



Oman Authority for
Academic Accreditation and
Quality Assurance of Education



Report of a General Foundation
Programme Quality Audit of

Sur University College

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OVERVIEW OF THE GFP QUALITY AUDIT PROCESS

This General Foundation Programme (GFP) Quality Audit Report (the ‘Report’) documents the findings of a GFP Quality Audit by the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA) of the Sur University College (SUC). The GFP Quality Audit followed the process of audit as outlined in OAAAQA’s General Foundation Programme Quality Audit Manual.¹ The GFP Quality Audit also used the *Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes* (‘GFP Standards’) as an external reference point.²

The GFP Quality Audit commenced with SUC undertaking a self-study of its Mission, Vision and systems in relation to the GFP. The results were summarised in the GFP Portfolio (the ‘Portfolio’). This document was submitted to the OAAAQA by the agreed date of 20 June 2021.

The OAAAQA appointed an external GFP Quality Audit Panel (the ‘Panel’), comprising appropriately qualified and experienced local and international reviewers, to conduct the GFP Quality Audit (for membership of the Panel see Appendix A). The Panel met virtually through MS Teams on 23 August 2021 to consider SUC’s GFP Portfolio. Following the Preliminary Meeting, a representative of the Panel Chairperson and the Review Director undertook a planning visit on behalf of the Panel to SUC on 22 September 2021 to clarify certain matters, request additional information and arrange for the Panel’s Audit Visit. Prior to the Audit Visit, the Panel formally invited submissions from the public about the quality of SUC’s activities in relation to the GFP. No public submissions were received using this process.

The GFP Quality Audit Visit took place from 25 to 28 October 2021. During this time, the Panel spoke with approximately 70 people, including current and former GFP students, GFP and post-GFP faculty, GFP support staff, SUC senior management and administrative staff. The Panel also visited a selection of venues and examined additional documents.

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

The Panel’s audit activities and preparation of this Report were governed by regulations set by the OAAAQA Board. No documents created after 28 October 2021 (the last day of the Audit Visit) were taken into consideration for the purposes of this audit other than pre-existing evidence specifically requested by the Panel in advance and/or submitted by the HEI in response to GFPQA draft Report v5. This Report was approved by the OAAAQA Board on 7 July 2022.

The OAAAQA was established by Royal Decree No 9/2021. For further information, visit the OAAAQA website.³

¹ <https://oaaaqa.gov.om/getattachment/d2ff92f6-df58-4fa6-ab82-fb9eb3bed27d/General%20Foundation%20Program%20Quality%20Audit%20Manual.aspx?b=0>

² <https://oaaaqa.gov.om/getattachment/9b7cfb45-33e2-45c0-b436-28ace65f54d3/Oman%20Academic%20Standards%20for%20General%20Foundation%20Programs.aspx?b=0>

³ <https://oaaaqa.gov.om/>

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

Each OAAAQA GFP Quality Audit Report is written primarily for the institution being audited. The Report is specifically designed to provide feedback to help the 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 current and potential students, their families, employers, government, other higher education institutions (HEIs) 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). Prospective students should still undertake their own investigations, however, 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 nature. In other words, although the audit addresses four areas of activity, 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. The GFP Quality Audit therefore recognises that each institution and its GFP has a unique purpose and profile; it does not directly compare the GFP of one institution with that of other institutions in Oman.

For the reasons cited above, 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 the Audit Report is not as important as the substance of those conclusions. Some Recommendations, for example, 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. It is neither significant nor appropriate, therefore, to compare the GFP Quality Audit Reports of different HEIs solely on the numbers of Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations.

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. These 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

Sur University College (SUC) is a private higher education institution located in the coastal city of Sur, around 150 kilometres southeast of Oman's capital city of Muscat. It was established in 2001 and is one of a group of companies within a local business consortium. SUC has the following academic departments: Department of Business Administration; Department of Information Systems and Information Technology; Department of Engineering; the General Foundation Department (GPD); and the Department of Postgraduate Studies and Research. At the undergraduate level, these departments offer diploma and degree programmes in affiliation with Bond University, Australia (BU) and the American University, Egypt (AUC). At the postgraduate level, SUC offers masters programmes in affiliation with the University of Sunderland (UoS), UK; and Ain Shams University (ASU), Egypt. The delivery of the General Foundation Programme (GFP) is managed solely by SUC without the involvement of any international affiliate institutions. All programmes, with the exception of the Masters in Public Administration, where the medium of instruction is Arabic, are offered in English. At the time of the GFP Quality Audit (GFPQA), there were 568 students studying at SUC, of which 85 students were registered for the GFP. The GFP is supported by 13 staff members, including the Head of General Foundation Department (HGFD), an administrator and 11 teachers.

Overall, the GFP self-study Portfolio submitted by SUC follows the ADRI model but is more descriptive than analytical, focusing mainly on the SUC's approach to the management of quality assurance within the GFD. There is limited and overlapping reference to the deployment of resources, review of results and consequent improvement measures. The Portfolio only reflects the operations of the GFD and SUC up until 2019 with very limited reference to the occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic since March 2020 and the impact on each of the scope areas under review. In addition to this, a number of supporting materials provided along with the Portfolio were either not relevant or dated and hence not fully reflective of current practice within the GFD. As the Audit progressed, however, the GFD was able to provide the most recent evidence in the form of additional supporting material which reflect current practice adjusted to manage the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic, evidence of deployment of the stated approach, analysis of results and in some cases opportunities for improvement being addressed. The quality of the submission made by SUC unfortunately did not fully reflect the actual practice of quality assurance measures within the GFD.

The GFP at SUC was designed using the Oman Academic Standards for the General Foundation Programme (OASGFP) as a reference point and aims to address the learning outcomes in the areas of English, Mathematics, Computing and General Study Skills (GSS) (Portfolio, p3). The GFD operations and delivery of the GFP are underpinned by the Mission, Vision and Values (MVV) of SUC (Portfolio, p12) and SUC management and the GFD share a common understanding of the purpose of the GFP. The SUC MVV are disseminated to external and internal stakeholders through the SUC web-site, posters in prominent areas of the college buildings, induction material, GFP documentation and student handbooks. There is evidence of GFP staff and student involvement in the development of the GFD MV but while the level of consultation is acceptable, it could be wider, more comprehensive and more explicit in the future. The GFD governance structure is aligned with the SUC's organisational structure and provides the required framework for an inclusive approach for the effective management of the GFP. The Board of Directors (BoD) and the Board of Trustees (BoT) are responsible for the governance of the College and the GFD, overseeing all academic and administrative functions. At the operational level, the College Academic Board (CAB) is responsible for the operations of all departments including the GFD (Portfolio, p8). Leadership of the GFD is the responsibility of the HGFD who reports to the Assistant Dean for Academic and Research Affairs (ADAR) (Portfolio, p9). The HGFD is a member of key SUC committees indicating that the GFD is well integrated in the College structure and participates in decision-making (Portfolio, p9). Internally, the GFD is organised by six Committees which

report to a GFD Council (Portfolio, p9). While this arrangement is consistent with the wider SUC structure, the large number of committees is disproportionate to the number of staff in the GFD which has declined in recent years. The College is encouraged to train its GFD staff members in chairing academic committees as well as participating as members in order to enhance leadership skills amongst the staff. The GFD Operational Plan (OP) has defined objectives that are translated into key performance indicators (KPIs), however, in some instances, the KPIs are not clearly defined. Identified KPIs could be used more effectively to allow for better monitoring and subsequent planning for improvements to the GFP. The Dean is responsible for managing the finances for the College with the support of the Senior Manager for Administration and Finance (SMAF) while the HGFD is responsible for the daily utilisation of GFP resources (Portfolio, p11). The budgeting and financial system adopted by SUC for the GFD is functioning well and that there is flexibility within the budgetary system to accommodate unanticipated expenditure. SUC's current approach to risk management is governed by its Risk Management Policy (Portfolio, p13). The GFD has a practice of managing operational risks but it is not formalised into a system and the department could benefit from proper implementation of its existing Risk Management Policy within the GFD. SUC operates an effective 'multi-layered' monitoring and review approach to the GFP guided by the College's Procedures for Entity and Activities Review (Portfolio, p15). This involves seeking feedback from a wide variety of sources such as the individual teacher, the department, and the College (Portfolio, p14). At College level, the monitoring of the GFP is largely dependent on the reports that the HGFD provides which lack the rigour of critical analysis and do not often result in actionable plans. The GFD needs to consider streamlining and prioritising its review findings to ensure that it supports the department in developing action plans with timelines and allocated responsibilities. GFD has appropriate procedures in place for addressing GFP student complaints and grievances and the relevant policy and procedures are well communicated to students. The Health and Safety Policy and related procedures were updated (Portfolio, p18,) to accommodate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, the health and safety procedures and processes are effectively deployed and monitored.

The development of the GFP aims and learning outcomes (LOs) at SUC is guided by the learning outcomes stipulated in the OASGFP (Portfolio, p22). While the Panel values aligning the GFP curriculum with the OASGFP, consistency of embedding the General Study Skills across all the courses and its assessment is not evident. Student awareness of the GFP LOs and study skills is limited and the processes used to assess student awareness need to be reviewed. The GFP LOs, design and delivery are not benchmarked with other HEIs, thus not providing an external insight into the fitness of purpose of SUC's GFP LOs. The SUC GFP curriculum meets the OASGFP requirements in the areas of English, Computing, Mathematics and General Study Skills (GSS). The HGFD along with the Curriculum and Syllabi Development and Review Committee (CSDRC), is responsible for ensuring that the GFP curriculum continues to adhere to OASGFP. SUC has the basic mechanisms in place for the GFP curriculum review; however, consistent implementation of this mechanism needs attention for the review process to be of value. GFD uses an in-house placement test to place new GFP students at an appropriate level based on their proficiency in English language, Mathematics and Computing (Portfolio, p26). Students with an IELTS 5 or TOEFL score of 500 or more are exempt from the English language courses. The Mathematics and CIM courses are compulsory unless a student has passed an equivalent course in another recognised HEI. Students may also be exempted from the Mathematics and CIM courses based on their performance in these two components of the GFD in-house placement test. Passing the Internet and Computing Core Certification (IC3) or the International Computer Driving Licence (ICDL) could provide students with exemption from the CIM courses (Portfolio, p26). The GFD placement test needs to be benchmarked against internationally recognised reference points to serve as an appropriate tool for defining learning levels for new students. The GFD uses an exit test to assess GFP student achievement of GFP LOs, however, since the test only focuses on the English component of the programme it cannot be considered as a comprehensive tool to measure achievement of all GFP LOs. The exit examination mechanism currently in use also needs to be regularly reviewed and externally benchmarked for validity and reliability to meet the purposes of the GFP as a route to future higher education studies. Teaching quality at SUC is informed by the SUC Teaching and Learning Strategy outlined in the Quality Manual. SUC monitors GFP teaching quality through regular class visits by the HGFD, peer observation, as well as course and instructor evaluations by students. The College has comprehensive and informative policies on plagiarism for staff and students (Portfolio, p31). There are systems and processes in place to manage academic integrity at the GFP level in line with practices used in other academic departments but SUC could include processes to monitor consistent implementation of the College's policy. The GFD assessments are designed to demonstrate the student

achievement of all GFP LOs and support the achievement of SUC's strategic goals (Portfolio, p33). The GFD uses a variety of methods for both formative assessments (classroom participation, projects, and quizzes) and summative assessments (midterm and final examinations) for GFP courses (Portfolio, p33). SUC has policies on grading, moderation and double marking of GFP assessments. The GFD has mechanisms in place for internal moderation of GFP assessments but external moderation processes are not in place. The GFP could benefit from external feedback on the assessment development and marking process. The GFD has processes in place to provide GFP students with verbal and written feedback on their assessments but needs to ensure greater consistency in the implementation of these processes. SUC has a well-defined system for academic security and invigilation of examinations which is also implemented in the GFD. The department ensures the security of examinations at all times starting with examination preparation through to the storage of examination papers before and after the administration of the examination. Statistical data relating to progression and retention are calculated and discussed by the GFP team, however, there is a lack of interpretation, and therefore, is not used in planning for future improvements to the GFP. The GFD does engage with the GFP alumni through annual surveys but there is potential for a more active engagement to inform changes to the GFP.

