

Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education

MID-TERM PROGRESS REPORT

University of Akureyri

May 2020

Preface

This is a Mid-term Progress Report following an Institution-Wide Review of the University of Akureyri that was carried out in 2014 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).

Dr. Andrée Sursock

Chair

Dr. Sigurður Óli Sigurðsson

Manager

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 University of Akureyri (the University) underwent Institution-Wide Review (IWR) in 2014. The resulting report¹ concluded with judgments of confidence in both the University's management of standards and degrees, as well as the University's arrangements to secure the quality of the student learning experience. This report serves as the University's Mid-term Progress Report as described in the 2nd edition of the Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education². 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 autumn 2019 a summary of developments since the QEF1 IWR and the annual meeting between the University's representatives and a representative of the Quality Board that year was dedicated to discussions of those developments. The Mid-term Review Meeting was also informed by the ongoing discussions held in the Annual Meetings in 2017 and 2018. The document, 'The Strategy of the University of Akureyri 2018-2023' had helpfully also been made available.

The Review meeting lasting one full day included a series of discussions involving in total around 30 staff and students. These included the Rector, Deans, the Director of Quality Management, the Director of Human Resources, Chair of the Quality Council, President of the Student Association, a range of student and staff representatives on Course Committees and Subject Review Committees (on- and off-campus based) and staff and students from the recently started doctoral programmes. The Board was represented by Professor Norman Sharp. The agenda for the day was agreed with the University in advance and was focussed on five topics:

- An overview of institutional developments: progress, challenges and responses looking back to the previous IWR and towards the next one;

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

² Handbook is available at: <https://gef.is/assets/PDFs/Others/QEF2-Handbook-for-website.pdf>

- Open and distance learning and general developments in learning and teaching strategy;
- Developments in doctoral education at the University;
- Developments in Subject-Level Reviews
- Final discussions with the Rector and Director of Quality Management

2. Main findings

2.1. Overview

Throughout the day, all participants engaged fully in very open and self-reflective discussion. The main topics for discussion had been selected to focus on follow-up to previous reviews and progress with the new round of Subject-Level Reviews together with key developments in the University in doctoral education and pedagogical strategy and delivery including, but not exclusively, for students based off-campus. These discussions illustrated the ways in which the University is continuing to address successfully the requirements of Part 1 of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, and, in general manage and enhance quality and standards in a systematic and self-critical manner. The examples below illustrate the basis for this general conclusion.

2.2. Follow-up of QEF1 review

In their Reflective Analysis for the 2014 IWR, the University identified a list of 40 enhancement issues they wished to address with dates and responsible personnel identified. The University's Year-on 2016 Report reported on progress in addressing these matters which was further followed through in this Mid-term Review. The one major issue still to be taken forward, which the University recognises, is the systematic development of benchmarking the University's performance against other appropriate national and international providers. Further, the 2016 Year-on Report³ provided

³ <https://qef.is/assets/PDFs/QEF1-Year-on-Reports/QEF1-Year-on-Report-UNAK.pdf>

a detailed breakdown of suggestions and recommendations raised throughout the 2014 Institution-wide Review Report together with the reactions of the University to each point and, as appropriate, action to be followed. This systematic process has been followed through in the Mid-term Review process where outstanding matters have been addressed in more detail. This relates in particular to issues related to pedagogy, staff support and development and doctoral education. These are addressed briefly below.

In the Mid-term Review the opportunity was also taken to have discussions on follow-up action taken to Subject-Level Reviews. Meetings were held with staff and students from the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Natural Resources, the Faculty of Business Administration and the Faculties of Social Sciences, Psychology and Law. In each case the Mid-term Review Report included detailed discussions of the recommendations of the Subject-Level Review Reports and the consequent actions of the Faculty. Each Faculty also included a table of Action Points covering matters that were in the course of being addressed or still timed on the to-do list. In each case these reports were thorough and thoughtful, with the School of Health Studies providing a particularly impressive list of Actions being taken forward. In general, from both the reports and discussions, it was clear that the Subject-Level Review process was being consistently and securely carried out and having impact. Because of the timing of their subject-level reviews, it was not appropriate to explore the recent introduction of the management of research as a topic to be included in these reviews in the second round.

