



## Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight: desk-based analysis of Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, October 2021

### Outcome of the desk-based analysis

1 From the annual return and documentary evidence, the monitoring team concludes that Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC; the Institute) is continuing to maintain academic standards and the quality of student learning opportunities since the October 2020 [Higher Education Review \(Foreign Providers\)](#).

### Changes since the last QAA review

2 No material changes have taken place since the October 2020 review. However, the Institute completed the first year of the Dual Degree partnership with Columbia University in New York and secured approval to offer the MA Muslim Cultures on a part-time basis for those who have the right to live and study in the UK. AKU-ISMC is currently undergoing a review by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, as part of the wider Aga Khan University system.

3 The Institute currently has 20 full-time students registered on the MA Muslim Cultures, representing a 25% increase over the 15 students reported at the time of the Higher Education Review (Foreign Providers) (HER (FP)) in October 2020. There are 14 academic staff members, of whom 11 are full time. Five of the academics also hold senior management responsibilities.

### Findings from the desk-based analysis

4 The review team studied the Annual Monitoring Return, supporting evidence and supplementary documentation requested prior to the desk-based analysis. Consideration of the evidence indicated that AKU-ISMC has made progress in addressing the single recommendation to produce and implement a plan to ensure the active engagement of students in the quality of their learning experience (see paragraph 6). This confirms that the Institute continues to meet the Expectations set out in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code).

5 The 2020 HER (FP) report recommended that AKU-ISMC develop and implement a plan to ensure that students were actively engaged in the quality of their learning experience (Core practice 5). The actions originally proposed have been completed. Terms of reference for the Education Committee have been amended to include student membership, with meetings organised to ensure student participation in discussions relating to their learning experiences. For example, in one meeting students suggested that books and reading materials be provided to new students in advance of the programme start date, and staff members responded positively to their request. Student Council Representatives meet with a member of academic staff to discuss issues more frequently than was previously the case, and results are now formally minuted. All students have opportunities to attend the

ISMC Staff Forum and to participate in wider institutional conversations and activities. In the Institute's plans for 20th Anniversary Activities, all working groups include at least one student member. AKU-ISMC has yet to undertake an evaluation of the impact of the implemented actions, as it is still too early to render a valid assessment. The Institute should be better positioned to do so in the context of annual monitoring in 2022.

6 Performance data indicates that retention and progression levels remain high. Six of the seven students (86%) recruited in January 2018 successfully completed their studies in 2020. All nine students (100%) registered in 2019 obtained MA degrees in 2021. Of the 20 students currently registered on the MA programme, seven are expected to complete in 2022, when final performance data will become available; with the remaining 13 - including two students coming from the Dual Degree partnership with Columbia University in New York - expected to finish in 2023.

## **Progress in working with the external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education**

7 The Institute continues to make effective use of external reference points, including the Quality Code's Core and Common practices, the *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* and the Master's Degree Characteristic Statement (2020), to meet UK expectations for higher education.

8 The Aga Khan University (AKU), accredited by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, is the Institute's awarding body and sets regulations for the MA programme. Academic activities are monitored by the AKU Academic Council and the Quality Assurance Review Committee (QARC). An Independent Board of Trustees subjects the University and Institute to external scrutiny and provides advice. Formal periodic reviews are undertaken every five years in accordance with procedures set out in the University's Academic Quality Framework. As noted in paragraph 2, the Institute, as part of the wider AKU system, is currently undergoing a review by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan.

9 With respect to maintaining academic standards and meeting the four Core practices of the Quality Code, external examiners' reports confirm that the Institute's threshold standards are consistent with relevant national qualifications frameworks, that students have opportunities to achieve standards beyond the threshold comparable with other providers, and that assessment and classification procedures are reliable, fair and transparent. In 2021, the external examiner also confirmed that the Institute had always responded positively to the observations made (both critical and positive) during her four years of service.

10 The Institute's activities are subject to regular review and annual monitoring by QAA, as well as periodic reviews undertaken every five years by AKU. The Institute also benefits from a strategic partnership with, and external advice from, Advance HE which enables AKU-ISMC to offer accredited courses for academic staff who wish to gain Associate Fellowship HEA or Fellowship FHEA standing.

11 The Institute ensures that the eight Core practices of the Quality Code applicable to the quality of its provision, continue to be met. Admission requirements and procedures are clearly stated and made available to all interested parties in the 2022 Student Prospectus and via the Institute's website. Candidates and students have ready access to detailed programme information - including assessment requirements - in the Prospectus, Programme Specifications, and in the AKU University's Student Handbook. External examiners' reports confirm the programme to be of a high standard. The Institute recruits a sufficient number of appropriately qualified staff to deliver a high-quality learning experience, employs mechanisms for monitoring performance through appraisal and peer

review, sets out requirements for promotion, facilitates staff development through initiatives such as the Water Sustainability Project and the 20th Anniversary Working Groups, and monitors staff engagement activities. With respect to learning resources, students have access to the Aga Khan Centre library - a shared resource that maintains a significant collection of hardcopy and electronic materials, the British Library, as well as other useful resource sites. In addition, students registered on the programme have access to detailed information about each course (module), including assessment requirements, on the Institute's virtual learning environment.

12 Substantial progress has been made in engaging students in the quality of their educational experience over the past 12 months. Students are now represented in the Institute's major committees, and minutes indicate active involvement in meetings. A review of student survey results undertaken for 2020-21 indicates that questions have been added to gain more information about students' perceptions of their learning experiences, and all comments - whether positive or negative - have been recorded for each module delivered. Although detailed results have been provided, the Institute's response to general themes and issues arising have not been included. The ISMC may wish to consider matters further in the Annual Monitoring Return for 2022.

13 The Institute has clear policies and standardised procedures for complaints and appeals that apply separately to admissions, the student experience and academic integrity. Particulars are published on the website and can be easily accessed and downloaded by students, staff members and other interested parties.

14 Under the Memorandum of Understanding for the partnership with Columbia University in New York, students, have additional opportunities to gain dual degrees from the two universities: an MA Islamic Studies (Columbia) and an MA Muslim Cultures (AKU-ISMC). Operations are in the early stages but the first two students on the programme have completed their first year in Columbia and are currently undertaking their second year in the Institute.

15 The Institute supports all students to achieve successful outcomes. At the beginning of the programme, all students attend induction sessions aimed at improving academic writing and developing leadership skills. Each student is assigned to an Academic Advisor, who provides guidance to students in respect of academic and career matters. Financial assistance is available for students in need. Students also have access to counselling and career services provided by the University of Westminster.

## **Background to the desk-based analysis**

16 The desk-based analysis 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 process or review.

17 The desk-based analysis was carried out by Dr Tommie Anderson-Jaquest, Reviewer, and Dr Neil Casey, QAA Officer, in October 2021. No meetings were held with students or staff, and the conclusions presented in this report are based on the analysis of documentary evidence submitted by the provider.

**QAA2633 - R13165 - Dec 21**

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