Higher Education Review (Foreign Providers) of Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations

October 2020

Contents

About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review (Foreign Providers) conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations. The review took place on 11 June and 22 October 2020 and was conducted by a team of two reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Barbara Howell
- Dr Richard Samuels

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provision and to make judgements as to whether or not academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations (and the associated Core and Common Practices) are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)[1] setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review (Foreign Providers) the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - the quality of student learning opportunities
- provides a commentary on academic standards
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#)[2] and explains the method for [Higher Education Review (Foreign Providers).](#)[3] For an explanation of terms see the glossary at the end of this report.

The impact of COVID-19

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the review of Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations in 2019-20 was subject to an interim outcome in June 2020 and was concluded in October 2020. The review was conducted online and included meetings with senior management teams, teaching staff and students. The scope of the evidence considered, and the nature of the judgements and operational milestones have remained the same but with some adjustments due to the online format. A risk assessment was carried out prior to the review to identify and mitigate any potential risks. Annual monitoring will resume again in 2021-22.

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[1] The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code
[2] QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk
[3] Higher Education Review (Foreign Providers) handbook:
www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/her-fp-handbook-for-providers.pdf

Key findings

Judgements

The QAA review team formed the following judgement about the higher education provision.

- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

The QAA review team also provided a commentary on academic standards.

- The provider satisfactorily manages its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in contractual arrangements with its academic partners.

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendation**.

By June 2021:

- Produce and implement a plan to ensure the active engagement of students in the quality of their learning experience (Core practice 5).

About the provider

Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-the Institute) was established in 2002 as an integral part of the Aga Khan University (AKU), itself a major component of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), a group of international organisations devoted to human development. AKU is active in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and the United Kingdom.

As part of its mission, AKU aims for strength in research and excellence in teaching. Its students and graduates are expected to make meaningful contributions to their societies through professional achievement and through service. Inspired by humanistic ideals and the philosophy of AKDN, the University is committed to building an environment that fosters intellectual freedom, distinction in scholarship, pluralism, compassion and humanity's collective responsibility for a sustainable physical, social and cultural environment. AKU has recently established a Graduate School of Media and Communications, the first of several that are planned. AKU has launched a project to expand its coverage to the liberal arts through the establishment of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences based in Karachi. AKU-ISMC (the Institute) is playing a leading role in curriculum development and academic recruitment for this new Faculty.

The Institute has recently adopted a five-year strategic plan. This has reaffirmed its basic mission to advance teaching and research in its area of specialisation. The Institute continues to develop the two areas identified at the QAA Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight (RSEO) review of 2016; increased use of online and blended learning and developing networks of scholars and institutions with common interests on a global basis.

Within AKU, the Institute has a specific role to foster scholarship, teaching and dialogue concerning Muslim civilisations and their heritage within the contemporary world. It states that it is explicitly not a theological institution, and uses comparative, social science-based methodologies.

At the time of the review the Institute had a total of 15 students. Recruitment of a new cohort had been postponed due to the pandemic restrictions. There are 12 permanent members of academic staff (three of whom have administrative/management roles built into their contracts) and 20 administrative (this excludes the academics who also have partial administrative contracts).

Recent changes include revision of the MA programme which is now 18 months in duration, rather than two years. The Institute has agreed a Memorandum of Understanding with Columbia University to create a dual degree pathway for select students.

Construction of a new academic building for the Institute (shared with the Institute of Ismaili Studies) at King's Cross in London is now complete. New student accommodation in the same area is already occupied, and almost all students are in residence there. The Institute became a founding member of the Knowledge Quarter, established by the British Library in 2014.

Key challenges faced by the Institute include, at the time of the review, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond this, the Institute's founding mission has remained consistent since its founding; however, the political and economic landscape in which it operates has shifted considerably. The Institute has noted that changes in political direction and associated policies, such as the implementation of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 and the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union have resulted in increased levels of uncertainty for academic recruitment and retention.

Explanation of findings

This section explains the review findings in greater detail.

1 Commentary: The provider satisfactorily manages its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in contractual arrangements with its academic partners

Findings

1.1 The Institute is an entity of Aga Khan University (AKU) which is accredited by the Higher Education Commission in Pakistan and subject to scrutiny by an independent Board of Trustees. Responsibility for the setting and maintenance of academic standards at the Institute rests with AKU as the awarding body. AKU provides a comprehensive qualifications framework which outlines the levels of achievement and their broad descriptors. The Institute is required to follow the academic policies and regulations of the University, including the credit and qualifications frameworks, policy on external examiners and the teaching and learning framework. The Registrar's or Provost's offices at AKU prepare policies which require consultation at the University's Board of Undergraduate Studies and final approval at Academic Council. The University's Academic Council is the senior academic body of the University with responsibility for the approval and implementation of policy on academic matters. Policies are located on the AKU website and, where applicable, included in the Institute's student handbook. The University's Quality Assurance Review Committee (QARC) is responsible for assuring quality at the Institute through cyclical quality assurance processes.

