



Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of The Institute of Ismaili Studies, May 2017

Section 1: Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that The Institute of Ismaili Studies (the Institute) has made commendable progress with implementing the action plan from the April 2016 [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

Section 2: Changes since the last QAA review

2 Student numbers are constant. There are currently 23 students enrolled on the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH) and 60 on the Secondary Teacher Education Programme (STEP), a total of 83 students compared with 85 at the time of the 2016 HER (AP). The Institute is in negotiations with a potential validating partner for the first two years of GPISH, which it delivers (paragraph 17), while University College London-Institute of Education (UCL-IOE) is the awarding body for STEP. The Head of the Quality Assurance and Evaluation unit came into post in August 2016 and an Academic Skills Coordinator has also been appointed. These are both new posts.

Section 3: Findings from the monitoring visit

3 Progress on the actions contained within the action plan following the HER (AP) 2016 is commendable. The Institute has completed all the actions arising from the recommendations of the review within the specified timescales. These have been evaluated and in some cases extended, further enhancing the quality of the learning experience and ensuring that the academic standards of the GPISH programme are securely fixed within *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). Good practice identified by the review continues to be maintained and enhanced through the Institute's systems for quality management.

4 The 2016 HER (AP) review highlighted four areas of good practice which have been maintained and further developed since then. The continuous dialogue with, and support for, students throughout the recruitment and admission process has been maintained and further enhanced with updated visa application guidance and the development of a webinar to assist students with their applications for visas. The Institute monitors the support for applicants as part of the post-orientation evaluation. Students confirm that the information and support provided by the Institute continues to be excellent.

5 The appointment of an Academic Skills Coordinator to deliver academic writing, critical thinking and academic English support to students enhances the student learning experience. The Institute has also appointed an Academic Skills Coordinator who provides dedicated support to students in the development of academic critical thinking, research and writing skills and guidance on assignment preparation, comprising referencing and plagiarism. The involvement of students in the planning and design of new library and accommodation facilities, which enables the appropriate development of resources, has continued. Students stated that they felt that they could contribute to the strategic decision-making processes of the Institute. The Institute's extensive and effective use

of alumni to provide support, information and guidance to all current students, which supports and enhances students' learning, continues to be developed with the introduction of software to create an online community forum for alumni and students to facilitate a dialogue between them.

6 The Institute has developed and implemented a formal moderation process for assessment tasks on the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities by the introduction of the Assessment Development Policy. Records of recent moderation demonstrate that this is rigorous, and staff feedback confirms that it is a significant improvement.

7 The Department of Graduate Studies' (DGS) Special Projects Manager has developed a formal induction and mentoring procedure for all new teaching staff. It has been internally assessed by the new Quality Assurance and Enhancement Unit and the Human Resources department, and integrated into the general induction procedures. The process includes guidelines on the appointment of a mentor and details on the mandatory Principles of Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Higher Education workshop. The workshop familiarises staff with limited teaching experience at the appropriate FHEQ level with contemporary issues in higher education teaching, tools and techniques for the classroom, and reflective practice approaches. A workshop was held in February 2017 for two recently appointed members of staff. Post workshop evaluation shows that the workshop was well received. Participants particularly appreciated the information about higher education structures, FHEQ levels, academic standards, and assessment design.

8 The Institute has revised the programme and module learning outcomes on the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities to reflect clearly and consistently the terminology used in the FHEQ at level 7. The programme learning outcomes have been revised with regard to terminology, and approved by the Co-Director. Intended learning outcomes specific to each module have been reformulated to clearly reflect the terminology used by the FHEQ for level 7. All changes to modules on the GPISH programme have been considered by a validation panel which included external academics and an alumnus member. It also confirmed alignment with the FHEQ at level 7.

9 The Institute has developed new grading criteria for the GPISH programme that relate more clearly to the learning outcomes for each module, as well as detailed procedures for developing and applying component-specific marking criteria. These have been evaluated by the programme leader and an external academic. Staff and students have been briefed on the new procedures at meetings and by email. Staff and students confirmed that the introduction of the grading criteria has enabled students, who were consulted during the development process, to understand more clearly the requirements of assessments.

10 In consultation with students currently in the role, the Institute has developed a new training programme for student representatives which was introduced in September 2016. Post-training evaluations show that the programme was considered 'excellent' or 'very good' by the trainees. The programme included outgoing representatives who shared their experience. A Student Representative Handbook contains the information provided during training and provides a reference source. Student representatives confirmed the effectiveness of the training available to them.

