

# Review of the Quality Enhancement Framework for Higher Education in Iceland

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FIRST CYCLE REVIEW - SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

MARCH 2015



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## Executive Summary

In general, respondents from all groups were positive towards the main principles of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), and the student emphasis in the first cycle was generally celebrated. The Icelandic Higher Education Institutions (HEI) found the principles clearly laid out and subject level review (SLR) experts described them as being positive and progressive, with a certain degree of flexibility. All believed that these principles should remain within the second cycle of evaluations, but respondents also offered ideas for additional emphases or foci, such as: transparency; social responsibilities of HEIs; research; perspectives of HEI staff members; the relational nature of research, learning and teaching; and the view of employers as future stakeholders, only to name a few.

The implementation of the QEF and the Quality Board (QB) was commented on as being a positive step towards enhancing quality standards at Icelandic HEIs. The current structure was remarked as being appropriate and professional, and the work of the QB generally praised. In renewing membership of the QB for the second cycle, the importance of keeping a balance between maintaining the current knowledge within the QB and thus ensuring continuity, as well as introducing new members, was stated. Furthermore, several respondents believed that the student voice could be increased by adding a student representative to the Board. Other suggestions included increased communication between the QB and other parties within the higher education system, as well as secure funding. The annual meetings that QB members have with the Icelandic HEIs, were for the most part seen in a positive light and commented on as being useful.

Similarly, the Quality Council (QC) was generally regarded as an important venue for discussing quality matters, exchanging information and sharing experiences, as well as being a link between different stakeholders within the higher education system. Key obstacles in the future of the QC were stated as being lack of funding and excessive workload of members.

The subject level reviews were perceived as being beneficial and a valuable component in the quality work of the HEIs, as well introducing a good opportunity to receive outside comments from qualified colleagues. The overall experience of the SLR experts themselves was also positive. The need for clearer guidelines in relation to the SLRs was a suggestion which was made by all groups. Other issues that were discussed were the need for feedback; need for training of students and ways to compensate them for their work (also applies to institution-wide reviews); having more than one external expert on SLR teams; adding a second student representative; and the need for standardised data. It was also mentioned by the SLR experts that information flow with regards to the finalising of reports might be better.

In general, respondents of the questionnaire reported a positive experience with the IWRs. The HEIs were in agreement on its usefulness and the external experts themselves were generally pleased with the review in which they had taken part. They remarked that communication with the QB had been good, the reflective analysis produced by the HEIs helpful, site visits well organised and discussions commendable, open, transparent and insightful. Both the HEIs, as well as the experts, commented that the number of meetings and/or number of participants during the meetings might have been excessive, especially with regards to the time allocated for the events. The grading scale of the IWRs was also stated as needing further clarification, e.g. in terms of implications in case of “limited confidence”; distinction between “confidence” and “full confidence”; and the marking of research.

Incorporating research into the QEF was largely welcomed by respondents, but to varying degrees. Some saw it as a logical step forwards and it being an essential component of a university’s operation, both reasonable and necessary. Several considerations that would need to be kept in mind during the design of a research evaluation framework were aired by all groups of respondents and suggestions or experiences in this regard shared. As an example, these included whether research should be a part of current QEF processes or a separate review; discrepancies between fields when evaluating research; the need for a research information system; that not only bibliometric methods be used; and that this addition only partially completed the picture of a university, as it had other roles, such as social responsibility.

The view on public disclosure of SLR reports was mixed in nearly all groups of respondents. Those who were sceptical of making the reports publicly available were mostly worried that in doing so could jeopardise the candour which currently characterised the reports. Those who favoured disclosing the reports did so on various grounds, such as it being necessary if the QEF’s mission was to be transparent; that it was important for institutions to learn from each other; and students saw the reports as a possible tool for themselves to monitor and maintain quality. The middle ground of producing publicly available summaries of the reports was contemplated and suggested by three groups of respondents.

Lastly, some respondents regarded the current state of affairs with regards to accreditation satisfactory. The main issue discussed was the lack of clarity of relations between the QEF activities, such as the IWRs, and Ministry accreditations. Also, the implications of introducing the “full confidence” grade were contemplated.

## Abbreviations

HE = Higher Education

HEI = Higher Education Institution

IWR = Institution-wide Review

MESC = Ministry of Education, Science and Culture

PBL = Problem based learning

RANNIS = Rannsóknamiðstöð Íslands (The Icelandic Centre for Research)

SLR = Subject Level Review

QAA = The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

QB = Quality Board

QC = Quality Council

QEF = Quality Enhancement Framework

## Background

At the outset of the establishment of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) in 2011, it was agreed that the Framework would be evaluated at the end of the first cycle of operation in 2015. This work is now being conducted by the Quality Board (QB) and will involve an extensive process of evidence collection and analysis involving all parties with an interest in the QEF. One part of the internal review centred on seeking the views and experiences of those parties that have been involved in the QEF from its establishment. This report outlines the results of a semi-structured questionnaire that was sent to all Icelandic Higher Education Institutions (HEI); student unions within these institutions, as well as the National Union of Students; the Quality Council within the QEF; and all external experts that have partaken in Icelandic reviews on either institutional or subject level.