1.2 The responsibilities for managing the Institute are delegated by the Board of Trustees to the Dean. The Dean is subsequently supported by a senior management team (SMT) with the Head of Educational Programmes (HEP) providing strategic and managerial oversight of the academic programme. The Institute is represented in AKU's committee structure with adequate representation at the University's Academic Council and QARC. The Institute's internal committee structure ensures adherence to AKU policies and procedures and an ongoing reflection on academic matters. The SMT chaired by the Dean is the final internal decision-making forum on academic matters. The Staff Forum provides dialogue on all staff matters with minutes feeding into the SMT. A review of the committee structure by the Institute has led to the establishment of a separate Teaching Team Meeting to ensure that academic matters are comprehensively covered, with minutes feeding into the SMT.

1.3 The MA in Muslim Cultures, which is run at the Institute, is multidisciplinary and is viewed by AKU as part of the Institute's specific role to develop scholarship and dialogue on Muslim civilisations. The programme design is a shared responsibility between AKU and the Institute. AKU is required to engage with the Institute on adjustments and approve major changes. Minor modifications of modules made by the Institute are reported to AKU's University Registrar. The Institute complies with AKU assessment standards and takes responsibility for the marking and moderation of student work. The Academic Standards Committee chaired by the HEP provides an effective internal check on assessment standards.

1.4 At the time of the review, the COVID-19 pandemic was active and senior staff confirmed that the Institute has temporarily adapted academic delivery and assessment policy to ensure that students are not disadvantaged. Teaching and learning went online in 2020. New modules have been delayed, allowing students to focus on research activities. Additionally, a no detriment policy has been introduced for modules that require completion.

1.5   The Institute uses various external reference points. The MA programme is accredited by the Higher Education Commission in Pakistan and was also accredited by the British Accreditation Council up until 2016. In the design of the MA Programme, the Institute also considers Subject Benchmark Statements published by QAA in specific areas such as Religious Studies and History, though there is no specific Statement relating to interdisciplinary programmes at master's level. A review of the programme was carried out by a team from UK NARIC as part of preparation for the original QAA RSEO review in 2012 with the NARIC Benchmarking Analysis concluding that the master's course is comparable to Regulated Qualifications Framework Level 7.

1.6   As is appropriate for an international, non-denominational liberal arts institution, the University uses the expertise of international advisers, with advisers of different faiths and origins reflected in the membership of the Board of Trustees. AKU's Board of Trustees comprises specialists that include those with senior management experience from the sector in Europe and North America.

1.7   A formal programme review provides the opportunity for close external scrutiny of academic standards at the Institute. As outlined in AKU's Academic Quality Framework, visiting external assessors are selected by the Provost to conduct a periodic review of the academic programme. The process was introduced in 2015 with a five-year cycle but the review date has been deferred due to the COVID-19 pandemic and is expected to be conducted in 2021.

1.8   The Institution adheres to AKU's External Examiner Policy which provides assurance that external scrutiny of assessment standards is effective. External examiners have online access to all assessment, attend an annual Exam Board and generate annual reports which are processed by the Institute. The external examiner comments provided in the reports are considered at SMT with the HEP providing a formal response. The external examiners' reports highlight that the level taught is appropriate for a master's programme and that assessment is professionally managed.

The provider satisfactorily manages its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in contractual arrangements with its academic partners:
Summary of findings

1.9   In reaching its conclusion, the review team matched its findings against the three questions specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The review team concludes that the Institute satisfactorily manages its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in contractual arrangements with its academic partners. The review team found that the Institute as an entity of AKU is stringent in managing its responsibilities for maintaining academic standards. It adheres to the requirements of AKU, which in turn is accredited by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan. The review team concludes that the Institute satisfactorily manages its responsibilities for academic standards.

2   Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

Core practice (Q1): The provider has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system.

Findings

2.1   Students are recruited directly into the Institute without the use of agents. The Institute's website, which includes a prospectus, provides the main source of information for potential students with additional publicity provided through social media, webinars and interactive open days that include the use of alumni. Application procedures are outlined to students on the website.

2.2   The Institute follows AKU's Admissions Framework. The Registrar's Office at the University processes applications by collecting applicant documentation and evaluating whether the applicant meets the minimum entry requirements. The Registrar's Office also answers queries from applicants or potential applicants. The Institute's Admissions Committee subsequently takes responsibility for a further review and assessment of applications, which is based on set criteria. The Admissions Committee is chaired by the HEP and is comprised of two members of Faculty. As part of the application process, interviews of shortlisted candidates are conducted by two Faculty staff, one of which must be a member of the Admissions Committee. The theme of interviews is structured around an essay that candidates are required to write. A report form must be completed at the end of each interview which is translated into a numerical score and ranked. Using these reports, the Admissions Committee recommends candidates to the Registrar's Working Group for formal approval. These arrangements allow the Core practice to be met.

2.3   The review team examined the effectiveness of the recruitment, selection and admissions procedures for the MA programme by analysing published documentation, including website information and programme brochures. The team also met management, support staff and students.

2.4   The review team found that the procedures for recruitment, selection and admission of students work effectively in practice. Public information is comprehensive with processes embedded to ensure its accuracy. Information on admissions criteria, fees and how to apply are clear and accessible on the AKU website. The website additionally provides information on how to appeal against an admissions decision. Students whom the review team met stated that during their application the University was very supportive pre-arrival, for example, by providing support with information on visa applications.

