

Education Quarterly Reviews

Al-Rusheidi, Ibtisam Saed. (2021). General Foundation Programs (GFPs) Student Entry and Exit Standards. In: *Education Quarterly Reviews*, Vol.4, No.4, 382-391.

ISSN 2621-5799

DOI: 10.31014/aior.1993.04.04.400

The online version of this article can be found at:
<https://www.asianinstituteofresearch.org/>

Published by:
The Asian Institute of Research

The *Education Quarterly Reviews* is an Open Access publication. It may be read, copied, and distributed free of charge according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.

The Asian Institute of Research *Education Quarterly Reviews* is a peer-reviewed International Journal. The journal covers scholarly articles in the fields of education, linguistics, literature, educational theory, research, and methodologies, curriculum, elementary and secondary education, higher education, foreign language education, teaching and learning, teacher education, education of special groups, and other fields of study related to education. As the journal is Open Access, it ensures high visibility and the increase of citations for all research articles published. The *Education Quarterly Reviews* aims to facilitate scholarly work on recent theoretical and practical aspects of education.



ASIAN INSTITUTE OF RESEARCH
Connecting Scholars Worldwide

General Foundation Programs (GFPs) Student Entry and Exit Standards

Ibtisam Saed Al-Rusheidi¹

¹ The University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Rustaq. Email: ibtisam.alrusheidi.rus@cas.edu.om
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6021-0585>

Abstract

This paper assessed the performance of General Foundation Programs (GFPs) in Oman in the area of 'Student Entry and Exit Standards'. Data was collected from the GFP quality audit reports prepared and published by Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA). The study adopted a simple descriptive data analysis method, consisting of identifying the formal conclusions issued by OAAAQA (Commendations, Affirmations, and Recommendations) and analyzing their distribution (frequency of occurrence and percentages) and the issues they covered. The study found out that (a) HEIs are yet to establish sustainable practices in their GFPs in relation to entry and exit standards; and (b) the systems in the GFP are still underdeveloped and practices are largely unsystematic. The paper ended by highlighting four improvement suggestions in order to ensure GFP effectiveness.

Keywords: Affirmations, Commendations, GFP, Placement and Proficiency Tests, Recommendations

1. Introduction

Students generally enter the university environment with little knowledge or understanding of what they are going to face (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Roberts & Higgins, 1992 cited in Lowe & Cook, 2003; Greene and Foster 2003). The challenges they may encounter include, among many other aspects, coping with the new teaching style, period and nature of lectures, required study skills like note taking, critical reading, IT skills, communication skills, time management, English skills etc. Thus, they might lack engagement or a sense of belonging to the new environment which may adverse effects on their behaviour, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Trowler, 2010) and, worst of all, their academic performance.

The failure of higher education institutions (HEIs) to secure to their new-comers adequate transition to university life can have long-term negative effects on the new students' careers, such as underachieving and, in some extreme cases, even dropping out. According to Trounson (2002 cited in Bettinger & Long, 2009), about 2200 students (nearly 7% of the freshmen) in the California State University in fall 2001 were expelled as they failed to master basic English and mathematical skills. Students who lack sufficient preparation for HEIs (that tend to enrol more students to fill their classes for financial reasons) need additional support and services to successfully complete a degree (Mulvey, 2008). The majority of dropouts indicate that they would have benefitted from adequate early academic and personal support (Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995).

The Foundation, 'pre-university', 'remedial', 'developmental' or 'preparatory' program aims to prepare students academically for the new environment¹. The importance of foundation programs grows especially with the growth of transnational education and the adoption of English as the language of instruction in many non-English-speaking developing countries in an attempt to have access to modern advanced sciences.

One such country that strives to modernize its education by adopting English as the language of instruction is the Sultanate of Oman. Since 1986, the date of establishing the first HEI, about 40 HEIs in the Sultanate of Oman opened and most of them embraced English as an official medium of instruction for many of their majors (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018). As English is not the mother tongue, most students would need some level of support in English language. The need for support in English language has been growing consistently, prompting decision-makers to take a radical response by establishing a structured remedial program rather than leaving students to rely on their own resources. The remedial pre-university program came to be known as the General Foundation Program and in 2008, the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI) standardized the GFP components (English, Mathematics, Information Technology (IT), and Study Skills) and made it mandatory in all HEIs.

