



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 2022

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 (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (the Institute) is making acceptable progress since the [October 2021 desk-based analysis](#).

Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC; the Institute) was established in 2002 as part of the Aga Khan University (AKU), a component of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). It is active in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and the United Kingdom.

3 There are currently 29 students on the MA Muslim Cultures programme of whom two are studying part-time. This is made up of 14 enrolled in 2021 and 15 enrolled in 2022. 10 students are undertaking the programme as part of a dual degree programme with Columbia University in the United States. There are 12 full-time and three part-time staff.

4 There have been no material changes since the last review.

Findings from the monitoring visit

5 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, documentation relating to annual monitoring and the external examiner's report. Meetings were held online with students, senior management, teaching and administrative support staff. It was concluded that AKU-ISMC continues to make acceptable progress in addressing the single recommendation it received following the 2020 Higher Education Review.

6 This was the second annual monitoring after the full Higher Education Review in October 2020. At that review, AKU-ISMC was recommended to: 'Produce and implement a plan to ensure the active engagement of students in the quality of their learning experience'. The Institute developed an action plan to address the recommendation and the subsequent annual monitoring report concluded that it had made progress in addressing this.

7 The Student Council meets once per term and reports to the Education Committee. During academic session 2021-22 there were four student representatives on the Student Council - two for each year cohort. To that, the Institute has now added a part-time student, so that all routes through the programme are represented. There is also a student representative on the Education Committee. All students are invited to meetings of the Staff Forum. Students can also be invited to attend meetings of the Senior Management

Team when there are relevant items on the agenda. However, this has not yet taken place, as no student matters have been discussed in any meeting of this committee since October 2021. The impact of the changes made has not yet been formally evaluated. The minutes of the Student Council indicate that a wide range of issues are discussed, with matters being referred to the Education Committee where appropriate. Students confirmed that meetings are effective and that staff were open to discussion and responsive to issues they raised. The Aga Khan University is currently preparing for its forthcoming 40th anniversary and student representatives from all of the Aga Khan University centres, including AKU-ISMC, are members of the 40th Year Celebration Planning Committee.

8 The Institute has several internal quality monitoring processes that identify targets for improvement although these are not consolidated into an internal action plan. At the end of each module, students complete anonymised online evaluations and module organisers complete course reports. These have previously been consolidated into an MA Coordinator's Report. Due to technical issues in 2021-22, response rates to the student evaluations were low. The role of MA Coordinator has been discontinued, with its duties being taken up by the Head of Education and Manager of Education with issues considered by the Senior Management Team where necessary. Comments on three modules have been incorporated into the annual programme monitoring report. The latter also includes some reflective commentary on the programme and the challenges it faces but makes no reference to how any issues identified in the previous report were addressed. There is no standard template for annual monitoring reports which potentially affects consistency of reporting and monitoring.

9 The external examiner's report for 2021-22 includes several suggestions for improving assessment processes. These, and any actions arising from them, are not mentioned in the annual programme monitoring report or the minutes of the Education Committee at which the external examiner's report was discussed. The Team was informed that the external examiner's report and the annual programmed monitoring reports would be considered by the Senior Management Team as part of the Annual Review later in this academic year. The Institute may want to review the operation and effectiveness of its internal monitoring systems, so that targets for improvement can be more effectively identified, monitored and addressed.

10 The University undertakes periodic reviews of its programmes on a five-year cycle. The process utilises external expertise and is overseen by the University's Quality of Teaching and Learning Network. The review of the MA was scheduled to take place in 2021 but was delayed due to the pandemic. It is now scheduled to take place in spring 2023.

11 As part of the programme, students are required to complete two language modules, in either Persian or Arabic. These count towards the final award but at present are not externally benchmarked or overseen by an external examiner. These modules are not described on the Institute website; although the content and expectations of these modules is discussed with applicants at the interview stage, the students met commented that they were unclear about the level at which they would be studying the language prior to arriving at the Institute. The varying language backgrounds of students has also created some practical difficulties for teaching and assessment. Internal examiners reported that they take this into account when marking presentations and essays but not examinations, which are marked anonymously. The Institute may want to review these modules so that they meet the expectations of the Quality Code for Higher Education.

12 The duration of the MA programme is being extended from three to four semesters. This will allow students access to a wider choice of elective modules and for their teaching and learning to be less intensive. It will also better align the Institute's academic calendar with that of the dual degree programme at Columbia University. The proposal has been

discussed with staff, students and the Senior Management Team. It is currently being further developed prior to approval by the University Academic Council. It is anticipated that recruitment will commence in autumn 2023 with the revised programme starting in autumn 2024.

13 The Institute has recently gained approval to offer two PhD programmes in history and political science. Development commenced in 2018 and involved consultation with students, academic staff, the University Registrar's Office, the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, the International Advisory Committee of the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, and the UK Board of Trustees of AKU. The proposals were approved by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan in August 2022 and it is anticipated that the first student intake will be in autumn 2023. The Institute has not previously offered programmes at this level and it may wish to consider this development further in its 2023 annual monitoring return.

14 Staff training activities continued during the academic session 2021-22, including sessions on inclusion and diversity, and safeguarding - the latter being delivered by an external specialist. New staff are also supported through the process of becoming a member of the Higher Education Academy. The students the review team met reported that they particularly enjoyed the relaxed and supportive atmosphere within the Institute and the opportunities the programme created for them to learn from students from other cultural backgrounds. Teaching staff are approachable and readily respond to their queries. They are also assigned a named academic adviser whom they are required to meet at least once a term and who provides academic and pastoral support.

15 Performance data indicates that retention and progression levels remain high. All nine students (100%) registered in autumn 2019 obtained MA degrees in 2021. Due to the pandemic, recruitment in 2020 was delayed until April 2021. Seven students registered and, of these, five completed the degree in May 2022. Two students delayed completion, due to personal and health problems, but are continuing on the programme. The current student cohort comprises 15 students registered in autumn 2021 (including two on the dual degree) scheduled to complete in December 2022, 14 students registered in 2021 (including seven on the dual degree) due to complete in December 2022, and two part-time students.

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

16 The Institute is required to follow the academic policies and regulations of the University. However, it uses the Quality Code for Higher Education and procedures adopted in other UK universities for guidance. At its last full Higher Education Review (October 2020), the Institute met all but one Core practice of the Quality Code. The Action Plan it developed in response to the review recommendation is overseen by the Education Committee and Senior Management Team and is available for consideration by students at the Student Council. As noted in paragraph 6, continuing progress is being made in addressing actions. The external examiner's report for 2021-22 confirms that the academic standards set were appropriate for a master's-level qualification, that assessment processes were sound and fairly conducted, and that student performance was similar to that in other UK institutions.

Background to the monitoring visit

17 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.

18 The monitoring visit was carried out by David Wright, Reviewer, and Millard Parkinson, QAA Officer, on 9 November 2022.

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