



Oman Academic
Accreditation Authority

**Report of a General
Foundation Programme
Quality Audit of Oman Dental
College**

March 2018

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P.O. Box 1255
P.C. 133
Al-Khuwair
Sultanate of Oman
Ph +968 24121600
Fax +968 24121231
<http://www.oaaa.gov.om>

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OVERVIEW OF THE GFP QUALITY AUDIT PROCESS

This General Foundation Programme (GFP) Audit Report (the ‘Report’) documents the findings of a GFP Quality Audit by the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) of Oman Dental College (ODC).

The GFP Quality Audit followed the process of audit as outlined in OAAA’s General Foundation Programme Quality Audit Manual¹. The GFP Quality Audit also used the *Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes*² (‘GFP Standards’) as an external reference point.

The GFP Quality Audit commenced with ODC undertaking a self-study of its mission, vision and systems in relation to its GFP. The results were summarised in their *GFP Portfolio* (the ‘Portfolio’). This document was submitted to the OAAA on the 28 February, 2017.

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. For membership of the Panel, see Appendix A. The Panel met (international members by telephone) on 10 April, 2017 to consider ODC’s GFP Portfolio. Following this, the local Panel member and a representative of the Review Director undertook a Planning Visit on behalf of the Panel to ODC on 26 April, 2017 to clarify certain matters, request additional information and make arrangements for the Panel’s audit visit.

Prior to the audit visit, the Panel invited submissions from the public about the quality of ODC’s activities in relation to the GFP. One public submission was received within the timelines of the process and was considered.

The GFP Quality Audit visit took place from 22 to 25 May, 2017. During this time, the Panel spoke with approximately 60 people, including Members of the Board of Directors, management staff, teaching staff, support services staff, students and alumni. They also visited a selection of venues and examined additional documents.

No information provided after 25 May, 2017 was 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.

The Report contains a summary of the Panel’s findings, together with formal Commendations where good practices have been confirmed, Affirmations where ODC’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 system in place at ODC.

The Panel’s audit activities and preparation of this Report were governed by regulations set by the OAAA Board. This Report was approved by the OAAA Board on 15 March 2018.

The OAAA was established by Royal Decree No. 54/2010. For further information, visit the OAAA website (<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>

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 has 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

Oman Dental College (ODC), a private College, is the only dental college in the Sultanate of Oman. It is located with the Ministry of Health primary and tertiary care medical facilities in Al Wattayah, Muscat. The College offers the award of a Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) Degree either through a six-year programme of studies comprising a five-year Dental Degree Programme preceded by a one year pre-dental General Foundation Programme or as a standalone five-year BDS programme. The one-year General Foundation Programme will be referred to in this report as the Foundation Programme (FP), except in the formal conclusions where the term *General Foundation Programme* will be used. The College is housed in a purpose-built facility which offers oral and dental care to approximately 3500 outpatients per annum through a 67-chair outpatient clinical dental teaching facility and day care theatre suite. Originally, the English Course of the FP was taught by Hawthorne English Language Centre, Muscat. When the College moved to this new purpose-built facility, it was brought in house. This occurred in the 2011/12 academic year.

The College first admitted students in the 2006/07 academic year. The first graduating cohort of 47 students was in the 2011/12 academic year. By the end of the 2015/16 academic year, the College had graduated five cohorts of students comprising a total of 262 students. In the 2016/17 academic year, the College had 384 students. Seventy-two of these students were in the FP.

Most students admitted into ODC undertake the FP. An English Placement Test determines if the registered students undertake the FP or go directly into the BDS. Students are streamed as a result of the English Placement Test results into two groups F1 and F2 with a differing number of contact hours assigned to each group. Students in both these streams study the same courses in Mathematics, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and Learning Skills.

Overall, the Panel found that the self-study Portfolio read well and provided a good overview of the FP. However, much of the Portfolio was written in descriptive rather than analytical terms and it was not clear how the activities in relation to the FP had been analysed (for example through using a model such as ADRI) in the self-review. The approach to how results are used for improvement was not always apparent from the Portfolio. During the audit visit, the Panel found that the development and delivery of the FP was better than the impression they had initially gained from the Portfolio. This was a very pleasing aspect of the audit visit.

ODC's Mission Vision and Values (MVV) encompass both the FP and the BDS, reflecting the integration of the FP in the six-year dental programme. The College is clearly fulfilling its Mission and has a clear commitment to its Vision. The Panel was impressed with how the MVV inform the development of the FP, its conception and operation as an integrated six-year dental programme, and how they are an integral part of the College's operations. The Panel believes this activity is worthy of commendation.

The Panel identified areas where the College's FP would benefit from a more planned approach. These were in operational planning and financial management. Regarding operational planning, the current KPIs were developed soon after ODC was founded and have undergone little in the way of substantive revision. There is a risk that a narrow focus on the KPIs as stated in the Operational Plan may not identify more fundamental issues. For example, FP attrition more than doubled between academic years 2014/15 and 2015/16 from 3.51% to 8.47%, yet the 2015/16 Operational Plan Review Report did not comment on this increase or raise it as a concern despite the graphical representation on page five of that review report

demonstrating that this rise was significantly out of step with what had happened with the BDS or previous FP years. The College would benefit from reviewing the Operational Plan's KPIs to ensure that they are "fit for purpose".

It was apparent to the Panel that the approach to financial management of the FP is reactive, and in the absence of clear planning, it was difficult to determine if there is an effective financial management process in place. A more planned approach to budgeting that includes yearly projections for the FP including staffing, professional development and learning resources is required.

The College has a myriad of review and improvement initiatives, some built on long-standing good practices such as external moderation and subject reviews. It was pleasing to see that support for initiatives relating to monitoring and review and the development of a systematic Quality Assurance Framework relevant to the FP has commenced. ODC is encouraged to ensure that improvement actions, identified by these initiatives, including those in response to student feedback data, are undertaken in a timely manner and that feedback is provided to students and graduates regarding these improvements. The Panel found that ODC would benefit from reviewing the Grievance Policy and the Student Academic Appeals Procedure to ensure that they fulfil their intended purposes.

The structure of the FP is fitting, as the students are given enough learning opportunities to meet the requirements of the different curricular areas. The feedback processes from the BDS faculty and the BDS students who have graduated from the FP have resulted in many improvements in areas that enhance further skills and broaden the knowledge base needed to pursue the BDS studies, such as the introduction of ESP subjects. The Panel agrees that this improvement will facilitate the transition of FP graduates into the BDS. The College has been conducting separate subject reviews which will culminate in a full programme review of the FP in 2018.

The College has mechanisms for ensuring teaching quality. These include staff induction checklists, student survey data, subject evaluation data, regular FP team meetings, and faculty observations which are used in a systematic way for teaching improvement. The Panel heard from students, external examiners and BDS staff regarding systematic improvements to teaching quality and the commitment of the FP staff and the quality of their teaching. However, the Panel is concerned that the Academic Integrity Policy requires a more formal system of implementation and would benefit from the use of electronic plagiarism detection tools.

The process of internal and external moderation of summative examinations for Maths and ICT creates a robust mechanism to ensure the validity and reliability of assessment aligned with the OAAA learning outcome standards for FP. The Panel supports the College's recent introduction of external moderation for the English subject area to ensure that assessment for this subject area is appropriate and effective.

FP students at ODC are well supported, particularly in their transition from high school to higher education and through timely improvements made to the programme and its delivery. FP students and graduates found the Induction Programme provided a highly effective transition from high school to higher education studies, providing students with clear expectations in terms of ODC professional conduct, behaviour, workload, and English language competence, and equipping students with the initial self-study skills required for subsequent success in the FP. The Panel commends ODC for this. However, the Panel is concerned that use of eLearning using the College's Virtual Learning Environment has not been prioritised and strategised to maximise student learning opportunities.

The student climate is well monitored and the College is committed to actively seeking students' feedback. ODC uses this feedback to make demonstrable improvements to the programme and its delivery, though this is not always relayed back to students in a timely manner.

