

Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education

Annual Report 2023

March 2024

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For questions about this report, please email secretariat@qef.is

Glossary and Abbreviations

Board	Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education
QC	Quality Council for Icelandic Higher Education
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Also known as European Standards and Guidelines.
EUA	European University Association
IRIS	Icelandic Research Information System
IWR	Institution-Wide Review
LÍS	National Union of Students in Iceland
Ministry	Icelandic Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation
QEF	Quality Enhancement Framework
QEF1	First cycle of the Quality Enhancement Framework (2011-2017)
QEF2	Second cycle of the Quality Enhancement Framework (2017-2024)
QEF3	Third cycle of the Quality Enhancement Framework (2024-2029)
RA	Reflective Analysis
REAC	Research Evaluation Advisory Committee
SLR	Subject-Level Review

Abbreviations of the Icelandic universities

AUI	Agricultural University of Iceland
BU	Bifröst University
HU	Hólar University
IUA	Icelandic University of the Arts
RU	Reykjavík University
UI	University of Iceland
UNAK	University of Akureyri

Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education

Mission and principles

Mission

Safeguarding the standards and enhancing the quality of Icelandic higher education and research.

Six Principles

- 1.** Acknowledging the primary role of autonomous higher education institutions in managing and enhancing the quality of their core activities.
- 2.** Committing to the continuous enhancement of the learning experience for all students in an inclusive way.
- 3.** Involving students as partners in the learning process and as active participants in the quality assurance and enhancement of their learning.
- 4.** Anchoring QEF in the Icelandic context while maintaining an international perspective.
- 5.** Promoting a partnership with all Icelandic stakeholders while retaining the independence of the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education.
- 6.** Embracing transparency as an explicit value of an open consultative process.

Introduction

This annual report presents the main activities of the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education (Board) in 2023, a year characterised by continuity and the successful completion of the second cycle of QEF activities across the Icelandic higher education sector. 2023 has also, significantly, been a year of intense consultation and preparation for the developments in the QEF that will be implemented from May 2024 when QEF3 formally launches.

Building on the activities that took place in previous years, the second cycle of Institution-Wide Reviews (IWRs) concluded with the publication of the review report for the Agricultural University of Iceland and of the follow-up review for the for Bifröst University. Institutional visits and stakeholder meetings were all completed as planned, and the QB maintained its processes of monitoring the ongoing internal quality assurance activities of the sector, supporting REAC and the work of the Quality Council. Formal advisory work with the Greenlandic sector and Ministry concluded in mid-2023, although the QB will informally continue to offer some formative support for the developments that are now being taken forward in Greenland. 2023 was always identified primarily as a year of reflection and review. The Board started the review of QEF2 in late 2022 and this continued in 2023. A survey sent to all stakeholders was analysed by an independent consultant and a second external expert was also commissioned to review the QB documentation, processes and operation (including direct observation of QB meetings and private discussions with stakeholder groups). This part of the external consultation also included specific consideration of the alignment of the QEF with current and likely future expectations in the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality in Higher Education. All of this feedback, along with QB's own reflections and observations, has led to extensive development and numerous changes to be implemented in QEF3 from 2024. The second half of 2023 has therefore been characterised by an intensive period of activity by the Secretariat, supported and guided by Board members, in redrafting materials, further review of process, as well as ongoing consultation and communication in relation to these changes.

Several changes have taken place in the Board membership during 2023. Dr Andrée Sursock stood down as Chair from the Board in May, and Professor Crichton Lang took over the position of Chair. Professor Ellen Hazelkorn finished her term of Board membership in September, and Professor Philip Winn in November. The expertise of all three of these Board members will be greatly missed and their contribution to QEF2 (and to the shaping of QEF3) cannot be overstated. We have, however, been fortunate to have recruited some excellent new Board members (see Annex 1) and look forward to working with them in the coming years. We were also very pleased in February to welcome Liv Teresa Muth as our new international student member and she has already made very significant contributions to our work. Grateful thanks are also due to both Dr Ólöf Sigfúsdóttir and Þorgerður Edda Hall for continuing in their complex and varied roles so effectively in what has been a very demanding year for the Secretariat.

