



Oman Authority for
Academic Accreditation and
Quality Assurance of Education



Report of a General Foundation
Programme Quality Audit of
Oman College of Health Sciences

March 2023

GFP Quality Audit Report Number 32

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OVERVIEW OF THE GFP QUALITY AUDIT PROCESS

This General Foundation Programme (GFP) Quality Audit Report (the 'Report') documents the findings of a GFP Quality Audit by the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA) of the Oman College of Health Sciences (OCHS). The GFP Quality Audit followed the process of audit as outlined in OAAAQA's General Foundation Programme Quality Audit Manual. The GFP Quality Audit also used the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes ('GFP Standards') as an external reference point.

The GFP Quality Audit commenced with OCHS undertaking a self-study of its Mission, Vision and systems in relation to the GFP. The results were summarised in the GFP Portfolio (the 'Portfolio'). This document was submitted to the OAAAQA by the agreed date of 16 February 2022. OCHS has Muscat as the main campus and seven branches spread across the country. The seven other branches are located in North Sharqiyah, South Sharqiyah, North Batinah, South Batinah, Dhofar, Dakhaliya and Dhahira. Despite the number of branches involved in the audit, the OAAAQA aimed to maintain the integrity of the audit process as presented in the General Foundation Programme Quality Audit Manual.

The OAAAQA appointed an external GFP Quality Audit Panel (the 'Panel'), comprising appropriately qualified and experienced local and international reviewers, to conduct the GFP Quality Audit (for membership of the Panel see Appendix A). For the purposes of this multi-site audit, it was decided to form a Panel of six external reviewers, comprising three international and three locally-based members. The Panel met virtually through MS Teams on 30 March 2022 to consider OCHS's GFP Portfolio. Following the Preliminary Meeting, a representative of the Panel Chairperson and the Review Directors undertook a planning visit on behalf of the Panel to OCHS on 28 April 2022 to clarify certain matters, request additional information and arrange for the Panel's Audit Visit. Prior to the Audit Visit, the Panel formally invited submissions from the public about the quality of OCHS's activities in relation to the GFP. No public submissions were received using this process.

The Panel was divided into three sub-Panels of two reviewers, each served by a Review Director. Sub-Panel 1 visited the Dhofar and Muscat branches. Sub-Panel 2 visited the Dakhaliya, North Sharqiyah and South Sharqiyah branches, while Sub-Panel 3 visited the branches in Dhahira, North Batinah and South Batinah. The GFP Quality Audit Visit took place from 29 May to 02 June 2022. During this time, the Panel spoke with approximately 440 people, including current and former GFP students, GFP and post-GFP faculty, GFP support staff, OCHS senior management and administrative staff. The Panel also visited a selection of venues and examined additional documents.

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

The Panel's audit activities and preparation of this Report were governed by regulations set by the OAAAQA Board. No documents created after 02 June 2022 (the last day of the Audit Visit) were taken into consideration for the purposes of this audit other than pre-existing evidence specifically requested by the Panel in advance and/or submitted by the HEI in response to GFPQA draft Report v5. This Report was approved by the OAAAQA Board on 13 March 2023.

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

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSIONS

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

Executive Summary of Findings

The Oman College of Health Sciences (OCHS) which is an amalgamation of the 12 former Ministry of Health Education Institutes (MoHEIs) was established by Royal Decree 18/2018. The MoHEIs, supervised by the Directorate General of Human Resources Development (DGHRD) in the Ministry of Health, were established to provide health sciences education and training. Subsequently, in response to the need for Omanisation of the healthcare workforce and to meet the local health sector human resource needs, they were expanded as a network to provide accessible health care education and training across Oman (Portfolio, pvii). Currently, the OCHS offers undergraduate programmes in Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Information Management, Physiotherapy, Medical Imaging and Medical Laboratory Sciences (Portfolio, pviii). In addition to these undergraduate programmes, the OCHS also offers a three-semester General Foundation Programme (GFP). Until AY 2011-12, the MoHEIs, based in various regions across the country, offered their own Foundation Courses based on their specific needs. Subsequently, in response to the evolving nationwide standardisation of the GFP, the MoHEIs established a common GFP across all its institutes with the Muscat campus coordinating the programme (Portfolio, pviii). Currently, the OCHS has eight campuses spread across the different regions of Oman, with the Muscat campus serving as the main campus. The current OCHS GFP is designed to align with the Oman Standards for General Foundation Programme and has a duration of three semesters. Over the course of three semesters the programme delivers three levels of English language courses, two levels each of Information Technology (IT) and Mathematics. The General Study Skills (GSS) component of the GFP is embedded in the English, IT and Mathematics components (Portfolio, pviii). The management of the GFP is facilitated through the Foundation Programme Section (FPS) at the main campus in Muscat (Portfolio, p12, SM005, ASM001).

OCHS has a set of Mission, Vision and Values that are clear, relevant and set an appropriate level of ambition and intention which are widely understood by GFP staff and students (Portfolio, p11, SM011). OCHS has a multi-level governance and management structure with the College Academic Board (AB) as its highest regulatory body (Portfolio, p12, SM013). The College main campus is based in Muscat and is centrally managed by the College Dean, who reports to the AB Chair, supported by four Assistant Deans and four Program Associate Deans. The College has seven branches located around the country and each branch is headed by a Branch Associate Dean (AD) who reports also to the College Dean (Portfolio, p12, SM005). The management of the GFP is facilitated through the Head of the Foundation Program Section (HFPS) based at the main campus in Muscat. At the main campus, the HFPS is supported by three supervisors, Level Coordinators (LC), and GFP component coordinators (GFPC), and at the branches by Foundation Branch Coordinators (FBC) (Portfolio, p12, ASM102, ASM103, interviews). The FBCs report to both the AD and the HFPS and delays are often experienced due to the centralised system and several layers of management. The current governance and management system at times creates a diffused sense of accountability which diminishes the autonomy of the branches and causes delays in decision-making (interviews). It is important that there is adequate input from staff at the branches in FPS operational planning and that there be a firm and functioning monitoring and evaluation mechanism in place to ensure that each branch meets its quality targets and provides a consistent equivalence of provision to GFP students and staff across branches.

The College is committed to continuous quality improvement although there are some barriers to enacting this, particularly the differences in the resources available to the branches and the delays involved in current financial management processes. The current system of risk management for the FPS does not include reference to key financial risks, for example, by the unification of the College in 2018 or to the unique circumstances of OCHS as a geographically dispersed institution based at multiple sites. OCHS has tools such as satisfaction surveys, teacher course appraisals (SM044), peer reviews of teaching (SM046), and annual reports (SM045) in place for the monitoring and review of the GFP (Portfolio, p15), but such efforts remain sporadic and unlikely to be sustained as a system. Establishing a policy management system is an urgent priority for OCHS and would be of benefit to the academic and administrative functioning of the GFP. The health and safety function operates locally at every branch and reflects the rigour of the system applied at each

branch. For the FPS, integration within this system is varied and the approaches overall appear fragmented and piecemeal.

With regard to GFP student learning, there is clear evidence of the use of learning outcomes, and appropriate curricula, with some degree of internal assessment monitoring. The OCHS GFP (centrally implemented, though receiving feedback from the branches) has developed over the years, and is currently trimester in design, with three levels of English, and two levels of IT and Mathematics and General Study Skills (GSS) embedded throughout these courses (Portfolio, p19, SM001). The GFP curriculum design would benefit from a rigorous needs analysis, formal feedback mechanisms, and input from all relevant stakeholders. Placement tests are used for all three course areas, English, Mathematics and IT, to enable students to enter the GFP at the appropriate level but these need to be benchmarked against internationally recognised reference points so that they can be used as a more reliable tool for streamlining newly admitted GFP students. There is evidence of a review of teaching, and some relevant policies are in place. However, review mechanisms are often not clear, and the manner in which analysis and feedback inform developments requires more thought. The FPS has mechanisms in place for internal moderation of GFP assessments but requires an underpinning policy to ensure consistency of practice across branches. Currently there is no external oversight to GFP assessments and this limits the overall validity and reliability of the assessment design and grading processes. Retention of students is high, and students report generally high levels of satisfaction with teachers and courses.

While GFP students on all campuses were generally satisfied with the provision of academic and non-academic support provided by the College, there were notable differences in the level of learning resources and facilities available to support the GFP across the branches. Learning resources for GFP students, particularly textbooks, is an area in need of urgent attention as there are significant quality concerns in relation to these across all branches. Information technology and internet services are widely perceived to be inadequate to meet the present needs in most of the branches. Significant investment in IT is required to upgrade the provision in this area. There was evidence to indicate that academic advising is being implemented by GFP staff in all branches. The availability and appropriateness of health care services and of suitable social and recreational activities requires detailed assessment and provision needs to be effectively supported to improve the learning and social environment for GFP students.

The FPS staff profile reflects diversity and represents a range in terms of age, gender, nationality and academic qualifications. The FPS, could however, consider the use of formal appropriate staff projection tools to identify and define its long-term staffing needs and plans as part of its operational planning cycle. The recruitment and selection process at the FPS is transparent, informed by the staffing needs of the FPS and is aligned with the MoHERI recruitment regulations. Newly recruited staff members are integrated into FPS operations through well implemented induction policies and procedures. The commitment, hard work and team spirit of the FPS staff across branches is evident including the College's commitment in supporting the professional growth of Omani employees at the FPS. There are, however, areas relating to human resources where the College is encouraged to focus efforts for improvement while recognising the current constraints on human resource management imposed by the need to work within Civil Service regulation requirements. These areas include the need for a more planned and systematic approach to performance planning, review and professional development.

As the audit has been based on the OCHS Portfolio, which provides a system-level compilation of the findings of the College's self-review, the Panel's conclusions in this Report are focused at an overall level, rather than at the level of a specific OCHS Branch. This is to help and support the OCHS branches as they continue to realise and implement the College's Vision and Mission. The Panel recognised the extensive and collective work required in the development of the College's Portfolio. It is recognised that the self-review was undertaken in a genuine spirit of reflection, accompanied with a commitment to honest self-evaluation and, where appropriate, self-criticism. The Panel recognises the OCHS's commitment to improvement and the collective desire for change which were encountered at both central and local levels. The audit visits also confirmed that OCHS, both at its main campus and its branches, is operating at the edge of its own capabilities and capacities and that the strengths which make this possible are not likely to be scalable or sustainable in future without significantly improved support and the speedy addressing of the identified areas for improvement.

Summary of Commendations

A formal Commendation recognises an instance of particularly good practice.

1. The OAAAQA commends Oman College of Health Sciences, with the General Foundation Programme as an entry point, in its application of a single unifying Vision, Mission and set of Values to develop future health care professionals in Oman in the context of a branch model to which this programme is integral and which allows for the access and success of local students with a future focus on qualifying health practitioners to serve in regions across the country.11

Summary of Affirmations

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

1. The OAAAQA agrees with Oman College of Health Sciences on the need to review its policies and procedures related to the General Foundation Programme and supports its efforts in this area.18
2. The OAAAQA agrees with Oman College of Health Sciences on the need to formally benchmark aspects of the General Foundation Programme with other similar education providers to ensure that the programme continues to be fit for purpose and supports its initial efforts in this area.21

Summary of Recommendations

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

1. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences, as a matter of priority, review the current arrangements for the governance and management of the General Foundation Programme to provide optimal leadership which supports the efficient and effective delivery of the programme at all branches.12
2. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences make available all relevant General Foundation Programme policies, procedures and other key documents both in Arabic and English to make them accessible to all stakeholders.....14
3. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences strengthen its approach to the Foundation Programme Section operational planning processes, including the branch staff involvement in the planning process, and develop a monitoring and review mechanism to ensure the equivalence of educational provision and achievement of the programme objectives across all branches.....14
4. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences develop and implement a system of financial management in the Foundation Programme Section which allows for effective and efficient budgeting and allocation of resources while ensuring the equivalence of provision across all branches as well as the main campus.15
5. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences urgently review and allocate the financial resources required by the Foundation Programme Section in order to provide a safe, adequate and sustainable educational infrastructure at all branches, and which contributes to offering an appropriate teaching and learning environment.....16
6. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences develop and implement a comprehensive and structured approach to the identification and management of academic and non-academic risks particularly related to the delivery of the General Foundation Programme at all branches in order to ensure its sustainability.....17

7. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences develop and implement a system of communication with the General Foundation Programme alumni and academic staff teaching on the degree programmes to support quality improvements to the programme.....17
8. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences develop and implement a structured approach to the monitoring and review of the General Foundation Programme to ensure quality, academic standards and equivalence of provision at all branches.18
9. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences prioritise the development and implementation of a systematic and comprehensive approach to the management of health and safety in the Foundation Programme Section, and notably at all branches, with clearly defined lines of accountability to ensure that there is a safe and healthy environment for General Foundation Programme staff, students and stakeholders who visit or use its facilities.19
10. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences review the mandate and operation of the Foundation Programme Curriculum Review Committee to ensure that rigorous needs analysis, formal feedback mechanisms, and input from all relevant stakeholders are part of the committee’s deliberations, and are used to regularly inform the General Foundation Programme curriculum development and review processes.22
11. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences review and benchmark its General Foundation Programme placement tests so that they can be used as reliable tools to determine the appropriate learning levels of newly admitted students.22
12. The OAAAQA recommends that the Oman College of Health Sciences review and benchmark its General Foundation Programme exit standards across all study areas to give confidence to the public that students exit at the required levels with the necessary skills, knowledge and abilities to pursue their higher education programmes.23
13. The OAAAQA recommends that the Oman College of Health Sciences develop and formalise a teaching pedagogy for the General Foundation Programme for implementation across all branches to ensure consistency of practice to teaching styles which impact student learning and experience.23
14. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences develop and implement a system for monitoring and review, which includes a pedagogic framework, of teaching quality in the General Foundation Programme to ensure the consistency of the student learning experience at all branches and to inform programme improvements in relation to teaching and learning.23
15. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences review its policies and procedures on plagiarism in the General Foundation Programme, and apply a consistent approach to the implementation of academic misconduct policies which includes investing greater resources in its efforts to enhance academic integrity and strengthen the management of academic misconduct in examinations.24
16. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences develop and implement formal internal moderation policy and procedures for both the grading of General Foundation Programme continuous assessments and to guide the central oversight of the grading of summative assessments as part of ensuring consistency in the assessment of academic standards across all branches.....25
17. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences implement its existing external moderation policy for General Foundation Programme assessments to ensure the overall validity and reliability of the assessment design and grading processes.....25
18. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences develop and implement a formalised, structured approach to the Foundation Programme Section’s engagement with its alumni in order to inform improvements to the design and delivery of the programme, as well as to enhance the quality of the student experience.....27

19. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences regularly and formally review the orientation provided to newly admitted General Foundation Programme students to allow for the sharing of good practice across branches and to ensure the consistency of delivery and the quality of the orientation at all branches while taking into account the local contextual conditions at the different branches.29
20. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences urgently review the provision of all General Foundation Programme learning resources to ensure that these are appropriate and adequate for students to study in a well-resourced, positive and engaging quality educational environment.....30
21. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences develop and implement a systematic approach to assess the effectiveness of the academic advising process and the staff use of the Health Academic Management System at the Foundation Programme Section including collecting feedback from General Foundation Programme students on this process.....31
22. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences urgently review the provision of General Foundation Programme non-academic student support services and facilities, and develop and implement a planned approach to their delivery and ensure that there is consistency in the quality of the GFP student experience across all branches.33
23. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences define the external community for the Foundation Programme Section and formalise the approach and implementation of external engagement in order to establish meaningful ties with external stakeholders and the community, as well as enhance the General Foundation Programme and the overall student experience.34
24. The OAAAQA recommends that the Oman College of Health Sciences review its approach to formal staff planning and the analysis of staffing data in the Foundation Programme Section to ensure that its future staffing requirements per branch are met and to inform staff training and development initiatives.36
25. The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences review the Foundation Programme Section performance planning process in favour of transparency and to align it with its staffing requirements and identification of professional development needs at all branches.....38

1 GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

By Royal Decree 18/2018 dated 06/06/2018 OCHS was constituted as a University College through integrating the 13 former Ministry of Health Education Institutions (MoHEIs) and the Higher Institute of Health Specialties (HIHS). The MoHEIs were established to provide health sciences education and training. Subsequently, they were expanded as a network to provide accessible health care education and training across Oman in response to the need for Omanisation of the healthcare workforce and to meet the local health sector human resource needs. Until AY 2011-12, the MoHEIs, based in various regions across the country, offered their own Foundation Courses. Of the nine Nursing Institutions, which offered a unified nursing programme, the Oman Information and Health Management Institution and the Oman Pharmacy Institution had separate foundation courses integrated respectively into their programmes. Whereas, the Institute of Health Sciences (IHS) had a full-fledged Foundation Programme with Study Skills as an independent module. In 2011, a common GFP was established across all the MoHEIs with the Muscat campus coordinating the programme. The College now offers its programmes on eight campuses across the country and operates autonomously, having its own governance and management structures and operational systems. The GFP runs over three semesters and is managed by the OCHS FPS.

This part of the report expresses the findings of the Panel in governance and management of OCHS Mission, Vision and Values, the governance and management arrangements, institutional affiliations for programme and quality assurance, operational planning, financial management, risk management, monitoring and review, student grievance processes, and health and safety.

1.1 *Mission, Vision and Values*

The College's current Mission, Vision and Values (MVV) are included in the Strategic Plan (SP) 2021-25 (Portfolio, p11, SM013) and replaces earlier versions following unification in 2018 and a review in early 2019 (Portfolio, p11). The Mission statement commits OCHS to:

...prepare competent healthcare professionals through provision of a conducive learning environment, quality programmes based on evidence-based practices and research. The college nurtures and reinforces Omani values and sense of responsibility and continues its positive contribution to enhance community wellbeing and professional needs. (SM013).

The FPS endeavours to meet the College's MVV through the GFP curriculum, teaching and learning, use of feedback and extracurricular activities (Portfolio, p11) and its overall success is reflected in the positive retention, progression and completion results of the GFP students for the past three academic years, AY 2016-17 to AY 2020-21 (SM026). The annual foundation reports for the last three academic years highlight the record of accomplishment of student success in the GFP (SM026). There is also evidence of initiating the processes of benchmarking with other GFP providers within the country (SM002, SM043, SM075, SM076).

The Panel agreed that the OCHS Mission and Vision provide clear, practical statements on how the College intends to fulfil its role as the national provider of healthcare workers (Portfolio, p11). The Panel also considered that the statements reflected a close alignment with the College's Values (SM011) which are relevant to the discipline and in which ethical considerations are embedded in the value of 'professionalism', and compassion is closely associated with the value of 'belonging'. GFP staff and students at the branches provided positive feedback commenting that the MVV are relevant and set a professional standard for which the GFP provided the first step in the learning journey for students to become professional healthcare workers. Evidence that the OCHS MVV are being used to align the GFP to nursing needs is seen in the GFP curriculum, which includes introductions to medical terms and research methods. In the meetings with GFP staff, students and alumni, there were several suggestions for further development of this process to stimulate closer connections between GFP staff and other OCHS academic staff, through problem-based learning and the teaching of first aid (interviews).

The Panel noted the common purpose of GFP staff and students and the specialist, vocational environment of the OCHS branches. There was, however, widespread concern expressed by GFP staff, students and alumni about the suitability of physical infrastructure, quality of the learning resources and the ability of the College to live up to its Mission in relation to the 'provision of a conducive learning environment' (see Sections 3.3 and 3.4). Post GFP staff noted during interviews that some students may require greater support with their general writing skills in English (interviews) (see Section 1.7).

Development of the latest version of the MVV, reviewed in 2019, includes evidence of a consultation process which involved the Board of Trustees (BoT) and external benchmarking (SM011). While the Portfolio lacks clarity concerning how the MVV were developed, meetings with GFP staff across OCHS highlighted their involvement through representatives who participated in related workshops (interviews). GFP staff also confirmed that the earlier GFP MVV, in use until 2013 (ASM002), had informed the discussion at the workshops and had provided the foundation for the new version (interviews). The Panel was informed that the MVV are made known and owned by all staff and students, including those of the GFP, through the Student Handbook, Strategic Plan document and the new GFP English teacher orientation document (Portfolio, p11, SM012, interviews). The OCHS MVV were also visible, displayed on corridor notice boards of all the OCHS branches and on the College website.

The Panel noted that OCHS has a set of MVV that are clear, relevant and set an appropriate level of ambition and intention which are widely understood by GFP staff and students. There is evidence of the variety of means, used in all the branches of the College, to communicate the MVV to GFP students and staff. The OCHS is encouraged to continue to monitor the consistency in the level of awareness of the MVV among FPS staff and students, across all Branches, as part of its commitment to support students as they train to become qualified healthcare professionals.

Commendation 1

The OAAAQA commends Oman College of Health Sciences, with the General Foundation Programme as an entry point, in its application of a single unifying Vision, Mission and set of Values to develop future health care professionals in Oman in the context of a branch model to which this programme is integral and which allows for the access and success of local students with a future focus on qualifying health practitioners to serve in regions across the country.

1.2 Governance and Management Arrangements

The main campus of the College is based in Muscat and is centrally managed by the Dean who reports to the Chair of the Academic Board. In addition to the main campus there are seven branches located around the country. Each branch is headed by an AD who reports to the College Dean and the main campus is headed by the Dean. In addition, at the central level, four Assistant Deans are in charge of Student Affairs, Academic and Academic Support, Research and Community Service, and Administration and Finance Affairs, respectively. At the branch level, each AD is assisted by the Director of Administration and Finance (Portfolio, p12, SM013).

OCHS operates under the oversight of the BoT and has the Academic Board (AB) as its regulatory body (Portfolio, p12, SM013). The AB is chaired by the Undersecretary of Administrative, Financial, and Planning Affairs of the Ministry of Health (MoH) and includes as members the officials of the College such as the Dean, Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs and Academic Support (ADAAAS), Assistant Dean for Administrative and Finance (ADAF), Assistant Dean for Student Affairs (ADSA), Director of Quality, staff representative, and Associate Deans (AD) of the College main campus and various branches (Portfolio, p12, SM005, SM017, SM018). The College Council supports the Academic Board in its operational duties (Portfolio, p12).

Unlike the academic programmes which are overseen directly by the Dean, the GFP is supervised by the ADAAAS who also serves as the programme's representative on the AB (Portfolio, p12, SM005). Interviews with the AB members and the sample meeting minutes confirmed that critical GFP issues

are discussed and monitored at the AB level (SM018, interviews). The Foundation Council (FC) meetings, chaired by ADAAAS, and attended by representatives from the branches, are conducted once a trimester to discuss GFP issues and approve academic results from all the branches (Portfolio, p12, SM020, ASM101, interviews).

The GFP is managed from the main campus in Muscat by the Head of the Foundation Programme Section (HFPS), who is aided by three supervisors, Level Coordinators (LC), and GFP component coordinators (GFPC), and is further supported at the branches by Foundation Branch Coordinators (FBC), who act as liaison between Muscat and the branches (Portfolio, p12, ASM102, ASM103, interviews). The roles and responsibilities of supervisors, as well as those of level and component coordinators, are also clearly stated (SM019).

In terms of the reporting line, the HFPS reports to ADAAAS (SM005). In the branches, the FBCs report to and are supervised by the branch ADs. The AD communicates with ADAAAS who, in turn, communicates with the HFPS. The Panel noted that the reporting line in the sample correspondence that was provided could go from either the ADAAAS or the HFPS to the AD (Portfolio, p12, SM019). With the current organisational structure, FBCs are required to report to both the AD and the HFPS. The Panel was informed during interviews that delays were often experienced due to the centralised system and several layers of management. To obtain a salary certificate, for example, the branch Director of Administration and Finance must write an official request letter to main campus in Muscat, wait for it to be ready, and then send a driver to collect the document — a process that can take up to four or five days. There were similar delays in academic issues related to both academic staff shortages and insufficient resources, as reported by the branches (SM045, interviews). The Panel also heard that the communication of timely information was a challenge posed by the current centre and branch structure (interviews). Other issues noted by the Panel, and which are dealt with in other sections of this Report, include inadequate infrastructure, budgetary constraints, insufficient library facilities and resources and poor maintenance of learning resources, all of which can undermine the GFP provision and the programme's operational efficiency. Furthermore, the Panel also heard, in addition to delays, the current governance and management system at times creates a diffused sense of accountability which diminishes the operational effectiveness of the branches (interviews). The Panel therefore recommends that OCHS as a matter of priority review the GFP governance and management ecosystem in order to provide optimal leadership for the management and delivery of the programme.

Recommendation 1

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences, as a matter of priority, review the current arrangements for the governance and management of the General Foundation Programme to provide optimal leadership which supports the efficient and effective delivery of the programme at all branches.

The FPS organisational structure is further supported by a number of committees which serve various functions and enable collaborative decision making from all the branches (Portfolio, p12, SM006). The Curriculum Review Committee (CRC) is delegated with tasks related to ensuring the quality of the curriculum such as reviewing curriculum implementation, seeking feedback from GFP as well as post-GFP students and teachers, and evaluating student performance (SM021). Other FPS committees include, among others, the Examination Committee (EC), Quality Assurance Committee (QAC), Staff Development and Learning Resources Committee (SDLRC), Newsletter Committee (NC), Research Committee (RC), and the Risk Management and Health Safety Committee (RMHSC) (Portfolio, p12). In addition to the FPS-level committees, GFP teachers are also involved in many branch-level committees including the Research, Examination, and Professional Development Committees (SM006). The Panel considered the Terms of Reference (ToRs) and they were satisfied that all the branches are well-represented on these committees (SM006, SM021). The Panel noted that all these committees meet to make shared decisions on teaching, assessments and various other aspects related to the GFP (SM021). The Panel also heard that feedback is sought from the branches as part of the GFP performance review process (SM021, SM022, SM023, interviews).

The Panel heard that the HFPS does not regularly visit the branches, instead relying on main campus-based meetings and email communication. Communication is conducted through the OCHS e-mail communication portal Al Barwa, Gmail, Messaging Applications (such as WhatsApp) and information is shared via Google drive (Portfolio, p12). The Panel confirmed that the ADs, the HFPS and GFP staff were satisfied with this arrangement (interviews). While most of the GFP committees are required to report to the HFPS (SM022, SM026), the Panel noted that the Extra-Curricular Activities Committee reports to the acting DGHRD. It is suggested that attention is given to defining the management and leadership role and responsibilities of the HFPS and to the rationale underpinning the reporting by committees to the HFPS in ensuring the integration and coordination of committees at the FPS. At the end of every academic year, the FPS committee chairs submit action plans and annual reports which contribute to the preparation of the consolidated FPS Annual Report by the HFPS (Portfolio, p13, SM025).

During interviews, the Panel noted that there are many established committees with some being more active than others. While the CRC and EC meet their mandates, the Extra-Curricular Activities Committee, for instance, appears to have little influence in boosting the student experience in social and cultural activities (interviews). The Panel was provided with one instance of an extra-curricular activity which was conducted at the Muscat Branch and which involved GFP students creating an appreciation wall for teachers (SM006). While the FPS annual reports note that committees should report to the HFPS (SM026), the committee mandates lack clarity on reporting, membership, meeting frequencies, accountability and review procedures. The Panel also observed that there is no monitoring system in place to track and evaluate the work of the committees or to streamline their responsibilities in alignment with the operational plans. The Panel was informed that a restructuring of committees and their mandates has been proposed and is yet to be approved (SM024, interviews). The Panel believes that the role of committees in ensuring the good functioning of the GFP cannot be understated and therefore encourages the GFP to give attention to strengthening the committees' terms of reference and their monitoring in supporting the GFP's effectiveness and efficiency.

The OCHS organisational chart places the Directorate of Quality (DQ) under the line management function of the deanship (SM005). OCHS established a Quality Assurance Committee within the FPS to assist in establishing and maintaining a quality system (SM006). The committee's accomplishments, as reported in the AY 2019-20 FPS annual report, centred around the preparation and compilation of the GFP audit report (SM025). During interviews, the Panel learned that the DQ assisted in reviewing the GFP audit report and in compiling the supporting material. The Panel is of the view that the DQ could enable a more robust QA system and enhance the focus on the quality of the GFP through the provision of frameworks and audits, updating and communicating policies, and developing a system for monitoring policy implementation centrally and in the branches.