2. Background to the study

Graduate students holding General Education Diploma (GED) or qualifications recognised by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI) as equivalent to GED, may apply for higher education positions in their programs of choice through the Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC) at MoHERI. About 44779 students registered in HEAC in 2020/2021 (al Numani in Oman Observer, 2021). After registration, students are informed about the programs they are admitted to. Each program has basic admission requirements that might be similar or different from others and students who meet the requirements will be admitted. However, HEIs are entitled to set additional requirements that align with the requirements of their programs. Newly admitted students, thus, will be given a placement test to determine if they meet the program requirements to enter undergraduate programs or not and to place them in the corresponding GFP level according to their performances. Students' performance in these placement tests opens the gate for a number of possibilities. Those candidates who get a score equivalent to IELTS band 5 in English (or a formal IELTS Score of 5) and meet the requirements set for Mathematics and IT may be exempted from the GFP, providing that the HEI undertakes to include the Study Skills in the first year of the undergraduate programs. GFP traditionally comprises four levels, known from the highest to the lowest, as A, B, C, or D. As each level is convertible into a semester of study, students who are placed in Level 'A' are supposed to study for one semester (about 3 months), while Level 'B' students study for 2 semesters (one academic year and so forth). However, students can skip one or two levels if they achieve determined grades on a challenging test.

HEIs, thus, offer GFPs to prepare students for their undergraduate studies. In line with this, GFPs in Omani HEIs have been designed to prepare students who graduate from schools for their postsecondary and higher education studies by providing them with the knowledge and skills that would help them complete their undergraduate studies successfully and in a timely manner (Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programs, 2009). GFP can be considered as a bridge to safely transfer students and fill in the gap between school and university environments and demands, as "The majority of students graduating from secondary school in Oman need to undertake a GFP in order to develop the knowledge, skills and competencies they need to successfully undertake a higher education program" (OAAAQA, 2017, p3)

Based on the decision of the former Higher Education Council (HEC) No.13/2008, the Ministerial Decision No.72/2008 ordained the implementation of GFPs in all public and private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Oman starting from the first semester of the 2009 academic year.

¹ The term 'General Foundation Program' shall be used in the remainder of this paper, as it is the term used in Oman, the focus of this research project.

GFPs are licensed formal and structured programs to aid students to attain the prescribed learning outcomes in four areas. The four areas of learning in GFPs are: English Language, Mathematics, Information Technology, and General Study Skills. These courses contribute to helping students to acquire the basic skills they need for their degree courses. Most HEIs deliver their courses using English, thus enhancing English language skills is a priority. Figures about ELT in Oman demonstrate that a large number of secondary school graduates who enroll in various public and private higher education institutions lack using English four skills effectively and appropriately (Al-Issa & Al Bulushi, 2012). Benchmarks with experiences throughout the world also unveiled that university students need some levels of computer literacy (Computing), numeracy (Mathematics) and skills that may help them manage their studies (Study Skills such as summarizing, quoting, citations, etc).

3. Research Methodology:

3.1. Purpose of the study:

This paper aims to evaluate the performance of GFPs in Oman in terms of ‘Student Entry and Exit Standards.’

3.2. Data and analysis:

The data analyzed in this study consists of official documents adopted by MoHERI and OAAAQA, including the GFP Quality Audit Manual and the Oman Academic Standard for General Foundation Programs (OASGFP). The main source of data, however, is the published GFP quality audit reports² which result from the OAAAQA auditing various GFPs. The paper’s key focus is the formal conclusions which quality audit panels include in these reports; they were classified and their frequency analyzed using descriptive statistics (numbers and percentages).