In closing, the Board wishes to thank the Quality Council, LÍŚ, the Rectors' conference and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation for their confidence in, and their contribution to, our work. We look forward to our ongoing dialogue with the sector, and the future deployment of QEF3 as a tool for the continuing development of Icelandic universities.

Crichton Lang
Chair, Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education

The strategy and the rolling action plan

The Board adopted a strategy for the period 2019 – 2024, with the following priorities:

- To ensure that the Quality Enhancement Framework secures the standards and improves the quality of Icelandic higher education
- To promote the independence, competence and professionalism of the QB
- To enhance the QB's national and international reputation

An associated action plan was developed, with key performance indicators and milestones. The action plan is on track, apart from two items, which were noted in previous annual reports. The Quality Board postponed its application for full membership of ENQA until the QEF3 cycle (2024 onwards). The launch of a Quality Board newsletter is under reconsideration.

As one of its first priorities, the Quality Board committed to ensuring that moving into the third cycle, the QEF continued to evolve in a timely and appropriate manner. To this end, the steering committee established in 2022, and chaired by Crichton Lang as the QB chair elect, continued to work throughout 2023. The committee was tasked to oversee the evaluation of QEF2 and included representatives from the Board, the Research Evaluation Advisory Committee, the Quality Council and the National Union of Students in Iceland (LÍS). Two independent experts were commissioned: Howard Davies to analyse the results of the survey on QEF2 and Achim Hopbach to provide comments on the extent to which the second edition of the [Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education \(Handbook\)](#) complies with the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education](#). Their analyses proved to be important in shaping QEF3 and helped to shape further consultation with key stakeholder groups in relation to the main changes in the QEF being proposed.

Other operational tasks in 2023 included the implementation of a new records management system and a rebranding of the Quality Board to be utilised at the start of QEF3

QEF2

The four main components of QEF2 are discussed below. They include Subject-Level Reviews (SLR), Institution-Wide Reviews (IWR), Annual Meetings and the activities of the QC.

2023 SLR

The Subject-Level Reviews (SLR) are the responsibility of the universities. The *Handbook* defines their focus as

all forms of provision, including, for example, taught, research, full-time, part-time, distance learning and work- based provision... any provision for which the institution is responsible that is undertaken in collaboration with any other institution or partner, either national or international... and also cover the main areas related to the management of research

Furthermore, the *Handbook* notes “The Board monitors whether reviews at the subject level are carried out, if they are robust (i.e., use an evidence-based methodology that stands up to scrutiny), are constructive, are in line with the HEI's strategy and lead to enhancement”

The following SLR reports were completed in 2023:

- University of Iceland:
 - School of Education, Management of Research
- University of Akureyri:
 - Nursing
 - Occupational Therapy

- Hólar University:
 - Rural Tourism
 - For Aquaculture and Fish Biology, the deadline was extended until Spring 2024
 - For Equine Studies, the deadline was extended until Spring 2024

2023 IWR

No IWRs took place during the year as the cycle came to an end, with 2023 as a year of reflection and review of the QEF. However, with site-visits taking place at the end of 2022, the IWR report for the [Agricultural University of Iceland](#) (AUI) and the follow-up review report for [Bifröst University](#) (BU) were published in 2023

Year-on Reports for the [Iceland University of the Arts](#), the [University of Akureyri](#) and the [University of Iceland](#) were submitted by the universities and published, as well as the Mid-term Progress Report for [Reykjavík University](#).

