



Oman Academic  
Accreditation Authority

**Report of a General  
Foundation Programme  
Quality Audit of  
Gulf College**

October 2019

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## OVERVIEW OF THE GFP AUDIT PROCESS

This General Foundation Programme (GFP) Quality Audit Report (the 'Report') documents the findings of a GFP Quality Audit of Gulf College (GC) by the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA).<sup>1</sup> The GFP Quality Audit followed the process of audit as outlined in OAAA's General Foundation Programme Quality Audit Manual.<sup>2</sup> The GFP Quality Audit also used the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes (OASGFP) as an external reference point.<sup>3</sup>

The GFP Quality Audit commenced with GC undertaking a self-study of the Mission, Vision and systems in relation to its GFP. The results were summarised in its GFP Portfolio (the 'Portfolio'). This document was submitted to the OAAA by the agreed date of 12 November 2017.

The OAAA appointed an external GFP 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 (international members by telephone) on 26 December 2017 to consider GC's GFP Portfolio. Following this, a representative of the Panel Chairperson and the Review Director undertook a planning visit on behalf of the Panel to GC on 17 January 2018 to clarify certain matters, to request additional information, and to make arrangements for the Panel's Audit Visit. Prior to the Audit Visit, the Panel formally invited submissions from the public about the quality of GC's activities in relation to the GFP. One public submission was received using this process.

The GFP Quality Audit Visit took place over the period 25 to 29 March 2018. During this time, the Panel met with approximately 75 people, including the Dean, Head of Faculty of Foundation Studies, GFP Programme Leaders, GFP teaching staff, GFP students, teaching staff on post-Foundation programmes and degree Programme Leaders, GFP Module Leaders, post-Foundation students (GFP alumni), academic and student support services staff, administrative staff, library and information technology staff and representatives from Cardiff Metropolitan University. They also visited a range of venues and examined additional documents.

This Report contains a summary of the Panel's findings, together with Affirmations where GC'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 GC.

The Panel's audit activities and preparation of this Report were governed by regulations set by the OAAA Board. No documents created after 29 March 2018 (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 GC in response to draft GFPQA Report v5. This Report was approved by the OAAA Board on 12 October 2019. The OAAA was established by Royal Decree No 54/2010. For further information, visit the OAAA website.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix B.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Docs/To%20upload-FINAL-GFP%20Quality%20Audit%20Manual%2025%20April%202017.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Docs/GFP%20Standards%20FINAL.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.oaaa.gov.om>

## HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

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

The Report is made public because it also may be of interest to students and potential students, their families, employers, government, other higher education institutions in Oman and abroad, and other audiences. Students, in particular, may find this Report useful because it provides some independent comment on the learning environment at this institution (particularly Chapters 2 and 3 below). Prospective students, however, should still undertake their own investigations when deciding which higher education institution will best serve their particular learning needs.

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

For the reasons stated 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 its 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 Audit Reports of different higher education institutions (HEIs) solely on the numbers of Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations.<sup>5</sup>

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.

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on Oman's System of Quality Assurance in Higher Education please visit [www.oaaa.gov.om](http://www.oaaa.gov.om)

## CONCLUSIONS

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

### *Executive Summary of Findings*

Gulf College (GC) is a private education institution that has developed from a professional and vocational training provider established in 1990. It currently operates from a single purpose-built campus in Mabela, Muscat to which it moved in 2014. The campus is non-residential but provides a female-only hostel for some students. GC aspires to grow to a total enrolment of 12,000 students spread across Foundation, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Its current total enrolment is around 5,000 students.

At undergraduate level, GC offers nine programmes, all of them four-year franchised programmes in affiliation with UK universities, across two programme areas: Computing (four BSc (Hons) streams) in association with Staffordshire University (SU), and Business (five BA (Hons) streams) in association with Cardiff Metropolitan University (CMet). Since Bachelor's with honour programmes in the UK (Scotland excepted) requires only 360 credit points (normally of three-year duration) and the Oman Qualifications Framework (OQF) requires these programmes to have at least 480 credit points (normally of four-year duration), the franchised programmes are validated with 480 credit points in total including 120 credit points offered at what GC refers to as 'Level 3' (See Appendix B). The latter represents the first year of an undergraduate programme. All undergraduate programmes are taught and assessed in English. Entry to the first year of the undergraduate programme (Level 3 according to the College) requires English language ability at IELTS Level 5.0 or equivalent, and progression into the second year of the undergraduate programmes (Level 4 according to the College) requires IELTS Level 6.0.

Although direct entry into the undergraduate programmes is in principle possible for General Education Diploma graduates, relatively few Omani graduates are able to meet the direct entry requirements in English language, Mathematics and Information Technology. To prepare students for enrolment into the franchised undergraduate programmes, GC has undertaken to provide a foundation programme taught in English. Initially, GC offered a one-semester International Foundation Programme (IFP), quality assured by SU, but commencing with the academic year (AY) 2016-2017 the College replaced this IFP with a two-semester General Foundation Programme (GFP), owned and delivered by GC but quality assured by CMet. The agreement with CMet was signed in 2014 and remains in effect until 31 August 2019. It is this GFP that is the subject of this Quality Audit.

It should be stated that because the two-semester GFP has only been offered for two academic years at GC, opportunities for quality enhancement through the normal ADRI (approach, deployment, results, improvement) process have been more limited than would be the case for a longer established programme. Moreover, changes to internal arrangements of the GFP, including replacing general English with academic English, and changes to higher level governance structures of the College that affect reporting and approval, have made parts of GC's Portfolio and a significant amount of the supporting documentation supplied by GC, challenging to interpret. Distinctions have not always been clearly made in the documentation between former practices, recently implemented new practices, those currently undergoing transition, and planned changes to practices that have not yet, or have only just begun being implemented. In addition, responses to the Panel's requests for additional supplementary materials either to clarify potential ambiguities or substantiate claims made with evidence have sometimes proved uninformative. These limitations have meant that the Portfolio has not presented compelling evidence that the GFP is operating well in all areas, and that quality assurance processes are fully in place and appropriately implemented. Although the transition from the former IFP to the new GFP has been ongoing since 2015, the Panel expected GC to have complete documentation of all the changes by the time of this audit in 2017/2018. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

Hence, it was difficult for the Panel, to confirm how certain decisions have been taken and how certain changes have been addressed and approved.

GC has clearly articulated Mission, Vision and Values statements that are disseminated to stakeholders in different ways, including via the Student Handbook (SM007) and the Staff Employment Manual (SM012b). The Faculty of Foundation Studies (FFS), as the entity responsible for the GFP provision at GC, is positioned to support GC's Mission statement aspiring "to offer internationally recognised and innovative academic qualifications that are appropriate to the needs of students, the job market, and meet international standards"(Portfolio, p.9). Little evidence was found on how the GFP is supporting and contributing to GC's Mission, Vision and Values. Among the seven Values articulated by GC, the one related to 'Social Responsibility' is well supported by the GFP (Portfolio, p.9). GC needs to capture this opportunity for improvement by developing and implementing a mechanism through which it ensures that its GFP is aligned to, contributes to and supports the achievement of its Vision, Mission and Values (MVVs).

The GFP is managed by the Head of FFS who reports directly to the College Dean and is assisted by Programme Leaders and Module Leaders, in addition to 37 academic staff members functioning as module tutors and academic advisors. At a higher level, the College's organisational structure (Portfolio, p.11, Figure 1), shows five governing structures in place; namely, the Board of Directors, the Board of Trustees, with the Head of the FFS sitting as a member in the College Board, Academic Board and College Coordinating Committee (CCC) (Portfolio, p.10). There are several examples of inaccurate documentation, lack of clarity and inconsistency in the roles, reporting lines and terms of reference of several GFP committees (SM004; SM005; SM011; SM019).

On examining the governance and management structure of the GFP, the Panel found frequent instances of inadequate record keeping. In the absence of an up-to-date version of the Quality Manual and in view of the improper documentation and dissemination, the Panel were not able to evidence a clear GFP committee structure, terms of reference, membership and reporting lines. This requires review by GC, together with improved documentation of practices and procedures and better dissemination mechanisms to all stakeholders.

The academic affiliation and partnership with CMet and SU enable GC to offer franchised undergraduate programmes which conform to UK and Oman standards. The GFP was quality assured by SU until October 2016 when the quality assurance was assumed by CMet (SM010). CMet played a significant role in promoting review of the former foundation programme, the IFP. As a result of this, GC took the decision to introduce the current two-semester GFP, to be in line with the OASGFP.

The impact of these affiliate relationships on the GFP itself, including the use of the External Moderators from the affiliate, is not yet clear. The Panel advises GC to review the effectiveness of its relationship with the affiliate, with particular reference to the contribution made by External Moderators from CMet, to ensure the quality of the newly developed programme.

College-wide operational planning for AY 2107-2018 has improved in comparison with the previous year (SM023); nevertheless, none of the objectives of the current operational plan was found to be specifically relevant to the GFP. The lack of measurable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) represents another opportunity for improvement that GC is strongly advised to consider in this area. GC can build on the 'Activity Plan', which relates to routine day-to-day activities arising from the Operational Plan (SM026) for this purpose. The purpose of this Activity Plan is to ensure that the College achieves the performance indicators identified in the operational plan (Portfolio, p.13). The College needs to consider strengthening the link between its strategic plan and the operational plans of FFS.

Financial management and planning activities at GC are the responsibility the Deputy Dean – Administration and Finance (DDAF) with input from all units and faculties. Reviewing the implementation of these activities is the responsibility of the Financial Review and Audit Committee (FRAC) as part of the monthly financial audit of accounts. This is a fixed item on the FRAC agenda and recorded in the meeting minutes of this committee (SM024, SM025). Although FFS management and staff stated that FFS receives adequate funds for the delivery of the GFP through the GC centralised budget allocation, the Panel did not find

evidence of a mechanism in place that ensures GFP needs are clearly identified and made available when required. This is another area that the College is encouraged to address.

GC developed a risk management system in 2011 (SM038) with two revisions, in 2013 and 2015. It is the College Board's function to follow up major risks. On examining the documents provided and from interviews, the Panel found that the risk management system does not involve a high level formal process for risk identification and management, nor does it have a protocol for systematic comprehensive audits of these risks. With regard to the GFP, and although GC states that "regular training is offered to make FFS staff aware of how to identify risks and report them" (Portfolio, p.15), the Panel did not find evidence of common understanding and awareness of GFP-specific risks, nor a procedure to identify and mitigate these risks. In view of this, the Panel recommends an urgent review of GC's risk management system to ensure that GFP-specific risks are identified and appropriate action and plans to mitigate them are taken.

The Panel found evidence that GC has a GFP reviewing and monitoring system in place comprising two types of reviews: internal and external (SM005). Internally, the College has several tools to collect data and feedback on its various functions and activities. These tools include student surveys, staff-student liaison meetings, academic advisor-student meetings, and Student Council meetings (Portfolio, p.18). The Panel, however, identified some issues of concern regarding these internal reviewing and monitoring practices. These relate to the sources of information and feedback, the way this data is processed, analysed and assessed, and more importantly the decisions taken, and the actions made in response to the results. In many instances, the Panel found that the way in which internal data is collected compromised the effectiveness of the process. For example, surveys are implemented irregularly, the survey results are not analysed appropriately, and actions based on this analysis are not taken in a timely manner.

Externally, GC went through a pilot audit for the IFP in 2015, which triggered the revision of all Foundation modules and initiated the transition of the IFP into the current GFP, which the College says adheres to local needs and meets OASGFP and MoHE regulations. The Panel, however, did not find evidence on how this adherence and alignment to the local needs have been achieved and how they are maintained. Other external reviewing and monitoring tools that the College uses are those provided by its affiliates. The Tutor Link from CMet provides regular reports on different areas of the GFP (SM022), whereas SU provides IFP revalidation and general review reports. The Panel supports these efforts and encourages GC to build on them in order to establish a robust and comprehensive review and monitoring system, consisting of both internal and external reviews, and make use of the results of these reviews to inform the decision-making process and enhance its GFP systems and operations.

GC has a clearly articulated process for student academic and non-academic grievance which is applicable to GFP as well (Portfolio, p.18) with two types of grievances accounted for, namely informal and formal. Students are introduced to the steps in the grievance process during their induction programme and through the Student Handbook (SM007). The Panel found from interviews that students were aware and satisfied with the process and the way it is implemented. The Panel believes, however, that the current grievance process can be enhanced and would benefit from periodic review, as part of a comprehensive review system for all of GC's systems, policies and processes.

Health and safety arrangements in place at GC operate according to a Health and Safety Policy (SM050). However, and while it acknowledges that an updated version of this policy exists, that Panel finds this document is still in need of a major revision as it confuses policy with procedural advice. The shift to the new purpose-built campus has positively contributed to this aspect. Basic staff and student medical services are handled locally at the College clinic by an on-site nurse (Portfolio, p.19, SM147, SM189a.). In the Staff Satisfaction Survey conducted in 2016, the Panel noted a relatively high rate of staff satisfaction with health and safety arrangements (76.3%) (SM054) while no data was available on the level of student satisfaction in this area. Nevertheless, the arrangements made to accommodate special needs students by teaching them in a single class with a teacher and a signing interpreter, are worth noting in this regard.

With regards to the GFP aims and learning outcomes provided in the Module Handbooks (SM057), GC states that its newly structured GFP is aligned to the College's Vision, Mission and Values and adheres to the OASGFP, although the Panel did not find evidence on how this alignment has been established. Moreover, the GFP alignment with the OASGFP is still incomplete. Based on the documents provided (SM006) and the



Portfolio (p.21), the revised version of the Foundation programme was designed in July 2017, in response to the CMet External Moderator's report and was not introduced until the second semester of the AY 2017-2018. With the transition from the IFP to the GFP, general English was replaced by Academic English. In order to "bridge GFP with GC specialisation programmes" (Portfolio, p.21), a Post-Foundation focus group. However, the meeting minutes of the group which were reviewed by the Panel (SM061) do not explicitly indicate that this process of 'bridging' between the GFP and specialisation programmes has been ensured. Notwithstanding the potential improvement represented by the transition to the new programme, the Panel noted that some areas of the programme, such as the module learning outcomes, fall short of aligning with the OASGFP (SM57). Therefore, GC is strongly advised to address this issue as a matter of urgency.

GC has made an effort to align its GFP curriculum with the needs of its students, through needs analysis, benchmarking, and monitoring and review (Portfolio, p.21). There was evidence of this from the External Moderator's recommendations and benchmarking outputs with Foundation programmes in similar Omani HEIs. These recommendations include extending the GFP over two semesters rather than one and grouping the Mathematics Learning Outcomes into logically sequenced sets as suggested in the OASGFP (SM068). The learning outcomes for English, on the other hand, are less differentiated between levels 1 and 2 (semesters one and two) of the GFP curriculum. The learning outcomes for English Level 1 (ASM057a) are identical to those of Level 2 (ASM057c). The Panel identified the lack of adequate distinction between the learning outcomes of the two levels of this component along with a lack of clarity about the duration of the teaching semester and the nature and extent of teaching activities during each week, as opportunities for improvement. The quality of the in-house prepared GFP teaching and testing material in terms of style, format and wording was another source of concern for the Panel. GC is urged to take necessary action to ensure clear distinctions between the module learning outcomes in line with the new framework of the GFP and check the adequacy and consistency of teaching and testing arrangements documentation.

From the evidence reviewed by the Panel, the GFP student entry and exist standards represent a significant opportunity for improvement that GC is advised to address. There is no evidence that the College has aligned its placement test to assess the Learning Outcome from the OASGFP in order to exempt students from the GFP.

The Panel found evidence of emerging efforts to improve the quality of GFP teaching at GC. The College has its own pedagogical framework "to adhere to international standards taking a student-centred approach" translated into a set of Institutional Teaching Guidelines (Portfolio, p.26). Peer observations are conducted by staff for developmental purposes and GFP students are given the opportunity to evaluate the professional attributes of their instructors. The Panel found these practices to be newly implemented, and there is not much established evidence as to how they work. GC is encouraged to evaluate the effectiveness of its current procedures for evaluating teaching quality and incorporate student input in these monitoring procedures as students are key stakeholders in this area.

The Panel acknowledges the steps taken by GC to maintain academic integrity among GFP staff and students. The GFP Student Induction Programme (SM090), use of plagiarism detection software (Turnitin), and utilisation of the Study Skills Module to increase student awareness in this area, are all encouraging examples in this regard. However, this area will also benefit from a comprehensive system that includes useful data collection on the frequency of detection of breaches of integrity, the nature of penalties applied, tracking of any repeat offenders, and identification of collusion.

