Oman Academic Accreditation Authority

Report of an Audit of the University of Nizwa

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P.O. Box 1255
P.C. 133
Al-Khuwair
Sultanate of Oman
Ph +968 24614361
Fax +968 2461 4364
http://www.oac.gov.om

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OVERVIEW OF THE QUALITY AUDIT PROCESS

This Quality Audit Report (the ‘Report’) documents the findings of a Quality Audit by the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) of the University of Nizwa. It comments on the University of Nizwa’s Mission and Vision, and the appropriateness and effectiveness of its systems for achieving that Mission and Vision. Quality Audit is the first stage in Oman’s institutional accreditation process. It is designed to provide a level of assurance to the public about the quality of University of Nizwa’s activities and constructive feedback to the University to assist with its ongoing improvement efforts.

The Quality Audit commenced with the University of Nizwa undertaking a self study of its Mission, Vision and systems. The results were summarized in their Quality Audit Portfolio (the ‘Portfolio’). This document was submitted to the OAAA by the due date of 1 November 2010.

The OAAA appointed an external Audit Panel (the ‘Panel’), comprising suitably qualified and experienced local and international reviewers, to conduct the Quality Audit. For membership of the Panel see Appendix A. The Panel met (international members by telephone) on 15 December 2010 to consider the University of Nizwa’s Portfolio. Following this, a representative of the Audit Panel Chairperson and the Executive Officer undertook a planning visit on behalf of the Panel to the University of Nizwa on 19 January 2011 to clarify certain matters, request additional information and make arrangements for the Panel’s audit visit.

Prior to the audit visit, the Panel invited submissions from the public about the quality of the University of Nizwa’s activities. One valid submission was received.

The audit visit took place over 27 February-1 March 2011. During this time, the Panel spoke with approximately one hundred and fifty people, including governing authorities, staff, students and external stakeholders. They also visited a selection of venues and examined additional documents.

No documents created after 1 March 2011 (being the last day of the audit visit) were taken into consideration for the purposes of this audit.

The Report contains a summary of the Panel’s findings, together with formal Commendations where good practices have been confirmed, Affirmations where the University of Nizwa’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 the University.

The Panel’s audit activities and preparation of this Report were governed by regulations set by the OAAA Board. This Report was approved for release by the OAAA Board on 22 October 2011.

The OAAA was established by Royal Decree No. 54/2010. Its responsibilities include conducting quality audits of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Sultanate of Oman. For further information, visit the OAAA website (http://www.oac.gov.om). Full details of the quality audit process are available in OAAA’s HEI Quality Audit Manual (available from http://www.oac.gov.om/qa/HEI/).
HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

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

The Report is made public because it also may be of interest to 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, 6 and 7 below). However, students should still undertake their own investigations when deciding which higher education institution will best serve their particular learning needs.

Quality Audit is the first stage in Oman’s two-stage process for institutional accreditation. Its focus is formative (developmental) rather than summative. In other words, although the audit addresses nine areas of activity which are common to all institutions, it does not measure the institution against externally set standards of performance in those nine areas. Instead, it considers how well the institution is attending to those areas in accordance with its own Mission and Vision and in the context of relevant legal regulations. Therefore, Quality Audit recognises that each institution has a unique purpose and profile; it does not directly compare one institution with all the other institutions in Oman.

For these reasons, a 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 an institution receives in its Audit Report is not as important as the substance of those conclusions. For example, some Recommendations 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. Therefore, it is neither significant nor appropriate to compare the Audit Reports of different HEIs solely on the numbers of Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations.

The second stage in the institutional accreditation process is Standards Assessment. Unlike the Quality Audit, this stage, which will take place about four years after the Quality Audit, does provide a summative assessment against external standards in the same nine areas of activity. It should be noted that Oman also operates a system of accreditation/recognition for academic programmes, separately from the institutional accreditation process. For more information on Oman’s System of Quality Assurance in Higher Education please visit www.oac.gov.om.

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. They 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 Nizwa (UoN) was established in Oman as a non-profit, private university in 2004. It is located about 140 km from Muscat in the historic former capital city of Nizwa. The University’s well-considered Mission, Vision and Values reflect this context. The establishment of the University was preceded by a comprehensive planning project involving extensive national and international consultation and engagement with stakeholders and advisors. University documentation sets out a framework for a sophisticated institutional infrastructure, some of which has been realised.

The University has 14 academic departments accountable to four Colleges: the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS); the College of Economics, Management and Information Systems (CEMIS); the College of Engineering and Architecture (CEA); and the College of Pharmacy and Nursing (CPN). Currently, the institution has a student population of approximately 6,000; almost all are Omani and over 81% are female. More than 900 of these students are studying in the Foundation Institute in preparation for entry to diploma and degree programmes in the Colleges. The institution is supported by over 1000 staff of whom approximately 300 are teaching faculty. The first cohorts of Bachelor and Masters students graduated in 2009.

The UoN submitted a comprehensive Quality Audit Portfolio resulting from its institutional self-study which identified areas strength and opportunities for improvement in relation to each chapter. The Portfolio emphasises the strong theoretical basis which underpins the University’s infrastructure and its resulting frameworks, structures, policies and procedures. In term of the quality assurance tool ADRI (Approach, Deployment, Results, Improvement – see Appendix B), this represents a strength in the approach of the University to its operations. By contrast, the Portfolio lacked evidence of data collection and analysis in many, but not all, areas. This is an area that needs to be further developed across the University so that the deployment (or implementation) of plans and the results of these can be monitored and evaluated effectively and evidence-based opportunities for improvement can be identified.

The not-for-profit aspect of the University’s status is central to its philosophy as an institution; those associated with the governance and management of the University are, justifiably, proud of this method of operation. This approach has been assisted by the establishment of an investment fund company (UoNIF) which both provides non-academic services to the University and generates profit that is re-invested into the University. The Panel considered this to be an innovative and well-managed institutional model.

Governance and management roles are set out in the University’s Charter and a clear distinction between these functions is maintained. The senior leadership of the University, through its Board of Trustees and its Academic Council, benefits from extensive high-calibre external expertise. The role of representatives from Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) is particularly evident in this. The approach adopted by senior management, and the structure and membership of groups through the different levels of the institution, provide for a high degree of consultative activity within the University. The University has established formal relationships with a range of international partners providing benefits that include international exchange of students, provision of equipment for technical research and professional development for academics. This partnership activity needs to be supported by a formal monitoring and evaluation mechanism.
The University has a comprehensive 2011-2025 Strategic Plan derived from its start-up planning activities and documents and has recently taken the important step of developing a set of institutional Key Performance Indicators to allow progress towards strategic objectives to be tracked. It is now important for the University to enhance its capacity to develop operational plans which guide its activities effectively. A strong culture of external review at different levels and of different activities has been established at the University although, for continuous quality improvement, such reviews need to be supported by effective follow-up. The University primarily, but not exclusively, uses the medium of English for academic programs. It serves a community of both Arabic and English users, many of whom are not bilingual. In view of this, the University needs to take formal action to ensure that communication is effectively managed across the institution.

The University is aware that it has yet to develop and implement a comprehensive risk management plan and also that, as a priority, more work is required in the area of health and safety. Safety in laboratories, in particular, needs attention.

The University offers over 30 undergraduate majors and follows the North American credit-hour system. Currently more than 70% of its students follow just eight of these majors and this situation needs monitoring with respect to: the capacity of the University to offer courses with low enrolment; the learning experience of students on courses with low enrolment; and the low enrolments on majors that align with the technological aspect of the University’s Vision. A critically important area for the University to attend to is the English language proficiency of students on English-medium academic programs; students need to have adequate levels to be granted admission and, subsequently, to progress through their program. Rigorous implementation of the national standards for General Foundation Programmes that have now been adopted by the University is required. The University also offers six Masters programs. These operate within a strong theoretical framework and benefit from the involvement of SQU staff. The existing provision of postgraduate programs will benefit from formal evaluation of student retention as well as evaluation of the support for research activities undertaken by the students.

It is to the University’s credit that it has recently introduced a comprehensive Quality Teaching Management system to help ensure consistent implementation of polices and procedures across programs. Further work is needed to ensure that learning outcomes for all programs are explicitly aligned with course learning outcomes and generic attribute attributes. Development of a comprehensive assessment policy would support the University’s efforts to ensure academic standards. The University has yet to develop effective systems to both support students in gaining employment and to monitor graduate destinations and employability. Although the University is a relatively young institution, this development is now overdue.

The importance of research to the University is articulated clearly through its Mission, Vision and Values. This is reflected in the comprehensive infrastructure and associated systems that the University has established to promote this activity. The University will need to maintain efforts to ensure that its research output reflects its University status as defined in ROSQA (Requirements for Oman’s System of Quality Assurance in Higher Education) and that its increasingly demanding goals in this area are met. A strength of the University that aligns well with its Mission and institutional Values is its engagement with the community at large; provision of a health clinic that serves the local community and an extended, community-based literacy project are examples of this. An overarching industry and community engagement plan is, however, required. This will also help to guide the steps the University is taking to develop mechanisms to engage effectively with its alumni.

The University is aware of the academic challenges faced by its students and is working on enhancing its academic advising and academic counselling services. This is required, particularly as high numbers of students are on academic probation. Enhancement of the library is also required in terms of seating capacity and resources available. It is unfortunate that the poor level of internet provision available to the University currently undermines its operations. On the other hand, a positive aspect of the University’s academic support for students is its dedicated and heavily utilised Writing Centre. A Learning Enhancement Centre has now been established to supplement this and encourage academic excellence.
Non-academic support services are provided through UoNIF and include extensive provision of accommodation and transportation services. The University also has a funding scheme for needy students. A positive development is the recent enhancement of formal collection of feedback from students on a range of its services and facilities through on-line surveys. Results from these surveys have provided evidence that improvements to catering, student counselling and sports/recreation are required. In order to ensure that this feedback collection activity becomes embedded as part of a quality improvement system, the University needs to ensure that students are kept informed of actions taken in response to their feedback.

The University has a well-established Human Resources Department which operates according to comprehensive policies and procedures. Clear strategic objectives reflect the importance the University attaches to this area. The location of the University in an interior region of Oman presents its own challenges with respect to staff recruitment and retention and it is clear that a formal system for measuring and evaluating staff satisfaction is needed to support the University’s efforts in maintaining a staff profile appropriate to its needs.

The University leadership is passionate and sincere in pursuing its Vision of establishing the University as a prominent higher education institution of excellence. The University recognises that an appropriate physical infrastructure is an essential requirement if its long-term aspirations are to be realised. The new campus that is currently under construction addresses this.

**Summary of Commendations**

A formal Commendation recognises an instance of particularly good practice.

1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for its well-considered and integrated Mission, Vision and Values statements that drive its planning and operations as a non-profit, regional centre of higher education in the Sultanate of Oman........ 13

2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for the clear distinctions it has drawn between academic governance and academic management processes in the University and the consultative approach adopted by the senior leadership to engage staff at all levels in academic decision making. ................................................................. 14

3. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for the vitality of a number of its partnerships with international institutions and the benefits these bring to the University as a whole................................................................. 15

4. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for the manner in which it balances academic and management considerations in policy development and, in particular, the constructive role that the University Academic Council plays in this................................................................. 18

5. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for the establishment of the UoN Investment Fund (UoNIF) as a vehicle for supporting the development of the University as a non-profit institution and the care taken to ensure transparency and accountability in its operation................................................................. 20

6. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for its planned development of a comprehensive research infrastructure and associated systems to support achievement of its strategic aims................................................................. 33
7. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for the strength and depth of its engagement with the community through planned initiatives that align with its Mission and institutional Values. ................................................................. 38

8. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for the establishment of its Writing Centre as a well-planned, dedicated facility to support student learning and promote academic excellence. .............................................................................. 41

9. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for its system of integrated facilities management that provides services such as housing, catering, transportation, health care and campus maintenance which are supportive of students and responsive to change. ....................................................................................................................... 52

Summary of Affirmations

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

1. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority supports the initiative taken by the University of Nizwa to outline Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the core areas of the Strategic Plan and encourages the institution to capitalise on this achievement through the development of associated plans that will allow tracking of progress towards goals at all levels. ................................................................................................................................................. 16

2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Nizwa that its health and safety functions need to be enhanced and encourages continuation of its work in this area as a priority. .................................................................................................................................................. 19

3. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recognizes the importance of the University of Nizwa having introduced the national standards for General Foundation Programs, and urges the University to ensure that implementation of these is monitored and evaluated. ....................................................... 24

4. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Nizwa that its research performance needs to be enhanced and recognizes the steps that have been taken to support achievement of this.............................................................................................................. 33

5. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Nizwa that systems for effective engagement with its alumni are required and supports its work in developing an alumni database as a positive step towards this. ....................................................................................................................... 38

6. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Nizwa that its internet facilities need to be improved to a level that effectively supports its general communication requirements as well as its academic and research goals and supports its ongoing efforts to secure the best services available through the local internet provider. ....................................................... 40

7. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Nizwa that the effectiveness of its academic advising system needs to be improved and supports the steps taken towards ensuring that the various stakeholders involved in academic advising are effective in providing a systematic and integrated network for referral and monitoring of those students in need of academic assistance.................................................................................. 41

8. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Nizwa that increasing and then maintaining a high percentage of Omani faculty members is a challenge
and supports the efforts taken by the University to achieve its clear strategic objectives in this area................................................................. 50

9. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Nizwa that achievement of its strategic aims requires an enhanced physical infrastructure and supports the steps taken towards development of its new campus. .......................... 51

Summary of Recommendations

A Recommendation draws attention to a significant opportunity for improvement that the University of Nizwa 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 Nizwa introduce a program of periodic review of the effectiveness of its governance groups. ............... 14

2. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa establish a system of periodic review of its international partnerships as a whole with a view to establishing the benefits of individual agreements and identifying additional opportunities for collaboration. ................................................................. 15

3. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa implement a program to develop capacity in organisational units at all levels of the institution for the preparation of useful operational plans that will guide the day-to-day operation of the University. ................................................................. 16

4. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop and implement a comprehensive risk management plan. ................................................................. 17

5. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa outline a process for systematic, thorough consideration of the review reports of organisational units, activities and policies with reliable follow-up to monitor progress on implementation of review results within stated timeframes. ................................................................. 18

6. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa ensure that explicit alignment between course learning outcomes, program learning outcomes and generic attribute attributes is established and documented for all programs. .................. 21

7. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa evaluate its program offerings in relation to levels of student demand and strategic intent in order to achieve a level of alignment that supports both effective programme delivery and the achievement of institutional aims. ................................................................. 22

8. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that, as a matter of priority, the University of Nizwa develop and implement a system for monitoring the academic progress of students on Diploma and Degree programs to ensure that progression is conditional on attainment of adequate English language proficiency. ................................................................. 23

9. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop a system to ensure that feedback is provided to students on actions taken in response to their course and teaching evaluations. ................................................................. 24

10. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop systems to ensure that its Copyright, Cheating & Plagiarism Policy is systematically and consistently implemented across the University. ................................................................. 26
11. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop a comprehensive academic assessment policy and ensure consistent implementation of this across all programs. ................................................................. 27

12. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa systematically analyse student retention and progression data in order to identify opportunities for improvement in these areas. ........................................................................................................... 27

13. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop and implement effective systems for monitoring and evaluating graduate destinations and employability in order to inform the development of strategies to improve results in this area. .......................................................................................... 28

14. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop and implement a formal system for evaluating its support of students engaged in research. .......................................................................................................................... 30

15. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa comprehensively analyse and evaluate student retention on postgraduate programs. ........................................................................... 31

16. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop a structured professional development program to support achievement of its strategic objectives relating to research and consultancy. .................................................................................. 35

17. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop an overarching plan for community engagement in order to coordinate and guide its activities and provide for systematic monitoring and evaluation. .............................................................................. 36

18. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop and implement systems to evaluate its library resource collections and seating capacity on a regular basis to help ensure the academic and research requirements of students, staff, and faculty are met. ........................................................................................................ 40

19. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa review the effectiveness of its career and employment services, and take action to ensure it is able to provide systematic support and services to students and graduates in need of career counseling and employment support. .......................................................................................... 44

20. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa take action to ensure the Center for Student Counseling has the facilities, staff and institutional support to satisfy the needs of students and meet the stated aspirations of the University. .......................................................... 46

21. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop and implement systems to monitor and evaluate the needs and satisfaction of students for social, sports and recreational services and facilities, and use this to guide planning in this area. ................................................................................................. 46

22. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa ensure that its professional development activities take place in accordance with approved plans that align with strategic objectives. ................................................................................................. 48

23. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop and implement a system for measuring and evaluating staff satisfaction in order to inform staff employment and retention strategies. ........................................................................ 50

24. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop and implement a comprehensive institutional communication strategy that is supported by a policy on the use of English and Arabic. ................................................................. 52
1 GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

The University of Nizwa (UoN) was established as a private, non-profit university in 2004 (Portfolio, p.3). The establishment of the University was preceded by a comprehensive planning project involving extensive national and international consultation and engagement with stakeholders and advisors. University documentation (such as the Strategic Plan document) sets out a framework for a sophisticated institutional infrastructure, some of which has been realised. Governance and management roles are set out in the University’s Charter.

This chapter reports on the Panel’s findings in relation to overall governance and management at the UoN and specifically covers the following: Mission, Vision and Values; governance; management; strategic plan; operational planning; financial management; risk management; policy management; entity and activity review systems; student grievance processes; and health and safety.

1.1 Mission, Vision and Values

Through its Mission, the University describes itself as:

... a non-profit academic institution, which is governed by its faculty. It shall promote positive thinking, preserve the nation’s Islamic and cultural heritage and identity, faith in Allah and loyalty to the country and His Majesty. Its purpose is to broadly educate students and equip them with values, knowledge and life skills needed to enrich their lives and enable them to meaningfully contribute to the progress of society. To achieve its mission, the University shall develop dynamic integrative programs which provide high quality academic training, research and intellectual development (Portfolio, p.11).

The University’s Vision is:

The University of Nizwa aspires to be a beacon (minaret) of knowledge and enlightenment as a prominent higher education institution of excellence. It is to achieve a worldwide reputation for the quality of its programs and graduates and international distinction for innovation, progress and development (Portfolio, p.11)

The University has also developed a clearly defined set of “core values” relating to: academic excellence; leadership through research and technology; sustainable development; and quality management. The latter encompasses the ideas of integrated quality management, self assessment and continuous improvement (Portfolio, p.12).

The Panel learned that development of the University’s Mission and Vision and Values had formed part of the comprehensive planning process that ran from 2000-2004 prior to the University’s formal establishment. Stakeholders in this process ranged from representatives of the local community who were engaged through the work of 25 local “outreach committees” through to formal reviews undertaken by international experts (Portfolio, p.12). The Panel found the statements of Mission and Vision and Values, which reflect the UoN as a regional University in a location of significance in the scholarly history of Oman, to be well communicated and well understood within the University community. The Panel also noted the close alignment of the four core Values with the University’s Mission and that each value has been linked to a specific functional unit in the organisational structure; for example, “Academic Excellence” is linked to the Centre for Academic Excellence and Quality Assurance (CAEQA) and “Sustainable
Development” is linked to the UoN Investment Fund (Portfolio, p.13). In summary, the use of the Mission, Vision and Value statements to guide the operations and development of the University was evident to the Panel.

Commendation 1

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for its well-considered and integrated Mission, Vision and Values statements that drive its planning and operations as a non-profit, regional centre of higher education in the Sultanate of Oman.

The University reports that approximately 70% of the undergraduate population is enrolled on only eight of its 35 undergraduate majors and that the engineering and science majors are not currently popular choices (Portfolio, pp.88-89). However, the University also states that these programmes will continue to be offered as they represent the major source of development and innovation in the global age (ibid). The Panel considers that the alignment between the programmes offered, student enrolments and the University’s Vision needs to be kept under scrutiny (see Recommendation 7).

1.2 Governance

The highest governing body of the University is the Board of Trustees (BoT) which is invested with “the authority to adopt policies, make decisions and approve recommendations” (Portfolio, p.13). The Panel confirmed that the composition and responsibilities of the BoT and other key bodies are set out in the UoN Charter. The Board comprises representatives of the “General Assembly of Donors” (founding and contributing donors as defined in the “University Establishment Contract”) and the community at large as well as University executives, University academics, international scholars and representatives of the Ministry of Higher Education (ibid). The BoT membership demonstrates strong high level external support for the University. BoT members met by the Panel demonstrated passion, vision and commitment to their role. The Panel heard how the regular receipt of reports by the Board as well as the diversity of its membership support its work.

The UoN states that the University Academic Council (UAC) “governs all aspects of the University academic life” (Portfolio, p.13). It is chaired by the Chancellor and the membership includes the Vice Chancellors, the Assistant to the Chancellor for Student Affairs, Deans, the Library Director, two elected faculty members and one elected student. It is intended that the Chairman of the planned Advisory Council will be a member also. In addition, a number of scholars from Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) have participated in the UAC from its inception as a strategy to guide the development of the Council to be a strong academic governance body (Portfolio, p.13). The activities and reach of the UAC demonstrated to the Panel that it plays a significant role in the development of policy and procedure at the University. This is in keeping with the intention articulated in the UoN Mission that the institution be “governed by its faculty”. The Panel considered this to be a noteworthy feature of the institution. College Boards and Department Boards also play a major role in developing policy and procedure and feeding proposals through to UAC (Portfolio, p.14).

In terms of advisory groups, the University indicated that it is in the process of forming an Advisory Council and an Efficiency Enhancement Council (EEC) to advise on risk management, continuous improvement and sustainable development (Portfolio, p.14). While the Panel was satisfied that the intention behind the formation of these two councils is well-reasoned, it suggests that the University will need to be vigilant to ensure that focus and lines of accountability between these and existing bodies is not blurred as they work gradually towards further defining their roles and contributions. The relationship of the relatively new CAEQA to these Councils also needs to be considered.
It was not clear to the Panel how the University inducts new members to its various governance committees including the BoT and UAC. Likewise, the Panel found no evidence of a formal mechanism for evaluating the effectiveness of these governance structures. The Panel believes that the University should develop a strategy to evaluate its governance groups and committees from time to time to ensure maximum effectiveness in the academic leadership bodies.

**Recommendation 1**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa introduce a program of periodic review of the effectiveness of its governance groups.

**1.3 Management**

The Chancellor of the University serves as the Chief Executive Officer. Three Vice Chancellors report to the Chancellor. Their portfolios comprise Administration and Finance; Academic Affairs; and Graduate Studies and Research. There are two Assistants to the Chancellor covering the areas of Student Affairs and External Relations (Portfolio, p.16).

The University had 14 academic departments accountable to four colleges: College of Arts and Sciences (CAS); College of Economics, Management and Information Systems (CEMIS); College of Engineering and Architecture (CEA); College of Pharmacy and Nursing. There is also a Foundation Institute providing a program to prepare students for entry to degree and diploma programs in the Colleges.

The UoN has an Executive Board (EB) made up of the Vice-Chancellors, academic and administrative deans, together with the Chancellor and Assistants to the Chancellor. This Board was developed to ensure collective participation in the process of executing approved policies and procedures (Portfolio, p.14). The Panel noted that the staff members of departments and colleges meet on a regular basis with evidence of a high degree of consultative activity around planning and delivery of academic programs.

The Panel concluded that there are clear and appropriate distinctions between academic governance and management processes in the University. The senior leaders who operate in both governance and management roles demonstrate full understanding of the requirements of each perspective; the structures in place ensure that academic policy is driven by academic staff with implementation, management and resource aspects dealt with by management groups.

**Commendation 2**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for the clear distinctions it has drawn between academic governance and academic management processes in the University and the consultative approach adopted by the senior leadership to engage staff at all levels in academic decision making.

It was noted that the present leadership team is both experienced and highly committed to the development of the University but there was no evident succession plan or grooming of the next generation of leaders. The University needs to make plans to ensure continuity in institutional leadership.

The relatively new CAEQA is responsible for quality assurance principles and processes and there are plans to appoint Quality Assurance Officers in all major units of the University (Portfolio, p.16). The Panel considered that the Center could be a major contributor but that, as yet, it has not fulfilled its potential. The standing of CAEQA and the Quality Assurance Officers
at different levels within the organisation will need to be clarified to ensure that CEAQA has the necessary authority and appropriate high-level moral support for the tasks it is to undertake.

1.4 Institutional Affiliations for Programs and Quality Assurance

One of the University’s ten strategic aims is “to establish close links with national, and international universities and institutions in academic and research affairs” (UoN Strategic Plan, Portfolio, p.11). As previously mentioned, since its inception, the University has had close ties with individual academics from SQU with a number of them serving on key academic committees. These scholars have provided important external reference points, although this input will become less crucial as the UoN matures. In addition, the University has had an International Advisory Committee for Academic Excellence and Quality Assurance which, with Fulbright Foundation assistance, has contributed significantly to the development of the University.

The University has international connections, including Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), with some 14 institutions or companies. These agreements are for specified periods but not all are being actively pursued at this time (Portfolio, p.16). While the volume of activities happening in collaboration with each of the individual MoU partners is not high, the success of a number of these partnerships was clear. The Panel spoke with five international partners and received positive feedback on their engagement with the UoN. The scope of the interactions ranged from provision of sophisticated technical infrastructure for DARIS, the University’s flagship research institute (see Appendix B), to the international exchange of students as well as the provision of a summer school in mid 2011 in the UK for some UoN students.

Commentation 3

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for the vitality of a number of its partnerships with international institutions and the benefits these bring to the University as a whole.

Looking ahead, the self-limiting time frames on individual MoUs are useful but the Panel believes that the University needs to introduce a system of formal periodic evaluation of its partnerships in terms of the financial and non-financial costs in relation to the benefits each brings. The evaluation process should also aim to identify additional opportunities for collaboration.

Recommendation 2

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa establish a system of periodic review of its international partnerships as a whole with a view to establishing the benefits of individual agreements and identifying additional opportunities for collaboration.

1.5 Strategic Plan

The University’s initial strategic planning exercise began in 2000 prior to its formal establishment in 2004. In 2007, the University established a Strategic Planning Committee to refine the existing plan, and a 2011-2025 Strategic Plan was publicly released in 2009. This comprehensive institutional plan identifies ten strategic aims mapped to Immediate Objectives (2011-2015), Medium Term Objectives (2016-2020) and Long Term Objectives (2021-2025). The Plan also includes a matrix of “mechanisms” to support the achievement of each objective.

Colleges and departments and centres are expected to produce strategic plans and annual plans and the Panel examined a sample of these. A number of the plans were well conceived (particularly from the College of Engineering), and included elements that would give confidence
the plans could be a useful guide to focusing actions towards specific goals for the organizational unit. By and large, however, the academic and non-academic unit plans were considered inadequate as a touchstone for working towards goals. Some plans were little more than general statements of good intentions and had very few, or no, indication of targets, timeframes or accountabilities.

The Portfolio indicates that the University had been working to implement Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure institutional performance (Portfolio, p.17) and the Panel was provided with a set of 50 KPIs newly-approved by the UAC. These KPIs are linked to the core areas of the Strategic Plan as well as the Vision and Mission and there is a set of four weighted criteria for measuring the performance of the University. The Panel welcomed this development and concluded that the University has taken an important first step in introducing effective strategic planning at different levels of the institution. The University now needs to capitalise on the identification and definition of KPIs and to build conceptual frameworks for strategic planning that will focus action on targets, measurement of progress within given timeframes as well as accountability for achievement of goals.

**Affirmation 1**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority supports the initiative taken by the University of Nizwa to outline Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the core areas of the Strategic Plan and encourages the institution to capitalise on this achievement through the development of associated plans that will allow tracking of progress towards goals at all levels.

### 1.6 Operational Planning

The University has adopted a set of principles designed to guide operational planning and implementation for use by University executives at all levels. The University acknowledges, however, that there is need for further development in this area (Portfolio, pp.17-19). The Panel examined a range of action or operational plans and found some evidence of useful and practical approaches to planning work. The Panel concluded however that, by-and-large, there is an institutional weakness in the area of operational planning. In implementing an approach to strategic planning that incorporates the new KPIs, the institution needs to attend to developing the capacity of organisational units to set out operational plans. The leaders of organisational units need support in developing their skills in this regard so that they can identify tangible strategies and methods to track progress towards strategic goals at the same time as holding individuals to account for their role in achieving the goals.

