

Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education

Annual Report 2021

Month 2022

Table of contents

ABBREVIATIONS	3
Mission and principles	4
Introduction	5
The strategy and the rolling action plan	6
QEF2	6
Specially commissioned work	8
The Research Evaluation Advisory Committee (REAC)	9
Communicating with the sector and partners in Iceland and abroad	9
Annex 1: Quality Board Membership	12
Annex 2: Research Evaluation Advisory Committee Membership	12
Annex 3: Quality Council	13
Annex 4: Secretariat	13
Annex 5: IWR Teams	13

For questions about this report, please email secretariat@qef.is

ABBREVIATIONS

General abbreviations

Board	Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education
Council	Quality Council for Icelandic higher education
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Also known as European Standards and Guidelines.
EUA	European University Association
IWR	Institution-Wide Review
LÍS	National Union of Students in Iceland
Ministry	Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture
QEF	Quality Enhancement Framework
QEF1	First round of the Quality Enhancement Framework
QEF2	Second round of the Quality Enhancement Framework
RA	Reflective Analysis
SLR	Subject-Level Review

Abbreviations of the Icelandic universities

AUI	Agricultural University of Iceland
BU	Bifröst University
HU	Hólar University
IUA	Icelandic University of the Arts
RU	Reykjavík University
UI	University of Iceland
UNAK	University of Akureyri

Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education

Mission and principles

Mission

Safeguarding the standards and enhancing the quality of Icelandic higher education and research.

Six Principles

- 1.** Acknowledging the primary role of autonomous higher education institutions in managing and enhancing the quality of their core activities.
- 2.** Committing to the continuous enhancement of the learning experience for all students in an inclusive way.
- 3.** Involving students as partners in the learning process and as active participants in the quality assurance and enhancement of their learning.
- 4.** Anchoring QEF in the Icelandic context while maintaining an international perspective.
- 5.** Promoting a partnership with all Icelandic stakeholders while retaining the independence of the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education.
- 6.** Embracing transparency as an explicit value of an open consultative process.

Introduction

This annual report presents the main activities of the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education (Board) during 2021.

Building on the activities that took place in 2020, the second cycle of Institution-Wide Reviews (IWR) continued with the publication of the review reports of Bifröst University and the University of Iceland. Other activities included the review of Police Studies at the University of Akureyri and a project to develop internal quality assurance mechanisms in Greenlandic higher education institutions.

The Icelandic universities and the Board continued to be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic this year. Three of the four regular Board meetings were conducted online but the Board took advantage of the online meeting tools to hold additional Board meetings and meetings with various stakeholders. The Board was particularly keen on maintaining contact with all the Icelandic stakeholders for a mutual update on the impact of the pandemic. Fortunately, a lull in the pandemic in the autumn allowed the Board Chair and Vice-Chair to visit the seven Icelandic universities, to hold the fourth regular Board meeting in Reykjavík, and to meet other key stakeholders on both occasions.

The Board continued its strategic work by planning the review of QEF2 and the development of QEF3, with an emphasis on strengthening the Icelandic roots of the QEF and securing additional resources to support its work and that of the Quality Council and the National Union of Icelandic Students (LÍS).

The Board membership was refreshed in November 2021. Barbara Brittingham stepped down from the Quality Board after 11 years of service. Barbara's breadth and depth of experience has been influential in shaping the work of the Board in many areas and has been much appreciated by the Icelandic universities. Crichton Lang, former Vice-Chancellor (Rector) of the University of the Highlands and the Islands, joined the Quality Board. Crichton has been a reviewer in Iceland in both QEF1 and QEF2. He brings with him in-depth knowledge of the Scottish QEF as well as keen understanding of the role that university leadership plays in ensuring and enhancing quality.

The Board welcomed the expanded activities of the Quality Council (QC) in 2021. This included a conference on the student voice in quality assurance and a formal agreement between QC and a working group of university teaching developers to create a community of practice around the work of both groups and to promote quality in teaching.

The Board wishes to thank the Quality Council, LIS, the Rectors' conference and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture for their confidence in, and their contribution to, our work. We look forward to the continued dialogue with the sector, the further deployment of QEF2 in 2022, and planning of QEF3 as a tool for the continuing development of Icelandic universities.

