

# Possibility of Implementing National Level Standardized Exit Test of GFP in Oman

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## Abstract:

The study aims to examine the possibility of implementing national level standardized exit test of GFP by explaining the ongoing exit exam system adopted by the GFP in higher education institutions in Oman and identifying the concerns to be addressed with recommending possible solutions. The study discusses the existing system of the exit test in GFP in various colleges. The research tries to identify the need and possibility of implementing a standardized national level exit test in GFP in the Sultanate of Oman. Researchers also discuss the challenges and possible solutions for the implementation of standardized national level exit test in GFP in the sultanate.

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## Introduction

As per The Royal Decree (54/2010, Article 7), “OAA is responsible for regulating the quality of higher education in Oman to ensure the maintenance of a level that meets international standards, and to encourage Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to improve their internal quality through certain defined and approved mandates” (OAAA Website). Since then, HEI started the accreditation process and most of the HEIs in Sultanate of Oman are now at the stage of accreditation. OAAA has provided separate standards, criteria and manuals for undergraduate courses and general foundation programs. OAAA audit reports were submitted by different HEIs in Oman work under Ministry of Higher Education, Research & Innovation (MoHERI). By 2022, 23 GFP-HEIs had gone through their audit and had received a list of commendations, affirmations, and recommendations. All GFP-HEIs in Oman strive to achieve the minimum requirements set by Oman’s Academic Standards. These requirements are translated by each institution into their own learning outcomes and are achieved through different textbooks and supporting materials. At the end of their GFPs, a student is expected to take an exit test to determine if s/he has met the required learning outcomes. While the emphasis is given on the attainment of learning outcomes across all three subject components, English, Math and IT, an IELTS score of at least 5.0 is deemed equivalent to passing the standards set for the English component. Therefore, all GFPs in Oman are actively trying to benchmark their exit standards with IELTS. Some GFPs have plans in place to benchmark their tests while a number of other GFPs have already benchmarked their tests, but the results show a discrepancy between the actual scores and IELTS scores. Therefore, the study tries to discuss the possibility of implementing the national level standardized exit test of GFP. Oman Vision 2040 addresses every aspect of education to engrave future citizens of Oman. It also confirms the nation’s interest in bringing up young Omani people to serve for the nation. So, the research tries to explore the possibility, challenges, and possible solutions of implementing national level standardized exit test of GFP in Oman.

## General Foundation Program (GFP)

A general foundation program is a one-year course to bridge the gap between school education and tertiary education. In Oman, the general foundation programs are of vital importance as they are undertaken by most Omani students. The foundation program is only required for students who do not meet the entrance criteria for the first year of their degree programs. However, it does not result in the awarding of formal credit to the students. The program is of general disciplinary scope and includes four areas: English Language, Mathematics, Computing and Study Skills.

## Oman Academic Standards of General Foundation Program (OASGFP)

The general foundation program is governed by Oman Academic Standards (OAS) that ensure that the programs are effective in helping students achieve the required learning outcomes in the four areas. These standards guide higher education institutions in curriculum development, teaching, assessment, review, and improvement.

## Functioning of GFP

GFP programs are usually one year, but the standards do not “impose a time limit... unlike ... OAC standards for diploma and degree programs” (GFP Standards). Though GFP is a non-credited course, it is structured according to the credit hours set out in ROSQA

(Requirements for Oman's System of Quality Assurance in higher education). Therefore, the GFP generally is a 30 weekly hour course, offered in a minimum of two semesters. It is necessary that the universities make all GFP courses available every semester to allow students to repeat any course if required.

### Exit Test in GFP

Currently, there is no standardized national test for GFPs in Oman, and each institute is responsible for developing its own methods of assessments. The final result should be either a pass or a failure. Many countries, however, employ national tests for standardization and to ensure that all learners are meeting the required learning standards.

### Statement of Problem

- The study aims to examine the possibility of implementing national level standardized exit test of GFP by explaining the ongoing exit exam system adopted by the GFP in higher education institutions in Oman and identifying the concerns to be addressed with recommending possible solutions.

### Objectives

- To describe the existing system of exit test in GFP in various colleges
- To identify the need for national level standardized exit test of GFP
- To examine the possibility of having national level standardized exit test of GFP
- To address the challenges of having national level standardized exit test of GFP
- To state possible solutions to overcome the identified challenges

### Scope of research

*"The educational vision in Oman is to: Equip human resources with the values, knowledge, and skills to enable them to be productive in the world of the knowledge economy, keep pace with the continual changes in the world, maintain their national identity and intrinsic values, and contribute to the advancement of human civilization. (Oman Vision 2040, Page No: 20). The updated education vision (Oman Vision 2040, Page No: 20) evidently expects a total revolutionary transformation of education sector. So that Oman Academic Standards of General Foundation Program could examine the effectiveness of existing standards of GFP in Oman and also consider restructuring or updating the existing standards. The current study enables or provides a base to think of practically implementing the national level standardized exit test of GFP and also to suggest standards which could be modified in Oman Academic Standards of General Foundation Program to meet Oman Vision 2040.*