**Recommendation 3**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa implement a program to develop capacity in organisational units at all levels of the institution for the preparation of useful operational plans that will guide the day to day operation of the University.

### 1.7 Financial Management

The University budget is devised in relation to Operational and Capital Development Plans. The Budget Committee (BC) chaired by the Chancellor assesses bids from across the University. Annual budgets are endorsed by the BoT. The Vice-Chancellor for Administration and Finance oversees the execution of financial processes while the office responsible for internal audit provides reports to the Chancellor. At the time of preparation of the Portfolio, an external financial audit was in progress (Portfolio, pp.19-20).
The University has established a series of special purpose funds within which unused annual funds can be rolled over to the following year. The funds cover areas such as student support; staff development; medical care and community service.

The University has a strategic aim “to create and develop its financial resources to ensure sustainable development” (UoN Strategic Plan). As a not-for profit institution, the University faces significant financial challenges arising from both the nature of its funding base, and more recently, the pressures on the financial situation of the families of students following the recent Global Financial Crisis. These impacts are sharply felt in relation to the University’s plans for a new “main” campus located some 10km distance from the existing campus which will require substantial resources (also see Section 9.1). To build up its capacity, the University has established the UoN Investment Fund (UoNIF), a limited liability company owned entirely by the University to serve an endowment vehicle and investment tool (Portfolio, p.20). UoNIF is discussed further below (see Section 1.13 and Commendation 5).

The Panel was satisfied that the arrangements for budgeting and financial management are appropriate for the time being although in the coming years, with the inevitable pressure on resources for establishing the new campus, the University will need to ensure that budgetary strategies support its Strategic Plan and the new KPIs. Care will need to be exercised to ensure resources remain aligned to the Mission and strategic goals of the University.

1.8 Risk Management

The University has identified the risk of declining student enrolment and has established a Student Support Fund (SSF) to both attract and retain students (see Section 7.6). Strategies have also been introduced to attract and retain strong academic staff, such as the provision of research infrastructure and resources (Portfolio, p.24). The University plans to create a Risk Management Unit as part of its Planning Office which will report directly to the Chancellor (Portfolio, p.22). The Panel supports this intention to address potential risks associated with both University and UoNIF operations and recommends that the range of mechanisms to manage risk be extended to include a risk register. The Panel considers that the speed at which the University is developing its activities also constitutes a risk to the University, particularly to teaching and learning activities.

Recommendation 4

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop and implement a comprehensive risk management plan.

1.9 Policy Management

The University Charter sets out the roles of Boards and the Executive in policy establishment and implementation. While policy ideas can be initiated in any part of the University or in its committees, authority to approve these is clearly defined. For example, strategic policies are the domain of the BoT and academic policies are approved by the UAC. The Chancellor approves management and implementation policies on recommendation of the Executive Board or other management groups (Portfolio, p.24).

The Panel was satisfied that responsibility for policy development is appropriately delegated at the University. In particular, it was noted that the UAC plays a key role in policy relating to academic matters in a manner consistent with the UoN Mission which states that the institution be “governed by its faculty”. The Panel was pleased to learn about examples of policy development they considered showed an appropriate balance between the goals of management and academic governance processes at the University. For example, the recent development of a promotion
policy was considered in various iterations by both management bodies and the UAC prior to approval.

**Commendation 4**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for the manner in which it balances academic and management considerations in policy development and, in particular, the constructive role that the University Academic Council plays in this.

While it was clear to the Panel that a Task Force for reviewing the University Assessment Policy was operating at the time of the audit visit it was not evident that individual policies are reviewed on an agreed timeframe. The University is still in a relatively early stage of development, but as its systems mature it would benefit from setting out an approach to evaluating policies on a periodic basis within a framework of what is sometimes referred to as a “policy on policies”.

**1.10 Entity and Activity Review Systems**

The University states that it reviews programs, departments, schools, colleges and services through internal and external reviews (Portfolio, p.25). A Quality-Achievement Model for the University dated 2010 outlines an “annualised review model”. All functional units are required to submit annual reports and academic departments are expected to have external assessors to review departmental academic offerings, as well as academic activities and structures (Portfolio, p.25).

All programs have been reviewed with the majority subject to external review. The Panel viewed detailed records (from 2004-2009) of these reviews and changes implemented as a result. The Panel was told that there is an intention to introduce, from 2010-11, an annual report on teaching to be compiled by the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, and another on research prepared by the Vice Chancellor for Graduate Studies and Research.

While the Panel welcomed the University’s commitment to reviews of organizational units (and more recently, to activity based reviews such as research), they found no evidence of an overall policy on the timing and conduct of reviews. Nor was there an indication of the way reports should be handled and monitored for implementation. It was clear that the UAC considers at least some review reports but it was unclear how follow-up occurs to ensure that improvements flow from review recommendations. This is an area for attention and policy development perhaps building on the Quality-Achievement Model mentioned earlier.

**Recommendation 5**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa outline a process for systematic, thorough consideration of the review reports of organisational units, activities and policies with reliable follow-up to monitor progress on implementation of review results within stated timeframes.

The University hopes that activation of its EEC will support further development of its review activities (Portfolio, p.25). From the terms of reference for this group given in the University Charter, the Panel agrees that it could be well-placed to assist.

**1.11 Student Grievance Process**

The University states that it is open to informal consultative approaches to the Chancellor and other senior administrators by students and parents with concerns (Portfolio, p.26). The UoN has, however, also formulated a formal grievance process for dealing with student issues (Portfolio,
p.26). Although this process was relatively new at the time of the audit visit, the Panel found students were well informed in this regard. Further, the Panel viewed examples of documentation showing implementation of the processes in relation to both academic and non-academic issues raised by students. The Panel encourages the University to continue with its efforts to ensure consistent implementation of the grievance process.

1.12 Health and Safety

The UoN has a Health, Safety and Environment (HSE) Department responsible for compliance with government legislation. In addition, there is a Health and Safety Committee which is concerned with staff and students, including those in University housing or engaged in UoN activities off-campus. Further, in 2004, the UoN established a licensed private polyclinic (Gana Clinic) to serve the wider community (see Commendation 7). These three operations, along with the Integrated Facilities Management Division (IFMD), form the UoN Health, Safety and Environment Coalition (Portfolio, p.27).

The Panel viewed draft documentation relating to public safety and noted that the University obtained (in 2010) an “Institution Public Safety License” for its College buildings and separate licenses for its clinic and restaurant. However, despite the existing framework provided by the Health, Safety and Environment Coalition, the Panel found little evidence of formal comprehensive health and safety policies and procedures existing or being implemented systematically, although there is clearly work in this area in progress. The Panel noted that the University has identified enhancement of health and safety as a priority area for improvement (Portfolio, p.28). Although student satisfaction survey data examined by the Panel indicates agreement by most students surveyed that laboratories are equipped with safety instructions, a walking tour of several laboratories by the Panel identified many potential safety concerns, providing further evidence of this need.

Affirmation 2

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Nizwa that its health and safety functions need to be enhanced and encourages continuation of its work in this area as a priority.

1.13 Oversight of Associated Entities (e.g. owned companies)

As mentioned above, the University has created an Investment Fund - UoNIF Company (LLC) - to diversify sources of University revenue. It is overseen by a Board of Directors (BoD) chaired by the Chancellor of the UoN. The BoD reports (through the Chancellor) to the UoN Board of Trustees (Portfolio, p.27). The Panel was told that in establishing the UoNIF the University ensured it met the requirements of the relevant Omani authorities including the Ministry of Legal Affairs, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, and the Ministry of Higher Education. Any profits from the UoNIF are re-invested for the benefit of the University and no dividends are paid.

This company provides non-academic services, such as student and staff housing and catering. In addition a facility development division provides construction services and a cement product division provides all cement products needed for construction through a joint venture with the main contractor for the new campus project (Portfolio, p.20). The company also operates a polyclinic to serve the University community and the area of Birkat Al Mouz in which the University is situated (see Section 1.12 and Commendation 7).

The Panel met with representative of UoNIF and examined a range of documentation on the operation of the fund. The Panel concluded that the UoNIF is carefully managed with transparency in operations and appropriate financial auditing which includes external auditing conducted by a high profile international accounting firm.
Commendation 5

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for the establishment of the UoN Investment Fund (UoNIF) as a vehicle for supporting the development of the University as a non-profit institution and the care taken to ensure transparency and accountability in its operation.
2 STUDENT LEARNING BY COURSEWORK PROGRAMS

The University has fourteen academic departments accountable to four Colleges: the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS); the College of Economics, Management and Information Systems (CEMIS); the College of Engineering and Architecture (CEA); and the College of Pharmacy and Nursing. There is also a Foundation Institute (FI) providing a program to prepare students for entry to degree and diploma programs in the Colleges (Portfolio, p.3). Currently, the institution has a student population of approximately 6,000 of which more than 900 are studying at Foundation level.

The UoN offers Diploma and Bachelor qualifications in its four colleges, as well as Masters degrees in CAS and CEMIS. The University states that prior to being allowed to start their degree studies, students must achieve a TOEFL score of 500 (Portfolio, p.37). The Foundation Institute offers English language courses as well as Mathematics, Computing and General Study Skills courses in order for students to fulfill the appropriate degree entry requirements. The University has recently introduced a comprehensive pedagogic framework termed the “Quality Teaching Management System” (QTMS); the Panel found evidence of this impacting positively on a number of areas reported on in this chapter.

The UoN approach to teaching and learning is articulated in its commitment to provide outcome-based education, producing graduates who are “broadly educated and equipped with values, knowledge and life skills needed to enrich their lives and enable them to meaningfully contribute to the progress of society” (Mission, Portfolio, p.11).

This chapter reports on the Panel’s findings in relation to the following: graduate attributes and student learning objectives; curriculum design; student entry standards; plagiarism; student placements; assessment methods, standards and moderation; academic security and invigilation; student retention and progression; and graduate destinations and employability.

2.1 Graduate Attributes and Student Learning Outcomes

The University lists six “Graduate Attributes” to be achieved by all UoN graduates (Portfolio, p.30). There is alignment between these and the Mission and core Values of the University. They are broad qualities with “three interconnected characteristics – knowledge, values, and skills” (ibid).

Based on documentation examined by the Panel, it was difficult to trace how individual programs (degree qualifications) ensure students have achieved the generic graduate attributes at the end of their degree studies. There seems to be an inconsistent approach to aligning program outcomes with the generic graduate attributes. Although some programs (in CEA and some Business majors) appear to be well advanced in this exercise others have a long way to go. Similarly, course-specific learning outcomes need to be aligned with the overall program goals. Explicit alignment between course learning outcomes, program outcomes and the generic graduate attributes is required for all programs.

Recommendation 6

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa ensure that explicit alignment between course learning outcomes, program learning outcomes and generic attribute attributes is established and documented for all programs.
The Panel recognizes the concerted effort made by the UoN in producing the Quality Teaching Management System (QTMS) (also see Section 2.5). Implementation of this framework across the University will support improvement in this area.

2.2 Curriculum

It was encouraging to see that through the process of curriculum design and the setting of appropriate graduation requirements, the UoN promotes a multi-disciplinary approach to knowledge acquisition in its student population (Portfolio, p33).

Program and course development at the UoN follow structured and, in many respects, rigorous processes and take into account, for example, input from external stakeholders and professional body requirements. It also became evident during the audit visit that there are detailed processes in place for the approval of new programs and courses as well as for making changes to these. The UoN states that curricula are reviewed within five years of implementation and that minor changes may be made during implementation (Portfolio p.37). The Panel found evidence of ongoing program reviews having occurred across the University. The Panel also viewed sample benchmarking documents but found these to be variable in content and depth and formed the view that attention is required to ensure consistency in benchmarking and programme review across Colleges. Further, the Panel concluded that a mechanism is required to allow to institutional level monitoring and evaluation of these activities (Recommendation 5).

The University offers 35 undergraduate majors but reports that approximately 70% of the undergraduate students are enrolled on just eight of these (Portfolio, p.89). The basic science and engineering sciences majors are not currently popular choices (also see Section 1.1). This has resulted in cases of very small enrolment numbers on some majors and advanced classes needing to be offered to small groups, or even individual students, to ensure that progression and graduation is not delayed. The Panel was told that the University is reviewing degree plans in relation to challenges involved in dealing with small student cohort programs, taking into account feedback from External Examiners which includes concerns about the impact of very low enrolment on the learning experience of students. The Panel considers it important for the University to build on any current initiatives to formally evaluate the current alignment between its student profile in terms of enrolment, its programme offerings and its strategic intent. With this approach, strategies may be developed to harmonise these elements and to ensure the quality of students’ learning experience.

Recommendation 7

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa evaluate its program offerings in relation to levels of student demand and strategic intent in order to achieve a level of alignment that supports both effective programme delivery and the achievement of institutional aims.

2.3 Student Entry Standards

General entry requirements for academic programmes are published in the University’s Admissions Guide. These are expressed for each academic program in terms of required subject grades from secondary school (as published by the Higher Education Admission Centre [HEAC]) and include notification about the University’s TOEFL requirement. Some programs have supplementary entry requirements: there is an aptitude test for students applying for the Art Education program and an interview for students applying for nursing and education programs (Portfolio, p.37). The Panel appreciates the rationale for these additional requirements, but did not explore how these assessments were conducted.
There are no minimum English language requirements to be admitted into the FI. The University states that to be eligible to enter degree studies students must achieve a TOEFL score of 500 but that students who still do not achieve this after one year in FI may start their degree studies if they have reached a score of 400. These students are required to take a dedicated English language programme (Portfolio, p.37). During the audit visit the Panel was told that that the majority of students enter degree studies prior to reaching a TOEFL score of 500. The Panel was told that a large number of students has been admitted with a score as low as 400.

The Panel appreciates the challenges for UoN Foundation level students in attaining appropriate entry standards for higher education in English but the recent practice of admitting these students to academic programs with scores lower than TOEFL 500 was a concern to the Panel particularly as this practice was not aligned with the University’s intention for students to achieve a score of 500 prior to starting an academic program. For this reason, the Panel was pleased to note the University has now begun to implement the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programs (see Affirmation 3) which include a minimum standard for English Language proficiency equivalent to TOEFL 500/IELTS 5.0. As the University states, these minimum standards also include learning outcomes for Mathematics, Computing and General Study (Portfolio, p.37). However, the University makes no reference to pass requirements in these latter areas for students progressing to academic programs. The University needs to ensure that the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programs are implemented in their entirety. As these standards comprise minimum requirements, the Panel considers that the University would also benefit from developing a system whereby review of its Foundation programme and entry standards is informed by feedback from academic programs.

