



Oman Academic
Accreditation Authority

**Report of a General
Foundation Programme
Quality Audit of Sultan
Qaboos University**

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OVERVIEW OF THE GFP QUALITY AUDIT PROCESS

This General Foundation Programme (GFP) Quality Audit Report (the 'Report') documents the findings of a GFP Quality Audit by the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU).

The GFP Quality Audit follows a similar process to the Institutional Accreditation Stage 1: Quality Audit (which SQU went through in 2009) as outlined in the OAAA's *Quality Audit Manual*¹. The scope outlined in the draft *General Foundation Programme Quality Audit Manual (v1)*² provided the basis for the areas explored during the GFP Quality Audit.

The GFP Quality Audit commenced with SQU undertaking a self-study of its Mission, Vision and systems in relation to its GFP. The results were summarised in its *GFP Portfolio* (the 'Portfolio'). This document was submitted to the OAAA by the agreed date on 14 November 2018.

The OAAA appointed an external GFP Audit Panel (the 'Panel'), comprising suitably qualified and experienced local and international reviewers, to conduct the GFP Quality Audit (GFPQA). For membership of the Panel see Appendix A. The Panel met (international members by telephone) on 10 January 2019 to consider SQU's University's GFP Portfolio. Following this, a representative of the Panel Chairperson and the Review Director undertook a planning visit on behalf of the Panel to SQU on 14 February 2019 to clarify certain matters, request additional information and make arrangements for the Panel's audit visit. Prior to the Audit Visit, the Panel formally invited submissions from the public about the quality of CPS's activities in relation to the GFP. No public submissions were received using this process.

The GFP Quality Audit visit took place over the period 24-28 March 2019. During this time, the Panel spoke with approximately 90 people, including students, staff and other stakeholders from SQU. They also visited a selection of venues and examined additional documents.

This Report contains a summary of the Panel's findings on the foundation programme offered by SQU, together with formal Commendations where good practices have been confirmed, Affirmations where SQU's ongoing quality improvement efforts merit support, and Recommendations where there are significant opportunities for improvement not yet being adequately addressed. The Report aims to provide a balanced set of observations but does not comment on every GFP system in place at SQU.

The Panel's audit activities and preparation of this Report were governed by regulations set by the OAAA Board. No documents created after 28 March 2019 (the last day of the audit visit) were taken into consideration for the purposes of this audit, other than pre-existing evidence specifically requested by the Panel in advance and/or submitted by the HEI in response to GFPQA Report v5. This Report was approved by the OAAA Board on 9 December 2019.

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 website³ (<http://www.oaaa.gov.om>).

¹<http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Docs/To%20upload-FINAL-GFP%20Quality%20Audit%20Manual%2025%20April%202017.pdf>

²<http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Docs/GFP%20Standards%20FINAL.pdf>

³ <http://www.oaaa.gov.om>

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

Each OAAA GFP Quality Audit Report is written primarily for the institution being audited. The Report is specifically designed to provide feedback to help that institution better understand the strengths and opportunities for improvement for its GFP. The feedback is structured according to four 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 useful because it provides some independent comment on the learning environment at this institution (particularly Chapters 2 and 3 below). However, prospective students should still undertake their own investigations when deciding which higher education institution will best serve their particular learning needs.

The focus of the GFP Quality Audit is formative (developmental) rather than summative. In other words, although the audit addresses four areas of activity which are common to all GFPs, it does not measure the programme against externally set standards of performance in those four areas. Instead, it considers how well the institution is attending to those areas in accordance with its own Mission and Vision, in the context of relevant legal regulations, and guided by the current GFP Standards as an external reference point. Therefore, GFP Quality Audit recognises that each institution and its GFP have a unique purpose and profile; it does not directly compare one institution's GFP with all the other institutions' GFPs in Oman.

For these reasons, a GFP 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 the GFP 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 GFP Audit Reports of different HEIs solely on the numbers of Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations.

For more information on Oman's System of Quality Assurance in Higher Education please visit www.oaaa.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

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), founded in 1986, is the only public university in the Sultanate of Oman. At the time of the General Foundation Programme (GFP) Quality Audit visit SQU had over 15,000 students studying on English and Arabic programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level in nine Colleges: Agricultural and Marine Sciences, Art and Social Sciences, Economics and Political Science, Education, Engineering, Law, Medicine and Health Science, Science, and Nursing. The SQU campus is located in Al Khoudh in the Muscat Governorate.

The GFP, or Foundation Programme (FP) as it is referred to at SQU, was first implemented in 2010, and consists of four components: English language, Mathematics (Maths), Information Technology (IT), and Study Skills. English language is the largest component and consists of six proficiency levels that are taught in six Foundation Programme English Language (FPEL) courses. The Maths component (Foundation Programme Mathematics or FPMT) until recently had two levels, which were merged into three different versions of a single course starting in Fall 2018. Depending on their intended undergraduate programme of study, FP students take one of the three courses. The courses are taught in English and Arabic, and students choose the language of study depending on which language their intended undergraduate programme will be taught in. There is also a single IT course (Foundation Programme Computer Science or FPCS) which is delivered in English and Arabic. The Study Skills component does not have a separate course, and is integrated into the other three components, although mainly in the English language component through FPEL courses. SQU states that the Learning Outcomes (LOs) of the FP courses were designed according to the Oman Academic Standards published by the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA), and that the curriculum is based on expanded LOs which state the skills and strategies that learners are expected to acquire before completing each FP course.

When students first enroll at the University, they are given a Placement test to determine their proficiency level in English language. Depending on the result, they are placed in one of the six levels of FPEL courses or allowed to take an English Exit test. For the Maths and IT components, students can attempt an Exit test and, if they pass, they are exempted from taking that component in the FP. Students may also be exempted from the FP by presenting an equivalent qualification, such as IELTS or TOEFL for English, and the International Computer Driving License (ICDL) or the IC3 Digital Literacy certificate for IT. Students who intend to study an undergraduate programme that is taught in Arabic are also required to take the English Placement Test. However, they are exempted from taking the English language component of the FP if they score the equivalence of level 5 or above in the Placement Test; otherwise, they have to study one English course (FPEL1025 or FPEL1026). All FP students must complete the programme within two academic years.

The FP was originally taught separately by the Language Centre and the College of Science, with the former teaching the English Language and Study Skills components, and the latter the Maths and IT components. In 2016, the Centre for Preparatory Studies (CPS) was created for the purpose of delivering the full FP (i.e. all four components) through a single entity. The CPS officially commenced teaching in Fall 2017. In addition to the FP, the CPS offers higher level English language (LANC) courses, which were part of the former Language Centre, and which SQU students must take as part of the University requirements courses of their undergraduate programmes. In 2010, when the FP was launched at the Language Centre, it had 2762 students enrolled. Today, the CPS admits approximately 3,000 students to the FP each academic year, with the vast majority (more than 95%) commencing their studies in the Fall semester. The CPS has a Director and two Deputy Directors, with the FP courses delivered by three academic departments: Department of English for Humanities (DoEH), Department of English for Sciences (DoES), and Department of Mathematics and Information Technology (DoMIT). Additional support is provided through various learning support centres within the CPS, including the Tutorial Centre (TC), Writing Centre (WrC), Self-Access Centre and CPS Library. The CPS has 276 staff members, of which 244 are academic staff members (FP teachers) with different

ranks, and 32 are administrative staff. The majority of the academic staff members (89%) are in the English departments.

CPS's Portfolio reflected a genuine effort by the Centre to undertake an evidence-based, structured and thorough self-study based on the Approach, Deployment, Results and Improvement (ADRI) model (see Appendix B). Initially, an Audit Portfolio Committee was established consisting of representatives from the Colleges of Education, Arts and Science, the Quality Assurance Office at SQU, the Director and Deputy Directors of the Language Centre, and the former Head of the FP. The Committee produced a self-study based on the courses offered separately by the College of Science (Maths and IT) and the Language Centre (English with Study Skills). Following the establishment of the CPS in 2016, the Committee met again and set up working groups for each of the GFP Quality Audit areas. The working groups were responsible for drafting another version of the self-study Portfolio in 2016/2017 with input from a range of stakeholders. In 2018, an Audit Team was created to integrate the four GFP areas and finalise the Portfolio before it was sent to an external reviewer for feedback. A mock QA audit was also conducted. The feedback from the external reviewer and the mock audit were used to finalise the Portfolio which was submitted to the OAAA.

The FP at SQU does not have its own Mission, Vision and Values statements, however, the CPS which delivers the programme, does, and these are aligned to SQU's Mission and Vision. The main aim of the FP is to prepare students for their undergraduate programmes by developing their English, Maths, IT and Study Skills, and the CPS Mission statement reflects this aim, which in turn supports SQU's Mission to "excel in teaching and learning". The CPS Vision is to "assist in fulfilling SQU's Vision to become one of the best universities in the region". The Mission, Vision and Values statements were developed when the CPS was established in 2016, but they have not been consistently communicated to stakeholders resulting in gaps in their understanding and fulfillment. The CPS has a clearly defined governance and management structure, beginning with a Director, supported by Deputy Directors, heads of academic departments and administrative units, and FP teachers and support staff members. The structure has not yet been renewed since it was only established recently, however, a review of the committee structure is currently under way because the CPS has identified that there are too many committees with some overlapping responsibilities. The Panel agrees with this and supports the review of the committee structure which needs to ensure that each committee has clearly defined terms of reference. The CPS does not have any institutional affiliations for its FP or for quality assurance purposes, although there are plans to enter into relationships with other higher education institutions for the purposes of benchmarking.

Planning in the FP is based on SQU's Strategic Plan 2016-2040, from which the CPS has extracted goals and initiatives that are relevant to its activities, and developed a CPS Strategic Implementation Plan 2016-2020. Progress towards the achievement of these goals and initiatives has been slow, and there are reservations about the appropriateness of the plan. The CPS also has an Operational Plan which has been developed based on the initiatives from the SQU Operational Plan, but it is not aligned with the Strategic Implementation Plan. It is not clear how plans at the CPS are implemented and monitored, although the Steering and Executive Committee are responsible for this. There is a need to develop and implement an operational planning process which ensures that strategic and operational plans at the SQU and CPS levels are aligned, and involves a range of stakeholders. The progress and outcomes of any plans need to be monitored on an ongoing basis. Financial resources for the FP are secured through a bottom-up budgeting process which entails heads of departments and units at the CPS providing their input based on the FP needs. This is compiled into a CPS budget by the Director of Administration and forwarded to the SQU Academic Council for approval. In recent years, the CPS budget has been reduced due to cuts in the public sector in Oman, however, these have not impacted the academic provision and the CPS has worked on securing alternative sources of income. The risk management arrangements at the CPS are relatively new, with the Risk Management Committee established only in 2018. Progress has been made with developing risk management plans and risk registers for some CPS departments, however, there is awareness that this is still in the embryonic stages; more work in this area is needed. The Panel agrees with this and supports the CPS's efforts to date.

The FP has not been formally reviewed as a full programme since 2015 and there is no review schedule in place to ensure that this is done on a regular basis. Individual components of the FP and courses have been subject to review, but there is a clear need for developing and implementing a review and monitoring system of the whole FP programme, which includes relevant stakeholders, benchmarks and external reference points, so that improvements can be made.

The CPS has a robust grade appeal system implemented through Appeals Committees in each academic department, with some inconsistencies in the way it is deployed. However, there is no formal system in place for dealing with non-academic grievances and this needs to be addressed so that student grievances are effectively managed and recorded, and the outcomes are communicated back to students.

There has been one fire drill only at CPS since 2016, and a number of health and safety issues need to be addressed as the Centre is one of the few units at SQU that does not have its own health and safety committee. This role has been delegated to the Risk Management Committee. Hence, there is a need for a health and safety system within the CPS, which includes a formal approach to managing health and safety issues, that is disseminated to all stakeholders, and includes designated responsibilities for deployment, health and safety training, and ongoing monitoring of health and safety.

With regards to the FP, the aims of the FP are reflected in its goals. Each of the four FP components have their own learning outcomes which are assessed. The English language and IT learning outcomes are fully aligned with the Learning Outcome Standards specified in the Oman Academic Standards for GFPs. However, the Panel found gaps in the learning outcomes of the Maths and Study Skills components, which need to be closed. The recent merging of the basic and pure/applied Maths courses into a single Maths course has created these gaps. The CPS does not offer a separate Study Skills course and most, but not all, of the study skills learning outcomes are covered in the English language courses. There is a proposal to develop a separate Study Skills course which the Panel supports. Due to a lack of regular interaction with and input from the colleges at SQU, the CPS has no formal means of evaluating the extent of preparing students for their higher education programmes, which is a major aim of the CPS. This needs to be addressed by having formal mechanisms for obtaining feedback from post-FP stakeholders. The FP curriculum is reviewed and updated on a semesterly basis by the central and departmental Curriculum Committees which ensure that individual FP courses are changed in response to the outcomes and student performance in the previous semester. Changes are documented in the Comprehensive Curriculum Document. The Panel finds this process commendable.

The FP has clear entry and exit standards which are in line with the Oman Academic Standards for GFP. Placement and Exit tests are used to determine students' proficiency levels in English, and whether they need to study the Maths and IT courses. The standards and procedures related to the Tests are clearly specified in the FP Student Guide, the draft version of the Staff Handbook and the Comprehensive Curriculum Document, and deployed in practice. However, there has not been any external benchmarking of the English proficiency levels since 2012, and the CPS has identified a need to conduct the benchmarking as a priority. The Panel agrees and is pleased to note that approval and funding for this has already been secured. The Maths and IT entry standards also need to be benchmarked to appropriate external reference points.

Teaching quality at the CPS is monitored through the Course and Teacher Survey, as well as observations. To support teaching quality, FP staff can undertake special teaching-related projects for which they receive release time, and also participate in research conferences. The FP was one of the first programmes at SQU to have an academic integrity policy and adopt the use of Turnitin software for plagiarism detection. While it has been a trailblazer in this area, the application of the policy and detection mechanisms is inconsistent across departments and courses. Turnitin is used in only two of the English language courses (out of six), and only on one assessment (the 500 word report). There are no mechanisms for checking for plagiarism in the Maths and IT courses. These limitations need to be addressed as a priority by introducing plagiarism detection mechanisms in all FP courses, providing additional training for FP students and staff, consistently dealing with academic misconduct cases, and maintaining records of plagiarism cases to track repeat offences. Student achievement of learning outcomes is assessed through various means and the Panel found an example of "best practice" in the way in which the objective tests in reading and listening were designed, administered and marked by the Assessment Unit. Students are provided with feedback on their assessment verbally, and criteria-based marking rubrics are used. The security of the tests and examinations is rigorously assured by the Assessment Unit which follows strict security practices and protocols that have resulted in no examination breaches in the last ten years. The Panel commends this approach and the way in which it has been deployed.

Student retention and progression on the FP is monitored, with data showing that progression and completion rates in most courses have improved over time, with the exception of Maths. Almost 90% of FP students complete the programme within four semesters. Relationships with FP alumni are informal and not well defined, and their feedback about the programme and input into reviews is not taken into account. The CPS

needs to address this by implementing a formal system for eliciting feedback from FP alumni about their experience on the programme, and collecting data on their progression in the higher education programmes.

SQU and the CPS provide a range of academic and support services to FP students, and statistics of FP enrollments and student profile data are used to inform planning when required. FP students are registered as SQU students by the Deanship of Admission and Registration, but the Student Advising and Registration Department at the CPS manages the individual timetables and course registrations of FP students. The Department is also involved in the student induction by hosting a Welcome Desk in the first three weeks of the academic year. However, apart from the Welcome Desk and a presentation from the CPS Director, FP students do not have any other orientation about the FP. Induction is organised by SQU and the emphasis is on the higher education programmes and University services. The CPS needs to develop and implement a formal induction programme for new FP students which provides them with appropriate information and support. The teaching and learning resources available to FP students include a CPS Library, various teaching materials (some of which are developed in-house and available on Moodle), classrooms and computer laboratories. However, there is no means of assessing the effectiveness and appropriateness of these resources, so that improvements can be made. This needs to be rectified by implementing regular feedback mechanisms to solicit students' comments and input. The CPS does not allocate academic advisors to FP students and relies on the teaching staff and Student Affairs Co-ordinator to provide academic advice. However, the complexity of the FP pathways and progression requirements, as well as the need for identifying "at-risk" students, necessitates the establishment of an academic advising system for FP students, which is reviewed for effectiveness. By contrast, the CPS has established a strong learning support system for FP students through the Tutorial and Writing Centres which offer appropriate and commendable learning support that is highly rated by the students. Nonetheless, the general student climate and student satisfaction with the FP and different services and facilities, including non-academic support services and facilities that are available to them, is not monitored and there is no student satisfaction survey in place. This is crucial if improvements are to be made, and needs to be developed as a matter of priority. There is a Student Representative Council at the CPS. External engagement is undertaken through a series of professional activities by FP staff members who are invited to be external guest speakers and host workshops by the British Council. The foremost external engagement activity is the annual ELT conference which is hosted by the CPS.

The majority of staff at the CPS are academics, with qualifications that are in line with the Oman Academic Standards. However, there is no staffing needs analysis or long term HR planning to ensure that the delivery of the FP is fully supported. This needs to be addressed by the CPS, and used to facilitate the staff recruitment and selection process. The induction of new academic staff is highly effective and organised through the Induction Committee, which ensures that staff can successfully fulfil their roles. Professional Development (PD) of staff members is conducted through weekly and daily PD workshops and sessions, as well as release time and funding for projects and research. However, this is not done consistently across the academic departments and the CPS has identified a need for a more inclusive approach to PD, which is evaluated for effectiveness. The Panel agrees with this. The current performance appraisal system is being replaced with a University-wide approach which will be implemented in 2019. As with students, the CPS does not conduct regular surveys of FP staff members about their experience at the Centre. Regular feedback mechanisms need to be put in place to make sure that staff views are heard and staff concerns are addressed. The CPS's Omanisation strategy is dependent on the availability of financial grades for Omani academic staff members which are approved through SQU in co-ordination with the Ministry of Finance.

Summary of Commendations

A formal Commendation recognises an instance of particularly good practice.

