Iceland: QEF2 survey – qualitative analysis of stakeholder responses

Executive summary

This analysis examines the results of a survey conducted by the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education in the autumn of 2022. The survey was set up to investigate how the Quality Enhancement Framework was viewed by the seven Icelandic universities. The analysis follows the format of the QEF1 Final Report published in March 2015. It might therefore be a first step towards a longitudinal study undertaken sometime in the future.

The online questionnaire first sought views on the principles informing the QEF, the areas of evaluation and the various bodies involved. Opinion was divided on whether the principles were clear and visible to all categories of stakeholder; a wide range of comments were made. Opinion was divided, too, on the question of whether the distinction between 'quality' and 'standards' was clear. It raised the issue of how the concepts might be accurately translated from English to Icelandic, as well as the related issues of how much of the QEF documentation should be made available in Icelandic and for which reading publics. No consensus emerged. The inclusion of research management in the scope of the QEF, by contrast, was welcomed with virtual unanimity.

Perceptions of the Quality Board and the Quality Council were broadly supportive, but the Research Evaluation Advisory Committee was considered to have low levels of visibility and transparency. Views on how the three bodies interacted were mixed. There was disagreement regarding the wholly foreign composition of the Board. Student participation in quality assurance evoked a positive response, with the rider that it was not always forthcoming. The effectiveness of the Quality Board secretariat was widely appreciated. Respondents offered a range of suggestions as to how Quality Board publications might be better disseminated.

In its main section, the survey invited the universities' perceptions of the 'quality cycle', focusing on the subject-level and institution-wide reviews. The former were deemed beneficial, conditional on consistent follow-up being overseen by well-embedded quality assurance staff and procedures. The seven-year gap between visitations by external panels did not facilitate such a development. The external experts had made useful contributions.

The institution-wide reviews were on the whole well received, in terms of their preparation and conduct, although it was regrettable that due to the pandemic some had to be undertaken online. The Reflective Analysis was considered to be a constructive and helpful exercise. The possibility of mounting an institutional showcase for the benefit of the visiting teams was welcomed, but the need for a case study was questioned. There was mixed opinion, too, regarding the question of whether the review reports should have been presented as action plans – or whether that was a task for the institutions. The review reports tended to be regarded as too long and inappropriate for wider dissemination.

Overall, the QEF2 exercise was held to be positive. The survey elicited many observations, not always consistent among themselves, but nearly all relevant and improvement-oriented.

The opinions reported in the analysis that follows have been extrapolated as reliably as possible from the data entered on the survey software. However, given the number of incompletions, skipped questions and the permeable nature of the boundaries between the different categories of respondents, the weight of opinion on the various issues has been impossible to ascertain exactly.

Abbreviations

CRIS	Current research information system
DL	Distance learning
ESG	Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area
HEI	Higher education institution
IWR	Institution-wide review
LÍS	*Landssamtök íslenskra stúdenta* (National Union of Icelandic Students)
QA	Quality assurance
QB	Quality Board
QEF	Quality Enhancement Framework
RA	Reflective analysis
REAC	Research Evaluation Advisory Committee
SLR	Subject-level review

Background

The Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) was set up in 2011 and evaluated in 2015 at the conclusion of its first cycle of operations. The Quality Board (QB) subsequently decided that the duration of the second cycle would be seven years. The QEF2 survey was therefore undertaken in 2022. It took the form of a semi-structured questionnaire and the responses it elicited are the subject of this report. They provide commentary by all Icelandic higher education institutions on the subject-level and institution-wide reviews conducted by panels of external experts under the auspices of the QB.

Underpinning the questionnaire was the assumption that the higher education institutions were pursuing their activities in line with the principles set out in 2017 and published in the *QEF2 Handbook*. These incorporated a number of significant changes to the QEF1 template, while maintaining strong continuity with it. The main changes were:

➢ The inclusion of the management of research
➢ The transfer to the institutions of more extensive responsibility for the organisation of subject-level reviews
➢ The dissemination to the wider public of the outcomes of subject-level reviews
➢ The appointment of a student to full membership of the QB
➢ The addition of transparency as a cornerstone of the QEF

Overview of respondents and methodology of report

A preliminary set of questions established the institutional affiliation and occupation of the respondents. The questionnaire then divided into three further sections. The second (section B) sought views on the principles informing the QEF, the areas of evaluation and the various bodies involved. Section C addressed the 'quality cycle', focusing on the institution-wide and subject-level reviews. A final section D was open for additional comments by the respondents.

Certain categories of respondent were directed to skip particular sub-sections. In order to accommodate this facility, the Sogolytics survey software generated two records for each question. This is why this report references two numbers for each question (e.g. qq 1,78) while nevertheless

aggregating the responses. The majority of questions invited open-ended answers. Those that required a simple 'yes' or 'no' were mainly inserted at the questionnaire's branch points.

