



## Academic Standards – MA (SOAS)

1. This document describes the Institute of Ismaili Studies' (IIS) approach to setting, maintaining and ensuring appropriate academic standards for programmes delivered by the IIS which are validated by SOAS University of London (SOAS) and are benchmarked at Level 7 of the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ, 2014), resulting in Master's awards. Therefore, for the purpose of clarification for all staff and students involved in the design and delivery of validated programmes, the wording of the common descriptor for Master's degrees awarded in the UK is reproduced below. Additional key reference points are the *UK Quality Code* (expectations S1-S4) and the *Characteristics Statement for Master's Degrees* (CSMD 2015 and 2020).

### **Master's degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:**

- A systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study, or area of professional practice
- A comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship
- Originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline
- Conceptual understanding that enables the student to evaluate:
  - Critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline
  - Methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.

### **Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:**

- Deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- Demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level
- Continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and to develop new skills to a high level.

### **And holders will have:**

- The qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
  - The exercise of initiative and personal responsibility
  - Decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations
  - The independent learning ability required for continuing professional development.

All the aforementioned characteristics are also echoed in section 1.3 of the CSMD 2015 and section 2.1 of CSMD 2020, with particular attention to Category 2 characteristics (specialised or advanced study master's degrees),

2. All staff who design and deliver validated IIS programmes must demonstrate a critical and up-to-date understanding of the forgoing common descriptor, Characteristics Statement and relevant sections of the Quality Code with a view to helping students understand those programmes' threshold standards and help nurture the IIS' critical academic community.
3. Setting and maintaining threshold standards assures students of the rigour, quality and ongoing comparability of their qualification, and ensures that the academic fields in which we work are appropriately represented in the curricula we devise and creatively elaborated in the teaching and learning (including assessment) we administer.

4. **How we set threshold standards:**

4.1 The Institute's *Programme Design, Development and Approval Policy* includes clear guidance on setting threshold standards from the module or programme design phase, as well as outlining a robust process for approval. Threshold standards are thus established upon an up-to-date academic understanding of the pertinent epistemological domain and the aforementioned key reference points for Master's qualifications. Standards are consultatively and collaboratively agreed among a group of internal academic staff in the relevant field or fields **and** in consultation with external advisory academic consultants, in accordance with the principles and processes set in the *Programme Design, Development and Approval Policy*. Standards are eventually enshrined in the relevant Programme Specifications which, once internally approved, are validated by SOAS. Due regard for standards is established in the SOAS validation protocol, including pertinent external presence in the Validation Panel, while final responsibility is retained by SOAS – as established by the Memorandum of Agreement between the two institutions (MoA, para 5.4).

4.2 Detailed Module Outlines are devised according to a similar process, in which the Intended Learning Outcomes and Assessment Specifications appropriate for the UK Master's level are clearly described in all due detail. It is a requirement that internal approval panels for Module Outlines contain pertinent academic expertise from a representative of an external higher education institution in the UK who is not a member of staff at SOAS.

4.3 The multi-layered involvement of external expertise thus plays a key role in the setting of credible and secure threshold standards, as well providing reassurance that we are operating in harmony with our validating body (re QAA QC S4).

5. **How we maintain threshold standards:**

5.1 Firstly, threshold standards are maintained in collaboration with our validating body via the IIS-SOAS Joint Programme Committee (JPC), and the use of External Examiners.

- 5.1.1 The JPC meets regularly and maintains oversight on the academic quality and standards of validated programmes (MoA Appendix 2). Its composition includes IIS and SOAS representatives, as well as an External Advisor (not to be confused with the External Examiner), and student representation.
- 5.1.2 The External Examiner (EE) is appointed by SOAS following recommendations made by the IIS through the JPC (MoA 8.2.6). The EE will present a yearly report to the Exam Board, including an evaluation (and possibly recommendations or suggestions) in regard to threshold standards. Oversight on responses to EE reports will be maintained by SOAS (MoA Annex 7).
- 5.1.3 The consistent use of externality also reassures ourselves of the comparability of our degree standards with other providers in the sector. As the External Adviser and the External Examiner nomination criteria also require appropriate subject expertise, we are also reassured of the maintenance of our standards and currency at the subject level (re QAA QC S2).
- 5.2 Secondly, threshold standards are maintained internally via a range of structured processes aimed at assuring the quality and continuity of our teaching and learning (re CSMD 2020: 3.2):
- 5.2.1 All staff participating in the delivery of academic programmes are required to have relevant academic qualifications and recent experience of teaching and learning at Master's level in the UK. Where staff are new to teaching at the Master's level in the UK, or where they return to teaching at that level after a specified hiatus, they are required to attend the IIS' *Principles of Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Higher Education Workshop*, run by the QA&E unit. Such workshop may also include the collaboration of members of academic staff at the IIS who have extensive direct experience of modular and programmatic design and approval, best practice in teaching and learning (including assessment), and quality and standards assurance, and are recognised as Fellows of the Higher Education Academy.
- 5.2.2 *Additionally*, we require all internal staff involved in teaching and learning to become members of the Higher Education Academy (Associate Fellowship is the minimum level of recognition), with the expectation that they will pursue the next level of recognition, in line with their responsibilities. It is expected that most staff will have Fellowship or Senior Fellowship status. Staff is also supported in case they wish to pursue higher degrees of expertise in teaching and learning, typically by achieving a PG diploma or an MA. Staff development workshops, provided by external academic consultants, contribute to nurturing a culture of continuous professional development, external comparability, and sharing good practice.
- 5.2.3 Staff involved in teaching, learning and assessment use the following questions a guide for developing and enhancing their understanding of quality in teaching and learning at the Master's level:
- **Academic standards:** Do you make it clear what students have to do to reach the standard for Master's level on your course?