4. The GFP Quality Audit

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA) is responsible for the quality audit of GFPs in Oman. The audit takes several months and can be conducted for a single GFP, which is the most frequent; for a multi-campus GFP, when an HEI runs a GFP across a number of institutional venues and as a network audit, for many HEIs running the same GFP. This last case was applied for the Colleges of Applied Sciences (CAS) and the Colleges of Technology (CoT) before these two networks were merged into the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS). The audit process involves the submission of a self-study by the GFP concerned; the formation of a review panel, known as the GFPQ Audit Panel, carefully selected to comprise experts covering the various GFP components. In light of the self-study, documentation submitted by the GFP and site visits the GFPQA panel writes a report documenting evidence-based formal conclusions. These reports are published on the OAAAQA website, except for those related to military institutions.

4.1 The GFP Review Framework

As mentioned above, the documents that constitute the basis for the GFP Quality Audit are the *General Foundation Programme Quality Audit Manual* (GFPQA Manual) and the *Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes* (OASGFP).

4.1.1. The General Foundation Quality Audit Manual

The GFPQA Manual sets the general and specific areas for GFPs to cover in their self-studies and audit panels to include in their review reports. These are known as the audit scope and comprise the four areas of Governance and Management, GFP Student Learning, Academic and Student Support Services, and Staff and Staff Support

² http://www.oaaa.gov.om/GFPAccreditation.aspx#Inst_DownloadGFPQA

Services. Each of these four scope areas has a number of more specific 'sub- scope' areas. These sub-scope areas address specific aspects by outlining what the HEIs need are expected to focus on. The aspects with regard to GFP entry and exit standards- the primary focus of the present paper- are as follows:

The HEI should describe and evaluate how GFP entry and exit standards are set, implemented and reviewed. This may include consideration of, for example:

- Entry levels in different subject areas in relation to the lowest GFP study levels and duration of the program;
- Entry levels in relation to any pre-GFP program;
- Exit levels in all subject areas in relation to the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programs, national and international benchmarks and the entry requirements of the higher education programs that the GFP is preparing students for;
- Entrance and/or placement testing systems and procedures;
- How entry standards are set, communicated and implemented;
- Exit testing systems and procedures;
- Monitoring of GFP student entry and exit standards to ensure they are being implemented fairly and consistently;
- how the rigour of entry and exit testing is assured; and
- Monitoring of student cohorts in terms of progression in GFP relative to entry standards and progression of GFP alumni on higher education programs.

How does the HEI know that the student entry and exit standards are appropriate, implemented and monitored effectively?

Source: General Foundation Program Quality Audit Manual, p.26

Two key characteristics of the GFP quality audit process are worth highlighting. The first is OAAAQA's emphasis on 'effectiveness'. As a value-free review process, the GFP quality audit does not prescribe how GFPs manage their processes in order to improve their performance. Instead, it has been designed to assess the ability of these processes to help the GFPs achieve the goals and objectives they would have set for themselves. In other words, the primary focus of the GFP quality audit is to assess whether the GFP under audit is doing things the right way i.e., whether its processes are 'fit for purpose'. To help ensure the effectiveness of processes, OAAAQA encourages GFPs to adopt a systemic approach to all aspects of their activities. In other words, GFPs are prompted to establish systems for their activities rather than content themselves with disconnected practices that may not be sustainable. The systemic approach OAAAQA champions consists of four key stages, namely the stages for (a) planning; (b) implementation; (c) monitoring and (d) review. Highly reminiscent of the PDCA (Plan, Do, Check, Act) adopted in ISO-based audits, OAAAQA's systemic approach is known as ADRI (Approach, Deployment, Results, Improvements). Applying this systemic approach to the 'Student Entry and Exit Standards' would give four dimensions GFPs should address in the management of their activities and report in their self-study portfolios. These would be the same dimensions the GFP quality audit panels cover in their reports.

