



Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, November 2023

Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that the Aga Khan University (AKU; the University) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC; the Institute) is making acceptable progress since the [November 2022 annual monitoring visit](#).

Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 The Institute currently has 25 students on the MA Muslim Cultures programme, of which two are studying part-time, representing a small decrease on the 29 students reported in November 2022. This is made up of 10 students enrolled in 2023 and 15 continuing students. Six students are undertaking the programme as part of a dual degree programme with Columbia University in the United States.

3 There are five full-time senior managers, six full-time academic staff and three part-time academic staff at the Institute. There has been an internal promotion to the post of Head of Educational programmes and the appointment of four assistant professor roles.

4 From September 2024, it is planned to change the duration of the MA Muslim Cultures from one-and-a-half years (three semesters) to two years (four semesters). This is to align with Columbia University in the United States and to enable a smoother transition to the PhD programme which is also planned for September 2024. A second dual degree programme for 2024-25 is also being planned with the Catholic University of Portugal in Lisbon.

5 No external reviews in the UK have taken place since the last monitoring visit but a review by the wider Aga Khan University is expected soon as it has been delayed due to internal structural changes.

Findings from the monitoring visit

6 The review team studied the Annual Monitoring Return, supporting evidence and supplementary documentation requested prior to the review visit. This included minutes of relevant committees, CVs of key staff and correspondence relating to course changes. Meetings were held online with students, senior management, teaching and administrative support staff. It was concluded that the Institute continues to make acceptable progress since the November 2022 annual monitoring visit.

7 There were no actions identified in the November 2022 annual monitoring return, and the previously identified action from the original Higher Education Review in 2020 was completed by the 2021 annual monitoring visit.

8 The Institute does not have an internal action plan, which was noted in the November 2022 annual monitoring report. Staff state that the Education Committee acts as the Institute's oversight body for quality assurance and standards, and its internal quality monitoring processes are considered and actioned there - for example, course changes. Given the size of the programme portfolio, and the small student cohort, this is a pragmatic approach. However, should the Institute realise its plans to offer the PhD programme and the second dual degree programme, senior staff are considering introducing an internal action plan to address any targets for improvement.

9 Performance data indicates that retention and progression levels remain high. Five students (71%) of the total seven registered in autumn 2021 obtained MA degrees in 2022. The current student cohort comprises 25 students registered in autumn 2021 of which two are studying part-time, representing a small decrease on the 29 students reported in November 2022. This is made up of 10 students enrolled in 2023 and 15 continuing students. Six students are undertaking the programme as part of a dual degree programme with Columbia University in the United States.

10 The Institute proposed a change in the duration of the current MA in Muslim Cultures programme from one-and-a-half years (three semesters) to two years (four semesters). This was a considered approach by the Institute to give students from disadvantaged backgrounds time to make sufficient progress, as well as to align the academic calendar between the UK and USA to allow for smoother transition to PhD and other graduate programmes. Teaching staff are able to detail how this change was identified and acted upon under the auspices of the Education Committee, including how the pedagogy of core modules would be changed to reflect the extended time available to students.

11 The Institute identified its plans to run a PhD programme with proposed first entry of autumn 2024, which will be an opportunity for current students and alumni to return or continue their education with AKU-ISMC. The Institute is taking a balanced approach to implementing its PhD offering by ensuring only small numbers of students are accepted per year - that is, two in the first year of operation, culminating in eight per year once the programme is embedded. Senior managers were able to detail staff workload allocations accordingly, particularly in respect of the proposed PhD programme.

12 Students are satisfied with the variety of student support mechanisms available in the Institute, ranging from pastoral support via a named faculty member, mental health support from an external agency, and financial assistance in the form of loans for laptops and scholarship arrangements. The Institute reports that it was successful in gaining recognition from United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) as Independent Research Organisation Status (IRO) and will now be entitled to apply for grants from UK funding bodies in preparation for its planned PhD offering in 2024.

Progress in working with the external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education

13 The Institute is required to follow the academic policies and regulations of the Aga Khan University. However, it uses the UK Quality Code for Higher Education and procedures adopted in other UK universities for guidance including the UK Quality Code (2023), *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications*, and the *Master's Degree Characteristics Statement* (2020). The Institute intends to provide training sessions on the UK Quality Code as it relates to teaching to its faculty in late 2023.

Background to the monitoring visit

14 The monitoring visit serves as a short check on the provider's continuing management of academic standards and quality of provision. It focuses on progress since the previous review. In addition, it provides an opportunity for QAA to advise the provider of any matters that have the potential to be of particular interest in the next monitoring visit or review.

15 The monitoring visit was carried out by Dr Nick Dickson, Reviewer, and Kevin Kendall, QAA Officer, on 10 November 2023.

QAA2808 - R14572 - Jan 24

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