The FP staff were found to be highly qualified, motivated and committed, and this is to be commended. ODC claims that the hiring of part-time staff as FP faculty is a temporary measure. However, the Panel believes that ODC should review the policy of hiring part-timers to ensure it does not pose risks to teaching

and learning through, for example, a high rate of staff turnover. At times, traditional and informal recruitment and selection approaches, for example, word of mouth, are effective and time saving in small Colleges, especially when there is only one vacancy; however, the Panel heard that the appointments of FP teaching staff and staff in areas servicing the FP were all made through personal networks or professional recommendations. Implementing the College's recruitment and selection policy in this manner limits consideration of potentially suitable applicants and needs to be addressed.

The College has recently implemented a staff Performance Appraisal Process which records the professional needs and aspirations of all academic and administrative staff including those teaching and supporting the FP. This is a positive initiative and ODC is encouraged to evaluate its implementation to ensure that improvements can be identified and acted upon. The current professional development practices were found to be more reactive than proactive. Part-time staff do not have the same access as full-time staff to development activities. The College would benefit from planning staff professional development in light of the staff Performance Appraisal Process and ensuring that this development is accessible to both full-time and part-time academic and administrative staff.

Summary of Commendations

A formal Commendation recognises an instance of particularly good practice.

1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Oman Dental College on how its Mission, Vision and Values inform the development of the General Foundation Programme, its conception and operation as an integrated component of the six-year dental programme and as an integral part of the College's operations.10
2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Oman Dental College for its effective induction to the General Foundation Programme that helps to ensure students are well supported in their transition from high school to the College environment.22

Summary of Affirmations

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

1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority supports Oman Dental College's initiatives relating to the monitoring and review of the General Foundation Programme to date and agrees with the need to develop a systematic quality assurance framework relevant to the General Foundation Programme.12
2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with Oman Dental College that General Foundation Programme students need specific English language skills for their successful transition to the Bachelor of Dental Surgery programme and supports its efforts to incorporate English for Special Purposes elements to facilitate this.16
3. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority supports Oman Dental College's plan to review the effectiveness of its General Foundation Programme as part of the College's overall efforts in this area.16
4. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with Oman Dental College that it needs to extend its approach to externality in the assessment to all subjects in the General Foundation Programme and supports its efforts to introduce an external examiner system for the English language component.18

- 5. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees that Oman Dental College needs to implement a performance appraisal process for General Foundation Programme staff and encourages the College to ensure that its effectiveness is evaluated, improvements identified and acted upon, and timely feedback is provided to staff on these improvements.29

Summary of Recommendations

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

- 1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Oman Dental College review the Strategic and Operational Plans’ KPIs to ensure that they are current and fit for purpose for the General Foundation Programme.11
- 2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Oman Dental College develop and implement a planned approach to budgeting that includes yearly projections for the General Foundation Programme including staffing, professional development and learning resources.12
- 3. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Oman Dental College ensure more timely feedback is provided to General Foundation Programme students and graduates on improvements that the College has implemented in response to student feedback data.13
- 4. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Oman Dental College revise its grievance and academic appeals procedures, taking into account observations of deficiencies in current procedures, so that General Foundation Programme students have access to fair and effective processes in these areas, and then communicate widely to the College community student rights regarding grievances and academic appeals.13
- 5. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Oman Dental College review current practice to ensure better detection of plagiarism in the General Foundation Programme; to develop and implement appropriate mechanisms to deal with and report it; and to provide further support to students in how to avoid it.18
- 6. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Oman Dental College prioritise the planning and implementation of eLearning in the English language component of the General Foundation Programme to deliver the learning benefits to students.23
- 7. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Oman Dental College explore more options for advertising staff vacancies in the General Foundation Programme in order to ensure the transparency of the recruitment process and to more effectively fulfil the intent of the Staff Recruitment Policy.28
- 8. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Oman Dental College establish a systematic approach to the planning and provision of professional development opportunities for General Foundation Programme staff aligned to the staff performance appraisal process and that these opportunities are accessible to both full-time and part-time academic and administrative staff associated with the programme.28

1 GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

Oman Dental College (ODC), a private College, is the only dental college in the Sultanate. It is located with the Ministry of Health primary and tertiary care medical facilities in Al Wattayah, Muscat. The College offers the award of a Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) Degree either through a six-year programme of studies comprising a five-year Dental Degree Programme preceded by a one-year pre-dental General Foundation Programme or as a standalone five-year BDS programme. The one-year General Foundation Programme will be referred to in this report as the Foundation Programme (FP). The College is housed in a purpose-built facility which offers oral and dental care to approximately 3500 outpatients per annum through a 67-chair outpatient clinical dental teaching facility and day care theatre suite. Originally, the English Course of the FP was taught by Hawthorne English Language Centre, Muscat. When the College moved to this new purpose-built facility it was brought in-house. This occurred in the 2011/12 academic year.

The College first admitted students in the 2006/07 academic year. The first graduating cohort of 47 students was in the 2011/12 academic year. By the end of the 2015/16 academic year, the College had graduated five cohorts of students comprising a total of 262 students. In the 2016/17 academic year, the College had 384 students. Seventy-two of these students were in the FP.

Most students admitted into ODC undertake the FP. An English Placement Test determines if the registered students undertake the FP or go directly into the BDS. Students are streamed based on the English Placement Test results into two groups F1 and F2 with different numbers of contact hours assigned to each group. Students in both these streams study the same courses in Mathematics, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and Learning Skills.

This Chapter reports on governance and management of the FP and includes the Panel's findings related to the College's Mission, Vision and Values (MVV); governance and management; operational planning; financial and risk management; systems for monitoring and review; student grievance process; and health and safety considerations.

1.1 *Mission, Vision and Values*

ODC indicates that ODC's MVV encompass both the FP and the BDS, thereby reflecting the integration of the FP within a six-year dental programme (Portfolio, p.12).

The Mission of ODC is to “...provide a quality dental education of the highest international standards and contribute towards the progress and development of national healthcare facilities through the training of skilled, competent, ethical, and caring dental professionals” (Portfolio, p.12). Evidence from external examiners, student and staff surveys and audit interviews with students, FP and BDS teaching staff and FP graduates, indicates that ODC is fulfilling its Mission in this regard. This same evidence also indicates a clear commitment on the part of ODC to its Vision: “To excel internationally and particularly in the Middle East as a prestigious institute and centre of reference for dental education through the utilization of modern technology, an evidence-based curriculum and contemporary techniques that nurture skilled and caring dental professionals who value lifelong learning and fulfil patient expectations” (Portfolio, p.12). The application of its values “Work, Learn, Believe” (Portfolio, p.12) can be said to be reflected in ODC's provision of FP as integral to wider dental training where students are expected to work hard, are exposed to academic, professional and personal learning and where staff work to instil in FP graduates the confidence that they can become dentists.

There is a clear consensus from the Board of Directors (BoD), to senior management, administrative staff and FP academic staff (full and part-time) that the FP is delivered within the context of ODC's MVV to prepare FP graduates for the BDS. The FP is central to ODC operations as the first critical year of an integrated six-year dental programme that is aligned to ODC's MVV.

This can be seen from the approach to FP improvements, with interview evidence confirming that these have been made with a view to supporting a seamless transition from the FP to the BDS.

Commendation 1

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Oman Dental College on how its Mission, Vision and Values inform the development of the General Foundation Programme, its conception and operation as an integrated component of the six-year dental programme and as an integral part of the College's operations.

1.2 Governance and Management Arrangements

The members of the BoD oversee all College activities, and interview evidence confirmed that they see the FP as an integral component of a six-year dental programme. The BoD takes a strategic approach to governance and planning for the FP and delegates implementation of operational planning for the FP to the Dean and academic matters to the Academic Council (AC). Managerial oversight of the FP is the responsibility of the Dean. The Head of Foundation (HoF) is actively involved in the FP's academic governance as a member of the AC and the management of the FP as a member of the Senior Management Team (SMT). There are clear lines of reporting and interviews confirmed that the lines of reporting operate effectively, responsively, and consistently with documentation and terms of reference provided by ODC (Portfolio, pp.13-14). The Dean operates with delegated authority and if additional resources are needed outside the budget, the Dean will make representations to the BoD. There has been a recent empowering of the HoF role with all foundation matters effectively channelled through this role. The Panel confirmed through interviews that the FP HoF meets regularly with the Dean, BDS course leaders, and FP teaching staff and sits now on the SMT and the AC. Interview evidence confirmed that matters related to the management and improvement of the FP are raised at these meetings and these matters were minuted, for example at the SMT. The Panel was pleased to conclude that at the time of the audit, the FP was well integrated within the College's organizational and management structure and functioning effectively as a programme.

