



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

June 2016

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## 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 The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations. The review took place from 15 to 16 June 2016 and was conducted by a team of two reviewers, as follows:

- Emeritus Professor Peter Bush
- Emeritus Professor Diane Meehan.

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)<sup>1</sup> 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, the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - the quality of student learning opportunities
  - the information provided about higher education provision
  - the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- provides a commentary on academic standards
- provides a commentary on the selected theme
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 6.

In reviewing The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland.

The [themes](#) for the academic year 2015-16 are Student Employability and Digital Literacy,<sup>2</sup> and the provider is required to select, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.<sup>3</sup> A dedicated section explains the method for [Higher Education Review \(Foreign Providers\)](#)<sup>4</sup> and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents. For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code).

<sup>2</sup> Higher Education Review themes:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2859](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2859).

<sup>3</sup> QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us).

<sup>4</sup> Higher Education Review web pages:  
[Higher Education Review \(Foreign Providers\) handbook](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2859).

## Key findings

### QAA's judgements about The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations.

- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement 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.

## Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice** at The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations.

- The extensive range of information provided for students to support their transition into the Institute (Expectation B4).
- The thorough consideration of feedback from students which impacts positively on their learning experience (Expectation B5).

## Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations.

By October 2016:

- adopt and implement the grade descriptors approved by the University (Expectation B6)
- ensure that all staff and students have access to the external examiner's report and the Institute's response to it (Expectation B7)
- develop and implement a formal student complaints policy and procedure (Expectation B9).

By December 2016:

- develop and implement a formal appeals policy for admissions decisions (Expectation B2).

By June 2017:

- support staff to engage more fully with the UK Quality Code (Academic Standards).

## Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team did not **affirm** any actions that The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations is already taking to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to its students.

### Theme: Student Employability

The Institute is aware that although the MA programme is not primarily designed as a vocational programme, alumni expect to use their education to advance their careers. Therefore, there are a number of measures in place to prepare students for the work environment, although both the Institute and its students feel it could do more in this regard. The Institute noted that it would be revising its approach in the future and would embed employability into the MA programme rather than it being an add-on. The MA programme facilitates the development of generic skills in processing and analysing information, research skills and language skills as well as specialist knowledge.

In addition, students take a leadership course as part of the programme which includes sessions on CV preparation and preparing proposals for admission to doctoral programmes. The Institute also has an agreement with the University of Westminster allowing students access to its Careers Service, although students do not tend to use it extensively. Therefore, the Institute has developed a series of in-house careers sessions. Job opportunities are shared with alumni and current students. The Institute is considering sponsoring students on internships outside the UK using the University's networks.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Higher Education Review](#).

## About The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations

The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (the Institute), a private company limited by guarantee, was established in 2002 as an integral part of the Aga Khan University (AKU) which was founded in 1983. AKU is 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. AKU's vision is to be an autonomous, international institution of distinction, primarily serving the developing world and Muslim societies in innovative and enduring ways. Its vision is to be committed to the development of human capacities through the discovery and dissemination of knowledge, and application through service. It seeks to prepare individuals for constructive and exemplary leadership roles, and shaping public and private policies, through strength in research and excellence in education, all dedicated to providing meaningful contributions to society.

The Institute currently has 25 full-time master's students reading for the two-year MA in Muslim Cultures. The degree is awarded under the authority of the University's Pakistan charter. Besides a core group of full-time academic staff, the Institute also has a group of longstanding part-time language teachers and adjunct faculty, mainly drawn from other universities in the London area.

The Institute was subject to a QAA Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight review in June 2012. This had successful outcomes, with Confidence and Reliance judgements, three features of good practice, and two desirable recommendations. The Institute has built on the areas of good practice, and has satisfactorily addressed the two recommendations, and this was reflected in its two subsequent annual monitoring visits, both of which resulted in the Institute making 'commendable' progress.

While there have been no major changes since the 2012 review, the Institute has been holding discussions with a UK university to establish a validation partnership for a new one-year master's programme to sit alongside the existing programme. In addition, construction is about to commence on a new academic building at King's Cross, London which is due to be completed in 2018. The Director is also due to retire later this year.

The Institute cites as its main challenges: the development of the new MA programme and the associated need to attract a more diverse student body, including from Europe and North America; and providing a full range of higher education academic services and committees within such a small institution.

## **Explanation of the findings about The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations**

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#) is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.

## 1    **Commentary: Academic standards**

### **Findings**

#### **Question A: How effectively does the Institute fulfil its responsibilities for the management of academic standards?**

1.1    Responsibility for programme development and approval is shared by the Aga Khan University (AKU) and the Institute, as are responsibilities for the recruitment and admission of students and the selection of academic staff. The Institute is primarily responsible for the setting, marking and feedback on assessments, responses to external examiner reports, and student engagement. Annual monitoring is the Institute's responsibility with periodic review being primarily the responsibility of AKU.

1.2    As an entity of AKU, the Institute effectively takes account of a suite of academic policies which are discussed by the University's Board of Undergraduate Studies before being approved by its Academic Council (AC), including policies and regulations on programme grading, assessment of learning outcomes, credit and qualifications frameworks, external examiners, student academic integrity, and the teaching and learning framework. These apply in principle across all the University's entities worldwide and are generally prepared within the Registrar's or Provost's offices, put out for consultation, and discussed at the Board of Graduate Studies (BGS) prior to approval by the AC.

1.3    The Institute is adequately represented on all relevant University committees including BGS, which has oversight of all graduate programmes, AC which is the senior academic body within the University, and the Quality Assurance Review Committee (QARC). The Institute's Director may also be invited to meetings of the Board of Trustees (BoT). Within the Institute, the two key committees are the Faculty Council (FC) and the Academic Standards Committee (ASC), both of which are chaired by the Institute's Director.

1.4    The University's Academic Quality Framework (AQF), approved by AC in March 2015, notes that the 'regulatory bodies in the countries in which Aga Khan University (AKU) operates have various models for quality assurance and improvement'. This has led to a variety of different review processes which has led the AQF to note that the University 'must adopt a consistent and structured approach to quality assurance and improvement'. The AQF also outlines detailed arrangements for the periodic review of the University's programmes, of which external input and consideration of annual self-monitoring reports are key elements. The University has established a periodic review schedule over a five-yearly cycle. Within this new framework, the team was informed that the review of the Institute's MA programme would take place in late 2016. Subsequently, the team was informed that it would not take place until 2018, the year initially allocated in the AQF. The Institute has confirmed that its preparatory work for this review is already in progress.

1.5    The Institute can determine minor modifications to individual modules, reporting such changes to the University Registrar. Changes are then reported to the University's BGS, the minutes of which are received by AC. Major modifications are presented for discussion and decision to the BGS and then to AC. The definitive record of the current degree structure is maintained electronically on the University's student and academic administrative systems. Senior staff met by the team confirmed their understanding of the AQF and, together with academic colleagues, demonstrated their awareness of the distinction between minor and major changes. They confirmed that changes to course content and assessment arrangements were considered initially by the Institute's ASC, often by circulation of papers and comment, and formally reported to the FC at the Institute. Any major changes to programme structure or title would be submitted via the FC to AKU's BGS.

