

**Review of the Action Plan Submitted  
by Hólar University College in relation  
to the findings of the Institution-Wide  
Review Report of Hólar University  
College published in September 2013**

February 2016



## Preface

This report follows a meeting between representatives of Hólar University College (HUC) and representatives of the 2013 Institutional Review Team appointed by the Icelandic Quality Board for Higher Education. The meeting took place on 1 February 2016 at HUC. The purpose of the meeting was to review HUC's progress in addressing the concerns raised in the 2013 Institutional Review Report which recorded a judgement of **Limited Confidence** in the institution's present and likely future arrangements to secure the quality of the student learning experience.

The following attended the meeting:

- From Hólar University College: Erla Björk Örnólfsdóttir, Rector; Bjarni Kristófer Kristjánsson, Head of the Department of Aquaculture and Fish Biology; Sveinn Ragnarsson, Head of the Department of Equine Studies; Laufey Haraldsdóttir, Head of the Department of Rural Tourism; Hjördís Gísladóttir, Head of the Division of Academic Affairs and chair of the Academic Affairs Committee.
- From the Institutional Review Team: Rita McAllister, Tove Bull (Quality Board, and standing in for Frank Quinault who was unable to travel to Iceland). Secretariat: Sigurður Óli Sigurðsson.

This report is based on the content of that meeting and also on the outcome of a number of interactions (meetings and documentary submissions) between HUC, the Review Team and the Quality Board in the intervening period between the Review of 2013 and the present time. The finding and conclusions in this report by the Review Team, in draft, were considered and are approved by the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education.

The relevant earlier meetings took place on the following dates:

21 May 2014 at HUC (Annual Meeting with Frank Quinault)

30 September/1 October 2014 at HUC (formal Follow-on to the Review, with Rita McAllister, Frank Quinault and Þorsteinn Gunnarsson); this

involved a cross-section of HUC faculty and other staff members, and a number of student representatives.

10 June 2015 at HUC (Annual Meeting with Rita McAllister, Frank Quinault and Sigurður Óli Sigurðsson).

The main documentation exchanged was as follows:

Preliminary Action Plan on the Student Learning Experience (HUC), 1 November 2013, updated 10 March 2014.

First Year Report on the Student Learning Experience (HUC), 17 September 2014; this included, amongst other institutional documents, a draft Strategic Plan 2015-19 and a draft Quality Assurance Plan.

Follow-up Report to the Institution-Wide Review (Quality Board), October 2014.

Action Plan for 2015 (HUC), 8 January 2015.

Action Plan with implementations (HUC), May 2015; this included, amongst other institutional documents, HUC Policy and Departmental Policy documents.

Detailed minutes of the Annual Meeting (Quality Board), 10 June 2015.

Institutional documents relating to the Academic Affairs Committee, sabbaticals, staff development and research (HUC), July 2015.

Action Plan for 2015-6 (HUC), 30 October 2015.

Quality Board letter in response to the Action Plan, outlining further requests for specific evidence of progress, 11 December 2015.

The response from HUC in January 2016 to the letter of 11 December 2015, including documentation on staff development, research, assessment and distance learning.

The Quality Board/Review Team also received the submissions, reports and follow-up Action Plans from the Subject-level Reviews of the

Departments of Aquaculture and Fish Biology, Rural Tourism and Equine Studies.

The representatives of the Review Team found the material submitted by HUC to be increasingly pertinent and helpful to discussions; the documentation from the Subject-level Reviews was generally impressive. Discussions with staff and students of HUC were open, positive and productive, and the Review Team wishes to express its thanks to HUC for this.

Below are the main areas addressed over the course of the Review together with the Review Team's findings in each area.

*Professor Norman Sharp OBE*  
*Chair of the Icelandic Quality Board for Higher Education*

*Rita McAllister*  
*Chair of the Hólar University College Review Team*

*Sigurður Óli Sigurðsson*  
*Manager of the Icelandic Quality Board for Higher Education*

## **1. Creating a coherent, reflective and analytical institutional culture, with effective strategic planning**

At the time of the Institution-Wide Review (IWR) there seemed to be little experience within the institution of creating formal procedural or planning documents; a culture of informal processes and problem-solving seemed to prevail. In this respect HUC had to face a substantial cultural transformation in respect of quality enhancement; inevitably this took both time and, particularly for a small institution with comparatively few full-time staff, a considerable effort. The situation was in no way helped by the institution's financial vulnerability and the insecurities about its future standing. Strategic planning was extremely difficult. The Rector was newly-appointed at the time of the Review; the University Board was quite informal; the three Departments, while each had outstanding expertise in their fields, seemed not to coalesce into a coherent institutional whole; students seemed detached from decision-making. The institutional budget for 2015 had not had Ministerial approval, leading to further uncertainties, but the 2016 budget has been approved.