On examining samples of assessment tasks designed to measure student achievement of these learning outcomes, the Panel established that these assessments are not benchmarked with any external reference point. The Panel also established that the correlation between the learning outcomes and their assessments are inadequate. Many of these assessments were found to focus on limited subsets of the learning outcomes. Therefore, it is recommended that GC benchmark GFP student assessments to those of comparable programmes elsewhere in Oman to ensure that GFP graduates are properly prepared for subsequent undergraduate study programmes.

Although the Panel found some evidence that GC provides oral and written feedback to GFP students on their assessments, this feedback is limited in scope and a relatively low percentage of students are satisfied

with the feedback they receive, according to the results of the Student Satisfaction Survey (SM045). The College is therefore recommended to revisit this area.

While the Panel acknowledges the existence of detailed procedures in place to maintain the security of examination papers, it noted with a lot of concern the similarity between mock examination papers which GFP instructors give to their students beforehand as means of preparation, and the actual examination papers which students take. The College is strongly advised to address this issue as matter of urgency in order to maintain exam integrity.

GC does not yet have a robust mechanism for collecting and analysing data on GFP students' retention, progression and completion, and utilising the results of this analysis to improve the relatively low overall progression rate of the students, which was only 60% in AY 2016/2017. Although GC has taken some actions to improve this situation, this has not been embedded as part of an established system specifically developed and implemented for this purpose. Hence, the College is advised to develop and deploy a system for collecting and analysing data on student retention and progression rates, and use the results of the analysis to improve student achievement.

The GFP alumni's learning experience is shared with current GFP students via the "Learning from Seniors" programme, whereby GFP alumni visit current GFP students and discuss their study experiences and give advice related to specific modules (Portfolio, p.31, SM106). Student feedback about this arrangement was positive (SM106). Other than this, the GFP graduate contribution is limited to informal contact between former and current GFP students. The Panel also noticed a lack of monitoring of the performance of GFP graduates who have progressed to their academic degree programmes. This type of analysis would help to improve the learning experience of GFP students and support the review of the GFP curriculum. Hence, the College is advised to track GFP graduate progression within their undergraduate programmes regularly and collect and use feedback from GFP alumni to improve the learning experience of GFP students and review the GFP curriculum and student services.

GC provides a range of academic and student support services to its GFP students. Academic support services include admission and registration by the Centre of Admission and Registration (CAR), the induction programme for new GFP students, teaching and learning resources through the Centre for Learning Resources (CLR) and Centre for Information Technology E-Learning (CITE) and academic advising. Non-academic support services include hostel accommodation for female students, extracurricular activities and a variety of other support services (such as catering, transport, counselling, medical services) and facilities, as facilitated by the College move to the new campus in 2014. The Panel did not find evidence that GC has a system in place yet to use its GFP student profile data to inform its planning of academic and student support services. This type of system would better inform GC's activities in this area, by ensuring effective provision and allocation of these services.

Although online registration was introduced in AY 2017-2018 to make the process easier and faster, the Panel was informed that it remains a challenge for GC because many students are more comfortable with manual registration. Moreover, the Panel concluded that attendance regulations stipulated in the Student Handbook (SM007) and applicable to GFP students are not strictly enforced, an issue that GC is yet to address in order to ensure consistent and fair implementation of its regulations and policies.

GC offers a two-day induction programme for new GFP students, during which they are introduced to various aspects of the programme. During the induction, GFP students receive different documents including an Induction Pack, the Student Handbook, an IT Services Handbook, a CLR Handbook and the Student Disciplinary Handbook. The induction also includes a campus tour to view the different support centres and facilities available. GFP academic advisers meet the new students and offer guidance on how to progress into their studies. Students are also asked to read and sign the Learner Agreement (Portfolio, p .35). Based on the statistics offered by GC (SM208, SM250d), the Panel was concerned with the low rates of student attendance in and satisfaction with the induction programme. The College is advised to review its GFP induction regularly, find reasons underlying the low participation and satisfaction rates and address these issues to ensure that the induction is effective.

GC is well equipped in terms of the range and availability of teaching and learning resources provided to GFP students and staff. Information and learning technology services are provided through CITE. The use of Moodle and remote access to study-related documents were mentioned favorably during interviews. Nevertheless, the Panel did not find statistical or usage tracking data to support this conclusion. The College does not have a mechanism in place to track either student use or satisfaction with these facilities. This represents a lost opportunity for enhancing teaching and learning, which GC is advised to address.

GC has a detailed Academic Advising Policy incorporated in the Student Handbook (SM007). The provision of this learning support service is the shared responsibility of several individuals and entities, namely the academic advisor, the module tutor, CAR and the Centre for Capacity Building. Students are familiarised with academic advising procedures during a training workshops organised for this purpose. Furthermore, the College states that several methods are used to identify students at risk, starting from first impressions based on in-class observations, to student results in the placement test and their results at mock exams (Portfolio, p.37). In Academic Advising Policy (SM130) the College states that students at risk are identified by module tutors after the formative test in the fourth week of the semester based on their test results, and they receive “pastoral” support sessions afterward. Although GFP students were highly satisfied with the system as a whole (97% satisfaction rate in AY 2016-2017), the level of satisfaction decreased significantly in many of the subareas of the system (70%, SM045), indicating a considerable level of dissatisfaction that urgently needs to be investigated and effectively addressed.

The Panel was impressed by the range of both academic and non-academic support that GFP students with special needs receive at GC. Special arrangements are made to accommodate these students and provide them with necessary support to pursue their studies. In addition to these academic support services, GC provides a range of other services to GFP students through the Student Support Service Centre in order to create a conducive teaching and learning climate. However, the Panel made two observations about these services; namely the lack of a robust tracking system to evaluate the level of satisfaction with the services by stakeholders, and the lack of a system of systemic revision of the services to ensure the provision is effective. The College is therefore urged to address these matters adequately.

Although GC has a recruitment process for GFP staff in place, guided by a Staff Employment Manual (SM012b), the Manual does not include information for staff members who conduct recruitment and selection. The Panel found that the recruitment and selection practices lack consistency and transparency when implemented in practice. Moreover, the Panel did not find evidence that the College uses its staff profile data to inform recruitment planning and selection criteria. The Panel examined the Staff Module Matrix (SM083), which the Head of the FFS submits to the Centre of Administration and Finance as part of the recruitment and selection process, and found it unclear as to how long in advance of each semester the decision to recruit is made. The number of staff required is also not shown; only the qualifications of existing staff to teach the different modules are included. The College is advised to review the effectiveness of its GFP staff recruitment and selection arrangements, and ensure their clarity, and transparent implementation with input from its staff profile.

GC has had an induction programme for its academic and non-academic staff since 2009 and it has been subject to review three times since then. New staff are assigned to a mentor (SM121) whose role was described as a positive feature of the new staff experience. The College also provides valuable organisational support for mentorship and offers eligible staff a financial incentive to take on this mentorship role. Evidence was also available that the College provides opportunities for professional development and engagement in research activities to GFP staff.

Academic staff performance is evaluated through the Staff Performance Review and Development System (SPRD) (SM158). The College reviews GFP staff performance in relevant areas and supports them in goal setting. However, the Panel learned that the feedback provided to instructors on various aspects of their performance is not systematic; from the evidence reviewed (SM166), the Panel noted that in different cases the scores, verbal comments and written records provided indicate different emphases.

On examining the general Staff Satisfaction Survey AY 2016-2017 (SM054), the Panel found that 50% of the very small number of FFS staff who responded to the relevant questions were not satisfied with the provision of letters of appointment, contracts and other documents such as the terms and conditions of

employment, the induction programme, staff employment documents and the lecturers' handbook. GC is urged to investigate the reasons behind the high rates of staff dissatisfaction with many aspects of the organisational climate, and the relatively low staff retention rates, and take necessary actions to address them as a matter of urgency.

GC mentions success in recruiting Omani lecturers and administrative staff for the FFS (Portfolio, p.49). References to improved Omanisation were also made during interviews. However, no clear explanation of the FFS plans to meet the Strategic Plan Omanisation targets was given and it is likely that Omanisation of teaching staff in the GFP-related continues to be a challenge. GC needs to develop and implement a plan to secure and retain Omani staff for its GFP in line with its Strategic Plan.

### ***Summary of Commendations***

A formal Commendation recognises an instance of particularly good practice.

1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Gulf College for providing adequate and effective support to students with special needs and helping them integrate in the General Foundation Programme teaching and learning process. ....39
2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Gulf College for developing and effectively implementing a mentoring system for its newly recruited General Foundation Programme academic staff. .... 43

### ***Summary of Affirmations***

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

1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority supports the efforts that Gulf College that the College is making to uphold academic integrity among General Foundation Students, and encourages the College to incorporate these efforts into a more comprehensive system with a review mechanism for its effectiveness.....28
2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority supports Gulf College in engaging with its General Foundation Programme alumni, and concurs with the College in its intention to widen the scope of this relationship to include other areas such as programme review, student induction, networking and other communication activities. ....33

### ***Summary of Recommendations***

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

1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College review and enhance the contribution that the General Foundation Programme makes in support of the college's Vision, Mission and Values. ....15
2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College ensure that all committees pertaining to the General Foundation Programme are convened in accordance with College governance structures and clear documentation of their operational matters is maintained.....16
3. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College ensure there is an appropriate alignment between the College's Operational Plan and the Activity Plan of the

- Faculty of Foundation Studies, with clear key performance indicators to monitor the implementation of the Activity Plan and help guide the delivery of the General Foundation Programme.....18
4. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College reviews the budgetary planning and management arrangements for the General Foundation Programme as an aid to improving strategic and operational planning within the Faculty of Foundation Studies. ....19
  5. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College review the implementation of its risk management system to ensure effective operation of this system in relation to the General Foundation Programme.....20
  6. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College ensure that its Quality Manual is comprehensive and includes relevant information on additional committees and processes associated with the review and monitoring of the General Foundation Programme. .21
  7. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College improve monitoring and review processes adopted in the General Foundation Programme and ensure effective use of the results. ....22
  8. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College regularly reviews its Health and Safety Guidebook to ensure that it provides clear guidelines and procedures in relation to health and safety issues. ....23
  9. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College ensure that all module learning outcomes of the General Foundation Programme are aligned to the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes in order to prepare students for their future higher education studies. ....25
  10. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College develop and implement clear and distinct module learning outcomes for each of the two levels of the General Foundation Programme English modules to allow monitoring of student achievement. ....26
  11. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College ensure that all in-house materials and documentation concerning the teaching calendar, class contact hours and examination arrangements be rigorously checked for accuracy and consistency.....27
  12. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College ensure that students who pass the English modules of the General Foundation Programme have attained the required level for each of the four English language skills. ....27
  13. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College fully aligns the General Foundation Programme assessments and the module learning outcomes to ensure that student achievement of the learning outcomes is being assessed effectively. ....29
  14. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College benchmark General Foundation Programme assessment in Mathematics and Information Technology modules to ensure students are adequately prepared for subsequent undergraduate study pathways. ....30
  15. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College review its Assessment Feedback System to ensure that effective feedback is provided for General Foundation Programme students on their academic performance in all types of assessment. ....31
  16. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College ensures the integrity and security of its final exam papers by eliminating the similarity between mock and final examinations in General Foundation Programme Modules as a matter of urgency in order to be able to assess objectively the attainment of the module learning outcomes. ....32
  17. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College establish and implement a comprehensive system to collect and analyse detailed information about retention

- and progression of General Foundation Programme students to inform decision making about maintaining adequate rates in these areas. ....32
18. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College periodically and systematically collect and effectively use the feedback from General Foundation Programme alumni to improve the General Foundation Programme curriculum and student services. ....33
  19. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College monitor and analyse General Foundation Programme student profile data on a regular basis and use the results of this analysis to enhance teaching and learning, and ensure the provision of effective services to General Foundation Programme students. ....34
  20. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College ensure consistent implementation of its Attendance Policy within the General Foundation Programme to enhance the student learning opportunity. ....35
  21. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College develop and implement a mechanism to monitor General Foundation Programme staff and student use of teaching and learning resources, and to regularly measure stakeholder satisfaction with these resources to ensure that they are adequate and meet the needs of General Foundation Programme staff and students. ....37
  22. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College develop and implement mechanisms and processes to evaluate the effectiveness and adequacy of the information and learning technology resources and services, monitor General Foundation Programme staff and students' use of these resources and services, and use the data obtained to make improvements. ....38
  23. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College develop and implement an action plan to improve the effectiveness of the academic advising services provided to General Foundation Programme students, and regularly measure student satisfaction with this service. ....38
  24. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College collect regular feedback from General Foundation Programme students on their satisfaction with various aspects of the programme, and use this feedback to make improvements which are communicated back to students. ....40
  25. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College develop and implement a system to regularly obtain feedback from General Foundation Programme students on the hostel and issues related to accommodation, and respond to this feedback in order to ensure that the hostel is appropriate and meets the needs of General Foundation Programme students. ....41
  26. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College develop and implement an operational plan for external engagement involving students of the General Foundation Programme with clear targets and Key Performance Indicators in line with the college Value of Social Responsibility. ....41
  27. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College use the available General Foundation Programme staff profile data to support short-term and long-term human resource planning and effective delivery of the General Foundation Programme. ....42
  28. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College review its current recruitment process and procedures related to General Foundation Programme staff to ensure that they are clearly disseminated and consistently implemented. ....43
  29. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College monitor and review the staff induction programme on an ongoing basis for its effectiveness and improvement. ....44

- 30. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College review staff professional development activities for their effectiveness, and introduce clear key performance indicators that inform General Foundation Programme staff achievement in this area.....44
  
- 31. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College investigate the reasons behind the high rates of General Foundation Programme staff dissatisfaction with many aspects of the organisational climate and ensure that actions are taken based on the results derived from satisfaction surveys. ....46
  
- 32. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College develop and implement a detailed Omanisation plan for the Faculty of Foundation Studies which is aligned to the Gulf College Strategic Plan with clear Key Performance Indicators and specific measures to secure and retain Omani teaching staff.....47

## 1. GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

This Chapter reports on governance and management of the GFP at GC. It addresses both processes within the Faculty of Foundation Studies (FFS), which is the academic unit dedicated to the delivery of the GFP, and processes in the broader GC context, including the Panel's findings related to the College's Mission, Vision and Values; governance and management; operational planning; financial and risk management; systems for monitoring and review; student grievance process, and health and safety considerations.

### 1.1. *Mission, Vision and Values*

GC has a clearly articulated Mission, Vision and Values (Portfolio, p.9) which are drawn to the attention of staff and students in various appropriate ways including through the Student Handbook (SM007) and the Staff Employment Manual (SM012b). Because the GFP acts as the main feeder of student enrolments into GC's franchised, externally quality assured undergraduate programmes, the GFP and the FFS are positioned to support the stated Mission of GC, namely "to offer internationally recognised and innovative academic qualifications that are appropriate to the needs of students, the job market, and meet international standards" (Portfolio, p.9). The extent to which the GFP succeeds in supporting the Mission needs to be assessed in terms of the learning outcomes of its students and their standards of achievement upon the completion of the GFP. The Panel did not find evidence that GC assesses its GFP graduates' progress in their undergraduate programmes after completing the GFP. Hence, it was not clear how the GFP is aligned to the College's Mission. Moreover, the Panel found it difficult to assess directly how the FFS and GFP contribute specifically to GC's stated Vision, namely to "contribute to developing the future direction of higher education in Oman, producing graduates with the ability to think, achieve and excel in research and entrepreneurship". The Panel did not find evidence on how the GC's GFP serves the achievement of its Vision.

Several of the seven Values articulated by GC (Portfolio, p.9) connect directly to the role of the GFP and to the quality of its performance. The Panel established that the Social Responsibility Value ("higher education opportunities to the working population and General Education and embedded, since the GFP is available to both day students (typically recent school leavers) and evening students (normally in the paid workforce). In addition, special teaching arrangements and other support mechanisms are provided for students with special needs, mainly students with hearing disabilities (see Section 3.8). Other values that underpin the GFP provision include the Quality Value ("a comprehensive quality management system, which focuses on quality assurance and quality enhancement through continuous reviews and improvements"), the Teaching and Learning Value ("continuous improvement...based on continuous feedback from stakeholders") and the Student Centred Value ("student-focused services are provided through the student support service centres").

The Panel noted here that although the FFS does not have its own Mission, Vision or Values as distinct from those of the College as a whole, the Programme Handbook (SM059) does list eight aspirational statements – four focused on GFP Aims and four specific to GFP Programme Outcomes (see Section 2.1). Broadly, these eight statements relate to English language proficiency, technical competence in Mathematics and Information Technology, and desirable generic intellectual or ethical development. All these statements align with the Mission, Vision and Values of GC as a whole.