### **Question B: How effectively are external reference points used in the management of academic standards?**

1.6 The AQF draws on a number of international reference points with specific policies having had input from international advisers from the UK and North America, and is overseen by senior colleagues, some of whom have had senior experience with North American and UK universities. The Institute uses AKU's qualifications framework which is modelled on the UK's and has a clear hierarchy of levels and descriptors, with titles of qualifications appropriately assigned. It also states the intellectual requirements of a two-year master's degree. The framework was approved by AC in 2014. The initial draft of the AKU framework was written by the Institute's current Director and broadly reflects *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). This is supported by the Credit Framework and the Teaching and Learning Framework, with the latter setting out the competencies expected of all AKU (graduate) programmes.

1.7 The Institute has been accredited by the British Accreditation Council since 2008. The most recent interim inspection took place in November 2014 and the Institute remains accredited until August 2016. As part of its preparation in 2011 for the following year's QAA Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight (RSEO) review, the Institute commissioned UK NARIC to review the MA programme and benchmark it against UK master's degrees. The report confirmed that the programme is comparable to master's degree standards in the UK. The Institute monitored the progress of its own action plan against NARIC's enhancement recommendations.

1.8 While the Institute has 'taken note' of the various QAA Subject Benchmark Statements, particularly those relating to Area Studies and to Languages, Cultures and Societies, it has concluded that these focus on undergraduate programmes and that none of the current Statements encompass the academic scope of its MA programme. However, the Faculty Handbook alerts teaching staff to the 2010 QAA Master's Degree Characteristics Statement, and staff met by the team confirmed their consideration of the 2015 revised version. In addition, the Institute ran an in-house workshop session in May 2014 for faculty and visiting lecturers that explained each section of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) in some detail, and two further sessions had been arranged since November 2015. Despite these initiatives, the team found that faculty's awareness of the Quality Code was limited and, although the Institute has embedded it into its practices, it acknowledged that mapping of the Quality Code could be fuller and more explicit. Therefore, the review team **recommends** that, by June 2017, the Institute supports staff to engage more fully with the Quality Code.

### **Question C: How effectively does the Institute use external scrutiny of assessment processes to assure academic standards?**

1.9 The University revised its policy on external examiners in 2016. The roles and responsibilities in the draft procedures generally mirror those that the Institute had already adopted and which it developed in line with UK practice in this area. The role of the external examiner as described in AKU's policy, the more detailed person specification developed by the Institute and the Institute's use of its external examiner are broadly effective, although the Institute recognises the need for some enhancement in this area (see also Expectation B7).

## The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of academic partners

### Summary of findings

1.10 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 found the Institute assiduous in managing the responsibilities delegated to it by the Aga Khan University for maintaining academic standards. The team made a recommendation for the Institute to support staff to engage more fully with the Quality Code.

1.11 The review team concludes that the provider **satisfactorily manages its responsibilities for academic standards**, as set out in contractual arrangements with its academic partners.

## 2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (B1): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B1: Programme Design, Development and Approval**

### Findings

2.1 The Institute distinguishes between the process that led to the approval of the existing programme in 2005 and the process underway for the development and approval of the proposed one-year master's programme. Although the former was developed in the absence of a formal design and approval process, the Institute states that the process was rigorous, transparent, and subject to external scrutiny before being considered by the University's Board of Trustees (BoT) who requested further refinement of the programme prior to final consideration and approval.

2.2 The current system is in accord with the University's Academic Quality Framework (AQF) which was approved by the BoT in 2015 and is managed through the Office of the Registrar (see paragraphs 1.4 and 1.6 for further details of the AQF). Detailed scrutiny of new programmes is conducted by the Board of Graduate Studies (BGS) on receipt of a completed Academic Proposal Form, supported by a checklist for submitting proposals, and thereafter by Academic Council (AC). New programmes also have to receive approval from the Vice-President, Finance and from the BoT. As the University normally requires programmes carrying an MA title to be delivered over two academic years and because the Institute is keen to offer a UK degree to attract greater applicant interest from the European and North American markets, the Institute is currently in discussions with a number of appropriate UK universities to explore the possibility of a validation agreement for its proposed one-year programme. The University is supportive of this strategy, and is taking into account the environments of its constituent entities. The adherence of the Institute to the University's procedures for programme design, development and approval, and its own internal processes, would allow it to meet the Expectation.

2.3 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining documentation relating to the programme approval process and minutes of relevant committee meetings. The team also held meetings with senior, teaching and support staff, and students.

2.4 The review team found these processes to work effectively in practice for both the current and proposed programmes. The team found evidence that the processes have enabled detailed discussion of programme rationale, structure, and content, and collegial approval within the Institute prior to extensive scrutiny by relevant AKU bodies responsible for recommending to the BoT the approval of postgraduate programmes. The University's standard new programme proposal form requires information on the overall objectives of the proposal and the mapping of learning outcomes onto the University's framework. Each module outline includes statements of the intended learning outcomes, and the programme specification indicates how its different elements form a coherent programme, consistent with the MA qualification level.

2.5 The development process for the proposed one-year MA programme has been protracted given the University's policy on the length of MA programmes and the Institute's

response to this by seeking an appropriate UK validating university. The Institute's Faculty Council has played the key role in developing the programme and initially considered outline ideas in March 2010 following earlier advisory discussions with the University's Academic Development Committee. Faculty at the Institute have since discussed more detailed proposals at meetings held in 2013 and 2014. Faculty staff met by the team reported that they had been through three iterations of the proposed programme and had involved extensive external expertise in its discussions. The Institute has also commissioned a study to inform the programme design through surveys of current students and alumni, and focus groups with potential students and other stakeholders.

2.6 The current programme was developed and approved on the basis of a process which, although informal at the time, was rigorous and transparent, and subject to external scrutiny. The proposed one-year programme is also being developed carefully, is subject to external academic and market advice, and involves the Institute recognising and engaging with the University's programme development and approval arrangements. The review team therefore conclude that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation:** Met

**Level of risk:** Low

**Expectation (B2): Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education**

## **Findings**

2.7 The Institute uses a variety of mechanisms to publicise its MA programme including newspaper advertisements, websites, virtual open days and recruitment visits. The Institute's prospectus is available in printed form and on the University's website. The Institute does not make use of recruitment agents. The Institute operates under the University-wide Admissions Framework, in place since August 2015. Admissions are the responsibility of the Institute's Admissions Committee, chaired by the Head of Educational Programmes (HEP), and its membership includes the MA Coordinator who is an academic member of staff, another academic member of staff, and the Assistant Registrar who acts as secretary. Admissions criteria, including the requirements for English language proficiency, and the application procedure are clearly set out on the Institute's website. Financial assistance is available to students, and students who require visas are guided through the process by the Assistant Registrar. The procedures in place would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.8 The review team examined the effectiveness of the recruitment, selection and admissions procedures by analysing documentation including the University's Admissions Framework, the prospectus and website information relating to the MA programme and application process, and minutes of the Institute's Admissions Committee. The team also met senior, academic and support staff, and students.