The GFD uses the demographic details of its GFP student profile to provide appropriate learning environments for the different categories of students in the GFD. This data also helps SUC provide adequate academic and non-academic support services for GFP students. SUC Admissions and Registration Department (ARD) has an effective system for registration, admission and enrolment of GFP students which is clearly communicated to GFP students through various channels. There are measures in place to ensure data security and confidentiality of student information, including restricted access to student records. The GFD has a one-week student orientation immediately following student enrolment into the programme where students are introduced to the GFP structure, assessments, general rules and regulations and learning support systems and facilities (Portfolio, p49). GFP students find this orientation programme useful and are satisfied with the duration and content of the orientation. The GFD has facilitated a healthy learning environment by providing GFP students with appropriate learning resources such as technologically-enabled classrooms, laboratories and learning support opportunities. The College would benefit from putting in place a mechanism to assess the effectiveness of the various student learning support services and activities. Academic advising procedures at the GFD are clearly defined and GFD teachers are appointed as advisors for the classes that they teach. The GFD has a system for recording these advising sessions but there is no evidence of follow-up on the provision of the different types of academic advising and it was difficult to confirm the effectiveness of the academic advising system in place in the GFD. The GFD provides learning support to GFP students through appropriate and targeted student learning support for English language, but does not have a similar support mechanism for GFP students with learning difficulties in Mathematics and IT. While GFP students appear to be generally satisfied with the quality and quantity of learning support provided to them, SUC needs to formally assess the effectiveness of the various student learning support services and activities offered by the GFD on a regular basis. The SUC Student Affairs Department (SAD) is responsible for the monitoring of student satisfaction with the provision of non-academic facilities and services (Portfolio, p56). SUC uses different mechanisms and instruments to collect and monitor GFP student satisfaction, which include various college-level and departmental level surveys, a system of class representatives and provision of suggestion and complaint boxes (Portfolio, p56). The Assistant Dean for Student Affairs (ADSA) is responsible for the management of the non-academic support services and facilities, such as hostel accommodation for female students, free transportation twice a week for shopping, clinic, counselling services, restaurant, recreational room, rest room, and English and Drama clubs (Portfolio, p59). GFD students indicated a paucity of recreational activities which needs to be addressed along with ensuring that there is a choice of activities that are both gender and needs appropriate. The GFD lacks a structured approach to external engagement which would enable SUC to gain insights from GFD stakeholders on various aspects of the GFP curriculum and delivery to support SUC in the achievement of its stated strategic objectives.

The HGFD, in coordination with the SUC management and service departments, is responsible for the provision of adequate and appropriate academic and non-academic staff and staff support services for the GFP to operate effectively. The GFD staff profile reflects diversity and represents a range in terms of age, gender, nationality and academic qualifications, exposing GFP students to different academic experiences and cultural backgrounds. The recruitment and selection process in the GFD is transparent, driven by the staffing needs of

the GFD and aligned with the MoHERI recruitment regulations. SUC, however, could benefit from developing and implementing a mechanism to evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of this process. Newly recruited staff members are integrated into GFD operations through well-implemented induction policies and procedures. The GFD needs to actively support the professional growth of its staff and would benefit from developing a more structured approach to professional development as intended in its Strategic Plan 2020-2025. GFD teachers are evaluated every semester and annually using different tools such as class observation, peer review, and a teaching, learning, assessment evaluation survey (Portfolio, p70). Performance is also evaluated through formal planned class visits conducted by the HGFD. Teacher evaluations based on the various tools mentioned above feed into the Annual Efficiency Rating document for each teacher (Portfolio, p71). This annual evaluation form for GFD teachers includes a 30% weighting for Research and Scholarly activities and the contract of employment of faculty states that each faculty member should publish at least one research paper every two consecutive academic years in a recognised academic journal (Portfolio, p70). Given the specific nature of the GFD, which has a strong teaching focus, it is important that SUC completes the intended review of the existing Annual Performance Evaluation System criteria to accurately reflect the balance between the various aspects of GFP staff performance including research related areas (Portfolio, p71). SUC has fostered a satisfactory working environment within the GFD, which is sustained through annual monitoring and development of Quality Improvement Plans. While SUC has made some progress in achieving its Omanisation targets within the GFD, the implementation of the Omanisation plan needs a more focused approach.

Summary of Affirmations

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

1. The OAAAQA agrees with Sur University College that improved communication between academic departments and the General Foundation Department will facilitate informed improvements to the design and delivery of the General Foundation Programme and supports the initial efforts by the department to achieve this purpose.....12
2. The OAAAQA agrees that SUC needs to review the existing Annual Performance Evaluation System criteria in the General Foundation Department to accurately reflect the balance between the various aspects of the staff performance including research-related areas and supports its efforts in that area.....36

Summary of Recommendations

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

1. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College ensure that General Foundation Department staff members are equipped with the appropriate knowledge and skills required for them to effectively contribute to the department academic committees and support the achievement of their mandates.....11
2. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College review the existing committee structure of the General Foundation Department to ensure that the responsibilities of different committees are fit-for-purpose for the size and requirements of the department, including managing the balance of the academic and administrative workload for teachers.....12
3. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College ensure more effective utilisation of the identified key performance indicators for the General Foundation Department to allow for the effective monitoring and subsequent planning for improvements to the General Foundation Programme.13

4. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College expand the scope of the existing Risk Management Policy within the General Foundation Department by putting measures in place to identify, document and manage strategic risks facing the General Foundation Programme and embed risk management within the operations of the programme.....14
5. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College evaluate the existing approach to the monitoring and review of the General Foundation Programme to ensure that a complete and effective quality cycle of revision and monitoring is implemented to support the ongoing improvement of the programme.15
6. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College review the General Foundation Programme curriculum content to ensure that all the study skills are clearly embedded and assessed to ensure that students are adequately prepared to undertake higher education programmes.....17
7. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College develop and implement a system to regularly benchmark its General Foundation Programme learning outcomes, design and delivery against other similar programmes of other higher education institutions to ensure that the programme is aligned with the needs of the students in their future higher education studies.18
8. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College ensure that Curriculum and Syllabi Development and Review Committee fulfils its mandate in spirit and practice to assure that the GFP curriculum is fit for purpose and allows achievement of the programme learning outcomes. .19
9. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College review and benchmark its General Foundation Programme placement test for quality in order for it to be used as a suitable tool to define appropriate learning levels of new students.19
10. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College expand the scope of its exit assessment to include Mathematics and Computing, to ensure the achievement of all General Foundation Programme learning outcomes and develop and implement a system to review and benchmark its General Foundation Programme exit testing systems and procedures to ensure that the academic standards of the programme are realised.....20
11. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College, as a matter of priority, develop and implement a system for external moderation processes for all General Foundation Programme assessments in order to strengthen the validity and reliability of its assessments mechanism and tools.22
12. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College ensure systemic collection, thorough analysis, and effective utilisation of General Foundation Programme student retention and progression data to inform decisions regarding the improvement of the provision of the programme and the student learning experience.23
13. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College develop and implement a structured approach to enhancing engagement with General Foundation Programme alumni in order to identify opportunities for the quality enhancement of the programme.24
14. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College review the effectiveness of the academic advising system used in the General Foundation Department for its fitness for purpose and to benchmark it against local and international good practices in order to enhance the learning experience of the General Foundation Programme students and support their academic success.....29
15. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College review the current provision of learning support for the General Foundation Programme students to ensure that it equally addresses student-learning needs in all areas and implement a system for monitoring the effectiveness of this provision.....30

- 16. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College define the external community for the General Foundation Programme and develop and implement an approach to external engagement which is monitored for effectiveness to ensure it supports the delivery and development of the programme.32
- 17. The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College develop and implement a structured approach to the provision of professional development opportunities for the General Foundation Programme staff in all areas based on regular needs analysis including the outcomes of the annual staff appraisal.....35

1 GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

Sur University College (SUC) was established in 2001 and has three academic departments – namely, the Department of Business Administration; the Department of Information Systems and Technology; and the Department of Engineering. SUC also has a General Foundation Programme (GFP) which had approximately 85 enrolled students in AY 2021-22 which is 15% of SUC's overall student population of 568 students.

This Chapter reports on governance and management arrangements of the GFP and includes the Panel's findings related to the Mission, Vision and Values; the governance and management structure that supports the delivery of the SUC GFP; strategic and operational planning and monitoring of plans; financial and risk management related to the GFP ; systems for reviewing the GFP; student grievance processes, and health and safety procedures.

1.1 *Mission, Vision and Values*

In 2016, the GFD developed its own Vision and Mission statements based on the specific requirements of the GFP and in alignment with those of SUC (Portfolio, p7). The GFD Vision highlights the aspiration to prepare '...incoming students for their undergraduate education by enhancing their English, maths [*sic*] and computer skills, whilst at the same time teaching them the tools necessary for developing productive and efficient academic skills and study habits' in the context of SUC's Vision which stresses on '...socioeconomic transformation through quality education...'. The GFD Mission focuses on high quality to '...achieve the standards of the Omani Academic Accreditation Authority and Sur University College and to produce competent and responsible students who pursue their education with ambition and purpose.' (Portfolio, p7). The GFP shares its values with SUC and aspires to reflect them in its approach to education, development and professionalism. The Panel confirmed that the GFD MVV are aligned to the purposes of a GFP and reflect a mapping to the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Program (OASGFP) requirements.

The Panel noted GFD's efforts to establish a sense of belonging and identity among staff and students through the formal placement of its MVV statements in prominent places such as on noticeboards, in GFD documents such as the Student Guide and on the SUC website. It was noted by the Panel that the student-integration reading and vocabulary skills' worksheets tested GFP students' awareness of the MVV and reflects a good use of contextual learning materials in educational practice. The Panel confirmed through interviews with GFD staff and students that they are familiar with these statements. This shared understanding of GFD's Vision and Mission provides evidence that the statements are embedded throughout the GFD. The GFD should continue this process of ensuring that the MVV of the department are well communicated and that they continue to characterise GFD operations as they do now. While staff and student involvement in the development of these statements was not evident, interactions with staff helped the Panel confirm their involvement in the strategic and operational planning of the GFD. GFP student involvement in the process of developing the GFD MVV, however, remains an area that needs attention and the Panel encourages SUC to involve GF students in any future revisions to the MVV.

1.2 *Governance and Management Arrangements*

SUC has an organisational structure that clearly defines the management of its academic and administrative departments. The College Organisational Chart was approved in 2020 and it aligns with Strategic Plan 2015-16 to 2019-20 and Strategic Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25.

The Board of Directors (BoD) and the Board of Trustees (BoT) are responsible for the governance of the College and the GFD, overseeing all academic and administrative functions. At the operational

level, the College Academic Board (CAB) is responsible for the operations of the College and GFD under the leadership of the Dean (Portfolio, p8). The Dean (who chairs the CAB) is also a member of both the BoT and the BoD. The CAB reports to the BoD and the BoT on matters which require strategic input and communicates governance decisions to the departments (Portfolio, p8). Through this arrangement, GFD affairs and its performance is reported to the BoD and BoT through the HGFD's membership on the CAB (Portfolio, p7).

The HGFD is an ex-officio member of the CAB which has managerial responsibility and oversight for academic and business operations, including implementing its decision-making mandate as captured in five-yearly strategic and operational plans (Portfolio, p8). Managing the GFD is the responsibility of the HGFD who is expected to provide academic leadership and oversee administrative tasks (Portfolio, p8). The HGFD is a member of key SUC committees, such as the CAB, which is an indication that the GFD is well integrated in the College structure and participates in decision making, showing that the GFD is considered to be on a par with other departments (Portfolio, p9).

The HGFD is supported by Course Coordinators and academic committees to ensure that the GFD functions effectively and meets its goals. The HGFD interacts with the College Dean, the Assistant Dean for Students Affairs (ADSA), and the Assistant Dean for Academic and Research Affairs (ADAR) in relation to the management of the GFD (Portfolio, p9). Additionally, the HGFD interacts with other academic HoDs in relation to pertinent student learning issues. At the academic level, Course Coordinators and GFD committees are charged to see that the GFD functions effectively and meets its goals. Course Coordinators are responsible for ensuring that all courses are delivered according to their outlines and are aligned with the College policies and guidelines.

Internally, the GFD is organised by committees, which report to a GFD Council (Portfolio, p9). In total, there are six academic committees, all of which report to the overarching Council which is chaired by the HGFD (Portfolio, p9). These include the Examination Creation and Security Committee; the Teaching and Learning Resources Committee; the Students Relations Committee; the Curriculum and Syllabi Development and Review Committee; the Evaluation and Assessment Committee; and the Quality Assurance, Professional Development and Research Committee (Portfolio, p9). The Panel found that while in practice each committee does have its own chairperson it is ultimately the responsibility of the HGFD to oversee all committee decisions and activities as well as ensuring that each committee meets its operational goals. The Panel heard that staff with roles of responsibilities on committees were not clear about their committee roles and responsibilities and appeared to be somewhat ill-prepared to provide the needed academic leadership, participation and academic inputs to meet the committee mandates. The Panel noted that reliance on the HGFD alone to provide leadership may place the GFD at risk in ensuring the collegial and cooperative nature of the academic enterprise. The Panel strongly urges SUC to provide training to its GFD staff members in chairing academic committees as well as participating as members in order to enhance staff capabilities in exercising leadership and contributing meaningfully to the fulfilment of the mandates of the academic committees.