The survey elicited 39 submissions, of which nine were incomplete. Twelve of the 39 stated (qq 52,123) that their institution had not yet completed the IWR process in QEF2. In addition, there may have been individuals who intended to respond fully, but who failed to do so before the cut-off date. It is equally possible that some deemed certain sections/questions to be inapplicable.

The 39 responses broke down into the following group categories:

University executive/senior manager	10 (26%)
Teaching management/research management	8 (21%)
Quality management	9 (23%)
Academic (teaching and/or research)	19 (49%)
Student support/technical support services	3 (8%)
Undergraduate/Postgraduate student	4 (10%)
Student association officer	0%
University board member	2 (5%)
Government official	2 (5%)
International peer external expert for subject level review	3 (8%)

Note that these percentages, rounded to the nearest integer, accommodate multiple responses (there were 60 in total). Two respondents who logged their role as 'other' were active in QEF2, one as project manager and secretary of an SLR, the other as 'project manager of self-evaluation'. Two students also reported that they had participated in QEF2. Ten respondents said that they had undertaken the survey as individuals; one had represented students.

When asked if they wished to see all questions, 20 (51%) replied 'yes' and 18 (46%) 'no'. However, not only did the questionnaire bifurcate at certain points in accordance with the group to which the respondent belonged, but in certain instances it is clear that the person answering belonged to a group other than those to which the question was restricted. Moreover, only two thirds of informants had completed their IWR at the time of responding. This raises the possibility that the survey had been launched too early and/or that its deadline may have been too short.

These factors taken together mean that it is not always clear from which groups the various sets of answers derive. This is particularly true of sections B1, B2 and B3 below. They also render problematic the drawing of precise conclusions regarding the weight of each opinion.

The clearest inference to be drawn from the data is that student participation – in the survey, although not necessarily in quality assurance procedures at institution level – was low (10%).

Survey PART B: Survey Questions "Principles, Structures and Relationships"

B1 Principles

The second edition of the Quality Enhancement Handbook (2017) restates the six founding principles laid down by its predecessor in 2011. They are:

> ➢ The role of the Quality Board is to support the autonomous higher education institutions; they are the guardians of the quality and standards of the courses they deliver.
> ➢ Together, the Board and the universities strive continuously to enhance the learning experience of all students.
> ➢ Students are partners in the quality enhancement endeavour.
> ➢ The Quality Board is committed to maintaining full alignment with best European quality assurance practice.
> ➢ While the Quality Board seeks constructive partnerships with all higher education stakeholders, it retains absolute independence.
> ➢ In its operations and procedures the Quality Board is committed to the full transparency of the Quality Enhancement Framework.

- **Do you think these principles are clearly defined and visible to stakeholders in the way that QEF2 has run? How could this be improved? (qq 7, 78)**

  Twenty-eight of the 39 respondents addressed this question. Eighteen agreed that the principles were clearly defined and visible to stakeholders, while three called for greater visibility. The remainder expressed reservations: the definitions were too convoluted, syntactically complex and insufficiently categorical; they would have been better formulated as bullet points, with examples; finally, they should also be available in Icelandic. Despite the perceived lack of clarity, one respondent acknowledged their usefulness in stimulating internal reflection and debate. Another proposed that the various categories of stakeholders be monitored to ensure that their understanding of the principles was shared. Only one submission addressed each principle in turn. It recommended strengthening the European and international dimensions and consolidating the partnership with students.

- **Are there other important fundamental principles relating to Higher Education in Iceland that you feel could/should be incorporated? (qq 8,79)**

  Of the 28 responses (of the total of 39), eight identified no further principles. The remainder volunteered several suggestions:

  > ➢ Social engagement of the HEI (four mentions)
  > ➢ Academic freedom and institutional autonomy, with explicit reference to the 2006 law (4)
  > ➢ Partnership with industry (3)
  > ➢ Learning and teaching (2)
  > ➢ Focus on non-standard, DL and online students (2)
  > ➢ Accountability of senior management and quality assurance offices (2)
  > ➢ Description of the facilities and equipment available for staff and students (2)
  > ➢ Participation of science funding bodies (1)
  > ➢ Academic staff experience and support (1)
  > ➢ PhD supervision (1)
  > ➢ Soft skills (1)

B2 Areas of evaluation

- **Do you think the distinction between "standards" and "quality" is clear for an Icelandic audience? (qq 9,80)**

Opinion was divided on this question, with 16 positive and 11 negative responses. In both camps there was some measure of hesitancy. Respondents sought more explanation and direct textual reference to the ESG. The call for the relevant text to be available in Icelandic was reiterated, with two respondents noting that speakers of Icelandic would need to know the two terms in Icelandic before making a judgement. Another doubted whether there is indeed a distinction between standards and quality.[1] Finally, one contribution pleaded for relevant staff training.

