.

1.11 Student Grievance Process

CAS Sohar states that it has developed different channels to gather students' suggestions for improvements and grievances (Portfolio, p.21). However, interviews revealed that students were unaware of these different channels and any appeals lodged were mainly against academic decisions. Although CAS Sohar provides examples of instances where students' suggestions were taken into consideration (Portfolio, p.21), the Panel concluded that CAS Sohar needs to develop and implement formal review mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness/appropriateness of the complaint and suggestions channels already in place. CAS Sohar also needs to establish clear guidance on the grounds for academic appeals. Such policies should be clearly communicated to the students and strictly followed.

Recommendation 5

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar review its current student grievance policies and processes to ensure that they are transparent, clearly communicated and effective.

1.12 Health and Safety

CAS Sohar claims that it aims to "keep the College a safe and healthy place" (Portfolio, p.23). The College has a number of external contracts for cleaning and for maintaining and checking its fire system. However, with the introduction of academic programmes such as Engineering, the College will require more rigorous and comprehensive health and safety policies and procedures that are well communicated to the staff and students. The College acknowledges that "a lot more can be done in the area of health and safety" (Portfolio, p.23) but does not have a clear action plan to address the opportunities for improvement in this area.

Recommendation 6

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop and implement comprehensive health and safety policies and processes which are clearly communicated to staff and students.

1.13 Oversight of Associated Entities (e.g. owned companies)

As CAS Sohar does not have oversight of associated entities, this section is not applicable to the College.

2 STUDENT LEARNING BY COURSEWORK PROGRAMMES

CAS Sohar is undergoing a significant reconfiguration of its programmes from Education to Applied Sciences, ultimately specializing in Information Technology (IT) and Engineering. Achieving this shift has required significant reorganization both at the level of Ministry in terms of overall organization and at the level of teaching and support at the College. Recognizing the need to achieve programmes capable of producing graduates of a high calibre able to operate in a global market, CASs initially sourced its programme curricula from the New Zealand Tertiary Educational Consortium (NZTEC) and sought to recruit staff capable of contextualizing and delivering these programmes in an Omani context.

2.1 *Graduate Attributes and Student Learning Objectives*

CAS Sohar has designated a range of graduate attributes that encompass:

- *High ability to communicate in written and oral Arabic and English*
- *Adequate computer skills*
- *Good appreciation of society's core values and heritage and sufficient professional ethics*
- *Ability to interact globally*
- *Ability to work individually and in teams with adequate leadership skills*
- *Ability to think analytically and critically" (Portfolio, p.25).*

In seeking to develop these capabilities, the College requires its students to undertake courses that include English for Academic Purposes, Arabic, IT Fundamentals, Islamic Culture, Omani Economics History, Communication, Interpersonal Skills, Entrepreneurship, Numeracy, Mathematics, Introduction to Research Method and Ethics and Professional Practice (Portfolio, p.25). In addition, the College provides a range of activities, field trips and summer training programmes to support the enhancement of desired attributes (Portfolio, p.25). In practice, the Panel found little evidence in interviews with staff and students to indicate that all stakeholders are aware of these desired graduate attributes or how they might be achieved.

The College is to be recognized for its commitment to enriching the student experience and to enhancing employability. It is, however, vital that all staff share an understanding of and commitment to these goals. Desired graduate attributes do not appear to be explicitly identified in specialization courses or unit outlines, suggesting that student achievement in these areas is not assessed. CAS Sohar needs to develop an approach to support the achievement of its graduate attributes.

Recommendation 7

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop a strategy to incorporate graduate attributes into the curriculum, communicate them to all key stakeholders and to monitor students' progress and achievements in these areas.

2.2 *Curriculum*

As discussed in Section 1.4, NZTEC has an agreement with the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) to provide programmes of study for all CASs in disciplines including English, IT, International Business Administration, Communication Studies, and Design. Each programme is coordinated by one of the institutions in the NZTEC consortium (Portfolio, p.26). Programmes are intended to be tailored to the needs of undergraduates in Oman. Programme Directors (PD)

lead programme delivery across all CASs and provide assurance of equity of academic standards and teaching approaches across individual Colleges.

Strategic Goal 7 of the CAS network's Strategic Plan aims to establish "Centres of Excellence". CAS Sohar has been designated as a Centre of Excellence for IT and Engineering, with the first intake of Engineering students being enrolled in September 2009. This programme has been introduced to reflect the growth of the industrial sector in Sohar.

Cooperation and collaboration between NZTEC, the CAS network, CAS Sohar and its teaching staff has the potential to provide a valuable and dynamic melting pot of ideas and perspectives. Achieving a balance between the various stakeholders' interests and goals currently appears to be problematic; enhancing communication and understanding is likely to be a key area for staff and professional development. There are indications that a lot of work remains to be done to ensure programmes fit the needs of Omani students: for example using Omani case studies; making references to Omani law; addressing the need for competency in written and spoken Arabic.

The Panel was informed that each programme has an Academic Advisory Committee at the network level, made up of Programme Directors, representatives from other higher education institutions (HEIs) and industry members. CAS Sohar would benefit from the development of a College level systematic curriculum review process that draws on the NZTEC experience. This review process should use data such as the distribution of grades, progress and retention performance indicators, and teaching and learning quality data for future use when the Memorandum of Co-operation with NZTEC expires in 2011. While the Panel recognizes that the programmes are still at an early stage of implementation, the College will need to monitor the appropriateness of its current programmes as graduates enter the local labour market.

Recommendation 8

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop and implement a process for a regular in-house review of programmes that also monitors local market needs.

2.3 Student Entry Standards

Students gain entry to CAS Sohar via the central Higher Education Admissions Centre. They list their choice of up to twenty programs in order of preference. Once they have received their school leaving Diploma results, students are allocated their highest choice of program which they are eligible to enter. Students admitted to the College are required to sit an entry test which includes an assessment of their level of English language. Those who attain IELTS 4.5 and/or pass the College challenge exam are eligible to proceed immediately to the first year of the degree programme. Otherwise, students must follow a Foundation Programme at intermediate, pre-intermediate or elementary level. Students progress through the levels until they are able to achieve the required English standard. The Panel was informed that the College is in the process of reviewing its Foundation Programme (see Section 2.4) in line with Oman's national General Foundation Programme (GFP) Standards which requires the exit level of students to be equivalent to IELTS band 5 or above.

The College states that, from 2009, Engineering Programme applicants must achieve a school grade of at least C in Pure Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry and a grade of at least B in English. IT Programme applicants must achieve at least a grade C in Pure Mathematics and a grade of at least B in English. Students will be aware of the programme they will be undertaking before joining the GFP (Portfolio, p.28). The programmes are clearly still in transition; but the increased level of transparency is to be encouraged and the identification of base level standards should ensure that students enter the programmes and complete them successfully.