Recommendation 1

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College ensure that General Foundation Department staff members are equipped with the appropriate knowledge and skills required for them to effectively contribute to the department academic committees and support the achievement of their mandates.

The Panel noted that while the GFD committee structure is consistent with the wider SUC structure, the large number of committees was disproportionate to the number of staff in the GFD, which has declined in recent years. As a result, GFP staff workload has increased due to membership of multiple committees with duplication of responsibilities. The Panel concluded that a review of the GFP academic committee structure, including their terms of reference, could bring efficiencies and better coordination, for example through the consolidation of a number of the committees. The outcomes of

such a review could contribute to balancing the teachers' academic and administrative workloads as well as enhance the effectiveness of the GFP committees.

Recommendation 2

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College review the existing committee structure of the General Foundation Department to ensure that the responsibilities of different committees are fit-for-purpose for the size and requirements of the department, including managing the balance of the academic and administrative workload for teachers.

In summary, the Panel acknowledges the established management of the GFD and its position within the College governance system. It supports the work being undertaken to enhance communication between the College senior management and GFD staff. This includes having, for example, the ADAR and academic HoDs in attendance at GFD Council meetings. The Panel concurs that such an arrangement could improve the communication of GFD activities to senior management as well as directly improve oversight of GFD activities by senior management leading to informed improvements in the design and delivery of the GFP.

Affirmation 1

The OAAAQA agrees with Sur University College that improved communication between academic departments and the General Foundation Department will facilitate informed improvements to the design and delivery of the General Foundation Programme and supports the initial efforts by the department to achieve this purpose.

1.3 Institutional Affiliations for Programmes and Quality Assurance

The SUC GFP has no affiliation agreements.

1.4 Operational Planning

The GFD is guided by an annual operational plan (currently referred to as an Action Plan) for each academic year which sets out goals, activities and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The Panel noted that in the latest strategic planning cycle, SUC no longer has a dedicated department-wise strategic plan but a College-wide Strategic Plan (SP) which includes all departments including the GFD. The Panel confirmed that the GFD operational plan is aligned to the college Strategic Plan, ensuring that it 'guides students, teachers, and the community in the attainment of the department's goals and objectives' (Portfolio, p10).

The HGFD prepares the GFD operational plan (OP) with inputs from GFD Course Coordinators and GFD committee chairpersons, using the SUC operational planning template (Portfolio, p10). The Panel noted GFD staff participation in this process. The Panel further noted that, as part of good governance, the GFP OP is tabled at the CAB and approved by both the BoT and the BoD. The Panel had the opportunity to review the GFD's annual Action Plans from AY 2018-19 to AY 2021-22. In reviewing these, the Panel found that the GFD's plan considers budgetary implications and other resource requirements. Activities are aligned to the objectives outlined in SUC Strategic Plans and KPIs measure achievement of activities and goals while identifying responsible persons or structures for accountability purposes. The Panel noted, however, that in some instances, the KPIs are not clearly defined and the status of actions is noted as 'ongoing' in the attainment of the objectives outlined in the SP (Portfolio, p14) resulting in an incomplete review and monitoring cycle. Hence, while the Panel supports the use of KPIs to track the achievement of goals, it encourages the further development of the use of KPIs for monitoring and improvement purposes.

Recommendation 3

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College ensure more effective utilisation of the identified key performance indicators for the General Foundation Department to allow for the effective monitoring and subsequent planning for improvements to the General Foundation Programme.

1.5 Financial Management

The final responsibility of managing the finances for the College rests with the Dean, with the support of the ADAF and the Senior Manager for Administration and Finance (SMAF), while the HGFD is responsible for the daily utilisation of GFP resources (Portfolio, p11). The HGFD prepares the consolidated departmental budget based on the inputs from the GFP staff members (Portfolio, p11). Once the budget is approved by the GFD Departmental Council it is presented to the CAB for review and recommendations (Portfolio, p11). The GFD budget is presented to the BoT as part of the overall SUC budget for review and to the BoD for final approval (Portfolio, p11). The Panel was informed that any extraordinary budget requirements require approval by the Dean or the CAB, based on a motivation of need and urgency. The Panel learnt that an additional 10% contingency is added to the College's annual budget to accommodate unforeseen additional expenditure and should the requested funds exceed this contingency amount, the Dean requests additional funding from the BoD. The Panel confirmed that senior management and staff found the budgeting process to be useful and effective. The Panel also noted the attention given by the GFD to document the firm alignment between the budgeting processes, the Strategic Plan and Action Plans.

The Panel confirmed that the budgeting and financial system adopted by SUC for the GFD is working satisfactorily and that there is flexibility within the budgetary system to accommodate unanticipated expenditure. In terms of the ADRI cycle, however, the Panel encourages SUC to ensure that the stages of results and their analysis inform the budgeting process to track and monitor the specific and measurable use of resources for the enhancement of the provision of academic quality in the delivery of the GFP.

1.6 Risk Management

SUC's current approach to risk management is governed by its Risk Management Policy and a template outlines the systems and procedures to identify and tackle risks, which threaten the achievement of institutional objectives (Portfolio, p13). The Panel noted that the policy provides direction to systematically address any actual or potential risks. The Panel noted that the CAB owns the institutional Risk Register and reviews, prioritises and adds or removes risks as their risk status changes (Portfolio, p13). The Heads of Departments (HoDs) are expected to manage lower-level departmental risks while the higher-level risks are communicated to the SUC Quality Assurance (QA) Manager, who is also the Risk Manager (Portfolio, p13).

The Panel noted that the 2020-21-2024-25 College Strategic Plan is silent on the identification and management of risk, barring the mention of a SWOT analysis having been conducted in preparing the SP and a review of the 2015-16-2019-20 Strategic Plan and other documents. In reviewing the Risk Register for strategic planning period 2020-21-2024-25, the Panel considered the register as inadequate in terms of commonly accepted understandings of how risk is identified, managed, and detailed annually with the institutional risks prioritised. The Panel noted that the register had not identified the Covid-19 pandemic as a major risk which threatens the sustainability of the GFP (or the College) and its impact, for example, on academics, finances and human resources. There is no explicit mention of identified risks related to the Covid-19 pandemic which are varied and multiple, including operational risks, health risks, decrease in student enrolments and financial risks. The Panel also noted that there is no explicit question on institutional or academic risks and their management in the staff or student satisfaction surveys to gather stakeholder views on the issue of risk management.

The Panel pursued in a number of interviews the understanding and approach taken by the GFD to identify and manage risks and is of the view that there is more focus on the management of operational risks such as physical maintenance of the premises (Portfolio, p14). The Panel believes that greater attention to the approach to risk is needed through the research of global good practice in this area. In particular, the Risk Management Policy would benefit from better identification, reporting, risk prioritisation and management mechanisms. The Panel believes that the management of risk, particularly strategic risks within the GFD requires regular and enhanced monitoring embedded within its operations and recommends that SUC consider proper implementation of its existing Risk Management Policy within the GFD, expand the scope of this policy to address GFP-related strategic risks more explicitly and embed risk management within GFD operations.

Recommendation 4

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College expand the scope of the existing Risk Management Policy within the General Foundation Department by putting measures in place to identify, document and manage strategic risks facing the General Foundation Programme and embed risk management within the operations of the programme.

1.7 Monitoring and Review

Administration of an ‘effective entity and activity review system’ is objective 1.8 of the GFP SP 2015-2019 ‘to perform a regular and appropriate review of the GFP and associated support services’ which is aligned with strategic objective 04 to ‘administer effective entity and activity review system’ under Goal A3 in the College-level Strategic Plan (Portfolio, p14). Strategic goal 1 of the SUC Strategic Plan 2020-21-2024-25 also focuses on increasing stakeholder satisfaction through monitoring and review of its governance and management structure, system and roles. This ethos is reflected in SUC’s ‘multi-layered’ system for the monitoring and review of the GFD and it includes collecting data from a variety of sources including the individual teacher, the department, and the College (Portfolio, p14). This process within the GFD is guided by the College’s Procedures for Entity and Activities Review (Portfolio, p15). The department-level Quality Assurance Committee, Professional Development Committee and Research Committee are tasked with monitoring and reviewing the quality of GFD activities (Portfolio, p15).

Review of GFD operations includes teachers’ course files and course reports at the individual level (Portfolio, p15), mid-year and annual activity reports of all GFD committees, peer observation and HGFD’s observation reports, students’ survey of teaching quality at the departmental level, all of which feed into the HGFD’s annual departmental report (Portfolio, p15). At the College level, the CAB is responsible for the monitoring of GFD operations and this is done through reviews of the HGFD’s annual report and the teaching quality report by the ADAR. The Panel confirmed that the recommendations of the CAB are communicated to GFD staff at Department Council meetings and Quality Improvement Plans are prepared where needed (Portfolio, p15).

Based on the documentation provided (as cited in the previous paragraph) and interviews, the Panel concluded that the GFD is following the monitoring and review processes in alignment with the other academic departments. Of concern, however, is that in terms of the ADRI approach, the results and outcomes of many reviews lack clarity, and that they are scattered across many documents. As a general comment, improvements do not always appear to be based on clear results. For example, the proposed improvements identified in a number of places in the Portfolio do not appear to be linked to the results and analysis of findings or conclusions. The Panel also noted that the main GFD operations review reports, such as the annual report and committee reports are all prepared by the HGFD. These reports are descriptive and do not provide the kind of detail, analysis, and recommendations which are implementable, measurable and can be monitored. It may be that the GFD consider streamlining and prioritising its review findings to ensure that the full benefit of the monitoring and review processes result in a consolidated practical action plan with timelines and allocated responsibilities.

The Panel also noticed that the last internal audit of the GFD by the SUC QA department was carried out in AY 2016-17 and the practice has since been discontinued. The Panel is concerned that at College level the monitoring of the GFP could be largely dependent on what the HGFD provides by way of reports which lack the rigour of critical analysis and do not result in actionable plans. In the absence of an external lens to provide insight into the GFP operations it would be difficult to ensure that the GFP is aligned with local good educational practice and that it meets stakeholder expectations. This is all the more critical in the absence of meaningful external benchmarking of the GFP in its various academic and academic support practices to enhance the learning experience of its students and support their academic success.

In reviewing the survey outcomes used throughout the Portfolio, it was noted by the Panel that in several instances some questions were of such a general nature that it is potentially difficult to draw reliable conclusions from the responses of the participants. The GFD is encouraged to review its survey construction and methodology to ensure that its analysis and findings are consistently valid and reliable, particularly in identifying what is working well and to put improvements in place. The Panel also noted the lack of statistical data trend analysis to support the review and monitoring processes embedded within the SUC governance structures. In conclusion, the Panel recommends that SUC review its current approach to the monitoring and review of the GFP to provide College-level insight into quality assurance and departmental practices, including the strengthening of the overall monitoring and assurance through tracking identified lessons learnt and improvements which are undertaken at the GFP over the period under review.

Recommendation 5

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College evaluate the existing approach to the monitoring and review of the General Foundation Programme to ensure that a complete and effective quality cycle of revision and monitoring is implemented to support the ongoing improvement of the programme.

1.8 Student Grievance Process

The College Policy on Student Grievances used by the GFD has explicit procedures to address student grievances and it applies to both academic and non-academic matters (Portfolio, p17). The policy is outlined in the Student Guide. The Student Guide is also available on the College website and students are encouraged to make use of the policy when needed. GFP students are informed about the policy during orientation and by their teachers when relevant. The Student Grievance Committee that is chaired by the ADSA and includes a student representative as a member manages student grievances. Should a student appeal the decision of the committee, a Student Appeals Committee is formed to resolve the issue. The decision reached by the Appeals Committee is final. The ADSA is responsible for maintaining documentation and reporting on student grievances as the custodian of all student grievances.

The HGFD investigates any student complaint and holds a meeting with the complainant to discuss the grievance. GFD students are advised to first raise minor complaints regarding courses to the teachers concerned and escalate the complaint if they do not receive a satisfactory response. The HGFD attempts to solve minor grievances informally within the department before they are escalated to the College level. The HGFD keeps records of all minor student grievances. Should a student not be satisfied with a HoD intervention or suggested solution, then a complaint can be escalated to the College-level Student Grievance Committee. It was reported to the Panel that there have been very few grievances lodged at the GFD in the past five years. The Panel confirmed with interviewees that the policy and procedures are well communicated to students and that they are informed at orientation. Overall, the Panel is satisfied that the GFD has appropriate procedures in place for addressing GFP student complaints and grievances.

