

Quality Audits of the General Foundation Program in Oman: A Review of Trends and Priorities

Mohamed Elamin^{*1}

¹ General Foundation Department, Mazoon College, Muscat, Oman, mohamed.elamin@mazcol.edu.om.

*Corresponding Author.

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Abstract:

The General Foundation Programs (GFPs) are a significant part of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Oman. Recently, GFPs underwent quality audits carried out by the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA). This study aims to quantify and categorize the GFP Quality Audit (GFPQA) reports available on the OAAAQA website, highlighting emerging patterns and key focus areas. Twenty-eight GFPQA reports were classified and evaluated based on their scope and relevance. The research indicates that GFPs face challenges in meeting GFPQA standards, and the focus of GFPQA is sometimes compromised by prioritizing broader concerns over GFP-specific topics in higher education institutions. The uniqueness of this research comes from the lack of prior studies that have thoroughly classified and analyzed the GFPQA reports. In this regard, the study could also be important for regional policymakers, institutional researchers, and international audiences interested in comparative education systems. Additionally, the paper takes this important opportunity to clarify details regarding the existence and importance of GFPs.

Keywords: General Foundation Programs (GFPs), Quality Audit, OAAAQA, Higher Education in Oman.

1. Introduction

1.1 General Foundation Programs (GFPs)

GFPs in Oman primarily aim to prepare students for their post-secondary studies. The main objective of GFPs is to bridge the gap between schooling and tertiary education. GFPs are based on the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programs (OASGFPs) (OAAAQA, 2008), which were formally approved by the Higher Education Council in oaaa. Ministerial Decision No. 72/2008, issued by the Ministry of Higher Education – now referred to as the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI) – mandated the implementation of OASGFPs in all HEIs across the nation. Consequently, the adoption of GFPs in Omani universities and colleges dates back to the 2009/2010 Academic Year. A GFP is predominantly structured around one academic year, which is why it is informally known as the foundation year. OASGFPs document concentrates on four subject areas: English Language, Mathematics, Computing, and General Study Skills. It also sheds light on GFP structure and assessment of student learning, among other interrelated issues.

In this context, the Oman Qualifications Framework (OQF) (OAAAQA, 2023b) needs to be looked at to situate GFP in the Omani educational arena. OQF was developed by the **Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA)**, formerly known as the **Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA)**. The OQF serves as a national reference point for qualifications in Oman, providing a well-defined framework for classifying and comparing qualifications across sectors and levels. The academic pathway of OQF is classified into 10 levels, ranging from literacy to doctorate. Levels 4 and 5 are General Educational Diploma exit level and the higher education entrance level, respectively. There is no explicit mention of GFP in OQF, but it can be inferred that GFP fits somewhere between Levels 4 and 5 on OQF. This further supports the view that it is a bridging course (see Figure 1).



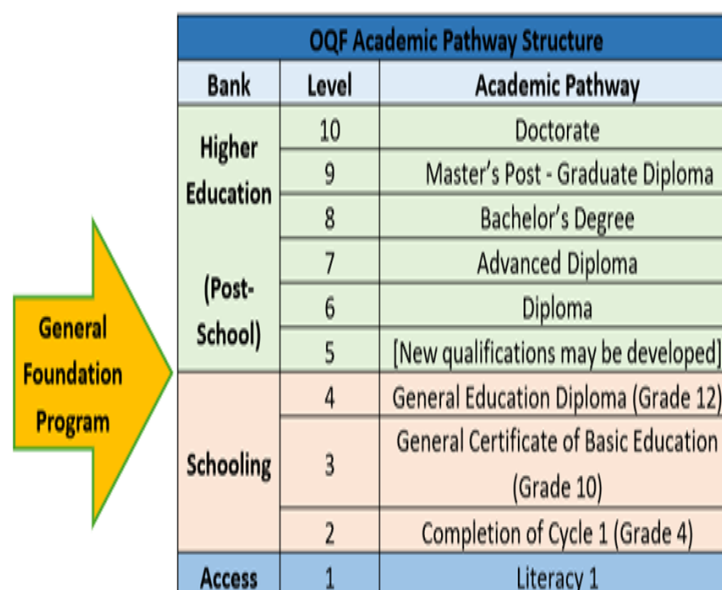
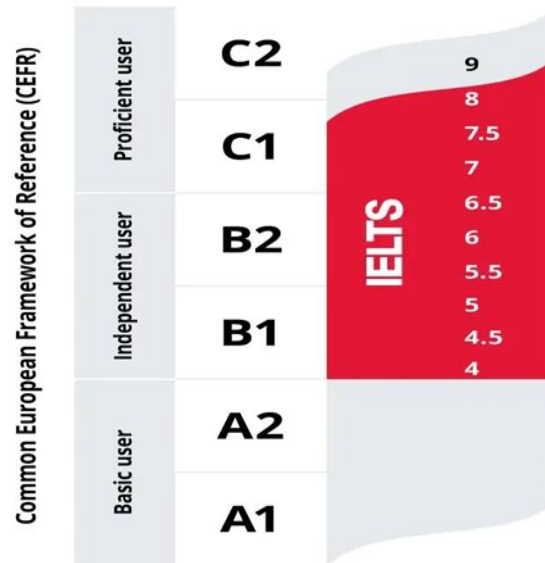


