



Oman Academic
Accreditation Authority

**Report of a General
Foundation Programme
Quality Audit of
University of Buraimi**

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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 Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) of University of Buraimi (UoB). The GFP Quality Audit followed the process of audit as outlined in OAAA's General Foundation Programme Quality Audit Manual.¹ The GFP Quality Audit also used the *Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes* ('GFP Standards') as an external reference point.²

The GFP Quality Audit commenced with UoB undertaking a self-study of its Mission, Vision and systems in relation to the GFP. The results were summarised in the GFP Portfolio (the 'Portfolio'). This document was submitted to the OAAA by the agreed date of 09 November 2017.

The OAAA appointed an external GFP Quality Audit Panel (the 'Panel'), comprising appropriately qualified and experienced local and international reviewers, to conduct the GFP Quality Audit (for membership of the Panel see Appendix A). The Panel met (international members by telephone) on 18 December 2017 to consider UoB's GFP Portfolio. Following this, a representative of the Panel Chairperson and the Review Director undertook a planning visit on behalf of the Panel to UoB on 10 January 2018 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 UoB's activities in relation to the GFP. No public submissions were received using this process.

The GFP Quality Audit Visit took place from 18 February to 22 February 2018. During this time, the Panel spoke with approximately 75 people, including current and former GFP students, GFP and post-GFP faculty, GFP support staff, UoB 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 UoB's ongoing quality improvement efforts merit support, and Recommendations where there are significant opportunities for improvement not yet being adequately addressed. The Report aims to provide a balanced set of observations, but does not comment on every system in place at UoB.

The Panel's audit activities and preparation of this Report were governed by regulations set by the OAAA Board. No documents created after 22 February 2018 (the last day of the Audit Visit) were taken into consideration for the purposes of this audit, other than pre-existing evidence specifically requested by the Panel in advance and/or submitted by the HEI in response to GFPQA draft Report v5. This Report was approved by the OAAA Board on 04 February 2019.

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

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

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

³ <http://www.oaaa.gov.om>

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSIONS

This section summarises the main findings and lists the Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations. 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 University of Buraimi (UoB) is a relatively young higher education institution (HEI) in the Sultanate of Oman. UoB moved to a new custom-built campus in September 2016 (Portfolio, p.3). UoB provides a General Foundation Programme (GFP), within the Centre for Foundation Studies (CFS), to prepare students for higher education studies in the four Colleges: College of Business, College of Health Sciences, College of Engineering and College of Law. All programmes are delivered in English with the exception of those in the College of Law (Portfolio, p.4).

UoB has been offering the GFP since 2010, but for the first three years, because of human resource constraints, the delivery of the programme was outsourced to English Language Education Services (ELES), Oman (Portfolio, p.4). During this period, the GFP was delivered by the ELES team on the UoB's premises and was jointly supervised by UoB and ELES. Since the spring semester of AY 2012/2013, the GFP has been independently delivered by UoB as a unit under the CFS.

The GFP offered at UoB has four components: English, Mathematics, Computing and Study Skills, in line with the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes (OASGFP). The Study Skills component is embedded within the English language courses. English for Special Purposes, on the other hand, is taught as a separate language course in the undergraduate programmes offered at UoB. The three placement tests, for English, Mathematics and IT, determine student admission into the three levels of the GFP. A Head of the GFP Unit (HoU GFP), who reports to the CFS Director, leads the programme. The delivery is assured through 30 Academic Staff and 78 Administrative Staff from the various UoB support units (Portfolio, p.5).

A broad-based consultative process was used in the development of the Portfolio, starting with the UoB-GFP Roadmap and Calendar of Activities; this was developed by the Quality Assurance Department (QAD) in consultation with the CFS – the body responsible for the delivery of the GFP (Portfolio, p.5). Based on this plan of activities, a GFP Audit Steering Committee and a GFP Audit Working Committee were formed to spearhead the development of the GFP Quality Audit Portfolio (Portfolio, p.5). The GFP Audit Steering Committee, comprising the senior management of UoB, was responsible for leading and monitoring the self-study process and guiding the Working Committee with respect to the planning, organisation and timeliness of the process. The Steering Committee included GFP academic and administrative staff, together with representatives of the supporting units, and was engaged in the self-assessment process. This involved the collection and aggregation of data, and its analysis and interpretation, to produce the GFP Quality Audit Portfolio.

CFS, which is responsible for the delivery of the GFP, has a management structure with defined reporting lines, roles and responsibilities of staff responsible for the delivery of the GFP. The clear distinction in deployment of managerial and operational responsibilities, particularly between the Director of CFS and the Head of the GFP, however, needs attention. The Vision and Mission of the CFS focus on the GFP as a platform for students to acquire the skills and knowledge required to pursue higher education studies. The Vision and Mission of the CFS are aligned with the UoB's Vision and Mission. These focus on providing a progress-oriented education and learner-centred experience for students and reflect national priorities, thus making them appropriate for guiding the GFP in achieving its goals. UoB's Vision and

Mission inform the strategic and operational goal setting and the planning processes, for UoB as a whole as well as for the individual departments.

CFS has a well-structured framework of action planning, progress reporting and annual accomplishment reporting cascading from the UoB Strategic Plan. The KPIs identified for the GFP are, however, neither specific nor measurable. The goals are hence not clear resulting in unclear and non-specific accomplishments. Financial management at UoB is centralised and provides the CFS with the required resources for the GFP. The CFS, however, needs regular oversight to monitor deployment of planned expenditure for the GFP against the budget. CFS has identified its dependence on government-sponsored students as one of the most significant risks facing the GFP. Risk management as a concept, however, is still at a nascent stage at UoB and needs regular evaluation and monitoring to ensure a comprehensive coverage of potential risks.

UoB has policies applicable to the CFS, but a number of these have only recently been developed and therefore are yet to be implemented, and eventually, evaluated for effectiveness. An appropriate mechanism is required for the systematic and regular review of the implementation of these policies and their effectiveness. UoB has processes in place to address GFP student grievances and appeals. These, however, need to be communicated more explicitly as there is a lack of awareness amongst the students. Similarly, GFP staff and students need to be made better aware of the health and safety procedures in effect.

GFP Aims and Student Learning Outcomes (SO) are designed to ensure the GFP's fitness for purpose in bridging the gap between secondary and post-secondary education and are aligned with the OASGFP. The GFP curriculum is designed to adequately address the learning needs of students through three progressive levels for each of the three core areas of English, Mathematics, and Information Technology; Study Skills are embedded in the English courses. The individual Course Outcomes (CO) emerge from the SOs, thus allowing for effective delivery of the GFP, and student achievement of these is monitored annually. CFS now has mechanisms in place to gather stakeholder feedback on the GFP curriculum and its fitness for purpose, and to systematically utilise this feedback to inform GFP curriculum review and development.

UoB uses three in-house placement tests at the GFP level to ensure that students follow the most appropriate learning pathway based on their proficiency levels. The three placement tests, for English, Mathematics and IT, each allows UoB to categorise new students according to their educational needs. Benchmarking these entry tests against internationally accepted standardised tests would help ensure the validity of UoB's GFP entry standards. Since, Study Skills are embedded only in the English language course and not in Mathematics or IT courses, UoB needs to take appropriate measures to ensure that students exempted from the English language courses are provided with the opportunity to fully attain the GFP Study Skills learning outcomes.

A GFP student can gain admission into UoB undergraduate programmes if he/she passes all the GFP modules undertaken and UoB considers this as an indicator of the GFP students' achievement of all the GFP aims and SOs. The CFS monitors the grades of the GFP alumni in their first-year undergraduate studies at UoB and uses the grade distribution in the undergraduate courses as an indicator of the adequacy of the GFP curriculum in preparing students for higher education studies. This approach, however, is not considered as sufficient to demonstrate the adequacy of the GFP in meeting the OASGFP exit standards, as a minimum as there is no evidence that the passing marks in the GFP examinations are benchmarked against internationally recognised tests.

GFP teaching quality is managed through a comprehensive and consistently implemented framework of quality assessment tools and techniques such as student evaluations, peer reviews and continuous professional development of staff; feedback on assessment indicates student satisfaction. The GFP teaching staff has made efforts to incorporate innovative teaching methods using smart technology tools and they are encouraged to continue exploring and adopting innovative teaching initiatives appropriate to the further development of the GFP. UoB has recently started using a plagiarism detection software

within the GFP, and the CFS supports the effective implementation of the Academic Integrity Policy. The scope of the existing Academic Integrity Policy, however, is limited to dealing with academic misconduct in student work and needs to be reviewed as a priority to include staff within its scope.

CFS has well-structured processes in place for assessment of students and staff provide timely feedback, both oral and written, to students on the assessed work. Security and safety arrangements of electronic examinations like the Moodle-based placement tests is an area that needs attention and UoB needs to put mechanisms in place to address this gap.

UoB has developed an in-house, customised and centralised Student Information System (SIS) that maintains records and data for all UoB students. The SIS is versatile in providing a range of information from the student records, but UoB was unable to provide evidence of mechanisms available for the regular monitoring and review of the system's effectiveness in meeting the needs of the diverse stakeholders of the CFS. While the student profile classifies the student population based on a range of criteria, it does not offer any information on students facing challenges arising from medical conditions (ie students with special needs). It is important therefore, that a structured record of such students and their unique needs is maintained to allow the CFS to provide the necessary support for these students.

The UoB campus uses a Windows based Internet infrastructure through which the IT Department provides SharePoint and Moodle as the two platforms for disseminating teaching materials. UoB has initiated measures to extend the systematic usage of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) across all levels and courses of the General Foundation Programme to facilitate the effective delivery of the programme. UoB has provided the required IT infrastructure to the CFS for the delivery of the GFP but needs to have processes in place for the review of the appropriateness and adequacy of the IT security mechanisms.

GFP students are supported throughout their study at the CFS to successfully complete the GFP. This support includes induction to UoB, CFS and GFP as well as to the available academic and non-academic support services. UoB has a proactive approach to identifying and supporting "at risk" students from an early stage of the GFP but lacks a similar system to track students with special needs or to support the diversity of their needs. UoB also has a systematic approach to the provision of academic advising within the CFS. There is limited evidence, however, of the review of the impact of academic advising on student progress.

GFP students are generally satisfied with the facilities and the support services offered to them; their feedback, however, could be better utilised to enhance the facilities provided and in turn raise satisfaction levels. UoB has mechanisms in place to assess GFP student satisfaction, but processes to review and monitor the effectiveness of these feedback mechanisms are not present. UoB is encouraged to address this in order to ensure that these mechanisms are effective in producing reliable and valid indicators of student satisfaction. The Student Code of Conduct, the policy and process, used in case of a breach are implemented consistently across the CFS. The review and monitoring of this process, however, are not evident.

UoB has HR policies and procedures in place, as articulated in the UoB GFP Guidelines, to guide human resource operations within the CFS. UoB has ensured that the GFP teaching staff represent a range in terms of age, gender, nationality and years of experience in the field. Staff members are well qualified and have a diverse range of skills, which enable them to meet the academic and administrative requirements of the GFP. UoB does, however, face challenges with staff recruitment and retention, due to factors such as the location of UoB and remuneration. UoB has a structured induction programme for the newly recruited GFP staff which is consistently implemented and the process is reviewed annually to identify areas of possible improvement.

UoB has a system in place to provide general staff development, but expenditure on external development activities is not adequately supported and there is a need for CFS to place greater focus on individual and institutional needs for professional development. While UoB invests in the professional

development of GFP staff, it would benefit from using the performance appraisal system to inform their performance development plans. UoB has measures in place to provide a healthy and positive working environment for staff and a structured mechanism for the collection of staff feedback.

UoB needs to operationalise plans for recruiting more Omani academic staff members, while at the same time ensuring that the quality of provision and academic standards of the General Foundation Programme are maintained.

UoB's self-study Portfolio is clear, well written and it reflects the use of the ADRI method for the self-review. It describes the GFP practices, processes, facilities and resources, and evaluates the effectiveness of the implementation of their policies and procedures to allow the CFS to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement within the GFP. Most of the policies and procedures, however, have been implemented recently (from around 2016), and hence the effectiveness of the review processes in place was not always evident.

Summary of Commendations

A formal Commendation recognises an instance of particularly good practice.