Notwithstanding the strengthening of the management of the FP that has taken place in recent years, improvements have evolved over time through feedback and reflection on an *ad hoc* basis and do not reflect a systematic approach to reviewing the effectiveness of the management of the FP. Many reviews and improvement activities discussed below, though recent, are considered by the Panel to be beneficial to ODC and reflective of a positive approach to continuous improvement (see also Section 1.7 below). The College now needs to proactively consider how best to manage the FP within the overall context of ODC's operations in order to ensure the long-term viability of the FP, since the overwhelming majority of BDS students enter the degree through the FP. This is especially the case given the challenges that will be faced with the anticipated reductions in scholarship students.

1.3 Institutional Affiliations for Programmes and Quality Assurance

ODC has an academic affiliation with the University Complutense of Madrid, Spain; however, the FP is not included in the scope of this affiliation.

1.4 Operational Planning

ODC has in place a Strategic and Operational Plan 2013/14-2018/19 with institutional, FP and BDS Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). ODC cites the following KPIs for the FP as evidence of being effective and operational:

“KPI 4 – Provision of a learning experience resulting in the following low attrition rates: (FP 0-15%)

KPI 5 - Student surveys and evaluations indicate a good ((minimum target score of 3.5 out of 5) level of student satisfaction

KPI 9 – Staff surveys and evaluations to indicate a good (minimum target score of 3.5 (70%) out of 5) level of staff satisfaction

KPI 11 - Staff levels to be similar or equivalent to UK/EU norms when calculated on a Full Time Equivalent basis.” (Portfolio, p.14)

The BoD reviews the operational planning section of the Strategic and Operational Plan 2013/14-2018/19 via an Annual Operational Plan Review, including the KPIs and performance against the KPIs. It is at this point that a KPI may be revised or deleted, with the BoD citing the example of the building completion as a KPI that was recently deleted. The operational planning section of the Strategic and Operational Plan 2013/14-2018/19 is a standing item of the fortnightly SMT meetings.

The Panel established that the current KPIs were developed soon after ODC was founded (circa 2007/08) and have undergone little in the way of substantive revision. While FP staff implement the operational planning section of the Strategic and Operational Plan 2013/14-2018/19, they had not had input into its development. There is also a risk that a narrow focus on the KPIs as stated in the Operational Plan component may not identify more fundamental issues. For example, FP attrition more than doubled between academic years 2014/15 and 2015/16 from 3.51% to 8.47%, yet the 2015/16 Operational Plan Review did not comment on this increase or raise it as a concern, despite the graphical representation on page five of that review report demonstrating that this rise was significantly out of step with what had happened with the BDS or previous FP years. It was also not made clear during the audit why particular FP KPIs were being used and how these were effective at ensuring quality. ODC would benefit from reviewing the KPIs to ensure that they are suitable benchmarks for performance of key aspects of the College’s activity.

Recommendation 1

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Oman Dental College review the Strategic and Operational Plans’ KPIs to ensure that they are current and fit for purpose for the General Foundation Programme.

1.5 Financial Management

ODC states that it has annual budgeting for the integrated six-year FP-BDS programme as a whole and a ten-year financial plan (Portfolio, p.15). The BoD and Dean are aware of the financial challenges faced by ODC and the need to ensure equitable distribution of resources for the FP and BDS programmes. Statements within the Portfolio that the FP is provided with financial resources needed in terms of budgetary allocations and requests for funds were confirmed through interviews with a broad range of stakeholders. Nevertheless, it was clear to the Panel that the approach to financial management of the FP is reactive and, in the absence of clear planning, it was difficult to determine if there is an effective financial management process in place for the FP. Basic matters such as yearly student projections for the FP are not factored into financial planning for the programme, nor are staff, professional and learning resources needs.

Recommendation 2

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Oman Dental College develop and implement a planned approach to budgeting that includes yearly projections for the General Foundation Programme including staffing, professional development and learning resources.

1.6 Risk Management

ODC has a risk register that is reviewed by the BoD yearly alongside the review of institutional performance against KPIs. The 2013-18 Risk Register includes general risks that concern the FP, such as occupational health and safety (OH&S), and risk 1.3 which identifies risks related to staffing for the FP. The SMT Terms of Reference has risk as a standing item which provides for regular discussion of risk, with interview evidence confirming that such discussion occurs. Nonetheless, in the absence of an audit and risk committee or similar body that reviews risks regularly from a governance perspective, ODC would benefit from more frequent formal review by the BoD than the current yearly review, to better ensure that the risks routinely monitored by the SMT are consistently aligned with strategic risks to ODC.

1.7 Monitoring and Review

ODC outlines a myriad of review and improvement initiatives, which build upon some more long-standing practices such as external moderation of the Maths and IT subjects and subject reviews using student feedback (Portfolio, p.16). Interview evidence confirmed that informal improvement mechanisms are strong, with student-FP teacher, Student Advisory Council-FP teacher and BDS teacher-FP teacher discussions resulting in ongoing improvements to the FP, its subjects and the way they are delivered. The Panel encourages continued use of these informal mechanisms but notes the risks inherent in reliance on such mechanisms, especially if there are over time organisational or external environmental changes that impact upon the College. There is a need for a more structured approach, informed by good documentation and an institutionalisation of the emergent review system. This is recognised by ODC, as the College confirmed that it is in the process of implementing a systematic approach to continuous improvement through a quality assurance framework that includes the following new initiatives:

- a structured review of FP via a review panel that includes students and an external FP academic, which interview evidence confirmed would occur henceforth on a bi-annual basis;
- surveying of FP graduates and devising and implementing improvement actions based on their feedback;
- inclusion of English in the existing robust external moderation process, confirmed through interviews;
- teacher observation and resultant improvement actions;
- reviews of the student support service, first conducted in October 2016 but confirmed during interviews to become a regular part of ODC continuous improvement framework.

There is an improvement action plan in place, the Quality Enhancement Action Plan (QEAP), which incorporates actions resulting from the December 2016 FP review and the reviews of student services. The Panel is therefore confident that ODC's commitment to a more systematic approach to quality assurance can be fulfilled.

Affirmation 1

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority supports Oman Dental College's initiatives relating to the monitoring and review of the General Foundation Programme to date and agrees with the need to develop a systematic quality assurance framework relevant to the General Foundation Programme.

As part of its quality assurance initiatives, the College sought feedback from recent FP graduates, and identified a number of improvement actions that are in the process of being implemented. However, a review of the evidence relating to the surveying of these students indicates that improvement actions were not undertaken in a timely manner, with FP graduates surveyed in June 2016 but the improvements derived as an outcome of this feedback were only provided to FP students on 14 May 2017. This is a significant delay between receipt of the feedback and communication to students of the outcomes of this feedback. Such delays may affect student motivation to complete future ODC surveys.

Recommendation 3

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Oman Dental College ensure more timely feedback is provided to General Foundation Programme students and graduates on improvements that the College has implemented in response to student feedback data.

1.8 Student Grievance Process

ODC provided evidence of a recently approved Grievance Policy dating from 13 February 2017. Firstly, it is clear from the site visit evidence that this policy is still in the early stages of implementation, as there was little awareness of formal grievance processes among FP students and graduates or staff, in general. The Panel is concerned that the Student Grievance Procedure requires grievances to be resolved informally in the first instance, through discussion with the concerned parties. In instances of serious grievances such as complaints against harassment or inappropriate staff conduct, such an approach may not be appropriate and may dissuade students from lodging a grievance. There is no provision within the procedure for the student to be assisted by an external support person at hearings of the Grievance Committee and no avenue for external review of the Committee's decision. The Panel concludes that there is a need for ODC to review the Student Grievance Procedure to address opportunities for improvement highlighted in this Report.