The Panel noted CAS Sohar's awareness of student needs and the importance of maintaining a good standard of entry against the needs of individual programmes and students.. CAS Sohar is addressing this challenge both through care in the assessment, particularly, of students' language skills, prior to entry onto the GFP, and through the operation of the 'challenge test' for those candidates who feel confident of meeting the output levels of that programme. The use of the challenge test for new entrants provided faster progress towards the exit award for those students with appropriate levels of knowledge. The Panel supports the College's efforts in this area.

Affirmation 3

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with College of Applied Sciences Sohar that care should be taken in assessing entry standards and supports its efforts to do so through the introduction of the challenge test.

2.4 *Foundation Programme*

The Colleges in the CAS network follow a common GFP (Portfolio, p.19), and have outsourced the teaching of the programme to staff from the Hawthorn Language Centre. The Panel was informed that the GFP has evolved over the last two years with a new assessment tool being developed which appears to be more systematic. A programme review is being implemented in the light of the national GFP standards. CAS Sohar has lengthened the programme from two to three semesters for weaker students who need more support. Teaching staff have also identified the need to provide greater teaching input with regard to English for Special and Academic Purposes. In interviews, students appeared to be satisfied with the current content and scope of the GFP. The Panel supports the College's efforts in this area.

Affirmation 4

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with College of Applied Sciences Sohar that the Foundation Programme needs to be aligned to Oman's General Foundation Programme Standards and supports its efforts in this area.

2.5 *Teaching Quality*

CAS Sohar states that it "has earnestly taken all measures to ensure good quality teaching" (Portfolio, p.29). Interviews with students, teaching and support staff provided strong evidence that the learning experience at CAS Sohar is enjoyable, interesting and useful. The Panel was informed that staff make a considerable effort to advise, encourage and interact with students; their support is recognized and appreciated by students.

While there were many indications that teaching staff took an interest in the quality and content of their teaching materials, it was apparent that much of the quality assurance for teaching and learning is done externally at the CAS network level rather than in-house. The College needs to consider developing an approach to quality assurance that is transparent and inclusive. . It is important that all stakeholders know and understand defined benchmarks and key performance indicators and the quality assurance framework whereby the teaching quality will be measured.

Initiatives such as peer observation (Portfolio, p.30) are to be applauded, provided they are underpinned by clear performance indicators that identify skills and competencies that are contextualized within a quality assurance framework. Moreover, it is important that such evaluations are seen as supportive rather than punitive.

Recommendation 9

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop and implement a strategy to ensure a consistent approach to the enhancement of teaching quality, such as clear processes for peer observation, and systematic mechanisms for the analysis of student evaluations.

A further method of teaching evaluation is assessment through questionnaires completed by students. Information resulting from this feedback is available to staff through the online Blackboard teaching platform.

The CAS Strategic Plan includes an objective to “improve student learning skills” (Strategic Plan, p.11). Student learning in higher education is distinctive in relation to the importance given to the development of academic and research skills. The College has a role in assisting students to become independent/autonomous learners, and so prepare them for employment at a professional level, and/or for further university-level studies. As noted elsewhere in this Report, the CAS Foundation Programme and the academic advising process go some way towards providing a sound basis for this sort of development at CAS Sohar. It is hoped that, as the College further considers the development of its students’ distinctive graduate skills, due attention might be paid to their development as individual, self-confident, learners.

2.6 Plagiarism

CAS Sohar has adopted a range of approaches for dealing with plagiarism (Portfolio, p.32). A Student’s Guide provides a description of plagiarism and advice on how to reference, quote and paraphrase but the Panel found that few students were familiar with the Guide. In interviews, a number of students showed an understanding of what plagiarism was and why it should be avoided. The Panel was informed that the *Safeassign* service will be available through the Blackboard platform and that this should facilitate the screening of student assignments for plagiarism.

Nevertheless, the area of plagiarism is a concern as the Panel found a lack of consistency in terms of identifying and addressing incidents of cheating and malpractice, including plagiarism, which jeopardizes the integrity of learning outcomes. CAS Sohar needs to review its approach to training students to avoid plagiarism and monitor how cases of plagiarism are dealt with in different departments. It needs to ensure that a College-wide approach is adopted in order to tackle this area.

Recommendation 10

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop a shared and consistent approach to promoting academic integrity, including ensuring the College community has a shared understanding of plagiarism and how to avoid it.

2.7 Student Placements

Student placements are seen to be “an integral part of education” (Portfolio, p.32). A central committee, chaired by a PD and with representatives from the CAS network, decides on matters relating to work placement. CAS Sohar is evidently committed to ensuring employability and the teaching of workplace skills in degree programmes. Although the Panel was informed that establishing an efficient interface between the College and industry is not always easy, the overall experience of students and employers involved in student placement appears to the Panel be good. Encouragingly, CAS Sohar succeeded in placing 60% of students eligible for work experience in 2009.

The Panel found that there is a need to develop clearly defined goals and benchmarks for work related interaction and work placements so that all stakeholders can easily assess whether performance has been successful. For those students normally resident outside the Sohar catchment area, further provision will need to be made to develop relationships with appropriate employers. The Panel was informed that the College is reviewing its approach to student placements, including implementing a centralized logbook system, and supports its efforts in this area.

Affirmation 5

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the College of Applied Sciences Sohar that workplace learning is an integral part of its programmes and supports the College's efforts to improve work placement opportunities for its students.

2.8 *Assessment Methods, Standards and Moderation*

In its Portfolio, CAS Sohar reflects that the assessment process is “one of the most important criteria in Quality Assurance” (p.33) and mechanisms exist to ensure a consistent approach to the teaching and assessment across all CASs (for example, through the PD role). The College states that it uses summative and formative assessment methods, including a final year project for final year IT students (Portfolio, p.33 and p.40). The College has set up uniform grade-based assessment methods for student examinations.

All diploma and degree programmes in the CAS network are assessed through a common examination system. A Course Committee for each course has been established with central and local course coordinators and develops a common question paper for all Colleges (Portfolio, p.35). Meetings with staff confirmed that workshops are held to prepare academic staff for the marking and moderating of exam scripts. Some staff noted that centralized exam papers are occasionally problematic as some questions suit students in one College more than another. It is important that, as with curriculum design and teaching quality, clearly defined benchmarks and quality assurance frameworks be established and communicated to all stakeholders. The College would benefit from developing a review system in order to monitor the effectiveness its assessment methods on a regular basis.

2.9 *Academic Security and Invigilation*

In ensuring academic security the central Course Committees produce three versions of the final examination. Question papers are sent by the PD to all Heads of Department (HoDs) of the Colleges. Papers are stored in the HoDs' offices in safe lockers. Copies of question papers are made a few days before examination date by course coordinators in restricted areas, this process being supervised by HoDs. The Panel concluded that CAS Sohar paid rigorous attention to the security of processes surrounding examination and that the College was well aware of its responsibilities in this important area of operation.