Table 1: Analysis of the ‘Student Entry and Exit Standards’ according to the OAAAQA ADRI approach

Dimension	Key Question(s)	Useful Documents
Approach	What does the HEI attempt to achieve?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statements in strategic plans in relation to entry and exit standards • Specific targets in operational plans (Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)) • Directions from senior management • Policies, manuals, guidelines, action plans, etc. developed to achieve the strategic goals and/or targets • Bodies established or restructured to implement the plans
Deployment	Is action on the ground in line with the planned activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of meetings (correspondences, meeting minutes) • Evidence of appropriate involvement in this process
Results	How far is GFP successful in the implementation of its plans?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of progress in implementation (progress reports, periodic reports as per policies above) • Evidence of issues, if any, being addressed
Improvement	What is GFP doing to improve its performance in this area (Entry and Exit Standards)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of decisions being taken and plans adjusted in the event of failure to achieve targets; • Evidence of targets improved once achieved

The second key characteristic of the OAAAQA review approach is that the formal conclusions reached by audit panels are highly structured. As Table 2 shows, there are three types or levels of conclusions, namely commendations, affirmations and recommendations (known for short as CAR). A fourth type is the so-called non-CAR text which is likely to take place when the review panel concludes that the HEI’s practice in the concerned area is within the required norms.

Table 2: Nomenclature of formal conclusions in GFP quality audit reports

Conclusion	OAAAQA Definition	Interpretation
Commendation	‘A formal Commendation recognises an instance of particularly good practice [in GFP]’	The practice of the GFP follows a clear system deliberately developed for the purpose, carefully monitored and regularly reviewed to ensure it is effective and remains as such. The outcomes of the system are sustainable (i.e., they can be reproduced over a period of time). The practice may have some elements of innovation or good practice.
Non-CAR		The practice of the GFP is at the required level; there is no aspect significantly below or beyond the normal level of practice which warrants special attention
Affirmation	A formal Affirmation recognises an instance in which the HEI has accurately identified a significant opportunity for improvement [in relation to GFP] and has demonstrated appropriate commitment to addressing the matter.	There is a major aspect of the GFP which requires attention. By the time of the audit, the panel found that the HEI had already identified this aspect and started dealing with it. In other words, the Panel finds that the HEI has started taking action in response to this issue.

Recommendation	A Recommendation draws attention to a significant opportunity for improvement [in relation to GFP] that the HEI has either not yet accurately identified or to which it is not yet adequately attending.	A Recommendation may be issued in either of the two cases below: There is a major aspect of the GFP which requires attention. By the time of the audit, the panel finds that the HEI has not yet identified this aspect (unaware of it). There is a major aspect of the GFP which requires attention. By the time of the audit, the panel finds that the HEI has already identified this aspect but no action has been taken to start addressing it.
----------------	--	--

4.1.2 The Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programs

The second tributary of the GFP review is the OASGFP. Formally adopted by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI) in 2009, the document specifies in explicit, often numeric, terms the learning outcomes for each of the four GFP components (English, Mathematics, Information Technology and Study Skills) and the knowledge and skills standards required for progressing from GFP to undergraduate programs. It also sets criteria for exemption from the entire GFP or any part of it. The requirements related to the area of ‘student entry and exit standards’ in this document are too many to contain within the limited scope of this study; specific examples will be provided whenever the specific context allows.³

4.2. *The Interface between the two documents*

Together, the two documents form an audit platform that may be regarded as a combination of process and product requirements: while the GFP Quality Audit Manual outlines the generic decision-making processes GFPs are expected to follow to ensure they are fit for purpose, the OASGFP provides measurable descriptors of the achievement levels required to enter and/or exit GFPs. This combination should not, however, be regarded as a failure, on the part of the OAAAQA to observe the generic, non-prescriptive nature of its audit principles. Once these entry and exit standards are formally instated by MoHERI, they become national requirements which neither OAAAQA nor the HE sector can afford to ignore.