## The Questionnaire and Methods

A semi-structured questionnaire was designed by the Quality Board with the aim of collecting a wide range of contributions from individuals or institutions that might have experiences to share with regards to the QEF's first cycle of operation. The evidence collected with the questionnaire would then be utilised in the development of the next cycle of operation for the framework.

The questionnaire was in the form of a consultation note, where the various parts of the QEF were outlined and respondents invited to make comments (see full note in appendix I). The structure of the note was as follows:

- **Part A** provided a brief background to, and explanation of, the consultation process with the main elements and key dates outlined.
- **Part B** outlined the main ingredients of the current version of the QEF and hence the areas in which comments were being sought.
- **Part C** raised some particular issues and suggestions that have already been proposed for introduction in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition of the Quality Handbook and invited comment in these areas.
- **Part D** contained instructions for submission of responses.

All answers to the questionnaire were anonymous, that is, neither the Quality Board, nor the Board's Secretariat at Rannis had access to individual answers, although some respondents chose to send their answers to the Secretariat as well.

The questionnaire was sent to the following stakeholders and participants in the Icelandic QEF:

- All Icelandic Higher Education Institutions (7).
- The Quality Council.
- The National Student Union.
- Individual student unions within each of the HEIs (7).
- All external experts that have taken part in institution-wide reviews (11).
- All external experts that have taken part in subject level reviews (48).

During the processing of the participants' contributions, the answers were categorised into the following groups: Icelandic Higher Education Institutions; Students; Other Icelandic stakeholders (including the Quality Council); Institution-wide review experts; and Subject level review experts.

The response rate was particularly good as the open nature of the questionnaire introduced a higher response burden, that is, the effort required by participants to respond, and that in some instances quite some time had passed since foreign experts had taken part in the process. All in all, 52 answers were collected, which were divided by groups of respondents in the following manner: Icelandic Higher Education Institutions (7), Student bodies (5)<sup>1</sup>, Other Icelandic stakeholders (5); Institution-wide Review experts (9); and Subject Level Review experts (26). The results obtained from the semi-structured questionnaire will be presented below and structured by the aforementioned groups of respondents.

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<sup>1</sup> Five answers were received from four different student groups.

## Icelandic Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

### Principles of the QEF

When asked about the principles of the QEF, as they are stated in the Quality Handbook<sup>2</sup>, and how they had underpinned the first cycle of reviews, all HEIs reported a positive experience. The principles were thought of as being clearly laid out and the emphasis on students and the student experience was celebrated. The following points were made in this regard:

- Our university supports the principles.
- Were well chosen and well thought out, particularly in consideration of the emphasis placed on the learning experience and students during the first cycle of the QEF.
- They are clear and the first round of operation of the QEF has proven beneficial for quality culture and awareness for students and staff. The focus on students and the emphasis on student experience are of great importance.
- Have been clear and with a clear purpose with respect to teaching and learning.
- We found the principles very useful. They encouraged the institution to reflect on important issues and to focus on strengths as well as weaknesses.
- The main principles of the system have functioned very well. Initially, there was some scepticism of an approach based on quality enhancement, as opposed to review and evaluation, but these principles have turned out very well and should be the foundation for the future.

Asked whether these principles should continue as main principles during the development of the QEF, all of those who commented on the question agreed. Apart from obvious satisfaction with the principles, as reported above, ensuring continuity in the review work was regarded as being important. Being able to follow up on students and their learning experience, as well establishing a timeline for an easier comparison, were mentioned in this regard. One respondent also mentioned that the ownership of the QEF being in the hands of autonomous institutions was a key part of successful institution-wide reviews (IWRs) and honest self-assessments. This would then subsequently result in a successful execution of the action plan derived from the reflective analysis (RA). It was, however, also noted that including research evaluation in the next review cycle, might mean that the principles would have to undergo a review.

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<sup>2</sup> Ownership of quality and standards resting with the autonomous institutions; the focus in the QEF on enhancement of the student experience balanced with public accountability; the centrality of students; the importance of both Icelandic and international perspectives in the Framework; and, the absolute operational independence of the Quality Board but the importance also of partnership with the institutions, student bodies and the Ministry.

Probed for additional or other fundamental principles or emphases, respondents provided the following ideas:

- An additional principle that might merit consideration would be transparency in the whole evaluation process.
- Social responsibilities of the institutions and the institutional ownership of quality and standards might be emphasised more in the second cycle. The role of Universities is fourfold; to accumulate knowledge, preserve it and mitigate through teaching and community outreach, all of which are important for the quality of higher education.
- Future assessments should also include review of research activities and the role of the University in its local, national and global communities.

