Audit of General Foundation Programs: Call for Project Consultant

Background

Oman’s *Academic Standards for General Foundation Programs* state that a General Foundation Program (GFP) has the following characteristics:

a) It is a formal, structured program of study... provided by a licensed HEI.
b) It is designed to prepare students for their postsecondary and higher education studies.
c) It precedes the first formal year of higher education study (except where, on a case by case basis, the HEI has determined that it can be undertaken, in part, concurrently with first year study).
d) It is only required for students who do not otherwise meet all the entrance criteria for the first year of their postsecondary and higher education.
e) It does not result in the awarding of formal academic credit to the student. And more specifically, a HEI may not award credit for any higher education course which only meets these [GFP] standards or less.
f) It is general in disciplinary scope, thereby preparing students for a wide variety of subsequent postsecondary and higher education program options.
g) It is not precisely ‘higher education’, but nonetheless falls within the ambit of the OAC (2008:6).

The standards require that all GFP programs are effective in helping students attain the prescribed student learning outcomes in four areas: English, mathematics, computing and general study skills. These standards were developed by working groups in Oman in consultation with the higher education sector and were approved in June 2008 (Higher Education Council decision No.13/2008). Ministerial Decision No. 72/2008 required these standards to be adopted by all public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) in Oman in the academic year 2009-2010. Although some institutions needed more time to adopt the standards (e.g. Sultan Qaboos University introduced a restructured program to meet the standards in 2010-2011), the OAAA understands that the majority of HEIs in Oman have been working to align their GFPS with the national standards.

In 2011, the OAAA Board supported a proposal to develop and implement a system of higher education and General Foundation program accreditation. In relation to higher education program accreditation, this proposal has been taken forward in a project which has reached a relatively advanced stage. Evidence has emerged which indicates that GFPS offered in Oman are generally not at a sufficiently advanced stage of development and maturity to be subject to accreditation against internationally recognised standards. This issue has been highlighted in national conferences (e.g. paper on Foundation Programs delivered at the 2012 Oman Quality Network in Higher Education conference); meetings with stakeholders and

---

1 http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Program.aspx#GeneralFoundation
2 http://174.142.90.208/$sitepreview/oqnhe.om/Docs/Atiya_Said_Al-Mamari.pdf
observed during OAAA Quality Audits. A major challenge is the need to improve the level of English of the majority of General Education Diploma graduates. This presents challenges to both students and providers of GFP programs. This fact is also reflected in the GFP standards themselves; the agreed equivalency of IELTS band 5.0 to the specified learning outcomes for English language was a compromise. This compromise was agreed to in recognition of the local context although it reflects an English language level which is below international norms as a standard for entry to degree programs. Although there is national recognition of this issue, it will take some time for reforms in school education to produce General Education Diploma graduates who are better prepared for further study in terms of their English language proficiency.

The OAAA 2006 Quality Plan proposed a Foundation Program audit rather than a Foundation Program accreditation (Quality Plan, goal 8, p.44). The Plan considered that it would not be helpful to have a system which could lead to the possibility of Foundation Programs failing accreditation or being closed; rather, it favoured a system whereby poor programs were subject to close scrutiny by supervising bodies. Considering the above, it is now believed that a system of GFP audits (which will include a review of an HEI’s implementation of national standards) will best serve the sector and relevant stakeholders at the present time - and that this will form the basis of a system of accreditation in the future. This approach should be informed by the first stage of OAAA’s institutional accreditation process, Quality Audit.

The OAAA Board has recently agreed that the accreditation process proposed in 2011 is postponed and replaced by a formative process which serves the dual purpose of supporting the development of GFPs and providing the public and other stakeholders with independent assurance about their quality.

Public reporting of GFP audit findings in a relatively short and reader-friendly report will help to share good practices as well as provide independent evaluation of GFPs for the public and relevant stakeholders. Development of the process can include consideration of using statements of "confidence" about GFPs as formal outcomes of the audit process. Benchmarks for using such statements include the Quality Assurance Agency in the UK and the National Authority for Qualifications and Quality Assurance of Education and Training in Bahrain.

**Project aim**
The aim of this project is to develop and implement an external audit process for GFPs in order to provide support for HEIs in the development of GFPs and information to the public about the quality of GFPs being delivered in Oman.

**Project scope**
The development and implementation of an audit process for GFPs will include specific consideration of the following:

1. The current OAAA approach to institutional and program accreditation; in particular, the approach to the first stage of institutional accreditation, Quality Audit.
2. The requirement for an HEI’s implementation of the existing GFP standards to be included in the audit process.
3. The requirement for the Omani context to be fully recognised.
4. The requirement for the diversity of institutions in the sector to be fully recognised.

---

5. The requirement for the use of ADRI to be maintained and encouraged in the sector.

6. The requirement for the audit process to be linked to the OAAA Appeals procedure. 

7. Consultation with the Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Education and other key stakeholders.

8. Development of procedures that support both HEI self-assessment and external review.

9. The requirement for extensive relevant benchmarking with current international approaches to the external review/audit of Foundation Programs (or equivalent programs) and reporting of formative outcomes.