The Panel noted that many OCHS policies are out-dated. For example, the Grievance Policy (SM008, SM047) was last reviewed in 2009. The Panel was informed that a task force has been formed to review and revise these policies (SM157, interviews). To ensure the consistency of policy development and review, the AB approved a policy for policies (ASM099, ASM100). The OCHS Operational Plan 2021-25 (OP) lists establishing a policy management system to guide the day-to-day operations as a goal (0.3.20) with the level of compliance as an indicator of success (ASM085). The Panel urges OCHS to accelerate the development of the policy management system and ensure a proper implementation and review of these as they relate to the GFP at the various branches (see Section 1.7).

The Panel noted that some key GFP related documents, including the College's fundamental regulations and by-laws, are not available in English. During interviews across branches, the Panel heard that such documents had to be translated for the non-Arabic staff. The Panel was concerned about the consistency of translation across different branches, which could cause confusion, and there could be unnecessary duplication of these informally translated documents across the branches. It is clear that having such key documents available in English in addition to Arabic, would assist non-Arabic speaking staff to access important documentation.

Recommendation 2

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences make available all relevant General Foundation Programme policies, procedures and other key documents both in Arabic and English to make them accessible to all stakeholders.

1.3 Institutional Affiliations for Programmes and Quality Assurance

The GFP at OCHS does not have any affiliation arrangements.

1.4 Operational Planning

The College has a five-year Strategic Plan (SP) 2016-20 which is derived from the OCHS MVV and aligned with the MoH 9th Five-Year Plan (Portfolio, p13). OCHS claims that the FPS developed a five-year OP for 2016-20 and communicated it via email to the branches (SM027). The Panel, however, noted that this 2016-20 OP (SM027), which appears to be more like a Strategic Plan, is a consolidated one for the entire College with only a few GFP-related goals. The Panel noted that in addition to the College level OP, the FPS had a GFP OP for AY 2018-19 (Portfolio, p13, SM028), but this one too, in the Panel's view, is a checklist of routine tasks that are repeated every trimester and not fully linked with the OCHS OP.

The Panel heard that training on operational planning was provided to all OCHS staff including those in the FPS to support the development of the 2021-25 OP (Portfolio, p13, SM029, interviews). The Panel agrees that the latest OP is better developed compared to the prior one. It identifies the domains, respective strategic goals and designated responsibilities, as well as provides KPIs; however, it is a replication of the SP (SM013). While appreciating the improvements witnessed from the rudimentary 2016-20 OP, the 2021-25 OP still lacks detail regarding allocation of resources and budget commitments. A comprehensive marketing plan for OCHS, for example, has been proposed as an objective, but no resources have been allocated and no measurable actions or outcomes have been specified to execute it.

In addition to lack of budget allocation and measurable actions, the Panel found no evidence for any system or mechanism for OP monitoring, evaluation, or review. While staff training was provided, the Panel learnt through conversations with GFP staff at the branches that they had little or no input into the OP (Portfolio, p13, interviews). The Panel is of the view that for the OP to be meaningfully implemented, it is important that adequate branch input from staff be sought and that there be a firm and functioning monitoring and evaluation mechanism in place to ensure that each branch meets its quality targets and provides a consistent equivalence of provision to students and staff across branches. It is on this basis that improvements can be identified and implemented across the FPS to enable the quality of GFP provision to be met as set out in the OP.

In summary, the Panel formed the view that there is lack of clarity in the FPS between strategic and operational planning purposes and their related documents. The 2016-20 OP resembles a strategic plan. OCHS states that the FPS developed a 5-year plan (SM027, Portfolio, p13), but the evidence made available to the Panel shows that it is an OCHS plan rather than an FPS plan. For the 2018-19 period, the FPS had its own OP but it consisted of routine tasks that are repeated every trimester and not adequately aligned with the strategic goals. The Panel encourages the FPS to give attention to these matters in order to enhance the quality of the programme and support students in their studies.

Recommendation 3

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences strengthen its approach to the Foundation Programme Section operational planning processes, including the branch staff involvement in the planning process, and develop a monitoring and review mechanism to ensure the equivalence of educational provision and achievement of the programme objectives across all branches.

1.5 *Financial Management*

Since AY 2020-21, responsibility for financial planning and control of the budget has moved from the DGHRD of MoH in Muscat to OCHS (Portfolio, p13, SM030). At the FPS level, the ADAF is responsible for financial matters and the annual budget. This control at the OCHS level, however, appears to be partial and while finances are now aligned to a budget allocated by the Ministry of Finance, they are still based on estimations of the College's needs as determined by the MoH. The Panel confirmed that the utilisation of this budget is currently audited annually by the MoH (Portfolio, p14, SM031, interviews).

In response to the Panel's requests for clarification on financial matters, it was advised that OCHS was in a transitional stage in terms of its future arrangements and was engaged in discussion with the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) to form a partnership which would provide mutual academic and financial benefits (interviews). This partnership was described variously as a 'union' and a 'merger', although it was confirmed that the former was the correct term (interviews). The Portfolio reflects the uncertainty related to the future of OCHS and lacks clarity and transparency on financial management issues (Portfolio, p14). There are no policies to provide guidance for OCHS and FPS during the current period of transition from financial oversight of the MoH (Portfolio, p14) to institutional financial autonomy. The GFP does not have a separate budget in any of the branches. The AD for each branch plans the budget for the branch as a whole, which includes the resources requirements of the GFP. The Panel heard that these branch level budgets are sent to the ADAF for approval (ASM028, interviews). OCHS states that the FPS internally decides and finalises its resources requirements, and 'then the demand is sent to the concerned entity and the required resources are provided after due consideration' (Portfolio, p14, SM032). Despite requests for additional information, these arrangements are still not clear to the Panel, particularly in relation to the identity of the 'concerned entity' and the details of the 'due consideration' provided. An example, which is addressed later in this Report (see Section 3.3), highlights the limited number, range and type of educational resources available for GFP students in the libraries across the branches. Given these arrangements and from the examples cited above, the Panel is of the view that greater clarity in relation to GFP financial management must be achieved to enable the effective and efficient running of the GFP in terms of transparency of process, determination of what is adequate, and consistency of allocation of resources at both the main campus and at the branches.

Recommendation 4

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences develop and implement a system of financial management in the Foundation Programme Section which allows for effective and efficient budgeting and allocation of resources while ensuring the equivalence of provision across all branches as well as the main campus.

The Panel noted a lack of information on the alignment of resource allocation which has led to inadequate provision and dissatisfaction of staff in relation to budget allocations (SM034). Staff, including management and teachers, and students associated with the GFP, voiced their concerns that learning resources are inadequate for the needs of the programme (interviews). In addition to serious problems relating to the budgeting process, it was reported during interviews that the finances available to the branch ADs are limited and restricted to small amounts of petty cash. The Panel noted that there is widespread concern about budget and resources across all levels of staff and students, many of whom are working in buildings with inadequate infrastructure and limited resources. Multiple examples were provided of absent or inadequate facilities including study spaces, library, IT, cafeteria, rest rooms, recreation spaces, chairs and tables (site visits, interviews). Because the branches do not receive their funding on time, there is a negative impact on the cleaning and maintenance of buildings. For GFP students, it means delays in settling their monthly accommodation costs (interviews). At one of the branches, the impact of poor maintenance due to lack of sufficient budget for essential services has meant reliance on fans to combat extreme heat as the air conditioning had not been working for at least three months (site visit). This latter example raises serious concerns for the health and safety of students and staff working under these conditions and the Panel recommends that OCHS urgently review the provision of financial resources for the FPS to ensure the availability of an appropriate academic environment.

Recommendation 5

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences urgently review and allocate the financial resources required by the Foundation Programme Section in order to provide a safe, adequate and sustainable educational infrastructure at all branches, and which contributes to offering an appropriate teaching and learning environment.

1.6 Risk Management

The FPS RMHSC is responsible for managing risk associated with the GFP across all branches of the College (Portfolio, p14, SM006, SM034); however, the Panel heard that at the branch-level, there is no systematic risk management process or report specifically for the GFP (interviews). The Panel is aware that the OCHS has recognised this as an area for improvement since the OAAAQA audit report in 2014 and that a Risk Management Policy is under development as part of a thorough review and updating of policies in the administrative Qarar (SM157, see Section 1.2).

The Panel noted that the FPS RMHSC has clearly defined ToRs, explicit in relation to potential risks including Hepatitis B and influenza vaccination, fire safety, and the health and wellness programme. It also identifies staff responsibilities and the mitigation of risks through action plans (SM006, SM034). The RMHSC has also initiated identifying and recording risks using risk register forms (Portfolio, p14). The Panel noted the completed FPS risk register forms for recording risks associated with the GFP at the Muscat branch (SM035), and at the branch-level, risk management records for the 'entire branch' are filed (including the GFP) and these reports are submitted annually to the ADs of the branches (Portfolio, p14, SM036). During the site visits, the Panel learned that a range of practices is in use relating to risk management at the individual branch campuses (interviews). At some branches, risks are categorised informally into academic and non-academic, while at others the health and safety officer produces a list relevant to the branch (interviews). Academic risks which have an impact on GFP student experiences were also identified and included those relating to staff absence which is the responsibility of the Timetable, Attendance, and Substitution Committee (TASC) (Portfolio, p14, interviews) and identification of potential at-risk of failing students (Portfolio, p14, SM037). The Panel confirmed that FPS staff at all branches were also able to identify a range of risks such as, those relating to finance and building infrastructure as well as other resources such as computer hardware, software and internet access and speed, facing their branch, and recorded in the risk management records filed with the branch ADs. Climate risks relating to natural disasters were identified at one branch and also the impact of shortcomings of air conditioning systems on staff and student health and wellness as summer temperatures increase (interviews).

The Panel noted several examples of risk mitigation due to the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic (Portfolio, p14, SM038). This included a comprehensive move to online learning for the GFP and solving of a range of issues related to online programme delivery which saw GFP staff 'trained to facilitate a smooth transition to Moodle' (see Section 2.4) (SM035, SM039). Another example of mitigation was the need to provide alternative plans to conduct final examinations on site, as needed (SM041). Feedback from students and staff were mostly positive in relation to the success of the measures taken in response to the pandemic (interviews).

The Panel confirmed that while specific risks are identified and tracked, a more systematic and comprehensive approach to risk identification and risk management is required. Specifically, the current system does not include reference to key financial risks, those posed, for example, by the unification of the College in 2018 or to the unique circumstances of OCHS as a geographically dispersed institution based at multiple sites. While it recognises the need, for example, for a collective change of institutional culture, these risks are not collated or prioritised for the FPS. The Panel notes that OCHS recognises risk management training for staff as an area for improvement (Portfolio, p17), but could not see evidence of the steps taken to address this issue. To ensure that it is effective, attention needs to be given to the scope, content and implementation of risk management as part of a comprehensive institution-wide approach to ensure the viability, sustainability and quality of GFP delivery across all branches.

Recommendation 6

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences develop and implement a comprehensive and structured approach to the identification and management of academic and non-academic risks particularly related to the delivery of the General Foundation Programme at all branches in order to ensure its sustainability.

1.7 Monitoring and Review

OCHS, through the FPS, reviews GFP curriculum design and delivery, teaching quality, and provision of teaching resources (Portfolio, p15). The FPS Curriculum Review Committee (CRC) takes a leading role in conducting GFP curriculum reviews and collecting feedback from the students and staff in the branches through module reports, course evaluations and surveys (Portfolio, p15, SM007, SM044). Requests for curriculum improvements based on the CRC reviews are forwarded to the HFPS for approval (Portfolio, p15). The Panel confirmed that approved modifications are communicated to the branches for implementation (Portfolio, p15, SM044, interviews). Feedback is also sought from GFP alumni and staff teaching on the degree programmes and the Panel saw evidence of the changes made to the GFP consequently. One example of such a change was the inclusion of medical terminology in the GFP teaching material based on this feedback (SM044, interviews).

In addition to monitoring and reviewing staff development within the FPS, the FPS Staff Development and Learning Resource Committee (SDLRC) is responsible for ensuring the provision of teaching and learning resources to support learning and teaching activities (SM045). The SDLRC reviews the availability of resources and assesses future needs based on the reports submitted by the other FPS committees (Portfolio, p15, SM045). The quality of the teaching on the GFP is monitored and reviewed through peer reviews and teaching practice appraisals by the HFPS, which are conducted once in a year (Portfolio, p23, SM046, see Section 2.4). The Panel confirmed that feedback of such reviews is provided to the FPS staff and interventions are made when necessary (interviews). The Panel heard concerns regarding the GFP graduates' challenges in using English and writing as critical gaps in the current GFP (interviews) but did not find evidence of a systematic process in place to collect feedback from the staff teaching on the degree programmes. The Panel recommends that the College establish more robust and formal communication channels with the post-GFP staff and students, which would help OCHS identify and address learning gaps in the GFP (see Section 2.10, Recommendation 18).

Recommendation 7

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences develop and implement a system of communication with the General Foundation Programme alumni and academic staff teaching on the degree programmes to support quality improvements to the programme.

The Panel noted the tools reported for monitoring and review of the GFP and these include satisfaction surveys, teacher course appraisals (SM044), peer reviews of teaching (SM046), and annual reports (SM045) (Portfolio, p15). Despite the availability of such tools, the Panel found little evidence of the value of these surveys in the ongoing development of the GFP, with the exception of the incorporation of medical terminology. The reporting of the results of the review process (such as satisfaction surveys) is also not clear and the Panel was also unable to confirm the consistency in monitoring and review at the various branches. In addition, there was insufficient evidence of the use of surveys in the improvement process. During interviews, various stakeholders described the review process as being 'scattered'. The Panel believes that without a structured review process, improvements are likely to be haphazard. The OCHS acknowledged that monitoring and review need improvement and indicated that steps are being taken to enhance the process through benchmarking and tracking post-foundation students (Portfolio, p15). The Panel, while appreciating the College's efforts in this area, find that such efforts remain sporadic and unlikely to be sustained as a system. The Panel concluded that there was no clear approach or mechanism for the monitoring and review of the GFP as an entity. The Panel is of the view that it is critical that OCHS establishes a monitoring and review system that includes

internal stakeholders such as GFP alumni and post-GFP academic staff and external examiners, advisors, and reviewers and which uses institutional benchmarking to ensure the quality of GFP.