Secondly, the Student Academic Appeals Procedure provides for reviews of formative assessments and of final end-of-subject/course summative examinations, but not for in-course summative assessments. ODC indicates as an area of improvement the provision of rights to appeal final examination results (Portfolio, p. 17). Alongside its review of grievance procedures, the Panel believes that ODC should review fitness for purpose of its Academic Appeals Procedure, based on an underlying principle that students may appeal any major assessment. Additionally, there is also a need for ODC to more effectively communicate to students and staff a student's rights in case of grievances and appeals, once revisions to the relevant procedures are completed.

Recommendation 4

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Oman Dental College revise its grievance and academic appeals procedures, taking into account observations of deficiencies in current procedures, so that General Foundation Programme students have access to fair and effective processes in these areas, and then communicate widely to the College community student rights regarding grievances and academic appeals.

1.9 Health and Safety

ODC building meets the Oman Civil Defence requirements in terms of health and safety. ODC has a Health and Safety Policy in place that commits the College to maintaining a safe campus, in line with Omani law, and allocates appropriate responsibilities to the BoD, Dean, the Health and Safety Working Group, staff and students. The working group undertakes health and safety reviews and

inspections and develops policies relevant to its area of operation. The Panel confirmed that Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) is a standing item of discussion for the SMT. The Panel was satisfied with the evidence regarding ODC's management of health and safety.

2 GFP STUDENT LEARNING

The College's Strategic and Operational Plan 2013/14-2018/19 has four strategic themes:

Professional Alignment and Standards
Develop a Dentistry Skill and Research Base
Quality Assurance
Enabling Student Success

(Strategic and Operational Plan AY 2013-14 to 2018-19, p.6)

All of these themes are relevant to this Chapter on student learning, due to the integration of the FP into the six-year BDS programme. The College has approached the FP student learning in a systematic way to provide the knowledge and skills needed by students wishing to enter the BDS programme.

This Chapter considers GFP student learning at ODC and specifically reports on the following: GFP aims and the learning outcome standards; curriculum; entry standards and exit standards; teaching quality; assessment of student achievement; academic integrity; feedback to students on assessment; academic security and invigilation; student retention and progression; and relationships with GFP alumni.

2.1 GFP Aims and Learning Outcomes

The FP is the first year of the six-year DBS degree and, as such, the needs of the BDS degree programme students have informed the aims and intended learning outcomes of the FP curriculum. There are four areas in the FP: English (which includes both English Language and English for Special Purposes subjects), Mathematics, ICT, and Learning Skills (Portfolio, p.18). These align with the areas required in the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes (Portfolio, p.18). The College has clearly mapped the summative assessment against the learning outcome standards as required by these standards. The Panel confirmed that the College demonstrates that the course objectives and learning outcomes for all the four areas of the FP are those required by these standards and are clearly stated in the course outlines for each subject.

Additionally, the English curriculum has been mapped against the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFRL) and the ICT has been mapped against the European Computer Driving License (ECDL) (Portfolio, p.18). This demonstrates that the FP staff recognise the importance of benchmarking activities particularly in the areas of English and ICT.

A small number of students (10%) are sponsored to sit the IELTS test annually (Portfolio, p.19). The College uses this activity and student performance on this test, for example, since the 2014/15 academic year students have achieved an IELTS score of at least 5.5, to demonstrate the effectiveness of the English course in preparing the students to meet the required English standards.

The academic standards set for, and learning outcomes achieved by, the students are confirmed by the external examiners in their reports. All three external examiners in English, Mathematics and ICT concluded that they were satisfied overall "*with the processes, standards and outcomes of the assessment*". The final exam results of the FP students and the ongoing feedback from the BDS staff provide input to assess the effectiveness of attaining FP aims and learning outcomes.

2.2 Curriculum

The College develops and manages the standards and quality of the FP curriculum with a series of arrangements including:

- monitoring and review by external examiners, and course/subject reviews;

- staff development activities to expose staff to contemporary trends in pedagogy and curriculum development;
- benchmarking, for example, mapping against CEFRL and ECDL as already discussed in Section 2.1, as well as incorporating the International Computer Driving License (ICDL) into the ICT curriculum and some IELTS testing (Portfolio, p.19);
- development of a FP Teaching, Learning and Assessment Manual provided to students and updated annually following the course/subject review period (Portfolio, p.19); and
- various formal and informal teacher meetings, (FP Teacher Meetings , colocation of FP and DBS staff offices), and student forums, such as the Student Advisory Council.

Any important changes in the curriculum are presented to the College Academic Council for approval along with the needed justifications. The College intends to undertake a detailed curriculum review in 2018 (Portfolio, p.20).

The Panel heard that the structure of the FP is fitting as the students are given enough learning opportunities to meet the requirements of the different curricular areas. The teaching materials enable students to acquire relevant knowledge and skills. Staff and students confirmed the importance of recent curriculum inclusions and changes to the preparedness of the FP students to undertake BDS studies including elements of statistics to prepare students for Biostatistics and Epidemiology studies, an Anatomy and Physiology for Language Learners textbook, and other English for Special Purposes inclusions.

Affirmation 2

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with Oman Dental College that General Foundation Programme students need specific English language skills for their successful transition to the Bachelor of Dental Surgery programme and supports its efforts to incorporate English for Special Purposes elements to facilitate this.

Ten percent of students are sponsored by the College to take the IELTS exam and the established internal moderation process along with the input of the external examiner intends to ensure the effectiveness of the English programme assessment. Moreover, the feedback process from BDS faculty and the BDS students who have graduated from the FP has resulted in many improvements in areas that enhance further skills and broaden the knowledge base needed to pursue the BDS studies, such as the introduction of ESP elements. The Panel recognises the importance of such feedback and encourages the College to follow a regular review process to ensure fit for purpose improvements. The Panel is familiar with the recent practices related to separate subject reviews that are expected to culminate in a full FP programme review to be carried out in 2018.

Affirmation 3

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority supports Oman Dental College's plan to review the effectiveness of its General Foundation Programme as part of the College's overall efforts in this area.

2.3 *Student Entry and Exit Standards*

As part of the standard practice, the College enrolls students predominantly assigned by the MoHE Higher Education Admissions Centre (HEAC); the College also receives independent candidates most of whom are international students (Portfolio, p.20). The College uses the Oxford Placement Test to stream students into the F1 or the F2 group (Portfolio, p.20). Following a review of the English Placement Test and student results, the Panel has identified that this placement test may help in streaming students into F1 or F2, but it is inadequate to determine the eligibility of students to direct entry into the BDS programme, as it is not an exit exam. While students scoring the equivalent of IELTS 6.0 on the Placement Test may be given direct entry on to the BDS

programme, it was not clear how the equivalency to IELTS 6.0 was established. In relation to the Placement Test, the Panel observed that:

- There is too much emphasis on grammar, while there is no reading comprehension component to determine the reading skills competency level of students.
- The listening component focuses on discerning the correct words in context with no opportunities for responding to instructions, making predictions or paraphrasing conversation.
- The speaking component is based on general conversation with no academic context such as agreeing/disagreeing, expressing point of view, explaining a process or steps, providing description of graphic information, and taking notes to provide a summary.
- As for the written part, the tasks required from the three written exercises are similar and expository in nature. There is no evidence of any analysis, comparison or evaluation.

The College has decided to ask students who are eligible to enter directly to the BDS programme to also sit for the Maths and ICT placement tests, effective from the 2017/18 academic year, to ensure that students meet the FP exit standards (Portfolio, p.21).

The Panel interviewed current FP students and former FP students who were studying on the BDS programme and found that most of the students demonstrated effective communication skills in English. BDS faculty and students indicated that students who complete the FP were better prepared to embark on the BDS programme as they were better able to manage the workload and stress of study in later years due to the FP being such a robust study experience. Exit standards from the FP are evaluated based on the reports of the external examiners and the Panel heard from students and faculty that the level of preparedness of FP students to the BDS programme was satisfactory. The Panel concluded that, overall, students undertaking the FP were adequately prepared to continue their BDS studies. Furthermore, the current placement testing systems, which determine student eligibility to enter directly into the BDS, require attention to ensure that these students are adequately prepared for their higher education standards.

2.4 Teaching Quality

The College has recently created systematic mechanisms for ensuring teaching quality (Portfolio, p.22). Such measures include using a New Staff Induction Checklist, conducting student surveys, development of the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Manual, gathering subject evaluation data, discussing FP issues in regular FP team meetings and faculty observation overviews which are used in a systematic way for teaching improvement.

