

A GUIDE FOR BOARD MEMBERS AND PROSPECTIVE MEMBERS

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ABBREVIATIONS

General abbreviations

Board	Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education
Council	Quality Council for Icelandic higher education
ENQA	European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Also known as European Standards and Guidelines.
ESU	European Student Union
INQAHEE	International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
IWR	Institution-Wide Review
MESC	Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Iceland
LÍS	The National Union for Icelandic Students
QEF	Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF1 and QEF2 refer to the first and second rounds, respectively)
REAC	Research Evaluation Advisory Committee
SLR	Subject-Level Review

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

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Purpose of this guide:** Membership of the Board brings with it significant responsibilities and demands on high-level professional expertise. It provides exciting opportunities for engaging with both the diverse higher education community in Iceland and the stimulating environment of the international membership of the Board itself. This Guide offers a brief overview of the context and functions of the Icelandic Quality Board for Higher Education (the Board) together with a description of the role and responsibilities of Board members. It is written primarily for Board members, particularly new members and those considering possible appointment to the Board.
- 2 History of the Quality Enhancement Framework:** The Board was established by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (MESC) in 2010 and tasked with the design and subsequent implementation of a framework for the management of standards and quality in Icelandic higher education (see below for further details). The resulting Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), widely discussed with the Icelandic higher education community, was approved by MESC and implemented from session 2011-2012.
- 3 European and international QA benchmarks:** While focused on the Icelandic context, the QEF is designed to be consistent with the requirements set forth for membership to the European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA), which are embodied in the 2015 edition of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. The *Guidelines of Good Practice (2007)* of the *International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)* and other international good practice have also been integrated into QEF. The international membership of the Board provides a firm foundation of international benchmarking to the entire QEF.
- 4 Scope of QEF:** The QEF embraces all higher education institutions in Iceland, public and private, and all levels of higher education provision, undergraduate and postgraduate. Annex 1 provides a background of Icelandic higher education, for purposes of further orientation.
- 5 The foci and approach of the QEF** are the effectiveness of the management of the quality of the student experience and the enhancement of that experience; the security of the standards of awards; and the effectiveness of the management of research. In this context, 'standard' refers to standards of awards and degrees, and 'quality' refers to quality of the student learning experience. The Board supports the autonomous universities in Iceland in enhancing the quality of their provision, securing the standards of their awards and managing their research activities. The Board also provides the sector, Government, the public and the wider international audiences with information on the quality and standards of Icelandic higher education.
- 6 The Board is independent** in its operation and works within the legal and policy framework of Iceland and also within its own remit set by the Government. The Board is governed by a constitution, available on its website¹. While a brief outline of the QEF follows below, full

¹ <https://gef.is/assets/PDFs/Others/Quality-Board-Constitution.pdf>

information on the QEF is provided in the *Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education* (2nd Edition, 2017).²

- 7 The term of Board members**, including the Chair, is normally six years. All members and the Chair are appointed by MESC. The Board, through its Chair, makes recommendations to MESC regarding suitable candidates for possible membership including the chair.
- 8 The student member and observer:** The Board includes an Icelandic student who is nominated by LÍS, the national student body in Iceland. The term of the student Board member is normally two years. There is also a place on the Board for a student observer. At its discretion, LÍS may involve the European Student Union (ESU) in these activities. The student member will normally be a 'senior' student (undergraduate or postgraduate) with representational experience, ideally both at class level and faculty or institution level.
- 9 The Board members**, with the possible exception of the student member, are drawn from outside Iceland. Every effort is made to recruit international members from a variety of different countries. Because of the range of Icelandic higher education activities and relationships, this will normally include Scandinavia, the UK and the USA, but much depends on the skills and experience of the individuals concerned. The non-student members will normally be senior academics with significant experience of managing academic portfolios and student affairs. They will be expected to have significant experience in quality assurance and enhancement and normally to have worked in national and international contexts. The overall Board membership is composed with a view to balance of gender, countries, broad discipline areas and types of university.
- 10 The Chair of the Quality Council** (see paragraphs 17-19) attends meetings of the Board but withdraws when any individual university is being discussed; this is also the case for the Icelandic student member and observer.
- 11 The Board Secretariat** coordinates the work of the Board. The Secretariat has an important role in supporting the Chair in strategic and operational planning, agenda preparation, drafting of minutes, documents, etc. Further, the Secretariat has a vital liaison and communication role with the sector, with and through the Quality Council (see paragraphs 17-19), and with LÍS, rectors and Ministry officials. In the absence of the Chair, the Secretariat serves as the Board's representative in the country. In addition, the Secretariat undertakes all administrative tasks related to the Board's work, including members' travel arrangements, managing the budget, arrangements associated with meetings and circulation of papers, etc. The Secretariat is currently housed at the National Library.
- 12 The working language** of the Board is English and all formal Board documents are written in English. Where possible and appropriate, documents are also provided in Icelandic.
- 13 Board meetings:** The Board meets three to four times a year. Normally the schedule of meetings for a given year is determined in the early autumn of the preceding year, with input from members. On rare occasions, additional meetings will be scheduled if discussion