2.10 *Student Retention and Progression*

The College states that it monitors its students' academic standards closely and students who fail to maintain an average of GPA 2 are put under probation. Academic advisors monitor these students and advise them accordingly. The College has also developed a system to limit the number of course contact hours for students under probation (Portfolio, pp.36-37). The success of the College's academic advising system is acknowledged in this Report (see Section 6.5). However, it is too early to fully assess the College's effectiveness in tracking and acting on information relating to initial registrations, drop outs, failures and de-registration. The College

could in the future take advantage of being part of a network in order to develop targets and benchmark in this area.

2.11 *Graduate Destinations and Employability*

As its programmes are newly established and, although no cohort had graduated by the time of the audit visit, CAS Sohar is aware of the need to establish procedures to track its graduates. In this respect, the establishment of the new Career Guidance Department is a positive first step. The College is also planning to establish an alumni association as soon as the first cohort graduates in 2010. The Panel acknowledges and supports the College's intention to develop procedures to track graduates to identify destinations and employment.

3 STUDENT LEARNING BY RESEARCH PROGRAMMES

At the time of this quality audit, CAS Sohar did not offer research programmes *per se* so this section is not addressed in this Report.

4 STAFF RESEARCH AND CONSULTANCY

In developing from a College of Education into a College of Applied Science, research at CAS Sohar has not been a priority in the past. CAS Sohar's Portfolio reflects that, in this respect, "research was fundamentally an individual initiative" (Portfolio p.44), and it is within this context that the College is developing.

Research features within the strategic goals of the CAS Strategic Plan 2008-13, stating a desire to "[s]upport research that informs and enhances teaching" (Objective 2.2C), and the aim to "[e]stablish a research and development framework" (Objective 5.2).

4.1 *Research Planning & Management*

In order to support the transition from "individual initiative" (Portfolio, p.44) towards the development of a research culture across the College, CAS Sohar has established a Research and Studies Committee, which is to oversee the establishment of policy in this area. The role of the Committee is to take responsibility for:

- *Planning and supervising research and related activities at the College*
- *Assisting and facilitating research proposals and projects*
- *Monitoring and evaluating ongoing research, consultancy, products and related activities (Portfolio, p.44).*

This Committee reviews proposals from individual staff members and receives research plans each year, proposing both individual and group projects. However, it has not yet begun to develop a longer-term strategic viewpoint, which might enable better evaluation of individual proposals and focus support on those which clearly underpin the strategic Vision of the CAS network and the operational goals of CAS Sohar.

Recommendation 11

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop a clear research strategy in line with its Mission, Vision and strategic goals.

Within this research strategy, CAS Sohar needs to consider ethics and biosafety; intellectual property; research commercialization; and professional development for research.

4.2 *Research Performance*

Commitment to research as a day-to-day activity is spreading gradually among the staff within CAS Sohar, being more apparent with recent appointments (where there has been more emphasis on research experience). The record of research outputs within the Portfolio (pp.45-6) shows a peak of activity around the academic year 2005-2006, which has lessened a little in recent years.

Interviews with staff confirmed that the competing demands of teaching and student support had an impact on the amount of time available for research. There were many new staff at CAS Sohar, and while they had an interest in developing their research, this was not easy in the first years of appointment.

However, the situation was developing, with more time becoming allotted for research duties. A *Joint Scientific Symposium* is co-organised with CAS Rustaq, and provides a forum for the presentation of staff research, which is reported each year as a part of the College's annual report.

4.3 *Research Funding Schemes*

In its Portfolio, the College reflected that a new policy for supporting research (approved by the MoHE in March, 2009) was being implemented in academic year 2009/10 (p.46). Staff reflected that research funds were available to assist with the purchase of specialist books and for travel to conferences (chiefly within Oman). There was little evidence, however, that these funds were allocated in order to fulfill any particular strategic objectives, and the formulation of a coherent research strategy would assist in ensuring a more targeted approach to spending.

4.4 *Consultancy Activities*

CAS Sohar outlines a moderate amount of consultancy activity undertaken by academic staff across the College (Portfolio, p.46) and this was confirmed in interviews with staff. Discussions with staff indicated that there were many good ideas emanating from departmental planning and this is an area in which the College may wish to consider further investment in the future.

4.5 *Research – Teaching Nexus*

The College makes it clear that, apart from a course on research methods, there is no direct training for research within its programmes (Portfolio, p.47). It was apparent, in interviews with staff, that there was indeed some overlap between staff research interests and the academic programmes delivered within CAS Sohar. As the ownership and contextualisation of programmes continues (and the research strategy develops), it is expected that there will be increased opportunity to enhance the engagement between staff research and student learning and to thus enhance the quality of student learning opportunities in the College.

5 INDUSTRY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Located 200 km north of Muscat and 200 km south of Dubai, Sohar is becoming a significant centre of industrial and business development. The re-directing of the College's programmes from Education to IT and Engineering is well considered; Sohar is ideally positioned to assist in creating the appropriate skills base for a rapidly expanding economy.

This Chapter considers CAS Sohar's approach to industry and community engagement planning and management; its relationships with industry, employers and professions; and its interaction with other higher education providers and the local community.

5.1 *Industry and Community Engagement Planning & Management*

Strategic Goal 9 aims to "enhance community engagement". The College has developed an action plan in order to support its Career Guidance Department (CGD) (see Section 7.5) and this is a significant development in its industry engagement. The College also plans to identify long term strategies and goals to enhance links with industry and the business community (Portfolio, p.50).

The Panel was provided with anecdotal evidence that CAS Sohar is perceived to have performed well and to be one of the most effective colleges in the CAS network for creating and sustaining good relations with industry and providing worthwhile training experiences. However, there are no performance indicators to show how the College measures its effectiveness in this area. The Panel found that there was no overall plan to support the activities in this area; this needs to be developed and implemented in order to support the achievement of the College's strategic objective.

Recommendation 12

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop and implement an overall strategy to engage with industry and the community that informs operational planning in this area.

5.2 *Relationships with Industry and Employers*

The focus of these activities to date has been on supporting the establishment of the CGD and student placements. The College is also planning to offer more field trips, seminars and workshops to build its relationship with industry and employers. The College could also consider how to develop links with industry in order to support its plans for consultancy (see Section 4.4).

5.3 *Relationships with Professions*

The College is represented at a senior level on a range of national committees, including the Research Council and the Joint Committee between the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) and the Ministry of Manpower Directorate General for Technical and Training Education (Portfolio, p.50). As its programmes in IT and Engineering become well established, the College could consider other opportunities for developing relations with professions in these areas, such as through the Oman Society of Engineers.

5.4 *Relationships with Other Education Providers*

CAS Sohar recognizes the value of creating and maintaining links with other educational institutions. In cooperation with the other CASs, activities are organized that include cultural

weeks, workshops, and scientific and sports competitions. CAS Sohar also collaborates with Sultan Qaboos University, Sohar University, CAS Rustaq and Shinas College of Technology in activities that facilitate the exchange of academic experience and expertise (Portfolio, p.50).

