Oman Academic Accreditation Authority

Report of a General Foundation Programme Quality Audit of

Al Buraimi University College

May 2019

CONTENTS

OVERVIEW OF THE GFP QUALITY AUDIT PROCESS

This General Foundation Programme (GFP) Quality Audit Report (the 'Report') documents the findings of a GFP Quality Audit of Al Buraimi University College (BUC) by the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA). The GFP Quality Audit followed the process of audit as outlined in OAAA's General Foundation Programme Quality Audit Manual.[1] The GFP Quality Audit also used the *Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes* ('GFP Standards') as an external reference point.[2]

The GFP Quality Audit commenced with BUC undertaking a self-study of its Mission, Vision and systems in relation to the GFP. The results were summarised in the GFP Portfolio (the 'Portfolio'). This document was submitted to the OAAA by the agreed date of 29 January 2018.

The OAAA appointed an external GFP Quality Audit Panel (the 'Panel'), comprising appropriately qualified and experienced local and international reviewers, to conduct the GFP Quality Audit (for membership of the Panel see Appendix A). The Panel met (international members by telephone) on 15 March 2018 to consider BUC'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 BUC on 01 April 2018 to clarify certain matters, request additional information and make arrangements for the Panel's Audit Visit. Prior to the Audit Visit, the Panel formally invited submissions from the public about the quality of BUC's activities in relation to the GFP. No public submissions were received using this process.

The GFP Quality Audit Visit took place from 29 April to 3 May 2018. During this time, the Panel met with approximately 75 people, including current and former GFP students, GFP and post-GFP faculty, GFP support staff, BUC senior management and administrative staff. The Panel also spoke with representatives of California State University Northridge, USA, by telephone. In addition to this, the Panel visited a range of venues and examined additional documents.

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

The Panel's audit activities and preparation of this Report were governed by regulations set by the OAAA Board. No documents created after 03 May 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 the HEI in response to GFPQA draft Report v5. This Report was approved by the OAAA Board on 07 May 2019.

The OAAA was established by Royal Decree No 54/2010. For further information, visit the OAAA website.[3]

---

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

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

[3] http://www.oaaa.gov.om

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

Each OAAA GFP Quality Audit Report is written primarily for the institution being audited. The Report is specifically designed to provide feedback to help the institution better understand the strengths and opportunities for improvement for its GFP. The feedback is structured according to four broad areas of activity and presented as formal Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations, or as informal suggestions, each accompanied with explanatory paragraphs. It is expected that the institution will act upon this feedback as part of 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 should still undertake their own investigations, however, when deciding which higher education institution will best serve their particular learning needs.

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

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

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

CONCLUSIONS

This section summarises the main findings and lists the Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations. 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

Al Buraimi University College (BUC) is a private College established in Academic Year (AY) 2003/2004 and licensed by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) in the Sultanate of Oman. It was the first higher education institution (HEI) in Al Buraimi Governorate. BUC, in affiliation and partnership with California State University, Northridge, USA (CSUN) and Ain Shams University, Egypt, offers ten academic programmes. All these programmes, with the exception of the Law programme, where the medium of instruction is Arabic, are offered in English. The Law programme is offered in partnership with Ain Shams University, whereas the rest are in partnership with CSUN. CSUN provides expertise to review curriculum, pedagogy, course objectives, approaches to assessment and teaching quality to support the General Foundation Programme (GFP) to meet the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes (OASGFP) and also to be internationally competitive (Portfolio, p.21). It may be worthwhile to note that while CSUN provides consultation on quality aspects to the Unit of Foundation Programme (UFP), the GFP completion certificate is from BUC and not CSUN. At the time of this GFP Quality Audit, there were 4597 students studying at the College, of which 935 students were registered in the GFP. The GFP is supported by 24 academic staff members, including a Director, a Deputy Director, an Administrative Coordinator and 21 instructors.

In 2003, the time when BUC commenced its operations, the GFP was offered by the Department of English Language and Literature. In 2008-2009, however, through an organisational restructuring process, the programme was separated from the Department of English Language and Literature, and established as an independent unit, named UFP, with its own organisational structure (Portfolio, p.6). In this report, GFP shall refer to the programme and UFP to the academic unit managing it at BUC. The GFP at BUC was designed using the OASGFP as a reference point and aims to address the learning outcomes in the areas of English, Mathematics, Computing and General Study Skills (GSS) (Portfolio, p.6). The English component of the GFP is delivered through English language courses delivered on three levels and cover the four English language skills. The Computing component of the GFP is delivered and assessed through the IC3 course. The GSS outcomes are embedded in the English language and Mathematics courses and are assessed using continuous assessment tools. In Level 1, students are taught two English language courses and Basic Mathematics, while in Level 2, they are taught three English language courses and IC3 and finally in Level 3, they are only taught one English language course. The UFP recognised the unique needs of students who wished to study on the Law programme on completion of the GFP and in semester 2 of AY 2015/2016, they introduced three courses specially designed for these students. These courses are GSS (GSS100), Basic Mathematics (Math010) and Computing (IC3A), which are all, delivered in Arabic.

Overall, the Portfolio is well structured, clear and reflects the use of the ADRI method for the self-study. It describes the planning and the process followed to develop the BUC GFP Quality Audit Portfolio and offers an evaluation of the effectiveness of the implementation of BUC policies and procedures, allowing the UFP to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement for the GFP. BUC has addressed the relevant Recommendations and Affirmations of the 2012 Institutional Audit Report, insofar as these influence the GFP.

Under the leadership of the UFP Director, an eight person Steering Committee oversaw the self-study and development of the Portfolio and Supporting Materials (SMs). The BUC Quality Assurance Director also served as a consultant on the Steering Committee. A broad-based consultative process was used in the development of the Portfolio, beginning with the development of a detailed action plan for the self-study, which involved participation from all UFP staff members.

BUC has a well-defined organisational structure with the Board of Directors (BoD) and the Board of Trustees (BoT) providing strategic oversight through the Dean's office. All academic departments of BUC including the UFP report to the Assistant Dean Academic Affairs, which helps ensure consistent deployment of academic policies and procedures across the institution. The GFP is represented at BUC's decision-making bodies, as the UFP Director is a member the College Council (UAC), the highest decision-making body of UoB with representation from all its departments. This ensures that GFP issues requiring College-level attention can be addressed immediately and that the senior management of BUC is informed of the GFP operations. As a result of this, along with the oversight from the BUC Quality Assurance Department (QAD), the UFP now has in place most of the systems it requires for the effective delivery of the GFP albeit, not at the same levels of maturity and effectiveness, across the four scope areas covered by this audit.

Student learning is at the center of BUC's Mission and the Strategic Plan considers academic quality as its first pillar. The UFP organisational culture and approaches provide the appropriate framework for this priority to be understood and implemented through the GFP. This framework has been the platform on which the UFP has developed its own Vision, Mission and Value statements. These statements are tailored to the specific requirements of the GFP and are appropriate for a preparatory programme of study and in alignment with those of BUC as an institution. The UFP organisational structure shows that governance and operational management at the UFP level is facilitated by clear definitions of roles and responsibilities of senior management of the UFP and its academic and administrative staff. It also shows that the UFP does not have a dedicated and independent quality assurance office within its structure. Currently, the UFP Director is responsible for both academic operations and quality assurance of the GFP. It would be appropriate and advisable to adequately separate the management of quality from the operational management function in order to ensure accountability and rigor of independence in quality assurance. The UFP is advised to provide relevant documentation in both Arabic and English to all GFP stakeholders so as to make it accessible to all stakeholders. The UFP uses the CSUN-developed Assurance of Learning (AOL) review process to assess, review, and improve the curriculum of courses delivered within the GFP. The major benefits of CSUN's involvement with the GFP include the development, review and suggested improvement to the curriculum and delivery of the GFP.

Operational planning at the UFP is a systematic activity, with the UFP as a unit and all its committees having their own action plans in alignment with BUC's strategic plan. The UFP now is in the process of establishing explicit procedures for the preparation and review of its Departmental Action Plan as well as those of its committees. The UFP could benefit further by setting key performance indicators for each of the identified priorities. BUC has a defined budgeting and financial management system in place which is aligned with its Financial Management Policy. Financial management is centralised at BUC, with the BUC Financial Department responsible for the approval of the UFP annual budget and the deployment of resources thereafter (Portfolio, p.25). The budgeting and financial processes work well within the UFP and the GFP receives the resources it requires to deliver the programme. The UFP has identified potential risks and relevant risk management strategies for the GFP. The UFP Departmental Action Plan and other plans, however, could give greater attention to engaging with identifying and managing the strategic risks which could threaten the continuation of the GFP. BUC is advised to consider proper implementation of its existing risk management policy within the UFP, expand the scope of this policy to address GFP-related strategic risks more explicitly and embed risk management within GFP operations.

The UFP uses a documented three-semester cyclical process called Assurance of Learning (AOL) to monitor and review the GFP. This process was developed by CSUN and adopted by BUC for assessing, reviewing, and improving the curriculum on both course level and programme level within the GFP. This cyclical process intends to cover the four GFP courses, English, Basic Mathematics, IT and GSS and it was first deployed within the GFP in 2015 (Portfolio, p.38). This, however, is a recent review and monitoring process within the GFP and hence there is limited evidence of its effectiveness. Given the newness of AOL in the context of the GFP, the UFP needs to ensure that this internal review process is not only embedded within its core activities but also its systematic implementation is regularly reviewed. The UFP uses surveys as a primary tool for collecting feedback and could consider using a diverse range of instruments to get a broader understanding of stakeholder opinion. Regular communication with the stakeholders on actions taken based on their feedback would support active participation from stakeholders in future surveys.

BUC has established processes and procedures for addressing student grievances. These include mechanisms for students to register their complaints and systems to address and resolve the complaints, which the UFP also uses for the management of student grievances within the GFP. The policy in effect, however, is a student disciplinary policy and the UFP needs to differentiate between student misbehaviour and student grievance and develop a formal policy and processes to address these grievances. BUC has developed health and safety measures for the GFP staff and students but the emergency evacuation drills at the UFP need to be conducted more regularly to maintain preparedness for emergencies.

The GFP aims and learning outcomes are achieved through the GFP curriculum, which is designed using the OASGFP as a reference point. The curriculum aims to achieve the learning outcomes in the areas of English, Mathematics, Computing and GSS through courses that include English language courses at three levels, Basic Mathematics, IC3 and GSS, which are embedded in all courses except IC3. BUC's GFP, in general, meets the OASGFP in the areas of English, Computing and GSS. For Mathematics, however, BUC offers only one course in Basic Mathematics while the OASGFP recommend two Mathematics courses, Basic Mathematics and a second one in either Applied or Pure Mathematics. BUC needs to ensure a more comprehensive coverage in Mathematics to better align GFP learning outcomes to the OASGFP as a minimum. BUC's survey of the teachers of the and interviews with academic staff teaching on the degree programmes at BUC showed some areas where the GFP does not appear to be facilitating the provision of the expected levels of knowledge and skills. These included areas such as, student's ability to communicate satisfactorily in both written and spoken English; the ability to speak on a topic in front of the class; the ability to actively participate in discussions that are more complex and the ability to use Study Skills in note taking. Attention is needed to ensure that such identified competency gaps that exist between GFP courses and the academic departments' language and Mathematics needs are bridged, in order to ensure GFP's continued fitness for purpose.

BUC uses the Oxford English Online Test and the IC3 examination as placement testing mechanisms for English and IT respectively, while an in-house developed test is used for Mathematics. The GFP Mathematics placement test needs to be benchmarked so as to serve together with the English and IT placement tests, as an appropriate tool to define appropriate learning levels for new students. The UFP has recently started, in AY 2017/2018, using an Exit Examination to ensure students exit the GFP at the required level in the English language component of the GFP. An overall band 5 in the Exit Examination, with not less than band 4 in each of the language skills (writing, speaking, listening and reading) is required to pass this examination (Portfolio, p.40). This is below the stipulated 4.5 in each of the four language skills in the OASGFP and the UFP needs to review this to be in full alignment with the OASGFP as a minimum. BUC needs to ensure that GFP students are allowed to progress to the academic programmes delivered in English, only after passing the English Exit Examination of Level 3 of the GFP. In addition to this, the Exit Examination currently assesses the GFP students' achievement of learning outcomes in the English courses only, which cannot be considered as a comprehensive assessment of all required GFP learning outcomes. While GFP students' achievement of learning outcomes in Computing is assessed through the IC3 examination, the current Exit Examination would serve its purpose more effectively if the scope were extended to include Mathematics which is not currently covered, thus ensuring the achievement of all GFP learning outcomes.

Teaching quality within the GFP is managed and supported through a well-structured syllabus, using a variety of teaching and learning methods and embedding the use of technology in the teaching and learning process. Academic integrity amongst GFP staff and students is promoted through the implementation of BUC policies on plagiarism. The UFP has started using the plagiarism detection software (namely, Turnitin) since AY2017/2018 for the Level 3 English course and will be used across all levels. BUC has systems in place to monitor and manage academic integrity within the GFP.

The UFP uses a variety of assessments at the GFP to assess student achievement but needs to closely evaluate and benchmark the rigor of its current GFP assessments to adequately prepare GFP students for the challenges of degree programmes. Students are provided with detailed written feedback on their assessments and active boards are used in class to discuss writing assignments with the entire class as a group. The Examinations and Assessment Committee of the UFP follows strict measures to ensure the security of the examination scripts as well as to manage examination logistics right from examination preparation to the marking and moderation of examination scripts. Developing and implementing robust external moderation

processes would further help in assuring the validity and reliability of the assessments and in turn the GFP's fitness for purpose. The UFP monitors the GFP student retention and progression data and uses it to inform the process of curriculum review. The GFP alumni are an important group of stakeholders for the UFP and the UFP engages with their alumni on multiple levels which include involving them in the induction of new GFP students, inviting them to the activities in the UFP and surveying them to gather feedback on their experience of the GFP.

BUC provides a range of academic and student support services to GFP students through the Admissions and Registry Department (ARD), Student Affairs Department (SAD) and the Library. The UFP uses a Student Information System (SIS) called LOGOS, for monitoring student profile and performance and is accessible to all authorised users. The ARD is responsible for the entry of the enrolment data into the LOGOS SIS. Student data security and confidentiality is ensured through controlled access to this system in accordance with the defined access protocols. The ARD is also responsible for the placement testing which allows BUC to place new students in appropriate levels of study in the GFP. Current and former students of the GFP expressed satisfaction with the registry services. The student data from the LOGOS allows the UFP to evaluate the demographic profile of its GFP students as well as attrition, retention and progression rates. The UFP could benefit from systematically analysing the trends emerging from the student profile data for planning, review and improvement purposes. The current LOGOS system does not have provision to identify students with special needs as a distinct group and the UFP needs to address this gap in order to support such students effectively.

The UFP has a clearly defined and implemented induction process to orient its new GFP students to BUC, its rules and regulations, the UFP and the GFP. The new students are also inducted on the use of the UFP library and IT resources. The UFP reviews and monitors its induction process by seeking feedback on the process from GFP students and alumni and it is found to be effective in supporting GFP students in settling into the GFP.

The UFP is equipped with adequate teaching, learning and IT resources to support the effective delivery of the GFP. Of particular mention would be the initiatives taken by the GFP academic staff members to employ and embed technology in learning in order to effectively engage its current students who are technologically adept, by using various software applications such as a game-based learning platform for teaching English vocabulary. This a good initiative which is noteworthy. The UFP provides the IT infrastructure for the effective delivery of the GFP, but could further enhance the services by making active use of the feedback collected on the quality of infrastructure and services.

UFP employs a different approach for academic advising for its GFP students as compared to that used within other BUC academic departments. According to this approach, students are not allocated to a particular advisor, but all GFP teachers serve as academic advisors and are involved in assisting any GFP student who needs academic support. All GFP staff are inducted and trained on applying this academic advising approach but, and since this is a recent initiative, it would need careful monitoring and review to evaluate its effectiveness and fitness for purpose. BUC had identified a number of measures to improve academic advising such as, conducting a survey of GFP staff and students to gather feedback on the effectiveness of the academic advising process; however, there was no evidence of the implementation of such measures. BUC is urged to implement these identified measures as a priority.