- **"Management of Research" was added in QEF2. Do you have any views on how successful this has been and how useful it has been to include it? (qq 10,81)**

  By contrast, this question elicited positive and near unanimity of 31 responses. The inclusion of research management would stimulate stronger synergies with learning and teaching and shine a light on research infrastructure and facilities. It would prompt relevant data collection and encourage forward planning. Some felt that it should be formally evaluated in future, despite the difficulty – pinpointed by one respondent – that it has no standard institutional location, operating at any or all of departmental, faculty and central levels. One respondent observed that the REAC guidelines were not only complicated but presupposed the existence of an institutional research strategy – which was not always the case.

- **Are there other key areas of evaluation that might be considered for inclusion/further development/focus in QEF3? (qq 11,82)**

  This question generated a catalogue of suggestions from 26 respondents:

  - Social engagement of the HEI (4)
  - Staff satisfaction and academic staff experience (including workload) (2)
  - Academic freedom (1)
  - Gender and equality (1)
  - Clear career pathways for all categories of staff (1)
  - Staff-student ratios (1)
  - Quality assessment of the QA unit (1)
  - Evaluation of teaching (1)
  - Evaluation of research (1)
  - The need for QA practice to accommodate issues of compliance with the EU Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications (1)
  - Innovation, entrepreneurship, collaboration with industry and business (1)

  One respondent demurred, preferring QEF3 to resist expansion and instead to take a gradualist approach, ensuring that innovations already in train might be securely embedded.

B3 Structures

QUALITY BOARD

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[1] This doubt may stem from the fact that, while in English there is a serviceable and recognised distinction between the two terms, this is not the case in Icelandic. Translating from Icelandic to English might present little difficulty, since the choice between *quality* and *standard* would depend on the context. Translating from English to Icelandic is more problematic. I am advised that *quality* can be rendered by *gæði*, but that *standard* has no obvious equivalent. Perhaps the Quality Board can prescribe a regulatory usage, as I believe it has in respect of the *Board/Council* pair: I understand that the *Quality Board* is the *Gæðaráð,* while the *Quality Council* is the *Ráðgjafarnefnd Gæðaráðs.*

- **Do you wish to comment on any aspect of the structure, operation, independence, transparency or utility of the Quality Board? (qq 12,83)**

Academic staff, students, and external stakeholders were not invited to answer questions in this section of B3. The 19 responses broadly endorsed the functioning of the QB, in the range of strong to moderate. Dissenting views noted its insufficient transparency and the absence of an independent national expert with local knowledge.

- **Are there any ways in which you think the role/remit of the QB could develop? (qq 13,84)**

Academic staff, students, and external stakeholders were not invited to answer questions in this section. The 16 responses yielded some thought-provoking comments. One forceful endorsement of the QB's role was qualified by two further remarks to the effect that the Board should better justify its activities and provide more detail on the background and profile of the experts. It was also suggested that the QB-HEI relationship would benefit if relevant training were given to senior management in the universities. Another contributor insisted that QB membership remain solidly non-Icelandic. One respondent addressed the issue of judgements of 'limited confidence' (para.102, QEF2), observing that the procedure followed by the QB is 'rather unclear and incoherent'. This comment appeared to refer to a recently concluded IWR.

QUALITY COUNCIL

- **Do you have any comment to make on the structure, operation or utility of the Quality Council? (qq 14,85)**

Academic staff, students, and external stakeholders were not invited to answer questions in this section. In general, there was support for the QC, some of it fulsome, particularly in respect of student involvement. One respondent noted reprovingly that it appeared to display less concern for HE staff experience than for student experience. Another stressed the need for focused training and induction into QA procedures. Others felt that the Council needed a higher profile and that the production of annual reports would help in this respect.

- **Are there any ways in which you think the role/remit of the Quality Council could develop? (qq 15,86)**

Academic staff, students, and external stakeholders were not invited to answer questions in this section. Here there was an acceptance of the usefulness of the QC, accompanied by some pointed commentary:

  ➢ The remit of the QC is too ambitious and is deliverable only with increased commitment of HEI leaderships
  ➢ QA would be better embedded in institutional practice if QC meetings were to rotate through the sequence of seven universities
  ➢ QC activities should be continuous rather than periodic
  ➢ Open QC workshops would significantly raise its visibility
  ➢ QC activities should be subject to external review
  ➢ The improvements made in QEF2 should be incorporated into the QEF3 Handbook

RESEARCH EVALUATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE (REAC)

- **Do you have any comment to make on the structure, operation or utility of REAC? (qq 16,87)**

Academic staff, students, and external stakeholders were not invited to answer questions in this section. This question drew 15 entries: five offering 'no comment' and two declaring no knowledge of REAC. The remainder regarded REAC as insufficiently visible, lacking transparency, and ill-equipped to effect change. The most detailed of the replies recommended amplification of its remit to cover the evaluation of research, its social impact, ethical issues, and management of CRIS systems. Another recommended that REAC membership include representatives of international research funding bodies.