Neither the GC Strategic Plan 2015–2019 (SM055) nor the GC Operational Plan 2017–2018 (SM023), a much more extensive document, specifically caters for the needs of the GFP. In addition, while GC has developed Constructive Alignment Documents (SM015), each of which covers a major component of the GFP curriculum (namely: Academic Skills; Information Technology; Mathematics), these do not make explicit the manner in which the GFP helps GC to achieve its Mission, Vision and Values. Each of these documents simply lists GFP Programme Outcomes, learning outcomes for the specific curriculum area, assessment element(s) for each Learning Outcome, indicative assessment criteria and Teaching and Learning activities which support each



Learning Outcome. They do not, however, show a logical connection to items from the GC Mission, Vision and Values statements.

GC claims that “the GFP is helping the vision, mission and objectives by providing opportunities for GFP graduates to join internationally recognised programmes either in GC or other HEIs in Oman”. GC recognised, however, that its former IFP was unable to successfully prepare students to meet the OASGFP (SM056) and therefore introduced the new GFP as an improvement. The impact of this new programme is yet to be fully assessed. As such GC’s claim above is not yet evidenced.

### **Recommendation 1**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College review and enhance the contribution that the General Foundation Programme makes in support of the college's Vision, Mission and Values.**

#### **1.2. Governance and Management Arrangements**

The Panel found the governance structures of GC unclear. In part, this was because these structures were undergoing change at the time of the Audit Visit. This was not mentioned in documentation received before the Audit Visit and only became apparent during interviews, and from additional supplementary materials requested by the Panel. It was difficult for the Panel to determine whether particular documentation referenced the old or the new governance structure.

The Portfolio (p.11, Figure 1.1) shows a management structure for the FFS, in which the Head of the FFS reports to the Dean, who in turn has separate reporting lines to the College Board, the Board of Directors (BoD) and the Board of Trustees (BoT). The Portfolio (p.7 and p.12) states that the Head of FFS is a member of most senior deliberative committees, including the Academic Board and the College Board, with the latter being concerned with financial reporting (Portfolio, p.16), the risk register (Portfolio, p.17) and the approval of the Student Disciplinary Handbook (Portfolio, p. 42).

The Operational Plan (SM023) includes a diagram of GC’s organisational structure in which the College Board sits immediately below the BoD and BoT, with all other major committees of GC, including the Academic Board, reporting to the BoT and/or the College Board. The Panel was informed that the governance structure had recently been revised, however, with the Academic Board and the College Board now having different responsibilities and sitting at the same level, rather than the one reporting to the other. At the Panel’s request, (SM249) the most recent minutes of the College and Academic Boards from March 2018 were provided by GC (SM249). On examining this document, the Panel noted that the issues related to the transitional status, such as GFP committee structure, committees’ terms of reference and membership lists, were not discussed.

According to the Portfolio (p.11, Figure 1.1), the management and delivery of the GFP are the responsibility of the FFS Head assisted by Programme Leaders, Module Leaders, and module tutors/academic advisors. Each GFP staff member has well-defined job responsibilities (SM016). The Panel established that staff meetings are held on a weekly basis and chaired by the Head of Faculty; during these meetings, operational matters such as time tabling, resource allocation, student attendance, reviews and assessments, results and feedback are discussed (SM017). The preparation of various documentation and requirements for the examination boards are also managed by the Head of FFS in coordination with Programme Leaders and the Academic Registrar. Moreover, faculty level committees are in place to consider academic matters pertaining to GFP; these include the Programme Review Committee, Staff Student Liaison Committee (SSLC), Academic Dishonesty Committee and Academic Unfair Practice Committee. All these committees assist in managing and delivering the GFP at GC (SM005). Various documentation confirmed the GFP committee structure, terms of reference and membership lists (SM011, SM175).

The roles and reporting lines of some other committees, such as the Risk Management Committee and the Exam Committee, were unclear, partly due to evolving structures and also because of poor documentation. The Revised Organisational Structure diagram, dated November 2016 (SM004) and

the FFS Management Structure diagram (Figure 1.1, Portfolio p.11) do not match the diagrams in the Quality Manual dated May 2016 (SM005c). In the absence of an up-to-date version of the Quality Manual, the Panel was not able to locate for a given committee its current terms of reference, its membership (both how this is defined, and who the current members are) and to which person or higher entity each committee reports or makes recommendations. Another example of inadequate documentation concerns the Staff Student Liaison Committee (SSLC). This committee is mentioned only twice in the Quality Manual (SM005c), once in terms of its membership and once regarding the Chair. Both statements are unclear. In response to the Panel's request for the terms of reference of the SSLC, the Panel was provided with the Standard Operating Procedure for the SSLC Meeting (SM218). The document's stated scope is "preparation of the agenda for the Staff Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) Meetings to recording and distribution of the minutes of the meeting", but the important matters of committee membership and the objectives of the committee are intermingled with mechanical details of meeting paper circulation and other practicalities.

In examining the documents related to various GFP operational matters, the Panel found frequent instances of inadequate record keeping. Meeting papers, including agendas, supporting papers and minutes of completed meetings, raised particular concerns. Minutes did not always record who chaired the meeting, the full list of attendees, and the list of members who lodged an apology for non-attendance. Supporting papers that were the basis of decisions recorded as made at meetings were not attached to the minutes. The samples examined by the Panel indicate some of the deficiencies in record keeping and management (SM025b, SM245). In the Panel's view, ensuring that committee records are permanently and securely recorded in a format that guards against unauthorised future changes would be prudent.

## **Recommendation 2**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College ensure that all committees pertaining to the General Foundation Programme are convened in accordance with College governance structures and clear documentation of their operational matters is maintained.**

### **1.3. Institutional Affiliations for Programmes and Quality Assurance**

The franchised undergraduate degree programmes offered by GC are owned by the franchise partners (CMet or SU) and are expected to conform to UK standards. For the GFP, however, CMet only provides quality assurance guidance and plays a developmental role. The affiliation agreement from 2014 (SM010) states that, "Any awards granted [for the GFP] will not be awards of the University" (CMet), and "for the avoidance of doubt students will not be enrolled with the University". The CMet logo can be used on certificates issued to students in recognition of CMet's quality assurance guidance role. The original agreement defined a commitment to "externally moderate" the GC IFP and a Foundation Bridging Course until 31 August 2019, but this arrangement has remained in place for the present GFP, which was first offered in the AY 2016/2017. The External Moderator's (EM) role as stated in the Agreement with CMet (SM010) is "similar to, but broader than that of a traditional External Examiner in the UK system" and precise expectations of the EM in terms of attendance at GC, reporting back to CMet, moderation of assessment tasks and other matters are laid out. In view of this context, that Panel established that the replacement of the GC IFP by the current GFP has not changed the EM's role, which was evidenced by the Panel in interviews with relevant staff members during the Audit Visit.

In Appendix 1 to the 2014 affiliation agreement (SM010), it is made clear that the EM has a role in reviewing draft assessment tasks and assessment criteria for the GFP, with advice to be given on the level of appropriateness, complexity, content and mapping of assessments to the module learning outcomes. The EM has the right to access all marked work and is expected to view a suitably large representative sample. The EM is also expected to ensure that GFP examination boards comply with agreed rules and regulations. However, ultimately GC is responsible for the quality and integrity of their GFP, the maintenance of appropriate academic standards in teaching and assessment, and the

demonstrated achievement of learning outcomes that match or exceed those mandated under the OASGFP.

The practical arrangements for CMet to fulfil its role, described in the Portfolio (p.12), were clarified through interviews with CMet representatives and GC staff. Until recently, a single CMet faculty member provided specific input related to both the franchised undergraduate programmes and the GFP, and general management of all aspects of the partnership arrangement. The faculty member is referred to at GC as the Link Tutor, although that title is not used in the 2014 affiliation agreement (SM010), which refers only to the "External Moderator". On the recommendation of the present Link Tutor, an additional quality assurance expert, nominated by CMet and with special expertise in English language programmes, has been engaged to deal specifically with the GFP (SM022). A consequence of this appointment has been the decision to change the nature of the English language component of the GFP from General English to Academic English. This initiative is too recent to determine what impact it has had on the GFP quality assurance arrangements since implementation was scheduled for the AY 2018/2019, after the Audit Visit. The appointee is an English language specialist, and has no specific discipline expertise in either Information Technology or Mathematics, so it is not possible to obtain meaningful advice on marking practices and assessments in these modules.

In February 2018, GC entered into a contractual arrangement (SM254) with an additional, external international expert. The duties of this expert are described as: reviewing programme submission documents for programme approval; reviewing the semester review framework as mentioned in the Quality Manual under the responsibilities of the Deputy Dean (SM005c, p.17); chairing the panel for the semester review of the three faculties that constitute GC (one of which is the FFS), and conducting staff development or training workshops. While the Panel recognises the benefit of recruiting an additional external advisor the outcomes of the new arrangements are yet to be demonstrated.

On examining the data of students progressing from GFP to the first year of the undergraduate programmes (SM105), the Panel concluded that the quality assurance arrangements currently provided by CMet for the GFP (and the first year) are unable to ensure that typical students successfully completing the GFP attain standards that make their success in the first year of undergraduate programmes studies likely. Progression rates of GFP graduates from the first year of the undergraduate programmes for the AY 2017-2018 are very low. In the Business stream, only 90 of 288 GFP graduates (31.25%) passed all examinations on the first attempt, and only four of those failing who were permitted to re-sit and chose to do so subsequently completed the first year of the programme. The performance in the Computing stream was only slightly better. As challenges remain in assuring that required academic standards are being met (see Chapter 2), the Panel concluded that the affiliate still has a role to play in supporting the transition from the IFP to the GFP in terms of providing guidance regarding quality assurance.

#### **1.4. Operational Planning**

A lack of detail and of reference to the Mission, Vision and Values (MVVs) in the Strategic Plan 2015–2019 (SM055) has already been noted in Section 1.1. The Panel examined how MVVs inform Strategic Planning, and strategic goals inform GFP operational plans and goals; how operational plans are devised and what they cover, and whether operational planning on the GFP is effective. Excerpts relevant to the GFPQA from GC's Operational Plans for 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 were provided (SM178 and SM023).

On examining the two-page excerpt from the Operational Plan for 2016-2017 (SM178), the Panel noted that it reveals no connection either with the Strategic Plan or the Mission, Vision and Values. It simply sets the enrolment targets for the GFP September and March intakes; stipulates the total FFS student load to meet assigned revenue targets, and gives corresponding targets for the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes offered by GC. As this document relates to the time the two-semester GFP is implemented, it was not possible to compare these targets to a previous year benchmark. The remainder of the Operational Plan 2016–2017 excerpt gives a list, under 14

subheadings, of actions to be taken showing responsibility and timeframes. These tasks apply to all faculties and no aspects unique to the FFS are mentioned. There are neither Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to determine whether the operational plan is on track mid-year nor any measurement of accomplishment of the operational plan at the year's end. Moreover, the relation of this material to the Mission, Vision and Values, or to the Strategic Plan is not addressed.

A more substantial excerpt from the Operational Plan for 2017-2018 (SM023) appears to be the complete front-end of the plan, followed by some specific details for the FFS, with corresponding details for other faculties redacted. The Dean introduces the document by saying that it aims “to provide guidelines for these units to meet their business objectives as per the Strategic goals and the financial targets”. The first 40 pages of the Operational Plan for 2017-2018 (SM023) restate the Mission, Vision and Values and the MVV alignment matrix already provided in the Strategic Plan 2015–2019 (SM055). They also describe the college faculties and centres, the memberships of working groups associated with preparing for the present OAAA review and other housekeeping matters. The Panel examined the FFS-specific section of the Operational Plan for 2017-2018 (SM023) and noted that it represents an improvement over the corresponding section of the Operational Plan 2016–2017 (SM178). Fine-level procedural details with responsibilities assigned have been replaced by broader headings, with success indicators identified, although none of these are expressed in any quantifiable way. None of the items covered is specific to the GFP and some are of doubtful relevance to the GFP such as: “Implement a well-designed student exchange programme”, with performance indicator “Increase student exchange partnerships with international universities”.

Echoing the recommendation made in Section 1.1 concerning the FFS and GFP contribution to and alignment with GC's MVVs and its Strategic Plan, the Panel urges GC to find better ways to document strategic, operational and financial planning to ensure that the GFP contributes appropriately to the GC MVVs. A detailed account of the operations of the GFP in relation to the GC Operational Plan and improvements to the documentation of the FFS budget are required (see Section 1.5).

The Panel's concerns expressed in Section 1.2 about governance structures and record-keeping also apply to operational planning: it is not clear how operational planning in relation to the GFP occurs since, from sample minutes supplied (SM024), many committees seem to fulfil mainly a reporting, rather than an advisory, planning or decision-making role. Moreover, the connection between operational planning and decision making within the FFS is not well documented. For example, the Operational Plan 2017-2018 (SM023) includes a table headed "Operational Targets", which lists 11 activities with associated performance indicators and time-lines. The FFS Action or Activity Plan for the Operational Plan 2017–2018 (SM026) lists activities in six broad areas but without key performance indicators. There is no indication of how these activities proposed contribute towards achieving any of the Operational Targets in the Operational Plan 2017-2018 and indeed none of these Operational Targets is mentioned in the Activity Plan. The tabular layout of the Activity Plan includes a column headed "Remarks" in which such information might usefully be placed, but this column was left empty. Given the lack of connection between action planning within the FFS and the Operation Plan, it is unsurprising that the Operational Plan Accomplishment Report for the AY 2016–2017 (SM031), while describing a number of changes, developments and activities, does not comment on the FFS contributions to specific areas listed in the Operational Plan.

In order to address the lack of explicit connection between the operational planning process at GC and FFS activities, the Panel suggests that clearer distinctions be drawn between performance targets, the broad strategies followed to attain those targets, and the way in which these strategies will be operationalised, resourced and reviewed in the specific context of the GFP.

### **Recommendation 3**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College ensure there is an appropriate alignment between the College's Operational Plan and the Activity Plan of the Faculty of Foundation Studies, with clear key**

**performance indicators to monitor the implementation of the Activity Plan and help guide the delivery of the General Foundation Programme.**

### **1.5. Financial Management**

The Portfolio provided very little information on the financial management of the GFP, and very few relevant details were provided in other SMs for either GC as a whole or for the FFS in particular. The Financial Plan (SM032) submitted with the Portfolio consisted only of two short documents: the Financial Plan Budget 2016–2017 (SM032a) which lists "total revenues" as a single amount with no indication of its origin, and the Financial Plan Operating Budget (SM032b), which shows no monetary amounts. The latter only records such things as the number of staff members required to deliver the programme, basic equipment supplies (such as new computers, photocopiers) and computer consumables (printer ink and photocopier toner). Neither document bear evidence of approval or ratification by authority and the process of budget preparation is not described.

No account is given within GC's submission of the major items of expenditure, such as salaries and associated personnel costs, related specifically to the GFP. On request, GC submitted an additional document (SM251) but this shows only the revenue earned by the GFP and minimal administrative expenditure, exclusive of staff resourcing. Although the Panel found evidence of budgetary planning and review processes for GC as a whole (as described in the Operational Plan for 2016–2017) (SM023), there was insufficient evidence for the Panel to establish whether the financial management of the GFP as a specific faculty is adequate. Furthermore, while the Portfolio claims that the faculty of FFS informs budgetary planning (Portfolio, p.13) no evidence of the process by which this occurs was available.

Despite the lack of disaggregated information about the budget supporting GFP activities, and the lack of detail regarding the process of giving inputs to the budget, interviews suggested that the GFP team is satisfied with the funding provided by the College for the provision of GFP learning resources. Review of the college budget is outsourced to an external auditor but there appears to be no internal mechanisms within FFS to gauge formally whether there are adequate resources to meet GFP needs.

The Panel suggests that a more systematic approach is required for the involvement of GFP faculty and/or management in the budgeting process. In addition, more detailed documentation showing disaggregated revenue and expenditure is required to support the planning process within the FSS.

#### **Recommendation 4**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College reviews the budgetary planning and management arrangements for the General Foundation Programme as an aid to improving strategic and operational planning within the Faculty of Foundation Studies.**

### **1.6. Risk Management**

While GC reports that the risk management system was developed in 2011 (Portfolio, p.14), the supporting 'Risk Management System' document provided (SM038) is dated October 2009, with revisions in August 2013 and September 2015. The Quality Manual (SM005) does not address risk management except to note that one responsibility of the College Board is to closely follow up strategic issues associated with risk management. It should be noted that the word "risk" is not mentioned in the Strategic Plan 2015-2019 (SM055). The Panel urges GC to reflect risk management practices more accurately in key documentation.