BUC, through its SAD, has a range of student support mechanisms in place for GFP students. These include the different college and UFP level committees and clubs that host a variety of extracurricular activities, which have been welcomed by the GFP students. The ease of access and communication amongst GFP staff and students supports a conducive learning environment. BUC believes that an appropriate academic and campus environment strengthens student academic achievement and uses a number of surveys to seek feedback from its different stakeholders on a variety of aspects concerning the delivery of the GFP, in order to inform improvements in this area. The UFP needs to exercise caution in using surveys as the primary source of feedback and is urged to widen its range of feedback collection mechanisms to avoid survey fatigue and enhance the reliability of data, which can be then used to inform future planning.

GFP students are informed of the institutional regulations concerning student behaviour during induction and through the Student Guide. BUC has a well-defined student disciplinary procedure and appeals process which are communicated to GFP students. BUC provides the GFP students with a range of non-academic services which includes off campus hostel accommodation for female students in addition to the on campus cafeteria, medical clinic and facilities for sports and recreational services provided for all students. The campus provides a conducive environment for both staff and students to foster and support student learning. In addition to the relationship that BUC has with CSUN for the GFP, it has also established formal relationships with other local institutions such as, Sur University, Sohar University and International Maritime College Oman. The agreements include mutually beneficial activities like benchmarking for quality improvement. BUC is urged to critically evaluate the benefits accruing from its external engagement activities.

BUC has defined policies, procedures and processes related to staff and staff support services management as mandated by the BUC By-Laws and these are deployed in accordance with the remit within the GFP. BUC has managed to achieve Omanisation rates of 100% for its non-academic staff and 50% for its academic staff at the UFP. The College is encouraged to continue its process of Omanisation, while at the same time ensuring that the quality of provision and academic standards of the GFP are maintained. The UFP staff requirements are identified once a semester and the selection of staff is done following the BUC Academic Staff Hiring Policy. The current staff profile of the GFP shows that BUC's hiring policy has allowed it to staff the GFP with appropriate knowledge and skills. Newly recruited staff is oriented into the UFP operations through well implemented induction policies and procedures. There is evidence of well-defined processes and activities related to professional development in place. These activities and opportunities, however, seem to be mostly focused on English teaching, as opposed to other GFP subject areas of Mathematics, Computing and GSS. The recent Professional Development Plan, however, does include strategies to address this gap, which need to be implemented as a priority. BUC has identified the need to develop customised training programmes for their novice Omani teachers at the GFP and is urged to initiate these at the earliest in order to support achievement of its Omanisation plans and enhance the quality of GFP delivery.

Performance appraisal at the UFP is governed by BUC's policy on assessing and promoting academic staff. "Research work" is mandatory for all academic staff at BUC and is part of the performance evaluation criteria. The teaching load assigned to GFP teachers, however, may not be compatible with the research outcome expectation of BUC and hence there is a need to find an appropriate balance between the different aspects within the context of the performance appraisal criteria for GFP teachers. Career paths, as far as academic promotions for GFP staff, need to be made sufficiently clear so as to support GFP staff retention.

BUC has measures in place to provide a healthy and positive working environment for its staff teaching on the GFP and there is a structured mechanism for the collection of staff feedback. There are areas, however, such as workload of teachers, salaries, benefits and the provision of health insurance that need attention.

Summary of Affirmations

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

Summary of Recommendations

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

1   GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

BUC was founded in 2003 and is licensed by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). It is a private higher education institution and is the first established university college in the Al Dahira region of the Al Buraimi Governorate in the Sultanate of Oman. The General Foundation Programme (GFP) was launched under the BUC Department of English Language and Literature in 2003. In the AY 2008/2009, the GFP was separated from the Department of English Language and Literature, becoming the Unit of Foundation Program (UFP) with its own identity and structure. Under the leadership of a Director, this structure identifies the roles and duties of the 24 staff at the UFP (Portfolio, p.6). In the first semester of AY 2017/2018, the GFP had 935 registered students, 525 of whom were newly enrolled (Portfolio, p.7).

This Chapter reports on governance and management of the GFP and includes the Panel's findings related to the BUC UFP'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. It also considers the role of the affiliate, the California State University, Northridge (CSUN) with respect to the GFP.

1.1   *Mission, Vision and Values*

BUC's Vision is "Our students and faculty are leading voices in the economic and cultural development of the nation, both locally and regionally" and its Mission is "to provide graduates with the knowledge and skills needed to contribute to the well-being of our nation and to actively involve our faculty and staff in the advancement of the public, business and non-profit sectors of the society." (Portfolio, p.13). The UFP has developed its own Vision and Mission statements based on the specific peculiarities and requirements of the GFP and in alignment with those of BUC (Portfolio, p.13). The UFP Vision and Mission statements read as follows:

> *Vision*
> *UFP vision is to pursue the path of excellence in developing a fully viable, working and appropriate centre that caters for the needs of all foundation students with varied learning abilities and language competencies, thereby helping BUC to achieve its mission to promote the cause of education in serving the community and contributing in nation-building activities.*
>
> *Mission*
> *To equip our aspiring student graduates with English proficiency, basic IT skills, numeracy and study skills in pursuing their graduate studies thereby contributing to the welfare of the society through various endeavors.*

BUC has six clearly stated Values, namely: Citizenship, Transparency, Team, Partnerships, Organisational Learning and Flexibility, which BUC states that they have guided the Values of the UFP, which are as follows:

- *We take pride in our diversity.*
- *Students are our priority.*
- *We seek input and collaboration from all sectors of the college and the community.*
- *Professional Development is our frontier*

<div align="right">(Portfolio, p.13)</div>

The Vision and Mission of the UFP are aligned with that of BUC as in both cases the focus is on providing a platform for students to acquire the skills and knowledge required for them to contribute actively to the well-being of the nation (Portfolio, p.13). In addition to this, the UFP Vision and

Mission reflect the institutional priorities, thus making them appropriate in guiding the GFP in achieving its goals (Portfolio, p.13).

The Panel witnessed UFP's efforts to establish a sense of belonging and identity among staff and students through the formal placement of its Vision, Mission and Value statements in prominent places such as on noticeboards, in brochures, and through the BUC website; these statements are also included in the study plans of all the GFP courses. The Panel confirmed through interviews with GFP staff and students that they are familiar with these statements. This shared understanding of UFP's Vision and Mission provides evidence that the statements are embedded throughout the UFP. The UFP should continue this process of ensuring that the Mission, Vision and Values of the unit are well communicated and that they characterise UFP operations. While staff and student involvement in the development of these statements was not evident, interactions with staff helped the Panel confirm their involvement in the strategic and operational planning of the UFP. GFP student involvement in the process of developing the UFP Mission, Vision and Values, however, remains an area that needs attention. The Panel formed a view that the level of consultation was acceptable, although it could be wider, more comprehensive and more explicit in the future.

1.2   Governance and Management Arrangements

The GFP is offered by the UFP which is a constituent unit of BUC. Under the leadership of the UFP Director, the academic and operational aspects of the GFP are regulated by BUC By-Laws (Portfolio, p.15). The UFP Director has a direct reporting line to the Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs, and in turn to the Dean of the College (Portfolio, p.15). There are clearly defined corporate and academic governance structures which oversee the functioning of the UFP. These include BoD, a BoT and the BUC Council, which together provide a strategic oversight, and the UFP Council, with various sub-committees for the operational oversight (Portfolio, p.15).

Governance and operational management at the UFP level is facilitated by clear definition of the roles and responsibilities of the senior management of the UFP, and its academic and administrative staff (Portfolio, pp.15-22). The Panel noted that the UFP Director exercises clear responsibility and oversight for the GFP. Interviewees confirmed that the UFP Council exercises its mandate through three sub-committees (namely, Examination and Assessment, Scientific Research and Professional Development and Curriculum Committees) in accordance with its stated Terms of Reference (ToR). This was supported by the minutes of the meetings of these committees. The committees have individual annual action plans and the decisions concerning the GFP made by these committees have to be approved by the UFP Council before they are forwarded to the Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs and ultimately to the BUC Council for final approval (Portfolio, p.17). The Panel also confirmed through interviews that the UFP Director meets with the committee chairs to monitor and review the functioning of each committee. The duties of Level and Course Coordinators are documented and the Panel confirmed in interviews that they are active in their academic coordination roles (Portfolio, p.20). Employee Satisfaction Survey results with respect to governance and management of the GFP show that at an average 60% of the UFP staff is satisfied with the leadership and management of the UFP (Portfolio p.21).

The Panel was informed that there is a frequent rotation of participation of staff on UFP committees (Portfolio, p.6, p.16). The Panel encourages the UFP to closely monitor the benefits of participation and rotation of staff on committees in order to ensure that a committee's institutional memory is protected, continuity can be expected in terms of decision-making, stability can be guaranteed, and the introduction and review of academically innovative practices can be maintained. The Panel appreciates that the UFP Director regularly meets with staff and committee members, and notes the participation of the local community representative on the UFP Council (Portfolio, p.15). The Panel heard during interviews that having a local community member on the UFP Council helps introduce a stakeholder perspective to ensure the GFP's fitness of purpose.

The Panel noted that BUC identified the need to strengthen the GFP through the appointment of a Deputy Director with a Master's Degree as an area for improvement (Portfolio, p.21, p.34). The UFP currently has a Deputy Director with a Bachelor's Degree, who is expected to run the unit in the

absence of the Director, participate in the recruitment of new staff and is the current chair of the Examination and Assessment Committee (EAC). Upon examination of evidence and as established during interviews, the Panel concluded that this role is currently limited to providing administrative and coordination support to the UFP in the absence of the Director. The Panel noted that, some of the responsibilities in the job description of the Deputy Director are articulated in a way that does not provide clear guidance for the Deputy Director to execute duties as expected. The Panel urges that BUC consider reviewing the job description of the UFP Deputy Director, so that the guidance provided for the execution of the responsibilities of this post is better articulated.

The BUC organisational chart shows that quality assurance oversight for all departments of BUC rests with the Quality Assurance Department (QAD) which reports to the Assistant Dean for Administrative Affairs and Quality Assurance. The UFP organisational chart, however, shows that the UFP does not have a dedicated quality assurance office within its structure. The Panel learnt that UFP Director is responsible for both academic operational oversight as well as quality assurance of the GFP. The Panel considers it a good practice for academic operations and the quality assurance function to be vested in more than one person, as otherwise it could lead to a possible conflict of interest. The Panel believes that the segregation of responsibilities between the operational management of the programme and its quality assurance would be more appropriate. In summary, the Panel noted that quality assurance arrangements are in place for the GFP, but urges BUC to ensure that quality assurance is appropriately separated from operational functions to ensure accountability and independence in the quality oversight and quality assurance functions.

> **Recommendation 1**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College prioritise the need to put measures in place to ensure that quality assurance within the General Foundation Programme is appropriately separated from operational functions to ensure accountability and independence in quality assurance functions.**

The Panel noted that not all key GFP documents, such as policies, guides and procedures are available in English. Having such key documents available in English would assist non-Arabic speaking students and staff and other stakeholders, such as External Reviewers, to access important documentation. Having all major documents available in English would also be well aligned to the nature of the GFP as it prepares students with the skills to communicate and study in English in their further studies, with the exception of the students of the Law programme. The UFP is reminded of the 2012 OAAA Audit Report Recommendation (number 28) to provide relevant documentation in both Arabic and English to all GFP stakeholders so as to make it accessible to all stakeholders.

> **Recommendation 2**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College make available all relevant General Foundation Programme policies, procedures and other key documents in both Arabic and English to make them more accessible to all stakeholders.**

1.3 *Institutional Affiliations for Programmes and Quality Assurance*

In 2003, BUC initiated an academic affiliation with California State University, Northridge (CSUN) in the United States of America (Portfolio, p.21). BUC's rationale for the selection of CSUN as a partner was CSUN's experience and expertise in education (Portfolio, p.21). CSUN has a contact person, the Curriculum Advisor, assigned for providing consultation to the UFP and verifying GFP's quality and academic effectiveness. CSUN provides expertise in reviewing curricula, pedagogy, course objectives, approaches to assessment, and teaching quality to support the GFP to meet the OASGFP and to be internationally competitive (Portfolio, p.21). The Panel was informed that the UFP uses the CSUN-developed Assurance of Learning (AOL) review process to assess, review, and improve the curriculum of courses delivered within the GFP. While CSUN provides consultation on quality aspects of the UFP, the GFP qualification is awarded by BUC.

The annual addendum to the original affiliation agreement specifically includes the GFP and states that the GFP would be reviewed by a Curriculum Advisor from CSUN in two stages. The first stage involves a review of the curriculum based on the material sent by the UFP to the CSUN Curriculum Advisor; while the second stage includes an on-site visit. During this visit, the CSUN representative is to meet the GFP faculty, students and others as deemed required to determine the adequacy of the GFP. At the conclusion of the review, the Curriculum Advisor is to issue a report on the findings of the review. The Panel noted that while the first stage of the agreement has been fulfilled, the CSUN representative has not yet visited the UFP for a face-to-face programme review of the GFP. The CSUN representative has, however, interacted with the GFP staff over two occasions, through emails and over phone. The purpose was to ensure that the UFP is maintaining quality in terms of academic standards. The first instance was in AY 2014/2015 and the next in AY 2017/2018 (Portfolio, p.22). The Panel heard from both BUC and GFP staff that the affiliation with CSUN with regards to the AOL process is working well within the GFP and that the engagements and feedback from CSUN are very useful in implementing, reviewing and enhancing the academic performance of the GFP. Interviews with CSUN representatives informed the Panel that CSUN has a broad oversight of the GFP operations and they are satisfied with their affiliation with BUC and in particular with the GFP.

The Panel heard that the major benefits of CSUN's involvement with the GFP include the development, review and suggested improvements to the curriculum and delivery of the GFP. Some of the suggested improvements include an English Language Laboratory, hiring more native-English speakers as English language teachers and using a student-centered approach in classrooms. The Panel was informed that a visit has been planned for November or December 2018. Given the benefits expressed by both GFP and CSUN, the Panel concurs that consideration be given by the GFP "…to establish more regular and systematic communication between CSUN representatives and UFP administration in order to receive constructive feedback and constant recommendations" (Portfolio, p.22). The Panel is of the opinion that periodic visits to the GFP would assist in gaining the maximum benefit of the affiliation with CSUN. The Panel encourages the UFP to leverage the strength of this relationship as it further develops the GFP in its task of preparing students for higher education programmes.

In addition to the CSUN affiliation, BUC has an affiliation with Ain Shams University in Egypt covering the Law programme. This affiliation, unlike the one with CSUN, however, does not include the GFP.

1.4   Operational Planning

A college-wide strategic plan was developed by BUC in 2015 for the period 2015 to 2020, as a positive response to the 2012 OAAA Audit Recommendation to develop and implement operational plans, linked to strategic objectives (OAAA 2012 Audit Report, Recommendation 6). The plan presents an overall context for BUC's strategy for a five-year period. It also identifies the four improvement priority areas, namely, academic quality, student experience, national community service and infrastructure. These areas are divided into 12 strategies and 39 objectives (Portfolio, p.22). The Strategic Plan is used to develop the annual BUC Operational Plan, which includes the GFP, and details the actions to be taken, completion dates and accountable persons for the implementation of the various actions. It also articulates the various College strategies and objectives within a matrix approach to operationalisation (Portfolio, pp.22-23). The Strategic Plan incorporated the GFP, for example, through Strategy 1.2, which states that the GPF should "Ensure measurable outcomes that meet the highest professional standards for all academic programs". Specifically, Objective 1.2.2 states that: *By 2015*, [BUC should] ensure that the Foundation Program aligns with OASGFP, including Computing and Study Skills".