The Strategic and Operational Plan 2013/14-2018/19 has quality assurance as one of the four strategic themes and the KPIs and goals contained within this plan provide a framework for action and monitoring. Coordinators look at compliance with policies and procedures and the SMT has a monitoring role in this. The Quality Enhancement Action Plan provides an update on quality improvement actions from May, 2016.

The commitment of the FP faculty was evident during Panel interviews. Whilst the Panel confirmed improvement in teaching quality from students, external examiners and BDS staff feedback, the College is encouraged to formally evaluate these quality improvement mechanisms to ensure that the various initiatives deliver the intended outcomes.

2.5 Academic Integrity

ODC takes steps to raise students' awareness towards the importance of academic integrity through the Induction Programme and the Student Handbook (Portfolio, p.22). Students access policies related to academic integrity, for example, the College Plagiarism Policy, and the student guide related to this policy, in the 'common student folder', provided for electronic document access, and in the Library. The Panel heard that staff provide instruction on plagiarism as part of Learning

Skills course. When detected, breaches of academic integrity are recorded in the FP Academic Plagiarism Register and based on this record, very few cases have been dealt with in the 2015/16 academic year. The FP faculty and the HoF are responsible for reporting, dealing with, and recording plagiarism cases. The Director of Administration may also become involved in counselling students or if the student challenges the implementation of the policy.

The Panel heard that the Dishonesty/Cheating and the Plagiarism policies are being merged to enable improved implementation. There is one detailed report on an FP plagiarism incident in October 2015, which was resolved satisfactorily. Students told the Panel that staff do not always detect cases of plagiarism. The use of plagiarism detection software would assist both FP faculty and students in maintaining academic integrity. After reviewing many of the extended written assignments presented by FP students, and hearing from students and staff regarding implementation of the policies related to academic integrity, the Panel confirms the need to establish a more formal system to help in the implementation of these policies. Turnitin or similar software can assist students and faculty to determine what plagiarism is and how to detect it. The College may also want to consider training seminars for FP staff and students on how to avoid plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct, for example, contract cheating, where a student's assignment is written by a third party. These seminars would complement the FP's Learning Skills course's instruction on academic integrity that students receive in the Learning Skills course.

Recommendation 5

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Oman Dental College review current practice to ensure better detection of plagiarism in the General Foundation Programme; to develop and implement appropriate mechanisms to deal with and report it; and to provide further support to students in how to avoid it.

2.6 Assessment of Student Achievement

The College states that it can demonstrate that it meets, or exceeds, all the learning outcome standards in the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes through the mapping of assessment against these standards (Portfolio, p.23). These standards are all summatively assessed (Portfolio, p.23). ODC Portfolio (p.23) and other documentation such as the Foundation Programme Teaching Learning and Assessment Manual indicate the use of a variety of appropriate assessment tools in the Foundation Programme, ranging from formative assessments, in-course assessment observations, presentations, to summative tests.

The details of grade distribution weights per subject are stated in the course syllabi and the Panel noted an appropriate balance between formative and summative assessment. The process of internal and external moderation of summative exams for Maths and ICT creates a robust mechanism to ensure the validity and reliability of assessment. The Panel acknowledges the recent practice of external moderation for English exams and benchmarking with IELTS as further validation of the English learning outcomes. This is corroborated by the external examiners who have checked the appropriateness of the assessment tools.

Affirmation 4

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with Oman Dental College that it needs to extend its approach to externality in the assessment to all subjects in the General Foundation Programme and supports its efforts to introduce an external examiner system for the English language component.

2.7 *Feedback to Students on Assessment*

The timeframe of feedback and grading schemes for formative and summative assessments are stated in the Student Handbook. As mentioned in the Portfolio (p.24) and the Student Handbook, the students are given timely feedback on all tests. End-of-subject evaluation feedback confirms student satisfaction with assessment practices and feedback mechanisms. The Panel also heard from students that written and oral feedback is shared with them within two weeks of any formative test or assignment. The FP English faculty were keen to ensure even more immediate feedback to students by planning to expand their assessment tools through the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The VLE has the ability to provide immediate electronic feedback on formative assessment tasks, and currently the ICT modules already use this facility for formative assessment tasks. A related workshop was organised for the FP faculty to share their thoughts and practices on the importance of providing constructive feedback to students.

2.8 *Academic Security and Invigilation*

ODC gives serious consideration to the security and integrity of its FP assessment activities (Portfolio, p.24). The Panel heard from the staff and external examiners that the established guidelines for invigilation are implemented effectively. Faculty use a secure platform to submit their questions and then the exams are compiled from the pool presented by faculty taking into consideration all the learning outcomes to be assessed (Portfolio, p.24). The Panel heard from faculty that the VLE platform is secure and accessed with password codes and that the exam security is robust.

The Invigilator Guidelines indicate the full process of invigilation and the role of invigilators. Exam regulations, late arrival lists and incident reporting form are handled by the senior invigilator who is also in charge of getting the sealed exam envelopes from the Dean's office. Any irregularities during the exam are reported on a special Incident Form for later action. The Student Handbook outlines the conditions of examinations and the responsibility of each student to abide by these conditions. The Panel heard that staff are confident with the security surrounding exam papers.

2.9 *Student Retention and Progression*

The College states that there has been, up until the time of the GFPQA, low attrition of between 2%-8%, for the reporting period on the current Strategic and Operational Plan 2013/14-2018/19 (Portfolio, p.25). However, the Panel observed that the attrition rate for the FP, while below benchmark, more than doubled from 3.51% in the 2014/15 academic year to 8.47% in the 2015/16 academic year, but this has not been explored in the 2015/16 Operational Plan Review and even though it is below the benchmark, the College needs to be aware of any probable causes for the increase in attrition rates. The support that the College provides for students at risk on not meeting exit standards will be explored in Section 3.7 of this Report.

The Student Progression Policy indicates required pass marks for English, Mathematics and ICT that students need to achieve to progress from the FP to the BDS. ODC Portfolio shows a high rate of completion and progression from the FP to the BDS programme (88%-92%) (Portfolio, p.10, Table 2). The College management is keen to ensure the implementation of the stringent progression policy and, hence, progression from FP to the BDS programme is not automatic. The Academic Council reviews students' academic achievement and then confirms progression to the BDS programme.

2.10 *Relationships with GFP Alumni*

The FP students and the BDS students all study in the same building, and they have informal opportunities to interact with each other, and for FP students to learn about the expectations of the BDS programme. The 2015-2016 Foundation Programme Alumni Report to FP HoF and the FP

Review Report to the Academic Council show the interest of the College in eliciting feedback from FP alumni and acting upon some recommendations. FP faculty told the Panel that some amendments were made in the English and Maths programmes as a result of feedback from FP alumni. However, the Panel observed that while these initiatives were useful in informing some improvements to the programme, it was not yet part of a formalised system of gathering FP alumni feedback, implementing improvements, and evaluating the impact of the improvements in the FP.

The Panel recognises the recent efforts made to elicit feedback from FP alumni and encourages the College to establish a more formal monitoring process that is systematically used to inform the FP team about the continuous relevance and standards of their programme.

3 ACADEMIC AND STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

ODC provides a range of academic and student support services to FP students through the Student Affairs Registry (SAR), the Library, and student activities and support staff. The Strategic and Operational Plan 2013/14-2018/19 includes the theme “*Enabling Student Success*” and, coupled with the 2015/16 Operational Plan Review, highlights the KPI relevant to this area in the audit scope:

KPI 5 Student surveys and evaluations indicate a good (minimum target score of 3.5 out of 5) level of student satisfaction.

(Operational Plan Review AY 2015-16, p.4-5)

This Chapter reports on the Panel findings regarding the academic and student support services for the FP at ODC including the student profile; registry; student induction; teaching and learning resources; information and communication technology services; academic advising; student learning support; student satisfaction and behaviour; as well as the non-academic support services and facilities.