2.9 The review team found that the procedures for recruitment, selection and admission work effectively in practice. The Institute has a comprehensive admissions procedure which involves an application form, an essay and an interview conducted by two members of academic staff. Interviewers complete a structured report form which includes a summative score; scores are converted into the University's scale, summarised by the Assistant Registrar and then ranked. A final meeting of the Admissions Committee reviews the list as a whole; the list of proposed admissions is sent to the Board of Graduate Studies (BGS) and is considered at its meeting in May. Once the BGS has approved the list, acceptance/rejection letters are sent to applicants. Students met by the team commented that the admissions procedure was straightforward and it was clear what was expected of them in relation to the essay and interview. They had also been made aware of the timescales involved in the decision-making process. Staff involved in admissions are identified a year in advance of taking up their role during which time they observe the admissions process to ensure they are able to undertake their role effectively.

2.10 While, in general, the Institute's admissions procedures adhere to the principles of fairness and accessibility, the team was able to confirm that the Institute has no formal policy in place to allow an appeal against an admissions decision, although unsuccessful applicants may request, and receive, informal feedback from the Assistant Registrar. In discussion with the team, the Institute acknowledged that having a more formal policy in relation to admissions appeals would strengthen the process. Therefore, the review team **recommends** that, by December 2016, the Institute develops and implements a formal appeals policy for admissions decisions.

2.11 The previous year's experience of the admissions process is reviewed through additional meetings of the Admissions Committee and may lead to enhancements to the process. For example, a change made as a result of such a meeting was the decision to introduce an assignment as part of the admissions process.

2.12 With the exception of the absence of a formal policy for handling appeals against admissions decisions, the Institute's processes for the recruitment, selection and admission of students are comprehensive, fair and accessible. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation:** Met

**Level of risk:** Low

**Expectation (B3): Higher education providers, working with their staff, students and other stakeholders, articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching**

**Findings**

2.13 The Institute has recently adopted a new strategic plan which reaffirms its mission to advance teaching and research in its area of specialisation. The plan identifies two areas of emphasis in relation to learning and teaching over the next five years, namely increased use of online and blended learning technologies, and development of networks of scholars and institutions with common interests on a global basis.

2.14 The University aims for strength in research and excellence in teaching. Its Teaching and Learning Framework, adopted in March 2015, provides overall guidance to the Institute in relation to teaching and learning. Central support for the development of teaching is provided by the University Teaching and Learning Network, located within the Provost's Office, which is responsible for supporting individual teachers across the University and leading innovation in pedagogical practice. Teaching at the Institute is undertaken by three categories of staff: seven full-time experienced academic staff qualified to doctoral level who are expected to fulfil a full range of duties including conducting research; a number of part-time teachers, each with a doctoral-level degree and a research record; and a group of experienced language teachers who also teach at other UK universities. These arrangements would enable the Expectation to be met.

2.15 The review team examined the effectiveness of learning opportunities and teaching practices by reading relevant documentation relating to strategies and procedures including the Institute's Strategic Plan, the University's Teaching and Learning Framework, information relating to teaching observations, staff appraisal and staff development activities, the Faculty Handbook and academic staff CVs. The team also held meetings with senior, academic and support staff, and students.

2.16 The review team found these processes to work effectively in practice. There are effective procedures in place for the appointment and ongoing support of new members of staff. The procedure for appointment of full-time academic staff includes external assessors, while part-time staff are interviewed by the Head of Educational Programmes (HEP) prior to being offered a teaching post. Full-time academic staff are expected to have extensive teaching experience or undertake a postgraduate certificate course in the early stages of their appointment and seek membership of the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Until recently, the Institute used a programme offered at a London-based University but, as this is no longer available to external staff, the Institute is seeking a suitable alternative programme. Staff met by the team who had undertaken the programme found it useful and confirmed they had sought, or would be seeking, Fellowship of the HEA.

2.17 The probationary period for new academic staff is 12 months, at the end of which staff put together a self-assessment and details of their academic output and the Director makes a recommendation to the University's Provost about whether staff should be retained. Staff confirmed that the process, which is set out in the Faculty Handbook, is clear. Staff also commented positively on the supportive and ongoing induction programme in place for new staff.

2.18 The Institute uses a variety of teaching methods including team teaching and guest speakers and, as noted above, is exploring the increased use of online and blended learning. During the initial period of appointment of an academic member of staff, their teaching is observed by the HEP and mid and end-of-probation reviews include a review of teaching performance. Peer observation is also being used by the Institute on an experimental basis through a teaching squares system involving mutual observation by four members of academic staff. Although at an early stage of development and thus far restricted to full-time academic staff, the review team believes that the system has the potential to enhance teaching practice. Staff who had already participated confirmed the value of the process in supporting development and self-reflection.

2.19 All academic and support staff undergo a formal annual appraisal and a more informal mid-year review. Documentation requires academic staff to comment on teaching, research and services to the University, and support staff (with the exception of library staff) complete a standard template. The process allows staff to comment on development needs and all staff spoke positively about the usefulness of the process. Staff also confirmed that clear and accessible promotion policies and criteria are in place.

2.20 The Institute provides regular continuing professional development courses for its staff. Some courses are facilitated internally and others by outside providers, and they are made available to both full and part-time academic staff. To support its strategic priorities, the Institute has held recent training on the VLE, with additional support for VLE development and other classroom technologies also being provided through the University's Teaching and Learning Network. Staff commented positively on their engagement, through video conferencing, with the regular seminar sessions offered by the University's Teaching and Learning Network and the Teaching and Learning Conference.

2.21 Students have the opportunity to provide feedback on courses and teaching staff through surveys conducted at the end of each term. Separate evaluations are conducted of the language immersion and leadership programmes. While students recognise that staff research and subject knowledge is fed back into teaching practice, they also commented that the quality of teaching is variable and depends on the course being taught and the member of staff.

2.22 The Institute has an effective approach to learning and teaching, appropriate processes are in place for the appointment and ongoing development of staff, and students have opportunities to provide feedback on the quality of their courses and teachers. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B4): Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement**

**Findings**

2.23 The Institute maintains direct involvement in the development of each of its students from pre-enrolment to post graduation. Responsibility for maintaining and enhancing the student experience, academically and socially, is clearly defined and rests with the HEP, the MA Coordinator and the Assistant Registrar. The HEP and the MA Coordinator report to the Director of the Institute and through him to the Provost, while the Assistant Registrar is accountable to the Registrar and Associate Vice-Provost (Student Life). The Institute has in place a number of formal and informal mechanisms to support the development and achievement of students including: the support provided for transition; faculty advisers; counselling and employability support provided through the University of Westminster; and library and IT resources (see paragraphs 2.25 to 2.33 for a fuller discussion of these mechanisms). The effectiveness of these mechanisms is regularly reviewed through ongoing student feedback and the annual monitoring process. The clearly defined roles and responsibilities and the mechanisms in place to support the development and achievement of students would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.24 The review team tested the effectiveness of the Institute's arrangements and resources by scrutinising relevant documents including University and Institute policies, minutes of relevant committee meetings, student support materials, student handbooks, pre-sessional webinars, information relating to induction, language instruction and the student dissertation, student feedback and annual monitoring reports. The team also held meetings with senior, academic and support staff, and students.