It was of particular concern to the Panel to learn that there are a number of UoN students who have fulfilled all academic requirements for their degree studies, but are unable to graduate as they still have not reached a TOEFL score of 500. The University’s Admissions Guide emphasises that a score of 500 or more on TOEFL is a graduation requirement. Firstly, the Panel was concerned about the status of these students in relation to their chances of gaining employment. Secondly, this situation raises serious questions about the extent to which academic standards have been upheld. The Panel strongly urges University to find a way to support each of the students in this situation in moving forward with their academic and/or professional life. There is now a requirement for the University to develop and implement a system for monitoring the progress of all students on academic programs in relation to the level of English language to ensure that students do not progress beyond a level where their weakness in English Language prevents them from engaging effectively with their academic studies and prevents them from attaining the academic standard required.

**Recommendation 8**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that, as a matter of priority, the University of Nizwa develop and implement a system for monitoring the academic progress of students on Diploma and Degree programs to ensure that progression is conditional on attainment of adequate English language proficiency.

The Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes restrict the progression of students who do not meet the prescribed learning outcomes; implementation of these standards (see Affirmation 3) will support the University in addressing this issue.

The Panel suggests that the University may wish to consider developing program exit awards at Certificate level (in alignment with the Oman Qualifications Framework) as a means of recognising the achievement of students who are unable to, or who do not wish to, progress to Diploma or Degree level studies.
2.4 **Foundation Program**

The University states that the program conducted by the FI has been designed to deliver student learning outcomes that fulfill the requirements outlined for General Foundation Programs by the OAAA (Portfolio, p.37). The Panel learned that in order to meet these requirements the program had been restructured to comprise three levels each with clear exit and progression criteria. The Panel was told that this has led to a significant number of students repeating levels because they had not reached required exit levels. The Panel found academic staff from across the institution to have confidence in this newly revised program, which was implemented in 2009-2010, and expect it to impact positively on assuring appropriate entry level standards to Diploma and Degree programs. The Panel recognizes the importance of this strategy in helping to promote the retention and progression of students on academic programs and in assuring academic standards. The Panel urges the University to maintain vigilance in its implementation of the new program which, according to documentation provided to the Panel, was serving more than 900 students in 2010.

**Affirmation 3**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recognizes the importance of the University of Nizwa having introduced the national standards for General Foundation Programs, and urges the University to ensure that implementation of these is monitored and evaluated.

2.5 **Teaching Quality**

The UoN has developed and implemented a pedagogic framework called the “Quality Teaching Management System” (QTMS) in order to monitor and assess its performance in the area of teaching and learning. The QTMS addresses a number of key areas in teaching and learning and aims to standardise the quality and the monitoring of teaching and learning standards at the University. It takes the form of a comprehensive manual which covers all aspects of course delivery, assessment and evaluation. The Manual includes relevant policies, procedures and standard forms (covering, for example, course syllabus and teaching plans; course portfolios; academic advising; absenteeism; academic integrity; examinations, assignments and grading; textbook selection and use; and field visits). The Manual clarifies roles and responsibilities as well as reporting lines and requirements. The Panel learned that the QTMS had been developed and implemented as a result of an opportunity for improvement identified by the University during the self-study process that led to the production of the Portfolio; the University found that whilst relevant practices and documentation existed for the teaching and learning areas, implementation was inconsistent and checks and balances and a system for monitoring implementation were missing. The Panel found widespread use of the QTMS amongst academic staff and heard examples of positive impact it has had. The Panel was told that the University plans to review the QTMS in the medium term. In the meantime, the Panel urges the University to maintain its effort in ensuring that the QTMS is implemented consistently across all Colleges and programs.

The UoN identifies student feedback as one of its most important quality measures (Portfolio, p.39). While there was sufficient evidence that the University regularly seeks student feedback on its teaching and learning performance, there was no indication that the feedback received from students is acted upon and that information about consequent actions is given back to students. In order to fully close the “feedback loop” students must be informed of actions taken based on their evaluations.

**Recommendation 9**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop a system to ensure that feedback is provided to
students on actions taken in response to their course and teaching evaluations.

The UoN states that it takes a student-centered approach to education (Portfolio, p.32); however, the Panel found no evidence of the University defining or elaborating on the meaning and implementation of such an approach to teaching and learning. The Panel was pleased to see that the University’s recently approved set of institutional KPIs (see Section 1.5 and Affirmation 1) identifies Teaching Excellence as one of the University’s main criteria (carrying a weighing of 35%) for measuring institutional performance. The Panel noted the Academic Council’s recent concern (expressed in the October 2010 meeting) that “too much emphasis is placed on teaching rather than learning” and agrees that more work needs to be done to support student-centered learning.

The University acknowledges that evaluation of the performance of faculty plays an important role in quality management (Portfolio, p.40). Towards this, a revised performance appraisal system that aligns with the new academic promotions policy (see Section 8.7) has been approved. The University is also introducing a system of peer review of teaching but the Panel was told that this has not been fully implemented yet. The Panel supports these initiatives to further enhance teaching quality.

2.6 Plagiarism

The UoN prides itself on upholding the highest standards when it comes to academic integrity. The University makes it very clear to staff and students that academic misconduct in any form will be considered as a serious breach of its regulations (Portfolio, p.40).

The University has developed and implemented a comprehensive “Copyright, Cheating & Plagiarism” policy which is clearly communicated to students and staff and is available to all students in various documents. There are clear guidelines and procedures in place for dealing with allegations of academic misconduct and the QTMS also includes a declaration form (“Statement of Authorship”) to be submitted alongside project and assignment work.

The Panel found students it interviewed to be well aware of the policy and the consequences should they be in breach of it. Whilst these students clearly understood the notion of cheating, they were less clear, however, what “plagiarism” entailed. Some students also expressed the view that academic misconduct is not dealt with consistently across the University. The Panel viewed samples of student work which indicated some lack of capacity for correct referencing practices when quoting, copying and/or paraphrasing. The University indicated that training seminars are available for students and staff (Portfolio, p.41); however, there was no clear evidence this training was being conducted consistently across the University.

The University states that plagiarism detection methods are in place (although specific plagiarism detection software is not currently used). Documentation submitted to the Panel showed that cases of academic misconduct are recorded by different Colleges, although not in consistent format; the UoN acknowledges that a published policy to help the documentation process in each College is required (Portfolio, p.41). The records show that penalties applied for academic misconduct include: warnings (to staff as well as students); zero grade allocations; suspension from the University; and also expulsion from the University. The Panel noted that almost all documented cases and records it examined related to forms of academic misconduct other than plagiarism; most related to examination offences, primarily cheating. The Panel concluded that, as yet, full and consistent application of the academic misconduct policy is still to be achieved, particularly with respect to plagiarism.
Recommendation 10
The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop systems to ensure that its Copyright, Cheating & Plagiarism Policy is systematically and consistently implemented across the University.

2.7 Student Placements
One of the University’s strategic aims is “to prepare qualified Omanis with the knowledge and technical skills required by the Omani society and international economy” (Portfolio, p.11). Towards this, student internships (placements) have been included in the curriculum of the majority the University’s degree programs (Portfolio p.41). The University provides a strong rationale for this in terms of helping students to become more familiar with workplace requirements prior to finishing their studies and to have students who are “work-ready” upon graduation.

The Panel noted in positive terms that the internship courses are credit bearing as this recognises students’ efforts and learning. The four Colleges have developed their own specific internship manuals and guidelines to suit their specific needs. These include monitoring and evaluation procedures. Moreover, each College has an Assistant Dean for Training with specified responsibilities for managing internship activities. Students are helped by the University to find suitable internships although the Panel remained unclear as to what would happen to students if they were unable to find suitable internship placements. The Panel examined completed examples of internship documentation and interviewed both staff and students who viewed the internships positively. The Panel noted that CPN places students both locally and internationally and at the time of the audit visit there were CPN students undergoing internships in both the USA and in Malaysia. The Panel encourages the University to continue its efforts to support student internships and to share the good practice that clearly exists within individual Colleges across the University. The UoN now needs to develop and implement a mechanism to formally evaluate this activity across the University in relation to institutional goals. This will allow opportunities for improvement to be identified and help to ensure that areas of strength are sustained.

2.8 Assessment Methods, Standards and Moderation
The University states that assessment methods are “continuous, integrative and cumulative” (Portfolio, p.31) and it presents a clear theoretical framework for evaluating the level of achievement of course and program outcomes (Portfolio, p.36). The University states that it has institutional assessment policies (Portfolio, p.42). These are contained in the QTMS and comprise a “Student Assessment Procedure 2009”, Final Exam Procedures, and various associated documents and forms. The Panel found these to be a valuable and helpful suite of documents, but considers that they cannot replace a comprehensive overarching assessment policy. The Panel noted that the Academic Council, in its October 2010 meeting, concluded that the Student Assessment Policy was inadequate and was in need of revision. Prior to that, in June 2010, the Council had already emphasized the importance of appropriate assessment processes to enhance student learning and encourage students “to think”. The Panel examined sample course documents and found little consistency or standard practice across the various Colleges with regard to ensuring effective assessment of learning outcomes. While the University has in place quality control measures at Department, College and University level (Portfolio p.44) the Panel concluded that there is a need for UoN to develop a comprehensive assessment policy that informs the QTMS and is implemented across the University. This should include information on the University’s praiseworthy use of both external examiners and professional exams (which are not covered in the QTMS).
Recommendation 11

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop a comprehensive academic assessment policy and ensure consistent implementation of this across all programs.

The University operates a clear system of academic probation (Portfolio, p.43), but it needs to ensure that appropriate academic support is provided to students with this status (see Section 6.5 and Affirmation 7).

The requirement for pre and post moderation of examinations is specified in the QTMS Manual and the Panel viewed evidence of such post moderation having occurred. The University may wish to consider an appropriate form of pre and post assessment moderation of all summative assessments (not just final examinations) as a means of ensuring that all assessment tasks are valid, fair and appropriate and that marking procedures are robust.

2.9 Academic Security and Invigilation

The University states that it has a well-defined system for academic security and invigilation of exams (Portfolio, p. 45). The Panel found there are clear procedures for this in place as well as mechanisms within the University to monitor implementation at different levels.

2.10 Student Retention and Progression

Data is recorded systematically by the UoN using a dedicated “EduWave” software system to enable monitoring and review of student of retention and progression. The EduWave system is used by the Deanship of Registration and Records and academic advisors to ensure that students’ academic status is maintained in accordance with the University’s progression requirements (Portfolio, pp.44-45). There are clear guidelines with regard to progression for students who do not achieve the required academic standards measured via GPAs; in these cases students are placed under probation and are given the chance to improve their GPA over a period of three semesters.

Despite concern expressed by the Academic Council (in their October 2010 meeting) over the “high percentage of students under probation”, the University provided no critical analysis of relevant data in this section of the Portfolio. Evidence gathered by the Panel from other sources showed that between 2007-2008 and 2009-2010 an average of 29% of UoN students were under academic probation. There are also considerable differences between programs in the numbers of students under probation. Considering the academic credentials of incoming students and the issues with English language, it was not surprising to the Panel that, in a number of cases, students do not progress smoothly through their studies and take longer to complete their qualification than the normal 4-5 years of study for a degree programme. However, the University needs to monitor and critically evaluate data in this area in relation to institutional objectives and appropriate benchmarks, particularly with respect to consideration of the number of students on probation and the effectiveness of its strategies for dealing with these students.

Recommendation 12

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa systematically analyse student retention and progression data in order to identify opportunities for improvement in these areas.

The Panel was pleased to note that the University’s recently developed and approved KPIs include a relatively heavily-weighted KPI for the percentage of students graduating on time (also see Section 1.5).
2.11 Graduate Destinations and Employability

As mentioned above, one of the University’s strategic aims is to “prepare qualified Omanis with the knowledge and technical skills required by society” (Portfolio, p.11). With respect to this, the Panel considers graduate destinations and employability to be a critical area for the University to monitor and evaluate. The UoN states that, after graduation, the Centre for Career Counseling and Alumni (CCCA) monitors graduate destinations and employability (Portfolio, p.45).

Over 2,300 students have graduated from the University. This number includes 1,131 graduates of a one year Higher Diploma (postgraduate) course in Education (Portfolio, p.3). The Panel was informed that this program had operated from 2004-2008 but was then discontinued. The UoN states that these students were helped to prepare for competing for teaching jobs (Portfolio, p.91). The University states that “a great number of UoN’s graduating students have found jobs while others are still job-seekers” (Portfolio, p.69). However, the Panel examined graduate employment statistics of Diploma, Bachelor and Masters graduates which showed that out of a combined total of 1,263 graduates from the four Colleges, 259 (approximately 21%) had found employment. The Panel appreciates that the first batch of undergraduate and Masters students graduated in March 2009 only (Portfolio, p.69) but nevertheless was disappointed by the lack of data and analysis in this area. After speaking to relevant stakeholders, the Panel came to the conclusion that the University’s support for students to find employment as well as the monitoring and analysis of graduate destinations and employability are underdeveloped at present. These aspects need focused attention. The Panel noted that the University’s new KPIs include a relatively heavily weighted KPI for the percentage of graduates employed but, if the stated target of a 70% employment rate for 2010-2015 is to be met, plans for improvement in this area need to be developed and implemented.

Recommendation 13
The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop and implement effective systems for monitoring and evaluating graduate destinations and employability in order to inform the development of strategies to improve results in this area.
3 STUDENT LEARNING BY RESEARCH PROGRAMS

A research function is explicit in the University’s statements of strategic intent. In support of the development of postgraduate programs, the UAC approved the UoN “Graduate Studies: Academic Regulations and Procedures” in 2006. The University now offers Masters degree programs in CAS and CEMIS. The three CAS programs which began in 2007 are: MA in Arabic Language and Literature; M.Ed. in Educational Administration; and M.Ed. in Psychological Guidance and Counseling. The three CEMIS programs which began in 2009 are: M.Sc. Information Systems; M.A. Economics; and M.A. Business Administration (Portfolio, p.48). It is clear that the University hopes to extend its provision of postgraduate programs in the future.