The integration of research into the review process was also discussed by other respondents. This was seen as a welcome addition and a natural development, as the core of university activities was to integrate teaching and research for the benefit of both. Nevertheless, it was also stated that the methodology of implementation would need careful consideration with regards to a unified standard for all the HEIs.

## Structures of the QEF

Respondents were invited to comment on the current structures underpinning the QEF, that is, the Quality Board and the Quality Council.

### The Quality Board

Responses related to the QB were divided into issues relating to impact of the QB on the one hand, and composition of the QB on the other. Other aspects that were discussed are also listed below.

#### *Impact of the Quality Board*

In general, it was the view of respondents that the implementation of the QEF and the appointment of the QB had been a positive step towards enhancing the quality standards at Icelandic HEIs. It was also mentioned that the process had increased awareness of quality matters and contributed towards a quality culture within individual institutions.

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The appointment of the QB in 2010 marked a milestone in the field of quality assurance for Icelandic universities. For the first time, quality assurance in universities was entrusted to independent professional bodies, and with the entrance into force

of the QEF and its publication in the Quality Enhancement Handbook in 2011, a clear and comprehensive framework for quality assurance was created for Icelandic universities.

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Several respondents expressed their appreciation of the high quality work carried out by the Board, and how it had served their institution well, for example, by raising the awareness of quality matters and aiding in the development of a quality culture. In the light of this, it was remarked by one of the respondents that work should continue along the lines that had already been established, with the comments received from the first cycle review in mind for further development and streamlining. Furthermore, another respondent expressed the importance of having an active QB to ascertain that international standards be met during the review process of Icelandic HEIs. Lastly, one HEI expressed that cooperation with the Board's secretariat at Rannis had also been effective and efficient.

#### *Composition of the Quality Board*

The future composition of the QB was discussed by respondents. The balance between introducing new members to the Board, but also ensuring consistency and continuity, was mentioned by several respondents. Three of the HEIs also remarked that the student voice within the Board might be increased by adding a student member. With regards to specific knowledge or expertise, the importance of ensuring access to specialist knowledge in the field of research was mentioned by two respondents, as the second cycle would presumably take on research evaluation as well. Furthermore, one of the HEIs also remarked that it would be of great importance having a member trained in the arts, who could, therefore, recognise the particular needs of the field, creative processes and artistic research.

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It is important to maintain knowledge of the Icelandic HEIs within the quality board, at the same time it is important to get fresh blood with new ideas and experience. Bearing in mind that research is to be emphasized during the second cycle of QEF, it is of increasing importance to secure the research insights among QB members. Furthermore, we welcome the idea of introducing a student member on the QB. It may be questioned if the student representative should not be appointed by the European Students Union.

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Lastly, two respondents commented on the international membership of the Board. One stated that having international experts composing the Board was a key part in its success, as it brought a highly professional and constructive approach to the review process. In this HEIs opinion, the future composition of the QB should have the same structure. The other respondent pointed out that the Board indeed operated independently from the Icelandic HEIs and the government, and that this had been done successfully as all members of the QB were foreign experts with an extensive experience with quality frameworks. This respondent also remarked that having an international Board would support the need for transparency amongst all stakeholders in the QEF. In his/her opinion, this had been the case hitherto, in part due to the specific makeup of the QB membership and in part due to them being foreign and independent of Icelandic interests. Hence, in future selection of Board members, care should be taken to select the correct members for the QB and that they continue to be completely independent of Icelandic interests. Yet another respondent, did, however, raise the issue of whether the scope for increased transparency in the operations of the QB merited some consideration.

#### *Other aspects*

The following issues discussing on funding and communication with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (MESC) were also introduced by respondents:

- In order that the QB be able to perform its role effectively and achieve the objectives of the QEF, it is necessary that the government support its operations and secure it sufficient funding. This also applies to the Quality Council (QC), which hitherto has operated on a voluntary basis, without funding.
- It is also important to maintain both the good trust the QB has gained among the HEIs and the healthy independence from the MESC. The MESC, on the other hand, has to ensure proper funding of the QB. Especially for the smaller HEIs an obvious obstacle is the lack of special staff to deal with the QEF processes and the direct and indirect costs. Following up the reviews and implementing items in need of further development in many cases needs human and financial resources.
- One weakness in the structure is the interface between the QB and the MESC. The collaboration between these two elements of the overall quality system must be good and effective. In particular, the QB must be aware of the policy changes and decisions made by the ministry, and similarly, the decisions of the MESC should be informed by the insights and knowledge that reside with the QB. It is important to formalize the relationship between these parties in the future.

- There is a notable disconnect between the QB and the MESC when it comes to accreditation of programs. Delays in responding to requests for accreditation and lack of clarity in responsibility for accreditation processes shows that this aspect of the structure must also be clarified and formalized.

## The Quality Council

Respondents were invited to comment on any aspect of either the structure or operation of the Quality Council. The responses were divided into answers relating to the role of the QC on the one hand, and future of the QC on the other.