2023 Annual meetings

University	Board Representative	Timing
Agricultural University of Iceland	Ellen Hazelkorn	September
Bifröst University	Crichton Lang	September
Hólar University	Riitta Pyykkö	September
Icelandic University of the Arts	Philip Winn	November
University of Akureyri	Riitta Pyykkö	November
Reykjavík University	Ellen Hazelkorn	September
University of Iceland	Philip Winn	September

Annual meetings were organised in all seven universities and agendas agreed in advance with the universities. Agendas generally included strategic developments in the universities, their current QEF-related activities such as the outcomes of the previous IWR, any SLRs undertaken during the year or planned for the following year and the Year-on and Mid-term Progress Report, as appropriate. The Annual meetings also provided an opportunity for the universities and the Quality Board members to exchange information and ensure that the Board remains current and knowledgeable about developments in Icelandic higher education.

Quality Council

The QC is an essential partner of the Board and continued to play a prominent role in the success of the QEF. Its membership includes the senior staff with responsibility for quality and standards from all Icelandic universities, as well as two representatives of Icelandic students (see Annex 3 for a list of QC members in 2023). The QC Chair attended all QB Board meetings as an observer (withdrawing when individual universities were discussed).

The QC met 10 times in 2023. In addition to the ongoing dialogue and sharing of resources, focus areas of the QC were on reviewing QEF2, developing processes for joint degrees and reinforcing the quality culture within the university sector in Iceland, e.g. by organising webinars and workshops. The QC held two on-line workshops during the year, one on *Quality Management in HE*, led by Dr Katrín Frímansdóttir, Director of Strategy and Quality at the University of Iceland, and the other on *Enhancing Student Retention in Higher Education*, led by Dr Dimitrios Vlachopoulos, Associate Professor of Management Education at Rotterdam School of

Management, Erasmus University. The QC contributed significantly to the development of QEF3, through critical discussions and workshops with the Secretariat and the Board.

Commissioned work

In 2022, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation (hereafter the Ministry) commissioned the Board to undertake a follow-up review of Police Studies at the University of Akureyri. The site visit took place in November 2022 and [the review report](#) was published in February 2023.

The Greenlandic Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Church commissioned the Board to continue to support the development of internal quality assurance processes in Greenlandic higher education institutions. In 2023, activity included a visit to Nuuk, where the QB Chair, Executive Director and the Quality Manager of Akureyri University met with representatives from the local institutions and the Ministry to discuss ongoing development of the project. Follow-up meetings were held online.

The Research Evaluation Advisory Committee (REAC)

REAC is an advisory committee of the Quality Board that met four times in 2023. It maintained its primary mission to support the evaluation of research management in the universities while also providing a sectoral forum for wider discussions of research-related matters. The committee has representation from all seven universities, the doctoral research community and the Science and Innovation Council, with an additional membership of the Project Manager of Research Services and Open Access from the National and University Library of Iceland. Their recruitment to REAC is particularly important because a significant part of REAC's discussions this year have continued to relate to the development and roll-out of the Icelandic Research Information System (IRIS) across all universities and relevant research institutes. The full development of IRIS will be a significant advance in the ability of Icelandic universities to manage and highlight research activity across all disciplines. REAC is planning a webinar for 2024, *Making the Most of IRIS – how it will showcase your work locally and internationally*. The webinar is not a training package – these will be developed as part of the IRIS roll-out – but rather a conversation across the sector about the opportunities offered by IRIS. REAC has also continued to take an interest in the national conversation about the societal impact of research outside academia. It has developed tools and approaches that might aid in collecting and curating the societal impact of research and which are being piloted by all universities. This work will continue to be part of the agenda of the committee through 2024 (for the REAC membership, see Annex 2.)

Communicating with the sector and partners in Iceland and abroad

The Quality Board views maintaining a dialogue with its partners and stakeholders as one of its most important responsibilities. Such dialogue facilitates an appropriate level of engagement with Icelandic stakeholders and keeping abreast of Icelandic policy developments that are relevant to the QB's work. Meetings are formally scheduled within the QB's annual cycle of activities, but additional meetings were also scheduled as required, for example in relation to consultation on the emerging proposals for QEF3. Similarly, the QB strives to stay connected with European and international developments in quality assurance and higher education to make sure that its work continues to support the Icelandic higher education sector.