On examining the Risk Management System document (SM038) and the lists of risks and their ratings (SM40a, SM40b), the Panel noted that the documents are largely concerned with procedural aspects of reporting and documenting identified risks, rated for severity according to likelihood of

occurrence and anticipated impact, together with consequent action taken, but with no risk mitigation mechanisms articulated. Further documentation was therefore requested and the Panel was provided with two 'Risk Reports' documents (SM179a, SM179b). One of these reports (SM179b) is a single spreadsheet listing 15 risks and associated recommended responses in tabular form and categorised only as 'avoid, prevent, minimise, transfer'. This approach does not itemise tangible plans or actions to be taken if a risk is realised. The other document (SM179a) addresses one specific risk, namely failure to ensure that the income due to the College is collected in a timely and efficient manner; while this document shows a list of useful proactive interventions, the risk appears to have minimal relevance to the GFP. This document is neither dated nor signed and gives no indication of how or when successful implementation of the remedial actions are to be confirmed.

Attempts have been made to increase staff involvement in the risk management process. According to the Risk Management System, the Deputy Dean QA & Partnerships must interview stakeholders every two years and consider any internal or external reports to identify perceived risks, and the College Board members can nominate risks for inclusion in the Risk Register (SM038). While the Panel was not able to verify staff engagement in risk identification, it did confirm an increased awareness amongst staff of the variety of possible risks between 2015 and 2016. A risk management workshop was held on 28 January 2016 (SM039). The Panel noted that two of the thirteen individuals attending were FFS staff members. Evidence of follow-up from the workshop, or of ongoing training relevant to risk assessment and remediation was not available.

GC states that it was decided that the risk management system should be one of the standing items on the agendas of College Board meetings (Portfolio, p.16). The Panel was provided with four samples of College Board meeting minutes. Three of these (SM036) bore 2016 dates and only one of them (SM036a) had any mention of risk management matters. It commits the Centre for Quality Management (CQM) to "take the lead on the risk management exercise, to prepare the plan for interviewing the staff students and other stakeholders to identify any potential risks". Unconfirmed Minutes of the Meeting of 18 March 2018 (SM249), the latest College Board minutes available to the Panel, did include a recorded commitment to conduct a risk management workshop for all staff by 5 April 2018. GC also states that the risk management system is reviewed every two years (Portfolio, p.16). The Panel requested evidence that this review took place and GC provided, in response, the Standard Operating Procedure for Management Review Meeting (SM181). This document addresses quality management systems in general with no specific mention of risk. The Panel also viewed the Minutes of the ISO 9001:2008 Management Review Meeting of 22 November 2017 which simply records that risk management system review was due and that the current system was deemed to be working well, without reference to evidence, and suggests changes to the risk report format. Although references to a Risk Management Committee were made in the GC submission, important features of the committee such as membership, terms of reference, decisions or recommendations made and implementation of follow-up actions are not currently well documented (SM041).

GC is urged to conduct timely reviews of the risk management system as stipulated in the relevant documentation and to make these reviews specifically inclusive of the GFP. A revision of risk management system documentation (SM038) is needed to ensure that risks related to the GFP are given adequate consideration, that designated persons hold the responsibility for remediating risk, and that risk registers are updated.

### **Recommendation 5**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College review the implementation of its risk management system to ensure effective operation of this system in relation to the General Foundation Programme.**

### 1.7. *Monitoring and Review*

The GC submission explains that the review process and structure of reviews are documented in the Quality Manual (Portfolio, p.16, SM005). The Quality Manual mentions contributions to monitoring or review in the job descriptions for some staff, including Deputy Deans, Heads of Faculties (including the Head of FFS), the Academic Registrar, the Managers of the Centre for Capacity Building and the Centre for Information Technology and E-Learning, and Programme Leaders. In addition, review functions are stated as responsibilities of three major committees. The responsibility of Faculty Heads and Programme Leaders to participate in the Programme Review Committee relevant to their activities is also described in the Quality Manual.

The Quality Manual made available to the Panel is dated 2016 but despite its currency it does not fully correspond to current practices. There is no mention, for example, of the review mechanisms that are currently in practice for the GFP as carried out by the GFP Programme Review Committee. While minutes for one meeting of the GFP Programme Review Committee were provided to the Panel (SM044a), the Panel did not find evidence on how this committee is constituted nor the nature of its duties; it was unclear, furthermore, whether the committee met on more than one occasion in a three-year period. The Panel believes that GC will benefit from a clearer and fuller account of the review responsibilities of committees and individuals relating to the GFP, including review frequency, the nature of review processes and reporting lines to higher-level committees and senior management. This should be captured in future revisions of the Quality Manual:

#### **Recommendation 6**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College ensure that its Quality Manual is comprehensive and includes relevant information on additional committees and processes associated with the review and monitoring of the General Foundation Programme.**

The external contribution to monitoring and review of the GFP made by CMet has been discussed in Section 1.3. The version of the Quality Manual seen by the Panel only discusses the role of SU as an external partner. Nevertheless, consideration needs to be given to possible differences in monitoring and review processes between franchised programmes owned by external partners and the GFP, which is entirely owned by GC. For the GFP, the external partner's reputational risk is less and the importance of self-reliance in GC's monitoring and review processes is consequently increased.

Some changes in the GFP curriculum were made based on comparison with the curricula of other relevant Omani institutions such as Majan University College, Muscat College and Mazoon College (SM067), although the reliability of comparisons based on "trawling websites of the GFP in three colleges" was called into question by the Panel (Portfolio, p.22). During interviews the Panel was advised that a Course Experience Questionnaire was conducted for the former IFP in the two years preceding the introduction of the GFP. On probing the lack of related data for the first offering of the GFP, the Panel was informed that the College opted to move the Questionnaire forward to semester one and omit it for the AY 2016-2017 so as not to overburden students with surveys. GC used to conduct this survey during semester two of each academic year in class, using paper versions "in order to get a good number of responses". This approach resulted in the tabulation of year as a missed opportunity to record students' responses to the first offering of the GFP, establishing a base level against which future improvements can be demonstrated. The data of the same Questionnaire for the AY 2017-2018 was presented in two documents, one referring to student evaluation of modules (SM192d) and one referring to student evaluation of lecturers (SM192e). On examining these two questionnaires, however, the Panel noted that they do not provide useful data in relation to the evaluation intended. They simply show bare statistical data without attribution to particular items on the questionnaires.

The CMet Link Tutor's report for 2016-2017 (SM022) listed three areas of concern related to the GFP: firstly, the high rate of non-submissions for assessments caused by GFP students not sitting for their final examinations; secondly, the high failure rate in individual modules or overall in the GFP0,

and thirdly, the need for further development and specialist input into the English language modules. The third of these has been addressed by the recruitment of an English Language expert, but evidence of an effective response to the other two concerns was lacking (see Section 2.6 for further details).

The GFP Programme Review Committee is charged with reviewing student progress in an appropriately data-informed way. Despite a Focus Group identifying challenges in a number of areas and suggesting changes to the GFP, this Group has met only once and included only first-year teachers who discussed the performance of students enrolled in level. The Panel found, therefore, there is a lack of evidence of *effective* review of the GFP itself, for example, through higher-level committees or focussed working groups tasked with considering the curriculum. Furthermore, it did not find evidence that the Committee systematically monitors the achievement of learning outcomes or consistently addresses matters related to academic standards or student progression.

While the Panel acknowledges that GC undertook a ‘Revalidation and Review of the GFP in June 2015 as part of a broader review of college programmes, the Panel notes that this was undertaken in collaboration only with SU and not with CMet, the institution charged with quality assuring the GFP (Portfolio, p.18, SM018). Furthermore, the review covered only the discontinued one-semester IFP rather than the current two-semester GFP. Despite this anachronism, one general recommendation arising from the review of all programmes is pertinent to the current GFP programme too: “Gulf College should enhance and make greater use of its management information so that it could report annually on student enrolment, retention, progression, withdrawal, intermission and attainment by course, level, mode of study, gender and student entry point.” The Panel concurs with this general recommendation and considers that non-collection of relevant data and uncritical data analysis across the college as a whole potentially undermines the effectiveness of monitoring and reviewing many aspects of the GFP as well; this includes data on student and staff performance, morale and student welfare. The Panel believes that this low level of analysis of data suggests that the essential recommendation by SU is still to be fully realised.

### **Recommendation 7**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College improve monitoring and review processes adopted in the General Foundation Programme and ensure effective use of the results.**

#### **1.8. Student Grievance Process**

GC differentiates between formal and informal grievances based on whether the complaint is made through official channels or is resolved through the academic advisor. GC outlines in a flow chart the procedure for addressing the two types of grievance with different pathways for formal grievance, depending on whether or not a partner university is involved (Portfolio, p.18). This procedure is made known to GFP students in their Student Handbook (SM007) and to the GFP staff through the Quality Manual (SM005c). The Panel established that the process is mostly appropriate (interviews) except for the absence of clear advice given to students on the options available if they do not agree with the final decision of the Academic Registrar.

For academic appeals against GFP exam results, there is a reference in the GC submission to the Appeals Hearing Committee, and to the possibility of a direct approach to the College Dean (Portfolio, p.18; SM188). Apart from explaining where a student can collect appeal, complaint or request-to-meet-the-Dean forms, however, no guidance is given as to when it is appropriate to use these formal grievance and appeal processes.

The Panel learned from interviews that academic complaints are referred, through the student advisor, to a Programme Review Committee and non-academic complaints are directed to the Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC). The Standard Operating Procedure for the SSLC (SM218) states that this is “an opportunity for the students and staff to exchange the views in relation to any aspect of non-academic services to the students by the faculty/centres and review the agreed



actions”. Student concerns are also identified through surveys and brought to the attention of the relevant committees by student representatives or referred by senior management. These arrangements for dealing with collective complaints appear to be adequate (interviews) but they are dependent on clear terms of reference and reporting lines and quality record-keeping – an area that requires significant improvement as discussed in Section 1.2.

### **1.9. Health and Safety**

GC has arrangements with a local hospital to provide an on-site nurse from 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. Sunday to Thursday to provide medical consultations for students enrolled in both morning and evening classes (Portfolio, p.19, SM147, SM189a). In addition to providing first aid services and general health advice, the nurse refers students in need of urgent care to the nearest hospital. Students with non-urgent health concerns that cannot be addressed by the nurse need to seek external medical advice, for which no specific provision is made.

Although GC buildings are of very recent construction and well maintained, GC is urged to avoid complacency and ensure that appropriate health and safety guidelines are in place. The Panel for example examined the Health and Safety Guidebook (SM050) which is the primary document relevant to health and safety at GC, and noted that this needs significant revision. It is poorly presented and, while containing useful advice, confuses policy (for example the selection of the criteria of choosing the Health and Safety Committee (HSC) is shown alongside procedural advice (such as what to do in case of fire).

The Panel noted that “health and safety committee members are obvious choices of personnel to carry out formal inspections, drills and follow up meetings” (SM050). No guidelines are given, however, to ensure that all areas of the College, including GFP premises, are regularly inspected, that records of the inspections are recorded in a known place, and that hazards are reported to the appropriate person who accepts responsibility for dealing with such matters in a timely manner. The Guidebook itself (p.5) prescribes that “all accidents must be reported and investigated immediately”, but the mechanisms for reporting accidents and incidents are not described. The HEC minutes, furthermore, do not appear to cover these matters; indeed, the minutes given as supporting evidence (SM052) date back to 2014 and refer only to health and safety considerations regarding the construction of the new campus.

A “committee to look upon various procedures for fire safety” is mentioned in the Health and Safety Guidebook (p.6), but other than the number of members (namely, five) no other reference is made to its constitution, how often it meets, its terms of reference and to whom it reports. The Panel confirmed fire drills have been held (SM190c, interviews). The Panel recommends that fire drills are also extended to evening classes.

The GC Staff Satisfaction Survey (SM054) includes a question related to health and safety provisions at the College. In 2016, 34 FFS staff members responded to this question, with 73.5% indicating they were highly or satisfied with health and safety arrangements, and only 2.9% were dissatisfied. Curiously, the Portfolio (p.20) reports that the survey “shows that on average more than 60% of the staff are satisfied with the health and safety procedures and the various activities conducted in relation to this”. The Portfolio (p. 20) refers to a repeat survey in the first semester of AY 2017–2018 to determine causes of dissatisfaction in areas related to health and safety. Although the review took place after the completion of the 2017–2018 AY, no survey data for that year was available.

### **Recommendation 8**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College regularly reviews its Health and Safety Guidebook to ensure that it provides clear guidelines and procedures in relation to health and safety issues.**

## 2. GFP STUDENT LEARNING

The GFP at GC is undergoing changes which have particularly impacted the area of student learning; these changes have been taking place since 2015 when the one-semester IFP was replaced by the two-semester GFP. As discussed earlier, the incomplete documentation of these changes has made it difficult for the Panel to determine how decisions are made, the extent to which these changes have been implemented, and whether the institution has evaluated changes to the curriculum for effectiveness.

This Chapter considers GFP student learning at GC, in terms of GFP aims and learning outcome standards; curriculum; student 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

GC states that the GFP is intended to align with GC's Mission, Vision, Values and Strategic Plan (Portfolio, p.12) and Constructive Alignment Documents (SM015) purport to show this alignment. These do not show clear relationships between the Mission, Vision and Values; GFP aims; GFP learning outcomes; module learning outcomes; assessment elements; indicative assessment criteria; and teaching and learning activities which support each LO. The Portfolio (p.21) also states that the GFP learning outcomes are aligned with the OASGFP, although the Panel found contrary evidence of this as discussed below. The GFP aims and programme outcomes are stated in programme and module handbooks (SM007, SM057, SM059). The Minutes of Meetings on GFP Curriculum Mapping (SM056) explain how the IFP that preceded the GFP IFP aims and learning outcomes are not aligned with the GFP aims and learning outcomes based on the OASGFP. The minutes describe these aims as:

too complex hence confusing, and the way they were drafted is broad and lengthy – putting in so much and various ideas and projections. Some are written as taxonomies of learning targets such as *knowledge* and *understanding*, *analysis*, and *application*. Others are in the form of action or strategy such as *problem solving*, *enquiry*, and *reflection*, and in a form of general objective like the term *learning per se*.

According to the same document, these findings were based on a detailed quantitative assessment of the learning outcomes of all modules against OASGFP. Hence, the College decided to adopt the entire OASGFP per genre as the module learning outcomes of the corresponding GFP modules (SM056). Reference to the aims of the revised GFP is also given in Student Handbook (SM007) and Programme Handbook AY 2016–2017 (SM059).

In addition to the revision of the GFP aims and module learning outcomes, one more characteristic of the new GFP is the adoption of academic English in place of general English, together with Mathematics, IT and a separate Study Skills module; study skills were formerly embedded within the English module. These changes were suggested by the CMet Link Tutor in the EM's report for the GFP (SM006). According to the Portfolio (p.21), "the revised GFP programme structure was designed in July 2017" but interviews during the Audit Visit established that the new academic English curriculum was not implemented until the second semester of AY 2017-2018 (ie from March 2018). GC formed a Post Foundation Focus Group of faculty members to "bridge GFP with GC specialisation programmes" (Portfolio, p.21), although the minutes provided for this group (SM061) do not explicitly focus on aims and learning outcomes; instead, the Focus Group identified challenges in a number of areas and suggested changes to the GFP. It was agreed to implement a one-year (two-semester) structure for the GFP with more credit hours focusing on English language and more intensive language training based on the needs analysis guidance. The evolution of GFP arrangements at GC, including the replacement of general English with academic English came in

response to the OAAA's recommendation to map the GFP to the OASGFP (Portfolio, p.21) during the GFP Pilot Audit in 2015. The alignment of module learning outcomes and programme outcomes was ensured as part of the College action plan to respond to the pilot report. However, the Panel did not find evidence that these changes have yet been systematically structured and evaluated.

On examining the module learning outcomes stated in the Module Handbooks (SM057), the Panel found that some of the OASGFP areas are missing from GC's GFP learning outcomes, indicating that the alignment falls short of meeting the minimum requirements of these standards. For example, the 11 learning outcomes listed in the 2017-2018 Basic Mathematics module handbook (SM057b) correspond to 10 of the 15 learning outcomes mandated for this component of the GFP under the OASGFP. Basic Mathematics areas (h), (i) and (l) to (n) in the OASGFP are not listed in any of the GFP Mathematics handbooks. Regarding English, OASGFP area (e) (writing a report) is not covered by the learning outcomes of GFP Levels 1 or 2 (SM057a, c); and the Level 2 learning outcome for writing specifies a maximum length of 180 words, in contrast to the minimum 250-word length specified in the OASGFP. Further shortcomings were found in the learning outcomes of the Study Skills and IT components.

### **Recommendation 9**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College ensure that all module learning outcomes of the General Foundation Programme are aligned to the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes in order to prepare students for their future higher education studies.**

## **2.2 Curriculum**

As the GC undergraduate programmes are based on a franchised degree from a UK partner institution, preceded by a preliminary undergraduate year referred to as Level 3, taken after the completion of the GFP, it is essential for the GFP graduates to meet the English language requirements for these degrees. Moreover, GFP graduates need to reach an English level high enough (ie IELTS 5.0 or equivalent) to make the attainment of UK English entry standards by the end of the first year of an undergraduate programme realistic.