1.9 Health and Safety

Health and safety provisions at the GFD are aligned with the 2018 College-approved Health and Safety Policy. It is overseen by a Health, Safety, and Disaster Management Committee responsible for maintaining a healthy and safe campus environment. The GFP has a representative on the committee and this person also fulfils the role of GFP Safety Officer. The College has an Emergency Disaster Management Plan which was revised in 2019, to maintain a safe campus environment and take specific actions when warranted. The plan has been approved by the local Civil Defence Authority. A GFD emergency evacuation team of four persons is responsible to act during an emergency, for example, to guide staff and students to the emergency assembly points. Various health and safety workshops were held in 2019-20 to ensure campus health and safety. The College website provides comprehensive information on matters regarding health and safety.

There are comprehensive safety measures to control campus access, including the use of traffic barriers, security officers, CCTV technology and recording equipment, as well as roving security officers. The GFP buildings are equipped with a functioning centralised fire alarm system, fire extinguishers, and first-aid boxes. Alarm systems and fire-fighting equipment are regularly maintained and certified by a certified external contractor. Scheduled fire drills are conducted, the latest being held in March 2021. GFP alumni confirmed their participation in fire drills, while current GFP students indicated that due to Covid-19 they were not on campus and therefore had not been through a fire drill. GFD staff and students have access to a qualified nurse at the campus clinic. The clinic is equipped to respond to emergencies while offering basic medical services and the clinic nurse is available to support the health needs of hostel students and is on call in cases of emergency. Students confirmed with the Panel their satisfaction with access to and services at the clinic.

In terms of responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Health and Safety Disaster Management Committee formulated and implemented an Emergency Plan for Covid-19 Precautionary Measures. The Health and Safety Policy and related procedures were updated (Portfolio, p18). Special Committee decisions were circulated to staff and students by email. For example, the committee developed guidelines on precautionary health measures for staff and students. Various circulars and information prepared and circulated by the Ministry of Health and MoHERI were distributed by the committee. The committee commissioned virtual seminars and workshops on health and safety, and on taking personal measures to prevent viral infection. A Covid-19 evacuation drill was conducted to train staff members on how to react when a Covid-19 medical emergency was declared. Stakeholder surveys have been used to gauge the effectiveness of health measures taken by the College. The results indicated that during the pandemic staff members were 'very satisfied' with the safety measures taken by the College. Students were 'generally satisfied' with a score of 4.09 out of 5. The Panel concluded that the health and safety policy, procedures and processes are in place, effectively deployed and monitored.

2 GFP STUDENT LEARNING

GFP student learning at SUC GFP aims to meet the learning outcomes set by the OASGFP, and further prepares GFP students to study on their higher education programme. This section considers GFP student learning at SUC and specifically reports on the following: GFP aims and learning outcomes; curriculum; entry 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 development of the GFP aims and learning outcomes at SUC GFP is guided by the learning outcomes (LOs) stipulated in the OASGFP (Portfolio, p22). To achieve the GFP LOs, the GFD decided on six broad goals that are aligned to the OASGFP's requirement. These goals also address higher education challenges stated in the Oman National Strategy for Education 2040 (Portfolio, p22).

The GFP curriculum includes four key components: English Language, Mathematics, Computing and General Study Skills (GSS). GSS are embedded in the English, Mathematics and Computing courses (Portfolio, p23). GFD has developed its own lower-level and upper-level learning outcomes covered in three major GFP courses; English Preparation Courses (EPC I and EPC II), Mathematics (Basic, Pure and Applied), and Computer Information Management (CIM I and CIM II) and these are delivered over one academic year divided into Foundation Level one and Foundation Level two (Portfolio, p23). While the Panel values aligning the GFP curriculum with the OASGFP, consistency in the embedding of study skills across all the courses and its assessment is not evident. On examining the LOs in EPC I and II, for example, the Panel noted that eight study skills are listed, which are fewer than the stipulated 54 study skills in the OASGFP under managing time and accepting responsibility skills, research skills, taking notes skills and giving presentations skills. The Panel encourages SUC to review the importance of giving adequate attention to addressing the GFP study skills and benchmarking them against GFP curriculum and assessments. The Panel also recommends that SUC review its GFP curriculum to ensure that GFP students have the required study skills for the fulfilment of the GFP LOs and to successfully undertake their higher education programmes.

Recommendation 6

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College review the General Foundation Programme curriculum content to ensure that all the study skills are clearly embedded and assessed to ensure that students are adequately prepared to undertake higher education programmes.

The Panel was informed that GFP students are apprised of the GFP LOs, courses and study skills during induction and through the Student Guide (Portfolio, p48), but through the interviewing process the Panel could not confirm this awareness amongst GFP students, both current and alumni. The Panel is of the opinion that for the LOs to serve effectively as a tool that GFP students could use to guide their learning, the GFD needs to ensure awareness and understanding of the GFP LOs amongst GFP students.

The Panel noted the Table of Specifications (ToS) developed by the GFP staff for assessing the LOs of English courses in the final and mid-term examinations. Considering that SUC GFP have both a summative (Final) and a formative (Internal) component each worth 50% (Portfolio, p33), the Panel encourages the GFD to reconsider the design of its ToS and make it more holistic such that it addresses assessments in all GFP courses and incorporates GFP study skills. The Panel noted that the GFD conducts a comprehensive statistical analysis of final examinations but there is no follow-up action plan based on this analysis. Similarly, the GFD conducts a Stakeholder's Perceptions Feedback

Survey on the GFP outcomes and achievements, but the Panel could not find any action plan based on the results of this survey (Portfolio, p23). The Panel encourages the GFD to consider implementing the ADRI cycle in its entirety for effective monitoring and review of the achievement of GFP aims and LOs (see Recommendation 5 in Section 1.7).

Overall, the Panel concluded that while SUC seeks feedback from its internal stakeholders to assess the fitness of purpose of its GFP LOs, external feedback on this is limited. The Panel noted that SUC has recently initiated a benchmarking process, but it is limited only to the LOs and study skills of the English courses. In this regard, the Panel recommends that SUC develop a system through which the GFD regularly benchmarks various aspects of the GFP such as LOs and design and delivery across all courses of the programme to ensure continued fitness of purpose of the programme.

Recommendation 7

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College develop and implement a system to regularly benchmark its General Foundation Programme learning outcomes, design and delivery against other similar programmes of other higher education institutions to ensure that the programme is aligned with the needs of the students in their future higher education studies.

2.2 Curriculum

SUC's commitment to design an appropriate GFP curriculum is set out in the strategic objectives 2.2 of its Strategic Plan: 'ensure the GFP curricula are implemented in line with the Omani Academic Standards' (Portfolio, p24). The GFP curriculum has been designed to allow student achievement of the stated GFP LOs which are aligned with the OASGFP (Portfolio, p24). All GFP students are required to study English, Mathematics, and Computing to prepare them for their academic programmes and the study skills are embedded in all the courses (Portfolio, p23). The GFP is delivered over one academic year which is divided into two semesters of 15 weeks each (Portfolio, p24). Level one consists of EPC I, Basic Mathematics, and CIM1 while level two is made up of EPC II, Pure or Applied Mathematics, and CIM II (Portfolio, p25). "The GFP approved 26 teaching hours per week distributed as 20 hours for English, four hours for Mathematics, and two hours for CIM (Portfolio, p25).

The HGFD, along with the Curriculum and Syllabi Development and Review Committee (CSDRC), is responsible for ensuring that the curriculum aligns with OASGFP. The Panel confirmed that the GFP curriculum is reviewed every year as mandated by the ToRs of the CSDRC (Portfolio, p25). The Panel heard that GFP teachers use a form to recommend changes to the curriculum but the Panel was not provided with any examples of changes suggested or incorporated in the GFP curriculum. The Panel also heard that during the Covid-19 pandemic the GFD adjusted the GFP curriculum marginally without compromising the LOs to accommodate online teaching and learning, but examples of actual practice of the same were not evident to the Panel.

SUC has stated in the Portfolio that the Curriculum and Syllabi Development and Review Committee is responsible for the annual review of the GFP curriculum (Portfolio, p24), however, the Panel did not see evidence of an annual review. The evidence submitted, as minutes of the above-mentioned committee, is only agenda points without the details of the discussion regarding the review. The Panel did see the Stakeholder Perception surveys carried out from AY 2018-19 to AY 2020-21, but the surveys do not explicitly address curriculum design and content. The Panel found a report only on the survey carried out in AY 2018-19, which included generic recommendations and there is no evidence of actions taken in response to findings or any subsequent monitoring. Based on interviews and the evidence provided, the Panel was of the opinion that while the mechanism for an annual curriculum review exists, the implementation is not as per the remit of the committee designated for the task and hence is not confident of the continued fitness of purpose of the GFP curriculum. The Panel therefore recommends that SUC ensures that the Curriculum and Syllabi Development and Review Committee conducts a periodic curriculum review of the GFP based on its defined remit, which includes feedback

from all internal stakeholders such as GFP staff and students as well as the staff and students of the SUC academic programmes. This would help SUC ensure that the GFP continues to be fit for purpose.

Recommendation 8

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College ensure that Curriculum and Syllabi Development and Review Committee fulfils its mandate in spirit and practice to assure that the GFP curriculum is fit for purpose and allows achievement of the programme learning outcomes.

2.3 Student Entry and Exit Standards

SUC admits new GFP students based on admission criteria that are mandated by the MoHERI (Portfolio, p26) and is guided by the SUC Placement Test Policy (Portfolio, p26). According to the SUC Placement Test Policy, new students are placed at the appropriate GFP level using in-house placement tests (Portfolio, p26). The Panel noted that the existing one-page Placement Test Policy could include the GFP study pathways as stipulated in OASGFP for it to serve more effectively as a guideline for accurate placement of students. The Panel was informed that students who choose not to take the placement tests are placed at the lowest level of the GFP (Portfolio, p26, SM050). Students scoring 50% and above on the three English components of the placement test are exempt from the GFP English courses (Portfolio, p26). Similarly, a score between 50-70% on the Mathematics and Computing components of the Placement Test would mean that students are exempt from introductory courses; that is, Basic Mathematics and CIM 1 (Portfolio, p26). Direct entry into the academic programmes is possible for prospective students who pass all the English language tests (or have IELTS 5 or TOEFL 500) and pass the Mathematics and Computer Skills Placement Test with 80% or above. Prospective students are exempted from CIM if they have the Internet and Computing Core Certification (IC3) or the International Computer Driving License (ICDL). In addition to this, the Transferred Students Policy guides the GFD in equalising courses that are equivalent to SUC's GFP courses which students have completed in other higher education institutions in order to place them at the appropriate level of the SUC GFP (Portfolio, p27).

The Panel acknowledges that SUC uses in-house placement tests to enable fair and consistent monitoring of entry standards. There has been no calibration, however, on the equivalency of SUC's English placement test mark of 50% to a specified IELTS score. SUC did provide the Panel with the Placement Test Benchmarking Report, but the Panel noted a discrepancy in the data presented in the benchmarking document, the placement test result reports and the stated claim in the Portfolio (Portfolio, p28). SUC stated that the 'results of the evaluation of the Placement Test revealed that it is a valid and appropriate instrument for determining student entry levels to the GFP. The validated Placement Test shows the statistical measures of reliability index of 78 for English, 69 for Mathematics, and 72 for Computing Skills (Portfolio, p28). The statistical measures of Mathematics and Computing Skills have not appeared in the provided documents as described in the benchmarking, and the generated reports were exclusive to English language only. Since the evidence provided is not fully reflective of the actual practice within the GFD, it leaves the Panel unclear as to how the robustness of the entry standards is assured. The Panel, therefore, recommends that SUC review the mechanism used to assure itself of the robustness of its entry standards to serve as appropriate tools for defining learning levels for new students.

Recommendation 9

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College review and benchmark its General Foundation Programme placement test for quality in order for it to be used as a suitable tool to define appropriate learning levels of new students.

The GFD uses an in-house developed exit test for all GFP level two students to assess the attainment of the GFP LOs (Portfolio, p26). The results of this test are benchmarked against IELTS but, since this test assesses the student's proficiency in English language alone, it cannot be considered as a comprehensive mechanism to ensure achievement of all the stated GFP LOs. The Panel stresses on the importance of benchmarking the entire outcome of the GFP and recommends that SUC expand the scope of its exit test to cover all components of the GFP. The exit examination mechanisms need to be regularly reviewed and externally benchmarked for validity and reliability to ensure that the GFP meets its purpose to prepare students for future higher education studies.

Recommendation 10

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College expand the scope of its exit assessment to include Mathematics and Computing, to ensure the achievement of all General Foundation Programme learning outcomes and develop and implement a system to review and benchmark its General Foundation Programme exit testing systems and procedures to ensure that the academic standards of the programme are realised.