In a more recent development, the UFP, has developed its own Action Plan for AY 2017/2018 which is approved by the Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs. This Action Plan deals specifically with the academic operations of the GFP and is aligned with the College Operational Plan as well as the UFP Academic Affairs' Operating Policies and Procedures. This plan has systematically addressed suggested actions prepared by the UFP Council, chairs of committees, and Level and Course Coordinators (Portfolio, pp.23-25).

Action planning at the UFP is a systematic activity with all UFP level and course coordinators as well as committee chairs preparing their own annual action plans. These plans include the actions needed, implementation dates, and persons responsible for the implementation or review (Portfolio, p.24). The Panel noted the consultative process taken to both institutional and GFP planning and established through interviews that the processes detailed in the plans are implemented, reviewed for improvement and demonstrate signs of supporting the core academic functions of the UFP. As per the BUC Operational Plan, the GFP was expected to have its own operating policies by the second year of the plan (that is, by AY2016/2017). The Panel did not find this explicitly reflected in the GFP documents it reviewed, but noted the progress made in the deployment and review of the Departmental Action Plan (Portfolio, p.23). The establishment of the English Language Laboratory and the UFP Employee Satisfaction survey carried out in AY 2017/2018 are examples of steps taken towards implementing the Departmental Action Plan (Portfolio, p.24). The Panel concurs with the UFP in its identified opportunity for improvement that it needs to develop explicit procedures on the development, implementation and review of the Departmental Action Plan.

> **Affirmation 1**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees that Al Buraimi University College needs to develop explicit procedures in order to develop, implement and review the Unit of Foundation Programme Departmental Action Plan and supports its efforts in this area.**

The Panel noted that while there has been progress in the deployment of the Departmental Action Plan, the UFP does not have explicit targets and KPIs in place to support effective review of the deployment. The Panel therefore encourages the UFP to set explicit targets, KPIs or milestones for each of the priorities and actions to assist in the achievement, monitoring and improvement of its activities and projects for the GFP in order to close the quality loop.

> **Recommendation 3**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College set explicit targets and key performance indicators for each of the priorities and actions in the Unit of Foundation Programme Departmental Action Plan to assist in assessing and monitoring progress made in the achievement of this plan.**

1.5 Financial Management

BUC has a defined budgeting and financial management system in place, which is aligned with its Financial Management Policy (Portfolio, p.25). The Director of Finance has full oversight of all College finances, including the GFP, under the leadership of the Dean. The UFP Director conducts an annual needs analysis for the GFP, on the basis of which the annual GFP budget request is made to the BUC Finance Department. The Director of Finance reviews the budget and forwards to the College Council for discussion and the Dean for the final approval (Portfolio, p.25).

All annual departmental budgets are discussed at the College Council, where all Heads of Departments including the UFP Director are members. Thereafter, the budget is sent to the BoT to discuss the details, and finally to the BoD for approval. The Panel heard that the Chairman of the BoD plays a key role in the budget-approval process and the College finances in general. The Panel heard that there is focused attention to overall quality and its provision in the budgeting process and the aspects covered by the budgets. The attention paid to providing student support for hostel accommodation, and initiating a process to assist low-income students with study scholarships, are examples of the focus on overall quality improvement. The Panel gathered from its interaction with UFP management and staff that the budgeting and financial processes work well within the UFP and that the GFP receives the resources it requires to deliver the programme. The GFP staff is satisfied (rated 3.5 on a scale of 5) with the quality and adequacy of teaching, learning and IT resources. The Panel did not hear any concerns within the UFP that activities or services cannot be offered due to

lack of financial resources and hence concluded that the budgeting and financial system used within the UFP is satisfactory. The Panel on the other hand heard that the Dean and the BoD are supportive when requests for resources are made. The allocation of funds for the establishment of the English language laboratory (which is yet to be fully operational) is an example of the support from the BoD.

The Panel encourages the UFP to continue monitoring the effectiveness and efficiency of developing its annual budget. This can be executed through considering, for example, the use of SWOT analysis, strategic risks, and needs analysis.

1.6   Risk Management

The GFP makes use of and implements the BUC Risk Management Policy, which describes the policy as "…basically a planning device in the general quality management system…" (Portfolio, p.1). The Panel noted that the Policy provides direction to systematically address any actual or potential risks by laying out the five-step procedure to be followed (Portfolio, p.26). The risk register, which is part of the Risk Management Policy, was prepared in June 2015, but evidence indicates that it has not been updated since then. The areas covered in the risk register include management structure, system and roles, governance and management, recruitment and selection, information and technology services, and health and safety (Portfolio, pp.26-27).

The Panel pursued in a number of interviews the understanding and approach taken by the UFP to identify and manage key strategic risks within the GFP. The Panel confirms that there is evidence of a systematic approach to managing operational risks and that the UFP has identified both potential risks for the GFP and relevant risk management strategies for different categories of risks (Portfolio, pp.26-27). Maintaining periodic backup of critical data of GFP students in accordance with the BUC's policy on database servers backup is an example of the systematic approach to managing operational risks in the area of information and learning technology services (Portfolio, p.27). Based on the evidence and interviews, the Panel could confirm that no major lapses have occurred in the effective delivery and operations of the GFP (Portfolio, p.27). The Panel, however, noted that the UFP departmental action plan and other plans could give greater attention to engaging with identifying and managing the strategic risks which could threaten the continuation of the GFP. Areas that could be considered include student enrolment, academic reputation, maintenance and improvement of academic standards and attracting and retaining the desired academics for the GFP.

The Panel believes that the management of risk, particularly strategic risks within the GFP requires regular and enhanced monitoring embedded within its operations. The Panel was pleased to note that BUC has also recognised these issues and intends for the UFP to have a dedicated risk management plan and risk register for the GFP that would be reviewed annually (Portfolio, p.28). The Panel, however, could not find evidence that concrete steps have been taken by BUC in this direction and urges BUC to initiate the process at the earliest opportunity. The Panel suggests that BUC consider proper implementation of its existing Risk Management Policy within the UFP, expand the scope of this risk management policy to address GFP-related strategic risks more explicitly and embed risk management within GFP operations.

> **Recommendation 4**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority strongly recommends that Al Buraimi University College expand the scope of the existing Risk Management Policy by putting measures in place to identify, document and manage strategic risks within the General Foundation Programme and embed risk management within the operations of the programme.**

1.7   Monitoring and Review

A documented three-semester cyclical process called Assurance of Learning (AOL) is employed to assess, review, and improve the curriculum on both course level and programme level within the GFP. This review process was developed by CSUN and is now adopted by BUC for the review of its GFP (Portfolio, p.22). The process intends to cover the four GFP areas, namely, English, Basic

Mathematics, Computing and General Study Skills. In particular, it assesses achievement of student learning outcomes (SLOs). The UFP Director oversees the implementation of the curriculum review process, while the Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs has the overall responsibility for monitoring the implementation of the curriculum review policy of the UFP. The Panel did not find evidence of oversight by the BUC QA Director in the deployment of this process within the GFP and believes that oversight of the process by the BUC QA Director would assist the UFP in ensuring that the AOL process is deployed within the GFP as mandated in the BUC Quality Manual. The Panel heard from CSUN representatives as well as UFP administration that the onus of managing quality within the GFP lies with the UFP and that CSUN has only a broad oversight of GFP operations (see Section 1.3). The Panel gathered that the major benefits of CSUN to the GFP have been the development, review and suggested improvements to the curriculum, through two reviews. The first of which was via email in AY 2014/2015 followed by a similar one in AY 2017/2018 (see Section 1.3).

There are two stages in the AOL process, namely Stage 1, comprising Curriculum review and Stage 2, the Programme review. Each of the stages are detailed and comprehensive (Portfolio, pp.28-30). Stage 1, Curriculum Review, takes three semesters and covers all aspects of teaching and learning. It includes an evaluation of student achievement of the SLOs, teaching materials (including textbooks), teaching methods and teaching hours. The report of this review is also informed by feedback collected from current and past GFP students and from instructors teaching on the academic programmes at BUC as well other inputs, such as student retention, progression and attrition data (Portfolio, p.27). The Panel saw evidence of this review carried out for the English Level 1 course from the first semester of AY 2016/2017. There were a number of recommendations made by the UFP Curriculum Committee on the Level 1 Integrated Intensive English Course resulting in changes to the curriculum, teaching methods and assessments (Portfolio, p.46). Some of these included revisions made to reading and writing worksheets, and grammar and extensive reading tests. The Panel saw evidence of the implementation of these revisions and this was further confirmed in the interviews with GFP staff. In conclusion, the Panel noted that the AOL provides a sound platform for the review and improvement at course as well as at programme level. In addition, the AOL report generated at the end of each review process stage enables continuity of courses, particularly when there is a change in the academic staff member delivering the course (Portfolio, p.28).

The Panel was provided with the report for the review of Level 2 courses, which was conducted recently, but was informed that the report is yet to be discussed in the Curriculum Committee and the UFP Council. The Panel understands that the use of AOL for the GFP is recent and hence there is not much by way of evidence of the full effectiveness of this review and monitoring process. Indeed, Stage 2 has yet to be implemented. Interviewees were very positive of AOL and spoke of its benefits, and suggested improvements as the AOL process is being implemented. The Panel recognises that AOL, as a process, has been implemented recently within the GFP and has not completed a full cycle of review. The Panel, however, urges BUC to ensure that the AOL process and the identified improvements arising from the AOL review are not only explicitly embedded within its departmental action plans, but are systematically implemented and regularly reviewed for effectiveness as indicated in the departmental action plan to assure and enhance the quality of the GFP.

Given the benefits expressed by both GFP and CSUN, the Panel concurs with the UFP that consideration be given "…to establish more regular and systematic communication between CSUN representatives and UFP administration in order to receive constructive feedback and constant recommendations" (Portfolio, p.22). The Panel urges BUC to ensure that CSUN representatives visit the UFP periodically to leverage the strengths of this relationship as BUC continues to develop its GFP (see Section 1.3).

The Panel observed that surveys are used extensively by the UFP as part of its approach to quality assurance and enhancement for the GFP. While surveys are a useful tool to collect feedback, the Panel believes using a diverse range of instruments could be considered to get a broader understanding of stakeholder opinion about the various aspects of the GFP, its curriculum and delivery.

Recommendation 5

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College review its approach to collecting feedback within the Unit of Foundation Programme by deploying a variety of tools to systematically collect, analyse and act upon data collected from General Foundation Programme staff, students and other stakeholders to inform decision-making.

The Panel, as it interacted with the documentation and listened to responses in interviews with staff, noted that the full value of survey feedback is yet to be effectively utilised to monitor and drive improvements across the GFP. The Panel also heard in interviews that even when the UFP acts upon the feedback obtained, actions are not actively communicated to the concerned stakeholders such as, GFP staff and students. The Panel encourages the UFP to provide and communicate feedback on actions taken to strengthen stakeholder participation in the various quality enhancement surveys conducted by the UFP.

Recommendation 6

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College ensure that the impact of actions taken as a result of stakeholder feedback is communicated within the Unit of Foundation Programme to strengthen stakeholder support for the various quality enhancement surveys used for the General Foundation Programme.

1.8   Student Grievance Process

The SAD at BUC is responsible for establishing processes and procedures for addressing student grievances; these include mechanisms for students to register complaints and systems to address and resolve these complaints (Portfolio, p.30). The UFP claims that it uses the policy and procedures established by BUC for the management of student grievances within the GFP (Portfolio, p.30). The policy presented as evidence, however, is in fact a Student Disciplinary Policy. The Panel urges BUC and the UFP to distinguish between student grievances and student disciplinary issues. While a single carefully-worded policy may address both areas, two separate policies may help stakeholders understand better the distinction between a student grievance and a student disciplinary issue.

Despite the lack of a formal student grievance policy, GFP students do have a number of avenues available to raise their concerns and grievances, whether individually or as a group. The UFP provides the opportunity for GFP students to share their complaints and opinions, and for them to raise grievances through their elected representatives who are voted in at the beginning of each academic year, although this is still a recent practice at the UFP (Portfolio, p.30). The Student Council is also a forum that GFP students could use to raise their concerns and GFP students are made aware of this during induction (Portfolio, p.30). With regard to academic issues such as appeals against examination grades, the UFP follows the process set out in the Academic Affairs Operating Policies and Procedures. Students are required to lodge their appeal against examination grades with the ARD using the Grade Appeals form which is then forwarded to the UFP Director (Portfolio, p.31). The Panel heard that appeals are reviewed and resolved by consultation between the concerned faculty member and the Director UFP in accordance with the rules and regulations set out in the Academic Affairs Operating Policies and Procedures.

During the campus tour, the Panel noticed the suggestion box in the UFP building, where students could place their concerns or complaints. The Panel heard in interviews that the suggestions/ complaints are regularly reviewed by the UFP Director and also actioned through relevant offices or departments. In addition, the Panel was informed that the Office of the UFP Director is open for students to directly approach him to resolve issues (Portfolio, pp.30-31). GFP students confirmed this easy accessibility to the UFP Director. Newly registered GFP students have a meeting with the BUC Dean and the UFP Director, wherein the College's rules and regulations, including the grievance process, are explained to them in detail. The Panel confirmed in interviews with staff,

alumni and students that there is a student grievance process albeit informal. Students confirmed that the open-door policy of the UFP Director and the availability of staff to resolve issues is useful for addressing academic issues as well as other issues such as complaints about the food in the canteen. Nevertheless, existing informal processes need to be developed and complemented by formal and comprehensive policy and procedures to deal with grievances and these should be accessible and effectively communicated to both students and staff. The UFP would ensure consistency, transparency, fairness in the deployment of the policy with formal documented procedures for deployment.

> **Recommendation 7**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College develop and implement formal and comprehensive student grievance policy and procedures which should be accessible and effectively communicated to General Foundation Programme students and staff.**

1.9   *Health and Safety*

The BUC Safety, Health, Risk and Security Committee is responsible for issuing policies, procedures and protocols for health and safety across the college (Portfolio, p.31). The Panel noted that the UFP is compliant with the BUC Health & Safety Policy and is focused on creating and maintaining a safe environment for GFP students, staff and visitors. BUC has identified three main categories under health and safety, namely, Health and Safety Service, Health and Safety Services Procedures, and Security Service Guidelines. BUC has a dedicated health service for students, security services to protect staff and students, and emergency procedures in case of disaster such as a fire in the building (Portfolio, pp.31-32). There are documented and public notices of procedures and protocols for each of the above areas.

The Panel heard from staff and students that the health and safety services are functioning well. The Panel, however, noticed that while there is a well-articulated Health and Safety Policy, in place since 2014, there was no available evidence of review of the policy nor of the procedures to assess the policy's effectiveness. It is suggested that a review of this policy is required to incorporate lessons learnt since its approval and implementation and to establish the effectiveness of health and safety measures in place as evaluated by different stakeholders.

BUC states that there was an emergency evacuation drill in 2013 (Portfolio, p.32) and the interviewees informed the Panel that there had been an evacuation drill more recently within the weeks prior to the Audit Visit. The Panel is concerned that the frequency of emergency evacuation drills is insufficient to ensure the preparedness of staff and students for an emergency and testing of fire equipment and systems. The Panel is of the view that there must be regular evacuation drills to maintain staff and student preparedness for emergencies.

> **Recommendation 8**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College conduct regular emergency evacuation drills at the Unit of Foundation Studies in compliance with national guidelines in order to ensure the preparedness of General Foundation Programme staff and students for an emergency and conduct periodic testing of fire equipment and systems.**

2   GFP STUDENT LEARNING

Student learning is at the center of the BUC Mission (Portfolio, p.13), which is "to provide graduates with the knowledge and skills needed to contribute to the well-being of our nation". The UFP, through the GFP, plays a critical role in preparing students for academic degree programmes and, therefore, achieving the UFP Mission (Portfolio, p.13) which aims to "equip aspiring student graduates with English proficiency, basic IT skills, numeracy and study skills in pursuing their graduate studies". The UFP Mission is learner-focused and well aligned with BUC's approach to education. This focus on a learner-centered approach is also characteristic in other key documents and practices, such as the BUC Strategic Plan for 2015-2020, the BUC Quality Manual and the UFP Departmental Action Plan.