The replacement of the IFP by the GFP enabled GC to align its in-house, wholly-owned foundation programme arrangements with the Omani Qualifications Framework, but in consequence, the GC GFP is required to conform to the OASGFP. GC uses the term "module" to describe a semester-length course of study in a single area. Unless a student is exempted from one or more modules on the basis of cognate prior education, a full-time student load consists of two modules in the first semester of the GFP (General English Language 1 and Basic Mathematics) and four smaller modules in the second semester (Academic Study Skills, General English Language 2, IT and either Applied Mathematics or Pure Mathematics, for students aspiring to undergraduate study in business or computing, respectively) (SM007).

The revised GFP is a two-semester programme, with 17 weeks which include 15 study weeks and two weeks for reviews and assessments (SM058). Classes in the GFP are co-educational and their size is usually capped at 20 students (Portfolio, p.25), consistent with advice provided in the OASGFP. Classes run from Sunday to Wednesday inclusive, with the first three days in standard classroom mode, while Wednesday classes are run in what is described as a "collaborative learning style" involving group work and oral presentations. There are both morning and evening streams, the former mainly consisting of recent high school leavers, often supported by scholarships, and the latter by self-paying students, typically several years out of school, who work during the day. All GFP teaching and assessment is conducted in English. Some special arrangements are made to accommodate special needs (hearing impaired) students, by teaching them in a single class with a teacher and a signing interpreter (Portfolio, p.38, SM132).

The GFP has a common first semester for all students, regardless of their future UG degree programme, consisting of two modules, namely English Language 1 and Basic Mathematics (GFP-BM01). In the second semester, students study English 2, Study Skills, IT and either Pure Mathematics or Applied Mathematics (tailored for future computer-science related studies) modules. For each module, relevant information is provided to students in a Module Handbook (SM057). Each module handbook lists the module's learning outcomes, learning strategies, assessment details, lecture schedule and textbook details.

Students who pass a placement test are exempted from one or more of the four modules usually taken per semester, so the modules that a student takes in the GFP vary. Some students study all of the eight modules, while others take fewer modules depending on which placement tests they pass.

GC states that “needs analysis, benchmarking, and monitoring and review” have been carried out to guide the recent changes in curriculum (Portfolio, p.21). The Panel saw some evidence of activity in these areas. For example, the GFP is now organised over two semesters rather than one; the Mathematics Learning Outcomes (SM068) are grouped into sets as suggested in the OASGFP, the sets are sequenced logically and GFP students follow a path appropriate to their intended degree, again in accordance with the OASGFP. These changes have been informed by reports from the EM (SM006) and by comparison with the curricula of other relevant Omani institutions (see Section 1.7). However, monitoring and needs analysis are still at a very early stage and need to be more systematic. For example, although a Focus Group exists to link GFP and post-GFP faculty, the Panel saw no clear evidence of systematic data gathering about skills or language needed by students in their degree programmes. No formal monitoring and review mechanisms are currently in place for the new curriculum.

As mentioned above, the GFP Mathematics curriculum is divided and sequenced in line with the OASGFP (SM086). On the other hand, the learning outcomes for English, which the OASGFP does not divide into sets, are less differentiated between levels 1 and 2 of the curriculum. The learning outcomes for English Level 1 (ASM057a) are identical to those of Level 2 (ASM057c), except for the lowering of some quantitative criteria (eg giving a talk of three to four minutes at Level 1 compared with five minutes at Level 2). In the Panel's view, distinguishing between outcomes for the two levels will help facilitate assessment of progress. Without a stronger and clearer distinction between the learning outcomes of the two levels, the monitoring of progress towards the programme's stated learning outcomes and the identification of students at academic risk is problematic.

### **Recommendation 10**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College develop and implement clear and distinct module learning outcomes for each of the two levels of the General Foundation Programme English modules to allow monitoring of student achievement.**

The *Straightforward* book series is being used as a resource for materials to support the curriculum delivery, in line with a greater focus on IELTS. The teaching materials (SM001), for example, use short texts and a grammar focus, which help towards achievement of the new learning outcomes of the GFP.

The Panel found some lack of clarity about the duration of the teaching semester and the nature and extent of teaching activities during each week. For example, the Portfolio (p.21) states that there are 15 teaching weeks in the semester, plus two weeks of examinations; the module information given (SM193f) indicates 14 weeks; the Mathematics teaching schedules show 13 teaching weeks plus two examination weeks (SM001). The balance of hours in the weekly schedule is clearly stated; for example, there is a document (SM068c) showing a total of 78 Class Contact Hours, 26 Guided Learning Hours and 96 Independent Learning Hours. Information from visit interviews suggests that this time is used for homework, but the aims, nature and quantity of this homework were unclear. The Panel had additional concerns about the presentation of in-house teaching and testing materials

and found inconsistent font styles used, spelling and numbering mistakes and clumsy wording (eg, Marked Final Exams in SM193ab, SM193ac).

### **Recommendation 11**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College ensure that all in-house materials and documentation concerning the teaching calendar, class contact hours and examination arrangements be rigorously checked for accuracy and consistency.**

### **2.3 Student Entry and Exit Standards**

GC states that “If the student passes all the modules and scores IELTS 5.0 or equivalent, then he or she can progress to the UG programme at level 3” (Portfolio, p.24). In so far as the GFP’s learning outcomes are aligned with the OASGFP (see Section 2.1 above), this standard reflects the minimum overall standards set by the OASGFP. The OASGFP also specifies a minimum standard for each English language skill: “none of the four areas of writing, speaking, listening and reading below 4.5” (OASGFP, p.12). If the final marks in the English modules, which are benchmarked against IELTS scores through the sampling of five students (SM0252), are simply averaged across the four skills, then a student can pass with 5.0 by gaining a high speaking score, for example, in compensation for weak writing skills. The Student Handbook (SM090) states that students need to score “at least IELTS 4.5 in each of the four components” of IELTS (pp. 24, 28); however, the Module Learning Outcomes for English Semester 2, 2017 (SM001) state that “a student is expected to demonstrate that he/she has achieved an equivalent of IELTS 5.0 [overall]”. It is unclear whether the specific minimum standards are applied in assessing the final English grades of students. In other words, even though students pass the final English test, there is no evidence that their grades are equivalent to IELTS 5.0 (see 2.6). Progression rates for students in the first year of the undergraduate programmes (SM105) show that both GFP graduates and direct entry students in the Business programme had a similarly low pass rate in that level (just over 35%), again suggesting that the standards applied to both groups of students requires review.

### **Recommendation 12**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College ensure that students who pass the English modules of the General Foundation Programme have attained the required level for each of the four English language skills.**

### **2.4 Teaching Quality**

As stated in the Portfolio (p.24), there is a range of procedures in place to monitor and enhance quality in teaching. Institutional Teaching Guidelines (SM076) are detailed, and a clear distinction is drawn between teaching with limited teacher talking time and lecturing, in line with the GC’s Strategic Goal 1: Provide quality teaching and learning environment that meets internationally recognised standards (SM055). The first Value listed by the College is “Teaching and Learning: Gulf College adopts an environment that promotes continuous improvement in teaching, learning, assessment and curriculum based on continuous feedback from Stakeholders”. Moreover, observations by The CCB Manager makes reference to meaningful teaching standards (SM078) and salary incentives are offered for higher standards of teaching. Levels of teaching of FFS tutors from level 1 to level 5 indicate some improvements in observed teaching in terms of teaching skills, levels of student participation and informal feedback given to students in classroom (Figures 2.1-2.3, Portfolio p.26). Peer observation is conducted for developmental purposes, and activities such as Communities of Practice have been created to enhance the sharing of good practices and the maintaining of teaching consistency among lecturers (SM079). Moreover, continuing professional development (CPD) workshops and faculty weekly meetings represent a forum for sharing good practice and encouraging interfaculty discussions and exchanges of ideas (SM080). During interviews with academic staff, the Panel confirmed that they learned from each other during the peer observations about teaching

methods and classroom management techniques. The Panel noted the introduction of a Personal Professional Development Portfolio (PPDP) for each staff member; staff are encouraged to keep abreast with the changing trends and directions of the teaching profession and to incorporate staff research and scholarly activities in their teaching practice (SM082). Students interviewed during the Audit Visit indicated they were satisfied with the teaching they received, finding it supportive, friendly, engaging and educational; this was reflected in a high mean (4.6 out of five) in the Course Experience Survey carried out in 2016 (SM065).

The Panel noted the College's commitment to enhancing teaching and learning. However, the Panel noted that some of the procedures mentioned above are new, and there is not much recent evidence as to how these procedures work in practice. For example, it is not wholly clear what use is being made of the portfolios (SM082) or the peer observation reports (SM084) or of their impact. The Panel examined a sample of the peer observation reports and noted that they are brief and of limited use to the teacher being observed. The Panel believes that additional details and information in these reports would help ensure honest, helpful feedback and add value to the existing supervisor observations.

## 2.5 *Academic Integrity*

According to GC, the GFP has taken a planned approach to raising students' awareness about academic integrity, and this was reflected in the student interviews (Portfolio, p.27). Academic misconduct and plagiarism are addressed in the Student Induction Programme (SM090). Turnitin was used in the second semester of AY 2016-2017 in Academic Study Skills Module to detect plagiarism issues. During interviews the Panel confirmed that this software is being used to identify plagiarism from online sources, and students are given access to it to help them look out for plagiarism in their own work. The Panel also confirmed that the permitted similarity index is 20% and this is indicated to students during the induction programme. However, the Panel did not find evidence that students are provided with adequate training on how to use this software. During interviews, for example, they were not aware of how many times they are allowed to resubmit.

The GFP would benefit from review of the effectiveness of its academic integrity policies and procedures to ensure that students are presenting original work with properly acknowledged sources. Useful data including the frequency of detection of breaches of integrity (in exams and in other work); the nature of sanctions applied; tracking of any repeat offenders; and identification of collusion should be part of these procedures and regulations. Feedback is sought from faculty members in the degree programmes about student compliance with integrity policies (Portfolio p.28), although the findings from this feedback are not yet available. Relevant learning outcomes related to academic integrity are included in the General Study Skills Module (SM001-5a), but it is unclear how these are assessed (see Section 2.6), and the Panel saw no evidence about how effectively students are prepared in this regard.

### **Affirmation 1**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority supports the efforts that Gulf College that the College is making to uphold academic integrity among General Foundation Students, and encourages the College to incorporate these efforts into a more comprehensive system with a review mechanism for its effectiveness.**

## 2.6 *Assessment of Student Achievement*

GC states that assessments are mapped to module learning outcomes and moderated internally and externally (Portfolio, p.28). However, as mentioned in Section 2.2 above, the learning outcomes for English are themselves not clearly distinguished between the two levels, and the mapping between assessment methods and learning outcomes shown in the Constructive Alignment of GFP document (SM015) is the same for both levels. GC also states that marking quality is supported by training of markers and through the practice of second marking (Portfolio, p.28). The examination papers

viewed by the Panel (SM193, SM194) were presented with clear information for students about examination rules and with evidence of approval by a second marker (See Section 2.8).

All for-credit summative assessment tasks in English, Mathematics and IT modules of the GFP are end-of-semester examinations or tests (SM057). Subjects also have formative assessment tasks, not specified in detail in the module handbooks, but these are intended to help students prepare for the summative assessments and do not contribute to the final result in the module (SM057a).

On examining the Module Handbooks (SM057), the Panel noted that assessment of Mathematics, IT and English Writing, Listening and Reading (SM099) is made through class participation, punctuality and guided learning activities, group presentation and portfolio as well as final examinations. According to the Constructive Alignment Document (SM015e), Study Skills and English Speaking are assessed from general or specific performance in class, but examples of such assessed tasks were not available. The Panel noted that there is an end-of-semester “5-10 minute speaking test” (SM057c), and a mock speaking assessment task structured similar to an IELTS speaking task was provided (SM062).

Although the Portfolio (p.28) states that “assessment for each module is linked with the learning outcomes prescribed in the module descriptors which are aligned with the OASGFP, the samples of English and Mathematics final examinations viewed by the Panel focus on a very limited subset of the learning outcomes, resulting in a lack of coverage of learning outcomes in assessment. For example, the English Writing test (SM193f) consists of one writing task that addresses English Module LO4 (composing a short text) but not Module LO2 (writing a paraphrase) or Module LO5 (take notes from a listening text). It was not clear how LO2 and LO5 are assessed since the Panel did not find other assessment tasks in this Module. Furthermore, Module LO7: “Listen to a conversation between two or more speakers and be able to answer questions in relation to context, relationship between speakers, register (e.g. formal or informal)” is only partially assessed in the listening test (SM194a). Mathematics assessments are also limited to summative tests, with the second semester tests mainly re-examining first semester material: for example, in the Applied Mathematics module examination (SM193ab), the only material tested from the module content (for 15 marks on a 100-mark exam with a pass mark of 40) is through the construction of a bar chart from tabular data (two columns, six rows).

### **Recommendation 13**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College fully aligns the General Foundation Programme assessments and the module learning outcomes to ensure that student achievement of the learning outcomes is being assessed effectively.**

Despite training being provided for markers, the marking of tests is not always accurate and comprehensive. For example, in a marked writing examination viewed by the Panel (SM194a), the marker failed to notice grammatical, comprehension and spelling errors, for example “alot” (instead of “a lot”), using “attention” instead of “intention”, and spelling “distance” as “distanse”.

GC states that “as GFP is adapted from OASGFP, students must get 40 marks out of a hundred in order to get a pass mark” (Portfolio, p.28). However, the OASGFP does not mention a specific pass mark, stating only that a student must achieve all of the learning outcomes (OASGFP, p.7). Interviewees gave varying explanations for the origin of the pass mark but the rationale for 40 marks being a pass mark remains unclear. Furthermore, in the “conversion tables” which guide the equivalence of English scores with IELTS (SM001-10f), the pass mark appears to be not 40% but 40/59 (in Speaking and Writing) or 40/67 (in Listening and Reading).

As noted above in Section 2.3, GFP students are required to both pass all of the modules and also attain the equivalent of at least 5.0 overall in Academic IELTS before they can enrol in their undergraduate programmes. Passing each module is decided on the basis of the College’s own pass mark (40%), while the IELTS requirement relies upon a mapping of the GFP English test marks to

IELTS bands. Conversion tables (SM001-10f) set out the mapping between the two scores for each skill area (Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking): the pass mark in each GFP exam (40 out of 100) is assumed to be equivalent to the lower boundary of IELTS band 5.0, and ranges of marks are mapped to IELTS bands. For example, in Speaking and Writing, marks between 36-39 are assumed to be equivalent to IELTS 4.5, while marks between 45-50 are mapped to IELTS 5.5. The Panel requested evidence of how these conversions were determined, but no documentary evidence was available. The Panel was informed during interviews that the conversion tables are a legacy from the IFP when the College used a model provided by SU for this purpose.

The College, in the second semester AY 2017/2018 has made one attempt thus far to benchmark the GFP graduates' English proficiency against IELTS by asking a very small sample of five student volunteers to take an IELTS test near the end of their second semester (results shown in SM252). All five students gained GFP English scores in the low 50s in their final exams at GC, which according to the conversion tables is equivalent to IELTS band 6.0. The weakest student actually gained an IELTS 5.0 overall (the minimum passing standard according to the learning outcomes of the GFP), while the strongest gained 6.5 IELTS overall. This indicates that the conversion tables (SM001-10f) and the GFP marking guidelines need to be revised to provide more accurate equivalences. A larger sample of students with varying levels of English language proficiency needs to be used to establish whether the students are actually achieving IELTS 5.0 (see Recommendation 14 under Section 2.3).

In Basic Mathematics, the Panel found the level of assessment questions too simple for the level and the marking standards overly generous. The final examination addresses only index laws, arithmetic, and elementary algebra (expanding brackets). A student answering a question on compound interest could gain more than half the marks by answering the question as a simple interest question (SM246). The excessively generous marking for low-level Mathematics skills and inadequate spread of questions across the range of curriculum topics makes it difficult for the Panel to conclude that the GFP is in effective compliance with the OASGFP in Mathematics modules.

Marking standards in IT raised no immediate concerns but there was no evidence to relate the standards of questions or of marking to any external benchmark such as IC3 or ICDL. The Panel examined samples of marked IT examination papers (SM194b) and found that they barely linked to the Module learning outcomes, and the OASGFP embedded therein. Indeed, they consist of basic Word and PowerPoint skill questions, and file and folder use. In addition, in common with the other module examinations, they are compromised by close similarity to the mock examinations given the week before (see Section 2.8 below). This similarity was confirmed during interviews with student and teachers as well.