Andrée Sursock
Chair, Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education

The strategy and the rolling action plan

The Board adopted a strategy for the period 2019 – 2024, with the following priorities:

- Ensure that the Quality Enhancement Framework secures the standards and improves the quality of Icelandic higher education
- Promote the independence, competence and professionalism of QB
- Enhance QB's national and international reputation

An associated action plan was developed, with KPIs and deadlines. The action plan is on track, with the exception of two items. The Quality Board had been preparing for full membership of ENQA, with the process to be completed in 2020, and EQAR registration to be obtained in 2021. As was noted in the 2020 Annual Report of the Board, this initiative was postponed and an application for full membership is now scheduled to be submitted in 2024, following the QEF2 Period of Reflection. The launch of a Quality Board newsletter has not been implemented because of workloads, but an update on European Higher Education and Quality Assurance was posted in April.

The Quality Board developed in 2020 a plan for the future trajectory of the Board, to be addressed in its strategy and rolling action plan. This work foreshadows the review of QEF2 and the development of QEF3, with an emphasis on securing the Icelandic roots of the QEF. This work continued in 2021 with the establishment of a steering committee, chaired by Crichton Lang, for the review of QEF2 with membership from the Board, the Research Evaluation Advisory Committee (REAC; see p. 12 for membership), the Quality Council (QC; see p. 13 for membership) and the National Union of Students in Iceland (LÍS).

QEF2

The four main components of QEF2 are discussed below. They include Subject-Level Reviews (SLR), Institution-Wide Reviews (IWR), Annual Meetings and the QC.

2021 SLR

The Subject-Level Reviews (SLR) are the responsibility of the universities. The second edition of the Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education¹ (Handbook) defines their focus as “all forms of provision, including, for example, taught, research, full-time, part-time, distance learning and work- based provision... any provision for which the institution is responsible that is undertaken in collaboration with any other institution or partner, either national or international... (and) cover the main areas related to the management of research”. The Handbook notes “The Board monitors whether reviews at the subject level are carried out, if they are robust (i.e. use an evidence-based methodology that stands up to scrutiny), constructive, in line with the HEI's strategy and lead to enhancement.” (2017, p. 12)

The universities' work on SLRs was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and deadlines extension were granted. The following SLR reports were completed in 2021:

- Agricultural University of Iceland:
 - Faculty of Agricultural Sciences

¹ <https://gef.is/assets/QEF2-Handbook-for-website.pdf>

- Faculty of Environmental and Forest Sciences
- Faculty of Planning and Design
- Reykjavík University:
 - Department of Business
 - Department of Law
 - Department of Psychology
 - Department of Sports Science
- University of Akureyri:
 - Doctoral Education
 - Faculty of Business Administration
 - Faculty of Psychology
- University of Iceland:
 - Faculty of Medicine
 - Faculty of Nursing
 - Faculty of Odontology

2021 IWR

The Institution-Wide Reviews (IWR) are organised under the direct responsibility of the Quality Board; the plan has been to carry out one or two IWR every year, until the end of the cycle, which will conclude with a period of reflection in 2023.

In 2021, the IWR reports for Bifröst University² and University of Iceland³ (for a list of the review teams, please see pp. 13-14). The IWR site visits for the Icelandic University of the Arts and the University of Akureyri took place, respectively, in September 2021 and November 2021 (for a list of the review teams, please see p. 14). The reports for these two reviews will be published in 2022.

2021 Annual meetings

University	Board Representative	Timing
Agricultural University of Iceland	Ellen Hazelkorn	September
Bifröst University	Ellen Hazelkorn	June
Hólar University	Barbara Brittingham	June
Icelandic University of the Arts	Philip Winn	June
University of Akureyri	Norman Sharp	June
Reykjavík University	Riitta Pyykkö	June
University of Iceland	Philip Winn	December

Annual meetings are organised in all seven universities and agendas are agreed in advance with the universities. They include strategic developments in the universities, their current QEF-related activities such as the outcomes of the previous IWR, any SLRs undertaken during the year or planned for the following year and the Mid-term Progress Report as appropriate. The Annual meetings also provide an opportunity for the universities and the Quality Board members to exchange information and ensure that

² <https://qef.is/assets/PDFs/Universities/BU-QEF2-IWR-Report-for-publication-v2.pdf>

³ <https://qef.is/assets/PDFs/Universities/UI-QEF2-IWR-Report-for-publication.pdf>

the Board remains current and knowledgeable about developments in Icelandic higher education. In addition to topics listed above, the universities' response to the COVID-19 pandemic featured largely in these discussions.

