



# 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 2018

## 1 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 continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the previous [Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight monitoring visit](#) in June 2017.

## 2 Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 The Institute confirmed there has been no change to ownership or programme provision since the 2017 review. Student numbers remain at a similar level with 22 students on the two-year MA in Muslim Cultures. The Head of Educational Programmes (HEP) retired in December 2017; a new HEP has been appointed and will join the Institute in September 2018. The Institute has made progress with discussions with SOAS University of London, noted in both the 2016 and the 2017 review reports, to establish a partnership to validate a one-year master's programme starting in 2020. Discussions are also underway with Columbia University to offer a two-year dual award with the Aga Khan University (AKU). The Institute's relocation to a newly constructed building in the London King's Cross area will be completed in July 2018.

## 3 Findings from the monitoring visit

3 The Institute has continued to make progress with monitoring, reviewing and enhancing its provision following the review of 2016. Good practice identified in respect of provision of information to students continues to be augmented. Practice regarding responses to student feedback remains sound but is not being further enhanced. The Institute continues to make acceptable progress with addressing recommendations in respect of the use of grade descriptors, the availability of the external examiner's reports, the establishment of policies for handling student complaints, and for appeals against admissions decisions policy, and engagement with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code). The Institute has secure processes for the implementation of its admissions policy, for internal monitoring of its provision and for engagement with its students.

4 The Institute continues to augment the information provided to students during their transition into the programme. Pre-session events, including pre-reading, webinars and online discussion, enable students to take part at a distance and to help them decide whether to study Arabic or Persian. Students indicated that this was helpful in supporting them in the conversion to master's level study given the wide range of prior knowledge of incoming students. The online prospectus contains information about the programme structure, fees and admissions details; students were all in agreement that this was comprehensive and informative. Students are sent a pre-session letter that informs them

about the choice of languages to study and informs them of introductory texts that are located on the virtual learning environment (VLE), together with a pre-arrival handbook that includes valuable information about living and studying in the UK.

5 It is not clear what action has been taken in relation to feedback from students through their evaluation of courses, as the most recent action plan indicates that earlier comments misunderstood the term feedback. It was taken to mean feedback to students in relation to their assessed work, rather than feedback from students. Students are reminded by email of the need to complete evaluations. However, fewer than 50 per cent of both the first and second-year groups have completed the student evaluation of teaching surveys. Students report that the timing of evaluations clashes with assessment hand-in dates, making it difficult for them to prioritise their response. Some students commented that the limitation of one hundred words in the open comment sections of evaluation forms led to respondents running out of space to say all that they wished; this then results in non-submission of the questionnaire. There was a conflict between the students' perception and that of the faculty who felt that the poor response rate was due to the late distribution of the evaluation forms to students. The team were told that the AKU electronic system only permits evaluation forms to be circulated once the assessments have been submitted. Additionally, the Institute obtains students' views about its provision through student representation on the Student Council, which is effective in enabling senior managers to hear and respond to matters raised by students. Students confirmed that they are aware of the Student Council and have access to its minutes through the VLE. Although the Institute's practices in respect of student engagement remain sound, they have not enhanced the good practice previously identified.

6 As reported in the last annual monitoring report in 2017, AKU has abandoned the implementation of uniform grade descriptors across all of its campuses worldwide, and the Institute now uses its own scheme. This is based on descriptors used in related subject areas in UK universities. The external examiner's report indicates that faculty would like to improve the marking criteria document, because in some instances the criteria are not clear and are open to interpretation, leading first and second markers of the dissertation to have difficulty in agreeing on grades. Grade descriptors are published to the staff and students, and students found them helpful in setting their expectations and relating their feedback to the grade awarded. The Institute acknowledged that the implementation of grade descriptors needs further attention and affirmed that once the new HEP is in post the issue will be revisited.

7 The external examiner's report is on the agenda for the Student Council and both faculty and students confirmed that it was discussed, although there is no reference in the minutes. Student Council agendas and minutes are available on the VLE. Although previous external examiners' reports have not been shared with students, this year staff and students also indicated that all students had received an email attaching the report.

8 Students and faculty are aware of the Student Complaints Policy which is published in the Student Handbook and is now also shared with students on the VLE. Students are also familiar with the informal routes for complaint resolution prior to the formal procedures within the Policy.