11 The new Head of the Quality Assurance and Evaluation Unit, who has extensive experience of UK higher education quality and standards, has formulated an Enhancement Strategy. The unit maintains oversight of all quality assurance-related activities across the Institute.

12 Potential applicants are made aware of admission requirements by means of the website, posters, leaflets and the programme prospectus, available in hard and soft copy.

Programmes are advertised globally through sister organisations, using information leaflets, electronic notice boards, mailing lists and the Ismaili student networks. There is consistency of approach for both the GPISH and STEP programmes regarding recruitment systems; however, STEP admissions are jointly managed by the Institute and the awarding body and thus have different procedures.

13 Interviews are conducted face to face for the STEP programme. The STEP interview guide is provided to recruitment staff, who must also attend a briefing meeting. The GPISH programme admissions process is managed and administered by the Institute using a two-stage review process. All applicants are interviewed either in person or via video link before offers are made. Applicants are provided with written admissions criteria and application guidelines and are given information on how to make a complaint at all stages of the application process.

14 English language competence is verified by means of external testing. For STEP an overall International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score of 7.0 is required. However, students scoring 6.5 will be considered for pre-sessional English classes at UCL-IOE. For GPISH, an IELTS score of 6.5 overall is the minimum for an application to be considered. Prior qualifications are verified through the UK NARIC database for both programmes. For the STEP programme, prior qualifications are also checked during the initial phases of the application process by the organisations sponsoring the applicants. Assessing intention and aptitude for the chosen programme is part of the interview process. Interview guidance directs interviewers to assess intention to study, as well as aptitude. The monitoring visit confirmed that admissions procedures are rigorous. In 2017 there were 82 applicants for the GPISH, of whom 11 were admitted. For the STEP programme, 27 students were admitted from 116 applicants.

15 The Institute conducts annual programme monitoring, which is robust and contributes to the enhancement of its provision. The Annual Programme Review (APR) considers the student experience, including the destination of graduates and external examiner reports, and highlights changes, innovations and enhancements. Programme data is gathered by programme leaders from faculty, support staff, documents, reports and surveys according to a template, ensuring consistency and comparability in data gathering and output. The APR also reviews the actions resulting from programme-specific action plans emerging from the previous year, and informs the action plan for the year ahead. Student feedback gathered throughout the year constitutes an essential element of the APR. A dedicated section of the report summarises and analyses student feedback from module evaluations and surveys, while another section deals specifically with student engagement. A completed APR draft is circulated to the student body and their feedback is sought via student representatives. Draft Annual Programme Reviews are sent to selected teaching staff for comment prior to approval through the Institute's quality processes. All students who met the review team were aware of the Annual Programme Review process and their role within it.

16 Retention rates on both the GPISH and STEP programmes are very good. For the STEP programme, out of 35 students enrolled in September 2015 and due to complete at the end of the current academic year, only two have discontinued, giving a retention rate of 94 per cent. All of the STEP students enrolled in 2016 are continuing and there is a 100 per cent retention rate for GPISH students enrolled in 2015 and 2016. GPISH students normally proceed to the third year of study at a UK university, where their record is excellent. All of the 13 GPISH students from the 2015 cohort gained a level 7 qualification, while 10 out of 12 of the 2016 cohort have progressed to further study. The pass rate for STEP students who completed in 2016 was 69 per cent, although a number are still continuing on the programme. The level of achievement may be improved further by the appointment

of the Academic Skills Coordinator, who staff consider has already had a positive impact on teaching and learning.

Section 4: Progress in working with the external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education

17 The Institute has mapped all of its policies and procedures against the UK Quality Code for Higher Education and the 2016 HER (AP) confirmed that the Institute meets all of the Quality Code's Expectations. For STEP, the MA Education meets the UCL-IOE's requirements for validation, and the division of responsibilities between the Institute and the awarding body is clearly specified. Validation panels for both of the Institute's programmes have external members and are informed by the FHEQ and relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. The Institute is continuing with its objective to obtain an external validation partner for GPISH, and the Co-Director confirmed that negotiations with an appropriate higher education institution, given the specialist cultural and religious focus of the Institute, are at an advanced stage.

Section 5: Background to the monitoring visit

18 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.

19 The monitoring visit was carried out by Mr Peter Hymans, Reviewer, and Professor Nicholas Goddard, Coordinator, on 4 May 2017.

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