Quality Council

The QC is an essential partner of the Board and plays a prominent role in the success of the QEF. Its membership includes the senior staff with responsibility for quality and standards from all Icelandic universities, as well as two representatives of Icelandic students (see p. 13 for a list of QC members in 2021). The QC hosted a seminar and workshop in Icelandic titled *The Student Voice as a Driver of University Quality* on 10 November 2021.

The QC met 10 times in 2021. In addition to the ongoing dialogue and sharing of resources, focus areas of the QC in 2021 have been to follow up on the identification and definition of quality indicators for universities, student-university partnership agreements, strengthening the student voice, closing the feedback loop so that students are informed of changes made in response to course evaluations and preparing for the evaluation of QEF2.

The QC Chair has attended all meetings of the Board as an observer (withdrawing when individual universities were discussed).

Specially commissioned work

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (thereafter the Ministry) commissioned the Board to undertake an enhancement-led review of Police Studies at the University of Akureyri, with the resulting report submitted to the Ministry and an executive summary of the report published in March 2021 (see p. 14 for a full list of team members).

The Ministry commissioned the Board to conduct an impact assessment of research funded by the Icelandic Research Fund over a five-year period via qualitative and quantitative methods. This work is led by Philip Winn, Board member and REAC Chair. Katrín Frímannsdóttir, former Director of Continuous Quality Improvement and Program Evaluation at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN, was hired as project manager and Fróði Guðmundur Jónsson, MA in Animal Behaviour, was hired as a data analyst on the project. The impact assessment is ongoing and a final report will be published in the second quarter of 2022.

The Greenlandic Ministry of Education, Culture and Church commissioned the Board to develop and implement a project over the course of academic year 2021-22 to support the development of internal quality assurance processes in Greenlandic higher education institutions. Representatives of *Fróðsakaþarsetur* (the University the Faroe Islands) were also invited to participate. In 2021, the project entailed the delivery of five webinars on key concepts and procedures in internal quality assurance. This project will continue into 2022, with both online and on-site workshops in Greenland planned. A project steering committee, that includes Greenlandic and Icelandic members, is chaired by Norman Sharp.

The Árni Magnússon Institute commissioned the Board to conduct a review of its strategic management to support development of a new strategic plan. A review team is being assembled to conduct a site visit in April 2022 (for the names of the review team, please see p. 14).

The Research Evaluation Advisory Committee (REAC)

REAC is an advisory committee of the Quality Board that met four times in 2021. REAC hosted a webinar on research evaluation on 10 September (for video recordings of the proceedings, please visit the Board website). Three international speakers presented on research assessment across all academic disciplines. Following the presentations, the presenters joined two Rectors of Icelandic Universities in a panel discussion with audience participation. Seventy-three signed up for attendance and at any given point there were approximately 45 attendees watching online. The webinar was followed up with an onsite conference on the same topic on October 1 that was conducted in Icelandic and streamed simultaneously online. The success of the webinars has encouraged REAC to think about further opportunities for online events.

Communicating with the sector and partners in Iceland and abroad

The Quality Board views as one of its most important responsibilities to maintain a dialogue with its partners and stakeholders in order to ensure appropriate engagement with Iceland and to keep abreast of international developments. These activities were curtailed in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and certain planned activities, including meetings with Icelandic working life stakeholders, were not considered feasible.

Reaching out to Icelandic partners

The Board met with its Icelandic partners to discuss issues of mutual interest and to update the sector on the work undertaken during the year. The Board met with:

- The Rectors' Conference in November (online).
- The QC in November. In addition, the QC president sits on the Board meetings and the Board manager on the QC meetings.
- LÍS in September and November.
- Representatives of the Ministry in May (online).