The combination also provides a comprehensive audit scope that covers all aspects of the GFP. In the case of ‘Student Entry and Exit Standards’, for example, the audit extends from the GFP relationship with the study levels preceding it (such as the Basic School qualifications) to the performance of the GFP graduates in their undergraduate studies (GFP alumni). This audit continuum may be analysed into three key stages, as follows:

- **Pre-GFP requirements:** They generally refer to GFP entry requirements as they set the levels attained in any programmes preceding the GFP. The most obvious example is the candidate’s score in the General Education Diploma and their achievement in specific subjects relevant to the higher education specialisation the candidate wishes to pursue. These requirements are centrally set by the Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC) at MoHERI and used to allocate scholarships. As indicated earlier, however, HEIs may set higher or additional requirements which they feel better to serve their higher education programmes.
 - **In-GFP requirements:** While running GFPs, HEIs are expected to demonstrate that their programmes meet the standards set in the OASGFP to ensure that the exit levels meet the requirements of the higher education programmes. This may be achieved through the continuous review and improvement of the entry and exit standards through mechanisms such as benchmarking and external moderation. During this phase, HEIs are also expected to disseminate information about GFP accurately and ethically and to implement the related requirements and procedures fairly and consistently.
- Post-GFP requirements:** In the post-GFP stage, HEIs are expected to maintain communication with the GFP graduates in order to seek their feedback about the programme. The GFP graduates’ experience with their undergraduate programmes, the feedback they receive from their lecturers and in particular their

³ OASGFP may be retrieved at: <http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Docs/GFP%20Standards%20FINAL.pdf>

progression, retention and completion rates may provide useful information to the HEI to improve the GFP offerings and services.

The various taxonomies offered above help us determine the following key characteristics of the formal conclusions in GFPQA reports that will be covered in this study:

- Formal conclusions must be directly related to the scope area ‘Student Entry and Exit Standards’.
- Formal conclusions must address the requirements explicitly stated in the scope area ‘Student Entry and Exit Standards’. For the sake of consistency, transparency and fairness between GFPs, no additional requirements may be added by review panels.
- Formal conclusions may be issued in the form of Commendations, Affirmations, Recommendations (CARs) or non-CAR texts.
- Formal conclusions should reflect the ADRI cycle in their identification of good practices or opportunities for improvement. In other words, a Commendation should demonstrate how a practice helped improve the performance of a GFP developing, implementing and reviewing effective processes. By the same token, a Recommendation should demonstrate how addressing the OFI identified would help the GFP attain sustainable results.

5. Findings of the GFP Reviews

During the period between March 2018 and January 2021, the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA) reviewed 20 GFPs. The present study included, however, only 18 of them. The remaining two were the Colleges of Applied Sciences (CAS) and the Colleges of Technology (CoT). They both underwent GFP quality audits as networks, but their GFPQA reports were archived as they became part of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS).

5.1. A General GFP Profile

It may be worth noting at this stage that OAAAQA cautions that the formal conclusions it issues in GFPQA reports should not be regarded as the sole indicator of quality in the GFPs. These conclusions, however, help draw a global picture of the performance of all the GFPs in the Sultanate, whether in general (all areas) or in specific areas, such as the performance of the sector in the area of entry and exit standards, the primary focus of this paper.

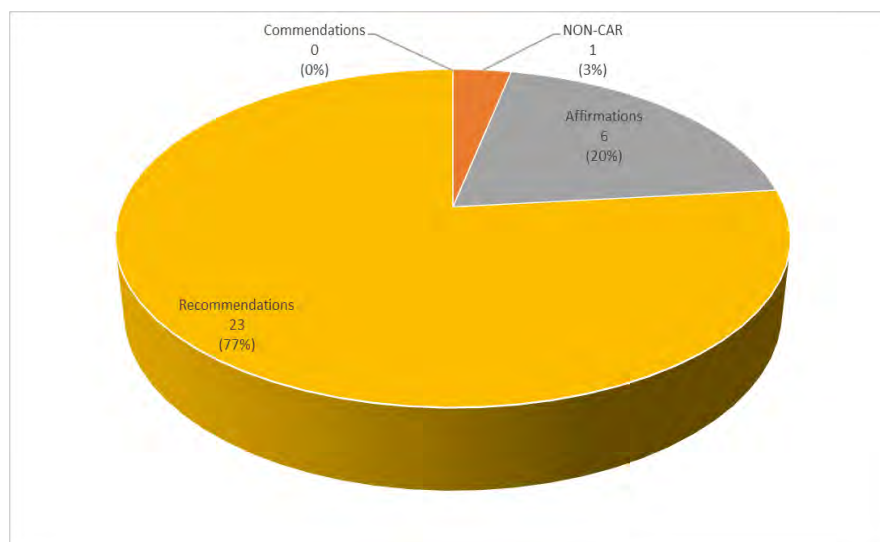


Figure 1: Performance of GFPs in the area of ‘Student Entry and Exit Standards’ according to OAAAQA Report Conclusions