- **Are there any ways in which you think the role/remit of REAC could develop further? (qq 17,88)**

Academic staff, students, and external stakeholders were not invited to answer questions in this section. Most of the few responses were non-committal. The three substantive views considered that REAC should raise its profile by improving its dissemination and establishing institutional contacts at departmental level. And, moreover, that QA process should be more explicit about the expectations it places on the activities and personnel involved in the quest for external research funding.

GENERAL QUESTIONS ABOUT GROUPS AND THEIR ROLES

- **Do you feel that the roles and responsibilities of the Quality Board, Quality Council and REAC, and their relationships to each other, are clear? Yes/No? (If 'no', do you wish to elaborate) (qq 18/19-89/90)**

This pair of questions was addressed specifically to university managements. Twenty-three respondents posted answers, of which eleven were positive and twelve were negative. Fifteen took the opportunity to elaborate further. Those with a positive view nevertheless noted that while the relationships of the bodies are clear, they do not enjoy a high level of visibility in the wider academic community. By way of remedy to the perceived lack of clarity, one 'no' voice suggested a one-page summary of the bodies' respective remits. Other dissenting voices expressed anxiety about role definition and the possibility of role overlap. The position of REAC was highlighted: what exactly is its remit, how does it relate formally to QB and QC – and to the ministry?

- **Do these groups work effectively together for example in terms of consultation, collaboration and planning? How could this evolve further? (qq 20,91)**

The twelve entries were characterised by uncertainty. Clearer lines of collaboration would help, involving formal information sharing, joint meetings, together with more energetic promotion vis-à-vis the general public. They would also boost the evaluation of research within the QEF. Contact between the QC and REAC was regarded by one informant as insubstantial: the secretariat could play a role in facilitating and reinforcing it.

- **Are any additional groups needed, in order to engage more stakeholders in relevant areas/aspects of planning, development and quality enhancement activities within the QEF? (qq 21,92)**

The twelve respondents provided some detailed observations. One urged QEF to stick to the core issues of standards and quality of degree programmes, as well as research; the inclusion of stakeholders from industry would risk weakening the core focus. Another implicitly agreed,

stressing that priority be given to enlisting of support of senior management in the implementation of review recommendations. As for additional groups, there were two suggestions: a formal group of academic staff and a student QA forum.

B4 Student engagement

- **As a student, have opportunities to engage in quality work been visible to you? (qq 22,93)**

Three of the four responses to this question elicited a simple categorical 'yes'. The fourth was a distance-learner unaware of student involvement in QA.

- **We would welcome your observations on how effective student engagement has been throughout QEF2? (qq 23,94)**

Although responses in this section B4 were restricted to students and officers of student associations, many other stakeholders took the opportunity to express their views. The students noted the degree of support and encouragement that they had received from Faculty members. The broader stakeholder response was very positive; it valued the input of undergraduates, postgraduates and alumni, as well as the extent to which student members of QA teams liaised with each other and with students outside the process. Nevertheless, in some institutions it was difficult to secure student involvement, particularly given the transient nature of the student body. The solution to this problem was QA training delivered more systematically. Only one response was unreservedly negative, finding the student input 'completely useless' in contrast to the effective formative assessment undertaken on-course.

- **Can you suggest ways in which student engagement could be further enhanced and the student voice better heard? (qq 24, 95)**

A number of comments emerged from the sixteen responses:

  - Greater involvement of alumni is desirable (2) and a wider canvass of student opinion
  - Departmental Boards already involve students in the discussion of QEF2 outcomes
  - Formal agreements between university leaderships and student organisations would help secure consistent student participation
  - QA training for students should build on an initial orientation process inducting new students to reflection on the mission and function of higher education
  - Mechanisms should be sought to ensure that student criticism of academic staff finds its way to individual academics without exposing individual students

B5 Communication

- **Do you have any observations about the quality, transparency, usefulness and/or tone of communications from the Quality Board, secretariat, or review teams? (qq 25,96)**

The questions in section B5 were open to all respondents. The invitation to make observations on QB communications was taken up by 23 respondents, 18 of whom were happy with their quality, in the range of 'excellent' to 'mostly good'. Of the remainder, some commented on the QEF2 process in general – either to applaud it or, in one case, to criticise it for focusing on the student experience to the exclusion of the experience of academics. Very few addressed the issue of communications; one recommended that QB 'simplify its written protocols'. More

material in Icelandic was requested by another, while yet another complained about items of text that appeared only in Icelandic.