Recommendation 8

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences develop and implement a structured approach to the monitoring and review of the General Foundation Programme to ensure quality, academic standards and equivalence of provision at all branches.

The Panel also noted that a number of policies in use at the FPS were outdated and had not been reviewed for a considerable time (see Section 1.2). For example, the Grievance Policy dates back to 2009 (see Section 1.8). The Panel noted other examples of policies that need to be updated such as the academic security and invigilation policy and procedures, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. The Panel saw evidence of activity in this area including the establishment of a task force to develop a policy management system; the addition of a relevant goal in the operational plans and the development and implementation of a policy for policies (SM157, ASM085, ASM099, interviews). The Panel agrees that establishing a policy management system is an urgent priority for OCHS and is an essential underpinning which will support the effective academic and administrative operation of the GFP.

Affirmation 1

The OAAAQA agrees with Oman College of Health Sciences on the need to review its policies and procedures related to the General Foundation Programme and supports its efforts in this area.

1.8 Student Grievance Process

The OCHS student Grievance Policy and procedures issued in 2009 remain valid and also apply to GFP students (Portfolio, p15, SM047). The Foundation Student Handbook (FSH) also includes the grievance process and the form that GFP students can use to raise their grievance to the HFPS (Portfolio, p15, SM008, SM047). In addition to the forms, the GFP students have other options for voicing their concerns and grievances, such as through their elected representatives who act as liaison with the teachers and FBC. There are also suggestion and complaint boxes in the buildings where GFP students can lodge complaints anonymously (site visit).

GFP students can also appeal against the grades awarded to the ADAAAS, after payment of prescribed fees through the Student Affairs Department (SAD) (Portfolio, p16, SM052). The College Academic Bylaws and College Student Handbook explain the process for grade appeals. Students share their grievances with their academic advisors or GFP component teacher who forwards them to the HFPS or FBC (Portfolio, p15, SM049, interviews). Depending on the type of grievance and categorisation of the assessment, the HFPS may refer it to the SAD or the ADAAAS (Portfolio, p15, SM050). GFP students can also appeal against a disciplinary action (Portfolio, p15, SM047).

GFP students indicated awareness of the grievance procedures and reported a general satisfaction with the process of lodging appeals and grievances (interviews). The Panel concluded that the FPS has a system in place to address academic and non-academic complaints, grievances and appeals, which is applied consistently and GFP students can utilise it and are fully aware of it.

1.9 Health and Safety

The OCHS reports that staff and students at the FPS have access to free health care in the MoH healthcare facilities (Portfolio, p16, SM054, SM055). FPS staff are provided with a Health Card to provide them with access to the Primary Health Care Department of the MoH (Portfolio, p16, SM055). The Panel confirmed that newly admitted GFP students have a medical check-up at the beginning of the academic year, and evidence of medical inspection results are provided to the FPS (Portfolio, p16, SM053). The Panel heard that records of student and staff absences due to health issues are maintained

by the FPS (Portfolio, p16, interviews), and the Panel encourages the FPS to use these records to identify recurring problems or emerging trends.

The Panel was also informed of the on-campus clinic in Muscat which is being established with qualified staff and which will include a mental health counsellor (Portfolio, p16, SM057, interviews) and encourages OCHS to have similar facilities at all its branches. The Panel noted that health and safety awareness-raising during the pandemic was reported as one of the good services provided (SM060, SM061, interviews). However, there was limited feedback from GFP students and staff on health and safety issues, training or of initiatives such as health awareness workshops and presentations (interviews). The Panel is of the opinion that despite the clarity of the process outlined for responding to students who become ill on campus (SM056) and the co-location as part of hospital campuses, there is a need for clearly documented systematic processes for health and safety at the branch-level, including associated overall procedures for FPS staff and students.

One of the self-identified strengths of OCHS is its fire safety measures (Portfolio, p16). The Panel reached a less positive view, however, as fire safety certificates for the Muscat branch which were provided as evidence were out of date and no certificates were provided for the other branches (SM058, SM060). Despite requests (ASM013, ASM014, ASM015) little additional information was provided on health and safety planning at the branches and it was not confirmed that current safety certificates are now in place (interviews). During the visit, the Panel did observe fire safety equipment installed in corridors and evacuation procedures on noticeboards (site visit(s)). In speaking to staff and students, however, it was reported that no fire safety drills had taken place since the return to campus post-pandemic. This in the Panel's opinion represents a significant risk to the FPS which needs to be addressed without delay and subsequently a procedure needs to be established which is carefully monitored and managed.

The Panel understands that based on the evidence provided, the health and safety procedures operate locally and reflect the rigour of the system applied at each branch. For the FPS, integration within this system is varied and the approaches overall appear fragmented. It was not evident in relation to health and safety matters that the FPS is governed by statements of intent through clear policies and procedures, or that it has identified the full range of key responsibilities, or that comprehensive arrangements are in place. The Panel concluded that this represents a high-risk health and safety environment.

Recommendation 9

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences prioritise the development and implementation of a systematic and comprehensive approach to the management of health and safety in the Foundation Programme Section, and notably at all branches, with clearly defined lines of accountability to ensure that there is a safe and healthy environment for General Foundation Programme staff, students and stakeholders who visit or use its facilities.

2 GFP STUDENT LEARNING

The FPS, through the GFP, plays a critical role in preparing students for academic degree programmes and, therefore, achieving the College Mission and Vision. The OCHS GFP has developed over the years, and is currently trimester in design, with three levels of English, and two levels of IT and Mathematics and study skills embedded throughout these courses (Portfolio, p19, SM001). The programme aims to provide courses to meet student needs and to develop student skills in Computing, English, Mathematics and GSS.

This section reports on GFP student learning at OCHS, focusing on the following: GFP aims and learning outcomes; curriculum; entry and exit standards; teaching quality; assessment of student achievement; academic integrity; feedback to students on assessment; academic security and invigilation; student retention and progression; and relationship with GFP alumni.

2.1 GFP Aims and Learning Outcomes

An important goal of the FPS is to prepare its students to engage in undergraduate health care studies, in order to progress to employment (Portfolio, p19). The objectives of the GFP, which are aligned with the Oman Academic Standards for GFP (OASGFP), are clearly stated, as are the learning outcomes of the GFP courses i.e., English, Mathematics, IT and GSS (Portfolio, p19, SM001). The Panel noted that the ability to work in a team and the development of personal autonomy, values in line with the College's MVV, are stressed at the FPS, and the College seeks to instil these through various teaching methodologies used in the GFP (Portfolio, p19, SM001).

The learning outcomes (LOs) for all GFP courses and skills have been formally approved by the MoH (ASM020). The Panel noted that some of the LOs exceed those recommended by the OASGFP, for example, a 1200-1500 word report, compared to 500-word requirement, and the inclusion of the health-oriented LOs into the programme (SM001). It is the responsibility of the FPS CRC to ensure that GFP course content is aligned with the OASGFP (Portfolio, p16, SM006). The ToRs of the FPS CRC were updated in 2022 (SM024) and define the distribution of numerous tasks among its members. The Panel saw evidence of how GSS are embedded in English courses but there is no specific mention of embedding these in Mathematics and IT (ASM020). The Panel also saw evidence from the Al-Dhahira branch of the mapping of GSS across all courses of the GFP (ASM021). This mapping, however, does not seem to be consistently applied or complete across the branches. In addition, the Panel could not confirm the reasons for this branch-wise mapping exercise rather than carrying it out centrally at the FPS level (interviews). Interviews with relevant stakeholders did not give the Panel confidence concerning the presence of a systematic approach to assessing study skills.

Feedback on the different GFP courses is collected after every trimester from both GFP students and teachers, and the Panel noted that feedback was generally very positive (Portfolio, p19, SM044, SM062, SM063). For GFP students, feedback opportunities arise in the form of reflective journal entries and end of course surveys (SM044); however, it was unclear how such entries inform developments in the programme. The Panel noted that GFP teachers monitor these student reflective journals (SM001, SM062, SM066), but found no evidence of systematic analysis of these for development purposes (interviews). This is also the case for end-of-course student feedback. The teacher course evaluation forms (SM044) contain occasional suggestions for development (SM063), but the mechanism for approving and implementing these are not clear. For example, the results analysis of the FPS questionnaire (SM064) makes it clear that note taking and referencing skills are clearly a concern for teachers, but the Panel did not find evidence of these concerns being formally reviewed and changes implemented to address the concerns. In the Teacher and Course Evaluations (SM065), while comments of concern are noted with some basic analysis, the conclusion is left vague giving little confidence of an appropriate review mechanism in place concerning feedback. There was also little evidence that the feedback form has been reviewed or developed over the years. The Panel notes the use of appropriate LOs to help design the foundation programme and reminds the GFP to ensure that there is consistency of mapping and implementation of programme and module outcomes. As part of a well-functioning quality assurance system, the FPS needs to have review mechanisms in place which involve relevant stakeholders and ensures that the outcomes are appropriately taught and

assessed, and suggestions for improvement are implemented (see Section 1.7, Recommendations 7 and 8).

The Panel noted that a benchmarking initiative has been initiated with Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), with a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed in April 2021 and more recently an MoU relating to benchmarking is underway with Middle East College (SM002). The Panel noted the recent benchmarking initiatives and encourages OCHS to develop these relationships to look for areas to enhance its programme.

Affirmation 2

The OAAAQA agrees with Oman College of Health Sciences on the need to formally benchmark aspects of the General Foundation Programme with other similar education providers to ensure that the programme continues to be fit for purpose and supports its initial efforts in this area.

2.2 Curriculum

The OCHS GFP (centrally implemented, though receiving feedback from the branches), has developed over the years, and is currently trimester in design, with three levels of English, and two levels of IT and Mathematics, with GSS embedded throughout these courses (Portfolio, p19, SM001). The OCHS GFP courses have gone through various review processes, though the last review took place in AY 2013-14 (Portfolio, p21, SM007, SM074). Each course has LOs and descriptions with a syllabus. The programme contains course elements specifically related to health sciences, with occasional inclusion of World Health Organisation materials. Activities, including research and seminar tasks, are used to help students develop their problem-solving skills and in preparation for further studies (SM001). OCHS states that its curriculum is reviewed annually by the FPS CRC following on from a needs analysis exercise (Portfolio, p20, SM045). Any minor changes to the curriculum, arising from the needs analysis, are communicated to staff on the orientation day (Portfolio, p20, SM071). The course overview document contains the syllabus and methods of delivery and serves as a guiding map for the staff (SM001). Implementation of the curriculum is monitored by the HFPS through a weekly staff checklist system (SM072), and in periodic meetings between the GFP Component Coordinator (GFPC), and staff (SM066). Level co-ordinators monitor the work of the component co-ordinators (SM073). The current system requires the OCHS AB to approve any major curriculum changes, and these are forwarded to the BoT. As a result of the last major curriculum review which was held in AY 2013-14, changes were made which included increased teaching hours, the move to three levels in English, IELTS benchmarking and the introduction of reflective journals and projects (Portfolio, p20). The Panel noted that in addition to the benchmarking activities noted in Section 2.1, the College has also contacted Oman Dental College concerning possible co-operation in this area (SM007, SM043, SM074, SM075). The Panel heard that the FPS plans to engage in a major curriculum review, taking into account feedback from AY 2019-21 by introducing a separate general study skills course and considering pre- and post-foundation support (Portfolio, p21, interviews) (see Section 2.11).

The Panel noted the historic developments in the curriculum (SM074) which were clearly documented but was concerned about the documentation and involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the curriculum and its review since 2014. FPS CRC minutes for the last three years were seen by the Panel, but its work remains somewhat unclear (SM024, ASM022). The CRC's engagement with other related committees was not clear, nor how and why the CRC ToRs were changed in 2022. The Annual Report submitted by the CRC in AY 2019-20 (SM023) shows that the needs analysis is equated with the feedback forms (with no specific analyses or recommendations made). The Annual Report AY 2020-21 (SM045), follows the same pattern. In a letter to the ADs from the HFPS (SM082) minor curriculum changes were made, but with no rationale provided for them. Although this document stated that there were discussions preceding the decisions, there was no evidence of the committee deliberating over stakeholder opinions. The Panel also heard that the teachers delivering the degree programmes were unaware of a formal mechanism through which they could communicate their suggestions for the improvement of the GFP to the FPS. This, together with concerns surrounding mechanisms of review of the work of the committee are matters, needs to be addressed for the continued fitness of purpose of the GFP (see Section 1.7, Recommendation 7).

Recommendation 10

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences review the mandate and operation of the Foundation Programme Curriculum Review Committee to ensure that rigorous needs analysis, formal feedback mechanisms, and input from all relevant stakeholders are part of the committee's deliberations, and are used to regularly inform the General Foundation Programme curriculum development and review processes.

2.3 Student Entry and Exit Standards

OCHS communicates its entry criteria, approved by the OCHS AB, for undergraduate programmes to the Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC) of the MoHERI (Portfolio, p21, SM077). The ADSA is responsible for coordinating the admission process and communicating the allocation of students. The entire process is managed through the College Health Academic Management System (HAMS) (Portfolio, pp21-22).

To ensure that students are placed at the appropriate level in line with their abilities, all newly admitted students are required to take an English, Mathematics and IT placement test, all of which have been developed in-house (Portfolio, p22). Performance in these placement tests determine the level of the GFP at which the newly admitted student is placed. Criteria for partial or complete exemption are defined by GFP Bylaws and Regulations (Portfolio, p22, SM003). The Panel noted that placement tests were not conducted in the AY 2020-21 because of the Covid 19 pandemic (Portfolio, p22, interviews). The Panel also noted that the English placement tests of the last three academic years, AY 2018-19 to AY 2020-21 (ASM023) have had repeated grammar items, and the same essay writing item is present in its last two iterations. This is a finding of some concern, particularly as parts of the test are publicly available online.

While the College did provide data concerning students who gained exemption or partial exemption (SM080), GFP students expressed their concerns about the suitability of the placement test, and their own placements (interviews). The Panel was also unable to ascertain the validity of the placement test score boundaries as none of the placement tests (English, Mathematics and IT) used have been benchmarked against internationally recognised reference points to ensure their reliability in placing students at appropriate levels. The Panel therefore recommends that OCHS benchmark its GFP placement tests against internationally recognised reference points so that they can be used as a more reliable tool for streamlining newly admitted GFP students.

