



Institutional Review Year-on Report for Reykjavík University

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Contents

Introduction	2
Overview of developments.....	2
New charter for RU	2
Measuring teaching quality	3
Development of learning outcomes	3
Restructuring of IT systems	3
Specific issues from report	3

Introduction

In accordance with section 72 in the Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education, this Year-on Report for Reykjavik University is written to inform about developments at Reykjavik University (RU) and how the University is responding to issues noted in the Institution-level Review (IR) Team's report.

Reykjavik University would like to express its gratitude and support for the quality enhancement process in general and the Institution-level review in particular. The process of preparing for the review, by producing the Reflective Analysis, was highly informative and useful. Even before the review team's visit, it had started serving as a guide for further development within RU. The Review Team then confirmed issues identified in the Reflective Analysis, identified additional points for improvement and provided specific suggestions for how the University could proceed. Over the last year, these results have all been discussed at different levels of governance at RU; from general staff meetings to Executive Committee meetings as well as at the RU Board of Trustees. This whole process has been very valuable and the University strongly supports the continued quality enhancement effort led by the independent Quality Board.

The aim of this report is to directly address the points made in the Institution-level Review Team in their report. Needless to say, many other efforts are under way in the development of the university, but those are not addressed here.

The report is structured in two parts. We first give a brief overview of developments that relate to more than one point in the report, so as to avoid repetition. We then address the issues identified in the report, one by one. The issues are numbered with reference to the section in which they appear.

Overview of developments

This section outlines recent developments at Reykjavik University that relate to the issues identified in the Review Team Report.

New charter for RU

The Executive Committee has led an effort to review and update the charter for Reykjavik University. This has led to a greatly improved charter that addresses a number of issues identified in the institutional review process. Among those are:

- Student representation on councils and committees
- Organization of councils and committees within schools
- Responsibilities of deans, schools, Rector, Executive Committee and Board of Trustees when it comes to quality management
- Annual assessments and reports

The new Charter has already been approved by the Board of Trustees and is being implemented.

Measuring teaching quality

The RU Curriculum Council is leading an extensive effort to develop new ways to measure the quality of teaching. Significant effort has gone into identifying best practices at other institutions and that information is being used to develop a set of key measures along with necessary supporting measurement tools. The intent is to cover the quality of the preparations, the organization of the courses, the teaching methodology, the assessment methods, the student experience and innovation in teaching.

Development of learning outcomes

RU Teaching Affairs and Registry is leading an effort to ensure continued development and use of learning outcomes. This is done through a number of different mechanisms, including education about learning outcomes, direct support with the development and use of learning outcomes, and active surveillance of the status of learning outcomes of different programmes and courses.

Restructuring of IT systems

Information technology is constantly under development, but three key changes are underway that are relevant here. The first is the strengthening of the Information Technology Services unit. The second is the establishment of a new document management system called CoreData. The third is an extensive overhaul of IT systems for teaching, in particular the student management system, so as to ensure easy access to required data both directly from the system and through data warehousing.

Specific issues from report

Issue 1.a

Quote: "As already acknowledged, the Board of Trustees has played an important part in creating that focus. The Board may nevertheless wish to consider whether it would now benefit from diversification, by recruiting members with, for example, a research background or an international perspective and by seeking a better gender balance."

Response: The gender balance of the Board of Trustees has steadily been improving as opportunities for replacing members have arisen. The current Board of Trustees is made up of 6 men and 4 women. With the new charter, a smaller board of directors takes over the traditional board role; the new board has 3 men and 2 women. It is also stated in the new charter that a representation of industry, academia and administration should be enhanced. Furthermore, it is also noted in the charter that deans of the schools within RU and the head of the Student union are to be present at meetings of the Board of Trustees. As far as other development of the Board of Directors and the Board of Trustees, work is underway to decide how the structures and work of the Board can be organized, so as to provide the best support and oversight for the University.

Issue 2.1.a

Quote: "The University recognises that some aspects of students' education, such as internships, would benefit from more formalised methods. For example, while standards among the Schools are said to be 'similar,' there is not yet a framework in place that could provide evidence of reasonable consistency. As another example, the Curriculum and Research Councils are both relatively new, and the travel of documents and issues is not always clear; for instance, how and by which groups the findings of the previous accreditation reports are used has not been fully sorted out."

Response: Quality management is being formalised more and more. The quality handbook of RU is currently under revision with special emphasis on synergy in enhancement throughout the whole university. Two key aspects are the overhaul of regulations and processes, in parallel with improved technology to support and enhance processes. The following key developments are worth noting:

- New document management system in place (CoreData)
- Progress being made on setting and reviewing policies
- New Charter provides a foundation for clear responsibility and serves as the basis for regulations and processes.