10. The requirement for effective consultation with all relevant stakeholders and sector ‘ownership’ of the GFP audit process.

11. Development of documentation that aligns with OAAA format and style.

12. Development of training materials for HEIs and reviewers.

The project will result in the production of a GFP Audit Manual which will include the process for audit, guidelines for HEIs carrying out a self-study of their GFPs and support for external reviewers who will be involved in the audit panels.

**Proposed methodology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Provisional timeline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage One</strong></td>
<td>• Recruitment of consultant</td>
<td>August 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage Two</strong></td>
<td>• Developing familiarity with OAAA documentation and GFP standards</td>
<td>Early November 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Environmental scan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Undertaking relevant benchmarking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Initial proposal for developing and implementing an approach for the audit of GFPs, taking into consideration an HEI's implementation of the GFP standards.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Draft proposal circulated for consultation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage Three</strong></td>
<td>• Feedback on proposal considered and reflected in proposal v2</td>
<td>February 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Based on this, development of draft GFP Audit Manual including detailed procedure for the audit of GFPs and guidance for HEIs and external reviewers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Draft manual circulated for consultation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage Four</strong></td>
<td>• Revision of GFP Audit Manual in light of feedback</td>
<td>April 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• OAAA prepares GFP Audit schedule</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Training for HEIs/reviewers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage Five (OAAA)</strong></td>
<td>• Pilot GFP Audits to be carried out</td>
<td>September 2015 (though need to look at timeline for pilots)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Publication of final GFP Audit Manual</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Final approval process (through OAAA Board)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Project deliverables
- Initial proposal for developing and implementing an approach for the audit of GFPs, taking into consideration an HEI’s implementation of the GFP standards.
- Draft GFP Audit Manual including detailed procedure for the audit of GFPs and guidance for external reviewers.
- Final GFP Audit Manual.
- Training program for HEIs and reviewers.

Project consultant
The OAAA Board has approved a proposal to appoint a consultant recruited on a temporary contract to support development of the agreed approach and audit process (see Appendix 1 for job description and person specifications). It is expected that the consultant will either be based in Oman or will spend an extended period in Oman to support the project.

Those interested in applying for this position should send their CV, indicating relevant experience, to Shuruq Al Barwani shurooq@oaaa.gov.om by Wednesday 21 May 2014.

Acronyms
ADRI ..................... Approach-Deployment-Results-Improvement
GFP ...................... General Foundation Program
HEIs ...................... Higher Education Institutions
IELTS ..................... International English Language Testing System
MoE ....................... Ministry of Education
MoHE ....................... Ministry of Higher Education
OAAA ..................... Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
OAC ....................... Oman Accreditation Council
Job Specifications

Position title:..........................Quality Assurance Consultant for Foundation Programs

Reporting to: .........................Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

Direct reports:.......................Nil

Grade..................................1

Main purpose: ......................This position is a temporary role designed to support the development and implementation of an external quality review process for General Foundation Programs, taking into consideration Oman’s Academic Standards for General Foundation Programs (GFPs).

Organisational context:............The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) (formerly the Oman Accreditation Council) was established by Royal Decree No. 54/2010 and is charged with assisting in the development of the Omani higher education sector through institutional and program accreditation processes. Also, in collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education, it has responsibilities for assuring academic standards, and providing training and networking opportunities. The OAAA is assembling a team of professional staff to support it in meeting its mandate. While these staff will have areas of specialisation, it is envisaged that they will work as a team in addressing all the OAAA strategic objectives.

Objectives and tasks:
- To develop and support the implementation of General Foundation Program (GFP) external review activities taking into consideration Oman’s Academic Standards for General Foundation Programs
- To carry out benchmarking and support a wide range of consultation with key partners and stakeholders
- To develop associated documentation (such as Manuals)
- To support the preparation of a draft national schedule for GFP external review activities in consultation with the sector and other stakeholders
- To devise and deliver training to the sector, reviewers and other stakeholders on external review activities for GFPS.
- To provide guidance for staff working with external review Panels during review activities.
- To develop a framework for a review of the Academic Standards for General Foundation Programs following the initial cycle of external review activities.
To participate as a full member of the OAAA team of professional staff.
Other tasks as may be assigned from time to time by the CEO within the area of technical affairs.

Person Specifications

Knowledge & Experience:
- Direct extensive experience with developing and implementing quality assurance practices in higher education (at institutional and, preferably, also at national level).
- Direct experience of developing and delivering Foundation Programs
- Knowledge of the contemporary literature and practices on quality assurance in higher education, particularly in the area of Foundation Programs
- Knowledge of preparing documentation relating to quality assurance activities
- Experience of leading teams of diverse professionals

Qualifications:
- PhD (or equivalent) and at least 12 years’ relevant experience; or Masters or equivalent and at least 17 years’ relevant experience.

Attributes:
- Proven interpersonal skills.
- Demonstrable organisational skills and ability to establish effective working relationships with teams.
- Ability to research and report on complex academic, quality-related issues.
- Ability to work collaboratively with senior persons.
- Excellent English language communication and writing skills.
- High levels of energy and tenacity combined with patience and resilience.