



THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

## **Aga Khan University**

### **Setting Strategic Academic Priorities: A University “of and for” the Developing World**

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There can be no other university with a stronger sense of mission and vision than Aga Khan University – marked by its commitment to being a university originating and firmly rooted in the developing world, determined to offer educational programmes of the highest quality that are targeted towards the needs of the communities that we serve, to the solutions of their problems, to the enhancement of their wealth and quality of life, and to the strengthening of civil society. It is this vision that has attracted students, faculty and staff to AKU and that motivates us to meet the challenges and respond to the opportunities that abound in our work.

Yet, while these challenges and opportunities, driven by the pressing needs of our communities, are without limits, our capacity to respond with the necessary financial and human resources and at the rate demanded is limited. If we are to maximize our impact, we must identify a strategic framework that provides the basis for annual and longer-term academic planning – a framework that allows us to optimally match the available resources to our academic priorities.

This document represents a first attempt at providing such a framework. Although it is used in the first instance to provide a context for the 2014 academic planning cycle, it is intended to be an ever-evolving document – like living organisms shaped by natural selection – providing at the same time both continuity for planning and a structured basis for change in response to shifting circumstances and experience.

As Provost, it is my plan that this strategic update, authored in large part on the basis of my first two years at AKU, will be a first step towards a more comprehensive academic strategic plan. This plan must be the product of a thorough consultative process that actively engages all elements of the academic community.

#### **I. Touchstones or Organizing Features of AKU’s Vision**

A useful starting point to identifying strategic priorities that will shape our planning decisions is the consideration of five organizing features that capture critical aspects of AKU’s mission and vision and serve as touchstones for our plans and resource allocation.

## ***1. Four key principles***

Four key principles have long guided AKU's decisions and growth. They continue as the foundation of our strategic vision and must be reflected in our future evolution and plans.

**Quality.** At the heart of AKU's special niche is our commitment to the highest quality in all that we do. Whether in education, research, outreach or service, we can never succumb to the notion that we must accept a poorer quality because it is good enough for the developing world.

**Access.** With a commitment to quality comes higher costs; higher costs in a resource-poor part of the world. One response to this dilemma would be to offer our programmes only to those who could afford to carry these heavier costs. Increasingly, a rising middle class in the developing world is able to afford such programmes – often sending their children abroad – and would welcome their availability in their communities. This option is not open to AKU. If we are to have the impact we seek and to contribute to increasingly pluralistic and equitable societies, we must continue to find ways to provide access to those from diverse social-economic ethnic, religious and regional backgrounds. Nonetheless, this objective cannot easily be achieved simply by committing to a merit-based admissions policy because, often, economic status is associated with differences in academic preparedness that do not reflect an individual's ability or commitment but rather a systemic lack of access to quality primary and secondary education.

**Relevance.** AKU is blessed with an unusual ability to call on support and collaboration from partners who are ranked amongst the very best leading universities in the developing world. Our task, however, is to strive to be a university not only located in but, more importantly, that is *for* the developing world. Our educational programmes, research, outreach, and service must be relevant to future leaders in the developing world, to solving its particular problems and promoting the stability, health, wealth and civility of its communities. Although our international partnerships are invaluable, they must never tempt us to uncritically transplant programmes from other parts of the world, no matter how great the status or reputation of their sources. Moreover, even within AKU's various geographical locations, we must reflect local conditions, cultures and traditions at the same time that we strive to harmonize our programmes across AKU.

**Impact.** Without impact on the communities we serve, quality, access and relevance are for naught. One might argue that, if one focuses on the former three principles, impact will inevitably follow. Although there is undoubtedly some truth to this argument, mechanisms explicitly designed to maximize the effect of our educational programmes, our research and our service will hasten and ensure the impact we seek.

### *The inter-relationships of these four principles*

Increasingly, we must do more than pay lip service to these principles. Even if they are to a degree guiding the structure and nature of our programmes, we must also commit to providing demonstrable evidence that we are achieving quality, access, relevance and impact. We must model evidence-based practice in all that we do - both to inform our own internal management decisions and to be accountable to all of our various communities: our Chancellor, board, students, funders and the people of the communities we serve.