Recommendation 11

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences review and benchmark its General Foundation Programme placement tests so that they can be used as reliable tools to determine the appropriate learning levels of newly admitted students.

While the placement test determines the student entry standard, continuous assessment alongside final examinations are used to measure the students' readiness to actively participate in their higher education studies (Portfolio, p22, SM081). College-specific health sciences student LOs are also assessed in addition to the LOs required by the OASGFP. The Panel heard that the GFP Mathematics courses help students in Nutrition and Pharmacology, while IT courses help in word processing and presentations (Portfolio, p22, interviews). The Panel was informed of the College's plan to include sample IELTS testing (20% sampling plan by 2025) to ensure that GFP exit standards are appropriate (Portfolio, p22, SM029, interviews). The Panel heard that GFP students do exit the programme at the required English language levels, as stipulated in the OASGFP. However, the Panel found no evidence that the boundary grades in the GFP examinations for all the study areas are benchmarked against internationally recognised reference points. The Panel therefore recommends that OCHS develop and implement a mechanism for the review and benchmarking of the GFP exit standards to ensure fitness of purpose of the programme.

Recommendation 12

The OAAAQA recommends that the Oman College of Health Sciences review and benchmark its General Foundation Programme exit standards across all study areas to give confidence to the public that students exit at the required levels with the necessary skills, knowledge and abilities to pursue their higher education programmes.

In addition, it is important to monitor student performance in the OCHS undergraduate programmes to ensure that the GFP prepares students to succeed, where it is not only important to use external reference points but also monitoring students' academic progression post the GFP.

2.4 Teaching Quality

The FPS contributes to the achievement of the College's Mission to prepare competent health care professionals by managing teaching quality in the GFP. This is done through promoting the use of diverse teaching methodologies, promoting scholarly activities involving teaching quality research, gathering GFP student feedback on teaching and learning, class observation by HFPS, peer evaluation and annual performance evaluation of GFP teachers (Portfolio, p23, SM001, SM087, SM090, ASM036, interviews).

In the course overview document, in the section entitled Teaching Strategies, references are made to using 21st century skills (SM090), active learning (SM090), and critical thinking (SM090) among others, but the Panel could not find any mention of a formally defined GFP teaching philosophy or approach. With the multiple branch model of OCHS, having a shared understanding of the GFP's teaching philosophy, supplemented by an aligned approach to GFP teaching and learning, would bring some consistency of practice to teaching styles which contribute to student academic success in the GFP.

Recommendation 13

The OAAAQA recommends that the Oman College of Health Sciences develop and formalise a teaching pedagogy for the General Foundation Programme for implementation across all branches to ensure consistency of practice to teaching styles which impact student learning and experience.

The Panel found evidence that teacher observation is being carried out but noted that the teacher follow-up plans emerging from these observations were not consistently documented (ASM031), and different peer review forms were being used in different branches. Similarly, documentation of formal class observation of GFP teachers was inconsistent and the forms being used did not give the reviewee any opportunity to agree or disagree with the comments made (ASM032). The Panel heard that the FPS is transitioning to a system in which specific goals will be set by GFP teachers on an annual basis, and the Panel encourages the FPS to consider how best to put this to use alongside analysis of feedback received from students on teaching quality. Concerning student feedback, although OCHS stated, 'Students' feedback on teaching is duly considered and every possible measure is taken to ensure improvement' (SM088), it was not clear to the Panel the extent of consideration, and the impact of any measures put in place as a result of the analysis of student feedback. In the absence of a strong monitoring and evaluation system, which tracks the impact of improvements made, it would be difficult to report on and provide evidence of progress (see Section 1.7). Given these concerns about the teaching philosophy, the review process and the value of student feedback in enhancing delivery of the GFP, OCHS is urged to develop and review a system for the monitoring and review of teaching quality in the GFP, which includes collection of data on teaching quality in the GFP with a clear approach to analysis and the development of subsequent plans for improvement to ensure consistency of student learning experience.

Recommendation 14

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences develop and implement a system for monitoring and review, which includes a pedagogic

framework, of teaching quality in the General Foundation Programme to ensure the consistency of the student learning experience at all branches and to inform programme improvements in relation to teaching and learning.

2.5 *Academic Integrity*

OCHS has an institutional level policy, the Unfair Practice and Plagiarism Policy (last reviewed in 2009), which guides the approach to the practice of academic integrity in the GFP (Portfolio, p24, SM094). The same is also included in the College Academic Bylaws governing the delivery of all academic programmes including the GFP (Portfolio, p24, SM003). The Panel noted a more recent document, the GFP Academic Issues Guidelines Handbook that also includes the guidelines to be followed at FPS in cases of academic dishonesty, late submission of assignments and requests for extension of submission dates (ASM033). The Panel, however, noted that the provisions for management of academic dishonesty within this document (ASM033) differ from those present in Unfair Practice and Plagiarism Policy (SM094). The Panel was unable to clearly understand the relationship between these two documents and is of the view that the College would benefit from aligning the contents of these two documents for better clarity.

OCHS claims that, in order to raise awareness of academic integrity amongst GFP students, the relevant guidelines are included in GFP course syllabi, student code of conduct, and conveyed to the students during student induction. The Panel, however, noted that the course overviews contain no guidelines on plagiarism, and there was little evidence of raising awareness in the induction material (Portfolio, p24, SM090, SM096). Similarly, notes on the mini-research project carried out by GFP students do not reference the academic integrity policy or penalties (SM099). The post-foundation teachers expressed ongoing concerns regarding academic integrity in GFP student writing when they start their studies in the degree programmes (interviews). The College's philosophy concerning the punitive and / or educational approach to enhancing academic integrity and the avoidance of plagiarism amongst GFP students was not evident to the Panel.

There was some evidence provided of GFP students being penalised for academic offences and of *ad hoc* decisions concerning penalties being applied (SM050, ASM097). There is also evidence of a practice in the FPS in which students submit a declaration form confirming that the work submitted is their own (SM098). Although OCHS states that teachers 'ensure submission of original student work' (Portfolio, p24), and there is some evidence of implementation of the College's Unfair Practice and Plagiarism Policy (SM094), the Panel did not see a structured approach or a system to ensure the consistent implementation of this across branches. Currently the FPS encourages GFP teachers to use freely available plagiarism detection software, and the Panel confirmed that some GFP teachers are using it but again it is not a consistent practice across the FPS (interviews). In 2021, the College identified the need to employ plagiarism detection tools (SM164) as an opportunity for improvement but the Panel did not see any systematic use of such software at the FPS. The Panel therefore strongly encourages OCHS to develop systematic procedures to ensure high standards of academic integrity and to support a consistent and cohesive approach to the implementation of academic misconduct policies across the branches. The College needs to invest in both educational and technological resources in its efforts to enhance its commitment to academic integrity in the GFP.

Recommendation 15

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences review its policies and procedures on plagiarism in the General Foundation Programme, and apply a consistent approach to the implementation of academic misconduct policies which includes investing greater resources in its efforts to enhance academic integrity and strengthen the management of academic misconduct in examinations.

2.6 *Assessment of Student Achievement*

The FPS has formative and summative assessments for the GFP, details of which are included in course overviews. Continuous assessment scores are added to mid-term and final examination scores

(Portfolio, p38, SM003, SM102). The Panel confirmed awareness of GFP assessment procedures and methods amongst both GFP staff and students (Portfolio, p25, interviews).

FPS staff across all the branches are collectively responsible for preparing the GFP mid-term and final examinations for all subject areas (Portfolio, p25, interviews). The FPS Examination Committee (EC), in consultation with all GFP staff, prepares blueprints for GFP mid-term and final examinations. The sample question papers for mid-term examinations are prepared by all branches and sent to pre-determined internal moderators, who could be from the same branch or a different one. These moderated mid-term examination papers are implemented across all branches (Portfolio, p25, interviews). The final examination question papers are prepared centrally by the FPS EC based on the sample questions sent by the GFP staff from across all branches (Portfolio, p25, SM104, interviews). The same question paper is administered across all branches according to the examination schedule specified in the GFP annual calendar (Portfolio, p25, SM104, SM105). The Panel noted that the FPS uses a variety of methods, such as internal moderation and double marking, to validate the final examination results (Portfolio, p25, SM100, SM106, ASM034). The Panel also noted the assessment guidelines for online examinations developed by the College (SM111).

The Panel confirmed that GFP assessment grades are entered in HAMS and the FPS EC reviews the results and forwards to the FC for approval (SM017, interviews). While the Panel acknowledges the process used at the FPS to ensure consistency in assessment marking practice across branches, the Panel noted evidence of changing item weighting after an examination in a report from 2019 (SM104). The Panel was unable to ascertain the formal policy underpinning the permission to make and report such changes. The Panel noted that in AY 2016-17 (SM020), a decision was made that 10% of level three final examination scripts have to be sent to Muscat for checking. However, the Panel found no evidence that this practice is currently being carried out. The Panel also noted the concerns regarding the consistency of examination marking moderation across branches noted in the FC meeting of AY 2020-21 (SM107). In interviews, it was established that there is no policy for the moderation of continuous assessment, nor central moderation of level three assessments across the branches. Accordingly, the Panel was concerned about assessment standards and the potential for inconsistent grading being practised across the branches. OCHS is urged to develop and implement an internal moderation policy for the grading of the continuous assessments used in the GFP and ensure oversight by the FPS at the main campus in Muscat of the grading of summative assessments in order to ensure consistency of academic standards across all branches.

Recommendation 16

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences develop and implement formal internal moderation policy and procedures for both the grading of General Foundation Programme continuous assessments and to guide the central oversight of the grading of summative assessments as part of ensuring consistency in the assessment of academic standards across all branches.

While the FPS has some mechanisms in place for the internal moderation of GFP assessments, there was no evidence of any external moderation processes in place. The Panel noted that there is an approved policy in the policy and procedure document of the College, issued by the MoHEI in AY 2008-09 (SM094). OCHS is encouraged to apply the existing external moderation policy to GFP assessments to ensure that students who successfully complete the GFP do so at the required level. Through this approach, the FPS is provided with an important assurance of the validity and reliability of its assessment and grading as well as of confirming the quality of its provision and the extent to which programme outcomes are being met.

Recommendation 17

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences implement its existing external moderation policy for General Foundation Programme assessments to ensure the overall validity and reliability of the assessment design and grading processes.

2.7 *Feedback to Students on Assessment*

OCHS's approach to providing feedback to GFP students on their assessed work is outlined in the College's General Assessment Policy (ASM034). The College believes that timely and constructive feedback is important to help students develop academically and the Panel could confirm this for all the subject areas (Portfolio, p26, SM101, SM111, ASM034, interviews). FPS communicates the assessment criteria to GFP students (SM001) and the Panel confirmed that teachers provided feedback comments based on the specific criteria (SM109, SM110). GFP students can review their graded work (SM110) and after each assessment feedback is provided, together with assessment worksheets (Portfolio, p26, SM109). OCHS also has regulations governing grade appeal and GFP students who are not satisfied with their grades can use these and also speak with their academic advisors (Portfolio, p26, SM003, see Section 1.8). OCHS stated that GFP students are required to sign a form acknowledging they have received feedback (SM110); however, the Panel heard that this form is only periodically used for English assessment and not for Mathematics or IT assessments (interviews).

A survey conducted in the AY 2020-21 (SM065) indicates that 72% of students were satisfied with feedback; however, these data were not specific to the GFP, and the Panel was concerned that this was just a single instance of data collection. It is acknowledged by OCHS that feedback is an area that needs further work (Portfolio, p29) and the Panel agrees that the FPS needs to develop, implement and document its approach and procedures on feedback, which can then be reviewed systematically in order to monitor its effectiveness.

2.8 *Academic Security and Invigilation*

The College's system for academic security and invigilation of examinations, outlined in the policy and procedure document issued by the MoHEI in AY 2008-09, is also implemented at the FPS (Portfolio, p27, SM094, SM101). The College has an updated version, which includes the protocols applicable to online examinations, which is also implemented at the FPS (SM111). The Panel confirmed that the current practice followed at the FPS to manage the security of GFP examinations is that examinations are sent from the EC in Muscat with encrypted passwords to the ADs in the branches, who are the only people with the secure password (Portfolio, p27, interviews). In line with the policy noted earlier, the papers are printed and stored safely one day before the day of the examination. The invigilation practice stipulates having two invigilators in a room, with a chief invigilator and a member of the EC available to monitor the examination proceedings.

The policy and procedure document issued by the MoHEI in 2008-09 and applicable to GFP students, outlines the penalties to be levied for cheating in examinations (SM094). The penalty noted in the student code of conduct (ASM033) indicates that a cheating offence would result in failing the course. The Panel, however, heard of the practices followed at the FPS, which according to some involved one oral warning for the first offence, while others mentioned two warnings (interviews). The Panel was informed that there have been no cases of cheating in GFP examinations and hence the Panel could not confirm the consistency of implementation of the policy.

Given a review of the documentation and the conflicting accounts presented to the Panel during the interviews, the Panel is of the view that attention be given to updating academic misconduct policies and procedures relating to examinations and clearly communicating these to GFP staff and students to ensure a common understanding. The Panel believes that OCHS would benefit from ensuring that academic misconduct policies and procedures relating to examinations are up to date, clearly conveyed to all GFP staff and students and followed, in order to ensure greater confidence in the examination procedures of the FPS.

2.9 *Student Retention and Progression*

Data on GFP student retention and progression is maintained by the FPS both centrally and at the branches (Portfolio, p27). The Panel heard that the FPS uses these data to inform changes and improvement (SM020). The evidence provided (SM020) show good progression and retention rates of the GFP students across all branches and in all subject areas (Portfolio, p27, SM020). The Panel

was informed that the low attrition rate is because of the guarantee of public sector employment on completion of the degree programmes (Portfolio, p28, interviews).