Reaching out to Icelandic partners

The Board met regularly with its Icelandic partners to discuss issues of mutual interest and to update the sector on the work undertaken during the year:

- Rectors' Conference
- QC (the QC chair also sits on the Board meetings and the QB staff on the QC meetings)
- LÍS
- Representatives of the Ministry

Reaching out beyond Iceland

Reaching out internationally is essential to a quality assurance body. It provides invaluable opportunities to benchmark and learn from others, and to lend the Quality Board's unique expertise.

The Quality Board has been an affiliate member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) since 2018. ENQA is the body that represents quality assurance organisations from the European Higher Education Area (www.enqa.eu). The Executive Director attended the ENQA Members' Forum in Tbilisi in April and the ENQA General Assembly in Dublin in October. The Executive Director also attended NOQA's (the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education) annual meeting in September, hosted by the Danish Accreditation Institution. Lastly, the Executive Director participated in a conference in Nuuk in November, organised by the University of the Faroe Islands and the Ministry of Children and Education, on the Faroe Islands' upcoming application for membership in the European Higher Education Area. On behalf of the Board, the Executive Director gave a lecture on *Quality Assurance in the Context of Bologna/EHEA: an example from Iceland*, in addition to participating in a one-day workshop on IQA with staff at the University of the Faroe Islands. As noted above, representatives of the QB and of the Icelandic sector also visited the Greenlandic Ministry and higher education institutions in May.

The Annual Conference

The 2023 annual Board conference titled *Making the Most of Online Provision* took place at Hótel Kriúnes in May with approximately 80 attendees. The conference included three keynotes: Michael Gaebel, director of the Higher Education Policy Unit, European University Association, Belgium, on *Institutional strategy for digitally enhanced learning* (online), Martha Caddell, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, Scotland, on *Inspiring digital-based learning, community & collaboration: Opportunities and challenges*, and Birgitta Ásbjörnsdóttir, student in BA Media and Communication at Bifröst University and representative of the National Union of Icelandic Students (LÍS) on *The Icelandic students' experience of online learning and recommendations for improvement*. The keynotes were followed by two parallel discussion groups on enhancing the quality of online provision, one on student and staff issues and the other on institutional and national issues. The conference programme ended on a plenary discussion chaired by Crichton Lang, Chair of the Board.

Concluding remarks

The annual report is an occasion to identify emerging issues, but in 2023 this has been embedded within the more extensive and lengthy review of the whole of the QEF2 cycle. As noted earlier, the changes being planned are extensive and are too numerous and detailed to expand on in this report.

Throughout that review of QEF2 the Board noted the growing maturity of the internal quality processes in Icelandic universities and, beyond that, the extent to which the QEF had now

become truly embedded in and embraced by the sector as a whole. We would also note that at the end of QEF2 all seven universities have positive outcomes in their external quality assessments, further supporting the QB's confidence in the maturation of internal quality assurance and the QEF in Iceland. Feedback on the success of including the quality of research management within QEF2 was unequivocally positive as was a stated desire to also incorporate the quality of the management of societal engagement in QEF3 and in doing so extend quality review to all aspects of university missions.

The Quality Board therefore views the extent of the planned changes in QEF3 in a wholly positive sense. These do not reflect in any way a deficit in earlier cycles, but rather reflect the positive changes that have been generated through QEF1 and QEF2 and build on these in ways which will bring the greatest value and utility to the sector while at the same time recognising the changing expectations, policies and educational landscapes operating in Iceland, across Europe and internationally.

We look forward to working with all of our stakeholders in the coming years to ensure an effective and impactful third cycle of the QEF.