1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Buraimi for the thorough mapping between course outcomes and the General Foundation Programme aims and student outcomes enabling the Centre of Foundation Studies to inform planning of course content, delivery and assessment strategies of the General Foundation Programme. 21
2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Buraimi for its comprehensive and consistently implemented quality evaluation and enhancement framework for teaching and learning to monitor, evaluate and improve teaching quality within the General Foundation Programme. 24

Summary of Affirmations

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

1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Buraimi that it needs to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of the Key Performance Indicators for the General Foundation Programme, at all levels of reporting within the Centre of Foundation Studies, and supports its efforts in this area, such as the introduction of accomplishment reports. 15
2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Buraimi that it needs to effectively manage risk within the General Foundation Programme, and supports the introduction of the Risk Management Policy and related mechanisms. 16
3. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Buraimi that it needs to develop and implement a formal process to systematically utilise stakeholder feedback to inform curriculum review and development of its General Foundation Programme, and supports the implementation of the Learning Outcomes Assessment survey and the curriculum review process. 22
4. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Buraimi's decision to extend the use of the plagiarism detection software in student work across all courses in the General Foundation Programme, and supports its efforts in this area. 25

5. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Buraimi in its decision to extend the systematic usage of the Virtual Learning Environment across all levels and courses of the General Foundation Programme to facilitate the effective delivery of the programme, and supports the steps taken in preparing for this..... 33

Summary of Recommendations

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

1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi review the terms of reference of the Director of the Centre of Foundation Studies and the Head of the General Foundation Programme in order to avoid any ambiguities in their respective duties and responsibilities to ensure effective management of the programme and clear division of responsibilities between the two positions. 13
2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi develop specific and measurable Key Performance Indicators for the General Foundation Programme within the action plans of the Centre of Foundation Studies to operationalise the University's strategic plan more effectively..... 15
3. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that University of Buraimi utilise the accomplishment reports of all committees within the Centre of Foundation Studies more effectively to feed into the improvement cycle and inform future planning of the General Foundation Programme..... 15
4. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi ensure regular oversight of financial management at the Centre of Foundation Studies through the close monitoring of planned expenditure for the General Foundation Programme against the budget..... 16
5. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that University of Buraimi ensure the implementation of the actions identified through the review and monitoring process and assess their impact within the General Foundation Programme..... 17
6. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi put in place mechanisms for periodic review of the implementation of its existing and new policies and procedures within the General Foundation Programme..... 18
7. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi improve awareness of the health and safety procedures amongst General Foundation Programme students and staff in order to enhance the effectiveness of deployment of the health and safety arrangements and to comply with national standards..... 19
8. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi review placement testing to ensure validity, reliability and security across a number of iterations of the placement tests in use..... 23
9. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi periodically benchmark its General Foundation Programme entry and exit standards against recognised international standards to establish the effectiveness of the programme in preparing students for their higher education studies, and ensure that these standards are subject to rigorous review to establish continued validity and reliability. 23
10. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends as a matter of urgency that the University of Buraimi review its Academic Integrity Policy to include procedures to detect

	academic dishonesty of staff and outline mechanisms to effectively manage any violation of the policy within the General Foundation Programme.....	25
11.	The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi implement the procedures and mechanisms in place at the Centre of Foundation Studies to strengthen its relationship with alumni to inform planning, delivery and review of the General Foundation Programme.	28
12.	The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi include appropriate details of the General Foundation Programme students with special needs in their student records and put relevant mechanisms in place to inform provision of future academic and non-academic support provided to these students.....	31
13.	The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi strengthen its mechanisms for the regular monitoring and review of the effectiveness of the Student Information System in meeting the information needs of the various stakeholders of the Centre of Foundation Studies with respect to the General Foundation Programme.	31
14.	The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi strengthen its mechanisms for review of the appropriateness and adequacy of the IT infrastructure provided at the Centre of Foundation Studies to cater for the needs of the General Foundation Programme.	34
15.	The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi strengthen the IT security mechanisms for the backup of General Foundation Programme electronic data.	34
16.	The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends the University of Buraimi regularly review the student learning support provided by the Student Academic Support Activities Committee and the Student Engagement and Academic Advisory Centre and encourage higher involvement of General Foundation Programme students in the identification, design, planning and organisation of extra-curricular activities.	35
17.	The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi consider the feedback provided by the General Foundation Programme students to improve the quality of outdoor spaces on the campus and the extent of recreational activities provided, and ensure that improvements made are communicated through multiple channels to the General Foundation Programme students.	37
18.	The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi use the outcomes of the staff performance appraisal to identify professional development needs of staff and inform the professional development plan for its General Foundation Programme staff members.....	41
19.	The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi operationalise plans for recruiting more Omani academic staff members, while at the same time ensuring that the quality of provision and academic standards of the General Foundation Programme are maintained.	42

1 GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

UoB, established in 2007, is a relatively young HEI in the Sultanate of Oman. UoB moved to a new fully operational campus with a capacity of 7500 students in September 2016, incorporating a female hostel with a capacity of 1012 students and occupancy rate of 85% comprising mainly General Foundation Programme (GFP) students (Portfolio, p.3). UoB provides a GFP within the CFS to prepare students for undergraduate programmes in four Colleges: College of Business, College of Health Sciences, College of Engineering and College of Law. All the programmes at UoB (that is, GFP as well as undergraduate programmes), are delivered in English with the exception of those offered in the College of Law, which are delivered in Arabic.

UoB has been offering the GFP since 2010, but for the first three years, because of human resource constraints, the delivery of the programme was outsourced to ELES, a GFP provider. The ELES team delivered the GFP on UoB's premises for three years and was jointly supervised by the UoB and ELES. Since the spring semester of AY 2012/2013, the GFP has been independently delivered by UoB as a unit under the CFS.

The GFP has four components: English, Mathematics, Computing and Study Skills in line with the OASGFP. Study skills is embedded within the English language courses. English for Special Purposes, on the other hand, is taught as an English language course in post GFP studies. The three Placement tests, for English, Mathematics and IT, determine student admission into the three levels of the GFP. A Head of the GFP Unit who reports to the CFS Director leads the programme. The delivery is delivered through 30 academic Staff and 78 administrative Staff from the various UoB support units (Portfolio, p.5).

This Chapter reports on governance and management of the GFP and includes the Panel's findings in relation to the GFP Mission, Vision and Values; governance and management; operational planning; financial and risk management; systems for monitoring and review; student grievance process, and health and safety considerations.

1.1 *Mission, Vision and Values*

The CFS has clear, well-articulated Vision and Mission statements, which are aligned with those of UoB. UoB's Vision is "providing inspired learning for global empowerment" and its Mission is:

"Offering progress oriented education, research and engagement that contribute to quality of life and learner-centred experience enhanced by sustainable local and global partnerships"

(Portfolio, p.7)

While the CFS shares the overall Values of UoB, namely, "integrity, respect, commitment, diversity and excellence", it has developed its own Vision and Mission statements in alignment with those of UoB and based on the specific peculiarities and requirements of the GFP. The CFS Vision is:

"To aspire to be a centre of excellence, and a distinguished source of knowledge where learners acquire basic skills and knowledge required to pursue their academic programs successfully".

(Portfolio, p.7)

The CFS mission is to:

“Create an ideal academic platform for learners to accommodate themselves with the new atmosphere of university education and proceed with their studies successfully; and to contribute effectively to the achievement of UoB’s mission as a centre of regional and international academic excellence”.

(Portfolio, p.8)

The CFS Vision, Mission and Values were initially developed and mapped with those of UoB by the Director of CFS in consultation with the CFS staff and later approved by the CFS Board and University Academic Council (UAC). The Panel, however, was not able to establish the role of students in this process. Evidence shows that the Vision and Mission have been widely disseminated to staff and students via notice boards, staff induction, student induction, the Student Guide and GFP Student Handbook. Both the staff satisfaction survey and the student satisfaction report of AY 2017/2018 show that GFP staff and students are aware of the Vision, Mission and Values of the CFS. The Panel was pleased to confirm this during the interviews with academic staff and students; however, based on the interviews with non-academic staff, the Panel is of the opinion that the same awareness has not been cascaded fully to administrative support staff. An awareness of the Mission, Vision and Values of UoB would serve as a cohesive mechanism to bring the administration staff on board with UoB’s strategic objectives.

The Vision and Mission of the CFS focus on the GFP as a platform for students to acquire the skills and knowledge required to pursue higher education studies. The Vision and Mission of the CFS are aligned with the UoB’s Vision and Mission which focus on providing a progress-oriented education and learner-centred experience for students and reflect national priorities, appropriate in guiding the GFP in achieving its goals. UoB’s Vision and Mission inform the strategic and operational goal setting and planning processes for UoB as a whole as well as for the individual departments.

The Portfolio states that UoB has developed a set of policies, procedures and guidelines such as the UoB Academic Policies Procedures, UoB Administrative Policies and Procedures and the GFP Guidelines to support the CFS in embedding the values of UoB within the GFP and in attaining the CFS Vision and Mission (Portfolio, p.8). Based on the evidence provided, and the interviews during the Audit Visit, the Panel confirmed that the GFP’s Vision, Mission, supporting policies, procedures and guidelines are appropriate for a preparatory programme of study and are well aligned with UoB’s Vision and Mission.

1.2 Governance and Management Arrangements

UoB has an organisation structure which clearly defines the management of its academic and administrative departments. The Board of Directors (BoD), which was activated in April 2017, appointed a Board of Trustees (BoT) to provide overarching governance of UoB (Portfolio, p.3). The roles and responsibilities of the BoD and the BoT are clear and distinct. These two bodies are supported by the Vice Chancellor (VC) for the overall governance and management of UoB. The VC is responsible for the strategic management of UoB and the organisation structure provides for a Deputy Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Research and Innovation (DVCAARI) for the operational management of the academic departments of UoB. The Panel, however, was informed during the Audit Visit that currently this position is vacant and UoB is in the process of recruiting a suitable candidate. Until the post is filled, the Deans of the Colleges and the Director of CFS report to the VC for all academic matters and to the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Financial, Administrative Affairs and Support Services (DVCFAASS) for all other administrative matters. The GFP is fully represented at UoB, as the CFS Director is a member of the University Academic Council (UAC), the highest decision-making body of UoB with representation from all departments. This ensures that GFP issues requiring University-level

attention can be addressed immediately and that the senior staff members of UoB maintain awareness of GFP operations.

The CFS has a clear management structure under the leadership of the CFS Director and includes two departments, the Department of Foundation Studies (which delivers the GFP) and the Department of Service Courses (Portfolio, p.9, Figure 1), although the GFP is the main focus of the CFS. The CFS Director is responsible for the overall governance and management of CFS and is supported by the GFP Unit Head (HoU GFP) for all academic and administrative issues concerning the GFP (Portfolio, p.9). The GFP has a flat organisational hierarchy with a HoU GFP, Group Leaders and academic staff all reporting to the CFS Director. The operational management of the GFP is facilitated through the CFS Board, Group Leaders and committees (Portfolio, p.11). All three English courses, as well as Mathematics and IT, have Group Leaders with each group consisting of five to twelve academic staff. The selection criteria, tasks and responsibilities of Group Leaders are clearly defined and interviews with Group Leaders confirmed that they have an understanding of their role. The Panel heard that there is a strong interaction between Group Leaders and academic staff in a group (ie, academic staff teaching the different sections of the same courses) through regular weekly meetings to discuss teaching progress. Group Leaders also monitor the weekly academic progress reports prepared by academic staff.

The Panel confirmed that the CFS Board has been in existence since AY 2013/2014 and holds meetings during the academic year to oversee the strategic and operational management of the GFP. Group Leaders in the Department of Foundation Studies were appointed in February 2017 to support the operation of the GFP. The Group Leaders have operational responsibility for subject groups within the GFP. These responsibilities range from ensuring course delivery is carried out in line with procedures and regulations, to maintaining course files and preparing course reports at the end of every semester. The different committees include the Staff Professional Development Committee, the Curriculum Review Committee, the E-Learning Committee and the Examination Committee. The Panel confirmed that the remit of each committee is well-defined and that these committees were operating as defined in their terms of reference. The committees typically develop an action plan and submit an annual Accomplishment Report with KPIs (see Section 1.4).

The roles of Director CFS and HoU GFP are defined in the “Constitution and Terms of Reference of the CFS Director, GFP Unit Head and relevant committees” with the role of the Director CFS intended to be strategic in nature while that of the HoU GFP is intended to be operational. The Panel, however, found that there are areas of overlap (such as supervision of teaching, academic delivery and performance evaluation of departmental staff) in the individual terms of reference of the two roles and that this lack of distinction was causing ambiguity amongst staff in terms of the areas of responsibility of the CFS Director and the GFP Unit Head. The Panel gathered during the Visit that this has created some confusion amongst the CFS staff with regards to reporting lines. The Panel concluded, therefore, there was a lack of clarity amongst staff about the implementation of the management responsibilities of these two roles.

Recommendation 1

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi review the terms of reference of the Director of the Centre of Foundation Studies and the Head of the General Foundation Programme in order to avoid any ambiguities in their respective duties and responsibilities to ensure effective management of the programme and clear division of responsibilities between the two positions.

1.3 *Institutional Affiliations for Programmes and Quality Assurance*

UoB does not have any existing institutional affiliations although, in June 2017, UoB signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with WE Bridge Academy. WE Bridge Academy is a UK based Language Academy that offers an International Foundation Programme (IFP) (Portfolio, p.45). The Panel was informed that UoB is in the process of mapping the content of its GFP with that of WE Bridge Academy's IFP and developing an exit test for their GFP; this will be endorsed by WE Bridge in order to align its GFP to similar foundation programmes offered within Oman and around the world.