The Panel noted that the FPS has clearly stated policies on resits for all GFP courses (Portfolio, p28, SM003); however, GFP students failing a course in the branches can repeat the course only at the Muscat branch (Portfolio, p28). It was explained to the Panel that since some of the branches have very few students in the GFP, it is not possible to offer resit opportunities in every branch (interviews, see Section 3.7). The Panel heard that while formal remedial classes were not always available in all branches, GFP students facing learning difficulties are given additional work and supported by the teachers (interviews). The Panel confirmed GFP students' satisfaction with the support provided to them (interviews).

In conclusion, the Panel encourages the FPS to closely monitor and evaluate the reasons for students who fail or are at risk of failing and the extent to which remedial measures, resitting or repeating a trimester are successful. In this way, the FPS can identify gaps or required interventions in these areas and enhance the quality of the programme and support for students. In a similar way, high performing students could also be identified, and strategies be developed to stretch them to improve their knowledge and skills in the subject areas.

2.10 Relationships with GFP Alumni

The FPS states that its GFP alumni are an important source of information and support and is committed to maintaining a close relationship with them (Portfolio, p28). Feedback on the GFP is collected from alumni when they are in their first year of undergraduate studies (SM064), but the Panel did not find evidence of any changes made based on this feedback. GFP alumni are requested to contribute to the FPS annual newsletter (SM115) and are involved in events such as National Day celebrations (SM116). The Panel noted that the involvement of GFP alumni in student orientations occurs only at some branches and that the FPS recognises that it can do more to improve its engagement with alumni (Portfolio, p29, interviews).

While the Panel recognises that the FPS has established some engagement with its alumni, it concluded that the FPS would benefit from a well-conceptualised and formalised approach in a multi-branch context. This could facilitate the utilisation of alumni feedback to benefit the programme and its students. OCHS needs to consider the ways in which the GFP can practically engage with its alumni, including the ways their feedback can contribute to enhancing the quality of the GFP student experience.

Recommendation 18

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences develop and implement a formalised, structured approach to the Foundation Programme Section's engagement with its alumni in order to inform improvements to the design and delivery of the programme, as well as to enhance the quality of the student experience.

3 ACADEMIC AND STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

There are a number of academic and non-academic support services offered by OCHS to FPS staff and students. This Chapter reports on the Panel's findings regarding student profile, registry, student induction, teaching and learning resources, information and communication technology services, academic advising, student learning support, academic and student support services, student satisfaction and climate, student behaviour, non-academic support services and facilities, and external engagement.

3.1 *Student Profile*

The SAD is responsible for managing the GFP student data on the HAMS system (Portfolio, p31, SM079, interviews). The GFP student profile includes the demographic data, school records, health records, and other social and personal details (Portfolio, p31, SM079). The College AB and the BoT decide on the number of students admitted every year in the GFP (SM117) based on the College's academic bylaws (Portfolio, p31). In the AY 2020-21 there was a student intake of 623 into the GFP, (73% female and 27% male), with the Muscat branch having the largest number of enrolments amounting to 317 students (Portfolio, p31).

GFP student data is managed through HAMS and the Panel heard that cloud storage is used to ensure the security of the system (Portfolio, p34, interviews). Access to HAMS requires authentication via card or phone which gives greater confidence of data security (interviews). It was evident to the Panel during the site visits to branches that the full potential of HAMS has yet to be realised and that its various functions are not fully utilised (see Section 3.2).

The Panel confirmed that student profile data is not only used by OCHS to determine the living allowance for GFP students and inform the provision of teaching and learning, but also to plan non-academic services such as catering, transportation and accommodation (Portfolio, p32, interviews). The Panel heard that since OCHS does not have its own accommodation facilities, the SAD helps students in selecting their accommodation in accordance with MoHERI defined criteria (Portfolio, p31, SM118, interviews).

The Panel was informed that students with special needs are identified during registration (the form is designed to capture this to ensure that support is provided to them) (Portfolio, p32). The Panel saw examples of this support offered to a student with special needs in AY 2020-21 who, post neurological surgery, was provided with a personalised schedule to allow for a slower and more appropriate pace of course delivery (SM119). The Panel heard of the presence of students in the programme with disabilities that had the potential to severely impair the ability to carry out their duties as nurses (interviews). Consequently, the Panel reached the view that it is important for the OCHS to assist students to consider appropriate and realistic academic future study pathways. Accordingly, OCHS is encouraged to enhance the current special needs identification and support system for students with special needs.

3.2 *Registry (Enrolment and Student Records)*

The ADSA manages the GFP student registration and an *ad hoc* committee facilitates the admission process (Portfolio, p32, SM078). Students' data are stored, managed and maintained on HAMS (Portfolio, p32, SM121, interviews). The registration process has been automated since AY 2020-21 (Portfolio, p32, SM165). The Panel heard that students are supported in using the on-line automated registration system in the first year, after which they can register by themselves, with no difficulties (interviews). While HAMS is a step in the right direction to provide reliable and live data regarding GFP students, the Panel was not sure of the consistent use of this system across the GFP staff and student body (interviews). The College is hence encouraged to provide on-going and targeted training to GFP staff and student on the various features of HAMS so that they receive the full benefit of the system. For example, in some branches, not all GFP teachers are using HAMS for recording class attendance or for academic advising purposes (interviews). It was explained to the Panel that some of the GFP teachers do not find the system user-friendly and hence it is not fully utilised (interviews).

The Panel confirmed that GFP staff and students were given training in the use of HAMS (SM131, ASM038F) and suggests consideration of refresher training workshops to encourage GFP teachers to fully utilise the HAMS system.

OCHS conducted a College-wide student satisfaction survey in AY 2017-18 where the admission and registration process was evaluated. The student satisfaction rate for the admissions and registration process was 69.9%, although disaggregated data for GFP students was not available (Portfolio, p32, SM122). The Panel noted that this appears to be a college-wide 'once off' snapshot because it is not part of a regular review system to identify areas of strength and improvement. The Panel concluded that a regular review of services such as student registration is needed to ascertain the satisfaction of GFP students as a separate cohort (see Section 3.8). This would help the FPS identify specific concerns of GFP students and help them to address these to enhance the GFP student registration and admission experience.

3.3 *Student Induction*

The FPS conducts a one-day orientation programme for new GFP students (Portfolio, p32). During the induction, newly admitted GFP students are informed about the College's MVV, policies, GFP objectives, the structure of the GFP, exit criteria and available support services and facilities (Portfolio, p32, SM008, SM090, interviews). FPS academic staff brief GFP students on academic integrity, and the Panel noted that this is also covered in the FSH (interviews). The Panel was also informed that GFP alumni are sometimes asked to address students as part of the orientation process. While the content of the orientation appears to be adequate, it was evident to the Panel that the focus is on the provision of information with less attention on engaging with newly admitted students and supporting them in their transition to college life, with the expectations regarding academic behaviour in a post-school GFP context (interviews). The Panel is of the view that considering GFP students' newness to higher education and its expectations, they may benefit from orientation support spread over the first semester and would also address the needs of students who might have missed the one-day orientation.

The Panel noted that the OCHS College-wide satisfaction survey (SM122) conducted in AY 2017-18 contains a question on the orientation day (Portfolio, p32). However, for the registration services, disaggregated data on GFP students' satisfaction with the induction was not available. The Panel confirmed that the one-day orientation provided to GFP students helped them get an idea of the GFP and the branch at which they were studying (interviews). The Panel, however, noted that GFP teachers are not surveyed on their view of the adequacy of the orientation day for students.

The Panel is of the view that it would be useful for OCHS to regularly review the orientation provided to newly admitted GFP students, as a distinct, separate group of students (see Section 3.8). This feedback would help the FPS assess the effectiveness of the orientation across all branches to assure itself that the objectives of student orientation are achieved and that improvements can be introduced and their impact monitored. As part of this, the Panel noted the potential to seek inter-branch feedback and sharing ideas on the orientation process to ensure that while there is equivalence of content delivery, local contextual conditions are also taken into account by adding relevant content and/or information.

Recommendation 19

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences regularly and formally review the orientation provided to newly admitted General Foundation Programme students to allow for the sharing of good practice across branches and to ensure the consistency of delivery and the quality of the orientation at all branches while taking into account the local contextual conditions at the different branches.

3.4 *Teaching and Learning Resources*

OCHS has a Teaching and Learning Resources Section (TLRS) under the jurisdiction of the ADAAAS which facilitates procurement of learning resources for the College, including for the FPS (Portfolio,

p33). The FPS CRC is responsible for identifying the appropriate GFP textbooks and course materials to support students achieve the GFP LOs (Portfolio, p33, SM063, SM124). Textbook requirements for the GFP are managed through the FPS in coordination with TLRS and ADAF (Portfolio, p33, SM125, interviews). The ADs of the branches send their GFP textbook requirements to the HFPS, who then in co-operation with the FPS staff, arrange for the effective use of these learning resources (Portfolio, p33, SM124, interviews).

The Panel heard that OCHS provides GFP students with hard copies of textbooks at the start of the trimester and students are expected to return these books to the library at the end of the semester. The Panel heard that this practice was followed across branches because of lack of adequate resources for new textbooks (interviews). These books are then recycled and issued to the next batch of GFP students (Portfolio, p34, ASM038, interviews). During visits to the various branches, the Panel found that a number of these books contained previous student answers written in them. The Panel is concerned about the impact of this on GFP student learning. The Panel also noted that in general, the libraries across the branches were not adequate for GFP student learning needs and usage, and that the library staff in some instances were not trained and involved in facilitating GFP student learning.

OCHS stated that GFP classrooms are equipped with TVs and projectors, and students have access to WIFI (Portfolio, p33). During their visits to the OCHS branches, however, the Panel members observed, that the classrooms in some branches were inadequately equipped. GFP students also expressed dissatisfaction with learning facilities, including non-functioning AC units (interviews). The Panel noted that computer laboratory facilities for GFP students were inadequate at some of the branches and there appears to be a lack of attention to updating of software and replacement of hardware according to a capital replacement plan of equipment (interviews) (see Section 3.5).

The Panel noted the use of a student satisfaction survey in AY 2017-18 (SM122) which has an item covering learning resources (Portfolio, p33). The Panel has already commented in this report that more attention must be given to the regularity of collection of such data and its analysis for reporting and improvement purposes (see Section 3.2 and 3.3). The Panel noted that attention to study and student recreation spaces (including for group work) is an area in need of attention across most, if not all, of the branches.

Based on the documentation provided and the observations made during the visit to the branches, the Panel concluded that learning resources is an area in need of urgent attention as there are significant quality concerns in relation to teaching and learning resources. Furthermore, OCHS must ensure that there is equivalence of provision of GFP learning resources across all branches. Specific examples of the inconsistency of provision include the quality of learning and teaching spaces, and library provision (including the number and types of available resources). Furthermore, there are concerns regarding staff capacity to support student learning and adequacy of computer laboratory equipment in terms of hardware and software (see Section 3.5). Overall, the Panel was concerned that the teaching and learning resources provided for GFP students are not adequate to facilitate a positive student learning experience.

Recommendation 20

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences urgently review the provision of all General Foundation Programme learning resources to ensure that these are appropriate and adequate for students to study in a well-resourced, positive and engaging quality educational environment.

3.5 Information and Learning Technology Services

OCHS states that it provides GFP students with learning resources including classrooms and laboratories which are equipped with necessary technology (Portfolio, p34). The Panel heard that Moodle is used as the LMS, and GFP staff and students were trained to use it during the Covid 19 pandemic (Portfolio, p34, SM131, interviews). The Panel believes that it is important that FPS continue to develop the full potential of Moodle to support GFP learning and teaching and to ensure ongoing training for both GFP staff and students in relation to its various functions. The Panel

confirmed that GFP staff and students use multimedia resources, such as e-texts, and PowerPoint presentations and GFP teachers record their specific use of technology in course review documents (interviews).

OCHS states that internet connectivity is available for both GFP staff and students in classrooms and across the branches (Portfolio, p34). The Panel noted during the branch visits, however, that not all GFP classrooms across branches are WIFI enabled (interviews, campus tour). In this regard, OCHS is encouraged to ensure that there is adequate provision, coverage and stability of WIFI services at all its branches.

OCHS IT staff are responsible for the regular maintenance of the IT infrastructure (Portfolio, p34, interviews). The Panel noted that while the College has an IT Policy (ASM084) there was no evidence of its systematic implementation or of review mechanisms or an accountability structure to govern its functioning and adequacy. While FPS staff satisfaction with the provision of IT resources and infrastructure is relatively high (71.64%), the Panel noted insufficient physical and online resources in the libraries and some outdated hardware and software in the computer laboratories for the GFP staff and students (interviews, campus tour). As noted earlier in this Report, the Panel encourages OCHS to ensure that its IT infrastructure, including its hardware, software, maintenance, upgrading and connectivity are sufficient and appropriate to support GFP student learning (see Section 3.4, Recommendation 20).

3.6 *Academic Advising*

Academic advising (AA) is part of the College's Strategic Plan (Portfolio, p35, SM003) and is governed by the academic bylaws. AA in the FPS is guided by the OCHS Academic Advising and Counselling Policy (Portfolio, p35, SM101). All GFP students are assigned an academic advisor (SM003, interviews) in addition to being supported by their GFP teachers (Portfolio, p35). GFP students spoke positively of their AA experiences and confirmed that they can formally request a change of adviser should this be necessary (SM101, interviews). The Panel heard that GFP students who have learning difficulties and poor performance are also provided with extra support and remedial classes as needed (Portfolio, p35, SM037, interviews) (see Section 3.7).

The Panel noted that the AA system is operational in the FPS (ASM042, ASM045) and some GFP teachers maintain records of their AA sessions using the HAMS system (ASM042). While the Panel heard that GFP teachers are provided with an orientation to their roles and responsibilities as academic advisors (interviews), there is no mention of AA awareness or training on the induction form signed off by new teachers (ASM090). The Panel believes that an AA review and monitoring mechanism, which at present is not evident, would facilitate the integration of various processes in the quality assurance process to close the 'quality loop'. Accordingly, the Panel suggests OCHS give further attention to its approach to the monitoring and review of the system of academic advising across the branches.

Recommendation 21

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences develop and implement a systematic approach to assess the effectiveness of the academic advising process and the staff use of the Health Academic Management System at the Foundation Programme Section including collecting feedback from General Foundation Programme students on this process.