Annex 1: Quality Board Membership

Andrée Sursock, Chair (until May), Senior Adviser, European University Association (EUA)
Crichton Lang, Chair (from May), Former Vice-Chancellor and Principal, University of the Highlands and Islands
Liv Teresa Muth (from February), PhD student in Industrial Biotechnology, Ghent University
Ellen Hazelkorn (until September), Joint Managing Partner, BH Associates, Joint Editor, Policy Review in Higher Education
Elsa Núñez (from September), President of Eastern Connecticut State University
Riitta Pyykkö, former Vice Rector, University of Turku
Philip Winn (until November), Research Professor, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow
Vaka Óttarsdóttir, observer, representative of the Quality Council
Alexandra Ýr van Erven, student observer, representative of the National Union of Icelandic Students
Lilja Margrét Óskarsdóttir (from September), student observer, representative of the National Union of Icelandic Students

Annex 2: Research Evaluation Advisory Committee Membership

Philip Winn, Chair (until November), Research Professor, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow
Piergiorgio Consagra, Doctoral Student, University of Iceland (nominated by the National Union of Icelandic Students)
Christian Schultze, International Relations and Research Manager, Agricultural University of Iceland
Elín Díana Gunnarsdóttir, Pro-Rector, University of Akureyri
Finnborg Salóme Steinþórsdóttir (until September), Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Iceland
Anna Bergljót Gunnarsdóttir (from November), Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Iceland (nominated by the Rectors' Conference). Alternate: Gabriel Marc Marie Jouan, Postdoctoral researcher, Reykjavik University.
Halldór Jónsson, Director of the Division of Science and Innovation, University of Iceland
Anna Guðrún Edvardsdóttir, Research Manager, Hólar University
Sigrún Lilja Einarsdóttir (until September), Associate Professor, Bifröst University
Kasper Kristensen (from September), Research Manager, Bifröst University
Hulda Stefánsdóttir, Dean of Academic Development, Iceland University of the Arts
Kristján Kristjánsson, Director of Research and Information Technology, Reykjavík University
Margrét Helga Ögmundsdóttir (until May), Chair of the Science Committee of the Icelandic Science and Technology Policy Council
Sara Stef. Hildardóttir, Project Manager of Research Services and Open Access, National and University Library of Iceland
Skúli Skúlason, professor, Hólar University (nominated by the Quality Council)

Annex 3: Quality Council Membership

Agricultural University of Iceland	Guðmunda Smáradóttir, Director of Quality and Human Resources.
Bifröst University	Lyðía Geirsdóttir, Quality Manager
Hólar University	Edda Mattíasdóttir, CEO
Iceland University of the Arts	Sóley Björt Guðmundsdóttir, University Office Director, Human Resources and Quality Manager
Reykjavik University	Guðrún Ragna Hreinsdóttir, Quality Manager
University of Akureyri	Vaka Óttarsdóttir, Director of Quality and Human Resources (Chair)
University of Iceland	Katrín Frímansdóttir, Director of Strategy and Quality
National Union of Icelandic Students	Alexandra Ýr van Erven, President Lilja Margrét Óskarsdóttir, Quality Officer

Annex 4: Secretariat

Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir, Executive Director
Þorgerður Edda Hall, Senior Adviser

Annex 5: Calendar of meetings and events

February	Board meeting, Reykjavik REAC meeting, Reykjavik Board Meets with the Rectors' Conference Secretariat meets separately with the quality leads of all the universities
March	Chair and Vice Chair meet with the QC
April	ENQA Members' Forum, Tbilisi Board meeting, online Chair meets with the QC
May	Board meeting, Reykjavik REAC meeting, Reykjavik Board meets with the QC QB Annual Conference
June	Secretariat staff visit to FINEEC, Helsinki Greenland steering committee meeting, online
August	Board meeting, online
September	Board meeting, Reykjavik

REAC meeting, Reykjavik
External evaluator (Achim Hopbach) observes Board and REAC meetings and meets with stakeholders
Board meets with Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation
Board meets with the Quality Council
Board meets with the Rectors' Conference
Annual meeting of Board representative with Reykjavik University, Bifröst University, Hólar University and University of Iceland
NOQA Annual Meeting, Holbæk
ENQA General Assembly, Dublin

October

Workshop with the QC on QEF3

November

Board meeting, Reykjavik
REAC meeting, Reykjavik
Annual meeting of Board representative with Iceland University of the Arts and Akureyri University (online)