Figure 1 suggests the following patterns with regard to the performance of HEIs in the management of their GFP student entry and exit standards:

- With no commendations and one Non-CAR conclusion, HEIs are yet to establish sustainable practices in their GFPs in relation to entry and exit standards. While this may be understood in view of the fact that GFP quality audits started only as late as 2017, quality audit has been practised at the institutional level since 2008 (Institutional Quality Audit-IQA) and refers explicitly to the role of the GFP:
The HEI should describe and evaluate its system for setting, implementing and reviewing the student entry standards. This may include benchmarking nationally and internationally; entrance testing; links to General Foundation Programs.... (IQAM, p.20)
- The systems in the GFP are still underdeveloped and practices are largely unsystematic. The high percentage of Recommendations (77%) provide evidence that HEIs are still largely unaware of the systems that need to be put in place to ensure the GFP entry and exit standards they adopt to support the effectiveness of their GFPs. The fact that the number of recommendations (n=23) exceeds the number of GFPs (n=18) means that HEIs need to address more than one aspect of their entry and exit standards.
- As mentioned above, Affirmations denote work in progress to bring some substandard practices to the required levels. The rate reported (20%) may, however, be positively perceived as an indicator of growing awareness of the need to actively attend to GFP entry and exit standards so as to align them with the prescribed requirements

5.2. Opportunities for Improvement

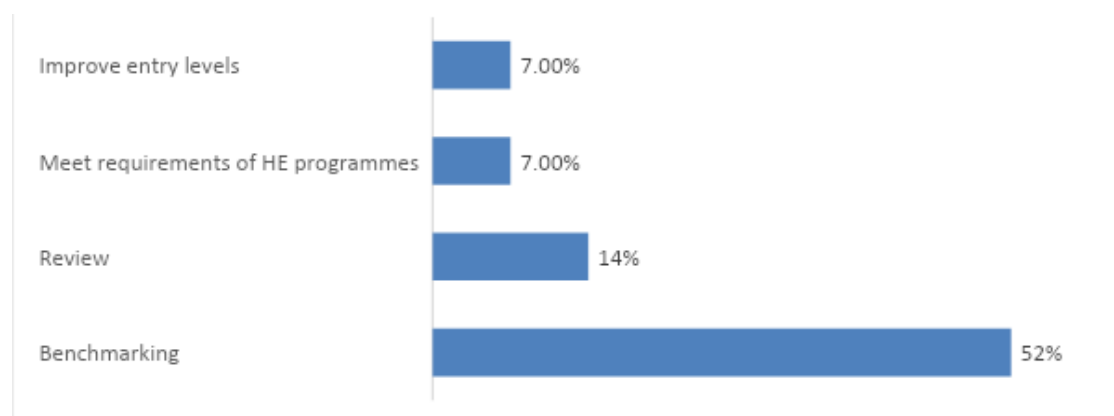


Figure 2: Distribution of OAAAQA Formal Conclusions related to Student Entry and Exit Standards

Figure 2 offers a detailed analysis of the distribution of OAAAQA formal conclusions (CARs). Merging Recommendations and Affirmations as opportunities for improvement, the analysis suggests an order of frequency in which four topics account together for around 80% of the formal conclusions. As reported in Figure 1 above, 29 Recommendations and Affirmations were issued, touching on a variety of subjects related to student entry and exit standards. Out of these 29 conclusions, 2 (7%) were prompts for HEIs to “improve entry levels” and “meet requirements of HE programmes”, 4(14%) about review, and 15 (52%) were directly about benchmarking.