In seeking to promote international cooperation with other higher education institutions, students have visited Lebanon, Germany, Holland, China, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Switzerland, and Norway (Portfolio, p.51). However, whilst there is evidently some collaboration with other institutions in the CAS network, it is likely that more advantage could be taken of this valuable resource. Despite an evident desire to encourage mutual collaboration within an international context, the Panel felt that in the short term CAS Sohar could usefully further develop its collaborative links within the CAS network, to mirror and enhance its international aspirations.

5.5 Relationships with Alumni

The Department of Admission and Registration (DAR) uses Student Information System (SIS) Oracle as a tool to store and manage student data. The College appears to have established a reasonably strong relationship with its graduates from the former Colleges of Education in the past and has actively encouraged regular interaction through visits, exhibitions and collaborative organisation of College activities (Portfolio, p.51). Importantly, CAS Sohar advises that it will establish an alumni association for its first cohort of graduates for the new programmes in 2010. The Panel supports this initiative.

5.6 Relationships with the Community at Large

CAS Sohar seeks to increase community engagement via initiatives such as community services; sponsored student evenings for Sohar University; allowing members of the local community to use the College premises and facilities; and hosting indoor activities (for example at the purpose-built Sohar Hall) (Portfolio, pp.51-52). The College also delivers workshops and symposiums to the Sohar community. During the course of interviews with prominent members of the local community, the Panel detected many positive comments on the good reputation of the College and its active role in the Sohar community. CAS Sohar's activities are successful and are much appreciated by the local community.

Commendation 2

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the College of Applied Sciences Sohar for establishing a number of successful initiatives to strengthen its relationship with the community at large.

While local relations appear strong, the College will need to expand and strengthen its contacts beyond Sohar in order to draw on the wide range of opportunities available in Oman, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and internationally.

6 ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES

Academic support services at CAS Sohar are provided by the Learning Resource Centre (LRC) and the Department of Admission and Registration (DAR). The LRC consists of three basic units, namely, the Library, the Computer Unit, and the Educational Media Unit (Portfolio, p.53); while as the unit title indicates, DAR provides a range of student admissions and registration services, including the student academic records and has involvement in academic advising. These units are therefore responsible for the provision of support services that are directly related to the teaching and learning process.

6.1 *Academic Support Services Planning & Management*

As CAS Sohar is one of six CASs that come under the umbrella of the MoHE, academic planning and management of policies at the network-wide level are centralised. However, the College does have a certain degree of autonomy in determining internal needs at the operational level. In this regard, it should be noted that the LRC and DAR currently both prepare an annual operational plan that outlines the projects each intends to implement.

As noted earlier in Section 1.6 of this Report, these operational plans now need to be aligned with the strategic directions that have been specified in the new network-wide Strategic Plan, in order to ensure that CAS Sohar operational areas are fully capable of meeting strategic goals in the medium and longer term. It should also be noted that academic support services at CAS Sohar are subject to quality of service surveys by both staff and students. The Panel noted that results from surveys showed that satisfaction with the academic support services provided varied; for example staff seemed satisfied with the services provided by DAR, whereas students were less satisfied. The Panel found that there was a lack of analysis of the survey data and no action plans had been produced in response to the survey results.

The Panel concluded that CAS Sohar appears to be committed to developing a culture of quality and improvement, as indicated by implementing satisfaction surveys with academic support services. However, this initiative will be enhanced if there is more detailed analysis of survey data and action plans produced in response to the survey results.

6.2 *Registry (Enrolment and Student Records)*

The DAR is responsible for maintaining and updating student records using the centralized SIS (Portfolio, p.53). The Panel was advised by a number of the students interviewed that as far as they were concerned, registration was the most important support service provided by the College, and students and staff were generally complimentary about the DAR performance. The Panel found consistent positive feedback on that department's service orientation and delivery, and these positive comments are supported by encouraging customer satisfaction survey results. The guidelines for student registration, enrolment and student records also appear to be comprehensive and robust. The Panel commends the College on its provision of its Registry services.

Commendation 3

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the College of Applied Sciences Sohar for its registry systems and services and for the level of support provided to students in this area.

In interviews with staff, the College acknowledged the need to maximise the usage of the SIS, and the Panel noted that modules for the introduction of online enrolment and registration facilities were in preparation, which is an encouraging development. The Panel also noted that the

DAR was dependent upon IT resources supplied by the Information and Learning Services (ILS) for support of the SIS and this point is taken up in Section 6.4 below.

6.3 *Library*

The Library lies at the heart of the learning, teaching, research and scholarship endeavors of any educational institution. The Panel reviewed the Library's resources and listened to student and staff views on matters of quality. It was noted that the LRC received the second-highest score in terms of the academic service satisfaction surveys conducted (Portfolio, p.54). However, the Panel formed the view that the Library was largely reactive rather than proactive in learning resource planning and acquisition. The Panel was informed that Library staff are totally dependent upon requests from academic staff for the supply of texts on reading lists. Rather than having a dedicated annual Library budget for acquisitions, staff were tasked with visiting local book fairs to purchase resources at discount prices. Economical as such practices may be, they do not indicate a well-developed and planned approach to resource acquisition. Moreover, with English now being the official language of instruction, there is a need to invest more in English language resources.

The Panel also detected a sense of disengagement by students towards using the Library as a learning space, as they felt that the current learning environment was not supportive of their further development as independent or autonomous learners. To address these deficiencies, CAS Sohar needs to develop its purchase and investment strategy for its Library resources.

Recommendation 13

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop a purchase and investment strategy which will act as the basis to increase access to a wider range of reading and research resources in English.

The Panel also detected the need for the Library to take on a greater level of responsibility for supporting students and teachers on how to use its resources to support more effective enquiry-based learning and teaching (see Section 6.6 below). As reflected elsewhere in this Report (see Section 2.5), the development of students as independent learners can only serve to enhance their employability and career prospects upon graduation. The Panel concluded that the Library could also play a more proactive role in encouraging the development of CAS Sohar students as independent learners, by providing them with enhanced access to resources for academic and research skill development, such as electronic journals. The Library staff could also provide a more 'hands-on' approach to supporting students as independent learners, such as by running an independent research skills training programme.

6.4 *Information and Learning Technology Services*

As noted above, CAS Sohar is very dependent on the ILS to provide support for both the academic and administrative operations of the College. It was also noted that the online learning platform, Blackboard, had been implemented as the College's learning management system. The use of the Blackboard platform to supplement more traditional teaching resources had been identified as an area for further expansion, which the Panel viewed as a positive development. This is in the process of being rolled out across the CAS curriculum. In addition, the SIS and some human resource management information systems are currently going online, and ILS also supports the CAS Sohar website.