² For the full text of the Handbook, see <https://qef.is/assets/PDFs/Others/QEF2-Handbook-for-website.pdf>

of pressing matters arising cannot wait until the next regularly scheduled meeting. Meetings either take place in Iceland or as video conferences.

14 Honorarium and expenses: Board members receive an honorarium for each day of meetings, whether they take place in Iceland or online. For meetings in Iceland, Board members receive a *per diem* to cover expenses for each day of meetings in addition to days travelling to and from Iceland. Hotel and full travel expenses are paid to and from Iceland, and also for any internal travel involved in the course of undertaking Board duties.

THE RESEARCH EVALUATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

15 The Research Evaluation Advisory Committee (REAC) is an advisory committee to the Board. REAC is chaired by a Board member, and each university is represented by one member. Also included in REAC's membership are the Chair of the Science Committee of the Icelandic Science and Technology Policy Council, a representative of the Quality Council, a doctoral student and a postdoctoral researcher. The Board Chair and Secretariat may also attend meetings of REAC as observers.

16 Activities of REAC: REAC meetings are normally scheduled the day after a Quality Board meeting. The main responsibilities of REAC are to support the evaluation of research management, the development of research information and the development of research assessment within the QEF while ensuring continued focus on enhancing students' learning experience. More information on REAC is available on the Board website³.

THE QUALITY COUNCIL

17 The Quality Council (the Council) is a sister body to the Board. The Council includes in its membership the senior staff member with responsibility for quality and standards from all the Icelandic universities together with two Icelandic student representatives from LÍS. The Board Secretariat and a senior Ministry official also attend meetings of the Council as observers.

18 Activities of the Council: The Council meets approximately monthly to share matters related to managing quality and standards – challenges and successes – and to undertake joint development work in areas of shared interest. In general, the Council is a vital resource for sharing both problem areas and good practice in quality enhancement. The Council runs its own seminars and workshops as well as events run jointly with the Board. More information on the Council is available on the Board website⁴.

19 A productive partnership between the Council and Board is fundamental to the success and future development of the QEF. The Board Secretariat serves as liaison to the Council. It works with Council members to ensure the success of the Institution-Wide Reviews and flags any issue that universities are encountering with the schedule of their QEF-related activities such as SLRs, follow-up reports, etc. It keeps the Board abreast of national higher education developments. As appropriate, Board members are expected to support the

³ <https://gef.is/about-us/reac/>

⁴ <https://gef.is/quality-enhancement-framework/quality-council/>

Council in its work. Joint meetings of the Board and the Council are held at least once a year.

PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

20 A set of fundamental principles govern the entire QEF, including all Board activities:

- Independence
- Partnership working
- Involvement of students
- Enhancement
- Icelandic and international perspectives
- Transparency of operation

The *Handbook* provides further discussion of these principles.

21 Values and conflict of interest: In bringing their talents to the Board all members are expected to uphold those principles as well as such values as mutual respect and avoiding all conflicts of interest. On appointment to the Board, all members are required to declare absence of any conflict of interest with any Icelandic university or related organisation. During the time of a member's appointment it is not permissible to undertake any activities on behalf of any Icelandic university or related organisation, paid or unpaid. Board members, Secretariat staff, and observers are expected to leave the Board meetings when topics are discussed that involve a possible conflict of interest. Participants in Board meetings are requested to disclose any conflict of interest when meeting agendas are adopted.