We must also be aware that a focus on only one or a subset of these principles can lead to a violation of others – our task involves a difficult balancing act. A blinkered commitment to quality, for example, runs the risk of restricting access for those who do not bring an elite academic background to the classroom; in contrast, an overly enthusiastic focus on access could lead to a lowering of standards and expectations in order to accommodate students who are ill prepared for the rigors of a high quality programme.

## ***2. A single, global, comprehensive university***

AKU has deliberately chosen to work as a single, integrated university with multiple campuses in numerous countries on several continents. In so doing, we have rejected alternative models: for example, one campus clearly central and dominant – a spoke-and-wheel or mothership-satellite organization – or a model in which the university name serves as little more than a loose umbrella for a number of autonomous campuses.

We have made this choice because it offers outstanding opportunities for collaboration, synergy, programme harmonization, exchange, and common standards and services and that would be impossible or much more difficult in another model. The single integrated university also provides an opportunity to reduce redundancies by building on a distributed network of services and programmes that works against the inefficiencies of scale inherent in a relatively small university with geographically disparate sites.

In addition to becoming a single integrated university, we are committed to the exciting path of becoming truly comprehensive in our activity – a marked turning point in the evolution of AKU. Having established itself as setting the highest standards of education, research and service in health care and education, the university has now embraced a future featuring comprehensive programmes whose roots are firmly embedded in the liberal arts and sciences tradition. This new direction is based on the recognition that the next leaders of the developing world must both be provided with the very best technical skills in their professions and be well grounded in the arts, humanities, social sciences and sciences. Such grounding is essential if they are to act as the critical thinkers, problem solvers and ethical leaders who can address the pressing problems of their communities and help realize their potential.

The transition to a comprehensive university involves not only the creation of a Faculty of Arts and Sciences but also a visibly increased emphasis on the liberal arts and sciences in other programmes. Currently, this is most evident in the design of our new medical and nursing programmes in East Africa and in the establishment of graduate professional schools in a range of relevant domains, beginning with the new Graduate School of Media and Communications. It is worthy to note that the proposal for an integrated arts and science/nursing and medical programme originated with the academic plans for the Faculty of Arts and Sciences in Karachi.

## ***3. Research-led + student-centred***

From its founding, AKU has been conceived as a university whose academic programmes and service are informed and enhanced by an active commitment to research. This commitment not

only reflects a valuing of research for its own right but also a belief that the active involvement of faculty and students in research and scholarly activity enriches the educational process by demanding active engaged learning and an understanding and practice of complex reasoning and problem solving.

Experience around the world has taught us, however, that universities who embrace a research-intensive model often do so at the expense of the quality of educational programmes where teaching and learning takes a back seat to research and scholarship by faculty. AKU, then, must deliberately support and encourage research by our faculty while at the same putting the highest value on a student-centred environment where we strive to provide our students with the very best experience. AKU must have no place for faculty who see teaching as a less important aspect of their responsibilities. We can quite reasonably strive to create a teaching and learning environment that rivals that of any university in the world.

#### ***4. An integral element of the Aga Khan Development Network***

The term “unique” is perhaps overused when describing AKU. Yet, its place as an element of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is one characteristic that most certainly does justice to this adjective. We operate within the context of one of the world’s foremost development organizations whose scope encompasses health, education, community development, revenue generating economic enterprise, and culture. This environment provides a level of potential that even the most successful universities in the world can envy but cannot replicate. AKU must do much more to exploit the opportunities provided by the AKDN in our educational, research and service activity. Moreover, we must also embrace our role in the Network to be what the Chancellor has described as “AKDN’s intellectual turning plate.” That is, we must actively seek roles with our sister AKDN agencies where our academic and scholarly resources support, extend and enhance AKDN’s activity and impact.

## **II. Key Action Elements of a Strategic Plan**

Irrespective of the potential power of the features of AKU’s vision articulated in the previous section, its realization depends on the effectiveness of our decisions and actions and the extent to which they serve our mission. Thus, the term “touchstone” was chosen to reflect that the university’s plans and those of its constituent entities, as well as our annual and longer-term resource allocation decisions, will be directly shaped by these points of reference.

In this section, an effort is made to identify action themes and some of the key directions in which the university will invest in this and future planning cycles.