The Panel reviewed the College's IT resources: there is a basic multimedia lab and IT labs which are relatively well-equipped; there is a user-friendly help-desk function; each student has access to internal-only email accounts; there are the usual problems with internet speed, but there are

also plans to upgrade the exchange server. However, the same lack of systematic planning detected elsewhere in this Report is also in evidence. In particular, it was noted that there is little exchange or sharing of resources between the Colleges in the CAS network. The Panel concluded that the College is aware of its dependency on well-provisioned IT to function well, and in the Portfolio had identified the need to improve IT infrastructure as a priority area (Portfolio, p.57). There is a particular need for increased investment in the purchase of bandwidth in order to address problems with regard to speed of access to the internet and the effectiveness of IT resources to support student learning (as well as College administrative applications).

Affirmation 6

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with and supports the College of Applied Sciences Sohar's efforts to improve the quality of its IT infrastructure to support student learning.

6.5 Academic Advising

SCT describes academic advising as one of the vital tasks of the College in monitoring student improvement and academic output. More specifically, it helps to:

- *Acquaint students with academic requirements and clarify issues related to regulations.*
- *Assist the student discover his/her academic potential and inclinations towards the appropriate selection of the major.*
- *Collect data relative to academic progress and academic life.*
- *Assist in orientation and advising to sort out challenges the student may encounter (Portfolio, p.57).*

The College has clearly outlined the role of the academic advisor and this is made available to staff in the Academic Counselling Guide. In collaboration with the DAR and Heads of Department (HoDs), the Academic Advising Committee (AAC) is in charge of distributing students to advisors, with an average of 20-25 students per advisor. The Panel noted that the number of students on probation had decreased since the implementation of the College's approach to academic advising and this suggests that it may well be a result of the introduction of a more effective student advising strategy.

Senior managers, students, and both academic and administrative staff all spoke positively about the value of academic advising in providing students with academic and pastoral support through access to resources such as individual academic mentors and the AAC. Based on the available evidence, the Panel wishes to commend the College on its efforts in this area.

Commendation 4

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the College of Applied Sciences Sohar for its proactive academic advising system which recognizes and responds to student needs.

6.6 Student Learning Support

CAS Sohar recognizes the importance of extra-curricular activities in enhancing the learning experience of students and provides a list of equipment that is made available to students to support events (Portfolio, p.58). What distinguishes student learning in higher education (as distinct from the other sectors of education and training) is the importance given to the development of academic and research skills. These skills assist undergraduate students to become independent (or 'autonomous') learners, and so prepare them for employment at a professional or paraprofessional level, and/or for further university-level studies (see Section 2.5).

CAS Sohar would benefit from reviewing its offering of student learning support activities, especially for those students identified at risk.

6.7 Teaching Resources

The CAS network aims to “provide high quality up-to-date learning resources” (Objective 6.1, Strategic Plan). While the teaching resources may be adequate to meet basic requirements, there is an expectation that CAS Sohar, as a designated ‘Centre of Excellence’ in IT, should be quite distinctive in this particular respect. The Panel found the College’s IT labs to be adequately resourced, but the three language labs once used for English language learning had fallen into disrepair, with one of the labs now being used as a general teaching space. The Panel also noted that a number of the class sets of texts stored in the Library appeared to be unused, but these may have been recent acquisitions. A number of measures have been identified to improve the teaching resources including establishing and updating a list of equipment; organising training sessions and reorganising the LRC and the working plans to comply with the new programmes of the College. The College is making progress in this area and the Panel supports these efforts.

Affirmation 7

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar needs to review its current teaching resources in line with the recent introduction of new programmes and supports its efforts in this area.

7 STUDENTS AND STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Students and student support services at CAS Sohar come under the Department of Student Affairs (DSA) and the Department of Admission and Registration (where academic records and profiles are generated and stored) (Portfolio, p.60). Most student support activities (including academic and non-academic activities) have undergone restructuring following the College's shift from providing programmes in Education to Applied Sciences.

7.1 *Students and Student Support Services Planning & Management*

CAS Sohar states that Strategic Objective 4.1, "establish a supportive management system" underpins the area of student and student support services (Portfolio, p.60). Although CAS Sohar is not a totally independent entity, it does have a certain degree of autonomy in determining internal needs at the operational level. On the other hand, some student support service initiatives (such as providing enhanced careers and employment services (see Section 7.5)) have been centrally planned and resourced.

As noted in Section 1.6 of this Report, the operational plans for students and student support services now need to be aligned with the strategic directions that have been specified in the new network-wide Strategic Plan. This should ensure that CAS Sohar's operational areas are fully capable of meeting strategic goals in the medium and longer term.

7.2 *Student Profile*

According to figures provided by the College, the total number of students at CAS Sohar in the academic year 2008-2009 was 1377 with 445 students enrolled in the General Foundation Programme (GFP) (Portfolio, p.76). On a gender basis, the student profile is 55% male and 45% female, the largest difference being in the GFP in which there were 318 male students compared to 127 female students (2008 figures). The College recognizes that importance of having comprehensive and accurate student statistics (Portfolio, p.60), but also needs to develop a system to analyse data provided by its Student Information System (SIS). The Panel supports the College's plan to explore the potential for fully exploiting the SIS with the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE).

7.3 *Student Satisfaction and Climate*

Data from a variety of sources is collected to measure student satisfaction. These sources range from formal student evaluations to less formal suggestion boxes (Portfolio, p.61). The College acknowledged that "More regular and separate surveys are needed" and indicated that "CAS Sohar is planning to organise at least two surveys per year" (Portfolio, p.62).

The Panel considered various data which showed that CAS Sohar is making headway in this area. As noted in Section 6.1, the involvement of students is mainly based on collecting their views on the quality of the services provided by the College. Students respond to numerous surveys, but the College now needs to develop and implement a clear strategy for how the College responds to student feedback and how students are informed of responses to their issues or grievances. As the College reviews its approach in this area, the Panel suggests that a wider range of management information is considered.

Affirmation 8

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar needs to broaden its approach to monitoring student satisfaction and supports its efforts in this area.

7.4 *Student Behaviour*

MoHE rules and regulations on student behaviour are compiled into the Student Handbook, and every year, the College distributes a new version of the handbook to all students (Portfolio, p.62). In addition, new students are required to follow an annual induction programme which addresses matters relating to student behaviour. There is also a Disciplinary Committee headed by the Assistant Dean with the membership of academic and non-academic staff responsible for enforcing MoHE requirements and for handling cases of misconduct.

The Panel noted that under ministerial regulations students are not allowed to take their final exams in a course if they have missed more than 20% of the hours allocated for the course. The Panel was informed that 75 students in the academic year 2008-2009 were disqualified from taking the exams in one of their courses. As noted above (Section 6.5), following the introduction of the academic advising process, the College had seen a reduction in the number of CAS Sohar students on probation. The Panel supports the College's efforts in this area.

7.5 *Career and Employment Services*

In line with the strategic objective to "establish an on-campus Career Centre for prospective graduates" (Strategy 9.1.B, Strategic Plan), a Career Guidance Department (CGD) has been established in each College. This Department will liaise with the private sector to identify training and employment opportunities for final year students and graduates. Employers will be encouraged to promote their vacancies and conduct interviews on campus. Further CGD activities include the creation of a career guidance group of students; visits from consultants from the Ministry of Manpower and Oman Chamber of Industry and Commerce to provide updates on public and private sector projects; and the organization of talent and job fairs (Portfolio, pp.48-49).

