



Quality Board
for Icelandic Higher Education

INSTITUTION-WIDE REVIEWS IN QEF1

Sigurður Óli Sigurðsson

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Acronyms

AUI	The Agricultural University of Iceland
BU	Bifröst University
HU	Hólar University
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
IUA	Icelandic University of the Arts
IWR	Institution-Wide Review
RU	Reykjavík University
SLR	Subject-Level Review
UNAK	University of Akureyri
UI	University of Iceland

Glossary

ESG 1.x	Reference to Standards 1-9 found in Part 1 of ESG
QEF	Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education. QEF1 refers to the first cycle of the Framework (2011-2015). The QEF1 Handbook is available at: http://www.rannis.is/media/gaedarad-haskola/Handbook_complete_1558767620.pdf

1. Introduction – on QEF1 reviews and the Icelandic higher education landscape

1.1. The scope of this paper

This paper examines the reports produced during 2011-2015 as part of the first round of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF1) in the seven universities in Iceland. QEF envisaged three types of reports:

- University-led Subject-Level Reviews (SLR): reports on unit-level reviews conducted as part of the universities' internal quality assurance.
- Board-led Institution-Wide Reviews (IWR): reports of external quality assurance reviews that concluded with judgements on standards of degrees and awards; and quality of student learning experience.
- University-led Year-on-Reports: reports on progress made in internal quality assurance, submitted one year after the publication of a Board-led Institution-Wide Review.

This paper analyses specifically the IWRs through the lens of the ESG. That is, headline outcomes from IWRs were coded in terms of which Part 1 ESG Standard they pertained to. More details on QEF1, the three types of reports, and the coding methodology are found below.

1.2. The Icelandic higher education landscape

In calendar year 2015 (the last year of QEF1), there were approximately 18,500 students enrolled at the seven Icelandic universities, of which 64% were female; the average age of all students was slightly over 26.

By law, there can be only one form of higher education institution: a university. No formal distinction is applied to Icelandic universities in terms of research/teaching intensity or pure/applied science focus. There are four public universities and three private universities in Iceland, and both types of university receive block funding from the government based on the same funding model, which is mostly based on student number. Private universities are not-for-profit, but can (and at present time, do) charge tuition fees, whereas the public universities cannot. The Icelandic Student Loan Fund (a government agency), sets a limit to students' annual loans for tuition fees. That cap tends to be close to what the private institutions actually charge.

Public universities:

- University of Iceland (UI); est. 1911; approximately 13,000 students
- University of Akureyri (UNAK); est. 1987; approximately 1,700 students
- The Agricultural University of Iceland (AUI); est. 2005; approximately 300 students
- Hólar University (HU); est. 2006; approximately 150 students

Private universities:

- Reykjavík University (RU); est. 1998; approximately 3,200 students

- Bifröst University (BU) est. 1988; approximately 450 students
- Icelandic University of the Arts (IUA); est. 1998; approximately 450 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 Graduate School. Professors from HU also supervise doctoral students, but those matriculate at UI. 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 with MESC every few years. Approximately two-thirds of the income of the universities comes from government funding. Annual expenditure per student in Iceland is comparatively low compared to OECD countries, notably to other Nordic nations.

In order to provide context to the Icelandic Higher Education landscape, it bears mentioning that the Icelandic economy was severely affected by the global economic crisis of 2008. As a result, public funding of higher education was reduced drastically. One illustration of that fact is that in 2014 (towards the end of QEF1), funding per university student in Iceland was approximately 65% of the OECD average, and approximately 50% of the funding per average Nordic student. That is particularly revealing, as Iceland has historically aspired to keep up with the Nordic average. It should be noted, however, that the Icelandic krona is a volatile currency, which makes comparisons over time difficult.