2.25 The team found that the procedures for implementing, monitoring and evaluating arrangements and resources work effectively in practice. Student transition to the Institute is supported effectively. A number of pre-sessional webinars, aimed at helping students to make informed choices about choice of language and understanding the demands of their initial courses, ensure that students are well prepared for their programme. Students are able to join these sessions live and the material is also made available through the VLE. Students met by the team were appreciative of the information provided. In January 2016, a pilot English language preparation course was held overseas on an experimental basis and, following review, may be extended to other geographical locations. Students are met at the airport when they arrive in the UK and a comprehensive induction programme is held during the week before the programme starts at which students receive a welcome pack, additional information about their courses and programme, library and IT resources and the wider support services available. A number of social events and excursions are also included. While some students thought the induction period could be shorter, they generally commented very positively on its overall usefulness and the information provided. Students also receive comprehensive University and Institute Handbooks which they confirmed were accurate and helpful. The team consider the extensive range of information provided for students to support their transition into the Institute to be **good practice**.

2.26 Ongoing student support is provided formally and informally. Each student is allocated a faculty academic adviser at the start of the programme with whom students are encouraged to meet frequently; the adviser's role is set out in the student handbook. All staff act as advisers and, while there is no general training in place for advisers, the Institute has provided training on specific issues such as mental health. Staff met by the team confirmed that issues arising from advisory sessions are discussed at Faculty Council meetings

allowing experiences to be shared. Students confirmed that there is no formal requirement in relation to frequency of meetings and engagement with their advisers varied considerably. Support is also provided through the Assistant Registrar, the Senior Assistant for the programme, and library and IT staff.

2.27 In addition, students may confidentially access specialist pastoral support provided through an agreement with the University of Westminster. A summary report is made available to the Institute at the end of each academic year to indicate levels of usage and any issues that appear to be of general concern. Senior staff commented that the facility is used by a small number of students and if the Institute was successful in increasing the number of the students in the future, it would consider provision of an in-house facility.

2.28 The Institute has a Student Disability Policy in place and applicants are asked to declare a disability on their application form. Student accommodation includes rooms that are suitable for students with physical disabilities and, where necessary, the Institute will seek to ensure that all teaching materials meet individual student needs and makes every effort to assist students with disabilities to complete the programme.

2.29 Students are required to complete a substantial piece of research in the form of the dissertation and preparation begins during the first term of the programme. In the second year, having undertaken a research methodologies course and submitted an initial research proposal, students are assigned a dissertation supervisor; they nominate their first choice although in some instances a second choice is assigned. Research proposals are submitted for ethical consideration to the Institute's Ethical Review Committee, which includes an external member and uses University guidelines. Financial support is available for students to conduct fieldwork. Students confirmed that appropriate support is in place for the dissertation, they have regular contact with their supervisors and they can access writing support from a specialist teacher if required.

2.30 Language instruction is an important part of the programme and accounts for approximately 25 per cent of the credit required to complete it. The language element of the programme is kept under review with a new language coordinator currently being appointed to standardise pedagogical approaches across languages, achieve greater clarity on required learning outcomes and provide a greater degree of quality assurance. Currently, students are able to select from any of the three languages available provided they are not already fluent in that language. As part of the language component of the programme, all students are required to spend about a month in an appropriate country. During the second year, students are given the opportunity to visit a European country. Students complete a separate evaluation of the language programme. Students the review team met were positive about their experience of the language immersion programme and, generally, this is also reflected in their evaluation of the programme.

2.31 The Institute supports the employability of students in a number of ways although both staff and students believe that more could be done. Careers advice is provided through an agreement with the University of Westminster and students are introduced to the facility at induction. Usage levels are low and, having reflected on this, the Institute has developed a series of in-house career advice sessions; at the time of the review, one session from the new Employability series had taken place and was positively received by the students. The Institute requires all students to attend a leadership development programme at the beginning of the second year. Student feedback on this programme has been mixed and, due to continuing concerns, a new trainer was engaged to deliver a short programme in March. Student evaluation of the new programme was generally positive although some students met by the team stated that aspects of the programme had been more useful than others. A series of guest lectures are in place and students are encouraged to participate in seminars and workshops that take place at the Institute and other venues.

Students contribute papers at graduate conferences in their field and they can apply for grants to facilitate attendance.

2.32 The Institute's library is managed as a joint activity with the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) which occupies the same building. The Library Committee is a joint one between the Institute and the IIS. It oversees the library and monitors the library strategy. As well as having access to the library, the Institute pays for students to have borrowing rights at the library of the School of Oriental and Asian Studies (SOAS). Students are represented on the Library User group and student feedback is collected and acted on through a separate library survey. IT facilities and support are provided by the Institute and loans are available for students to purchase laptops. The Institute's VLE contains all the information required by students on the programme including policies and regulations, information on individual courses and the required reading for each session. Students confirmed their satisfaction with the resources available to them.

2.33 The Institute takes effective steps to enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential. The extensive range of information provided for students to support their transition into the Institute was highlighted as good practice. The team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation:** Met

**Level of risk:** Low

**Expectation (B5): Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B5: Student Engagement**

**Findings**

2.34 The Institute seeks to create an 'atmosphere of trust and mutual respect with students identifying with the intellectual mission of the Institute and feeling empowered to participate in it'. Student engagement is primarily the responsibility of the Institute, exercised within parameters laid down by the University. The Institute engages its students through a number of mechanisms including through student representatives whose role is set out in the student handbook. Student representatives are invited to Faculty Council (FC) meetings, with the exception of reserved items of business. Students are also represented on the Library Advisory Group. A Student Council meets on a termly basis and its membership includes the student representatives, the HEP, the MA Coordinator and the Assistant Registrar. Once a term students also meet with the Director and occasionally with senior University leaders when they visit the Institute, previously through the Institute's Oversight Committee but, in the future, it is expected that the new Academic Development Committee will wish to meet students although, at the time of the review, a meeting had yet to take place.

2.35 Responsibility for student course evaluation has recently moved from the Institute to the University. Student feedback on courses is collected through surveys conducted at the end of each term; feedback is also collected through separate surveys for the leadership programme, language immersion programme, library and from students on exit. The framework for student engagement would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.36 The review team examined the effectiveness of the procedures in place to engage students by examining documentation including minutes of relevant committee meetings, student handbooks and outcomes of student evaluations. The team also held meetings with senior, academic and support staff, students, and student representatives.

