Sultanate of Oman
Oman Authority for
Academic Accreditation and
Quality Assurance of Education

Institutional Quality Audit Report

Higher Institute of Health Specialties

May 2024

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OVERVIEW OF THE QUALITY AUDIT PROCESS

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA) is an independent government body with the following Mission:

> *Guiding and supporting the education sector in Oman to meet the relevant national priorities and objectives while maintaining internationally benchmarked standards* [1]

The institutional Quality Audit results in a public Quality Audit Report which contains formal conclusions in the form of Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations. The QARs are published on the OAAAQA website.[2] Standards Assessment results in a report for the Higher Education Institution (HEI), and public results in the form of ratings and criteria and an overall Accreditation Outcome. These Standards Assessment results are published on the OAAAQA website.[3] When undergoing ISA for the first time, HEIs are expected to include reference to actions taken in response to the formal conclusions of HEI IQA in their ISA Application (ISAA). Each HEI undergoes IQA once only. Full details of the Institutional Quality Audit (IQA) process, including the standards and criteria, are available in the OAAAQA HEI Quality Audit Manual.[4] The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) was established by Royal Decree No 54/2010. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA) was established by Royal Decree No 9/2021, amending the name of the OAAA. For further information, visit the OAAAQA website.[5]

This IQA Report (the 'Report') documents the findings of the IQA of the Higher Institute of Health Specialties (HIHS). It contains a summary of the Panel's findings, together with formal Commendations where good practices have been confirmed, Affirmations where 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 HIHS.

The IQA commenced with the HIHS undertaking a self-study of its Mission, Vision and systems. The results were summarised in the Quality Audit Portfolio (the 'Portfolio'). This document was submitted to OAAAQA by the due date of 20/8/2023. OAAAQA appointed an external IQA Panel (the 'Panel'), comprising qualified and experienced local and international reviewers, to conduct the IQA. For membership of the Panel, please refer to Appendix A. A list of abbreviations, acronyms and terms is available in Appendix B. The Panel met on 12 October 2023 to consider the HIHS Portfolio. A representative of the Panel Chairperson, together with the Review Director and another local Panel Member, undertook a Planning Visit to the HIHS on behalf of the Panel to clarify certain matters, request additional information and make arrangements for the Panel's IQA Visit. Prior to the Visit, the Panel invited submissions from the public about activities at the HIHS but no public submissions were received.

The IQA Visit took place from 10 to 14 December 2023. During this time, the Panel spoke with over 75 people, including representatives of the governing authorities, staff, students, alumni and external stakeholders. It also visited a number of venues and reviewed a range of Additional Supporting Materials (ASMs). While the Report makes reference to a number of these SMs and ASMs, they do not provide an exhaustive list of the broad range of evidence that the Panel has considered in order to come to a conclusion. No documents created after 14 December 2023 (the last day of the IQA Visit) were taken into consideration for the purpose of the audit, other than pre-existing evidence specifically requested by the Panel in advance and/or submitted by the HIHS in comments on draft Report v5. The final Report was approved for release by the OAAAQA Board on 28 May 2024. The OAAAQA Final IQA Report is made publicly available through the OAAAQA website.

[1] https://oaaaqa.gov.om/About-the-OAAA/Mission-Vision-and-Values
[2] https://oaaaqa.gov.om/Media/Document-Centre
[3] https://oaaaqa.gov.om/Reports-Results/ISA-Outcomes
[4] https://oaaaqa.gov.om/getattachment/c63fde93-150b-430d-a58f-9f68e6dc2390/Institutional%20Standards%20Assessment%20Manual.aspx?b=0
[5] https://oaaaqa.gov.om

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

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

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

The focus of the IQA is formative (developmental) rather than summative in nature. In other words, although the audit addresses nine areas of activity, 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, in the context of relevant legal regulations. The IQA therefore recognises that each institution has a unique purpose and profile and it does not directly compare the HIHS with other institutions in Oman.

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

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

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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 Higher Institute of Health Specialties (HIHS) was established in 2018 by a Royal Decree no.18/2018 offering nine different specialisation programmes to prepare healthcare workers to meet the different and critical health needs of the people in Oman.

Prior to this, the Institute evolved as a response to the requirements and development of the health sector in Oman, starting from the Muscat Nursing Institute (MNI) which was founded in 1995 offering post basic diploma programmes in Midwifery, Nephrology Nursing, Critical Care Nursing in Paediatrics and Neonatology. Subsequently, in 2001, the Oman Specialised Nursing Institute (OSNI) was inaugurated, offering additional post basic diploma programmes including Nursing Administration/Health Service Management, Adult Critical Care Nursing, Mental Health Nursing, Infection Prevention and Control Nursing, Emergency Nursing, Community Health Nursing Practice, as well as three BSc Programmes: a BSc (Hons) Nursing Studies, a BSc (Hons) in Community Health Nursing Practice and a BSc in Midwifery.

In 2018, the HIHS was established taking all the responsibilities, assets, rights, and records of the OSNI but although the Royal Decree has given the institute its administrative and financial independence most of the financial operations are still conducted through the Ministry of Health (MoH).

At the time of the Audit Visit, one hundred and seventy two students were enrolled in the nine Postgraduate Diploma programmes with all these programmes delivered in English. The student intakes are nurses serving in the different health sectors in Oman who are either BSc holders or Diploma holders who have worked in nursing for six years.

In the Academic Year (AY) 2023-24, fifty students have also been enrolled in a newly launched diploma programme in Sterile Processing Technology. However, this programme was not reported in the Self Study and is outside the scope of this review.

Development of the Portfolio was started during AY 2021-22, distributed among eight working groups under the leadership of the Dean of the HIHS and submitted to OAAAQA in August 2023. Overall, the Portfolio is well-structured. The Portfolio describes the HIHS' practices, processes, facilities and resources and in some areas there are efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of the policies and procedures to allow for the identification of areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. However, the ADRI method to analyse the Institute's perception of the different scopes is only used in a relatively few instances

The HIHS initiated the strategic planning process in 2019 following its designation as a separate entity in 2018 and the HIHS Strategic Plan (SP) outlines eleven strategic objectives focusing on the Institute's vision for education, learning, scientific research and national talents. The Panel acknowledges that the plan provides sufficient guidance for institutional development across all activities in line with its mission, but in its current form is lengthy and complex and the Panel suggests that a simplified version of this comprehensive document may enhance wider understanding and implementation. The Panel also recommends that the HIHS review its strategic planning process, incorporating insights from a broader range of stakeholders and ensuring the provision of resources to support achievement of the goals. The Panel noted that the actual process followed for operational planning is not clear and there is inconsistency in the use of terminology related to the planning process.

The Panel concurred that the HIHS Mission and Vision offer clear, practical statements outlining how the Institute aims to fulfil its role as the national provider of healthcare workers. These statements are well disseminated to staff and students, but the HIHS is encouraged to explore additional strategies to ensure consultation with external stakeholders in shaping these statements and elevate awareness of the Mission, Vision and Values, ensuring a consistent level of ownership among staff and students.

As mandated by the MoH, the Board of Trustees (BoT) and the Academic Board (AB) are the governance bodies of the Institute and are responsible for establishing and overseeing academic standards and organisational quality of not only the HIHS but also of the adjacent Oman College of Health Sciences (OCHS). The Panel noted that by overseeing two different institutions the operational efficiency is sometimes

compromised due to lack of independence or delays in decision-making and the Panel is of the opinion that this model of governance might need to be reviewed to facilitate the effectiveness of the Institute's operations. It appears that communication within and between the two governing bodies is often inadequate or lacks detail and the HIHS is advised to review its mechanism of communication within and across the two main governing bodies to actively leverage the collective strength of these bodies.

The HIHS has well-defined parameters and functions for its management structure. The Institute Council, led by the Dean, oversees the daily operations of the HIHS and reports to the AB and the BoT. The Dean is assisted by two Assistant Deans, Heads of Sections and the Academic Coordinators who manage the operational aspects of the nine academic programmes offered by the HIHS. The management of the Institute and its academic programmes is further facilitated by fifteen different academic and administrative committees but the Panel was not clear on reporting lines for committees and how actions taken in response to feedback are monitored. Considering the relatively small number of staff, there is concern about the complexity of potentially overburdening those who operate the Institute, particularly given the teaching load carried by academic staff. The Panel recommends that the HIHS review its current management and committee structure to streamline the number of committees, avoiding overlap in their remits and memberships to enhance efficiency in the daily operations of the Institute.

The HIHS financial management system adheres to a standardised framework dictated by the Ministry of Finance (MoF). The Panel observed that despite the Institute's Charter explicitly declaring administrative and financial autonomy, the Institute's budget remains a sub-budget of the MoH and due to the current lack of staff and expertise at the HIHS, the Directorate General of Financial Affairs at the MoH continues to handle most day-to-day financial transactions. The Panel recommends that there is a need for a clearer and more transparent budgetary process, with a focus on expediting resource request processing times to enhance the Institute's operations in alignment with the goals outlined in the SP.

Risk management appears to be in its initial stage of development and a dedicated Risk Management Committee (RMC) has been established, entrusted with the oversight of risk management, review of Risk Registers and the formulation of contingency plans for identified risks. Although a Risk Management Policy was developed and approved (ASM013), the HIHS needs to start deploying a comprehensive system in place to review and monitor potential strategic and operational risks to ensure the institution's sustainability.

The Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) has responsibility for the policies deemed necessary for the effective management of the Institute. A clear commitment to prioritisation and stakeholder consultation is essential to ensure the development of relevant policies, to further facilitate the efficient and effective delivery and management of the HIHS programmes. The Panel noted that the majority of listed policies are either in the development or endorsement stage, with a number of approvals having been delayed for a considerable time, with no clear timeline for implementation.

Students at the HIHS receive information about their rights, responsibilities and procedures for registering grievances. The Panel, however, found no evidence of a systematic review mechanism to inform future approaches to student grievances and recommends that the HIHS reassess its current approach to managing student concerns, incorporating a mechanism to utilise data on student grievances for future practices.

The Panel acknowledges the constitution of a Health and Safety Committee (HSC) to maintain a healthy and secure working environment in the HIHS, but noted that the Health and Safety Manual is in draft format awaiting approval. There has also been no review of the implementation of health and safety measures across the campus and no evaluation of this committee's effectiveness, all important issues that the HIHS is recommended to consider.

The Institute has developed a set of generic graduate attributes that its graduates are expected to have attained upon qualification and has worked in a number of ways to ensure these attributes are disseminated to all stakeholders, aligned with the Mission and Vision, embedded in all programmes and reflected in programme learning objectives and student learning outcomes. The HIHS needs to deploy more efforts in seeking external input on the review of the curricula of its academic programmes.

The Institute uses a variety of mechanisms to ensure the quality of teaching and to monitor the effectiveness of its teaching and learning approaches. Staff and student academic integrity is an aspect requiring immediate action to ensure a culture of integrity is established among staff and students. Although student destinations after graduation are assured as most of the students are on study leave and would rejoin their institutions

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immediately after graduation, the Institute needs to follow up on other aspects of graduate destination including further studies.

The HIHS has a strategic approach to research planning and management as shown in the SP 2021-2025. 'By the end of 2025, the institute will have a research system that promotes and enhances the research capabilities of the staff and faculty to strengthen the quality of the educational programmes and the healthcare services'. Although the Institute encourages staff to take part in research and has also established a mentorship programme for novice researchers, the HIHS needs to systematically plan its approach to research deployment, management and review and more efforts are required to build research targets, facilities, funding and infrastructure for research in order to achieve the required standards for research performance. Given the health sciences specialties of the Institute and the accumulated expertise of the HIHS faculty in their various fields, consultancy can be an area that the Institute should capitalise on.

The HIHS adopts a strategic approach to industry and community engagement by emphasising the development of a high-quality health education system that is transparent, encourages community partnership and meets the needs of the labour market. The Community Outreach Committee (COC) helps the HIHS in the achievement of objectives relating to industry and community engagement by representing the Institute in the wider community and strengthening its relationship with all stakeholders. Policies, guidelines and templates have been developed to provide a reference for actions related to industry and community engagement and partnerships. However, the Panel noted that some of these documents are in draft format and pending approval and the Panel urges the Institute to finalise and approve the policies, procedures, guidelines and forms that regulate its community engagement to guide the planning, implementation, monitoring and reviewing of its industry and community engagement more systematically.

The HIHS has established a wide range of effective and successful mutual relationships, engagement and collaborations with industry and employers as many of the MoH and other governmental health institutions host the clinical placements and are the main employers of the HIHS graduates. The HIHS is encouraged to widen its relationships to include private health sector.

Employers provide input to the HIHS in a number of ways, but the Panel noted limited involvement in some areas, such as the development of Vision and Mission statements and in strategic planning. The Panel recommends the HIHS to consider this issue in order to enable a broader and a more effective input to the different aspects of the Institute.

Memberships of professional organisations appear to relate to personal interest and application by individual faculty members and the Panel agrees with the HIHS that a structured plan and a database of staff membership in professional bodies will be a useful source of information for future collaborations with professional bodies to provide endorsement of the quality and international equivalence of the programmes.

The Panel commends the HIHS for having a positive and constructive relationship with its Alumni, particularly with those who are now staff at the HIHS.

The Panel noted that the HIHS is positive and proactive in its relationship with the community at large, which is manifested in the wide range of community outreach activities conducted. Some of these activities are planned based on community needs, while some activities are conducted as academic programme requirements. The Panel affirms the need to obtain input from the local community on the effectiveness of the community engagement activities as currently feedback is only obtained from organisers of these activities and not from participants.

The HIHS provides a variety of academic support services to its students, including registry and enrolment services, library services, information and learning technology services, academic advising, and learning support services.

Registry processes seem to be clear to students. The HIHS utilises Health Academic Management System (HAMS) as a centralised system for creating electronic records of every student, including personal and academic details and students also utilise this system to register their courses. However, this electronic system requires attention as some modules are still not functioning and enhancing the functions of the various modules within the system should enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the registry and enrolment processes.

The library lists a diverse collection of more than three thousand books, CDs and audio-visual aids for learning purposes and provides access to electronic information resources through the MoH e-library and with other local and regional organisations and universities to facilitate interlibrary loan. However, the Panel observed

the library system is not automated due to the lack of a robust library management module and the use of Microsoft Excel does not allow the provision of statistical analysis and usage reports.

The information and learning technology resources and services require attention and updating to encourage more interactive teaching and learning. The Panel noted that the Information Technology Section and the Cyber Security Unit require an immediate staffing increase in order to carry out the wide range of tasks and responsibilities assigned to them and to attend to staff and student needs more efficiently and avoid serious risk to the institution. The Simulation Laboratory has inadequate out-of-date equipment and this is hindering the effective development of student clinical skills and competencies. The HIHS is recommended to urgently develop and implement clear plans to ensure that the HIHS is steadily provided with the teaching and learning equipment and resources that meet the needs of the students and the requirements of the academic programmes. The Institute must finalise the policies that provide guidelines on appropriate and secure information technology use as well as the policies regulating hardware and software maintenance, replacement, upgrade and procurement.

During the Audit Visit, the Panel found that both students and alumni were highly satisfied with the academic advising system and services and the proactive approach demonstrates the HIHS's commitment to supporting students and providing necessary interventions. As the HIHS has recently started providing training for academic advisors and mentors (CSM001), the Institute is recommended to continue providing this kind of training regularly and in a timely manner to ensure that advisors have the necessary skills and knowledge to guide and support students more effectively.

The HIHS provides some learning support services to its students, but the Panel noted that these services are limited and relate more to community outreach activities and recommends a more systematic approach to the provision of student learning support.

The HIHS takes a strategic approach to overall student support services and, as reflected in the Institute's Mission statement and its Vision to be 'the leading Health Professions Education Institution in the Sultanate of Oman', the Institute's values emphasise 'professionalism, innovation, collaboration, empowerment, belongingness, and transparency'. The Student Support Services play a major role in engaging the students to develop both academically, clinically and professionally and should be closely monitored. At present, facilities for social and recreational activities and the availability of a campus cafeteria and relaxation areas are limited, but the HIHS is planning to improve this aspect of student life in the Institute.

The institute's approach to human resource planning and management is aligned with the Ministry of Labour's (MoL) rules and regulations and there is a focus on providing professional development opportunities and improving training and development following a recent needs analysis assessment. The Ejada system has been introduced for staff appraisals and information on staff profiles is reported showing a wide range of qualifications, skills and expertise within the Institute. Although, during AY 2023-24, one MoHERI scholarship has been awarded, a number of staff have been studying abroad and faculty have had study leave approved, there is a need to develop and implement a planned and systematic approach to professional development for all its academic and administrative staff. Although the Institute adopts an approach to staff wellbeing which includes staff representation at different levels within the Institute, there is a need to develop and implement a more regular staff satisfaction review to inform the provision of staff support services.

The Institute has adopted a strategic approach to Omanisation as evidenced in the SP 2021-2025 and by the end of the AY 2021-22 the Omanisation rate for academic staff is 66.7% and 95.5% for administrative staff (SM004).

The Institute follows the Civil Services Law and its Executive Bylaws, No. 9/2010, for the recruitment and selection of administrative staff and the Medical and Para-Medical Bylaws: Ministerial Decision (No 16/2014) for the selection of permanent academic staff and vacancies are widely advertised. Recruitment and selection of staff are carried out according to the needs of the programmes as advised by the Academic Coordinators but the HIHS needs to review its approach to human resource planning to develop and implement a mechanism that ensures consistent availability of adequate staff, academic and non-academic, to support the delivery of the Institute's academic provision.

The HIHS describe and evaluate the systems for planning and managing its general support services for campus management and maintenance of facilities, but the Institute still depends on the MoH to provide many of the regular maintenance services. As noted previously, the delays to the maintenance of the IT infrastructure and

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the Simulation Laboratory are examples of how external control of finances may impact on the efficient functioning of the HIHS.

The HIHS has systems for promoting and marketing its programmes through collaboration with different government and non-governmental organisations to improve admissions. As student participation in numerous activities in the community generates such a positive image for the HIHS, there would be benefit from not only updating the website but developing and implementing an appropriately funded marketing and communications strategy to further share the Institute's contributions to improving community and health services in Oman.

Summary of Commendations

A formal Commendation recognises an instance of particularly good practice.

1. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education commends the Higher Institute of Health Specialties for actively engaging with Alumni in various activities and reviewing the outcomes to guide further improvements. 39

Summary of Affirmations

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

1. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education agrees with the Higher Institute of Health Specialties for developing and implementing a structured plan to build relationships with local nursing professionals and national and international professional bodies to support its strategic objectives. 38

2. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education agrees that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties needs to continue to obtain more detailed feedback from the community regarding the effectiveness of implemented outreach activities.....40

3. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education agrees with the Higher Institute of Health Specialties for the need to enhance the Health Academic Management System (HAMS) functionality and security to manage student records and improve the efficiency of the registry process.....42

Summary of Recommendations

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

1. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties review its mechanism for communication within and between the two primary governing bodies of the Institute in order to fully leverage the collective expertise of its Board of Trustees, facilitating enhancements in governance, management processes, infrastructure, and learning resources for an enriched student learning experience. 15

2. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties assess and streamline its committee structure to rationalise the number of committees, eliminate overlaps in committee remits, and clarify member roles to enhance overall efficiency and effectiveness. 16

3. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties use terminology relevant to operational planning consistently across all relevant documentation to ensure clarity and uniformity of understanding across internal and external stakeholders. 17

4. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties establish and enforce a systematic approach to aligning the departmental and committee annual Work Plans with the Institute Operational Plan and monitoring the achievement of the Key Performance Indicators outlined in the Institutional Strategic Plan. 18

5. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties in coordination with the Ministry of Health, review the current approach to budgeting to ensure that the allocated budget aligns with the operational needs of the Institute and mitigates any possible financial risk to ensure sustainability. 18

6. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement an integrated risk management system incorporating suitable mechanisms for reviewing and monitoring potential strategic and operational risks, thereby ensuring sustainability for the institution.....19

7. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties adopt a systematic approach for the timely development, implementation, monitoring and review of its policies and procedures to ensure the efficient and effective delivery and management of the activities of the Higher Institute of Health Specialties.....20

8. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties provide all pertinent policies, procedures, guidelines, and other essential documents in both Arabic and English to ensure accessibility for non-Arabic-speaking staff and stakeholders. 20

9. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties establish and execute a well-organised approach to its entity and activity review system incorporating a set of policies and procedures for conducting reviews and ensuring timely responses to reports, all aimed at maintaining quality across the institution.....21

10. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement a structured approach to the management of student grievances, incorporating a systematic monitoring and review process to guide future practices. 21

11. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties re-evaluate its strategy for overseeing the health and safety provision at the Institute and establish a system to regularly review and monitor the effectiveness of both the provision and the entities responsible for this function. 22

12. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties urgently conduct major periodic curriculum reviews for all its programmes to ensure relevance, currency and validity of the curricula.....25

13. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties work to create a culture of academic integrity among staff and students and put in place a more comprehensive system for reporting the cases of academic misconduct and dealing with any trends.....27

14. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties formulate an approach to provide quality student placements and encourages it to establish a quality system to monitor, review and evaluate student clinical and community outreach placements.....28

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15. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement a comprehensive institute-specific assessment policy and procedures to ensure appropriateness of assessment in relation to the student learning outcomes. 28

16. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement a robust approach to the management of student assessment data to ensure the security and integrity of all data pertaining to assessment. 29

17. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties review its approach to establishing a research culture that is aligned to its mission and strategic plan to ensure that research and consultancy are planned, managed, and reviewed in a systematic way. 33

18. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement a comprehensive research plan with clear research targets against which research performance is to be measured. 33

19. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement a structured approach to the management of research funding schemes to support the delivery of research output in the Institution. 34

20. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties urgently identify opportunities for consultancy and establish a system for its delivery and review to meet the defined strategic goals in this area. 34

21. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties conduct regular internal reviews of staff and student satisfaction with the effectiveness of planning and management of academic support services to ensure that the provision of Academic Support Services meet the needs of students and staff. 41

22. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties urgently automate library system to improve library management and provision of services to students and staff. 43

23. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties review its staffing in the Information Technology Section to ensure continuity and stability of the information and learning technology services. 44

24. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop policies and procedures for managing the use of IT facilities by students and staff and for regulating IT hardware/software maintenance, replacement, upgrade, and procurement to ensure safe use of IT resources and to keep them current with advancement in information technology. 44

25. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties regularly review its information and learning technology services and infrastructure to remain current with the new advancements in this area and support the Institute's teaching and learning. 44

26. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop a systematic approach to student learning support services and activities and align these to student learning requirements to ensure their effectiveness in supporting student learning. 45

27. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties urgently develop and implement clear plans to ensure that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties is steadily provided with the teaching and learning equipment and resources that meet the needs of the students and Programme requirements. 46

28. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties urgently provide appropriate and acceptable catering services and common rooms on site to provide a safe and comfortable relaxation environment for students, as well as staff. 50

29. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends the Higher Institute of Health Specialties establish a system for the planning, management, monitoring and review of the provision of social and recreational activities and associated resources and facilities to ensure that students have appropriate opportunities for relaxation, socialising and personal development. 51

30. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties urgently review its approach to human resource planning to develop and implement a mechanism that ensures availability of adequate staff, academic and non-academic, to support the delivery of the Institute's academic provision. ..53

31. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement a structured approach to the recruitment and selection of its staff which includes a mechanism for monitoring, review and evaluation of the effectiveness of the recruitment and selection processes to ensure that the staff selected and recruited help the Higher Institute of Health Specialties meet the requirements of the programmes. 54

32. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement a systematic approach to professional development for all its academic and administrative staff which allows regular review and monitoring of the effectiveness of Professional Development Programmes and staff satisfaction to achieve its strategic goals. 55

33. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement a review system to gauge its staff satisfaction (both academic and non-academic) on a regular and timely manner to ensure that the results are analysed, and acted upon to inform the provision of staff support services. 56

34. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties address the quality of the website information and update the site to further reflect the vibrancy and strengths of the Higher Institute of Health Specialties to increase awareness of the contribution students, staff and graduates make to healthcare provision in Oman and support appropriate national and international recruitment. ..59

35. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties urgently review its public relation and marketing to ensure the effectiveness of its marketing activities in raising the Higher Institute of Health Specialties profile to external community and in the achievement of its vision. 59

36. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties create a formal communication and language policy and guidelines for regulating, guiding and enhancing effective internal and external communications. 60

37. The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties review the effectiveness of its

communication services to ensure effective dissemination and flow of information to internal and external stakeholders. 61

1. GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

Established in 2018 through Royal Decree no. 18/2018, the Higher Institute of Health Specialties (HIHS) offers nine distinct specialisation programmes aimed at preparing healthcare professionals to address the diverse and crucial health requirements of the people in Oman. Subsequently, the Institute has conducted a comprehensive review of its Mission, Vision, Values, and Strategic Plan to ensure it provides the necessary guidance for its endeavors.

This Chapter covers the Panel's findings about the governance and management of HIHIS including its Mission, Vision, and Values; governance; management; institutional affiliations for programmes and quality assurance; strategic planning; operational planning; financial management; risk management; policy management; entity and activity review systems; student grievance process; and, health and safety.

1.1 Mission, Vision and Values

The HIHS current Mission, Vision and Values (MVV) (SM013) are included in the Strategic Plan (SP) 2021-2025 (SM003) and replaced an earlier version following the Royal Decree 18/2018 (SM001), which designated the HIHS as a separate entity and specified its objectives related to education, research, innovation, collaboration with other national and international higher education institutions, community development, and promotion. This called for a review in early 2019 to reflect these changes (Portfolio, p.12). The Mission statement commits the HIHS to: '…..prepare competent health professionals through the provision of a conducive learning environment and high-quality specialised programmes that contribute to the development of research skills and capacity-building and provide solutions for health problems based on evidence-based practices. The HIHS nurtures and reinforces Omani values and a sense of responsibility and provides a positive contribution to community wellbeing and professional needs.' (SM013b, Portfolio, p.13).

The Panel concurred that the HIHS Mission and Vision offer clear, practical statements outlining how the Institute aims to fulfil its role as the national provider of healthcare workers (Portfolio, p.13). The Panel also believes that the statements closely align with the Institute's Values (SM013), demonstrating relevance to the discipline, with ethical considerations integrated into the value of "professionalism", and compassion closely associated with the value of "belonging"

Development of the latest version of the MVV, reviewed in 2019, includes evidence of a consultation process which involved some of the internal stakeholders, such as the Academic Board (AB) and the Board of Trustees (BoT) (Portfolio, p.13, SM013c, interviews). The Panel heard that these were then disseminated to the staff and students by the Dean (Portfolio, p.13, SM013c). However, the Panel could not find sufficient evidence of consultation with a wider group of internal and external stakeholders (interviews). The Panel suggests that the HIHS actively involve both internal and external stakeholders in shaping its MVV, leveraging their insights for mutual benefit.

The Panel noted that the HIHS has a set of MVV that are clear, relevant and set an appropriate level of ambition and intention. These statements are effectively communicated to all staff and students through various channels, including the SP document, the Student Handbook, and are prominently displayed on notice boards across the campus (Portfolio, p.13, SM012, SM017, SM040, campus tour). The HIHS is committed to reviewing and monitoring the effectiveness of its MVV. The effectiveness of the Mission is evident in providing the healthcare institutions with graduates specialised in various nursing specialties, midwifery, health service management and infection control. This is also evident from the positive feedback from these institutions on graduates attainment of graduate attributes (See Section 2.1). The Vision and Values are measured and monitored through the performance indicators of the SP (Portfolio, p.14, SM003). However, the HIHS may explore additional strategies to elevate awareness of the MVV, ensuring a consistent level of ownership of the MVV among staff and students as part of its commitment to support students as they train to become qualified healthcare professionals.

1.2 Governance

As a public sector higher education institution, the HIHS operates under a distinctive three-tier governance and management system mandated by the MoH: the BoT, chaired by His Excellency the

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Minister of Health; the AB, chaired by Her Excellency the Undersecretary of Planning, Administration, and Finance (MoH); and the Institute's Council, chaired by the Dean (Portfolio, p.15, SM001, SM003b, SM010e). The detailed organisational structure, issued as a decree from higher authorities, includes the terms of reference, and membership details of the BoT and AB. Their roles and responsibilities in strategic planning, budgeting, financial approvals, risk management, and quality assurance, are outlined in the HIHS SP document (Portfolio, p15, p23, SM003b, SM007, SM010e, ASM005).

The Portfolio states that the BoT and AB are responsible for establishing and overseeing academic standards and organisational quality of both the HIHS and the OCHS (Portfolio, p.15, interviews, SM003). The Panel heard that while the two bodies have the required expertise to provide strategic guidance to both institutions, the operational efficiency is sometimes compromised because of confusions or delays in decision-making (interviews). The Panel is of the opinion that this model of governance might need to be reviewed to facilitate independence of decision-making and avoid delays which impact the effectiveness of the Institute's operations.

The membership composition of the BoT and the AB within the governance structure reflects an appropriate balance, encompassing individuals with diverse perspectives and expertise necessary to guide the HIHS (SM003b, SM007, SM008a, SM008c, SM010e). For instance, the BoT includes members representing the MoH, the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MOHERI), a Chancellor of a private HEI, and members of higher education institutions from the health sector, both private and public (SM008). The Panel recognises the potential value of the collective experience within the BoT in informing quality improvements in the Institute's educational provision. However, the Panel heard that communication within and between the two apex governing bodies, i.e. AB and the BoT, is often inadequate or lacks detail to fully inform these bodies about the operating conditions and resource requirements of the Institute to effectively fulfill its mandate. Therefore, the Panel recommends that the HIHS review its mechansim of communication within and across the two main governing bodies to actively leverage the collective strength of its governing bodies to benefit from this wealth of experience (interviews).

Recommendation 1

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties review its mechanism for communication within and between the two primary governing bodies of the Institute in order to fully leverage the collective expertise of its Board of Trustees, facilitating enhancements in governance, management processes, infrastructure, and learning resources for an enriched student learning experience.

The Panel acknowledged that the method employed for assessing the Academic Board's performance is deemed suitable for the current phase of the Institute's development (ASM083). Nevertheless, as it relies solely on self-evaluation by members of the Academic Board, the HIHS could enhance its assurance of fulfilling its mandate through an external evaluation.

1.3 Management

The Ministry of Legal Affairs and Ministry of Labour (MoL) approved the organisational chart of the Higher Institute of Health Specialties, and a Ministerial Qarar (i.e. decision) defining the role of each unit within the institution was issued in July 2022 (Portfolio, p.16, SM010e ASM005). The Panel acknowledged the approved organisational chart being in Arabic and recognised the Institute's concerns about effectively communicating the organisational structure, roles, and responsibilities to non-Arabic staff due to limitations in translating legal documents (Portfolio, p.18, refer Section 1.9, Recommendation 8).

The Institute Council, led by the Dean, oversees the daily operations of the HIHS (Portfolio, p.14, p16, SM008e). This Council reports to the AB and the BoT (Portfolio, p.14). The Panel concurs with the

HIHS on the inadequacy of using meeting minutes as a performance indicator for the effectiveness of the Council (Portfolio, p.16, SM008, SM023). The Panel was presented with and reviewed the survey designed to assess the Council's effectiveness (ASM002) and encourages the HIHS to administer it immediately.

The Dean is assisted by two Assistant Deans, one for Academic Support Affairs, Scientific Research, and Community Service, and the other for Student Affairs, along with a Director of Administrative and Financial Affairs (Portfolio, p.16, SM010e). Both Assistant Deans receive support from Heads of Sections and Academic Coordinators (Portfolio, p.16, SM006). Academic Coordinators manage the operational aspects of the nine academic programmes offered by the HIHS (Portfolio, p.16, SM020a). The management of the Institute and its academic programmes is further facilitated by 15 different academic and administrative committees (Portfolio, p16, interviews). Each committee, led by a chairperson, has terms of reference which are to be periodically reviewed (Portfolio, p17, SM009a-SM009i).

Until January 2023, Academic Coordinators, Heads of Departments/Sections, and Chairpersons of committees submitted Annual Reports and Annual Work Plans to the Dean, but these are now reviewed by the Quality Assurance Section (QAS) (Portfolio, p17, interviews). Until August 2023, committees also reported to the Dean for review and monitoring, but now the QAS oversees the review and monitoring of committee functioning (interviews). Committee Chairs use a standard template provided by the QAS to report progress on individual operational plans and annual reports (Portfolio, p17, SM023, SM029). These reports are discussed between QAS and the Dean every three months. However, the evidence available to the Panel outlined the terms of reference of many of the committees, but an organisational chart would have been useful to enable the Panel to clarify how committees report and receive feedback and how each committee responds to feedback and subsequent monitoring from the QAS. The Panel emphasises the need for clarity on the ultimate responsibility for approving plans and monitoring progress by the QAS.

While the HIHS has well-defined parameters and functions for its management structure, considering the relatively small number of staff, there is concern about the complexity of potentially overburdening those who operate the institution, particularly given the teaching load carried by academic staff. The Panel recommends that the HIHS review its current management and committee structure to streamline the number of committees, avoiding overlap in their remits and memberships to enhance efficiency in the daily operations of the Institute.

Recommendation 2

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties assess and streamline its committee structure to rationalise the number of committees, eliminate overlaps in committee remits, and clarify member roles to enhance overall efficiency and effectiveness.

1.4 Institutional Affiliations for Programmes and Quality Assurance

As the HIHS has no formal academic affiliations for its programmes this sub-scope does not apply.

1.5 Strategic Plan

The HIHS initiated the strategic planning process in 2019 following its designation as a separate entity in 2018 (Portfolio, p18, SM001). The HIHS SP is a comprehensive document outlining eleven strategic objectives derived from six pre-identified domains of the Oman Vision 2040 (SM015), focusing on the vision for Education, Learning, Scientific Research, and National Talents. It is also aligned with the Health Vision 2050 (SM027), and reflects the Institute's MVV (Portfolio, p19, SM003, SM026). Individual operational plans for various Sections, Programmes, and Committees complement the SP (Portfolio, p19, SM029). An in-house institute task force collaborated on the plan with experts from OCHS under the guidance of advisors from the Directorate General of Planning Department in the

MoH (SM001). However, the Panel observed limited evidence of collaboration with a broader range of internal or external stakeholders (interviews).

The Panel acknowledges that the SP seems to provide ample guidance for institutional development across all activities in line with its mission. However, there is limited evidence suggesting effective monitoring of the plan's delivery (ASM008). Moreover, the current form of the SP (SM003b) is detailed, lengthy, and complex. The Panel suggests that a simplified version of this comprehensive document may enhance wider understanding and implementation across all departments (Portfolio, p19, SM003b). The Panel also expresses reservations about the HIHS securing the necessary resources to support the achievement of its SP objectives. Therefore, the Panel encourages the HIHS to review its strategic planning process, incorporating insights from a broader range of stakeholders, enabling timely review and monitoring of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and ensuring the provision of resources to support achievement/accomplishment of these goals.

1.6 Operational Planning

The HIHS Operational Plan (OP) (SM029) mirrors the Institute's strategic objectives and outlines the activities for achieving each key performance indicator (Portfolio, p19). Workshops were conducted to train all staff members in developing operational plans, ensuring a shared understanding of elements such as objectives, key performance indicators, and resource allocation (Portfolio, p19, SM028, interviews). According to the Portfolio, all Departments, Programmes, and Committees then formulate individual Annual Work Plans based on the HIHS SP (SM003b), which are subsequently consolidated into an institution-wide OP (Portfolio, p19, SM029). However, the Portfolio states, and the Panel also heard, that first the HIHS OP was developed and disseminated to all Departments, Programmes, and Committees by the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Section in December 2021 and after that the Heads of Sections, Chairs of Committees, Departments, and Academic Coordinators created their individual OPs accordingly (Portfolio, p20, SM029, interviews). The actual process followed for operational planning is therefore not very clear as there was no specific document explaining the detailed process to follow when preparing Operational Plans.

The Portfolio mentions that Departments, Sections, Committees, and Academic Programmes develop Annual Work Plans linked to their individual OPs (Portfolio, p20, SM024). Upon reviewing the evidence and conducting interviews, the Panel observed inconsistency in the use of terminology related to the planning process for example, terms such as “Annual Work Plan”, “Action Plan”, and “Operational Plan” are used interchangeably (Portfolio, p19, p20, SM023, SM024, SM029, interviews). Therefore, the Panel recommends that the HIHS ensures consistency in the terms used in the operational planning process to enhance clarity and uniform understanding among all stakeholders.

Recommendation 3

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties use terminology relevant to operational planning consistently across all relevant documentation to ensure clarity and uniformity of understanding across internal and external stakeholders.

The Panel learned that starting from August 2023, all Departmental and Committee OPs are submitted to the QAS (SM010e) and monitored by the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Section (Portfolio, p20, interviews). Before this change, Heads of Sections, Chairs of Committees, and Academic Coordinators were responsible for monitoring the implementation of their respective OP. The Dean was responsible for monitoring and reviewing the status of achievements in collaboration with the Heads of Sections, Chairs of Committees, and Academic Coordinators (Portfolio, p20, interviews).

Recognising the need for the HIHS to establish a mechanism to monitor and review the implementation and achievements of the OP under the latest reporting system introduced in August 2023, the Panel recommends that the HIHS develop and implement a structured approach to the operational planning

process. This approach should ensure alignment of individual action plans of various entities within the institution with the HIHS OP and allow monitoring of the achievement of the KPIs identified in the HIHS SP.

Recommendation 4

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties establish and enforce a systematic approach to aligning the departmental and committee annual Work Plans with the Institute Operational Plan and monitoring the achievement of the Key Performance Indicators outlined in the Institutional Strategic Plan.

1.7 Financial Management

The Director of Administrative and Financial Affairs is tasked with formulating the Institute's budget, managing salaries, overseeing procurement, and handling petty cash. The HIHS financial management system adheres to a standardised framework dictated by the MoF (Portfolio, p20, SM032). The Panel observed that, despite the Institute's Charter explicitly declaring administrative and financial autonomy, the Institute's budget remains a sub-budget of the MoH (Portfolio, p20). The Panel heard that there are discussions between the Institute and authorities in the MoH about potentially separating the Institute's financial management system and human resources from the MoH. However, due to the current lack of staff and expertise at the HIHS, the Directorate General of Financial Affairs at MoH continues to handle most day-to-day financial transactions (Portfolio, p20, interviews). They continue to approve the Institute's budget and expenditure documents until the HIHS achieves independent financial management (Portfolio, p20, SM031). While regular audits by the MoH are in place, the Panel suggests implementing a more relevant internal audit programme to monitor effectiveness (Portfolio, p21). Therefore, the Panel encourages staffing the HIHS's Internal Audit Section to establish a system of checks and balances, ensuring the appropriate utilisation of funds as the institute moves towards financial autonomy.