### *Role of the Quality Council*

A general consensus was amongst all respondents that the Quality Council was an important component of the QEF and a few respondents commented on the positive change of membership in the Council in 2012. The QC was primarily perceived as a useful venue for discussing QEF procedures and quality matters in both formal and informal context, exchanging information and good practice, sharing experience, as well as being a valuable link within the QEF amongst various stakeholders (e.g QB, MESC, students and Rannis). As such the Council was seen as a “tool to heighten the level of knowledge of quality standards and practices within respective higher education institutions” which had at the same time “strengthened the personal contact network among the HEIs”. As a result, one respondent remarked that this had made quality work within his/her institution easier, as QC members could consult one another in matters of doubt and share their experiences. Two comments with regards to the role and structure of the Council in need for further consideration, had to do with (1) the Council’s role in raising awareness of quality matters at the community level, an aspect which the respondent believed still to be unclear, and (2) the increased participation of students.

### *Future of the Quality Council*

When discussing the future of the Quality Council, issues regarding lack of steady funding and the workload of QC members were mentioned as key obstacles. The quote from one respondent below captures the main points of discussion regarding the future of the QC:

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The QC has great potential to grow and flourish still further as time goes on. Looking to the future, however, consideration must be given to the fact that all members of the QC fill demanding positions in their universities, and that work on the Council is added to their existing duties. In order that the QC be able to fulfil its role in organising conferences and seminars, training, publication of guidance material and so forth, it is imperative that it receive steady funding and access to at least a part-time employee.

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One respondent also added that in light of heavy workload of QC members, expectations to the operative strength of the Council, for example, the organisation of events and composition of written guidelines, need be realistic.

### Institution-led Subject Level Reviews

With regards to subject level reviews (SLR), respondents were invited to comment on the operation or effectiveness of these reviews, as well as to address any particular aspects in need of improvement when applicable.

### Experience with the SLRs

Those respondents commenting on the general experience with the SLRs were of the opinion that they had been beneficial. The reviews were in many instances regarded as a valuable component in quality work within the institutions, both on the departmental level, as well as for the institution as a whole. Furthermore, one respondent regarded the external experts as being of key importance for an outside view and point of reference, and another commented that the contribution of the external experts was invaluable to the whole process.

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The institution-led reviews at the subject level have been very effective and are used as an important tool in the strategic vision and action plans for improving each subject level. The foreign experts have proved to be very helpful and their input to the assessment processes valuable. Site visits were also very effective and an important part of the entire process.

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Lastly, one respondent commented on the extraordinary amount of work that had gone into the reviews, but the work had none the less paid significant dividends.

Those comments that were related to issues in need of further discussion or improvement were categorised into the following categories: Clarity of guidelines, Feedback, and then other considerations for the second cycle.

### Clarity of Guidelines

One of the aspects that was widely discussed with regards to the SLRs by nearly all respondents were the clarity of guidelines in the Quality Enhancement Handbook. The following issues were pointed out as needing further consideration and clarification:

- Clearer overall guidelines for the implementation of the reviews.
- Clearer remit for the role of the external experts and how they are to be selected.
- Clearer definition of the role of students in the SLR process.
- Clearer guidelines on how external experts are to report back to the Quality Board.
- The connection between the external reviewers report and the accreditations have to be made clearer.
- It would be helpful to make the handbook more accessible and to include a glossary and explanations of the main terms and concepts.

It was the view of the majority of respondents that the guidelines for the SLRs, or at least some parts of them, needed further clarification. One respondents reported that the lack of guidelines had in some instances caused confusion and made the remit unclear. Furthermore, another expressed that providing more guidelines would help the HEIs to focus on specific issues, as well as provide comparability between reviews.

Despite the call for further guidelines, the flexibility of the system was also commemorated by some of the respondents. One of them believed it to be valuable for the institution to develop its own internal review system, whilst another HEI had even taken it one step further and indeed developed its own SLR approach:

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Faculties at our University started off by using different approaches to preparing and writing their reviews at the subject-level, and guidelines were not written at the beginning. After three subject-level reviews, it was decided to write guidelines and advocate for one approach as best practice. Not having specific guidelines to follow from the QEF Handbook allowed that, and we value the freedom we had to choose a

framework to follow. We wrote an in-house description of their duties (foreign experts) but it is left to each self-assessment team to decide on the details of their involvement in the self-evaluation processes, as well as plan their visits.

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## Feedback

Several respondents commented on the need for external feedback on the SLRs. Two respondents mentioned that as the workload of staff with regards the SLRs was heavy and universities underfunded, the reviews being time consuming and resulting in a detailed report, it was important to ensure that the faculties/departments in question were provided with beneficial feedback. One of those respondents saw the feedback as adding value to the reviews and further improving their impact, whilst another added that it would contribute towards holding on to the enthusiasm which had characterised the work of staff and students during the first cycle of reviews. Furthermore, the fact that the HEIs should provide such feedback themselves, as well as manage follow-up of the reviews, was not seen as an equivalent of a professional and independent external feedback and advice. In light of this, it was suggested that during the second cycle of the QEF, a particular emphasis be placed on the follow-up of the first cycle and the introduction of plans of action.