1.3. QEF1 Reviews

The Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education (Board) is the only recognised Quality Assurance body in Iceland. The Board developed and implemented the first cycle of its Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education (QEF1) in 2011-2015. QEF1 involved IWRs of all seven universities. Universities submitted Reflective Analyses to the Board, followed by a site visit of a review team composed of four or five international experts and an Icelandic student member. After the site visit, the review team submitted an IWR Report to the Board, which the Board subsequently published in its entirety. All IWR reports concluded with judgments on two facets of university management: standards of degrees and awards (standards); and quality of student learning experience (quality). The judgments were based on the examination of institutional governance structures and processes related to securing standards; the use of external reference points and benchmarks; design approval, monitoring, and review of programmes, induction, appraisal and development of staff; assessment of students; information management; and public information.

Five of the seven universities received judgments of 'confidence' for management of both quality and standards in QEF1, whereas one university received 'limited confidence' on management of standards and one received 'limited confidence' on management of quality. Following the submission of action plans to alleviate the concerns that led to judgments of 'limited confidence', and on the basis of evidence of clear progress in addressing these concerns, both universities had their judgments subsequently upgraded to 'confidence'. The Board then published reports on the process of alleviation of 'limited confidence' for both universities.

One year after the publication of the IWR report, a university submitted a Year-on Report. This report detailed progress made on issues identified in the IWR, as well as any new developments in the institutional management of quality and standards. In order to maintain continuous engagement with

the universities, a representative of the Board also met with university leadership and student representatives in Annual Meetings. The agenda of these Annual Meetings included updates from the Board, university and students, as well as discussions about recent Subject-Level Reviews (see below). Year-on Reports would be discussed in the Annual Meeting immediately following their submission.

Prior to QEF1, there was little history of formal internal quality assurance in Icelandic universities. The universities had all undergone re-accreditation in 2007-2008 as stipulated by the Higher Education Act of 2006. The Higher Education Act was also the first piece of legislation to mandate internal quality assurance mechanisms. In order to support the universities in developing and institutionalising those mechanisms, the Board included SLRs in QEF1. SLRs are university-led self-reviews at a unit level (department/faculty) that culminate in a report that was submitted to the Board according to a pre-agreed schedule. SLRs were not made public and served only as a form of reporting to the Board on the internal quality assurance of the universities. In total, the seven universities submitted 54 SLRs in QEF1, of which approximately half were submitted by UI. Universities had considerable freedom in how they determined the division into academic units for purposes of SLR, but there was a clear mandate that all academic programmes in a given university had to be covered. In SLRs, an academic unit appointed an SLR team with staff and student representation to write a reflective report on the unit's management of standards and quality. There was also a requirement for the involvement of an international peer expert in the SLR. The peer expert had the dual roles of providing expertise and support to the SLR team, as well as verifying that the review was done with fidelity and in line with QEF1 requirements. SLRs were submitted as part of the evidence base for Reflective Analyses in QEF1. However, there was limited opportunity to include them in IWRs for universities that were reviewed early in the cycle. For example, the first university to undergo institutional review in QEF1 had not completed any SLRs at the time of its submission of a Reflective Analysis.

2. Analysis of IWR Reports and Year-on Reports: Themes and trends

All IWR Reports (with the exception of RU, the first Report in the cycle) concluded with bulleted lists in two areas: commendations and recommendations. In order to provide an overview of good practice and identify sector-wide challenges, these bullets were collated, and then coded using the ESG (2015) Part 1 classification scheme. The bullets for RU were extracted from the main text of the Report and its Year-on Report. It should be noted that one bullet could belong to more than one ESG heading. For example, the recommendation bullet "Resolving the mismatch between the aspiration to raise admission standards and the need to strengthen academic support for non-traditional entrants" was coded as pertaining to both ESG 1.4 ('student admission, progression, recognition and certification') and ESG 1.6 ('learning resources and student support').

The following Chapter provides an overview of some of the key themes emerging from IWR reports in QEF1. The themes were first identified by content analyses of the explicit commendations and recommendations found at the end of IWR Reports. This is followed by a content analysis of Year-on Reports, along with progress reporting on the various action items listed in the Year-on Reports. This chapter concludes with some additional themes that emerged from reading the body text of all reports.

2.1. Content analyses of commendations

In total, 83 commendation bullets were extracted for all seven universities reviewed in QEF1. Table 1 (below) shows the number of bullets pertaining to each ESG coding category.