2.37 The review team found that the procedures for student engagement work effectively in practice. Each cohort of students selects two student representatives who rotate on a termly basis; their main responsibility is to provide representation on academic and non-academic matters that contribute to, and affect, overall student learning. On appointment, student representatives are sent a welcome email and, although they receive no formal training in relation to their role, they feel well supported through the close contact maintained with the Director, HEP, MA Coordinator and academic staff. In the student submission students commented that having class representatives makes it easier and more effective to have a student voice in the overall structure of the Institute and gives students who are not comfortable raising issues directly the chance to have their individual voices heard. Students the review team met spoke positively about the Student Council which they noted provides a useful mechanism through which student issues can be raised. Action items arising from Council meetings are either dealt with by the appropriate individual or are brought to Faculty Council. Students were able to give examples of action taken as a result of issues raised through the Student Council including the provision of additional lectures on one course.

2.38 Student feedback on courses is collected through surveys conducted at the end of each term. Until the academic year 2014-15, this was done locally through the Assistant Registrar's office; a standard form was completed electronically and returned to the HEP who, once the assignments for that course had been graded, distributed the results to the

individual teacher and spoke individually to teachers as appropriate. Students gave examples of action taken as a result of their feedback including, in one case, a change of teacher. From the academic year 2015-16 onwards, a new system of course evaluation has been introduced with the process now being administered by the Student Experience Network within the Registrar's Office. The main changes include a revised form and the fact that the results are held by the Registrar's office until course grades are released. The new system will be monitored for effectiveness. The Institute noted that there are risks that student feedback to teachers will be delayed and that response rates will be lower than under the earlier system which has been the case with the first set of evaluations. The issue will be raised with the University's Student Experience Network. Students also provide feedback on their experiences of the leadership programme and language immersion programme. Student evaluations are fed into and considered as part of the annual monitoring process. The review team was provided with a range of evidence, including from students, which indicated that student feedback is important to the Institute and leads to enhancements to their overall experience. The team considers that the thorough consideration of feedback from students which impacts positively on their learning experience is **good practice**.

2.39 The team found the arrangements for student engagement to be well organised and fit for purpose. The thorough consideration of feedback from students and the positive impact it has on their learning experience was considered to be good practice. Therefore, the team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation:** Met

**Level of risk:** Low

**Expectation (B6): Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning**

## **Findings**

2.40 In its policy and guidelines on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes, AKU seeks to ensure the highest standards of academic achievement through procedures for student assessment that are fair, transparent, standardised and linked to evidence. While it expects assessments to meet a number of specified criteria, the University also recognises that assessment practices vary among disciplines. In practice, the Institute has considerable delegated authority on assessment matters within these guidelines and within the broad assessment strategies approved at initial programme approval and confirmed at programme review. The design of the assessment is the responsibility of the course teacher, subject to approval by the internal examination board, and typically involving mid-term and final assignments. All courses, except language courses which are assessed orally and via written tests, have been assessed by written assignments since the programme commenced in 2006, the efficacy of this having been endorsed by successive external examiners. Students are advised of the assessment briefs, marking criteria and submission dates at the beginning of the course and will expect to receive feedback on their assignments within two weeks. The University has a policy on recognition of prior learning but the only use made by the Institute is for students with prior knowledge of a language who can be placed on an intermediate or advanced, rather than on a basic, language class. The Institute's own processes and procedures for assessment and its approach to complying with the University's regulations would allow it to meet the Expectation.

2.41 The team tested the Expectation by scrutinising the evidence provided by the Institute and the University, including assessment policies and regulations, student handbooks, assignment briefs, minutes of Examination Boards and external examiner reports. The team also met senior staff, teaching staff and students.

2.42 The evidence showed the policies and procedures to be effective in practice. The assessment arrangements the Institute has in place reflect the University's policy and guidelines for assessment and are well understood by students and teaching staff. The team saw evidence that assessment outcomes are moderated internally and externally, and at internal and external Examination Boards, and students have recourse to an appeals system. Students understood the processes for second marking, mitigating circumstances and penalties for late submission. Students reported that comprehensive marking criteria for the assignments for every course are clear and that assessments are appropriate.

2.43 Students and staff the review team met shared a common understanding of the Institute's policy on turnaround times for providing assignment feedback to students. For most courses, the feedback is usually timely, in advance of the next assignment, detailed and constructive. Students the team met confirmed that most of their mid-term assignments were returned within the specified two-week timeframe although they and staff acknowledged this was more difficult for end-of-term assignments that require double marking.

2.44 The University uses plagiarism-detection software and requires all dissertations to be checked this way. There is no similar requirement for the checking of other assignments.

All assignments are submitted electronically and both students and staff have the option of using the software although at present there is no requirement to do so. On average, the Institute handles two or three cases of suspected plagiarism each year. The Institute organised a plagiarism-training session for students in late 2014, and the AKU Student Handbook clearly identifies penalties for plagiarism based on the University's policy. Students also receive guidance on plagiarism at induction and from some tutors. Students reported an awareness of the University's policy on plagiarism through the Handbook and via the VLE. The Institute might wish to consider providing more support to staff in the use of plagiarism-detection software, and adopting its use more consistently in the submission of assignments.

2.45 Each course's outcomes are assessed according to the University's marking scale based on North American practices, and students receive a percentage grade which is loaded immediately on the University's administration system. The detailed and extensive Student Handbook for Graduate Programmes provides accurate and consistent advice to students on a range of assessment matters including credit transfer, grading schemes and the calculation of grade point averages. This information is repeated in the programme-specific handbook produced by the Institute, and extended to include matters such as submission arrangements and mitigating circumstances. Although the student submission noted that the overall grading criteria are clearly expressed in the Student Handbook, on the VLE and in course outlines, the level of detail adopted is not consistent across courses. While the information available to students consistently shows the equivalents among grade points, percentages and letter grades, not all course outlines adopt the detailed descriptors that describe the characteristics demonstrated in a student's work at different grade ranges. Therefore, the team **recommends** that, by October 2016, the Institute adopts and implements the detailed grade descriptors approved by the University.

2.46 The assessment arrangements facilitate the setting and operation of an equitable, valid and reliable set of processes, the outcomes of which are scrutinised rigorously at various stages. Students are fully informed of the arrangements, understand the assessment process and appreciate the detailed feedback on their assignments. The team makes a recommendation to adopt and implement the grade descriptors approved by the University. Overall, the team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation:** Met

**Level of risk:** Low

**Expectation (B7): Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining**

**Findings**

2.47 AKU's Policy on External Examiners, revised in 2016 following input from the Institute, requires examination arrangements leading to an award of the University to include an evaluation by an external examiner. Previously, the University had allowed the appointment of external examiners in the light of local practice. The University's policy clearly lists the responsibilities and roles of the external examiners in assessing and reporting on the standards of student performance, the fairness of the assessment processes, criteria for selection and appointment, and the comparability of standards with similar programmes in other international higher education institutions. Following standard UK practice, the Institute has appointed an external examiner, all from UK universities, since the programme was approved. The latest external examiner was recently appointed with effect from 2016. External examiner appointments are made by the Board of Graduate Studies (BSG) on the advice of the Faculty Council (FC).