This Chapter reports on the Panel's finding in relation to the following: GFP aims and learning outcomes, curriculum, student entry and exit standards, teaching quality, academic integrity, assessment and student achievement, feedback on student assessment, academic security and invigilation, student retention and progression, and relationships with GFP alumni.

2.1   GFP Aims and Learning Outcomes

The UFP has developed a set of learning goals (Portfolio, p.35) in alignment with the learning outcomes defined by the OASGFP for GFP. The Panel was presented with detailed evidence, which included the UFP Manual, the UFP Levels and Courses syllabi and the Assurance of Learning Report (AOL), which clearly show that learning outcomes for all GFP courses are defined and pursued (Portfolio, p.36).

The GFP at BUC was designed using the OASGFP as a reference point and it aims to address the learning outcomes in the areas of English, Mathematics, Computing and General Study Skills (GSS) through a range of courses (Portfolio, p.6). The courses include English language courses at all three levels of the GFP, Basic Mathematics and IC3. The UFP uses both formative and summative assessments to assess student achievement of the specified GFP learning outcomes (Portfolio, p.36). The GSS outcomes are embedded in all courses except IC3 and are assessed using continuous assessment tools (Portfolio, p.35). It would benefit BUC to take all the necessary measures to embed GSS in all GFP subjects and ensure these are properly assessed. In Level 1, students are taught Integrated Intensive English 1 and Basic Mathematics; in Level 2, Integrated Intensive English 2 and IC3, and finally, in Level 3, they are taught Intensive English 3 only (Portfolio, p.7). All the four English language skills are covered in each of the English language courses taught across the three levels. The three Integrated Intensive English courses are offered at the three levels with 16 contact hours per week in Levels 1and 2 and six hours of lecture per week in Level 3. Both Basic Mathematics and IC3 offered at Level 1 and 2 respectively have three contact hours per week. The learning goals of each level are related to those of the other levels and progress from Level 1 through Level 3 (Portfolio, p.35). Moreover, the Panel heard in interviews that, in Level 3, students are allowed to start with the first year courses on the academic programmes of their choice, alongside the Level 3 English language course, provided they have passed the Mathematics and IC3 courses. The Panel was informed that the GFP Level 3 students are allowed to register for those courses on the academic programmes where the Level 3 English language course is not a prerequisite. The Panel, however, noted that allowing students to enrol the first year courses on the academic programmes of their choice without having passed the GFP in its entirety does not comply with the requirements stipulated by the OASGFP (see Section 2.3, Recommendation 11).

GFP learning outcomes are evaluated using the Assurance of Learning (AOL) process and identified changes are implemented (Portfolio, p.36) (see Section 1.7). Action plans of the different UFP level committees and courses are defined and monitored within the UFP, assuring that appropriate GFP learning outcomes are defined and reviewed. The online surveys used to collect feedback from teachers and students of the BUC academic departments to evaluate GFP performance also play an important role in terms of defining and revising GFP aims and learning outcomes. Additionally, UFP

carries out benchmarking activities as another source of information that may lead to further development of GFP aims and learning outcomes (Portfolio, p.36). The 2017 benchmarking exercise with International Maritime College (IMCO) was used to review UFP's operations and GFP aims, learning outcomes and curriculum. This exercise resulted in the UFP identifying three areas that needed improvement, namely operational planning, relationship with GFP alumni and academic advising. The UFP has since then developed its own departmental operational plan, distinct from the BUC strategic plan, put in mechanisms to collect feedback from the GFP alumni to inform future planning of the GFP, and introduced a new academic advising system (see Section 3.6, Recommendation 16).

UFP has adopted the Assurance of Learning (AOL) review process for its Level 1 English Course. The Panel supports UFP's plans to expand this approach to all of the GFP courses, building on their experience with the first course to which the AOL Stage 1 process was applied (see Section 1.7). The Panel noted that as part of the AOL process, all GFP syllabi include a matrix with SLOs which are aligned to the OSAGFP (see Section 2.2). The Panel was informed that the UFP has initiated a process to assess all course outcomes and the Panel confirmed that at the time of this Audit Visit, Level 1 course outcomes had been evaluated and the GFP teachers had begun to act on the evaluation outcomes. Some of these outcomes included changes made to Reading and Writing worksheets, Grammar and Extensive Reading tests. (Portfolio, p.24).

Overall, the documentation provided shows that BUC's GFP, in general, meets the OASGFP as a minimum for GFP outcomes in the areas of the English, Basic Mathematics, Computing and GSS. The Panel, nevertheless, reminds the UFP that the OASGFP states, "the Math foundation curricula must be designed to cover two sets of learning outcomes". These learning outcomes cover Basic Mathematics and either Applied or Pure Mathematics, through a suggested sequence of two one-semester courses "with 3 contact hours per week for lectures plus 1-hour tutorial/problem solving session per week". Moreover, the UFP was unable to provide the Panel with a convincing explanation for offering only one Mathematics course instead of the two one-semester courses suggested by the OASGFP and hence urges that UFP consider ways to ensure that a comprehensive coverage of Mathematics is considered in the planning of courses. This will help achieve a better alignment with the OASGFP requirements for this particular knowledge area.

> **Recommendation 9**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College ensure a more comprehensive coverage of Mathematics within the General Foundation Programme, in order to better align the learning outcomes of the programme to the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes as a minimum.**

2.2   *Curriculum*

The UFP Academic Affairs' Operating Policies and Procedures clearly mandate the process of curriculum development and review for the GFP (Portfolio, p.37). The GFP curriculum is detailed and periodically reviewed in accordance with this mandate, taking into account a number of inputs, as mentioned above in section 2.1, with Level and Course Coordinators and the Curriculum Committee playing a key role in these efforts. In addition to these internal reviews, CSUN conducted two programme reviews, one in AY 2014/2015 and then subsequently in AY 2017/2018, which also served to inform the GFP programme structure and course curricula (Portfolio, p.22, see Section 1.3, 2.1). The curriculum development activities also take into account the BUC strategic plan. The AOL process plays an important role in curriculum definition and revision within the GFP programme and courses, and is being expanded to cover all the GFP courses (Portfolio, p.37, see Section 2.1). The Panel noted that through the implementation of the AOL process, BUC has partially addressed the Institutional Quality Audit Panel's recommendation (Recommendation 12, IQA Report 2012). This recommendation suggested that BUC review its GFP curriculum to ensure that it is aligned with all four areas of the OASGFP and continue to regularly review the effectiveness of the programme in preparing students for further study. The Panel, however, would like to remind BUC that the GFP is

not in full alignment with the OASGFP minimum requirements in the area of Mathematics (see Recommendation 9).

The UFP offers three levels of courses in the GFP for students to attain the GFP learning goals and uses the Oxford Online Placement test to help categorise new students into the three levels of the GFP, based on their language proficiency (Portfolio, p.37, see Section 2.3). The UFP recognised the unique needs of students who wished to study on the Law programme post the GFP and hence, in Semester 2 of AY 2015/2016, the unit introduced three specially designed courses for these students delivered in Arabic. These courses are GSS (GSS100), Basic Mathematics (Math010) and Computing (IC3A) (Portfolio, p.7). It is important to clarify here that the Panel considered reviewing the GFP courses delivered in English and not the courses delivered in Arabic.

The Panel noted that the language laboratory software was recently installed and suggests that appropriate staff and student training is provided for the full deployment of this software which would help promoting student autonomy and independent learning (Portfolio, p.38). The Panel favorably noted the applications of IT that are used to support curriculum delivery, including the use of online educational games. The Panel suggests that the GFP explore similar initiatives, not just for English language teaching and learning, but also for the other GFP subject areas.

The Panel observed that for the GFP English courses the UFP uses textbooks such as the Headway and Inside Reading series that have been benchmarked with CEFR (Portfolio, p.37). An IC3 approved textbook is used for the IT course. For the Basic Mathematics course, however, a compiled collection of handouts with acknowledged sources is used as teaching material (Portfolio, pp.37-38). The Panel was informed that Mathematics textbooks are to be adopted soon. The GFP is encouraged to benchmark its Basic Mathematics course materials with other colleges (Portfolio, p.38), and explore the use of interactive IT-based tools to support Mathematics teaching.

Feedback on the effectiveness of the UFP curriculum is collected from teachers and students of the BUC academic departments, via online surveys (Portfolio, p.37). Interviews conducted with GFP alumni students indicated that they apparently did not have many difficulties in the transition from the GFP to BUC academic departments but the academic department staff survey results showed otherwise. The Panel noted that the survey of BUC academic department teachers showed some areas where the GFP does not appear to be facilitating the provision of the expected levels of knowledge and skills. These areas include a student's ability to communicate satisfactorily in both written and spoken English; the ability to speak on a topic in front of the class; the ability to actively participate in discussions that are more complex and the ability to use Study Skills in note taking. It was not clear to the Panel the extent to which the results from surveys obtained from BUC academic department teachers are effectively used to close the loop in leading to a revision and improvement of the curriculum and its deployment. The Panel was informed that efforts are being made to introduce these targeted improvements. The Panel, however, did not see sufficient evidence of this and encourages the UFP to have a systematic approach to bridging the identified skills and competency gaps in the GFP.

> **Recommendation 10**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College act upon the feedback from the academic departments and review its General Foundation Programme curriculum to bridge the identified gaps in skills and competencies that exist between General Foundation Programme courses and the English language needs of academic departments in order to ensure the continued fitness for purpose of the General Foundation Programme.**

2.3   Student Entry and Exit Standards

The Admission and Registration Department (ARD) enrols all students seeking admission to BUC. All new students are required to take a placement test for the areas of knowledge covered by the

GFP (Portfolio, p.39). Although students are required to take placement tests in Mathematics and Computing, student categorisation into the three GFP levels is decided by the English test results only (Portfolio, p.39).

BUC uses the Oxford English Online Test (OEOT), which is benchmarked against the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), as the placement test for admission into the different levels of the GFP. Students with an IELTS score of no less than Band 5 or a TOEFL (paper-based test) score of no less than 500 and TOEFL (computer-based test) score of no less than 180 are exempted from the English Placement test (Portfolio, pp.39-40). All other students must take the OEOT, as the placement test outcomes determine if a given student is placed in Level 1, 2 or 3. Students scoring A1 are placed in Level 1, while those scoring A2 and B1 are placed in Levels 2 and 3 respectively. Students scoring B2, C1 or C2 can join the academic departments. These students are still required to enrol for the Basic Mathematics and IC3 courses if they do not succeed in the computer-based Mathematics and IC3 placement tests (Portfolio, p.37).

The Panel heard that the UFP is considering the possibility of offering some sort of Pre-Foundation preparation for students scoring A0 on the OEOT and needing higher levels of support in achieving the required levels of language proficiency for entry into the GFP. Currently, to address this gap in the English language proficiency required at the entry level, namely Level 1, the UFP places students scoring A0 on the placement test in Level 1, along with students scoring A1. The A0 students, however, are given four weeks of intensive training in English to help them achieve the learning outcomes of the Level 1 English courses (Portfolio, p.37). In this regard, the Panel is of the opinion that this single period of four weeks of intensive training may be insufficient for these students to reach levels of proficiency comparable with A1 students (Portfolio, p.53). The Panel believes that this may be a good placement alternative for the A0 students, which will help assure that appropriate levels of required knowledge and skills are attained according to the specific GFP standards for each level of development.

> **Affirmation 2**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with Al Buraimi University College on the need to provide additional support to students who currently do not meet the English language entry-level requirements for the General Foundation Programme.**

The Panel encourages the UFP to continue its efforts to ensure that placement flexibility allows for students with different combinations of English proficiency versus, for example, Mathematics placement test performance, to be allocated to the most appropriate levels within the GFP. The Panel noted that the benchmarking exercise with IMCO also included reviewing the BUC's entry standards and the placement test used and it shows that BUC's entry standards are in line with other HEIs in the region (Portfolio, p.40). The Panel supports BUC's use of a placement testing mechanism which allows categorisation of new GFP students according to their educational needs.

The Panel noted that the UFP uses the standard IC3 examination as the placement test for the Computing component of the GFP. The Panel, however, noted that for Mathematics, there is no standardised placement test in use, and currently the UFP uses an in-house, computer-based Mathematics placement test, benchmarked against a similar tool used by the IMCO (Portfolio, p.40). The Panel was pleased to hear that BUC intends to review and further benchmark its GFP Mathematics placement test and urges BUC to consider this as a priority. The Panel suggests that BUC ensures that the Mathematics placement test considers recognised standards of performance so that it can be used together with the results from the existing placement tests for English and Computing, to define more flexible learning levels for new students, whenever needed.

> **Affirmation 3**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority supports Al Buraimi University College's effort to review and benchmark its General Foundation Programme Mathematics placement test so that it can be used**

together with the English and Computing placement tests as a suitable tool to define appropriate learning levels within the General Foundation Programme for new students.

The Panel noted that the UFP has recently introduced an Exit Examination to confirm the satisfactory achievement of GFP learning outcomes in the English component of the programme before students are allowed to progress to the academic degree programmes (Portfolio, p.40). The examination is administered at the end of the Level 3 English course and the pass/fail in the course is determined by examination. This Exit Examination has been developed in-house and benchmarked against the IELTS examination (Portfolio, p.40). The benchmarking exercise involved comparing the student performance in the Exit Examination in the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking against IELTS band scores. A sample of 21 students were asked to take the IELTS examination and their scores on this were compared with their scores on the Exit Examination. The UFP concluded from the analysis that overall the band scores matched, with half the students having the same band score in both examinations while the other half had a 0.5 band score difference. The Panel noted that an overall band 5 in the Exit Examination, with no less than band 4 in each of the skills is required to pass this examination (Portfolio, p.40). The Panel, however, noted that a minimum of band 4 in each of the skills is below the stipulated 4.5 in the OASGFP and urges the UFP to review the criteria to be in full alignment of the OASGFP as a minimum.

The Panel was informed that the GFP Level 3 students are allowed to register for courses on the academic programmes where the Level 3 English language course is not a prerequisite. The Panel, however, highlighted that allowing students to enrol for the first year courses delivered in English on the academic programmes of their choice without having passed all the three levels of the English language component of the GFP in its entirety does not comply with the requirements stipulated by the OASGFP. The Panel strongly urges the UFP to review this practice in order to fully comply with the OASGFP as a minimum.

> **Recommendation 11**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College ensure that only students who have passed the English language Exit Examination of Level 3 of the General Foundation Programme be allowed to register for courses delivered in English on the post-Foundation academic programmes to ensure that students are fully prepared to meet the requirements of their degree programme courses.**

The Panel is pleased to see that BUC is taking steps to ensure that the UFP has a system in place that allows them to assess whether their GFP students meet the minimum national standards for English language proficiency by the time they complete the GFP (Portfolio, p.40). The Panel, however, noted that this Exit Examination assesses the GFP graduate achievement of learning outcomes in the English courses only, which is only one of the four areas in the GFP.

The Panel notes that GFP LOs for Computing are assessed through the IC3 assessments and therefore not included in the Exit Examination. The Panel also established that the GSS are embedded in the English and Mathematics courses and assessed through continuous assessment. The Panel urges BUC to extend the scope of the Exit Examination, which currently covers English only, to include the assessment of the GFP LOs in the area of Mathematics. This would complement the assessment of the GFP LOs is the areas of Computing and English and help BUC ensure the quality of exit standards in all the four core areas of the GFP.