Despite being a public higher education institution under the financial governance of the MoF, the HIHS states that it actively engages in financial planning, budgeting, salary management, procurement, reporting, and resource allocation through an internally designated team led by the Director of Administrative and Financial Affairs, with support from the Head of the Administrative and Financial Affairs Section (Portfolio, p20, ASM012). However, the methods for setting, allocating, and monitoring the budget, as well as managing risks associated with expenditure deficits in specific areas, remain unclear. The Panel also learned that financial resources are limited, and approvals take time, impacting their ability to effectively deliver the programmes (interviews). There is a clear need for a more transparent budgetary process, with a focus on expediting resource request processing times to enhance the Institute's operations in alignment with the goals outlined in the SP. Therefore, the Panel recommends that the HIHS urgently review its current approach to financial management, particularly budgeting, to ensure that the Institute is in a position to meet its financial requirements and manage any associated risks.

Recommendation 5

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties in coordination with the Ministry of Health, review the current approach to budgeting to ensure that the allocated budget aligns with the operational needs of the Institute and mitigates any possible financial risk to ensure sustainability.

1.8 Risk Management

The HIHS is in the initial phases of setting up a comprehensive risk management system. In 2022, the Institution initiated staff orientation to the concept of risk management, with the QAC conducting two workshops to introduce the staff to the requirements, framework, and processes involved in risk management. The training programme covered various departments and functions, addressing strategic and operational risk identification, delegated risk management responsibilities, risk rating, and the establishment of control measures and methods (Portfolio, p22, SM035).

Subsequently, the HIHS established a dedicated Risk Management Committee (RMC), distinct from the Health and Safety Committee (HSC), entrusted with the oversight of risk management, review of Risk Registers, and formulation of contingency plans for identified risks (Portfolio, p21-22, SM009p, ASM084). Comprising representatives from academic programmes and administration sections, this committee is presently in the process of developing its terms of reference (Portfolio, p22). Acknowledging the necessity for a Risk Management System and the importance of identifying and monitoring potential risks, the HIHS in collaboration with the OCHS has crafted a Risk Management Policy (ASM013) which was approved by the BoT on 18 October 2023.

The Panel reviewed examples of the Risk Assessment template (ASM014) which was devised by the QAC while awaiting the development and approval of the Risk Management Policy (ASM013). However, at the time of the audit visit, there was no evidence of implementation of the newly devised risk assessment template as per the recently approved Risk Management Policy.

Recognising that the HIHS is still in the early stages of establishing a comprehensive risk management system, the Panel urges the Institute to immediately implement the underlying policies and procedures for risk management. This is essential to ensure consistent review and monitoring of risks for sustainability.

Recommendation 6

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement an integrated risk management system incorporating suitable mechanisms for reviewing and monitoring potential strategic and operational risks, thereby ensuring sustainability for the institution.

1.9 Policy Management

In the academic year 2018, the HIHS collaborated with the OCHS to create a template for the formulation of the OCHS and the HIHS Policies (Portfolio, p22, SM037). Following a review, the final version received approval from the AB in January 2022 (SM008b-meeting number 3). The Panel confirmed that the HIHS staff members also underwent relevant training (Portfolio, p22, SM038, interviews). This policy template aims to facilitate the consistent development, implementation, review, and monitoring of policies within departments, sections, programmes, and committees (Portfolio, p22, SM037).

The HIHS QAC has compiled a list of policies deemed necessary for effective institute management (Portfolio, p22, SM039). The Panel, however, noted that the majority of these policies are either in the development or approval stage, with no clear timeline for implementation. The HIHS attributes this delay to other operational priorities (Portfolio, p22), a fact corroborated during interviews. The Panel is also concerned about the extent of stakeholder engagement in policy development and review, the relationships these policies have with other entities such as OCHS, MoH and the resulting benefits to the HIHS, as well as the effectiveness of communication to the Institute's staff regarding policy implementation.

While the HIHS has a wide range of policies and is developing additional ones in line with the agreed policy, the Panel lacks confidence that this is the result of a policy needs analysis with broad stakeholder consultation. A clear commitment to prioritisation is essential to ensure the development of relevant policies that cover all pertinent areas, facilitating the efficient and effective delivery and management of the HIHS programmes (Portfolio, p22, SM037).

The Panel recommends that the HIHS re-evaluate its approach to policy development, implementation, monitoring and review, to align better with changed circumstances. This review should provide clarity on ownership of policy development and management responsibilities, as well as the dissemination of policies, procedures, guidelines, and directives to the HIHS staff, students, and other stakeholders.

Recommendation 7

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties adopt a systematic approach for the timely development, implementation, monitoring and review of its policies and procedures to ensure the efficient and effective delivery and management of the activities of the Higher Institute of Health Specialties.

The Portfolio states that the Academic Bylaws (SM006a) are monitored at the programme level by Academic coordinators and institutionally by the Examination and Assessment Committee (EAC) (SM009e) and the Institute Council (SM008d) (Portfolio, p. 22-23). The Panel noted, however that, the EAC's Terms of Reference (ToRs) do not include receiving reports and monitoring data beyond examinations (SM009e). The Panel also noted that although the Academic Bylaws (SM006a) are comprehensive and cover areas such as plagiarism and student grievances, they are in Arabic, potentially impeding understanding for non-Arabic-speaking staff.

Recommendation 8

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties provide all pertinent policies, procedures, guidelines, and other essential documents in both Arabic and English to ensure accessibility for non-Arabic-speaking staff and stakeholders.

1.10 Entity and Activity Review Systems

The Portfolio and submitted evidence indicate the development of guidelines for reviewing the curricula of academic programmes, along with the establishment of an annual schedule for academic and administrative reviews (Portfolio, p23, SM041a, SM041b and ASM058). The QAC, utilising approved standardised tools, is responsible for preparing the annual schedule and conducting academic reviews (SM041). However, while entity review surveys are mentioned, there is limited information on survey content, and there are limited details on results or actions taken based on any analyses (SM052).

Since 2018, a comprehensive guide for curriculum reviews has been in operation, and examples of these reviews include accompanying recommendations (SM010). Other sections of this self-study indicate performance reviews in certain areas, such as the AB (SM003b) and the Student Registration Process (Portfolio, p32, SM052). During the audit preparation process, the Institute acknowledged the need to monitor review outcomes in the future. The Panel noted that despite the existence of these processes for several years, mechanisms to review results for informing improvements are yet to be developed.

While acknowledging the HIHS' commitment to continuous quality improvement, the Panel emphasises that delivering quality across the Institute entails more than checking equipment and conducting satisfaction and feedback surveys. Although the HIHS recognises the need to enhance its capacity for internal reviews and Quality Assurance systems, there is insufficient evidence to support the Institute's intention to regularly review key entities or activities to assess the effectiveness of practices for identifying improvements.

Therefore, the Panel is of the opinion that while the HIHS has taken some basic steps to review certain activities and entities, the Institute would greatly benefit from establishing a systematic process for reviewing entities and activities to ensure quality across all academic and administrative areas.

Recommendation 9

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties establish and execute a well-organised approach to its entity and activity review system incorporating a set of policies and procedures for conducting reviews and ensuring timely responses to reports, all aimed at maintaining quality across the institution.

1.11 Student Grievance Process

The HIHS adheres to the requirement for a student grievance system outlined in the Academic Bylaws of the Institute, granting students the right to appeal examination results (Portfolio, p23, SM006). The oversight of student complaints and appeals against academic decisions or disciplinary actions falls under the responsibility of the HIHS's Guidance, Counselling & Graduate Follow-up Section (Portfolio, p24).

In alignment with the MoH Academic Bylaws, guidelines, and the institute's mission, the HIHS has formulated a Student Grievance Policy (SM045) (Portfolio, p23, SM006, SM013). Notably, the policy is pending approval from the AB (Portfolio, p23, interviews). Students receive information about their rights, responsibilities, and procedures for registering grievances/appeals during orientation (Portfolio, p24, SM016, SM043), a practice reinforced in the HIHS Student Handbook (Portfolio, p24, SM017). The Panel also noted that the Student Handbook (SM017) contains a 'declaration form' (SM063d) that students sign attesting to their understanding of the HIHS Grievance Policy and processes and confirmed awareness of both the Grievance Policy and procedures amongst students during interviews.

Dissatisfied students can appeal using the Grade Appeal form within three days of grade announcements (Portfolio, p24, SM042, interviews). The Student Handbook outlines the process for appealing disciplinary actions (SM017). Although the HIHS maintains records of appeals, the Panel found no evidence of a systematic review mechanism to inform future approaches to student grievances. Consequently, the Panel recommends that the HIHS reassess its current approach to managing student grievances, ensuring the approval of relevant policies and procedures, and incorporating a mechanism to utilise data on student grievances for future practices.

Recommendation 10

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement a structured approach to the management of student grievances, incorporating a systematic monitoring and review process to guide future practices.

1.12 Health and Safety

Established in 2018, the HIHS Health and Safety Committee is tasked with managing and reviewing health and safety provisions at the Institute (Portfolio, p24, SM009f). Although the committee's Terms of Reference (ToRs) clearly outline its mandate, the reporting lines are ambiguous, and it does not appear as a distinct function on the organisational chart (SM003b).

The HIHS has crafted a comprehensive Health and Safety Manual, encompassing relevant forms and guidelines for ensuring the safety of students, staff, and visitors (Portfolio, p24, SM046). The Panel noted that while the manual is comprehensive it is still awaiting approval from the Institute Council (Portfolio, p24) and does not have an approval date or information relating to the approval authority

(SM009f). Furthermore, the Health and Safety Policy remains in draft format, awaiting finalisation before undergoing the approval process (SM039).

The Panel acknowledged the HIHS's efforts in organising events such as training sessions and fire and safety drills to uphold a secure environment for staff and students, aligning with national health and safety guidelines from the MoH and Civil Defense and Ambulance Authority (SM048b) (Portfolio, p24, interviews). However, the Panel observed a gap in the Institute's capacity for regular monitoring and review of the Health and Safety Committee's effectiveness and the implementation of health and safety measures across the campus. Consequently, the Panel recommends that the HIHS reassess its approach to the provision of health and safety management, developing and implementing the necessary policies and processes.

Recommendation 11

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties re-evaluate its strategy for overseeing the health and safety provision at the Institute and establish a system to regularly review and monitor the effectiveness of both the provision and the entities responsible for this function.

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

The HIHS does not have oversight of any associated entities.

2. Student Learning by Coursework Programmes

Currently, the HIHS offers nine Postgraduate Diploma programmes including Midwifery, Critical Care Nursing in Paediatric and Neonatology, Adult Critical Care Nursing, (4) Infection Prevention and Control, Community Health Nursing Practice, Nephrology Nursing, Health Services Management, Mental Health Nursing and Emergency Nursing. An undergraduate Diploma in Sterile Processing Technology has been launched this AY 2023-2024, but it was not covered in the HIHS self-study. Until the AY 2022-2023, the Institute offered a Bachelor programme in Midwifery which was discontinued in AY 2023-2024. All programmes are taught in English. Entry into the programmes is based mainly on the proposed requirements of the public health institutions in Oman in addition to some international students from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) neighbouring countries. Prospective candidates for the nursing programmes are practicing nurses who are already working in healthcare institutions in Oman and the GCC countries. Two programmes, however, the Infection & Prevention and Control Programme, and the Health Services Management Programme, are open to other healthcare professionals in addition to nurses (Portfolio, p.30).

The HIHS does not offer a Foundation Programme to its students, considering that English language entry requirement is set at a minimum of an IELTS band of 5.5 or equivalent for all the programmes (SM006).

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 Objectives

In 2018, the HIHS has identified a set of eight generic Graduate Attributes (GAs) for postgraduate programmes and worked in a number of ways to ensure they are embedded through all its programmes: (1) Knowledgeable, competent, and safe healthcare professional, (2) Life-long learner, (3) Critical thinker & problem solver, (4) Researcher, (5) Innovative leader, (6) Effective communicator, (7) Legal, ethical & professional, and (8) Responsible & culturally sensitive citizen (SM049). The undergraduate programmes, before being discontinued, had the same number of GAs, but with some variations: (1) knowledgeable and skillful, (2) critical thinker, (3) collaborator and team player, (4) effective communicator, (5) lifelong learner, (6) ethical, legal and professional awareness, (7) good and engaged citizen, and (8) culturally sensitive (SM049). The generic GAs are clearly set out and reflect what is expected of newly qualifying students (SM049), and were developed in consultation with internal and external stakeholders.

The Directorate General of Human Resources Development (DGHRD) drafted two sets of GAs for undergraduate, and postgraduate programmes. The sets were circulated to the Deans, programme heads, and external stakeholders (employer, industry and profession) in November-December 2017 to seek their opinions. In light of the feedback, the drafts were modified and approved by the Technical Committee on 17th April 2018 (SM049, p.4).

The HIHS follows a varied approach to establishing, embedding, monitoring and communicating GAs and student learning objectives across all programmes at the institution. These are communicated in programme materials, the Student Handbook (SM017) and in the International Students Support Services Handbook (SM017a). They are linked to the MVV statements (SM050) and were approved by the Technical Committee of the MoH Education Institutes in 2018 (SM049). The Curriculum Development and Evaluation Committee (CDEC) ensures the incorporation of GAs in the curriculum (Portfolio p.27, SM050). All programmes have mapped and incorporated the generic GAs and programme learning outcomes. Teaching strategies and assessment are aligned to ensure assessment of these. A matrix is provided as evidence and shows detailed mapping of the GAs and their alignment to the Vision and Mission (SM050) and their incorporation into programme curricula. Samples of Course Descriptions submitted as evidence for the Portfolio showcase how the Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs), assessment and teaching methods incorporate the GAs (ASM043).

Achievement of GAs is evaluated indirectly through course assessments, student surveys and employer surveys. Interviews with external stakeholders (employers and placement providers) gave the Panel valid reassurance about the attainment of the GAs. The GAs that all graduates should have attained

upon completion of their study are embedded implicitly within the PLO. Each Programme has a Course Content and Assessment breakdown that contains PLOs and CLOs that students must achieve upon graduation (SM050).

The HIHS has developed a curriculum mapping matrix which helps to guide the academic programmes to map the GAs, PLOs, and CLOs. The CLOs are mapped with the GAs and are introduced to students through the courses and course delivery methods. The HIHS evaluates the effectiveness of its overall commitment to GAs through gathering data from different stakeholders like students' feedback, end of semester course feedback, employer's feedback, etc. From interviews and the evidence provided (SM056a, SM056b), there is reassuring confirmation that the HIHS has a good employer's satisfaction which demonstrates that the curriculum outcomes provide graduates with the necessary knowledge, technical skills and professional competencies, and employability skills.

The Panel noticed that apart from the indirect ways to evaluate the achievement of the GAs, the Institute does not deploy any mechanism to directly assess their achievement. In interviews, the Panel heard that starting from the AY 2023-2024, timely feedback is centrally gathered by the QAS and the Panel encourages the HIHS to take this as an opportunity to set the right mechanisms to gauge student attainment of GAs. Another matter of concern that the Panel noticed is that although the language of instruction is English, there is little evidence of a systematic approach to supporting students linguistically and developing their study skills. Moreover, no benchmarking at this level is attempted to ensure student proficiency matches the PLOs. Thus, the Panel is of the view that the Institute needs to systematically support its students in terms of English language and study skills, and benchmark its practices to get thorough assurance about its effectiveness.

2.2 Curriculum

All programmes at the HIHS are licensed by the MoH (SM010b, SM010c, SM010d). Programmes at the HIHS are designed to align with the OQF level descriptors and the curriculum proposal is well-detailed (SM006b,d,f,g,h,k). The programmes have a standardised format and matrix to map, structure and develop programme-specific syllabi (Portfolio p.29, SM050). Each programme has a course outline which consists of course description, purpose, learning outcomes, course content, teaching and learning strategies, assessment methods, quality improvement plan, required and additional reading references and references. Each course is developed to ensure learning outcomes and graduate attributes are embedded, taught and assessed alongside discipline specific learning outcomes (SM050). All programmes have theory and clinical courses as major components of the curricula and four programmes - the Postgraduate Diploma in Critical Care Nursing of Pediatrics and Neonatology (SM006d), the Postgraduate Diploma in Emergency Nursing (SM006e), the Postgraduate Diploma in Adult Critical Care Nursing (SM006b) and the Postgraduate Diploma in Midwifery (SM006j) - have laboratory based courses (SM058).

The curricula of all academic programmes are gauged at level five of the OQF for postgraduate diploma programmes (SM006b) according to the HIHS (Portfolio, p.28). The delivery of the postgraduate specialty diploma programmes is spread over two semesters and one summer session. The duration of the postgraduate diploma in Midwifery is four semesters. The credit hours vary between 30 and 42 credit hours and a student can take the relative numbers of credit hours each semester as per Article 13 of the Academic Bylaws (SM006a).

Evidence provided shows that faculty develop course delivery plans to meet the learning outcomes and devise continuous and final assessment to evaluate student attainment in each course (ASM107, ASM108). Development of programmes is overseen by the Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs, Scientific Research and Community Services and then by the Dean. The BoT provides the final approval of programmes (SM006) based on the recommendations of the Technical Committee (SM010). A mandated three-year review cycle is the standard practice (Portfolio p.28) although the Curriculum Review Guidelines states that the review takes place every five years (SM010, p.4). According to the staff, the curriculum review has been disrupted due to the institutional merger, changes in the OQF (SM058b) and the Covid-19 pandemic. During the audit, these have been under review using standardised criteria developed by the Central Committee of Curriculum Development and Evaluation (CDEC) (SM010d). Upon the request of the Panel, the HIHS provided additional

evidence showing some aspects of curriculum review but it does not constitute a reliable evidence of a major curriculum review as per the Curriculum Review Guidelines (SM010).

As per the Curriculum Review Guidelines (SM010d, p. 4), the review of existing programmes involves ten steps to be followed involving internal and external stakeholders, alignment, expert consultation from other HEIs and professional bodies, and seeking the required approvals. However, the process described in the Portfolio and the interviews not only limits the steps to internal efforts (Portfolio, p. 28) but also identifies the lack of expertise in curriculum review and development as a need for the HIHS CDEC (Portfolio, p29). The HIHS is required to implement its curriculum, programme and course review policy (SM010d) to facilitate external and internal input into the development and review of the curriculum.

Recommendation 12

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties urgently conduct major periodic curriculum reviews for all its programmes to ensure relevance, currency and validity of the curricula.

As an attempt to benchmark the programmes, the HIHS mentions that the Curriculum Development and Evaluation Committee compares the HIHS' programmes against other programmes from various international and national academic institutions of a similar level which are available online to ensure a consistent approach when implementing their courses (Portfolio, p29). These institutions include Arizona State University, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, University of California, Los Angeles-Fielding School of Public, University of Greenwich, University of Southampton, Queen Margret University, Bucks New University, Manchester Metropolitan University and University of Pretoria (SM006c, p.19). The Panel supports the HIHS intention to undertake benchmarking of its curricula with other higher education institutions and collect feedback from industry and alumni on the effectiveness of the present curricula but it is suggested that an action plan for these activities with a specified time frame and designated responsibilities should be developed.

2.3 Student Entry Standards

The HIHS entry standards and the numbers to be admitted to each programme are set by the Institute Council and approved by the AB. For nursing programmes, the applicants are nurses from MoH or other healthcare providers in Oman or GCC countries. However, admission is open for other health professionals, in addition to nurses, in two programmes: the Infection, Prevention and Control Programme and the Health Services Management Programme (Portfolio, p.30). The Academic Bylaws (SM006) provide the guiding principles to ensure fair, transparent and consistent admission arrangements are in place to enrol students in the HIHS programmes.