Within this framework, the College has recently appointed a new Careers Officer, and the College stated that "it is hoped that this new service will establish the necessary link between the College, graduates and potential employers in local businesses" (Portfolio, p.63). The Panel was aware that these were recent initiatives and needed time to become well established. Locally, the Shell Development Oman Company had conducted a "Career Awareness" programme and a "Bright Ideas" workshop during the second semester of the academic year 2008-2009. The Panel supports the College's efforts in this area.

Affirmation 9

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the College of Applied Sciences Sohar that it needs to improve its current career guidance strategy and supports its efforts to develop its Career Guidance Department and to engage local employers in this initiative.

Further work will need to be done in order to develop students' practical skills through the provision of well resourced labs, Library and the delivery of value added courses that enhance business writing skills, CV development and soft skills (encouraging personal and professional development).

7.6 *Student Finances*

The College states that monthly bursaries, transportation allowances, and financial support for students' activities are provided by the MoHE (Portfolio, p.63). Eligibility for a monthly bursary is based on the MoHE regulations in relation to the distance of a student's home from the College. Eligibility for transportation allowances is also determined on the same basis.

7.7 *Accommodation, Catering and Transport*

The College provides assistance to students from outside Sohar in finding accommodation. Transportation for official trips is covered through the College's limited fleet. Other transportation duties include transfer of students to hospital/health centres.

The quality of the services provided by the College's Services Department was generally rated poorly by students in the satisfaction surveys and a number of the students interviewed were critical about the quality of the catering, which is outsourced to external contractors.

The Panel encourages the College to ensure that all services are included in the ongoing surveys of student (and staff) satisfaction. In the case of catering services, the Panel suggests that it may be worthwhile holding some student focus group sessions that will signal to both the student body and to the service provider that responding to student feedback is important.

7.8 *Medical and Counselling Facilities*

The College states that although there is no nurse located on the CAS Sohar campus, a first aid box is prominently located in the Student Affairs Office for immediate treatments of a minor nature (Portfolio, p.64). The College advised the Panel that more serious cases are transferred to the nearest clinics and hospitals by the College's transport services, and no cases of complaint were brought to the Panel's attention.

CAS Sohar acknowledged that there was a need to raise awareness about issues relating to accident prevention and first aid procedures, and that consequently a first aid training programme needs to be organised (Portfolio, p.64). The Panel endorses this self-identified improvement and supports the College's efforts in this area.

Affirmation 10

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with and supports the College of Applied Sciences Sohar's efforts to develop awareness of accident prevention and to introduce a first aid training programme.

The College has not addressed the area of counseling in the Portfolio, and interviews with staff and students indicated that counseling was handled by the academic advisors. CAS Sohar would benefit from reviewing its current provision of counseling facilities, as distinct from academic counseling.

7.9 *International Student Services*

CAS Sohar has no international students and therefore this area has not been considered by the Panel.

7.10 *Social and Recreational Services and Facilities*

CAS Sohar states that it follows a "bottom-up approach" in formulating student activity plans, with students proposing activities, discussing them with coordinators and then with the Head of the DSA. An activity plan is then developed which is submitted to the Dean and then the MoHE for approval (Portfolio, p.60).

It was noted that the DSA was the most highly-rated department in the College-wide satisfaction surveys, and feedback from students and staff during the audit visit was overwhelmingly positive about the range and quality of extra-curricular activities, such as student participation in cultural activities and performances. The College stated that it was responding positively to student-identified issues – for example in the provision of a sports area for girls (Portfolio, p.64). As

mentioned earlier (see Section 7.3), CAS Sohar needs to ensure that it informs its stakeholders of any outcomes in relation to survey feedback.

The Panel had the opportunity to meet a number of students, all of whom were positive about their experience at the College and would be quick to recommend it to prospective students. Students spoke very highly of the social and cultural activities provided on and off campus, especially relating to theatre and media. The Panel concluded that the extracurricular activities programme at CAS Sohar was worthy of commendation.

Commendation 5

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the College of Applied Sciences Sohar for its active engagement with students to support a wide range of extracurricular activities.

8 STAFF AND STAFF SUPPORT SERVICES

CAS Sohar has undergone a significant change over the past few years which has had an impact on staff recruitment and support. The first phase was transition from a College of Education (CoE) to a CAS which had five academic departments. The current phase involves a re-profiling of the College to have a focus on Engineering and IT. At present, recruitment and staff policies are developed at the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) level for all CASs.

8.1 *Human Resources Planning & Management*

Human resources (HR) planning and management operates on the basis of a Ministerial Decision (8/96) and activities conform to the requirements of central policies (Portfolio, p.65). The Panel found there to be a tension between meeting the requirements of Ministry policies in this area and meeting the local needs of CAS Sohar. Strategic Objective 4.2 outlines the intention to “reinforce and expand the College human resources”. However, there seems to be no strategic planning in this area, especially as this would relate to an overall approach to HR management. Such an approach would ensure that there was a clear link between recruitment, appointment, probation, professional development and promotion.

Recommendation 14

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop and implement a human resources strategy to ensure that the areas of staff recruitment, induction, probation, development and reward are aligned.

8.2 *Staff Profile*

Of the 156 employees, slightly over 50% of staff are Omani while others have been recruited from seventeen countries including: Egypt, Malaysia, Iraq, Sudan, Jordan, Britain, USA, Canada and India among others. Just under half (49.5 %) of current staff have been recruited since 2005. Nearly 65% of the staff are classified as academic, while academic support staff comprise nearly 18% and administrative staff 17%. With regard to gender, 21.2% of employees are female. Twenty percent of academic staff hold Doctoral degrees, while other academic staff hold Masters degrees (Portfolio, pp.66-67).

Of possible concern is the fact that a number of staff speak only English or Arabic (Portfolio, p.67). This potential language barrier has implications for the communication channels between College staff and for the effective delivery of programmes (see Recommendation 19).

8.3 *Recruitment and Selection*

Because of structural changes in the transition from a College of Education (CoE) to a CAS, there has been a 50% growth in academic staff numbers since the 2005-2006 academic year, with nearly 25% of academic staff recruited during 2008. The College liaises with the MoHE to hire and maintain highly qualified, experienced and culturally diverse faculty (Portfolio, p.67). Positions are advertised through local, national and international newspapers and on the internet. In some instances, particular markets have been targeted, for example in Jordan, India, Malaysia and Australia. Deans and Assistant Deans are appointed by the Minister after they have been nominated by the Director General of CASs (Portfolio, p.13). Staff teaching on the Foundation Programme are recruited by the Hawthorn Language Centre. The College noted that there is sometimes a time lapse between the determination of the staffing needs and the arrival of newly appointed staff but it is not clear what action is being taken to address this. The Panel concluded

that the area of recruitment and selection needs to be considered within an overarching HR development strategy (see Recommendation 14).