> **Recommendation 12**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College expand the scope of its General Foundation Programme exit assessment to include Mathematics, to ensure achievement of all General Foundation Programme learning outcomes.**

The Panel was informed that students failing the Exit Examination are given a resit Exit Examination. It was not possible, though, for the Panel to establish how many times students are allowed to take this resit Exit Examination (Portfolio, p.40). The Panel could confirm that the UFP has taken measures to establish the reliability of this Exit Examination by benchmarking it against IELTS and through comparing it with the GFP exit standards of IMCO (Portfolio, p.40). The Panel encourages the UFP to further pursue such benchmarking of its Exit Examination since feedback received from BUC academic department teachers (see Section 2.2) points out some gaps in English language skills of students graduating from the GFP, particularly in the areas of oral and written communication in English.

2.4 *Teaching Quality*

The BUC as well as the GFP Mission statements emphasise teaching quality as being important to the institution (Portfolio, p.14). It is further manifested in two of the Values of the UFP which are "Students are our priority" and "Professional Development is our frontier". These have guided the definition and implementation of teaching quality within the GFP. This is also in alignment with BUC's Strategic Plan for 2015-2020.

BUC has developed and implemented a strategic approach to assure and enhance the quality of teaching. This includes the Recruitment Policy, which ensures the selection of qualified and experienced instructors into the unit and enables provision of facilities to the faculty to maintain teaching quality (Portfolio, p.41, see Section 4.2). The BUC Quality Manual also provides guidelines for all BUC teachers to help them maintain the teaching quality across BUC academic departments including the UFP (Portfolio, p.41). The Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs is responsible for maintaining consistent teaching quality at the UFP and the Panel heard in the interviews that he supports this by providing GFP staff, for example, with templates for preparing course syllabi, examinations, quizzes and result sheets (Portfolio, p.41).

Another mechanism used at the GFP to promote teaching quality improvement is the peer observation system (Portfolio, p.42). Once a year, all GFP teachers are expected to invite a peer to observe one of their classes, share good practices and provide feedback. The Panel gathered from interviews with the GFP staff that they find this practice beneficial and that it results in the identification and implementation of teaching quality improvement opportunities (Portfolio, p.42).

As will be further explored under Chapter Four of this Report, GFP teachers are offered a number of professional development opportunities, mostly focused on English teaching, which contribute to quality assurance and improvement of teaching (Portfolio, p.42). This includes external experts who are invited to contribute to the programme and help in the professional development of GFP teachers, together with GFP teachers who are themselves encouraged to organise and deliver monthly workshops, presentations and demonstration lessons (Portfolio, p.42).

The Panel noted that the UFP has a clear policy to evaluate GFP teachers and their performance, which includes the use of student feedback (Portfolio, p.41, pp.44-45) on teaching quality. This feedback is collected using an online survey, conducted at the end of every semester. Based on the overall positive results of such a survey conducted in 2017 (an average score of 3.5/5) and interviews with students and alumni, the Panel concluded that students are satisfied with the teaching quality within the GFP. The Panel supports UFP's approach to supporting GFP low achieving students, through specific measures such as remedial classes and tailored remedial action plans (Portfolio, p.42).

The Panel observed that well-structured syllabi and a variety of teaching and learning methods, including new ways of exploring IT for content delivery are used to manage and support teaching quality (Portfolio, p.41). Interviews with the academic staff and the demonstration of the Language Laboratory, informed the Panel that GFP staff are able to promote student engagement through the active use of the recently developed Language Laboratory and other teaching applications such as Kahoot and Google classroom. Student interviews also confirmed that the use of technology in the classroom motivates them to attend the English language classes and engage in their learning. The

Panel was pleased to note the focussed efforts to embed technology in the teaching and learning process of the English language, in order to enhance teaching quality in the GFP. The Panel recognises the use of Google classroom in Mathematics and encourages the creative use to technology in the delivery of Mathematics and IT. The Panel noted that the UFP recognises that embedding technology in the teaching and learning process helps increasing student engagement with the process, and supports BUC in its efforts to widen the use of technology to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in the GFP in line with initiatives taken for the English courses.

> **Affirmation 4**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees that Al Buraimi University College needs to encourage enhanced use of technology in the teaching and learning process within the General Foundation Programme in line with initiatives taken for the English courses and supports its efforts in this area.**

2.5   *Academic Integrity*

BUC has institutional level policies on plagiarism for staff and students, and these are part of the BUC Quality Manual (Portfolio, p.42). These policies clearly state what constitute plagiarism and academic misconduct in general. These regulations are also published in the Student Guide given to all students (Portfolio, p.42). The documents discuss plagiarism and cheating in detail and cover ways of avoiding and identifying plagiarism as well as BUC's regulations in this regard. The Panel found these documents to be comprehensive and informative.

Every student is given a copy of the course syllabus at the commencement of the course. These course syllabi inform students clearly about the course, course outcomes, assessment procedures and methods, study plan, policy for plagiarism, cheating and other forms of academic misconduct. The Panel could confirm through interviews that GFP teachers reinforce all of these in the first week of the semester, (ie orientation or induction week) (Portfolio, p.43). The English course content is also designed to teach students the skills of paraphrasing and citation. The Panel noted that the UFP has recently (in AY 2017/2018) started using plagiarism detection software (namely, *Turnitin*) for the Level 3 English course and intends to extend its use across all levels. The UFP was unable to give more details on plagiarism cases in student work, when requested by the Panel, as the use of *Turnitin* is still nascent.

The UFP uses approved course books for the GFP English courses and IC3 (Portfolio, p.43). It is noteworthy that the avoidance of plagiarism extends to all teaching material that is developed in-house. Currently, for Basic Mathematics, a compiled collection of handouts with acknowledged sources is used (Portfolio, p.43). The Panel, however, was reassured that the GFP Mathematics teachers have now identified a text for Mathematics teaching and it will be used in the next academic year (2018-2019) (Portfolio, p.43). Panel interviews with GFP students as well as alumni showed a good understanding of the policy on plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct.

The UFP Scientific Research and Professional Development Committee (SR&PD) conducts training seminars for GFP teachers on various aspects of academic integrity, which include, how to raise awareness of academic integrity amongst students, how to identify plagiarism in student work and how to help students avoid plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct (Portfolio, p.43). In conclusion, the Panel noted that BUC has systems and processes in place to monitor and manage academic integrity at the GFP level in line with practices used in its other academic departments.

2.6   *Assessment of Student Achievement*

The UFP Academic Affairs' Operating Policies and Procedures govern the assessment of student achievement at the GFP (Portfolio, p.44). It defines the policies and procedures relating to assessment methods, standards, moderation, security, and invigilation. It also sets forth the layout for UFP framework for monitoring assessment and moderation processes to ensure that OAAA and MoHE standards are maintained (Portfolio, p.44). The three-semester cyclical AOL process also

serves as an internal quality assurance process to ensure that students achieve the student learning outcomes (Portfolio, p.44). The AOL process, when applied to a course within the GFP, evaluates student achievement of individual SLOs for the course and in turn the achievement of the LOs of the GFP Level within which the course stands. The process allows the GFP academic staff to make informed judgments on content, delivery and assessments of the course, thus serving as an internal quality assurance process (Portfolio, p.44).

The UFP Examination and Assessment Committee (EAC), is responsible for the operational, regulatory and governance aspects of preparing examinations and assessments in the UFP and follows the guidelines and procedures mentioned in UFP Academic Affairs' Operating Policies and Procedures on all examination-related processes (Portfolio, p.44).

The Panel noted that the GFP uses both formative and summative assessments. The ratio of the formative to summative assessments in the English language courses across the three levels of the GFP is 25:75, whereas for the Basic Mathematics course it is 20:80. The IC3 course has only three electronic tests. The summative assessments consist of mid-term and final examinations and the reliability, authenticity and validity of these is the responsibility of the EAC (see Section 2.8). Formative assessments are conducted over the course of the semester using a variety of tools such as quizzes, presentations, student portfolios, vocabulary log, library work, extended reading, report writing, attendance and class participation (Portfolio, p.45).

The Panel noted that the marking and internal moderation of assessments follows the guidelines of the UFP Academic Affairs' Operating Policies and Procedures. Mid-term and final examinations are blind-marked and internally moderated within 72 hours as per the guidelines (Portfolio, p.45). Following the guidelines of the UFP Academic Affairs' Operating policy, a sample of the final examination scripts are sent for external moderation (Portfolio, p.45). As stated in the UFP Academic Affairs' Operating Policy, the external moderation process is a confirmatory review where the external moderator is expected to confirm or 'unconfirm' students' marks. The Panel, however, believes that the external moderation is not carried out in the full spirit of the prescribed guidelines. The Portfolio confirmed that IMCO acted as the external moderator for the English scripts while BUC academic departments acted as external moderators for Mathematics and GSS. It was explained to the Panel that IMCO expressed their inability to carry out the external moderation for the Mathematics and GSS scripts because of time and resource constraints. While the Panel acknowledges that the UFP has a process of external moderation, it is concerned with the reliability of the process, as BUC academic departments may not be considered as "external" are not genuinely external in terms of providing an outsider's evaluation. The Panel therefore urges BUC to establish formal external moderation processes to strengthen the reliability and validity of the moderation process and assure proper standards for examinations and grading.

> **Recommendation 13**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College, as matter of priority, develop and implement robust external moderation processes for all General Foundation Programme assessments in order to strengthen the validity and reliability of its assessment mechanisms and tools.**

The Panel gathered from the evidence provided that student course evaluation and teacher feedback collected at the end of every semester contribute to the AOL process along with other inputs, such as student retention, progression and attrition data. The Panel was pleased to note that the AOL process of the Level 1 English course resulted in changes to the curriculum, teaching methods and assessments. Some of these included changes made to reading and writing worksheets, grammar and extensive reading tests (Portfolio, p.46).

The Panel noted that the UFP Manual defines the criteria for students to pass a level or course of the GFP and the Exit Examination at the end of the programme to graduate successfully from the GFP. In case of Levels 1 and 2, students pass a course if they obtain 50% of the total marks from formative and summative assessments. In case of Level 3, however, students need to score an overall

band 5 in the Exit Examination and no less than a band 4 in each of the skills to graduate successfully from the GFP (Portfolio, p.45, see Section 2.3). Data on retention, progression and attrition also shows that the majority of students progress on to the next level of study of the GFP; an average of 85% progression rate across the three levels from AY 2012/2013 to 2017/2018 has been reported (Portfolio, pp.51-52, see Section 2.9). Interviews with GFP students, as well as GFP alumni, also indicated that students were provided with mock examinations to help them prepare and found the assessments at the GFP manageable and not extremely challenging.

The Panel accepts that the teaching methodologies used, timely feedback on formative assessments and the support provided by the GFP teachers, is instrumental in students being better prepared for their assessments. The feedback from the academic staff teaching on the undergraduate programmes, however, indicates areas of proficiency gaps and that the GFP does not appear to be facilitating the provision of the expected levels of knowledge and skills. (see Section 2.2, Recommendation 11). In light of the comments from GFP students and alumni, pass rates on the GFP courses and the feedback from the academic departments, the Panel urges the UFP to closely monitor GFP assessments for fitness for purpose. This would also help in maintaining the UFP academic standards and adequately preparing GFP students for the challenges of degree programmes whether at BUC or in any other HEI. The Panel also suggests that BUC pursue efforts to benchmark GFP assessment content and levels with similar GFPs in Oman and beyond.

> **Recommendation 14**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College closely evaluate and benchmark General Foundation Programme assessments to assure their fitness for purpose, reliability and validity to maintain appropriate academic standards and adequately prepare General Foundation Programme students to meet the requirements of degree programmes.**

2.7   Feedback to Students on Assessment

The UFP Academic Affairs' Operating Policies and Procedures underpin the practice and process of providing feedback on both formative and summative assessments of the GFP (Portfolio, p.47). The UFP intends that GFP students use the feedback provided to them on their work as a means of learning and to help them improve their performance in subsequent assessments. The Panel was pleased to note that GFP instructors facilitate this by giving students guidance on what they need to consider in order to bring their performance closer to their desired goals and also by designing feedback comments that invite self-evaluation for learning (Portfolio, p.47).

The Panel saw evidence of detailed written feedback given on assessments such as worksheets, homework, dictation sheets, reading and writing assignments, presentation assessment rubric, report writing (at every stage), oral examination grade sheets, quizzes and oral skills. Active boards are also used to display and discuss writing assignments with the whole class (Portfolio, p.47). UFP teachers have adapted an error symbol technique in marking the writing composition part of the examination "which invites student self-evaluation and future self-learning management". Teachers are encouraged through meetings as well as staff development sessions to provide students with oral and written feedback.

The Panel confirmed student satisfaction with the quality of the feedback provided to them by GFP teachers. Students interviewed by the Panel revealed that they are given timely and constructive feedback on their assessment, enhancing their ability to achieve their learning goals. The Panel concluded that the UFP has systems in place for the effective implementation of BUC's policy on providing constructive and timely feedback to GFP students.

2.8   Academic Security and Invigilation

The EAC of the UFP, is responsible for the operational, regulatory and governance aspects of preparing examinations and assessments in the UFP. The EAC follows the guidelines and procedures

mentioned in UFP Academic Affairs' Operating Policies and Procedures on all examination related processes (Portfolio, p.48).

The EAC prepares an action plan before mid-term and final examinations and sends it to Level and Course Coordinators after the approval of the UFP Director. The Course Coordinators, formulate their examination preparation schedule along with the examination specifications and send it to relevant teachers to prepare different parts of the examinations (Portfolio, p.48). Level and Course Coordinators are in charge of compiling the parts of the examination sections, reviewing the examinations and sending them (along with the listening audio tracks and the examination evaluation checklist) back to the EAC for review. The EAC conducts the examination review as per the prepared schedule and it is their responsibility to ensure that the examination is valid and reliable. The UFP follows strict measures to ensure the security of the examination scripts (Portfolio, p. 49) as well as to manage examination logistics which includes examination preparation, storage of examinations before and after the examination is administered, invigilation during examination and marking and moderation of examination scripts (Portfolio, p.49).

The UFP uses double-blind marking as well as internal and external moderation to ensure the quality and consistency of marking of the GFP scripts and the EAC follows up with the entire process of marking and moderation at the UFP (Portfolio, p.49). After marking and moderation, individual teachers are responsible for entering marks of their students onto the portal (Portfolio, p.50).

The Panel was informed that consistent implementation of the policies and procedures of the EAC across all GFP examination have facilitated the smooth conduct of examinations with very few cases of cheating by students being reported. In a survey conducted in AY 2017/2018, most (75%) of the GFP students have indicated their satisfaction with the conduct of the examinations. The Panel concluded that BUC has mechanisms in place to manage academic security and invigilation within the GFP (Portfolio, p.50).

2.9   Student Retention and Progression

The UFP student data on progression, retention and attrition is maintained on the BUC portal as well as on the LOGOS system and is available to all GFP staff. UFP's approach to analysing student retention and progression data is driven by two aims: to attract and retain capable students and to support students who are not succeeding in their studies (Portfolio, p.50). In order to achieve this, the UFP uses student retention, progression and attrition data as one of the assessment tools in the AOL process of curriculum review and to plan the required support in the form of remedial work for low-achievers and students at risk of failing. The Panel heard in interviews that this remedial work involves identifying individual areas of weakness, tutoring students accordingly and following up on their progress (Portfolio, pp.50-51).

At the end of every semester, teachers submit approved copies of the mark lists, which contain the marks, grades, the progression and the retention rates to Level and Course Coordinators. Level-wise data of retention, progression and attrition is prepared at the end of every semester and maintained in the UFP Results File (Portfolio, p.50). This data is analysed and overall level and course results are presented graphically and a copy of the same is submitted to the UFP Director. The results and the statistics are discussed at the End of Semester Meetings held by Level and Course Coordinators before End of Semester Reports are prepared. The Panel noted the trends in student retention, progression and attrition from AY 2012/2013 to AY 2016/2017 (Portfolio, pp.52-53). Data on retention, progression and attrition shows that the majority of students progress on to the next level of study of the GFP; an average of 85% progression rate across the three levels from AY 2012/13 to 2017/18 has been reported (Portfolio, pp.51-52, see Section 2.9). This could indicate the motivation and keenness of students to learn, but it could also be the result of the rigour of the assessments. The Panel would urge the UFP to review this data critically to evaluate the causes for the declining failure rates in order to ensure that it is a result of increased student motivation or improved teaching quality and not lack of rigour of assessments (Portfolio, p.53) (see Section 2.6).