1.4 *Operational Planning*

UoB has institutionalised its strategic planning process through the development of an Operational Plan for each individual department, derived from the UoB Strategic Plan. UoB conducted an internal review in AY 2013/2014, based on which the five-year strategic plan (2013-2017) was revised. During this review, UoB revised its Vision and Mission statements and developed a set of goals and core values; these informed the 2013-2017 Strategic Plan (Portfolio, p.11). Strategic planning at UoB is an inclusive activity with representation from all departments of the UoB, including the GFP.

The UoB Strategic Plan 2013-2017 has nine strategic goals, five of which guide GFP's strategic orientation. These are:

- Goal 1: To engage in academic initiatives that encourage student-centred and life-long learning;
- Goal 3: To invest in human and other resources that contribute to continual development;
- Goal 4: To prepare students for purposeful and successful careers that meet local, regional and global challenges;
- Goal 7: To encourage and support activities that transform students into responsible global citizens; and
- Goal 8: To engage with industry and the community to establish initiative for the common good.

(Portfolio, p.11).

Prior to AY 2015/2016, CFS submitted a summary of scheduled annual actions to support the achievement of the strategic plan goals. Since AY 2015/2016, however, CFS, like all other academic units of the UoB, also adopted the systematic usage of a yearly action plan. This plan included activities to meet University goals and corresponding KPIs. The plan is monitored annually through the submission of an accomplishment report. Elements of the action plan are assigned to committees within CFS, which produce their own action plan, progress reports and the annual accomplishment report.

On reviewing the CFS Action Plan and the action plans for the committees, the Panel noted that while detailed implementation strategies along with resource requirements and KPIs are identified, the KPIs are broad, rather than specific and measurable. These unclear goals could result in accomplishments that are unclear and difficult to measure. The CFS action plan, for example, identifies "increased integration of cultural issues in class settings" as a KPI for the following UoB Goal 5: "To create new knowledge and become a national repository of expertise". The KPI in this case is not specific or quantifiable. Another similar example from the CFS action plan is the KPI for the following goal: "To create a culture and environment that promotes learning by inquiry". The KPI stated in the action plan to measure achievement of the above is as follows: "increased amount of informal learning initiatives". This is also not specific or quantifiable, making it difficult to close the quality loop.

The Panel concluded that CFS has a well-structured framework of operational planning, progress reporting and annual accomplishment reporting cascading from the UoB strategic plan. The KPIs, however, need to be reviewed in order to have more specific and measurable targets allowing UoB's strategic plan to be effectively operationalised by the CFS.

Recommendation 2

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi develop specific and measurable Key Performance Indicators for the General Foundation Programme within the action plans of the Centre of Foundation Studies to operationalise the University's strategic plan more effectively.

It was also evident from the review of the documentation that while there is an attempt at embedding the evaluation of KPIs within the action plan, it is not consistent across the various action plans of the different committees within the CFS. For example, the GFP Audit action plan includes KPIs but does not indicate how the achievement of the same would be evaluated. The Panel, however, was pleased to note that UoB is aware of this, has identified it as an area for improvement and introduced the 'Accomplishment Report' as an instrument for reviewing and monitoring the implementation of the action plan and the achievement of KPIs.

Affirmation 1

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Buraimi that it needs to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of the Key Performance Indicators for the General Foundation Programme, at all levels of reporting within the Centre of Foundation Studies, and supports its efforts in this area, such as the introduction of accomplishment reports.

While committee reports are not fully utilised, the Panel noted that UoB has recognised this gap and is working towards a more regular monitoring pattern by introducing the annual accomplishment report (Portfolio, p.18). The Panel, however, was of the opinion that this annual accomplishment report, whilst a useful mechanism, is not used within a formal monitoring and review process to inform development of the following year's action plan.

Recommendation 3

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that University of Buraimi utilise the accomplishment reports of all committees within the Centre of Foundation Studies more effectively to feed into the improvement cycle and inform future planning of the General Foundation Programme.

1.5 Financial Management

The GFP is part of the CFS and hence its financial needs are included in the CFS Budget (Portfolio, p.12). The Panel understood from the documentation provided and from interviews that UoB has a largely centralised financial budgeting process with major elements of expenditure (such as Human Resource Affairs (HRA) for staffing, Library for books, including electronic resources, and the Information Technology Unit for IT) managed by the office of the DVCFAASS. The CFS controls the budget for staff development and training, extracurricular activities, functions, events and curriculum/unit development and other operational/capital expenditure and submits requests to the DVCFAASS annually in the form of a CFS Budget. The CFS Director prepares the CFS Budget in consultation with the HoU GFP. The Director CFS submits requests for resources based on enrolled students, projected student intake and teaching and the learning resources required. Budget utilisation is monitored by the Head of Finance and this information is shared with the Director CFS at the end of the financial year; in addition to

this, there is a budget review at the end of the second quarter. The Panel heard that the CFS Director has limited authority for approving expenditure within the CFS and most expenditure needs approval from the DVCFAASS.

The Panel concluded from the evidence provided and the interviews with staff that the budget planning process is operating efficiently and that the GFP does not appear to be short of resources. Notwithstanding this, the Panel noted that expenditure for AY 2016/2017 included zero expenditure on staff development and training (see Section 4.4) and on extracurricular activities, in spite of having an allocated budget for both. The Panel is concerned that this could result in objectives and goals for these areas not being fully achieved. The Panel was unable to find adequate evidence of regular review of expenditure against budget lines. The Panel concluded, therefore, that whilst there is a good system in place to support budget planning for the GFP, the lack of regular review of expenditure to date against budget lines could result in significant under- or over-spending, whether managed centrally or within the GFP.

Recommendation 4

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi ensure regular oversight of financial management at the Centre of Foundation Studies through the close monitoring of planned expenditure for the General Foundation Programme against the budget.

1.6 Risk Management

Until 2017, UoB had an informal approach to risk management (Portfolio, p.12) through which they were able to identify some risks, such as an unacceptable withdrawal rate of students. The Panel was pleased to note that UoB recognised the need for a more formal approach to Risk Management and initiated the process by drafting a formal Risk Management Policy towards the end of the Spring semester of AY 2016/2017, which was formally approved in November 2017. The policy incorporates both risk reporting and risk monitoring processes. The Panel noted that since the Risk Management Policy has been implemented only from the current semester there is no evidence of the policy implementation or risk management mechanisms such as a formal risk register. The Panel concluded that the risk management process at UoB is not yet mature and agrees with UoB's efforts to implement, monitor and review the approved Risk Management Policy.

Affirmation 2

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Buraimi that it needs to effectively manage risk within the General Foundation Programme, and supports the introduction of the Risk Management Policy and related mechanisms.

A study of the GFP student profile of the last seven academic years shows heavy reliance on the admission of Government-sponsored students who represent an average of 82% of the entire GFP student intake. The Panel was reassured that UoB recognises this as a risk and has initiated marketing efforts to attract more self-paying students. UoB is encouraged to develop appropriate risk-management strategies at the CFS level in order to address student numbers (see Section 3.1, Section 3.3).

1.7 Monitoring and Review

The Quality Assurance Department (QAD) of UoB is responsible for maintaining and enhancing overall quality assurance across all departments including the CFS. The approach to monitoring and review at UoB is set out within the Internal Quality Audit (IQA) Policy. This policy

confirms that UoB aims to review its processes regularly and systematically, in order to enhance quality and seek continuous improvement. An annual IQA Plan, covering all major areas of activity including curriculum, assessment, technical facilities and learning resources, sets out a monitoring and review schedule for each academic year for all programmes offered at UoB.

ELES was responsible for the delivery of the GFP from AY 2010/2011 to AY 2013/2014 and they monitored quality through an audit conducted once a semester (Portfolio p.13). In 2012, delivery of the GFP was gradually handed over to UoB (Portfolio p.13) and the CFS Director has since then been responsible for the monitoring and review of the GFP (Portfolio p.13). The HoU GFP and the committees within the GFP support the CFS Director in overseeing specific aspects of GFP delivery and operations (Portfolio, p.13). A number of committees have been established since AY 2013/2014 to support implementation of elements of the UoB Strategic Plan such as the Quality Assurance Committee, Curriculum Review and Development Committee, Research and Professional Development Committee, Examination Committee and Student Academic Support Committee. The Panel noted that the terms of reference of all these committees included monitoring and review of the GFP. In addition to this, since AY 2013/2014, Group Leaders have been appointed to coordinate and facilitate the monitoring and review of GFP activities within each level (Portfolio, p.13). During the Audit Visit, the Panel learnt that Group Leaders use weekly progress reports, course files and course improvement plans along with regular meetings with the ELES team to monitor and review the delivery of courses at all levels.

In line with the UoB Curriculum Review Policy and the Quality Assurance Policy, various aspects of GFP delivery and operations were reviewed in AY 2014/2015 and clear recommendations given; these have had a positive impact on the GFP. Evidence of end-of-year monitoring and reporting from these committees were shown to the Panel. This included, for example, the AY 2013/2014 Research and Professional Development Committee End of Year Report, the Improvement Plan on Moderation, the IQA Report on Post-moderation, and the IQA Report on Programme and Course Specifications. The Panel noted the review of GFP provision in these areas and confirmed that such internal quality assurance activities of the UoB QAD, along with the GFP QA Committee, help ensure that policies are implemented at the GFP in accordance with the stated remit of individual committees.

The Panel found evidence of processes in place to review and monitor GFP delivery and operations against the CFS Operational Plan and the UoB Strategic Plan. Based on the documentation and interviews with GFP staff members, the Panel believes, however, that while processes for reviewing and monitoring exist, they are not systematically used to review and monitor the impact of suggested interventions in GFP curriculum and delivery. For example, the IQA Report on Programme and Course Specifications, Improvement Plan on Moderation suggest interventions based on the review process, but do not highlight how the impact of these interventions would be evaluated.

Recommendation 5

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that University of Buraimi ensure the implementation of the actions identified through the review and monitoring process and assess their impact within the General Foundation Programme.

The Panel found that a number of GFP policies have either been recently approved or are currently being developed. For example, the Health and Safety Policy is not yet approved; the Benchmarking Policy was approved only in May 2017, and the Risk Management Policy was approved in November 2017. A number of policies have only recently been developed and therefore have yet to be implemented or are yet to complete an academic cycle before monitoring and review. The Panel acknowledges that there may not be evidence of a complete quality cycle of the implementation and review of these policies as yet. There is concern, however, that the newly introduced Policy Management and Review Process, included in the UoB Administrative

Policies and Procedures, covers the dissemination of the process in its Policy Implementation section, but does not clearly articulate procedures and mechanisms for the periodic review of policies within the GFP. The Panel concluded that an appropriate mechanism is not in place for the systematic and regular review of the implementation of these policies and their effectiveness. The Panel urges UoB to give this urgent attention. The Panel further concluded that the implementation of the policies is new and the results are therefore not yet apparent (see Sections 3.8 and 3.9).

Recommendation 6

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi put in place mechanisms for periodic review of the implementation of its existing and new policies and procedures within the General Foundation Programme.

1.8 *Student Grievance Process*

UoB has well-defined policies for managing student grievances, complaints and appeals for both academic and non-academic matters (Portfolio, p.15) and these are communicated to students through the Student Guide. In addition to this, UoB also has a clearly defined “Exam Code of Conduct” for all students, including GFP, which articulates expected student behaviour during examinations. Efforts are made, at the very start of the semester during induction, to ensure that GFP students are aware of their rights and obligations during their time at UoB and in particular within the GFP. Academic Advisors and GFP staff also reinforce the appropriate behaviour, rights and obligations during the semester (Portfolio, p.15).

GFP student complaints and requests are addressed through various entities depending on the nature of the grievance (Portfolio, p.15). The Student Guide refers to an informal and formal process for resolving an academic complaint. The guide also refers to a process for appealing against a disciplinary decision using a general petition form. Students usually first approach the GFP managers with their grievance. If the issue is not resolved at this stage, the student can approach the Student Engagement and Academic Advisory Centre (SEAAC), Student Affairs Department (SAD), or the Admission and Registration Department (ARD) depending on the nature of the complaint (Portfolio, p.15). SEAAC manages the academic issues such as student advising and counselling (Portfolio, p.15), whereas the ARD deals with appeals against grades (Portfolio, p.16). The Panel was presented with evidence on the implementation of the grievance procedure, which included a sample of the SEAAC Informal Complaint Form, and a sample of the Formal Complaint Form. Student appeals against grades are received by the ARD and forwarded to the CFS Director and the CFS Exam Committee (EC) for resolution (Portfolio, p.16). These appeals are resolved in line with the policies of the CFS. UoB records show a relatively small number of GFP complaints each academic year.

The Panel noted that while there was evidence of mechanisms in place for addressing student grievances, interviews with GFP students showed a lack of awareness and understanding of the process they could use in case of a grievance or an appeal against grades. The Panel concluded that UoB could be more explicit, clear and reiterative in its communications with the GFP student body to ensure that they are aware of the appeals and grievance processes.

