

Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education

MID-TERM PROGRESS REPORT
Icelandic University of the Arts

May 2019

Preface

This is a Mid-term Progress Report following an Institution-Wide Review of the Icelandic University of the Arts that was carried out in 2015 by the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education. The aim of a Mid-term Progress Report is to review progress in taking forward developments foreshadowed in the Institution-Wide Review process.

Mid-Term Progress Reports are one component of the second cycle of the Icelandic Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF2) established by the Icelandic Government in 2017. The main elements of the QEF are:

- Quality Board-led Institution-Wide Reviews (IWRs);
- University-led Subject-Level Reviews (SLRs);
- University-led Year-on and Mid-Term Progress reports;
- Annual meetings between universities and Quality Board members to discuss institutional developments, including in quality assurance;
- Quality Council-led enhancement workshops and conferences;
- Quality Board-led special reviews.

Further information on QEF is available on the website of the Icelandic Quality Enhancement Framework (www.qef.is).

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Chair

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Glossary and List of Abbreviations

QEF. Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education.

QEF1. First cycle of the Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education, 2011-2015.

QEF2. Second cycle of the Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education, 2017-2022.

IWR. Institution-Wide Review. Board-led review of institution, based on QEF.

1. Introduction

In the first cycle of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF1), the Icelandic University of the Arts (formerly the Icelandic Academy of the Arts) underwent Institution-Wide Review (IWR) in 2015. The resulting report¹ concluded with judgments of confidence in both the Icelandic University of the Arts' management of standards and degrees, as well as its arrangements to secure the quality of the student learning experience. A Year-On Report² was published by the Icelandic University of the Arts (the University) one year following the publication of the 2016 report.

This report serves as the Icelandic University of the Arts' Mid-term Progress Report as described in the 2nd edition of the Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education³. The aim of a Mid-term Progress Report is to review progress in taking forward developments foreshadowed in the most recent IWR report. The University submitted in spring 2019 a summary of developments since the QEF1 IWR, and the annual meeting between the University's representatives and two representatives of the Quality Board that year was dedicated to discussions of those developments. This report is a summary of those discussions.

¹ Full report is available at: <https://gef.is/assets/PDFs/Universities/QEF1-IAA-IWR-Report-for-website.pdf>

² Full report is available at: <https://gef.is/assets/PDFs/QEF1-Year-on-Reports/QEF1-Year-on-Report-IAA.pdf>

³ Handbook is available at: www.gef.is/publications-and-resources/QEF2-Handbook-for-website.pdf

2. Main findings

2.1. Follow-up of QEF1 review

The overall learning output of the QEF1 Institution-Wide Review of the University had three main themes: (i) A formalization of working procedures and general administration followed by a heightened transparency and accountability; (ii) a higher level of student participation in academic decision making and administration; and (iii) the development of a formal and all-inclusive quality management system. The following list is not exhaustive but illustrates ways in which the University reported that it is enhancing its work in light of the QEF1 review.

i. A formalization of working procedures and general administration followed by a heightened transparency and accountability.

- The strategic planning process has been driven by a steering group but has adopted a participatory, bottom-up approach that has engaged academic and professional support staff, students and stakeholders.
- Committees with responsibility for Teaching & Learning and for Research operate across Departments. Enhancements in Teaching & Learning include the development of better methods of assessment – replacing the usual numerical assessment in favour of structured interviews that let students reflect on how well they have achieved the learning outcomes set for a class. This approach is highlighted in the Subject-Level Reviews, either as work in progress or in maintaining a watching brief to determine how well the process works. This approach will not work for all academic disciplines, but the creation of new ways of working, piloting and sharing is a good way to enhance learning and student experience.

- The structure of administration was identified as needing improvement and that effort is work in progress. The employment of project managers to take specific responsibilities has helped and further developments will likely follow as new programmes come on stream. The new Department of Film and, if pursued, an independent Department of Architecture will create two more Deans, at which point it would be prudent to review the roles of the Deans and Programme Managers who report to them.
- In future internal reviews of management structure, the University may look to creating management structures that offer greater support to the Rector and greater operational resilience in senior management.

ii. A higher level of student participation in academic decision making and administration.