While the Panel recognises this as good practice, it encourages the UFP to ensure that this practice is embedded within its internal quality processes and develop the capacity of Level/Course Coordinators to interpret student data in order to make informed decisions that enhance student learning. The Panel noted that the Level 1, Semester One 2017 student data on retention, progression and attrition was used in the AOL process of curriculum review and resulted in recommendations such as changes made to reading and writing worksheets, grammar and extensive reading tests; these recommendations were then implemented.

2.10 *Relationships with GFP Alumni*

The UFP considers its GFP alumni as an important source of information and support and is committed to maintaining a close relationship with them (Portfolio, p.54). While the BUC SAD and the BUC Alumni Club are responsible for managing alumni relationships at a college-wide level, the UFP has its own system of nurturing its relationships with the GFP alumni (Portfolio, p.54). This includes involving the GFP alumni in the induction of new GFP students and also in supporting current GFP students in their preparation themselves for degree programmes (Portfolio, p.54). The Panel was able to confirm this through the interviews with some of the GFP alumni. The same students, however, also expressed that they would like regular communication from the UFP of the activities being conducted for the current GFP students.

The Panel noted that since the first semester of 2017, the UFP has initiated the practice of gathering feedback from the GFP alumni on various aspects of teaching, learning and student experience at the GFP and the input contributes to the AOL process, which involves the review of the curriculum, delivery and assessments of a course (Portfolio, p.54). The aim is to use the feedback to inform curriculum changes and other aspects of the GFP delivery in order to enhance student preparedness at GFP level (Portfolio, p.54). This survey showed that 61.5% of the students are satisfied with their experience in the English language courses, 68% for IT and 64.5% for Mathematics. The survey also indicated the areas where GFP alumni students expressed lower levels of satisfaction such as problem solving in Mathematics, creating and manipulating tables in a Microsoft Word document and developing study skills such as note-taking and paraphrasing. The Panel encourages the UFP to review the results and initiate actions to address the opportunities for improvement.

UFP's recognition of the importance of maintaining an effective communication system with its alumni has been beneficial in terms of the feedback received from the alumni in the interviews. The Panel supports the UFP in its acknowledgement of the need to develop a graduate database and using social networking groups, group SMS or available group emails effectively, to communicate with GFP alumni.

> **Affirmation 5**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees that Al Buraimi University College and, in particular, the Unit of Foundation Programme needs to maintain an active relationship with the General Foundation Programme alumni and supports its efforts to achieve this through using a multi-pronged communication approach, which includes the use of surveys, direct interactions and social media.**

3   ACADEMIC AND STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

BUC provides a range of academic and student support services to GFP students through the Admissions and Registry Department (ARD), SAD and the Library. The Strategic Plan 2015-2020 includes two goals, Goal 2 and Goal 4, which focus on student experience and infrastructure, respectively.

This Chapter of the report considers the extent to which the range of activities within Academic and Student Support Services of the College supports the needs of GFP students. These services cover enrolment and student records, learning resources, information and learning technologies, academic advising, student learning support, non-academic support and external engagement.

3.1   Student Profile

BUC has an Admissions and Registration Department (ARD) which is responsible for admissions, enrolment and student records. It uses a Student Management System (SMS), called LOGOS, to make student data available to all authorised users, including GFP teachers. The system provides data useful for the monitoring of GFP student profile and performance. It includes, for example, gender distribution, sponsored and non-sponsored students, Omani and non-Omani students, and attrition, retention and progression rates (Portfolio, p.56). In keeping with the cultural aspects of the Al Buraimi Governorate, BUC offers female-only classes from 8.00 am to 2.00 pm and a second shift from 2.00 pm to 9.30 pm for the male students (Portfolio, p.5). Female students can only be registered for the morning sessions, but exceptions are made for female students working during the day, and with the permission of the UFP Director, they are allowed to attend the evening session of classes (Portfolio, p.61). The Panel heard during interviews that this data informs institutional planning processes and the provision of services and facilities for the GFP. This planning includes, for example, deciding on the number of classrooms and teachers needed, timetabling and teaching material requirements for the semester as well as support requirements for the GFP students who are placed in the A0 groups based on their performance in the Placement Test (Portfolio, p.57).

BUC monitors the changes in the student profile, particularly the decrease of international students, differences in the number of male and female students and decreasing number of ministry-sponsored students as well as private students (Portfolio, p.57). The Portfolio includes a trend analysis of the GFP student profile from AY 2013/2014 to AY 2016/2017 which shows a gradual overall decrease in the number of students, a greater dependence on government-sponsored students and a decrease in the number of international students at the GFP (Portfolio, pp.56-59). The Panel encourages BUC to investigate these trends more closely and put mechanisms in place to decrease its dependence on government-sponsored students and attract more students, both local and international. The Panel is of the opinion that increased systematic analysis of student data and trends for planning, implementation, review and improvement purposes could assist the GFP to further improve its performance.

The UFP has recognised that there is a gap in the LOGOS database to make provision for students with special needs, including any relevant medical or other health conditions of students, to enable them be supported effectively. Currently, students requiring special care, if identified, are brought to the attention of the GFP teachers by the UFP Director (Portfolio, pp.60-63). The Panel noted that there are no special provisions made within the UFP for the support of such students. The Panel urges the UFP to establish a systematic approach to early identification of and catering for students with special needs.

> **Recommendation 15**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College put in place a systematic approach to identify students with special needs enrolled on the General Foundation Programme at an**

> **early stage in the programme in order to provide them with the necessary academic and other types of support.**

3.2 Registry (Enrolment and Student Records)

The BUC ARD offers a range of services, which include student admission, registration, transfer, examination timetabling, assessment records, academic standing and graduation. The ARD is responsible for the Student Guide, ensuring that it includes all the necessary information for students, such as duration of the GFP and eligibility criteria, courses offered, grade point averages, fee structure, academic calendar and class timetables, to complete their academic programme (Portfolio, p.60). All GFP (and BUC) students are provided with an online registration guide in both Arabic and English (Portfolio, p.61).

Since AY 2013/2014, the ARD has been responsible for the entry of enrolment data into the LOGOS Student Information System (SIS). BUC administrative staff and faculty members are granted access to the LOGOS application system through individual accounts in accordance with defined access protocols as mentioned in the Computer Center Policies and Strategies. This controlled access has resulted in a secure, confidential and capable documentation system which manages information such as student results, class attendance, and courses enrolled and completed (Portfolio, p.60). It also deals with checking the admission documentation of students registering with BUC for the first time. The ARD arranges for placement tests to be completed during the initial stage of registration for new students seeking admission to BUC. Students are allocated to the various levels of study in the programme depending on their results in the placement tests (Portfolio, p.61).

ARD also manages the admission of students wishing to transfer to the BUC GFP from other HEIs. They inform students who request exemption from BUC GFP courses of the documents required to support their application (Portfolio, p.62). The Equalisation Committee is responsible for reviewing these applications to recommend the exemptions, and these are then forwarded to the Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs for approval (Portfolio, p.62).

A student satisfaction survey of the GFP students was conducted by the UFP in the first semester of AY 2017/2018, and the findings revealed that most (73.5%) of the students are satisfied with the services of the ARD. The Panel noted that the survey used to assess staff satisfaction does not include a specific question on this and suggests that UFP considers collecting the feedback of staff as they are also users of the services provided by the ARD. The Panel heard during interviews that an automatic backup of all digital data of the UFP happens daily and in addition to this there is a weekly backup wherein one set of records in maintained on-site at BUC and two copies are maintained off-site.

Attention to the identification of students with special needs should be addressed as part of the development of the SIS (see Section 3.1). The Panel heard in the interviews that the online registration system is ready for use, but the online admission system is yet to be completed and operationalised to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the process. The Panel was therefore unable to comment on this system. The Panel was, however, satisfied with the range of registry and associated services that are available to the GFP, including ensuring the security of records through defined access protocols and periodic backup of critical GFP data in accordance with the policy on database servers backup.

3.3 Student Induction

The UFP, as part of BUC, seeks to develop GFP students by motivating them to acquire the necessary language, Mathematics and Computing skills that would facilitate their academic progress and enable them to eventually contribute positively to society (Portfolio, p.63).

UFP provides a comprehensive induction for new GFP students, which commences with interactions with the Dean, Assistant Deans, Director of Students Affairs, the UFP Director, GFP teachers and GFP alumni (Portfolio, p.63). It also includes an introduction to the library, IT and other facilities,

comprehensive information provision on policies, procedures and academic matters, placement testing and other welcoming and "settling in" activities. Students can access information about the College and the GFP ahead of the enrolment process by accessing the BUC website. The website has information on programmes offered at BUC and in particular details about the GFP courses, structure, duration, eligibility criteria, fee structure and placement testing. During the course of the induction, students are given an overview of the GFP and are also informed about the Student Online Evaluation survey of the courses and teachers, to be completed at the end of every semester.

New students are provided with a Student Guide and Orientation Handbook at the start of their study. This Handbook provides them with all information that they require at the GFP (Portfolio, p.63). This includes details on the programme of studies, levels of study, progress and retention conditions, attendance policies, GFP and BUC regulations, academic advising, the hostel regulations, details on the health care, and the code of conduct.

New students are also educated in the use of emails as a means of communication with their teachers and guided on how to activate their individual BUC email accounts (Portfolio, p.63). BUC ensures that IT support staff are available to help new students resolve any of their IT related issues (Portfolio, p.63). The Panel confirmed this through interviews with both the IT staff and GFP students.

The Panel learnt that students are given hard copies of the course syllabus and a soft copy is sent to them via email during the first week of the semester. The course syllabus is a detailed document covering the course plan, the continuous assessment methods and marks allotted for every assessment, grades and necessary rules and guidelines related to attendance, examination and ways of avoiding plagiarism. The Panel noted that GFP teachers have fixed office hours to help their students in study-related issues (Portfolio, p.64).

The UFP has recently begun distributing the GFP brochure to all students. This brochure gives a brief overview of the GFP highlighting the UFP Vision, Mission, Values, learning goals and course details. It also includes information on the Exit Examination that GFP students need to pass in order to progress to the degree programmes. The Panel supports such steps taken by the UFP to create awareness among its GFP students of its Vision, Mission and goals, and was pleased to note that the students seemed to be well-informed of their rights and duties. The Panel was impressed with the role played by the GFP alumni during induction through them sharing their GFP experiences, and adding their encouragement and suggestions on how new students might maximise their learning strategies.

The Panel concluded from the evidence provided and interviews with students that the induction process appears to be working well and is useful to students. In a survey carried out in 2017, most (73.7%) of the GFP students surveyed indicated satisfaction with the induction provided to them by the UFP. GFP alumni also commented in interviews that there have been significant improvements of the GFP in the last few years across a range of areas, including induction. The UFP is encouraged to continue to review and improve its induction programme for GFP students.

3.4 Teaching and Learning Resources

Responsibility for the planning and the development of teaching resources for the GFP rests with the UFP Director, Level and Course Coordinators and GFP teachers (Portfolio, p.64). Attention is given to identifying and acquiring relevant resources for both students and teachers. While the UFP Council has oversight, it is the Curriculum Committee that primarily reviews all issues relevant to the teaching and learning process and makes recommendations to the UFP Council for final consideration and approval (Portfolio, p.64).

While there is a BUC library that all staff and students of the College can use, a dedicated library in the UFP building was established in AY 2015/2016 for the exclusive use of GFP staff and students (Portfolio, p.65). The GFP Library is currently open from 8 am to 4 pm daily. The Panel appreciated the presence of the library within the UFP building, but observed that it caters largely to the English

language courses and not to the Mathematics and IT course requirements. The Panel was also informed that the GFP students would be able to access the library until 8 pm once the GFP Library is relocated and integrated for logistical reasons into the main BUC library in another building on the BUC campus. The Panel found evidence that the decision to relocate the library is a result of feedback from student satisfaction surveys. The Panel saw the new library building under construction during the tour of the facilities. The feedback also indicated a desire for more books, computers and a larger reading area (Portfolio, p.66). Currently, the GFP student use of the GFP Library is closely monitored by the UFP Level Coordinators who schedule weekly library visits for their students. The Panel encourages the UFP to continue to monitor the GFP student use of the library once it has been relocated to another BUC building, and to ensure that it is optimally used by GFP students in their studies.

The Panel was informed that approximately 50 students visit the GFP Library on a daily basis. The Panel was pleased to note that Level Coordinators schedule three library visits per semester for every section, thus integrating the use of the Library into the learning process. In addition to this, the Panel learnt during the library visits students are assigned reading tasks which are then followed up by various post-reading activities such as writing book reviews, summaries and describing book characters, to ensure their use of the library and development of their library skills (Portfolio, p.65).

Teaching materials for the English component of the programme are benchmarked with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the IC3/IT component uses an internationally benchmarked and Certiport-approved course book. Certiport is a leading provider of certification examination development, delivery, and programme management services. The Basic Mathematics component, however, currently makes use of a collection of in-house compiled handouts that are subject to BUC's plagiarism monitoring procedure. The Panel was informed that the UFP has decided to use a Basic Mathematics textbook for the GFP beginning next semester. This would be in alignment with what is practiced for both the English and IT components.

The Panel noted that there is a keen interest at the GFP to engage its 'digital native' and technologically adept students through the use of various software apps and gadgets which employ and embed technology in learning. The Panel was given a demonstration of a game-based learning platform used by the English teachers to reinforce and enhance language learning. In addition, the recent acquisition of language laboratory software also reveals UFP's intention to support GFP learning through the use of relevant technology. The Panel noted the availability of smartboards in all classrooms. The Panel acknowledges BUC's intention to ensure that appropriate technology is acquired, GFP teachers are made aware of and supported in the possible uses of technology in teaching, learning and assessment, and that both teachers and students are trained in the use of the technologies acquired.

3.5 *Information and Learning Technology Services*

The BUC Networking and Information System Department is responsible for all the ICT needs for the UFP and is governed by the Computer Center Policies and Strategies. The Department ensures that the UFP network, Wi-Fi and technology in the classroom and laboratories are working optimally (Portfolio, p.66). The department also makes available two of its technicians to support GFP staff and students. At the beginning of the semester, IT support staff check all the computers, laboratories and software (such as the College portal, or the LOGOS system) for functionality, together with iTools for the English courses, in addition to updating or replacing outdated computers (Portfolio, p.66). The Panel confirmed that the computers in the laboratories are updated at the end of every academic year.

The Panel noted that the UFP is provided with four computer laboratories equipped with 36 networked computers each, individual instructor computers, classroom PCs, printers, scanners and interactive boards for use by GFP staff and students (Portfolio, p.67). The Panel heard during interviews that students have access to an additional four BUC computer laboratories, which are also equipped with 36 computers each. The Panel was pleased to note that the UFP intends to add one more laboratory for students to practice their English language listening and speaking skills. The

Panel saw that Google Forms were used within the English courses for administering vocabulary, and for reading and writing tests. The Panel appreciated the use of Google Forms as a learning platform by some of the GFP teachers and encourages UFP to extend this good practice amongst all teachers on the GFP (Portfolio, p.67).

The UFP monitors the provision of IT services, including hardware, software, the IT infrastructure and security, within the GFP through collecting feedback on this annually from both GFP staff and students. The survey conducted in the first semester of AY 2017/2018 shows that two-thirds (70.8%) of GFP students and most (79.4%) GFP teachers expressed satisfaction with the IT services (Portfolio, pp.67-68). The Panel also heard in interviewees with both staff and students that the IT infrastructure, hardware and software, IT training assistance, along with the helpfulness of the IT services staff have enhanced the quality of learning and teaching at the GFP. The Panel, however did not see evidence of the use of this information to inform improvement in services and the Panel encourages the UFP to use the findings from, for example, the IT and various teaching and learning surveys, to further enhance the quality of the student learning experience.