- **Do you have any observations on the format, clarity or utility of the QEF Handbook and supporting documentation? (qq 26,97)**

  Thirteen comments emerged from 18 respondents, ranging from the supportive to the non-committal. In the view of one respondent, the Handbook was of great assistance in drafting the Reflective Analysis. Others objected to its length and the complexity, pleading for simpler language and summaries in Icelandic[2]. One proposed that the Handbook be produced in a bilingual edition, following the example of LÍS. One QA manager requested the inclusion of standard report templates with recommended timelines.

- **Do you have any observations regarding the effectiveness of public information generated by the QEF (e.g. review summaries and reports) and other elements of work by the Board, Quality Committee and REAC? (qq 27,98)**

  In general, the limited number of comments (15) considered that the effectiveness of QEF public information was high where specialist readership was concerned; it diminished when disseminated to a wider public. The question of summaries in Icelandic arose again (cf. the previous question), this time to welcome their inclusion.

- **Could QEF communication channels develop further (either in terms of the range of communications or the channels used)? (qq 28,99)**

  Here, a limited response (12) generated a few suggestions:

  - Use of social media
  - An improved homepage
  - Reinforcement by short workshops
  - Targeting senior management to secure adequate resourcing of SLR/IWR activities
  - Dissemination to external experts of the review outcomes and the reactions of staff and students
  - More direct contact between the QB and the departmental units working on the IWR
  - Wider public dissemination of the process and the outcomes

- **Could the Quality Board produce a wider variety of papers to support quality enhancement in Iceland? And if so, what topics should the Board focus on? (qq29,100)**

  The eighteen opinions split between those suggesting further topics and those preferring instead to focus on enhancing the current arrangements. Among the latter, there were calls for an improved website, for more material in Icelandic, and for a critical review of QEF1 and QEF2 undertaken in order to simplify the processes involved. As for the possible future topics, there was a strong plea for consideration of student mental health, as well as a proposal to promote inclusion – in respect both of non-standard distance learners and of multinational diversity in the student body. The issue of the academic staff experience was also raised once more. Finally, there was a need for wider dissemination of material demonstrating the relevance of research

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[2] The language question crops up regularly. It should be noted that some respondents were unaware of the existence of the summaries in Icelandic – or that they did not realise that summaries exist for IWR reports but not for chapters of the Handbook.

and teaching to social and environmental concerns and, in particular, engaging chambers of commerce in discussions about research priorities.

B6   Effectiveness of the secretariat

- **Do you have any observations regarding the Secretariat's responsiveness, communication, and provision of support? (qq 30,101)**

The two questions in section B6 were addressed to university management, student associations and government officials. Other categories (academic staff and students, university board members, external stakeholders) were excluded.

Six of the twelve responses expressed either 'no comment' or 'no contact'. The six substantive comments were appreciative of the Secretariat's 'exemplary' work, while calling for (and welcoming) the recruitment of additional staff.

- **Do you have any observations regarding the Secretariat's professionalism and independence from Ministry? (qq 31,102)**

The Secretariat's independence and professionalism were unanimously acclaimed – 'excellent' and 'faultless'.

B7   Annual Meetings

- **Is the purpose of the annual meetings clear? (qq 32,103)**

University management teams and student associations were invited to answer questions in section B7. Responses in general were sparse and terse. To the question on the purpose of annual meetings, for example, eleven responded 'yes', four 'no', and five 'not involved'. No commentary was provided.

- **Are the annual meetings effective in providing a channel of communication with the Board? (qq 33,104)**

Similarly, this question generated eight 'yes', three 'no', and ten 'not involved'.

- **Do you think these annual meetings are useful? (qq 34,105)**

Here the weight of opinion was clearer: nine 'yes', three 'no', and nine 'not involved'.

- **Are there any ways in which you think the annual meetings might be changed to increase their value**? **(qq 35,106)**

Only eight of the 14 respondents had been involved. They offered a range of reflections. One was very satisfied, another felt that discussion could be deeper and involve fewer people. One strand of opinion held that meetings were useful mainly for information provision; they were nevertheless unstructured, not given due importance by senior management, and (as reported by one informant) tended to deteriorate into 'polite chatter' about current affairs. Set against this was one voice which appreciated the informality and wondered whether two meetings per annum would be possible.

