



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

Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight

Review by the Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education

June 2012

About this report

This is a report of a review under the Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight 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 (AKU-ISMC). The review took place on 21 June 2012 and was conducted by a panel, as follows:

- Professor A Jago
- Professor R Harris
- Mrs M Pride.

The main purpose of the review was to:

- make judgements about the provider's delegated responsibilities for the management of academic standards and the quality and enhancement of learning opportunities
- draw a conclusion about whether the provider's public information is reliable
- report on any features of good practice
- make recommendations for action.

A summary of the [key findings](#) can be found in the section starting on page 3. The [context](#) in which these findings should be interpreted is explained on page 4. [Explanations](#) of the findings are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 5.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#)¹ and its mission. More information about this review method can be found in the [published handbook](#).²

¹ www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx

² www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/eo-recognition-scheme.aspx

Key findings

The QAA panel considered evidence relating to the educational provision at The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC), both information supplied in advance and evidence gathered during the visits of the review itself. The review has resulted in the key findings stated in this section.

Judgements

The QAA panel formed the following judgements about AKU-ISMC:

- **confidence** can be placed in AKU-ISMC's management of its responsibilities for academic standards
- **confidence** can be placed in AKU-ISMC's management of its responsibilities for the quality of the learning opportunities.

Conclusion about public information

The QAA panel concluded that:

- **reliance can** be placed on the public information that AKU-ISMC supplies about itself.

Good practice

The QAA panel identified the following **features of good practice** at AKU-ISMC:

- AKU-ISMC's timely and responsive approach to student feedback, both formal and informal (paragraph 2.6)
- the skill and commitment demonstrated by AKU-ISMC in its academic and pastoral engagement with students (paragraph 2.8)
- AKU-ISMC's success in ensuring that faculty members enhance their teaching by reference to their academic research (paragraph 2.10).

Recommendations

The QAA panel makes the following recommendations to AKU-ISMC.

It is **desirable** for AKU-ISMC to:

- take further steps to ensure the appropriateness and effectiveness for all students of its leadership programme (paragraph 2.3)
- continue to develop its policies and practices concerning adjunct faculty, with particular reference to recruitment, grading and professional development (paragraph 2.11).

Context

The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom (the University), a private company limited by guarantee, was established in London in 2002.

Its only operational entity is the The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC; the Institute), which teaches one programme leading to a formal academic qualification: a two-year MA in Muslim Cultures. Students, all of whom are full-time, have been admitted on an annual basis since September 2006; intakes are small (nine-20); teaching is in English; and staff are very well qualified academically (all faculty have a relevant PhD and research experience) and supported by adjunct faculty with experience of higher education teaching.

The degree is awarded under the authority of the University's Pakistan charter. In the UK, the titles 'University' and 'Institute' are used with the formal approval of, respectively, the Privy Council and the former Department for Education and Skills.

The University commissioned the National Recognition Information Centre of the United Kingdom (UK NARIC) to undertake a benchmarking analysis in April 2011, examining a set of criteria against UK practice at master's level, as defined by QAA. The ensuing report concluded that 'assessment of student learning has been found to be rigorous and is supported by an effective quality assurance system which is comparable to standard practice at UK recognized higher education institutions.'

Detailed findings

1 Academic standards

How effectively does the provider fulfil its responsibilities for the management of academic standards?

1.1 Responsibility for establishing the framework for academic standards rests with the University: it follows that AKU-ISMC is subject to its quality assurance arrangements. These arrangements, supplemented as necessary by local information, are made known to all relevant staff in a Faculty Handbook and students in a Student Handbook.

1.2 AKU-ISMC operates within an integrated governance and management structure designed to assure academic standards. All proposals for new programmes and new and amended academic policies and procedures (other than minor changes devolved to it) are subject to the approval of the University's Academic Council, guided by the Board of Graduate Studies, responsible also for approving admissions, progression and completion data and external examiners' nominations, and for initiating or agreeing external programme reviews. Both these bodies contain members from all campuses and are currently serviced from Karachi.