3.6 Academic Advising

The UFP employs a different approach to academic advising compared to the one used by other BUC academic departments. Students are not allocated to a particular advisor; rather, all GFP teachers serve as Academic Advisors and are involved in assisting any student who requires academic support (Portfolio, p.67). Each teacher is an advisor in his/her classes to facilitate student learning. The Panel was informed that every class has three teachers, teaching the three different elements of the English language courses, who are collectively responsible for identifying low-achievers and providing them with a remedial plan. The Panel learnt from interviews with GFP academic staff that it is the Level and Course Coordinators' responsibility to ensure that all students are adequately supported.

The Panel heard during interviews that the UFP Director inducts all new GFP teachers into this particular academic advising system and that the UFP's Scientific Research and Professional Development Committee (SRPDC), conducts training programmes to assist teachers in supporting "slow learners" (Portfolio, p.61). The Panel noted that the academic advisory mechanism is relatively new and has been formally in operation since June 2017 and hence was unable to comment on the effectiveness of the system.

The Panel was informed that 'at-risk' of failing students are identified early in the semester but was unable to confirm if this process is planned and consistently practiced across all levels and subjects since the required evidence was not provided (see Section 3.7). Given the importance of academic advising to support student success, the Panel supports the UFP's intention to develop mechanisms to identify 'at-risk' of failing students in the GFP and develop remedial plans to support them towards success (Portfolio, p.68). The Panel was pleased to note that GFP students are aware of the academic advising facility available to them and utilise it to receive support in their studies. The student survey results of AY 2017/2018 show that most (73%) of the GFP students surveyed are satisfied with the academic advising system, and believe that the academic advisor plays a critical role in providing them with the required guidance.

The Panel noted that the UFP intends to take steps such as, conducting a survey amongst GFP staff and students on the academic advising system, involving high-achieving students from the undergraduate programmes to support weaker GFP students and conducting more workshops to help academic staff members deal with low achieving students. The Panel was informed that this would help the UFP improve the effectiveness of its Academic Advising system. The Panel, however, could not find evidence of progress made on the above-mentioned intended actions and suggests, therefore, that the identified actions are implemented as a priority. It is further suggested that BUC monitor and review the effectiveness of the existing system of academic advising used at the UFP to ensure its fitness for purpose for GFP students.

Recommendation 16

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College review the effectiveness of the newly introduced academic advising system in the Unit of Foundation Programme and benchmark it against local and international good practice in order to enhance the learning experience of the General Foundation Programme students and support their academic success.

3.7   Student Learning Support

BUC SAD is responsible for providing all students, including the GFP students, with the required learning support and they do so by organising a range of extracurricular activities (Portfolio, p.69). These activities are organised through the Symposia Committee, the Sports Committee, and other college clubs. The Panel was informed that in addition to these, UFP has an English Club which regularly organises activities for GFP students. This club was established by the UFP Council in the second semester of AY 2016/2017, and has its own activity action plan for the AY 2017/2018 (Portfolio, p.69). The Panel acknowledges UFP's recent initiative of having one elected student class representative for each class or section, who then collectively choose one from amongst themselves to represent the GFP in the UFP Council. During interviews, the Panel felt that the student representatives were not fully aware of the responsibility attached to this role. The Panel was pleased to note that the UFP is making efforts to increase student participation at both the UFP and BUC but suggests that student representatives are adequately prepared for and supported in their roles (Portfolio, p.69).

The Panel heard that students placed in the A0 group as an outcome of the English placement tests are provided with intensive English language support for the first four weeks of the semester (see Section 2.3). The Panel appreciated this dedicated support, but believes that four weeks may not be adequate. The Panel noted the ready access the GFP students have to their teachers as well as the UFP Director. The Panel concluded, based on the evidence provided and interviews conducted, that GFP students are satisfied with the ease of access and communication, which has resulted in a conducive learning environment.

3.8   Student Satisfaction and Climate

BUC believes that an appropriate academic and campus environment strengthens student academic achievement as manifested in Goals 2 and 4 of the Strategic Plan 2015-2020 which aim to focus on student experience and supporting infrastructure, respectively (Portfolio, pp.70-71). In order to provide this educational context, BUC employs different strategies to gather student feedback on the facilities provided to them.

The Panel noted that the BUC uses a number of surveys to gauge the opinions of GFP students, for example, the evaluation of courses and teachers survey and the survey regarding support services, to develop its facilities in response to student needs. The results of the support services survey conducted in AY 2017/2018 shows that most (70.3%) of the GFP students surveyed were largely satisfied with the sports and cultural activities and with the Student Council. In AY 2017/2018, the UFP administered its own surveys to assess the opinion of GFP students about the hostel and cafeteria services provided to them. The results show that only about one–third (34.75%) of GFP students surveyed were satisfied with the food, entertainment and internet facilities provided at the hostel and half (50%) of the GFP students surveyed were satisfied with the quality, variety and food in the cafeteria. The Panel suggests that the UFP review this data to inform their future planning in these areas.

Student satisfaction is further tracked through the analysis of statistics such as the retention, progression, attrition rates and student attendance data. Data on retention, progression and attrition also shows that the majority of students progress to the next level of study of the GFP (an average of 85% progression rate across the three levels from AY 2012/2013 to 2017/2018 has been reported (Portfolio, pp.51-52, see Section 2.9). The consistent retention rates and declining failure rates are

considered as indicative of the extent of GFP student satisfaction with respect to their studies (see Section 2.9). The student voice is also heard through the class representatives who, as members of the Student Council, express suggestions and complaints on behalf of their cohort (see section 3.7). The Panel was pleased to note that the Level 1, Semester One 2017 student data on retention, progression and attrition was used in the AOL process of curriculum review and resulted in recommendations such as changes made to reading and writing worksheets, grammar and extensive reading tests; which were then implemented.

Suggestion boxes to collect student views and suggestions have been made available since the beginning of AY 2017/2018. The Assistant Dean of Students Affairs directly monitors the responses and along with the Director of UFP ensures that appropriate action is taken. While the Panel recognises all the steps taken by the UFP to address student complaints and grievances, including the implementation of an informal process to manage the same, it also notes the absence of a formal policy on managing student complaints and grievances (see Section 1.8). In light of that, the Panel supports and endorses UFP's intention to put in place a clear policy regarding student complaints and to use the findings of student feedback to improve the overall learning and campus environment (see Recommendation 7).

3.9   Student Behaviour

The GFP, as part of BUC, follows the institutional regulations concerning student behaviour as mentioned in the Student Guide (Portfolio, p.72). The SAD is responsible for establishing these regulations and ensuring that students follow these regulations (Portfolio, p.72). The BUC QAM defines the regulations for student disciplinary procedures to be followed across BUC. There is an established BUC Disciplinary Committee to deal with any student violations of the rules and regulations. The Director of Student Affairs and the UFP Director introduce new students to the rules and regulations during the induction week. In addition to this, GFP teachers are expected to read the examination instructions to remind students of the relevant rules during the examination period (Portfolio, p.73). UFP handles cases of violation of the college regulations with regard to student discipline and behaviour according to their severity. If the case is serious, it is referred to the Disciplinary Committee for further action. A student has the right to appeal the decision of the Disciplinary Committee when s/he considers the decision too severe or unfair (Portfolio, p.73). Students can also appeal against their final examination grades by following the process laid out in the UFP Academic Affairs' Operating Policies and Procedures. Students are required to fill in the 'Grade Appeal' form, which is reviewed by the Examination and Assessment Committee (EAC) for a decision (Portfolio, p.73).

The Panel heard from students and staff that there is an effective system to communicate the rules and regulations to students, and that the rules are fair and are reasonably implemented. The Panel, based on the evidence provided and interviews conducted, concluded that GFP students are aware of the disciplinary policy and processes of BUC. The Panel encourages the UFP to act upon its intended development of forms to record the various categories of student misconduct (Portfolio, p.73). The Panel also supports UFP's intention to analyse disciplinary data to identify the underlying causes of misconduct and find ways to proactively engage with students to assist them to continue to adhere to the rules and regulations (Portfolio, p. 73).

3.10   Non-Academic Support Services and Facilities

BUC through Goal 2 of Strategic Plan 2015-2020 where the focus is on student experience, manifests an awareness of the importance of providing students with a variety of non-academic support services (Portfolio, p.73). BUC offers hostel services only for female students in accommodation rented by BUC for this purpose. The students staying in the hostels are also provided with transportation to and from the campus at a nominal cost (Portfolio, p.74).

BUC has a cafeteria, medical clinic and facilities for sports and recreational activities on campus (Portfolio, p.73). In addition to this, the UFP building also houses a canteen exclusively for the GFP and Law programme staff and students (Portfolio, p.75). The details of all such services are

communicated to students through the Student Orientation Handbook. The Panel noted that in the first semester of the AY 2017/2018, BUC conducted a number of surveys to gauge student satisfaction in relation to support services and facilities. The surveys indicate that students would like to have more recreational activities in the hostel, a wider variety of food at more affordable prices in the UFP canteen and a more ambient canteen environment (see Section 3.8). The capital development of the campus includes a recently inaugurated mosque as well as the provision of a spacious, modern cafeteria that is being constructed as a part of BUC's Phase Three Building Expansion Plan (Portfolio, p.76). The Panel supports such proactive responses to student requests. The Panel heard positive comments from GFP students and alumni about the number and nature of sport and recreational activities arranged by the UFP, as well as the many channels of social media through which these activities are announced.

The BUC has implemented a health policy, which was approved in 2014. There is a committee responsible for ensuring that the policy is implemented, reviewed, and that identified improvements are acted upon. Health services are made available to GFP students and staff through the BUC clinic (see section 1.9). During the Audit Visit, the Panel was informed that the clinic would soon be relocated to a more private, spacious and appropriate location which will have additional facilities to better serve BUC students and staff.

The Panel noted during the tour of the campus, that considerable thought and planning has gone into the development of the physical infrastructure and the resourcing of the campus. The campus provides an academic environment for both staff and students that has the potential to engender their institutional identity and encourage pride in the GFP; it also provides a context that fosters and supports student learning and the development of graduate attributes. The Panel appreciated BUC's investment in a suitable and evolving campus infrastructure for staff and students which supports the quality of student learning.

3.11 *External Engagement*

Both the BUC and UFP Vision have an outward-looking stance towards external engagement (Portfolio, p.13). In addition to the relationship with CSUN (see Section 1.3), BUC also has formal agreements with Sur University College (SUC), Sohar University (SU) and IMCO to conduct mutually beneficial academic and non-academic activities including benchmarking exercises for quality and improvement purposes at the GFP level. The Panel concluded that BUC recognises the importance of benchmarking and is taking the necessary steps to ensure that benchmarking-driven improvements are being made. UFP has a professional development programme that aims to develop its teachers by inviting external trainers, speakers and presenters to introduce, for example, new pedagogical methodologies or techniques to enhance teaching, curriculum development and assessment.

The GFP also acts to actualise its Mission in serving the community through, for example, cooperation with BUC's Training, Consultations and Community Services Department to provide IELTS Preparation course as a contribution, among other efforts, to develop the public and private sectors in the community (Portfolio, p.77). The Panel appreciated the inclusion of an external member from the local community on the UFP Council to establish a relationship with the local community (Portfolio, p.78).

The Panel encourages the GFP to monitor the benefits accrued from affiliations and agreements with other institutions, and ensure that, as a result of the interactions and benchmarking activities, the GFP enhances course delivery, staff capabilities, and academic quality and standards.

4.   STAFF AND STAFF SUPPORT SERVICES

Many of the approaches that BUC has taken in the area of staff and staff support services are provided for and applied College wide. The Panel considered these approaches in the context of the GFP and assessed their impact on the delivery of the GFP. As an example of a college-wide approach, the BUC By-Laws govern all matters concerning staff members and academic careers, including those in the GFP. The Panel was pleased to note that BUC has well-defined procedures and processes related to staff and staff support Services Management and that these are deployed consistently across BUC, including the GFP.

This Chapter provides the Panel´s main findings related to GFP staff under the following topics: staff profile; recruitment and selection; staff induction; professional development; performance planning and review; staff organisational climate and retention, and Omanisation.

4.1   Staff Profile

The BUC Human Resource (HR) Department is responsible for maintaining all official records relating to staffing (Portfolio, p.80). This includes updating the staff profile data every semester (Portfolio, p.80), as well as maintaining this data in a systematic manner. This allows the UFP to analyse staff profile in terms of experience, qualifications and quality, and to identify areas for improvement (Portfolio, p.86).

Presently, the UFP has 26 academic staff members teaching on its GFP, with 13 expatriates and 13 Omani nationals. The 13 expatriates represent five nationalities but only one is a native English speaker and the ratio of male to female academics is 16:10 (Portfolio, pp.85-86). UFP has in place a number of initiatives aimed at reinforcing the qualification levels of its GFP academic staff. This includes incentives for teachers with a Master's or PhD degree (Portfolio, p.94), as well as professional development activities carried out according to an annual plan that is defined and supervised by the UFP Scientific Research and Professional Development Committee (Portfolio, p.89). These efforts have resulted (in 2017) in the GFP having a staff profile of well-qualified members that includes one PhD, 15 Master's and 10 Bachelor degree holders (Portfolio, p.84).

The UFP conducts an HR needs analysis every semester using the staff profile data and the expected number of new students (Portfolio, p.85). The Panel, however, did not see any evidence on the possible usage of other indicators such as the expected enrolment of students, number of students per class, student to teacher ratio or teaching load that the UFP may use to inform HR planning in future. The Panel encourages the UFP to consider the adoption of appropriate staff projection tools to identify and define future long-term staffing needs and plans. The Panel also encourages the UFP to further analyse available GFP staff profile information in order to better support the preparation and implementation of future staffing plans and targets.

4.2   Recruitment and Selection

The UFP follows a well-defined, documented and implemented staff recruitment process which is set out in the BUC Academic Staff Hiring Policy and in the BUC Quality Manual (Portfolio, pp.86-87). This process involves three stages: prior to selection, prior to arrival and follow-up (Portfolio, p.86). In each stage, there are various steps with different departments responsible for each step; for example, the UFP is involved in the interviewing process prior to the selection of the candidate and once that is decided, the HR and the Director of the Financial Affairs Department manage the process of making an offer to the selected candidates and ensuring that the candidates arrive at BUC on time. The Panel verified the implementation of the process through interviews and evidence presented. Although reference is made to the UFP Recruitment Committee (Portfolio, p.86), the Panel was informed during interviews that there is no standing recruitment committee. It was explained to the Panel that the UFP Director convenes a temporary recruitment committee every time the need arises and it usually includes two experienced academics from the UFP, the HR

Director and the Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs and Research. The UFP Director identifies recruitment needs once every semester based on evaluation of the current staff and the number of students expected (Portfolio, p.86). Job opportunities are advertised through a variety of means, including local and international newspapers, the internet and the College website (Portfolio, p.86). Based on the evidence provided, the Panel concluded that BUC's hiring policy has allowed it to staff its GFP with appropriate knowledge and skills required for the effective delivery of the programme.

4.3 Staff Induction

BUC states that its approach to induction for new staff members is defined in the BUC New Faculty Induction Manual (Portfolio, p.88). It contains comprehensive information to familiarise new staff with the College's academic and administrative systems, policies, regulations, procedures, resources and facilities as well as on matters concerning the daily and social lives. The induction is conducted in two phases, beginning with one organised at the BUC level by the HR Director. The Dean and Assistant Deans of BUC meet with new staff during this phase of the induction. It is during this induction that all new staff members are provided with the New Staff Induction Manual and are given an insight into BUC's approach to research, quality assurance, academic advising and its regulations (Portfolio, p.89). This is followed by the induction at the UFP level, where a mentor is assigned to all new faculty members. The mentor offers support to new staff members through the three-month probation period and provides specific information on aspects such as GFP course syllabi, assessments, rules, regulations, processes and UFP committees (Portfolio, p.89). In addition to this, new staff members, particularly expatriate staff, are supported in the process of resettlement through assistance with finding accommodation and transportation.