#### **Recommendation 14**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College benchmark General Foundation Programme assessment in Mathematics and Information Technology modules to ensure students are adequately prepared for subsequent undergraduate study pathways.**

Rates of failure and non-submission of assignments appear to be high in all modules. This is referred to in the EM's report for AY 2016-2017 (SM20a). This refers to students who do not show up during the examination time or do not submit their required assignment. In the GFP Board minutes from July 2017 (SM021b), non-submission rates are much lower than for re-sits, but still high (as high as 16.9%, depending on module). The combination of 44 fails (16%) and 46 non-submissions (17%) for the General English module out of 272 test-takers in July 2017 was a cause for deep concern. This is an improvement on the 78 (26%) of 303 scheduled test-takers who failed to show for the February 2017 assessment but is still very high. The Panel requested additional evidence of the analysis and how results were used to inform decision making (SM213) but was referred back to another document (SM105), which does not provide evidence of a clear plan to address non-submission. The Panel urges GC to investigate and take action to ensure better examination attendance rates in future.



## 2.7 *Feedback to Students on Assessment*

GC states that students receive feedback on a regular basis through an Assessment Feedback System that is communicated to students through the module handbook at the beginning of the semester (SM057) and that faculty are supported by training, observation and materials in giving helpful feedback (Portfolio, p.29, SM005C, SM0057). Some examples of detailed feedback were seen by the Panel (SM098, SM099), but no evidence was given of improvement that took place in a student's performance as a result of this feedback.

GC claims that students receive various forms of feedback such as formal, informal, written or oral, individual or group. It also says that it monitors the timeliness of the assessment feedback through the Centre for Capacity Building (CCB) (Portfolio, p.29). The Panel found evidence that the CCB monitors the timeliness of feedback (SM101), but the proportion of students receiving feedback is quite low (average below 60%, SM101) suggesting that the system of feedback on assessment is not fully deployed. In addition, the type of feedback (ie, whether written or oral, individual or group) is not shown. GFP Faculty Meeting Minutes (SM017) are cited as evidence of teachers receiving guidance on the feedback system (Portfolio, p.29), but that evidence is not apparent in the minutes.

A sample of completed feedback forms were viewed by the Panel (Formative Assessment Feedback) (SM098) but the feedback given in these forms appeared limited. In the 2016 Student Survey (SM045), a relatively low proportion (only 62.4%) were satisfied with assessment feedback. No surveys were conducted after 2016. During interviews, the Panel heard that students received feedback for the mock examination and this was considered to be helpful, but no other feedback was mentioned for other types of assessments. A consolidated statistical report called Formative Feedback 2016-2017 Semester 2 (SM098) shows the total number of GFP students in each module and the number of students who received feedback but it is not made clear who evaluates this information and how it is used to inform decision-making. The mode of providing this information, furthermore, is not made clear.

### **Recommendation 15**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College review its Assessment Feedback System to ensure that effective feedback is provided for General Foundation Programme students on their academic performance in all types of assessment.**

## 2.8 *Academic Security and Invigilation*

GC describes detailed procedures for keeping examination papers secure before, during and after GFP examinations (Portfolio, p.29) and claims that the system is working well. Evidence to support this statement is not available in the Portfolio, but evidence gathered by the Panel in interviews during the Audit Visit suggests that faculty are familiar with examination procedures and that the procedures are implemented. The Panel was particularly impressed by the special invigilation measures used in the examination for hearing impaired students (Portfolio, p.38, interviews). The College has a detailed procedure for conducting the assessments and invigilation (SM094, SM102, SM103). During its campus tour, the Panel established that assessment records are kept secure and a rigorous invigilation process is followed for those modules that have an examination component.

The Panel noted, however, that mock examinations given to students to practice are very similar to the actual examinations (SM062). This undermines confidence in a student's achievement and raises questions about the security of the exam papers since the questions have a high degree of similarity. For example, questions in the Maths Mock Exam (SM243) mirror those in the actual exam which followed it (SM193), with only different numbers inserted. The IT Mock (SM243) and final examinations (SM193) include similar or identical steps, with trivial changes to a few words. In English, the Writing Mock Exam (SM062) focuses on "A place I visited" and "My hometown", while the final examination (SM001) requires students to write about "My village" and "My favourite places in Oman". This means that students enter the test primed for the specific topics and

questions to be asked, thus compromising the integrity of the examination in assessing student attainment of learning outcomes.

### **Recommendation 16**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College ensures the integrity and security of its final exam papers by eliminating the similarity between mock and final examinations in General Foundation Programme Modules as a matter of urgency in order to be able to assess objectively the attainment of the module learning outcomes.**

## **2.9 Student Retention and Progression**

GC aims to “maintain high retention and progression rates of its students in line with those students on similar programmes elsewhere and also benchmarks those rates with the partner universities” (Portfolio, p.30). GC acknowledges the low progression rate of the GFP students overall (60% in the AY 2016-2017) and refers to actions that were taken to increase these rates (Portfolio, p.31). These actions include the revision of the curriculum in the AY 2016-2017 (see Section 2.2.), introducing a re-sit examination every semester so that students do not have to wait for one full semester before repeating an examination they failed, and conducting workshops on plagiarism and Turnitin. GC also describes the changes made to strengthen the academic advising system as well as gathering feedback on academic and non-academic issues that students may experience in the course of their GFP study to increase progression rates (Portfolio, p.31). GC claims that there is a connection between their programme revision and improved student retention and progression rates (Portfolio, p.30) but the Panel found no evidence to support this conclusion.

The College presents statistics showing a retention rate of 95% for 2016-2017 and an overall progression rate of 62% (Portfolio, pp.30-31). The latter figure is affected by the progression rate for the English modules, while progression rates for the other GFP modules are higher (e.g. 80% in IT). The Panel requested additional supplementary material containing detailed statistics on the progression and pass rate level-wise for the past five years but was simply referred to data of students progressing from GFP to the first year of the undergraduate programme (SM105) and to Table 2 in Appendix A in the Portfolio (p. 57). On examining both documents, the Panel noted that they only show results for the whole cohort. The Panel did not find evidence of regular analysis of student results in relation to relevant student characteristics such as gender, age, background, placement test performance or time of classes, with no disaggregation against any attribute. In the Panel’s view, failure to engage effectively with data in this area represented a missed opportunity for improvement.

### **Recommendation 17**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College establish and implement a comprehensive system to collect and analyse detailed information about retention and progression of General Foundation Programme students to inform decision making about maintaining adequate rates in these areas.**

The Panel also noticed a lack of analysis of the performance of GFP students who have progressed to their academic degree programmes; for example, the high failure rate during the first year of undergraduate programmes (SM105) (see section. 1.3); this would suggest a lack of preparedness in students graduating from the GFP. In the Panel’s view analysis of this kind would help to review the GFP curriculum in order to improve the learning experience of GFP students.

**Recommendation 18**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College periodically and systematically collect and effectively use the feedback from General Foundation Programme alumni to improve the General Foundation Programme curriculum and student services.**

**2.10 Relationships with GFP Alumni**

The Panel was pleased to see that the experience of GFP graduates is shared through the “Learning from Seniors” programme, whereby GFP alumni visit current GFP students and discuss their own study experiences and give advice for specific GFP modules (Portfolio, p.31, SM106). During interviews, the Panel heard positive feedback from students receiving them. This was also confirmed by examining the documents provided (SM106). Despite this initiative, and in view of the GFP’s mission to prepare students for degree studies, the interface between GFP and post-GFP needs to be more systematic and elaborate.

GC identifies other areas in which to consider alumni engagement in order “to get valuable insights and maintain a positive relationship with them” (Portfolio, p.32). These areas include programme reviews, student induction, networking and communication activities. The Panel concurs with the College’s intention in this direction and encourages GC to put their intentions into action. While the informal contact between GFP alumni and GFP students helps individual students, feedback from GFP alumni is a valuable source of data to help monitor and review the effectiveness of the whole programme in achieving its goals.

**Affirmation 2**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority supports Gulf College in engaging with its General Foundation Programme alumni, and concurs with the College in its intention to widen the scope of this relationship to include other areas such as programme review, student induction, networking and other communication activities.**

### 3. ACADEMIC AND STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

This Chapter covers the academic and student support services that GC provides to GFP students. It presents the Panel findings related to these services. These include the GFP student profile, registry, student induction, teaching and learning resources, information and learning technology services, academic advising, student learning support, student satisfaction and climate, student behaviour, non-academic support and facilities, and external engagement.

#### 3.1 *Student Profile*

GC maintains and manages student data from admission to graduation through a College-wide information system at the Centre of Admission and Registration (CAR). The Panel noted that although the CAR is not mentioned in either the existing Quality Manual (SM005c) or the draft revision of the manual dated February 2018 that was provided on request to the Panel, it is listed in the Student Handbook (SM007).

For the AY 2016-2017, the Semester 1 module enrolments varied between 314 and 322 for females and between 696 and 722 for males. At the time of this Audit, the total number of enrolled GFP students was 1044 (1025 Omanis and 19 international students). Morning stream module enrolments are slightly larger than the evening stream enrolments.

The information system records relevant personal data at the time of admission, including a student's previous qualification(s) and entry level, and is updated progressively with data on attendance, summative assessment results, and progression, as the student undertakes studies at the College (Portfolio, p.33). During the AY 2016-2017, GC had a population of 1044 students enrolled in the GFP of which 31% were female and 69% were male students. Almost half of the student population study in the evening stream (47%) while the remaining portion study in the mornings. There were 19 international students enrolled in the GFP during the AY 2016-2017, representing less than 2% of the total GFP enrolment for that year. No similar data was available for the AY 2017-2018 because the academic year was still underway.

In the AY 2016-2017, 39 students with special needs were enrolled in the GFP. One of them was visually impaired and the remaining were hearing impaired. The Panel was pleased to see that the GFP has a number of special needs students, that provisions are made for them (such as a sign language interpreter) and that these students are welcomed as part of an enriched diversity in the student cohort (Portfolio, p.33) (see also Section 3.7).

GC states that the FFS utilises student profile data as a basis for streaming students into intakes or batches, offering different modes of study, ensuring the provision of appropriate services, and designing teaching and learning strategies (Portfolio, p.33). While some of these uses were evident to the Panel, such as the number of batches and the distribution of students into different study modes (ie morning and evening sessions), no evidence was available about how the data are used to enhance teaching and learning, and to develop the GFP. The Panel requested evidence of this but the documents provided (SM200) were not related to this area. The Panel was informed that the documents provided reflect the resources that have been allocated to the GFP based on student numbers. However, the Panel was unable to establish this from the documentation. GC needs to carry out ongoing analysis and monitoring of its student profile data in order to make informed decisions to enhance teaching and learning on the GFP, to provide appropriate resources and to further develop the programme.

#### **Recommendation 19**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College monitor and analyse General Foundation Programme student profile data on a regular basis and use the results of this analysis to enhance teaching and learning, and ensure the provision of effective services to General Foundation Programme students.**

### 3.2 *Registry (Enrolment and Student Records)*

CAR is the unit responsible for the admission and registration of GFP students (Portfolio, p.33). The processes and procedures for admission and registration are outlined in the Student Handbook (SM007) and in the Admission and Registration Staff Handbook (SM175). CAR conducts workshops for staff and students to facilitate admission and registration processes (Portfolio, p.33; SM107). The effectiveness and efficiency of the admission and registration services are measured through the college-wide Student Survey (SM045). Extrapolating from the data therein, this survey shows that students from across the whole college are generally satisfied with these services. The Panel encourages GC to consider those issues where student satisfaction is low, such as the issuance of request letters (57%), the SMS system (51.5%) and the friendliness of staff and giving useful information to students (63% satisfied). Moreover, the Panel urges GC to collect feedback on GFP services specifically from GFP students in GFP student satisfaction surveys to ensure that results are not being diluted by college-wide responses. GC is advised to consider this opportunity for improvement and either consider this distinction within the existing surveys or develop faculty-based surveys of their own.

Online registration was introduced in the AY 2017-2018 to make the process of registration easier and faster (Portfolio p.34; SM053). The Panel was informed that online registration is still a challenge that needs to be fully resolved. Although efforts are made to guide students on how to use the system, students prefer to register for modules manually (interviews). This preference has led to another challenge noted by the Panel during interviews, of students crowding in the CAR queueing for help with registration, especially at the beginning of each semester, thus exacerbating the problem which the online system was designed to overcome. To mitigate this and to maintain order in serving students, the CAR has introduced a token system.

Student attendance regulations are stipulated in the Attendance Policy available in the GFP Student Handbook (SM007, pp.12-13) which students receive during their induction programme. The Panel concluded, from the examination of examples of warning letters issued to students regarding their absence, that the attendance regulations are not strictly enforced. For example, based on the Attendance Policy, a student exceeding 14 days of unauthorised absence should be either suspended from attending the module and its assessment, or suspended from all the of the modules and their assessments for one semester. However, a review of the warning letters provided to the Panel shows that there are some cases of students whose absence exceeds 14 days and they were only issued with warning letters and some proceeded to the final examination (SM204). Moreover, the Panel heard during interviews that the practice is that if students withdraw before the final exam due to their absence, it does not count as a fail, and they can repeat the exam without additional financial charges; this arrangement is only partially covered in the submission (Portfolio, p.28). The attendance regulations need to be deployed consistently in the GFP.

#### **Recommendation 20**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College ensure consistent implementation of its Attendance Policy within the General Foundation Programme to enhance the student learning opportunity.**

### 3.3 *Student Induction*

At the beginning of each semester, GC provides an induction to students enrolling in the GFP. The induction lasts for two days and is intended to ensure that all newly enrolled students are well aware of their responsibilities as students at the College, and to inform them about the support services and facilities available to them (Portfolio p.35; SM111). There was no indication in the Portfolio as to whether a specific unit or individual at GC is in charge of organising the induction. However, the Panel learnt during interviews that many different units conduct this activity, including the CAR and Student Affairs Department.

During induction, students are provided with different materials and handbooks, including an Induction Pack, the GFP Student Handbook, the IT Services Handbook, the Centre for Learning Resources (Library) Handbook and the Student Disciplinary Handbook (SM117). At the start of the induction programme, students are given a welcome speech by the College Dean and taken on a campus tour to show them the different support centres and the facilities available on campus. Finally, students meet their Academic Advisors where they are offered guidance on how to progress to their higher education programmes, and are asked to read and sign the Learner Agreement (Portfolio, p.35, SM007, SM090, SM114, SM115, SM116, SM117).

The effectiveness of the student induction is measured through a survey (SM118a, SM118b). The results of the survey conducted in Semester 1, AY 2017-2018 showed either low satisfaction or dissatisfaction with many of the induction activities, including the campus tour, their awareness about the duties and responsibilities under the Code of Student Conduct, and their awareness of the Virtual Learning Gateway (Moodle). Satisfaction in these areas was below 50%, indicating that not all aspects of the induction programme were effective. However, the Panel noted that GC had identified these areas of concerns and developed an action plan to address them in subsequent induction programmes (SM119). The Panel was provided with evidence that a Student Induction Survey was conducted to measure student satisfaction with the induction programme that took place in March 2018, at the beginning of the second semester of the AY 2017-2018 (SM250). The analysis of this survey results was not completed in time for the Audit Visit (SM250j). The Panel encourages GC to analyse the survey and compare the results with the previous survey findings in order to determine if there are any improvements in student satisfaction levels as a result of the action plan that was implemented (SM119).

The Panel had some concerns about student attendance in the induction programme. Based on the statistics provided in the supporting materials (SM208; SM250d) there is a low level of attendance, especially by students from the evening stream, with 68% of new students from morning classes attending induction, compared to only 52% of new students from the evening classes. The Panel suggests that measures are introduced to improve student attendance in induction activities, which are regularly reviewed and assessed for effectiveness, to ensure that every student enrolling in the GFP attends the induction programme.

### **3.4 Teaching and Learning Resources**

GC provides teaching and learning resources for its students and staff through the Centre for Learning Resources (CLR) and Centre for Information Technology E-Learning (CITE). GFP students and new teaching staff are informed about the available learning and teaching resources in classrooms and in CLR and CITE (SM090) through their general induction activities. GC conducts workshops for GFP staff on how to utilise the e-Learning resources and the Moodle learning management system (Portfolio p.36, SM120, SM123).

At the time of the Audit Visit, there were 18 computer laboratories at GC, each equipped with an average of 25 computers. Seven of these labs are designated for the FFS for teaching GFP modules and as open access laboratories for GFP students. Some multimedia software for learning English has been installed (Portfolio, p.37).