1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Sultan Qaboos University for implementing a robust process for making changes to individual courses that make up the Foundation Programme curriculum, which results in ongoing improvements at the course level recorded in the Comprehensive Curriculum Document.....28
2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Sultan Qaboos University for implementing a rigorous, robust and comprehensive approach to developing and validating objective tests, which results in effective assessment of student achievement of learning outcomes in the English Foundation Programme courses.....34

3. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Sultan Qaboos University for the effective academic security and invigilation procedures established by the Assessment Unit at the Centre for Preparatory Studies which ensure that examinations are held under secure conditions. .36
4. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Sultan Qaboos University for the range of effective student learning support services provided to Foundation Programme students through the Writing Centre and the Tutorial Centre, which are aligned to students' needs, provide peer-assisted support, and enhance the overall student learning experience.....45
5. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Sultan Qaboos University for the comprehensive and effective induction and mentoring system for new Foundation Programme academic staff, which provides guidance to newly recruited staff members and supports them to successfully fulfil their roles.50

Summary of Affirmations

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

1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with Sultan Qaboos University that the Centre for Preparatory Studies committee structure needs to be reviewed in order to ensure that all committees have clearly defined terms of reference, duplication between the responsibilities of different committees is eliminated, and a more balanced workload for academic staff is achieved, and supports the initial efforts by the ad hoc committee created for this purpose.15
2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with Sultan Qaboos University that the University's risk management system needs to be fully deployed for the Foundation Programme, and relevant academic and non-academic risks need to be identified and monitored periodically, and supports the efforts of the Centre for Preparatory Studies in this area which include establishing a Risk Management Committee and developing a Risk Register.19
3. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with Sultan Qaboos University that the Study Skills component of the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes needs to be fully integrated into the Foundation Programme curriculum, teaching and assessment to ensure that all of the Learning Outcome Standards in this area are achieved, and supports its efforts to develop a separate Study Skills course within the Programme.25
4. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with Sultan Qaboos University that the Foundation Programme Exit tests need to be reviewed and benchmarked against external reference points, and supports the actions taken by the Centre for Preparatory Studies to conduct an external benchmarking exercise as a matter of priority.....29
5. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with Sultan Qaboos University that a more inclusive professional development strategy for all Foundation Programme staff needs to be developed, implemented and monitored for effectiveness, and supports the initial efforts in this area by establishing relevant committees and deploying the digital badges initiative.51

Summary of Recommendations

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

1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University ensure that the Centre for Preparatory Studies' Mission, Vision and Values statements are consistently articulated in all relevant documents and through the different communication channels, so that they are clear and accessible to all stakeholders.13

2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement a systematic and effective operational planning process at the Centre for Preparatory Studies, involving different stakeholders, which ensures that all operational plans are clearly aligned with the University's strategies and initiatives, and include relevant goals, resources, and key performance indicators to monitor performance on an ongoing basis.....17
3. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement an effective system for monitoring and reviewing the whole Foundation Programme on a regular basis, which includes input from a range of internal and external stakeholders, benchmarking and other relevant reference points.....20
4. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement a formal process for recording, managing and resolving non-academic student grievances for the Foundation Programme, which includes communicating the outcomes to students, and which is periodically reviewed for effectiveness.21
5. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University establish and implement a health and safety system within the Centre for Preparatory Studies, which includes a formal approach to managing health and safety issues that is disseminated to all stakeholders, and includes designated responsibilities for deployment, health and safety training, and ongoing monitoring of health and safety issues.22
6. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University ensure all of the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes for Mathematics learning outcomes are integrated into the Foundation Programme curriculum, teaching and assessment.24
7. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement a systematic approach to obtain feedback from Foundation Programme alumni and external (post-Foundation Programme) stakeholders about the Programme and the preparedness of its graduates, and use this feedback to ensure that the Foundation Programme is effective in fulfilling its aims.26
8. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University extend and evaluate its current approach to maintaining a culture of academic integrity, and include appropriate plagiarism detection mechanisms in all Foundation Programme courses, provide additional training for Foundation Programme students and staff, consistently deal with academic misconduct cases, and maintain records of plagiarism cases to track repeat offences.....33
9. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University establish and implement a formal system for collecting data on Foundation Programme alumni progression in the higher education programmes, which are used to enhance the Foundation Programme.37
10. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement a formal induction programme for new Foundation Programme students, organised by the Centre for Preparatory Studies, and which provides appropriate information and support for student entry into the Foundation Programme, and which is regularly reviewed for effectiveness.....41
11. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching and learning resources in place to support the delivery of the Foundation Programme on an ongoing basis, and to ensure that they are appropriate and meet the learning needs and teaching requirements of Foundation Programme students and staff. .42
12. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement an academic advising system for the Foundation Programme to identify and support "at risk" students, and monitor individual student's progression through the Foundation Programme, which is linked to student learning support and evaluated for effectiveness.....43

13. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement a system for regularly monitoring student satisfaction with all of the different services available to Foundation Programme students, and communicate actions taken in response to the student feedback to relevant stakeholders, in order to ensure a positive, constructive and supportive student climate.45
14. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement a long-term human resources plan for the Foundation Programme, which is informed by the staff profile, in order to facilitate and enhance staff recruitment and selection, and ensure appropriate human resources are available to support the Foundation Programme provision in the long term.49
15. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement a system for monitoring satisfaction of Foundation Programme staff members, which includes the use of regular feedback mechanisms, and ensures that actions taken in response to the feedback are communicated to staff.52

1 GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

The FP has been delivered by the Centre for Preparatory Studies at SQU since 2016. This Chapter reports on governance and management arrangements of the FP and includes the Panel's findings related to the CPS's Mission, Vision and Values, the governance and management structure at the CPS that supports the delivery of the FP, strategic and operational planning and monitoring of plans, financial and risk management related to the programme, systems for reviewing the FP, student grievance processes which are in place, and health and safety considerations.

1.1 Mission, Vision and Values

The FP at SQU does not have its own separate Mission, Vision and Values statements for the programme. However, the CPS, which offers the FP and other English language preparatory courses, has developed Mission, Vision and Values statements for the Centre, which are as follows:

Mission:

"The CPS is committed to providing a high quality preparatory programme that develops in the students the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for success in their respective colleges. It provides students with the necessary language, technical and life skills to enter, participate and thrive in their academic undergraduate programmes." (CPS website)

Vision:

"Assist in fulfilling Sultan Qaboos University vision to become one of the best universities in the region and to achieve an international reputation that is a source of Omani pride." (CPS website)

Values

- a) *Student focus: Students shall be placed at the centre of the activities, emphasizing their academic and social development.*
- b) *Integration of knowledge and practice: Teachers shall constantly apply the most effective teaching methodologies into their teaching.*
- c) *Reflective practice: Students and teachers shall engage in reflective practice whereby they reflect on the learning and teaching process and refine their practices accordingly.*
- d) *Independent learning: Teachers shall help learners gradually develop independence and responsibility for their learning.*

The CPS's Mission and Values were created by the committee tasked by SQU's Vice Chancellor in 2012 with restructuring the FP, following the SQU Quality Audit by the OAAA in 2010. The committee considered similar programmes in other countries and visited various higher education institutions (HEIs) in Oman and the Gulf for the purposes of benchmarking. Several SQU colleges and centres were also consulted during this process. An initial proposal to establish a Deanship of Preparatory Studies was produced in 2013. This was later revised in 2015 to an Institute of Preparatory Studies. Both proposals included the same Mission and Values statements for the new entity, which were identical to the ones listed above. There was no Vision statement included in either proposal. Since the Mission and Values statements were developed by the committee prior to the establishment of the CPS, there was no direct stakeholder involvement by FP staff members or students, although the Head of the FP and the Director of the Language Centre at the time were on the committee.

The CPS Mission and Values statements can be found on its English website, on posters in the CPS building, and in the draft version of the Staff Handbook 2018/2019. The statements, however, are not available in any of the FP Student Guides, or the Guide for New Teachers. The CPS Strategic Implementation Plan 2016-2020 also does not contain any of the Mission, Vision or Values statements, however, there is a reference to increasing awareness about CPS's Vision in one of the strategic initiatives (Strategy C, Initiative 1 on p.69). Despite this being an initiative, the Vision statement is not on CPS's website, but can be found in the draft version of the Staff Handbook 2018/2019 and on posters in the CPS building on campus.

The “CPS recognises its role in supporting and assisting SQU to achieve the University’s vision, pursue its mission and achieve its objectives while implementing its values” (Portfolio, p.10). This role will be accomplished by designing the FP “to help prepare students to undertake undergraduate education at [SQU] successfully” (Portfolio, p.9). As such, the CPS’s Mission, Vision and Values are intended to be in line with SQU’s. The CPS Vision statement directly references SQU’s Vision, although it is not clear how the CPS contributes to SQU’s Vision of achieving international recognition. The Mission statement of the CPS focuses on developing academic skills and knowledge so that students are prepared for their undergraduate programmes “in their respective colleges”. This is also directly relevant to SQU’s Mission to “excel in teaching and learning” (Portfolio, p.9). The Panel found the link between the CPS Values and those of SQU to be less clear, with the CPS Values all being directly related to student-centred learning, while SQU’s Values are more general, and include “excellence, integrity, credibility, loyalty, commitment and collegiality” (Portfolio, p.10).

The Panel found that several efforts have been made to disseminate the CPS Mission, Vision and Values statements to stakeholders. In addition to being displayed on posters around the CPS building, the CPS Director circulated an e-mail to all CPS staff members in February 2018 as part of SQU’s Institutional Standards Assessment (ISA) preparations, which included the CPS Mission and Vision. Following this, a staff workshop was presented in March 2018 by the Quality Management Unit (QMU) to develop awareness about the FP Quality Audit. The workshop included information about the CPS Mission, Vision and Values, although the Panel notes that the Mission presented differed from the one mentioned above and was stated as “CPS prepares students for better learning and engagement that can boost and facilitate SQU’s general mission”. The Panel also noted that the Arabic version of the CPS website did not contain the Mission and Vision statements, while the English version only had the Mission and Values statements. This lack of consistency in the articulation of the Mission, Vision and Values statements across different media and channels, has resulted in a lack of awareness amongst staff and students about the actual Mission and Vision of the CPS, and subsequently the FP, as evident in interviews conducted during the GFPQA Visit. This is echoed in feedback from staff in the CPS Teacher Survey which includes some comments about the Mission and Vision not being clear.

Recommendation 1

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University ensure that the Centre for Preparatory Studies’ Mission, Vision and Values statements are consistently articulated in all relevant documents and through the different communication channels, so that they are clear and accessible to all stakeholders.

Since the CPS was established in 2016 and has not completed the first cycle of its Strategic Implementation Plan 2016-2020, the Mission, Vision and Values have not yet been reviewed. When this review is undertaken in the future, the Panel urges CPS to ensure that there is appropriate stakeholder participation, so that students, staff members and stakeholders from SQU’s colleges are involved. The Mission, Vision and Values also need to be better integrated into CPS’s planning processes, to ensure that they are being achieved (see Section 1.4). For example, CPS aims to support SQU’s Vision of attaining an “international reputation” but does not yet have a plan in place to acquire its own international recognition, as identified in the QMU Recommendations 2017/2018. These recommendations are currently being addressed.

1.2 Governance and Management Arrangements

The Academic Council (AC) at SQU has oversight of all academic matters at the University, and reports to the University Council. The AC is chaired by the Vice Chancellor (VC) of the University and consists of three Deputy Vice Chancellors (DVCs), the Deans of all of SQU’s colleges, and four faculty members who are nominated by the VC. The CPS is led by a Director, who is appointed by the VC, but reports to the DVC for Academic Affairs and Community Service. The Director attends AC meetings as an observer only and does not have voting rights which full members of the AC are entitled to (Portfolio, p.14). The Panel heard that this is due to the University’s By-Laws which put a limit on the number of

full members of the AC. The Panel was informed, however, that the lack of voting rights did not impinge or have a negative effect on the CPS or, by extension, the FP since the Director is able to participate in AC meetings and the DVC for Academic Affairs and Community Service is able to represent the CPS's interests when a voting situation arose, which was a rarity (interviews).

The CPS has a clearly defined management structure which was developed as part of the establishment of the Centre in 2016. The structure is evident in the CPS's organisational chart, which is available in the draft version of the Staff Handbook 2018/2019. The CPS Director is supported by two Deputy Directors: the Deputy Director for Academic Programmes (DDAP) and the Deputy Director for Professional Development and Research (DDPDR). The DDAP has oversight of the Assessment Unit and Student Advising and Registration Department only, while the DDPDR is responsible for the Technical Assistance Department and the Sustainable Development Unit. There are three academic departments at the CPS: the Department of English for Sciences (DoES), the Department of English for Humanities (DoEH) and the Department of Mathematics and IT (DoMIT), each of which is led by a Head of Department (HoD) who reports directly to the CPS Director. In addition to teaching the FP, the two English departments are also responsible for the delivery of the post-FP English language (LANC) courses which students study as part of their undergraduate degree. On the administrative side, the CPS has a Director of Administration, as well as a Co-ordination, Follow-up and Archiving Department. Finally, there is a Quality Management Unit (QMU), which was established in April 2017 and is responsible for the implementation of CPS's quality assurance activities (. The administrative units and the QMU also report directly to the CPS Director. In total, eight staff members and/or units have a direct reporting line to the CPS Director. Job descriptions for all of the positions at the CPS are available, and include detailed responsibilities. A management appraisal system will be implemented in stages from 2019 onwards, which will be used to review the performance of the CPS management. In addition, the University is planning to review the CPS as a whole within the next three years (interviews).

The work of the CPS is supported by a number of committees at both central (CPS) level and departmental level, with the former helping to ensure consistency of implementing policies across the three departments (. The work for these committees is defined in the CPS Committee Work Guidelines. There are 13 central committees in total, all of which are chaired by either the CPS Director or one of the two Deputy Directors (. The Steering Committee is one of the highest level committees at the CPS and has a broad composition. Chaired by the Director, the committee consists of the Deputy Directors, HoDs, Director of Administration, as well as the heads of the different units at the CPS, Course Leaders (CLs) and teaching staff from the different departments. A student representative may also be invited to attend meetings if required. The Steering Committee is responsible for planning and policy-making at the CPS and should meet at least once per semester according to its terms of reference (ToRs). However, the Panel notes that there was a period of 18 months during which the Steering Committee was inactive and did not meet at all from December 2016 until March 2018. The Committee has recently been revived and several meetings have been held, with key decisions being made. The Panel found that the impact of not having Steering Committee meetings for an extended period was mitigated by the work of the CPS Executive Committee.

The Steering Committee is responsible for forming the Executive Committee which is also chaired by the Director, and includes the Deputy Directors, the Director of Administration and HoDs. There is a high degree of overlap between the responsibilities of the Steering Committee and the Executive Committee. Unlike the Steering Committee, however, the Executive Committee meets more regularly, and particularly in the last year (2018), and discusses issues related to the planning, management and delivery of the academic provision at the CPS, including the FP, as well as the budget (. The Panel noted that this Committee does not have full ToRs provided alongside the ToRs of all the other CPS committees, only information about the composition and a general description of its responsibilities. However, more detailed information about this Committee is available in the draft version of the Staff Handbook.

Other central committees at the CPS include the Student Support Committee (SSC), the Curriculum Committee, the Projects Committee and the Students with Special Needs Committee. All of these committees are chaired by the DDAP and have ToRs outlining their responsibilities. The SSC has oversight of key support services for FP students, including the CPS Library, the Writing Centre (WrC),

the Tutorial Centre (TC) and the Extra Curricular Activities (ECA). Four other central committees are in place and chaired by the DDPDR. These include the Research and Conference Committee, the Professional Development and Support Committee, the Induction Committee and the Academic Mentoring Committee, with specific responsibilities related to research and staff professional development. Finally, three other central committees exist which are chaired by the CPS Director, including the recently formed Observation and Quality Enhancement Committee, the Promotion Committee and the Recruitment Committee. Most of the central committees are active with regular meetings taking place, and discharge their responsibilities in line with their ToRs as evidenced by their meeting minutes viewed by the Panel. However, some have been formed recently and have not yet met (for example the Promotions Committee), and some have been in place but inactive (for example the Academic Mentoring Committee). The CPS Director can also set up *ad hoc* committees and working groups to address specific matters. For example, *ad hoc* committees were set up to review the recent budget and the CPS committee structure, while there is working group involved in implementing and monitoring plans (see Section 1.4).

At the departmental level, there are five committees in each of the three academic departments, including the Curriculum Committee, the Assessment Committee, the Research and Projects Committee, the e-Learning Committee, and the Appeals Committee. The Quality Assurance Committees which previously existed at departmental level were replaced by the central Quality Management Unit. These committees are chaired by the HoD and consist of CLs and teaching staff. They liaise with the central committees through common members, such as the HoDs and CLs, who present the discussions, proposals and decisions made at the departmental level, to the central CPS committees. The meeting minutes provided to the Panel show that the committees in the two English Departments meet regularly, with each committee meeting at least once every semester. However, the committees in DoMIT do not follow a regular schedule and have less frequent meetings. For example, the Curriculum Committee in this department had only one meeting in January 2018. The results and outcomes of all of CPS's committees are summarised at the end of the academic year in the CPS Achievement Report.

The Panel noted in CPS meeting minutes and in interviews during the QA visit that the large number of committees at the CPS and a committee structure consisting of multiple levels which need to interact with each other, has led to increased workloads for some staff members, and CLs in particular (interviews). There is also some overlap between the responsibilities and work of certain committees, resulting in duplication of efforts and an increased need for better co-ordination. Serving on multiple committees, in some cases without a reduction in teaching hours (interviews), may have adverse effects on the quality of teaching. The Panel heard of several examples where teaching staff had up to 14 or 18 hours of teaching per week, while having to sit on two or three committees, in addition to other responsibilities such as projects. The CPS has recognised the need for reviewing the committee structure in order to “enhance workflow” and an *ad hoc* committee was formed at the end of January 2019 with a mandate to “re-engineer” the committees and propose changes to the structure based on the flaws and discrepancies in the current system. The Panel welcomes this initiative, and notes that the *ad hoc* committee has already met twice in February and March 2019 to discuss their approach and implementation. The Panel urges the CPS to ensure, as part of this review, that all committees also have clear and accessible ToRs (which include a schedule of meetings) so that the CPS can monitor that they are meeting regularly and fully discharging their responsibilities.

Affirmation 1

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with Sultan Qaboos University that the Centre for Preparatory Studies committee structure needs to be reviewed in order to ensure that all committees have clearly defined terms of reference, duplication between the responsibilities of different committees is eliminated, and a more balanced workload for academic staff is achieved, and supports the initial efforts by the *ad hoc* committee created for this purpose.

One of the recommendations which was presented to the Executive Committee by the QMU in 2017/2018 includes performing an annual “governance effectiveness review” of the Executive Committee and producing a Self-Appraisal Report with the Steering Committee (Portfolio, p.18). The

Panel requested evidence of this recommendation being implemented and was provided with meeting minutes which indicated that the review was carried out, but no report was written.

1.3 Institutional Affiliations for Programmes and Quality Assurance

The FP delivered by the CPS does not have any institutional affiliations for programme or quality assurance arrangements, therefore this area of scope is not applicable.

1.4 Operational Planning

SQU has a Strategic Plan 2016-2040, which consists of goals, strategies, initiatives and related performance indicators for five domains (including undergraduate teaching and programmes, research, and community engagement) and seven enablers (including human resources and support services). These are applicable to the FP, although the Programme itself is only referenced specifically once under Strategy J in Domain 1 Undergraduate Teaching and Programmes: “Ensure programmes comply with national accreditation standards and best practices”. One of the initiatives under this strategy is to “cyclically review the foundation programme and entry level proficiency”. The CPS has extracted three domains and six enablers from SQU’s Strategic Plan which are relevant to its activities, and developed a five-year CPS Strategic Implementation Plan 2016-2020. An “action plan” has been developed for each SQU initiative and embedded within the CPS Strategic Implementation Plan. For example, under Strategy E in Domain 1 of SQU’s Strategic Plan: “Develop and map course learning outcomes to programme outcomes”, the CPS has developed an action plan to “monitor outcome based teaching in all courses” which will be implemented by CLs on an ongoing basis in the CPS Strategic Implementation Plan. Under Strategy A in Enabler 5: “Provide facilities and services that support student learning and experience”, CPS’s action plan includes actions such as increasing peer and writing tutorial spaces, implementing ePortfolios with Moodle, and organising an English Learning Campaign.

Overall, the CPS Strategic Implementation Plan appears to be aligned with SQU’s Strategic Plan, and comprehensive, consisting of 160 pages of actions, with designated responsibilities, time frames, performance indicators, resource requirements and risk mitigations. The Panel requested reports showing the progress made and achievements to date based on the actions identified in the CPS Strategic Implementation Plan. The meeting minutes of the SQU Operational Plan and CPS Strategic Implementation Plan Working Group from February 2019 were provided. These minutes included a summary discussion of how the CPS Strategic Implementation Plan was developed, and showed that, despite the Plan being dated 2016-2020, it was not actually fully developed and adopted until 2018, and had significant input by the former Language Centre, rather than the CPS which delivers the full FP. It was also noted in the minutes of the Working Group meeting that the Plan is “very long and not well integrated with the SQU Operational Plan”. The Working Group plans to “review this document and develop the next plan for 2020 onwards”. Despite the thorough approach to developing the CPS Strategic Implementation Plan, the deployment does not appear to have been successful since certain objectives were no longer financially feasible and some were more relevant to the former Language Centre rather than the CPS. There has not been any monitoring of the results from the actions that have been identified in the Plan. The Panel was informed that the CPS Strategic Implementation Plan is being revised because it was based on the Language Centre rather than the CPS (interviews).

