



Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, June 2019

Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review panel concludes that The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (the Institute) has made acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the June 2018 [monitoring visit](#).

Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 The Institute relocated in July 2018 to permanent premises in a new development funded by the Aga Khan Foundation with the students' residential accommodation close by. This building, which also houses the Aga Khan Development Network, includes purpose-designed multi-functional technologically-equipped teaching rooms, library, language learning spaces and staff accommodation. The number of students has fallen from 22 in 2018 to 18 in 2019.

3 During the last year, significant revisions to the MA programme, proposed by the Institute, have been approved by the Academic Council of The Aga Khan University (AKU), the AKU-UK Board of Governors and the AKU Board of Governors. The revised programme, to be delivered from September 2019 through an 18-month three-semester structure, reflects the enhanced research expertise of the Institute's faculty and meets the requirements of the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan. Discussions are at an advanced stage with Columbia University to offer the revised MA as part of a dual degree programme.

4 Appointed in late 2017, the Institute Director has undertaken significant restructuring of the governance arrangements following wide consultation with Institute and AKU central staff. This involves the establishment of a Senior Management Team, sub-committees on research, educational programmes and administration to ensure greater involvement of staff at all Institute levels, and the setting-up of an ISMC Staff Forum. The committees overseeing educational programmes have been retained with the addition of a dedicated Teaching Team Committee which meets every eight weeks, a development welcomed by faculty. The Institute has appointed new staff including a Head of Educational Programmes (HEP), a Professor of Islamic Studies, and a new Assistant Professor.

Findings from the monitoring visit

5 In addressing the outcomes of the Higher Education Review (Foreign Providers) in 2016 (the 2016 review), the Institute continues to monitor successive updated versions of the action plan which it developed following the 2016 review, reporting particularly on ongoing matters and those identified during the 2018 monitoring visit. It has made acceptable progress in continuing to develop the areas of good practice relating to support for students entering the Institute and to the consideration of feedback from students

(paragraphs 6 and 7), and is making acceptable progress in meeting, or in continuing to meet, the recommendations relating to the adoption of grade descriptors (paragraph 8), to ensuring student access to the external examiner's reports (paragraph 9) and to supporting staff engagement with the Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) (paragraph 13). The Institute has secure practices for the admission of students (paragraph 10) and for assessment (paragraph 11).

6 During 2018-19, the Institute has focused on developing further the good practice identified in the 2016 review of supporting students entering its programmes. The Institute created temporary virtual learning environment (VLE) accounts and preliminary learning tasks to enable students to engage with the programme before physically arriving in London. Students reported that teaching staff are accessible helpful whether approached via the VLE, by email or through meeting staff during formally notified office hours or informally. They acknowledged the assistance of support staff in many areas although they expressed the view that professional counselling services should be available onsite rather than through a sub-contracting arrangement with the University of Westminster. While acknowledging the desirability of onsite services, the Institute confirmed that it regards the present arrangement as being cost-effective for the size of the student body, and drew attention to the experience of the Institute's staff in guiding students to the services available.

7 The Institute has continued to build upon its good practice in seeking and acting upon student feedback. Students are invited to comment anonymously on their programme at various stages, both on the courses themselves and on the individual instructor, although the primary purpose of the annual questionnaire feedback is to enhance the experience of subsequent cohorts. The termly meetings of the Student Council, chaired by a student, are also a source of feedback. The HEP prepares a termly summary report of student feedback and faculty observations for discussion with module leaders and the Student Council. The Institute additionally arranged a consultation meeting with current second-year students on the proposed revisions to the MA programme which incorporated the students' suggestion of an increase in the number of elective courses. Faculty understand that they may make minor changes to courses within AKU's policy of major and minor modifications, although major changes require formal approval through the Registrar's Working Group (RWG). At the programme level also, faculty periodically review whether programme learning outcomes, which are reflected within some of the course learning outcomes, continue to be appropriate.

8 Following AKU's decision in 2017 not to implement university-wide grade descriptors, the Institute has designed its own explicit descriptors, approved by the Academic Standards Committee, taking into account the Quality Code and practice at UK universities. Both students and staff welcomed this development as providing clear guidance on the criteria adopted in determining the final grade, and in providing a further source of faculty feedback. Faculty participated in a grade mark training programme which explained the interpretation and application of the new grade descriptors.

9 The external examiner attends the Examination Board and prepares a report and a detailed annex. Copies of these are made available to all students. The report and the Institute's response to it are prepared by the HEP and are considered at the final Student Council meeting of the year and by the Registrar's Working Group.

10 The Institute has sound processes to govern the selection and admission of students. In addition to prospectus information about the application process, the Admissions Process paper details the admissions process and eligibility requirements. The Institute's Registrar's Office undertakes an initial check to ensure applications are complete and that the applicant meets the minimum entry requirements, including English language requirements. Online interviews of shortlisted candidates are conducted by a common

interviewing panel whose recommendations are subject to approval by the Registrar's Working Group. Students whom the panel met confirmed that they understood the application and selection arrangements, considered that their applications were dealt with expeditiously and noted opportunities to appeal against decisions at various stages of the process. They observed that information about the Institute provided in its prospectus and its website is clear and accurate, and reported that pre-arrival information and induction arrangements are detailed, accurate and helpful.

11 The Institute has rigorous practices for the security of its assessment of students' work. It emphasises the importance of the assessment of student work both to establish whether all the course learning outcomes have been met and to provide feedback to highlight areas for student development. Students are advised of the principle of academic integrity at induction, by tutors on all courses and particularly through the Dissertation Workshop course, especially in the academic writing section. Students confirmed that assignments are submitted electronically via plagiarism detection software and expressed awareness of the processes and penalties for suspected breaches of the Institute's integrity policy. The Institute expects graded assignments to be returned within 14 days after submission, and students confirmed that most assignments are returned within this timescale; the review team heard that the Programme Administrator tracks returns and follows up delays. The practice of universal second-marking on all substantial assessment elements ensures that two assessors will review all key assessed work. Dissertations and theses are subject to blind double-marking and to subsequent discussion of outcomes by the examiners.

12 There are currently 18 students on the two-year programme, including 11 of the 12 who enrolled in 2017 and the 7 who enrolled in 2018. The number of applicants has increased from 24 for 2015-16, to 36 and 50 in subsequent years, and 69 for the 2018 entry. Pass rates for 2017 and 2018 were 100% and 82% respectively, while the current second year has a 92% retention rate from year 1.

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

13 The Institute joined AdvanceHE in July 2018 and intends to support faculty seeking Fellowship and Senior Fellowship recognition. AKU more generally is adopting the AdvanceHE framework across all its campuses. The Institute's own staff are actively engaged in AKU initiatives to enhance teaching quality through workshops and webinars aimed at assisting faculty in preparing and submitting applications to AdvanceHE and in developing intra-campus mentoring arrangements. The Institute organised a dedicated workshop to discuss the 2013 version of the Quality Code. The review team heard that staff generally welcomed this and that the Institute believes this familiarisation event should be held annually, especially in the light of the publication of the 2018 version of the Code. Faculty are expected to attend a planned London workshop dedicated to marking and feedback, and an equality and diversity refresher course in 2019-20 following an initial event in 2018.

Background to the monitoring visit

14 The monitoring visit serves as a short check on the provider's continuing management of academic standards and quality of provision. It focuses on progress since the previous review. In addition, it provides an opportunity for QAA to advise the provider of any matters that have the potential to be of particular interest in the next monitoring visit or review.

15 The monitoring visit was carried out by Dr Stephen Ryrie, QAA Officer, and Professor Peter Bush, review panel member, on 19 June 2019.

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