This chapter reports on the Panel’s findings in the following areas: research programme design; supervisors; postgraduate supervision; student research project; thesis examination; retention, graduate rate and employability.

3.1 Research Program Design

The development of the University’s Masters programs has, to date, been driven by market needs; the CAS programs were developed in response to demand expressed by the regional Directorate General of Education and the CEMIS programs were developed in response to survey data collected by the University (Portfolio, p.48). The University states that it has based its Masters level provision on the North American model for graduate studies and notes that this provides a solid foundation for potential cross-collaboration and exchange of students. This model allows students the option of taking a smaller number of credit courses and writing a thesis or taking a greater number of credit courses, and taking a comprehensive examination. However, both options include courses in research methodology, and the second option includes a requirement for students to demonstrate competence in research methodology by completing a graduation project (ibid).

The development of Masters programs follows a defined process aligned with that for the University’s undergraduate programs (see Section 2.2). The Panel learned from UoN faculty that there is a very positive working relationship between the UoN and SQU regarding the development, delivery, assessment and review of Masters programs; the contribution of SQU to date has clearly been of great value and is appreciated by the University. Systems in place to evaluate the programs include a graduate exit survey, student course and teaching evaluation surveys and external assessors and examiners’ reports. The Panel concluded that there is a strong framework in place to support the design and development of Masters programs. The Panel supports the University’s stated intention of enhancing its systems by seeking feedback from employers of postgraduate students.

3.2 Supervisors

Students who are preparing a thesis are assigned to supervisors who guide them and monitor progress. The University reports that 248 students are currently engaged in thesis work (Portfolio, p.49). The requirements for supervisors are set out in the Graduate Studies: Academic Regulations and Procedures (which have been reproduced as Department Graduate Handbooks). The University states that faculty undertaking Masters thesis supervision are required to hold a PhD or equivalent and have an active involvement in research. The UoN also advises that full supervision is limited to five students and that supervisors’ teaching loads are reduced in line with their supervision commitments (ibid). The Panel learned that there are some students linked with international institutions for conducting research work. Such collaboration provides students a valuable opportunity of studying at other institutions to gain exposure to different environments.
and cultures. Under such circumstance, co-supervision is arranged. The present arrangements appear to be working satisfactorily for the University.

### 3.3 Postgraduate Supervision

The Graduate Studies: Academic Regulations and Procedures document sets out a comprehensive framework for the supervision and examination of theses and includes relevant roles and responsibilities. It states that each College has a College Graduate Studies Committee which appoints a Thesis Supervising Committee for each student comprising a Thesis Research Supervisor (as Chair), a co-supervisor or faculty member; and a faculty member from another department in the University. For students taking the “course work with thesis” Masters program option, thesis supervision appears well structured and comprehensive.

### 3.4 Student Research Support

The University described a range of resources to support student research in the form of library access, allocated office space, and conference participation (Portfolio, p.52). Colleges also hold seminars for graduate students which have external participation (ibid). The Panel learned that the Centre for Arabic Studies also supports Arabic Language and Literature students’ engagement in research and the Panel heard details of a conference that the Centre had held.

The Panel was pleased to hear students speak positively about being respected as Masters level students. These students also spoke positively about teaching that was interactive and about which they could give feedback. However, the students also indicated that they consider the library to be inadequate in terms of both the number of books and journals and the physical space for studying (also see Recommendation 18). They also indicated to the Panel that they consider there should be more office space for them to be able to study without disturbance from other students. In addition, whilst there seems to be sufficient computer access, access to web-based resources appears to be limited due to the limitation of internet bandwidth that compels limits on access to certain websites.

The Panel was pleased to learn that the UoN encourages students to get involved with staff research and was told that, owing to the limited numbers of post-graduate students, this opportunity is also available to final year undergraduates. The Panel was told that some students are employed by the University on a part-time basis as research assistants, both to provide an opportunity for them to engage in research and to support them financially.

The Panel considered the University is well intentioned with respect to supporting research by students, but that it is not monitoring this aspect adequately as it lacks formal mechanisms to evaluate provision in this specific area. Effective institutional-level evaluation would help to ensure that the students currently engaged in research are supported appropriately and also inform the University’s plans for research facilities in the new campus.

**Recommendation 14**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop and implement a formal system for evaluating its support of students engaged in research.

### 3.5 Thesis Examination

The UoN has a comprehensive and thorough process in place for thesis examination. This involves an external assessor and, subsequently, a Thesis Examination Committee (which is independent from the Thesis Supervising Committee). Students are required to deliver two seminars prior to their thesis examination and defence. The process is clearly documented in the Graduate Studies: Academic Regulations and Procedures document. This document also includes
details of the “Comprehensive Examination” for students choosing the alternative Masters program option that does not include a thesis. This process appears to be working well for the University and the Panel encourages the University to continue to monitor its effectiveness both at College and Institutional level.

3.6 Retention, Graduate Destinations and Employability

The UoN states that the vast majority of Master’s students are from CAS and already employed by the Ministry of Education and it describes the retention rate of about 77% to be “high” (Portfolio, p.53). The University stated that most students who withdraw do so in the early phase of the program because they find it difficult to cope with their part-time studies while working full-time. The Panel considers that retention rate of Masters students warrants more comprehensive analysis and evaluation in relation to appropriate benchmarks and in order to inform improvement strategies.

Recommendation 15

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa comprehensively analyse and evaluate student retention on postgraduate programs.

The University identifies “gauging the employer satisfaction regarding the UoN post-graduates” as an opportunity for improvement (Portfolio, p.54); as with the graduates of undergraduate programs, the Panel considers this to be an important area to address as part of an overall evaluation of this area (see Recommendation 13).
4 STAFF RESEARCH AND CONSULTANCY

The UoN Strategic Plan recognizes research and education as integral components of the University’s Mission with a major focus on the needs of Oman and the Gulf region (Portfolio, p.55). Within this context, this chapter reports on the planning and management of staff research at the UoN and details the Panel’s findings with respect to: research performance; research funding schemes; consultancy activities; ethics and bio-safety; intellectual property and research commercialisation; professional development for research; and the link between research and teaching at the UoN.

4.1 Research Planning & Management

The UoN states its intention to pursue a plan for research as part of its earliest stages of development (Portfolio, p.55). The University also states its belief in enhancing teaching through engagement in research and consultancy (ibid). Research and innovation are addressed in the Strategic Plan in short, medium, and long term strategic objectives. Enabling mechanisms have been developed and mapped to these objectives. In line with this, recently-approved criteria and KPIs viewed by the Panel to be used by the University to measure its performance include an overall weighting of 25% for “active and productive research”. In support of its strategic intentions, the UoN has established a research policy and associated regulations to manage the research activities at the University. The University indicates that a future intention is to appoint a Pro Vice Chancellor for Research (Portfolio, p.62).

The Panel found that in translating its strategy into action, the UoN has established a comprehensive system governing various aspects of research management, including some of the required infrastructure. Research work at the UoN is currently lead by the Vice Chancellor for Graduate Studies and Research, the University Research Board, and the Research Committees in the various Colleges. Two research centers have been established: the Center for Arabic Studies and the Center for Scientific Research and Technology Development (DARIS). The Center for Arabic Studies has been in operation since 2005 (Portfolio, p.55) and the Panel found that it is already well established. DARIS has been established more recently, but now has equipment, staff and a director. The Centre aims to facilitate research through the provision of relevant equipment and technical support. The Panel learned the University has entered into a partnership with an international supplier of advanced research equipment in order to equip DARIS. The Panel heard that the supplier wishes to work within the local context to set up an applications laboratory that will, through subsequent research output, serve to market the company within the Middle East. The Panel spoke to the relevant stakeholders and viewed the facility and the advanced equipment that has been secured. The Panel noted that this represents an innovative partnership between a university and a private enterprise and concluded that this is a positive initiative of which the University can be justifiably proud.

With respect to developing its research capacity and capability, the University has also taken steps towards addressing funding, library resources (although further development is required in this area – see Recommendation 18), staff development, and the setting up of collaborative partnerships.

In summary, the Panel was pleased to find that even in this early stage of development, the UoN has effectively placed an emphasis on research and is preparing itself to become a research oriented university in line with its strategic aims and national requirements for higher education institutions classed as universities as identified in ROSQA (Requirements for Oman’s System of Quality Assurance in Higher Education).
Commendation 6

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for its planned development of a comprehensive research infrastructure and associated systems to support achievement of its strategic aims.

4.2 Research Performance

The UoN has analysed its research performance against KPIs. These align with those in the newly approved set of institutional KPIs and relate to: the number of research paper publications per faculty member; the average number of research projects per faculty member; the number of international research collaborations; the number of research innovations; the number of research awards; and the total internal and external research funds. The University reports that each indicator has either been met or exceeded in relation to targets set for the initial five-year period from 2005-2010 (Portfolio, pp.57-60). The University acknowledges that these indicators were kept low in its first five years of operation (Portfolio, p.58) and identifies enhanced research performance and output as an opportunity for improvement (Portfolio, p.62). Such enhancement is required to ensure achievement of the University’s medium and long term goals and alignment with the requirements of ROSQA.

The Panel heard from staff who felt well-supported in conducting research and who showed appreciation for the University’s system for assessing research proposals; this was felt to be merit-based, transparent and effective. The Panel was told that approximately 30% of academic staff across the University are research active and that the University hopes to improve this number, and subsequently increase its research performance. Relevant strategies to address this include establishment of the DARIS research centre and the newly-approved promotions criteria which reflect the importance of research. The Panel encourages the University also to engage in more detailed analysis of the quality of its research output.

Affirmation 4

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Nizwa that its research performance needs to be enhanced and recognizes the steps that have been taken to support achievement of this.

The University treats research as a regular part of faculty workload and faculty engaged in research have reduced teaching loads. However, the Panel learned that faculty teaching loads are typically heavy making it difficult for faculty to find the time to conduct research. The teaching obligations at the UoN, therefore, appear to compete with the priority that has been placed on research. The UoN is aware of the need to further develop research resources through the library and on-line research materials (Portfolio, p.56) but the Panel found no evidence of a system for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the current provision and considers this to be required (see Recommendation 18).

4.3 Research Funding Schemes

The University utilizes both internal and external funding for research. The University states that its internal fund for research, created in the first year of operation, has gradually increased from 2% of the total UoN budget to 5% (Portfolio, p.60). Competition to secure research funds is based on the research proposals that are generated in departments. As noted previously, the system for submitting research proposals for approval and funding by the University research fund is well-established and appreciated by faculty. The proposals are evaluated at departmental level, College level and by the Deanship of Research. The Panel noted the active involvement of faculty in this system. The University states that its level of financial commitment to research
underscores its commitment and aspirations in this area (ibid). The Panel concluded that the internal research funding system was operating well in support of the University’s aims.

The UoN identifies the fact that external funds for research are potentially available from The Research Council (TRC), Omani Industry, and international collaboration (Portfolio, p.60). The Panel was told that most research projects funded internally have a relatively small budget (generally under RO 10,000) and that external funding is sought for major projects. TRC provided support for two projects in 2009 and 2 additional grants were awarded in 2010 (ibid). Other than the TRC, where the pursuit of external grant funds has been successful, other external funding sources have not been fruitful. The Panel noted how faculty are encouraged to seek external research funds; they are rewarded not only by an increased likelihood of promotion (which is partially based the number of publications that result from the research work) but also by a financial incentive whereby they receive an honorarium proportional to the funding secured.

4.4 Consultancy Activities
Consultancy services provided by the UoN aim to solve problems and provide solutions for development of society, while also enhancing the professionalism and teaching performance of faculty (Portfolio, p.60). This is reflected in the University’s strategic aims and objectives which include a medium term objective (2016-2020) to “provide expertise and consultancy to various sectors of society”. The University’s suite of criteria and KPIs to monitor institutional performance includes a KPI for “contracts and consultancy income” within the “socio-economic” criterion. The University states that it has also established a consultancy policy and associated procedures (ibid).

The University reports that it signed a single consultancy contract (for US $220,000) in 2010, but acknowledges that, to date, activity has been limited. The Panel supports the University’s intentions to develop and promote a Centre for Consultancy Services (Portfolio, pp. 61-62).

4.5 Ethics and Biosafety
The UoN is in the process of developing a policy for research ethics and bio-safety in compliance with national and international regulations (Portfolio, p.61), although the Panel confirmed that the criteria for approval of research proposals articulated in the UoN Research Policy and Regulations already includes compliance with ethics and biosafety.

With respect to general safety in laboratories, during a walking tour of several laboratories the Panel identified many safety concerns, suggesting that an immediate audit of laboratory safety should be conducted (see Affirmation 2).

4.6 Intellectual Property and Research Commercialisation
The UoN has addressed the issue of intellectual property of a research product in policies that it has developed to date (Portfolio, p.61). The Panel confirmed that, for example, the UoN Research Policy and Regulations includes a section on Patents/Copyrights and Trademarks, and also found staff to be aware of documents relating to IP. The Panel supports the UoN’s stated intention to develop a comprehensive IP policy aligned with a national policy being developed by TRC (ibid).

4.7 Professional Development for Research
The University recognizes the importance developing faculty research skills, and in support of this, for example, joint research skills development workshops have been held between the UoN and TRC (Portfolio, p.63). The Panel also viewed records of conference attendance by faculty and was told that support is provided by the University for this activity. The University now
proposes to develop a staff development program focusing on research. This program is to target Omani faculty who have recently completed post-graduate programs; encourage interaction between senior and junior researchers; support faculty who are not actively engaged in research; and develop interaction with industry (ibid). The Panel encourages the University to continue with its plans in this area.

**Recommendation 16**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop a structured professional development program to support achievement of its strategic objectives relating to research and consultancy.

4.8 *Research – Teaching Nexus*

The UoN is aware of the importance of harmonizing teaching and research efforts. In the UoN situation, undergraduate students have benefited from the absence of graduate research degree students to support faculty research. The Panel learned that many undergraduate students are involved in research projects, and the graduation projects of undergraduate students are being designed to strengthen the teaching-research nexus.
5 INDUSTRY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The University identifies community service (alongside education and research) as one of the three principal aims embedded in its Mission (Portfolio, p.64). The UoN emphasizes that community service is particularly salient to its identity and states that the University is a pillar of economic and cultural development within the region (ibid).