1.3 Within AKU-ISMC, responsibility for academic standards rests with the Head of Educational Programmes and the MA Coordinator, both of whom report to the Director. All institutional-level academic decisions are subject to the approval of the Faculty Council, a body comprising all members of academic staff, which meets monthly and receives reports from the Academic Standards Committee.

1.4 The Academic Standards Committee has day-to-day responsibility for all aspects of the master's programme; it also acts as an internal examination board: when it so convenes, it is augmented by external examiners, whose duties are clearly specified. Such examiners submit annual reports, which are given proper consideration by the Committee and, through it, the Institute as a whole.

1.5 Assessment follows University practice, with clear grading criteria set out in each course outline and specified in all relevant handbooks. Assessed work is returned with feedback on achievement and advice on possible areas for improvement, normally within four weeks. Methods of assessment are matched against the defined learning outcomes; all end-of-course assignments are blind double-marked.

1.6 Language training is integral to the programme and undertaken in part in an immersion summer programme in institutions in countries which include Iran, Morocco, Tajikistan, Tunisia and Turkey. It was found that care is given to quality controlling, planning, supporting and monitoring both these programmes and the students undertaking them. The programmes are examined, satisfactory attainment is required for students to progress, and the Institute ensures that assessment is equitable and appropriate.

1.7 Students who met the panel confirmed their satisfaction with these arrangements and with their opportunities to undertake and receive responses to their formal and informal course evaluations.

How effectively are external reference points used in the management of academic standards?

1.8 The key reference points are the requirements of the University, adherence to which is scrupulously maintained. In addition, the Institute takes the view that it would be

advantageous to review and evaluate its work in a wider context by addressing other external reference points, notably the Academic Infrastructure. With this in mind, the UK NARIC benchmarking exercise was commissioned in 2011 (see Context on page 4); work has been taking place to map current practices against the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, and the Institute staff are engaging with the emerging expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

The Institute also makes extensive but appropriate use of adjunct faculty (see also paragraphs 2.7 and 2.11), many of whom have experience of the Academic Infrastructure through teaching in higher education institutions in the UK.

1.9 Overall, it was found that AKU-ISMC is aware of, and discharges competently, its institutional responsibilities for the assurance of academic standards.

The panel has **confidence** in the provider's management of its responsibilities for the standards of the awards to be conferred by its awarding body.

2 Quality of learning opportunities

How effectively does the provider fulfil its responsibilities for managing the quality of learning opportunities?

2.1 As an integrated unit of the University, AKU-ISMC discharges its responsibilities for managing the quality of learning opportunities in the context of institutional policy. Within the Institute, clear lines of responsibility exist, with the MA Coordinator and the Head of Educational Programmes exercising executive authority subject to the oversight of the Academic Standards Committee (see paragraph 1.3). Faculty are recruited by the Institute, supported by advice from, and subject to the approval of, the University.

2.2 The quality of student learning opportunities is strengthened by several factors. Firstly, the Institute is currently located in the same building as The Institute of Ismaili Studies, with which it shares library facilities and some teaching space: this association with a cognate (though distinct) body provides opportunities for joint academic and social activities, which are valued. Secondly, the Institute's proximity to Bloomsbury means that its academic activities benefit from outstanding national and University museum and library facilities. Thirdly, the Institute works with University of London institutions, including Birkbeck and the School of Oriental and African Studies, with which it shares many academic interests and networks.

2.3 The MA includes a leadership programme as a mandatory element. This programme, which takes place at the start of the second year, has been the subject of debate. The panel studied the student evaluations and discussed them with both students and staff. While the Institute takes seriously and is addressing the very diverse distribution of evaluation scores, it was not clear to the panel that a solution has yet been found to the problem that the programme, while it has attracted some strongly positive reactions, has attracted also some equally negative ones, as well as some disruption which will have had an impact on the quality of student learning. It is desirable that AKU-ISMC takes further steps to ensure the appropriateness and effectiveness for all students of its leadership programme.

How effectively are external reference points used in monitoring and evaluation processes?

2.4 See paragraphs 1.8-1.9.

How effectively does the provider assure itself that the quality of teaching and learning is being maintained and enhanced?