### ***1. Towards an integrated, comprehensive university***

As AKU developed campuses beyond our starting place on Stadium Road in Karachi, programmes evolved that often paid little attention to ensuring a harmonization with existing programmes in the same discipline. In some cases, this tendency has continued and been exacerbated by the growth of the new campuses. Thus, for example, some masters programmes

in the same discipline in East Africa bear little more resemblance to those in Pakistan than one might expect between two independent universities. This trend raises a number of issues: it begs the question of the nature of an AKU degree; it limits the opportunity for student and faculty exchange; it makes impossible the notion of a single programme offered on two campuses; and it precludes the synchronies that might be otherwise achieved. This list could go on.

Future plans and initiatives must reverse this trend: deans and academic directors are encouraged to include in their plans actions that will better realize the potential of a single integrated AKU. Such initiatives might include steps to harmonize programmes or offer single programmes across campuses but need not be limited to this direction.

## ***2. Building a liberal arts and sciences core***

Most of AKU's existing programmes were developed before the university had clearly articulated its commitment that all our programmes should include a substantive component based on our belief that all AKU graduates, irrespective of their discipline, should be firmly grounded in the study of the arts, humanities, social sciences and sciences. Future activities at AKU and within its programmes should better reflect this commitment.

## ***3. Quality of the student experience: academic programmes, extra-curricular activities and student support services***

The creation of AKU's SE\_net, TL\_net, QAI\_net, and BDL\_net is based on the recognition that the university must offer a strong and full student experience, spanning not only our academic programmes and classroom experience but also the experience and support we offer our students in all aspects of their lives while at AKU. We have a long way to go to achieve our goals in these domains; students on some of our campuses have even less access to certain services than others. The success of our networks is entirely dependent upon the active engagement and commitment of our academic entities. Deans and academic directors are encouraged to work with the directors of the networks on innovative initiatives that will contribute to AKU's goal of offering all of our students the quality of student experience necessary for them to reach their academic and personal goals in their time with us.

## ***4. Research-led but reflecting AKU's mission***

From its creation, AKU has sought to build the research base necessary to legitimately claim the label "research-led university" – but we have a ways to go.

Deans and academic directors must continue to identify and support initiatives that promote AKU's research and scholarly success. A number of considerations would be kept in mind:

- In many of our entities, it is critical to identify and invest in those individuals with the potential to be top-notch researchers and scholars. Not all members of faculty have the skills, training and aptitude necessary to succeed here. Nor is it appropriate or practical that each individual fulfill the same profile of responsibilities across the domains of teaching, research, service and academic leadership/administration.

- We must recognize and support the full range of scholarship and research that comprises a comprehensive university: the investigation of basic mechanisms as well as applications of knowledge; the science of teaching and learning and of clinical and educational practice; and research and scholarship that spans the health sciences, natural and biological sciences, professional domains, and all areas of the arts, humanities and social sciences.
- We cannot do everything well. It is critical, therefore, that all entities identify specific areas of priority in research and scholarship that will be the targets of particular strengthening and support, not only currently but over years to come. Some progress has been made in identifying such areas of priority in the health sciences; parallel areas of priority need to be identified in all disciplines. A particular effort should be made to identify some areas that are trans-disciplinary, requiring engagement of research expertise from multiple entities and disciplines at AKU and from our partners.

### ***5. Partnerships and collaboration***

AKU does not strive to rival other universities in its scale; our vision is to remain a relatively small university whose impact comes through its diversity and unwavering commitment to quality. Our impact, however, can be greatly multiplied if we take advantage of the unrivalled opportunities for collaboration with our many partners.

Academic plans should reflect innovative initiatives that see AKU's educational, community outreach and research activity diversified and enlarged through partnerships with our sister institutions within AKU, with our partner universities in the developed world and, increasingly, through partnerships with other universities in the developing world.

### **III. Concluding Remarks**

This document's first function will be to form the context of the 2014 planning cycle. Submissions from deans and academic directors should reflect the elements outlined here. This expectation will be especially true in the allocation of incremental funding during the planning process but should also be seen in decisions made regarding the allocation of existing resources within the entities.

Second, this *Strategic Update* will serve as a starting point for a broader academic strategic planning process to be initiated later in 2014. We will ensure a process that includes discussion of its content and input from the broad academic community to contribute to a refinement and elaboration of the *Update* into a more comprehensive academic plan.