The Assistant Dean for Students Affairs and the Admission, Registration and Student Affairs Section are responsible for managing admission and entry into the HIHS programmes. Academic Coordinators are involved in the selection process of applicants based on the agreed entry requirements. For language proficiency requirement, an IELTS 5.5 band is commonly required for entry into both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes (SM006). Although the HIHS reviews its registration process annually (interviews), seeks student feedback about registration (SM052) and communicates its entry requirements through various ways, there is no evidence that the HIHS checks that these generic criteria are adequate and appropriately effective for the progression of students in the academic programmes and that they are being consistently implemented. The Panel urges the HIHS to formally monitor and evaluate its entry standards to ensure appropriate student admissions.

During interviews, academic staff expressed their satisfaction with students' language proficiency at entry level to the HIHS programmes. However, the Panel urges the HIHS to evaluate its English proficiency in the different skills at entry levels especially for the postgraduate programmes to ensure smooth student progression and learning and conduct the necessary benchmarking nationally and internationally to ensure student entry standards are appropriate.

2.4 Teaching Quality

The HIHS sets the first domain of its SP 2021-2025 'as a high-quality health education system that is transparent, encourages community partnership, and meets the needs of the labour market' (SM003b, pp.57-58) and the Portfolio states that the HIHS 'is committed to upholding quality standards in teaching and learning' (Portfolio, p.33). In its Mission, the Institute aspires to 'provide quality education in a conducive learning environment' (SM064). This stands as an essential indication of the HIHS commitment to providing high-quality teaching. To meet these aspirations and plans, the HIHS aims to provide appropriately qualified teachers to meet the educational needs and to maintain a very acceptable student-staff ratio of 1:6 for the postgraduate diploma programmes (Portfolio, p.33). The faculty profile shows the distribution of faculty in terms of qualifications, specialisations, nationalities, and experience (SM069, ASM118). The HIHS requires faculty to have a minimum of a Master's level degree in their field, but some new faculty members are yet to complete their qualifications (Portfolio, p.33).

In April 2023, the HIHS formulated a Training and Scholarship Committee to manage and facilitate the process of educational development of faculty (SM009k). Moreover, a training plan has been developed for new faculty with more continuous development programmes and opportunities for existing teaching staff identified (SM016). The HIHS has a Continuing Professional Development Committee and teachers are encouraged to participate in professional development activities, including seminars, training programmes and scholarly activities to enhance their professional levels (Portfolio, p33, SM009c).

The HIHS has a Workload Policy (SM073) which is developed to set the framework for teaching load and the related tasks and activities. From interviews with the academic staff, the Panel noticed an overall satisfaction with the workload allocated for them. However, the Institute needs to review the extent to which the involvement of staff with multiple committees does not conflict with the required standard of teaching quality.

The Panel noticed that the feedback mechanisms are available to a limited extent. Student evaluation of teaching takes place at the end of each semester (SM065). There are forms for peer observation, Academic Coordinators' teaching observations and Dean's teaching observation of Academic Coordinators (SM066a, SM066b). However, they are not systematically and consistently deployed, and evidence provided shows that there is no timely implementation in place to review the quality of teaching and no action, apart from some individual initiatives. It is advisable to set an annual programme relating to peer review and teaching observations and clinical teaching observations to ensure there is overall coverage of all aspects of teaching and learning. The HIHS needs to identify where and how feedback is provided to staff and what arrangements are in place to support staff development following the teaching quality assessment.

The Panel is concerned about the way teaching quality is assured, particularly in clinical outreach placements. It appears the QAC carries out evaluations but it is important to understand how all aspects of the clinical placements are quality-controlled in order to protect the students and the student experience to ensure the achievement of competence. There is limited evidence of attention being paid to the quality of clinical teaching and it appears there is a need to ensure mutually supportive two-way communication between the HIHS and the clinical supervisors.

2.5 Academic Integrity

Article 62 of the Academic Bylaws (SM006a) constitutes the guiding principle for a number of policies and guidelines on academic integrity including plagiarism and cheating, academic security and invigilation, and the management of academic misconduct. From interviews, the Panel noticed that academic integrity and avoiding plagiarism are areas of focus during student orientation at the beginning of each semester. Moreover, some course booklets include guidance on how to avoid plagiarism and provide supporting material to help students with referencing and citations (SM076).

Although the Plagiarism Policy does not appear in the comprehensive list of policies and procedures (ASM82), it appears in the Student Handbook (SM017) as 'Unfair Practice and Plagiarism Policy' on pages 63 to 69. This policy covers assessment, examination and plagiarism. However, the policy does

not specify the levels of plagiarism and their relative penalties, nor does it explain what happens in case of recurrence of the breach of academic integrity by the same student. In its response to the Panel's request for further evidence regarding the actual cases of plagiarism, the HIHS states that the cases of plagiarism are rare and that they are reported to the Institute Council and the details are maintained by the Council Rapporteur. However, no evidence was submitted to support this claim.

The Portfolio (p.34) states that the regulations concerning academic integrity are communicated to students through the orientation week presentations and the Student Handbook (SM017). The Examination and Assessment Committee is in charge of raising student awareness of plagiarism and how to avoid it. The HIHS stated that as part of its efforts to ensure student understanding of the policies pertaining to academic integrity, the Institute requires students to sign a Student Contract (Portfolio, p. 35, SM063d).

Academic integrity awareness sessions for staff are limited to a presentation on plagiarism for newly recruited staff as part of their induction training package. None of the HIHS policies deals with staff academic integrity.

Since January 2023, the HIHS acquired a plagiarism detection software and introduced it to staff and students (Portfolio, p. 35). However, the HIHS is encouraged to consider other approaches in addition to the anti-plagiarism software in order to help prevent plagiarism. It is suggested that there is further staff development in areas of plagiarism prevention such as designing assessment tasks that make plagiarism difficult. The HIHS is urged to increase student and staff awareness and understanding of plagiarism.

The Panel is seriously concerned about the practice of editing students' assignments undertaken by the English tutor (ASM064 amended), especially in the absence of clearly defined guidelines stating the fine lines between acceptable editing and plagiarism in the Institute, and urges the HIHS to set clear academically acceptable and ethical guidelines to the practice of 'editorial assistance for assignments.

Recommendation 13

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties work to create a culture of academic integrity among staff and students and put in place a more comprehensive system for reporting the cases of academic misconduct and dealing with any trends.

2.6 Student Placements

The Institute states that student placements are a major component of student learning and that it has a procedure for identifying and communicating the placement needs each semester (Portfolio, p35). The Joint Institute Service Committee (SM009h) leads and collaborates with all clinical placements. Academic Coordinators prepare clinical allocation plans at the start of each semester and agree arrangements with the clinical areas in the MoH and governmental hospitals to maximize the number of students and institutions available for their students (SM075, ASM27). The final arrangements are communicated by the Dean to the MoH and the placement institutions.

The Panel found that all the students undertaking the HIHS programmes are required to complete placements for clinical or community outreach experience (ASM021). Students are provided with the objectives of the placement and specified learning outcomes to achieve during the clinical placement to enable students to integrate theory into clinical practice (SM076). The HIHS note that faculty accompany students and supervise their clinical learning. The Panel appreciates the fact that clinical teaching evaluations are undertaken for all students. However, this needs analysis in order to lead to actions for improvement.

As part of its review of clinical placements, the HIHS also noted that there are challenges with clinical placements, including limited places for different specialties. A joint taskforce (ASM030) with a number of concerned institutions was formed and started taking action to deal with these challenges and better manage clinical placements. The Institute acknowledges the need for clear guidelines for

monitoring outreach clinical placements, ensuring the safety of students and establishing an effective preceptorship system to maximise students gains from placements.

Recommendation 14

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties formulate an approach to provide quality student placements and encourages it to establish a quality system to monitor, review and evaluate student clinical and community outreach placements.

2.7 Assessment Methods, Standards and Moderation

The HIHS approach to assessment and moderation is detailed in Chapter 4 of the Academic Bylaw 2/2019 (SM006) and overseen by the EAC (SM009e). Assessment rules and regulations are communicated to students by the EAC during their orientation week and through the Student Handbook (Portfolio, p. 36, SM017). The assessments include theory, clinical and practical examinations and are aligned to student learning outcomes (Portfolio, p.37). Some programmes also include projects, research and assignments as part of the overall assessment.

Various systems have been introduced to organise assessment and moderation. These include an Examination Flowchart laying out the steps and duties of the roles involved in examinations before, during and after the administration of examinations (SM081e) and Moderation Guidelines covering the areas related to marking, double marking and sample marking (SM081d). Additionally, External Examiner Guidelines stating the criteria for nomination, procedures for appointment, and roles and responsibilities of external examiners (SM081a) and the Operational Guidelines for Final Submission (SM081c) and setting the rules for online assessment submission have also been devised. These various guidelines and checklists reflect the HIHS awareness of the importance to standardise assessment methods and moderation.

As stated above, the Institute has recently elaborated its Moderation Guidelines (Portfolio, p.37, SM081d) and the Panel was not able to verify its implementation through the evidence provided in situ (ASM109). Thus, the Panel encourages the HIHS to urgently deploy and communicate its Moderation Guidelines to ensure fair and transparent marking and evaluation of student work and assessment.

The Panel is of the view that using various procedures, guidelines and checklists, with some being shared from another institution, can lead to the ineffective management of the HIHS assessments and moderation and could lead to serious gaps in the future.

Recommendation 15

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement a comprehensive institute-specific assessment policy and procedures to ensure appropriateness of assessment in relation to the student learning outcomes.

The HIHS uses a grade point system (GPA) as a grading scheme for decisions about student progression and academic probation. The pass level as per the latest Academic Bylaws 2/2019 (SM006a) implemented from 2018-2019 is a cumulative GPA of 2.25, the equivalent of an overall grade of 70%. The HIHS acknowledges the need to evaluate the newly deployed bylaws and gauge students' and faculty's satisfaction with it. The Panel encourages this step as it ensures fair and equitable assessment and progression of students.

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After moderation, final marks are sent to the Institute Council for final approval (SM053). As per articles 63-65 of the Academic Bylaws (SM006a), once results are approved and published, student appeals can be lodged within three working days. From interviews with students, the Panel came to an assurance that students are well-aware of the appeal process and timelines.

External moderation and benchmarking of assessment is a crucial element in the process of meeting course expectations, learning outcomes and maintaining academic standards. The Panel noted that there is no evidence of external moderation or benchmarking of assessment. Thus, the Institute is encouraged to develop the necessary system to ensure the validity and appropriateness of assessment.

The Panel came to know from interviews with students that feedback on assessment is provided to them consistently and that they are made aware by the Academic Coordinator of the objectives and content of the course, and assessment methods and rubrics at the beginning of each semester (SM083). Evidence of student written work and assessment submitted on site showed the teacher's feedback was provided in every assessment (ASM109).

2.8 Academic Security and Invigilation

The HIHS' academic security and invigilation approach is guided by Article 58 of the Academic Bylaws 2/2019 (SM006a). The Examination and Assessment Committee (EAC) is the entity responsible for the safety, physical security, and integrity of examinations (Portfolio, p.37). Students and invigilators are made aware of the examination rules, regulations duties and responsibilities (SM087a).

The physical arrangements for the examination are the responsibility of the Chairperson of the EAC. These include printing, photocopying, managing and storing examination question papers. The EAC Chairperson prepares the final examination schedule and invigilation duties and communicates them to the Assistant Dean for Student Affairs for approval (SM086). Once approved, they are communicated to all staff.

As per the Portfolio, Academic Coordinators, course teachers, EAC member(s) and a faculty member from the same programme all have access to the examination papers sometime during the different stages of designing, moderating, reviewing and securing the examination papers (Portfolio, p.38). The Institute uses a secured locked room to secure final examination question papers and allocates a photocopier and printer solely for examinations. Examination answer scripts are archived for one year after the examination is conducted before they are discarded.

The HIHS ensures that two teachers are allocated the task of invigilation of each examination and one more teacher is on standby for any emergency or support (SM086). An invigilation report is completed at the end of each invigilation slot (SM087b) and a standardised form is available for the incidents of misconduct (SM088a).

The Panel, however, noticed from interviews that the management of student data, grades and result entry into the system is done manually and no security arrangement is considered. The results are entered by members of staff who are not supposed to deal with such matters and in ways that expose student data and results to misuse. The Panel considers this a major area of concern that the HIHS needs to rectify urgently.

Recommendation 16

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement a robust approach to the management of student assessment data to ensure the security and integrity of all data pertaining to assessment.

2.9 Student Retention and Progression

The HIHS Academic Coordinators are responsible for consistently monitoring student progression and reporting attrition, and completion data at the end of each academic year in their annual reports (SM023) to the Assistant Dean of Student Affairs (Portfolio, p.39). The reported data is discussed in the Institute Council (SM053).

Students' attrition and progression are closely monitored and evaluated. To maintain a high retention and progression rate and in compliance with Article 15 of the HIHS Academic Bylaws (SM006a), the Institute allocates an academic advisor for each student. Academic advisors guide, advise, counsel, and monitor students' progress throughout their period of study within the HIHS (ASM115). Academic advisors meet with students at least twice per semester and maintain records of their meetings (See Section 6.5).

The HIHS provided the Panel with statistics pertaining to attrition, retention and progression of students for the last five years and stated that students at risk are referred to their academic advisor for extra support and assistance with their studies (SM89). Students under academic probation are reported to the Assistant Dean of Student Affairs. Cases are discussed and decisions regarding student status are made by the Institute Council (SM053). The HIHS considers that the trends of 2020-21 show that the Covid-19 pandemic was a contributory factor to the occurrence of some students on academic probation. From interviews with the staff, the Panel was informed that withdrawal cases are very rare and due mostly to personal or family reasons. The Panel encourages the HIHS to further analyse its students' progression and retention data to inform future decisions about guiding students to timely completion of their studies.

2.10 Graduate Destinations and Employability

The MVV of the HIHS set out the intended aim regarding preparation for the health workforce in line with the national strategy. The HIHS states that all students are already employed and are on study leave from their employers (Portfolio, p.40). A database is set up by the Institute to track its graduates' destinations. A survey conducted once in 2019 showed that 83% of graduates were employed in areas related to their studies in the HIHS (SM091). Although most of the satisfaction rates are high, some rates raise areas of concern that the Panel encourages the HIHS to consider. The data provided (Q2.2.1) shows that some alumni were not very satisfied with some educational areas: 21.2% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with theoretical courses, 23.4% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with clinical courses and 35.5% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the laboratory educational area. The survey has been discontinued until the time of this audit despite its importance in gathering valuable data for the Institute. The HIHS relied on the national survey conducted by the MoHERI to get data about its graduates (CSM002). The Institute is urged to continue the practice of alumni satisfaction survey and to track their employability and seek their feedback in addition to the employers' feedback that is routinely collected by the QAC.

The HIHS told the Panel that a Labour Market Needs Analysis is currently being conducted (Interview, Portfolio, p.41) and the information will be used to inform curriculum review and development and to inform the proposed scope of practice for nurses (SM061). In interviews, the Panel was informed as well that the Institute targets students from GCC countries. Thus, it is advisable that the needs analysis cover not only the Omani market with its public and private sectors but also the overall Gulf Region and review these students destinations

Although employability is not a major concern for the graduates of the HIHS, the Institute is urged to set targets for further study rates which align with each student's field of study and benchmark the quality of its graduates with other graduates of similar institutions nationally and internationally.

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3. Student Learning by Research Programmes

At the time of the Quality Audit, the HIHS did not offer research programmes, so this section is not addressed in this Report.

4. Staff Research and Consultancy

The HIHS aspires, as noted in Domain 6 of the HIHS Strategic Plan 2021-2025, to be 'an educational system that supports scientific research, creativity, innovation, and contributes to knowledge enhancement' (SM003b, p79). The appointment of a research lead, the Assistant Dean for Academic Support, Scientific Research & Community Services who is responsible for managing the institute's research activities, is of major significance for the strategic importance of research in the HIHS. The HIHS Mission is 'to prepare competent healthcare professionals through the provision of conducive learning environment and high quality specialisesd programmes that contribute to the development of research skills and capacity-building' (SM013c) and the fourth Graduate Attribute of the Institute is for any graduate to be a 'researcher' (SM013c, SM049).

This Chapter reports on the planning and management of staff research and consultancy activities and describes the Panel's findings with regards to research planning and management; research performance and funding schemes; consultancy activities; ethics and biosafety; intellectual property arrangements; professional development of research; research commercialisation and the research-teaching nexus.

4.1 Research Planning and Management

The HIHS has a strategic approach to research planning and management as shown in the Strategic Plan 2021-2025, 'By the end of 2025, the Institute will have a research system that promotes and enhances the research capabilities of the staff and faculty to strengthen the quality of the educational programmes and the healthcare services' (SM003b). The responsibilities of the Board of Trustees include "Setting the general policy for specialised education and research to ensure their quality" and the additional obligations of the Academic Board involve 'Preparing proposals related to scientific research that are commensurate with the objectives of the Institute and submitting recommendations to the Board of Trustees' (SM008a, p.8). Further management of research prompted the establishment of the Joint Research and Studies Committee in 2019 which listed six research priority areas as part of its research guidelines to form the basis for future research for both the HIHS and the OCHS (SM094f).

Research approval is the responsibility of either the MoH Research and Ethical Approval Committee (RERAC) or the HIHS Institute's Research and Newsletter Committee (IRNLC) depending on the nature and the size of the research. As an internal committee, IRNLC has recently been approved to be an ethical committee to approve student research projects (SM094f) and some educational research projects (Portfolio, p45). The HIHS considers that there is an additional benefit, as staff or faculty can submit their draft research proposals to the committee for review and feedback prior to submitting them to the MoH, thus assuring quality and value of all research applications.

The Institute management encourages staff to take part in research. It has organised some professional development activities for research (SM094b). To encourage staff to undertake research, the HIHS launched an award for best innovation and research in 2021 (SM152). However, there was no submission for the award until this audit. From interviews with staff, the Panel came to know that the Institute offers a research mentorship programme to the staff. However, the Panel was informed that the participation of staff is still limited and this issue was mentioned as well in the annual report of the Assistant Dean for Academic Support, Scientific Research & Community Services (SM023d). The Institute has identified the issue of low attendance at research development opportunities (SM023d) but no further investigation was done. In interviews, the reason for low staff interest in research was identified as the high workload and duties. The Institute is encouraged to identify the main reasons behind this trend to meet its strategic aspiration pertaining to research.

The Institute mentioned that currently there is no budget allocated for research (a request has been made for this in 2024 (SM094c) nor a research plan and research targets are set. It is evident that a fully-fledged system for research needs to be put in place to better plan and manage research and research activities across the HIHS.

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Recommendation 17

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties review its approach to establishing a research culture that is aligned to its mission and strategic plan to ensure that research and consultancy are planned, managed, and reviewed in a systematic way.

4.2 Research Performance

The development of academic staff research capacity and capability is set in the SP and the HIHS confirms that all faculty are expected to engage in research and scholarly activities as they are seen as essential for both the intellectual advancement of the programmes and for promoting research-led teaching (SM097).

The Institute strives through the Assistant Dean for Academic Support, Scientific Research and Community Services and the IRNLC to encourage staff, raise their awareness and provide training for research based on the needs of staff despite the lack of an allocated budget. A staff survey conducted in 2020 shows only one fifth of staff are satisfied with the Institute support for research (Portfolio, p.46). Staff response to the satisfaction survey is clear evidence that there is a major gap. As a response, the HIHS has tried to vary its approach to research especially that it constitutes a strategic domain of its direction and a graduate attribute of its students. As a response, the IRNLC has supported staff to conduct research by providing protected time for data collection, announcing a research award, establishing a research journal club (SM099) and encouraging staff to consider research targets as part of their appraisal. Some individual attempts by staff over the last five years, until the time of this audit, have led to the publication of seven research articles, a chapter in a published book as well as two other research articles, and a book chapter which are still in the process of publication (SM101).