2.5 Both Faculty Council and the Library Committee have student members, and students complete detailed evaluations of each course: these are sent to the MA Coordinator, who examines them before agreeing an appropriate response with the Head of Educational Programmes. Where a specific problem is identified, the Head of Educational Programmes discusses it and explores solutions with the faculty member concerned. Given, however, the small size and intimate culture of the Institute, it is normal for any such issue to be identified and addressed expeditiously and informally.

2.6 Students expressed strong satisfaction with these arrangements and procedures, valuing not only the formal opportunities open to them but also (and in particular) the ready availability and responsiveness of staff to engage with them and address concerns as they arise. This responsiveness contributes positively and distinctively to the student-centred culture of the Institute. The Institute's timely and responsive approach to student feedback, both formal and informal, is a feature of good practice.

How effectively does the provider assure itself that students are appropriately supported?

2.7 As noted above (see paragraph 2.5), all faculty members are accessible to students; in addition, the Institute ensures that adjunct faculty are available to deal with questions and concerns outside their teaching slots: in both cases email contact is effective and normally prompt. Students particularly value the support and flexibility of one senior administrator charged with student-facing responsibilities. Where specialist help or support is required, faculty refer students appropriately.

2.8 New students take part in an induction programme about which they spoke positively. The Director has regular meetings with individual students, and each student has an academic supervisor. Nevertheless, the encouragement to identify and approach the member of staff with whom a student feels most comfortable in relation to a particular issue is highly valued as a means of moderating the variability inherent in any universal tutor system. Students emphasised to the panel their strong appreciation of the level of support provided and the formal and informal mechanisms in existence. The skill and commitment demonstrated by AKU-ISMC in its academic and pastoral engagement with students together constitute a feature of good practice.

How effective are the provider's arrangements for staff development in relation to maintaining and/or enhancing the quality of learning opportunities?

2.9 As noted in paragraph 1.1, all staff receive a Faculty Handbook setting out all relevant policies and procedures. Additional support is provided for new members of staff; there is no formal mentoring system, but an appraisal procedure is in place and an informal peer observation system under development. Faculty are predominantly evaluated through student evaluations and supported by a staff development plan, which includes funding for conference attendance.

2.10 The panel noted the strong emphasis on research among an academically well qualified group of faculty, also learning that the Institute is increasingly seeking to strategise

faculty research interests and activities. Students stressed the extent to which faculty bring their research experience and topics into classroom and informal discussions, making a distinctive contribution to their learning. AKU-ISMC's success in ensuring that faculty members enhance their teaching by reference to their academic research is a feature of good practice.

2.11 As noted previously (see paragraph 2.7), the panel noted the valuable work of adjunct faculty. Nevertheless, scope exists for this contribution to be strengthened. In particular, recruitment is based mainly on informal networking; not all adjuncts are familiar with the North American grading system (accordingly, conversion responsibilities fall to full-time faculty), and few opportunities exist for adjuncts to undertake staff development. In respect of the first of these, a more open recruitment process would potentially diversify and further enrich teaching; secondly, grading, while currently effective, is not optimally efficient; thirdly, staff development would potentially strengthen adjuncts' institutional affiliation. It is desirable that the Institute continues to develop its policies and practices concerning adjunct faculty with particular regard to recruitment, grading and professional development.

How effectively does the provider ensure that students have access to learning resources that are sufficient to enable them to achieve the intended learning outcomes of their programmes?

2.12 In addition to its own library, the shared resource with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, and the University and national resources locally available (see paragraph 2.2), the Institute has appropriate computing facilities. Students' positive views of the available learning resources were confirmed by course evaluations and committee minutes.

The panel has **confidence** that the provider is fulfilling its responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of the learning opportunities it provides for students.

3 Public information

How effective are the provider's arrangements for assuring the accuracy and completeness of information it has responsibility for publishing?

3.1 The University deploys electronic and print media to inform potential students prior to admission; students confirmed that this information was accurate and comprehensive. The Institute has an intranet and a student portal. The website has been designed to cater for different user categories, including prospective and current students, alumni and other external stakeholders. Its contents are developed by departmental administrators, checked by the relevant departmental head, and further reviewed by the Planning and Academic Development Coordinator, prior to publication by the University. A similar process exists for all external publications.