## Other Considerations

- It is also worth considering whether the SLRs should be repeated afresh in the same way, rather than, for example, be based on fewer, larger units or focused specifically on follow-up of the results from the first cycle. However, it is not possible to take a position on this matter before the full picture is available with regards to, e.g., how the increased emphasis on research will affect the organisation and implementation of the self-review work, whether teaching/learning and research will be reviewed separately or together, and so forth.
- Limited resources to facilitate this work at the University level further increased the workload of already stretched staff which negatively affected other acts at the University. **Additional funding, or other support** such as translation services, to facilitate subject level reviews would be of great value.

## Quality Board-led Institution-wide Reviews

With regards to institution-wide reviews (IWR), respondents were invited to comment on the operation or effectiveness of these reviews, as well as to address any particular aspects in need of improvement when applicable. Comments made by respondents on the IWR process of the QEF were categorised into the

following categories: Experience with the IWRs; Reflective analysis, case study and communication; Site visit; Grading scale; Impact on the institution; and other considerations for the second cycle.

### Experience with the IWRs

All respondents agreed upon the usefulness of the IWRs and were in general pleased with their experience during the review. Instead of paraphrasing, a glimpse into the responses of the HEIs is in order:

- Experience with the IWR has generally been very good, particularly in relation to the self-review, the writing of the Reflective Analysis, the site visit from the external review group and those meetings held both in the run-up to the site visit and during the visit.
- The benefits of the IWR are significant and of great importance - the vision of good practices and shortcomings of the institution have crystalized in the minds of the staff, esp. during the writing of the reflective analysis. Every step of the first cycle has been informative and educating, improving the culture of quality work at the University.
- From our viewpoint, this part of the QEF work was the most useful part, especially because of the site visit with hearings and the massive feedback provided by the QB.
- The planning and execution of the Quality Board led-review at our University was a very successful process. We were also impressed by the Board's ability to absorb and understand the core aspects of our institution during this short visit.
- This review cycle within the QEF has been an invaluable contribution in the process of developing a comprehensive quality system in our institution.
- The QB-led reviews have been a success. They fit the system and the purpose very well. They provide a solid backbone for the entire framework and approach.

### The Reflective Analysis, Case Study and Communication

As is evident from the points above, work on the RA was highly valued by respondents. One described it as a tool in the enhancement process as it laid out all the issues that needed addressing after the IWR. Another remarked that writing the RA had not only been a valuable learning process for the institution, but had also served as means of increasing solidarity amongst staff and students:

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The writing of the Reflective Analysis turned out to be a good learning process for the institution. Its findings and the inspiring review meetings increased solidarity within the institution both among the staff and between the management and the students. The strong focus on student perspective in the review had a very positive impact on the attitude and working methods of the school's management.

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Two respondent commented specifically on the case study, one deeming it “one of the most interesting part of the IWR” and the other stating it being useful.

On the topic of communication, one respondent replied that communication with the QB had been good and very informative. Another echoed this view, and was especially pleased with being able to receive comments from the review team mid-way through the writing of the RA, as it had been extremely helpful.

### The Site Visit

The following points were made with regards to the meetings held during the site visit of the IWR. The remarks were mostly centred on the usefulness of the meetings, but also touched upon concerns with short time frames, excessive number of participants and possible miscommunication.

- The meetings during the visit went well and the fact that it took three days was particularly useful. It gave enough time for meetings with all relevant stakeholders, so we have a feeling that the foreign experts had time to get to know the University and what it stands for.
- The review teams have a very high workload during the short time they have to conduct interviews and meetings as part of institution reviews. This may be driven by the desire to minimize time and cost, but there is a potential for a negative impact on the quality of the reviews. This should be considered for the next round of quality reviews.
- The limited funds of the QB resulted in a brief visit. Furthermore, the evaluation committee evaluated two highly specialized Universities, back to back. It might be preferable for both the institution and the review team to focus on one University in ample time. Additionally, when two institutions are evaluated by the same review team in a short time it is highly likely that those institutions will be compared. It is not fair to anyone to expect a review team to conduct evaluations of two Universities during the same week.
- It was apparent that a number of faculty and staff experienced shortage of communications during the meetings of the review visit. How this came about is unclear but should be prevented in future reviews as mutual respect and trust are key elements in fruitful relationships. The balance between the number of participants and the time allocated for each meeting resulted in some attendants not being able to participate in the dialogue or were excluded from the conversation.
- In our experience some of the meetings also had too many participants for the timeframe allowed. In some instances people felt that the conversation suffered for lack of time; many of the participants would have liked to go deeper into issues that they felt were important.