The research performance and scholarly activities of staff are monitored using an Excel database of the research and scholarly activities, including a list of faculty research topics and completed research (SM098). This is maintained by the Assistant Dean for Academic Support, Scientific Research and Community Service. Staff satisfaction with the support given for research is not sought on a regular basis but based on the institutional staff survey conducted. Satisfaction is low but the Panel encourages the HIHS to monitor staff satisfaction with the support provided, especially in view of the strategies which have been introduced and the efforts being made to increase the interest and ability to undertake research to increase the overall research output of the faculty.

There is a particular need to stipulate the required time for research and teaching expected from all faculty. The Panel noted that the HIHS needs to communicate the Institute's expectations, research plans and research targets so that academic staff engage in scholarly activities which would also support faculty in keeping up-to-date with the latest developments in their subject disciplines.

Recommendation 18

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement a comprehensive research plan with clear research targets against which research performance is to be measured.

4.3 Research Funding Schemes

The HIHS has not provided any research funding so far (Portfolio, p47, interviews) and this is mainly due to budget allocation which is still not controlled by the Institute. The HIHS states that opportunities for funding are available for staff through the MoH and other government agencies.

The context of higher education in Oman provides various funding opportunities for research. In view of the absence of an allocated budget for research activities at the HIHS, the Panel noted that more guidance and resources need to be provided to encourage staff to apply for the funds offered by the MoH, the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation and other governmental agencies. The Panel requested the HIHS to provide evidence for any sponsorship obtained for staff research

(ASM038) and any research grants or funds received by staff (ASM039), and the response from the HIHS was 'Although staff are encouraged to apply for funding, however no staff apply for that'. The HIHS is in the process of discussing the allocation of a budget for research in order to fund and create incentives for faculty to undertake research (SM094c). However, the Panel is of the view that a more structured approach is needed for sharing, allocating and managing internal grant schemes; staff applying for external competitive grants; research income, etc. and the HIHS is required to complete the development of their research framework to provide a comprehensive approach to funding.

Recommendation 19

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement a structured approach to the management of research funding schemes to support the delivery of research output in the Institution.

4.4 Consultancy Activities

Under Domain 6 of the Strategic Plan 2021-2025, the HIHS intends to engage in external research consultancy activities and a formal mechanism will be developed to facilitate consultancy activities (SM003b). Although it is a strategic goal and the Strategic Plan 2021-2025 is in its fourth year of implementation, no consultancy plan or activity is in place. In the case of the HIHS, this area could be a major opportunity for improvement, given the health sciences specialties of the Institute and the accumulated expertise of the HIHS faculty in their various fields. It is expected that the developed framework for consultancy provides details pertaining to staff contractual and workload arrangement; financial arrangements; legal liabilities; marketing schemes; training and support for staff engaged in consultancies.

Since this is at the initial stage of inception, the HIHS suggests that a formal mechanism is developed to facilitate consultancy activities and achieve targets and goals as envisioned in the SP (Portfolio, p47). The Panel supports this orientation in line with Recommendation 17 (see Section 4.1).

Recommendation 20

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties urgently identify opportunities for consultancy and establish a system for its delivery and review to meet the defined strategic goals in this area.

4.5 Ethics and Biosafety

The Institute states that it follows the guidelines of the MoH Research and Ethical Review and Approval Committee (RERAC) (SM102) when it comes to the approval of research, whether it involves biosafety or not. A list of experts and reviewers is made available by the IRNLC to provide additional guidance for researchers (SM094). Although research conducted at the institute at present does not use biochemical or biological agents or other hazardous materials, there is still a requirement to provide appropriate controls and checks of any research which involves biosafety considerations or human, animal or genetic ethical considerations.

Although the Joint Committee Guidelines briefly mention biosafety (SM094f), serious consideration of biosafety should be considered as there may be future proposals which involve genetic ethical considerations or the use and disposal of biohazardous materials. Any policy and procedures, in this regard, should be developed with reference to the MoH guidelines and in accordance with the Code of Ethics of the World Medical Association (Declaration of Helsinki) (World Medical Association (2013) 'Declaration of Helsinki: Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects'. JAMA. 310(20): 2191–2194). The Panel recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties provide

the necessary ethics training for its staff and students and develop the appropriate framework for managing biosafety.

4.6 Intellectual Property

The HIHS states that it is committed to promoting good practices in all aspects of its research initiatives and ensuring all faculty are aware of the National Law of Copyrights and Neighboring Rights (Royal Decree 37/2000) (Portfolio, p 48, SM103).

The Panel was informed that a draft policy and procedures for intellectual property have been developed (SM104) jointly with OCHS. However, the draft submitted as evidence refers to OCHS only. In order to match the nature of the specialties and the staff expertise of the Institute, the Panel urges the HIHS to act independently on matters relating to policies and procedures. The HIHS needs an Intellectual Property Rights Policy which conforms to the national guidelines and clearly defines and supports the management of any intellectual property issues with regards to staff or student work, teaching and support materials as well as anticipated future research.

4.7 Professional Development for Research

One of the HIHS' strategic priorities aims to provide professional development opportunities for staff in a broad range of areas. The IRNLC is responsible for professional development for research (SM009g). The Panel was informed that the committee conducted a research needs analysis in 2022 and factored the results into a series of activities targeting the identified needs such as training on writing a research methodology, writing proposals and critically appraising journal papers and based on the findings a range of training opportunities has been offered (SM094a, ASM042, Portfolio, p48). However, no data about staff attendance and satisfaction with these professional development for research activities is provided.

A list of professional development activities related to research conducted by faculty is available and includes some training for research (SM093). As part of its SP 2021-2025, the HIHS has developed a mentorship programme for novice researchers (SM0092) which is meant to promote the professional development of novice researchers. The Panel encourages the HIHS to continue implementing this initiative to help novice researchers to take part in research activities.

It is evident that the lack of an overarching research plan has led to the limited impact of all research related activities. Thus, the Panel urges the HIHS to develop and implement a formal structure for the management of professional development for research in order to support staff to undertake research.

4.8 Research Commercialisation

The commercialisation of research is not part of the institute's mission or strategic plan, so this section is not addressed by the Panel.

4.9 Research-Teaching Nexus

The Strategic Plan of HIHS emphasises the importance of linking research to teaching: 'By the year 2025, the Institute will have a research system that promotes and enhances the research capabilities of staff and faculty to strengthen the quality of the educational programmes and healthcare services' (Portfolio, p49, SM003b).

The institute provides a number of research studies that were either conducted to gauge ways of teaching in the educational programmes at the HIHS or to improve and enrich the curriculum (SM098f).

The Assistant Dean for Academic Support, Scientific Research and Community Services maintains an Excel sheet of the research and scholarly activities of faculty, including whether the research has been incorporated into the teaching-learning process (SM098). However, a priority-setting process needs to be followed to ensure that the research conducted addresses the needs of the HIHS and aligns with the academic disciplines and fields of study. Whilst the SP (SM003b p76-82) supports research for staff,

and is encouraging collaborative research with external partners, there is no mention of collaboration between students and faculty and no incentive schemes to encourage student collaboration.

It is unclear if faculty consider the research-teaching nexus and the HIHS should continue to support staff scholarly activities to promote a systematic approach to linking teaching and research to ensure a research-led teaching focus. Faculty should be supported to ensure that all student teaching is evidence-based, up-to-date and based on the latest research. The Panel urges that the HIHS needs to implement a systematic approach to developing a research action plan to ensure its research and scholarly activities have a positive impact on teaching and learning.

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5. Industry and Community Engagement

The HIHS adopts a strategic approach to industry and community engagement. The strategic focus on community engagement has continued from the SP 2016-2020 (SM003a) into the current SP (2021-2025), with an emphasis on developing a high-quality health education system that is transparent, encourages community partnership and meets the needs of the labour market (SM003b).

This Chapter reports the Panel findings on industry and community engagement planning and management, relationships with industry and employers, relationships with professions, relationships with other education providers, relationships with alumni, and relationships with the community at large.

5.1 Industry and Community Engagement Planning and Management

In Domain One of its SP, the HIHS intends to "encourage community partnership" (SM003b). The planning and management of this strategic priority pertaining to industry and community engagement is allocated to the Assistant Dean of Academic Support, Scientific Research and Community Services (ASM003). To help in the achievement of the HIHS strategic objectives relating to industry and community engagement, the HIHS retained the Community Outreach Committee (COC), which was established in 2015. The COC represents the Institute in the wider community and strengthens its relationship with all stakeholders, including students, faculty, employers, other educational institutions, non-governmental agencies, alumni and the community at large (Portfolio, p51, SM009b, SM003b, p.54-56). The committee supports the development of relationships with key stakeholders and works closely with all the programmes to develop an annual plan of community outreach activities for each programme (SM105, SM113, ASM045), ensuring the implementation and evaluation of these activities and annually reporting outcome to the Dean (Portfolio, p 52).

In order to provide a reference for actions related to industry and community engagement and partnerships, policies, guidelines and templates have been developed (SM107a, SM107b, SM108a, SM108b). Although these documents are still in draft format (see section 1.9), the Panel noted a wide range of community engagement activities and events that have been conducted by the HIHS with different sectors of the community and which have been documented in different reports (SM023d, SM113, ASM045, ASM056, ASM065, SM155). This cooperation also generated an exchange of visits between the Institute and other higher education institutions such as Sultan Qaboos University, the National University of Science and Technology and other colleges (ASM045). These efforts were also confirmed by different stakeholders during interviews, including external stakeholders. However, while the Panel acknowledges the efforts made by the HIHS in this regard, it urges the Institute to finalise and approve the policies, procedures, guidelines and forms that regulate its community engagement to guide the planning, implementation, monitoring and review of its industry and community engagement more systematically.

From the list of activities deployed in AY 2021-2022 and the list of planned events for AY 2023-2024 (ASM045), the Panel was impressed to notice the multiplicity of events and activities related to industry and community engagement initiatives. However, the lists provided as evidence of implementation do not classify the activities and events which indicates that the Institute requires to redefine its perception of community engagement. The Panel urges the HIHS to establish an institutional approach for the planning and management of the area of industry and community engagement and consider a review mechanism to evaluate the effectiveness of its collaborations with external stakeholders.

5.2 Relationships with Industry and Employers

The HIHS has a wide range of mutual relationships with industry and employers. The HIHS links with MoH institutions and other governmental health institutions such as the Royal Oman Police, Sultan Qaboos University and the Armed Forces Hospital and these associations remain effective because they are the main employers of the HIHS graduates. Clinical placements for students are also hosted by the same employers and this is facilitated by the Joint Service Institute Committee (JSIC) which liaises between the HIHS and health service providers to ensure appropriate clinical experience for students (SM009h). The Institute is recognised for its efforts in this area and encouraged to widen its

scope of relationships to include the private health sector as this may provide additional opportunities for employment for its future graduates.

The relationship with employers and industry is also manifested in their involvement in different aspects of the HIHS. Employers provide input to the review of the curricula of the programmes. An example of a method used for the provision of this input is the annual Graduate Attribute Survey used to seek employers' feedback on the achievement of graduate attributes and qualities (SM056 a-b). However, although the survey focuses on the graduate achievements of the attributes it does not investigate the effectiveness of the relationships established between employers and the HIHS, an area that is important for the Institute to consider when planning future surveys.

The HIHS works closely with external stakeholders and serves the community through its many academic roles outside the institution (SM081a). The HIHS faculty receive invitations to give lectures to community audiences (SM071c), to be external examiners for other organisations (SM071a), to provide expert opinions (SM071b), or link with external research teams (SM094d, Portfolio, p52). These examples were confirmed during interviews with academic staff and external stakeholders. Examples of external relationships include experts in relevant areas being invited as guest lecturers to extend the students' learning beyond the classroom (SM109) or to take the role of external examiners (SM081a), advisors (SM071b), research collaborators (SM094d) and curriculum reviewers (SM056).

However, through interviews, the Panel noted that there has been limited involvement of employers and industry in some aspects of the HIHS, such as the development of Vision and Mission statements and in strategic planning (see Section 1.1). Additionally, there is no apparent evaluation and review of the effectiveness of these relationships. In view of this, the Panel urges the HIHS to systematically review its relationships with industry and employers to ensure that these relationships enable broader and effective input to different aspects of the Institute.

5.3 Relationships with Professions

One of the strategic objectives of the HIHS SP 2021-2025 (SM003b) emphasises the development of multiple partnerships with national and international organisations. Moreover, there is a reference for participating in professional activities formulated by the COC to guide the collaboration with professional bodies and organisations in various activities including curriculum review (SM107b, Portfolio, p53). However, there is no evidence of engagement with professional bodies, either by faculty or in the form of endorsement of programmes by professional bodies in the respective fields. Based on interviews, the memberships to professional bodies (e.g. Cancer Association, Nurses Association) relate to personal interest and application by individual faculty members. The Panel formed the opinion that this indicated a limited awareness of the importance of professional bodies in the development of the academic programmes and the maintenance of quality and would advise the establishment of improved links. This limited awareness is also evident in the lack of evidence of relationships with national and international organisations for general academic collaborations such as guest lectures, workshops, seminars and meetings or through direct and indirect involvement in local, national, and international events hosted by professional bodies (Portfolio, p 53). The Panel agrees with the HIHS that a structured plan and a database of staff membership in professional bodies will be a useful source of information for future collaborations (Portfolio, p53).

Affirmation 1

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education agrees with the Higher Institute of Health Specialties for developing and implementing a structured plan to build relationships with local nursing professionals and national and international professional bodies to support its strategic objectives.

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5.4 Relationships with Other Education Providers

The development of 'multiple partnerships with national and international organisations, and programmes of science and knowledge exchange with local, overseas universities and other organisations' are strategic objectives that the Strategic Plan 2021-2025 is striving to achieve (SM003b). Currently, there are some formal and informal arrangements which allow sharing of resources, curriculum review, visits, examination moderation, and external examination (SM071). The HIHS plans to develop mapping for multiple collaborations with local universities and other organisations with a target of two organisations: one by 2023 and one by 2025 (SM003b-Strategic Objective 1, Sub-Activity 1). The Institute plans to develop and sign Memoranda of Understanding with international organisations/institutions with a target of one international organisation by 2024 (SM003b-Strategic Objective 1, Sub-Activity 2). However, the Panel found no apparent actions have been taken by the HIHS towards the achievement of these plans, an issue that the HIHS is urged to immediately consider in order to achieve this strategic objective within the targeted deadlines, especially when considering that the current SP (2021-2025) is in its fourth year of implementation (SM003b).

5.5 Relationships with Alumni

The HIHS relationship with Alumni is fostered by the formation of the Alumni Focal Group (AFG) in 2018 to develop and strengthen the links between the Institute and its Alumni. An Alumni database was set up in 2019 to track graduates. An Alumni survey which was conducted in 2019 revealed the interest of the Alumni in attending Institute events and provide guest lectures (SM091). The Institute provides opportunities for Alumni to take part in orientation programmes for new students, curriculum review (SM111, ASM054) and in teaching as guest speakers (ASM055). Fourteen new teaching staff who joined the Institute are from its alumni (ASM052). Alumni serve as clinical preceptors in clinical placement (Portfolio, p54, SM112). During the interviews, Alumni confirmed satisfaction with their involvement in different aspects of the Institute and demonstrated their commitment to serve the HIHS and its students. This is a very positive indication of the effective relationship between the Institute and its Alumni. In addition to the feedback received from alumni and used to inform improvements in the Institute, it was confirmed in interviews that those alumni who served as staff at the HIHS were an asset to directly implement and provide suggestions in their capacity as staff based on their own experience as previous students in the academic programmes.

Commendation 1

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education commends the Higher Institute of Health Specialties for actively engaging with Alumni in various activities and reviewing the outcomes to guide further improvements.

5.6 Relationships with the Community at Large

The HIHS's strategic objectives emphasise the principle of engagement with the community (SM003b, SM029). The Community Outreach Committee (COC) was established to maintain oversight of the community outreach activities of the Institute (SM009b). Annually, the COC assesses proposals for community outreach activities from each of the academic programmes and collates them into annual plans (Portfolio, p 55, SM113, ASM057).

Community outreach activities are planned based on community needs, such as celebrating national and international events, addressing health issues through exhibitions, seminars, and health promotion activities (Portfolio, p54-55, SM113, ASM057). Some of the activities relate to the academic programme requirements, as is the case with the Community Health Nursing Practice Programme in which students are required to first complete a health needs assessment of a target community to

identify the main health problems, plan sustainable community health promotion programmes accordingly, implement them and finally evaluate them (Portfolio, p55, SM115, ASM019).

COC also oversees the implementation of the community outreach activities, arranging for sponsorships to support implementation and the evaluation of the activities by the academic programmes (Portfolio, p55, SM108b, SM116, ASM045).

The Panel noted that the HIHS is positive and proactive in this area by conducting a wide range of community outreach activities. This has further enhanced relationships with the community at large. However, there is a need to obtain input from the community on the effectiveness of the community engagement activities as currently feedback is only obtained from organisers of these activities and not from participants (ASM116, ASM056). This has been recognised by the HIHS as an area for improvement and work is in progress to develop ways to obtain the required feedback (Portfolio, p55).

Affirmation 2

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education agrees that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties needs to continue to obtain more detailed feedback from the community regarding the effectiveness of implemented outreach activities.

6. Academic Support Services

The HIHS adopts a strategic approach to the provision of academic support services to meet its mission of preparing competent healthcare professionals. This is accomplished through the provision of conducive learning environment. The HIHS recognises that the effective and constructive use of academic support services is vital to achieving the institute's mission (Portfolio, p57, SM003b).

This chapter presents the findings of the Panel on the planning and the management of academic support services, registry, library, information and learning technology services, academic advising, student learning support, and teaching resources.

6.1 Academic Support Services Planning and Management

The HIHS has emphasised in its SP (2021-2025) the importance of its academic support services in the achievement of its strategic objective of offering academic programmes that meet the changing healthcare needs of the country. The HIHS plans to achieve this by providing various advanced educational resources in accordance with the new healthcare and higher education trends; upgrading the Institute's available teaching and learning resources; and expanding the opportunities available for students' clinical learning (Portfolio, p57, SM003b).

Academic support services are provided by different sections, including Admission, Registration and Student Affairs Section, the Learning Resources Section, the Information Technology Section and the Director of Administration and Finance. However, the Dean assumes overall responsibility for the planning and administration of academic support services (Portfolio, p. 57, SM010e).

The HIHS offers different academic support services and facilities for the students, such as admission and registry services (Section 6.2), library services (Section 6.3), Information and Learning Technology services (Section 6.4), and academic advising (Section 6.5). The HIHS also provides other support services including language support and counselling, as well as additional support for international students (see also Section 7.3). All the necessary information to help students learn about all academic support services and facilities is made available in the Student Handbook (SM017, SM017a, Portfolio, p. 69).

The HIHS ensures student satisfaction with the academic support services and facilities is evaluated annually, including registration and enrolment, academic advising, classrooms, scientific laboratories, multi-media and information technology services, library, and transportation services since the AY 2018-2019. The results of the student satisfaction survey over four years showed that the level of satisfaction has improved, and the latest results showed that students are generally satisfied with these services, except for selecting and registering courses through the HAMS and printing services with which students were dissatisfied (SM052). The HIHS has addressed these concerns by the provision of heavy-duty printers and by providing assistance from the IT Section for student registration of courses. However, staff satisfaction with the planning and management of academic support services has not yet been measured, and the Institute has identified this as an area for further work (Portfolio, p58). The HIHS has provided a rolling schedule of staff satisfaction surveys in the Summer of 2024 (ASM059, p4). The Panel urges the necessity for Quality Improvement Plans (QIPs) to be considered as an integral part of the quality management of academic support services.