Table 1: Number of IWR Commendations by ESG Part 1 Standard

ESG Part 1	Number
1. Policy for quality assurance	0
2. Design and approval of programmes	3
3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	24
4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	2
5. Teaching staff	6
6. Learning resources and student support	17
7. Information management	1
8. Public information	2
9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	6
10. Cyclical external quality assurance	0
Not coded	31
Total	92

Interestingly, no bullets were coded as pertaining to ESG 1.1 on ‘policy for quality assurance’. The reason for that is that bullets were only considered to pertain to ESG 1.1 if they explicitly referred to a quality policy or elements of a quality policy as stated in ESG 1.1. Twenty-four commendation bullets were coded as pertaining to ESG 1.3 on ‘student-centred learning’ (ESG 1.3) and seventeen as pertaining to ‘learning resources and student support’ (ESG 1.6). Other ESG standards had considerably fewer instances.

It was not possible to code a large number of diverse bullets using the ESG classification such as those touching upon the broad context or specific types of institutional activities, such as:

- The extent to which the University’s research output has been raised, in accordance with the University Policy;
- The seriousness with which the University plays its role in serving national needs in Iceland;
- The institution’s willingness to take advantage of the range of collaborative support mechanisms being developed through NPUI (Network of Public Universities of Iceland).

More details on the items that did not fit the ESG can be found in Section 2.3 below.

2.2. Content analyses of recommendations in IWR Reports

In total, 88 recommendation bullets were extracted for all seven universities reviewed in QEF1. Table 2 (below) shows the number of bullets pertaining to each ESG coding category.

Table 2: Number of IWR Recommendations by ESG Part 1 Standard

ESG Part 1	Number
1. Policy for quality assurance	9
2. Design and approval of programmes	14
3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	14
4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	8
5. Teaching staff	12
6. Learning resources and student support	14
7. Information management	9
8. Public information	0
9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	9
10. Cyclical external quality assurance	0
Not coded	22
Total	111

The distribution of recommendations was more even across ESG standards in Part 1 than what we found for commendations. Twelve to fourteen bullets were coded as pertaining to ‘design and approval of programmes’ (ESG 1.2); ‘student-centred learning’ (ESG 1.3); ‘teaching staff (ESG 1.5); and ‘learning resources and student support’ (ESG 1.6). Eight to nine bullets pertained to ‘policy for quality assurance’ (ESG 1.1); ‘student admission, progression, recognition and certification’ (ESG 1.4); ‘information management’ (ESG 1.7); and ‘on-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes’ (1.9). No recommendations were coded as pertaining to ‘public information (ESG 1.8)’. As was found for commendations, a large number of recommendations could not be fit into the Standards in Part 1 of the ESG.

2.3. Thematic analysis of items that were not codable according to Part 1 of ESG: Commendations and recommendations

As mentioned above, a large number of commendations and recommendations could not be fit into the Standards in Part 1 of the ESG. To provide an analysis of these items for both commendations and recommendations, a thematic analysis was carried out for all bullets were not coded. The following themes emerged from this analysis:

1. Mission and vision. This category contained bullets related to how realistic and appropriate the missions and visions of the universities were, and if they were connected to regional and/or national needs. This category also included some key actions to support the missions of the universities, such as establishing a Graduate School to support the research mission.
2. Commitment to enhancement and engagement with External Quality Assurance Process (EQA). This category contained bullets related to honesty of Reflective Analyses and the fidelity of the SLR process, as well as the university community’s engagement with the site visit review team in IWR.

3. Ethos and resilience. This category contained bullets related to the commitment of the university community to its mission and vision, as well as references to resilience and resourcefulness in the wake of the economic crisis.
4. Management Team. This category contained bullets related to the commitment and management qualities of upper management.
5. Governance and role clarity. This category contained bullets related to the fitness of purpose of governance structures, and the clarity of the remits of various governance bodies.
6. Strategy and action planning. This category contained bullets related to the existence, relevance and execution of strategic plans and actions plans.
7. Documentation and formalisation of policies, procedures, and processes. This category contained bullets related to whether policies, procedures and processes were documented and if so, fit for purpose.
8. Outreach. This category contained items that specifically mentioned outreach as part of a recommendation or commendation.
9. Research. This category contained a bullet on research that did not fit any of the definitions above.