SQU has an Operational Plan for the period 2016 to 2020. Action items from this plan which are relevant to the CPS have been extracted and collated into the “SQU CPS Operational Plan 2016-2020”. Unlike the CPS Strategic Implementation Plan, the CPS Operational Plan only has action items related to one domain (undergraduate teaching and programmes) and one enabler (student environment), even though both plans are for the same time period. Furthermore, none of the actions from the CPS Strategic Implementation Plan are included in the CPS Operational Plan, and the relationship and alignment between these two plans are not clear. The Portfolio states that there is “currently no specific CPS operational plan” (p.21). The Panel clarified this statement in interviews and found that it indicated that the Centre’s Operational Plan is derived and extracted directly from SQU’s Operational Plan rather than being a separate plan with goals and objectives that are aligned to the University’s (interviews).

Under current arrangements, planning is undertaken by the CPS Director and Director of Administration in consultation with the Executive Committee (Portfolio), which is part of its responsibilities. According to its ToR, the Steering Committee is also responsible for overseeing the implementation of CPS plans, although this committee was inactive for an extended period (see Section 1.2). There were discussions around the implementation of SQU's strategic and operational plans at the CPS Retreat in 2017, indicating that the CPS is aware of its contribution towards the achievement of the University's plans. A Strategic and Operational Planning Team within the CPS was established in 2018 "to review the current strategic plan, develop new goals, strategies and initiatives and construct operational plans" under the guidance and supervision of the QMU. The team consisted of representatives from different CPS units and departments, but no ToRs were included, and there is confusion about whether the role of this team was to develop an Operational Plan specifically for the CPS, or review the results from the CPS Operational Plan that was derived from SQU's Operational Plan. The team met on several occasions between November 2018 and February 2019, and produced a document titled "2018 CPS Operational Plan Actions" (termed "Action Plan" in the Portfolio (p.21)), which listed all of the actions from the SQU CPS Operational Plan 2016-2020 and showed the progress made as of December 30, 2018. Ten out of the 27 actions are shown as 100% achieved, while 50% or less of 11 actions has been achieved. CPS states that some of the "proposals" in the CPS Operational Plan are on hold due to financial restrictions (Portfolio, p.21) and work on others has just commenced even though the Plan ends next year. The Panel heard that from October 2019, the CPS Operational Plan will be organised by department and performance indicators will be reviewed by more stakeholders, including CLs (interviews). Currently, there are no operational plans for individual departments and units at the CPS (interviews), although End of Semester Reports are produced by each department and unit containing summaries of various achievements as well as key performance indicators (KPIs) (see Section 1.7). The Tutorial Centre (TC), Writing Centre (WrC) and Library End of Semester Reports all have data on KPIs but these are not related to the performance indicators in the CPS Strategic Implementation Plan or CPS Operational Plan. Some of the individual course reports also contain KPIs, however, it is not clear where these have been derived from or how they contribute to the achievement of the CPS's plans.

Overall, the Panel found that operational planning and monitoring of plans at the CPS to date have been undertaken in an *ad hoc* manner, with a lack of clarity regarding the relationship between the CPS Strategic Implementation and Operational Plans, the definition and measurement of KPIs, as well as the designated responsibility for strategic and operational planning which ensures that these plans are effective and being monitored regularly.

Recommendation 2

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement a systematic and effective operational planning process at the Centre for Preparatory Studies, involving different stakeholders, which ensures that all operational plans are clearly aligned with the University's strategies and initiatives, and include relevant goals, resources, and key performance indicators to monitor performance on an ongoing basis.

1.5 Financial Management

Budgeting for the FP is done on an annual basis and involves the Steering Committee and the Executive Committee (Portfolio, p.22). One of the key responsibilities of the CPS Director and the Director of Administration, who are both members of these two committees, is to prepare the annual budget, which has to be approved by the Executive Committee. CPS also states that the responsibilities of the Steering Committee include "ensuring the efficient utilization of the Centre's resources and reviewing and approving the annual budget proposal" (Portfolio, p.22), and there is evidence that the budget is discussed during the meetings of this committee; however, these responsibilities are not actually included in its ToR.

The budget preparation process begins at the start of the year when the University administration invites all of the colleges and centres, including the CPS, to submit their budget requirements for the next

calendar year (interviews). The CPS Director of Administration subsequently sends a request to all department and unit heads at the Centre, to send in their resource needs, which are then analysed and collated into a single proposed budget for the CPS (interviews). The proposed budget is discussed and revised by the Steering Committee and Executive Committee before being sent to the University administration and Academic Council for approval and allocation in line with SQU's overall financial resources. The Panel heard that in recent times, there have been significant cuts to the budget requested by the CPS, due to the financial constraints affecting the public sector in Oman. For example, in 2019 the budget allocation was approximately 65% of the total amount requested. The allocated budget is then returned to the CPS in January, and presented at the Steering and Executive Committees for discussion. CPS staff are also informed about the status of the budget and any reductions by e-mail from the CPS Director and a brief report highlighting the differences between the requested and allocated financial resources may be prepared by the Director of Administration. If requests for additional resources required by the FP are submitted at a later stage, they are discussed by the CPS Director and the Director of Administration to determine whether they can be accommodated within the existing budget. Requests for larger expenses are considered by the Executive Committee (interviews).

Recent budget cuts have had a significant impact on administrative expenses such as educational/office supplies (including textbooks and paper), conference travel expenses, office equipment, staff recruitment in the Writing Centre, and staff training, while the effects on the academic provision, including the delivery of FP courses, have been minimal. The CPS has responded to budget cuts by forming an *ad hoc* committee to identify ways in which costs can be reduced without compromising the delivery of the FP and other courses at the CPS. As a result, there has been an increased use of in-house produced educational materials developed through the Curriculum Committees, more use of technology, such as Moodle, for the delivery of courses and for assessments, and employing FP teachers during their office hours to support the Writing Centre instead of hiring writing consultants (interviews). The CPS has also tried to compensate for the financial shortfall by generating alternative income. For example, the Oman Aviation Academy language programmes are being delivered by the CPS and the Centre will receive a portion of the income from this activity. The IELTS Test Centre at the CPS also provides a source of revenue. The Panel acknowledges CPS's efforts to maintain the availability of adequate financial resources for the delivery of the FP and encourages the Centre to continue its proactive approach to financial management.

1.6 Risk Management

SQU has a Risk Management Office (RMO), which was established in 2016 and reports to the Vice Chancellor. The RMO is responsible for providing training and assistance with risk management activities to all of SQU's colleges and centres, including the CPS. This is done through risk management committees which have been formed in the colleges and centres and which interact with the SQU Risk Committee and the RMO (Portfolio, p.24). The CPS Risk Management Committee (RMC) was formed in 2018 and met for the first time in April of that year. The RMC is chaired by the DDPDR and has members from all of the other CPS departments and units. The Committee does not have its own separate ToR and relies on the responsibilities outlined in the *Qarar* issued in 2016 creating the risk management system at the University, to guide its work. The main role of the RMC is to identify and prioritise all of the different risks within the CPS in a risk register, and develop strategies to mitigate these risks, in co-ordination and with the support of the RMO which will provide workshops and training to the staff involved. There is no separate risk management policy for the CPS and the Centre is required to abide by the University's Risk Management Policy.

Following the RMC's first meeting in April 2018, each department and unit at the CPS was asked to develop a Risk Management Plan. At the time of the GFPQA Visit, the plans for the following departments were available: Co-ordination and Follow Up Department, DoEH, DoES, DoMIT, and Technical Assistance Department. A Risk Management Plan for finance was also drawn up by the Director of Administration. Each Plan consists of a table which lists a risk category, and includes a description of the risk, the level and impact of the risk, mitigating actions and the person responsible. The Panel notes that most of the Risk Management Plans are incomplete and do not cover the full range of risks associated with an academic programme. For example, the risks identified by the English department include fire, unauthorised entry to Block F, medical issues and student discipline. A number

of important risks which the Panel was informed about during the GFPQA Visit were not included in the Plans, including the recent budget cuts (see Section 1.5), increasing student numbers which may affect resources and staff workloads, and a lack of financial grades for Omanis in the Maths and IT Department (interviews). The Panel also notes that the CPS Strategic Implementation Plan contains risks and mitigation strategies for each action, but these have not been included in the departmental Risk Management Plans.

The RMC reviewed the Risk Management Plans which were available at its second meeting in October 2018 and noted their weaknesses. A CPS Risk Register was compiled in November 2018 based on the risks identified in the Risk Management Plans, but remains a work in progress because it does not contain the full set of risks or deadlines for mitigation, making it difficult to assess the extent to which the risks were being monitored. The Panel was informed that the Risk Register is due for review in May 2019. The Panel notes that, despite the RMO's mandate to provide risk management training, the CPS has not yet had any workshops or awareness sessions in this area, which are needed to enhance and improve the current risk management system for the FP. The RMC at CPS has identified the need to "align itself with the University's central Risk Management Policy" as an opportunity for improvement, and the Panel agrees with this.

Affirmation 2

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with Sultan Qaboos University that the University's risk management system needs to be fully deployed for the Foundation Programme, and relevant academic and non-academic risks need to be identified and monitored periodically, and supports the efforts of the Centre for Preparatory Studies in this area which include establishing a Risk Management Committee and developing a Risk Register.

1.7 Monitoring and Review

The FP curriculum was reviewed in 2014/2015, following the SQU Quality Audit in 2010 which recommended that the University "urgently review its General Foundation Programme and related foundation courses within the colleges [...] in order to meet the new national standards". At the meeting of the former Language Centre Steering Committee in October 2014, it was decided that a Self-Evaluation of all of the FP courses would be conducted, and not just the English component offered through the Language Centre. The Self-Evaluation would be followed by an external review. The resulting report published in Spring 2015, however, only included the English courses, while Maths and IT were not considered because they were not yet part of the integrated CPS. The report presented the key findings of the review, which focused on the FP learning outcomes, curriculum and assessments in relation to the English courses and the study skills that were taught as part of these courses. The review identified and mapped the learning outcomes in the English courses with the requirements of the OAAA's Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes (see Section 2.1). In addition, student support services such as the WrC and the Tutorial Centre were included in the review (see Section 3.7), along with staff support available at the time, including research funding, professional development, induction and mentoring assistance (see Section 4.4).

According to the SQU Strategic Plan 2016-2040, the FP and students' entry level proficiency will be reviewed as part of Strategy J under the first Domain, "to ensure that courses comply with national accreditation standards and best practices". SQU has an Academic Programme Review Office (APRO), and a related policy, review schedule, guidelines and templates to be used for reviewing programmes at the University (www.squ.edu.om/apro). However, the Panel was informed that the APRO was a recently established office (interviews) and the FP is not part of its review activities at this point in time. Since the establishment of the CPS in 2016, which brought together all of the FP components under the umbrella of one centre at the University, there have been no reviews of the programme as a whole. The last review was conducted in 2014/2015, as discussed in the previous paragraph. The Panel heard that, prior to its submission to the OAAA in November 2018, an external reviewer looked at the FP Portfolio (and the FP in general), and made some recommendations for changes. There is a focus on reviewing

the credit-bearing (LANC) courses at the CPS at present using Course Review Forms, because the FP is viewed as being “stable” (interviews). The CPS also provided with its Portfolio, two Self-Study reports from 2016 for the Maths and IT courses, which showed some elements of review, but mainly summarised the activities and outcomes of the courses at the end of the academic year, and had very limited suggestions for improvements.

The Panel found that there was no clear indication of where responsibility for monitoring and reviewing the FP at CPS lies. While, the QMU at the CPS is responsible for all quality assurance activities at the Centre, including: implementing quality management policies and procedures; collecting data from CPS departments; preparing an annual quality report with recommendations for enhancing the CPS; ensuring quality assurance processes are reviewed; supervising the preparation of the CPS for accreditation and audits; and promoting quality assurance amongst CPS stakeholders, it does not have a specific mandate related to monitoring and reviewing the FP as a whole. The QMU does produce an annual report that summarises the activities of each academic department (including changes made to the curricula of the FP components and courses) and makes recommendations for improvements. The CPS Steering Committee is primarily concerned with planning and policy making and does not have reviewing on its list of responsibilities. The central Curriculum Committee and the departmental Curriculum Committees have oversight of specific issues related to the FP curriculum and individual courses, but not the entire programme. Each academic department produces an End of Semester Report, which includes KPIs for the department and specific courses. The End of Semester Reports also highlight improvements made to individual courses and curricula in the course of an academic year. An annual Achievement Report is also prepared highlighting all of the accomplishments and outcomes of various committees and units at the Centre. The only time that the full FP was benchmarked was by the committee created to establish the CPS, as part of its mandate (see Section 1.1). While all of the different review activities contribute towards the ongoing monitoring and continuous enhancement of the FP curriculum and individual FP courses (see Section 2.2), these do not constitute a coherent approach to the review of the FP as a full programme, including the preparedness of the FP students, the appropriateness of the FP learning resources and support services, and the FP staff profile.

Overall, the Panel is of the view that there is an immediate need for a system to regularly monitor and review the full FP, particularly since the integration of Maths and IT courses with the English courses in 2016, which has not been entirely seamless. Differences between the way things are done at the English departments and DoMIT continue to exist, leading to inconsistencies (as noted throughout this Report). This system should include a review schedule, designated responsibilities for FP monitoring and review activities, and input from a range of internal and external stakeholders and various data sources, reference points such as the Oman Academic Standards for GFPs, and benchmarks (see Section 2.1).

Recommendation 3

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement an effective system for monitoring and reviewing the whole Foundation Programme on a regular basis, which includes input from a range of internal and external stakeholders, benchmarking and other relevant reference points.

1.8 Student Grievance Process

For academic matters, FP students are subject to SQU’s academic grievance processes, which are outlined in the Undergraduate Assessment Policy. The main academic grievances are related to grade appeals and the University publishes an Appeal Leaflet showing the process to be followed if a student wishes to appeal against a final grade. The CPS has included the appeal process in its Student Guide, however, there is a discrepancy between the University’s appeal period, which is within 30 days of the grades being published, and the CPS period, which only gives students 14 days to appeal. The Panel was informed that the CPS policy, supersedes the University’s one (see Matters for Clarification #4), and the shorter appeal period for FP students was approved by the Academic Council in 2018. In the past, FP students had only three days to appeal a grade. The Panel notes that the Comprehensive Curriculum Document (CCD) for 2018/2019 has not yet been updated to reflect the change from three days to 14.

Each academic department at the CPS has its own Appeals Committee, which meets once at the end of each semester to consider grade appeals submitted by students. The Panel was provided with the meeting minutes of these committees for the last three years, along with samples of successful and unsuccessful student appeals and how they were processed, during the GFPQA Visit. Data about appeals is published in the CPS Achievement Report, the QMU Report and departmental End of Semester Reports. In 2017, a total of 239 appeal requests were received by the departmental committees, with the 49% being for English FP courses, 34% for Maths and 17% for IT. The highest number of appeals was received in the Spring semester. Appeals are submitted by students using a Grade Appeal Form and processed by the committee using a shared document to ensure transparency. The Panel was provided with examples of this process during the Visit. The majority of the grades were upheld and only a small number of appeals (less than 10%) was successful. Students are informed about the outcome of their appeal by e-mail. The grade appeals process is discussed at Appeal Committee meetings, and improvements are suggested in end of semester reports and the QMU report. Some of these are followed up on in subsequent meetings which contributes to the effectiveness of the process. For example, the format for informing students about the outcome of an appeal is now standardised in the English departments. However, the CPS has identified further enhancements to the process which will result in greater standardisation and co-ordination between the departmental Appeals Committees to ensure better transparency. One of the current proposals under consideration is having a separate CPS Appeals Policy and regularly conducting an analysis of the appeals (Portfolio, p.30). Key stakeholders, such as members of the Appeals Committees and students also need to provide their input and feedback into the process as part of the CPS's overall approach to monitoring student satisfaction (see Recommendation 13 in Section 3.8).

While the CPS has a clearly defined and implemented process for handling academic grievances (grade appeals), the process for dealing with non-academic grievances is not clear and is deployed in an *ad hoc* manner. The Portfolio states that the Student Affairs Co-ordinator (SAC) is the "first point of contact for students in the FP with any kind of problem" (p.29). However, the FP Student Guide, directs students to their course teacher in the first instance, if they have a problem. This can then be escalated to the "Programme/Course Co-ordinator" (p.9) although this position does not exist in the current CPS organisational structure (also see Matters for Clarification #7). Failing that, the student can see the SAC for problems with English courses, or the Registration officers in the Student Advising and Registration Department for issues with Maths and IT courses, and finally the DDAP, if needed. Complaints by students about CPS teachers and staff members are handled by the DDPDR and CPS Director, if required (Portfolio, p.29). Students can make complaints about FP teachers to the Student Affairs Co-ordinator (SAC), who then raises it with relevant staff members and CPS management as required. In Spring 2018, there were six complains about FP teachers raised by students. There is also a provision for a special committee to be formed to look into the complaint, but this has not been necessary to date (Portfolio, p.30). The Executive Committee has recognised the need for a single CPS Student Grievance Policy, although this has not yet been initiated or developed.

The Panel requested anonymised samples of non-academic student grievances for the last three years during the GFPQA Visit and was provided with handwritten and typed complaints and emails submitted by students. There was no formal process for handling these complaints, no centralised record-keeping and no documented follow up or resolution. In response to a request for evidence of how non-academic grievances are managed and resolved, the Panel was informed that this was done in person or by e-mails. It was also not clear to the Panel how the outcomes were communicated to students and how students were informed about any changes that were made in response to their grievances. The Panel confirmed this during interviews, noting the lack of consistency in managing non-academic grievances, and in ensuring the effectiveness of the process. The Panel also noted, however, that some of the complaints are outside the remit of the CPS (e.g. complaints related to the Wi-Fi network, classrooms, etc.), and require liaising with other SQU units for a response.

Recommendation 4

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement a formal process for recording, managing and resolving non-academic student grievances for

the Foundation Programme, which includes communicating the outcomes to students, and which is periodically reviewed for effectiveness.

1.9 Health and Safety

SQU's approach to Health and Safety is described in its Health, Safety and Environment (HSE) Code of Practice from 2014. Oversight for the implementation of this Code of Practice and related HSE Policy rests with the University's Health, Safety, Security and Environment Committee, and the HSE Department within the RMO at SQU. The heads of centres and other SQU units are responsible for deploying the HSE Policy in the areas under their jurisdiction or control, increasing awareness about health and safety amongst stakeholders, and ensuring that adequate HSE resources are available, including trained staff. The HSE Code of Practice includes details information about what to do in different emergency cases, safety procedures that need to be observed in the workplace, and the process for reporting accidents.

The CPS does not have a separate committee for dealing with HSE issues, unlike all the other units at SQU (Portfolio, p.32). Instead, the recently formed Risk Management Committee (RMC) (see Section 1.6) has oversight of health and safety, and has discussed HSE matters at its two meetings held in 2018. The RMC was responsible for organising the only fire drill that has taken place since the CPS was formed, in co-ordination with the HSE Department within RMO. The drill took place on 14 November 2018, and was preceded by a briefing workshop for the staff involved. A report was prepared following the fire drill, describing the procedure followed and identifying areas for improvement. One of the key areas which requires further development, according to the report, is awareness amongst staff and students about fire evacuation procedures. The Panel confirmed this during interviews, which showed a general lack of awareness about the fire drill amongst internal stakeholders, and students in particular.

CPS staff and students have not participated in any workshops related to fire safety, although there are instructions and evacuation procedure notices posted around the CPS building in compliance with national safety regulations. The Panel observed certain areas next to fire exits in the CPS building being used for storage purposes during the GFPQA Visit. The CPS has requested workshops to be conducted by the RMO related to HSE matters, and one Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) training workshop was held in March 2018. Two CPS staff members have participated in First Aid workshops at the University level.