Recommendation 21

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties conduct regular internal reviews of staff and student satisfaction with the effectiveness of planning and management of academic support services to ensure that the provision of Academic Support Services meet the needs of students and staff.

6.2 Registry (Enrolment and Student Records)

The Administration, Registration & Student Affairs Section is the entity that provides the registry and enrolment services. The HIHS enrolls students in its programmes based on the needs and requirements of the governorate/health institutions for qualified specialist nurses (Portfolio, p58, SM062). In the AY 2022-23, the Institute recruited international students from Bahrain, for the first time. However, during the Audit Visit, no international students were enrolled in the HIHS programmes.

By reviewing the HAMS, it was clear to the Panel that the HIHS utilises it as a centralised system for creating electronic records of every student, including personal and academic details. The Institute also employs the HAMS for student records management, encompassing academic functions such as inputting marks and generating final transcripts. HAMS issues unique ID numbers and student ID cards and is also used to report student records to the MoHERI (Portfolio, p58). Students utilise HAMS to register for courses, and the system is updated with their semester results, allowing transcripts to be produced. However, the Panel heard that students face difficulties with online registration using HAMS due to malfunctioning of some of the functions in the system. Change requests have been sent to the concerned authority to resolve these issues (SM117). However, until the date of the Audit Visit, these issues were not resolved and, as mentioned in 6.1. above, students still receive assistance from the IT Section with their selection and registration of courses.

Academic Coordinators enter student grades into HAMS each semester, and academic transcripts are updated at the end of each year. However, the Panel noted that student data are currently held in more than one staff computer and this poses challenges in ensuring the security of student data and in providing statistics and reports promptly (Portfolio, p59, Interviews). Enhancing the functions of the various modules in HAMS is expected to resolve these challenges and enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the registry and enrolment processes. The HIHS has recognised this and, as stated above, has made several requests to resolve these issues (SM117). The Panel agrees with the HIHS in its demands and supports the efforts exerted to improve the HAMS system (Portfolio, p59).

Affirmation 3

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education agrees with the Higher Institute of Health Specialties for the need to enhance the Health Academic Management System (HAMS) functionality and security to manage student records and improve the efficiency of the registry process.

While student satisfaction with registry processes is evaluated annually, and trend data indicate high satisfaction (90.3%) for the "admission and registration processes" (SM052), staff satisfaction with the registry process and student record has not been sought yet, but there is a plan to conduct staff survey in June 2024 (Portfolio, p59, ASM060). The Panel also noted insufficient evidence to assess the system's efficiency, reliability, and level of security, an issue that the HIHS has to consider in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the registry system.

6.3 Library

The library at the Institute is managed by the Head of the Learning Resources Section and is supported by two qualified medical librarians. Through library tour and reviewing the library records and contents, the Panel established that the library lists a diverse collection of more than 3000 books covering various specialties, CDs, and audio-visual aids for learning purposes. Academic Coordinators annually provide recommendations for new books and resources, which are consolidated and submitted to the decision-making body at MoH for seeking vendors and quotations (Portfolio, p60, SM118). In addition to these physical resources, the library provides access to electronic information resources through the MoH e-library, which offers thousands of e-journals and e-books (Portfolio, p59). Moreover, the HIHS follows a strategic approach outlined in its SP (SM003b, p 67-68), which

includes collaborations with other local and regional organisations and universities facilitated by an interlibrary loan system (SM119a, SM119b, and ASM62).

The HIHS provides comprehensive support through its library and learning resources, such as library orientation sessions for students and faculty on library systems, research skills, and resource utilisation (SM122a, SM122b). A manual is provided for ongoing support, and an additional orientation is offered specifically for the MoH e-library (SM121, SM123).

During the site visit, the Panel observed the use of the Excel database to log and track books, as claimed, ensuring efficient inventory management and monitoring of book usage (SM122d). However, the Panel noted that this system is unable to provide statistical analysis of resource circulation and usage by students and staff. Microsoft Excel is an alternative method to compensate for the lack of a robust library management module, which is one of the functions of HAMS, which is facing technical issues (as discussed in 6.1 and 6.2). The Panel urges the HIHS to develop the current HAMS system further or use an alternative automated system to ensure the sustainability of the library resources and efficient resource management for an optimal library experience.

Recommendation 22

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties urgently automate library system to improve library management and provision of services to students and staff.

Student satisfaction with library services is measured annually, and the trend data indicate overall satisfaction (SM052). During interviews, students and alumni did not share any issues regarding the availability of resources and limitations in services. Regarding the library's opening hours and the adequacy of accessible electronic resources, they reassured the Panel that they could also access the neighbouring OCHS learning resource centre for longer study hours. They could request any unavailable electronic resources from the library staff, who will request them from their partner local or international libraries (Portfolio, p61, SM119a, SM119b, and ASM62).

Although a draft policy for library services is currently under development (SM120), there is no mention of a specific entity review targeting the library, an issue that the HIHS needs to consider in the future.

6.4 Information and Learning Technology Services

The HIHS organisational chart includes a dedicated Information Technology (IT) Section. The Head of this section is responsible for managing the IT services at the institute (Portfolio, p61-62). The institute has two positions for IT technicians to provide support for computer operations, but one position is currently (at the time of Audit) vacant (Portfolio, p62). There is also a unit for Cyber-Security reporting directly to the Dean responsible for managing the electronic security of the institute (Portfolio, p62, SM010e, SM003b p.23). However, at the time of the Audit Visit this position is also vacant and the work of this unit is managed by the Head of the IT Section, who also manages Information and Learning Technology Services at the Institute. This member of staff is also responsible for providing technical support to staff and students and facilitating access to information through available IT resources, as well as providing induction/orientation to staff and students on using the multi-media laboratory and other IT services. Moreover, the Head of the IT Section helps students in their selection and registration of courses through HAMS and supports the process of grade input into the system (See Section 6.2).

The Panel concurs that the IT Section requires immediate staffing in order to carry out this wide range of tasks and responsibilities and to attend to staff and students needs more efficiently. The current situation in these two important entities (i.e. Cyber Security unit and IT Section) may put the institute at risk due to the unavailability of enough IT specialists.

Recommendation 23

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties review its staffing in the Information Technology Section to ensure continuity and stability of the information and learning technology services.

The HIHS IT Section operates a Multi-Media Laboratory with fifty computers connected to a server which is located in the neighbouring college, i.e. the OCHS and which also hosts the Institute's HAMS system (Portfolio, p62). During the Audit Vist, the Panel heard that the HIHS has its own server, but has not been put in service yet, an issue that the HIHS has to act on urgently if it is to have its own control of the system, to improve accessibility of HAMS and safeguard the confidentiality and integrity of its student data.

The workstations in the Multi-Media Laboratory are equipped with Windows 8 and the basic software necessary for data processing. Broadband internet services are available for staff, and wireless internet connectivity is provided separately for students and staff, although network connectivity is variable (Portfolio, p62). Both hardware and software are provided to students and staff, and antivirus services are offered through the MoH. The Panel observed that the Multi-Media Laboratory lacks clear and thorough guidelines on the appropriate and secure IT use, and monitoring of software copyright. The Panel also noted that there are no policies and procedures for safety and security measures to protect data from cyber attacks and breach of privacy. Moreover, there is no evidence that the HIHS has a policy regulating hardware and software maintenance, replacement, upgrade, and procurement.

Recommendation 24

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop policies and procedures for managing the use of IT facilities by students and staff and for regulating IT hardware/software maintenance, replacement, upgrade, and procurement to ensure safe use of IT resources and to keep them current with advancement in information technology.

Annual student satisfaction surveys indicate students are generally satisfied with the Multi-Media Laboratory and IT services, except with printing services (Portfolio, p. 63, SM052). During the site visit, the Panel observed that the Institute has installed new printers for students' use in staff-observed locations. However, staff satisfaction with IT resources and services is not measured, nor were there regular checks of these resources (Portfolio, p63, Interviews) in order to have a full review of the effectiveness of these resources and services in supporting teaching and learning.

Recommendation 25

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties regularly review its information and learning technology services and infrastructure to remain current with the new advancements in this area and support the Institute's teaching and learning.

6.5 Academic Advising

Article 20 of the Academic Bylaws states that every student is to be allocated an academic advisor from entry until graduation from the HIHS (SM006a). According to the Student Handbook, the academic advising services at the Institute are essential to student support and success. Currently, the responsibility of the Academic Advisor is limited to helping students whose performance and conduct

are below the expected standard and to examining the factors contributing to this (SM017, p69). The Academic Coordinator used to undertake the responsibility of assigning academic advisors to students, but starting from the AY 2023-2024, this responsibility has been transferred to the Admission, Registration & Student Affairs Section as complying with Article 20 of the Institute's Academic Bylaws. The student handbook outlines the provision of academic advising. A form has been designed to carry out Academic Advising sessions (SM089).

During interviews, students reported that they were aware of reporting clinical concerns to the clinical placement coordinator and mentor. They complimented the close relationship with their academic advisors. Students and alumni reassured the Panel that they could easily schedule meetings with their academic advisors to discuss any relevant academic or clinical matters, such as study skills, personal and professional support, mental health, etc., at any time needed. These meetings aim to track academic progress, address concerns, and develop action plans based on students' needs (SM089, SM090). Although the evidence does not provide details about regular academic advisory meetings, there is evidence that at-risk students are identified and appropriate remedial actions are taken, with records maintained (SM090). This proactive approach demonstrates the HIHS's commitment to supporting struggling students and providing necessary interventions.

While there is evidence that academic advising and mentoring are being implemented, there is very limited evidence of training and support for advisors. The only evidence provided for this is the recently conducted lecture on ‘How to recognise and deal with cases that require psychological counselling’, offered by an external trainer from a local institute (ASM063). The HIHS intends to conduct training for academic advisors in the AY 2023-2024 (Portfolio, p63, interviews) with no evidence of any plans for the implementation of this intent. This indicates a potential area for improvement, and the HIHS needs to provide more training for academic advisors to ensure that they have the necessary skills and knowledge to guide and support their students more effectively. Moreover, apart from the student satisfaction survey that is conducted annually, the HIHS currently lacks evidence of comprehensive reviews of its academic advising services (See Section 1.10). The Panel is of the opinion that to better understand the effectiveness of academic advising and improve practice in this area, the HIHS would benefit from having a clear approach to regularly obtaining appropriate feedback from all involved in academic advising.

6.6 Student Learning Support

The Admission, Registration, and Student Affairs Section of the HIHS takes responsibility for planning and managing activities relevant to learning and skill development for academic work (Portfolio, p64). The HIHS offers a range of student learning support programmes, including an orientation programme that includes time management sessions, APA referencing, academic writing styles, and online learning methodologies (SM043). The HIHS has elaborated on the mechanisms followed for this support (ASM64). This was confirmed during the Audit Visit when academic faculty informed the Panel that the Institute provides multiple language support and checks for the students' written drafts of assessments before the final submission to their academic staff.

In addition to these support elements, the Portfolio refers to the activities suggested by the Programmes for each semester (Portfolio, p64, SM116, ASM065). However, reviewing these documents showed that most of these activities relate to community outreach, mainly health awareness-raising activities. What can be regarded as learning support activities in this list are those that address Oral Presentation Skills, Online Learning Methodologies, and Library Search Skills, but these are very scarce. This indicates that there is no systematic approach to define student learning support, and when there are some activities, they are carried out on an ad hoc basis and lack a consistent plan.

Recommendation 26

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop a systematic approach to student learning support services and activities and align these to student learning requirements to ensure their effectiveness in supporting student learning.

Student satisfaction with learning support activities, including extracurricular services and student services, is evaluated annually, and trend data from AY 2018-2019 to 2021-2022 indicate improvements in satisfaction levels (SM052). However, further evaluation and examination of the effectiveness of these learning support activities are necessary to ensure they effectively meet the needs of the students and the requirements of the core content of different courses.

6.7 Teaching Resources

The provision of advanced educational resources for teaching and learning is emphasised in the HIHS SP (SM003b). The Director of Administrative and Financial Affairs is responsible for procurement of the resources needed. The Head of the Learning Resources Section undertakes the provision of the necessary resources and services and to maintain an inventory of these resources (SM121).

The Portfolio lists the resources required to facilitate teaching, including classrooms, the multi-media laboratory, the simulation laboratory, the library, and the IT services available (Portfolio, p65). The institute has ten classrooms, each accommodating 24 students and equipped with an LCD projector, whiteboard, and a laptop assigned to each programme. Additionally, a multi-media laboratory with 50 computers is maintained by the IT section (SM121). However, based on the site visit, the Panel noted that hardware and software in the simulation laboratory require upgrading to encourage a more interactive teaching and learning.

Programmes with a clinical practical component, such as Emergency Nursing, Midwifery, Adult Critical Care Nursing, and Critical Care Nursing in Paediatrics and Neonatology, utilise the Simulation Laboratory as a teaching and learning space. During the site visit to the laboratory and through interviews, the Panel observed the poor functionality of the laboratory due to its outdated software and equipment, which is hindering the effective development of clinical skills and competencies. A task force was constituted in May 2022 to provide suggestions for improving this laboratory and to seek financial support to upgrade it (SM127). During interviews, the Panel was informed that the task force requested quotations for completing the upgrading of the simulation laboratory and a letter was sent to the Ministry of Finance for utilizing the funds from the Bahrain students for upgrading it. However, nothing has taken place on the ground by the time of the Audit Visit. The Panel is of the opinion that improved planning and resource allocation is necessary to provide students with access to appropriate equipment and specialist facilities to ensure that learning outcomes and competencies in relation to the course's practical components are achieved, and students are well-prepared for their future careers.

Recommendation 27

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties urgently develop and implement clear plans to ensure that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties is steadily provided with the teaching and learning equipment and resources that meet the needs of the students and Programme requirements.

Student satisfaction with teaching resources is measured annually and overall student satisfaction with these resources is generally positive. However, the Panel noted that staff have not been surveyed to get a more comprehensive evaluation of the state, appropriateness, and effectiveness of the available resources, an issue that the HIHS is urged to consider. Moreover, while a system has been set up for regular checking, inspection, and testing of teaching and learning equipment, only sporadic checks appear to be recorded. The HIHS recognises the need to enforce guidelines to ensure consistent monitoring (Portfolio, p65, SM121).

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7. Students and Student Support Services

The HIHS takes a strategic approach to student support and, as reflected in the Institute's Mission statement (SM013a) and its Vision to be 'the leading Health Professions Education Institution in the Sultanate of Oman', this means placing student support at the heart of its ambitions. The Institute notes that its MVV cannot be achieved without reliable, functional student support services committed to responding to students' general needs, anticipating demands and addressing challenges. The Institute's SP includes the planning of student support services (SM003b). The Institute's values emphasise 'professionalism, innovation, collaboration, empowerment, belongingness, and transparency' and the Student Support Services play a major role in engaging the students to develop both academically, clinically and professionally (SM013b).

This chapter presents the findings of the Panel related to the student and student support services planning and management, student profile, student satisfaction and climate, student behaviour, career and employment services, student finances, medical and counselling facilities, international student services, and social and recreational services and facilities.

7.1 Students and Student Support Services Planning and Management

Student and student support services are managed by the Assistant Dean for Student Affairs. The HIHS provides a range of support services which are detailed in the Student Handbook (SM017) with additional guidance for international students (SM017a). The Student Handbook presents students with comprehensive information about academic and other student services, rules and regulations and other relevant procedures. Students sign a Student Contract that details their understanding of the handbook content when they start at the HIHS (Portfolio, p. 70, SM063d). In addition, the Academic Bylaws set out several supportive policies and regulations (SM006a) and students are oriented to these policies and regulations in the first week of the academic year. Additional draft policies and procedures such as the Student Grievance Policy, Student Admission and Registration policies and procedures, an Academic Appeal Policy and a Review of Graded Written Assessment Policy and Procedures have been developed, with a proposal to develop more (Portfolio, p. 66-67, SM017, SM045). However, many policies are in draft and during the Audit Visit the Panel was notified that in some areas guidelines had been provided to support staff and students pending final approval of policies, such as examination invigilation guidelines (SM087, interviews).

The Guidance, Counselling and Graduate Follow-up Section supports students throughout their academic experience by providing appropriate advice based on their identified needs (Portfolio, p. 66, SM052). Some student support services, such as transportation to clinical placements, are provided by the institute through contracting with a transportation company (SM129, SM121).

A Student Council, tasked with organising academic and extra-curricular activities, is convened at the beginning of each academic year to provide a forum for students to express their concerns and ensure they are addressed and also engage them in appropriate activities. Student representatives are voted onto the Student Council by colleagues each year and all programmes are represented (SM025, ASM066). Students from the Student Council are invited to be members of the Institute's Council and they attend other meetings if required. In addition, a Programme Council has been formed for the academic programmes and a representative from the Student Council is a member (SM008). This gives students input in planning their support services.

Communication is central to the success of student support services and the team works closely with the elected student representatives from each year group who are expected to take responsibility on behalf of their cohorts for raising issues on all aspects of student life in the Institute. An example provided related to concerns around clear guidance for assignments which was raised with the Assistant Dean for Student Affairs who then brought this to the attention of Academic Coordinators (SM025a). The Panel, however, found limited evidence that student issues are recorded and actioned appropriately, with feedback provided to the student body and staff, an issue that requires consideration.

The scope and the services provided to students appear to be adequate within the Institute, as well as in clinical placement. During interviews, students reported that staff are very supportive and their feedback is used to inform the development and provision of support services in clinical placements

and community outreach. Student satisfaction is surveyed annually by the QAC and students are generally satisfied with Student Support Services (SM052). However, staff feedback on the planning and management of student support services has not been sought to inform more efficient provision of these services. The Institute is urged to ensure that there is a complete cycle of planning, collecting, reviewing and sharing feedback on Student Support Services to ensure the HIHS achieve the Institute's strategic objective and mission.

7.2 Student Profile

The Admission, Registration and Student Affairs Section implements the registration and admission strategies and records student gender, geographical distribution, specialisation and academic background using the HAMS to generate reports. The HAMS platform is a key mechanism for collecting student profile information and must work efficiently (Portfolio, p68). The HIHS developed their student information system to provide up-to-date information from admission to graduation and has provided statistical analysis of intake numbers per cohort per programme, submitting a report at the end of each semester to the Academic Board, which includes grade distributions, probation levels and academic progress (SM004, SM130). This system documents the students' academic records from the beginning up to their graduation or termination of study to enable the production of Transcripts. The QAC produces a summary of students by programme (SM130). The HIHS reports that student data is used for planning registration processes and for the provision of transportation to clinical placement areas (Portfolio, 68, HAMS, interviews). The Panel advises the Institute to widen its analyses of student profile data to cover a broader range of student information which will inform more efficient planning and allocation of resources for students support services and activities.

7.3 Student Satisfaction and Climate

The HIHS is committed to providing students with a conducive learning environment and assisting them to grow academically and professionally (Portfolio, p68). Students are given a number of channels to voice their concerns and provide feedback. The Institute considers the Student Council (SM025, ASM066) to be the main vehicle for communicating student issues to management. Members of the Student Council attend meetings with the senior management to represent students and voice their concerns. Handbooks provide information on the policies, expected conduct and methods for students to provide feedback and raise concerns (SM017). Guidelines are provided with policies and procedures that set standards and expectations and help students develop a professional identity to formally and informally raise any concerns through regular feedback surveys (SM052), course evaluations (SM089c) and attending committee meetings. Other methods include meeting the Dean, using a suggestion box reviewed only by the Dean, or making use of student representatives in the Student Council or the regular meetings with Academic Coordinators (SM025, SM020).