The Board Chair and Vice-Chair visited all seven university campuses in October and met with Rectors, Quality Managers and various members of staff of all universities in person. During that visit, the Chair and Vice-Chair also met with the QC, the Ministry and LÍS. The Board Manager met with the Rectors' Conference in February to discuss the Board's proposed structure and trajectory.

Reaching out internationally

Reaching out internationally is essential to a quality assurance body. It provides invaluable opportunities to benchmark and learn from others, and to lend the Quality Board's unique expertise. The Quality Board has been an affiliate member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) since 2018. ENQA is the body that represents quality assurance organisations from the European

Higher Education Area (www.engq.eu). A Quality Board representative attended the two ENQA General Assemblies convened online in 2021 (April and October).

The Board Vice Chair and Manager represented the Board in the 2021 Annual Meeting of the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA) in October. The Manager also sits on the steering team for the NOQA Annual Conference. The Conference was to be held in Reykjavík in 2021, but was postponed until 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Annual Conference

The 2021 annual Board conference – titled *Teaching and Learning Post-Covid: What Lies Ahead?* – took place as an online webinar in March with approximately 140 attendees (for video recordings of the proceedings, please visit the Board website⁴). The conference opened with presentations from an international panel on developing and strengthening the quality of learning and teaching, followed by two panel discussions on the experience of online learning. The first panel consisted of representatives of Icelandic students, whilst the second panel consisted of staff representatives from the Icelandic universities.

Concluding remarks: Common issues across the sector

Every annual report is an occasion to identify a number of cross-cutting issues. (Annex 8 recapitulates the conclusions of the 2019 and 2020 Annual reports⁵.) The multiple opportunities for dialogue with the sector in 2021 have confirmed many of the issues that were identified earlier and led to the identification of additional ones, including:

- Can universities benefit from different levels of analysis for Subject-Level Reviews (for example, department/faculty vs. school)?
- How to best support universities in enhancing their mechanisms for ongoing programme monitoring and periodic review?
- How can the key QEF terms in English be translated into Icelandic, so as not to cause misunderstandings about the nature of IWR judgments?
- Are there instances of review fatigue following QEF reviews and if so, how can they be prevented ?
- How can the quality of international joint degrees awarded by Icelandic universities be best secured?
- Should the use of sessional staff, including their induction, development and the quality assurance of their teaching, be a focus area in the QEF?

Furthermore, questions about the role of the Quality Board were identified including:

- How can the Board support enhancement through annual meetings with the universities whilst ensuring its objectivity in making judgments about university quality?

⁴ <https://qef.is/events/board-webinar-2021/>

⁵ <https://qef.is/assets/PDFs/Annual-Reports/2019-Annual-Report-for-website.pdf> and https://qef.is/assets/Annual_report_2020-final.pdf

- How can the Board ensure that universities follow up on important recommendations in IWR reports even when there is confidence for both judgments?
- At present, QEF analyses education and research. Should there also be a focus on university profiles and corresponding strategic development and management?
- When examining internal quality processes (IQA) are the IWR reports capturing the link between IQA and decision-making? To what extent the IWR reports are focused on evaluating the extent to which a quality culture is embedded in governance and management?

These issues will be discussed with all stakeholders in the years ahead to ensure that the QEF3 Handbook serves its function in supporting the quality of Iceland's universities.

Annex 1: Quality Board Membership

Andrée Sursock, Chair, Senior Adviser, European University Association (EUA)

Norman Sharp, Vice-Chair, former Director of QAA Scotland

Crichton W. Lang, Former Vice-Chancellor and Principal, University of the Highlands and Islands (from November).