2.5   The review team also found evidence that the Institute has a rigorous selection process by which shortlisted candidates are required to attend an interview and write a short essay based on questions sent. The process ensures that the student's expectations are understood prior to confirmation. Students confirmed that the interview and written assessment were valuable in allowing them to decide whether the institution was suitable.

2.6   AKU emphasises the importance of widening access to education in its own Mission. The Student Disability Policy commits the Institute to making appropriate reasonable adjustments for those with disabilities. Additionally, financial assistance is available to applicants who require financial support, with the website promoting the opportunity to apply for assistance. The Institute's Financial Assistance Committee, which is chaired by the HEP, uses pre-set criteria to recommend the allocation of financial assistance. Recommendations are submitted to the Dean for approval.

2.7   Based on documentary analysis and meetings with managers and staff, the review team concludes that students joining the Institute have been well informed and carefully selected as having the potential to complete their selected courses. The Core practice is met and any associated risk is low.

Core practice   Met
Level of risk: Low

Core practice (Q2): The provider designs and/or delivers high-quality courses.

Findings

2.8   The Institute offers one academic programme, the MA in Muslim Cultures. Though the Institute acknowledges that the initial programme launched in 2005 was developed without an embedded formal process, a clear process has since been formalised and is articulated in the University's Academic Quality Framework. Major modifications are a shared responsibility between the Institute and AKU. The initial drafting of major changes to the existing programme is the responsibility of the Institute. The Registrar's Office at AKU subsequently manages the process of approval. Senior university leadership scrutinises proposed adjustments with a final proposal processed at Academic Council for approval at the Board of Trustees. If the proposals relate to a new programme then further approval is required by the Vice-President of the University as well as the Board of Trustees. These arrangements allow the Core practice to be met.

2.9   The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining documentation relating to the programme review, design and approval processes. The team also held meetings with management, teaching staff and students.

2.10   Processes for the design and delivery of programmes work effectively in practice, ensuring a rigorous review of proposed adjustments to the programme. Modular reports and an annual review process ensure regular internal reflection of the course and leads to improvement plans. The programme underwent a significant review in 2018, resulting in proposed changes to the programme structure being approved by AKU's Academic Council and the Board of Trustees. The revision has resulted in restructuring the programme from a two-year structure into a shorter 18-month, three-semester structure with increased emphasis on employability and transferrable skills. The Institute is additionally exploring future programme developments to strengthen student employability, such as through the introduction of internships. AKU also provided final approval of a partnership with Columbia University which establishes a dual degree option for students.

2.11   The review team concluded that programme specifications and module outlines are comprehensive and appropriate at RQF Level 7. Standardised AKU forms ensure that programme objectives and learning outcomes are sufficiently detailed. Further confidence in the quality of the programme design is provided through external sources. External examiner reports highlight the appropriateness of the content and assessment on the course. The deferred process of programme review as outlined in AKU's Academic Quality Framework will provide further external scrutiny of the quality of the programme.

2.12   These arrangements are comprehensive and effective in ensuring that the Institute designs and delivers high-quality courses. The team, therefore, concludes that the Core practice is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Core practice: Met
Level of risk: Low

Core practice (Q3): The provider has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience.

Findings

2.13   Teaching at the Institute is undertaken by three categories of staff: well established full-time and part-time academic staff, non-fixed term academics and language teachers. The full-time equivalent and non-fixed term academics hold doctoral degrees and recognition for their research. Full-time academic staff are appointed through international competition with part-time staff mainly identified through recommendation by full-time academic staff, followed by an interview with the HEP. Set procedures are in place for the recruitment process.

2.14   All full-time academic staff are expected either to have extensive experience of teaching at previous institutions or to undertake a postgraduate certificate course in the early stages of their appointment and seek membership of the Higher Education Academy. Of the current staff, three have completed the Higher Education Academy programme.

2.15   During their initial appointments, teachers are observed by the HEP. Mid and end-of-probation reviews also take place and include a review of teaching performance and peer observation.

2.16   The Institute puts on regular continuing professional development courses for all its teaching staff, some facilitated by AKU and some by outside experts. Some professional development courses are shared with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, thus enlarging the range of courses that can be offered. The Institute uses a virtual learning environment (VLE) with support provided through the Teaching and Learning Network. Academic staff are also encouraged to use blended learning and flipped classroom techniques, supported by the recent introduction of training courses in this area. The arrangements in place for ensuring sufficient and appropriately qualified staff allow the Core practice to be met.

2.17   The team tested the Core practice through the review of policies and procedures for the recruitment and appointment of academic staff, staff curriculum vitae and certificates, probation evaluation, appraisal and example peer observation process, staff development opportunities, role descriptors and meetings with the senior team and teaching staff.

2.18   The 2016 QAA Higher Education Review considered it desirable for the Institute to continue to develop policies and practices concerning adjunct faculty. In response, the Institute has reduced its reliance on fixed-term academic teaching staff (adjunct faculty) with a teaching compliment now comprising 11.5 full-time equivalent teaching staff.