In total, 31 commendation bullets and 25 recommendation bullets were coded according to this taxonomy. It should be noted that a given bullet could be classified as having more than one theme. For example, the recommendation bullet “The need for an approach to leadership that ensures a more coherent institutional culture and effective strategic planning” was coded as pertaining to both ‘Governance and role clarity’ and ‘Strategy and action planning.’ Table 3 (below) shows the number of commendations that were coded in accordance with each of the nine categories listed above.

Table 3: Number of IWR Commendations and Recommendations by Theme

Thematic Analysis	Comm.¹	Rec.²
Governance and role clarity	1	10
Strategy and action planning	1	5
Documentation and formalisation of policies, procedures, processes	0	6
Mission and vision	12	1
Commitment to enhancement and engagement with EQA	5	1
Ethos and resilience	6	0
Outreach	1	1
Management team	2	0
Research	0	1
Not coded	3	0
	Total	
	31	25

1. Comm: commendations

2. Rec: recommendations

The most common theme in commendation bullets was 'Mission and vision' with twelve instances, followed by 'Ethos and resilience' and 'Commitment to enhancement and engagement with QEF' with six and five instances, respectively. The most common theme for recommendations was 'Governance and role clarity' with 10 instances, followed by 'Documentation and formalisation of policies, procedures and processes', and 'Strategy and action planning,' QEF' with six and five instances, respectively. As is perhaps to be expected, the most common themes in commendation bullets hardly register as themes in recommendation bullets, and *vice versa*. Overall, Icelandic universities are commended for having missions and visions that are appropriate and fit well in the national higher education landscape. For lack of a better word, the universities appear to have found their 'niche.' On the whole, the university communities also were characterised as buying into the mission and vision of their institutions. However, formal structures and mechanisms to actualise and support the mission and vision of the universities were found to be largely underdeveloped.

3. Summary and discussion

This report analysed the commendations and recommendations from IWR reports for all Icelandic universities in the first cycle of the QEF. Some of the themes and trends that emerged from the analysis were that institutional reviews tended to focus at a fairly high-level on the management of the university, as evidenced by the large number of commendations and recommendations that were not easily coded according to Part 1 of ESG. Most notably, the thematic analyses revealed that while the universities had missions and vision statements that matched their aspirations and ethos very well, they struggled to actualise and support their missions through proper and formal strategic and action planning.

IWR reports also focused heavily on student-centred learning, teaching and assessment, as well as internal quality mechanisms dedicated to support, develop and ensure appropriate qualifications of teaching staff. A number of other themes and trends emerged from the reading of IWR reports and follow-up reports. For instance, there was often role confusion in governance, which was in part a consequence of stipulations in the legal framework on universities in Iceland. The universities were recurrently praised for the seriousness with which they engaged with the QEF, and the IWR review process in particular. Action plans frequently lacked specificity on key elements of a proper action plan, and benchmarking activities varied considerably. Finally, a heavy reliance on sessional staff was noted across the sector.

The results of the thematic analysis give a clearer picture of high-level institutional management of QA in Icelandic universities than was gained from using the taxonomy in Part 1 of ESG (2015). That is, the ESGs do not address leadership, governance and management issues. The ESGs are also silent on the need for universities to respond to society and manage their research activities. All of these are aspects of university quality management that are of considerable interest to society.

As the first QEF cycle ended in 2015, it is not particularly surprising that the 2015 version of ESG was not always a good fit for the themes that emerged from institutional reviews conducted in 2011-2015. The 2015 version of the ESGs also focuses squarely on learning and teaching and is designed to serve the needs of both programmatic and institutional reviews. One could therefore expect a gap in the ESG related to overall governance issues and institutional management.

In concluding, it should be noted that this analysis represents a methodology for QA agencies to possibly measure their operations against the ESGs. This analysis, and others like it, may also contribute to an evidence base to inform future revisions of the ESGs. In particular, they may shed light on whether it will be helpful for the next ESGs to include considerations of governance and management; research outputs and impact; research management; and third mission.