Barbara Brittingham, former President of New England Commission on Higher Education (until September)

Oisín Hassan, Former Board member of the European Student Union, representative of the National Union of Icelandic Students

Ellen Hazelkorn, Joint Managing Partner, BH Associates, Joint Editor, Policy Review in Higher Education

Riitta Pyykkö, Professor and Former Vice Rector, University of Turku

Philip Winn, Research Professor, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

Aldís Mjöll Geirsdóttir, student observer, representative of the National Union of Icelandic Students

Annex 2: Research Evaluation Advisory Committee Membership

Philip Winn, Chair, Research Professor, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

Rannveig Björnsdóttir, Dean of School of Business & Science, University of Akureyri (until September)

Bjarki Þór Grönfeldt, Doctoral Student, University of Kent

Elín Díanna Gunnarsdóttir, Dean of School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Akureyri (from November)

Sigrún Gunnarsdóttir, Professor, Bifröst University and University of Iceland (until May)

Ragnhildur Helgadóttir, Rector, Reykjavik University, and Chair of the Science Committee of the Science and Technology Policy Council

Kristján Kristjánsson, Director of Research and Information Technology, Reykjavik University

Helga Ólafs, Research Director, Bifröst University (from September)

Guðbjörg Linda Rafnsdóttir, Pro-Rector of Science, University of Iceland

Christian Schultze, International Relations and Research Manager, Agricultural University of Iceland

Skúli Skúlason, Director of Division of Research, Hólar University (nominated by the Quality Council)

Hulda Stefánsdóttir, Research Coordinator, The Icelandic University of the Arts

Finnborg Salome Steinþórsdóttir, Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Iceland

Guðný Zoëga, Assistant Professor, Department of Rural Tourism, Hólar University

Annex 3: Quality Council

The Quality Council (QC) is chaired by Áslaug Helgadóttir, University of Iceland. The composition of QC in 2021 was as follows:

Agricultural University of Iceland	Guðmunda Smáradóttir, Director of Quality and Human Resources
Bifröst University	Stefán Kalmansson, Director of Quality Management (until June) Lydía Geirsdóttir, Quality Manager (from September)
Hólar University	Skúli Skúlason, Professor and Director of Research
Icelandic University of the Arts	Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir, Director of Quality Enhancement, Teaching and Research
Reykjavik University	Guðrún Ragna Hreinsdóttir, Quality Manager
University of Akureyri	Vaka Óttarsdóttir, Director of Quality and Human Resources
University of Iceland	Áslaug Helgadóttir, Director of Quality Management
National Union of Icelandic Students	Jóhanna Ásgeirsdóttir, Chairperson (until June) India Bríet Böðvarsdóttir Terry, Quality Officer (until June) Derek Terrell Allen, Chairperson (from September) Björgvin Ægir Elísson, Quality Officer (from September)

Annex 4: Secretariat

Sigurður Óli Sigurðsson, Board Manager

Annex 5: IWR Teams

Bifröst University

Patricia Maguire Meservey, Chair, President Emerita, Salem State University.

Ragnar Árnason, student, University of Helsinki.

Iain Morrison, Dean of Students, University of the Highlands and Islands.

Anneli Pirttilä, Rector Emerita, Saimaa University of Applied Sciences.

Lewis Purser, Team Secretary, Director, Learning, Teaching and Academic Affairs, Irish Universities Association.

Oliver Vettori, Dean, Accreditation and Quality Management and Director, Programme Management & Teaching and Learning Support, Vienna University of Economics and Business.

University of Iceland

Susan Hunter, Chair, President Emerita, University of Maine.
Abbe Brown, Dean for Student Support, University of Aberdeen.
Bjarki Grönfeldt, student, University of Kent.
Philip Nolan, President. Maynooth University.
Sijbolt Noorda, Chair of the Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum.
Dorte Salskov-Iversen, Head of Department, Copenhagen Business School.

Icelandic University of the Arts

Lois Fitch, Chair, Deputy Principal, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.
Michèle Graf, Head of Accreditation and Quality Development, Zurich University of the Arts.
Helka-Liisa Hentilä, Professor of Planning and Urban Design and former Vice-Rector (Education),
University of Oulu.
Nhung Hong Thi Ngo, student, University of Iceland.
Kurt T. Steinberg, President, Montserrat College of Art.

University of Akureyri

Kimberly Bogle Jubinville, Chair. Senior Vice President and University Chief Academic Officer,
Southern New Hampshire University
Alan Davidson, International higher education and training consultant
Sandra Kristín Jónasdóttir, student, University of Iceland.
Taina Pihlajaniemi, Vice Rector/Vice President (Research), University of Oulu
Oliver Vettori, Dean, Accreditation and Quality Management and Director, Programme
Management & Teaching and Learning Support, Vienna University of Economics and
Business.