Figure 1: The Transitional Placement of GFP Between OQF Levels 4 and 5

Source: (OAAAQA, 2023b)

As shown in Figure 1, it can confidently be stated that the very existence of GFP is intended to solve a prevailing problem and that it is not an original component of the national educational ladder. GFP is viewed as a transitional period. Its continuation or potential elimination is closely tied to improvements and reforms in Oman's broader educational system. Some recent research papers suggest that the phasing out of GFP depends on the readiness of secondary education systems to adequately prepare students for higher education without the need for remedial programs (Carroll et al., 2009; Tuzlukova, 2019; Al-Rusheidi, 2021)

Although OASGFPs is a national document, it is linked with international standards. For instance, obtaining Band 5 in IELTS (International English Language Testing System) - Academic qualifies potential students to be exempted from the English Language course in GFP, as specified in OASGFPs. According to the official IELTS website, the IELTS nine-band scale is aligned with the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) levels (see Figure 2). CEFR is used around the world to define and evaluate language skills. In his study, Hidri 2020 points out that an IELTS Academic score of 5.0 is equivalent to the upper range of CEFR Level B1, which can be informally referred to as B1+. According to Cambridge University Press & Assessment. (2023), progressing from A1 to B1+ would likely require up to 400 hours of guided learning. In contexts where learners have limited opportunities to use English beyond formal education in the real world, language development is delayed and might take longer than the norm (Al-Issa, 2021). It can be concluded that progressing from **A1 to B1+** may require **additional time and targeted interventions** in the Omani context, as learners lack exposure to the target language outside the classroom. It is challenging for GFP to assist students in developing their English language proficiency within the limited time allotted to the program (one year).



This lack of synthesis limits the broader impact of the GFPQA process. When findings are scattered, stakeholders lack a clear evidence base to assess how GFPs perform collectively against national standards or to identify consistent issues. Consequently, the potential of GFPQA reports to inform ongoing updates of the OASGFPs, support institutional growth, and contribute to global discussions on foundation programs remains underused. Closing this gap is therefore crucial, and the current study directly addresses it by systematically categorizing and evaluating the 28 published GFPQA reports.

3- Related Work

There are a few research papers related to the subject matter of this study. Some of them focus on the narrower scope of GFP and its related quality assurance aspects. Others emphasize the broader scope of institutional audit and accreditation. Below, a brief overview of these studies will be provided.

Carroll et al. (2009) discuss the development and implementation of national academic standards for GFPs in Oman. The paper emphasizes how these standards serve as a quality-enhancement tool by promoting consistency across institutions and by improving teaching, curriculum design, and student outcomes. The authors also reflect on the challenges encountered during implementation and the broader impact of the standards on higher education quality assurance in Oman.

Tuzlukova et al. (2019) explore how general education principles and standards are reflected in the English foundation program at Sultan Qaboos University. Using interviews with academic leaders, the study highlights the program's role in developing students' academic and personal skills. However, it also identifies a need to enhance the curriculum and improve teaching strategies to better align with Oman's broader educational goals and general education standards.

Ali et al. (2020) analyze 12 quality audit reports conducted by OAAAQA on GFPs in Oman. It identifies common themes and areas of concern, such as curriculum alignment with OASGFPs, student progression, and the effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies. The study provides insights into the strengths and weaknesses of GFPs and offers recommendations for improvement.

Al-Rusheidi (2021) focuses on the student entry and exit standards for GFPs in Oman. It analyzes the alignment of GFPs with the OASGFPs and examines the effectiveness of these standards in preparing students for higher education. The study provides recommendations to enhance the entry and exit criteria to improve student preparedness.

El Kadhi and Bunagan (2017) analyze institutional audit reports from Omani higher education institutions to identify strengths and weaknesses in teaching, learning, and assessment. Based on their findings, they propose a teaching, learning, and assessment framework with guiding principles to help institutions improve quality and prepare for audits. The study emphasizes aligning academic practices with national quality standards.

