



Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of the Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, June 2017

Section 1: Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review panel concludes that the Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (the Institute) has made acceptable progress with implementing the action plan from the June 2016 [Higher Education Review \(Foreign Providers\)](#).

Section 2: Changes since the last QAA review

2 The Institute confirmed there had been no changes to ownership, programme provision or overall student numbers since the 2016 review. The Institute appointed a new Director, competitively recruited from Sweden, who took up post in early 2017, having additionally appointed in October 2016 a Language Coordinator. Changes in senior staffing responsibilities have resulted from these appointments, together with the expected recruitment in October 2017 of a Head of Educational Programmes, who will also assume responsibility for quality assurance and the coordination of the MA Programme. Additionally, the Institute's organisational chart identifies future positions, an Associate Director and a Head of Research. Existing staff may be given these titles. Student numbers remain the same, at 23 in 2016-17.

3 During the academic year 2016-17, the Aga Khan University's (AKU) Academic Development Committee visited the Institute to review provision and advise the Director accordingly, while a broader AKU audit of the Institute's academic, financial and other procedures is in progress. The Institute is continuing the discussions, noted in the 2016 review report, with an appropriate UK university to establish a partnership to validate the long-planned one-year master's programme, which will be offered in parallel with the existing two-year AKU programme. The Institute's anticipated migration to a purpose-built building in the London King's Cross area is now expected in May 2018. These developments, coupled with the appointment of a new Director and the imminent departure of the previous Director, who has retained responsibility as the Head of Educational Programmes on an interim basis, herald the onset of a developmental phase in the Institute's future.

Section 3: Findings from the monitoring visit

4 The Institute has continued to build-on those areas of good practice identified in the 2016 review report. The August pre-sessional information includes webinars introducing the study of Arabic or Persian and providing background to the methodologies employed more generally in the MA programme, although their voluntary nature and requirement for a suitable internet connection has led to only a partial take-up. The Institute has extended the time-frame for the various pre-departure activities, as not all students had opportunities to participate in these - consequent to the Institute's anticipated intake of 16 students. Students reported positive experiences of these pre-entry activities and found them helpful in

appreciating more fully the scope of the programme and its individual courses. The Institute has developed good practice regarding feedback from students. This is gathered through evaluations at the end of a course and through formal and informal meeting. The information is consolidated by the MA Coordinator and discussed at the Faculty Council.

5 The Institute reported that the recommendations from the 2016 review were led by the then Director following discussions with the Institute's Faculty Council. The panel learned that AKU had delayed and then abandoned the implementation of cross-campus grade descriptors, and was content for these to be developed locally. Accordingly, the Institute has formally adopted its original marking scheme and interim grade descriptors, developed from the Institute's own dissertation marking guide, for use across the MA programme. Students appreciated and understood these, confirmed their consistent application, and welcomed in particular the helpful glossary of terms for 'Grade Descriptors', available on the virtual learning environment.

6 The 2016 external examiner's report was received and discussed at the November 2017 meeting of the Faculty Council, but it was not shared with students as the names of individual candidates were included in the report. The external examiner has been requested not to include candidates' names in future reports so that they can be shared with students in ways that the Institute is currently considering.

7 Staff and students reported a variety of informal routes to complaint resolution. In addition, the Institute has now developed a formal complaints policy, approved at its Academic Standards Committee in March 2017. This is included in the student handbook.

8 Following a proposal and suggested input from the Institute, the AKU's Academic Council approved in September 2016 a formal Admissions Appeals Policy for cross-university adoption. Students joining the Institute in autumn 2016 confirmed their awareness of this Policy.

9 The Institute offers new staff an induction into the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code), although, as no new staff other than the Director have joined the Institute since the 2016 review, there have been no such induction sessions during the last year. The Institute has no formal plans for exploring in greater depth with staff key sections of the Quality Code, although it consulted it in the drafting of the Complaints and Admissions Appeals policies. Staff are trained in the application of the Quality Code. The Institute does intend to involve staff more directly with the use of the Quality Code as it considers necessary, and will also continue to ensure that its MA programme and operations broadly continue to meet the Code's Expectations.

10 The Admissions Policy is available on the Institute's website. Formal entry requirements are the possession of a first degree from a recognised institution and a demonstrable interest in the subjects within the MA curriculum, together with a minimum IELTS score of 6.5. Additional checks on English Language skills are provided through the compulsory essay and interview. Particular efforts are made to encourage applicants from underprivileged areas such as Central Asia, Syria and the mountain areas of northern Pakistan. The percentage of students from these areas is disproportionately high. Following an initial screening of applications, remaining candidates are invited for an interview of about 30 minutes with three or four staff, before which they are required to submit a short essay that forms a key element of the interview. The Admissions Committee develops scores based on the original application, the essay and the interview, with formal recommendations considered by AKU's Board of Graduate Studies. This Board has on occasion rejected only those marginal candidates at the lower end of the Institute's scores. The number of places offered is an Institute decision relating primarily to space and to tutor

availability. Students were content with the admissions arrangements, which they found to be accurately described, transparent and consistent.

11 The Institute continues to deploy a wide range of annual quality monitoring tools. Course reports are prepared by faculty in the form of comments responding to an Institute questionnaire covering the quality of staff induction, syllabus coverage, teaching, learning and assessment methods, major issues, and recommendations for improvement. Students complete questionnaires on both their courses and on the faculty/instructors. However, as AKU's recently adopted centralised systems of collecting student responses are continuing to lead to delays in the transmission of outcomes to the Institute, the latter has introduced local surveys that lead to immediate feedback to Institute staff on both the course and the instructor. The Institute consolidates the information from the various surveys into termly and annual reports, which are discussed at the Faculty Council, attended by students. Discussions on these reports have led to recent programme changes that, following discussions at the Faculty Annual Retreat and Faculty Council, were presented to AKU's Board of Graduate Studies. These changes, such as making language study optional in the second year and the introduction of an independent study option, were welcomed by students. The annual monitoring thus informs discussions on changes to the programme for the following year.

12 As each student cohort is typically about 12-14 in number, students quickly become familiar with academic and other support arrangements, and with Institute staff, faculty and students. Two student representatives serve termly, attending meetings of the Faculty Council and Student Council, which students found helpful, referring in particular to positive outcomes on library and security matters that they had raised. In practice, each student has the opportunity to be a student representative over the two-year programme; this was welcomed by students as a way to contribute to the enhancement of the student experience and to develop their interpersonal and representational skills. The Institute continues to gather student feedback through anonymous post-course student evaluations, feedback from student meetings and informal student feedback.

Section 4: Progress in working with the relevant external reference points relating to academic standards and quality for higher education

13 The Institute takes account of the Quality Code in developing policies and procedures, such as the recently approved Complaints and Admissions Appeals policies. Additionally, the Language Coordinator is undertaking a benchmarking exercise of the Institute's language courses against external standards, especially the Common European Framework of Reference. Although this exercise has not progressed as quickly as intended, it has informed the work of the recently established Language Policy Thinking Group, established to review the Institute's approach to language teaching and the place of languages in the curriculum. AKU has recently become a strategic partner with the Higher Education Academy (HEA), enabling it to offer accredited courses as a route in assisting staff seeking HEA Fellowship, and to adhere to its policy of ensuring that all its teachers will have higher education teaching recognition. Additionally, the Institute reported that it funded staff attending teaching qualification courses, as well as offering a range of in-house staff training sessions.

Section 5: 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 Mr Philip Markey, QAA Officer, and Professor Peter Bush, review panel member, on 20 June 2017.

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