Annex 6: Teams for commissioned reviews

Police Studies at University of Akureyri

Jelle Janssens, Chair, Assistant Professor, Ghent University.
Kimmo Kaleve Himberg, Director and Rector of Police University College, Tampere.
Fiona Ruth Crozier. Independent consultant.
Kolbrún Lára Kjartansdóttir, student, University of Iceland.

Strategic management at Árni Magnússon Institute

Boyd Robertson, Chair, former Principal, National Centre of Excellence for Gaelic Language and
Culture.
Antal van den Bosch, Director, Meertens Institute.
Tove Bull, former Rector, University of Tromsø and former Board member.
Student member, TBD.

Annex 7: Calendar of meetings and events

February	Quality Board meeting, online Meeting of the Board Manager with Rectors' Conference, online
March	Quality Board meeting, online REAC meeting, online Quality Board annual conference, online Publication of Bifröst University Institution-Wide Review Report Publication of commissioned review summary, Police Studies at University of Akureyri
April	Quality Board meeting, online ENQA General Assembly, online
May	Quality Board meeting, online Meeting of the Board with Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, online
June	Quality Board meeting, online Annual meetings of Board representatives with Bifröst University, Hólar University, Icelandic University of the Arts, Reykjavík University, and University of Akureyri, online
September	Quality Board meeting, online REAC meeting, online Meeting of the Board with LÍS, online Publication of University of Iceland Institution-Wide Review Report Annual meeting of Board representative with Agricultural University of Iceland Webinar 1 on building capacity for internal quality assurance in Greenland
October	Meeting of the Board Chair and Vice-Chair with LÍS, Reykjavík Meeting of the Board Chair and Vice-Chair with Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Reykjavík Meeting of the Board Chair and Vice-Chair with Quality Council, Reykjavík Meeting of the Board Chair and Vice-Chair with Rectors, Quality Managers and various members of staff of all seven universities ENQA General Assembly, online NOQA Annual Meeting, online Webinars 2 and 3 on building capacity for internal quality assurance in Greenland

November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality Board meeting, Reykjavík REAC meeting, online Quality Council seminar and workshop Quality Board meets with LÍS, Reykjavík Quality Board meets with Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Reykjavík Quality Board meets with Quality Council, Reykjavík Quality Board meets with Rectors' Conference, Reykjavík Webinars 4 and 5 on building capacity for internal quality assurance in Greenland
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Annex 8: Common issues across the sector identified in previous annual reports

2019

- How to strengthen cooperation across Iceland through the national network of universities? Might interinstitutional cooperation bolster such aspects as the provision of distance learning, the management of research, interdisciplinarity, and the second and third cycles?
- How to showcase the universities' role in society?
- What are the implications for learning of (i) the profile of Icelandic students, notably with respect to gender, age and time spent working and (ii) the use of sessional staff?
- Are Masters' degrees clearly positioned in relation to the first- and third-cycle degrees?
- What are the possibilities and implications for increasing and diversifying income, especially for the public universities?
- What type of common data should be used?
- How to promote good practice in benchmarking and bench-learning?
- How to manage risks?
- How to promote staff professional development?
- Are governing boards optimised for their functions?

2020

- How to capitalise on what has been learned from pivoting to online learning in the wake of COVID-19? How to enhance distance learning, notably by improving the use of electronic resources?
- How best to integrate internal quality assurance into high-level university governance and ensure follow-through of quality action plans?
- How best to support universities in capturing the student voice in all quality assurance activities?
- How can universities ensure the collection and publication of standardised Key Statistics for their internal dashboarding?

Furthermore, questions about the role of the Quality Board were identified including:

- How can the Quality Board expand its resources to more fully support quality in higher education, including the crucial work of the Quality Council and LÍS?

- How can the national grounding of the QEF in Iceland be strengthened?
- How can more public information on internal and external quality assurance be produced in the course of the QEF, in particular in Icelandic?
- How to best use Mid-Term Progress reports and annual meetings as mechanisms for ongoing quality assurance?