2.19   The process of recruitment follows set procedures, with the recruitment and appointments overseen by Human Resources, with shortlisting, interviews and appointments carried out by academic staff. The team confirmed that faculty members are expected to hold or take a postgraduate certificate in higher education (PGCHE) qualification or the equivalent and in most cases a PhD. Staff are further encouraged and supported to become a member of the Higher Education Academy. Three members of staff currently hold Higher Education Academy Fellowship, and the teaching staff curricula vitae reviewed revealed that those appointed were appropriately qualified.

2.20   The team found the Institute to provide a comprehensive and responsive range of continuing professional development courses for staff, with some sessions shared with the Institute of Ismaili Studies. Every member of academic staff is expected to complete at least one training course per year. The Institute had arranged development sessions on blended learning approaches, assessment and the grading rubric, teaching and learning and enhancement, and the VLE.

2.21   The evaluation of teaching is performed through annual appraisal and teaching observation which take place during the initial appointment phase by the HEP and annually by peers.

2.22   The team found the staff to be both committed and well qualified. The recruitment and appointment process and range of professional development opportunities enable the Institute to have sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff. Overall, the team concludes that the Core practice is met and the level of risk is low.

Core practice: Met
Level of risk: Low

Core practice (Q4): The provider has sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience.

Findings

2.23   Academic engagement with students begins as soon as the student offers have been confirmed, with pre-sessional seminars during August to inform on language choices and provide an overview of the course. On arrival, students are given AKU email accounts and provided with an opportunity to take out a loan from the Institute to purchase laptops and on-site IT helpdesk support is also available. The programme then begins with an induction week, comprising an introduction to the Institute and its academic activities and the Institute's library and other accessible libraries. The library supports both the Institute and the Institute of Ismaili Studies, with the Head of the Library responsible for its overall management, supported by a Library User Group.

2.24   Responsibility for sustaining and enhancing the student experience, academically and socially, rests with the HEP and the MA Coordinator, and each student has a Faculty Advisor for both academic and pastoral support. The library and IT staff also provide support. Counselling arrangements operate through the University of Westminster. A summary report is compiled at the end of each year to indicate levels of counselling usage and any issues that appear to be of general concern.

2.25   The Institute endeavours to meet the needs of all students with disabilities and welcome the opportunity to support anyone who can succeed on their programmes with the appropriate reasonable adjustments.

2.26   A VLE contains all the information required by students on the degree for all individual modules, including required reading and policies and regulations. The VLE also supports the submission and marking of assignments. Staff receive training courses and development on the use of VLEs and blended learning approaches. Arrangements for assuring sufficient and appropriate facilities allow the Core practice to be met.

2.27   The team tested the Core practice through a review of the Student Written Submission, Student Counselling Service Report, student support roles, student policy documents, development sessions for the VLE and virtual learning, orientation programme, tutorial record forms and strategy papers. The team also sent the Institution some initial written questions and held meetings with the senior team, staff and students.

2.28   The team heard that the student application process could be either paper-based or online with pre-arrival managers supportive, although the students found the process to be rushed. On arrival at the Institute an orientation session is in place to introduce the students to the library and online resources, the VLE, IT services, counselling service and orientation trip. However, due to late visas many students had arrived at the Institute late, and therefore missed the formal orientation session. Although the students arrived late, it was clear that they received brochures and materials about everything they needed to know and found this information to be useful.

2.29   The HEP supported by the MA Coordinator hold responsibility for the effectiveness of the educational experience, with all students provided with a Faculty Advisor for academic and pastoral support. The Faculty Advisor's role is expected to be an active rather than a passive one, with the expectation that they will meet the students once a term/semester. Some of the students had experienced variability in the number of meetings they received and the amount of guidance they were given. Any variation of practice was attributed to the differing needs of the students, and in some cases a staff member may have left the Institute

and therefore not been available for all the prescribed meetings. The team further confirmed that any anomalies would be identified, as the individual meetings are recorded and monitored by the HEP using standard template tutorial record forms.

2.30   The advisers can also help raise concerns about the welfare of the students and direct them towards the counselling service. The Institute also has a Student Disability Policy designed for both prospective and current students and which is in line with the goal of the Institute to promote access to educational opportunities, from pre-arrival through to implementation of reasonable adjustments and the accessibility of buildings.

2.31   The team confirmed that the Head of the Library is responsible for the overall management of the library, supported by a Library User Group. The team heard of an extensive range of library resources on campus, comprising approximately 55,000 volumes, access to audiovisual materials, dissertations and journals and subscriptions to a number of electronic journals and full-text databases. Advice on those resources is provided to the students by library staff, and the team learnt of the proactive approach to providing essential and required reading.

2.32   The Institute makes extensive use of its VLE, which contains information on the individual modules, required reading, articles, documentaries, films, policies and regulations. Support for Moodle and, more generally, the Virtual Classroom is provided through the Teaching and Learning Network, support materials and staff development sessions.

2.33   The team viewed the inclusive support provided by the staff, wide-ranging library collection and comprehensive virtual learning environment to enable the Core practice to be met and assessed the level of risk to be low.