This chapter reports on the Panel’s findings in relation to the UoN’s planning and management of its engagement with industry and the community and comments specifically on the University’s relationships with the following: industry and employers; professions; other education providers; alumni; and the community at large.

5.1 Industry and Community Engagement Planning & Management

The UoN Strategic Plan has aspects of industry and community engagement embedded in different strategic aims and objectives. The Panel noted that enabling mechanisms for “partnership and networking” have been developed and mapped to these. A number of different positions and units within the University’s organizational structure are involved in the management of industry and community services. These include an Assistant to the Chancellor for External Relations and the Trusteeship for Student Affairs (Portfolio, pp.64-65).

The Panel noted, in positive terms, the clear commitment by the University to industry and community engagement and acknowledges the clear strategic intent in this area. However, the Panel found little evidence of effective operational planning in this area or mechanisms to coordinate and evaluate overall performance. The University states that the various offices involved this engagement “…collect and store data concerning UoN’s engagement with community and industry, thus offering a resource when evaluating external engagement, and when driving future policies and strategy for engagement activities” (Portfolio, p.65). The Panel noted the section on “Community Service” contained in the University’s Annual Report highlighting many activities and achievements. This report contains detailed information and quantitative data in relation to different offices and activities. Nonetheless, the Panel found little evidence of evaluation of activities and achievements in relation to plans and targets. Nor did the Panel find evidence of a system for evaluating the combined efforts and performance in relation to strategic objectives. The Panel considers that the UoN needs to develop an overarching plan for this area of its activities and notes that, where appropriate, targets set within such a plan should be aligned with the institutional level KPIs that have been developed for the UoN as a whole.

Recommendation 17

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop an overarching plan for community engagement in order to coordinate and guide its activities and provide for systematic monitoring and evaluation.

5.2 Relationships with Industry and Employers

The University relates the importance of “partnering and networking” with industry and potential employers to facilitating employment opportunities for its graduates (Portfolio, p.66). The Strategic Plan describes a number of mechanisms broadly related to this activity, cross mapped to strategic objectives. To lead in this area, the UoN has appointed Assistant Deans for Training in all Colleges with specific responsibilities for internships (see Section 2.7). CEA has established an Industry Expert Board and the University identifies activation of such groups in all Colleges as an opportunity for improvement (Portfolio, p.71). The University’s Centre for Career Counseling...
and Alumni (CCCA) was established in 2009 to support efforts in industry and community engagement (Portfolio, p.66).

The University reports that it has representation on TRC, the Oman Industrial Development Board and the Oman Medical Specialties Council (ibid). It also reports some encouraging results in terms of examples of industry engagement with curriculum development and delivery. However, the Panel found the CCCA to be underdeveloped and lacking in effectiveness but noted that this has been targeted for enhancement by the University (Portfolio, p.70).

The Panel noted that in its institutional KPI document, the UoN has set a target employment rate of 70% in the five year period from 2010-2015. Given these ambitious aims, the Panel considers it important for the UoN to develop detailed operational plans in this area (see Recommendation 3 and Recommendation 17). These should include targets against which progress and achievements are systematically evaluated in order to inform future action.

5.3 Relationships with Professions

It was clear to the Panel that the University welcomes and values input from external stakeholders and agencies, including relevant professional bodies. In CPN, where the relationship with the relevant professions of Pharmacy and Nursing are of particular importance, appropriate relationships have been established both nationally (with the Oman Ministry of Health and the Oman Pharmaceutical Society) and internationally with respect to expatriate faculty being registered under professional boards in their respective country of origin (Portfolio, p.67). Other relationships have also been established and underpinned by formal MoUs; CEA, for example, has an MoU with the Oman Engineers Society (ibid). The Panel considers there is some good practice within the University with respect to establishing relationships with professions; however, systematic monitoring and evaluation of these are required to ensure sustained effectiveness.

5.4 Relationships with Other Education Providers

One of the University’s ten strategic goals is to: “establish and maintain close links with national and international universities and institutions in academic and research fields” (Portfolio, p.11). The Panel noted extensive evidence of such links (locally, nationally, regionally and internationally) spanning the life of the University to date. The pivotal role played by SQU in the development of the UoN has already been highlighted in this Report (see, for example, Section 1.4). The Panel found the breadth and strength of the links with other providers to be impressive and encourages the University to continue its efforts in this area. More systematic evaluation of these activities will support the University in this (see Recommendation 2).

5.5 Relationships with Alumni

The UoN states that “the CCCA represents the channel between the university and the job market for the good of graduating students” but also states that this Center is still in its establishment phase (Portfolio, p.69). The University has identified roles for the “Alumni Officer” (ibid) and also states that an alumni database has been activated. Whilst the Panel confirmed that work on the database had begun (and is to be integrated in the EduWave system), it was clear that the CCCA has yet to become a fully resourced and functional unit (see Recommendation 19). It also appears that many of the University’s graduates are yet to find employment and more support for those seeking employment is required (see Recommendation 13 and Recommendation 19). The Panel supports the University in establishing its alumni database, and agrees that there is more work to be done in enhancing the role of the CCCA (Portfolio, p.70). This enhancement should look beyond the current focus on employment and careers and take into account the full range of potential alumni engagement with the University and its activities. The Panel was pleased to
learn that graduates can continue to be in contact with the University and colleagues through the life-long e-mail addresses that are provided by the University.

**Affirmation 5**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Nizwa that systems for effective engagement with its alumni are required and supports its work in developing an alumni database as a positive step towards this.

### 5.6 Relationships with the Community at Large

The UoN states that “community engagement is a value that is embedded in the essence of the UoN’s Mission as a non-profit university” (Portfolio, p.69) and the Panel was pleased to find extensive evidence in support of this value from across the institution and from the range of external stakeholders interviewed. Two examples of the University’s engagement with the local community which were found to have a particularly positive impact are: the Gana clinic which was established in 2004 and is owned and operated by the University; and the University’s Literate Village Project.

As the University’s Gana Polyclinic serves both the community and the University it is located just outside the campus (also see Section 1.12). The Panel was told that the clinic had filled a need for additional local provision of health services and that charges are competitive. Having opened in 2004, the polyclinic is now well established. The Literate Village Project is a community based project resulting from collaboration between the UoN (through its Centre for Society Services) and the regional Directorate General of Education. This project, which began in 2009, aligns with the UoN strategic objectives and is underpinned by a formal agreement. The project has clear primary objectives: to combat illiteracy in the Birkat Al Mouz area of the University and to reinforce and strengthen the relationship between the University and the Directorate General of Education. The project was highly praised by the participant from the project interviewed by the Panel. A project report examined by the Panel demonstrates that the project is being monitored and evaluated effectively. It is proving successful in achieving its aims and opportunities for improvement have been identified.

**Commendation 7**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for the strength and depth of its engagement with the community through planned initiatives that align with its Mission and institutional Values.
6 ACADeMic SuPPort SeRViceS

The University states that its strategy for developing academic support services is guided by its strategic objectives. There is recognition that, in addition to providing academic support services that meet university-wide needs, the University also has to address the course-specific needs of the broad range of programs and courses that it offers (Portfolio, p.73). This chapter reports on the Panel’s findings on the overall planning and management of academic support services at the UoN and on the following specific areas: the registry; the library; information and learning technology services; academic advising; student learning support; and teaching resources.

6.1 Academic Support Services Planning & Management

The University states that the institution has a “clear plan for academic support services to achieve the mission and objectives of the UoN”, specifically “to establish, promote and maintain academic excellence in all programs and in scholarly and creative activities of faculty and students” (Portfolio, p.73). To this end, the University has begun to establish a number of centers to provide “all the required academic support services” (ibid)). Some of these support services were well-established at the time of the audit visit (for example, The Writing Center) whereas other services were relatively new (for example, the Student Learning Enhancement Center). The Panel noted that the University’s newly developed institutional KPIs give a 15% weighting for “Quality Services and Facilities” and include specific indicators for a number of areas covered in this chapter.

6.2 Registry (Enrolment and Student Records)

The Registration & Records (R&R) Department operates under the direction of the Deanship of R&R. The organization and operations of the Department appear to be suitable for an institution of the size and age of the UoN. The Panel found the EduWave System for registration and student record management to be comprehensive and well embedded in terms of its use by staff and students across the University. The Panel was pleased to see details of actions taken by the Department to improve its services following feedback from students through an on-line General Student Satisfaction Survey conducted in November /December 2010 and encourages this quality improvement process to be continued.

6.3 Library

The University acknowledges that investment in the library “is necessary in order to fulfill its aims for international excellence in scholarship and learning” (Portfolio, p. 77). The UoN has engaged in formal local, national and international benchmarking of its library provision and has targeted a ratio of ten printed books to each student over the next five years (Portfolio, p. 79). The annual acquisition rate of printed books (2006-2010) is sufficient for the University to meet this target by 2015.

These actions, however, do not address issues related to physical space limitations in the present library or to the availability of library resources for present students, research staff, and teaching faculty. Students have expressed dissatisfaction with the current library environment (Portfolio, p. 80). This also was articulated to the Panel during the audit visit. Whilst the Panel was pleased to learn that improvements have been planned as a result of student feedback, satisfaction of other users (for example, researchers, academic staff) with the library has yet to be formally evaluated. Phase 1 of the Main Campus project includes a library for projected completion in the summer of 2013. Both to inform this project, and to ensure that existing academic and research requirements of the University community are met, the Panel urges the University to develop mechanisms to regularly evaluate its library resource collections and seating capacity.
Recommendation 18

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop and implement systems to evaluate its library resource collections and seating capacity on a regular basis to help ensure the academic and research requirements of students, staff, and faculty are met.

6.4 Information and Learning Technology Services

The Center for Information Systems (CIS) manages all computational and information technology facilities at the UoN (including audio-visual equipment and telephones). Organization and operations of the CIS appear to be suitable for an institution of the size and age of the UoN. The University maintains a number of open-access computer laboratories for student use, and these include photocopying and scanning services. As well, the campus is a wireless-computer environment.

The University emphasizes the use of internet services (email, website etc.) in implementing its communications strategy (Portfolio, p.112) but students have expressed dissatisfaction with internet speed (Portfolio, p. 83). This issue was also articulated to the Panel from a number of sources during the audit visit and the Panel heard about frequent disruptions to services. The University has recognized this issue and has approached the local internet service provider about improved bandwidth service (Portfolio, p. 112). The Panel appreciates that the University has been active in improving electronic communication and that internet facilities have been upgraded over the years to the maximum availability of bandwidth from the local internet provider. However, local internet services to the interior region of Oman in which the University is situated remain limited and do not support the requirements of the University effectively. The Panel agrees with the University that further action in this area remains a priority.

Affirmation 6

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Nizwa that its internet facilities need to be improved to a level that effectively supports its general communication requirements as well as its academic and research goals and supports its ongoing efforts to secure the best services available through the local internet provider.

6.5 Academic Advising

The University states a commitment to “the provision of high-quality academic advising services, mentoring students in the development and pursuit of academic objectives consistent with life goals” (Portfolio, p. 83).

Academic advisors are given the responsibly to review the study plans and monitor the academic performance of a number of assigned advisees. Advisors are expected to maintain constructive relationships with their advisees and the academic performance of advisees forms part of the advisor’s annual performance appraisal. However, although the average staff-student ratio for academic advising is around 1:20, the Panel learned that in a number of programs it is as high as 1:45 which places a high demand on the advisors and causes student dissatisfaction. The Panel also learned that prior to the time of the audit visit, very little training had been provided to academic advisors.

The University is aware that its academic advisory services need to be improved; the UAC has documented its concern over “poor academic advising and a large number of advisees per
faculty”, and this area was formally identified as an area for improvement in the University’s self-study (Portfolio, p.85). Beginning in 2006, the University began to take action to improve its academic advising system with establishment of the Academic Advising Council in 2006, establishment of the Center for Academic Counseling & Follow Up in 2008, and appointment of an Academic Advising Officer in each College in 2010 (Portfolio, pp.37-38). The Panel also viewed a comprehensive draft Academic Advising Handbook which aims to guide new and existing advisors through the University’s system. The Panel encourages the University to pay particular attention to both the advisor: advisee ratio and also to the academic advising of the significant number of students on probation (see Section 2.10) in its continued efforts to improve academic advising across the institution.

Affirmation 7

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Nizwa that the effectiveness of its academic advising system needs to be improved and supports the steps taken towards ensuring that the various stakeholders involved in academic advising are effective in providing a systematic and integrated network for referral and monitoring of those students in need of academic assistance.

6.6 Student Learning Support

The University has established two student support centers, The Writing Center and the Learning Enhancement Center, in order to “help students navigate common and predictable obstacles” and hence to “enhance student learning outcomes in a broad range of degree programs” (Portfolio, p.84). These Centers operate primarily on a self-referral basis; the University considers this voluntary aspect to be vital in encouraging a culture of academic excellence (ibid).

The Panel learned that the Writing Center began to deliver its services in February 2009. The Centre has a clear mission, vision and objectives and although it caters for all students, the 2008-2009 University Annual Report identifies the Centre as a measure to support, in particular, students under probation. The Centre provides workshops on writing, one to one peer tutoring, academic consultations and conversation sessions (Portfolio, p.84). The Panel was told that the Centre has full-time academic and administrative staff and runs on a first-come, first-served, appointment basis, with a maximum of twelve students per tutorial session. The Centre maintains registration and attendance records and is clearly heavily utilized; the Panel heard that 3000 students were registered and the University reports that over thirteen thousand appointments having been made (ibid). The University reports positive feedback from students via a dedicated student satisfaction survey (ibid).

The Learning Enhancement Center, which is intended to support Mathematics, Sciences and Economics, is a more recent initiative and still in development. At present, it has no full-time staff but the Panel noted in positive terms that the Center employs high performing students and recent graduates to serve as teaching assistants to provide its service of tutoring sessions to individuals (Portfolio, p.86). The Panel also noted that a visit to the Writing Centre and an introduction to the Learning Enhancement Center are included in the student orientation program.

The Panel agrees with the University that its Writing Centre is a strength in terms of supporting students’ learning needs (Portfolio, p.11) and encourages continued evaluation and development of both this and the Learning Enhancement Centre.