1.9 *Health and Safety*

Health and safety arrangements at UoB are guided by a Health and Safety Policy (Portfolio, p.16). The Panel appreciated the rigorous measures in place to control access to the campus using barriers, security officers, CCTV recording and roving security officers. In accordance with the UoB Health and Safety Policy, the GFP-dedicated buildings are equipped with a centralised fire alarm system, fire extinguishers and First Aid boxes. This, along with a well-equipped medical clinic, which the Panel had the opportunity to see during the tour of the campus, indicates a

satisfactory health and safety infrastructure (Portfolio, p.17). Interviews with staff and students indicated an overall satisfaction with the medical facilities available and the security arrangements in place on the campus as well as the hostels. The Panel heard from staff and students, however, that there has only been one fire alarm test drill on the new campus and one recent drill at the student hostel, both occurring in the last two months. Interviews with GFP students and staff indicated that they were not clear on the actions they should take in the event of a fire drill on campus or in the student hostel. The Panel therefore concluded that there should be greater communication of health and safety procedures to GFP students and staff, as evidenced by the understanding of fire drill procedures amongst GFP staff and students.

Recommendation 7

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi improve awareness of the health and safety procedures amongst General Foundation Programme students and staff in order to enhance the effectiveness of deployment of the health and safety arrangements and to comply with national standards.

2 GFP STUDENT LEARNING

The GFP is delivered by the Department of Foundation Studies (GFP Unit) which is part of the CFS. UoB's GFP offers English, Information Technology (IT), Mathematics and General Study Skills; this component is embedded in the English courses throughout the programme (Portfolio, p.20). English is the medium of teaching as well as the language for all student-teacher communications in the GFP (Portfolio, p.25).

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

2.1 *GFP Aims and Learning Outcomes*

The aim of Goal 4 of the 2013-2017 UoB Strategic Plan is, "To prepare students for purposeful and successful careers that meet local, regional and global challenges". In support of this goal, the GFP programme specifications are, "designed to bridge the gap between secondary and post-secondary education" and are aligned with the OASGFP (Portfolio, p.19). The GFP curriculum is designed to adequately address the learning needs of students through three progressive levels for each of the three core areas of English, Mathematics, and Information Technology; Study Skills are embedded in the English courses. The Panel heard that since AY 2017/2018, attention to developing the required Study Skills was further reinforced by assigning five hours of the designated 20 hours per week of in-class instruction for the English language courses, to the delivery of study skills. Since, Study Skills are embedded only in the English language course and not in Mathematics or IT courses, UoB needs to take appropriate measures to ensure that students exempted from the English language course are provided with the opportunity to fully attain the GFP Study Skills learning outcomes.

The GFP has two Programme Objectives (PO), namely "PO1: Utilise foundation knowledge and skills to succeed in higher education, and PO2: Demonstrate a high sense of personal responsibility, recognition of cultures and appreciation of values". In addition, it encompasses eight Student Outcomes (SO) that include knowledge and understanding skills, course-specific skills, thinking skills, and general and transferable skills (Portfolio, p.19). Each course also has its own set of Course Outcomes (CO). The Portfolio indicated a consultative approach to the development of the SOs (Portfolio, p.19), and through interviews with GFP academic staff, the Panel confirmed the various sources of input into the process such as Academic Staff feedback and the IQA findings. Student input in the process would be useful to get the stakeholder perspective.

Since AY 2015/2016, the GFP, in common with the academic programmes of UoB, has been using the UoB standardised programme specifications template which describes in detail the syllabus and structure of a course, including summative and formative assessments, and provides a mapping of the COs to the SOs. The Student Learning Outcomes Guide explains the entire framework of COs and SOs. The SOs and COs within the GFP are also formulated using these guidelines (Portfolio, p.19).

The Portfolio states that the UoB QAD reviewed the GFP programme and course specification in October 2016 resulting in the IQA Report; this was used to inform future changes (Portfolio, p.19). Using the evidence provided and through interviews, the Panel confirmed that the CFS used the findings of the IQA, together with feedback from the academic staff of undergraduate programmes, to make changes to the GFP programme specifications. In particular, it was noted that all SOs were reformulated to be achievable and measurable, and categorised taking into

account Bloom's Taxonomy and the OASGFPS. The CFS monitors PO attainment for the GFP through assessing student achievement of COs and SOs and through collecting feedback from GFP alumni and academic staff members in the undergraduate programmes of UoB (Portfolio, p.20). The Panel supports CFS's intention to consider these during their upcoming GFP Curriculum Review in the Fall semester of AY 2018/2019 (Portfolio p.20).

The Panel appreciated the fine-tuned mapping of assessment grades to COs and SOs. The evidence provided shows that it allows the CFS to track in detail the attainment of SOs within the GFP. The Panel concluded that CFS has a strong framework for developing, monitoring, and reviewing learning outcomes for all levels within the GFP. The interviews with the academic staff confirmed that this continuous Curriculum review and improvement cycle is embedded within the operations of the GFP. The Panel also confirmed that the GFP staff use the data on student performance to improve the content and delivery of the programme.

Commendation 1

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Buraimi for the thorough mapping between course outcomes and the General Foundation Programme aims and student outcomes enabling the Centre of Foundation Studies to inform planning of course content, delivery and assessment strategies of the General Foundation Programme.

2.2 Curriculum

The GFP curriculum is described in the GFP Programme Specifications and the GFP Course Specifications. It includes English, Mathematics, Information Technology, and Study Skills (embedded in the English courses). Each of these subjects is taught in three progressive levels, L1, L2, and L3. A placement test determines the level on which new students enter the GFP (see Section 2.3). The course descriptions include detailed delivery and lesson plans including all assessments. Students study fifteen hours of English classes every week, five hours of Study Skills, three hours of Mathematics, and two hours of Information Technology. Furthermore, students are expected to spend 12.5 hours per week engaged in independent studies (Portfolio, p.20).

The curriculum has been aligned with the OASGFP and benchmarked in 2012 with the GFP at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Sohar University, and Higher College of Technology in Muscat. UoB's rationale for choosing these three institutions was primarily because they all offered undergraduate programmes in engineering and for their over-all profiles, nationally and regionally. SQU was chosen as an "aspirational benchmark" due to its widely acknowledged position as Oman's leading institution of higher education. Sohar University closely matches UoB's course offerings and is located near to Buraimi and hence was a convenient choice for benchmarking. The Higher College of Technology was chosen as a benchmarking partner due to its regional profile (Portfolio, p.21). The Panel saw evidence of benchmarking carried out through the mapping of various aspects of the GFP, such as admission criteria, courses offered, marking criteria, passing grades, study plans and semester length; it and supports UoB's efforts in this regard (Portfolio, p.21).

UoB states that their GFP curriculum was developed to respond to student needs in their chosen specialisations within the UoB colleges (Portfolio, p.20). The Panel corroborated this claim from the interactions with the GFP alumni and from the results of the GFP Alumni survey which indicated GFP Alumni's satisfaction (level of 3.41/5) with the GFP curriculum and design.

The Panel heard that Group Leaders review their courses at the end of every semester which enables the GFP to identify problems in course delivery at an early stage and either implement minor changes directly or inform the Curriculum Development Committee about curriculum

issues, such as textbook changes. The impact of such interventions on course delivery or assessments is evaluated at the end of the semester by assessing student achievement of COs and in turn SOs (see Section 1.7).

A standing Curriculum Development Committee is responsible for monitoring the curriculum and proposing changes. These changes are approved first by the CFS Board and then by the UAC. The curriculum review process is governed by the Policy on Curriculum, Programme and Course Review and Development Process. This policy states that the concerned College Deans or Centre Directors are responsible for establishing reasonable timelines for the phases of the development and review process of curriculum and programme.

The Panel noted that curriculum review has for the most part been an internal GFP process until the time of the GFP QA with little external participation. UoB, however, in the spring semester of AY 2016/2017 initiated a process to gather stakeholder feedback on the GFP curriculum and its fitness for purpose through a Learning Outcome Assessment survey. Feedback from both the GFP alumni as well as academic staff teaching GFP alumni on the undergraduate programmes was collected through this survey. The Panel supports this initiative and encourages UoB to make effective use of the feedback.

Affirmation 3

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Buraimi that it needs to develop and implement a formal process to systematically utilise stakeholder feedback to inform curriculum review and development of its General Foundation Programme, and supports the implementation of the Learning Outcomes Assessment survey and the curriculum review process.

2.3 *Student Entry and Exit Standards*

UoB admits new students into the GFP according to the admission criteria published on the UoB website and with HEAC. New students take three placement tests, for English, Mathematics, and Information Technology; UoB has developed these tests in-house. The outcome of these tests determines whether students are placed in L1, L2, or L3 of the GFP in the respective subject area. Students scoring more than 90% in any of the three placement tests are given the chance to take a Challenge Test. If a student scores 65% or more on this Challenge test, he/she is exempted from the related component of the GFP (Portfolio, p.22). Students with an IELTS score of at least 5.0 are also exempted from the GFP English courses, and students with an IC3 certificate are exempted from IT courses. Currently, no exemptions are given for the Mathematics component. In the last five years, 64% of the students were placed in IT L1, 34% in IT L2, and 2% in IT L3. In English, 65% of the students were placed in L1, 25% in L2, and 5% in L3. Only 5% of the new students were exempted from English, and only 2% of the new students were able to directly enter an undergraduate programme (Portfolio, p.22). While the English and Mathematics tests have a mix of questions of all three levels (Portfolio, p.22), the IT placement test includes questions only from Level 1. The Panel was informed that this has been so designed because of the low success rate in the IT placement tests. The Panel, however, believes that this may not allow UoB to place students at the appropriate level for the IT components based on their competency. The Panel urges UoB to take appropriate measures to ensure that students exempted from the English language course are provided with the opportunity to fully attain the GFP Study Skills learning outcomes as Study Skills are embedded only in the English language course and not in Mathematics or IT courses (see Section 2.1).

The placement tests are administered on campus as electronic examinations using Moodle (Portfolio, p.22). The Panel gathered from interviews that the same placement test might be administered more than a dozen times on one or two days to accommodate the large number of new students each year. The Panel was concerned about the fact that the same test was repeatedly

given to different groups of students (see Section 2.8). The Panel also heard that it is not possible to reassign a student to a different level if it is discovered at a later stage that the placement test results placed the student at a wrong level and would urge UoB to consider this while reviewing its GFP placement tests.

Recommendation 8

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi review placement testing to ensure validity, reliability and security across a number of iterations of the placement tests in use.

A GFP student can gain admission into UoB undergraduate programmes if he/she passes all the GFP modules undertaken and UoB considers this as an indicator of the GFP students' achievement of all the GFP aims and SOs (Portfolio, p.23). The CFS monitors the grades of the GFP alumni in their first-year undergraduate studies at UoB and uses the grade distribution in the undergraduate courses as an indicator of the adequacy of the GFP curriculum in preparing students for higher education studies. The Panel was not convinced, however, that this approach is appropriate to demonstrate the adequacy of the GFP in meeting the OASGFP exit standards as a minimum, as there is no evidence that the passing marks in the GFP examinations are benchmarked against internationally recognised tests. The Panel recommends that the CFS benchmark its GFP exit standards against recognised international standards. Similarly, the placement test and the assessments at the different levels within the English component of the GFP need to be benchmarked against standardised English tests. The Panel recommends this, since the ultimate goal of the GFP is to ensure that at the end of the programme its students should have English language proficiency equivalent to IELTS 5.0 – the stated entry requirement for UoB undergraduate programmes on the UoB website. The Panel, furthermore, did not find evidence of regular review of the standards to establish continued validity and reliability. It must be noted, though, that during the interviews, both GFP students and alumni, as well as academic staff of the GFP and undergraduate programmes, all expressed strong satisfaction with the preparedness of GFP graduates for higher education studies.

Recommendation 9

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi periodically benchmark its General Foundation Programme entry and exit standards against recognised international standards to establish the effectiveness of the programme in preparing students for their higher education studies, and ensure that these standards are subject to rigorous review to establish continued validity and reliability.

2.4 Teaching Quality

Goal 1 of the 2013-2017 UoB Strategic Plan is to “engage in academic initiatives that encourage student-centred and life-long learning.” In support of this and the core values of UoB, teaching in the GFP is learner-centred (Portfolio, p.23). The Panel validated this claim through the interviews with staff and students of the GFP. The Panel found evidence from interviews and supporting material of a task-based learning approach and the use of diverse and appropriate teaching methods like lectures, group work, project work, group discussions, role-plays and debates; this was evidenced in course files and detailed course descriptions.

The Panel acknowledges UoB's multi-pronged approach to managing teaching quality at the GFP: staffing the GFP with a diverse and well-qualified team, using a variety of teaching methods and having a process in place for review and monitoring. The Panel therefore believes that teaching and learning are optimised by appropriate scaffolding of content in all the core areas to help students progress across levels. The Course Evaluation Survey results for English,

IT and Mathematics all show a similar level of satisfaction (average score of 4.0 out of 5.0) which indicates that this detailed planning facilitates a consistent standard of course delivery.