2.48 The external examiner visits the Institute twice a year, reads samples of written work, reviews borderline cases and has access to all final assignments and dissertations. The external examiner attends and plays a significant role in discussions at the External Examination Board meetings held twice a year, and also provides an oral report. The external examiner submits a formal annual report to the Institute in template form. This requires comments on a number of matters including the appropriateness and comparability of academic standards, the appropriateness of assessments and satisfaction with the Institute's response to the previous annual report. The Institute's procedures and its adherence to those of the University would allow it to meet the Expectation.

2.49 The review team examined the effectiveness of these policies and procedures in practice by examining a range of documentation including external examiner reports and associated responses, minutes of committee meetings and Examination Boards, and information on the VLE. It also held meetings with students, teaching staff and senior staff.

2.50 The evidence showed the processes and procedures to be effective in practice. The Institute follows standard UK practice in its use of external examiners who are appointed by the BGS on the recommendation of the Institute's FC. In 2016, the AC approved revised guidelines, policies and procedures for the appointment, roles and deployment of external examiners and summarised the responsibilities of academic units, including the Institute, in relation to external examiners. Although the AC expects external examiners to be appointed initially for two years, renewable for another two terms, the Institute appoints its external examiner for a four-year non-renewable term, reflecting the guidance in the Quality Code. The University is currently reviewing its policy in this area.

2.51 The team saw evidence of the external examiner's participation at Examination Board meetings and the submission of appropriate reports to the Institute. The reports from 2010-15 confirmed the appropriateness of standards and offered, to varying degrees, a commentary and developmental suggestions. The external examiner's report is considered by the Institute's Academic Standards Committee (ASC), and then reviewed by the HEP and MA Coordinator before being submitted to the FC for discussion. Even though no significant issues were raised in either 2014 or 2015, the team saw evidence that the external examiner's report instigated a discussion on double marking which was followed up at ASC and FC. The Director, in his current role of HEP, responds to the external examiner's report and, although this response is not circulated to faculty, its contents would become apparent

during discussions at FC. While faculty and part-time academic staff are present at the External Examination Boards, and hear the external examiner's oral report, only full-time faculty attend FC. Students reported that they had not seen the external examiner's reports, although they were aware that these are available on the VLE. Also, although student representatives can attend meetings of FC, they are asked to leave when reserved business such as external examiner reports is discussed. Therefore, the team **recommends** that, by October 2016, the Institute ensures that all staff and students have access to the external examiner's report and the Institute's response to it.

2.52 While the Institute is broadly content with its overall arrangements and the value of the process, including the external examiner's report, it reported that the role could be enhanced further. In particular, the Institute feels the external examiner would benefit from a more detailed briefing which currently includes a meeting with the Director and receipt of the University's Policy on External Examiners. As part of this process, the Director prepared a detailed person specification which assisted faculty in the nomination process of the recently appointed external examiner.

2.53 The current external examining arrangements were introduced by the Institute several years ago and have helped to inform the development of the University's policy. Overall, the Institute is scrupulous in the nomination of its external examiners, their deployment and the care with which they consider the external examiner's reports. However, the team does make a recommendation for the Institute to ensure that all staff and students have access to the external examiner's report and the Institute's response to it. Overall, the team concludes that the Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

**Expectation:** Met

**Level of risk:** Low

**Expectation (B8): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and for review of programmes.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review**

**Findings**

2.54 The Institute's current processes for annual monitoring and periodic review are governed by the University's Academic Quality Framework (AQF) which was approved in 2005. It requires Deans or Heads of entities - in this case the Institute's Director - to be responsible for initiating annual self-monitoring. The Institute has routinely monitored its MA programme on an annual basis with the process being based on information collected from students electronically through anonymised evaluations of their courses, and reports prepared by Faculty on the courses they teach. These two elements form the basis of a report prepared by the MA Coordinator and presented to the Institute's Academic Standards Committee (ASC). Outcomes of the process feed into improvements in the delivery of the programme the following year.

2.55 The AQF also established a uniform approach to periodic reviews. The Quality Assurance Review Committee (QARC) oversees the process and is responsible to the Provost for ensuring that it is consistently applied, irrespective of geography and discipline, and for monitoring and comparing outcomes. The key components of the review process, to which each entity is subject every five years, are self-assessment, a visit by a panel of external assessors nominated by the Provost, and the annual monitoring of subsequent improvement plans. The periodic review of the Institute's MA programme is scheduled for 2018, six years after the University conducted an informal review of the degree. The Institute's own processes, and its adherence to those of the University, would enable it to meet the Expectation.

2.56 The team tested the effectiveness of the procedures by examining relevant documentation including the AQF, the 2012 review, student evaluations, minutes of relevant committee meetings, external examiner reports, faculty course reports, and the MA Coordinator's termly and annual reports. The team also held discussions with senior and teaching staff, and students.

2.57 The evidence showed the processes and procedures to be effective in practice. The team saw evidence that students complete anonymised evaluations each term and teaching staff prepare termly course reports in which they reflect on the course as a whole, as well as individual issues that may have arisen and any recommendations for improvement. This information is consolidated into a report prepared by the HEP and MA Coordinator on a termly and annual basis. The termly report summarises both student and staff views, highlighting issues and recommendations for further discussion and actions. At the end of each academic year, the MA Coordinator prepares a comprehensive and detailed annual report including student and faculty comments which is presented to ASC before going to the Faculty Council (FC). Samples of the reports received at FC from 2010-11 onwards include summaries of student performance, structural matters, reports on student academic and support services and a summary of the external examiner's comments, together with proposed changes for the following year, which were referred to in subsequent reports.

2.58 Staff met by the team found the student evaluations extremely helpful and commented on the speed with which the results could be processed for consideration by the ASC and FC via the termly and annual reports. However, in 2015-16, the University

introduced a new system of student evaluations, administered by the Student Experience Network within the Registrar's Office, which receives the completed questionnaires online from the students, thus bypassing the Institute. Now, the survey outcomes will not be released to entities until the grades are uploaded onto the University's central student record system. The Institute is concerned at the likely delay to the release of information to teaching staff. The University has agreed to monitor the effectiveness of the new arrangements.

2.59 Although an informal review and not formally reporting beyond the Institute, the 2012 review of the MA programme proved valuable and was welcomed by teaching staff. The review was undertaken by four international reviewers whose report 'affirmed the basic validity of the programme design', noted a range of strengths and weaknesses, and made a number of recommendations. The report and its recommendations were considered in some detail by the FC. Staff at the Institute concluded that while they did not accept all the recommendations of the report, some of these recommendations would be implemented immediately while others required 'internal review and formal approval through the Institute's academic committees prior to their implementation'. A particular outcome has been the regular consideration of the Leadership Course, while much of the debate engendered by the review has been assimilated in the consideration of the approach to be adopted in the proposed one-year MA programme. The review team also learned that the Institute was in the process of preparing its self-evaluation for the planned review by the University, now planned for 2018.