8.4 *Induction*

CAS Sohar indicates that there is an induction programme for newly appointed staff which is delegated to HoDs (Portfolio, p.68). On closer investigation, this appears to focus on Ministry and College rules and regulations rather than broader topics. Discussions with academic staff indicated that they had not participated in a formal induction programme but had been involved in an informal process to understand the culture and expectations of the College. The Department of English Language and Literature has produced a document providing useful information for those new to Oman and/or Sohar as well as to the College. As the College develops, it will need to implement a formal systematic approach to induction which meets the needs of staff at CAS Sohar as well as Ministry level requirements (see Recommendation 14).

8.5 *Professional Development*

The College claims that it is committed to the professional development of its employees (Portfolio, p.68). The Panel was informed that professional development is conducted through the Professional Development Unit of the College on the basis of needs analyses. While its activities receive positive comments from staff as evidenced through post activity surveys, such an approach tends to be *ad hoc*, as it focuses on specific needs of staff at a particular time. Accordingly, there appears to be no thought out strategy relating to the on-going professional development of staff. For academic staff, attendance at conferences and specific IT training sessions seem to be the major form of professional development. Not all staff are aware of the opportunities available for staff development nor the procedures required for availing themselves of these opportunities. Many staff felt they required increased levels of support for professional learning, suggesting the need to develop a culture that promotes continuous professional development.

Given the major challenges the College faces with its change of profile and growth in student numbers, the development of leadership and management capabilities of staff is a necessary aspect of professional development. Heads of Department (HoDs) play a key role in the effective and successful running of the College's academic programmes. While many academics learn the fundamentals of academic leadership *in situ*, this is not necessarily the best way to provide academics with the skills to lead and manage a department. During a period of substantial change, HoDs need to work with senior management to achieve the overall change objective. The College needs to develop a targeted leadership development strategy to build management capacity.

Recommendation 15

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop a targeted leadership development strategy to be implemented in the first instance for Heads of Department in order to build management capability.

8.6 *Performance Planning and Review*

The CAS Strategic Plan aims to develop a "transparent performance appraisal system linked to reward system" (Strategy 4.2F, Strategic Plan). CAS Sohar has developed an appraisal system for teaching staff which includes feedback from students and peers. Peer observation is an informal method used by academic staff whereby colleagues sit in on each others' classes and provide informal feedback and exchange expertise with each other. It does not seem to be integrated into the formal appraisal process and is not always perceived to be useful (see Section 2.5).

The approach to performance planning and review is underdeveloped and fragmented in how it is conceived and implemented. For example, job descriptions define activities but not key skills or core competencies against which staff performance can be measured. There is a need for more integrated and structured approach to staff performance planning and review. The Panel concludes that the College needs to develop a robust performance planning and review programme.

Recommendation 16

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar establish a staff performance planning and review mechanism which recognises areas of achievement and identifies priority areas for further development.

8.7 *Promotion and Other Incentives*

CAS Sohar has developed a document which outlines the rules and procedures regarding promotion. Rules and regulations regarding non-Omani staff are under development.

Of the 156 members of staff, 61.5% have never been promoted. In order to grow and retain talent, especially within the academic workforce, a programme that recognizes and rewards excellence in public and transparent ways ought to be developed and put in place. The College needs to consider consistency and alignment of criteria for appointment; probation; performance development and review; and promotion (see Recommendation 14).

8.8 *Severance*

The severance process in CAS Sohar is carried out in accordance with the Royal Decree 120/2004, Civil Service Law (Portfolio, p.70). While the College carries out employee satisfaction surveys, there is currently no formal system of handling severance procedures, such as exit interviews. This may be something to undertake in the future.

8.9 *Staff Organisational Climate and Retention*

CAS Sohar states that it is committed to the provision of a positive organizational climate that helps to retain staff (Portfolio, p.71). The conversion from a CoE to a CAS resulted in the termination of some staff contracts. Likewise the recent re-profiling of the College into a College of Excellence for IT and Engineering will also mean some changes in staffing and the need for workforce planning (see Recommendation 14).

The College has carried out surveys, mainly in administrative areas, to monitor the staff organizational climate in relation to their satisfaction with CAS Sohar services. In the most recent of these (May 2009) staff in areas such as the Department of Administration and Registration (DAR), indicated that they are generally satisfied with the quality of service (Portfolio, p.71). While this survey is a useful initiative, it needs to be extended to address any underperforming areas and include the academic departments. In future, results need to be analyzed, action plans developed and communicated to all staff. Given the high level of change occurring within the College, it would be useful to survey all staff to ascertain the impact of change on their work conditions and their work satisfaction.

As the College continues to recruit new staff, data will need to be collected to ensure that a positive organizational climate is sustained. Information from these surveys needs to complement and inform the human resources (HR) Plan by monitoring staff retention and staff satisfaction feedback in such a way that skill gaps can be filled and staff capabilities can be developed in a planned rather than in an ad hoc way.

Recommendation 17

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar develop and implement regular staff satisfaction surveys in order to inform management decisions.

The Panel also felt the need for establishing effective and proper channels for staff grievances. This is an area the College needs to address.

8.10 Omanisation

The College states that it is committed to the creation of opportunities for Omani nationals and has been proactive in recruiting over 50% of staff who are Omani nationals (Portfolio, p.71). Further recruitment in the area of Engineering will need to ensure that appropriately qualified Omanis are recruited and retained. It was clear, from discussion with College staff and students, that CAS Sohar was aware of the need to balance the Omanisation ambition against the needs of students and staff within their courses, particularly within the Foundation Programme. The Panel was confident that the College was engaging with the project for Omanisation sensitively and seriously, but the College needs to review overall staffing against the specific and generic needs of its programme delivery.

9 GENERAL SUPPORT SERVICES AND FACILITIES

General support services and facilities at CAS Sohar are a shared responsibility between the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) and the College. At the operational level, these responsibilities lie with the Department of Services (DS). DS personnel are appointed by the MoHE with the recommendation of the Dean of the College. Responsibilities are then assigned by the Head of Department (HoD).

9.1 *General Support Services and Facilities Planning & Management*

The MoHE develops a general plan for the College to implement and within the broad guidelines of this plan the College has some leeway to cater for its own specific needs. In the Portfolio, CAS Sohar claims that planning is ‘flexible’ (p.72). For example, the College makes plans for the acquisition of new furniture (e.g. classroom furniture) and the furniture is replaced when the need arises. It is apparent from the Portfolio (pp.72-75), that the College is aware of the need to develop its facilities to better support learning, but discussion within the interviews reflected that often this planning process focuses on short-term needs and does not, perhaps, enable greater strategic development. The Panel concluded that infrastructure planning needs now to be more closely aligned to the College’s new strategic priorities and directions, for improved operational effectiveness and efficiency.