Classroom observation is a regular practice at UoB's GFP (Portfolio, p.25) and, through interviews, the Panel confirmed that the HoU GFP observes a new teacher's class twice in the first year of joining and subsequently once a year. Academic staff members also share their good practices through an online forum on the GFP website. Course evaluation by students is also a regular feature of the GFP (Portfolio, p.25). Students are required to fill a Course Evaluation form at the end of every course and survey results show that since AY 2014/2015, student satisfaction with the courses has been increasing and has reached a value of approximately 4.0 out of 5.0. The Panel was informed that the Director CFS and the HoU GFP discuss the Course Evaluation results with individual academic staff members and counsel them for improvements where needed. The Panel heard the same positive feedback on teaching quality from both current GFP students and GFP alumni. Teaching quality is also an essential component of the annual staff appraisal. The Panel believes that these multiple-level feedback loops support a high level of teaching quality in the GFP.

Commendation 2

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Buraimi for its comprehensive and consistently implemented quality evaluation and enhancement framework for teaching and learning to monitor, evaluate and improve teaching quality within the General Foundation Programme.

2.5 Academic Integrity

Integrity is one of UoB's core values it is stated in the UoB Value statement that all members of the UoB shall be guided by the principles of openness, consistency and honesty (Portfolio, p.25). UoB's approach to academic integrity is manifested through its Academic Integrity Policy. The policy has information on procedures to counteract and penalise cheating, collusion, plagiarism and fabrication as well as and the appeals procedures. The Panel heard from GFP staff that the same policy is implemented at the GFP level and the use of Turnitin (plagiarism software) has been recently formalised.

The CFS takes a variety of measures to create awareness of academic integrity and educate its GFP students on the importance of the same in higher education (Portfolio, p.25). The Panel was pleased to note that students are advised on academic integrity at various points of their study and through different means such as induction at the commencement of the semester), the Student Guide, study skills courses and as a cautionary note in course specifications. The Panel was informed that a specific unit on avoiding plagiarism is included in the Level 2 Study Skills module of the GFP where students are introduced to academic writing skills of summarising and paraphrasing.

Interviews with staff indicated that plagiarism is a recurring problem among GFP students but the Panel noted that over the last two years, only an average of eight cases of academic dishonesty were officially reported in a semester. It was clarified that UoB is strengthening its mechanisms to manage plagiarism by subscribing to Turnitin but its use within the GFP is very recent and not extensive. The CFS has identified extending the use of Turnitin as an opportunity for enhancing quality standards within the GFP and has inducted and trained all GFP academic staff into the use of Turnitin to extend its use across all courses within the GFP. The Panel agrees with the GFP academic staff that this will help them determine the extent of similarity in student work with other sources thus helping manage plagiarism.

Affirmation 4

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Buraimi's decision to extend the use of the plagiarism detection software in student work across all courses in the General Foundation Programme, and supports its efforts in this area.

UoB conducts specific workshops in order to disseminate the Academic Integrity Policy among GFP staff and to train them in the use of Turnitin. The Panel supports CFS in its initiatives of creating awareness of academic integrity amongst GFP staff and students, although the Panel noticed instances of unreferenced text in the teaching material developed in-house by the GFP staff. On review of the Academic Integrity Policy, the Panel concluded that the purpose of the policy is to establish clear mechanisms that encourage students to behave honestly, provide procedures to ensure academic integrity and effectively to deal with any policy violations. The Panel, however, noted that neither the purpose, nor the scope of the policy refers to academic integrity amongst staff. The policy in its present state is written for dealing with academic dishonesty of students and the resulting penalties. It includes some advice to teachers on how to prepare assessments in a way that prevents students from plagiarising or cheating but does not have any defined guidelines to detect cases of academic dishonesty by staff and penalise staff accordingly. In November 2017, UoB added "Guidelines on Anti-Plagiarism" as a first amendment to the Academic Integrity Policy of January 2017. This amendment includes reference to academic work and teaching material produced by UoB staff and also states that any violation of related policies and guidelines by staff shall be dealt with according to the UoB Code of Conduct. The Panel, however, noted that both the Guidelines on Anti-Plagiarism and the UoB Code of Conduct do not explicitly articulate the specific penalties for cases of academic dishonesty by staff. The Panel could not find evidence of implementation of the anti-plagiarism guidelines in either the supporting material provided by UoB or during interviews with various staff members during the Audit Visit and it urges UoB to address this limitation in its policy and practice as a matter of priority. The Panel also recommends that UoB take steps to ensure that GFP academic staff acknowledge the academic sources used to develop their in-house teaching material and assessments.

Recommendation 10

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends as a matter of urgency that the University of Buraimi review its Academic Integrity Policy to include procedures to detect academic dishonesty of staff and outline mechanisms to effectively manage any violation of the policy within the General Foundation Programme.

2.6 Assessment of Student Achievement

UoB GFP uses a framework of Course Outcomes, Student Outcomes and Programme Outcomes to measure student achievement. All courses within the GFP use summative and formative assessments (Portfolio, p.26). Summative assessments are used to demonstrate the attainment of COs which are in turn used to demonstrate the attainment of the Student Outcomes of the GFP. The Guidelines on Student Learning Outcomes Assessment explain this framework and inform teachers on the process of conducting summative assessments.

Assessments in the GFP are prepared using the Guidelines on Assessment Scripts. The guidelines lay out the procedure for both assessment script preparation and moderation. At the start of every semester, Group Leaders, in collaboration with GFP academic staff and the HoU GFP, develop an Assessment Plan for every course (Portfolio, p.27). Group Leaders as well as academic staff also confirmed this during the Audit Visit. The Assessment Plan includes the COs, specific assessment methods and the corresponding weighting for each course outcome. The GFP uses a wide variety of assessment types such as, quizzes, assignments, projects, examinations, laboratory activities, and others (Portfolio, p.26). The questions of the summative assessments,

like the final examination, are formulated based on the topic coverage and are mapped to COs. The CFS QAA Committee approves this Assessment Plan at the start of the semester (Portfolio, p.27) and this helps in monitoring consistency in the implementation according to the Guidelines on Assessment Scripts. The Panel heard that while Group Leaders are responsible for assessing student achievement of the COs for every course at the end of the semester, individual teachers also conduct a section-wise CO measurement analysis. The Panel gathered from interviewing academic staff that they use this analysis to inform future course delivery and assessment design. The CFS has a system in place to calculate the CO contribution to the course performance and the resulting Course Performance Rating. The Group Leaders use this Course Performance Rating to demonstrate student achievement of the COs, and the results are then summarised in a report.

Moderation of assessment scripts is part of CFS's approach to ensuring that summative assessments within the GFP are designed to allow student achievement of COs, SOs, POs and ensure the fairness and accuracy of the marking process (Portfolio, p.28). A Post-Moderation Policy has been in place since September 2016 and new pre-moderation guidelines were implemented in fall 2017. The policy and the newly introduced guideline together help improve the consistency of examinations between different levels of the GFP (Portfolio, p.28). The Post-Moderation Policy stipulates that every semester 30-50% of the GFP courses should undergo post-moderation, and that the moderator should check 15-30% of all summative assessments of a course. An internal quality audit in AY 2016/2017, however, showed that none of the IT courses was included in the sample for post-moderation, indicating that the policy has not been implemented consistently throughout the GFP. The Panel encourages CFS to ensure that the remit of the policy is implemented consistently. The Panel noted that in the Fall semester of AY 2017/2018, the GFP also employed three external programme reviewers to ensure consistent and fair marking of examinations. Their reviews led to an Improvement Plan that is currently being implemented.

The Panel was satisfied that the different processes for assessment of student achievement described in the Portfolio (Portfolio, pp.27-28) are comprehensively structured and aim to ensure fairness and accuracy (notwithstanding concerns around Exit Standards raised in 2.3 and Recommendation 9). Based on the supporting documents, samples of examination papers and student scripts, external reviewer reports as well as interviews with a cross-section of academic staff, the Panel confirms that UoB has a framework for guiding pre- and post-moderation of assessments including external post-moderators to achieve fair and appropriate assessments of the learning outcomes within the GFP. Both academic staff and students agreed that assessment methods are fair and that the methods used to assess learning are in line with the LOs of the courses. The Panel appreciated the embedding of external oversight across the entire assessment process and it supports CFS's intention to strengthen formative assessment mechanisms within the GFP. The Panel would also like to note, however, that the relevant policies such as the Academic Integrity Policy and the Post-Moderation Policy are in their first cycle of implementation and hence it was not possible to assess the procedures in place for monitoring the implementation, nor to review the effectiveness of such policies.

2.7 Feedback to Students on Assessment

The GFP recognises that "feedback is an inseparable part of the teaching and learning process in general and assessment in particular" (Portfolio, p.1). UoB requires that all assessments within the GFP must be marked within 48 hours (Portfolio, p.29). Giving feedback to students on assessment is covered as part of staff induction and is discussed at CFS faculty meetings, particularly before a summative assessment. The Panel found that Group Leaders monitor the quality of feedback given by different staff members through regular group meetings, and this helps in maintaining consistency.

The Panel learnt from supporting materials and from interview with academic staff and students that students are provided with both oral and written feedback on their work. Students can usually see their marked papers and receive some general feedback. Model answers are provided during a special session scheduled shortly after the examination (Portfolio, p.29). Students are required to acknowledge that they had the opportunity to see their marked examination papers. Low achievers may receive additional oral feedback (see Section 3.7). The Panel considered samples of students' assignments from English, Mathematics and IT courses and found that the written feedback provided is constructive.

In an interview with a sample of students, the Panel heard that students were satisfied with the quality and timeliness of the feedback provided to them on their assessments; this was in line with the results of the student satisfaction survey (3.46 out of 5.0) on this item. Academic staff confirmed that they are regularly reminded of the feedback policies and the guidelines on feedback for student assessed work.

Based on the evidence provided and the interactions with students, the Panel concluded that the GFP academic staff provide effective and timely feedback to students on all assessments and supports the CFS in its endeavours to evaluate the efficiency of the feedback given to GFP students on their assessments (Portfolio, p.29).

2.8 Academic Security and Invigilation

The GFP examinations are conducted according to the UoB Exam Invigilation Policy and the UoB Exam Code of Conduct. Midterm examinations are usually conducted during regular class hours, while all final examinations are scheduled and conducted by the Administration and Registration Department with academic staff members serving as invigilators or observers. The invigilators verify student identity, enforce the Exam Code of Conduct, and report any examination irregularities (for example, late comers, disturbances and cheating attempts) in an Exam Incident Report. The Panel heard from staff interviewed that they are vigilant and follow the guidelines of the Exam Invigilation Policy. A decreasing number of incidents of cheating by students during examinations indicates diligent invigilation in line with the policy. The Panel was of the opinion that while the Policy addressed most aspects of invigilation, it did not fully address some important issues such as procedures in case of cancellation of examinations, minimum number of invigilators and observers in an examination room, and clear rules about safeguarding drafts of the examination scripts. The Panel suggests that UoB review its Exam Invigilation Policy to ensure that it is comprehensive in addressing all matters related to the conduct of examinations.

The Exam Code of Conduct and the Student Guide (Portfolio, pp.30-34) provide detailed instructions on expected student behaviour during examinations and information on penalties for academic dishonesty. Violations may in grave cases lead to expulsion from UoB (Portfolio, p.44).

The Panel learned that the CFS Director and academic staff of the GFP are responsible for the academic security of paper-based examinations. Examinations are prepared by individual teachers according to the Guidelines on Assessment Scripts, pre-moderated by the group and the Group Leader, finalised by the HoU GFP and approved by the CFS Director (Portfolio, p.28). The examination scripts are then kept in a safe until they are printed according to a detailed printing schedule. The Panel, did not find adequate evidence, however, of the security and safety arrangements of electronic examinations like the Moodle-based placement tests and urges UoB to put mechanisms in place to address this gap.

2.9 *Student Retention and Progression*

The attrition, progression and completion rates of GFP students are recorded systematically and evaluated at the end of every semester to enable the CFS to monitor the progress of students across different levels of the GFP. The CFS uses the attrition and progression rates of GFP students to assess the success of the GFP. For example, for the last five academic years (AY 2011- 2016), the English components across the three levels show an average completion rate of 90% and retention rate of 91%. The trend is similar in the other components of the GFP, with 88% completion and 95% retention rates in Mathematics and 93% completion and 96% retention rates in IT (Portfolio, p.31). The CFS also monitors the progress of GFP alumni during their first year in the undergraduate programmes in order to assess the effectiveness of the GFP in preparing students for their higher education studies. In AY 2016/2017, for example, GFP graduates in the first year of the undergraduate programmes across the different Colleges in UoB scored an average pass rate of 76% in English for Special Purposes (ESP) courses, 97% in the IT related courses and 88% in Mathematics related courses (Portfolio, p.32). The Panel learnt that this data is also used to evaluate different aspects of course delivery such as content, teaching methods, assessment methods, and learning support provided for all the GFP courses offered during the semester. Academic staff stated during the interviews that they not only review student performance at the end of the semester, but also analyse student performance in mid-term examinations to allow them to make amendments to teaching and learning support.