Survey PART C: Survey Questions "The Quality Cycle"

C1:   Annual/Periodic Monitoring

- **Have you been involved in annual/periodic monitoring of academic programmes in any capacity in recent years? Y/N (If N go to C2) (qq 49,120)[3]**

  Section C1 was open to all respondents except for those who had no role in recent annual or periodic monitoring exercises.

  When asked whether they had indeed been active, 17 replied in the affirmative, while 13 said 'no'. The 13 were routed direct to section C2 by the questionnaire software. Nine gave no answer.

- **Should QEF3 more formally capture developments in annual/periodic monitoring within institutions (for example, through Subject Level Reviews or Institution Wide Reviews)? (qq 50, 121)**

  The majority of 'yes' responses yielded a number of contributions. Two stakeholders preferred periodic monitoring to remain purely internal; another proposed a biennial cycle. Those in agreement with the question gave a number of reasons: (1) current practice lacked formality; (2) it would provide an opportunity to align programme monitoring with SLRs; (3) it would facilitate conduct of the 7-year SLRs.

- **In what ways could developments in annual/periodic monitoring be better promoted or shared? (qq 51,122)**

  The eight views expressed were in agreement that wider dissemination was desirable. It would demonstrate better the relevance of the monitoring process and remove the risk of it becoming a mere box-ticking exercise. Specification and publication of the list of action lines would help in this respect, as would improved QA training. One respondent suggested involving in QEF3 staff who had not been active in QEF2, but did not indicate which categories.

C2:   Subject Level Review (SLR)

- **Were you engaged in any capacity in SLR during QEF2 Y/N (If N go to C3) (qq 36/37, 107/108)**

  This section was open to all stakeholders, with those who had no involvement in SLRs (nine) being directed to C3. This left 22 active in QEF2, of whom 18 were internal and four external, as well as eight whose status in respect of this was indeterminate.

- **Do you think there were benefits that came out of that work? (Y/N) (qq 40,111)**

  Nineteen respondents said 'yes', the remainder being nil responses.

- **If yes - Do you think that the effort was proportionate to the benefits? (Y/N) (qq 41-43, 112-114)**

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[3] At this point in the sequence of questions, qq38-46 and qq107-121 are missing – they appear as section C2 (SLR) below.

- Some of the 19 affirmative answers were qualified to such an extent that they might have responded 'no'. There was general agreement that the effort required was substantial and beneficial. Regarding the SLR process itself, the prevailing view was that it provided direction for future development and helped identify appropriate measures for implementation. However, only in some cases was there effective follow-up. One respondent filed the summary judgement that the SLRs involved too much work undertaken by too few, with inadequate support from senior management. A few responses were directed at the external experts: one thought them pleasant but lacking in impact; others asserted that they brought credibility to the process, as well as authoritative opinion that could be used to bring pressure on senior management.

- **Do you have any further observations about SLRs in QEF2, their effectiveness and utility? (qq 44,115)**

  There were eleven, generally appreciative, comments in total, from which the impression emerged that the seven-year periodicity of the SLRs induced a substantial expenditure of energy which then rapidly dissipated. Whatever the frequency, it was felt that QA officers should oversee the process and that it was the business of the IWR to ensure that this arrangement was in place. Better follow-up on a regular basis was required at faculty and central levels, if outcomes were to be effective and sustainable. One unreservedly supportive comment stressed the importance of institutional ownership of the SLRs and its role in ensuring the responsible implementation of QA procedures.

- **Do you wish to comment on the effectiveness and added value of engaging external experts in SLRs? (qq 45,116)**

  Despite two dissenting voices, one of which reported very little help from the externals, while the other regarded the SLR process as a 'bitterly disappointing' box-ticking exercise, the dominant view (of the 17 in total) was that the experts' input had proved helpful and supportive: they had brought insights from outside and stimulated the discussion of strengths and weaknesses, even when their recommendations went beyond what the faculties could afford.

- **Has it been your experience that the SLR externals have been truly independent? If not, please explain. (qq 46 and 38-39, qq 117 and 109-110)**

  Questions 46 and 117 invited one-word answers: there were 14 replies in the affirmative. Questions 38-39 and 109-110 sought the same information, this time with 13 positive replies.

  Here there was unanimity: the external experts had been independent, helpful, supportive, positive, creative. One response came from an expert who self-identified as such and who hoped to have been independent and useful.

- **Do you have any views on the publication of summaries of SLR outcomes? (qq 47,118)**

  On this question there was a clear division of opinion. One respondent considered that the full reports would be read by those closely involved, while the uninvolved would have no interest and that summaries would not be useful. On the other hand, and as if potentially to confirm this view, another reported that while summaries had been published online, there was no indication of whether they had been accessed. The remaining three respondents supported publication, partly to increase transparency, partly to generate motivation at Faculty level, and

partly as a means of applying pressure for change. One added the rider that reactions to the summaries should also be published.