As is evident from the quantity of documentation submitted, in the two and more years since the IWR Report, Hólar has begun, to quote one of its senior faculty, to 'make the system work for it' and is reaping some of the benefits. There is a clear feeling of ownership of what is being put in place. Not all of the documentation is fully developed: strategic planning has been cultivated 'from the bottom up', with teaching staff and student involvement, with the result that Departmental Action Plans are both more visionary and more practical than some of the Institutional Policy documents. The Institutional Action Plan, submitted in October 2015, is more encouraging for future planning. It delineates three areas of strategy - culture and outreach; teaching and learning; and research – with objectives, dates, responsibilities, deliverables, etc. Though its approach is fairly broad-brush and financial implications are not analysed, it looks workable. Other policy papers – on research, for example – appear somewhat less impressive than the activities they relate to. But both programme documentation and pedagogical guidance are increasingly well thought-out.

There is also a definite feeling now of an effective institutional team: the Rector and senior staff are more confident in their executive management; the re-constituted University Board is fully engaged and has regular reporting mechanisms; the three Departments cross-consult, have jointly-taught modules, and are considering extending their inter-disciplinary research activities; the student body is well-represented on decision-making groups and is also active in quality enhancement activities across Iceland. Many institutional processes are still in the course of being formalised – programme validation, monitoring and review, aspects of assessment and feedback, policies for equal opportunity and disability issues, for example; but there is now expectation that development in these areas will continue.

## **2. Strengthening quality assurance infrastructure**

In the past, as a small institution, HUC had relied almost entirely on informal communication and personal contact as the means of monitoring the quality of student experience. These processes should, of course, continue; but more formal mechanisms were needed for quality enhancement, consistency and accountability. At the time of the IWR visit, the Academic Affairs Committee (AAC) was operational but the parameters of its responsibility were unclear. The remit and membership (which includes two students) of this key Committee has now been clarified and its role strengthened. Reporting mechanisms to the AAC from departmental study committees (the remit of whose monthly meetings is also clear) and from the AAC to the management team have also been defined, as has the AAC's relationship to the Division of Academic Affairs. The Division of Academic Affairs is committed to publishing a Quality Assurance Handbook by the end of the academic year 2015-6.

HUC is happy that these processes are working well, and while the Review Team has no wish and no evidence to doubt this, a note of caution might be in order. While a more complex and/or onerous QA system is probably unnecessary in a small institution, one which relies so heavily on the very wide-ranging activities of one committee and on one individual might be unwise as well as unkind; delegation of specific issues to short-term working groups should be considered, bringing more personnel into these processes. Also, there is the need to avoid particularly the more controversial issues becoming in-bred with, as it were, judges and juries acting together: the introduction of an element of externality – membership from, say, another University – might be an enhancement, to this as well as to other aspects of HUC's QA processes.

## **3. Strengthening the student voice and all aspects of student support**

This is the area in which HUC has made the most immediate progress: it was the main issue of concern at the time of the IWR visit. It was obvious from the Review Team's year-on visit in September/October 2014 that the student experience had been addressed as a priority by the institution. The eight students met by the Team confirmed that communication on all issues arising from the IWR had been extensive, as had participation in addressing the areas for development. Support and funding had been made available to the Student Union and students had been closely involved in Subject-level Reviews, in curricular developments and in cross-departmental discussions. The students felt altogether more empowered and more central to the institution.

Feedback from and to students on programme delivery and on assessment was another issue raised in the IWR report. The annual student survey, instigated by NPUI (the action-group involving all the public universities in Iceland) and based on the British National Student Survey, produced some apparently poor outputs for HUC in its initial round in 2014. HUC considered that the survey, especially in its earlier stages, neither provided useful information nor, by focusing on Year 2 students, related well to the nature of many of its courses. This experience, however, has prompted HUC both to devise their own (additional) survey and to give consideration to the best means of responding to internal teaching evaluations.