Al-Amri et al. (2020) explore how students, staff, and employers in Oman perceive accreditation standards in higher education. The study finds differing priorities: students value teaching quality, employers emphasize research and community engagement, while staff focus on governance. It concludes that accreditation systems should strike a balance between these perspectives to ensure comprehensive quality in higher education institutions.

All the previously referenced studies addressing GFP issues do not consider the matters from the perspective of this research. This is what distinguishes this study. This study builds on existing research by directly analyzing published GFP quality audit reports, thereby addressing a gap that has not been previously explored in the literature.

3- Methodology

This study collects data by reviewing the GFPQA reports published on the OAAAQA website. The paper aims to address the following research question: What patterns emerge in the outcomes of GFPQA reports across Omani higher education institutions, and how do these reports reflect their relevance to these institutions?

Since the study relied on publicly available, standardized audit reports published by OAAAQA, the coding process adhered to a predefined framework based on OAAAQA's own quality assurance standards. To maintain consistency, a record of coding decisions was kept, and themes were verified against the established framework. Although formal inter-rater reliability testing was not performed, the use of an existing authoritative framework helped minimize subjective bias.

The study will quantify and categorize the recommendations, affirmations, and commendations in 28 GFPQA reports published on the OAAAQA website. The Executive Summary of Findings in each GFPQA report includes all the recommendations, affirmations, and commendations related to that HEI. Data was collected by counting the findings in the Executive Summary section of the GFPQA reports. The 28 GFPQA reports were organized in ascending order based on the number of recommendations, with the HEI receiving the fewest recommendations placed at the top of the table. This approach is not intended to alter the qualitative and formative nature of the GFPQA reports; instead, it provides an opportunity to anticipate the upcoming GFP accreditation phase using numerical indicators. To improve the visualization of the numerical summary of the GFPQA reports, color-coding similar to traffic lights, adapted from CIToolkit, 2024, is used: Red (recommendations) indicates performance well below target, yellow (affirmations) signifies performance slightly below target, and green (commendations) shows performance meeting or exceeding the target (see Figure 3).

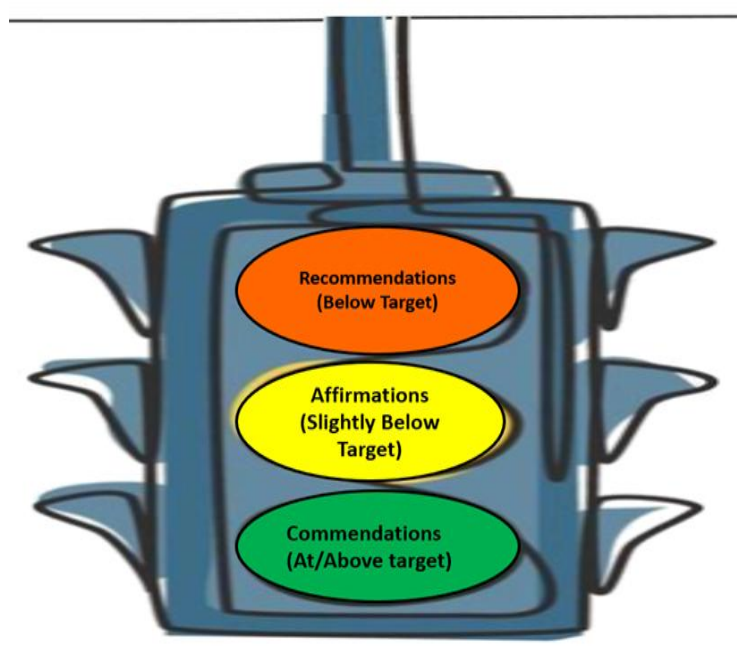


Figure 3: Traffic Light Color-Coding of GFPQA Outcomes

Evaluating the relevance and scope of the GFPQA outcomes involved examining the GFPQA reports to determine whether they address program-specific issues or broader institutional Concerns. Scope Two of the GFPQA Manual, titled GFP Student Learning, is directly related to GFP-specific subject matter, whereas the other three scopes: Governance and Management, Academic and Student Support Services, and Staff and Staff Support Services may have elements linked to the broader institutional matters. This study will highlight and discuss several unrelated topics related to GFP, including an analysis of the institution's budgeting process, health, safety, and accessibility protocols.