- There is a Student Council and students participate on committees and are involved in Subject-Level Reviews, and the strategic planning process.
- There are some minor concerns around the way in which information feeds back from Committees to the student body and about international students being fully informed because they may be less proficient in Icelandic (concerns that are far from unique to the University). Translating all papers into English is not cost-effective. The issue requires a more targeted solution.
- The University has adopted a positive encouragement to take part in university business by recognizing committee participation on the academic transcript.

- The University is a very selective institution, focused on quality and very conscious of the need to deliver education in the context of, for example, their limited space and labour market absorption. As reported by University management, the students they admit are engaged and active, within their degree programmes and around the wider community through imaginative public outreach projects in Reykjavik and across Iceland. The University is very conscious of its responsibilities towards students, from admission (including low uptake specialist courses), through participation in the life of the University through to career development and support through alumni associations.

iii. The development of a formal and all-inclusive quality management system.

- Quality Management is transparently something about which the University cares, as is clear from the points made above. The Rector has been focused on making the University more robust and resilient through greater clarity of organization, while still allowing the flexibility necessary to let different academic disciplines flourish. She also cited examples of measures to ensure staff buy-in through a bottom-up strategic development.
- The creation of new Departments has been eased by having clear templates for how to operate and organize a Department. A common appreciation of how to do things is of significant benefit. The future creation of further postgraduate and international programmes will benefit from such clear organizational thinking.
- The Rector, Managing Director, Acting Director of Division of Quality, Teaching and Research, Human Resource Manager and Director of Academic Affairs are all involved in developing their briefs and enhancing service within the University.
- Performance reviews allow staff to discuss the balance between research and teaching over time. It is an effective way of determining where staff aptitudes lie and making best use of their skills, to benefit staff themselves, students and the University generally.

2.2. Observations on special topics

Housing. The University is a conservatoire for all the arts, for all of Iceland, but with international reach and reputation. There is understandable frustration that the institution has to be housed in a number of converted premises and that three out of four of its property leases expire at different times over the next five years. This situation needs to be resolved quickly enough to allow proper planning and creation of new accommodation before existing contracts expire. There is an inevitable expectation that any creative community will be able to make-do-and-mend – as the University has done – but there is an urgent need to develop a long-term housing solution with facilities that are designed to be fit-for-purpose. Ideally, there would be a single location with room for growth, interaction with key partner institutions and, critically, the specialist facilities required by each of the disciplines within the University.

Research. The nature of research in Arts is still a matter under discussion in the University (a discussion that was a positive feature of Subject-Level Reviews in Music and Fine Art). It reflects the wider discussions at the Research Evaluation Advisory Committee (REAC) about how to categorize research, impact and public engagement. Further discussion of this, within the IUA and across the sector, will be of benefit. As a start, REAC has created further guidance to help understand the research element of Subject-Level Review. The development of a Current Research Information System that serves every academic discipline in Icelandic higher education should further stimulate understanding of what constitutes research. More immediately, the recent creation of a Humanities & Arts research panel at RANNIS for the Icelandic Research Fund has been warmly welcomed and should be of benefit to staff developing ambitious research projects.

Funding. The level of higher education funding for the Arts in Iceland is lower than the average in the OECD, and especially when compared to its Nordic counterparts. As with any University, net revenue is balanced across domestic and international income from tuition, grants and contracts and block funding agreed by Government; and as with any University, operational and capital infrastructure have to be managed using the revenues available, with surplus for reinvestment when possible. The creation of a RANNIS panel to deal with research funding in Humanities & Arts should be of benefit and there is hope that the Government will look favourably at the pressing need for capital investment in infrastructure. The University might wish to consider how it might further develop an attractive (and aggressive) international campaign to raise more independent funding to sponsor projects, courses and students.

2.3. Reflections on progress the University would like make before its next IWR

As mentioned in Section 2.1 above, the University has identified the creation of management structures that offer greater support to the Rector and greater operational resilience in senior management. It may also benefit from thinking about how to categorize research, impact and public engagement of its work. Finally, the University may want to consider developing an international campaign to raise more independent funding.

3. Conclusion

As evidenced by the University's Year-on Report and reports of University representatives in this meeting, as well as by discussions in previous annual meetings of the University and the Quality Board, all the University is fully engaged with addressing the challenges listed above. The University has transparently embraced the QEF and incorporated an enhancement philosophy into the institutional culture. Evidence of this comes through, *inter alia*, the ways in which the key themes identified in the QEF1 Institution-Wide have been tackled as described above.