From interviews, the Panel learned that the teaching resources are recommended by module teachers based on the teaching and learning needs. Students are provided with individual books for the English Module and learning materials for the other three modules (Portfolio p.36, SM126). Some other teaching materials are prepared in house by GFP instructors (See Section.2.2). Students can access these materials online using Moodle. Teaching staff also have a virtual folder, the Module Box, where teachers can upload their module learning materials. Staff are also given access to online resources with CMet. However, GFP students do not have access to these CMet online resources and the justification provided was unclear: GC stated that, GFP students “are part of the quality assurance programme which does not provide this facility to the students” (GC's response to Matter of Clarification). The Panel urges GC to review this arrangement for the benefit of its GFP students.

The Panel noticed the range and the availability of teaching and learning resources that GC provides for GFP students and staff. However, the Panel did not find evidence of a tracking system in place to monitor and evaluate the level of staff and student utilisation of these resources. This is another opportunity for improvement. GC also needs to regularly measure the appropriateness and adequacy of the resources and address any additional learning needs. Unlike the Staff Satisfaction Survey, the Student Satisfaction Survey conducted in 2016 shows moderate to low levels of student satisfaction in many areas related to teaching and learning resources (SM045) (60% and below).

### **Recommendation 21**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College develop and implement a mechanism to monitor General Foundation Programme staff and student use of teaching and learning resources, and to regularly measure stakeholder satisfaction with these resources to ensure that they are adequate and meet the needs of General Foundation Programme staff and students.**

### **3.5 Information and Learning Technology Services**

The provision of information and learning technology services for GFP students is the responsibility of CITE. The Centre is also responsible for ensuring the availability of internet across the campus and the procurement of hardware and licensed software (Portfolio, p.37). The Panel noted that the IT services which are provided by CITE are listed in the IT Services Handbook (SM115) which is given to students and staff. The Centre has also launched an IT Helpdesk System which enables GFP staff and students to request IT support or lodge complaints about any IT related resources using an online form. The IT Services Handbook contains instructions on how to use the Helpdesk system. GFP staff members are provided with a computer and Wi-Fi is available throughout the campus to assist their teaching (Portfolio p.36, SM123).

GC does not have written policies for procurement, maintenance, upgrading, and replacement of hardware and software; however, this area is looked after by CITE which is responsible for the provision of information and learning technology services for students (Portfolio, p.36, SM115, SM116). During interviews, the Panel was informed that the College's budgeting process allows for depreciation of IT equipment and computers in the laboratories are replaced and updated as needed. However, the documents that the College provide in this regard (SM032 a and b) do not support this claim as they do not reflect any detailed planning for learning technologies provision.

GC has adopted Moodle as its virtual learning management system to support teaching and learning on all programmes, including the GFP. According to the satisfaction surveys, both staff (76%) and students (56%) are moderately satisfied with this system (SM054, SM045). The implementation and maintenance of Moodle is supervised by the CITE and by the Moodle Coordinator, who provides support and training for students and staff on how to use the system (Portfolio, p.37, SM123). The Panel noted, based on interviews with different Moodle users, that the system is currently used solely as a passive repository of teaching materials. With the help of the Moodle Coordinator, GFP teachers upload materials in the form of Word or pdf files, which students can access within or outside the campus (Portfolio, p.37). Some interviewees considered the main advantage of Moodle to be "paper reduction" within GC although many students still print documents uploaded on Moodle. Interactive features of the Moodle system, such as forums or discussion boards, appear to be scarcely used thus far by staff and students (interviews). This represents a lost opportunity for enhanced teaching and learning. Moreover, the Panel did not find any system in place to track and monitor use of Moodle by GFP staff and students in order to evaluate its effectiveness in supporting the learning experience. This is an issue which needs to be addressed.

The effectiveness of the general information and learning technology services is measured through student and staff satisfaction surveys which were conducted in 2016 (SM045; SM054 respectively). While staff members seem to be satisfied with IT services, the results of the student survey show moderate and low-level satisfaction among GFP students in some areas of the IT provision, such as

the regularity of software updates (58.2% satisfied), network speed (51.1% satisfied), and Internet service and Wi-Fi (49.2% satisfied). Although GC claims that the CITE has taken this into account and an additional connection has been procured to ensure uninterrupted and higher speed internet service, the Panel heard there were still concerns about the speed of internet and Wi-Fi services, so further attention to this matter may be required. The general satisfaction survey has not been repeated since 2016 and current data is not available. GC is encouraged to evaluate the use of information and learning technology resources by GFP students and staff on an ongoing basis, and track staff and students' usage of these resources.

### **Recommendation 22**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College develop and implement mechanisms and processes to evaluate the effectiveness and adequacy of the information and learning technology resources and services, monitor General Foundation Programme staff and students' use of these resources and services, and use the data obtained to make improvements.**

### **3.6 Academic Advising**

Academic Advising (AA) at GC is a shared responsibility between a student's allocated academic advisor, module tutor, Centre for Admission and Registration and the Centre for Capacity Building (Portfolio, p.37). The AA Policy (SM130) has been incorporated in the GFP Student Handbook (SM007) to help direct the students towards support. GC provides training workshops for students on AA students to familiarise them with the AA system (Portfolio p.37; SM131). A registered GC student is assigned to one academic advisor upon joining the College; this advisor is also a module tutor. Students are informed about their assigned academic advisor and the hours designated for advising by the module tutors on the first day of classes (Portfolio, p.38; SM136, SM137).

Feedback on academic advising is elicited from students and staff through satisfaction surveys (SM045, SM054). However, the Panel found evidence of inadequate analysis of potentially useful data, for example in terms of the student at risk data presented (SM043). No disaggregation of the prevalence and degree of risk according to gender, nationality, fee status (scholarship or self-paying) or attendance time (morning or evening) is included in the supplementary material. In the absence of such analyses, the effective allocation of extra resources to reduce academic risk in cohorts where risk is most prevalent is compromised.

FFS student responses to the items related to AA in the Student Satisfaction Survey 2016 (SM045) show (65.6%) of the 146 GFP students who participated in this survey are satisfied with the availability of their academic advisors while (26.9%) were neutral and (5.9%) were not satisfied; (65.9%) think that the academic advisors gave them useful information about which modules to choose while (22.0%) and (6.8%) were not satisfied; (67.9%) agreed on the friendly approach of their academic advisors whereas (20.9%) were neutral and (10.5%) were not satisfied. The results show a neutral response towards AA and this was confirmed during interviews with GFP students who expressed mixed feelings about AA. Moreover, and on examining the action plan prepared by the College based on the results of this survey (SM046a, SM046b), the Panel did not find any action plans superficially addressing GFP student feedback, an issue that GC needs to consider and improve.

### **Recommendation 23**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College develop and implement an action plan to improve the effectiveness of the academic advising services provided to General Foundation Programme students, and regularly measure student satisfaction with this service.**



### 3.7 *GFP Student Learning Support*

Student learning support takes different forms at GC. “Learning from Seniors” (see Section 2.10), for example, can be considered a form of learning support since GFP students are given the opportunity to learn from their post-foundation peers in terms of beneficial study habits and preparation for assessments. However, and although CG says that “this is done on a regular basis” (Portfolio, p.38), the College did not provide evidence to support the claim of the frequency of this initiative. The only document the College provided to the Panel in this regard was the feedback of ten GFP students on one session conducted by two first-year seniors on their Math experience (SM106) in March 2017. The few students who, during interviews, mentioned the experience, stated they had mixed opinions of the value of this initiative.

Students at risk are identified by the module tutors after the formative test in the fourth week of the semester (SM134, interviews). In addition, the Panel heard that several methods are used to identify students at risk, starting with first impressions from in-class observations, student results in the GFP placement tests and their results in mock examinations. Students at risk are provided with additional AA hours called "pastoral" support sessions (Portfolio, p.38). Pastoral support sessions are offered exclusively to the students who fail in the final examinations and the sessions are directed towards helping students to prepare for the re-sit examination in the modules they have failed (SM214).

Students with special needs are considered by GC in AA by providing an interpreter with the academic advisor so that the students can communicate with their advisor through the interpreter (Portfolio, p.38). The Panel was impressed by the support and opportunities that GC provides to students with special needs. In the AY 2016-2017, 39 students with special needs were enrolled in the GFP. One of them was visually impaired and the remaining were hearing impaired. The Panel was pleased to find that specific arrangements are made to accommodate special needs students, by teaching them in a single class with a teacher and a sign interpreter present during academic advising sessions (Portfolio, p.38). Moreover, a Special Needs Student Coordinator is tasked with helping these students in case of emergencies.

#### **Commendation 1**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Gulf College for providing adequate and effective support to students with special needs and helping them integrate in the General Foundation Programme teaching and learning process.**

### 3.8 *Student Satisfaction and Climate*

GC has established the Student Support Service Centre to help in maintaining a positive and constructive climate for GFP students and to ensure that student needs are properly addressed (Portfolio, p. 39). The Centre for Quality Management (CQM) administers the Student Satisfaction Surveys (SM045) to obtain feedback from the students about various services offered by the College such as AA, catering service, the enrolment process, CLR facilities, library services, extracurricular activities. Based on the satisfaction survey results, GC develops action plans to address student dissatisfaction and to resolve the issues raised by students (SM046). The Panel found little evidence that actions are taken based on the results of these surveys (SM049, SM125).

GFP student voices are intended to be heard through the SSLC, which, based on its terms of reference, meets twice per year to give opportunity to GFP students to express their opinions and give their feedback on how to enhance academic and non-academic support services (Portfolio, p. 39, SM218). The Panel was provided with the goals and objectives of the SSLC, its terms of reference and the operational procedures for meetings (SM218). As the Panel had been provided with the minutes for only one SSLC meeting (dated January 2017), GC was requested to submit additional minutes to establish the regularity and the frequency of these meetings and the nature of students' contributions to the meeting agenda; however, no additional material was provided. Interviews revealed that GFP students are typically not aware of this Committee, although the Panel heard that one GFP student had been to an SSLC meeting once. This raises concerns about the

effectiveness of the SSLC and whether it is fulfilling its role. In addition, this suggests that greater awareness needs to be raised about this Committee and its ability to communicate GFP students' needs.

#### **Recommendation 24**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College collect regular feedback from General Foundation Programme students on their satisfaction with various aspects of the programme, and use this feedback to make improvements which are communicated back to students.**

GC claims that a positive and constructive climate is assured by organising extracurricular activities for GFP students, including cultural, social and sports activities (Portfolio, p.39; SM138; SM219). However, there is limited information about the effectiveness of these activities in relation to building a positive climate. Data about participation levels by GFP students in these activities, and how their views and opinions are considered in planning is not collected, the Panel heard that after each activity there is an evaluation form which gives GFP students the opportunity to give their feedback on the activity (interviews) but this evidence was not available. GC is encouraged to systematically evaluate extracurricular activities in order to ensure their relevance and plan improvements that support the objectives of the GFP.

### **3.9 Student Behaviour**

Communicating expectations to GFP students regarding their behaviour is carried out during the induction week (Portfolio, p.40). This is achieved by providing students with different documents containing policies and regulations related to student behaviour such as the Student Handbook (SM007), (SM090) and a Learner's Agreement (SM114). When GC was asked to provide evidence in the form of registers or reports of how behavioural misconduct incidents by GFP students are processed, and showing the outcome for each case, the response by the College was that there was "Nothing to report" (SM220). Instead, the Panel was referred to the audit submission (Portfolio, p.40).

The main document the College refers to in respect of student behaviour is the Student Disciplinary Handbook (SM117) issued in November 2015. The handbook refers to the formation of the Disciplinary Committee, terms of reference and the disciplinary penalties to be imposed for violations of the disciplinary code. The Quality Assurance Manual, on the other hand the only, does not refer to any sort of behavioural misconduct other than plagiarism and academic dishonesty (p.45). Moreover, the Panel did not find any evidence that the College maintains records of behavioural misconduct.

Although the Panel was informed during interviews that no serious incidents have taken place in the College so far, and that small issues of this sort are often settled informally, it advises the College to address this gap and ensure formal documentation of these incidents regardless of their scope or impact.

### **3.10 Non-Academic Student Support Services and Facilities**

A variety of non-academic support services and facilities are provided for GFP students, especially as a result of the shift to the new campus in 2014. The College is equipped with up-to-date non-academic facilities such as coffee shops, restaurants, a medical clinic, prayer halls, an auditorium (with a seating capacity of 1000), landscaping, car parks, an off-campus hostel for female students, an outdoor Roman Theatre (300 seating capacity), a gymnasium (male and female), an indoor sports stadium and an outdoor sports yard (Portfolio, p.40). Another form of non-academic support that GC provides to its GFP students is financial support. Self-sponsored students can pay their fees in instalments. There are also fee discounts for students who are from low income families. Moreover, student loans are available with repayments commencing six months after graduation (interviews).

Students are provided with opportunities for learning outside the classroom through visits to factories and museums (SM139, SM219). Some extracurricular activities are organised for students throughout the academic year (SM138). Nevertheless, interviews revealed that when post-GFP students undertook their foundation programme, there were no excursions and there were few extracurricular activities. This confirms the result of the Student Satisfaction Survey (SM045) where less than 60% of the GFP students showed satisfaction with extracurricular activities (57.3%).

For the 19 international students enrolled at GC, the Centre of Administration and Finance provides help with visas and finding hostel or other accommodation. There is also an International Students Ambassador Club, which was established in 2916 “to promote well-being of international students, and promote friendship and interaction among international students by sharing practical tips about life in Oman” (SM269).

The Panel noticed the range of services and facilities provided to GFP students. However, the Panel has some concerns related to the hostel. Meetings were held with students in the hostel to ensure that the hostel environment is conducive to their studies (Portfolio, p.40). While minutes for three of these meetings, dated April 2016, May 2016 and March 2017 (SM145, SM222) report a number of issues, there is no evidence that remedial action was taken. Moreover, the Panel noticed that student satisfaction with the hostel is rarely evaluated; the Student Satisfaction Survey, for example, conducted in 2016 did not include items specifically related to hostel condition and services.

### **Recommendation 25**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College develop and implement a system to regularly obtain feedback from General Foundation Programme students on the hostel and issues related to accommodation, and respond to this feedback in order to ensure that the hostel is appropriate and meets the needs of General Foundation Programme students.**

### **3.11 External Engagement**

GC is an ISO 9001:2008 certified institution (SM149) and has memberships in various professional bodies, such as The Association of Arab Universities, The Arab Organisation for Quality Assurance in Education, Arab European Leadership Network in Higher Education, and Oman Association for Quality in Higher Education (SM150). While it is stated in the Portfolio that FFS benefits from GC's certifications and memberships, no further information is provided (Portfolio, p.41).

External engagement relating to the GFP can partly be counted in terms of interaction with the affiliate partnerships. For example, an outcome of external engagement is the contribution of the affiliated university (CMet) to the changes that took place in the English Module with the shift of focus from General English to Academic English, and the provision of Study Skills as a separate module (see 2.1). GC states that the College is ISO certified and claims that the GFP benefits from this but does not explain how. Attempts at benchmarking with Majan University College, Muscat College and Mazoon College have been made but these are not commented upon in detail (Portfolio, p.22). As social responsibility is one of GC's core values it may be expected that GFP students would be inducted to various activities relating to the wider community but this is currently an area under-addressed, or at least under-reported, in GC's submission. The Panel does acknowledge, however, GC's outreach towards special needs sections of the community as mentioned elsewhere in this Report. The Panel urges GC to adopt a broader notion of external engagement and to approach this engagement through planned activities that relate to the general Mission and Vision of the College.

### **Recommendation 26**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College develop and implement an operational plan for external engagement involving students of the General Foundation Programme with clear targets and Key Performance Indicators in line with the college Value of Social Responsibility.**

## 4. STAFF AND STAFF SUPPORT SERVICES

The Centre of Administration and Finance (CAF) at GC is responsible for managing, supervising and maintaining all staff and staff support services in the College. All these functions are guided by the Strategic Plan of the College, although the Panel could not find a direct link between these areas and the Strategic Goals of the College. In order to fulfil these functions, CAF is assisted by two other entities, namely Centre for Quality Management (CQM) and the Human Resources Unit. The policies and procedures related to staff and staff support services include the Staff Employment Manual, Academic Ranking Policy, Staff Grievance Policy and Staff Module Matrix.

This Chapter considers GFP staff and staff support services in terms of staff profile, recruitment and selection, staff induction, professional development, performance planning, staff organisational climate and Omanisation.

### 4.1 *Staff profile*

CAF is the responsible unit for supervising, maintaining, reviewing and providing all information and statistic related to academic and administrative staff in GC (Portfolio, p.43). After reviewing the Staff Module Matrix (SM083), the Panel noted that this document only shows qualifications of existing staff who are teaching the different modules.