2.4 Teaching Quality

SUC states (Portfolio, p29) that the Peer Review Policy, Classroom Observation Policy, the Teaching and Learning Strategy and the Quality Assurance Manual guide the teaching quality assurance practices in the GFD. The GFD Strategic Plan 2015-19 objective 2.6, 'ensure high-quality instruction within the GFP', also underpins the department's approach to teaching quality management (Portfolio, p28). The described pedagogical framework (Portfolio, p29) is not exclusive to GFP, it is rather a generic teaching strategy for SUC and therefore does not fully reflect the expected teaching and learning principles of the GFP. The Panel, however, reports that evidence from course files and student interviews supported the widespread implementation of a variety of instructional methodologies.

The Panel noted that the GFD as a response to the pandemic transited to online teaching using SUC's Virtual Teaching Environment platform (Portfolio, p30). The Panel confirmed from both GFP staff and students that this technology platform was used to support synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning (Portfolio, p30). The Panel heard that teaching within the GFD is supported through institutional guideline documents, workshops, and department seminars in order to ensure the use of contemporary approaches in the delivery of the GFP (Portfolio, p29). GFD teachers also map the recommended teaching methods to ensure consistency in the student learning experience across different groups taking the same course. The Panel also confirmed student satisfaction with the teaching across all GFP courses.

Teaching quality is monitored through various methods such as Peer Evaluation, class observation by the HGFD, the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Survey and the Faculty Annual Efficiency Rating Form (Portfolio, p29). The Panel noted that the results from the analysis of the different quality monitoring exercises are shared individually with GFP staff members, based on which staff develop Quality Improvement Plans which they use to improve their academic practices (Portfolio, p29). The overall department results are consolidated by the HGFD to form the Semester Course Report which is intended to guide teaching and learning strategies for the subsequent semester. This report feeds into the College-level teaching quality report prepared by the ADAR (Portfolio, p29). The Panel, however, noted that recommendations made in these reports are not addressed in the subsequent semester reports and encourages the GFD to use the report effectively to inform improvements. From the Portfolio, and the verification of the provided reports, the Panel was not convinced about the availability of effective mechanisms to track the proposed improvements and its impact on future effectiveness of the GFP (see Section 1.7).

Overall, the Panel concluded that a variety of teaching methods are used for the delivery of the GFP course content and that SUC has introduced a number of mechanisms to assess and improve the

quality of teaching within the GFD. The mechanism for the review and monitoring of the effectiveness of these measures needs to be reviewed and the Panel encourages SUC to address this (see Section 1.7).

2.5 *Academic Integrity*

SUC has institutional level policies on plagiarism for staff and students, and these are part of the SUC Quality Manual (Portfolio, p31). These policies clearly state what constitute plagiarism and academic misconduct in general. These regulations are also published in the Student Guide given to all students (Portfolio, p32). The documents discuss plagiarism and cheating in detail and cover ways of avoiding and identifying plagiarism as well as SUC's regulations in this regard. The Panel found these documents to be comprehensive and informative. The concept of academic integrity is emphasised to GFP students during the induction and through workshops on academic writing, referencing and the use of anti-plagiarism software. The Panel confirmed that these awareness strategies are offered in partnership with the Learning Resources Centre (Portfolio, p32). The GFD uses the Academic Integrity Survey to reinforce GFP student awareness and understanding of academic integrity and its importance in the course of their education.

The Panel noted that the GFD has used a variety of dedicated plagiarism detection software to check for suspected plagiarism in student work and has started using Urkund since AY 2020-21 (Portfolio, p32). Documentation submitted to the Panel showed that cases of academic misconduct are recorded by the GFD but the department could benefit from having a more explicitly defined process for managing cases of academic dishonesty in the GFD (Portfolio, p32). The Panel noted, however, that SUC did not have any formal proctoring software for the GFP online examinations although the department confirmed that they did not see an undue increase in cases of academic dishonesty. GFD teachers are also given workshops on how to maintain academic integrity related to teaching and research. The Panel confirmed that the department has systems in place to ensure that in-house teaching material is free of plagiarism. In conclusion, the Panel noted that SUC has systems and processes in place to manage academic integrity at the GFP level in line with practices used in its other academic departments but could include processes to monitor consistent implementation of the College's policy.

2.6 *Assessment of Student Achievement*

Strategic Objective 2.8 of the GFD Strategic Plan 2015-2019 is to 'create a standardized assessment method that meets the GFP goals and objectives'. The GFD assessments are designed to demonstrate the student achievement of all GFP LOs as per the guidelines of the OASGFP and support the achievement of the above-mentioned strategic goal (Portfolio, p33). Each component counts for 50% of the total marks and the aggregate of the two components is considered as pass mark of all GFP courses. Course work counts for 35%, the mid-term examinations are worth 15%, and the final examination counts for 50%. The documents examined and interviews carried out by the Panel confirmed that the GFD uses a variety of methods for both formative assessments (classroom participation, projects, and quizzes) and summative assessments (midterm and final examinations) for GFP courses (Portfolio, p33).

SUC also has policies on assessment of student achievement such as policy on assessment & grading, the Moderation Policy and Double-Checking policy. The Panel confirmed these are being followed while grading GFP assessments (Portfolio, p34). The Panel also reviewed the semester course reports covering assessment grading and noticed that areas of improvement along with suggested recommendations, and action plans to be prepared by teachers were identified but there was no evidence of a system for the follow-up on actions taken. The Panel could not see the contribution of individual GFD teachers towards the development of such course reports.

The GFD has processes in place across all courses for double-marking of all examination papers and sampling and analysing the results to confirm the achievement of LOs (Portfolio, p34). The Panel was

informed that multiple versions of examinations papers (of similar difficulty levels) are prepared to ensure academic security and reduce the possibility of cheating. The final examination papers are set by Course Coordinators in consultation with the teachers for each section ensuring that all LOs are assessed at the appropriate level (Portfolio, p34). The Panel heard that these examination papers are then moderated by other GFD teachers not teaching that course. The Panel also confirmed that the same process of moderation is also used for all GFP assessments. While the Panel acknowledges that the GFD has mechanisms in place for the internal moderation of GFP assessments, there was no evidence of any external moderation processes in place. The GFP could benefit from an external feedback to the assessment development and marking process. The Panel is of the view that an external view or moderation of the assessment processes and verification of academic standards provides an important external reference point and recommends that SUC develops and implements a process for the external moderation of GFP assessments.

Recommendation 11

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College, as a matter of priority, develop and implement a system for external moderation processes for all General Foundation Programme assessments in order to strengthen the validity and reliability of its assessments mechanism and tools.

The Panel noted from the evidence provided that student course evaluation and teacher feedback collected at the end of every semester contribute to the learning process along with other inputs, such as student retention, progression and attrition data. Interviews with GFP students, as well as GFP alumni, also indicated that students were provided with support to help them prepare for the GFP assessments and found the assessments at the GFP covered all the learning outcomes, were manageable and of an appropriate difficulty level. The Panel accepts that the teaching methodologies used, timely feedback on formative assessments and the support provided by the GFP teachers, are instrumental in students being better prepared for their assessments. The Panel, however, did not find adequate evidence of any effort by SUC to benchmark the GFP assessment content and levels with similar GFPs nationally or regionally and would recommend that along with the provision of external oversight, benchmarking of GFP assessments would help SUC ensure the reliability and validity of the GFP assessments (See Recommendation 7 in Section 2.1).

2.7 Feedback to Students on Assessment

SUC acknowledges that assessment feedback plays a crucial role in enhancing student learning and the GFD's approach to this is guided by the college Strategic Plan (2015- 2019), objective 2.9 'ensure students understand how to use their feedback to improve their learning experience' and this was confirmed in interviews with both GFD staff and students (Portfolio, p35). SUC also arranges workshops to train GFP teachers in giving consistent, constructive and timely feedback to GFP students on their assessments (Portfolio, p37).

GFP students receive feedback as a group through verbal feedback during class and individual feedback through the comments on their assessments (Portfolio, p36). GFP teachers also maintain an Assessment Feedback Form which GFP students sign after receiving feedback on their assessments (Portfolio, p36). In addition to this, GFP teachers use the academic advising system to monitor the academic progress of their advisees on a continuous basis, provide them with feedback on their areas where they need to improve and develop remedial plans to follow-up on the advisee's progress thereafter (see Section 3.6). The SUC Assessment Appeals Policy gives GFP students the right to request a review of their final examination marks (Portfolio, p35). The Admissions and Registration Department (ARD) is responsible for managing academic appeals from the GFD using the processes put in place by SUC (Portfolio, p37). The Panel is satisfied that SUC has a feedback mechanism in place, and also confident that the provision is valued by students. To ensure greater consistency, however, between its feedback policy and its feedback practice, the GFD is encouraged to ensure that students are provided with consistent and effective feedback on their assessments.

2.8 *Academic Security and Invigilation*

SUC has a well-defined system for academic security and invigilation of examinations which is also implemented in the GFD. The guidelines for ensuring academic security and invigilation during GFP assessments are included in the SUC Constitution, Ordinance XXIII (Portfolio, p37). The responsibility for academic security rests with the CAB and the ARD supported by the academic departments (Portfolio, p37). The Panel confirmed that the GFD examination rules and regulations are communicated to the GFP students through the Student Guide and during the induction programme (Portfolio, p37).

The Panel noted that SUC has a systematic approach to the handling of final and midterm exam papers. The examination guidelines outline the security protocol before, during, and after examinations. These protocols and mechanisms cover the printing, transporting, photocopying, and secure storage of examination papers before and after the assessment is administered (Portfolio, p38). The ADAR is responsible for the allocation of invigilation duties for GFP mid-term and final examinations (Portfolio, p38). The invigilation protocols are well communicated to all those involved prior and during the examinations (Portfolio, p38). Invigilators are supported by CCTV cameras to maintain a high level of security during invigilation sessions (Portfolio, p39). The Panel noted that the systematic implementation of the SUC academic security and invigilation policies and procedures has helped the GFD control security lapses and cheating incidents by GFP students. The Panel heard that the GFD did not use an online proctoring system, and the GFP staff feel that the need to have such a system in place is no longer a pressing issue, due to the reintroduction of face-to-face assessments. All evidence provided showed that the GFD ensures the security of examinations at all times starting from examination preparation, storage of examination papers before and after the administration. The Panel found there are clear procedures in place as well as mechanisms within the College to monitor the implementation of the policies at different levels of the GFP.

2.9 *Student Retention and Progression*

The ARD and the GFD are collectively responsible for maintaining GFP student records (Portfolio, p39). The College also has a Student Retention Strategy which outlines strategies that academic departments, including the GFD, can use to address student progression and retention challenges. The GFD uses student results in the GFP courses to monitor their student progression through the GFP (Portfolio, p39). This data is in turn used to produce the GFD Annual Reports which are discussed at the Department Council (DC) and the CAB and also serve as a source to initiate quality improvement plans and strategies to support students in preparing for the academic programmes of their choice (Portfolio, p39).

The GFP's progression rate AY 2015-16 to AY 2018-19 for EPC I was 87%, EPC II is 89%, Basic Mathematics was 87%, Applied Mathematics was 84%, Pure Math was 91%, IT was 88% and Computing Skill II was 92%. The mentioned progression rate looks encouraging, however, there was no indication that the GFD carries out any analysis of factors that have led to the improvement over the years. The Panel noted that the progression data provided AY 2015-16 to AY 2018-19 reflects the data of the GFD student progression, attrition and completion but, lacks interpretation, and therefore, not useful to plan for future improvements to the GFP. The GFD is therefore encouraged to make use of the GFP student data, cohort analysis and trend data to inform decision-making to support the effective delivery of the GFP.

Recommendation 12

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College ensure systemic collection, thorough analysis, and effective utilisation of General Foundation Programme student retention and progression data to inform decisions regarding the improvement of the provision of the programme and the student learning experience.

2.10 Relationships with GFP Alumni

The GFD consider its GFP alumni to be an important stakeholder and is committed to maintaining a close relationship with them (Portfolio, p40). SUC states that the GFP alumni are involved during the orientation of new GFP students, but the evidence provided did not clearly show the GFD's mechanism to review the impact of GFP alumni involvement in the orientation programme (Portfolio, p40).

The GFD makes an effort to collect feedback from its alumni and developed a plan in AY 2019-20 to improve engagement with the GFP alumni. Recommendations made by the GFP alumni included, for example, introducing subjects such as Science to the GFP curriculum in addition to English, Mathematics and IT. The Panel, however, did not see evidence of changes made to the GFP based on these recommendations. While the Panel is of the view that the GFD has established helpful documents related to monitoring its relationship with GFP alumni, the implementation stage and utilisation of the alumni feedback requires more attention to benefit the GFP. Consequently, the Panel recommends that the GFD review its approach to engaging with the GFP alumni in order to use these relationships to inform improvements at the GFP.