4- Result Discussion

There are significant differences in the number of recommendations in the GFPQA reports. An HEI received as few as six recommendations, while another received as many as 32 (see Table 1). The range from 6 to 32

recommendations across educational institutions in GFPQA reports is quite broad and can suggest several important points depending on the context. The first obvious explanation is that some institutions may be performing significantly better than others, thus receiving fewer recommendations. However, according to the National Research Council (2001), the wide variation in audit and assessment outcomes is not necessarily due to differences in performance; it can also stem from the depth and variety of data interpretation. For example, when a leading HEI, such as Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), received 15 recommendations, it raised concerns about the overall effectiveness and consistency of the audit process itself. SQU's recommendations are highlighted here to raise concerns about the accuracy of the GFPQA, given that SQU is the highest-ranked university in Oman. Consistent with the National Research Council (2001), recent studies report that variability in external audit outcomes frequently reflects differences in the type and depth of evidence considered, the interpretive frameworks used by panels, and the aims of quality-assurance agencies — not solely underlying institutional performance (Beerken, 2018; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018; ENQA, 2025). Aligned with the National Research Council (2001), recent studies show that variability in external audit outcomes often depends on differences in the type and depth of evidence considered, the interpretive frameworks used by panels, and the goals of quality-assurance agencies — not just underlying institutional performance (Beerken, 2018; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018; ENQA, 2025).

Table 1: Summary of the GFPQA Reports Outcomes

No.	HEI	Recommendation	Affirmation	Commendation
1	National University of Science and Technology	6	7	3
2	The German University of Technology in Oman	6	7	1
3	Middle East College	7	2	2
4	Muscat College	8	1	3
5	Majan University College	8	3	3
6	Oman Dental College	8	5	2
7	College of Banking and Financial Studies	8	2	1
8	Dhofar University	9	8	6
9	Sohar University	9	0	3
10	International Maritime College	11	4	2
11	Modern College of Business and Science	12	5	5
12	Bayan College	12	1	1
13	University of Nizwa	13	1	4
14	Arab Open University	14	6	3
15	Sultan Qaboos University	15	5	5
16	Mazoon College	15	2	0
17	International College of Engineering	16	1	1
18	Sur University College	17	2	0
19	Global College of Engineering and Technology	18	3	1
20	Oman Tourism College	18	3	1
21	Oman College of Management and Technology	19	2	3
22	University of Buraimi	19	5	2
23	A'Sharqiyah University	19	3	0
24	Al Buraimi University College	20	5	0
25	Al-Zahra College for Women	23	3	3
26	Scientific College of Design	22	1	3
27	Oman College of Health Science	25	2	1

28	Gulf College	32	2	2
	Aggregate Total	392 (72%)	91 (17%)	61 (11%)
		544 (100%)		

In this particular respect, there is a tendency to explore other reasons behind the existence of this wide range of differences in the number of recommendations in the GFPQA reports. First, review panels might differ in how strictly or thoroughly they apply evaluation criteria. A higher number of recommendations may not always indicate poorer performance — it might reflect a more detailed review. Some reports may emphasize improvement (thus include many recommendations), while others may focus on affirmations/commendations. Variation could also stem from differences in reporting emphasis. The bottom line is that it can be concluded that the wide range of differences in GFPQA outcomes might not be solely linked with only performance differences.

From the total of 544 comments in GFPQA reports, there are 392 (72%) recommendations, 91 (17%) affirmations, and 61 (11%) commendations (see Figure 4). The majority of the comments in the GFPQA reports are recommendations (72%), indicating that most feedback focuses on areas needing improvement or change. Affirmations (17%) suggest that some existing practices meet standards or expectations. Commendations (11%) reflect positive recognition for exceptional performance. It is clear from these numbers that GFPs across the Sultanate of Oman do not perform satisfactorily, as they substantially fail to meet the GFPQA requirements. This opportunity should be used to highlight the other reasons behind the auditors’ dissatisfaction with the GFPs’ performance.

Recommendations: 392

Affirmations: 91

Commendations: 61

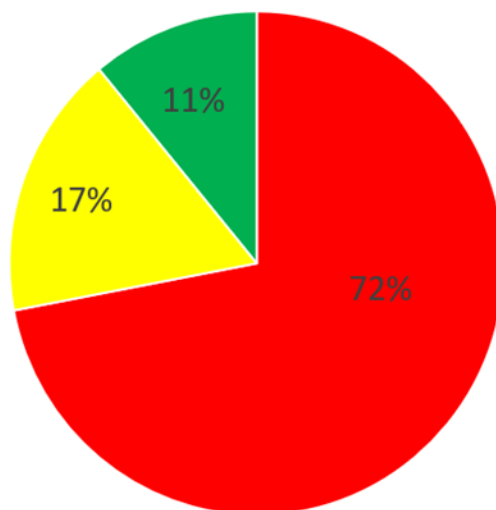


Figure 4: Distribution of GFPQA Outcomes Based on 544 Comments

It is believed that one of the major reasons is the role of GFP, which is thoroughly discussed in 1.1. above. Enormous pressure is put on GFP to fix problems in one year that schooling fails to resolve entirely in 12 years. Without understanding the very nature of GFP, auditors and other stakeholders, such as post-Foundation lecturers, will have high and unrealistic expectations. For example, band 5 in IELTS qualifies students to be exempted from the English language course in GFP, as specified in OASGFPs, but holders of band 5 in IELTS have a partial command of the language, coping with less complicated communication settings. Profound Awareness of GFP structure and challenges will lead to less rigorous review standards and minimize recommendations.