GC provided helpful information about the composition of the GFP's academic staff in terms of nationality, gender and qualifications (Portfolio, p.43). In the AY 2016-2017, FFS had 37 academic staff of whom 14 are males and 23 are females. In terms of nationality, 22% are local and 78% are expatriate from a variety of countries, but with the obvious prevalence (43%) of one nationality. On reviewing the FFS staff qualification document (SM0151), the Panel noted an appropriate balance between PhD and Master degree holders with 46% and 43% for the PhD and Master degrees respectively. The Panel nevertheless noted with concern that a high percentage of staff (11% out of the 37 FFS staff) are qualified only with a Bachelor degree, albeit expressing a desire to pursue higher academic qualifications (see Section 4.6).

The Panel did not find evidence that staff profile data is used by GC for short-term and long-term planning of staffing needs, specialisations and diversity. The Panel believes that this gap represents a significant potential opportunity of improvement that GC is urged to address in this area.

#### **Recommendation 27**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College use the available General Foundation Programme staff profile data to support short-term and long-term human resource planning and effective delivery of the General Foundation Programme.**

### 4.2 *Recruitment & Selection*

GC states that "Before the semester starts, the Head of Faculty submits a staff module matrix to Centre of Administration and Finance which supervises the hiring process" (Portfolio, p.43). It is unclear how long before the semester this decision is made. It remains unclear how the number of staff members required to deliver the GFP is calculated so that GFP staffing can be planned. It is stated in the Portfolio (p.44) that staffing and recruitment will be included in the Operational Plan, but this document (SM023) does not clarify the matter of staff planning. The Omanisation Plan 2015 (SM170) includes recruitments targets for FFS (see Section 4.7).

The Staff Employment Manual (SM012b), dated December 2015, has a broad non-discrimination/equal opportunity statement, supporting fairness in staffing and recruitment at the College; this also applies to the GFP. The Manual shows a sample advertisement and provides

information regarding the working awards, staff benefits, staff grievance, staff obligations, staff development programme and disciplinary actions and penalties clarify practice for those who conduct the recruitment and selection. It does not show, however, the stages involved in recruiting and selecting staff, despite appearing as headings in the Contents page. This information is shown in the form of a flow chart (Portfolio, p.45, Figure 4.4), although the basis for decisions at each stage of this process is less clear, in the absence of a recruitment committee.

The Panel learned from interviews that the Head of FFS is involved in the recruitment and selection of GFP staff members, based on the staff module matrix (SM083) prepared by FFS. GFP staff appeared to be satisfied with the recruitment process (interviews) but the Staff Employment Manual (SM012b) provides only limited guidance to staff members who conduct recruitment. As a result, the Panel finds the recruitment and selection practices lack consistency and transparency. For example, GC states that new staff are asked to teach a demonstration lesson before an offer letter is sent (SM154); during the Audit Visit, however, the Panel found that a number of GFP staff members had not been asked to give a demonstration lesson. This indicates that there is a discrepancy between the approach defined in the Staff Employment Manual (SM012b) and the deployment.

### **Recommendation 28**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College review its current recruitment process and procedures related to General Foundation Programme staff to ensure that they are clearly disseminated and consistently implemented.**

#### **4.3 Staff Induction**

GC outlines the staff induction programme which aims to help new staff settle into the College and the GFP, and understand the institutional policies, regulations and procedures (Portfolio, p.43). The induction process has been in place since 2009 and was subject to review three times during the subsequent period (Portfolio, p.46). The College was commended by OAAA for this process during its Institutional Quality Audit in 2011 and also in the pilot GFP Quality Audit which the College underwent in 2015 and the Panel confirmed that this remains an area of good practice. The Panel established that the responsibility for the staff induction programme lies with the Centre for Capacity Building noted that the programme includes standard aspects of staff induction at a tertiary education institution, helping new staff settle into the College and the GFP and understand policies, regulations and normal procedures and (SM120).

One further good practice in the process the Panel noted, and the staff themselves referred to during interviews, is the assigning of an experienced staff member as a mentor to new staff (SM121). The Panel found from interviews the mentor's role is a positive feature of new staff's experience. The Panel was also informed that the College provides valuable organisational support for mentorship and offers a financial incentive to staff member who take on the role of mentor. The Panel found a Mentor Checklist (SM121) and detailed Mentor-Mentee Academic Staff Progress Reports (SM122). Moreover, the Portfolio (p.46) reports the satisfaction with the mentoring system and the role of the mentor (100% satisfaction).

### **Commendation 2**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends Gulf College for developing and effectively implementing a mentoring system for its newly recruited General Foundation Programme academic staff.**

GC claims to use a form, namely the Staff Induction Feedback Form (SM156), to measure the effectiveness of the induction arrangements, however, the Panel found this was largely an attendance confirmation mechanism. On examining the general Staff Satisfaction Survey (SM054), however, the Panel found that satisfaction level for induction was only 50%. Although "Feedback on the induction of new staff" (SM229a) shows decisions made in 2015 on the basis of clear results from a survey about this topic, there is a lack of evidence that the GC continues to monitor and review the

staff induction programme to ensure that it works well or to determine how it could be improved. Notwithstanding the aforementioned positive aspects of staff induction system in place at GC, the Panel advises the College to continue monitoring and reviewing this system to ensure its improvement and fitness for purpose.

#### **Recommendation 29**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College monitor and review the staff induction programme on an ongoing basis for its effectiveness and improvement.**

#### **4.4 Professional Development**

The Staff Employment Manual (SM012b) provides a broad direction for staff development, strongly focussed on skill building for current teaching duties, understanding stakeholder expectations, responding to future employment demand for graduates of the College, and the development of personal resilience in teaching staff. The College provides resources to support these objectives in its staff development programme (Portfolio, p.47).

There are no scheduled GFP classes on Thursdays as these are set aside for staff support meetings or workshops (which include communication of policy or procedure changes, or for staff development activities) and to give staff time to attend to the preparation of teaching materials, administrative tasks and other activities. The List of Staff Development Activities (SM161) records the themes chosen for the Thursday workshops in the AY 2015-2016. Examples include "Updates of academic regulations", "Directed independent learning", "Citation indexing", and "What makes an effective lecturer?" Records are maintained of staff attendance at workshops (SM171).

To document professional development achievements for individual staff, Personal Professional Development Portfolios (PPDPs) have been introduced. The PPDP Guidelines for Teaching Staff (SM163) explain the documentation to be included in a PPDP, which ranges from career summary material to more reflective writing about professional interests. There is also an associated 'assessor rubric' that enables the PPDP to be incorporated into a formal staff performance appraisal process. The Panel sees the introduction of the PPDP as a positive step, but the most recent documentation (SM164) shows that as of late 2017, the PPDP had only been implemented in a pilot study, with only three portfolios submitted from FFS evaluated. A number of limitations in content included inadequate self-evaluation and lack of specificity in action plans have been identified by the College (SM164) and the large imposition on the time of senior staff members required for using the PPDP for appraisal (SM164). The PPDP scheme may require significant changes if it is to be rolled out to all teaching staff at the College. Overall, work remains to be done to ensure that the PPDP works effectively.

The Staff Employment Manual (SM012b) makes it clear that academic staff are expected to undertake research, with a 10% weighting given to research in the five-yearly formal performance evaluation. This expectation also applies to GFP teachers, and is briefly mentioned in the Portfolio (p.48) and reiterated in interviews. Some financial support for conference participation, travel and accommodation is provided to staff members who undertake research. In the Panel's view, the College needs to clarify the kind of research expected from GFP teachers and the implication of those expectations for staffing and staff time allocation. The teaching workloads of faculty members during the academic semesters as prescribed in the Staff Employment Manual (SM012b) mean that research or scholarly activity would be confined to non-teaching periods.

#### **Recommendation 30**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College review staff professional development activities for their effectiveness, and introduce clear key performance indicators that inform General Foundation Programme staff achievement in this area.**

#### **4.5 Performance Planning and Review**

GC documents the College's system for staff performance planning and review in the Staff Employment Manual (SM012b, Portfolio, p.48). Academic staff performance is evaluated through the Staff Performance Review and Development System (SPRD) (SM158). The College reviews GFP staff performance in relevant areas and supports them in goal setting. However, the Panel learned that the feedback provided to instructors on various aspects of their performance is not systematic. From the evidence reviewed (SM166), the Panel noted that in different cases the scores, verbal comments and written records provided indicate different emphases.

In 2016, the College introduced the SPRD Framework to replace what was formerly known as the Tutor Monitoring System to be used as a tool for evaluating academic staff performance (SM158). However, the Panel did not find substantial differences between these two evaluation tools as both of them use exactly the same five areas or parameters of evaluation (tutor observation, evaluation by students, line manager's evaluation module outcome and research activities). The main difference between the two is the latest is more detailed in that it shows the evaluation instrument specific to each area, weightages and the person or entity responsible for evaluation (SM158). Moreover, this update of the existing academic staff appraisal system was only introduced in the AY 2016-2017, hence its effectiveness is yet to be measured.

Evidence from the Audit interviews and exit interview forms completed by departing staff (SM233) suggests that detailed performance feedback should be provided more consistently, checking that staff understand how their performance rating and score is derived. The exit feedback should also indicate what is to be done if staff and line manager disagree about comments on the staff member's evaluation record.

#### **4.6 Staff Organisational Climate and Retention**

GC describes several activities to maintain a positive organisational climate within the College, including weekly staff meetings on the non-teaching day (Thursday), the opportunity to bring issues raised at faculty level to the College Coordinating Committee, annual on-line staff surveys and various social, sporting and cultural activities (Portfolio, p.49).

The College uses a survey to measure staff satisfaction with the various aspects of organisational climate (SM054). The Panel found that one survey was conducted in 2015 and one in the AY 2015-2016 but despite requesting survey data covering the last three years, along with actions taken in response to the results, the additional material provided in response (SM238) only covered earlier surveys dating back to 2013. This implies that the most recent survey was conducted in 2016.

Levels of satisfaction amongst FFS staff revealed by the AY 2015-2016 survey were generally high in absolute terms, and indicate that overall FFS staff were, at that time, more satisfied than their colleagues from the other two faculties at GC. The highest incidence of FFS academic staff dissatisfaction was clustered around questions related to professional development: the availability of teacher training (23.5% dissatisfied); opportunities to pursue further education through a master degree programme (29.5% dissatisfied); opportunities to pursue further education through a doctoral degree (PhD) programme (32.4% dissatisfied); opportunities for promotion (29.4% dissatisfied); promotion and the provision of rewards or other incentive procedures (23.6% dissatisfied). There were similar dissatisfaction levels related to rewards and incentives (23.6% dissatisfied), staff grievance policies and procedures (24.8% dissatisfied), the process of communicating job responsibility (25% dissatisfied), and other matters related to appointment documentation and to induction. Dissatisfaction with opportunities to appeal negative performance review outcomes (14.7% dissatisfied) and with opportunities to conduct research activities (8.8% dissatisfied) were noticeably lower than in the other two faculties.

It was noted by the Panel that in the 2015-2016 survey (SM054) no discussion or analysis of the results is presented or comparisons made to previous surveys, nor is there discussion about how changes made to the survey have influenced the current results. Moreover, there is lack of evidence regarding the College's responses to GFP staff feedback and the effectiveness of these responses.

For example, the dissatisfaction of some FFS staff in the 2016 Staff Satisfaction Survey in particular over “Provision of Letter of Appointment, Contract, or other documents that clearly describe the terms and conditions of employment”, “Process of induction or orientation” and “Process of Communicating the job responsibility” (SM054) was left unexplained. The College needs to consider any identified staff dissatisfaction, identify reasons and take action to address it

The staff contract renewal rate of 88% reported for the end of the AY 2015-2016 (Portfolio, p. 49) is encouraging, but this represents a slightly higher turnover than for the College as a whole (SM230). Statistics for the last five years showing the trend in staff retention indicate annual retention rates between 91% and 96.72% for GC overall. A sample Exit Interview Form (SM169a) was provided to the Panel with the initial Portfolio submission, but no analysis of results from the consolidated interviews was included. At the Panel's request for evidence that exit interviews have taken place and actions taken in response to the feedback, GC provided the completed Exit Interview Forms for two GFP staff who departed in 2018 (SM233). The questions on these forms differed from those in the original sample that was provided (SM169a). For example, the question about professional development needs (SM169a) was not asked on the 2018 forms. An analysis of the reasons for staff leaving covering all FFS teaching staff departing in recent years and an account of actions taken in response to exit interview observations was not available. A list of staff members from FFS who resigned (SM232) showed that seven FFS lecturing staff resigned in the AYs 2013-2014 to 2016-2017 inclusive.

### **Recommendation 31**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College investigate the reasons behind the high rates of General Foundation Programme staff dissatisfaction with many aspects of the organisational climate and ensure that actions are taken based on the results derived from satisfaction surveys.**

#### **4.7 Omanisation**

The GC Strategic Plan 2015-2019 (SM055) shows a 2014 Omanisation baseline of 35% and sets an Omanisation target of a 2% increase on the baseline figures in 2015, with a further increase above the baseline of 1% in each subsequent year until the end of 2019. The FFS Staff Profile (SM151), which is undated, shows the total number of Omanis as 8 out of 37 academic staff (22%), which is well below the targets for GC as a whole: the College aspires to 39% Omanisation of its academic staff by the end of 2017 (SM170).

Of the 37 FFS staff listed, 25 are shown as having expertise only in Academic English, or both Academic and Business English and six of these are Omani (24%). One of the two Special needs experts is Omani, but there is only one Omani (10%) with expertise listed in any of Mathematics, Computer Science, Quantitative Methods or Business. The Omanisation Plan 2015 (SM170) includes recruitment of five Omani financial and commercial science lecturers, three English Language lecturers and three Information Technology lecturers, but none of these positions is explicitly linked to the FFS. Although the Portfolio (p.49) mentions success in recruiting Omani lecturers and administrative staff for the FFS, and reference to improved Omanisation was made during interviews, no clear explanation of the college plans to meet the Strategic Plan Omanisation targets in relation to GFP was offered and it is likely that, in areas related to Mathematics and IT, Omanisation of teaching staff will be an ongoing challenge.

The Panel heard in interviews that Omani staff tend to move on from GC after a relatively short period of employment there. However, there was no evidence that College has considered finding out the reason behind this early departure. The sample Exit Interview Form (SM169a) for departing staff asked if the employee felt professional development was needed. Addressing professional development aspirations much earlier might be more productive. Interviews revealed that not all Omani lecturers have IELTS certification to level 7.0 or equivalent, generally considered desirable for senior educational education and tertiary teaching in English as per MoHE requirements. Offering Omani lecturers support and time release to upgrade their English skills might provide an



inducement for Omani staff to stay, as well as improving their ability to enhance the quality of GFP teaching.

**Recommendation 32**

**The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Gulf College develop and implement a detailed Omanisation plan for the Faculty of Foundation Studies which is aligned to the Gulf College Strategic Plan with clear Key Performance Indicators and specific measures to secure and retain Omani teaching staff.**

**APPENDIX A: AUDIT PANEL**

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## APPENDIX B: ABBREVIATIONS, ACRONYMS AND TERMS

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

AA	Academic Advising
ADRI	Approach - Deployment - Results - Improvement
AY	Academic Year
BoD	Board of Directors
BoT	Board of Trustees
CAF	Centre of Administration and Finance
CAR	Centre of Admission and Registration
CCC	College Coordinating Committee
CITE	Centre for Information Technology E-Learning
CLR	Centre for Learning Resources
CMet	Cardiff Metropolitan University
CQM	Centre for Quality Management
DDAF	Deputy Dean – Administration and Finance
EM	External Moderator
FFS	Faculty of Foundation Studies
FRAC	Financial Review and Audit Committee
GC	Gulf College
GFP	General Foundation Programme
GFPQA	General Foundation Programme Quality Audit
GFPQA Report	The final report that OAAA publishes at the end of the GFPQA
GFP Portfolio	The self-study document that HEI submits as part of its GFPQA
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HSC	Health and Safety Committee
IFP	International Foundation Programme
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
Level 3	This represents the first year of an undergraduate programme offered by GC. It is offered after the completion of the GFP.
MoHE	Ministry of Higher Education <sup>6</sup>
MVVs	Mission, Vision and Values
OAAA	Oman Academic Accreditation Authority <sup>7</sup>
OAAA Board	The governing body of the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
OASGFP	Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes
OQF	Oman Qualifications Framework
Panel Chairperson	The Chairperson of the Audit Panel
PPDPs	Personal Professional Development Portfolios
Review Director	An OAAA staff member assigned to an Audit Panel to provide professional guidance and support

<sup>6</sup> <http://mohe.gov.om/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.oaaa.gov.om/ar/Default.aspx>

SM .....Supporting Materials  
SPRD .....Staff Performance Review and Development System  
SSLC .....Staff Student Liaison Committee  
SU.....Staffordshire University  
System .....In this Report, *system* refers to plans, policies, processes and results that are integrated towards the fulfilment of a common purpose.

**NOTES**

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