Issue 2.1.b

Quote: "In particular, the lack of clear definition of dual and joint degrees represents a potential threat to RU's ability to safeguard its standards; the review team encourages the University to develop policies that are in line with international practice and that ensure that students who earn two degrees do significantly more academic work than students who earn a single degree and that dual and joint degrees are subject to the same quality assurance mechanisms as RU courses and programmes."

Response: Some progress has been made in this area, but further development is needed. Unified rules for undergraduate studies provide the basis for how degrees may be combined and processes for new programs provide a certain framework for double and joint degrees. However, further development is needed and the Executive Committee and Curriculum Council will work together to develop university-wide policies for all of these aspects:

- Major/minor degrees
- Combination of degrees
- Double degrees
- Joint degrees

Issue 2.1.c

Quote: "As the Curriculum and Research Councils mature and the institution re-consider the position of Provost, RU is advised to consider whether they have the appropriate amount of authority over the various issues that come before them."

Response: The new Charter significantly strengthens the Curriculum and Research Councils, both by formally defining them in the Charter itself and by clearly stating their roles. The Charter specifies what issues must be brought to each Council and what role each Council has in the development of processes and maintaining the quality of education and research at RU. The final decision-making authority still rests with the Rector, Deans and the Executive Committee, but they have a clear role in all key concerns that impact academic work or quality standards.

Issue 2.1.d

Quote: "Going forward, the University will benefit from more centralised and formal processes for the management of quality, while maintaining flexibility appropriate to the different disciplines and allowing for creativity."

Response: The new Charter defines a framework that is aimed at finding this balance between centralised processes and flexibility. In essence, quality assurance is rooted in each School where the primary impact is on the quality the student experience, standards of degrees and research productivity. The Schools, however, are required to provide regular information, reports and reviews on their programmes that are specified and scrutinized by the Executive Council and Rector. Furthermore, the Rector is responsible for an annual quality assessment for the Board of Trustees and external stakeholders. This framework is not sufficient for ensuring consistent and comparable quality management for all programmes and Schools, but it does provide the foundation on which the quality control mechanisms are based on.

Issue 2.3.a

Quote: "[The university] may also find it useful within the next few years to develop a centralized capacity to regularize data gathering, store and be able to mine the data, and ensure that individual offices, Schools, and deliberative groups have the information they need at the time it will be most useful to them."

Response: This development has been started as part of the overhaul of our information systems. The most important element is the development of a new Student Management System that provides better access to correct and consistent data than the current MySchool system does. As an intermediate step in that direction, a Data Warehouse is being developed, where key data is stored in a way that makes the relevant information easily accessible to users.

Issue 2.3.b

Quote: "This centralised capacity can also help the University identify additional data needs. For example, while the University seeks to serve Icelandic industry, there is currently little information available on the success of RU's graduates."

Response: There are two key issues here, both of which are being addressed. The first issue is the aforementioned current lack of central information management. For example, employment surveys are done twice a year, among those students who are about to graduate. However, this data is not accessible in a centralised fashion and thus the available data cannot be utilized as well as it should be. The other issue is that more information is needed from alumni of RU about their success and the value of their education for their careers. In order to support reliable data gathering from this growing group, RU is developing an alumni support service. This is under way and the plan is to launch a new approach when the University turns 50 years old this October*.

Issue 2.4.a

Quote: "Currently there is not a University-wide requirement that the process of developing new programmes incorporate an external perspective. The review team sees this as a key opportunity for improvement and fully in line with other University practices of using external perspectives."

Response: This is a very important issue and will be addressed in the next review of program approval rules. Currently, most programme development and review efforts do already include external perspectives.

Issue 2.4.b

Quote: "Similarly, there is not yet a systematic process for annual monitoring of programmes or of periodic programme review incorporating an external perspective."

Response: The new Charter requires School Curriculum Councils to review each programme annually, thus addressing the first issue. The second issue is addressed by the Subject-level Reviews, which will always include external perspective.

Issue 2.5.a

Quote: "As the University gains sophistication in its admissions processes, it could productively also turn its attention to retention, as the dropout rate is significant in some programmes."

* Current Reykjavik University was formed in the merger of old Reyjavik University and the Technical University of Iceland. The latter was founded in October 1964.