- It would be appreciated if selected meetings could take place in Icelandic as many Icelanders are not fluent in English; besides discussion on quality matters are often highly specialized. Meetings in Icelandic, translated by the secretariat of the QB, might minimize the chance that vital information is not presented or heard.

Three respondents also commented on the value of the first half day of the site visit. One respondent described it as being “extremely useful” and providing the opportunity to go over the work of the institution as a whole. Similarly, another felt that this first half day assisted the external review team in getting to know the University and what it stood for. The third respondent also believed it to be of considerable importance as it had aided in understanding of the institution’s case study and provided an opportunity to further explain the current state of affairs in those regards after the submission of the RA. However, it had to be noted that the time allowed for the introduction had been too short, which had put an unnecessary pressure on everyone involved.

### The Grading Scale

Another topic that was widely touched upon in the answers, was the issue of the IWR grading scale.<sup>3</sup> One HEI expressed its surprise of the announcement that only a part of the scale would be used during the first cycle, as it had not been mentioned in the Quality Enhancement Handbook: “The impression was that it had been decided in advance that the HEIs would generally be awarded the grade ‘confidence’, although this was never stated outright.” Furthermore, several respondents called for clearer standards regarding the grading scale. This included clarification of (1) the implications for receiving the “limited confidence” grade and the development of the process that followed, distinction between the “limited confidence” and “confidence” grade, (3) the criteria an institution needs to meet in order to receive the grade of “full confidence”, as well as (4) the distinction between the “confidence” and “full confidence” grade. One respondent also contemplated how the ranking system was comparable to other international/European standards.

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More significant, however, is that it does not seem clear what standards the University needs to meet in order to receive the grade ‘full confidence’. Will this be evaluated on the basis of objective data and criteria, the subjective judgement of the

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<sup>3</sup> Full confidence, confidence, limited confidence or no confidence.

external review team or, as previously, using the fitness for purpose approach? It is extremely important that this is made clear, because the final result will have considerable influence on the status, reputation and collaborative work of the HEIs.

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Another aspect which was introduced by one of the respondents, was the structure of the grading scale when the evaluation of research would be introduced at later stages. Would one grade be given for quality assurance in the field of teaching, and another for research, or would these components be evaluated together? The respondent remarked that this was an important question to answer, not least in light of the fact that the roles and activities of the HEIs in the field of research differed dramatically.

### Impact on the institution

Three respondents commented on the possible impact of the IWRs. Two of them contemplated the link between the reviews and the accreditation at the MESK. One asked whether the outcome of the reviews should not in one way or another be formally linked to the Ministry's HEIs accreditation procedures, whereas the other called for clearer explanations on how the reviews were in fact connected to the accreditation process at Ministry. Lastly, one respondent commented on the impact on its own institution, stating that the results of the final review report had clearly been of significant value to the institution, both in terms of good practice and issues that needed further development.

### Other Considerations

Other considerations that were mentioned by respondents as needing attention before the commencement of the second cycle were as follows:

- How the conferences held at the end of the IWR in each institution might be better utilised. Instead of a forum for reviewing the results of the IWR, discussing them and drawing conclusions from them (e.g. by presenting examples of best practice), the conferences have been rather bland meetings in which (almost) all the HEIs have simply bragged about receiving the second highest grade.
- It would have been useful if the Quality Enhancement Handbook had included more detailed guidance on the integration of the SLRs and the IWRs. This applies in particular to the larger universities with a high number of academic units.
- Our institution was the first HEI in Iceland to undergo a Quality Board-led reviews at the institutional level and has since then brought about the necessary subject reviews, while the system is structured for the other way around. The University wants to state that this is not seen as a drawback in the system.

- The public universities in Iceland, have a policy on Icelandic being the universal language, thus the emphasis is on Icelandic in all rules of operation and regulations, which consequently creates a hindrance for the QB and review teams. It would be of great benefit if a translation service would be provided to the institutes.

## Annual meetings with representatives of the Quality Board

Once a year there is a meeting at each institution between the institutional link Board member and key senior institutional representatives. There was a general consensus amongst respondents that the annual meetings with representatives of the Quality Board were very useful. These meetings were seen as an open forum for communication, where quality developments within the institutions were shared in an informal manner (e.g. status of SLRs) and ties between the QB and the institutions strengthened. They were believed to “enhance trust between the parties” and increase or improve understanding, both of the work at hand, as well as between the institutions and the QB representatives. One respondent remarked that although the nature of the annual meetings would inevitably evolve with the framework, they should be continued.

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The annual meetings of the QB representative and our University have turned out to be of key importance during the development progress of quality culture at the institute. They are a great example of a venue which fosters dialogue, increases mutual understanding of both parties and clarifies pathways of process, consequently building trust in the QEF.