3.1 *Student Profile*

ODC presented a trend analysis of its FP student profile dating back to 2006-2007 and encompassing 2016-2017 (Portfolio, p.26). ODC notes the growth in enrolments from international students in the past three years and plans to increase international student numbers (Portfolio, p.26). Informed by the data trends in this student profile, the BoD confirmed the strategic intent, expressed in the Strategic and Operational Plan (p.7), to further internationalise the student body to compensate for projected decreases in Omani scholarship student numbers. This should enhance the diversity of the student body and, therefore, the experience of FP students. However, ODC will need to consider also how it will identify and accommodate the differing academic and student support needs of international students.

There is a significant gender disparity in the student profile, especially regarding Omani students, with there being only four male Omani students in the FP in the past five years and 20 international male students (Portfolio, Table 6, p.26). The imbalance has in fact worsened as in the 2016/17 academic year, male students were only 4% of FP enrolments whereas in the 2015/16 academic year they were 19%, and the Panel encourages ODC to analyse the reasons for the gender imbalance and consider initiatives to address these.

3.2 *Registry (Enrolment and Student Records)*

The College Management System (CMS) is used to manage FP student records and the SAR manages student admissions and enrolments (Portfolio, p.27). The CMS is used to record student attendance. Student survey results indicate satisfaction with SAR staff services. A panel, which included independent external representation, reviewed the SAR as part of a Student Support Service review. The review report also commended the SAR’s engagement with prospective and current students. Access rights restrict access to the CMS to SAR staff but there is no formal confidentiality policy in existence. There is no policy for retention and disposal of student documents, but all documents to date have been retained and CMS records are backed-up. The Panel was told that Omani law requires that documents be retained for at least five years. Given the age of the College, some student documents could now be considered for disposal. The Panel encourages ODC to develop a policy for the retention and disposal of student documents.

The Panel heard that the College has access provisions for physically disabled students and patients to access the dental services. Disabled students (and their parents) are interviewed as part of the application process to ensure that any impact of their physical, visual or learning disabilities on

their ability to successfully undertake the FP and BDS programme is understood by the College and the applicant.

3.3 *Student Induction*

ODC has in place a comprehensive Induction Programme which includes staff introductions, library, facilities and IT orientation, comprehensive information provision on policies, procedures and academic matters, placement testing and other welcoming and “settling in” activities (Portfolio, p.28). The College also invites year five BDS students to give a presentation during the new students Induction Programme. The effectiveness of the induction process was attested by FP students, graduates of the FP, teaching staff and by the SAR staff.

FP students and graduates found the Induction Programme to have provided a highly effective transition from high school to higher education studies, providing students with clear expectations in terms of ODC professional conduct, behaviour, workload, and English language competence, and equipping students with the initial self-study skills required for subsequent success in the FP. The Quality Enhancement Action Plan identified the Induction Programme as requiring review and update by March, 2016. The revised programme was implemented in September 2016. The College has recently introduced a system to formally evaluate the admissions and induction process. The Induction Questionnaire collects FP student feedback, and this, along with focus group data, was analysed to develop the Induction Evaluation Report for the 2016/17 academic year. The findings of this report attest to the effectiveness of the revised FP Induction Programme whilst also identifying some improvements, such as incorporating new MoHE requirements for this activity in 2017. The Panel was impressed with the FP Student Induction Programme overall and the systems that the College has in place to assure its quality.

Commendation 2

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Oman Dental College for its effective induction to the General Foundation Programme that helps to ensure students are well supported in their transition from high school to the College environment.

Notwithstanding the above Commendation, in light of ODC’s plans to increase international student enrolments, the College needs to consider incorporating specific components in the induction relevant to international students, for example orientation to the available services in Muscat and more information on accommodation options.

3.4 *Teaching and Learning Resources*

ODC provides, or has available on loan, texts and workbooks to enable the FP students to undertake their studies (Portfolio, p.29). The Library manages this process. The Library is well resourced and has a range of English Language Readers and course books, audio books, and clinical books which FP students use for scientific referencing and other practice exercises (Portfolio, p.29). FP students are provided with an appropriate induction in the use of library resources (Portfolio, p.29) and the Panel confirmed that this induction assisted students in finding books and using the catalogue system. The Panel heard that students come to the Library as part of the Learning Skills course and also to learn referencing.

The recent FP review, conducted by a panel with independent external representation, found that, given the small number of FP students, the Library space was commendable. The annual reports on library usage (for the 2014/15, 2015/16, and 2016/17 academic years) show increased usage of the library by FP students.

Current approaches to resourcing the Library involve the librarian liaising with FP teaching staff to determine student needs at the beginning of the academic year, and then requesting purchase of

the identified resources. There is no acquisition policy or system of Library acquisition and the Panel found the processes to be *ad hoc*. While this has suited the needs of the FP to date, a more planned approach to resource acquisition for the Library is needed to ensure the library is fit for purpose with regard to the FP.

The FP has access to dedicated teaching rooms, which are increasingly being equipped with LCD projectors and personal computers (Portfolio, p.29). These improvements have been made in response to recommendations contained in the FP review report. Students undertake the ICT course in a multimedia room equipped with 37 computers. They also use the College VLE to access learning materials (Portfolio, p.29).

Evidence from interviews with FP staff, students and graduates indicates that teaching and learning resources are currently sufficient for the purposes of the FP, with classrooms equipped with audio-visual technology and projectors, sufficient computers available to students and the Library appropriately resourced for the needs of the programme. Student satisfaction with these resources is monitored using the student satisfaction survey which seeks student feedback on learning resources and the Library. The 2015/16 academic year survey results indicate a satisfaction level between:

- 3.3 to 3.8 (on a 5-point scale) for learning resources including, computers, internet access, teaching rooms and teaching equipment, and
- 3.9 to 4.4 for the Library including book and journal range, appropriate cataloguing, book availability, sufficient opening hours, availability of effect help, and overall satisfaction with library resources and services.

3.5 *Information and Learning Technology Services*

ODC provides students with individual copies of College Microsoft Office 365 (0365), which enables access to individual email accounts and Cloud-based storage facility. During the Induction Programme, students receive training on these learning technologies. The ICT course addresses the use of the College VLE (Portfolio, p.30). The FP students have access to a multimedia room with 37 networked and internet-enabled PCs and nine PCs in the Library. The building is also Wi-Fi enabled (Portfolio, p.30).

Feedback from student surveys indicates that FP students are not satisfied with Wi-Fi services in general, with a feedback score 3.3 on a scale of 5, whereas the College has the KPI of a minimum target score of 3.5 for student satisfaction survey responses. This view was confirmed in student interviews. ODC is working with the service provider to resolve the situation (Portfolio, p.30) and the Panel acknowledges that ODC has limited control over its Wi-Fi capacity. The Head of ICT is currently developing some innovative ICT tools that may benefit the FP. ODC uses the VLE system for learning and teaching activities, and self-directed learning (Portfolio, p.30) primarily for ICT. There is scope, however, to expand the use of eLearning in English language teaching.

Recommendation 6

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Oman Dental College prioritise the planning and implementation of eLearning in the English language component of the General Foundation Programme to deliver the learning benefits to students.

3.6 *Academic Advising*

FP faculty are assigned to FP students as academic advisors (mentors) and meet with them twice a year. Students are advised of the academic advising process and introduced to their advisor during the Induction Programme (Portfolio, p.30). The College stated that students at risk are identified through data provision to mentors and the mentoring meetings, and additional support is discussed and agreed (Portfolio, p.31). Academic advisors and teaching and management staff confirmed that

mentoring meetings are documented, and that interventions to support students at risk are developed, agreed by mentor and student, and then implemented.

The evidence considered by the Panel indicates that ODC has an effective process in place for mentoring, monitoring and supporting FP students academically. Survey results show a high level of agreement that staff provide good academic support and that mentoring is available. Students and FP graduates indicated to the Panel that academic support was there for students when needed and that it is effective in assisting student learning. Staff described how students were effectively supported through a formal mentoring process that monitors student progress at an individual level, and through more informal support such as before and after class discussions. The availability and approachability of FP academic staff to students was recognised as an important support for student learning, and was in effect an extension of the individualised approach to academic advising described by ODC (Portfolio, p.31).