2.60 The current programme's monitoring arrangements were introduced by the Institute many years ago and include feedback from staff and students which provide the basis of termly and annual reports considered by the FC. The informal periodic review of the programme was based on a self-evaluation, was led by external assessors and produced a detailed report including recommendations. The University's developing processes now require similar reviews on a five-yearly cycle. The arrangements are comprehensive, robust and clearly understood by the relevant parties. Therefore, the team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation:** Met

**Level of risk:** Low

**Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of learning opportunities; these procedures are fair, accessible and timely, and enable enhancement.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints**

**Findings**

2.61 The Institute stresses that it, and the University, specifically aim to provide multiple informal and formal channels for students to make appeals and raise complaints.

The Institute's formal academic appeals procedure is set out in the two handbooks given to students and is also available on the website. The Institute has no formal student complaints policy. Instead, students are referred to the British Accreditation Council (BAC) complaints policy, and there are also a number of informal mechanisms in place to allow students to raise and resolve concerns. The University has an anti-harassment policy available on its website. This framework would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.62 The review team tested the effectiveness of the procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints by examining documents such as the appeals procedures, student handbooks, and minutes of relevant committee meetings, and by analysing information on the website and VLE. The team also held meetings with senior staff, academic and support staff, and students.

2.63 The Institute encourages early resolution of issues likely to lead to an appeal or a complaint. If a student feels that a grade is not fair, the Institute would expect the issue to initially be raised with the academic member of staff concerned. If a resolution is not found, then the student can approach the MA Coordinator or the HEP. Formal 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's procedures, she or he may make a formal appeal to the University although no such appeal has yet been made. Students met by the team confirmed their awareness of the formal appeals procedures and where to find them.

2.64 The Institute has no separate complaints procedure but has not yet received any formal complaints as issues tend to be dealt with, and resolved, immediately. Senior staff met by the team reassured the various mechanisms in place which allow students to raise and resolve issues including termly meetings with the Director, the Faculty and Student Councils, student evaluations, and by invoking the BAC complaints procedure. Every student has a faculty adviser to whom she or he can bring issues of concern and students can also approach the HEP, the MA Coordinator, the Assistant Registrar and the Senior Assistant to raise issues. However, staff met by the team did recognise the need for the Institute to clarify the difference between a concern and a formal complaint. While students confirmed the mechanisms through which they could raise issues, they also noted that they were unclear as to how they could go about making a formal complaint and commented that they sometimes felt constrained in raising issues in front of, or directly with, members of staff and were unaware of the BAC policy. The team therefore **recommends** that, by October 2016, the Institute develops and implements a formal student complaints policy and procedure.

2.65 The Institute has in place a formal academic appeals procedure which is clear and accessible to students. In relation to complaints, the Institute has in place a number of mechanisms through which students can resolve and raise issues but lacks a formal complaints procedure. Students were unclear as to how a formal complaint could be made. As a result, the team makes a recommendation for the Institute to develop and implement a formal student complaints policy and procedure. The team concludes that the Expectation is

not met. The level of risk is moderate because of this gap in the Institute's governance procedures.

**Expectation:** Not met

**Level of risk:** Moderate

**Expectation (B10): Degree-awarding bodies take ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, irrespective of where these are delivered or who provides them. Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others**

**Findings**

2.66 The Institute, in partnership with the University, is responsible for the management of its higher education provision. During their first summer, students undertake language immersion programmes in appropriate countries. These programmes are provided by well-established language schools that are familiar to the Institute and its language teachers. Visits are made by staff, including by the Director, to ensure facilities are appropriate and that students are adequately supported both academically and pastorally. As no credit is awarded for the learning which takes place, the Expectation is not strictly relevant in the context of this review.

2.67 To determine the relevance of the Expectation, the team read documentation relating to the language immersion programme, student evaluations and student transcripts. The team also held meetings with senior staff, academic and support staff, and students.

2.68 A member of staff accompanies the students who go to an Arabic-speaking country and stays with them until they are settled in. A language teacher usually visits as well and, in some countries, alumni are used to ensure that the students are looked after satisfactorily. Students met by the team were positive about their experience of the language immersion programme and this is generally reflected in their evaluations of the programme. Although students are not awarded credit, in most cases the language schools administer end-of-course tests and send results to the Institute. The results are included on students' official transcripts as pass or fail.

2.69 The Institute has suitable procedures in place in relation to its language immersion programme and assures itself that the academic and pastoral support and resources available to students are appropriate. Students do not receive credit for their learning during the time spent at the language schools. The Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B11): Research degrees are awarded in a research environment that provides secure academic standards for doing research and learning about research approaches, methods, procedures and protocols. This environment offers students quality of opportunities and the support they need to achieve successful academic, personal and professional outcomes from their research degrees.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B11: Research Degrees**

**Findings**

2.70 The Institute does not offer research degrees; therefore, this Expectation is not applicable.

## The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.71 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published Handbook. Nine of the 10 applicable Expectations are met with low levels of risk. Expectation B9 (Academic Appeals and Student Complaints) is not met, with a moderate level of risk.

2.72 The team identifies two features of good practice in the quality of student learning opportunities - the extensive range of information provided for students to support their transition into the Institute (Expectation B4); and the thorough consideration of feedback from students which impacts positively on their learning experience (Expectation B5).

2.73 The review team makes four new recommendations in the quality of student learning opportunities which relate to the following: develop and implement a formal appeals policy for admissions decisions (Expectation B2); adopt and implement the grade descriptors approved by the University (Expectation B6); ensure that all staff and students have access to the external examiner's report and the Institute's response to it (Expectation B7); and develop and implement a formal student complaints policy and procedure (Expectation B9).

2.74 The moderate risk in Part B indicates a gap in the Institute's governance procedures.

2.75 The review team concludes that, overall, the quality of student learning opportunities at the Institute **meets** UK expectations.

### **3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities**

**Expectation (C): UK higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the higher education they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.**

#### **Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision**

##### **Findings**

3.1 The Institute works closely with relevant departments within the University regarding all communications and information available to applicants, students and alumni. The Institute's contribution is led by the Marketing Manager who reports jointly to the Director and to the University's Director of Public Affairs. The Public Affairs Department of the University maintains general oversight of all material that is published in hard copy or on the website, and lays down general guidelines, particularly with regard to the website and social media. The Institute's prospectus and other printed student-related material are approved by the Director, the Director of Public Affairs and the Registrar. Material on the website is written by a range of content writers according to specialism and is approved by the Marketing Manager under delegated authority from the Public Affairs Department, but with the Director holding overall responsibility for the Institute's site. The Office of the Registrar maintains the definitive record of University policies and makes these available via the University's website.

3.2 Key University policies and other information relevant to students are presented in the AKU Graduate Programmes Student Handbook. The Institute-specific MA Student Handbook is produced internally and provides information on programme structure and course content, enrolment, policies and practices on academic standards including programme regulations and assessment/grading policies, student support services, attendance policies and health and safety matters. The Handbooks are updated annually. Information on courses is also provided via the VLE in the form of course outlines which are available at the beginning of the course and include details of assessment and submission dates. Each teacher, working with the Senior Assistant, is responsible for keeping the course outlines up to date and accurate. The Institute's arrangements for the production of information, and its adherence to those of the University, would enable it to meet the Expectation.