5.3. Discussion of Findings

- The improvement of entry standards: the fact that the GFP entry requirements are centrally determined by HEAC does not invalidate OAAAQA’s call for entry standards to be improved. The HEAC, on behalf of MoHERI, sets the level at which students become eligible for government scholarships and to which HEIs and specialisations they would be streamed. HEIs are expected, however, to set their own entry standards which they believe should be adequate for the prospective students to complete their GFP studies

successfully. The dilemma in which HEIs find themselves is undeniable: setting higher entry standards may secure 'good' students who can complete the GFP in time or even get exemptions from it if their placement test scores meet the exemption requirements. By the same token, lifting the standards may limit the numbers of new admissions, thus leading to the decrease in much-needed revenues. It has to be noted, however, that some HEIs have started addressing this conflicting state of affairs by setting pre-GFP levels and developing special courses for them.

- The need to meet the requirements of higher education programs: while the successful completion of the GFP is a prerequisite for enrolment on higher education programs, HEIs, or their academic affiliates, have the option to impose additional admission requirements (OASGFP, Point 1.4(a), p.11) if they deem the standards set in the OASGFP not adequate for the successful progression of students in their undergraduate studies. Once any such additional requirements are instated and announced by the HEI (such as in student booklets), it becomes incumbent upon the GFPs to abide by them.
- Review of entry and exit standards: GFPs have much to gain from the review of their entry and exit standards. Firstly, review is a key component of the ADRI cycle and the GFPs' failure to review their processes will deny them of the opportunity to assess their progress in the attainment of their goals and, more importantly, deprive them of the chance to improve their provision. Secondly, the effectiveness of entry and exit standards is relative rather than absolute. It is affected by a variety of factors within GFP and outside such as the ever-changing requirements of the job market and changes in the curricula of undergraduate programs to remain relevant for employment purposes. An HEI, for instance, has an Information Technology programme and the GFP exit standards have been designed accordingly. If, for any reason, the HEI decides to add a 'Graphic Design' major to this program, the initial GFP exit standards will not serve the purpose and need to be updated in order to close the emerging gap. It is probably this ever-changing nature of entry and exit standards, much like any other area of the audit scope, that prompted MoHERI to consider the requirements set in the OASGFP as 'minimum requirements' (OASGFP, p.4) and OAAAQA to approach it 'as an external reference point' (GFPQA Manual, p.16).
- Benchmarking of entry and exit standards: OAAAQA obviously accords special attention to benchmarking. It devotes a whole section of the GFPQA Manual (Section 26) to it and prompts GFPs to use it in almost every scope area. This position may well be a reflection of the universally growing awareness of the importance of benchmarking as a development tool. By the end of the twentieth century, UNESCO authored a set of papers on benchmarking and branded them as:

Early contribution to what will inevitably become an area of increasing interest in the years to come, and it is likely that a concern with benchmarking and associated quality management initiatives will become increasingly central to future UNESCO activities within the field of higher education (UNESCO, 1998, p.5)

UNESCO's reading of the developments in the higher education sector has been accurate. The search intensified for tools to improve provision "in an increasingly diversified higher education sector" (Burquel & Vught, 2009, p.4). More importantly, "among the improvement strategies and techniques, benchmarking has emerged as a useful, easily understood, and effective tool for staying competitive" (Achim et al., 2009, p.850). The theoretical momentum built around benchmarking was sooner than later translated into action, with the birth of tens of benchmarking clubs and groups in developed countries (UNESCO, 1998, Burquel & Vught, 2009).

Interestingly, with regard to 'Student Entry and Exit Standards', benchmarking may be a useful tool for the GFPs' response to the three remaining opportunities for improvement. Running foundation programs has become a universal experience, particularly as more and more knowledge seekers travel around the world to study in languages other than their mother tongues. This provides GFPs in Oman with various opportunities to learn how issues such as low entry and/or exit levels have been addressed. The same applies to the review of GFP entry and exit standards which can be conducted for numerous purposes, including alignment with national requirements and meeting the requirements of undergraduate programs. Ensuring that GFPs remain in tandem with their counterparts throughout the world may not be achieved without being aware of how these programs operate, i.e., benchmarking.