Recommendation 13

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College develop and implement a structured approach to enhancing engagement with General Foundation Programme alumni in order to identify opportunities for the quality enhancement of the programme.

3 ACADEMIC AND STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

The responsibility for providing academic services to students at SUC lies with the ADAR while the ADSA provides non-academic student services. The departments responsible for provision of academic support to GFP students, as well as to the College as a whole, are the Learning Resources Centre, in collaboration with the Bookstore, and the Information Technology and Network Centre. The GFD provides further learning support through the classroom advising system. Non-academic support such as on-campus female accommodation, restaurants, the Clinic and other services further enhance student life at SUC. The effectiveness of these services is mainly assessed through student surveys.

This Chapter reports on the Panel findings regarding academic and student support services including student profile; registry; student induction; teaching and learning resources; information and communication technology services; academic advising; student learning support; student satisfaction and behaviour; the non-academic support services and facilities, and external engagement.

3.1 *Student Profile*

The ARD at SUC is responsible for the admissions, enrolment and for collecting student information, through the application form and keeping records such as the programme students are enrolled on, sponsor details, age, gender and nationality, accommodation and funding requirements, which are stored electronically in the Students Information System (Portfolio, p43). The data collected by the ARD is then forwarded to the GFD. Student enrolment on the GFP has been on the decline from 441 students in the AY 2015-16 to 166 students in AY 2019-20. The majority of students are female and the Panel understand that the majority benefit from MoHERI sponsorship. The Panel confirmed that no international students were enrolled on the GFP. Enrolment for AY 2020-21 decreased drastically with eight students enrolling on the GFP. This was following a decision by the MoHERI in 2021 to withhold sponsorship of students on the basis of the accreditation status of SUC.

SUC uses the student profile data for the purpose of planning and developing appropriate services, both academic and non-academic (Portfolio, p43). The GFD uses the GFP student data to inform its operational planning process such as delivery of the GFP, classroom allocations, number of teachers, and provision of support and facilities (Portfolio, p43). The student data is also used to prepare the GFD budget through a bottom-up approach, with input from teachers to the HGFD, which is then submitted to the SMAF for final approval at the BoD level (Portfolio, p14). The Panel is of the view that this process must be more effectively documented to show how student data and teaching and learning needs are used by the GFD in budget planning and allocation of funds, taking into consideration GFD action plans. The GFD analyses the enrolment data to identify students with special needs and classifies them under three groups: poor eyesight, physically handicapped and hearing impaired (Portfolio, p42). The Panel confirmed the arrangements made by SUC, such as allotting front row seats to students with poor eyesight, providing ramps and elevators, to support students with the above-mentioned special needs. The Panel was informed that at the time of the audit, SUC does not enrol students with any other special needs apart from the ones mentioned above (Portfolio, p48).

New students to the College are categorised by GFD according to their English proficiency levels in Level 1A or Level 1B, following the placement test (Portfolio, p44). Reading proficiency is also assessed by teachers in the classroom (Portfolio, p44) and the Panel saw evidence of the programmes prepared by GFD staff to support GFD students with varying proficiency levels. The Panel, however, did not find any evidence of assessment of student profiles that similarly inform teaching and learning in Mathematics and Computing. SUC states that data on GFP students' interests and study skills are collected and used to provide students with access to the English and Drama Club, and skills enhancement workshops. However, neither GFP alumni nor GFP current students that the Panel met

confirmed participating in those clubs or similar workshops. With students returning to campus, SUC and in particular GFD, is encouraged to support its students with similar extracurricular activities.

The Panel acknowledges that the demographic details of the GFP student profile are used to provide appropriate learning environments as mentioned above for the different categories of students in the GFD. However, with decreasing student numbers at the GFD, the analysis of admission trends could be used to inform the marketing needs of the GFD as identified in the Operational Plan 2020-24.

3.2 *Registry (Enrolment and Student Records)*

Student registration, admission and enrolment fall under the purview of the SUC Admission and Registration Department (ARD). This department is also responsible for collecting and managing student records, including those for GFD (Portfolio, p45). Clear guidelines on registration, withdrawal, transfer, suspension and termination are prepared in line with the Ordinances X-XV of the Constitution of SUC (Portfolio, p45). The College website (Portfolio, p45, <https://www.suc.edu.om/>) provides comprehensive information on admission and registration, including information on the process, eligibility criteria, placement test and registration. The Student Guide 2020-21 is also available on the College website in English and Arabic and provides the rules, regulations and policies on admission requirements for prospective students in GFP. SUC states that information on admission is also communicated to applicants in brochures and during school visits (Portfolio, p45). SUC has two student intakes per year, in January and September. The Panel heard that SUC has an online application system for students. Alumni and current students found that the online application process was convenient and useful, especially during Covid-19 pandemic. The GFD student survey conducted in AY 2018-19 also showed that students were generally satisfied (mean score of 3.74 out of a scale of 5) with the registration process, the registration staff and the online registration system.

The ARD informs the MoHERI of GFD student enrolment. Once students register at SUC, the list is forwarded to the GFD in order to administer the placement test to determine student level of entry into English, Mathematics and Computing. The Panel confirmed that copies of test records are kept by GFD, and original placement test records are stored by the ARD, as both electronic and hard copies. Locked and fireproof vaults are in place to ensure protection and security of student records, while electronic information is password protected in the College database and a backup is saved on an off-campus server (Portfolio, p46).

The College Management System, which is the student data repository, can be accessed and updated by teachers. This system is also used to record and monitor attendance and progress of students in the GFD (Portfolio, p46). Students confirmed that they also had access to their information, including their grades, on the College Management System through the student portal. GFD students are governed by the SUC absence policy and students are well informed of attendance requirements, as well as penalties for absences, during induction and in the Student Guide. Warning letters are issued to students by teachers for absences as per the College policy, and students may be prohibited from sitting for examinations and forced to withdraw from the College. Evidence of attendance records for the past five years was provided to the Panel, and it was noted that the average attendance in the GFD was high (>90%). The Panel heard that during Covid 19 pandemic, one of the main concerns of SUC was the lower student motivation in online classes which was addressed by making it mandatory for GFP students to attend in-person examinations. This ensured a 94% average student attendance in the GFD during online classes in AY 2020-21. Overall, the Panel was of the view that SUC has an effective system for registration, admission and enrolment which is well supported by established rules and regulations as per its Constitutions, and which is clearly communicated through various channels to GFP students.

3.3 *Student Induction*

Provision of a comprehensive induction programme for new students is clearly articulated in the annual GFP Action Plan 2017-18 which is mapped to the SP 2015-19 of SUC. SUC has designed and organised an Orientation Week programme for all incoming and returning students at the start of each semester, during which two orientation programmes are held for GFP students. The first one is College-wide and is conducted by the Student Affairs Division and covers information regarding the College, the rules and regulations, the different departments and their functions, including the GFD, and includes a tour of the College facilities (Portfolio, p49). Students are introduced to the senior staff responsible for different departments and are provided with key documents such as the Student Guide, Learning Resources Guide, and the Health and Safety brochure. Students are also taught how to use the College email and the College portal. A second orientation programme is then conducted at the level of GFD by the teachers in the classrooms to familiarise new GFP students with their curriculum, their teachers and to meet other students, as well as to inform them of classroom rules).

The survey reports on the satisfaction of students regarding orientation indicate that students found the orientation programme informative, helpful and comprehensive. The Panel met with GFP alumni who also confirmed their satisfaction with the orientation programme. New students, who recently joined the GFP on campus, also indicated that the online orientation, which was implemented due to the Covid-19 pandemic, was satisfactory. SUC plans on designing a virtual campus to support student online orientation and the Panel encourages SUC to take the necessary steps to implement this proposal which could be integrated in the SUC learning management system (Portfolio, p52). The Panel concluded that the GFD induction programme is useful for the GFP students and ensures that all newly enrolled students are well-informed of their responsibilities and that they are acquainted with the academic requirements, support services, and facilities available to them.

3.4 *Teaching and Learning Resources*

The GFD is housed in a dedicated building in the campus and has 35 WiFi enabled classrooms. The GFD building has also three computer laboratories with 25 computers each, which can be booked by the GFD teachers for scheduling computer classes. Seating arrangements in the classes are mostly traditional, although a few classrooms have movable seats for group work (Portfolio, p51, campus tour). The SUC Learning Resources Committee ensures that students have access to appropriate and up to date learning resources, as well as to optimise the use of the computer labs and educational software. This committee is also responsible, with the support of the Bookstore, to provide prescribed textbooks and learning materials as recommended by the teachers. The LRC, which is the College's library, provides reading and learning materials, both in the electronic and print forms, to GFD staff and students. The Panel was informed that students and teachers can book discussion rooms in the LRC for group work or workshops. As evidenced by the Panel during the campus tour, the LRC has adequate space and books for GFD students. To further support students, the LRC offers orientation activities to GFP students on the use of resources, how to conduct a search of the library databases and referencing (Portfolio, p50). The LRC has access to online journals through databases such as JSTOR, EBSCO and MADASAR. The Panel saw that the LRC has records of GFD students' use of the LRC facilities which was confirmed during interviews with students (Portfolio, p50). The Panel also saw the virtual tour of the library prepared by the LRC staff for students during the pandemic. The Panel confirmed the multiple services offered by the LRC which are also accessible through the SUC website, and which were maintained virtually when classes shifted online.

SUC uses a survey to assess staff and student satisfaction with the Teaching and Learning facilities and services and the feedback in both AY 2018-19 and AY 2019-20, showed that GFD students were 'generally satisfied' and 'very satisfied' respectively with the LRC, and furthermore 'generally satisfied' with the computer laboratories. Interviews with current students and alumni also confirmed satisfaction of students with the provision of resources. The Panel also noted, from a survey conducted in AY 2018-19 and AY 2019-20, that teachers at SUC, including the academic staff of

GFD, are also generally satisfied with the availability and quality of the teaching and learning resources that aid the teaching and learning process.

The GFD uses a Content Analysis survey to choose the most appropriate textbooks for the GFP courses and the recommendations given by GFP teachers on textbook selection is reviewed by the LRC (Portfolio, p25). GFP curriculum design is led by Course Coordinators who hold meetings at the end of each semester to review the delivery of the GFP courses through a semester. GFP teachers submit feedback after each semester where the suggested changes to the GFP curriculum are incorporated. In addition to this, teachers prepare learning materials for each course, such as worksheets to support the students' independent learning (Portfolio, p25). The Panel was of the opinion that the prescribed GFP textbooks and the in-house developed learning materials used are suitable for student learning. Overall, the Panel concluded that the teaching and learning resources at SUC are appropriate and effectively meet the learning needs of GFP students and teaching requirements of staff.

3.5 *Information and Learning Technology Services*

The Learning Resources Committee and the Information Technology and Network Centre together are responsible for the provision of the required information and learning technology services to all departments of the College. This is in line with the with Objectives 3 and 4 of the SUC SP 2020-25, which are to, 'ensure high quality educational environment' and 'augment blended learning processes' respectively. The IT infrastructure in the GFD which includes WiFi enabled classrooms, staff offices, access to computers in IT laboratories and LRC and use of MOODLE as the learning management system in the delivery of the GFP, all contribute to achieving the above stated objectives (Portfolio, p52).

SUC introduced MOODLE as a learning management system (LMS) in all academic departments, including the GFD, before the onset of the pandemic and hence the transition to online teaching in March 2020 was smooth for both GFD staff and students (Portfolio, p52). In the GFD, the MOODLE based LMS is mainly used as a repository for GFP course materials and the key features of the LMS are not fully utilised for effective teaching or for promoting independent learning. The Panel encourages SUC that should the College decide to continue to use MOODLE to enhance students' experience and engagement in the blended learning model, it might be useful to seek the expertise of an instructional designer to support the creation of effective online learning experiences. This will also align with the SP 2020-25 of SUC which has as an objective to augment blended learning processes.

The Panel confirmed that GFP teachers used different means to reach students during the pandemic, including WhatsApp and email, and conducted their live lectures using different platforms, such as Zoom or Google Classroom (Portfolio, p53). Evidence of surveys conducted with 11 staff and 180 students on remote teaching and flexible learning provided to the Panel showed that students were satisfied with the online teaching, but the data was collected at College level and did not identify the GFP students as a distinct cohort. The Panel, however, could confirm similar levels of satisfaction during interviews with the GFP students. Overall, the Panel that the information and learning technology services at GFD are presently meeting the needs of its GFP students and of its staff. GFD is encouraged, however, to assess the effectiveness of its online teaching and learning and to analyse the findings to identify further opportunities for improvement.