The Panel noted that the CFS has effective mechanisms in place to identify at-risk GFP learners early and provide them with additional support (discussed in detail in Section 3.7). CFS classifies students with social, health, psychological or discipline related issues as non-academically challenged (Portfolio, p.32). Records show that a number of such students identified as non-academically challenged do not progress in spite of the academic and non-academic learning support provided. The Panel believes that the CFS needs to review its approach to managing progression of these students.

2.10 *Relationships with GFP Alumni*

A total of 2349 students have passed from UoB's GFP since its inception and 89% of these chose to continue on an undergraduate programme at UoB (Portfolio, p.33). The GFP alumni expressed concerns that the CFS does not make much effort to utilise alumni experience to help inform GFP quality improvement. Interviews with a sample of the GFP alumni also revealed that not many students are aware of the different activities of the GFP that they are eligible to participate in as alumni. Hence, the Panel encourages the CFS to organise more activities such as those mentioned in the Portfolio (for example, Coffee Chat Morning, CFS Open Day, GFP English Day and the Award Ceremony) to improve direct interaction between GFP students and alumni. CFS is also encouraged to make efforts to increase awareness amongst the GFP alumni body on the role that they can play in improving the student experience of the GFP. The new Alumni General Assembly could be one such forum to improve contact and communication between the GFP and its alumni.

Currently, the tracking of first semester grades of GFP alumni in the different undergraduate programmes at UoB is the only mechanism used by the CFS to assure itself of the fitness for purpose of the GFP. The Panel, suggests, however, that processes, such as the Programme Objectives Survey conducted to collect feedback from the GFP Alumni, are embedded within the annual review and monitoring cycle of the CFS in order to inform curriculum reviews and overall GFP delivery.

Recommendation 11

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi implement the procedures and mechanisms in place at the Centre of Foundation Studies to strengthen its relationship

with alumni to inform planning, delivery and review of the General Foundation Programme.

3 ACADEMIC AND STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

UoB provides a range of academic and student support services for GFP students mainly through its Student Affairs and Support Services Departments. The Admissions and Registration Department (ARD) is actively involved in supporting GFP students with various aspects of their study. The provision of these support services is guided by UoB's strategic goals: as mentioned in the UoB Strategic Plan, specifically:

Goal 4: To prepare students for purposeful and successful careers that meet local, regional and global challenges

Goal 7: To encourage and support activities that transform students into responsible global citizens

Goal 8: To engage with industry and community to establish initiatives for common good.

(UoB Strategic Plan 2013-2017)

The CFS is supported in achieving the above goals through a set of comprehensive policies, procedures and guidelines that regulate various aspects of student life on campus. These include the Examination Code of Conduct, Health and Safety Policy, Admission and Registration Policy and the Student Guide, all of which define student-related rules and regulations in UoB, including the GFP.

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

3.1 *Student Profile*

UoB has a customised and centralised Student Information System (SIS) that maintains records and data for all UoB students (Portfolio, p.35). All academic Colleges and the CFS staff have access to this system and can obtain the required details for their individual students from the SIS (Portfolio, p.35). The CFS uses this data to evaluate student population in terms of gender, age, nationality (Omani/non-Omani), and the secondary education background of students (Portfolio, p.35).

The profile shows that over the last seven years, an average of 82% of GFP students have been government scholarship holders indicating a heavy reliance on the government funded student intake. The Panel was informed that UoB recognises this reliance on a single source for new student intake as a risk and has initiated marketing efforts to attract more self-paying students (see Section 1.6).

Student profile data shows that the female population in the GFP student body has been consistently increasing from 64% in AY 2011/2012 to 84% in AY 2017/2018. In response to this shift in composition, UoB has increased the accommodation, transportation and recreation facilities available for female students (Portfolio, p.35) and the Panel confirmed this during the tour of the campus. The Panel noted that while the student profile classifies the student population based on a range of criteria, it does not offer any information on students facing challenges arising from medical conditions (ie students with special needs). During interviews the Panel heard, however, that the CFS accepts students with special needs and the arrangements to support such students are made on a case-by-case basis. The Panel is of the opinion, therefore,

that a structured record of such students and their unique needs is required to allow the CFS to provide the necessary support for these students.

Recommendation 12

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi include appropriate details of the General Foundation Programme students with special needs in their student records and put relevant mechanisms in place to inform provision of future academic and non-academic support provided to these students.

3.2 Registry (Enrolment and Student Records)

The ARD is responsible for managing the admission and enrolment process for all students at the UoB including those studying in the GFP (Portfolio, p.36). The Admissions and Registration Policy of UoB lays out clear guidelines for student enrolment in all of its programmes. The admissions procedure for the GFP as well as the GFP requirements and entry criteria are published on the UoB website (Portfolio, p.22). Student data are recorded in UoB's SIS, which allocates students to appropriate levels upon release of the placement test results (Portfolio, p.36). The SIS has been developed in-house and is highly customised for various student related purposes. The system serves students, academics and administrative staff and caters for a wide range of needs from student admission and registration to student attendance, finance and academic advising. Accuracy and security of student records is maintained based on UoB's Admissions and Registration Policy (Portfolio, p.36). The CFS uses the SIS for managing all GFP student data. The Panel was informed that a dedicated staff member of the ARD is responsible for maintaining GFP student records in both paper and electronic formats; a separate room with adequate security and strict access protocols is allocated to this activity.

The SIS Module Guide defines procedures to ensure the accuracy of data entry through a set of data validation rules. Access rules for various staff and student groups are also clearly defined in the same guide. These rules restrict open access to the SIS and provide specific rights to eligible staff, both academic as well as ARD staff, thus ensuring the security of student data. Students also have restricted access to the system and are authorised to view their individual transcripts, final examination results and the courses registered in the given semester (Portfolio, p.36). Interviews with students, academic, administrative and IT support staff allowed the Panel to confirm that access to the SIS is controlled to ensure security of student records and data. Student and staff surveys conducted in AY 2017/2018 indicate satisfaction with the SIS and the information that it provides.

The Panel noted that while the SIS database is backed up twice daily and a second back up is undertaken for all servers at UoB once a day. This takes place, however, entirely within UoB's campus and there is no back up stored off-site (see Section 3.5).

The Panel was presented with a demonstration of the SIS and they noted that in addition to supporting the management of admissions and registration process, it also generates relevant student information to facilitate decision-making on student matters and inform future planning. The Panel noted the versatility of the SIS but UoB was unable to provide evidence of mechanisms for the regular monitoring and review of the system's effectiveness in meeting the needs of these diverse stakeholders of the CFS. The Panel urges UoB to address this to help close the quality loop.

Recommendation 13

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi strengthen its mechanisms for the regular monitoring and review of the effectiveness of the Student Information System in meeting the information needs of the various stakeholders of

the Centre of Foundation Studies with respect to the General Foundation Programme.

3.3 *Student Induction*

UoB has an organised approach to providing support and information for both prospective as well as newly admitted students. Prospective students to the GFP can find detailed information regarding admission procedures, entry requirements and curriculum on the UoB website or from the ARD (Portfolio, p.37). The Panel was informed that UoB also encourages students from local schools to visit the GFP and detailed information is provided for them during such visits.

The CFS uses a two-stage student induction for students newly admitted in the GFP (Portfolio, p.37). The newly admitted students attend a university-level induction in the third week of the semester and a GFP induction one week later. Induction to UoB is conducted by the SAD and includes sessions by all other support units (Portfolio, p.37). This induction provides information for students about policies and procedures that are useful throughout their learning experience; this is also included in the Student Guide. In addition to this, students are informed of the library services, e-services such as UoB email, Moodle and Health and Safety services. Students also receive an induction package which includes the Student Guide and other relevant information material.

The induction to the GFP is conducted a week after the induction to UoB; it covers GFP programme related information and includes an introduction to the Vision, Mission and Values of the CFS, components of the GFP, delivery schedules and policies, and rules and regulations governing the GFP. The Panel was informed that most of the aspects addressed during this induction are reinforced by academic staff at the beginning of the semester in their individual classes. The Panel heard that academic staff members devote the first class of the semester to providing the required guidance for newly admitted GFP students; this helps to support their first two weeks in the GFP until the official two-stage induction commences in the third week (Portfolio, p.37).

The Panel believes that the induction process serves its purpose based on the information gathered through the interviews with students and based on the results of the student satisfaction survey which showed a satisfaction level of 3.4 out of 5.0 for the induction provided (Portfolio, p.38). The Panel, however, noted that UoB does not target a certain satisfaction level and this lack of a key performance indicator strengthens the need to have specific and measurable targets for better operationalisation of its student induction plans (see Section 1.2, Recommendation 2).

3.4 *Teaching and Learning Resources*

UoB has a dedicated building for the CFS within which the GFP is housed. GFP students have access to 35 classrooms and four computer laboratories (Portfolio, p.38); these are equipped with the infrastructure required to facilitate learning (Portfolio, p.38). The Panel confirmed during the tour of the facilities that classrooms and laboratories are adequate and equipped with computers, whiteboards, overhead projectors, built-in speakers and required software. Staff surveys show that a majority of the academic staff (70%) are satisfied with the teaching and learning resources available for the GFP while student surveys show a satisfaction score of 4.0 out of 5.0 (Portfolio, p.39).

GFP students are supplied with textbooks (Portfolio, p.38), in addition to reference books available in the library. During the tour of the campus, the Panel visited the library, which they found to be spacious and well organised. The Panel observed that the library had multiple copies of relevant and required titles for the GFP and provides 12 PC workstations (4 for male students; 8 for female students) and an activity room to support independent learning. The Panel heard that

the induction programme for newly admitted students includes a session on the effective use of the library.

The management of the library has been under the direct supervision of the VC since AY 2017/2018 in the absence of a full time Library Director. The current staff members have been working in the library for six years, but the Panel gathered that they have not had sufficient training specifically in using technology for better delivery of library services. The Panel encourages UoB to ensure that this training gap is bridged so that library staff members are adequately prepared to support the particular learning and educational development needs of GFP students in preparation for their higher education studies. The Panel suggests that UoB take steps necessary to appoint a full-time Library Director to provide the oversight required for the functioning of the library.

GFP academic staff members mainly use SharePoint to disseminate teaching material to GFP students (Portfolio, p.38). The management and academic staff of the GFP confirmed that currently Moodle is used as the VLE for conducting placement tests but a few academic staff members have started using Moodle for sharing teaching material with students. The CFS has initiated steps to extend the usage of Moodle across all GFP courses and levels by arranging for training of GFP staff in the use of Moodle. A demonstration of the Learning Management System showed both the use of Moodle for placement testing as well as SharePoint and Moodle folders populated with course material.

Affirmation 5

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Buraimi in its decision to extend the systematic usage of the Virtual Learning Environment across all levels and courses of the General Foundation Programme to facilitate the effective delivery of the programme, and supports the steps taken in preparing for this.

3.5 Information and Learning Technology Services

UoB has a dedicated IT Department that provides all IT resources and related services to support teaching and learning across academic departments (Portfolio, p.39). The IT Department supervises all aspects appertaining to the use and maintenance of these resources, including hardware and software installation, trouble-shooting and a help-desk portal. The department is also in charge of a wide range of services such as Wi-Fi in the female student hostels, email, network services, servers, laboratories, telecommunication systems, projectors, copiers, networked printers and related training. Telephone services are provided by Omantel with a 30-channel ISDN PRI.

There are 11 IT Laboratories in three building blocks (B, C, and D) on campus. Four PC Laboratories are assigned for GFP students and are open from 08:00am to 16:00pm, as seen in the signage outside the laboratories (Portfolio, p.39). The IT Department has a maintenance plan where PCs are replaced every five years, and regularly tested for hardware and software problems.

The UoB campus is using a Windows based Internet infrastructure through which the IT Department provides SharePoint and Moodle as the two platforms for disseminating teaching materials. SharePoint is accessible off-campus, but Moodle is accessible on campus only. Internet connection to the outside world is provided via two ADSL routers with a total bandwidth of 32 MBPS. There are more than 2000 users at UoB, and only one password is used for all services. The Panel was informed that UoB would soon join OMRAN to improve bandwidth. The Panel saw evidence of the UoB's intention to provide the CFS with the required IT infrastructure to support the delivery of the GFP. The Panel heard from staff and students that they were satisfied with the IT infrastructure, support and training provided to facilitate the use

of IT in classrooms (Portfolio, p.40). The Panel did not find, however, evidence of processes in place for the review of the appropriateness and adequacy of the IT infrastructure; UoB is urged to address this issue.

Recommendation 14

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi strengthen its mechanisms for review of the appropriateness and adequacy of the IT infrastructure provided at the Centre of Foundation Studies to cater for the needs of the General Foundation Programme.