6. Conclusion

The GFP Quality Audit reports published by the OAAAQA have been analyzed in order to evaluate the performance of GFPs in Oman in the area of ‘Student Entry and Exit Standards’. The formal conclusions (CARs) issued by review panels were used as indicators. The study found that the GFP performance in this area is yet to reach acceptable standards, as recommendations were prevalent in the reports included in this study. Four opportunities for improvement were identified as requiring attention of GFPs and one of them, benchmarking, stood out as it accounted alone for about half of the recommendations. This finding suggests that HEIs continue to prefer taking the journey in solo. It is not clear whether this reluctance to embrace such a proven effective tool is due to the confusion between ‘collaborative’ and ‘competitive’ benchmarking (UNESCO, 1998) or simply a case of misconstrued implementation of which Shoffield (1998) explicitly warned in his assertion that,

Benchmarking will not be effective if it simply takes a snapshot of a comparative situation. It needs to be an on-going, systematic process for measuring and comparing the work processes of one organisation with those of another by bringing an external focus on internal activities (Shoffield, A.,1998, p.10).

References

- Achim, M., Cabulea, L., Popa, M., & Mihalache, S. (2009). The role of benchmarking in the higher education quality Assessment. *Annales Universitatis Apulensis Series Oeconomica*, 11(2), 850-857.
- Al-Issa, A. & Al-Bulushi, A. (2012). English language teaching reform in Sultanate of Oman: The case of theory and practice disparity. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 11(2), 141-176. doi:10.1007/s10671-011-9110-0
- Al-Mahrooqi, R. & Denman, C. (2018). Introduction: English education in Oman: Current scenarios and future trajectories. In R. Al-Mahrooqi & C.J. Denman (Eds.), *English education in Oman: Current scenarios and future trajectories* (pp.1-8). Singapore: Springer.
- Bettinger, E. P. & Long, B. T. (2009). Addressing the Needs of Underprepared Students in Higher Education: Does College Remediation Work? *The Journal of Human Resources*, 44 (3), 736-771.
- Greene, J. & Foster, G. (2003). Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates in the United States. *Education Working Paper No. 3*.
- Lowe, H. & Cook, A. (2003). Mind the Gap: Are students prepared for higher education? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 27(1), 53-76.
- Mulvey, M. (2008). Under-Prepared Students - A Continuing Challenge for Higher Education. *Research in the Teaching of Developmental Education*, 24 (2), 77-87
- OAAAQA (2017). *General Foundation Program Quality Audit Manual*. Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education. Retrieved online at: <http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Docs/To%20upload-FINAL-GFP%20Quality%20Audit%20Manual%20April.pdf>
- OAAAQA (2008). *Institutional Quality Audit Manual*. Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education. Retrieved online at: http://www.oaaa.gov.om/KeyDocument/Files/qam_2008_final2.pdf
- Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programs. (2010). Retrieved from <http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Docs/GFP%20Standards%20FINAL.pdf>
- Oman Observer. (2021). Retrieved from <https://www.omanobserver.om/article/1103368/oman/44779-students-registered-in-heac>
- Rickinson, B. & Rutherford, D. (1995). Increasing undergraduate student retention rates. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 23 (2), 161-72.
- Shoffield, A. (1998). Benchmarking: An overview of approaches and issues in Implementation in ‘Benchmarking in Higher Education: A study conducted by the Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service. *New Papers on Higher Education* (21). UNESCO, 10-30.
- UNESCO, (1998). Benchmarking in Higher Education: A study conducted by the Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service. *New Papers on Higher Education* (21). UNESCO.
- Trowler, V. (2010). *Student Engagement Literature Review*. York: The Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from [https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/hea/private/studentengagementliteraturereview_1_1568037028.p df](https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/hea/private/studentengagementliteraturereview_1_1568037028.pdf)