Response: As part of the abovementioned overhaul of information systems, the necessary tools are being developed to ensure that dropout information can be derived from the Student Management System in an effective manner. Once that is in place, the data will be put to immediate use in analysis of dropout causes. In the interim, dropout analysis is done on a case-by-case basis in areas where dropout is notably more than expected. One example of such an analysis was when it was noted that the dropout rate of first-year engineering students was too high. The causes were identified as the students lacking the opportunity to form connections with each other and with their subjects in the first semester. As a response to this, the School developed a three-day breakout period in the middle of the semester, during which the students work together on large-scale projects relevant to engineering. This proved to be quite effective.

Issue 2.7.a

Quote: "While all understand why support for faculty development and faculty initiatives has been curtailed, it will be important to restore these investments for the University to support and retain its faculty members."

Response: The financial status of the University is steadily improving, although the government has yet to undo any of the cutbacks or even respond to the significant growth in the number of students of the last 3 years. This has made it possible to hire a dedicated Human Resources Manager and in other ways improve the faculty access to development opportunities. However, there is no room yet for direct investment through an internal funds such as the Development Fund, but as soon as this is possible, this vital opportunity will be provided to faculty.

Issue 2.8.a

Quote: "While in the future it may be useful to ensure that the academic perspective is included in the preparation of the [Student] Handbook, students generally seemed to understand their responsibilities and opportunities."

Response: This has been addressed in the revision of the Student Handbook, something that will also necessarily take place following the adoption of the new Charter.

Summary Issue 2.9.a

Quote: "However, RU needs to continue formalising its procedures and the review team recommends that the University: ensures external involvement in the approval of new programmes; develops a more systematic approach to certain aspects of quality assurance, including the annual monitoring of programmes and follow-up to external reviews; and finalises its approach to periodic review at the Subject Level."

Summary response: As noted above, in responses to issues 2.1.d, 2.4.a and 2.4b, the new Charter provides a key foundation for this development, but further steps

will be taken to ensure that the overall system does indeed provide the necessary examination, review, analysis and refinement of programmes and structures to further enhance the quality of education at Reykjavik University.

Issue 3.5.a

Quote: "However, the accreditation team did point out that in order to demonstrate whether or not learning outcomes have been achieved it is necessary that each be linked, explicitly, to the most appropriate form of assessment. Such linkages were absent from any of the documentation seen by the accreditation team."

Response: This is an essential point that is high on the agenda of those responsible for quality of teaching at RU. What has been done so far, as a first step, is to put emphasis on learning outcomes and assessment methods being provided by all teachers. This is done though both training and oversight. The next step is to develop formalised methods for ensuring the linkage between learning outcomes and the specific execution of assessment, and to document those links.

Issue 3.6.a

Quote: "Members of the Curriculum Council were asked how RU was dealing with two matters that had been raised by students: the use of computers in examinations, in place of hand-written answers; and a move to anonymous marking."

Response: The necessary technology for allowing computer-based testing is being developed and has been tried out in a few courses, including large first-year courses. This effort is more complex by the fact that it will be necessary to have students provide their own computers and that in turn requires technology to ensure that students cannot use external parties to provide assistance. The deans have discussed the wider use of anonymous marking, but no further steps have yet been taken.

Issue 3.6.b

Quote: "The University may also wish to consider whether a student representative could join the Executive Committee, except for items concerning individual students or staff; whether a postgraduate student might usefully join the Research Council; and, whether more use could be made of students as members of working parties looking at particular aspects of learning and teaching."

Response: The new Charter specifies student representation on the Executive Committee, as well as on the Research Council.

Issue 3.7.a

Quote: "RU does not, at present, utilise any standard test of English when selecting international students. This is something that it may wish to consider doing."

Response: This has been implemented. TOEFL test is required for those whose native language is not English. In some cases further requirements are made, including oral interview in English.

RU has recently established new admission criteria in response to the request from the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture where it is stated that student are required to have gained proficiency of the English language to level B2 according to the European language portfolio.

Issue 3.10.a

Quote: "In its final meeting with senior staff the review team asked which individual, other than the Rector, could be said to have overall responsibility for students. There is no such person at present, so this may be something that the University would wish to consider."

Response: This will be carefully evaluated. There are advantages to having a single individual other than the Rector carry this responsibility. At the same time, the shared responsibility carried by deans, curriculum council and teaching affairs has provided a strong connection to students in multiple units within the university.