Shortcomings related to health and safety at the CPS were noted in the 2014/2015 review of the FP (see Section 1.7) while it was still the Language Centre. The review report noted that information provided to students during induction did not have any references to health and safety. This remains the case as of 2019, with the same information missing from the latest student induction. According to the Portfolio (p.32), staff have not been trained to use fire extinguishers, and there is no accessible information showing the details of First Aid Responders or First Aid equipment. While it is claimed that the RMC is working towards addressing these issues, there is no evidence to support this claim based on the RMC meeting minutes. The Panel heard that health and safety remains a "weak link" because the RMC still has work to do in this area (interviews). The Panel considers that a more systematic and co-ordinated approach to health and safety at the CPS is needed, with clearly designated responsibilities and regular training in order to ensure that a safe and healthy environment is provided for FP staff and students.

Recommendation 5

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University establish and implement a health and safety system within the Centre for Preparatory Studies, which includes a formal approach to managing health and safety issues that is disseminated to all stakeholders, and includes designated responsibilities for deployment, health and safety training, and ongoing monitoring of health and safety issues.

2 GFP STUDENT LEARNING

The FP has been taught at SQU since 2010 and has evolved into an integrated programme taught by one entity, which the majority of newly enrolled SQU students have to take. This Chapter provides an account of student learning in the FP, and reports on the following: the FP aims and learning outcomes, the FP curriculum, entry and exit standards, teaching quality on the FP, academic integrity, assessment of student achievement, feedback to students on assessment, academic security and invigilation, student retention and progression, and relationships with FP alumni.

2.1 *Aims and Learning Outcomes*

The overall aim of the FP is “to prepare students to undertake undergraduate education” at SQU. The FP strives to achieve this aim by equipping students with the requisite skills and knowledge, including analytical skills, in English language, Arabic language (through the teaching of the Maths and IT FP courses in Arabic), Maths, IT and life skills. The goals of the FP are stated in the FP Student Guide and consist of the following: improving English language proficiency; reinforcing knowledge of basic math and analytical techniques to enhance problem solving skills; consolidating knowledge of basic computer applications; and integrating the required study skills to support effective learning. The overall FP goals are in line with the definition of a General Foundation Programme (GFP) as per the Oman Academic Standards, since the programme prepares students for their higher education studies across four areas of learning: English language, Mathematics, Computing and general Study Skills.

Students who are admitted to study at SQU are required to do a Placement test in English, and Exit tests in Maths and IT during the University’s Orientation Week prior to starting their undergraduate programme. If they can demonstrate the required level of proficiency in English and IT through an Exit test or other means, such as IELTS for English or the ICDL for IT, they are exempt from those components of the FP (see Section 2.3). There are no exemptions from the Maths Placement tests. Based on the results of the Placement and Exit tests, students may either be exempted from the FP altogether if they pass all the tests, or enrolled in the FP at the appropriate level of study.

Depending on their intended higher education programme, FP students are streamed into science or humanities English language courses, while students who will study their future programme only in Arabic, are exempted from the English language courses altogether if they place at levels 5 or 6 in the English Placement test, and study only the Maths and IT courses in Arabic. If they place at level 4 or below, these students are required to study FPEL1025 or FPEL1026. This approach ensures that the FP courses studied by a student address the student’s specific needs and academic backgrounds, since SQU offers a diverse portfolio of higher education programmes which require different sets of skills and knowledge.

The FP consists of six levels of English language courses (FPEL), three Maths courses (FPMT), of which students study one, and one IT course (FPCS) which is taught in English or in Arabic. There is no separate course for Study Skills, with these being integrated primarily into the FPEL courses. Learning Outcomes (LOs) for the different FP components and courses are listed in the Comprehensive Curriculum Document (CCD), which specifies what FP students are expected to demonstrate by the end of a course or upon completing that component. All students are required to complete the FP within two years. None of the courses in the FP are credit-bearing and students are not awarded any formal credit towards their undergraduate programme while they are studying the FP. This is clearly stated in the FP Student Guide.

There are six proficiency levels of FPEL courses, which make up the English language component of the FP. Each proficiency level has a descriptor detailing what a student should be able to do at that level. In addition to the descriptors, the whole FPEL component of the programme has a defined set of LOs which apply to the entire English language component. These LOs are concise statements related to reading, listening, speaking, pronunciation, writing, and study skills. There are 28 reading LOs, 16 listening LOs, 10 speaking LOs, 15 pronunciation LOs, 24 writing LOs and 27 study skills LOs (which are split into 12 general study skills LOs, and 15 specific study skills LOs). The LOs are divided into five broad categories (knowledge, skills, attitudes, social action and individual behavior) although this

is not explicitly shown in the CCD. The tables listing the English language component LOs indicate to which FPEL levels each LO applies, with some LOs applicable only to the higher levels of the FPEL courses, gradually increasing in difficulty as the student progresses through the FP. The Panel examined the FPEL LOs in detail and found them to be consistent with the English language Learning Outcome Standards specified in the Oman Academic Standards for GFPs (OASGFP). Furthermore, CPS has broadened and extended the LOs to encompass a range of more specific English Language Skills (such as predicting the content of a text using the title and visual prompts, distinguishing between facts and opinions, and developing thesis statements for a text), in addition to the general skills outlined in the OASGFP. While the OASGFP list 10 Learning Outcome Standards, the FPEL component has a total of 93 LOs.

Every individual FPEL course also has its own course learning outcomes (CLOs) which are listed in the course outlines provided to students at the start of the course. These CLOs are aligned with the FPEL LOs, but more specific to the course level, since one FPEL LO may apply to several levels. For example, reading LO 1 (“Read and respond to a text of an appropriate length, for each level, in a given period of time”) is applicable to all six levels of FPEL courses, but the length of the text will vary depending on the course. In FPEL0120, students are expected to be able to read 200 to 250 words, while in FPEL0560, students should be able to read texts which are “broadly relevant to [their] area of study (minimum 450 words per text)”.

There are currently three Maths courses (FPMT), two of which are taught in English and one in Arabic. Students must study one of these three courses, depending on their future undergraduate degree. The courses are FPMT0106 Maths for Humanities (in Arabic); FPMT0107 Maths for Economics (in English); and FPMT0108 Maths for Sciences (in English). The total number of FP Maths courses was reduced from five to three in Fall 2018 following a review of the Maths FP learning outcomes and curriculum. Whereas basic mathematics concepts were previously taught in a separate course to Applied and Pure Maths, the new arrangement covers both Basic and Applied/Pure Maths in the same course, targeted to the undergraduate degree programme the student will pursue. The merger and reduction in the courses was proposed because of the high failure rates in the old basic Maths courses (FPMT0101 and FPMT0102), which prevented students from progressing to specialised (applied/pure) Maths courses for their undergraduate programmes (FPMT0103, FPMT0104, FPMT0105) and from successfully completing the FP within the allowed two year time frame. It was also thought to be necessary to review the Maths LOs to ensure that they are appropriate for the courses. However, CPS indicated that the proposed merger would create a small gap between the LOs stipulated by the OASGFP and the FPMT CLOs, with the proposed FPMT0106 and FPMT0107 covering 90% of the Standards, and FPMT0108 covering 95%. To compensate for the gap, additional topics such as the “Mathematics of Finance”, and “Matrix Algebra”, were introduced. The Panel was provided with the Course Outlines for the three new Maths courses which were implemented in Fall 2018, and compared the CLOs with the OASGFP’s Learning Outcome Standards for Mathematics, finding a much larger gap than what was indicated by CPS. For example, FPMT0108 does not include Learning Outcome Standards i) to o) in OASGFP’s Basic Mathematics. In its response to version 5 of the GFPQA Report, SQU clarified that these learning outcomes were part of other listed outcomes and covered in various exercises. However, they are not explicitly stated in the list of learning outcomes in FPMT0108 and it is not clear how they have been subsumed into other listed outcomes which are also required by the OASGFP as distinct learning outcomes for Basic Mathematics. The FP must ensure that all of the Learning Outcome Standards for Maths defined in the Oman Academic Standards for GFPs are listed, covered and assessed in the Maths courses.

Recommendation 6

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University ensure all of the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes for Mathematics learning outcomes are integrated into the Foundation Programme curriculum, teaching and assessment.

The former FPMT courses also included some study skills LOs according to the CCD. Information about the new FPMT courses which was provided to the Panel also lists some study skills LOs as being integrated into the Maths courses. However, the Panel could not find evidence of this in the course outlines of all three courses, and it remains unclear how the study skills are taught in the FPMT courses.

FP students are required to study one of two IT courses, depending on whether they will do their undergraduate degree in English or Arabic. FPCS0101 is taught in English and applies to students who will study in English, while FPCS0102 is in Arabic, for undergraduate programmes that are taught in Arabic. Both courses have the same LOs and content. The Panel was provided with the course outlines for both courses and found the CLOs to be fully consistent with the Learning Outcome Standards for Computing as stipulated in the OASGFP. There are no study skills embedded in the curriculum of the FPCS courses, although the Panel heard that some of these skills, such as presentations, are integrated into the teaching and the curriculum (interviews).

Study skills are taught primarily as part of the FPEL courses at the CPS and a separate Study Skills course does not exist. As stated previously, the overall FPEL LOs contain 27 study skills LOs, including 12 general study skills LOs, and 15 specific study skills LOs. Information provided by the CPS and in the CCD also suggests that some study skills LOs are embedded in the FPMT courses, but the Panel did not find evidence of this in the course outlines. CPS also confirmed this, indicating that, while the CCD includes LOs related to study skills in the Maths courses, specific skills have not yet been mapped to FPMT LOs and the matrix is being developed. A close examination of the Study Skills LOs in the FPEL courses shows that not all of the LOs required by the OASGFP are covered. While the CCD contains a list of Study Skills LOs, these are not linked to specific FP courses. The General Study Skills LOs in the CCD are not mapped to FP courses, while the mapping of Specific Study Skills LOs has been done between the LOs and the FPEL levels. The Panel examined the corresponding FPEL course outlines and found that these LOs were not listed. For example, Specific LO 5 (“Select or reject a source based on difficulty level, relevancy and reliability”) has been mapped to FPEL Levels 4, 5 and 6 in the CCD. However, this LO does not appear in the actual materials for FPEL0560 or FPEL0603. Another example involves research skills related to assessing sources not being specifically included. The use of Portfolios as an assessment tool in FPEL courses is the primary means for monitoring the acquisition of these skills.

Since study skills are mainly taught as part of the FPEL courses, students who successfully pass the English language Exit test or produce an equivalent qualification (and do not study the FPEL courses), forgo the opportunity to develop study skills which are very important for their undergraduate programme. The Panel heard that direct entry students, who do not do the FP, have less developed study skills compared to FP graduates (interviews). The CPS is aware of the shortcomings in this area, created because of the way in which the FP is structured and the reliance on English language courses for study skills, and is considering introducing a separate Life and Study Skills course as part of the FP (interviews). A Life and Study Skills course in Arabic was piloted by the English for Sciences Department in 2017/2018, but as of 2019, the course has been placed on hold.

Affirmation 3

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with Sultan Qaboos University that the Study Skills component of the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes needs to be fully integrated into the Foundation Programme curriculum, teaching and assessment to ensure that all of the Learning Outcome Standards in this area are achieved, and supports its efforts to develop a separate Study Skills course within the Programme.

The Panel found evidence of benchmarking being undertaken by the committee that was established to set up the CPS in 2016. The CPS Proposal includes a list of institutions in the Gulf region that were visited by the committee members for the purposes of benchmarking. Similar programmes in Europe, South East Asia, Australia and the Gulf were also considered from the perspectives of the courses taught, structure, support services and time to completion, and taken into consideration when setting up the CPS and the FP. The Panel requested additional evidence of benchmarking the FP since then, but while there

have been benchmarking activities for different FP components and FP support services, the current programme has not yet been benchmarked. Discussions around this have taken place at Executive Committee meetings in response to QMU recommendations, including the need for an international benchmark. There is recent evidence of limited benchmarking with other HEIs in Oman, including the Modern College of Business and Science in 2017 only for the purposes of comparing FP support services. Meetings were also held in December 2018 with the Armed Forces Medical Services School representatives to compare some elements of the foundation programmes at the two institutions. In addition, the FP Placement test results were compared with the performance of students at the Middle East College. Other examples of benchmarking include benchmarking to IELTS in 2010 and an internal benchmarking report on the MReader software used in the English courses. The CPS clearly engages in different forms of external benchmarking related to different elements of the FP at different times, however, there has been no benchmarking of the FP as a whole, which needs to be undertaken as part of the regular review and monitoring of the FP (see Recommendation 3 in Section 1.7).

The Panel explored how feedback from stakeholders (such as FP graduates and staff on higher education programmes at SQU) is taken into account when making revisions to the FP curriculum and courses and requested evidence of this. In response, the CPS provided details about projects undertaken by CPS teaching staff, which have led to changes and improvements in courses and the FP. Also, in 2012, the former Language Centre conducted a needs analysis survey of current FP students to support the development of learning materials for lower level FPEL courses and the results of the survey were used to inform this process. According to the Portfolio, “CLs and teachers of post-FP credit courses collaborate with FP Course Leaders ... by providing feedback about the readiness of their students to meet the requirements of their degree studies” (p.27). The Panel sought evidence of this collaboration and was informed that this was primarily done at the time of the Language Centre. The Panel heard that the College of Arts provided the CPS with more formal feedback (interviews), but upon requesting evidence of this, the Panel was informed that this is only for the LANC courses and not the FP.

The Panel explored the relationship between the FP and post-FP faculty members in interviews during the Visit and found that there are no formal means through which the CPS seeks and obtains feedback from the colleges at SQU about the programme and the preparedness of the FP graduates. Informal discussions do take place (interviews) and there was a general consensus that there is ongoing communication between the CPS and the colleges. The Panel heard of a joint committee that used to exist with FP and post-FP staff members, but has been inactive for some time. There is also some evidence of initiatives to survey students after they complete the FP, which took place in 2015. The CPS employs some of its alumni as peer tutors in the Tutorial Centre (see Section 3.7) and as extra-curricular activity (ECA) assistants, however, there are no formal means through which feedback from alumni is acquired for the purposes of enhancing the FP and ensuring that the programme is meeting its intended goals and outcomes. The CPS confirmed that there has been no formal feedback from alumni since the Centre was formed 2016.

The difficulty of evaluating whether the FP is fulfilling its aims is compounded by the existence of the credit-bearing English language (LANC) courses which are also taught by the CPS. Students take these courses as part of their degree programmes, along with the University requirements courses, to further enhance their English language proficiency. The Panel heard that, by the time students had completed these LANC courses and started their specialised degree courses, their level of English was adequate to support them on the higher education programmes. However, because of these courses, it was not possible to determine the preparedness of the students having completed only the FP.

Recommendation 7

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement a systematic approach to obtain feedback from Foundation Programme alumni and external (post-Foundation Programme) stakeholders about the Programme and the preparedness of its graduates, and use this feedback to ensure that the Foundation Programme is effective in fulfilling its aims.

2.2 Curriculum

The FP was introduced at SQU in 2010. At that time, the English language curriculum was developed by the former Language Centre, while the Departments of Mathematics and Computer Sciences at the College of Science were responsible for the design and delivery of the Maths and IT courses and curricula. As mentioned previously, the FPEL curriculum underwent a review in 2015 (see Section 1.7), which resulted in changes made to the delivery of the English language courses. With the creation of the CPS in 2016, all of the FP courses were brought together under a single entity which would deliver the full FP and “provide a forum for teachers to collaborate, exchange views and assess the effect of one area of teaching on the other area”. The first cohort of FP students that studied the programme under the CPS commenced in Fall 2017 (Portfolio, p.20).

Depending on the results of the Placement and Exit tests, students take different pathways through the FP. There are six levels of English courses (FPEL0120, FPEL0230, FPEL0340, FPEH/S0450, FPEH/S0560, and FPEH/S0603), three different Maths courses (FPMT0106, FPMT0107, and FPMT0108) and one IT course (FPCS0101/FPCS0102) which is delivered either in English and in Arabic. Students who are placed in one of the first three levels of FPEL courses (FPEL0120, FPEL0230, FPEL0340) study only English courses initially, and after they progress to higher levels (FPEH/S0450, FPEH/S0560, and FPEH/S0603), they are allowed to take one Maths and one IT course, if they have not passed the Exit tests for Maths and/or IT (see Section 2.3). The FPEL courses at levels 4, 5 and 6 have different suffixes to indicate whether they are taught by the English for Sciences Department (FPES) or the English for Humanities Department (FPEH). Both departments teach the courses at the same level, but the content and materials differ because they reflect the different needs of science and humanities disciplines (Portfolio, p.37). All of the FP courses are taught in a 15 week semester. The FPEL courses consist of 18 contact hours per week (except FPEL0603, which is 10 hours a week), while the FPMT courses are six hours per week and FPCS four hours per week. Students are only allowed to repeat a course one time.

The FP curriculum which is studied by a student can vary greatly depending on a number of factors, including the results of the Placement and Exit tests (students may be exempted from one or more of the three FP components depending on which Tests they pass), the level of English proficiency (students with weak English may study all six levels of FPEL courses, while others may only do the level 5 and 6 courses), their intended higher education programme (science or humanities), and the language in which their higher education programme is taught (students on Arabic programmes are exempted from the English language courses if they place at levels 5 or 6 in the English Exit test, and may only study Maths and IT in Arabic). As such, every student will experience the FP curriculum based on their individual competencies and proficiency in English, Maths and IT, and their chosen higher education programme, and take a different amount of time to complete the FP requirements, ranging from one semester to a maximum of two years. Most students enter the FP at FPEL level 5 (Portfolio, Table 1, p.136).

The FP curriculum is developed, reviewed and revised by the central and departmental Curriculum Committees, which replaced the former Curriculum Unit in the Language Centre. The central Curriculum Committee is chaired by the DDAP and made up of the DDPDR, Chairs of the departmental Curriculum Committees, teachers from each academic department, and the Head of the Assessment Unit (AU). The main role of this committee is to co-ordinate all activities related to the FP curriculum and courses, in addition to the LANC courses, including discussing and making decisions related to curriculum issues, developing policies related to the curricula, and proposing the development of courses. The Panel was provided with the meeting minutes of this committee for the past three years and noted the regularity of meetings and discussions in line with the committee’s ToR.

The departmental Curriculum Committees are formed in each academic department at the CPS. The English departments have Curriculum Committees that consist of nine to ten members representing both the FP and credit courses. DoMIT has a smaller committee which only had three members in 2016. The responsibilities of the departmental Curriculum Committees are limited to the curriculum of the courses that they deliver and include discussing curriculum-related issues; reviewing course outlines; following up on curriculum projects to improve current curriculum practices; reviewing departmental curriculum needs; and liaising with the central Curriculum Committee. The meeting minutes provided to the Panel for these committees show that the committees in the English departments meet several times a year to

discuss curriculum issues related to their courses and make revisions. The DoMIT Curriculum Committee had only one meeting in January 2018 and none in 2019 at the time of the GFPQA Visit. The 2016/2017 DoMIT Curriculum Committee Report included information about the revisions made to the FPMT courses (see Section 2.1), with the meeting minutes documented in the QMU Report under the heading “Minutes of CL Meeting”. CLs prepare an End of Semester Report for each course, based on feedback stipulated in the Course Evaluation forms (Portfolio, p.39) filled by different teachers involved in teaching the course. The report summarises the problems that were encountered and makes suggestions for changes and improvements. These are brought to the relevant departmental Curriculum Committees for discussion, before being escalated to the central Curriculum Committee.