3.7 *GFP Student Learning Support*

ODC does not have a special learning programme to assist students with special learning needs. While ODC admissions do not preclude admission of students with special needs, the College indicated that the nature of the six-year dental programme (inclusive of FP) and of the dentistry profession limits the accommodations that can be made to such students. The College has traditionally considered students with special learning needs as those with an evident physical disability. Whilst ODC building can accommodate students, staff and visitors with limited mobility, the College now acknowledges the need to “*identify and respond to students who may have other special learning needs*” (Portfolio, p.31).

Accessibility of FP teaching staff, small class sizes and the mentoring programme are the means by which particular student learning needs are identified on an individual basis. For students at risk, the individualised interventions and support provided by their mentors has already been discussed in Section 3.6.

There is some level of peer-assisted support, with final year BDS students invited to talk to FP students during the Induction Programme and with combined extra-curricular activities fostering FP-BDS interactions. However, there is no formal peer mentoring or support programme. Given the integration of the FP into the overall BDS programme, the co-location of students in the same building, and the potential benefits to students at risk or with special learning needs (Portfolio, p.31) from such a programme, the College is encouraged to explore this option.

Rather than running separate, stand-alone subject-specific learning support seminars, the FP has integrated such support into the Learning Skills course. This approach is confirmed in the document which maps the outcomes of the Learning Skills course with the OAAA GFP Learning Outcome Standards in this area. Interview feedback from students and graduates indicates that this subject provides excellent preparation for higher education studies, teaching students much needed skills and knowledge, ranging from academic integrity and referencing to basic research, library and internet research skills. BDS teaching staff confirmed that FP students had the necessary learning skills to undertake the degree course.

3.8 *Student Satisfaction and Climate*

ODC has effective formal mechanisms in place for monitoring student satisfaction that include End-of-Subject Student Evaluations, Course/subject Review Processes, Institutional Student Evaluations and Student Advisory Council feedback. Two FP representatives are on the Student Advisory Council and the president of the Student Council is a representative on the Academic Council. The College has a KPI of a minimum target score of 3.5 out of 5 for the level of satisfaction that students indicate in their surveys and evaluations. The Institutional Students Evaluations for

the 2015/16 academic year showed an overall student satisfaction level of 4.1, and for that same year, the summary results of End-of-Subject Student Evaluations showed an overall student satisfaction level of 4.3, both well above this KPI.

Interviews with staff, students and FP graduates confirmed claims in the Portfolio (Portfolio, p.32) that the Student Advisory Council is an effective mechanism for both informal and formal feedback to academic and non-academic staff and to senior management. These feedback mechanisms have resulted in changes to curriculum, for example, the inclusion of an English for Special Purposes subject on dental technology.

The student climate is well monitored and the students generally feel that their voice is heard by staff. The feedback mechanisms identified reflect an approach that is committed to actively seeking FP student feedback on their experience of the FP programme and using this feedback to make improvements. The planned addition of the SAR review and Course Review to these review processes is further evidence of ODC's commitment to seeking and responding to student feedback. The Panel was pleased with the College's commitment to actively seeking students' feedback on their experience in the FP and using this feedback to make demonstrable improvements to the programme and its delivery.

As indicated in Section 1.7, as ODC further develops its feedback and improvement mechanisms, it will be important to advise FP students and FP graduates in a timely manner of the improvements made in response to their feedback to ensure that response rates for student feedback requests will remain constant or improve.

3.9 *Student Behaviour*

The Student Handbook is the primary document for advising FP students of expectations regarding student conduct and during induction, students are provided with clear guidance on expectations concerning professionalism and commitment to studies. A Student Charter has been developed through the Student Advisory Council and is applicable to all students across the six-year dental programme (Portfolio, p.33). The CMS records data relating to student conduct. There is no formal disciplinary committee, and the Panel agrees with ODC that, due to the size of the College and the close monitoring of student progress by teaching and non-academic staff, it is not seen as necessary. Behavioural issues can be identified early on and dealt with through meetings with the Head of Administration, and escalated to the Director of Administration if necessary (Portfolio, p.33). Interview evidence did not indicate any systemic or serious issues regarding behaviour and the importance of ethical and professional behaviour, befitting the dental profession, was profiled by both staff and students.

3.10 *Non-Academic Student Support Services and Facilities*

ODC provides opportunities for recreational activities that bring together FP and BDS students, both on and off campus (Portfolio, p.33). Attendance by FP students and graduates is variable, because the capacity to participate is limited, due to study commitments. Although student survey data provided to the Panel indicated lower scores for recreational services, those FP students and graduates interviewed expressed general satisfaction with what was provided by ODC. ODC does not provide accommodation but does provide students with information on accommodation options in Muscat. The registry and administration staff provide a supportive environment for students.

The cafeteria rates poorly in student surveys, with the most recent survey having results of 2.9 to 3.6 on a 5-point scale for cafeteria related items. FP students and graduates indicated there has been some recent improvements but further efforts are required to meet student satisfaction. This issue was recognised by ODC as an area for improvement in its Portfolio and ODC indicated that it would continue to work on improving cafeteria services (Portfolio, p.34).

Survey data indicated a low score (2.7) for recreational facilities, but the recent provision of a student relaxation area has addressed some of the student dissatisfaction in this area. FP students would benefit from an outdoor recreation area, if this is a possibility.

The Panel heard from teaching and support staff, FP students and BDS students regarding the challenges of having a very intensive FP with a full curriculum, and how this contributes to high stress levels at certain times. Staff are aware of the need to support students who have personal issues and experience difficulties managing their levels of stress; however, at the time of audit, the College did not have staff with professional expertise in the area of counselling. ODC is encouraged to consider providing FP students with access to the services of a professional counselling service to support FP students with personal issues, including stress management.

3.11 External Engagement

The existing external relationships of ODC largely concern the BDS, for example the academic affiliation with the University of Complutense in Spain and the International Advisory Panel (Portfolio, p.34). ODC provides dental care to Omanis through BDS students. The External Examiner review of the FP does provide some level of external engagement and some of the extra-curricular activities involve FP students with external stakeholders, including a visit to Al Massarra Hospital and the Madeenat Alasnan (City of Teeth). ODC is not currently actively engaged with other higher education institutions that have FP programmes and would benefit from sharing good practice with other institutions that teach FP students.

4 STAFF AND STAFF SUPPORT SERVICES

The importance of Human Resources at ODC is highlighted in the Strategic and Operational Plan 2013/14-2018/19 as one of the eight elements that ODC focuses on to deliver on the strategic intent of the plan, specifically Element 4 to:

“further increase staff development”, furthermore, KPI 11 states
“Staffing levels to be similar or equivalent to UK/EU norms when calculated on Full Time Equivalent basis” (Strategic and Operational Plan AY2013-14-2018-19, p31).

This Chapter considers the key aspects of FP staff and staff support services at ODC, including staff profile, recruitment and selection, staff induction, professional development, performance planning and review, staff organisation climate and retention, and the process of Omanisation.

4.1 Staff Profile

The faculty of the FP are highly qualified, motivated and committed, as attested by both their curricula vitae and the face-to-face interviews (Portfolio, p.11). Initially in the 2016/17 academic year, there were six full-time and two part-time staff in the FP department. All staff had a teaching qualification and six of the eight staff had a higher-level qualification of a Master’s degree or equivalent (Portfolio, p.11). This supports the claim made by ODC that it follows strict recruitment criteria to ensure effective delivery of the FP (Portfolio, p.35). The newly recruited part-time staff member restores the staff-to-student ratio to 1:16 (Portfolio, p.35), which is line with the College KPI 11 where *“Staffing levels to be similar or equivalent to UK/EU norms when calculated on Full Time Equivalent basis”*.

There was no evidence that ODC used or examined the staff profile data for the benefit of future recruitment and selection purposes or for performance related policies. Since ODC has to rely on few part-time faculty in the FP, the Panel believes that the College should consider ways to mitigate possible risks posed to teaching and learning due to potential staff turnover.

4.2 Recruitment and Selection

ODC’s Staff Recruitment Policy includes several options through which vacancies can be publicised and a rigorous selection process which includes interviews and demonstration lessons. Interviews confirmed that potential teaching staff did conduct demonstration lessons prior to appointment.