BOARD RESPONSIBILITIES IN RELATION TO EACH QEF ELEMENT

22 The main elements of the QEF are:

- Subject-level Reviews – an institutional responsibility
- Institution-wide Reviews – a Board responsibility
- Annual meetings between Board members and each university
- Council-led enhancement workshops and activities
- *Ad hoc* Special Board-led reviews

Full information on each of these elements is provided in the *Handbook* (pp. 12-24) and on the Board website⁵. The Board is at the heart of the QEF and has overall responsibility for the QEF *Handbook* which brings all the individual elements together.

23 Subject-level Reviews (SLRs): These reviews cover teaching, learning, assessment, and research management. These are directly the responsibility of each university. The Board ensures the following aspects: all subject areas are covered; there is a reasonable schedule for completing them over the cycle; externals are involved; and information on the outcomes of each review is published. These reviews cover the security of standards, the

⁵ <https://gef.is/quality-enhancement-framework/>

enhancement of teaching and learning and the management of research. SLR Reports form an important part of the evidence to Institution-Wide Reviews.

24 Institution-wide Reviews (IWRs): These reviews cover how the university manages and enhances the quality of the students' learning experience, how it safeguards the standards of awards, and manages research activities. In the resulting review report, two confidence judgments are made. One judgment is about the university's management of quality, and the other about its safeguarding of standards (see paragraph 26 below). Commentary is also provided on the university's management of research.

25 The Board responsibility in relation to IWR: IWRs are the responsibility of the Board, although the Board members themselves do not participate directly in the review activities. It is the responsibility of the Board to select and appoint the IWR Chair and team members, all drawn from outside Iceland. The Board is responsible for the training of review team members. On behalf of the Board, the Secretariat oversees the efficient administration of each IWR and, normally, acts as secretary to the IWR Team. The Board reviews the IWR reports and is responsible for finalising them prior to publication.

26 Confidence judgments: In the event of a confirmed 'limited confidence' judgement, it is the Board's responsibility to agree a Follow-up Action Plan with the university and to monitor the implementation of that Action Plan. As described in the *Handbook* (p. 23), this would be done in consultation with the Ministry. In the event of a confirmed judgement of 'no confidence', the Board would agree with the Ministry the required follow-up action.

27 Appeals and complaints: In cases where a university disagrees with a judgment of limited or no confidence and wishes to appeal that judgment, the Board is responsible for implementing the Appeals mechanism described in the *Handbook* (p. 25). It is also possible for a university to file a complaint in case it is dissatisfied with any aspect of the review or with any aspect of the QEF operation.

28 Follow up to the Institution-wide Reviews: Each university is required to produce and publish a 'year-on' report one year following the publication of the IWR Report. The Board is responsible for ensuring that this is done and that the Follow-up Report is published. A Board member will discuss the Follow-up Report with the university (see Annual Meetings in Annex 2).

29 Annual Meetings: Each Board member is allocated to a university for the purpose of these meetings, which take place every year, normally on dates adjacent to Board meetings. They are intended as a relatively informal exchange of information regarding developments in the management and enhancement of quality in the university, including outcomes and follow-up to recent SLRs. The Board member will also provide updates on Board activities and related matters. As appropriate, the agenda will also include discussion of the year-on follow-up report. A note of each Annual Meeting is kept on file (Annex 2 provides a full description of the Annual Meetings).

30 Mid-term Progress Report and the annual meetings: Some three years following the completion of an IWR, each university will undertake a Mid-Term Review independently, resulting in the submission of a Mid-term Progress Report, which is largely a stocktaking

exercise. On this occasion the Board member responsible for the Annual Meeting at that university will be accompanied by a member of the IWR Team (normally the Team Chair) who undertook the most recent review of that university. A formal note is prepared of this meeting and published.

31 Ad hoc Special Board-led Reviews: Occasionally the Board may be asked to undertake a special review of a particular aspect of higher education provision in Iceland. Such a request (e.g., to undertake a review of distance/open learning) might come, for example, from the Ministry or from the sector. It is for the Board to decide whether to agree to such requests, which, if undertaken, are resourced directly by the commissioner. Once the terms of reference are agreed, the Board acts independently in carrying out and reporting on such a review. Board members would be expected to contribute as appropriate to a special review. It is anticipated that these reviews will continue to be infrequent.

32 Liaising with stakeholders: Board members are expected to participate in meetings and events with a range of stakeholders including:

- the Ministry and its officials;
- the Rectors, individually and collectively through the Rectors' Conference;
- the Quality Council;
- student associations and LÍS, the national student body;
- employers and civil society stakeholders.