3.6 *Academic Advising*

SUC states that GFD has an academic advising system that aligns with the GFD Strategic Plan 2015-2019 as well as with the College Strategic Plan (Portfolio, p53). Academic advising at College level falls under the purview of the General Academic Advisor, while in the GFD, the task is managed by the HGFD (Portfolio, p53). The Panel was informed that GFD teachers are appointed as advisors in

the classes that they teach which differs from the system followed by the other academic departments at SUC.

In the GFD, academic advising is conducted during dedicated consultation time (office hours) where students can meet their advisors for individual support as per their learning needs (Portfolio, p53). To support this system, the GFD has academic advising procedures and GFP teachers are informed about their roles and responsibilities upon appointment as advisors. Advisors maintain consultation logbooks which are signed by both the teacher and the student to document their meetings. These logbooks are used by the GFD to monitor and assess the consultation, and also for reporting purposes. The academic advisors and GFP teachers together identify 'students at risk' after the first assessments (Portfolio, p54) and additional academic support is then provided to these students through a Student Remedial Plan (Portfolio, p54).

Feedback on the academic advising provision in the GFD is evaluated using a survey and the Panel noted that the survey result does show an overall satisfaction with the provision (Portfolio, p53). Reviewing the survey, however, the Panel is not convinced that this survey in its current form can clearly assess the effectiveness of academic advising in the GFD as there is only one item in the survey instrument which touches upon this provision. Interviews with GFP students also did not confirm either their knowledge of or satisfaction with the academic advising. In addition to this, the training material on academic advising provided to the Panel was relevant to the system followed in academic departments other than the GFD and hence of limited relevance to the GFD academic advising system. The Panel heard that GFP staff provided academic advising through WhatsApp during the Covid-19 pandemic but there is no evidence that this process was effectively monitored and assessed. There was no evidence of benchmarking of the academic advising system used in the GFD with those used at any local or international HEIs. In the absence of clear records of students' progress and success as follow up to the provision of the of academic advising, the Panel could not confirm the effectiveness of the academic advising system in place at GFD and hence recommends that SUC reviews the academic advising provision within the GFD to assess its fitness for purpose.

Recommendation 14

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College review the effectiveness of the academic advising system used in the General Foundation Department for its fitness for purpose and to benchmark it against local and international good practices in order to enhance the learning experience of the General Foundation Programme students and support their academic success.

3.7 Student Learning Support

SUC states that the learning support services in the GFD have been established to provide the best possible opportunities for all GFP students and additional remedial support is offered to students who struggle to achieve the learning outcomes or who fail in examinations (Portfolio, p55). The GFD offers a range of learning support measures to ensure that the GFP student learning needs are met, the learning outcomes are achieved, student retention is improved and student progress through the GFP is supported (Portfolio, p55). This is in alignment with strategic objective 02 'enhance student support services to increase student [success]' under strategic goal G1 in the institutional Strategic Plan 2015-2019 (Portfolio, p55). Services provided as part of general learning support include examination preparation, club activities, information literacy programs, and tutorials (Portfolio, p55). At-risk students are provided additional support in the form of one-to-one remedial lessons with teachers during their consultation hours. The GFD has also initiated Drama Clubs and English language workshops to support language acquisition (Portfolio, p55). While the Panel appreciates the learning support initiative, these are all language-centric and there was no evidence of similar support organised for students with learning difficulties in Mathematics and Computing.

Although the Panel found that the GFD has an appropriate and targeted student learning support in place for English language, it did not find any evidence to comment on the effectiveness of the

system. Student surveys conducted by both the GFD and the College also do not specifically assess satisfaction of students with the various activities and services (Portfolio, p55). In addition to this, although the College states that the high progression rate of students is proof of the effectiveness of the student learning support services (Portfolio, p56), in the absence of a clear causal connection, it can be argued that student success can be attributed to other different factors. The Panel therefore encourages GFD to increase and diversify the learning support services for Mathematics and Computing rather than focusing on English and to set up a mechanism to assess the effectiveness of the various student learning support services and activities.

Recommendation 15

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College review the current provision of learning support for the General Foundation Programme students to ensure that it equally addresses student-learning needs in all areas and implement a system for monitoring the effectiveness of this provision.

3.8 *Student Satisfaction and Climate*

Measuring student satisfaction and acting upon student feedback is one of the objectives of the GFD Strategic Plan. GFD uses different mechanisms and instruments to collect and monitor student satisfaction, which include various surveys conducted at College-level as well as at the departmental level, a system of class representatives and provision of suggestion and complaint boxes (Portfolio, p56). The SUC Student Affairs Department (SAD) is responsible for maintaining a positive and supportive environment for all SUC students including those on the GFP. The Panel confirmed that GFP students are aware that they need to go to the SAD for any grievance or complaint resolution.

At College level, GFD students participate in the Student Satisfaction Survey, the Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Survey, the Health and Safety Survey. GFD also conducts a student satisfaction survey at departmental level. This annual survey evaluates the feedback of GFD students on the different academic and non-academic services. Reports are prepared by the GFD on the findings of the surveys and quality improvement plans are designed where appropriate. The Panel, however, did not find any comprehensive evidence of closing the quality loop at the GFD in the action plans. One of the survey analysis reports mentioned that 'deeper analysis' of some areas where student satisfaction was lower was required, especially for non-academic support although there was no evidence of follow up actions. The Panel therefore encourages SUC to review both the instruments and mechanisms in place for the monitoring and improvement of student satisfaction (see Recommendation 5 in Section 1.7). SUC is also encouraged to consider other means to gauge GFP student satisfaction, especially in light of the small student cohort in AY 2021-22. Extracurricular activities such as the Drama Club, Cultural Club and Sports Clubs were not possible in the last two years because of the pandemic and online classes. The Panel encourages SUC and the GFD to re-initiate these opportunities since the GFP students are back on campus in order to promote a positive climate for students while fostering personal and academic growth. The College-level survey results indicate that students are satisfied with their GFP studies at SUC and this was also confirmed by both the current GFP students and GFP alumni.

3.9 *Student Behaviour*

SUC Constitution has clear procedures and rules in place for the monitoring and maintaining of appropriate student behaviour under Ordinance VII: Student Conduct, Disciplinary Rules and Procedures (Portfolio, p58). The responsibility for managing student behaviour lies with the ADSA, supported by the Student Disciplinary Committee and the Students Appeals Committee (Portfolio, p58). In general, all GFD staff are involved in ensuring the appropriate behaviour of GFP students, and the Panel was informed that the HGFD deals with minor misconduct of students at their level (Portfolio, p59).

Students are informed of the Code of Conduct and the disciplinary policies of the College during the orientation week and later during GFP classes (Portfolio, p58). The student Code of Conduct is well articulated in the College's Student Guide 2019-20 and differentiates between general misconduct and academic misconduct (Portfolio, p58). The Panel noted that the Student Guide and the Constitution also include the processes in place for dealing with disciplinary and behavioural misconduct and the corresponding penalties. Posters in classrooms and examination rooms provide reminders to GFP students of their expected behaviour, and information on the general and specific rules and regulations. The Panel is of the view that GFP has a system for communicating the Code of Conduct to students in a clear language.

The Panel noted evidence of reports on cases of non-academic misconduct of GFP students during class. The Panel also found documented evidence of a few cases of academic misconduct, such as cheating during examinations and plagiarism. These are monitored and recorded by GFP and appropriate actions are taken at the GFP level or escalated to the ADSA depending on the severity and type of the case, in line with the rules and regulations and plagiarism policy of the College. This process was confirmed by both GFP staff and students. The Panel concluded that the GFP has an effective system for managing GFP student behaviour.

3.10 *Non-Academic Student Support Services and Facilities*

The ADSA is responsible for the management of the non-academic support services and facilities at SUC (Portfolio, p59). These services and facilities are well articulated in the Strategic Plans 2015-19 of both the GFP and of the College. Various facilities are provided by SUC to students which include hostel for female students, free transportation twice a week for shopping, clinic, counselling services, restaurant, recreational room, rest room, English and Drama Clubs (Portfolio, p59).

SUC uses annual surveys to determine student satisfaction with the provision of non-academic services and facilities, including GFP students (Portfolio, p59). On reviewing the survey reports, the Panel noted that student satisfaction results with non-academic support services such as recreational activities and hostel facilities were lower as compared to those for academic support in AY 2018-19 and decreased further in AY 2019-20. The GFP has identified these areas for improvement in its Action Plan 2020-24, however, there was no evidence that timely action has been taken, or that specific gaps were addressed given that the survey questions are very broad and generic. To better assess the effectiveness of these services, separate surveys for some of the services and facilities, such as hostel facilities, could be administered, and only students using these facilities should be surveyed. Interviews with GFP alumni further confirmed that they did not have many opportunities to participate in recreational activities at SUC. Although male students participated in some sports, female students did not have any opportunities. The Panel encourages SUC to address the limited opportunities for recreational activities for GFP students, and to ensure that there is a choice of activities that are both gender and needs appropriate.

3.11 *External Engagement*

Community engagement is an area of priority for SUC, and this is manifested through it being an integral part of the College's last two Strategic Plans, 2015-19 and 2020-2025 (Portfolio, p60). The GFP is guided by this when engaging in activities with external stakeholders in order to encourage effective and constructive development of the community (Portfolio, p60). The documentation provided, such as the minutes of the CAB, BoT and BoD meetings, as well as the interviews with the senior management and leadership confirmed the College's commitment to serve the community of the Wilayat of Sur in providing access to higher education and enabling student success, as well as making available its expertise and infrastructure for the education and development of the wider community and industry. One of the activities in the current Strategic Plan is the expansion of the College's services to the wider community through creating a national academy for training, consultancy and services to the community which was at an advanced planning stage at the time of the audit. The Panel was informed that the GFP would be instrumental in offering these services.

The GFD carries out various community engagement activities with the Sur community such as conducting English language workshops for the Royal Oman Police and young schoolchildren from Sur (Portfolio, p61). The GFD engages with other HEIs in the country through attending and presenting at conferences. The GFD also conducted a simple benchmarking exercise with the former College of Applied Sciences Sur to evaluate the GFPs offered at the two institutions, although there was no evidence of follow-up actions or a formal approach to establish such benchmarking exercises as regular practice. The Panel is of the opinion that the GFD needs to develop an external engagement plan in line with Objective 3, Strategic Goal 1 of SUC's SP 2020-25, which is to 'ensure constructive relationship with the community', and to build, increase and sustain relationships with the Sur community, with alumni and other HEIs. In the review of its external engagement, the GFD is encouraged to widen the scope of its activities, to identify its external stakeholders and to formalise its approach to external engagement, as well as consider how the quality of these activities will be assured. The involvement of GFP students in external engagement activities must also be prioritised.

Recommendation 16

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College define the external community for the General Foundation Programme and develop and implement an approach to external engagement which is monitored for effectiveness to ensure it supports the delivery and development of the programme.

4 STAFF AND STAFF SUPPORT SERVICES

Staff and staff support services at SUC GFP is one of its core areas. It is the responsibility of the HGFD in coordination with the SUC management and service departments to ensure adequate staff and staff support services are in place for the GFP to operate effectively. This chapter reports on the Panel's findings related to the GFP staff profile, recruitment and selection, staff induction, professional development, performance planning and review, staff organisational climate and retention, and Omanisation.

4.1 *Staff Profile*

The SUC Human Resource (HR) and GFD administrative team are responsible for ensuring that the GFD has the required staff profile for the effective delivery of the GFP (Portfolio, p62). The HGFD is responsible for the development and implementation of GFD recruitment in consultation with the GFD team (Portfolio, p62). The Panel agrees that such delegation of authority improves collective decision-making and the work environment in the delivery of the GFP. Staff recruitment needs and profiles are effectively monitored by the GFD through annual review of current staff and student numbers, projected student numbers for the following academic years, current vacancies and the SUC Omanisation Policy (Portfolio, p62). The Panel noted a discrepancy in the staff profile details provided, particularly of the staff teaching Mathematics and Computing that was later clarified when the Panel heard that the teachers teaching these two courses were not exclusive to the GFD and are borrowed from the other SUC academic departments. While it is not necessarily the case that the practice of borrowing teachers from other academic departments may affect teaching quality adversely, the Panel was concerned that the lack of any orientation of these staff members with GFP teachers could leave the needs of GFP students unsatisfactorily addressed. Regular meetings with GFP teachers to discuss GFP related teaching and learning practices may help mitigate this potential risk. Other than this concern, however, the Panel overall believes that the approach adopted by SUC to manage its human resources has allowed the GFD to build the required staff profile for the delivery of the GFP.