Commendation 8

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for the establishment of its Writing Centre as a well-planned,
dedicated facility to support student learning and promote academic excellence.

6.7 Teaching Resources

The UoN physical infrastructure has undergone dramatic growth since commencing operations in 2004. The area of its campus buildings, for example, has increased 30-fold in the past 7 years. This has been supported by a consultative planning process with formalized involvement of UoN staff. At present, the institution’s physical teaching resources appear to be adequate for its academic needs. It also has dedicated research facilities (see Section 4.1). Additional teaching and research space is included in Phase One of the construction plans for the new campus. As an opportunity for improvement, the institution recognizes the need to ensure that facilities at the new campus meet the functional needs of academic support services (Portfolio, p. 85). To that end, and in general, the Panel encourages the University to ensure that ongoing campus development continues to benefit from consultation with UoN staff, and that facility end-users in particular contribute effectively to this consultative process.
7 STUDENTS AND STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

The UoN considers its establishment of a Trusteeship of Student Affairs (TSA) in 2008 as a major development in managing student affairs in the University (Portfolio, p.88). Units within the TSA organisational structure have responsibility for the following areas covered in this chapter: career and employment services; counselling services; student finances; and social and recreational services. The TSA also supervises the Integrated Facilities Management Division of the UoNIF which provides accommodation, catering and transport services and medical facilities. The chapter includes the Panel’s findings in relation to these as well as the profile of students at the UoN, student behaviour and student satisfaction and climate.

7.1 Students and Student Support Services Planning & Management

The University “accords top priority to student welfare” (Portfolio, p. 87). Planning and management of the student support services is overseen by the TSA under the supervision of the Assistant to the Chancellor for Student Affairs with input for the Student Affairs Board and Student Council. The Student Affairs Board includes faculty and student representatives. The Student Council is freely elected by the student body. The Panel considers this to be a suitable organizational framework although its effectiveness has not been formally evaluated by the University.

7.2 Student Profile

The UoN states that it “aspires to emerge as an international university encompassing a diversity of young talent, nationalities and cultural backgrounds”, although its self-study appears to have focused on the regional background of its students from Oman and the programs on which these students are enrolled (Portfolio, p.89).

The University had approximately 6,000 students at the time of the audit visit, which included Omani students from all regions of the country plus a small number of non-Omani students. The student population is predominantly female (over 81%), but the number of male students has increased in recent times. The percentage enrolment of male students to total intake almost doubled between the academic year 2004-2005 and 2008-2009 and, in addition, the majority of postgraduate students are male (Portfolio, p.89). The Panel was told that the University operates on an equal opportunity basis and does not plan for the gender mix by, for example, setting quotas.

Most of the students are enrolled on only a small number of the majors offered by the University and this warrants continued attention (see Section 1.1 and Recommendation 7). It was clear that the University records data that will support critical analysis of its student profile and the Panel encourages the University to engage in this particularly in relation to institutional objectives.

7.3 Student Satisfaction and Climate

The UoN states that the TSA is working to “facilitate the establishment of a constructive relationship between students, faculty and other University staff through proper joint activities” (Portfolio, p.89). There are a number of different pathways for communication between students and the administration of the UoN. These pathways include suggestion boxes, the Student Council, Student Residential Committees, and direct meetings of students and their guardians with administrators (ibid). During the audit visit, it was articulated to the Panel that students consider some of these communication pathways to be ineffectual and student survey feedback data also indicates this as a weakness. The Panel viewed the results of an on-line General Student Satisfaction Survey covering various University facilities and non-academic services. This
survey, in which more than 900 students participated, was conducted by CAEQA as part of a continuous improvement and enhancement exercise. The Panel noted the actions resulting from the survey included action to improve registration services (see Section 6.2) and it encourages the University to maximize use of such data to systematically inform improvements in all areas included the General Student Satisfaction Survey. The Panel noted that the new institutional KPIs will support the University’s efforts to monitor and enhance student satisfaction and encourages the University to find ways of formally involving students in problem-solving and decision-making in relation to the services that directly affect them.

7.4 Student Behaviour
The University places emphasis on the importance of students’ attitudes and “civilized behavior” in support of its Mission and institutional Values (Portfolio, p.90). Appropriate policies and procedures are in place to provide guidance and direction to students, to communicate expected rules of conduct, and to investigate and discipline students for misconduct. The institution clearly is determined in its intentions to regulate student conduct, as evidenced by the dismissal of students from the University for misconduct of an academic and/or non-academic nature (16 students from October 2004 to March 2010) reported in the Portfolio (ibid).

7.5 Career and Employment Services
The CCCA began operations in 2009 with the goal of providing advice and information related to employment opportunities for graduating students (Portfolio, p.90). The Panel considered the Center to be understaffed and under-supported for its assigned responsibilities (also see Sections 2.11 and 5.5). The University acknowledges that the Center needs to improve its services and create links with alumni (Portfolio, p. 88), and the Panel agrees that improvement is required. At the time of the audit visit there was no evidence of action towards improvement in this area or firm plans in place.

Recommendation 19
The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa review the effectiveness of its career and employment services, and take action to ensure it is able to provide systematic support and services to students and graduates in need of career counseling and employment support.

7.6 Student Finances
The UoN appreciates that the cost of higher education is unaffordable for many members of Omani society (Portfolio, p.91). To offset this financial obstacle to higher education, the University has taken the approach of allocating a portion of its revenue (12.4% to date) to a Student Support Fund. The Student Support Fund provides financial support to students based on need. The Panel heard that applications for UoN funds were considered by a committee before final approval by the Chancellor. The fund is also is used to reward students based on academic merit (ibid). Clear minimum criteria exist for funding based on academic merit. Furthermore, the Panel learned that the University provides on-campus work opportunities to students in need of financial support.

In student survey data examined by the Panel, some students identified the provision of financial support as a reason for having joined the University. The Panel was pleased to see commitment demonstrated by the University to providing financial support to needy students and financial rewards to students of academic merit. The Panel appreciates that operation of the Student Support Fund is formally reported on. In addition, the Panel encourages the University to develop indicators in relation to the specific stated objectives of the fund (Portfolio, p.91) against which its operation can be formally evaluated. This evaluation can then be used to inform actions
that will help to ensure and sustain the effectiveness of this worthy initiative in meeting its stated objectives.

At present, the UoN requires students who score lower than the required TOEFL score of 500 to continue with English language education while commencing degree studies; the Panel appreciates the rationale for this (and notes that there is some scope for this within the national standards – also see Section 2.3). The Panel was told that students pay additional fees for these remedial English courses - though at a decreasing fee rate - until they reach TOEFL 500. The Panel encourages the University to monitor this situation with respect to financial pressure this may put on students.

7.7 Accommodation, Catering and Transport

Accommodation, catering and transport services are among those provided by the Integrated Facilities Management Division (IFMD), under the umbrella of the UoNIF (Portfolio, p.113 – also see Section 9.4). The Panel noted the extensive provision of the accommodation and transport services (also see Commendation 9). Accommodation is provided for approximately 80% of the student population (ibid). The University’s Transport Division is responsible for dealing with all requests to transport students, staff and faculty between their accommodation and the campus. This is an impressive service involving a large number of daily trips, predominately within the local region, but also to more distant areas such as Muscat. The Panel was pleased to see that student satisfaction with these services has been formally evaluated through an electronic survey in which over 900 students participated and to learn of improvements that have been made in response to feedback, such as changes of bus journey timings. The University reports that feedback is also received from the Student Housing Board, the Student Council and the Student Affairs Council (ibid).

The catering facilities of the institution do not, however, appear to have been able to keep pace with the rapid increase in student, staff and faculty numbers, occurring since the University opened in 2004. The general feeling conveyed to the Audit Panel was that the catering facilities for both students and staff/faculty are overcrowded. Student satisfaction survey results also reflect this. The University acknowledges a need for additional restaurant/cafeteria space (Portfolio, p. 95) and has plans for five additional catering and student rest areas in place. These additional facilities are to be part of the existing campus and are scheduled for completion in 2011.

7.8 Medical and Counseling Facilities

Medical facilities for the entire University community and the local community are provided through the University’s polyclinic (see Section 5.6 and Commendation 7). The Panel did, however, note that satisfaction survey data indicates a lack of certainty from students about how well the clinic is equipped and the availability of medical services. The Panel encourages this to be followed up by the University.

The Center for Student Counseling was established in 2004. The Center strives “to play an exemplary role at the national level” in student counseling, addressing academic, psychological and social issues of students (Portfolio, p. 93). Nonetheless, for much of its operational history, the Center has been under-supported in relation to that goal. Prior to 2009, the Center had no dedicated full-time staff (Portfolio Appendix Table 2) and between January 2008 and February 2009, the Center had no physical facilities as its space was annexed by an extension of the library. During that period of time, the University’s Chancellor and a Vice Chancellor (both male) provided counseling services to the students (who predominantly are female). The Panel considers this to be an inappropriate arrangement. The University acknowledges that the present Center needs more staff and larger facilities (Portfolio, p. 88). The Center engages in a range of activities which include awareness-raising though different media (for example, about safe
driving and healthy living) as well as engagement with the local community (Portfolio, p.94). Nevertheless, in some areas the Center has had a surprisingly low activity level. In 2009-2010, only 43 instances of academic, psychological and/or social counseling were conducted despite a student population of over 6,000 individuals. During the audit visit, the Panel observed that students appeared to be unfamiliar with the operations of the Center. On the other hand, student satisfaction survey data shows reasonable awareness of the services provided and an introduction to the Centre is timetabled as part of the student induction program so it is difficult to account for the pattern of low use. The Panel concluded that more analysis of need and development work is required in this area to move to provision of the level of exemplary support to which the University aspires.

**Recommendation 20**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa take action to ensure the Center for Student Counseling has the facilities, staff and institutional support to satisfy the needs of students and meet the stated aspirations of the University.

**7.9 International Student Services**

One objective of the institution’s Strategic Plan is to “create a student community encompassing a diversity of young talent, nationalities and cultural backgrounds” (Portfolio, p. 95). At the time of the audit visit, the UoN had students from 10 different countries (including Oman). Nonetheless, non-Omani students constitute only a small fraction of the total student population (less than 1%). The institutional services available to foreign students appear to be adequate. The University plans to attract more foreign students (Portfolio, p.96). These plans will need to be put into action and carefully monitored if the institution is to fulfil its long term strategic objective for a diverse student body.

**7.10 Social and Recreational Services and Facilities**

The UoN recognizes the importance of student social and recreational activities. The institution’s Strategic Plan specifically highlights the need for “developing student cultural, social, and religious aspects, providing facilities to train and coach students in the various sports activities, and fostering students’ talents and creativity” (Portfolio, p. 96). The institution claims to provide excellent social and recreational services and facilities (Portfolio, pp. 88 and 97). At the same time, the UoN acknowledges there is room for improving sports and recreational facilities and states that it is working towards that goal. The University describes a range of student clubs that have been established and a variety of social, cultural and sports activities that have taken place in support of its strategic aims. Student satisfaction survey data indicates that students are aware of the variety of activities offered but that participation is limited. Statements made to the Panel indicated that some students feel that sports and recreational services and facilities were lacking, overcrowded, and/or poorly supported by the University. In order to guide improvements in areas suggested by the University (Portfolio, p.97), the Panel considers that an enhanced system of evaluation and planning is required.

**Recommendation 21**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop and implement systems to monitor and evaluate the needs and satisfaction of students for social, sports and recreational services and facilities, and use this to guide planning in this area.
8 STAFF AND STAFF SUPPORT SERVICES

The UoN aspires to a culture of academic excellence and views human resources as an essential asset in developing the strong academic foundation which is critical to its success as an institution (Portfolio, p.99). The University acknowledges that meeting immediate staffing needs must be balanced against long term goals in this area, especially with respect to recruiting faculty (ibid). The University states that it has over 1000 staff of whom approximately 300 are academic staff representing over 30 nationalities (Portfolio, p.3). The University also employs staff on a part-time / visiting basis, notably from SQU.

This chapter considers the planning and management of human resources at the UoN and reports on the Panel’s findings in areas such as recruitment and selection; professional development and training; performance planning review; staff organizational climate and retention; and Omanisation.

8.1 Human Resources Planning & Management

The UoN’s strategic objectives relating to human resources are cross mapped to a series of enabling mechanisms included in the Strategic Plan. These guide the work of the UoN HR Department which was established in 2004 during the planning phase of the University. The department is managed by the Vice Chancellor for Administration and Finance and includes an HR Committee which is chaired by the Chancellor. The department also has an HR director who manages four support units with specific responsibilities for: public relations; staff support; recruitment and contracts; and training and development (Portfolio, p.100).

The Panel viewed the comprehensive UoN Human Resources Manual developed by the department to provide policies, procedures and guidelines in this area. The University notes that these are transparent and consistent with Omani Labour Law as well as international standards (Portfolio, p.99). In support of this, the Panel was told that the policies had been built up over time with internal and external consultation and Ministry of Manpower approval.

The University’s recently approved institutional KPIs viewed by the Panel encompass HR related areas, and in alignment with this, the Human Resources Department states that it plans to conduct a “service rating” survey to evaluate its provision of services (Portfolio, p.100). The Panel considers that such an evaluation is required and encourages the University to act on its stated intentions (see Recommendation 23).

8.2 Staff Profile

The UoN identifies three categories of staff: academic staff; non-academic staff; and technical staff and attaches particular importance to attracting high caliber academic staff (Portfolio, p.100). The University has an annual manpower planning system which is informed by principles relating to: the ratio of faulty at different ranks, and an acceptable student- academic staff ratio; selection and development of Omani faculty; coverage of all program specializations; and provision of an acceptable level of non-academic and technical support staff (ibid). The Panel was told that effort is taken to ensure diversity of academic staff and in this context, the Panel was pleased to note that relevant staff profile data is recorded, analysed and used to inform action. The University’s new institutional KPIs will support continued monitoring and evaluation of this area.
8.3 **Recruitment and Selection**

The University notes that the expansion of higher education in Oman and the Gulf region has made academic staff recruitment very competitive but also that it now has effective policies and procedures in place to support University efforts in this area (Portfolio, p.102). The Panel noted the clear process of recruitment detailed in the Human Resources Manual and found no evidence to suggest that this was not being implemented effectively. The Panel also noted in positive terms the active role that faculty members play in identifying academic staffing needs.