33 Evaluating the QEF: The Board is responsible for undertaking regular monitoring and evaluation of all its activities, sharing publicly the outcomes of such evaluations at least annually. In addition, it undertakes a formal evaluation of the entire QEF at the end of each cycle, involving significant externality, and abides by the review cycle required to maintain ENQA membership. All Board members are expected to contribute to the design, implementation and analysis of such evaluations.

AND FINALLY...

34 This Guide provides a rather brief overview of the main activities of Board members. The details can all be found in the *Handbook* and associated *Guidance Notes*. The Board is a vital forum for sharing contacts, good practice, and the extensive international experience that it embodies. This is at the heart of what Board members are expected to bring to the QEF and at the core of almost every Board meeting.

ANNEX 1: SOME FACTS ABOUT THE ICELANDIC HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

The Icelandic Higher Education system operates in accordance with Icelandic laws and regulations, including the Higher Education Act (63/2006)⁶, the Act on public higher education institutions (85/2008)⁷, the National Qualification Framework for higher education (regulation 530/2011)⁸, regulation on Quality Assurance of Teaching and Research (1368/2018; in Icelandic only)⁹, regulation on Doctoral Studies in Higher Education Institutions (37/2007; in Icelandic only)¹⁰, regulation on the procedure of the Board of Appeal for Higher Education Institution students' complaints (1152/2006; in Icelandic only)¹¹, and regulation on the Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions (1067/2006; in Icelandic only)¹².

A noteworthy feature of the Icelandic higher education system is that accreditations are awarded by subject. If a university seeks accreditation, it must first apply to that effect to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The Ministry then commissions an external body to assemble a group of subject experts who evaluate the application, conduct a site visit, and make a recommendation regarding the unit's fitness to offer degrees in that subject. The expert group makes a recommendation to the Minister of Education, Science and Culture, but the Minister is not bound by that recommendation when making his decision.

In the academic year 2017-2018, there were approximately 19 000 students enrolled at the seven Icelandic universities, of which four are public and three are private. Both types of university receive block funding from the government per student based on the same funding model. Private universities can charge tuition, whereas the public universities cannot. The Icelandic Student Loan Fund (a government agency), sets a limit to students' annual loans. That cap tends to be close to what the private universities actually charge.

- Public universities:
 - University of Iceland (UI); est. 1911; approximately 12,400 students
 - University of Akureyri (UNAK); est. 1987; approximately 2,400 students
 - The Agricultural University of Iceland (AUI); est. 2005; approximately 200 students
 - Hólar University (HU); est. 2006; approximately 120 students
- Private universities:
 - Reykjavík University (RU); est. 1998; approximately 3,000 students
 - Bifröst University (BU) est. 1988s; approximately 580 students
 - Icelandic University of the Arts (IUA); est. 1998; approximately 500 students

All universities offer undergraduate and Master's level degrees. UI, UNAK and RU offer doctoral degrees, and AUI offers doctoral degrees through resource sharing with UI's

⁶ <https://eng.menntamalaraduneyti.is/media/MRN-PDF-Althjodlegt/Higher-Education-Act-no.-63-2006nytt.pdf>

⁷ <https://eng.menntamalaraduneyti.is/media/MRN-PDF-Althjodlegt/Act-on-Public-Higher-Education-Institutions-no-85-2008---amended-2010.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.stjornartidindi.is/PdfVersions.aspx?recordId=8bfec154-2168-4de8-9170-4b19cf11d7c3>

⁹ https://qef.is/assets/PDFs/Others/Rules-pertaining-to-quality-assurance-of-teaching-and-research-in-higher-education-no-1368_2018.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.stjornartidindi.is/PdfVersions.aspx?recordId=9e43f819-38e4-4bc4-9466-e77ce98015ae>

¹¹ <https://www.stjornartidindi.is/PdfVersions.aspx?recordId=2e55c0dd-f482-4f07-8143-3e4edc393908>

¹² <https://www.stjornartidindi.is/PdfVersions.aspx?recordId=9dc4f819-3423-45d1-9ca1-e48a773d793e>

Graduate School. Professors from Hólar also supervise doctoral students, but those matriculate at UI. No formal distinction is applied to Icelandic universities in terms of research/teaching intensity or pure/applied science focus.