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One respondent suggested that agreeing upon a formal agenda for the annual meetings might be beneficial for the enhancement process. Thus the meetings could, for example, become a specific platform for the QB to express its concerns and priorities for the institution at hand, as well as other HEIs in Iceland, or a venue for discussing the needs and challenges each institution was facing.

## Early Suggestions for the Second Cycle

Respondents were invited to provide comments on specific issues that were up for discussion before the commencement of the second cycle of reviews. These include the inclusion of the evaluation of research, public information at the subject level, and accreditation.

## Inclusion of the Evaluation of Research

It was the general view of respondents that incorporating the evaluation of research into the future structure of the QEF was a welcomed and logical step forwards, as well as being consistent with the content of the Regulation on quality assurance of university teaching and research, no. 321/2009. A few points were, however, made regarding which aspects of this new addition needed further consideration. The key points are listed below.

- The development of evaluation criteria should include the broadness of research in a systematic way, as the transparency and uniformity of such a categorisation would be of utmost importance.
- The evaluation of research should also include the form of dissemination and direct use towards the Icelandic community, as well as the international academic community.
- As with evaluations of teaching quality, it is necessary that the research evaluation is based on internationally recognised methodology and reliable data.
- Research and teaching are integrated components of a university's activities. Research should thus preferably be evaluated in parallel to teaching in the next cycle of the QEF. However, to do that it is necessary to ask the institutions to provide information on research according to standards that are useful for benchmarking purposes. The state owned institutions apply the same standards, but the others have different systems.
- The QEF should also include a review of the current research evaluation system (i. *stigamat*) that is used within the public universities (as well as Bifröst University) with the purpose of having an external review on the goals and objectives of such a system, specifically in the context of the research objectives of individual institutions using this general system.
- It must be made clear whether one grade will be given for quality assurance in the field of teaching, and another for the quality of research, or whether these components will be evaluated in tandem.

Quite a few respondents also mentioned the implementation of a Current Research Information System (CRIS), which some respondents stated was a necessary prerequisite to the evaluation of research within Icelandic HEIs. The system was seen as providing evaluators with catalogued and comparable data between institutions in a clear and transparent manner. One respondent urged that such a system be present when the new cycle was brought into action.

Lastly, it was expressed by several of the HEIs that they wished to be included in the discussion of research evaluation and involved in decisions regarding how the quality assurance for university research would be implemented. Also, that including Icelandic academics in this discussion would also be important.

## Public Information at the Subject Level

One aspect that has been commented on during the cycle is the issue of publication of reports, that is, whether it be important that SLR reports and the RA remain confidential. All respondents commented on this issue and it was the view of the majority of respondents that in order to secure the trust and candour that had characterised the process up until now, the decision to publicly release the reports should remain within the institutions themselves as is the case now.

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...one of the QEF criteria is that reviews, both SLRs and IWRs, should be honest and critically reflective. To ensure that this is applied in practice, each university has been entrusted with the decision on whether or not to make their reflective analyses public, but the final reports and other data from the QB are always published on the QB website. It is the opinion of the University that this is an important prerequisite for the realisation of the targets of the QEF regarding systematic reform work and the enhancement of quality within the University. A strong case will have to be made for deviating from this arrangement, since this would carry the risk of destroying the trust which has been successfully established between parties.

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Some respondents stated that before a decision on this matter would be taken, a thorough discussion of all interested parties needed to take place. Also, one respondent remarked that as the MESC had expressed a desire to be granted access to the SLR reports, reasons as to why the Ministry wanted access to this particular data and how it would be used, needed to be provided.

Producing a summary of the reports to be made publicly available was mentioned as a possible solution. This summary would, for example, be in line with the headline letters the institutions receive shortly after an IWR has taken place. One respondent suggested that this could become a part of the SLR process and the summary would be signed by the foreign expert, as well as the chair of the review committee for confirmation.

In addition, one respondent added that “it is also worth mentioning that contracts already exist between the Ministry and each individual HEI, containing, amongst other things, detailed appendices on the HEI’s operations, updated annually.” Also that “work has long been in preparation under the auspices of the Ministry concerning the definition of key figures, and there is certainly a strong case for the idea that the

gathering and publication of key figures on HEI operations could be more useful for the government than detailed self-review reports.”

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In connection with this discussion, it is necessary to keep in mind that although the QB is independent and impartial in its work, it is important to ensure good relations between the board and the Ministry. This does not solely apply to Ministry access to the results of quality reviews; policy making and decisions at the Ministry on matters of higher education must be informed, in the sense that they take into account the valuable knowledge produced by the implementation of the QEF.

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Finally, one HEI replied that it had published all its SLR reports on its website. This had been a policy the institution had set itself right from the onset of the first cycle of reviews. This particular institution saw no reason to change this policy as it had not encountered any difficulties in this regard. Another respondent also expressed that it was quite open for the idea of making its RA publicly available.