3.2 Programme handbooks, which were found to be detailed and clear, are supplemented by additional course information. Students confirmed that they are useful and comprehensive.

The panel concludes that **reliance can be placed** on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the provider is responsible for publishing about itself and the programmes it delivers.

4 Action plan

The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations action plan relating to the Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight June 2012						
Good practice	Action to be taken	Target date	Action by	Success indicators	Reported to	Evaluation
The panel identified the following areas of good practice that are worthy of wider dissemination within the provider:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AKU-ISMC's timely and responsive approach to student feedback, both formal and informal (paragraph 2.6) 	<p>Regular Student Council meetings; representation of students in Faculty/Library Committees, tea with the Director, access to Faculty Advisor, MA Coordinator and Head of Educational Programmes</p> <p>Further develop formal existing evaluation of feedback processes</p>	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>Dec 2012</p>	<p>MA Coordinator</p> <p>Assistant Registrar</p>	<p>Students' positive comments regarding timeliness and responsiveness to issues they have raised</p> <p>Students' comments as recorded in Student Council Minutes showing that their feedback has been heard and responded to in a timely manner</p>	<p>Head of Educational Programmes</p> <p>Head of Educational Programmes</p>	<p>Minutes of Student Council, Academic Standards Committee and Faculty Council</p> <p>Student Council minutes</p>

	Introduce year-end student evaluation	July 2013	Assistant Registrar	Implementation of year-end student evaluation and its outcomes Responsiveness to issues raised	Head of Educational Programmes	Head of Educational Programmes annual report
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the skill and commitment demonstrated by AKU-ISMC in its academic and pastoral engagement with students (paragraph 2.8) 	Formal group training for faculty and relevant staff	Sept 2013	Faculty and relevant staff	Successful completion of formal training as seen in comments in faculty appraisal interviews and feedback to Faculty Council	Head of Educational Programmes	Outcomes assessed via year-end student evaluations and informal feedback to Head of Educational Programmes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AKU-ISMC's success in ensuring that faculty members enhance their teaching by reference to their academic research (paragraph 2.10). 	Revised course outlines when appropriate that reflect new areas of faculty research	From Jan 2013	Faculty members	Course outlines which reference faculty research areas	Head of Educational Programmes and Academic Standards Committee	Minutes of the Academic Standards Committee and Faculty Council Course outlines
Desirable	Action to be taken	Target date	Action by	Success indicators	Reported to	Evaluation
The panel considers that it is desirable for the provider to:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> take further steps to ensure the appropriateness and effectiveness for all students of 	Revision to leadership programme content; inclusion of speakers (leaders in the field)	Sept 2012	MA Coordinator	More positive evaluation of the programme by students than in previous year	Head of Educational Programmes; Academic Standards	Student evaluations of the leadership programme

its leadership programme (paragraph 2.3)	Optional sessions to meet varied student requirements (such as PhD applications, career advice)				Committee	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> continue to develop its policies and practices concerning adjunct faculty, with particular reference to recruitment, grading and professional development (paragraph 2.11). 	<p>Ensure consistent implementation of induction process for visiting lecturer, stressing professional development opportunities and awareness of grading procedures</p> <p>Finalise visiting lecturer recruitment process and include in faculty handbook</p>	From Dec 2012	MA Coordinator and Assistant Manager Human Resources	<p>Visiting lecturer confirmation of awareness of grading procedures and professional development opportunities as part of the visiting lecturer induction</p> <p>No issues raised by students regarding grading by visiting lecturer</p>	Head of Educational Programmes	<p>End of course report</p> <p>Student course evaluation</p> <p>Minutes of the Academic Standards Committee</p>

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. For more details see the [handbook](#)³ for this review method.

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality:

www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx.

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

academic standards The standards set and maintained by institutions for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

Code of practice *The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* published by QAA: a set of interrelated documents giving guidance for higher education institutions.

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.

feature of good practice A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

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

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

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

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

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

³ www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/eo-recognition-scheme.aspx

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The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
Email comms@qaa.ac.uk
Web www.qaa.ac.uk

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