Core practice: Met
Level of risk: Low

Core practice (Q5): The provider actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience.

Findings

2.34   The Institute has several complementary mechanisms to actively engage students. At a formal level, each cohort of students chooses two student representatives, with each rotating on a termly basis. Student representatives are members of the Student Council, which meets on a termly basis. Its membership also includes the HEP, the Programme Administrator and Student Support Officer. Minutes are taken by one of the student representatives. Action items arising from the Student Council meetings are either dealt with by the appropriate individual or are brought to Teaching Team meetings.

2.35   Student representatives are further invited to Faculty Council meetings, except for reserved items of business, and are also represented on the Library Advisory Group. The AKU Institute Oversight Committee, when it met in London, would also usually include a meeting with students as part of its agenda.

2.36   Student feedback on courses is collected through surveys conducted at the end of each term using a standard form. The process is administered by the Student Experience Network within the Registry Office who holds the responses until the course assessment grading process is complete before releasing them to the Institute.

2.37   The design enables the Core practice to be met.

2.38   The team tested the Core practice through a review of the Terms of Reference of the Oversight Committee, Library User Group, Library Committee, Faculty Council and Staff Forum, minutes of Students Council, Library User Group, Senior Management Team, Staff Forum and Teaching Team meetings, Student Evaluations Report, support and student representative roles. The team also held meetings with the senior team, staff and students.

2.39   The team confirmed that at a formal level, the student representative body consists of two elected representatives from each cohort. The student representatives provide representation on academic and non-academic matters through soliciting views at the Student Council. Student Council meetings were found to take place on a termly basis with the membership comprising student representatives, the HEP, the Programme Administrator and Student Support Officer. The minutes of those meetings are discussed at Teaching Team meetings. However, the student representatives were also found to maintain regular contact outside of those formal meetings, with the HEP, MA Coordinator and the Student Support Officer.

2.40   The role of the student representative descriptor and the respective terms of reference also require attendance at the relevant committee meetings, for example, the Faculty Council and Library Committee. The team was told by the senior team and staff that the students attend the Library Committee, Faculty Council, SMT and can be invited to Teaching Team meetings. Conversely, students were not able to confirm this and were not aware of attending any of the meetings mentioned above.

2.41   The team learnt that the Faculty Council had been replaced by the Staff Forum. The terms of reference for the Faculty Council included student membership, while terms of reference of the Staff Forum only required staff attendance. The team was also not able to confirm that any students had attended the Staff Forum meetings. It is further not evident that students had attended SMT meetings.

2.42   The team further learnt that the Library Council had recently been renamed the Library User Group. The terms of reference for both the Library Council and Library User

Group include student representation as part of its members; however, it was not evident that students had attended any meetings of the latter. It was also less clear that the students would attend the AKU Oversight Committee with the omission found within its terms of reference.

2.43   The terms of reference for the Teaching Team meetings require student attendance by invitation only, and it was clear that a student was in attendance for one of those meetings.

2.44   However, it was confirmed that the students could have regular meetings with the HEP and other staff members. Students were able to provide several examples of changes that had been made in response to issues raised. For example, the issue of long sessions had been addressed, and students were now in receipt of writing skills following a request to be better prepared for writing essays.

2.45   Full and part-time student feedback is further collected through the student evaluation of teaching survey conducted at the end of each term. The summary analysis report of the survey is then discussed with the staff once the final grades have been submitted.

2.46   The team considered that the Student Council worked well, and formal feedback was also gained through student evaluation. On an informal basis, the students were able to meet regularly with the HEP and other colleagues if they had any concerns. However, the team concluded that the arrangements for actively engaging students in the quality of their learning experience lacked clarity and were inconsistently implemented. This, together with the resulting lack of significant student attendance at meetings, led the team to conclude that the Core practice is not met and that there is an associated moderate risk that should be addressed. The review team, therefore, **recommends** the Institute to produce and implement a plan to ensure the active engagement of students in the quality of their learning experience.

Core practice: Not met
Level of risk: Moderate

Core practice (Q6): The provider has fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeals which are accessible to all students.

Findings

2.47   The Institute aims to provide multiple informal and formal channels for students to make appeals and raise complaints, with some circumstances giving rise to complaints that are addressed through the Student Council and the termly meeting with the Director. Individually, each student has a Faculty Advisor to whom she or he can bring issues of concern. The students are made aware that from the beginning of the programme, they can approach the HEP or the MA Coordinator at any time, with those meeting taking place on a regular basis. The two MA programme administrators, the Assistant Registrar and the Senior Assistant operate an open-door policy for the students.

2.48   Formal complaints and appeals procedures are set out in the two handbooks given to the students at the beginning of the courses. Academic appeals can be made on the grounds that the student was the subject of bias or prejudice, or that proper procedures were not followed. If a student is dissatisfied with the outcome of an appeal using the Institute procedures, she or he may make a formal appeal to the University. These policies and procedures allow the Core practice to be met.