### The Foundation in other GCC

Other countries GCC have similar foundation programs. In UAE, the foundation program is equal to 12<sup>th</sup> standard. The aspirants who complete the O level of their 11<sup>th</sup> standard are eligible for applying for the foundation program. Some of the higher education institutions offer extra assistance to enhance the language and numerical skill throughout the program embedded in the curriculum of the major discipline. The full-time foundation program is designed and offered according to the discipline the students opt for their degree program. The foundation program is not general like in Sultanate of Oman. It focuses on specific courses. The exit tests are in-house prepared fitting to the requirements of the specified bachelor programs students opted for or higher education institution offered. (*Foundation Studies, n.d.*)

In Qatar, the Foundation Program is known as the Academic Bridge Program. In order to pass the Academic Bridge Program, students are expected to pass IELTS or TOFEL or ACCUPLACER test (ACCUPLACER is a standardized test assists colleges in assessing student readiness for introductory credit-bearing courses and make reliable placement decisions) or the final exam of Academic Bridge Program with at least 1.3 GPA. So, unlike Oman and UAE, the testing system includes both standardized and in house prepared tests. (*Amity University Foundation Programmes*, n.d.)

In Saudi Arabia, students' readiness for the bachelor program is assessed by mainly through assessment which are formative and qualitative in nature. The assessment system includes students 'portfolios, focused observations with checklists, self and peer assessment, interviews, projects, oral presentations, and conferences. The promotion is based on the students 'required score on expected measures of proficiency in an array of areas'. (Shavelson et al., 2008)

So far, most countries allow the HEIs to design their own exit test.

### Research Methodology

The research is carried out following the methodology of content analysis. The qualitative research methodology assists in collecting data objectively and systematically. Content analysis provides an appropriate methodology to conduct an analysis following both observational and narrative method.

### Content Analysis

- Identify the intentions, focus or communication trends of an individual, group or institution
- Describe attitudinal and behavioral responses to communications
- Determine the psychological or emotional state of persons or groups
- Reveal international differences in communication content
- Reveal patterns in communication content
- Pre-test and improve an intervention or survey prior to launch
- Analyze focus group interviews and open-ended questions to complement quantitative data (*Content Analysis*, 2023)

Content Analysis identifies the presence of similar words, themes, or concepts in collected data. It allows the research to collect data and by validating the identified similarity in the qualitative data collected.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Functioning of every educational institution happens with required confidentiality. However, the expected data to be published on a public domain is always accessible on their official website. The policy regarding the final exam exit test or related policies are also available on the website. The data required for the research cannot be found in the published contents and most of them remain confidential or based on the affiliated universities' protocol.

First stage of OAAA auditing has been completed by 32 GFP HEIs in Oman (*OAAAQA - العامة التأسيسية البرامج جودة تدقيق عمليات تقارير*, n.d.).

The self-study report of every institution and against the OAAA manual had been submitted to OAAA and was published by OAAA on their website. GFP of every college

undergone separate auditing program completing the submission of self-study report to OAAA and the same is available on OAAA website. The research mainly collected the data regarding the execution of final exam of different HEIs GFP from their self –study report submitted to OAAA. The self –study report details the rationale for adopting their system of exit of test and mapping of the same to CEFR level.

To conduct the analysis, the audit reports of 32 institutions were studied to identify the GFPs with similar outcomes of the exit standards. The four identified GFPs were Arab Open University, Dhofar University, Oman College of Management and Technology, and National University of Science and Technology. These HEIs had received affirmations in their exit standards that show that these institutions have ‘accurately identified significant’ areas for improvement and have ‘demonstrated appropriate commitment to address’ it (OAAAQA - العامة التأسيسية البرامج اعتماد - n.d.).

Then, the existing test of these GFPs were identified, and their validity was confirmed through the description of mapping with national and international benchmark explained in the reports.

### English Tests

Most exit tests in the Higher Education Institutes in Oman are conducted at the end of the semester. Arab Open University, Dhofar University and Oman College of Management and Technology offer a separate exit test, after their final exams have been conducted, however, the National University of Science and Technology assesses the exit level of Foundation students through their final exam and coursework submission that addresses key outcomes that need to be achieved for progression. Although Dhofar University also has a separate exit test, it accounts for only 20% of students' grades and 80% comes from the in-house test. The Audit Report of Dhofar University shows that there are plans in place to gradually increase the weightage of the Exit test to 100%.

The development of exams in all these four HEI is in-house. The exams are generally IELTS based and test the same competencies. While all HEIs have a dedicated team of test writers, Arab Open University mentions that the staff who are involved in the development and administration of the test receive formal training.

The HEIs show a clear understanding of the importance of benchmarking exit tests. While at the time of their audit, Arab Open University and the National University had not benchmarked their exit tests, initiatives to benchmark tests had already been taken. The Arab Open University had previously made an attempt to benchmark their test by randomly selecting GFP students to take the official IELTS tests, but the comparison of test scores on IELTS with the Exit test score showed a clear difference between the levels. The National University has also planned to benchmark their tests by sending a group of randomly selected students to take the IELTS test and draw comparisons between their scores on the IELTS test and students' exit test.