3.3 The review team tested the effectiveness of the Institute's arrangements for publication and assurance of information by exploring the availability and accuracy of information on the website, on the VLE, and in redacted transcripts, programme specification, student and programme handbooks, course outlines and the prospectus. The team also held meetings with senior, academic and support staff, and students.

3.4 The review team found the procedures for checking and producing information to be effective in practice. The complementary roles of the Institute's Marketing Manager and the University's Director of Public Affairs interlock effectively to ensure that information relating to the Institute's higher education provision is accurate and fit for purpose. Published communications are subject to version control and the members of staff are made aware that communications should be routed through the Marketing Manager. The MA Coordinator works closely with teaching staff and subsequently the Marketing Manager and Assistant Registrar to ensure that course and prospectus information is current and accurate. Similarly, the Marketing Manager, within the guidelines set by the University, works in tandem with the Institute's Director and the University's Director of Public Affairs regarding

social media and information about courses and the Centre which is available on the website. The Faculty Handbook is produced internally, under the leadership of the Director, and is concise yet comprehensive. It includes a range of useful information including policies and procedures, faculty responsibilities, course delivery and assessment, and research.

3.5 The Marketing Manager obtains feedback from students on an informal basis; for example, students from both years of the MA programme provided comments on the style and presentation of the prospectus. Students were complimentary about the Institute's website, commenting that it is user-friendly, up to date and accurate, and provides useful links for both prospective and current students. Students reported that the handbooks were comprehensive and helpful, and are available in hard copy, on the website and via the VLE. Students also found the prospectus helpful and accurate; in particular, it provided sufficient information about the Institute and the programme, and made clear that the degree was awarded by the University.

3.6 The definitive record of the current programme, checked by the MA Coordinator and Director, is maintained electronically on the University's student and academic administration system. This system is used to maintain all student records including the issuing of transcripts to students and alumni. Sample redacted student transcripts viewed by the team named the Institute, the course title, the dates of the term in which the course was studied, and the credit awarded with percentage and letter grades. The transcript is authorised through the University's formal certification from the Office of the Registrar prominently incorporating 'London, United Kingdom'.

3.7 The arrangements for the selection and accuracy of information are clearly understood and implemented effectively by Institute staff who have significant delegation from the University in terms of content and style within clear guidelines laid down by the University. Students and teaching staff confirmed that the website and paper-based information were comprehensive and accurate. Therefore, the team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

## The quality of the information about learning opportunities: Summary of findings

3.8 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The Expectation for this judgement area is met and the associated level of risk is low. There are no recommendations, affirmations or features of good practice.

3.9 The review team concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at the Institute **meets** UK expectations.

## 4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (Enhancement): Deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities.**

### Findings

4.1 At the University level, there are a number of initiatives in place to provide strategic leadership with regard to the enhancement of students' learning opportunities. The University has set up a number of networks within the Office of the Provost to assure and enhance the quality of learning including: quality assurance; teaching and learning; blended and digital learning; and English language enhancement. The Institute's strategic plan set out its priorities in relation to teaching and learning including the increased use of online and blended learning technologies, and the development of networks of scholars and institutions with common interests on a global basis. A number of development activities are in place to support these strategic priorities. The Institute also sets out to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities through its detailed consideration of student feedback (see paragraph 2.38) and by incorporating this into its planning mechanisms. The Institute's strategies and procedures would allow this Expectation to be met.

4.2 The review team evaluated the effectiveness of the strategies and procedures by examining the Institute's Strategic Plan, the University's Teaching and Learning Framework, minutes of relevant committee meetings, student evaluations, and information relating to the University's annual Teaching and Learning conference. The team also held meetings with senior, academic and support staff, and students.

4.3 The Institute's strategies and procedures for enhancement work effectively. The Institute is represented on the networks for teaching and learning, and for quality assurance. It also participates in the University's activities and initiatives including the introduction of teaching squares, the new student course evaluation instrument, and seminars and the annual teaching and learning conference. The University has plans to introduce a University-wide teaching academy and staff within the Institute confirmed they had been part of the consultation process. The Director of the English Language Enhancement network has also recently visited the Institute and has engaged with students, while a decision has now been taken to appoint a new language coordinator.

4.4 Good practice is shared across the University through the annual teaching and learning conference and the teaching and learning network seminars. More locally, Faculty Council facilitates the sharing of good practice supplemented by staff development days and staff meetings.

4.5 Improvements to the quality of the student experience are also made through the Institute's regular and thorough consideration and use of student feedback, together with other information such as feedback from external examiners, and staff and student achievement data.

4.6 The review team concludes that the Institute is taking deliberate steps, in line with its own strategic priorities and those of the University, to improve the quality of student learning opportunities. Therefore, the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

## The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.7 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The Expectation for this judgement area is met and the associated level of risk is low. There are no recommendations, affirmations or features of good practice.

4.8 The review team concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the Institute **meets** UK expectations.

## 5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

### Findings

5.1 The Institute is aware that although the MA programme is not primarily designed as a vocational programme, alumni expect to use their education to advance their careers. Therefore, there are a number of measures in place to prepare students for the work environment, although both the Institute and its students feel it could do more in this regard. The Institute noted that it would be revising its approach in the future and would embed employability into the MA programme rather than it being an add-on.

5.2 The MA programme facilitates the development of generic skills in processing and analysing information, research skills and language skills as well as specialist knowledge. In addition, students take a leadership course as part of the programme which includes sessions on CV preparation and preparing proposals for admission to doctoral programmes. In response to student feedback, a new provider of the course was put in place for 2016. Overall, students were positive about the new leadership programme although some elements had been more useful than others and this was reflected in their recent evaluation of the programme.

5.3 The Institute has an agreement with the University of Westminster allowing students access to the University's Careers Service; students are introduced to this facility during orientation, but do not tend to use it extensively. Having reflected on this, the Institute has developed a series of in-house careers sessions which will offer students personalised advice on how to develop a profile of their skills and abilities drawn both from their work at the Institute and on their previous work experience. At the time of the review, one of the four planned sessions of the new Employability series had taken place and had been positively received by the students.

5.4 Job opportunities are shared with alumni and current students. The Institute maintains contact with its alumni, the majority of whom are in employment or further study. Feedback from alumni shows that many feel completion of the programme has not enabled them to progress further in their careers.

5.5 The Institute has considered sponsoring students on internships outside the UK by using AKU's networks and this option remains under review. In the student submission it was stated that students would welcome the opportunity to undertake internships should they be made available.

## Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers.

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality: [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality)

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx)

### **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.

### **Blended learning**

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

### **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

**Enhancement**

The process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported. It is used as a technical term in our review processes.

**Expectations**

Statements in the **Quality Code** that set out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

**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.

**Public information**

Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

**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** that all providers are required to meet.

**Reference points**

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

**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.

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