The Panel was pleased to hear that UoB has a strong firewall to protect itself and its IT infrastructure against external attack. The Panel noted, however, that while IT security at UoB follows a process of daily back up of the servers, it is all stored on campus and UoB does not have any offsite back-up (see Section 3.2). The Panel also did not find processes in place for the review of the appropriateness and adequacy of the IT security mechanisms; UoB is urged to address this issue.

Recommendation 15

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi strengthen the IT security mechanisms for the backup of General Foundation Programme electronic data.

3.6 Academic Advising

Each GFP student is assigned an Academic Advisor in the first semester of their study in the GFP (Portfolio, p.40) and they are informed of this practice during induction and through the Student Guide. The roles and responsibilities of Academic Advisors are clearly defined enabling a consistent academic advising experience for GFP students. The majority of GFP students have the same advisor throughout the duration of their study in the GFP (Portfolio, p.40); this allows continuity in the support provided and better rapport to be developed between advisors and advisees, thus ensuring greater effectiveness of the system. The SIS includes a function that allows Academic Advisors to maintain records of their meetings with the advisees. This serves as a source of information to help better support academic progress, particularly when a new Academic Advisor has to be assigned (Portfolio, p.40).

The Panel was informed that until recently, all GFP academic staff members worked as Academic Advisors but from AY 2017/2018 onwards, this role fell only to Study Skills teachers. Students meet their Study Skills teachers only once per week unlike teachers of Mathematics, English and IT, whom they meet every day. The Panel learnt that the rationale for this change was that the management of the CFS and GFP academic staff members believe that since GFP students meet their teachers of Mathematics, English and IT every day, there is a risk of over familiarity. It was explained to the Panel that this over-familiarity could be counter-productive to the ethos of academic advising as defined by the CFS. Assigning the Study Skills teachers as Academic Advisors, however, allows the CFS to achieve the balance they desire between accessibility and familiarity, as students meet the Study Skills teachers only once per week.

The evidence considered by the Panel indicates that UoB has a systematic approach to the provision of academic advising. There is limited evidence, however, of the review of the impact of academic advising on student progress. Student survey results show a high level of agreement that staff provide good academic support. Student satisfaction surveys for the past eight consecutive academic semesters show an average score of 3.78 out of 5.0 for academic advising. Students and GFP graduates also indicated to the Panel that academic support was provided for students when needed and is effective in assisting student learning. The Panel once again emphasises the need to have a measurable targeted satisfaction level.

3.7 *Student Learning Support*

The CFS organises learning support services for GFP students through the office of the Student Academic Support Activities Committee (SASAC), and in collaboration with the Student Engagement and Academic Advisement Centre (SEAAC) (Portfolio, p.41). The SASAC, in collaboration with CFS academic staff members, pays particular attention to both identifying and supporting academically challenged students (Portfolio, p.41). Senior management and academic staff of the GFP confirmed that the CFS starts the process of identifying academically challenged students from placement testing. The Panel was informed that students scoring less than 30% in the placement test are not denied admission to the GFP but are identified as “Intrinsic at risk” students and supported from the outset of their studies. They are observed closely for the first three weeks of the semester and, if confirmed as “at risk”, they are then provided with learning support through remedial classes. The Panel learnt that GFP student performance during mid-term examinations is evaluated to identify the second group of “at risk” students. Learning support is then arranged through tutorials, remedial classes and informal instructor-student sessions (Portfolio, p.41). The Panel learnt that student attendance in the remedial classes was “poor” and therefore since last semester all GFP academic staff members dedicate the last 15 minutes of their classes to providing learning support for all students. The Panel was also informed that students, and in particular “at risk” students, have since shown an improvement in their academic performance (Portfolio, p.41). The Panel appreciated CFS’s proactive approach to identifying and supporting academically challenged students within the GFP and reviewing the process for effectiveness. The Panel, however, would like to remind CFS to review its approach to identifying and maintaining records of students with special needs and addressing the needs of such students (see Section 3.1).

The SASAC is responsible for the planning and implementation of all extracurricular activities as detailed in the SASAC Annual Plan. The Panel noted that the committee seeks to encourage GFP student participation in extracurricular activities and events in order to support GFP students in achieving the learning outcomes on the completion of the GFP. The Panel, however, noted that GFP students have limited involvement in the planning or implementation of most of the extracurricular activities organised at UoB. GFP students are informed of these activities through their teachers in class as well as through posters in the GFP building, but awareness levels of these activities amongst the GFP students were found to be low. The Panel found evidence to support CFS’s claim that they organise extra-curricular activities exclusively for the GFP students linked to various areas and skills of the programme, but did not see any evidence of GFP student involvement in the identification, design, planning, organisation or the conduct of either pan-UoB activities or activities exclusive to the CFS. The Panel also could not find evidence of mechanisms to collect feedback from GFP students on the usefulness of these “student learning support” activities nor a regular review and monitoring of the process of providing learning support. The Panel encourages UoB to revisit the student learning support activities provided by the SASAC, with a view to allowing GFP students more involvement in the selection and implementation of such activities, particularly designed for their benefit.

Recommendation 16

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends the University of Buraimi regularly review the student learning support provided by the Student Academic Support Activities Committee and the Student Engagement and Academic Advisory Centre and encourage higher involvement of General Foundation Programme students in the identification, design, planning and organisation of extra-curricular activities.

3.8 *Student Satisfaction and Climate*

UoB relies on surveys to collect feedback from students to determine their satisfaction level with various aspects of UoB's academic programmes, services and facilities in order to ensure a positive academic climate (Portfolio, p.41). The survey conducted in Fall semester of AY 2017/2018 to determine the satisfaction levels amongst GFP students showed a score of 3.40 out of 5.0 (Portfolio, p.41). In addition to the surveys carried out by UoB, where the focus is more on facilities and support services, the CFS uses a Course Evaluation Survey to obtain feedback from GFP students on the academic aspects of their educational experience within the GFP (Portfolio, p.41). These results have been positive (average score of 4.0 out of 5.0 for the English, Mathematics and IT components) showing overall satisfaction. The Panel, however, learnt that GFP students would like further improvements to the facilities provided, in particular for the female students residing in the hostel, and encourages UoB to consider this feedback in their review process. Based on the evidence and the interviews, the Panel concluded that CFS provides GFP students with a positive and supportive learning environment. The Panel, however, heard that not all students were aware of changes and improvements made based on their feedback. The Panel suggests, therefore, that CFS improves its communication with GFP students and advertises the changes and improvements made in response to student requests and feedback more widely and explicitly.

UoB has a Student Advisory Council (SAC), but as explained by UoB, GFP students are not members based on the regulation of the Ministry of Higher Education. GFP students, do, however, have representation at the CFS through two class representatives for each section of the GFP (Portfolio, p.42). GFP students can raise their concerns and issues through the SEAAC and the SAD. The process for this is defined in the Students Complaints Procedure and the Panel confirmed this from the evidence provided (Portfolio, p.41). In addition to this, the Panel also learnt that the CFS Director has an "open door" policy to help maintain a positive environment within the GFP. The Panel acknowledges that while UoB has mechanisms to assess GFP student satisfaction, processes to review and monitor the effectiveness of these feedback mechanisms are not present. The Panel, therefore, encourages UoB to address this in order to ensure that these mechanisms are effective in producing reliable and valid indicators of student satisfaction.

3.9 *Student Behaviour*

UoB students, including those studying in the GFP, are expected to behave in accordance with the Student Code of Conduct outlined in the Student Guide. GFP students are made aware of UoB rules and regulations through various means and mechanisms, as indicated in the Student Induction at the beginning of the semester (Portfolio, p.42). In addition to this, the rules and regulations are available in the Student Guide and are also explained to students by their Academic Advisors at the beginning of the semester (Portfolio, p.42). Interviews with GFP students, however, indicated a lack of awareness and understanding of UoB's rules and regulations regarding expected student behaviour. The Panel was of the opinion that informing GFP students about rules, regulations and expected behaviour in a one-day induction and making the rules and regulations available in the Student Guide may not be sufficient to create awareness and understanding of expected student behaviour particularly amongst students newly admitted to the GFP. The Panel therefore encourages the CFS to continue to develop ways and means to effectively communicate the code of conduct to the GFP students through the course of their study in the CFS.

The GFP Portfolio states student behavioural issues are dealt with thoroughly by different entities depending on the nature of the issue, for example, academic misconduct is addressed in accordance with the Academic Integrity Policy of UoB (Portfolio, p.42, see Section 1.8). The Student Behaviour and Disciplinary Committee ensures that the Student Code of Conduct is appropriately implemented across UoB (Portfolio, p.42). The CFS Director and the HOU GFP jointly handle most cases of student misconduct by meeting with the concerned students (Portfolio, p.42). The cases that cannot be settled within the CFS are forwarded to the SAD,

which, in collaboration with the SEAAC, addresses such cases in accordance with the defined procedure (Portfolio, p.42). The Panel saw evidence of consistency in the implementation of the Student Code of Conduct and the policy and process used in case of a breach. The review and monitoring of this process, however, is not evident and the Panel encourages the CFS to address this (see Recommendation 5).

3.10 Non-Academic Student Support Services and Facilities

UoB facilitates the provision of non-academic student support services. This includes transportation, accommodation and recreational facilities for GFP students through a number of departments and units, such as SAD, SEAAC, Technical Affairs Department, and Safety and Security Unit (Portfolio, p.43).

Until the Summer semester of AY 2016/2017, UoB offered off-campus hostel accommodation for its female students including those of the GFP (Portfolio, p.43). The hostels were chosen based on predefined selection criteria and monitored by the SAD. UoB, since AY 2016/2017, has a female hostel on campus with a capacity of 1,012 students and hence female students are now offered accommodation on campus (Portfolio, p.43). The new hostel is operated by a Hostel Operator and offers a wide range of necessary services such as fibre optic internet, study rooms and entertainment rooms. The SAD is responsible for maintenance of the hostel based on periodic inspection.

The Panel visited the on-campus medical clinic, which is open for students from Sunday to Thursday. In addition to this, there are two cafeterias and a large food hall on the campus. There are two recreational rooms with table tennis and kicker tables. UoB organises at least six major activities per semester including some sports activities. The Panel also learnt that students can organise student clubs and five clubs are active as of now.

The survey results on student satisfaction levels with non-academic support services, facilities and recreational activities show satisfaction levels of 3.4 out of 5.0 (Portfolio, p.45). The Panel, however, heard in interviews that students felt that their feedback was collected but not used to inform improvement in the quality of the outdoor spaces on the campus and the recreational activities offered.

Recommendation 17

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi consider the feedback provided by the General Foundation Programme students to improve the quality of outdoor spaces on the campus and the extent of recreational activities provided, and ensure that improvements made are communicated through multiple channels to the General Foundation Programme students.

3.11 External Engagement

The Portfolio states that between AY 2013/2014 and AY 2017/2018, external engagement at the CFS has been in the form of various English language courses being provided for ministries and other public offices such as the Ministry of Education and the Buraimi Police Headquarters in collaboration with Buraimi Public Library and Buraimi Chamber of Commerce (Portfolio p.45). UoB has also collaborated with other educational institutions such as Al Buraimi University College, to organise training workshops for its GFP academic staff.

Recently, UoB has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with WE Bridge Academy to establish UoB as a teaching centre to offer WE Bridge's IFP curriculum. The Panel was informed that UoB is in the process of mapping the content of its GFP with that of WE Bridge Academy's

IFP and developing an exit test for their GFP. This will be endorsed by WE Bridge in order to align its GFP to similar foundation programmes offered within Oman and around the world.

4 STAFF AND STAFF SUPPORT SERVICES

UoB has university-wide staff and staff support service policies with local implementation, monitoring and review by each college or centre. The Panel has reviewed these policies in the context of the GFP and their impact on the delivery of the GFP.

The Panel noted that the provision of staff support services at UoB is informed by the University Mission (ie “Progress oriented education, research and engagement that contribute to quality of life, and learner centred experience enhanced by sustainable local and global partnerships”) and is manifested through Institutional Goal 3 (UoB Strategic Plan, Goal 3). The CFS Action Plan 2016-2017 accordingly includes implementation strategies to support the achievement of this goal at the CFS.

UoB Bylaws provide a detailed description of policies that cover a range of aspects applicable to UoB staff in general. UoB also has a well-defined Faculty Code of Conduct which is shared with all staff members.

In this Chapter, staff and staff support services provided at UoB are addressed and the Panel findings are reported in relation to its staff profile; recruitment and selection; staff induction; professional development; performance planning and review; staff organisational climate and retention, and Omanisation.

4.1 *Staff Profile*

The UoB Strategic Plan Goal 3 aims “To invest in human and other resources that contribute to continued development”. The CFS Action Plan identifies specific implementation strategies, resources required, the responsible person and a relevant KPI in order to meet the UoB Strategic Plan Goal 3. The implementation strategies include, for example, the recruitment of staff to support teaching activities, provide administrative support and to assist with remedial classes – evidence of the link between UoB’s strategy and CFS’s implementation plan in this area. The Panel notes, however, that the “responsible person” is in most cases either multiple people, a committee or “to be confirmed” where a more definite ownership is preferable and the KPIs should be more specific and measurable (see Section 1.4, Recommendation 2).