- **If not already noted, are there ways in which you think SLRs and their utilization within the overall QEF could be enhanced? (qq 48,119)**

The answers to this question (there were nine submissions) reiterated points made elsewhere: that SLRs would be more effective running at greater frequency, rather than at seven-year intervals; that they should be overseen and steered by QA staff operating at institution level, in order to reduce the burden placed on departmental staff.

C3: Institution-wide review (IWR)

The figures in square brackets after each title or question indicate the categories of respondents, as follows:

- 1   A manager/senior manager/executive with responsibilities for aspects of quality, standards or research within the scope of the IWR
- 2   A member of an institutional team contributing to or managing the preparation of the RA submission or the site visit
- 3   An individual who, in any capacity, met the IWR panel at one or more meetings during the site visit

GENERAL:

- **Has your institution completed the process of IWR in QEF2? (qq 52, 123)**

Eighteen responded 'yes', twelve 'no'[4].

- **What was your experience of the quality of the communication with the QB and secretariat at all stages of the IWR process? [1,2] (qq 54, 125)**

All eleven responses were positive.

- **What was your experience of the quality of the communication with the review teams at all stages of the IWR process? [1,2] (qq 55, 126)**

All ten responses were positive: the review teams were, among other attributions, good, excellent, professional open, creative.

BEFORE THE VISIT by the IWR TEAM [1,2]

- **Was it useful for your university to prepare the Reflective Analysis? And if so, in what ways? (qq 56, 127)**

Four of the seven respondents were positive: the RA drew in staff and students from beyond the narrow QA community; the open discussion it generated was particularly useful in giving the students a voice; the RA helped sharpen the sense of past achievements and shape a vision for

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[4] The twelve negative responses (i.e. uncompleted IWRs) doubtless had a direct effect on the volume and range of responses to many other questions, but to what degree is difficult to ascertain.

the future; it was of particular assistance in reaching internal agreement on IWR methodology (procedures, division of labour). One respondent, however, regretted senior management's failure to use the RA effectively when determining future institutional strategy.

- **Can you comment on the helpfulness of the guidance (e.g. in handbook, in guidance notes provided for preparing the Reflective Analysis)? (qq 57, 128)**

This question elicited the same distribution of answers: six positive and the seventh expressing reservations regarding the lack of clear distinction between the quality of degree programmes and the quality of the student experience.

- **Did you seek ongoing support when preparing the Reflective Analysis (from Quality Board or Secretariat)? (qq 58, 129)**

Only one of the ten had sought support….

- **Can you comment on the quality of that support? (qq 59, 130)**

… and reported it to be excellent, well-directed and effective.

- **Would you include a Case Study in the next Reflective Analysis if given a choice? Why, or why not? (qq 60, 131)**

Three responses agreed that the Case Study added nothing to the usefulness or quality of the RA. On the other hand, two responses regarded it as a useful complement to the RA. A further two said that it had created an opportunity for focused discussion that otherwise might not have taken place.

DURING THE SITE VISIT BY the IWR TEAM

- **The first half day of the team visit was devoted to a Showcase/introduction by the university. Would you include a Showcase in your next IWR if given a choice? Why, or why not? [1,2] (qq 61, 132)**

This question drew a predominantly positive response (nine answers only). Seven affirmed that the Showcase provided indispensable context for the review teams; an eighth said 'no', preferring to use the institution's standard introductory presentation; the ninth said that it was not useful to draw conclusions from an IWR held online.

- **Do you have any comments on the general spirit and conduct of meetings during the site visit? [1,2,3] (qq 62, 133)**

There were no negative comments. The nine respondents noted that the meetings were welcoming, positive, friendly, open, constructive and professional. One added that face-to-face would have been better.

- **How widely did the review team engage with staff, students and other stakeholders during individual meetings and over the site visit as a whole? [1,2] (qq 63, 134)**

The same nine contributors expressed their appreciation, with the reservation that online meetings dilute the quality of engagement, particularly in large institutions.

- **What do you think worked well (or not so well) with the site visit? [1,2,3] (qq 64, 135)**

The respondents had no particular remarks to make, other than that the time available was sometimes too short. One commented to the effect that the student lunch meeting had worked very well.[5]

PUBLICATION OF IWR REPORT AND FOLLOW-UP

- **Do you have any comments on the clarity of the basis for judgements in the report? [1,2] (qq 65, 136)**

Of the six comments, two commended the clarity of the basis for judgements. An external expert interpolated a wish to see the action plans deriving from the recommendations, while the fourth queried once again the usefulness of the distinction between the quality of degree programmes and the quality of the student experience. In one institution the IWR report had not yet been received.