4.2 *Recruitment and Selection*

SUC has a clearly defined staff recruitment process which is outlined in the SUC Recruitment Policy and covers all aspects of the appointment process. The same policy applies to all staff, including GFD staff, whether full-time or part-time, academic or non-academic appointments (Portfolio, p65). The recruitment process at GFD also reflects MoHERI guidelines for hiring GFP staff (Portfolio, p65). The GFD ensures the diversity of its faculty profile during the recruitment process by recruiting faculty from different nationalities with the requisite academic qualifications, for example recruiting teachers with CELTA qualification for teaching English language courses (Portfolio, p65). The recruitment and selection process of GFD staff is deployed through a College-level employment committee responsible for recruitment and selection of staff with the support of the HGFD (Portfolio, p65). The probation period for a newly recruited member of GFD staff is three months and during this period they are supported by the HGFD and also mentored by another senior GFP staff member (Portfolio, p66). The HGFD prepares an action plan for mentors and mentees which serves as a roadmap to help newly recruited GFD staff to successfully navigate their initial time in the department. The Panel heard that the outcome of the probation period is based on a collective report on the new staff member's performance based on the mentor's report, HGFD's class observation and peer reviews (Portfolio, p66).

The Panel concluded that SUC has processes in place for the recruitment and selection of the required GFP staff. The Panel, however, believes that that SUC would benefit from developing and implementing a mechanism to evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of these processes for GFP staff.

4.3 *Staff Induction*

SUC has an induction programme in place for all new staff members, including those teaching on the GFP. This induction is underpinned by the procedures defined in the SUC Staff and Faculty Induction Policy (Portfolio, p67). All newly recruited GFP staff members are provided with a two-stage induction, first at the College level and then at the departmental level. The first stage starts with a general introduction to the College which covers the SUC MVV and College rules and policies and an introduction to the key personnel in the various departments of SUC. This induction is conducted by the Dean's Office, supported by the HR department (Portfolio, p67). The Panel also found the Faculty Handbook to be comprehensive and a useful document for any new staff member. At the departmental level, all new GFP staff members are assigned mentors who support them in successful on-boarding by helping them become familiar with the academic rules and regulations governing the GFP (Portfolio, p75). The Panel noted that mentors use a checklist that includes information on the GFP structure, curriculum, assessments, committees, rules and regulations, to ensure that the mentees are familiar with all required information to support them in successful undertaking of their duties (Portfolio, p67). All mentors are required to submit a report to the HGFD at the end of the mentee's probation period, which the HGFD then consolidates and reviews for future action (Portfolio, p67).

Feedback on the SUC induction process is solicited from new staff members through a survey circulated after the induction session (Portfolio, p67). There was no evidence, however, that this feedback is analysed and the results are acted on and the Panel encourages SUC to implement a system to close the quality loop through review of feedback and follow-up action (see Section 1.7). The survey does not identify GFP staff as a cohort but the overall College-wide results indicate satisfaction with the induction process which was also confirmed by the GFP staff. Overall, the Panel concluded that SUC has a defined induction process in place that is consistently implemented within the GFP and that newly recruited GFP staff found the induction useful.

4.4 *Professional Development*

Professional development of staff is considered as an area of priority at SUC and is set out in Goal 3 of the College's Strategic Plan 2020-25 which is to 'strengthen research, innovation and professional development activities' (Portfolio, p68). The objective is in alignment with the GFP Vision and Mission which place emphasis on ensuring the highest standards to professional development for GFP staff for the enhancement of GFP teaching and learning (Portfolio, p7). The SUC Policy on Professional Development guides the provision of professional development for all staff including those teaching in the GFP and the ADAR is responsible for this provision (Portfolio, p69). The Panel heard that as part of the annual action plan, the HGFD in collaboration with its departmental Professional Development Committee compiles and submits a training need report. The GFP is encouraged to develop follow up action plans to its training needs report in order to support the achievement of the department's Vision and Mission.

The Panel noted that GFP teachers were provided with professional development opportunities both through in-house workshops and training programmes and through support to attend conferences and pursue scholarly activities (Portfolio, p69). In addition to this, GFP staff members are encouraged to be part of local and international educational networks such as the English Language Teaching Network for Professionals (ELTNP) organised by the British Council in Oman, International Researchers and Educators Organization Incorporation; Institute for Engineering Research and Publication; and Society for Education, Research and Training (Portfolio, p69). The Panel, however, noted that such opportunities have been very limited during the pandemic and found no evidence of training to GFP staff to support the transition to online teaching. SUC conducted a review of GFP staff satisfaction with the provision of professional development opportunities in AY 2017-18, but the Panel did not find evidence of any such review conducted after that. Interviews with staff did indicate their satisfaction with the provision of performance development.

SUC states that the annual staff appraisal system is used to identify the training needs and aspirations of every member of staff (Portfolio, p70). The Annual Efficiency Rating Form, however, does not have provision for identifying the continuing professional development needs of staff. The Panel did not see evidence of a specific plan in place in the GFD to provide professional development opportunities for its staff based on either a regular informed review of group or individual staff needs and requests, or from performance evaluations. The Panel considers that the GFD would benefit from developing and implementing a more structured approach to professional development for GFD staff to support the effective delivery of the GFP as well as aligning with the College's SP 2020-25.

Recommendation 17

The OAAAQA recommends that Sur University College develop and implement a structured approach to the provision of professional development opportunities for the General Foundation Programme staff in all areas based on regular needs analysis including the outcomes of the annual staff appraisal.

4.5 Performance Planning and Review

The approach to performance reviews at the GFD is informed by the SUC Constitution and the SUC QA Manual provides the guidelines to all departments on the procedures for performance planning and review (Portfolio, p70). The Panel confirmed that all GFD staff have access to this through the Faculty Handbook (Portfolio, p70). The Panel found the performance planning guidelines of SUC to be comprehensive including peer appraisals and appraisals by the direct supervisor. The Panel noted that the performance review of GFD teachers at SUC takes into consideration teaching performance as well as scholarly achievements. The Panel also noted that GFP staff appraisals serve specifically two purposes: for renewal of contracts, and as a feedback mechanism for improvement of teaching, but did not clearly contribute to identifying professional development needs at the individual staff level (see Recommendation 17, Section 4.4).

GFD teachers are evaluated every semester and annually using different tools such as class observation, peer review and the teaching, learning, assessment evaluation survey (Portfolio, p70). Performance is also evaluated through formal planned class visits conducted by the HGFD. Recommendations are made to the instructors following the classroom visits by the HGFD on teaching improvement measures. The Panel noted that '...the staff members who scored 'weak' in any of the factors are advised to prepare a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP)' (Portfolio, p71). The QIPs are intervention strategy plans, prepared by HGFD, for different GFP courses. On reviewing samples of the QIPs, the Panel believe that these would contribute to improving staff performance.

The Panel noted that teacher evaluations based on the various tools mentioned above feed into the Annual Efficiency Rating Form for each teacher (Portfolio, p71). The HGFD then prepares a consolidated report for the GFD that feeds into the ADAR's College-wide report on the overall staff efficiency at SUC (Portfolio, p71). The Panel found the report to be heavily dependent on quantitative data from the Annual Efficiency Rating forms and encourages SUC to include qualitative parameters in addition to the surveys and percentage ratings to ensure the effectiveness of the GFP staff performance planning and review system. The HGFD's consolidated report does not have interpretations to the presented statistics, nor does it suggest an action plan for improvement. The Panel did not see evidence of a system in place to review the outcomes of the Annual Efficiency Ratings to respond to the findings (see Section 1.7).

In addition to this, the Panel also noted that the annual evaluation form for GFD teachers includes a 30% weighting to Research and Scholarly activities and the contract of employment of faculty states that each faculty member should publish in a recognised academic journal at least one research paper every two consecutive academic years (Portfolio, p70). The Panel considers that the teaching loads assigned to GFP teachers may not be compatible with the research outcome expectations, such as papers published in indexed journals and books. Interviews with senior management confirmed that SUC is reviewing this requirement for the GFP teachers (Portfolio, p71). Given the specific nature of

the GFP, which has a strong teaching focus, the Panel agrees that in the context of the performance appraisal criteria for GFP teachers, it is important that an appropriate balance be found between the different criteria being applied to ensure that GFP teaching quality remains a high priority.

Affirmation 2

The OAAAQA agrees that SUC needs to review the existing Annual Performance Evaluation System criteria in the General Foundation Department to accurately reflect the balance between the various aspects of the staff performance including research-related areas and supports its efforts in that area.

4.6 Staff Organisational Climate and Retention

SUC considers staff members integral to its success and this is reflected in the SUC Strategic Plan 2020-25 which aims at increasing stakeholder satisfaction and maintaining a high quality educational environment through transparent governance and management systems, recruitment of qualified staff and keeping staff up-to-date with the latest developments in their individual domain areas through research and professional development (Portfolio, p72). SUC states that a well-defined system is in place to foster an enriching organisational climate and support staff retention at the College and in the GFD (Portfolio, p72). This includes HR regulations that comply with Oman Labour Law; transparent and well disseminated employee contract and work regulations; professional development programmes; a staff Code of Conduct; staff feedback on improvement of the work environment; staff benefits such as annual leave; an open door policy with senior management; and a Severance and Grievance Policy (Portfolio, p72). The Panel confirmed that the SUC governance and management system ensures that there is GFP representation on College-level committees and the SUC leadership follows an open-door communication approach which makes it possible for GFP staff to communicate their concerns to SUC management when the need arises (Portfolio, p73).

SUC states that it seeks staff feedback through a staff satisfaction survey that is administered annually (Portfolio, p73). The survey covers a range of aspects including employee satisfaction with their role in the College, workload, remuneration, opportunities for growth and quality of general support services. The survey results of the AY 2019-20 shows that all the 12 GFD staff members participated in the survey and that the majority of staff members are satisfied with the work environment in the College. The results show that the staff are generally satisfied with most aspects of their work and environment of the College except for the support services provided by the Finance Department. SUC states that GFD staff also participate in recreational activities such as sports activities conducted at the Sur Sports Complex, cultural day, and National Day celebrations (Portfolio, p72). In conclusion, the Panel saw evidence of a satisfactory working environment within the GFD which is sustained through annual monitoring.

4.7 Omanisation

The College's commitment to Omanisation is set out in the SUC Strategic Plan 2020-25 (Portfolio, p73). The Panel noted that while the Omanisation Plan is not specific to the GFD, recent recruitment in AY 2020-21 of two Omanis in the GFD shows SUC's commitment to implementing the plan across all departments. The Panel noted that SUC has recently developed the procedures for recruiting Omanis for academic positions, which is a good initiative (Portfolio, p73). The Panel also supports the efforts made by SUC to train Omani nationals through the provision of scholarships and professional development opportunities (Portfolio, p73), but would like to see more Omanis teaching in the GFP benefitting from such opportunities.

The Panel saw the projections and heard that SUC aims to increase the Omanisation rate to 47% in the GFD within the next five academic years (Portfolio, p73). While the Panel acknowledges the challenges faced by SUC in finding suitably qualified Omani nationals for the GFD, they did not see

any defined actions within the GFD to operationalise this intention. The Panel encourages SUC to continue to put its Omanisation plan into action to support the achievement of Omanisation targets within the GFD while maintaining the quality of the provision and academic standards of the GFP.

APPENDIX A. AUDIT PANEL

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APPENDIX B. ABBREVIATIONS, ACRONYMS AND TERMS

The following abbreviations, acronyms and terms are used in this Report. As necessary, they are explained in context.

ADRI	Approach→Deployment→Results→Improvement
ADAR.....	Assistant Dean for Academic and Research Affairs
ADAF	Assistant Dean for Administration and Finance
ADSA	Assistant Dean for Student Affairs
ARD.....	Admissions and Registration Department
AY.....	Academic Year
BoD	Board of Directors
BoT.....	Board of Trustees
CAB.....	College Academic Board
GFP.....	General Foundation Programme
GFD.....	General Foundation Department
GSS.....	General Study Skills
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HGFD	Head of General Foundation Department
HoD	Head of Department
HR	Human Resources Department
IC3.....	Internet and Computing Core Certificate
IT	Information Technology
KPI.....	Key Performance Indicator
LO.....	Learning Outcome
LMS.....	Learning Management System
MoHERI.....	Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation
MVV.....	Mission, Vision and Values
OAAAQA.....	Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education
OASGFP.....	Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes
OP.....	Operational Plan
QA	Quality Assurance
QIP.....	Quality Improvement Plans
SP.....	Strategic Plan
SM.....	Supporting Material
SMAF	Senior Manager Administration and Finance
ToR	Terms of Reference
ToS.....	Table of Specifications