At times, traditional and informal recruitment and selection approaches, for example, word of mouth, are effective and time saving in small colleges, especially when there is only one vacancy. However, the appointments of FP teaching staff and staff in areas servicing the FP were all made through personal networks or professional recommendations. No other option of publicising job vacancies, for example, advertising announcements in local and regional newspapers and on relevant websites, was utilised by the College. The Panel concluded that implementing the Staff Recruitment Policy in this manner would limit consideration of potentially suitable applicants and needs to be addressed.

Recommendation 7

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Oman Dental College explore more options for advertising staff vacancies in the General Foundation Programme in order to ensure the transparency of the recruitment process and to more effectively fulfil the intent of the Staff Recruitment Policy.

4.3 Staff Induction

The Panel found that ODC has created and implemented a robust and effective staff induction process, as described in the New Staff Induction Checklist. A “buddy system”, which starts the first week of induction, lasts for the three-month probation period (Portfolio, p.36). The success of the staff induction programme was attested by staff feedback gathered during the interviews with FP part-time and full-time faculty. It was further attested by the non-academic staff who also acknowledged the adequacy of the formal induction process that included access to all necessary information regarding the duties required in the positions for which they were hired. It is encouraging that the College is in the process of implementing an evaluation of the induction process (Portfolio, p.36).

4.4 Professional Development

ODC states that it is committed to the professional development of staff (Portfolio, p.36). It does this through budget provision for staff development activities for FP faculty and some in-house staff development activities. The College states that individual staff development opportunities are identified in the annual performance appraisal and staff also seek their own learning opportunities throughout the year (Portfolio, p.37). This is, however, a recently introduced process. The Strategic and Operational Plan 2013/14-2018/19 Element 7.4 indicates the intent to further increase staff development through several initiatives including provision of opportunities.

The Panel found that to date, ODC professional development practices as set out in the Portfolio (p.37) and in the Staff Handbook constitute more of a reactive process than a proactive framework. Furthermore, part-time FP academic staff do not receive the same access to professional development activities as the full-time staff. Some academic support staff do not have access to professional development opportunities. A more formalised approach to professional development would need to be linked to the process of performance planning and review and planned to ensure that it is built around the core aspects of staff members’ roles. The Panel found that this was not currently taking place, particularly for staff employed part-time and those working in the academic support areas of the College. Therefore, a more systematic and structured approach to professional development is required to ensure that it is linked to development needs and equitably managed for all staff.

Recommendation 8

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Oman Dental College establish a systematic approach to the planning and provision of professional development opportunities for General Foundation Programme staff aligned to the staff performance appraisal process and that these opportunities are accessible to both full-time and part-time academic and administrative staff associated with the programme.

4.5 Performance Planning and Review

As of the 2015/16 academic year, ODC has introduced a new staff Performance Appraisal Process that reviews and records the professional needs and aspirations of all academic and administrative staff (including both full-time and part-time FP staff) (Portfolio, p.37). The Panel confirmed that

the implementation of the appraisal system had taken place. Staff had received appraisal feedback, performance targets and professional development needs had been identified. Monitoring will occur annually. Staff welcomed the introduction of the appraisal system. The Panel agrees that as a newly implemented formal procedure, it needs to be regularly evaluated for its effectiveness and, consequently, established as a systematic performance enhancing tool.

Affirmation 5

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees that Oman Dental College needs to implement a performance appraisal process for General Foundation Programme staff and encourages the College to ensure that its effectiveness is evaluated, improvements identified and acted upon, and timely feedback is provided to staff on these improvements.

4.6 Staff Organisational Climate and Retention

The Panel found the working climate among the FP faculty and staff to be positive and supportive, which explains the reported high retention of staff (Portfolio, p. 38). The College conducts exit interviews with appropriately independent interviewers, and exiting staff comments in general reflect positively on the College and improvements are conveyed to managers (Portfolio, p.37). Overall, the Panel found open lines of communication among the FP faculty and between FP and the BDS staff.

The high level of positivity found in the workplace was further supported by the results of the newly implemented Staff Satisfaction Surveys, indicating that the College staff, in general, are very satisfied with the working conditions at ODC, with a score of 4.47 on a scale of 5 to the survey item “*overall I am satisfied with ODC and a place to work*”. The staff surveys are for all ODC staff and do not single out the FP staff. The College could consider disaggregating the data so that there is clearer indication regarding staff satisfaction for the FP staff cohort, and this would confirm or otherwise their satisfaction with, for example, their working conditions, support and facilities provided to them, and remuneration. To further enhance the working experience among the FP staff, the Panel encourages the annual implementation of the Staff Satisfaction Surveys.

ODC Staff Handbook provides information on a code of conduct expected of staff. There is a Staff Grievance Policy and procedure accessible to staff through the Sharepoint portal. This policy enables the resolution of grievances, should they arise, promptly, fairly, consistently, and confidentially. The Panel agrees that the in-place grievance policy should apply to all ODC staff, regardless of length of service or designation. It further agrees with ODC that it needs to uphold confidentiality when dealing with staff grievances during reporting and recording formal grievance processes. Whilst many of these policies are new, the College is encouraged to implement a review and improvement system.

4.7 Omanisation

The College Staff Recruitment Policy sets out that Omani nationals will be prioritised for recruitment if they meet the criteria required for the vacant position. Currently there are no Omani FP faculty (Portfolio, p.38), although there are a number of Omani faculty teaching in the BDS. About 30% of the College’s administration and support staff are Omani (Portfolio, p.38). At the end of the 2015/16 academic year, ODC offered an Omani national with a CELTA qualification a position as a full-time English Language teacher in the FP programme; however, the candidate did not take up this offer. The Panel understands that the area of Omanisation continues to be challenging; however, it strongly encourages the College to explore various avenues to attract qualified Omanis, not just in the administration section of the College, but also as faculty in the FP.

APPENDIX A. AUDIT PANEL

Ms Annie Lajinian-Magarian (Chair)
University Registrar
Lebanese American University
Lebanon

Dr Jasen Burgess
Manager, University Accreditation,
CQ University
Australia

Dr Najma Al Zidjaly
Associate Professor, English Department
College of Arts and Sciences
Sultan Qaboos University
Oman

Emeritus Professor Debbie Clayton, (Review Director)
Oman Academic Accreditation Authority

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.

ADRI	Approach→Deployment→Results→Improvement
Approach	The first dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on evaluating what a HEI aims to achieve for a given topic and how it proposes to achieve it.
BDS	Bachelor of Dental Surgery
Deployment	The second dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on whether a HEI's plans for a given topic are being followed in practice, and if not, why not.
Review Director	An OAAA staff member assigned to an Audit Panel to provide professional guidance and support.
External Reviewer	A Member of the OAAA Register of External Reviewers; a person approved by the OAAA Board to participate as a member of the OAAA's various external review Panels.
FP.....	Foundation Programme
GFP.....	General Foundation Programme
HEAC	Higher Education Admissions Centre (www.heac.gov.om)
HEI	Higher Education Institution
Improvement	The fourth dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on how effectively an organisation is improving its <i>approach</i> and <i>deployment</i> for any given topic in order to achieve better <i>results</i> .
KPI.....	Key Performance Indicator
MoHE	Ministry of Higher Education
OAAA	Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
OAAA Board.....	The governing body of the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
ODC.....	Oman Dental College
Panel Chairperson.....	The Chairperson of the Audit Panel.
Panel Member.....	An OAAA External Reviewer who is a member of an Audit Panel.
QEAP.....	Quality Enhancement Action Plan
Quality Assurance.....	The combination of policies and processes for ensuring that stated intentions are met.
GFP Quality Audit.....	An independent evaluation of the effectiveness of the system and processes by which a HEI sets, pursues and achieves its mission and vision.
GFPQA Portfolio.....	The report produced as the result of a self study. Also forms the main submission made to the OAAA by the HEI being audited.
GFPQA Report	A public report published by the OAAA which presents the findings and conclusions of the GFPQA Audit Panel's External Review of a HEI.
Quality Enhancement	The combination of policies and processes for improving upon existing <i>approach</i> , <i>deployment</i> and <i>results</i> .

- ResultsThe third dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on the evidence of the outputs and outcomes of a topic’s *approach* and *deployment*.
- Sic indicates that the preceding segment of the quote was copied faithfully, in spite of a mistake
- SystemIn this Report, *system* refers to plans, policies, processes and results that are integrated towards the fulfilment of a common purpose.