8.4 **Induction**

The University has a clear policy and associated procedures for staff induction set out in its Human Resources Manual. The UoN states that induction is conducted at three levels: by the HR Department, addressing institutional related matters; by the school or department, addressing academic matters (and including introduction to the QTMS); by the Chancellor in a seminar conducted for new staff (Portfolio, p.104). The Panel viewed the comprehensive UoN Employee Handbook 2010 provided during induction and spoke to administrative staff who confirmed the process. The Panel heard that some departments have a mentor system to support new faculty and some new faculty also have reduced teaching loads. However, the Panel also heard that some new staff did not experience a systematic formal induction and urges the University to ensure that implementation of its induction process is monitored effectively. The Panel noted in positive terms the University’s stated intention to post the Employee Handbook on its website and also for new employees to sign off on their induction (ibid).

8.5 **Professional Development**

The UoN’s policy for professional development (derived from the Strategic Plan and articulated in the Human Manual) considers all categories of staff. Professional development for academic staff is managed by the Colleges and professional development of non-academic staff in managed by the Human Resources Department (Portfolio, p. 104). The Human Resources Manual covers this area comprehensively under “Training and Development” and “Career Development” and it also links identification of professional development requirements to performance evaluation. The University’s emphasis on supporting development of Omani staff is evidenced in its approach to this area.

The procedures in place provide for a wide range of professional development activities and the Panel viewed records of these having occurred involving faculty and staff from across the University. The Panel also noted the role of the University’s international partnerships in supporting a range of professional development activities. As yet, however, much of the professional development activity appears to take place outside an overall plan. The Panel considers that, particularly in relation to teaching skills development, a plan is required in order to support the University in achieving its objectives, particularly relating to teaching excellence.

**Recommendation 22**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa ensure that its professional development activities take place in accordance with approved plans that align with strategic objectives.

8.6 **Performance Planning and Review**

A revised policy and procedure to evaluate the performance of individual academic staff was put into place in 2010. This policy evaluates teaching, research, and community service. It was developed by the Executive Board and discussed and approved by the University Academic Council. A similar evaluation scheme for non-academic staff was put into place by the HR Department (Portfolio, p.105). The Panel found both schemes to be comprehensive, clearly
documented and to include the identification of training and development needs in relation to under performance.

The University regards students’ evaluation of faculty as a useful indicator of faculty performance, but while department and college level rankings of faculty based on these evaluations are generated by CAEQA, the University states that these are not used as a major component in contract renewal or academic promotion (Portfolio, p.106). The Panel was told that the University aims to support staff who are underperforming rather than to terminate them. For example, the Panel was told that in such a case a contract may be renewed for a one year period, and if performance improves, the contract is subsequently renewed for two years.

The Panel supports the University’s ongoing development of its performance planning and review processes.

8.7 Promotion and Other Incentives
The UoN has engaged in considerable effort to develop a comprehensive academic promotion policy. This was approved in September 2010 and benefited from substantial input from the Academic Council (see Section 1.9 and Commendation 4). The Panel considers this a positive step in support of the University developing and maintaining an appropriate staff profile.

The policy and associated procedures for non-academic staff promotion and compensation adjustment are set out in the University Human Resources Manual. The Panel did not explore the implementation of these.

8.8 Severance
The University’s Human Resources Manual covers all severance cases and is written in accordance with Omani Labor Law (Portfolio, p.107). The Panel noted that the manual contains comprehensive coverage of discipline, grievances and termination of service and that these processes are supported by an appeals procedure.

8.9 Staff Organisational Climate and Retention
The UoN has developed comprehensive systems for the management of human resources but acknowledges that one of its major challenges is to employ and retain highly qualified faculty (Portfolio, p.108). The University reports data indicating an average retention rate of 61% with respect to its four Colleges since its date of establishment (Portfolio, p.108). The University considers staff retention to be acceptable for its particular context (ibid). However, the Panel heard concern about staff turnover expressed by interviewees.

In terms of challenges that UoN faces, the Panel was told that the interior location of Nizwa tended to impact negatively on attracting staff and that is response to this, the University provides daily transport for staff who have a requirement to live in Muscat. The Panel also heard that the University is becoming more demanding in terms of its English language proficiency and computer literacy requirements for non-academic staff.

The Human Resources Manual details an exit interview process for staff who leave the University. The Panel was told that previously the reasons for staff leaving the University had been requested informally, but was pleased to hear that the process was now being formalized. The Panel found no evidence of a system in place for the University to evaluate staff satisfaction. The Panel considers that such a system is required and would greatly assist the University in developing staff retention strategies.
**Recommendation 23**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop and implement a system for measuring and evaluating staff satisfaction in order to inform staff employment and retention strategies.

**8.10 Omanisation**

The Panel noted that Omanisation is clearly embedded in the University’s strategic planning; to “devise and effect a well-planned Omanisation scheme for academic and technical staff”. This is identified as a mechanism to achieve the University’s strategic objectives relating to human resources. This aligns with the institutional KPIs that have developed relating to areas such as medium and long term percentage Omanisation targets for faculty and non-academic staff.

The UoN states that it follows Government directives relating to Omanisation. The University reports that over 70% of non-academic staff are Omani but that it finds difficulty in recruiting suitably qualified Omani academics (Portfolio, p.108). The Panel learned that the UoN strategies to address this include providing scholarships for graduate students to complete Masters and PhD degrees; the Panel heard that at the time of the audit visit four Omani were studying abroad for higher degrees with the support of the University, and one had just completed his PhD. For non-academic staff, there is a requirement for career development plans linked to professional development and training to be established (see Section 8.5). The Panel concluded that the University is strongly committed to Omanisation but, in view of its strategic objectives, encourages it to identify additional strategies to enhance its already creditable efforts in this area, particularly in relation to faculty.

**Affirmation 8**

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Nizwa that increasing and then maintaining a high percentage of Omani faculty members is a challenge and supports the efforts taken by the University to achieve its clear strategic objectives in this area.
9 GENERAL SUPPORT SERVICES AND FACILITIES

The UoN campus services are provided primarily by the UoN Investment Fund (UoNIF), a profit generating company fully owned by the University which functions as a wholesaler, retailer and investment unit. The company is also engaged in generating income to support its construction of the new campus (also see Section 1.13 and Commendation 5).

This chapter reports on the UoN’s planning and management of its general support services, and comments specifically on the following: public relations and marketing; communication services; and facilities management.

9.1 General Support Services and Facilities Planning and Management

To date, the University has operated from a former school premises which has been systematically renovated and developed to accommodate the University’s on-going needs (see Section 6.7). The management of this includes an annual planning process whereby requirements of the Colleges and units are considered by the University Facility Planning Committee (Portfolio, p.110). The University’s Main Campus Project (for a new, purpose built campus) was envisioned from 2002, and since that time a number of external consultants have been involved in the development of the plans (Portfolio, p.110). As part of the strategy, UoNIF invested in a cement factory (Al-Shmook) to ensure reliable access to well-priced, quality cement products needed to construct the new campus. After some initial delays, the construction of the new campus started in March 2010. Panel members visited the construction site and were impressed with the progress and on-site management of the project.

Affirmation 9

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority agrees with the University of Nizwa that achievement of its strategic aims requires an enhanced physical infrastructure and supports the steps taken towards development of its new campus.

9.2 Public Relations and Marketing

The UoN has identified the importance for a new University of reaching the wider community. For that reason the University has set up the Information and Marketing Department. The University communicates with the general public via its own newsletter (Ishraqa) published through the Al-Watan newspaper. In addition, the UoN distributes its brochures via the general print media as well as advertising its events on the University website, national radio and TV. The University also reaches the local community through community services and events organized on campus (Portfolio, p.111). Two good examples are the “Village Literacy Project” and the health clinic which is open to the general public (see Commendation 7). Various stakeholders to whom the Panel spoke acknowledged the value of the University’s activities in this area. While the Panel concluded that there are many worthwhile activities organized by the University, it believes it would be advisable to introduce mechanisms to guide, monitor and evaluate the activities to ensure these are carefully targeted and deliver the benefits the University seeks.

9.3 Communication Services

The UoN recognizes that effective communication services are essential for effective functioning of the University (Portfolio, p.111). Extensive use of internet services (e-mail, website etc.) supports this, but many University activities, including teaching and learning are hindered by
inadequate internet provision (see Affirmation 6). The University indicates that it has developed a strategy to ensure that effective internal communication is maintained (Portfolio, p. 112), although the Panel did not find evidence of a formal documented strategy. The Panel notes that for any plans that are developed, it is just as important to make sure that identified goals are reached within a reasonable timeframe and hence that an operational/action plan with appropriate KPIs is developed and utilized. In relation to the use of Arabic and English in the University, the Panel found no evidence of a formal policy in place. The Panel considers that such a policy is essential for an institution that is primarily, but not exclusively, English medium and includes many members who are not bilingual. The Panel was told that all rules and regulations are published bilingually and that all documents are in Arabic and English; the Panel welcomes this intention, but found that this has yet to be realized.

Recommendation 24

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the University of Nizwa develop and implement a comprehensive institutional communication strategy that is supported by a policy on the use of English and Arabic.

9.4 Facilities Management

The Integrated Facilities Management Division (IFMD), under the umbrella of the UoNIF, is responsible for providing vital services, such as housing, catering, transportation, health care and general maintenance for its campus population (Portfolio, p.113). It was stressed to the Panel that this integrated system also allows the UoN to be responsive to student needs and to control costs. The Panel noted that these services were subject to formal evaluation. The extensive provision of the UoN’s transportation and accommodation services is reported on in Section 7.7. It was also evident to the Panel that the University community takes pride in the present campus and facilities which are carefully maintained to provide a pleasant working environment.

Commendation 9

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the University of Nizwa for its system of integrated facilities management that provides services such as housing, catering, transportation, health care and campus maintenance which are supportive of students and responsive to change.
APPENDIX A. AUDIT PANEL

Emeritus Professor Mairéad Browne (Chair)
Independent Higher Education Consultant
Formerly University of Technology
Sydney
Australia

Dr Joel Glassman
Associate Provost, Academic Affairs
Director, Centre for International Studies
University of Missouri, St Louis
USA

Dr Jurg Bronnimann
Manager, Curriculum Development Unit
Bahrain Polytechnic
Bahrain

Dr Khamis Al Balushi
Industrial Innovation Consultant
Rusayl Industrial Estate, Oman
Former Assistant Professor,
Department of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering
Sultan Qaboos University
Oman

Dr Tom Heming
Associate Dean for Academic and Student Affairs
Oman Medical College
Oman

Susan Trevor-Roper (Executive Officer)
Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
APPENDIX B. ABBREVIATIONS, ACRONYMS AND TERMS

The following abbreviations, acronyms and terms are used in this Report. As necessary, they are explained in context. In some cases, URLs are provided to facilitate further enquiries about these acronyms and terms.

AC………………………………. Advisory Committee
ADRI ............................................. A four step, cyclical model for analysing a topic, comprising: 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.
BC…………………………………Budget Committee
BoD …………………………….. Board of Directors
BoT ……………………………… Board of Trustees
CAEQA …………………………..Center for Academic Excellence & Quality Assurance
CAS ………………………………College of Arts & Sciences
CCCA …………………………… Center for Career Counseling and Alumni
CEA ………………………………College of Engineering & Architecture
CEMIS ……………………………College of Economics, Management & Information Systems
CIS ………………………………..Center for Information Systems
CPN ……………………………….College of Pharmacy and Nursing
DARIS …………………………….Center for Scientific Research & Technology Development
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.
EB ………………………………..Executive Board
EduWave ………………………… University of Nizwa Academic Management System
EEC ……………………………... Efficiency Enhancement Council
Executive Officer........................... An OAAA staff member assigned to an Audit Panel to provide professional guidance and support.
External Reviewer ......................... A Member of the OAAA Register of External Reviewers; a person approved by the OAAA Board to participate as a member of the OAAA’s various external review panels.
FI …………………………………Foundation Institute
HEAC …………………………… Higher Education Admissions Centre
HEI................................................. Higher Education Institution (also known as HEP – Higher Education Provider)
HSE ………………………………Health, Safety & Environment
Ibid ……………………………… indicates the reference cited immediately before
IELTS …………………………… International English Language Testing System
IFMD …………………………… Integrated Facilities Management Division
Improvement.................................. The fourth dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on how effectively an organisation is improving its approach and deployment for any given topic in order to achieve better results.
KPI ……………………………….Key Performance Indicator

MoHE ……………………………. Ministry of Higher Education (www.mohe.gov.om)
MoU ……………………………. Memorandum of Understanding
OAAA……………………………. Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (www.oac.gov.om)
OQF ………………………………. Oman Qualifications Framework.
OAAA Board ……………………… The governing body of the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
Panel Chairperson ……………….. The Chairperson of the Audit Panel.
Panel Member ……………………… An OAAA External Reviewer who is a member of an Audit Panel.
Portfolio …………………………. see Quality Audit Portfolio.
QTMS …………………………. Quality Teaching Management System
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 Audit Portfolio ............... The report produced as the result of a self study. Also forms the main submission made to the OAAA by the HEI being audited.
Quality Audit Report………………. A public report published by the OAAA which presents the findings and conclusions of the Audit Panel’s External Review of a HEI.
Quality Enhancement……………….. The combination of policies and processes for improving upon existing approach, deployment and results.
R&R ………………………………. Registration & Records
Random Interview ………………. An interview conducted in situ by individual Panel Members during the Audit but separately from the main interview sessions.
Results ………………………….. The third dimension of the ADRI cycle, which focuses on the evidence of the outputs and outcomes of a topic’s approach and deployment.
ROSQA …………………………. Requirement for Oman’s System of Quality Assurance in Higher Education
SQU …………………………….. Sultan Qaboos University
SSF ……………………………….. Student Support Fund
System …………………………… In this Report, system refers to plans, policies, processes and results that are integrated towards the fulfilment of a common purpose.
TRC …………………………….. The Research Council of Oman
TSA …………………………….. Trusteeship of Student Affairs
UAC …………………………….. University Academic Council
UoN …………………………….. University of Nizwa
UoNIF …………………………… University of Nizwa Investment Fund