Furthermore, a considerable number of recommendations focus on the broader institutional issues and are not GFP-specific. This, in a way, resembles institutional accreditation. The higher stakes lead to more requirements, and, hence, more recommendations. To illustrate this viewpoint, a recommendation from a GFPQA report is displayed below to enrich the discussion.

The OAAQA (2023a) recommends that “Mazoon College review the cover provided by medical services to ensure that there is medical support available for staff and GFP students at all times when it is needed during the academic year” (p. 28).

It goes without saying that medical services are crucial for HIEs, but the objection here is that it’s unfair to judge the quality of a specific GFP based on an institutional-level problem. This underscores the difficulty of distinguishing between GFP-specific issues and larger institutional challenges when making a fair and reliable assessment of a particular GFP.

5. Conclusion

5-1 Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into categorizing and quantifying GFPQA reports and spotting emerging trends, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations that may affect the scope and generalizability of the findings. Like any research, methodological and contextual constraints inevitably impact the results. Recognizing these boundaries ensures transparency and guides future research. By addressing these limitations, the study positions its contributions within a realistic framework while also pointing out areas where further investigation could deepen and broaden the understanding of GFPQA practices.

First, conducting thematic clustering of recommendations based on the GFPQA’s four scopes—Governance and Management, GFP Student Learning, Academic and Student Support Services, and Staff and Staff Support Services—could provide deeper insights into systemic strengths and weaknesses. In the present study, recommendations were counted together without differentiating them across these four categories, which limits the analysis’s granularity. This approach suggests that GFPs across Oman generally do not meet the required standards, but a more detailed categorization in future research could yield richer and more nuanced findings.

Second, evaluating the relevance of recommendations in GFPQA reports was based on a small sample, which helped determine whether recommendations were specific to GFP-related issues or reflected broader institutional concerns. This approach demonstrated that not all recommendations are directly tied to GFP deficiencies. However, a full review of all recommendations would be needed to produce a more thorough and detailed analysis. Therefore, the current study is limited to highlighting the importance of reviewers distinguishing between GFP-related issues and broader institutional matters.

5-2 Summary

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of General Foundation Program Quality Audits (GFPQAs) in Oman by addressing the research question: How accurately do GFPQAs reflect the performance and challenges of GFPs across higher education institutions? An analysis of GFPQA reports reveals that most programs fail to meet the standards set by OAAQA, as indicated by the numerous recommendations. Three systemic issues appear to underlie this outcome. First, GFPs are expected to address deep-rooted schooling deficits within a single academic year, creating unrealistic demands. Second, auditors and stakeholders often have limited understanding of the scope and role of GFPs, leading to overly strict assessments. Third, many recommendations target institutional challenges that go beyond GFPs, thereby conflating broader institutional performance with program-specific quality. These practices risk inaccurately representing the true effectiveness of GFPs.

In response to these findings, several targeted recommendations are proposed. Audit reports should clearly distinguish between GFP-specific concerns and general institutional issues to ensure fairness and accountability. Increased awareness is also necessary among auditors and stakeholders regarding the realistic scope of GFPs, particularly in terms of achievable language proficiency levels within limited program durations. Learning outcomes should, therefore, be aligned with students' actual entry levels and the time-bound nature of GFPs rather than idealized benchmarks. Additionally, closer coordination between GFP faculty and post-foundation departments is crucial to strengthen curriculum alignment, foster shared expectations of student readiness, and promote smoother academic transitions.

Beyond the Omani context, this study contributes to international debates on higher education quality assurance. Many systems worldwide face similar tensions between the expectations for preparatory or bridging programs and the practical challenges these programs encounter. The findings highlight the risks of applying audit frameworks too rigidly or without sufficient understanding of the local context—a concern reflected in global discussions about balancing accountability with developmental support in higher education quality assurance. By emphasizing these challenges, the study not only informs regional policymakers and institutional leaders but also provides insights for comparative education researchers exploring how foundational programs can better support students transitioning into higher education.

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