Although the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (MESC) is directly responsible for public universities by law, it does not play a significant role in their daily activities. The private universities operate in accordance with performance and funding agreements that are re-negotiated every few years. MESC reports that approximately 2/3 of the income of the HEIs comes from government funding. Annual expenditure per student in Iceland is comparatively low compared to OECD countries, notably to other Nordic nations. The latest available data from 2016 suggest that Icelandic expenditure per student is approximately 94% of the OECD average, and 69% of the Nordic average. It should be noted, however, that the Icelandic krona is quite a volatile currency, which makes comparisons over time difficult.

The government also runs various research and innovation funds that provide additional funding on a competitive basis. For example, the Icelandic Research Fund (annual budget = 17,6 million GBP) almost exclusively awards grants to university-based researchers (see Hermannsson 2017 for further details)¹³.

¹³ Hermannsson, K. (2017) Higher Education Systems and Institutions, Iceland. In: Shin, J. C. and Teixeira, P. (eds.) Encyclopedia of International Higher Education Systems and Institutions. Springer. ISBN 9789401795531 (doi:10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1_371-1)

ANNEX 2: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO ANNUAL MEETINGS

About Annual Meetings

All universities have an annual meeting with one or more representatives of the Board. This meeting is designed to facilitate the free exchange and updating of information between the Board and each university and allows the Board to maintain a current appreciation of the developments and challenges within each university. The outcomes of SLRs are shared at these meetings together with discussions of progress made in taking forward the outcomes of previous IWRs.

The Annual Meetings usually occur around the Spring meeting of the Quality Board, which is generally in May. Normally, the group in attendance from the university will include: the Rector; the senior member of staff responsible for managing the quality system; staff responsible for chairing key university committees and units; and student representatives. The Secretariat supplies note takers for each annual meeting.

Usually, the same member will attend annual meetings with the same university(ies) during the cycle. To avoid any conflict of interests, that Board member will not take part in confirming the judgements following that university's IWR.

The meetings normally last up to half a day – but can be longer by mutual agreement. The Annual Meeting to consider the Mid-term Progress Report lasts one full day, and a member of the IWR Team (normally the Chair) will join that meeting.

Agenda

The agenda for the Annual Meeting is agreed in advance. It is normally structured in two parts – the first, a relatively informal mutual updating, and the second, focused on the activities related to QEF that were undertaken in the previous 12 months (e.g. any SLR, mid-term review, etc.). A sample agenda includes the following points:

1. An overview of recent developments in the university and discussion of current issues
2. A discussion of developments in Board matters
3. An update from student representatives on student-related quality matters
4. A discussion of each of the SLRs completed since the previous Annual Meeting
5. Additional possible agenda items can be agreed upon in advance through discussions between the Board Secretariat and the university's Quality Manager

Beyond this, the specifics will depend on the timing of the meeting with respect to other activities related to QEF:

- a. In the year (or two) in advance of a university's IWR, discussion on planning for the IWR would be appropriate (although this can be an item for discussion at any Annual Meeting at the discretion of the university).

- b. The Annual Meeting that takes place approximately one year after the publication of the most recent IWR will incorporate the Year-On Report in the agenda.
- c. The Annual Meeting in year three or four following the publication of the most recent IWR will incorporate the Mid-term Progress Report following up developments foreshadowed in the IWR process. A member of the IWR Team (normally the Chair) will join the meeting.

Documentation and records

In general, there is no requirement for the universities to produce any documentation or papers specifically for these meetings. Exceptions to that are the Mid-term Progress Report and the 'Year-on Report'. It may be that the university would wish to share existing papers or documents for information with the Board representatives, but this is not a requirement. The Secretariat can provide *ad hoc* translations of these documents if they are supplied in Icelandic only.

Following the Annual Meeting, a file note will be made by the Board of the topics discussed. This is purely for Board information and to assist in planning the next annual discussion. These file notes will not form part of any formal record and will not be available to IWR Review Team members. The file note will be shared with the university. The file note will have the following structure:

- Meeting date
- List of those attending from Quality Board
- List of those attending from university
- Brief description of meeting agenda
- Brief coverage of discussions of most important strategic issues facing university (normally no more than 100 words)
- A list of 3-5 bullets describing instances of Good Practices noted during the meeting (ideally no more than 50 words per bullet)
- A list of 3-5 bullets describing Points of attention noted during the meeting (ideally no more than 50 words per bullet) to be followed up in subsequent annual meetings