Student satisfaction is measured by the QAC annually through the Student Satisfaction Survey, and feedback about courses and activities of teachers is requested regularly. Results are submitted to the Assistant Dean for Student Affairs and Academic Coordinators for follow up action (SM052, SM049). Trend data since AY 2018-2019 indicates students are reasonably satisfied (83% in 2021-22) with the institutional climate although attention must be paid to improving response rates and providing action plans to further improve student satisfaction. There seems to be a degree of dissatisfaction with support services such as transportation, financial support for activities, catering, appropriate recreational space and the promotion of innovation and creativity which will require further investigation (SM052, interviews). Concerns raised, such as not having a cafeteria and the lack of parking, are being addressed by the institution (SM132).

7.4 Student Behaviour

The mission statement of the HIHS emphasises Omani values and the HIHS aim to 'produce reflective competent healthcare professionals able to deliver quality care to protect, preserve, and promote health and wellbeing' (SM013).

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The Institute has a robust system for governing the conduct of students. Every new intake is given an orientation where expected student behaviour is emphasised. During orientation, students are advised of the values of the Institute, particularly professionalism, collaboration, empowerment and belongingness. The Student Handbook clearly states the conduct and behaviour expected of students, the regulations, dress code, attendance, disciplinary and grievance procedures, as well as the appeals process. Documentation is clear for students regarding 'rules and regulations' and the available mechanisms to raise concerns (SM017, SM063, SM009). Students sign a contract that details their understanding of the handbook content (SM063d).

Offences such as plagiarism and cheating are prohibited and behavioural misconduct is investigated by an ad hoc committee formulated by the Dean (SM006). Briefing on examination conduct is an essential part of every examination and follows the invigilation procedure (Portfolio, p39). Academic advisors also play an important role in emphasising appropriate behaviour. If misconduct is suspected, a report is submitted to the Student Affairs Section for investigation (SM088a, SM088b). During the past three years there has been one case of behavioural misconduct (Portfolio, p70).

Students who face any challenges when studying in the Institute can be referred to an Academic Coordinator and may be referred to meet with the Head of Guidance, Counselling and Graduate Follow-up if necessary (SM089).

Trend data from the AY 2018-2019 to 2021-2022 indicate that students found that the procedures for dealing with complaints, student grievances and the disciplinary procedures at the Institute were fair (SM049, SM052).

The Institute has not yet evaluated the effectiveness of the existing arrangements and it is not clear how the Institute knows that the system for governing student behaviour is appropriately effective and constructive. The Panel encourages the HIHS to ensure the development and approval of appropriate policies and procedures which should include convening Grievance and Disciplinary committees with agreed Terms of Reference.

7.5 Career and Employment Services

The strategic objectives of the Institute are to provide programmes that are consistent with healthcare needs in the country (Portfolio, p.71, SM003b) The recently undertaken Health Labour Market Needs Analysis for Specialised Education and Training Programmes in the Sultanate of Oman assessed the extent to which the current postgraduate diploma health specialty programmes meet the needs of the healthcare system in Oman. When published, the results are expected to provide valuable information that could feed into the planning and management of the curriculum, Learning Outcomes and GAs of prospective students (Portfolio, p71). The conclusions of the study (SM061) will also help identify the need for any new postgraduate diplomas in health specialty programmes that may not currently exist in the healthcare system in Oman. The data on training and skills will aid future enhancement of the existing academic programmes at the HIHS (Portfolio, p71).

The information gained from the alumni survey, delivered by the Alumni Focal Group (SM091) will be merged with the results from the Health Labour Market Needs Analysis (SM061) to inform future curriculum review and development (Portfolio, p72). The results of the alumni survey indicated that the majority of alumni are employed in areas related to their studies within the HIHS and confirmed that the education they received prepared them for their present employment. The Panel encourages the Institute to continue to be proactive in this area.

Students who attend the Institute are currently on leave from their employers. Nevertheless, the Institute provides career guidance for students (SM133) and is also developing workshops on career management skills and managing personal development for students via the Continuing Professional Development Committee, QAC and Admission, Registration and Student Affairs Section (Portfolio, p72).

Although the Panel was reassured that the majority of alumni are employed in areas relating to their studies at the Institute, and return to their previous employers and to their original jobs (SM091), it should not be taken for granted that this is the result of effective career and employment services as most alumni do not need career advice as they return to their previous employers. Instead, the HIHS

is urged to adopt a formal approach to the review and evaluation of the effectiveness of the career and employment services to ensure that these services meet student needs and meet the HIHS strategic objectives.

7.6 Student Finances

This section is not applicable as students are on study leave and receive monthly salaries from their employers (Portfolio, p72). The Institute does not provide scholarships to local or international students.

7.7 Accommodation, Catering and Transport

The HIHS is non-residential and students make their own accommodation arrangements, although guidance to approved accommodation is provided on request. There were no International students in the HIHS during the Audit Visit.

The Institute states that catering is limited to a small coffee shop and students have access to the neighbouring college cafeteria but students reported the timetabled breaks in teaching are short and mean it is impossible to leave the site in the time available. There are no common room facilities. However, there is an awareness that there is a need to provide an adequate cafeteria service for the students (Portfolio, p. 72) and in response to student feedback during annual evaluations, an on-site cafeteria is planned for AY 2023-2024 and priority needs to be given to the provision of acceptable catering services in accordance with national health and safety and regulatory requirements (SM132).

In collaboration with the MoH, a contracted transportation service is provided to take students to and from their clinical placement areas (SM129, ASM121).

The Panel notes there is continuing student dissatisfaction with both catering and transportation and the Panel encourages the HIHS to intervene wherever possible to ensure student needs for catering and transport are met (SM052).

Recommendation 28

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties urgently provide appropriate and acceptable catering services and common rooms on site to provide a safe and comfortable relaxation environment for students, as well as staff.

7.8 Medical and Counselling Facilities

Students confirm they are medically fit to study at the time of admission (SM063b). The Immunisation form indicates that all students must be immunised appropriately before starting placements according to the relevant vaccination protocols (SM063a, SM063b).

All students, including international students, receive free medical care at government hospitals and health centres. Transport is available to take students to nearby health institutions whenever needed (Portfolio, p73). This was confirmed during interviews. During the site tour the Panel also confirmed that the First Aid kits are readily available in the Institutes and regularly checked (Portfolio, p73). The HIHS is taking measures to equip the Institute with the resources and processes for attending to the health and wellbeing of students, such as in-house clinic (SM131).

A counselling policy is in draft form and will be submitted for approval (SM089e). Although the Institute has not yet appointed internal trained professional counsellors, the Guidance, Counselling and Graduate Follow-up Section provides services for academic advisory and personal matters (Portfolio, p73). The Academic Coordinator of the Mental Health Nursing Programme, who is a trained Mental Health nurse, provides counselling support to the section as required. Students are referred to

counselling services by the Academic Coordinator after assessment from the student's academic adviser (Portfolio, p73). However, through interviews, the Panel noted that the two faculty members who were trained in counselling have left the Institute and there are some efforts to train other staff members to do this task till the appointment of a qualified counsellor (Portfolio, p73).

The HIHS has been evaluating its system for attending to the health and wellbeing of its students and the latest results showed that the students are satisfied with the counselling and advising services provided (SM052). It is clear that the Institute is aware of the importance and urgency of providing the necessary resources to establish dedicated medical and counselling facilities for its students (SM131).

7.9 International Student Services

There were no International students enrolled during the Audit visit but during AY 2022-2023, eleven students from Bahrain were admitted to complete their studies in the Institute (Portfolio, p74, ASM067).

A specific team, which includes the Head of the Admission, Registration and Student Affairs Section, was set up to support international students in case of emergency and to respond to their queries (Portfolio, p74, SM017a). The HIHS confirmed that international students would be provided with a detailed International Student Manual before joining the Institute which contains the facts relating to services and provisions. This includes emergency contact information, health and wellbeing support, accommodation, academic success guidance, cultural events/activities participation and additional administrative support (SM017a).

Given that the HIHS wishes to attract more international students, the Institute may want to devote more attention to specific promotional and informative documentation directed to this student group. The Panel encourages the Institute to review this process in a timely manner and develop a robust system for providing and evaluating international student services, especially the marketing efforts that have been deployed to attract international students (SM154, 156a, SM156b, ASM081).

7.10 Social and Recreational Services and Facilities

The Assistant Dean for Student Affairs has overall responsibility for the planning and management of social and recreational services and facilities for students. Although the Institute does not have dedicated recreational facilities for students, it utilises available venues to conduct extracurricular activities such as sports activities for males and females (Portfolio, p74, interviews). Reports on the social and recreational activities, including their evaluation, are maintained by the Head of Admission, Registration and Student Affairs Section (Portfolio, p74, ASM068). However, the reports submitted by the HIHS do not provide evidence for recreational activities, but only two examples of community outreach activities (ASM068), indicating the scarcity of this type of activities. Given the nature of the HIHS Programmes in which students spend most of their period of studies in placements in hospitals and in conducting community outreach activities, recreational activities and associated facilities are considered less important by the students (Interviews).

There is no indication of how the Institute knows that the range and quality of its existing social and recreational services and facilities are appropriately effective and constructive in meeting the needs of students. It is important that appropriate and acceptable planning is undertaken, led by the students through the Student Council and that funding is identified.

Although student satisfaction is improving, there is a level of dissatisfaction with this aspect in terms of services and facilities. No substantial evidence on the availability of common rooms, social events, clubs, sports, and societies has been provided, but students indicated that they have some opportunities to interact socially with other students (SM052).

Recommendation 29

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends the Higher Institute of Health Specialties establish a system for the planning, management, monitoring and review of the provision of

social and recreational activities and associated resources and facilities to ensure that students have appropriate opportunities for relaxation, socialising and personal development.

8. Staff and Staff Support Services

The total number of staff at the HIHS in December 2022 was 72, which includes 51 academic staff (39 females and 12 males) and 21 non-academic staff (13 females and 8 males) and all academic staff have job descriptions and participate in annual appraisals. The HIHS explain the recruitment and selection of staff and the subsequent opportunities for professional development.

This Chapter considers the staff and staff support services at the Institute and reports on the Panel findings on Human Resources planning and management, staff profile, recruitment and selection, induction, professional development, performance planning and review, promotion and other incentives, severance, staff organisational climate and retention, and Omanisation.

8.1 Human Resources Planning & Management

The HIHS states that the oversight of human resources planning and management is the responsibility of the Director of Administrative and Financial Affairs and that the Institute's approach to this is as per the rules and regulations of the MoL (Portfolio, p77, SM139a). Recruitment, selection and promotion of medical and para-medical staff are guided by the Medical and Para-Medical Bylaws No 16/2014 (SM136), while the Executive Bylaws of Civil Service (bylaw No: 9/2010) is applied to the administrative staff (SM137) (Portfolio, p78). The Panel noted that HIHS staff include Omani and non-Omani members who work in academic departments as well as non-academic departments and sections. The Panel noted that the job descriptions for non-academic staff follow the MoL Bylaws 2020, while the job descriptions for academic positions were recently approved and disseminated to all staff (Portfolio, p78, SM140, interviews). A Succession Planning Policy which aims to support the planning and management of human resources by providing a framework for its operational activities in this area, has been developed and awaiting approval (SM021, Portfolio, p17, 86, 87).

The HIHS also states that within its authority, it has recently (April 2023) established a Training and Scholarship Committee which is chaired by the Dean and the remit of this committee includes new guidelines for registering and attending conferences, seminars, forums, and similar activities; approval of staff going for study leave and approval of study leave extension (Portfolio, p78, SM009k). The Panel noted that while this committee will focus on the policy for the provision of support to staff for furthering their qualifications and scholarships, management of continuous professional development is the responsibility of the CPDC (Portfolio, p78, SM009c). The Panel is of the opinion that the remit of the Training and Scholarship Committee could overlap with that of the CPDC and encourages the Institute to ensure that there is no duplication between these two committees.

The Panel noted that until December 2021, staff appraisals were done according to the rules and regulations of the MoH (Portfolio, p78, SM067). However, since January 2022, the staff appraisal is governed by MoL through the Ejada system (SM068) with set dates for reviews and approvals with the Heads of Departments or direct line managers (Portfolio, p78). The Panel noted that the HIHS has also established a Staff Appeal from Report of Actual Performance committee (SM009l) in response to the implementation of the Ejada system (Portfolio, p78, interviews). In addition to this committee the Institute has also formulated a Committee for Staff Affairs (SM009n) to deal with staff grievances and affairs and the Panel confirmed that the staff are aware of both committees (interviews). The Panel noted that the CPDC conducts an orientation programme for the new faculty members (SM016) and confirmed that the HIHS has initiated the process of developing a similar programme for the non-academic staff as well (Portfolio, p78, interviews).

8.2 Staff Profile

According to data submitted in the Portfolio, the total number of staff at the HIHS in December 2022 was 72, which includes 51 academic staff (39 females and 12 males) and 21 non-academic staff (13 females and 8 males) (Portfolio, p78). The staff profile is kept up to date by the Head of the

Administrative and Finance Section and job descriptions are available for all academic staff. (Portfolio, p78, SM069, SM140).

The Medical and Para-Medical Bylaws No 16/2014 (SM136) which govern the recruitment of academic staff at the Institute stipulate a master's degree as the minimum requirement and accordingly the Panel noted that the majority (53%) of the academic staff members at the HIHS hold a master's degree while, 20% have a PhD degree (Portfolio, p96). The remaining academic staff members either have a post-graduate diploma (20%) or a bachelor's degree (7%) (Portfolio, p96). The Panel heard that the Institute encourages and supports staff members who do not have a master's degree to apply for higher studies. (Portfolio, p80, SM136, SM138). The Panel observed that the information on the staff profile includes demographic information such as level of qualification, nationality and gender (SM069), as well as details of staff specialisations (ASM118), indicating that the Institute has the required academic staff in terms of level of qualification, nationality and gender and specialties to support the delivery of the HIHS's academic programmes and functions in line with its student body.

The Panel noted that job descriptions for all academic positions are available (SM140), however, there are some staff still having inappropriate academic titles in line with the criteria set by the Medical and Para-Medical Bylaws No 16/2014 due to delay in processes in the MoH and MoF (Portfolio, p78, SM136). The Panel encourages the Institute in coordination with these two ministries to rectify this issue at the earliest in order to have staff profile reflect the positions accurately.

The HIHS faced some staff shortage during AY 2021-2022 because of resignations and delays in the recruitment and selection process (Portfolio, p78). The Panel noted that the Institute manages this challenge by using adjunct faculty members from other health institutions. However, the Panel is of the opinion that the HIHS needs a long-term strategy to ensure that a sufficient number of academic and non-academic staff is available to support the delivery of the Institute's academic programmes. Therefore, the Panel recommends that the HIHS urgently review its current approach to managing the staff profile of the Institute and fill vacancies to ensure adequacy of the required balance of staffing in terms of qualifications, skills and capabilities to successfully meet the current and future needs of the students.

Recommendation 30

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties urgently review its approach to human resource planning to develop and implement a mechanism that ensures availability of adequate staff, academic and non-academic, to support the delivery of the Institute's academic provision.

8.3 Recruitment and Selection

The office of the Director of Administrative and Financial Affairs is responsible for the recruitment and selection of staff at the HIHS. The recruitment and selection of administrative staff is aligned with the Civil Service Law and its Executive Bylaws and for the selection of permanent academic staff the HIHS follows the Medical and Para-Medical Bylaws (Portfolio, p81, SM136, SM137, see Section 8.1).

Academic Coordinators conduct a programme needs analysis to identify their staff requirements (Portfolio, p79, interviews), but their involvement in the actual recruitment and selection of staff was not evident to the Panel. These vacancies are then announced to other healthcare institutions through the Al Barwa system and the MoH website for the internal recruitment of Omani staff from other MoH institutions (Portfolio, p79, SM034). The HIHS goes for external recruitment only if unable to fill the vacancies through internal candidates (Portfolio, p79, interviews). All newly recruited staff members sign an employment contract (Portfolio, p81, SM141). Recruitment of adjunct or visiting lecturers depends on the requirements and the needs of some programme learning outcomes following the defined criteria, policies and procedures (SM142, SM143). The Panel noted that an Adjunct Faculty policy and honorary contract for visiting faculty have been developed and is in the process of approval (SM143). The Panel found little evidence of the procedure that the Institute uses to ensure the effectiveness of its recruitment and selection process and recommends that the Institute develop a structured approach to facilitate effectiveness and efficiency in its recruitment and selection process.

Recommendation 31

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement a structured approach to the recruitment and selection of its staff which includes a mechanism for monitoring, review and evaluation of the effectiveness of the recruitment and selection processes to ensure that the staff selected and recruited help the Higher Institute of Health Specialties meet the requirements of the programmes.

8.4 Induction

Since AY 2021-2022, the CPDC has designed a structured staff induction programme with the aim to ensure that all newly appointed academic staff as well as those transferring from other health institutions are ready to assume the required responsibilities and continue to develop independently with minor supervision (Portfolio, p81, SM016).

This orientation lasts for three months and is facilitated mainly by the direct supervisor of the new staff in collaboration with CPDC, other committees, programmes and sections in the institute (SM016, interviews). During these three months, the direct supervisor who is the mentor, is expected to meet the new staff members twice a week to complete the orientation (SM016). The HIHS has a special support mechanism in the form of 'micro-teaching sessions' for staff members who are new to the teaching profession or are transitioning from the scholarship programme into teaching (SM016). The Panel heard that these sessions are designed for training purposes and building up teaching skills and confidence (SM016, interviews). The new staff members are also given a Faculty Orientation Programme Toolkit (SM016) which outlines the details of the three-month orientation programme as well as the 'micro-teaching' sessions (Portfolio, p81, interviews). The Panel heard of the positive experience of the newly recruited staff with the 'micro-teaching experience' (interviews). However, the Panel could not find evidence of a mechanism measuring the effectiveness of the overall orientation given to newly appointed academic staff (SM016a, SM016b). The Panel is of the opinion that the HIHS would benefit from reviewing its induction programme in entirety to inform improvements for the future.

The newly appointed academic staff confirmed their satisfaction with the induction process and material that were shared with them (interviews), but the Panel noted that there is no similarly structured induction programme for newly appointed non-academic staff and would recommend that the HIHS review this to ensure that the non-academic departments can perform their roles and responsibilities with efficiency and confidence.

8.5 Professional Development

The HIHS has its newly developed policies and procedures for staff professional development and induction which encourages different forms of professional development (In-house and external) (Portfolio, p82, SM147). The CPDC which is responsible for this area, depends on multiple resources and processes, such as the 'Needs Analysis' survey of the staff, student feedback and feedback from other committees, to identify staff needs prior to providing internal or external training/ professional development (Portfolio, p82, SM009c, SM022, SM144). Staff members also identify their individual training needs during the performance appraisal process using 'Ejada' (Portfolio, p82,). The Panel noted that CPDC conducts the training needs analysis to identify the training needs of staff in clinical or academic areas and arranges some activities to address these needs (Portfolio, p81, SM022).

The HIHS funds scholarships for Omani faculty to further their education and pursue postgraduate programmes (Portfolio, p82, SM145, SM146). The Panel noted that the Institute has set up the Training and Scholarship Committee to manage this process systematically (Portfolio, p78, SM009k).

The CPDC Annual Reports (ASM074) of the last three academic years show the range of professional development opportunities arranged and the Panel noted that most of them are generic in nature, focussing on skills development, teaching pedagogy and preparing the Institution for external quality

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assurance activities. The Panel, however, did not see evidence of the professional development opportunities in the technical medical and para-medical areas to ensure that the Institute continues to achieve its MV. The developmental opportunities for non-academic staff are also limited and the Institute would benefit from reviewing this provision. The Panel is of the opinion that the HIHS needs to consider a wider spectrum of areas for professional development which addresses skills development in the use of new technologies for both academics and clinical supervisors (SM023).

