

Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education

MID-TERM PROGRESS REPORT
Agricultural University of Iceland

April 2020

Preface

This is a Mid-term Progress Report following an Institution-Wide Review of the Agricultural University of Iceland that was carried out in 2013 by the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education. The aim of a Mid-term Progress Report is to review progress in taking forward developments foreshadowed in the Institution-Wide Review process.

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

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

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

Dr. Andrée Sursock

Chair

Dr. Sigurður Óli Sigurðsson

Manager

Glossary and List of Abbreviations

QEF. Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education.

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

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

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

1. Introduction

In the first cycle of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF1), the Agricultural University of Iceland (the University) underwent Institution-Wide Review (IWR) in 2013. The resulting report¹ concluded with judgments of confidence in both the University's management of standards and degrees, as well as the University's arrangements to secure the quality of the student learning experience. This report serves as the University's Mid-term Progress Report as described in the 2nd edition of the Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education². The aim of a Mid-term Progress Report is to review progress in taking forward developments foreshadowed in the most recent IWR report. The University submitted in autumn 2019 a summary of developments since the QEF1 IWR and the annual meeting between the University's representatives and a representative of the Quality Board that year was dedicated to discussions of those developments. This report is a summary of those discussions.

2. Main findings

2.1. Follow-up of QEF1 review

The report from the QEF1 review of the University identified strengths and elements of good practice, as well as areas in need of further development. For the purposes of this Mid-Term Progress Report, the focus in this section will be on progress made in areas in need of further development.

The University has formalised its quality assurance and HR processes (including staff development) through developing related staff functions; revising regulations to formalise the functioning of various institutional committees and other bodies; and establishing a dedicated position for Human

¹ Full report is available at: www.qef.is/qef-review-reports/QEF1-AUI-IWR-Report-for-website.pdf

² Handbook is available at: www.qef.is/publications-and-resources/QEF2-Handbook-for-website.pdf

Resources and Quality Management that is part of the Rectors' office. This post has varied responsibilities around quality assurance but the overarching role is to oversee quality enhancement activities, manage data collection on key indicators, monitor procedures, and ensure compliance with institutional policies. This post also has the support of a Quality Committee, consisting of three faculty members and a Chair appointed by the Rector.

The University has hired a Data Protection Manager, which it believes will further help in safeguarding student anonymity. The University has also clarified the role of Teaching Affairs, the Teaching Committee and Programme Directors in management of quality. These parties have all contributed to substantial programme reviews since 2016, with a focus on revising learning outcomes. Teaching Affairs has led an initiative to make assessment more transparent and consistent across the University, and provided support for staff in providing students with more formative feedback on assignments. The University has put in place rules and a framework for monitoring graduate student performance and progress, which include an annual research seminar ('Research Day'), as well as improved documentation of annual progress. A new course in scientific writing in English is also available to graduate students. The management of graduate studies continues to benefit from an agreement with University of Iceland's Graduate School, including graduate students taking an ethics training course that is delivered in collaboration with the University of Iceland.

The new strategic plan for 2019-2024 (see below) emphasises research and innovation with specific goals for research output and external collaboration; international research collaboration and grant seeking; and recruitment and staff development plans to support research. This function is supported by the new position of International Coordinator and Research Manager. Technical and pedagogical support for distance studies has been improved, and attendance at on-campus sessions for distance students continues to be strictly enforced. Since the 2013 IWR, the University has hired a part-time student counsellor who also shares time her across two other institutions. This new

position addresses equal opportunity and disability issues, as well as providing general student support and career guidance.

2.2. Observations on special topics

In 2019, the University approved its strategic plan for 2019-2024 with an associated change in the structures of faculties. This plan had been started by the previous Rector. There was considerable stakeholder involvement from both within the University (students and staff) and outside (companies, institutes, municipalities) and the process was facilitated by contracted consultants. Students representatives expressed satisfaction with the new strategic plan, and were in particular happy with meetings of the University Council. Further, this new strategic plan is anchored in the Icelandic government's policy and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

According to the new plan, the University has three faculties (or departments), representing the university's key subject areas: agriculture; natural resources and management; and landscape architecture and planning. Of special note is that instructors from related studies at the secondary level have integrated well with the faculty, although the studies at the different study levels currently remain clearly separated. This integration of the agricultural junior college is likely to serve the institution well as a whole and should further ensure a pipeline of students, and continuity of approaches and experiences across secondary and tertiary provision around work-enhanced/informed learning.