The departmental Curriculum Committees liaise with the central Curriculum Committee by presenting the discussions and decisions of the departmental Committees to the central Committee for consideration and approval. The Panel noted evidence of this related specifically to the English departments’ committees and curricula. For example, in December 2018, the DoES Curriculum Committee made a change to the testing matrix of two FPEL courses, which was communicated to the central Curriculum Committee so that the CCD could be updated to reflect the change. Similarly, in February 2017, the central Curriculum Committee discussed the curriculum unification in FPEL0450, FPEL0560, and FPEL0603 based on prior discussions at the departmental level. Another example is the introduction of MReader into the FP curriculum, which involved extensive discussions at the departmental and central Curriculum Committees, as well as a benchmarking activity with other HEIs using MReader and a report on the implementation of MReader with feedback from stakeholders. A subsequent eLearning Audit by the University confirmed that the introduction of MReader had “dramatically improved” the FP curriculum. The central Curriculum Committee also receives input from the Assessment Unit and the Projects Committee through the DDPDR, which allows for co-ordination between the FP curriculum, assessments and projects leading to changes in FP courses. The CPS has recently introduced Course Review Forms which will be used to evaluate new FP courses, and further ensure that they are aligned with the aims of the FP. The Panel triangulated the findings in the documentation with information received in interviews about the process followed when developing the FP curriculum, including the co-ordination between different committees. After changes are made to the FP curriculum, they are documented in the CCD, which was compiled in 2016 when the CPS was created, although SQU clarified in its response to Version 5 of the GFPQA Report that an earlier version of this document called the “Curriculum Document” has been available since 2001. The CCD has comprehensive and detailed information about the courses that make up the FP curriculum, including LOs, course descriptions, learning materials and assessment. Each FP course has a Course Outline, which has all of the information related to the course. Course Outlines are provided to students at the beginning of each semester (interviews) and also available through Moodle and the CPS website. Each course also has a “weekly pacing schedule” to support the delivery of the curriculum within the required time frame.

Overall, the Panel found that the process for revising and making changes to the individual courses that make up the FP curriculum to be robust, starting with formal feedback from CLs and course teachers, which is then discussed at departmental Curriculum Committees and escalated to the central Curriculum Committee. Changes are made to the FP courses and documented in the CCD, which is produced every year.

Commendation 1

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Sultan Qaboos University for implementing a robust process for making changes to individual courses that make up the Foundation Programme curriculum, which results in ongoing improvements at the course level recorded in the Comprehensive Curriculum Document.

2.3 Student Entry and Exit Standards

The FP has clearly stated entry and exit requirements which are available in the FP Student Guide and the CPS Placement and Exit Policy. Entry standards for higher education programmes are set by the University, and assured by the CPS through the FP and Placement and Exit tests. Students who are accepted by SQU are required to demonstrate that they meet the entry standards in English, Maths and

IT by taking Placement and Exit tests in these three areas. Students who have an IELTS certificate with a score of 5.0 (or equivalent) are exempted from taking the English Placement tests and from studying the FPEL courses. Students who are enrolled in higher education programmes taught only in Arabic, are exempted from studying the FPEL courses if they place at levels 5 or 6 in the English Placement and Exit tests. If they place at level 4 or below, these students are required to study FPEL1025 and/or FPEL1026. If a student is unable to demonstrate the necessary English language proficiency, they must take the FP Placement Test in English. Depending on the results of this test and the Exit test (for those who qualify), students are either exempted from the FPEL component, or placed in one of the six FPEL levels. For Maths and IT, students must take Exit tests to prove that they have the required level of skill in these areas. A passing score in one or both of these tests will result in the student being exempted from that component of the FP. An ICDL or IC3 certificate may also be presented in lieu of the IT Exit test. Visually impaired students were previously exempted from taking the Maths and IT Exit tests but this is no longer the case after the CPS developed the capacity and resources to conduct these tests for this category of students. The Panel examined the entry and exemption requirements for the FP and found them to be consistent with the OASGFP.

The number of students who successfully passed the different Placement and Exit tests in 2018 ranged from 410 in Maths to 560 in IT out of approximately 3,000 incoming students. The number of students passing the Maths and IT tests has been on the increase (Portfolio, pp.43-44). While there is no evident trend in the number of students passing the English tests, there has been a decrease in the number of students placed in the lower FPEL levels. In 2013, 487 students were placed in FPEL0230 (level 2), and in 2017, this number had dropped to 282. There has been a proportional increase in the number of students placed in the more advanced levels (levels 5 and 6). This suggests that the average FP completion time has decreased in the last five years, with students having to take fewer FPEL courses. While studying FPEL courses, students are also eligible to take a Challenge Test to skip a level if their English proficiency shows significant improvement. While enrolled in FP courses, students are not permitted to register for their higher education degree courses, until they have successfully completed all the three components of the FP.

The Placement and Exit tests (samples provided) are all developed “in-house” by the Assessment Unit (AU) at the CPS. The development of these tests involves a detailed validation process by FP teaching staff, prior to and after the tests are administered, to ensure the validity and reliability of the tests (interviews). The FPEL tests have been benchmarked to TOEFL and IELTS based on the FPEL level descriptors, with the correlation for each test and TOEFL/IELTS level and band indicated. This was based on a benchmarking exercise undertaken by the former Language Centre in 2010 to establish the equivalency of each FPEL proficiency level to IELTS. At that time, a total of 400 FP students from four different FPEL levels (3 to 6) were given the FPEL Exit test for their level, followed by the IELTS examination at the British Council. The results of the two tests were then correlated and used to establish an external benchmark for the FP tests in relation to IELTS. However, since this exercise was conducted, the FPEL courses and curriculum have undergone a number of changes and the CPS recognises the need to repeat the benchmarking of the Exit Tests for the current FP curriculum. A proposal to do this was prepared in 2018 and the Panel heard that it was recently approved, which is in line with SQU’s strategic initiative to review entry level proficiency (see Section 1.4). In addition to the English tests, the CPS also plans to benchmark the Maths and IT tests in October 2019. The Panel agrees that this will ensure that the Exit tests are still reliable and valid, and encourages the CPS to proceed with this as a priority.

Affirmation 4

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with Sultan Qaboos University that the Foundation Programme Exit tests need to be reviewed and benchmarked against external reference points, and supports the actions taken by the Centre for Preparatory Studies to conduct an external benchmarking exercise as a matter of priority.

The Placement and Exit tests in English are paper-based and the test papers are held under secure conditions within the Assessment Unit. The Panel was requested by the CPS to sight these tests only inside the AU during the GFPQA Visit. The Maths and IT Exit tests are computer-based, following a

staff initiated project to develop online versions of the tests in 2017. This has reduced paper waste, increased examination security, and reduced human errors in marking. There are multiple versions of all the tests to prevent students from cheating and copying (interviews).

Instructions for the Placement and Exit tests are communicated to students in the CPS Entry Exit Orientation booklet that is given to students during the Orientation Week, and can be downloaded from SQU website. The CPS Director also gives students a presentation about the tests during the Orientation Week. A sample FPEL Exit test is available for students to practice and can be downloaded from the CPS website, however, there are no sample Placement tests because these tests assess a student's proficiency level in English, and their knowledge of Maths and IT without the effects of training. Test invigilators are provided with detailed instructions on how to administer the Placement and Exit tests (interviews). The Panel heard that the current arrangements for deploying the Placement and Exit tests were considered to be appropriate and rigorous since no security breaches have occurred (interviews).

The Panel heard that the CPS does not monitor its FP student cohorts in terms of progression on the FP relative to their entry point because of large student numbers and the range of entry points and different FP pathways, as mentioned previously. However, performance on individual FP courses is closely scrutinised in End of Semester Reports by CLs and actions are taken in response. For example, the high failure rate in the old FPMT Basic Maths courses (FPMT0101 and FPMT0102), which impacted student progression and completion on the FP, was addressed by re-designing the FPMT courses (see Section 2.1). The progression of FP alumni on their higher education programmes is also not tracked due to the limited interaction with post-FP stakeholders (see Recommendation 7 in Section 2.1). However, the Panel noted a joint research paper which was published by faculty members in the colleges and the former Language Centre in 2015 titled "Predictors of First-Year SQU Student' Grade Point Average" which applied statistical analysis techniques to a range of variables (including performance on FP Placement tests) to determine their impact on a student's academic performance in undergraduate programmes. Repeating this study would be of benefit to the FP.

2.4 *Teaching Quality*

Teaching quality in the FP is guided by the CPS's objective of "providing quality education". There is detailed information provided in the CCD about the quality of lessons, pedagogical guidelines and "best practice" to be followed in classes. The FP is primarily taught through conventional face-to-face teaching, although e-learning is increasingly used to support this traditional form of course delivery. FP teachers employ various teaching strategies and methodologies, including presentations, independent and group activities, problem-solving and practical exercises and reflective feedback, along with pacing schedules, to support and enhance the quality of FP teaching. This is evident in the course outlines and learning materials provided to the Panel. For example, in FPEL0560, students have group discussions about different strategies for improving language skills, write a reflection on a Reading Skill exercise, prepare research questions, and select sources for their research. Similarly, students do practical exercises and activities in the computer labs during the FPCS course to develop their IT skills. All FP teachers are required to maintain eight office hours each week for student consultations and advice.

The CPS encourages FP teachers to propose and develop special projects with the aim of enhancing the FP curriculum and teaching. These proposals are considered by the Projects Committee which is chaired by the DDAP. The role of the Committee is to review the project proposals that are submitted, and make recommendations on which projects should proceed. Staff members whose projects are approved are provided with release time from their teaching responsibilities and additional resources to complete the project, normally during the Spring semester (interviews). The Panel was provided with examples of a number of projects and noted a strong focus on e-learning and mobile learning projects in the past two years. The FP is increasingly utilising e-learning through the use of Moodle and MReader to supplement in-class teaching. The Panel was provided with a demonstration of the FP courses on Moodle during the GFPQA Visit and heard about how technology was being incorporated into teaching, with some teachers, especially in the FPEL courses, using innovative techniques to teach certain skills. One project aimed to develop a web enhanced listening and speaking course, which would enhance the way in which these skills are taught. Staff members involved in learning support units such as the Writing Centre and the Tutorial Centre can also apply for projects to improve the teaching support in these units. Projects which

receive approval are monitored by the Projects Committee, which requires a progress report to be submitted. At the end of the academic year, a Professional Development Day is held at the CPS, during which staff members present the results and outcomes of their projects to the entire CPS community.

In addition to these projects, FP teachers also engage in research and scholarly activities which are supported by the Research and Conference Committee. The Committee facilitates research within the CPS, and collaboration with other SQU units as well as external partners. FP teaching staff have engaged in various research projects, some of which were funded by the Deanship of Research at SQU, that have resulted in journal and conference publications. According to the latest QMU Report, 18 CPS teachers attended international conferences in 2017, and 17 in 2018. These types of scholarly activities enable the teachers to stay up-to-date with developments in their fields. The CPS also hosts the annual ELT conference in Oman which brings together ELT teachers from all over the country and beyond.

Teaching quality on the FP is monitored mainly using the Course and Teacher Survey (CTS). The CTS is a questionnaire filled out by students at the end of each semester in each FP course, seeking their perspective on the teaching quality, the course, learning resources, and the assessment. The CTS scores of FP teachers are monitored and reported to HoDs every semester, as well as the CPS Director and the DVC for Academic Affairs and Community Service. According to the draft version of the Staff Handbook, "the University considers any mean below 2.50 [out of 5.00] as "unsatisfactory" and any mean in the range (2.50 2.75) is considered "marginal". Teachers who achieve a CTS score below 2.50 in two consecutive semesters or in all of the courses they teach in a single semester are counselled by the DDPDR (interviews) and given one semester to improve their performance. During this period, the teacher's performance is monitored through observations by the HoD and CPS Director, if required. The Panel viewed samples of the records related to this process during the GFPQA Visit. In Spring 2018, 12 staff members were counselled for having low CTS scores in the courses they taught, compared to 13 staff members in Fall 2017 (Portfolio, p.121). In the Fall of 2018, the average CTS scores across all FP courses were above the minimum of 2.50, and the Panel found that students were generally satisfied with the quality of teaching on the programme (interviews). The Panel noted the use of CTS scores for monitoring teaching quality as well as the promotions process and to support the Best Teacher Awards.

In addition to the CTS scores, teaching observations are employed on the FP to monitor teachers' performance in classrooms. Newly recruited teachers are observed by senior CPS staff once during their three-month period of probation, or twice if deemed necessary based on unsatisfactory performance. Teaching observations are also conducted for teachers with low CTS scores and teachers who students have complained about, and may be used by faculty for the purposes of promotion (interviews). The observation includes a pre-observation meeting between the teacher being observed and the observer, the observation itself, a post-observation meeting with the observer, followed by a written report of the observation. However, the Panel noted inconsistencies in the Teacher Observation Forms being used, some of which were not current and were developed for the former Language Centre. The CPS is also promoting voluntary peer observations by FP teachers (interviews), although this process is not yet formalised. The CPS has recently set up the Observation and Quality Enhancement Committee (OQEC), which will oversee all of the different types of observations at the Centre and ensure that there is a culture of transparency in this area according to its Terms of Reference. The Committee held its first meeting in February 2019. In its response to GFPQA Report v5, SQU clarified that the OQEC will only be responsible for peer observations, while other types of observations, such as classroom observations of new teachers, will be carried out by the Recruitment Committee.

The Panel found that teaching quality on the FP is being impacted somewhat by the membership of certain FP staff, including CLs, on a range of different departmental and central committees. The Panel heard that teachers are concerned about balancing their teaching load with their involvement in committees and saw evidence of this in the documentation provided (interviews). The CPS is currently working on reviewing the existing committee structure (see Affirmation 1 in Section 1.2), which will also have an impact on the teaching quality if staff commitments on committees are reduced.

2.5 *Academic Integrity*

Academic integrity on the FP is informed by the CPS's own Plagiarism Policy, and SQU's Student Academic Misconduct Policy. The Plagiarism Policy defines plagiarism and provides examples of what is considered as plagiarised work. The procedures for dealing with plagiarism are also specified, and involve preventing, detecting and reporting plagiarism. Penalties for plagiarism depend on the percentage of plagiarism detected in an assessment and the number of offences, and range from deducting marks to expulsion from the University. Student work which consists of more than 50% plagiarised content is awarded a zero mark and issued with a warning letter, while the lowest penalty is a deduction of 20% of the marks for work that contains between 15% and 25% plagiarism. Repeating plagiarism may result in a fail grade for the course or suspension and expulsion from the University depending on the nature of the second offence.

Information about plagiarism is also included in FP Course Outlines to ensure that students are aware of the academic integrity requirements and associated penalties for academic misconduct. The emphasis on academic integrity is particularly strong in the higher level FPEL courses (such as FPEL0603), which require students to write essays and reports. The FP uses the Turnitin software to detect cases of plagiarism in student work and was one of the first entities at SQU to adopt Turnitin (Portfolio, p.52). FP students may submit their assignments through Turnitin multiple times to check for plagiarism (interviews) before the submission deadline. Students also have to sign a Declaration of Originality form stating that the submitted assignments are authentic and original, and all sources are credited and cited. The Writing Centre organises workshops for students on core research skills such as paraphrasing, summarising, and annotating their sources to help them avoid plagiarism. There are also posters displaying notices about plagiarism in the CPS building. FP teachers may also attend Turnitin seminars which are delivered by the CPS to other units across SQU.

The Panel was informed that Turnitin was used only in the FPEL0560 and FPEL0603 courses and applied to the 500-word report that students have to write (interviews). Other written assessments in other FPEL courses, as well as assessments in FPMT and FPCS are not subjected to the same rigorous scrutiny to detect plagiarism. In these courses, there is a reliance on the teacher and an Internet search to check if a student has copied. The rubrics used for marking language assessments also do not have references to plagiarism, and it is not clear how this is accounted for when marking. Plagiarism is not covered during the students' Orientation Week presentation, or in the FP Student Guide which only mentions cheating in exams. The Panel noted varying levels of awareness about plagiarism amongst FP students, with some only becoming familiar with academic integrity requirements after completing the FP (interviews). There has also been an increase in the number of "ghost-writing" cases in the FP, however, there is no approach for dealing with this at present (interviews).

According to the CPS, only six cases of plagiarism have been reported overall, since the introduction of Turnitin. The Panel viewed samples of these plagiarism cases in FP assessments on site during the Visit and found varying approaches to reporting the cases, with the majority of incidents dealt with through e-mail communications. There does not appear to be a unified procedure for reporting and recording plagiarism cases. Since the Plagiarism Policy lists penalties related to repeat plagiarism offences, having a unified reporting procedure is crucial to implementing the policy. This is also the view of the CPS, which states that there is a "need for systematic record keeping of misconduct" (Portfolio, p.54). While keeping records of plagiarism misconduct is an issue, the Panel confirmed that the plagiarism penalties for individual assessments were applied consistently; however, this has only been the case since Fall 2018. It was also not possible to ascertain whether any of the penalties were for repeat offences since these cases are not tracked.

FP students can appeal against the penalties they are given for plagiarism by submitting a written appeal with required documentation and evidence to the Appeals Committee. This procedure is outlined in the Plagiarism Policy. An examination of the departmental Appeal Committees meeting minutes in 2018 showed that there were no discussions related to plagiarism cases, only grade appeals (see Section 1.8). Instead of convening a meeting, student appeals related to plagiarism were dealt with through e-mails by the DDAP.

While the Panel acknowledges that the FP led the introduction and implementation of academic integrity practices at SUQ, since the time of the former Language Centre, and has contributed to plagiarism awareness and training across the University, there are significant shortcomings in the current approach to detecting and dealing with plagiarism. The Plagiarism Policy is not applied in all FP courses, and only one assessment in two FPEL courses requires the use of Turnitin. Plagiarism cases are not systematically handled and recorded so that repeat offences can be tracked. The Plagiarism Policy also needs to be extended to include other forms of academic misconduct, such as “ghost-writing”.

Recommendation 8

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University extend and evaluate its current approach to maintaining a culture of academic integrity, and include appropriate plagiarism detection mechanisms in all Foundation Programme courses, provide additional training for Foundation Programme students and staff, consistently deal with academic misconduct cases, and maintain records of plagiarism cases to track repeat offences.

Cheating in exams is dealt with consistently and rigorously, in line with SQU’s Academic Misconduct Policy. Students are informed about cheating in the Student Guide, which also contains detailed examination rules. The CCD has comprehensive information about examination and test procedures, including administering exams, invigilating and reporting instances of cheating (also see Section 2.8). An Incident Report Form is used to report cases of cheating in exams, following which a committee is formed in line with the Academic Misconduct Policy to decide on the outcome and penalty. Meeting minutes and relevant documents are maintained. The student receives an official letter from the DVC Academic Affairs and Community Service outlining the case and the penalty that has been applied.

In terms of copyright of teaching and learning materials, CPS teachers are required to adhere to the CPS Copyright Policy, which has guidelines on the use of third party materials and in-house developed textbooks and handouts. An examination of the in-house materials by the Panel, showed compliance with the Copyright Policy, and citation of sources.

2.6 Assessment of Student Achievement

SQU has an Undergraduate Academic Assessment Policy, which the CPS and FP abide by (Portfolio, p.55). Every FP course outline contains specific information about the assessments which are used to determine whether students are achieving the LOs. The CPS has Assessment Committees in each of the three academic departments, which are responsible for assessments and the development of test banks in their courses. These committees work closely with the Assessment Unit (AU) which was created to ensure that CPS assessments are reliable, and consistent quality of testing is maintained (Portfolio, p.55). The AU is responsible for administering different types of tests at the CPS, including all Placement and Exit tests (see Section 2.3), and tests and exams conducted in FPEL, FPMT and FPCS courses. These tests include “objective tests” which have been designed in line with reading and listening LOs (interviews) and are uniformed across all courses at the same FPEL level. Vocabulary quizzes, which are part of continuous assessments, are developed and administered by teachers in individual FPEL courses. The AU has a Head, and employs test developers, a statistician, a test administration co-ordinator and a records officer. The Unit reports to the DDAP and liaises with HoDs and CLs on all testing-related issues. There is also communication and co-ordination with the departmental Curriculum Committees when required.