The Panel confirmed, from the documentation provided and through interviews with different groups of teachers that induction policies and procedures are well implemented and meet the expectations and needs of new teachers (Portfolio, p.89). The Panel encourages UFP to consider further the consolidation of the existing practices of staff induction by benchmarking them with other colleges and universities that also offer similar GFP courses, in order to share experiences in this area.

4.4 Professional Development

Professional development is a part of UFP core Values and this priority is well-aligned with BUC's overall priorities and Strategic Plan for 2015-2020, which states in Goal 1, Strategy 1.1, that in order to achieve the Quality Advantage:

> There is a strong commitment to the development of our administrative and faculty staff. We seek to provide opportunities and resources for them to engage in research projects, to participate on a broader "professional stage," including presentations at regional and international conferences, and to work with government, social, and private entities in BUC sponsored partnerships.

Strategic Plan 2015-2020

The BUC Training and Professional Development Policy, embedded within the BUC Quality Manual, underpins the provision of professional development for all staff, including the GFP teachers. In addition, the UFP Departmental Action Plan includes a section dedicated to professional development and the UFP organisational structure includes a SR&PD (Portfolio, p.15). This committee is responsible for developing and implementing the UFP Professional Development Plan. The Panel understood that since 2015, the UFP SR&PD Committee has coordinated with the Department of Scientific Research and Higher Studies to offer a set of professional development activities tailored to meet the needs of the GFP teachers. These included, for example, sessions on using Google Classroom and providing feedback on student assessments. (Portfolio, p.89). The Panel noted that the implementation and effectiveness of these activities is monitored closely by collecting feedback from the GFP teachers on the developmental opportunities provided to them (Portfolio, p.89). The Panel was pleased to note that the UFP has initiated a process of preparing its own annual professional development programme in which a workshop is organised every month to

foster a culture of research and professional development amongst its academic staff (Portfolio, p.89). The Panel also noted that the UFP Professional Development Plan is based on a needs analysis that is part of the annual performance appraisal exercise and on the Needs Analysis Form completed by individual staff members. The Panel gathered from the evidence provided that not all GFP teachers attend all the scheduled professional development sessions (which are mandatory) and encourages UFP to find ways to motivate stronger participation, whenever required. The Panel confirmed that this is an issue already recognised by the UFP management and it is stated in the minutes of its Scientific Research and Professional Development Committee that sometimes there is "a failure of some teachers to deliver their presentations" in the scheduled professional development sessions, as well as attending others.

From the documentation provided and interviews held with different groups of GFP teachers, the Panel could establish that there are well-defined processes and activities related to professional development in place. The Panel noticed, however, that the professional development activities and opportunities seem to be mostly focused on English teaching, as opposed to other GFP subject areas, namely, Mathematics, IT and GSS (Portfolio, p.91). The Panel heard from UFP management and staff that they intend to address this gap by including professional development workshops for teachers of Mathematics and IT in the Professional Development Plan for the AY2017/ 2018 (Portfolio, p.91).

BUC's approach to continued professional development for the GFP teachers is evident from the increased use of international trainers and the financial support given for GFP teachers to attend workshops and conferences (Portfolio, p.91). The Panel encourages the continuation of this kind of investment in the professional development of UFP staff teaching on the GFP.

The Panel appreciates that BUC has recognised the need to develop customised training programmes for novice Omani teachers at the GFP, in order to ensure that the BUC Omanisation plans are achieved while maintaining the required standards of GFP delivery. The Panel was provided with evidence of the training opportunities provided to GFP staff wherein the Omani staff members were also present. The Panel, however, did not find evidence of actions taken to specifically address this identified need and recommends that BUC makes a concerted effort to achieve this (see Section 4.7).

> **Recommendation 17**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College, in response to its intention to develop customised training programmes for the newly appointed Omani staff teaching on the General Foundation Programme, develop and implement professional development programmes to facilitate achievement of Al Buraimi University College's Omanisation targets.**

4.5 Performance Planning and Review

The UFP's approach to performance planning and review is outlined in the BUC Bylaws, specifically regarding the roles, rights and duties of faculty and other staff. The BUC Strategic Plan 2015-2020 embeds appraisal in current activities through objective 1.1.2 which states, "By 2015, develop and implement an annual faculty evaluation tool to assess (a) teaching effectiveness, (b) research productivity, and (c) community engagement; by 2016, ensure that every faculty member has a research agenda and professional development plan". The BUC Quality Manual devotes an entire section (Section 7) to this area and also includes a variety of appraisal forms.

UFP applies the BUC appraisal procedures for its GFP teachers and non-academic staff, as well as for the UFP Director (Portfolio, p.92). These procedures, entitled "BUC Appraisal Procedures", are well-defined and clearly documented (Portfolio, pp.92-93). The system is transparent and uses student evaluation of teaching and the evaluation by the UFP Director to inform the evaluation of academic and non-academic staff (Portfolio, p.92). The evaluation of the UFP Director is the responsibility of the Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs and Research. Following BUC policy, all GFP staff members are formally evaluated at least once per year. Retention of staff is decided by the

Dean, based on the recommendations of the UFP Director (Portfolio, p.92). The Panel noted that based on the annual evaluation of GFP staff, high-achievers are rewarded through incentives and low achievers are given opportunities to show improvement (Portfolio, p.98).

Performance appraisal practices at the UFP take into consideration the BUC policy of assessing and promoting academic staff. This policy states that "staff rights, duties, and responsibilities in all academic departments and UFP are not limited to teaching and testing, but also include research, academic advising, administration duties, and responsibilities towards students, colleagues, management, and society" (Portfolio, p.92). BUC By-laws state that in general faculty members will be promoted according to the following criteria and weighting: scientific research (70%), teaching performance (20%), and community and college service (10%) (Portfolio, p.41). The BUC Quality Manual also establishes incentives for outputs and financial awards related to scientific publications (Portfolio, p.133). The OAAA Audit Report 2012, Recommendation 19, emphasised strengthening the "research" within BUC and in response to that, BUC declared "research work" as a mandatory part of every faculty member's job including the staff teaching on the GFP. Research publication in books and refereed journals as well as participation in national and international conferences are part of the performance evaluation criteria for the GFP academic staff. The sample of GFP staff performance evaluation forms reviewed, however, showed limited research activities. The Panel believes that the teaching loads assigned to GFP teachers (up to 21 hours of classes per week) may not be compatible with the research outcome expectations, such as papers published in indexed journals and books. Interviews with GFP academic staff also indicated that they found it difficult to meet BUC's expectation on research outcomes. Given the specific nature of the UFP Mission and GFP goals, which have a strong teaching focus, the Panel suggests that in the context of performance appraisal criteria and career paths for GFP teachers, it is important that an appropriate balance be found between the different criteria being applied to ensure that GFP teaching quality remains a high priority (Portfolio, p.13).

The Panel appreciates that some of the issues presented above are already a matter of concern at the UFP. Discussions in the SR&PD Committee, on the promotion of a dynamic culture of research at the UFP, is an example. The minutes of the same meeting also included an assurance that that "faculty members will be provided with time to complete their research work". The Panel encourages the UFP, given its Mission and the GFP goals, to define for itself in more detail appropriate expectations for GFP teachers regarding research activities and teaching versus research time allocations.

> **Recommendation 18**
>
> **The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College, benchmark its performance management system, with respect to balancing teaching load and research scholarship of faculty teaching on the General Foundation Programme, with international good practice and similar General Foundation Programmes in Oman to ensure that faculty members are provided with sufficient time to complete their research work.**

BUC By-laws and the BUC Quality Manual establish well-defined career progression mechanisms and pathways for all BUC academic staff including those teaching on the GFP. The progression levels are as follows: instructors, assistant professors, associate professors and professors. The By-laws state that only PhD holders and staff holding the rank of assistant professor can apply for promotion at BUC. It is not clear therefore, how good performance among GFP staff is reinforced. The Panel encourages BUC to take into account that at this stage the appropriate and possible career paths as far as academic promotions and awarding academic titles for GFP teachers is not sufficiently clear. It is an important issue to consider in the future to maintain the retention rates amongst GFP teachers and also equality and fairness with respect to career development opportunities.

Recommendation 19

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College clearly define career progression opportunities for General Foundation Programme academic staff in order to facilitate and increase the retention of talented academics within the Unit of Foundation Programme.

4.6   Staff Organisational Climate and Retention

BUC considers staff members integral to its success and that is reflected in one of its core values on teamwork, namely, "Team: we work together as one family to achieve our mission, cultivating a collective commitment, spirit, and pride in our organisational goals and accomplishments" (Portfolio, p.13). The UFP, in turn, lives this value through a number of initiatives that have been aimed at promoting a good work environment for the GFP staff. These include satisfaction surveys, activities promoted by the BUC Social Committee for all staff including GFP, awarding of letters of appreciation for distinguished achievements, and the provision of incentives for academic staff to achieve further qualifications and also for those taking on the roles of course or level coordinators (Portfolio, pp.93-94). The Panel noted that all these efforts have resulted in high retention rates, with 16 GFP teachers that have over four years of working experience at BUC (Portfolio, p.85, p.94). The Panel also confirmed through interviews conducted with GFP students, alumni and teachers, as well as viewing survey results, that the Value of Team is well deployed at the GFP level, where proximity, accessibility and being part of a community were expressed and felt in consistent ways.

Both from the staff survey data provided and the interviews conducted, the Panel noted that there is an overall positive staff organisational climate at UFP (77% of the UFP staff surveyed indicated satisfaction in AY 2017/2018) in the areas of leadership and management, corporate culture, communication and line management. There are areas, however, such as workload of the teachers, career progression, salaries and benefits, and the provision of health insurance coverage, where an average of 40% of the UFP staff surveyed indicated lower levels of satisfaction. The evidence shows that there is scope to enhance staff satisfaction levels in these areas and BUC needs to put mechanisms in place to address these gaps. The Panel also reminds the UFP that it is important to identify areas of improvement based upon the staff survey results) or through additional staff feedback received, so that further targeted actions can be defined and implemented in this area. In order to close the quality improvement loop, the Panel encourages UFP to take into consideration the staff feedback and use it to set priorities with corresponding improvement actions.

Recommendation 20

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that Al Buraimi University College use the feedback collected from the General Foundation Programme staff to analyse their perceptions of the programme and work conditions in order to formulate strategies to address the areas of concern and enhance staff satisfaction.

4.7   Omanisation

The Panel noted that UFP has a process in place aimed at promoting Omanisation within GFP staff (Portfolio, pp.95-97), by which it has achieved Omanisation rates of 100% for non-academic staff and 50% for academic staff (Portfolio, pp.95-96). The current UFP Director himself is an Omani PhD holder and the UFP Deputy Director, too, is also from Oman (Portfolio, p.95). Special measures and additional flexibility are used to promote Omanisation while assuring teaching quality and the need to attract and retain native English speaking GFP teachers (Portfolio, p.98). These measures include accepting Omani candidates with a minimum of a bachelor's degree, a teaching qualification and no teaching experience, to teach on the GFP. An expatriate, on the other hand, to be accepted for the same position requires a minimum qualification of a master's degree and three years of teaching experience (Portfolio, p.95).

Some of the other approaches adopted to promote Omanisation within the GFP (Portfolio, p.95) include making administrative and networking positions only available for Omani candidates, training provided to recently graduated Omanis, and support for Omani GFP academic staff to attend national and international events. The existing Omani academics have been involved in a variety of professional development activities such as attending training workshops organised by the UFP and attending and participating in national and international conferences (Portfolio, p.98). In addition to this, UFP is also planning to launch a training programme exclusively for novice Omani teachers (Portfolio, p.98, see Recommendation 17, Section 4.4).

The Panel encourages the UFP to continue its process of Omanisation, while at the same time ensuring that the quality of provision and academic standards of the General Foundation Programme are maintained.

APPENDIX A: AUDIT PANEL

Dr Mark Hay (Chair)
Strategic Support to the Vice-Chancellor
Office of the Vice-Chancellor and Principal
Tshwane University of Technology
Pretoria, South Africa

Prof Pedro Saraiva
Department of Chemical Engineering
University of Coimbra
Portugal

Dr Nagham Al Azzawi
Assistant Professor, Linguistics and Translation
Department of English Language and Literature
Rustaq College of Education
Sultanate of Oman

Ms Gargi Chugh (Review Director)
Oman Academic Accreditation Authority

APPENDIX B: ABBREVIATIONS, ACRONYMS AND TERMS

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

ADRI	Approach➔Deployment➔Results➔Improvement
AOL	Assurance of Learning
Approach	The first dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on evaluating what an HEI aims to achieve for a given topic and how it proposes to achieve it.
ARD	Admission and Registration Department
BUC	Al Buraimi University College
CEFR	Common European Framework of References for Languages (also CEF or CEFRL
CELTA	Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults
CSUN	California State University, Northridge
Deployment	The second dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on whether an HEI's plans for a given topic are being followed in practice, and if not, why not.
EAC	Examination and Assessment Committee
External Reviewer	A Member of the OAAA Register of External Reviewers; a person approved by the OAAA Board to participate as a member of the OAAA's various external review Panels.
GFP	General Foundation Programme
GSS	General Study Skills
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HoD	Head of Department
HR	Human Resources
IC3	Internet and Computing Core Certification
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
IMCO	International Maritime College Oman
Improvement	The fourth dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on how effectively an organisation is improving its *approach* and *deployment* for any given topic in order to achieve better *results*.
IT	Information Technology
IMCO	International Maritime College
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LOGOS	Name of database application
MoHE	Ministry of Higher Education
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
OAAA	Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (http://www.oaaa.gov.om/ar/Default.aspx)
OAAA Board	The governing body of the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
OASGFP	Oman Academic Standards for the General Foundation Programme
OEOT	Oxford English Online Test
OP	Operational Plan

PD ....Professional Development

PDP ....Professional Development Programme

Panel Chairperson ....The Chairperson of the Audit Panel.

Panel Member ....An OAAA External Reviewer who is a member of an Audit Panel.

QAD ....Quality Assurance Department

QASC ....Quality Audit Steering Committee

QM ....Quality Manual

Quality Assurance ....The combination of policies and processes for ensuring that stated intentions are met.

Quality Audit ....An independent evaluation of the effectiveness of the system and processes by which an HEI sets, pursues and achieves its mission and vision.

Quality Audit Portfolio ....The report produced as the result of a self study. Also forms the main submission made to the OAAA by the HEI being audited.

Quality Audit Report ....A public report published by the OAAA which presents the findings and conclusions of the Audit Panel's External Review of an HEI.

Quality Enhancement ....The combination of policies and processes for improving upon existing *approach*, *deployment* and *results*.

Results ....The third dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on the evidence of the outputs and outcomes of a topic's *approach* and *deployment*.

Review Director ....An individual assigned to an Audit Panel by the OAAA to provide professional guidance and support.

Sic ....indicates that the preceding segment of the quote was copied faithfully, in spite of a mistake

SIS ……………………………...Student Information System

SLO ……………………………Student Learning Outcomes

SM ....Supporting Materials

SMS ……………………………Student Management System

SP ....Strategic Plan

SRPDC …………………………Scientific Research and Professional Development Committee

SU ....Sohar University

SUC ....Sur University College

System ....In this Report, *system* refers to plans, policies, processes and results that are integrated towards the fulfilment of a common purpose.

TOEFL …………………………Test of English as a Foreign Language

Turnitin ....An electronic text matching system that compares text in a student assignment against a database of sources

UFP ....Unit of Foundation Program

USA ....United States of America

NOTES

....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....

....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....
....