2.49   The team tested the Core practice by examining the complaint and appeals procedures, reviewing the student handbooks and the Student Written Submission, and analysing information on the Institute's website. The team also sent the Institute some initial written questions and held meetings with the senior team, staff and students.

2.50   Informal mechanisms are in place for both complaints and appeals with Faculty Advisers expected to meet the students once a term to advise on academic matters or personal issues. Although the role of the Faculty Advisor was clear to both staff and students, the experience could be variable and, in some instances, depended on the proactive nature of both staff and students (see also Q4.)

2.51   The team found formal complaints and appeals procedures are clearly accessible and can be found on the Institute's website and in the two handbooks given to students at the beginning of their course. Students have the right to appeal grades or awards on present grounds, and the Institute now has in place a formal procedure for appealing against admission decisions. The formal and informal process for complaints and appeals was clear to both staff and students met.

2.52   Both informal mechanisms and formal processes for appeals and complaints were found to be in place and clearly understood; therefore, the team considered the Core practice to be met and the level of risk low.

Core practice: Met
Level of risk: Low

Core practice (Q7): Where the provider offers research degrees, it delivers these in appropriate and supportive research environments.

Findings

2.53   The Institute does not offer research degrees; therefore, this Core practice is not applicable.

Core practice (Q8): Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the academic experience is high-quality irrespective of where or how courses are delivered and who delivers them.

Findings

2.54   The Institute, in partnership with AKU, is responsible for the management of its own higher education provision. The University has agreed to a Memorandum of Understanding with Columbia University. The partnership will enable the students to apply to complete the first year of Columbia University's MA in Islamic Studies and then enter the MA in Muslim Cultures at the Institute to complete their second year and the final semester of thesis research. Successful completion of the two parts results in a dual degree and an MA in Islamic Studies from Columbia University and an MA in Muslim Cultures from the Institute. There is no joint teaching involved, and neither institute provides validation or accreditation for the other. These arrangements allow the Core practice to be met.

2.55   The team tested the Core practice through a review of committee meetings, the Institute and Columbia University course mapping documents, Memorandum of Understanding agreement and meetings with the senior team.

2.56   The team found the dual degree partnership with Columbia University has been developed using the standard University protocol, with discussion and approval through the appropriate committee structure. Although the team found some ambiguity in the admissions within the Dual Award Memorandum of Understanding with Columbia, the team confirmed that this ambiguity would be removed and a process for admissions was being drafted. The programme will therefore only allow admission for students who had successfully completed their first year in Columbia and not allow students from the Institute to progress to Columbia, as described in the original Memorandum of Understanding.

2.57   The team confirmed that the Institute only currently had one partnership and that partnership was limited to a progression arrangement from Columbia University to the Institute; therefore, the Core practice was met and the level of risk was low.

Core practice: Met
Level of risk: Low

Core practice (Q9): The provider supports all students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes.

Findings

2.58   The Institute takes responsibility for the development of students throughout their studies with the main responsibility for the students' academic experience sitting with the HEP and the MA Coordinator. The Institute is a small provider that runs comparatively small class sizes and provides an Academic Advisor for each student. As an entity of AKU, the Institute is supported in the advancement of teaching and learning by the department of the Provost at AKU, which provides training to all teachers. The Institute has developed its own strategic plan which includes a commitment to the development of blended learning technologies to enhance students' learning opportunities.

2.59   Students have access to the Institute library and other libraries in the vicinity, including the British Library. As a small institution, the full range of academic and non-academic services is made available to students through collaboration with other organisations. Counselling and careers support are provided by the University of Westminster who submit a summary report at the end of each year on numbers using their services and common issues of concern. The arrangements for student support allow for the Core practice to be met.

2.60   The review team examined the arrangements and resources by reading documentation relating to policies and procedures, minutes of committees, student evaluation and feedback, and monitoring reports. The team also met management, academic and support staff and students.

2.61   The review team found that the current structures of management, academic support and the increased emphasis on employability provide opportunities for students to achieve their potential. Student performance is good with the Institute actively reviewing the student experience and seeking ways to strengthen academic and professional outcomes. The Institute ensures that all students have the opportunity to build the necessary language and academic skills required to succeed throughout their course, which is valuable for the international cohort of students from varied academic backgrounds. The Institute provides workshops on writing and plagiarism and AKU provides an online academic skills programme. The additional writing support is particularly important for a programme that requires a substantial piece of independent research and the writing up of a thesis in the final semester.

2.62   Students confirmed that they are designated an Academic Advisor whose primary role is to support them with their learning. The role of the Academic Advisor is defined in documentation, with meetings required once a term and a form to be completed at each meeting. While the Institute promotes the idea of a close relationship between student and the Academic Advisor, a number of students believed that some Academic Advisors were significantly more approachable than others and would subsequently receive significantly more attention. The Institute may want to consider ways to ensure that students receive comparable attention from their Academic Advisors.

2.63   With employability as a strategic goal, the Institute is building ways to strengthen professional outcomes and is providing students with a Leadership Development Programme which in future will be delivered in-house to ensure its appropriateness for the Institute's students. Internships are being considered and more emphasis is being placed on the tracking and networking of alumni for the purpose of socialising with existing students. The student learning experience is additionally enriched through the opportunity to engage in offshore language immersion courses which are currently available for Arabic and

Persian. Not all students take the courses, and some students believed that their value to language development was mixed. Nevertheless, the students who have engaged in the courses enjoyed the opportunity to study offshore and valued the cultural experience. At the time of the review, the Institute was considering the inclusion of additional languages.