The situation has also improved substantially in terms of student support. While there are still quite severe financial restrictions on new resources, HUC has clearly prioritised spending on both student services and staff development (see below), with a view to raising both morale and the quality of the student experience, and well as improving the work environment. A new and well-qualified Student Counsellor, shared with the Agricultural University (AUI) and with the University of Iceland, has very recently been appointed; an International Relations Officer, also shared with the AUI, has been in place since early 2015 to help both students and staff with exchange arrangements and external study placements. Both of these appointments are informally line-managed by the head of the Division of Academic Affairs. IT and technical equipment has also been upgraded, improving communications with, in particular, distance-learning students (see below) and part-time staff.

While its size and budget make it difficult to provide the sort of resources now expected in larger Universities, HUC is now positively supporting the learning experience of its students: extensive physical library provision is nowadays less crucial, and while learning support and career guidance/management are not provided formally, in this close educational community informal advice is continually available.

#### **4. Strengthening staff support, including a system of staff development**

In 2015 HUC appointed an external specialist to assess staff needs and produce an appropriate staff development plan. Importantly, this plan included support staff as well as academic staff. The plan was presented to all staff in August 2015, and it was immediately implemented with budgetary support. Reportedly, though as yet modest in scope, this has done much to raise staff morale.

For support staff, priority has been given to improving skills, health and safety, and the work environment. Travel grants are available for all staff for courses relevant to institutional needs. Academic staff development will strengthen pedagogy (initial seminars have been on assessment issues), and additional departmental priorities, related to teaching delivery, have been set out: for further training in sports psychology in Equine Studies, for example. Computer and communication skills will

be emphasised in the coming months. Attendance at staff developments events is to be considered mandatory and, so far, attendance has been good amongst full-time members; according to the Rector, a culture change will be needed for total commitment to the plan. The issue of ensuring the involvement of part-time, sessional teachers is recognised but has yet to be addressed.

An effective Human Resources function and a dedicated manager for HR have also still to be put in place by HUC. The Finance Director was appointed to this role in 2014, though the arrangement is far from ideal both in respect of, once more, too much responsibility being placed upon one individual but also because of possible conflicts of interest. Undoubtedly, limited funds prevent the institution from reinstating this key post; the enhanced systems of staff support have nonetheless substantially improved the situation.

## **5. The need for an explicit and realistic research policy**

In part, developments in research are related to the emergence of a staff development plan. For both, a policy has been instigated and dedicated budgets have been allocated. Rules and competitive criteria have been developed for faculty sabbatical research leave: one research trip each year; one sabbatical semester every three years. Fostering research and heightening the institution's research profile is a stated strategic priority for HUC: there is an urgent need for further research in the areas of HUC's academic specialisms and, with the government's policy of increasing competitive funding for research, there is the clear realisation that the institution needs to be active on this front.

In this context, while the Research Policy perhaps lacks detail on institutional strategy and priorities, there is no doubt that research activity is increasing in all three departments. The Department of Aquaculture and Fish Biology (DAFB) already has an enviable research profile; they have identified their research goals in terms of citations, grant income and PhD students. Both Rural Tourism (DRT) and Equine Studies (DES) are newer to the field, but both are research-ambitious. DRT's research priorities are closely related to their teaching programmes, centring on culinary, equine and cultural tourism and targeting an increase in faculty PhDs. For Equine Studies, raising the educational and research qualifications of their staff is of prime importance, focusing on horse physiology, biology, movement and structure: the gait of the Icelandic horse. Currently there is some research collaboration between DAFB and DRT and between DRT and DES.

All of these plans to further the delivery of research are, of course, underpinned by the high degree of specialist expertise in HUC's three departments. Until now DRT has been perhaps a little behind the other two departments in this respect. However, with new, well-qualified faculty from the US about to join the department, and with

the research ambition shown by the Head of Department, this may not be true for much longer.