The assessment component and weight of each assessment in a course is specified in all of the FP Course Outlines. Types of assessments include quizzes, homework assignments, practical assignments, projects, in-term examinations and final examinations. Teachers may also design other types of assessments, including presentations and essays. All of the “objective tests” that assess reading and listening in FPEL courses are developed through the AU using a specific process for writing, piloting and validation, which is described in the CCD. The testing matrix shows the number of “objective tests” in each FPEL course. The first step in designing an “objective test” is to prepare the test specifications, including a Test Map,

which maps the questions in the test to specific LOs in order to determine the coverage of the LOs in that particular assessment and find out if a particular LO is under- or over-represented. The test is then piloted with 100 candidates who will not sit the actual test. The procedure for doing this is described in the Test Piloting Procedure document. Feedback is also sought from other test writers, Course Leaders and members of the Curriculum Committees (interviews). The test then undergoes a formal Judgmental Validation Procedure, which is attended by a Curriculum Committee representative, in order to make adjustments to the questions made based on the pilot and the feedback. The assessments are checked for face validity, clarity of instructions, item implausibility, the appropriacy and sufficiency of the test, questions coverage and spacing, matching items against LOs, checking under representations of any LOs, and checking against the answer key. Any changes made are recorded in the Judgmental Validation Report (interviews) and the test is updated. The Panel also heard that FP teachers can review actual tests after they have been administered and marked by filling a Post Test Feedback form, and student feedback is also sometimes sought through surveys. Tests can be re-used after three academic semesters have passed, and only after the test developers respond to any post-test feedback (interviews). All tests and records of test validations and reviews are maintained within the AU, with access restricted only to AU staff members and secured through the use of electronic keypads and locks.

Test writers in the AU consist of CPS and FP teaching staff, who have been trained and given release time to work on creating assessments and test banks of questions for different tests (interviews). The writers are selected based on their prior language assessment experience and literacy level, during a formal interview. At the time of the Visit, the AU had nine members who were responsible for writing tests and exams for FP courses.

To ensure standardisation of assessment marking, all FP teachers, regardless of whether they are new to the CPS or not, undergo training in the form of a Marking Moderation Session for “objective tests”, and a Writing Standardisation Session for tests that involve assessing student writing. The purpose of this is to ensure that assessors mark against the given criteria-referenced rubric, and promote fairness of assessment practices (Portfolio, p. 55). Exams and tests are double marked and, in some instances if there are discrepancies, triple-marked for accuracy and consistency, while blind marking is used to ensure marking fairness (interviews). Teachers are instructed to work in pairs (as double-markers) while entering students’ test scores into the system to ensure accuracy. Students’ answers on the answer sheets of “objective tests” are scanned using an electronic reader machine (interviews). To make sure that the machine marking is accurate, two to three samples are drawn from the full set of tests, and re-marked manually. The Panel triangulated the procedures for developing, and marking “objective tests” during the GFPQA Visit through interviews with relevant staff involved, a visit to the AU and examples of the procedures being applied to tests, which were only available on site for security reasons.

The effectiveness of the “objective tests” is established by AU using two statistical analyses: the Item Analysis Programme (ITEMAN) classical item analysis, followed by a Test Performance Report that highlights students’ achievement of each LO which was assessed in the test. A detailed Statistical Test Report, which includes the results of all of the different tests in a course, is produced in order to determine course averages and compare performance across FP sections and courses. These analyses show the overall achievement of LOs across different FPEL levels and shed light on areas that require attention with the reference to under-achieved LOs, highlighting specific skills that students require more support with in the classroom, in order to achieve the LOs at the end of the course.

Overall, the Panel found that the assessment practices followed by the AU for “objective tests” to be clearly defined and implemented, ensuring that assessments are effective and aligned with the achievement of LOs.

Commendation 2

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Sultan Qaboos University for implementing a rigorous, robust and comprehensive approach to developing and validating objective tests, which results in effective assessment of student achievement of learning outcomes in the English Foundation Programme courses.

Maths and IT assessments are marked by the CLs and FP teachers and until recently double-marking of assessments was not practiced due to a shortage of staff (interviews). Some assessments are randomly selected for double-marking, and all of the mid-term exams are double marked (interviews). The CPS is now considering developing computer-based tests for FPMT0108 (Maths for Sciences) so that the good practice demonstrated in the “objective tests” in FPEL courses is also extended to the Maths, and later IT, courses. The Panel encourages the CPS to pursue this initiative promptly and bring the FPMT courses in alignment with FPEL.

Continuous assessments are developed and reviewed by Curriculum and Assessment Committees in each department-, in liaison with AU members who “ensure the reliability (consistency and fairness) and validity (assessing the intended skills) of continuous assessment across all CPS courses”. In FPEL courses, continuous assessment includes the portfolio, extensive reading word goals, essay/report writing, project folders with presentations, speaking tests, and vocabulary quizzes. In FPMT courses, continuous assessment includes homework assignments and quizzes, and in FPCS courses, continuous assessment includes assignments related to word processing, presentations and spreadsheets (interviews). Continuous assessments make up a smaller portion of the assessment components in a course, compared to tests and exams. Preparing and reviewing marking rubrics which are part of continuous assessment is done by the Assessment Committees. One of the tasks of CLs is to liaise with the AU through the departmental Assessment Committee regarding continuous assessment as shown in the Testing Matrix. The CPS acknowledges that its continuous assessments practices are not as rigorous as the ones applied to “objective tests” and need improvement through more standardisation (Portfolio, p.57), since there is a lack of uniformity across FP courses in both the design and marking of continuous assessments, compared to the “objective tests”.

2.7 Feedback to Students on Assessment

The CPS aligns its approach of providing feedback to students on their achievement in assessments to the SQU Assessment Policy. Students are provided with feedback on their continuous assessments through several means, including verbal feedback by the teacher in class or during office hours, or using marking rubrics which have comments. Feedback is generally provided immediately after the assessment if it involves a specific skill, or within 48 hours (Portfolio, p.59). Course Outlines and Writing Pacing Schedules indicate that feedback is given to FPEL students on different stages of their writing (such as essay outlines and drafts). The Panel was provided with examples of feedback given to students using marking rubrics for different types of assessments in English language courses, including portfolios, presentations, reports and essays. Interviews with stakeholders, including FP teachers and students, confirmed these practices were in place for providing assessment feedback, which was mainly in the form of marks and verbal rather than written, comments. No individual feedback was provided on “objective tests” and exams for security reasons, however, general feedback is provided about overall performance highlighting key areas that need improvement (interviews). There was limited evidence of how assessment feedback is given to students in FPMT and FPCS courses, which appears to be less consistent and varies across courses and assessments (interviews). There was consensus amongst students that their marks were returned to them shortly after a test or quiz (interviews). In the case of online tests conducted over Moodle, automatic feedback is given to the student upon the completion of the test (interviews). Students have access to mock mid-term exams and tests, which they can complete and seek feedback from their teachers on how they did.

The CTS includes a question about the usefulness of the feedback provided to students. Students are required to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement in the CTS: “The instructor gave helpful comments on marked tests/quizzes/assignments”. Data for individual statements in the CTS survey was not available, but the CTS averages for all of the courses showed scores of 3.00 and above (out of 5.00) in both the course and teaching components of the CTS. The CPS is also considering the use of post-assessment student surveys on a regular basis to consult students about their assessment experience, including the feedback that they received, which the Panel finds encouraging and urges the CPS to implement.

2.8 *Academic Security and Invigilation*

The Assessment Unit (AU) at the CPS oversees all of the stages in the development and deployment of tests and examinations, including preparation, printing, packing, distribution, administration, invigilation, marking, grade entry, and storage. The AU is located in a dedicated area of the CPS building which has been secured with locks and electronic keypads to restrict access and ensure that assessment instruments are safeguarded. The Panel toured the AU during the Visit.

To ensure the security of exams from the outset, they are prepared and written within the AU using dedicated computers, and not the FP teachers' office computers. The examinations are also printed and photocopied within the AU by a designated staff member. AU members are not allowed to send tests and examinations by e-mail, use USB drives or take hard copies outside the AU premises. After the tests and examinations are developed and validated (see Section 2.6), no FP teachers or students have access to them in any form until the testing event. Examination packs are delivered to the examination venue one hour before the examination, using a special truck provided by SQU. Since the CPS has on enrols 3,000 each year, this form of delivery is the most appropriate for the number of packs that need to be transported securely at the same time. Upon the arrival, the invigilators count every paper in their packs and sign off on the number of examination papers they receive. Multiple versions of exams are used to ensure that there are no opportunities for copying during the examination. After the event, the papers are re-counted and brought back to the control room in the AU where the marking takes place. All of marking sessions are performed within the AU and assessors do not have access to the tests and exams outside the AU. Marked examination papers are archived for two academic semesters within the AU before being incinerated by the SQU incineration facilities. Instructions regarding the use of online tests and exams through Moodle are also available but less stringent than those applied to paper-based exams and tests.

Examination invigilation at CPS is guided by SQU Assessment Policy and Examination Policy. Invigilators are selected among the FP teachers and teaching assistants (interviews). Administrative staff can also participate in invigilation, but teachers are the main invigilators (interviews). Invigilators are trained through an instruction sheet sent by e-mail before every examination, which is also available in the examination packs (interviews). Invigilation procedures are standardised and all invigilators must follow the same instructions. New teachers receive specific training about assessment procedures, including invigilation, as part of their induction. Any incidents related to cheating or other types of misconduct during the exams are reported and documented in reports written by the invigilators.

The Panel was able to examine the deployment of the examination security arrangements during the Visit by viewing random examinations and related records for the various FP courses within the AU, and through interviews with the students, as well as staff involved in the security and invigilation of examinations. The Panel noted a consistent implementation of the procedures described in the Portfolio and additional documents provided by the CPS during the GFPQA Visit, and also heard that no examination breaches have taken place in the last ten years (interviews). The CPS views this as evidence of the effectiveness of the security and invigilation process and the Panel agrees.

Commendation 3

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Sultan Qaboos University for the effective academic security and invigilation procedures established by the Assessment Unit at the Centre for Preparatory Studies which ensure that examinations are held under secure conditions.

2.9 *Student Retention and Progression*

The FP has clearly defined progression rules which are provided to students in the FP Student Guide and to FP teachers in the draft version of the Staff Handbook. In FPEL courses, students must achieve a minimum grade of C- to progress to the next level. Students who get lower grades, are registered for "half-way" FPEL courses. For example, a student who secures a B grade in FPEL0120 will progress to FPEL0340 in the next semester, whereas a student with a D grade in the same course, will be registered for FPEL0230. Students who fail a course are allowed to repeat only once, and if a student fails the same

course twice they are suspended from registering. They have the option of either taking the English Exit Test or producing an IELTS (or equivalent) certificate to prove their language proficiency. Students who get an A or A- grade in the FPEL0120 or FPEL0230 courses are given a chance to sit a Challenge Test on the next course, and if they score a grade C or above in this test, then they can skip an FPEL level and proceed to the next one. In FPMT, students must pass the course and if they fail twice, they can appear for the Exit Test in the following semester. To register for the FPCS course taught in English, students must first reach level 4 or higher in FPEL. To pass the FPCS course, the student must achieve a D grade or higher. Student who fail, may repeat the course once, and if they fail a second time, they are allowed to take the final examination of the next FPCS course, or produce an ICDL or IC3 certificate.

The CPS maintains student progression and completion data for all three FP components based on statistical analysis of student performance done by the AU, and presented this data in the Portfolio (pp.64-68). The data shows that up to 65% of FP students complete the programme in one or two semesters, and this rises to almost 90% after four semesters (Table 2.9.1, p.64). Students tend to complete their FPEL requirements earlier than the FPMT courses, while the vast majority of students finish FPCS within three semesters of starting the programme. Attrition rates in FPEL and FPCS are lower than those in FPMT, which has a significantly higher attrition due to students failing the old Basic Maths courses twice (Portfolio, Figure 2.9.5, p.67). Attrition in the FPCS course is the lowest, with less than 25 students not completing this component in 2016, compared to almost 60 students in FPMT and 40 students in FPEL. Overall, attrition rates have been declining since 2013.

Student progression and retention data is used to inform the development of the FP curriculum. For example, to increase the rate of retention and completion, CPS developed the FPEL0700 course for students who failed any English language level course twice, and the course had a 78% pass rate in 2018, indicating that the majority of students were able to satisfy the FPEL requirements on their final attempt, instead of dropping out of the programme earlier. Similarly, the high failure rate in Maths has been recently addressed by merging the FPMT courses so that students only study one Maths course related to their undergraduate programme instead of two (see Section 2.1). Students who previously failed Maths twice are referred to a peer-tutoring course (“Maths 2F”) at the Tutorial Centre (see Section 3.7), while FPEL progression is supported by the Writing Centre, which provides weaker students with writing assistance. The Panel has already noted that the CPS does not have a system for monitoring the performance of FP students after they have progressed to their higher education studies, and this needs to be addressed to ensure that the FP is fulfilling its aims (see Recommendation 9 in Section 2.10).

2.10 Relationships with GFP Alumni

The CPS maintains a relationship with its FP alumni for a certain period after they complete the programme, because most of the students study English language (LANC) courses at the CPS, which are part of their University requirements in the higher education programme. This provides the CPS with a unique opportunity to easily elicit feedback from the FP graduates about their experience. At present this is done through informal means and on an individual basis, between FP teachers and students. More formal channels need to be established to obtain regular input from FP alumni about the programme and improvements that are required (see Recommendation 7). Furthermore, since the CPS does not track the performance and progression of its graduates in their undergraduate programmes, these formal channels can be used for this purpose as well. The CPS recognises the need for more ongoing interaction with its alumni for the purposes of enhancing the FP and sees the “value in conducting regular surveys” with alumni (Portfolio, p.71). The Panel agrees with this.

Recommendation 9

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University establish and implement a formal system for collecting data on Foundation Programme alumni progression in the higher education programmes, which are used to enhance the Foundation Programme.

Although there are no formal and ongoing channels for communicating and maintaining relationships with FP alumni, the CPS does recruit former students as peer tutors in the Tutorial Centre (see Section 3.7) and also as ECA assistants (see Section 3.10). FP alumni are also involved and play an active role in certain clubs and societies at the CPS, and act as volunteers during the annual ELT conference which is hosted by the CPS.

3 ACADEMIC AND STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

SQU and CPS provide a range of academic and student support services to FP students. This Chapter provides an account of these, including the registry, student induction, teaching and learning resources, IT resources, academic advising, student learning support, and non-academic support services. The profile of FP students is also discussed, along with how student satisfaction and climate are monitored, student behavior expectations and external engagement opportunities for the FP.

3.1 Student Profile

Student data is provided to the CPS by the Deanship or Admissions and Registration at SQU, which is responsible for admitting and registering students at the University. The lists of students enrolled are sent by the Deanship to the CPS Director, who forwards them to the CPS Student Advising and Registration Unit (Portfolio, p.72). The information is used to organise Placement and Exit tests for students, and also supports the development of staff timetables and teaching allocations within the CPS, which has become more challenging in recent years with the increase in new student numbers, alongside returning students.

Approximately 3,000 new students are admitted to the FP each year. The programme has prepared more than 15,600 students for their undergraduate studies since 2010, when it commenced with 2762 students. In 2017, the new cohort consisted of 2,999 Omanis and 21 international students, showing an exponential growth in student numbers in only seven years. The Omani students come from all of the governorates, while international students come from 30 different countries, including those located in the Middle East, Europe, Africa and South East Asia. The largest number of non-Omani students are from Jordan (14 students) and Saudi Arabia (12 students). The largest proportion of the 3,000 students admitted to SQU (and the FP) in 2017, planned to study Engineering, Business and Art higher education programmes, while Nursing and Medicine programmes had the lowest enrolments. There are more male than female students in the FP, with a ratio of approximately 60% male to 40% female. The number of female students has also declined slightly over time, while the number of male students has recovered after a sharp drop in 2015 and 2016. The key student profile data which is of relevance and interest to the CPS are the FP students higher education programmes and the results of their Placement Tests. This data is used to stream FP students into their pathways, depending on whether they will study science or humanities programmes, in English or in Arabic.

The CPS also receives a list of Special Needs Students from Deanship of Student Affairs at the University, at the start of the academic year. The data for the last five years shows that the number of special needs students has ranged from eight in 2013/2014 to 14 in 2014/2015. There were 12 students with special needs admitted in 2017/2018. The CPS provides support for students with two types of disabilities: visual and physical impairments. The Students with Special Needs Committee, chaired by the DDAP, is responsible for ensuring that these students receive the support they require, and for co-ordinating with and providing training to FP teachers who will teach the students. Until 2018, students who were blind were exempted from taking Maths and IT Placement tests and courses; however, from Fall 2018, the CPS has acquired the necessary resources to administer the tests and offer the courses to this group of students. The CPS ensures that special needs students receive the devices and access that they need to do the FP, including magnifiers for low vision students and laptops for blind students. This is done in co-ordination with the Department of Students with Disabilities at SQU. There is a specialised lab in the CPS with a dedicated computer technician, which has software for visually impaired students and enables materials to be transferred into Braille or large print. Training and support is provided to teachers who have students with special needs in their classes, with no more than five special needs students allocated to a single teacher. Despite these efforts and processes, the work of the Students with Special Needs Committee has been constrained by the absence of a CPS policy for these students, leading to an *ad hoc* implementation of practices. The CPS is currently waiting for the Deanship of Student Affairs to issue an approved policy that will guide their future work with special needs students.

3.2 *Registry (Enrolment and Student Records)*

All students at SQU are admitted and registered at the University by the Deanship of Admissions and Registration. The CPS has its own Student Advising and Registration Department (SARD) which liaises with the Deanship to ensure that all newly enrolled students are registered in the Student Information System (SIS) provided by the University. The SARD has its own vision, mission and goals, and is responsible for a range of services related to student records and data, acting as a conduit between the CPS and the Deanship or Admissions and Registration. The Department is responsible for organising the lists, timings and venues of the Placement and Exit tests once a new cohort of students is admitted based on the enrolment data provided by the Deanship. After the Orientation Week, which the SARD participates in (see Section 3.3.), the Department prepares the class timetables for the FP courses and informs students about the sections they have been registered in. Students are not able to self-register for FP courses (interviews). During the semester, SARD maintains the student attendance records, and follows up on students who are not meeting minimum attendance requirements in line with the Attendance Policy (interviews). Grades and grade changes following student appeals (see Section 1.8) are also processed through SARD and forwarded to the Deanship so that they can be updated on student transcripts (interviews). Finally, the details of students with special needs are also maintained at the SARD.

All student records are managed through the SIS which is a University wide online system for storing student records. The Centre for Information Services (CIS) at SQU is responsible for the maintenance of the SIS and assigning access rights to staff members. Only three staff members in the CPS have access to the student records in SIS (interviews), which ensures their security and confidentiality.

In an effort to improve registration services, a pilot survey was carried out with the 2015/2016 FP cohort of students to obtain feedback on student satisfaction with the registration process. However, the Panel noted that the survey responses and results were not calculated and presented accurately. For example, out of 110 students who participated in the survey, only 38 had actually visited SARD and were in a position to answer questions about their experience. Yet the subsequent question on how often the student visited the Department elicited 107 responses. The Panel notes that many of the comments provided by students were meaningless and the overall results obtained were not useful for planning and improvement purposes. The QMU discussed the results with SARD (interviews) and suggestions were made to change the survey questions so that they are more reliable and accurate. These changes were not fully reflected in the next version of the survey, which also had questions about the student induction (see Section 3.3). The survey was administered in the Fall of 2018 but had similar problems with the validity of the results as the first one. SARD needs to develop more effective mechanisms for eliciting feedback from all types of stakeholders, which will help the Department achieve its objectives and provide appropriate services based on actual needs (see Recommendation 13 in Section 3.8).

3.3 *Student Induction*

Induction of new students is organised by the University (Portfolio, p.76). All newly enrolled students attend an Orientation Week at SQU during which the CPS Director addresses them and delivers a one hour presentation, which contains information about the FP and the CPS, as well as the regulations for the Placement and Exit tests. Students are also given a copy of the FP Student Guide, although this was discontinued from 2018/2019, with all of the information being provided on the CPS website instead. Students are given a tour of their future colleges and of the different University facilities that are available to them during the FP and their future studies.

The SARD maintains a Welcome Desk for the first three weeks of the Fall semester, to answer any questions students have and also direct students to classrooms and other areas (interviews). The Panel was informed that FP students are given information about the programme and their courses in the class by the teacher. From Fall 2017, students registered for the lower level FPEL courses (1 to 3) are also given an orientation and tour of the CPS Library.