2.64   The Student Submission, minutes from the Student Council and student surveys show that students are positive about how the Institute supports them academically and in their student life. Students emphasised that the Institute had been particularly supportive during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The Institute organised virtual events, such as quizzes, and provided regular institutional check-in points to ensure that communication channels remained open. Students also stated that financial assistance was available to them during lockdown for the purchase of hardware to support them to learn virtually. In addition, the counselling services provided by the University of Westminster were used more regularly than usual during lockdown and were viewed by the students as valuable.

2.65   The Institute is effective in enabling students to develop their academic and professional potential. The review team concludes that the Core practice is met, and the associated level of risk is low.

Core practice: Met
Level of risk: Low

Common practice (1): The provider reviews its Core practices for quality regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.

Findings

2.66   The Institute is developing its systems for the review and monitoring of programmes in conjunction with other entities in the University. This is still work in progress, but the Institute is confident that it is already gaining valuable information and feeding it back into the enhancement of learning opportunities for students.

2.67   Each term, two types of information are collected. In the first place, students complete anonymised evaluations on the courses they have taken. Secondly, teachers prepare course reports in which they reflect on the course, as well as individual issues that may have arisen. This information is consolidated into a report prepared by the MA Coordinator. This is then presented to the Academic Standards Committee. At the end of each academic year, an annual report is prepared and presented to the Academic Standards Committee before going to the Faculty Council.

2.68   The team heard that due to radical restructuring of the MA, most of the enhancement is currently about self-reflection. The team considered the Faculty Term Course Reports to be effective in their reporting on future improvements to the course and those reports feed into the MA Coordinator Term Report. The Academic Standards Committee, a subcommittee of Faculty Council, then takes responsibility for monitoring all programmes of study and associated regulations.

2.69   The Faculty Council was the forum in which all matters relating to the academic programmes and activities of the Institute would be deliberated. The Faculty Council has now been replaced with the Institute Faculty Forum, and the team was less clear that the new forum would continue to consider those matters.

2.70   The team found that mechanisms were in place to review programmes; however, as the Institute had recently changed its deliberative structure, the evidence to assure the team that regular review would continue to drive improvements and subsequent enhancements was not yet available.

Common practice (2): The provider's approach to managing quality takes account of external expertise.

Findings

2.72   AKU has developed a comprehensive set of academic policies and procedures which all academic entities are expected to follow. Their development has been the responsibility of the Provost and his colleagues and subject to scrutiny by the University's Board of Trustees, several of whom have experience as Presidents of major universities and colleges in North America. The University can demonstrate clear governance through its committee structure by the Board of Trustees who hold or have held significant roles in other higher education organisations or enterprises.

2.73   The MA offered at the Institute is of a comparable standard to master's degrees offered by UK universities as confirmed though the UK NARIC benchmarking analysis. Programme development and approval further includes obtaining advice from external reviewers. To ensure the MA is comparable with other UK master's programmes, the team confirmed the programmes had been benchmarked by UK NARIC in 2011.

2.74   The Institute has a cyclical review process for academic programmes, overseen by the Quality Assurance and Review Committee, which include self-assessment followed by a visit from a panel of external assessors. The team confirmed that policies and procedures are in place for the periodic review of the programme and the parameters for the role of the external peer team. The team review for the MA programme is expected to take place at the end of 2020.

2.75   Assignments, including the internal grades and comments, are made available to the external examiner. Final results for the year are reviewed at a meeting of the Examination Board at which the external examiner is present.

2.76   The Institute has set policies and procedures in place for the use of external examiners in ensuring the MA degree awarded meets the standards of comparable UK degrees.

2.77   Overall, the team concluded that external oversight by the Board of Trustees, external panel members during course development, external peers as part of the period review process and the use of external examiners as an integral part of student assessment ensures that full account is taken of external expertise.

Common practice (3): The provider engages students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience.

Findings

2.78   The Institute engages students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of the educational experience through a variety of mechanism. The Institute have elected student representative who attend termly Student Council meetings with the HEP, the Programme Administrator and Student Support Officer. Student representatives also attend the Institute Library Advisory Group and Faculty Council meetings, except for reserved items of business. The Student Experience Network within the Registry Office further distributes and collate end-of-term student surveys.

2.79   The role of the student representative descriptor clearly sets out the representative's role and a commitment to attend relevant committee meetings, for example, Faculty Council, Library Committee and Student Council. The team confirmed that those student representatives were in place. The Student Council as the main student representative forum comprises membership of the student representatives, the HEP and the Programme Administrator and Student Support Officer meetings and allow for discussion on academic and non-academic matters. The minutes from those meetings were found to be discussed at Teaching Team meetings as intended. The student representatives also maintain regular contact with the HEP, MA Coordinator and the Student Support Officer.