The Panel noted the measures taken by the HIHS to ensure the continuous development of their academic staff but could not find evidence of a review and monitoring mechanism to evaluate the effectiveness of the different training programmes arranged by the CPDC or the level of staff satisfaction for these different programmes. Therefore, the Panel recommends that the HIHS develop and implement a structured approach to the provision and review of professional development at the Institute.

Recommendation 32

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement a systematic approach to professional development for all its academic and administrative staff which allows regular review and monitoring of the effectiveness of Professional Development Programmes and staff satisfaction to achieve its strategic goals.

8.6 Performance Planning and Review

Until 2021, staff appraisal at the HIHS was guided by the staff appraisal system followed at the MoH (Portfolio, p84). The academic and non-academic staff members completed self-evaluation forms twice every year which were then reviewed by the immediate supervisor using the Annual Staff Appraisal Forms (Portfolio, p82, SM067). Both the form and the performance criteria were provided by the Ministry of Civil Services (Portfolio, p82). Starting January 2022, the HIHS implemented the Ejada Performance Management System provided by the MoL (Portfolio, p82, SM068a). The Panel heard that in this system, too, staff members evaluate themselves every six months based on their goals and objectives and this is followed by a review from the immediate supervisor (Portfolio, p82, SM068a, interviews). The Panel confirmed that individual staff goals and objectives are defined by the staff members themselves and are linked to the Institute's mission, vision, and values, as well as the strategic and operational plans (SM068a, interviews). To have an objective appraisal, the staff must provide evidence for the achievement of the planned goals and objectives to the immediate supervisor (Portfolio, p82). The Panel was informed that since the Ejada system is relatively new, MoL is still in the process of evaluating its effectiveness (Portfolio, p83, interviews).

The HIHS also uses a multi-source feedback approach for academic staff, whereby feedback from peer observation and students evaluation of teaching is gathered (SM065a, SM066a) and results are communicated to staff by the academic coordinators (Portfolio, p83, SM065b).

8.7 Promotion and Other Incentives

The Civil Services regulations are followed to promote administrative staff to higher financial grades and to provide incentives, while the Medical and Para-Medical Professionals Bylaws is followed for the promotion of academic staff (Portfolio, p83, SM136, SM137). In addition to this, for the past two years, if vacancies existed, staff were also promoted based on a Royal Decree (Portfolio, p.83, SM150). All permanent staff members have access to promotion if vacancies exist and they meet the criteria (Portfolio, p83). Internal vacancies are announced on the Al Barwa system (Portfolio, p83). The Panel confirmed that since July 2023, the Ejada system has been used for rewarding staff, and 10% of the Institute's staff who scored excellent on Ejada were given incentives for appreciation (Portfolio, p83, SM068b, interviews).

Non-Omani staff and their eligible dependants are provided with medical care and air tickets according to the terms of their employment contracts while Omani staff members are given gratuity based on the guidelines of the MoH (Portfolio, p83).

8.8 Severance

The Civil Service Law and its Bylaws are used for the severance of Omani academic and administrative staff (Portfolio, p83). While for non-Omani staff, severance is part of their contract specifying the circumstances for the termination of employment (Portfolio, p84, SM008, SM149). Policies are available in the Bylaws of the MoL and Medical and Paramedical Bylaws for the termination of employment if Omani staff breach the rules and regulations described in their contract (Portfolio, p84).

The HIHS has recently formed two dedicated committees to address staff appeals/ grievances with their performance appraisals, terminations, pensions and gratuity (SM009l, SM009n), and the Panel is of the opinion that the Institute would benefit from maintaining detailed records of terminations, resignations, appeals or exit interviews in order to inform future human resources planning (Portfolio, p84, ASM076).

8.9 Staff Organisational Climate and Retention

The HIHS states that it uses multiple approaches to ensure that a positive climate is maintained for staff, which includes membership in executive committees (SM008) as a representation of faculty in making high-stakes decisions and participation in community outreach activities nationally and internationally (Portfolio, p84, SM113). The HIHS also provides a conducive working environment in terms of fully equipped offices and break areas for work and socialising. (Portfolio, p84, campus tour). Staff are encouraged to work with colleagues from other institutions to share ideas, formulate research proposals and work on common themes with the objective of creating a supportive working culture (Portfolio, p84, interviews).

The Portfolio shows data on the staff satisfaction surveys conducted for the teaching staff by the QAC in year 2020 and year 2023 (Portfolio, p85, ASM094, ASM095). The Panel noted the action taken by the HIHS in response to the feedback from these surveys. The HIHS considered non-monetary rewards and initiated the "Best academic and administrative staff at HIHS" as part of staff recognition and rewards in 2022 (Portfolio, p86, SM149, interviews). The Panel confirmed that the HIHS staff were informed of this through internal communication and the process for nominations and the criteria are clearly defined (ASM077, interviews). The Panel, however, observed that these surveys are not conducted systematically and could not find any evidence of similar surveys conducted for administrative staff. The Panel, therefore, recommends that the HIHS develop and implement a system to measure staff satisfaction (both academic and non-academic) to inform their provision of staff support services.

Recommendation 33

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties develop and implement a review system to gauge its staff satisfaction (both academic and non-academic) on a regular and timely manner to ensure that the results are analysed, and acted upon to inform the provision of staff support services.

8.10 Omanisation

The HIHS Strategic Plan 2021-2025, domain four, strategic objective 1 (SM003b) manifests the Institute's commitment to Omanisation (Portfolio, p86). Strategies to achieve this include providing professional development opportunities to Omani staff members in order to groom them for leadership roles and having a designated succession policy and procedures (Portfolio, p87, SM021). The Panel

noted that the Omanisation rates in 2021-22 stand at 66.7% in the academic departments and 95.5% in the administrative sections of the Institute (Portfolio, p87, SM004).

While the succession policy and professional development are steps in support of Omanisation, the Institute would benefit from having a system in place for the review and monitoring of the implementation of the succession policy and the professional development opportunities for the Omani staff members. The Panel noted that the SP 2021-2025 also mentions deploying a training plan specifically for Omani staff, both academic and administrative, as one of the sub-activities to support achievement of its Omanisation strategic objective; the Panel encourages the Institute to develop and implement a structured approach to fulfilling its obligations to Omanisation.

9. General Support Services and Facilities

The HIHS describes and evaluates its system for planning and managing its general support services for campus management and maintenance of facilities and includes the delegated responsibilities of those responsible. The HIHS also describes its systems for promoting and marketing itself to external stakeholders as well as explaining how it communicates internally. It is important that the Institute ensures that the general support services planning and management systems are appropriately effective and the plans in place align with the Institute's Mission and Strategic Plan.

This chapter presents the findings of the Panel related to general support services and facilities planning and management, public relation and marketing, communication services, and facilities management.

9.1 General Support Services and Facilities Planning and Management

General support services and facilities management are led by the Director of Administrative and Finance Affairs, who is supported by the Head of Administrative and Financial Affairs and the Head of Information Technology (Portfolio, p88).

The directorate's responsibilities include planning and maintenance for all campus premises, teaching spaces and services. The Panel noted that the Institute still depends on the MoH to provide many of the regular maintenance services. Some of the services are outsourced and there are contracted agencies to provide some maintenance, security, gardening, transportation and cleaning duties (SM047, SM129, ASM080, ASM121).

The HIHS reports that the management of its general support services and facilities is based on emerging needs and programme requirements and that the systems in place are deployed appropriately 'to ensure the timely replacement and preventive maintenance' (Portfolio, p88, interviews). The Panel noted the absence of a specific facilities management policy or plan, though the facilities management actions are listed in the operational plan, that are monitored by the Oman Vision 2040 Follow up and Implementation section (SM003b, SM010c). Not having an effective operational plan for maintenance, replacement or enhancement of facilities and equipment can easily lead to delays in provision and maintenance, and consequently this may lead to problems for course delivery. The delays to the development of IT infrastructure and the Simulation Laboratory are examples of how external control of finances impacts on the HIHS (See Section 6.7).

In terms of general support and facilities, it was evident that this is an area in which a consistent, standard and active approach to providing a funded improvement plan for the maintenance of existing facilities or the provision of new facilities would be invaluable. A contingency plan and related funding allocation would be an important initiative to maintain sustainability.

9.2 Public Relations and Marketing

The HIHS has a Communication and Media Section, which is responsible for managing media and communication between the Institute and the community (SM010e, Portfolio, p. 89). However, this section is still vacant, and its responsibilities and activities are carried out by a taskforce and a sub-committee in the COC (Portfolio, p89, SM009b). The Higher Institute of Health Specialties adopts a variety of channels and mechanisms to realise its mission of being a leading institute in specialised health professions' education and to make the institute visible to its stakeholders (Portfolio, p89). Various media opportunities are taken up by the leadership of the Institute and this assists in raising the profile of the HIHS. Media information is posted either via a sub-committee of COC or by communicating with the MoH through the Office of the Director of Administrative and Financial Affairs (Portfolio, p89, interviews).

To further increase the Institute's visibility and to advertise its academic programmes, the marketing activities of the Institute have taken different forms to reach out to different stakeholders internally and externally. The Institute markets the programmes to local health providers and students and staff participate in various academic activities in the community to raise the Institute profile by collaborating with a range of organisations (SM010e, SM114a, SM116), television, radio and newspaper releases are organised (SM114c, SM156d), Open Days delivered (SM156c) and the

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publication of a Newsletter to inform stakeholders and the public about the Institute's activities (SM155, Portfolio, p90). The Institute's Newsletter Committee was incorporated into the Institute's Research Committee in 2020-21 to form The Institute Research and Newsletter Committee (IRNC) (SM009g).

The Institute at present markets its programmes through collaboration with different government and non-governmental organisations and in conducting community activities (SM009b, ASM045, AS057). Much of the programme promotion occurs in conjunction with the MoH and so, in collaboration with the Public Relations Department at the MoH, marketing activities have been carried out in adjacent GCC countries. Subsequently eleven international students from Bahrain had been admitted to the programmes within the Higher Institute of Health Specialties (SM114, SM156b, SM157).

The marketing activities of the Institute and the participation in numerous activities in the community generate a positive image for the Institute which is evidenced by student applications and the awards, letters and certificates of appreciation received from different government and non-governmental organisations (Portfolio, p91, SM142). However, the Panel was informed that many activities have been suspended recently due to the vacancy in the position of Head of the Communication and Media Section, but there is an intention to urgently resolve this situation.

It is clear the Institute would benefit from developing and implementing an appropriately funded marketing and communications strategy to promote student applications and increase admissions, as well as sharing the contributions of the Institute to the provision of health services in Oman. The Panel also recommends the HIHS to consider developing its official website as a lot of aspects of the site are still under construction. The website is a very important tool for communicating externally and raising the Institute's profile (See also Section 9.3).

Recommendation 34

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties address the quality of the website information and update the site to further reflect the vibrancy and strengths of the Higher Institute of Health Specialties to increase awareness of the contribution students, staff and graduates make to healthcare provision in Oman and support appropriate national and international recruitment.

Although the HIHS has recognised the need for evaluating the effectiveness of its approach to marketing activities (Portfolio, p91), no plans for conducting this review have been developed. In view of this, the Panel has denoted this as an urgent issue that the HIHS needs to consider in the very near future, taking into consideration that the SP 2021-2025 (SM003b) is in its fourth year of implementation.

Recommendation 35

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties urgently review its public relation and marketing to ensure the effectiveness of its marketing activities in raising the Higher Institute of Health Specialties profile to external community and in the achievement of its vision.

9.3 Communication Services.

The Institute states that it deploys a number of communication mechanisms for staff, students and external stakeholders, guided by its organisational structure. A general shared drive is utilised for internal use, and internal and external communications are standard. The Institute used three particular communications systems: the Ejada portal is for staff appraisals and has been recently applied across all public sectors; the HAMS which was implemented by the MoH as a system for communicating

important information about students; and Al Barwa is the mailing system used for official communications within the Institute and between the Institute and the MoH, as well as using it to collect feedback on the graduate attributes from the MoH health institutions (Portfolio, p91-92, SM157a, SM068).

The HIHS system for internally communicating with staff and students includes notice boards, a television screen, emails, SMS text, WhatsApp, Instagram, memos, shared drive and Microsoft Teams, while communication with external stakeholders is through emails and letters (Portfolio, p. 91, SM157b).

Methods of communication following the recent pandemic have been modified and advanced to facilitate communications with multiple stakeholders such as using Zoom, Google Classroom (SM126), but some traditional approaches are still used, such as a suggestion box (Portfolio, p. 91). Staff and students report WiFi connectivity is provided on campus to support this kind of virtual communication, but Wi-Fi connectivity is poor in some areas in the Institute, an important issue that the HIHS has to rectify to ease up communication (Portfolio, p.92, interviews).

The Institute website is still under construction, and the Panel considers this a very important way of communicating externally and raising the Institute's profile, the content of which requires continuous development and updating (See Section 9.2 and Recommendation 35.).

One form of communication is the Joint Institute Services Committee (JISC) which was established in 2018 to act as a link between the Institute and the MoH institutions and other governmental health institutions to coordinate the provision of clinical learning experiences (SM009h, Portfolio, p. 92). Students and those providing clinical learning opportunities express satisfaction with how the placements are arranged and how clinical experience is delivered (SM004, SM052, SM055, SM065).

As a government institution, the official language of communication at the Institute is Arabic and English language is the medium of instruction (Portfolio, p. 92, SM001, SM003, SM006, SM157). The use of English in the classrooms was confirmed by students and alumni during interviews. The Panel advises, following interviews, that the HIHS needs to consider bilingual communication to resolve the challenges facing the institute as a result of having a mixture of non-Arabic and non-English speaking staff to ensure that all notices, circulars, correspondence and messages are understood by all. Despite the availability of a wide range of options for communicating with stakeholders, the Panel noted that although the Institute has established a Communication and Media Section which will be responsible for managing communication between the Institute and stakeholders (SM010), it is not yet active due to staff vacancies. The Panel also noted that a Communications Policy is not available, an issue that the HIHS needs to consider in order to regulate and guide the use of these mechanisms.

Recommendation 36

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties create a formal communication and language policy and guidelines for regulating, guiding and enhancing effective internal and external communications.

The Panel noted during interviews that there has been no formal review and evaluation of the effectiveness of communication services, apart from the identification of the variable Wi-Fi connectivity in the Institute and that HAMS is not fully functional (Portfolio, p93), and this may have an impact on the efficiency of communication. Although, activating the modules in the HAMS system and measuring staff satisfaction with the HAMS system and the effectiveness of the communication services in the Institute have been identified as opportunities for improvement (Portfolio, p3), there is no evidence of a plan to carry this out in the foreseeable future. The Panel noted that as there is no Communication Policy and the fact that the Communication and Media section is not yet established means that communication may not be as efficient as it could be. The Panel recommends that the HIHS review the effectiveness of its communication services to ensure effective dissemination and flow of information to internal and external stakeholders.

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Recommendation 37

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education recommends that the Higher Institute of Health Specialties review the effectiveness of its communication services to ensure effective dissemination and flow of information to internal and external stakeholders.

9.4 Facilities Management

The Director of Administrative and Financial Affairs is responsible for the management of the Institute's facilities (classrooms, multimedia Laboratory, library, staff offices, coffee shop, gardens, car park and mosque) and is supported by the Head of Administrative and Financial Affairs and the Head of Information Technology (Portfolio, p93, ASM003, ASM004, SM047). The Head of Administrative and Financial Affairs is responsible for ensuring that the classrooms, multimedia laboratory, library, staff offices, coffee shop, gardens, car park and mosque are maintained. Some of the services are outsourced through contracts, including facility maintenance, transportation, cleaning and gardening services and security, which are all awarded through the MoH (SM047, SM129, ASM121). Although these contracts are maintained by the MoH, payment to the contracted companies is made from the budget allocated for the HIHS (SM032). Monitoring the implementation of the service is the responsibility of the Head of Administrative and Financial Affairs and based on the articles of the contracts (SM047, SM129, ASM121). Maintenance of teaching equipment, the Simulation laboratory are not included in maintenance contracts because, based on the budget of the Institute, these contracts do not cover educational and IT supplies (SM032) (see Section 6.7).

An Emergency Plan has been submitted for approval to facilitate the necessary inspections and obtain a certificate from the Public Authority for Civil Defense and Ambulance (SM158). In view of the importance of these approvals, the Panel supports the Institute’s efforts to get the necessary inspections and approvals for its plan from the concerned authorities. Fire and safety training was conducted twice in June 2023 and most of the students and staff attended the training sessions (SM048).

The results of the annual satisfaction survey to measure the satisfaction of students with various aspects of services provided to them include their satisfaction with the general support services, multi-media laboratory and information technology, maintenance and cleanliness of the facilities and trend data from the AY 2018-2019 to 2021-2022 indicate that students are mostly satisfied (SM052). However, the Panel noted that staff feedback on the quality of these services has not been sought, nor have their opinions on the effectiveness of managing these facilities and services been obtained, an area that the HIHS needs to consider in order to improve the management of its facilities and the provision of quality general support services.

APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY AUDIT PANEL

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APPENDIX B: ABBREVIATIONS, ACRONYMS AND TERMS

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

AB ……. Academic Board
ADRI ……. Approach Deployment Result and Improvement
AFG …….....Alumni Focal Group
ASMs …….....Additional Supporting Materials
AY……...Academic Year
BoT ……..... Board of Trustees
CDEC……..Curriculum Development and Evaluation Committee
CLOs ……. Course Learning Outcomes
COC …….. Community Outreach Committee
CPDC …… Continuous Professional Development Committee
DGHRD……..Director General of Human Resource Development
EAC ……..…… Examination & Assessment Committee
GAs ……Graduates Attributes
GCC ……..…….Gulf Cooperation Council
HAMS ……Health Academic Management System
HEI ……..... Higher Education Institution
HIHS …… …….Higher Institute of Health Specialties
HSC ……Health and Safety Committee
IQA …….....Institutional Quality Audit
IRNLC…….Institute's Research and Newsletter Committee
ISA …….....Institutional Standard Assessment
ISAA …….....Institutional Standard Assessment Application
JISC …….Joint Institute Service Committee
KPIs ……Key Performance Indicators
LCD ……Liquid Crystal Display
LO …… ……. Learning outcome
MNI…….Muscat Nursing Institute
MoF ……Ministry of Finance
MoH …… …….Ministry of Health
MOHEIs …… Ministry of Health Educational Institutes
MOHERI ……Ministry of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation
MoL ……... Ministry of Labour
MVV...…….....Mission, Vision and Values
NAP ……Nursing Administration Programme
OAAA ……....The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
OAAA ……Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
OAAAQA …… …… Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education
OCHS …….....Oman College of Health Sciences
OP ……..Operational Plan
OQF ……Oman Qualification Framework
OSNI ……..Oman Specialised Nursing Institute
PLO ……Programme learning outcome
QAC……....Quality Assurance Committee
QARs …….....Quality Audit Reports
QAS……Quality Assurance Section
RERAC ……..Research and Ethical Research Approval Committee
RMC……...Risk Management Committee
RMS …….. Risk Management System
ROSQA ……..Requirements for Oman's System of Quality Assurance in Higher Education
SMs …….....Supporting Materials
SP …….. Strategic Plan

SPSS …… Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SWOT ……Strengths, weakness, opportunities, threats
UCLan ……University of Central Lancashire
UK ……United Kingdom
USA ……United State of America

NOTES

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