Issue 4.3.a

Quote: "It still needs to be defined more precisely how many PhD students a supervisor can have and how to deal with a disagreement between a student and a supervisor. Also, the review team was informed that PhD students may sometimes have to pay the cost of attending a conference at which they were presenting a paper. RU should look into how to offer support for conference presentation – it is part of making the University known in the world. Finally, the specific conditions of PhD student education in the four Schools of RU could possibly be integrated – at last to some extent – in a uniform framework, which could be a joint doctoral School or some more flexible framework in which the common interests of all doctoral programmes are merged."

Response: The university-wide rules for PhD studies have been reviewed and further work is planned for linking the rules better and addressing the administrative points raised.

Issue 4.4.a

Quote: "At present, the creation of such centres happens at the initiative of the individual researchers. However, if RU wishes all of these research centres to achieve

international recognition, it may need to introduce systematic, albeit light-touch, procedures for their initial licensing and subsequent review."

Response: New rules for the creation of centres have been approved by the Executive Committee. The new rules have already been put into effect and a number of centres have been approved under the new rules.

Issue 5.2.a

Quote: "The RA suggests that the processes described elsewhere in this report for the development of a new programme, and for annual and periodic review of a programme or subject area are recognised as still being developed. The review team would encourage the University to complete this work to create the necessary underpinning for enhancement."

Response: The new Charter establishes the responsibility for periodic review of programmes and the responsibility of the Curriculum Council in the approval of new programmes. The specific processes will be developed and refined.

Issue 5.2.b

Quote: "However, it is the responsibility of the University and in the spirit of enhancement, to define its intentions and deliver them, potentially exceeding the expectations of its students. The University will wish to develop a shared understanding of its direction of travel in further enhancing the quality of the students' learning experience. In that context the clear statements in the Teaching Strategy may be the basis for a review of how far and how consistently the University has progressed in its intentions to enhance teaching and learning."

Response: This will be developed on the basis of other work on evaluating the quality of teaching at RU.

Issue 5.2.c

Quote: "Given the University's data warehouse and analytical capability, there is an opportunity to enhance the analysis of factors that appear to be associated with drop-out so that academic and pastoral support can be directed to where it might have greatest effect."

Response: As noted above, this is being worked on, in connection with an overhaul of the University's IT systems.

Issue 5.2.c

Quote: "While MySchool at present meets a multiplicity of needs, future solutions may be very different and it will be a mark of the University's commitment to enhancement if it can be open-minded in reflecting and planning to meet its future

needs, taking care to maintain the analytical capability which provides the basis for enhancement described above."

Response: As noted above, this effort is already underway.

Issue 5.3.a

Quote: "[Business and industry] were keen to provide student internships and project work as well as employment opportunities for the University's graduates. Discussion in meetings with staff and students suggested that there could be greater consistency and more equality of access to the opportunities available."

Response: The newly established Office of Industry Relations is developing overall strategy, policies and procedures for all interactions with industry. While the primary responsibility of internships and project work lies within the Schools, the procedures and strategy will serve to provide consistency.

Issue 5.4a

Quote: "The University should give active consideration to how good practice can be disseminated, including the range of means it employed to develop its strategy."

Response: The University will continue to actively disseminate good practices among units within the University. The collaboration in the Executive Committee is a key element in that dissemination as reflected in discussions on teaching methods, program structures, handling of student issues, workload management and many other issues. As far as dissemination outside the University, there are no obstacles from the point of view of the University, but a suitable platform for such sharing between Universities would help.

Issue 5.6.a

Quote: "The review team would urge the University and the Student Association together to establish the principles it considers should underlie student representation on boards and committees. From that statement of principles, it will become clear where students should be represented; the Team expects that there will be more widespread and consistent representation on committees and in the business of the University, for example their presence on hiring committees."

Response: The new Charter significantly extends student involvement in the University's governance structure, including the Executive Committee. The question of student presence on hiring committees is being considered, but no university-wide decision has been made in that regard.

Issue 5.6.b

Quote: "The Team encourages the University, in partnership with its Students' Association and its wider student body, to develop and enunciate a shared vision for student engagement to create a sound foundation for the enhancement of the student experience."

Response: This is an important issue that is on the agenda. An even closer cooperation between the University governance and the Student Association is being implemented this school year. A strategic planning meeting with the participation of all Student Association Directors and University Leadership is being planned by the Student Association.

Issue 5.7.a

Quote: "Staff whom the review team met regretted that it was not currently possible to replace the short-term Development Fund that had supported a number of innovations in teaching and learning."

Response: This is indeed a regrettable situation, but it can only be remedied with increased funding for the University. The rector and others in the university administration continue to push for increased government funding and to search for other sources of funding.