2.80   The weakness identified in the section on Core practice 5 equally apply when considering the extent to which the Institute actively engages students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience. The team heard during meetings with the senior team and staff that the students attend the Library Committee, Faculty Council, SMT and were invited to some Teaching Team meetings. Conversely, the students were not able to confirm attendance at any of those meetings.

2.81   The team learnt that various committees and councils had changed names, with the Library Council now called the Library User Group and the Faculty Council now replaced by the Staff Forum. The team found that although the newly named Library User Group included student membership, like its predecessor, there was no evidence of student attendance. The newly formed Staff Forum had very different terms of reference to its predecessor the Faculty Council, and only required staff attendance, with no evidence of students attending. It is further not evident that the students had attended SMT meetings as suggested. The Teaching Team meetings' terms of reference require student attendance by invitation only, and it was clear that a student had attended one of those meetings as specified.

2.82   Although limited engagement was found through the formal committee structure, the students whom the team met confirmed that they could have regular meetings with the Head of Educational Programmes and other staff members. Student feedback is further collected through the student evaluation of teaching survey conducted at the end of each term with the findings discussed with staff following the submission of the student grades.

2.83   The team recognises that students have some opportunities to engage in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience. However, the limited attendance of students through the formal committee structure and inconsistency in documenting the student representative contribution means that the Institute is unable to effectively demonstrate that students are actively engaged or identify the impact of their contribution (see also Core practice 5 and recommendation).

The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.84   In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published Handbook. Seven of the eight applicable Core practices are met with low levels of risk. Core practice 5 (The provider actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience) is not met, with a moderate level of risk.

2.85   The review team makes one recommendation in this section relating to the quality of student learning opportunities, and this recommends the Institute to produce and implement a plan to ensure the active engagement of students in the quality of their learning experience. The moderate risk associated with the circumstances leading to this recommendation is indicative of an aspect of quality assurance processes which, while broadly adequate, have some shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which they are applied.

2.86   The review team concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at the provider meets UK expectations.

Glossary

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer Glossary on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/glossary.

Academic standards
The standards set by **degree-awarding bodies** for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

Award
A qualification, or academic credit, conferred in formal recognition that a student has achieved the intended **learning outcomes** and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set for a **programme** or unit of study.

Awarding organisation
An organisation authorised to award a particular qualification; an organisation recognised by Ofqual to award Ofqual-regulated qualifications.

Blended learning
Learning delivered by a number of different methods, usually including face-to-face and e-learning (see **technology enhanced or enabled learning**).

Common practices
Practices included in the UK Quality Code that will be applied by providers in line with their missions, their regulatory context and the needs of their students. These are practices common to the underpinning of quality in all UK providers but are not regulatory requirements for providers in England (registered with the Office for Students).

Core practices
Practices included in the UK Quality Code that must be demonstrated by all UK higher education providers as part of assuring their standards and quality.

Credit(s)
A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education **programmes of study**, expressed as numbers of credits at a specific level.

Degree-awarding body
A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).

Distance learning
A course of study that does not involve face-to-face contact between students and tutors but instead uses technology such as the internet, intranets, broadcast media, CD-ROM and video, or traditional methods of correspondence - learning 'at a distance'. See also **blended learning**.

Dual award or double award
The granting of separate awards (and certificates) for the same **programme** by two **degree-awarding bodies** who have jointly delivered the programme of study leading to them. See also **multiple award**.

e-learning
See technology enhanced or enabled learning.

Expectations
Statements in the **Quality Code** which clearly and succinctly express the outcomes providers should achieve in setting and maintaining the standards of their awards, and for managing the quality of their provision.

Flexible and distributed learning
A programme or module that does not require the student to attend classes or events at particular times and locations. See also **distance learning**.

Framework
A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

Framework for higher education qualifications
A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS).

Good practice
A process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to a higher education provider's management of academic standards and the quality of its educational provision. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

Learning opportunities
The provision made for students' learning, including planned study, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, and resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios).

Learning outcomes
What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

Multiple awards
An arrangement where three or more **degree-awarding bodies** together provide a single jointly delivered **programme** (or programmes) leading to a separate **award** (and separate certification) of each awarding body. The arrangement is the same as for **dual/double awards**, but with three or more awarding bodies being involved.

Operational definition
A formal definition of a term, establishing exactly what QAA means when using it in reviews and reports.

Programme (of study)
An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

Programme specifications
Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of programmes of study, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

Quality Code
Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of **reference points** for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the **Expectations** (and associated, applicable, Core and Common Practices) that providers are required to meet.

Reference points
Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured.

Self-evaluation document
A report submitted by a higher education provider, assessing its own performance, to be used as evidence in a QAA review.

Subject Benchmark Statement
A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or **e-learning**)
Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

Threshold academic standard
The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic **award**. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national **frameworks** and **Subject Benchmark Statements**.

Virtual learning environment (VLE)
An intranet or password-only interactive website (also referred to as a platform or user interface) giving access to **learning opportunities** electronically. These might include such resources as course handbooks, information and reading lists; blogs, message boards and forums; recorded lectures; and/or facilities for online seminars (webinars).

Widening participation
Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.