The College reported that operational planning is monitored through the College Council (Portfolio, p.72). The Panel reflected that it would be useful for the Council to develop its strategic oversight of this important area so as to be better able to plan for medium to long term enhancement.

Recommendation 18

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar adopt a planned approach to infrastructure development and renewal which will fully support its strategic development.

9.2 *Public Relations and Marketing*

As a public institution, CAS Sohar is supervised by the MoHE and education is provided free of charge. Consequently, a large number of prospective students apply to enrol in the CAS network, and CAS Sohar does not have to actively recruit its students. However, because marketing plays an increasingly important role in projecting the image of the institution to stakeholders, the College claims to take public relations and marketing very seriously (Portfolio, p.72). In becoming a Centre of Excellence in IT and Engineering, an opportunity exists to reframe how the College is to be presented in terms of recruiting students and staff and in developing appropriate relationships with various business, community and professional stakeholders. The Panel noted, however, that there is no one person currently responsible for public relations and marketing at CAS Sohar. In the Strategic Plan, the College states that it intends to “develop a marketing policy for the College programmes and services” (Strategy 3.1D) but the Panel found no progress in this area. In order to meet its strategic objectives, the College needs to introduce mechanisms to develop in the areas of public relations and marketing.

9.3 *Communication Services*

CAS Sohar provides a range of communication services including telephone and mail services, and message boards for the posting of notices by students and staff. A key development in improving the communication between staff and students on academic matters is the introduction

of the Blackboard learning platform, while, administratively, the move to online enrolment via the internet will also assist communications.

The College states that it also intends to start a message service so that all staff and students can be contacted via SMS. There is also a plan to install LCD screens around the campus to communicate announcements to the students, rather than relying on messages posted on notice boards (Portfolio, pp.73-74). However, the Panel could not detect whether there was a commonly shared vision of CAS Sohar being communicated to both internal stakeholders (students and staff) and the external community.

The Panel found that the College is still in transition from being an Arabic-administered College of Education to one which has a greater focus on the English language. A significant amount of the documentation used is only available in Arabic, including the staff performance appraisal form, which is problematic for any of the non-Arabic speaking staff. The Strategic Plan and reports from New Zealand Tertiary Education Consortium (NZTEC), however, are available in English which may limit its dissemination to Arabic-only speaking staff. The College needs to consider its approach in this area to ensure that it develops a communication policy that is both inclusive and clearly engages all members of the College community.

Recommendation 19

The Oman Accreditation Council recommends that the College of Applied Sciences Sohar review its current communications policy to maximise understanding within the College community and for the development of internal and external communication strategies.

9.4 Facilities Management

There are numerous services and facilities provided by the DS, some of which are in collaboration with MoHE and with other CAS Sohar departments. The College uses outside contractors to deal with areas such as maintenance, plumbing, building and electricity. The College stated that it appreciates there is always room for improvement (Portfolio, p.75), and this need is currently reflected in the low customer satisfaction ratings in surveys on the DS. The Panel encourages the College to adopt an integrated approach to the in-house planning and management of its facilities and infrastructure maintenance, one which is characterised by a continuous process of ensuring that the quality feedback loop is closed (see Recommendation 18).

APPENDIX A. AUDIT PANEL

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APPENDIX B. ABBREVIATIONS, ACRONYMS AND TERMS

The following abbreviations, acronyms and terms are used in this Report. As necessary, they are explained in context. In some cases, URLs are provided to facilitate further enquiries about these acronyms and terms.

AAC.....	Academic Advising Committee
ADRI	A four step, cyclical model for analysing a topic, comprising: Approach → Deployment → Results → Improvement.
Approach	The first dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on evaluating what a HEI aims to achieve for a given topic and how it proposes to achieve it.
Blackboard.....	electronic online teaching platform
BoT	Board of Trustees
Call Back Interview	An interview conducted by the Audit Panel towards the end of the Audit Visit for which it has invited specific people, usually at short notice, to respond to particular issues on which the Panel will require assistance.
CAS	College of Applied Science
CGD.....	Career Guidance Department
CoE	College of Education
CV.....	Curriculum Vitae
DAR.....	Department of Admission and Registration
DG CAS.....	Directorate General of the Colleges of Applied Sciences
DSA	Department of Student Affairs
Deployment	The second dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on whether a HEI's plans for a given topic are being followed in practice, and if not, why not.
DS	Department of Services
DSA	Department of Student Affairs
Executive Officer	An OAAA staff member assigned to an Audit Panel to provide professional guidance and support.
External Reviewer	A Member of the OAAA Register of External Reviewers; a person approved by the OAAA Board to participate as a member of the OAAA's various external review panels.
GFP	General Foundation Program
GPA.....	Grade Point Average
HEI.....	Higher Education Institution (also known as HEP – Higher Education Provider)
HoD	Head of Department
HR.....	Human Resources
IELTS.....	International English Language Testing System
ILS	Information and Learning Services
Improvement.....	The fourth dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on how effectively an organisation is improving its <i>approach</i> and <i>deployment</i> for any given topic in order to achieve better <i>results</i> .

KPI.....	Key Performance Indicator
KRA.....	Key Result Area
LRC.....	Learning Resources Centre
MoF.....	Ministry of Finance
MoHE.....	Ministry of Higher Education (www.mohe.gov.om)
NZTEC.....	New Zealand Tertiary Education Consortium
OAAA Board.....	The governing body of the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
OAAA.....	Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (www.oac.gov.om)
OAC.....	Oman Accreditation Council (became OAAA in 2010)
OFI.....	Opportunity for improvement.
OQF.....	Oman Qualifications Framework.
Panel Chairperson.....	The Chairperson of the Audit Panel.
Panel Member.....	An OAAA External Reviewer who is a member of an Audit Panel.
PD.....	Programme Director
Portfolio.....	see <i>Quality Audit Portfolio</i> .
QA.....	Quality Assurance
Quality Assurance.....	The combination of policies and processes for ensuring that stated intentions are met.
Quality Audit Portfolio.....	The report produced as the result of a self study. Also forms the main submission made to the OAAA by the HEI being audited.
Quality Audit Report.....	A public report published by the OAAA which presents the findings and conclusions of the Audit Panel's External Review of a HEI.
Quality Audit.....	An independent evaluation of the effectiveness of the system and processes by which a HEI sets, pursues and achieves its mission and vision.
Quality Enhancement.....	The combination of policies and processes for improving upon existing <i>approach</i> , <i>deployment</i> and <i>results</i> .
Random Interview.....	An interview conducted <i>in situ</i> by individual Panel Members during the Audit but separately from the main interview sessions.
Results.....	The third dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on the evidence of the outputs and outcomes of a topic's <i>approach</i> and <i>deployment</i> .
SIS.....	Student Information System
System.....	In this Report, <i>system</i> refers to plans, policies, processes and results that are integrated towards the fulfilment of a common purpose.

NOTES

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