3.7 *Student Learning Support*

Requirements for student learning support resources and services at the FPS are submitted through the ADAAAS to the Dean at the beginning of each trimester (SM045, Portfolio, p35). At-risk or failing students are identified early in the trimester through early formative testing and through observation of their in-class performance (Portfolio, p35, ASM038). OCHS has stated that remedial classes are offered to GFP students in each trimester (Portfolio, p35, SM037). While the Panel heard that at some of the branches, GFP students meet with teachers in their offices and are given extra work to support

their learning (interviews), there was inconsistency in the implementation of the remedial support system for students (ASM038, interviews).

OCHS states to have good pass rates for GFP students who participated in remedial classes as evidence that the system is working (Portfolio, p36, Table 3). The College's defined approach to the provision of learning support to GFP students, in terms of the role of formal use of peer learning, or strategies to engage high-performing students to stretch them in their studies, is unclear to the Panel, despite the data provided (Portfolio, p36, Table 3). The Panel is of the view that consideration is given to have mechanisms to be in place in relation to student learning support to assist students who are facing learning difficulties to enable successful completion of their programmes and provide opportunities for high-performing students to enhance their performance. These mechanisms and the overall GFP student learning experience, in turn, must be monitored and reviewed in order to ensure that improvements are implemented and tracked as evidence of the effectiveness of the system to advance the development of student learning for academic success (see Section 1.7, Recommendation 8).

3.8 *Student Satisfaction and Climate*

The FPS adopts an open-door communication approach to enhance interaction between teachers and students (Portfolio, p36, SM011, interviews) and endeavours to maintain a positive and constructive student climate guided by the MVVs of the College (Portfolio, p36). The FPS provided the Panel with a survey conducted for all students (SM122) with some disaggregated data presented for more AY 2020-21 (ASM040). However, the FPS acknowledges that there is no analysis of these data, and hence it is difficult to establish that improvements have been made in response to survey results (interviews, see Section 1.7).

GFP students can also share their concerns with facilities and services provided through channels other than the survey, such as, the post-it page at the Muscat branch (ASM039) and suggestion boxes placed in all branches (Portfolio, p36, interviews, campus tour). The Panel heard that concerns about catering raised by GFP students using informal channels such as WhatsApp, were addressed (ASM086, interviews). However, the Panel also noted dissatisfaction with the services, infrastructure and facilities, such as the cafeteria, internet services, adequate learning and rest areas and the library facilities in some of branches (interviews, campus tour). In relation to satisfaction with academic matters, while GFP students can formally lodge an appeal against their grades in line with the College's Appeal Policy (SM047, SM168), the Panel heard that in most cases the GFP students were able to resolve their concerns with grades through meetings with their teachers or academic advisors (interviews, see Section 1.8).

At the branches, GFP student representatives can meet with their teachers to discuss student concerns and grievances and the Panel confirmed that these are escalated to the ADs, HFPS or the Dean, if needed (Portfolio, p37, interviews). In conclusion, the Panel noted that in the AY 2020-21 survey, while a majority of GFP students (80%) have expressed their satisfaction with the services provided by OCHS (ASM040), the Panel encourages the FPS to gather feedback from GFP students regularly on all aspects of the GFP operations, and ensure that the data is analysed and presented to the relevant committees so that actions and improvements are made where warranted (see Section 1.7).

3.9 *Student Behaviour*

The FPS makes use of and implements the College Student Code of Conduct (Portfolio, p37, SM095). GFP students are informed about the disciplinary rules in the Student Handbook and also during their orientation (SM123, SM008, SM095, interviews). In addition, FPS teachers instruct their students on expected behaviour in the classrooms (Portfolio, p37, interviews). The Panel noted documented evidence of absenteeism at the branches and student warning notices issued when student absenteeism was a concern (ASM042, ASM043). The Panel also noted evidence of follow up into absenteeism and poor performance, resulting in the issuing of verbal and written warnings (such as for absenteeism, tardiness and inappropriate behaviour) (ASM097). Depending on the severity of student misconduct, an *ad hoc* committee may be formed by the College to investigate and recommend action to the relevant authority (Portfolio, p37, interviews). The Panel heard that very few misconduct cases had

been registered in the FPS, and that disciplinary documentation is kept on record. Overall, the Panel found that the policy and processes in relation to student discipline are functioning adequately (SM008, SM095, SM123, ASM042, interviews).

3.10 *Non-Academic Student Support Services and Facilities*

Provision of non-academic student support services and facilities at OCHS are jointly managed by the Administrative Affairs and SAD departments (Portfolio, p37, interviews) and satisfaction with these services is measured through a survey (Portfolio, p38, SM122). These services include sports facilities, catering, accommodation and transport (Portfolio, p37). OCHS does not have its own student accommodation facilities, but supports the students in selecting accommodation (see Section 3.1).

The Panel noted that extra-curricular facilities and activities available to GFP students are very limited and where activities are present these depend on *ad hoc* individual branch initiatives (SM138), with little in the way of annual planning or review evident. An example of such engagement provided to the Panel include periodic visits to public and private libraries from one of the branches to the SQU Library, the Diwan Library and Al Shmouk Library to familiarise GFP students with library services (Portfolio, p33, SM127). The Panel acknowledges that given the OCHS branch arrangements, there may be logistical challenges in organising such visits for GFP students of all the branches. Nevertheless, the Panel encourages FPS to explore other opportunities for students through local library visits where feasible and practical.

The Panel heard from GFP students of their disappointment in the absence or poor quality of extracurricular activity and their desire for a more rounded and fulfilling GFP experience (interviews). The Panel noted that there is a marked lack of such services across the branches and little in the way of a formal action plan to improve the current situation. The Panel did not see any evidence of an integrated FPS approach to address this important aspect of the student experience. According to the survey conducted for GFP students in AY 2017-18 (SM122), 33% of students were not satisfied with student support services and facilities, 37% were not satisfied with extracurricular activities, 33% were not satisfied with transport facilities and 42% were not satisfied with sports facilities. While the CRC and EC meet their mandates, the Extra-Curricular Activities Committee, for instance, appears to have little influence in boosting the student experience in social and cultural activities (interviews) (see Section 1.2) The Panel is of the view that urgent attention should be given to a plan which is adequately resourced to enhance the quality of the GFP student experience at OCHS. It is also important that such a plan considers ensuring as far as practically possible an equivalence of provision of non-academic support services and facilities at an expected level across all branches to provide GFP students with a positive and engaging quality educational experience.

Recommendation 22

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences urgently review the provision of General Foundation Programme non-academic student support services and facilities, and develop and implement a planned approach to their delivery and ensure that there is consistency in the quality of the GFP student experience across all branches.

3.11 *External Engagement*

As part of OCHS external engagement activities, several benchmarking activities with national HEIs are being initiated, or have already begun (Portfolio, p38, SM076, interviews, see also Section 2.1). These include a GFP benchmarking activity conducted in AY 2018-19 with the Ibra College of Technology (SM076). OCHS has also signed a MoU with Sultan Qaboos University and Middle East College (Portfolio, p38, SM002). The Panel heard that, centrally, the FPS is also in the process of selecting a local HEI to benchmark the GFP (Portfolio, p38, interviews). The Panel confirmed that a limited number of GFP staff and students have participated in external activities, such as workshops, community activities, teaching high school students and MoH administrative staff, and blood donation campaigns (Portfolio, p38, SM089, SM139, interviews).

The Panel found the College's approach to external engagement for the GFP was *ad hoc*, lacked formal coordination and depended on local context and conditions at each branch. It noted a lack of clarity of purpose with respect to external engagement, with little evidence of a plan for improvement and development. GFP students appear to have few opportunities to engage with the outside community in an organised or structured manner (interviews). The Panel formed the view that the College's approach to this area requires improved conceptualisation and coordination at central and branch levels.

The Panel concurs with the GFP that this is an area requiring improvement (Portfolio, p38, interviews) and suggests that the GFP establishes a formal understanding of 'external engagement' and its role in relation to its local community. It may be useful in that context to clearly identify its different stakeholder communities per branch (such as schools in the remote area, industry, businesses) and establish guidelines for engagement with each of these communities. It is to be recognised that the location of each branch and the specific needs of the local communities would inform its external engagement framework. In addition, the Panel identifies a need for OCHS to consider how it will manage and monitor the quality and value of external engagements by GFP staff and students.

Recommendation 23

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences define the external community for the Foundation Programme Section and formalise the approach and implementation of external engagement in order to establish meaningful ties with external stakeholders and the community, as well as enhance the General Foundation Programme and the overall student experience.

4 STAFF AND STAFF SUPPORT SERVICES

Staff and staff support services are part of the College SP and the plan informs and underpins the staffing and related support services at the FPS. The ninth SP set by the MoH notes a human resourcing target for the College's staffing arrangements and has guided the FPS human resources planning, where 'Qualified human resources have been provided to meet the educational needs of increased student intake as well as the new health programmes' (Portfolio, p39, SM140).

This Chapter reports on the Panel's findings related to the FPS staff profile, recruitment and selection, staff induction, professional development, performance planning and review, staff organisational climate and retention, and Omanisation.

4.1 Staff Profile

Human resource (HR) planning in the FPS is aligned to the OCHS 2021-25 SP Objective Two, under Domain Four, which is 'to strengthen recruitment and retention of talented national teaching staff' (Portfolio, p39, SM013). The Panel acknowledges the College's stated intent in its SP 2021-25 to develop its recruitment and selection processes by engaging the branches in selecting and appointing staff, including those for the FPS (SM013).

The Staff Affairs Committee (SAC), which is responsible for all staff-related matters in the College, was established in 2021. It is chaired by the Dean and has five members which include all the ADs, ADAF, the Dean of Higher Institute of Health Specialities (HIHS) and the Director of Administration and Finance of HIHS (Portfolio, p39, SM141). The Personal Affairs Section (PAS) of the Directorate of Administrative Affairs (DAA), is responsible for the overall planning and oversight of employee management, including staff profiles (Portfolio, p39, SM143).

The GFP had a total of 63 full-time staff members in AY 2019-20, of which 49 (77.8%) were English teachers, five (7.9%) were Mathematics teachers, and nine (14.3%) were IT teachers (Portfolio, pp39-41). In some of the Branches the academic staff from the degree programmes support the Mathematics and IT teaching. The number of female staff (37) is higher than males (26). Omanis made up 17.5% of GFP staff in the AY 2019-20 (Portfolio, p39), and the percentage increased to 34.21% in AY 2020-21 (Portfolio, p41). In AY 2019-20, three GFP staff held PhDs, 47 had MPhil and Master's degrees, and 13 held Bachelor's degrees (Portfolio, p40). The Panel supports the FPS in recruiting well-qualified staff, enhancing Omanisation in its staff profile and providing new Omani staff with necessary mentoring and professional development programmes (interviews). The Panel recognised that the FPS also has staff with long years of service. The Panel suggests that the GFP gives attention to succession planning to manage available expertise and staffing continuity.

The Panel noted that the FPS provides descriptive statistics on demographic and academic variables of teaching staff (Portfolio, pp39-41). However, it is not clear that there is an analysis of whether the profile meets the GFP requirements regarding gender balance, age profile, staff turnover rates and student profile, and which taking into account the branch staffing requirements. The Panel therefore encourages the FPS to generate and analyse data relating to the demographic and academic characteristics of teaching staff, including age, gender, nationality, staff turnover (facilitating the introduction of new ideas and approaches) and native and non-native speakers of English, and to support the needs of the GFP in terms of teaching, assessment, curriculum development and language skills. Further, the Panel could not find any formal evidence of the use of indicators such as the expected enrolment of students, the number of students per class, and teaching load to inform future staff planning needs. The Panel formed the view that the FPS needs to consider the use of formal staff projection tools to identify and define its long-term staffing needs and plans as part of its operational planning cycle. Lastly, such data analysis could inform and support staff training and development plans.

Recommendation 24

The OAAAQA recommends that the Oman College of Health Sciences review its approach to formal staff planning and the analysis of staffing data in the Foundation Programme Section to ensure that its future staffing requirements per branch are met and to inform staff training and development initiatives.

4.2 Recruitment and Selection

Arrangements for the recruitment and selection of GFP staff follow the Medical and Allied Health Service Rules and Regulations and comply with Civil Service Law (Portfolio, p42, SM144, SM147, interviews). This is an interim arrangement which has been in place since 2018 and the intention is for the OCHS to take full responsibility for staff recruitment once College Executive bylaws are approved (Portfolio, p42, interviews). In terms of process, full-time appointments are made centrally by the HR Department with no input from management staff at the branches, while part-time staff are appointed locally by the branches (Portfolio, p42). The selection panel for full-time staff includes a representative from the MoH HR Department who also processes the applicant list, CVs and references. The process includes sending lists and applications of shortlisted candidates to the MoH. It was reported to the Panel in interviews with OCHS staff and noted by OCHS in the Portfolio that this results in delays (Portfolio, p42).

The Panel was informed that the ADs at each branch identify FPS staffing needs, usually at the end of the academic year, and communicate these to the HFPS and the ADAAS. Following approval, vacancies are internally and locally announced by the DAA (Portfolio, p41). Arrangements for the Muscat branch are slightly different as the HFPS identifies FPS staffing requirements and informs the ADAAS who in turn communicates them to the ADAF and Dean for approval (interviews).

The Panel was provided with advertisement samples for teaching posts which conform to regulations and job requirements as outlined in the Civil Service Law (SM147, SM149). The Panel noted that some job descriptions for teaching staff, including the English Tutor Job Description, had not been revised since 2002 and others not since 2012 (SM149) and would benefit from a review. Acknowledging that a review of staffing requirements and timely recruitment (Portfolio, p42) is in process, the Panel encourages the FPS to regularly review its processes and procedures for staff recruitment to ensure the timely provision of teaching staff. The College has a detailed procedure for the appointment of Omani candidates including appointments on short term contracts and use of part-time staff as emergency cover (Portfolio, pp41-42). The Panel concluded that the recruitment and selection process results in the appointment of staff who are well qualified and capable of contributing to the delivery needs of the GFP.