The mission statement in the new strategy is as follows: *To create and disseminate knowledge in the field of sustainable use of resources, environment, planning and food production in the Arctic.* The vision of the University is stated as: *To be locally and internationally known for progressive teaching, research and innovation, resulting in value creation and food security through sustainable use of resources.* The strategy also lays out six operational priorities:

- To emphasise innovation and value creation

- To substantially increase research and development
- To offer progressive and value enhancing education programmes
- To ensure efficient use of resources
- To strengthen human resources and team spirit
- To enhance trust and maintain a good reputation

Each of these priorities has associated action plans with specific goals. Some of the goals are benchmarked against performance of other Icelandic universities.

The University's financial situation is much improved since the 2013 review and there is an expectation that the new Strategic Plan will result in more research and innovation grants, as well as income from industry collaborations. This will be aided by three new faculty members and the relatively large number of doctoral students admitted in the 2019-2020 academic year. It is also noteworthy that the University saw a 30% increase in applications between 2018 and 2019, which is attributed to positive media coverage, students realising the broad range of degree offerings at the University, and its emphasis on environment and sustainability

Student satisfaction is improving from the previous year but course selection, little variety in teaching methods, staff responsiveness to student feedback and providing timely feedback on assignments are the most prominent student concerns. Master's students are very concerned with the variety of courses on offer, but overall express higher levels of satisfaction with their studies than undergraduate students. Graduate satisfaction is surveyed two years after graduation, and is overall very high. The lowest rates of graduate satisfaction were observed in the areas of organisation of studies and communication to students. Less than half of graduated students agreed with the statement that their study programme had increased their consciousness of equality issues. However, it should be noted that the University has created a session on sexual harassment that is now a mandatory part of its induction of new students.

Retention rates are very good, but improving graduation rates and increasing the number of students that complete their degree on time remain challenges for the University. New laws on government student loans incorporate incentives for students to finish on time, which will support those aspirations.

Staff satisfaction has improved in recent years, especially related to job satisfaction, outlook on management issues and perception of organisational image. Pay and benefits remains the lowest ranked item in staff satisfaction.

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

The University has identified some priority areas to work towards before the upcoming QEF2 IWR in 2022. Building on the new organisational structure, there are plans to continue to update and further formalise the terms of reference for various university committees. Obtaining external funding through research collaboration and innovation projects is very much a goal for the immediate future, and there are plans to recruit staff that can lead international research projects. There will be increased emphasis on international collaboration in this work, including in the recruitment of new academic staff. The University wants to attract more international students and has developed three new courses to that end. The University is also about to offer a joint MSc degree in Environmental Sciences from in collaboration with University of Helsinki and Lund University with the emphasis on 'Environmental Changes at the Higher Latitudes'.

The University plans to obtain equal pay certification from the Icelandic government, and has already started preliminary data analyses of salaries. There will be further efforts to create a common institutional culture at all campuses of the University and strengthening the Teaching Affairs unit by increasing support to programmes at all study levels. Finally, the University aims to improve its monitoring of student progression and modify the survey on graduate satisfaction to focus more on job opportunities and work participation in areas related to the University's fields of specialisation.

3. Conclusion

Mid-Term Progress Report submitted by the University was comprehensive and provided a very good evidence basis for assessment of progress made since the 2013 IWR. The University has undergone a number of changes since 2013, but the overall push to formalise the running of the university and further align strategy with the University's mission and vision is to be commended. It is particularly praiseworthy that the University has chosen benchmarks for its goals.

The University has recently moved to a structure that includes three faculties, or departments. Before the QEF2 IWR, planned for 2022, the University will need to implement Subject-Level Review. It is important to note that the process of Subject-Level Review must include all subject areas in which awards are made, both undergraduate and postgraduate. As part of that work, the University is urged to consider the study lines on offer and student pathways. Those Subject-Level Reviews will then form an important part of the evidence base of the QEF2 IWR.