- **Assessment:** Do students regard your approach to assessment as fair and transparent? Do students understand how their marks are decided?
- **Course quality:** What do students think about the design, content and organisation of your course? What do they think about the quality of your teaching?
- **Staff:** Do students think the teaching team is able to deliver a high-quality learning experience at the Master's level?
- **Facilities, learning resources and student support:** Do students consider that your facilities, learning resources and support services are able to deliver a high-quality learning experience at the Master's level?
- **Student engagement:** Do students think that you engage them in ensuring the quality of their educational experience? Are there a variety of different ways students can engage – either on an individual basis or as a collective group?
- **Student support:** Do students feel like you support them to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes? Do students receive helpful and timely feedback on their assessed work?
- **Complaints and appeals:** Do students know how they would raise a complaint or appeal? Do they perceive those processes to be fair and transparent?

5.2.4 *Additionally*, Heads of relevant Departments, Programme Leaders, and the Head of Quality Assurance serve as mentors for staff involved in teaching and learning to ensure that they are adequately informed about setting threshold standards, the meaning of these, and the importance of maintaining them. The plenary staff meetings, co-chaired by the Programme Leaders before each term and at the end of each academic year, represent key opportunities to convene teaching staff, discuss threshold standards and provide guidance and support as needed.

5.2.5 *Additionally*, our process for the moderation of assessment titles (*re Policy and Procedures for Assessment Development*) is designed to ensure that all staff involved in teaching and learning engage critically with the process of designing individual assessment titles (i.e. questions, rubrics, etc.) to ensure that all students are given the opportunity to reach and exceed the threshold levels.

5.2.6 *Additionally*, staff involved in assessment are required to review the previous academic year's assessment performances to ensure consistency in the appraisal of students' work.

5.3 Thirdly, our *Annual Programme Review (APR)* provides a comprehensive picture of the status of all validated taught Programmes upon conclusion of a given academic year, highlighting elements of good practice and areas for improvement. The APR considers both internal (e.g. student feedback on modules) and external (EE reports) sources and once completed it is disseminated to all key stakeholders.

5.4 *Additionally*, our Periodic Programme Review (PPR) policy mandates a complete review of each programme every six years. The PPR will be conducted with the in-depth involvement of external experts, representatives from SOAS, and students.

## 6. **How we demonstrate the *attainment* of threshold standards:**

6.1 Markers provide students with an overall mark (out of 100) on their work as well as written feedback. All students' work is marked according to component-specific marking criteria which clearly describe the level expected at each grade band for a mark in that band to be awarded. Our *Policy and Procedures for Assessment Development* provides guidance on the formulation of Assessment Briefs that will enable students to understand the criteria to meet and exceed threshold standards (re QAA QC S4). Attention also is paid to the achievement of transferrable skills and other attributes pertinent to the programme objectives (re CSMD 2020: 3.1). Also for this reason, the aforementioned policy aims at ensuring varied assessment methods within and across modules.

6.2 At least one assessment component per module will be subject to second-marking and the moderation of marking. The first and second markers must confer to ensure that they share a clear and consistent understanding of their expectations of the assessment components and marking criteria, and that the latter are applied consistently. Summary records of marks moderation are retained.

6.3 *Additionally*, the *Academic Malpractice Policy* governs our process for reporting on and investigating academic malpractice (including plagiarism). Specific measures are envisaged for the prevention and detection of contract cheating. Investigations are carried on by an Academic Malpractice Committee independent of the department delivering the relevant provisions, thus supporting the IIS in establishing and maintaining rigorous standards of academic integrity.

6.4 *Additionally*, the Institute takes a pro-active stance in encouraging good academic practice and discouraging malpractice, including contract cheating, as part of the student's regular academic skills training dispensed by the Academic Support unit.

## 7. **How we *inform students* about threshold standards and *what is required of them to reach standards beyond the threshold*:**

7.1 All teaching staff help students interpret the threshold standards and the Assessment Brief for their modules through class discussion, with particular attention on how such standards can not only be met, but exceeded. In addition to that, they open and sustain dialogue about how students' learning will be assessed in line with the marking criteria and the Intended Learning Outcomes. Marking criteria descriptors are available to students with the rest of their modular documentation. These relate the criteria to the Intended Learning Outcomes, clearly specify the pass mark, describe incremental levels beyond the pass mark, and provide guidelines about failing.

7.2 *Additionally*, the Programme Leaders discuss assessment with students at orientation meetings.

7.3 *Additionally*, wherever possible, we provide students with exemplars of high-quality previous students' work.

## 8. **How we verify *reasonable comparability with other UK providers*:**

- 8.1 Our IIS–SOAS Joint Programme Committee, arrangements for external examining, and inclusion of representatives from external higher education institutions among our pool of teaching staff support us through providing valuable external insight and sharing good practice (see section 6.1).
- 8.2 *Additionally*, the Quality Assurance and Evaluation unit maintains constant awareness of standards in the sector, regularly providing information to senior managers and other key staff on recent developments and trends.
- 8.3 *Additionally*, the Institute is a QAA member, and maintains a calendar of relevant open and member-exclusive training initiatives and inter-institutional fora. All key staff is directly invited to relevant events, and all staff in general is able to attend any event.