Dhofar University extensively benchmarks their exit test with IELTS by sending a random sample of 10% to take the official IELTS test every year. Oman College of Management and Technology collaborated with IDP for benchmarking their test with IELTS every year.



Failure to meet the exit test usually requires a student to re-take the test in a certain period of time, as per the HEI's assessment policies. In addition to this, Arab Open University also requires students to produce an official IELTS certificate after attempting the in-house test twice.

### **Math and IT tests**

At the time of their audits, in all the four HEIs, there are no separate Math and IT exit tests. The standards are assessed through the final exam and continuous assessments. There have been plans to implement a math exit test in the Arab Open University and Dhofar University. Similar to the English tests, the National University uses the final exam to measure the achievement of exit standards in Math and IT. The reports also do not reflect any plans for benchmarking Math and IT tests.

The study identified the implementation and execution of exit test of General Foundation Program in different in higher education institutions in Oman. All of the HEIs follow the OASGFP and the insisted learning objectives. (OAAA Manual). Further, HEIs have the autonomy to choose learning resources, and textbooks. The readiness and applicability of the resources are rationalized by mapping the learning outcomes to the learning objectives at initial level to OASGFP standards and then to CEFR, TOFEL, and IELTS. During the completion of the data collection, 27 General Foundation Program of 27 GFP were available on OAAA website.

The research studied the affirmation and recommendation regarding the exit test all theses 27 GFP had received during the auditing process. The auditing recommended the GFPs to:

- expand the scope of the GFP exit tests
- ensure the exit standards to meet the requirements higher education programs
- align the exit standards with internationally recognized English Language Tests
- implement proper procedure to execute the exit and entry test
- ensure that the proficiency of four English Language Skills of students who pass the GFP exit test
- review the GFP exit test grading system
- benchmark the exit and entry test
- ensure the attainment of learning objectives of Mathematics and IT

The research also identified that most of the GFP programs have got similar recommendations. Most of the HEIs mentioned might have taken the necessary steps to design strategies to implement the recommendations or already started implementing as they are preparing for program accreditation if they have institutionally accredited or preparing for the second chance of institutional accreditation. The data is not available on public domain.

### **Result**

1. The study identified the existing system of exit test in GFP in various colleges.

The research found the designing and execution of the GFP programs in various HEIs in Oman. Then it studied the exit test execution they have opted considering national and international level requirements. It has also learned the affirmations and

recommendations the HEIs received from OAAA during the audit about the exit test that they have.

2. It is not necessary to mandate a National Level Standardized exit test of GFP in Oman. Every HEIs designed their GFP program to cater their students for the major discipline they opt at the HEI. The HEIs use different measures to ensure the appropriateness of their exit tests. The HEIs are successful in stating the achievement of OASGFP in the implementation and functioning of exit test of General Foundation Programs despite of the affirmations and recommendations that they received during the OAAA audit.
3. Having a National Level Standardized exit test of GFP is possible for English Language Teaching Program.  
Implementation of a National Level Standardized exit test of GFP in Oman is possible for English language. But the collected data and its content analysis shows that HEIs include the Mathematics and IT courses and their duration according to the major course they offer.
4. The primary challenges of having a National Level Standardized exit test of GFP.
  - The major challenge is to address the students from the science stream and humanities stream and prepare them for the same exit test in one year's time.
  - Incorporating the target language, Math, and IT skills for the opted diploma/degree major course while preparing the aspirants for National Level Test.
  - Identifying an authority to conduct the test.
  - Training for the faculty members to teach the course and conduct the exam.
5. The possible solutions to overcome the identified challenges is that All HEIs can be allowed to follow defined benchmarking standards by OASGFP to develop the exam paper. As the HEIs already follow the learning objectives and standards to function the GFP, it will not be a totally new system to adopt for them.

## Conclusion

The research mainly studied the necessity of implementing national level standardized exit test of GFP in order to identify the need for implementing national level standardized exit test of GFP the research collected and analyzed the ongoing exit exam system adopted by the GFP in higher education institutions in Oman. The data collection and analysis were done following the research methodology of content analysis. By reviewing the details of the existing system of exit test in GFP in various colleges, the research was able to identify the need of adopting a standardized national level exit test in GFP in Sultanate of Oman. The research then listed out the major challenges in implementing such tests and the primary solution for addressing the challenges and adopting a system to overcome the mentioned barriers.

The major limitation of the study was to avoid the possibility of inferencing the collected qualitative data liberally, the data analysis of the research was limited to the mentioned categories of the data. This act limited the freedom to look into other possibilities. The research does not explicate any further improvements the HEIs might have adopted to improvise the existing test. Deriving the measurements, the HEIs might have taken to execute the received recommendations were not available on the websites of the HEIs. Such data is confidential in nature.



The research can be taken to the next level to study the development of a unified exam paper template to test the achievement of each learning objective stated by OASGFP.

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