- **Do you have any comments on the clarity of the commendations and recommendations? [1,2] (qq 66, 137)**

The seven responses evinced different reactions:

  ➢ the recommendations were clear and helpful
  ➢ they were verbose
  ➢ Icelandic translations were required
  ➢ a vote of thanks
  ➢ the recommendations would have been better formulated as an action plan (although this was the job of the institution, rather than the QB)

- **Do you have any comments on the readability of the final IWR report? [1,2,3] (qq 67, 138)**

Four answers considered the reports to be appropriate to the institutional staff directly concerned, but too lengthy for a wider readership. A fifth declared it too long and repetitive and suggested that editors be given clearer guidance.

- **In QEF2, the Board started to publish Icelandic summaries of IWRs. Do you have any comments on the quality and value of these summaries? [1,2,3] (qq 68, 139)**

The summaries were welcomed by the eight respondents.

- **Has your university submitted Year-on and/or Mid-Term Progress reports? [1] (qq 69-70, 140-141)**

Five answered 'yes' and two 'no'.

  o **If yes: How helpful was the dialogue with the Board about these reports?**

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[5] Note that some site visits and individual meetings were held online and others face-to-face. These logistical decisions were made after the survey had been launched; in consequence, it is not clear which (partial) mode was adopted by each institution.

Three incidences of helpful conversations with the Board were reported.

OTHER

- **Did you participate in a QEF1 IWR? [1,2] (qq 71-72, 142-143)**

    o **If yes: How was your IWR experience in QEF2 compared to your experience in QEF1**

Eighteen respondents replied. Three hailed QEF2 as a 'huge improvement' on QEF1 in all respects, from the Handbook and thereafter throughout the process. Fourteen had not participated in QEF1, while one informant who had been partially involved (in the IWR only) could only report by hearsay that QEF2 was better than QEF1.

- **Do you have any comments on the overall value of the IWR process? [1,2,3] (qq 73, 144)**

The seven comments were in agreement that the IWR was a valuable contribution to quality enhancement – for all stakeholders including the ministry. An external expert reported that the IWR was well conducted and in line with good practice in other countries. Two respondents suggested measures to improve the exercise:

  ➢ Clarification in the Handbook of the distinction between the quality of degree programmes and the quality of the student experience
  ➢ Also in the Handbook, direct reference to the ESG
  ➢ Tighter post-IWR monitoring and reporting by QB

- **Do you think that the effort of IWR was proportionate to the benefits? Please qualify your answer (qq 74, 145)**

Four responses to this question were reluctant to come to a judgement. Not only was the labour required immense, sometimes insufficiently structured and particularly burdensome on small institutions, but also some considerable time would have to elapse before benefits became apparent. Two informants unhesitatingly said 'yes': the IWR was professional, focused, and yielded clear directions for institutional development.

- **Is there anything else you want to add about your experience with IWR in QEF2? [1,2,3] (qq 75, 146)**

The only after-thoughts were, first, that the ministry should fund the extra time and labour involved, and secondly, that the external experts must be carefully selected in line with the mission of the institution under review.

- **If you have not covered this in an earlier question, do you have any comments on the inclusion of Research Management in QEF2? [1,2,3] (qq 76, 147)**

There was one further comment only, to the effect that Research Management is a topic worthy of inclusion in a manner which is in line with international good practice.

- **Can you suggest any ways in which IWR could be improved in QEF3? [1,2,3] (qq 77, 148)**

Two respondents were anxious to reduce the burden of work. One suggested that IWR meetings be chaired by an experienced external expert capable of managing debate and avoiding wasteful repetition. The third reiterated points made elsewhere (the 7-year cycle should be embedded in a process of continuous assessment, and the ESG should be used as an explicit reference) and stressed also that the IWR should probe the question of whether and how an institution evaluates its QA system. Other comments referred to the need for better and more comprehensive Icelandic translation, as well as to provide effective induction of the university community to the broad issues of HE ethics and QA good practice.

Survey D1:   Other observations

(q 149)

Sixteen entries appear on the survey, of which seven record 'no further comment'. The remainder offer the following:

➢ Forceful endorsements of the QEF2 exercise – one from a student, the other applauding the international input and the effort of the QB, while at the same time urging expansion of the secretariat and a greater level of participation by Icelandic stakeholders
➢ A request for a stronger focus on the experience of academics
➢ Four comments to the effect that the questionnaire was too long and complicated
➢ One respondent would prefer a methodology based on focus groups, but another found that organising student focus groups had been challenging
➢ An insistence that QB bring senior management to a state of readiness prior to the IWR, rather than delivering the Handbook and assuming that all will proceed smoothly

Howard Davies, London, January 2023

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