4.3 Staff Induction

OCHS has a staff induction system that addresses the needs of new staff including those recruited in the FPS (Portfolio, p42). Prior to the establishment of OCHS, staff induction was the responsibility of each MoHEI and there was no formal unified induction or orientation programme for newly joined staff in the FPS across the branches (Portfolio, p42). Since 2018, the FPS provides an induction for all new staff which includes an orientation of the organisational regulations, processes and procedures (Portfolio, p42, SM149, interviews). An orientation regarding the GFP curriculum, teaching, learning and assessments is given through workshops held with the rest of the GFP staff. The Panel heard that new staff at the branches are also encouraged to observe other senior teachers in the classroom (Portfolio, p42, SM151, interviews). The Panel confirmed that mentors are allocated for new staff to familiarise them with the GFP systems and procedures. Additionally, the Panel noted that during the probation period, mentors are involved in peer evaluation, and new staff are provided with informal peer feedback to help them to adjust to the system (Portfolio, p44, interviews). The Panel heard that new expatriate FPS staff are supported in arranging accommodation and transportation (Portfolio, p42, interviews).

OCHS uses the staff satisfaction survey (SM152) to monitor the effectiveness of their induction programme (Portfolio, p42). The results of this survey conducted in AY 2020-21 shows that a majority

(75%) of FPS staff are aware of their roles and responsibilities and are satisfied with the induction and support provided (Portfolio, p43, SM152). The Panel encourages the FPS to understand, address and monitor the concerns of those who did not score this area highly, where reasonably practical to do so. The Panel confirmed that all induction strategies and processes are reviewed, including the Staff Handbook and Staff Induction Manual to ensure their quality and the equivalence of staff support and HR provision across all OCHS branches. The Panel acknowledges the work currently being undertaken by the College to produce a staff induction policy and encourages it to consult with FPS staff and other key stakeholders as part of this process.

4.4 Professional Development

The responsibility for professional development (PD) for FPS teaching staff lies with the Staff Development and Learning Resources Committee (SDLRC) which coordinates, monitors and manages the PD activities (Portfolio, p43, SM045). PD activities take into account the needs of the branches and obtain approval from the HFPS. The Panel noted that since AY 2019-20, almost all PD sessions were conducted online due to the Covid-19 pandemic (SM045, interviews). FPS provides conference leave and travel arrangements for its staff to attend local CPD events (Portfolio, p43). However, there is no evidence of a policy, procedure or records for staff attending PD events nationally or internationally and the Panel encourages the development of a policy and procedures for staff conference leave which facilitates their participation in local and external PD events.

The SDLRC conducts an annual needs analysis through its committees on the main campus to identify staff training needs and, for FPS staff, contributions from the branches are provided through a questionnaire (Portfolio, p43, SM153). The SDLRC also collects suggestions for PD activities from the branches during the course orientation workshops using Activity Evaluation and Speaker Evaluation Forms (Portfolio, p43) which are meant to provide input for the SDLRC annual PD action plan. However, the Panel could find no evidence or samples of these forms completed by the branches during the course orientation workshops from AY 2018-19 to AY 2021-22. The Panel, though, noted that the Annual Report of the SDLRC for AY 2020-21 (SM045) provides a list of activities, and a needs analysis of staff PD and training internally (Portfolio, p43) which serves as an input for the SDLRC annual PD action plan.

Given the specific nature of the programme offered at the FPS, the Panel considers that a systematic and comprehensive plan for all FPS staff be conceptualised and developed, based on a needs analysis and data drawn from the FPS staff appraisal processes. Such a plan, when implemented and monitored would have the potential to strengthen the GFP academic provision and future staffing needs. Furthermore, the Panel notes the importance of keeping formal records of the topics covered and staff who have attended and benefitted from various PD activities, which may help inform the planning of future PD activities (see Sections 4.1 and 4.5, Recommendations 22 and 23).

The FPS has evaluated the effectiveness of PD programmes through a satisfaction survey conducted in March 2020 and it included four items which measured staff satisfaction in relation to PD opportunities (SM152). The Panel noted that PD opportunities are provided internally, and staff feedback suggested some satisfaction in this regard.

4.5 Performance Planning and Review

The approach to staff performance planning and reviews at the FPS is outlined in the Civil Service Executive Regulation and Administrative Qarar (SM149). Staff are provided with job descriptions on joining the FPS and are made aware of their roles and responsibilities, as well as the criteria and associated processes that are used to assess their performance (Portfolio, p44, SM149, interviews). The Panel noted that staff performance is planned, monitored and reviewed by the FPS and by the branches (Portfolio, p44). All aspects of course delivery, assessments and practical teaching and learning processes are discussed in detail with staff (Portfolio, p44). Additionally, course evaluation feedback from teachers and students is obtained through surveys and is used as an important part of the staff annual performance appraisal process.

The Panel noted that peer evaluation and teaching practice appraisal (SM046) for developmental purposes is used and form part of annual staff performance practices. In addition, ‘course evaluation feedback from students and teachers, course reflection forms, and teaching portfolio’ are all considered as essential parts of staff appraisals (Portfolio, p45, SM064). The performance appraisal results are confidentially discussed with individual staff by the HFPS at the main branch and by the ADs in the branches (Portfolio, p45). However, the Panel heard that administrative and teaching staff were not informed about the overall score of their annual performance appraisal and were informed verbally about their areas for improvement (interviews). The Panel encourages OCHS to consider increasing the transparency in the performance planning and review process to avoid misunderstanding and providing some type of feedback to staff on their overall annual performance, which includes a clear indication of their areas of strength and areas for improvement.

The Panel noted that staff have the right to appeal if they are not satisfied with the results of their performance appraisal. OCHS notes that, to date no staff have exercised their right to submit such an appeal (Portfolio, p45). While the Panel could not find evidence of a formal process to review the FPS appraisal procedures, the Panel was informed that the College would be making use of the ‘Ejada Performance Scheme’ from this current academic year. The Panel heard that it is a tool which the Ministry of Labour (MoL) developed as an electronic form for annual performance appraisal (interviews). The Panel considers that it is important to establish a comprehensive performance management system which is monitored. Additionally, the Panel encourages the FPS to ensure that staff are provided with the necessary training so that the Ejada Performance Scheme is used effectively and has a positive impact on the achievement of the GFP goals.

Recommendation 25

The OAAAQA recommends that Oman College of Health Sciences review the Foundation Programme Section performance planning process in favour of transparency and to align it with its staffing requirements and identification of professional development needs at all branches.

4.6 Staff Organisational Climate and Retention

Reflecting on the College’s culture and gauging the attitude of FPS staff through the staff survey last conducted in 2020 (Portfolio, p46, SM152) and noting the staff retention rates (reported at 99% for the past four years), OCHS states that currently, there is a ‘supportive organisational climate’ (Portfolio, p45). The Panel noted the high positive scores in the majority of categories in the survey, notably in terms of job satisfaction and working conditions. In relation to staff remuneration, while the majority of staff (80%) considered their salary to be appropriate, the figure was much lower (with 27% satisfaction) for financial recognition of extra work or additional responsibilities. A similar percentage was recorded in relation to the availability of recreational facilities with 45% of staff expressing dissatisfaction with these (SM152). Only 34% of FPS staff considered recreational facilities for staff and students to be satisfactory. There were also lower satisfaction rates with multimedia facilities (67% satisfied), research facilities (34% satisfied) and library (52% satisfied). These results align with the feedback provided by staff, at all levels, during the interviews concerning the low quality of the campuses and infrastructure, resources and facilities (interviews). Despite these limitations, the Panel noted a sense of commitment, enthusiasm and high motivation of many staff and students at all the branches and in Muscat. The Panel noted that the survey findings highlighted a strong sense that academic and professional services staff feel appreciated and their efforts are recognised; these views were endorsed by many staff during the visits to all the branches and in Muscat (interviews). The Panel noted that in terms of process, only one survey of the FPS staff has been conducted during the past three years and while the Panel acknowledges the large number of questions it posed, without an action plan or follow up survey it is difficult to see how the FPS can respond adequately to its results or to make improvements. The Panel encourages OCHS to gather such feedback on a regular basis so it can contribute towards maintaining and enhancing staff satisfaction levels.

The Panel noted that OCHS has policies related to the behaviour of staff including the Staff Disciplinary Code of Conduct specified by Civil Services Law (SM144, SM147) and Staff Grievance

Policy (SM147); however, these are only available in Arabic. The Panel heard that at the branch-level this issue is managed by translations undertaken by international bilingual members of staff to make them accessible to English-only speaking staff (interviews). The Panel considers that, despite the satisfaction expressed by the non-Arabic speaking FPS staff, all GFP relevant policy and procedure documents should be available in English for non-Arabic speakers (see Section 1.2, Recommendation 2). The Panel noted that there have been no 'violations of code of conduct (misconduct or inappropriate behaviour) recorded so far' (Portfolio, p.44) and the Panel confirmed that these results were not due to problems with the reporting process itself (interviews). The College agrees that it should have its own policies that deal with academic and non-academic codes of conduct of its staff and is currently undertaking a review and updating all its policies and procedures. The Panel supports the completion of this work as a matter of priority.

OCHS has an 'open door' policy which allows all staff, including those in the FPS, to contact their line managers at all the campuses and that they have equal rights to lodge their complaints and grievances (Portfolio, p45). The Panel heard of the satisfaction by staff with this approach which is considered to build a sense of positive engagement between the FPS staff and the leadership at the branches (interviews). The Panel concluded that despite serious challenges relating to the campus and branch infrastructure and other resources, the overall staff culture and organisational climate of the FPS is positive. As noted in Section 1.2, the Panel suggests attention to and supports the work which is being undertaken to review relevant policies and procedures and to translate into English the Code of Conduct and Staff Grievances Policy. It encourages OCHS to consider the development of a mechanism for more regular surveys of staff and to respond and use the findings more directly in its planning.

4.7 Omanisation

The FPS Omanisation Plan (SM029) aligns with the OCHS SP 2021-25 (SM013), which was designed in accordance with Oman Vision 2040. Under Domain 4, Strategic Objective 2 'to Strengthen recruitment and retention of the talented national teaching staff', two actions are required, namely to 'develop an Omanisation Plan' (Activity 6) and 'create a succession plan to sustain Omanisation' (Activity 7) (SM013). Based on the FPS OP 2021-25 (SM029), the targeted percentage of the Omani teaching staff in the FPS is to be 60% by 2025. The number of Omani staff at the FPS increased from 17 in AY 2018-19 to 26 in AY 2021-22 (Portfolio, p47). The Panel acknowledges the College's efforts to meet the minimum Omanisation requirement in AY 2021-22 (Portfolio, p47). The Panel supports the review of the effectiveness of the FPS Omanisation Plan to achieve its desired target while maintaining the quality of provision of the GFP.

The Panel noted the various types of support provided for new Omani teaching staff in the FPS, including observation of teaching and mentoring by experienced staff to help them be successful in their career (Portfolio, p47, SM16, interviews). Omani staff in the FPS are also effectively engaged in administrative roles, including as coordinators and Chairs or members of various committees (Portfolio, p47, SM163). The Panel heard during interviews that Omani GFP staff were encouraged to complete their postgraduate studies inside and outside the country, and five Omanis are currently completing their Master's degrees in Oman and with one in the UK (Portfolio, p48). The Panel acknowledges OCHS's efforts towards maintaining and supporting Omanisation within the FPS and concluded that Omanisation is effectively implemented at the FPS.

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APPENDIX B. ABBREVIATIONS, ACRONYMS AND TERMS

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

AA	Academic Advising
AACP	Academic Advising and Counselling Policy
AB	Academic Board
AD	Associate Deans
ADAAAS	Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs and Academic Support
ADAF	Assistant Dean for Administration and Finance
ADRI	Approach→Deployment→Results→Improvement
ADSA	Assistant Dean for Student Affairs
AFA	Administrative and Financial Affairs
ARS	Admission and Registration Section
AY	Academic Years
BoD	Board of Directors
BoT	Board of Trustees
CAC	College Admission Committee
CALL	Computer Assisted Language Learning
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CPDC	Continuing Professional Development Committee
CRC	Curriculum Review Committee
CSC	Classroom Schedule Committee
CSH	College Student Handbook
DAA	Directorate of Administrative Affairs
DCPD	Directorate of Continuing Professional Development
DGHRD	Directorate General of Human Resources Development
DGHS	Directorate General of Health Services
DQ	Directorate of Quality
EC	Examination Committee
ECC	Extra-Curricular Activities Committee
FBC	Foundation Branch Coordinators
FC	Foundation Council for GFP
FPS	Foundation Programme Section
FSH	Foundation Student Handbook
GFP	General Foundation Programme
GFPCC	GFP Component Coordinators
GFPQA	GFP Quality Audit
GSS	General Study Skills
HAMS	Health Academic Management System
HEAC	Higher Education Admission Centre
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HFPS	Head of Foundation Programme Section
HIHS	Higher Institute of Health Sciences

HIMP	Health Information Management Programme
HR	Human Resources
HSMS	Health and Safety Management System
IHS.....	Institute of Health Sciences
IT	Information Technology
LC.....	Level Coordinators
LO.....	Learning Outcomes
LMS.....	Learning Management System
MEC	Middle East College
MoF	Ministry of Finance
MoH.....	Ministry of Health
MoHEIs	Ministry of Health Education Institutes
MoHERI	Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation
MoL	Ministry of Labour
MoU.....	Memorandum of Understanding
MVV.....	Mission, Vision and Values
NC	Newsletter Committee
OAAAQA.....	Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education
OASGFP.....	Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes
OCHS	Oman College of Health Sciences
ODC.....	Oman Dental College
OMSB.....	Oman Medical Specialities Board
OP.....	Operational Plan
ORC.....	OCHS Research Committee
PAS.....	Personal Affairs Section
QAC.....	Quality Assurance Committee
QA-DGHRD.....	Quality Assurance Unit of Directorate General of Human Resources Development
QE.....	Quality Expert
RC.....	Research Committee
RMHSC	Risk Management and Health & Safety Committee
SAC	Staff Affairs Committee
SAD	Student Affairs Department
SDLRC	Staff Development and Learning Resources Committee
SGP.....	Student Grievance Policy
SLO	Student Learning Outcomes
SM	Supporting Material
SP.....	Strategic Plan
SQU	Sultan Qaboos University
TLRC.....	Teaching and Learning Resource Committee
ToR	Terms of Reference
UPPP	Unfair Practice and Plagiarism Policy
UTAS.....	University of Technology and Applied Sciences

WHOWorld Health Organisation