The Panel observed that UoB has ensured that teaching staff represent a range in terms of age, gender, nationality and years of experience in the field. Staff members are well qualified and have a diverse range of skills, which enable them to meet the academic and administrative requirements of the GFP. The GFP currently has 30 academic members and of these 80% hold a Master’s degree whilst 10% have a PhD and 10% hold a Bachelor’s degree (Portfolio, p.47).

The CFS conducts an academic staffing needs analysis each year based on current student numbers and predicted student intake in order to maintain an appropriate staff-student ratio (Portfolio, p.47). The Panel noted that the needs analysis conducted is based on a staff-student ratio of 25:1 for Foundation Level 1 and 30:1 for Foundation Levels 2 and 3 and interviews with both staff and students indicated satisfaction with the class size and delivery. The Panel encourages UoB to use staff profile to support the planning and provision of the GFP and to leverage the strength of individual staff members to support the effective delivery of the programme.

4.2 *Recruitment and Selection*

The HRA Department of UoB manages the recruitment and selection process of the GFP staff with inputs from the CFS Director and the GFP team. The recruitment process uses a series of

stages and activities to ensure that appropriate staff members are recruited for the GFP (Portfolio, p.47). The process starts with the CFS conducting an annual needs analysis based on existing and expected student numbers and developing a recruitment plan; this is then submitted to the DVCAARI, Deputy Vice Chancellor for Financial, Administrative Affairs & Support Services and the VC for approval (Portfolio, p.47). The senior management of UoB confirmed that this is the process followed across UoB. The HRA is responsible for advertising vacant positions, but the HoU GFP and the members of the Recruitment Committee (RC) of the CFS manage the selection process. The RC screens the received applications and interviews shortlisted candidates. The evaluation process also includes a teaching demonstration (Portfolio, p.47). The list of recommended candidates is forwarded to the DVCAARI through the CFS Director (Portfolio, p.48) for confirmation. On approval from the DVCAARI, the HRA initiates appropriate processes to complete the recruitment of confirmed applicants (Portfolio, p.48). The evidence provided, together with responses during the GFP Quality Audit Visit, indicated that based on the existing recruitment and selection process, CFS was not always able to recruit the most appropriate staff for the GFP. The two main reasons cited were that UoB is located in a relatively small town of Oman and, sometimes, the remuneration package was inadequate. The Panel urges UoB to introduce creative initiatives to make UoB, and in particular the CFS, a more attractive and appealing choice for job seekers.

4.3 Staff Induction

The Panel noted that UoB has created and implemented a two-stage staff induction process for all new staff members including those of the GFP, as described in the UoB Staff Induction Programme (Portfolio, p.48). The two-stage staff induction conducted at the start of the semester includes an induction to UoB followed by an induction to the GFP. The induction to UoB covers all aspects of the university, such as UoB's academic and administrative systems, rules and regulations, and resources and facilities. In addition to this, new academic staff members are given the faculty handbook and the academic calendar. In the first stage of the induction, the VC provides a brief overview of UoB's mission, vision and values to better orient the new staff members with UoB's culture (Portfolio, p.48). The second stage of the induction focusses on policies procedures and information on academic and administrative activities specific to the GFP.

Both recently-recruited as well as longer-serving staff members expressed their satisfaction with the induction process and material. Senior management of the CFS informed the Panel that at the end of the academic year new staff members are given the opportunity to share their opinion on how the induction informed their teaching practice in the first semester at the GFP (Portfolio, p.49). The Panel concluded that UoB has a structured induction programme which is consistently implemented as described and the process is reviewed annually to identify areas of possible improvement.

4.4 Professional Development

UoB has identified professional development as one of its strategic aims within Goal 3 of its Strategic Plan 2013-2017 and it reads as follows: "Investing in and providing training and resources to systematically improve professional competence". In alignment with this, for every academic year as part of the annual action plan, the CFS in collaboration with its Staff Professional Development Committee (SPDC) organises a number of professional development activities, both in-house and external, for GFP staff (Portfolio, p.49). The Panel noted that the CFS has its own SPDC that prepares an annual action plan for proposed professional development activities. This plan is based on a survey of GFP staff to assess their interest in a set of topics proposed by GFP management. The survey is also used to gather feedback on activities provided in the previous year (Portfolio, p.49). The Panel noted that these activities cover topics and issues related to various aspects of GFP teaching and assessments (Portfolio, p.49), and most of these were internal workshops. The Panel appreciated the online forum initiated by the CFS

SPDC, where staff can disseminate best practice on new teaching and learning methods (Portfolio, p.49). Survey results on the feedback collected by the SPDC are positive, indicating staff satisfaction with the range and quality of professional development activities provided. The Panel, however, noted that the annual performance planning process is not used to identify individual professional needs (see Section 4.5). UoB encourages all academic staff to participate in professional development activities, both in-house and off-campus, to remain current with new teaching methodologies (Portfolio, p.24) (see Section 4.4).

The Panel noticed that during AY 2016/2017, there was zero expenditure on staff development and training and urges UoB to review expenditure to date against budget lines regularly in order to avoid under- or over-spending (see Section 1.5, Recommendation 3). Currently, five members of the GFP academic staff are enrolled on Masters or PhD degree programmes. The Panel hence concluded that while UoB has a system in place to provide general staff development, expenditure on external development activities is not adequately supported and that there is a need for CFS to provide a greater focus on individual and/or institutional needs for professional development.

Recommendation 18

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi use the outcomes of the staff performance appraisal to identify professional development needs of staff and inform the professional development plan for its General Foundation Programme staff members.

4.5 Performance Planning and Review

UoB has a Faculty Appraisal System that details the processes and procedures for the performance appraisal of all staff and UoB believes in a consistent, continuous and communicated performance management system (Portfolio, p.50). According to this system, the performance appraisal includes a number of quantitative components including student evaluation of teachers, evaluation by the Department Head and the Dean, an assessment of professional development undertaken and services rendered by the individual to UoB and the community at large for a 360-degree review (Portfolio, p.50). The system also defines the weightings for each component to arrive at the overall evaluation score for individual staff members. Performance appraisal used to be conducted every semester, but since the Fall Semester of AY 2016/2017, it is now conducted annually for academic staff members who have completed one year at UoB and biannually for new staff members (Portfolio, p.50). The Panel was informed that staff members are provided with feedback on their performance by the HoU GFP and in addition to this, the staff members are given an opportunity to discuss their performance individually with the CFS Director. An appraisal summary of all CFS staff is submitted to the VC, DVCAARI and the HRA Department (Portfolio, p.50). UoB uses performance appraisal as one of the parameters to decide on task allocation, faculty development and contract renewal (Portfolio, p.50).

The Panel found that there is no mechanism to identify the professional development needs of individual staff members in order to support them to meet their objectives for the subsequent year or for their career development (see Section 4.4). There is no evidence of alternative methods of performing a professional development needs analysis. The Panel concluded that UoB may benefit from using multiple sources of data to identify professional development needs and not rely solely on the annual performance appraisal.

4.6 Staff Organisational Climate and Retention

The Portfolio sets out in detail the measures that UoB has in place and in particular the CFS to provide a healthy and positive working environment for staff (Portfolio, p.51). These include

activities for professional development as well as a number of social and recreational events (Portfolio, p.51). The Panel concluded that GFP staff members liked working at UoB and that they enjoyed good relationships within the CFS and with staff teaching on the undergraduate programmes. The Panel noted the positive team spirit amongst the academic staff members and their commitment to students and their welfare. Staff retention has been at an average of 80% for the past four years, which also indicates a positive working environment (Portfolio, p.51). Exit interviews conducted with CFS staff members leaving UoB also show that there is a good atmosphere amongst staff (Portfolio, p.52).

UoB has policies in place concerning expected staff behaviour. These cover aspects ranging from code of conduct, dress code and appropriate behaviour to discipline and the handling of grievances (Portfolio, p.51). UoB also has a system in place to address any non-compliance with or violation of policies and regulations (Portfolio, p.52). The small number of cases of staff members violating the code of conduct at the CFS during the last three-year period (AY 2014/2015 to AY 2017/2018) suggests that UoB's policy on expected staff behaviour is understood and followed by the GFP staff.

UoB collects feedback, including from GFP staff members, on a wide range of aspects, such as the work environment and atmosphere at UoB, and on facilities, performance review and training. The staff satisfaction survey results of AY 2017/2018 show that while staff are satisfied with most aspects of their employment, there are areas such as the appraisal process, promotion policies, their implementation, and the lack of support for professional development, which show lower levels of dissatisfaction. Only 34% of the staff members, for example, feel that they are adequately supported for professional development and only 28% feel that they have an opportunity for career progression or promotion.

The Panel could not find evidence of any structured and organised review and monitoring of the process of collecting staff feedback and responding to staff needs. The Panel noted that while UoB collects and analyses feedback from staff on a wide range of aspects that affect their work, the process of collecting feedback itself has not been subject to any formal review and the Panel urges UoB to consider putting mechanisms in place for the on-going monitoring of the implementation of its policies and procedures (see Recommendation 6).

4.7 Omanisation

Six percent of academic staff members delivering the GFP and a majority of administrative staff members are Omani nationals. Senior management indicated to the Panel that UoB is working towards increasing the number of Omanis among academic staff and has presented a plan to the MoHE, which would allow for the recruitment of a higher number of Omani nationals. The plan includes recruiting young UoB graduates as Teaching Assistants and identifying areas where appropriately qualified Omani academic staff could replace expatriate academic staff members (Portfolio, p.52). The Panel, however, did not see any evidence of the plan or the strategies in place and encourages UoB to operationalise these Omanisation plans.

Recommendation 19

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Buraimi operationalise plans for recruiting more Omani academic staff members, while at the same time ensuring that the quality of provision and academic standards of the General Foundation Programme are maintained.

APPENDIX A. AUDIT PANEL

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APPENDIX B. ABBREVIATIONS, ACRONYMS AND TERMS

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

ADRI	Approach→Deployment→Results→Improvement
Approach	The first dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on evaluating what a HEI aims to achieve for a given topic and how it proposes to achieve it.
ARD.....	Admissions and Registration Department
AY.....	Academic Year
BoD.....	Board of Directors
BoT.....	Board of Trustees
CFS	Centre of Foundation Studies
CO.....	Course Outcomes
Deployment	The second dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on whether a HEI's plans for a given topic are being followed in practice, and if not, why not.
DVC.....	Deputy Vice Chancellor
DVCAARI.....	Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Research and Innovation
EC.....	Examination Committee
ELES Oman.....	English Language Education Services Oman (formerly ELS Oman)
External Reviewer	A Member of the OAAA Register of External Reviewers; a person approved by the OAAA Board to participate as a member of OAAA's various external review Panels.
GFP.....	General Foundation Program
GSS.....	General Study Skills
HEAC	Higher Education Admissions Centre ⁴
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HoU GFP	GFP Unit Head
HRA.....	Human Resource Administration
ICT.....	Information and Communication Technology
IELTS.....	International English Language Testing System
IFP	International Foundation Programme
Improvement.....	The fourth dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on how effectively an organisation is improving its <i>approach</i> and <i>deployment</i> for any given topic in order to achieve better <i>results</i> .
IQA	Internal Quality Audit
IT	Information Technology
KPIs	Key Performance Indicators
LO.....	Learning Outcomes
MoHE	Ministry of Higher Education

⁴ www.heac.gov.om

OAAA Board	The governing body of the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
OAS	Oman Academic Standards
POs	Programme Outcomes
Panel Chairperson.....	The Chairperson of the Audit Panel.
Panel Member.....	An OAAA External Reviewer who is a member of an Audit Panel.
QA	Quality Assurance
QAAC.....	Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee
QAD	Quality Assurance Department
Quality Assurance.....	The combination of policies and processes for ensuring that stated intentions are met.
Quality Audit	An independent evaluation of the effectiveness of the system and processes by which a HEI sets, pursues and achieves its mission and vision.
Quality Enhancement	The combination of policies and processes for improving upon existing <i>approach, deployment</i> and <i>results</i> .
Results	The third dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on the evidence of the outputs and outcomes of a topic's <i>approach</i> and <i>deployment</i> .
Review Director	An individual assigned to an Audit Panel by the OAAA to provide professional guidance and support.
Sic.....	Indicates that the preceding segment of the quote was copied faithfully, in spite of a mistake.
SAC	Student Advisory Council
SAD	Student Affairs Department
SASAC	Student Academic Support Activities Committee
SDC	Student Disciplinary Committee
SEAAC.....	Student Engagement and Academic Advisory Centre
SIS	Student Information System
SOs	Student Learning Outcomes
SM	Supporting Materials
SPDC	Staff Professional Development Committee
System	In this Report, <i>system</i> refers to plans, policies, processes and results that are integrated towards the fulfilment of a common purpose.
SQU	Sultan Qaboos University
UAC.....	University Academic Council
UoB.....	University of Buraimi
VC.....	Vice Chancellor
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

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