The SQU Orientation Week schedule focuses primarily on the University and the higher education programmes, rather than the FP. Student awareness about the FP and the CPS was underdeveloped after Orientation Week (interviews) since they only had one presentation about the programme. The CPS has not monitored student satisfaction with their CPS induction experience in the past. The recently revised

SARD survey (see Section 3.2), has three questions about induction. The results of the survey were provided to the Panel but no data was reported about the induction survey questions. The effectiveness of the information provided to students when they commence the FP needs to be established so that students receive the appropriate support as they begin their academic career at SQU. This is particularly important considering the complexity of the FP pathways, levels and options, as well as the progression and completion requirements.

Recommendation 10

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement a formal induction programme for new Foundation Programme students, organised by the Centre for Preparatory Studies, and which provides appropriate information and support for student entry into the Foundation Programme, and which is regularly reviewed for effectiveness.

The CPS does not provide any type of transition support to the higher education programmes after the students complete the FP, because each student has an academic advisor in the colleges to facilitate the transition (see Section 3.6). In addition, most FP graduates stay in the CPS to study the LANC courses after completing the FP, which further helps with their transition since they commence their higher education studies in a familiar environment.

3.4 Teaching and Learning Resources

The CPS has its own teaching and learning resources, and relies on several central SQU units and departments for the provision of certain other teaching and learning services and facilities to FP students. The CPS Department of Co-ordination and Follow up liaises with these units and departments to ensure that there is ongoing support for the provision of these resources. The CPS has its own Library with 15,000 books and 14 computers; six computer labs which are equipped with hardware, software and online resources needed by FP students, such as MReader; a Self-Access Centre; and a specialised laboratory for students with special needs (see Section 3.1). The Centre for Educational Technology (CET), Centre for Information Services (CIS), Independent Learning Centre (ILC) and SQU Library provide additional resources where required. The CPS building has classrooms for teaching purposes, but the FP primarily utilises other classrooms across SQU, which are allocated to FP courses by the Deanship of Admission and Registration.

The CPS monitors the usage of the different teaching and learning resources within the CPS. For example, the six computer labs are available 30% of the time for independent study by students (Portfolio, p.79), and 4,700 MReader books were borrowed by students in Spring 2018. The usage of MReader has increased significantly since the Fall of 2016, with FP teachers integrating it into their teaching to promote reading by students. The number of MReader Quizzes taken by FP students has remained consistent over the last four semesters. However, the Library noted a drop in borrowing in Spring 2018 and attributed this to students sharing books, and the closure of the Library between 4pm and 6pm.

The CPS Library produces an End of Semester Report, which includes borrowing data and utilisation of resources such as the computers in the Library. A Library satisfaction survey was also conducted in Fall 2017 and Spring 2018, which showed that a large majority of respondents (80% and above) were able to easily find books in the Library, and were satisfied with the Library staff. However, only 65% were satisfied with the size of the Library. The Panel sought evidence of improvements made based on the survey results and additional feedback surveys conducted after Spring 2018 but was informed that there were no “areas of manageable improvement” identified and the survey was not repeated. Considering that the Library had a drop in circulation in Spring 2018, it is important to ensure ongoing monitoring of the appropriateness of the Library resources and satisfaction levels by the key stakeholders.

SQU conducts a Classroom Services Equipment Survey which is filled in by respondents across the University. However, there is no provision on the survey to identify the responses by a specific group of

stakeholders, which does not allow for data to be collected related to the appropriateness of classrooms by FP students and staff specifically. The Panel noted a number of complaints by FP teachers about the classrooms and classroom equipment in the 2017 Teacher Survey Report, with equipment not working or broken. Only 54% were satisfied that the classroom equipment was in good working order. The CPS does not have any direct control over improvements to classrooms since this is managed by the University. Nevertheless, in order to ensure that FP students have access to appropriate teaching resources in the classrooms, it is important to monitor the effectiveness of these services and stakeholder satisfaction.

Recommendation 11

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching and learning resources in place to support the delivery of the Foundation Programme on an ongoing basis, and to ensure that they are appropriate and meet the learning needs and teaching requirements of Foundation Programme students and staff.

The appropriateness of the learning resources used in each individual FP course is monitored through the CTS Survey and reported in the End of Semester Reports by CLs and academic departments. Revisions are made to materials developed in-house by individual CLs and FP teachers, and discussed at departmental Curriculum Committee meetings. There has been an emphasis on developing and using e-learning resources in recent years (see Section 3.5).

3.5 Information and Learning Technology Resources

The CPS has six computer labs for FP student use, however, students can also access and use computer labs and other IT facilities across the SQU campus. These resources are provided and maintained by the CIS and CET. Wi-Fi is available across the SQU campus, and classrooms are equipped with projectors. The Technical Assistance Department (TAD) at the CPS provides localised IT support to users within the CPS and tracks requests for technical support by CPS staff and students using the CIS's online help desk system for this purpose. Approximately 200 to 220 requests are received and attended to each semester, with the majority related to hardware and Internet problems.

SQU encourages the use of e-learning and has a University wide E-Learning Policy. The FP has adopted and developed various e-learning resources and assessments through the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS), which were demonstrated to the Panel during the GFPQA Visit. Mobile-assisted Language Learning (MALL) is also being deployed in the FP which allows students to interact on Moodle through smartphones. Each academic department at the CPS has its own E-Learning Committee which promotes the use of e-learning and supports the development of e-learning resources. The committees are intended to act as a link between the CPS and CET (interviews), representing the views of the FP students and staff. In 2018, the committees met jointly to discuss how e-learning can be deployed across the CPS and FP and Moodle integrated into teaching. The Committee is also responsible for organising workshops and training for staff on e-learning tools, in co-ordination with the CET. There are six CPS staff members who are certified Moodle Course Creators.

The CIS monitors utilisation and satisfaction with IT services and facilities across SQU, including those used by FP students and staff, through a Satisfaction Survey. The results of this survey collected from FP stakeholders specifically, are not available to the CPS; however, the Panel heard that feedback is responded to and improvements are made (interviews). FP staff can request technical support in the classroom if computers and projectors are not working; however, the Panel notes that response time by CIS and CET during early morning and later afternoon teaching sessions is not deemed to be adequate. The CIS also monitors e-services using dedicated software tools to check that they are online and conducts spot checks of IT equipment provided in classrooms on a daily basis to check that everything is in working order (interviews). The Panel was informed that all IT equipment is up to date and that hardware equipment is replaced every 5 years regardless of the condition it is in (interviews).

To monitor the usage of e-learning resources, SQU conducted an e-Learning Audit in 2016. At the CPS level, a survey was conducted by the E-Learning Committee in Fall 2017 to determine the extent to which e-resources have been deployed in CPS courses. E-learning projects by staff at the CPS are also encouraged. A Moodle survey of CPS teachers was conducted in Spring 2017, highlighting their experiences with and usage of Moodle, and making recommendations for improvements. Based on the results of this survey, additional support will be provided to CPS staff members to deploy e-learning in their courses.

While FP students and staff have access to a range of IT services through the University and the CPS, there needs to be more consistent and ongoing monitoring of the appropriateness and satisfaction with these types of teaching and learning resources to ensure that they are meeting the needs of the FP, and supporting the deployment of e-learning in line with SQU's strategic goals (see Recommendation 11 in Section 3.4).

3.6 *Academic Advising*

The FP Student Guide states that the “role of the Academic Advisors in the CPS is to guide students through their study period, and help them to fulfill their preparatory studies requirements” (p.10). However, the Panel was informed that there are no academic advisors specifically for FP students, who are responsible for providing advice related to the FP and the different individual FP courses a student may study. Instead, each SQU student is assigned an academic advisor upon joining the University who provides academic guidance for their higher education degree programme (Portfolio, p 86). This academic advisor is based in the student's college, regardless of whether the student needs to do the FP, and does not have a link to the CPS where the FP is located. The general Academic Advising Policy, rules and regulations are communicated to students through the University's Academic Advising Student Handbook. At the FP level, the CPS established a Student Affairs Co-ordinator (SAC) role in Spring 2018 to assist with counselling and resolving students' problems. The SAC is responsible for all types of students' problems (interviews), and “acts as a source of information in matters relating to academic regulations and curricula”, which implies an element of academic advising.

CPS states that emails are sent regularly to FP teachers to familiarise them with the advisory process (Portfolio, p.86) and, therefore, in a position to provide academic advice, if required. There is no academic advising training provided to FP staff members, by the CPS or the University. The Panel heard that, in practice, FP teachers usually refer their students to the SAC if they are having problems, and the SAC in turn may refer them to their academic advisor in their future college (interviews). Cases typically referred to the SAC include those related to tardiness and class attendance, absences, weaknesses in study skills, and misbehaviour. In Spring 2018, the SAC conducted class visits for the first time to talk to FP students about improving their academic achievement and attitude.

The Panel found that FP students were aware that they needed to consult their own academic advisors in their respective colleges for academic support (interviews); however, these advisors are not in a position to provide advice about the FP, which has different pathways and progression requirements, as well as options to take Challenge and Exit tests, and restrictions on the number of times a student can take a course (see Sections 2.1 and 2.9). Dedicated academic advising needs to be in place at the CPS to support students with their progression through the FP, and also identify students who are at risk of failing, especially on their second attempt of a course, so that relevant learning support opportunities can be provided to them.

Recommendation 12

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement an academic advising system for the Foundation Programme to identify and support “at risk” students, and monitor individual student's progression through the Foundation Programme, which is linked to student learning support and evaluated for effectiveness.

3.7 *Student Learning Support*

The CPS provides a variety of learning support services and facilities “to assist all students in acquiring and developing their FP skills, with the objective being to develop autonomous, creative, life-long learners” (Portfolio, p.89). These services are open to, not only FP students, but to all CPS’s and SQU’s students, and include the Tutorial Centre (TC), the Writing Centre (WrC), and a Self-Access Centre. In addition to these formal services, which are overseen by the Student Support Committee (SSC), students have access to their FP teachers’ eight office hours a week, during which they can discuss matters specific to their individual learning needs in a particular FP course.

The TC provides support to FP students in English, Maths and IT through peer tutorial sessions which normally last 30 minutes. The peer tutors are senior SQU students who are carefully selected for the role, and paid for their work. They are also often FP graduates. The CPS places a University-wide advertisement for peer tutors each semester. Applicants have to have a GPA of not less than 2.7, and are interviewed by SSC members for the position. They also have to do a written test which consists of a writing task. The selected peer tutors are provided with a Peer Tutor Handbook and additional formal training through workshops and meetings to be able to perform their tasks. The workshops include a 10-hour training module which covers reading, writing, speaking, grammar, vocabulary. The TC undertakes ongoing monitoring of peer tutors, involving observations. An observation form is used, written feedback is shared with tutors, and there is recognition of the best tutor at the end of each semester (interviews). The TC prepares an End of Semester Report, which includes usage statistics, and the results of student satisfaction with the services of the TC. In Spring 2018, there were 2,200 TC appointments scheduled for student consultations related to the English courses and almost 900 appointments for Maths and IT support. These appointments were carried out by 53 peer tutors. The TC also provided the “Maths 2F” tutorials for students who had failed Maths twice (see Section 2.9). A satisfaction survey is conducted by the TC at the end of the semester and in Spring 2017, the average satisfaction was 3.43 out of 4.00, which increased to 3.50 in Spring 2018. The results of these surveys are published in the CPS Achievement Report for the wider CPS community. A separate satisfaction survey is undertaken for the “Maths 2F” programme within the TC. The End of Semester Reports also include a summary of the outcomes of TC changes that were made in the previous semester, and KPIs (see Section 1.4). The Student Support Complaints Policy provides guidelines on how students can complain if they are not satisfied with the TC. At the same time, the TC has a No Show policy to deal with students who make appointments but do not attend. The TC has been the subject of FP staff research projects, including a study that aimed to correlate student attendance at TC sessions with their assessment marks. The results of the study were published in an international education journal.

The WrC caters to the higher level English language students in FPEL0450 courses and above. FP students bring their writing tasks and any drafts of written work to the WrC, for a “writing conference” with experienced writers, which usually takes 30 minutes but can last longer. In 2017, the WrC employed 12 writing consultants. However, due to recent funding cuts at SQU (see Section 1.5), the Centre is currently staffed by a group of FP teachers who are required to spend up to four of their eight office hours per week working in the WrC (interviews). The WrC has its own Protocol Guide which explains how consultations should be organised. Like the TC, the WrC prepares End of Semester Reports which provide a detailed account about the activities at the WrC in a particular semester, supported by data. In Spring 2018, the WrC consultants had 950 appointments with 353 students, which is a drop from over 1,400 appointments in the previous Spring semester. However, this was partly due to the re-organisation of the WrC staffing, with the FP teachers being given training for their new additional role, and also due to a reduction in collaborative activities with other SQU colleges to support non-CPS students, which the WrC previously undertook. The WrC also organises workshops to support FPEL writing classes, at the request of FP teachers. Almost 600 students attended these workshops in Spring 2018 (Portfolio, p.92). The results of the WrC satisfaction survey are presented in the WrC report, with overall satisfaction in Spring 2018 being 3.52 (out of 4.00), and satisfaction with the WrC staff, a high 3.80.

The Panel heard that both the TC and WrC were useful learning support resources which students utilised to get help with their FP courses and enhance their English language skills (interviews). This is supported by the above-mentioned survey results which indicate high level of students’ satisfaction with these services, and the results of the 2015 Self Study (see Section 1.7). The Panel also found that students

expressed an interest in longer sessions at the TC and WrC which is a further indication of their usefulness.

Commendation 4

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Sultan Qaboos University for the range of effective student learning support services provided to Foundation Programme students through the Writing Centre and the Tutorial Centre, which are aligned to students' needs, provide peer-assisted support, and enhance the overall student learning experience.

The Self-Access Centre provides a venue for FP students' independent learning and is located within the CPS Library. The Centre offers students books and DVDs, as well as computers for their use. Student learning is also supported by faculty members' office hours. Research on the use and effectiveness of teachers' office hours was conducted by CPS staff as a project, thus indicating that office hours are useful for both teachers and students, provided they are both trained to use the office hours effectively.

3.8 Student Satisfaction and Climate

The CPS measures the satisfaction of FP students using two mechanisms: the CTS, which is the primary mechanism (see Section 2.4), and meetings of the Student Representative Committee (SRC) which represents the voice of students at the CPS and provides feedback on courses, services and facilities. Students can also approach the Student Affairs Co-ordinator if they have a complaint or a problem.

The first SRC was established in 2017 with 18 student representatives (9 male and 9 female) enrolled in different colleges at SQU after completing the FP. The SRC has its own terms of reference. It met six times in the 2017/2018 academic year and had two meetings in 2018. The Committee members also are able to request meetings with FP teachers and HoDs to discuss academic and non-academic issues of concern with them. Information about the SRC and what it does is not readily accessible to students because it is neither in the FP Student Guide nor on the CPS website. Discussions took place when the CPS was formed about including a student representative on the Steering Committee and the Steering Committee ToRs include a student representative as a member, when required. However, the minutes of Steering Committee meetings do not show any attendance and participation by students. The QMU is responsible for ensuring and overseeing student representation on CPS committees according to its ToR.

In addition to the SRC, FP students can also express their views on issues such as the FP curriculum, teachers, resources and other services to the SAC who keeps records of students' complaints against FP teachers (see also Section 1.8).

While the above mechanisms and channels for monitoring student satisfaction are implemented, their effectiveness is not measured. Furthermore, the CPS does not have in place a regular mechanism for obtaining student feedback about a range of academic and non-academic issues and services. There are plans to implement an annual student satisfaction survey starting in the 2019/2020 academic year (see Matters for Clarification #1). The Panel urges the CPS to address this as a priority and ensure that improvements and changes made in response to student feedback from the surveys are communicated back to students and other relevant stakeholders.

Recommendation 13

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement a system for regularly monitoring student satisfaction with all of the different services available to Foundation Programme students, and communicate actions taken in response to the student feedback to relevant stakeholders, in order to ensure a positive, constructive and supportive student climate.

3.9 Student Behaviour

The CPS's approach to student behaviour is informed by SQU's Student Misconduct Policy. Students are informed about behavioural expectations through the FP Student Guide. The main issues related to student behaviour in the FP are low attendance and tardiness. The CPS has its own Attendance Policy, which has been externally benchmarked (Portfolio, p.64), and uses SQU's online attendance system to monitor attendance in every class. The attendance records are maintained by the SARD. Students are issued with warnings or barred from exams depending on their absences in relation to the total teaching hours for a particular course. The warnings and barring notices are sent to students via e-mail by SQU's automated attendance system. These are followed up on by the SAC, who has overall responsibility in this area, in lieu of a disciplinary committee which does not exist at the CPS. The SAC also meets with students whose attendance is low, to counsel them and discuss the reasons for their absence (interviews). There is a list of acceptable excuses for students who miss classes.

Data about student misconduct cases is reported in End of Semester Reports by the SAC. In Fall 2017, the SAC held more than 350 counselling sessions with students who were absent or late to classes. By contrast, only 14 students were counselled for misbehaving in Fall 2017, and 12 in Spring 2018 (Portfolio, p.97). FP teachers handle misbehaviour in the classroom, in the first instance, and if it persists, the student is reported to the SAC. At times, the SAC will refer the student to other relevant units in SQU, such as counselling, if needed. The Panel viewed examples of behavioural misconduct cases on site during the Visit and found that different means of dealing with these cases were employed, including having students sign Declaration Forms agreeing to improve their behaviour, and meetings between students and the DDAP. The CPS has addressed problems related to tardiness by encouraging students to be on time, increasing the level of tolerance for latecomers to 10 minutes after the start of the class, and applying the warnings and barring regulations to latecomers, in addition to absent students (interviews). Overall, the Panel found that the CPS has processes in place to manage student behaviour on the FP.

3.10 Non-academic Support Services and Facilities

The CPS has established an Extra-Curricular Activities (ECA) Unit to organise and promote student activities outside the classroom, such as clubs, projects and events (interviews). The CPS believes that FP students' experience is enhanced by these activities which focus on students' social needs, and help them practice and apply their skills outside the classroom (interviews). The ECA Unit has assistants who are current or former FP students. FP students also have access to all of the social and recreational activities provided by SQU.

The ECA Unit holds an ECA Exhibition Day at the CPS to present and raise awareness about the different types of clubs and activities that FP students can participate in. In Fall 2017, there were 15 student clubs available, including the Debate Club, Chess Club, Games Club, Digital Literacy Club and Toastmasters Club. The list of clubs up to Spring 2017 is also provided on the CPS website, although the ECA Unit maintains social media accounts to promote its events among FP students. Events held in the past include Oman National Day celebrations, vocabulary competitions, and workshops by external speakers. The clubs also organise different activities. The ECA End of Semester Report indicates that student participation and attendance at club activities were a challenge if the activities were student-led rather than teacher-led. The Unit also faced some budgetary pressures.

FP students' accommodation, catering, transport, and medical services are provided centrally by SQU. Although satisfaction with these services is monitored by the University, specific data for FP students is not extracted and made available to the CPS, which indicates that the CPS is not in a position to determine whether the range and quality of these services is appropriate for its FP students. Counselling services to FP students are provided by the SAC in the first instance, however, students are also referred to the University's counselling service which employs professional counsellors. Overall, the provision of non-academic support services for FP students is largely the responsibility of the University, rather than the CPS.