2.3. Observations on special topics

Pedagogy. One of the issues raised for further consideration in the 2014 IWR Report was the variability in approach to distance learning across the University not all of which was desirable, and also the apparent lack of support for staff in this area – both technological and pedagogical. It was interesting to learn during the Mid-term Review discussions that the strategic approach of the University was now to develop a single pedagogical and technological approach to all teaching and

learning in the University which would apply to all students whether on or off-campus. This new approach is a response to the very large proportions of off-campus students and also students who move between delivery modes. This is also viewed as an important enhancement in the quality of the learning experience for all students and a further instrument to address the important matter of student drop-out. Towards this end, the Centre for Teaching and Learning (established in 2015) has been significantly expanded and by 2018 included 9 positions. Discussions with staff highlighted impressive developments including the development of a 10-credit course, the graduates from which acted as mentors for other staff; the introduction of an Annual Teaching Conference, and importantly the provision of support to staff in the development of new courses and/or the adaptation of existing courses within the new pedagogical paradigm. In parallel with these developments, the Centre for Teaching and Learning has become responsible for the University's IT system for both students and staff. Discussions highlighted the importance of these developments while also recognising the challenges yet to be faced in moving these developments from a range of initiatives to encompass a whole-institution pedagogical and technological leap forward. These challenges are well recognised.

Staff support. The provision of an effective framework for staff support was identified in the 2014 Review as an important area for development. As in other areas, the Year-on Report and intervening Annual Meetings had noted some development in this area. However, it was clear in the Mid-term Review that major developments have now taken place in this area. In 2018 the human resources function was gathered together and an appointment made of a new Human Resource Manager. Since that appointment much has been achieved: a new framework for staff development interviews has been developed and is being implemented; job descriptions are being reviewed and updated; work on a new staff induction process for new staff is scheduled as is a new formalised process for staff retirement. These are all important areas for development and the University has identified action points to move them forward securely and timeously.

Doctoral Education. Doctoral education has only the recently been accredited in the University and the first five doctoral students admitted. During the Mid-term Review the opportunity was therefore taken to meet with 3 of the doctoral students together with the Director of Doctoral Studies, the Project Manager for doctoral studies, and two supervising professors. From these discussions it was clear that the University was taking a securely cautious approach to this development with numbers strictly limited in the short run and focussed on known and evidenced specialist areas of staff expertise. By having such a focus, it is intended that doctoral students will from the outset feel part of a larger, existing research community. For example, the students met talked of their projects being part of wider national and international initiatives that involved data sharing and joint symposium activities. A careful support and monitoring regime has been introduced with a clear expectation of completion within 4 years, and annual reporting and mid-term reviews built in to support timeous submission. Interestingly, all doctoral students will spend 1 term abroad. It was clear from the discussion with both students and staff that this was an important development for the University that was going to be carefully and securely nurtured.

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

It was stated that, following recent changes in the Act on Public Sector Finances (No. 123/2105) the University was able to plan on a more secure financial basis over 3-5 year periods. This had enabled a re-organization of the faculty structure to be effectively supported by external advisors allowing each new faculty to create its vision, goals and priorities for the period 2018 to 2023. This work both fed into and was informed by the development of the new Institution-wide Strategy for 2018-2023 – a good example of the University’s mix of top-down/bottom-up approaches. The strategy for the future also has a clear focus on sustaining the quality of provision in the light of tight public funding. In this context the University has concluded that total student numbers should not only stop growing, but should be cut by around 500. It was explained that, while this was a very necessary step in the University’s view, it conflicted with national policy on guaranteed entry for all successful high

school graduates. The problems associated with rationing places remained to be addressed. Finally, in this section, it was interesting to note the strategic change in emphasis in relation to pedagogy. It was indicated that the University is moving to a single approach to pedagogy that would apply to all undergraduate students both on- and off- campus. Work was underway to push this important development forward. This has been commented on briefly above.

3. Conclusion

This was a very helpful Mid-Term Review following the University's 2014 IWR. It focussed discussion with the Rector, staff and students on key strategic developments in the University together with discussions on pedagogical developments and staff support and development following through some of the outcomes from the IWR. There was also detailed discussion with staff and students associated with the recent developments in doctoral education and with staff and students associated with Subject-Level Reviews. All discussion was very well supported by the excellent Mid-Term Progress Report, which provided an evidence-based account of developments and comprehensive discussion of follow-up activity to previously identified actions. All discussion confirmed the dynamic nature of the University and the care with which it manages its quality and standards. It was clear throughout that the University continues to operate effectively its regime of quality assurance and enhancement activities.