9 The Institute has introduced an Admissions Appeals Policy. Students whose applications for admission are unsuccessful are informed by email, with reference to the Admissions Policy. They are advised of how they might strengthen their application, should they wish to apply in the next year and are provided with the link to the Admissions Appeals Policy. Details of the Admissions Appeals Policy can be found on the application section of the UK website of AKU. There have been no appeals to date.

10 The Institute has begun to develop an increased level of awareness of the Quality Code on the part of its teaching staff. Eleven faculty undertook training on the Quality Code in June 2017. Professional/administrative staff were able to describe the workshops but faculty were not able to explain how this knowledge had been used, although developments of the new programmes are at an early stage. Ten faculty took part in a workshop on the UK model of an MA and how it aligns with the Quality Code and *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) in February 2018. This workshop is informing development of the new course. Fifteen faculty attended a learning outcomes workshop and attendees were able to describe how this was immediately applicable in terms of improving alignment of aims, outcomes and assessment in current courses.

11 Recruitment has been undertaken via a number of virtual open days targeted at applicants from different countries, enabling potential applicants to ask questions of senior staff at the Institute. The Institute has a selection panel to determine which applicants should move forward to interview, this comprises the HEP and two faculty members; the panel rates applications on a criterion referenced scale from one to four, judging each student's suitability for, and understanding of, the programme and their research potential. The Institute has replaced the previous written paper, selected from a number of options, with a request for the applicant to prepare by reading two papers from which questions are posed in the interview. The Institute considers this to provide a better reflection of the activities that students will undertake during the programme. Interviews are held either face to face or by Skype and the interviewers complete an interview form; all interview panels comprise the HEP and one other member of faculty. The inclusion of the HEP in all interviews assures consistency. A report on admissions is presented to the Registrar's Working Group at regular stages. The Registrar checks the authenticity of qualifications offered by applications using UK NARIC. The Institute revised the admissions process for 2018 intake to check a student's identity by video link prior to interview at distance.

12 Course evaluation is carried out using a standard course report template and the Annual Report for programme evaluation is arranged using standardised headings; both include considerable critical analysis of the course or programme. While the Annual Report contains no presentation or analysis of students' performance on different courses nor any comparison of data from year to year, the team heard that the Academic Standards Committee considers student profiles, grades and comparison of performance within and across courses. There was no mention of the external examiner's report within the last annual report. This was explained as an oversight by the management team. AKU's Quality Assurance Review Committee (QARC) has postponed the planned 2018 internal review in light of the monitoring visit. The next internal review will be a curriculum review in 2019 as part of the QARC five-year plan. This will be followed by a self-assessment report in quarter four 2020, and a peer review report in quarter three 2021.

13 All students receive a briefing on the role of the class representative; this is an innovative approach as it informs all students, including potential representatives, about the role. Interested students then put themselves forward by email and a poll is held to elect two student representatives per cohort. The agenda and the minutes of student council meetings are accessible to all students via the VLE. Minutes of the meeting are taken by one of the student representatives. Representatives confirmed that they feel adequately equipped for the role and demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the AKU regulations. Students expressed the view that the size of the cohort is such that it is easy for all students to be engaged, nevertheless the role of class representative is well defined and well used.

14 The Institute's data on student achievement shows that of the 13 students enrolled in 2015, one discontinued while the remaining 12 successfully completed the programme. All 11 students who enrolled in 2016 continue on the programme and are expected to

complete in November 2018; of the 12 students who enrolled in 2017, one has discontinued and 11 are continuing.

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

15 The Institute is working closely with SOAS University of London with the intention of gaining approval for a one year master's course commencing in 2020; a retreat to discuss the design of such a programme was held in September 2017. Work has also begun with Columbia University on a two-year dual award with the AKU. Faculty have taken part in staff development sessions on a number of aspects of course development and teaching and learning in 2017 and in 2018: the Quality Code, UK model of master's provision, webinar on experiential learning, learning outcomes, programme design focusing on relationship of overall programme aims with core modules, teaching and learning conferences. AKU is a strategic partner of the Higher Education Academy (HEA). In May 2018 AKU was accredited for its CPD programme by HEA (now part of Advance HE) and a workshop will be held in London in June 2018. It is anticipated that seven Institute faculty will spend three days at the first workshop; they will supported to develop their claims for HEA fellowship. The Institute has a wide range of contacts with external bodies, enabling it to make use of external reference points suited to maintaining the currency of its provision.

#### **5 Background to the monitoring visit**

16 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.

17 The monitoring visit was carried out by Dr Stephen Ryrle, QAA Officer, and Dr Jenny Gilbert, review panel member on 13 June 2018.

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