3.11 External Engagement

The CPS's approach to external engagement is related to a range of professional activities and events that it organises and participates in. The foremost of these is the annual ELT conference, which is the largest ELT event in the country and has participants from all over the world. CPS used to publish a peer-reviewed journal called the Forum but this has been discontinued due to lack of staff interest. CPS staff also support various other academic institutions in Oman by providing them with training, materials, workshops and speakers. For example, FP teachers have been invited as guest speakers at a research conference held in A'Sharqiyah University in March 2019, and have presented ELT workshops on behalf of the British Council in Oman. The CPS has also accommodated students from other HEIs in Oman on their Peer Tutor training programme, while staff from the TC and WrC have been invited to present and share their experiences externally at various local and regional colleges and universities. FP staff have contributed to the development of the MReader internationally by evaluating and developing quizzes, which has been externally recognised. The CPS has participated in and supported national school-focused events, such as the Young Explorer Project which are hosted at SQU. Finally, the CPS hosts the IELTS Centre at SQU in affiliation with the British Council. While the CPS is directly involved in most of its external engagement activities, it also collaborates with SQU's Centre for Community Service and Continuing Education. There are plans to produce an annual External Collaboration Report for the Steering Committee which will summarise and compile all of the different external engagement activities at the CPS. The Panel supports this initiative.

4 STAFF AND STAFF SUPPORT SERVICES

Staff and staff support and services at the FP are informed by the desire “to recruit and retain highly qualified staff from Oman and around the globe” (Portfolio, p.110). In this Chapter, staff and staff support services for the FP are addressed and the Panel findings are reported in relation to its staff profile, recruitment and selection, staff induction, professional development, performance planning and review, staff organizational climate and retention, and Omanisation.

4.1 Staff Profile

The CPS had 276 staff members in the Fall of 2017 of which 244 (or 88%) were classified as academic staff, and 32 were administrative staff members (Portfolio, p.107). There are more female staff members, than male, with women making up 58% of the Centre’s staff population. The exception at the departmental level is in the DoMIT, where men out-number women by three to one (Portfolio, p.108). There are 33 different nationalities represented, with Omanis making up the largest group (76), followed by staff members from the United States (36), United Kingdom (31) and India (29). The CPS states that it recruits “a variety of qualified and skilled academic and non-academic staff” (Portfolio, p.106). Academic staff are recruited to teach both on the FP and the LANC courses and allocated specific grades (ranks) depending on qualifications with the majority of FP teachers ranked as Assistant Language Lecturers and Senior Language Lecturers (Portfolio, p. 107). In 2017, there were two Language lecturers, 118 Assistant Language Lecturers, 77 Senior Language Lecturers and 15 Language Instructors as well as three Demonstrators. There were an additional 28 Lecturers for Maths and IT.

The Panel found that the teaching staff hold qualifications in line with the expectations of the OASGFP, and have the appropriate professional experience. This was also confirmed in interviews, where the Panel heard that FPEL academic staff must have a Masters in ELT/TESOL or DELTA and a minimum of 2 years of work experience to teach on the FP. In total, 212 staff members held a Masters degree, and 13 had a PhD.

Although the CPS Strategic Implementation Plan 2016-2020 outlines a strategy for human resources (HR), the Panel found that there is no long-term planning in place for recruitment, or any staffing needs analysis being done. This is attributed to HR being controlled by the University with the CPS not having a separate plan to SQU’s overall HR plan. The CPS recruits teachers each year to fill empty grades “as needs dictate” (Portfolio, p. 107). The Panel was informed that the current staff profile is adequate to serve the needs of the FP (interviews). While the Panel agrees that the staff profile meets the requirements of the OASGFP in relation to qualifications and experience, there are indications that additional staff members are needed because of the increasing student numbers at the CPS coupled with University wide budget cuts (interviews), as well as a re-distribution of staff responsibilities (for example, staff being required to teach in the WrC), and less release time to do projects. In light of these recent developments, the CPS needs to take a more proactive stance towards short term and long-term HR planning, which is linked to recruitment and financial grades for Omani staff members, in order to support the effective delivery of the FP in the future (see Recommendation 14 in Section 4.2, and Section 4.7).

4.2 Recruitment and Selection

CPS states that one of its objectives is to “recruit and retain highly qualified staff from Oman and around the globe” to fulfill SQU’s vision for international recognition and a national leading role (Portfolio, p.109). Recruitment of academic staff is carried out by the CPS Recruitment Committee, which is chaired by the CPS Director, and includes the two Deputy Directors, the academic HoDs, and 10-12 senior representatives of different course groups within the academic departments. The Committee is responsible for reviewing CVs of applicants, interviewing and assessing potential candidates and participating in recruitment trips, if required. Each position in the CPS has a job description and there are Grade Recruitment Criteria, which inform the development of vacancy advertisements when a need to fill a position is identified. These vacancies are advertised on the CPS website. Members of the Recruitment Committee may attend job fairs nationally and internationally for recruitment purposes. For example, a team of recruiters from the CPS was sent to the TESOL Arabia conference in the UAE in

2016, where they reviewed CVs and interviewed more than 40 candidates. The Panel heard that this practice is now being replaced with an online system for direct recruitment, which was demonstrated to the Panel during the Visit. Applications are received through this online system and reviewed by the Recruitment Committee. The Committee selects candidates for interview, and conducts the interviews either face-to-face or through video conferencing if the candidate is outside Oman. Recommendations for appointments are made and the CPS Director is responsible for making the final appointment decision. The SQU Personnel Department processes all the documents for the new staff member, including issuing their contract. All new staff are placed on a probation period during which their teaching is observed by the CPS Director or one of the Deputy Directors. In its response to Version 5 of the GFPQA Report, SQU clarified that this teaching observation may also be undertaken by a member of the Recruitment Committee, although this was not mentioned in the Portfolio. The recruitment of Omani staff members is defined by SQU's guidelines and the availability of financial grades (interviews). The CPS typically recruits between 15 and 30 new academic staff members each year. Data provided indicates that 35 new staff were recruited in 2018/2019, and two in Spring 2018. The Panel viewed samples of records used in the recruitment process during the Visit and found them to be consistent with the documentation and process described in interviews. This was triangulated with the high satisfaction rating of 90% that new staff members gave to the recruitment process when the New Staff Survey was conducted in Fall 2018.

All administrative and non-academic staff are recruited by SQU's Personnel Department and the Director of Administration, with the CPS not having any input into this process (interviews). The Panel noted that it is common practice to transfer administrative staff to different units and departments at SQU, wherever possible, rather than recruiting externally (interviews).

The Panel notes that despite recent efforts to enhance the recruitment and selection process by using an online system and video-conferencing facilities, there is no recruitment needs analysis conducted before the selection process, which was one of QMU's Recommendations and has not yet been implemented. There is no indication of how the current staff profile is used to inform the recruitment planning, and no evidence to demonstrate how the recruitment process ensures that appropriate staff are being selected. Having an HR or workforce plan will assist and support the recruitment and selection process, and ensure that these processes are meeting the needs of the FP by hiring the right staff members (see also Section 4.1).

Recommendation 14

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement a long-term human resources plan for the Foundation Programme, which is informed by the staff profile, in order to facilitate and enhance staff recruitment and selection, and ensure appropriate human resources are available to support the Foundation Programme provision in the long term.

4.3 Staff Induction

Staff induction at CPS is informed by the SQU Staff Induction Policy. The Induction Committee is responsible for academic staff induction at the CPS, and supports the new FP staff with pre-arrival information and additional support on arrival. Prior to arriving at SQU, newly recruited staff are sent a detailed New Teacher's Guide which is updated annually. Staff are also assigned a mentor called a "Buddy" who is responsible for informal contact with the new staff member before and after arriving at the University. Details about the Buddy system are provided in the New Teacher's Guide, while the counterpart at the CPS who will take on the role of the Buddy, is given a list of responsibilities and "Dos & Don'ts". The Induction Committee provides a range of support services to new staff on arrival, including assistance with setting up a bank account, settling in to the SQU accommodation, and securing medical clearance for residence visa processing. There is also a three-day CPS induction programme on arrival for new staff members, which involves meeting the current staff, information on working with Omani students, IT information, tours of relevant facilities (e.g. Library) and information on the FP curriculum.

The Induction Committee regularly collects feedback on the induction from new staff members, and makes changes accordingly, which are described in the Induction Committee reports. For example, changes were made to the Buddy system following feedback received from participants. The Committee most recently collected feedback from a New Teacher Survey conducted in Fall 2018. The survey reports positive findings on the induction and orientation process, with 95.5 % of staff rating the Buddy system useful or very useful, and 95.4% of staff finding the orientation sessions useful or very useful. These findings were also corroborated by the Panel in interviews. There is high level of support provided to new staff both pre- and post- arrival at SQU, with a strong commitment from the Induction Committee to ease the new staff into their roles at CPS, as evident in the minutes of the Committee meetings and discussions. The New Teacher Survey highlighted that new arrivals were not satisfied with their accommodation and the CPS is working with the SQU Housing Office to resolve this issue (interviews). Overall, CPS's approach to the induction and mentoring of new staff has been effective in supporting them to fulfil their roles, as evidenced by the feedback received from new staff members.

Commendation 5

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Sultan Qaboos University for the comprehensive and effective induction and mentoring system for new Foundation Programme academic staff, which provides guidance to newly recruited staff members and supports them to successfully fulfil their roles.

Since non-academic staff are recruited centrally by SQU (Portfolio, p.110), there is currently no formal induction for non-academic staff at the CPS, and their induction is the responsibility of University.

4.4 Professional Development

The responsibility for Professional Development (PD) of FP staff lies with the DDPDR, and the Professional Development and Academic Support Committee. The CPS encourages PD through weekly activities, annual PD days, and through providing opportunities for staff projects and research activities (see Section 2.4).

In 2017/2018, the CPS organised 10 weekly in-house PD sessions in Fall and 13 sessions in the Spring semester. Examples of weekly activities include virtual PD sessions. PD day sessions are also organised covering topics such as giving feedback on projects and the use of mobile apps for learning. There were 11 of these in 2017/2018. CPS staff also actively participate in PD sessions and workshops organised at the University level. In addition to workshops and training sessions, FP teachers may apply for projects, which are linked to FP curriculum needs and approved through the Projects Committee (see Section 2.4). The central Research and Conference Committee at the CPS supports staff wishing to undertake research and present at conferences, and has developed relevant policies and documents for this purpose. These include an Ethics Clearance form, Permission form and consent forms for teachers and students participating in the research. In 2016/2017, 17 CPS staff members received funding to attend a conference (Portfolio, p.118). Staff who receive funding for projects, research or conference attendance are required to disseminate the results by presenting at a PD session. At the end of each academic year, the CPS organises a full PD Day during which staff members can present their research.

All of the different PD opportunities that CPS staff members participate in are recorded in the End of Semester reports. The range and diversity of PD opportunities, and staff engagement with these opportunities was evident to the Panel during interviews. Feedback is usually sought after each PD session and after the annual PD Day, using specially designed feedback forms; however, this is not done consistently. Furthermore, while feedback on individual PD events is collected, there is no systematic evaluation or review of the overall approach to PD at the CPS to ensure that it is appropriate and effective. This was also supported by the findings of the 2015 Self- Study.

PD needs for academic staff are identified from a range of sources including self-appraisals, CLs feedback, End of Semester reports, CTS results and individual PD requests from staff (interviews), although this process varies and is not regularly applied to every FP staff member. A list of PD needs

categorised around specific areas is compiled. These areas include technology and teaching, student related issues, teaching methodologies, assessment and curriculum. Staff members are then invited to submit proposals for PD sessions based on the specified areas. The CPS recently provided funding to a group of teachers to become certified Moodle Course Creators, since there is a move towards e-learning.

There are plans to introduce peer observations as part of the PD process, which will also support monitoring of teaching quality (see Section 2.4), as well as having a formal mentoring programme in place. An Academic Mentoring Committee has been recently set up with the aim of supporting staff in their academic career development. The Panel also heard about a new initiative based on “digital badges” (interviews), which is based on self-paced competency PD opportunities that provide staff with “micro credentials”. The Panel noted that most of the PD initiatives are for the staff in the English departments, which is a legacy of the former Language Centre, as acknowledged by the CPS (Portfolio, p.119). Although some PD sessions for Maths and IT staff members have recently been offered, they are still limited compared to the sessions available to English language staff. The Panel agrees that with the implementation of recent PD initiatives an inclusive PD strategy for all FP staff can be developed and implemented.

Affirmation 5

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with Sultan Qaboos University that a more inclusive professional development strategy for all Foundation Programme staff needs to be developed, implemented and monitored for effectiveness, and supports the initial efforts in this area by establishing relevant committees and deploying the digital badges initiative.

Non-academic staff PD is managed by the Centre for Staff Development, which is a central unit at SQU. The Centre offers courses for non-academic staff and their training needs are evaluated through a specific training needs form. Omani staff members are supported in taking academic leave to do Masters and PhDs as part of His Majesty’s grant programme (Portfolio, p.118).

4.5 Performance Planning and Review

The approach to performance reviews of FP staff members is outlined in the draft version of the Staff Handbook. Performance reviews are conducted through annual appraisals by line managers. The appraisal system consists of Self-Appraisal forms, which FP teachers fill in. The first form (Form A) requires staff to identify and list their goals in three areas: teaching, PD and service. The second form (Form B) is a reflection form, which requires staff to reflect on the previous year’s goals. These forms are then summarised by the CLs to identify PD needs and sent on to the HoDs, as well as the DDPDR for the purposes of PD planning. CTS scores are also used for performance reviews in cases where the CTS score is below 2.75 in two consecutive semesters (see Section 2.4). The Panel looked at samples of the FP staff members’ performance appraisal forms during the Visit and found evidence of self-evaluation, and evaluation by the CLs and HoDs.

A new appraisal system is being set up at the University which the CPS will have to comply with. The new system requires staff members to fill in a form with sections on teaching, scholarly achievements and service. The CPS have written a detailed response to the new system which was circulated to the entire SQU community for consultation and feedback. In their response, the CPS outline their concerns with respect to the nature of the evaluation, the provision of funding for PD needs, and issues related to format and applicability to the CPS teachers’ activities under the new system.

Promotion is governed by the former Language Centre promotion regulations from 2005, and supported with promotion guidelines and advice checklists (Portfolio, p.119). However, academic promotions have been frozen since 2016 due to the need to review the ranking system within the CPS. When the CPS was established in 2016, academic staff, including Assistant Professors, from the College of Science were integrated into the new Centre which had previously consisted of English language teachers. As a

result, the academic rankings had to be revised and with this now completed, academic staff will be able to apply for a promotion from September 2019 (interviews).

4.6 *Staff Organisational Climate and Retention*

The CPS states that it has a number of policies and practices to enhance the work climate at the Centre (Portfolio, p.123). This is done by encouraging staff to serve on committees (interviews). According to its ToR, the Steering Committee has staff members who are not in management roles, which gives them a voice on the highest level committee at the CPS and allows them to participate in decision making. CPS staff also take part in SQU's Staff Satisfaction Survey, although there is no dedicated CPS staff satisfaction survey which provides a more localised perspective of the staff climate. A CPS Teacher Survey was conducted in Spring 2017, and showed that staff had concerns in a number of areas including course allocations and workloads, availability of teaching resources, staff participation in decision making, and problems with IT equipment in classrooms. The results of this survey were not considered and discussed until March 2019, because there was a lack of clarity regarding who was responsible for collating the feedback and for following up on the outcomes of the survey. At the time of the GFPQA Visit, the outcomes of the survey results had not yet been communicated back to teachers along with the planned response. No other staff satisfaction surveys have been conducted since 2017, and there are no other feedback mechanisms in place to monitor staff satisfaction on an ongoing basis.

Recommendation 15

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Sultan Qaboos University develop and implement a system for monitoring satisfaction of Foundation Programme staff members, which includes the use of regular feedback mechanisms, and ensures that actions taken in response to the feedback are communicated to staff.

The staff grievance process is outlined in the draft version of the Staff Handbook. If they have a grievance, staff members can contact their CL or Head of unit in writing, in the first instance, seeking a resolution. If the outcome is not satisfactory, the grievance is escalated up the CPS hierarchy to the HoD and then the DDPDR. The Panel viewed samples of staff grievances during the Visit and found them to be related mainly to non-CPS matters, although no data on the grievances and how they are resolved is maintained.

To promote a positive work environment, two types of awards are provided for staff recognition, including the Best Teacher Award and the Best Researcher Award. In addition, SQU clarified in its response to Version 5 of the GFPQA Report that the CPS Director announces an Honour's List every semester for the top 10 teachers achieving the highest CTS scores. Staff are invited to submit an application for these awards and also informed of the criteria. The provision of PD opportunities, including participation at international conferences (see Section 4.5) is seen as another incentive for staff which promotes a positive climate. The CPS also organises social events for its staff members.

In terms of staff retention, 25% of English language staff had been at SQU for over 12 years, as of Fall 2017, while the majority of the Maths and IT staff had been at the University for less than 10 years (Portfolio, p.124). Non-academic staff retention rates show that most of the staff had been at SQU for either more than 15 years or between 10 and 12 years (Portfolio, p.125). There are plans to introduce exit surveys to better understand the reasons for staff leaving.

4.7 *Omanisation*

SQU states in its Strategic Plan that it aims to develop a "proactive, forward-looking plan for Omanisation while maintaining high standards". The Panel heard that the Omanisation approach at the CPS is driven by the overall SQU plans which rely on the Ministry of Finance and availability of financial grades for Omani staff. The overall percentage of all CPS staff who are Omanis is 28%, with the main concentrations of Omani staff members in the English departments (22%), and the technical and administrative departments (88%) at the CPS. The Panel noted that there were no Omani staff in DoMIT in the past, although there are three in the current 2018/2019 academic year. The CPS has

acknowledged this as atypical and stated their intention to recruit more Omanis to these DoMIT positions, although this aim is not reflected in the CPS Strategic Implementation Plan. The Panel learned that the lack of Omani DoMIT teachers was due to a lack of financial-grades available in this department, which the CPS is trying to fill with vacant grades from the English departments, although this is a short-term solution (interviews). Whilst the CPS does not have control over the number of grades for Omanis, Omanisation needs to be considered as part of the overall long-term HR planning (see Sections 4.1 and 4.2). The CPS supports the development of Omani staff by encouraging them to take up CL positions, as well as PD opportunities. While the CPS is involved in the recruitment of Omani academic staff members, it does not have any control over the recruitment process for Omani non-academic and administrative staff members, as this is done centrally through SQU.

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.

AC	Academic Council
ADRI	Approach→Deployment→Results→Improvement
APRO	Academic Programme Review Office
AU	Assessment Unit
CCD	Comprehensive Curriculum Document
CET	Centre for Educational Technology
CIS	Centre for Information Services
CL/CLs	Course Leader/Course Leaders
CLO/CLOs	Course Learning Outcome/Course Learning Outcomes
CPS	Centre for Preparatory Studies
CTS	Course and Teacher Survey
DDAP	Deputy Director for Academic Programmes
DDPDR	Deputy Director for Professional Development and Research
DoEH	Department of English for Humanities
DoES	Department of English for Sciences
DoMIT	Department of Mathematics and Information Technology
DVC	Deputy Vice Chancellor
ECA	Extra Curricular Activities
FP	Foundation Programme
FPCS	Foundation Programme IT Course
FPEL	Foundation Programme English Language Course
FPEH	Foundation Programme English Language for Humanities Course
FPES	Foundation Programme English Language for Sciences Course
FPMT	Foundation Programme English Mathematics Course
GFP	General Foundation Programme
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HoD/HODs	Head of Department/Heads of Departments
HR	Human Resources
HSE	Health, Safety and Environment
ICDL	International Computer Driving Licence
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
ILC	Independent Learning Centre
IT	Information Technology
ITEMAN	Item Analysis Programme
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LANC	English Language Credit Course (Post-FP)
LMS	Learning Management System
LO/LOs	Learning Outcome/Learning Outcomes
MALL	Mobile Assisted Language Learning

OAAA	Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
OQEC	Observation and Quality Enhancement Committee
PD.....	Professional Development
QMU.....	Quality Management Unit
RMC	Risk Management Committee
RMO.....	Risk Management Office
SAC	Student Affairs Co-ordinator
SARD	Student Advising and Registration Department
SSC.....	Student Support Committee
SQU	Sultan Qaboos University
TAD.....	Technical Assistance Department
TC.....	Tutorial Centre
TESOL.....	Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages
TOEFL.....	Test of English as a Foreign Language
ToRs	Terms of Reference
VC	Vice Chancellor
WrC	Writing Centre

NOTES

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