## **6. Creating transparent and consistent processes for the assessment of student work**

Assessment was one of the common issues arising from the first cycle of Institutional Reviews across Iceland and, in part, this is the result of specific traditions of examining practices in this country. Within HUC, however, it caused the Review Team major concerns at the time of the Review. Amongst the issues which, it was felt, needed addressing were: the need for the introduction of a common grading scale; clarification of assessment criteria and the clear relationship of these to learning outcomes; the role of external examiners, if these are involved; the rules for re-sit assessments; the reporting and monitoring of examination results; and the appeals procedures.

It is fair to say that, while not all of these issues have been effectively tackled, the institution has responded positively to the most pressing of them. DRT led the way in aligning assessment criteria with learning outcomes, and random checking has been introduced throughout the institution on the implementation of this process. Any irregularities in the distribution of final marks within and across department are examined by the Academic Affairs Committee and seminars are taking place to help ensure consistency of assessment throughout the institution. Complaints, of which there are very few, are being dealt with – and being seen to be dealt with – formally. DES already makes extensive use of external examiners in its practical assessments; DAFB's teaching is mainly at graduate level, its assessment procedures being transparent; generally, in all departments, double-marking has been introduced for important assessments. The question of a common grading scale was one to be discussed in NPUI, for instigation across the sector; this has not yet happened, however, and HUC has not initiated one by itself.

It is encouraging that assessment, transparency and consistency are clearly live discussion topics and staff development priorities within HUC. Both the Academic Affairs Committee and key staff are aware of the need to refine these processes. The institution has set targets of compliance and accountability, and staff support will be directed towards these ends.

## **7. The need for a comprehensive review of distance learning provision, in terms of contact, support, equipment and programme content.**

Reflection on distance learning provision should be important for HUC, in view of its rural location, Iceland's geography and the increasing demand for flexible modes of HE delivery. Arguably, indeed, there might be a need for a national debate and policy on the nature, delivery and comparability of distance- and blended-learning programmes throughout Iceland. HUC, with a ratio of distance-learners to on-campus students approaching 2:1, together with other institutions within NPUI with large proportions of distance-learners – the University of Akureyri and the Agricultural University for instance – might well take the lead in such a debate.

For the IWR Team the main concerns at HUC were: the high drop-out rate; the students' view of course delivery problems, unheralded changes to delivery patterns, irregular on-campus placements and inadequate feedback; the difficulty of integrating class cohorts; and comparability of both student experience and standards between on-campus and distance learners, and between distance learners in differing circumstances.

The Department of Rural Tourism, while not attempting to solve the national challenge, has in fact done a great deal in the past two years to address the most urgent of these concerns. On-campus periods have been planned more coherently, with aims and content announced in advance. Semesters have been re-structured so that two courses are delivered in each half-semester, with one course running throughout the term. Course content and assignment deadlines are published well in advance, the latter scheduled to avoid clashes. So, much has been achieved here, but perhaps not a holistic, systematic approach to the whole concept of flexible delivery. HUC is aware that their current Action Plan does not take account of diminishing numbers of resident students and the increased demand for blended learning, and that further discussion within all departments is needed.

## **Conclusions**

Following the visit of the Review Team to Holar University College on 1 February 2016 and its reappraisal of progress made by the institution since the Institution-Wide Review of 2013, the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education considered the Team's draft report and concluded that the judgement in relation to the soundness of HUC's present and likely future arrangements to secure the quality of the student learning experience should now be raised to **Confidence**.

In making this decision the Board listened carefully to the assurances presented to the Team by HUC that it will continue to deliver the various key actions set out in its response letter of January 2016 and discussed in the meeting of 1 February. We are reassured that, like ourselves, HUC sees further progress on all of these issues as critical to its future success.

Although, inevitably, priorities will evolve with time and in response to changing external challenges and opportunities, the Review Team strongly encourages HUC to further develop and implement their key quality enhancement processes over the coming years. While reassured by progress to date and by institutional and departmental Action Plans for further action in relation to concerns raised by the Institution-wide Review report of 2013, these issues will obviously be points of reference for future Annual Meetings with members of the Quality Board, and for the next scheduled Institutional Review of HUC.

Finally, in commending the progress made by HUC and in concluding the extended follow-up process, it is the Quality Board's view that:

- **Confidence can be placed in the soundness of Hólar University College's present and likely future arrangements to secure the academic standards of its awards.**
- **Confidence can be placed in the soundness of Hólar University College's present and likely future arrangements to secure the quality of the student learning experience.**