### Accreditation

Accreditation is the responsibility of the Ministry and currently sits outside the QEF. During the first cycle in relation to accreditation, the Ministry has asked the Quality Board to carry out the associated reviews of provision and consequently to offer advice to the Ministry regarding accreditation. To some extent, the accreditation process has therefore been brought within the QEF umbrella. A further proposal was made in the original QEF Handbook which linked accreditation more firmly to the outcomes of Institution-wide Reviews in successive cycles (see pages 24-25 of the 1<sup>st</sup> Edition of the QEF Handbook).

Respondents were asked about how they viewed this current arrangement with accreditation. The main issue brought up by respondents was the one of clarity, especially with regards to the relations between the QEF activities and Ministry accreditations, and the implications of the introduction of “full confidence” to the grading scale. Examples of answers are presented below:

- It would seem very useful to **spell out** in further detail the **linkages** between Quality Board reviews and accreditation as well as the role and responsibilities of the QB in this regard.
- The double evaluation system is **confusing** to the overall merit of the system. The **ties** between the two should be strengthened.
- The relation of accreditation and Quality Board led-reviews is **unclear** and needs to be defined better. This includes defining better the requirements for accreditation within a subject field as

well as on an institutional level, and the QEF should be an input into the accreditation process. However – it is important that the QEF and the Quality Board is not directly responsible for accreditation, since this would give the entire process completely different purpose, and in fact make the Quality Board part of the responsibility, rather than being the vehicle which creates the path for excellence in quality work at the institutional level.

- The current arrangement has been **sufficient for this first round** especially since the Quality Council announced early on that the highest review would be “confidence” in this round. **For the next round a clear framework** for assessing and presenting the review results is necessary. In the future though, we suggest that the framework for the accreditation include a strategy for how the Ministry can support the HEIs in Iceland as a part of the follow up process and how the framework can strengthen the cooperation between the Ministry and the HEIs.
- The Quality Enhancement Handbook states that universities receiving the grade ‘full confidence’ in an IWR are therefore awarded the status of ‘self-accrediting institution’, which means that they can implement teaching in new fields of science and their subcategories, in accordance with the Frascati Manual. However, it is **not entirely clear** whether this is fully compatible with the provisions of the Higher Education Institutions Act, no. 63/2006, and Regulations no. 1067/2006 and 37/2007. The opinion of the University is that uncertainty over this matter **must be cleared up**, such that the target of the QEF stating that the results of IWRs should have a direct influence on their accreditation can be realised, and that the results of the quality reviews and the accreditation of HEIs form a continuous and comprehensive process. Another possibility would be to open up for applications regarding subfields of already accredited fields, to be sent and accepted by the QB without a site visit.

## Other Aspects

The following points were included as additional comments to the questionnaire or were categorised as such during the processing of answers:

- **Data Access:**
  - In the regulations for QA<sup>4</sup> and in the QEF-handbook it is stated that the collection of key numerical data concerning higher education in Iceland should play a role in the system. It is also stated that the collection of these numbers should be under the auspice of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (MESC). To our knowledge, these numbers have not been made available to the Quality Board nor have they formally been utilized by stakeholders of the Quality Enhancement System. This should be remedied.
  - Hitherto the HEIs have not had access to standardised statistical data on which to base evaluations, data which the handbook assumes to exist.
- **Strengthening of ties between IWRs and SLRs:** In order to strengthen the ties between IWRs and SLRs, representatives of external members of the SLRs could be included in the IWR team. This

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<sup>4</sup> Abbreviation not spelled out by respondents but presumably stands for “quality assurance”.

could create stronger ties between the two evaluation processes and increase the depth of understanding of the institutions.

- **Definition and translation of terms:** A list with definition of terms and English translations of these should be included as an appendix in the QEF handbook in order to standardise language use and mutual understanding of terms.
- **Methods for increasing public awareness of quality affairs:** The institution welcomes discussions concerning the quality of Higher education in Iceland and encourages the Ministry and the Quality Board to form a strategy for media coverage in order to increase public awareness on matters of quality enhancement within the HEIs. The conferences that have been held to introduce results of the Quality Board-led reviews at the institutional level could have an important role in this regard, and could be a valuable platform for professional discourse, highlighting what can be gained from the evaluation process.
- **Re-definition of the QEF Handbook:** The QEF-Handbook has served as a useful tool for experts in the field of Quality enhancement but has not been of use for introducing the process or preparing members of internal review teams or other participants in subject-level or institutional reviews. In order to make information about the QEF more accessible to staff and students the University suggests the QEF-Handbook be re-defined. The QEF-Handbook should be useful to all parties of the QEF; Government, HEIs in Iceland, students, staff and externals. It should include clear explanations of the roles of each party.
- **Commitment by the Ministry:** It is essential that the MESC be fully committed to the approach and structure utilized in the quality enhancement framework. This means providing the necessary funding and support to both the QB and the HEIs. It also entails ensuring a clear separation between the roles of the QB and the MESC, so as to avoid lack of clarity, delays in responses and other consequences of unclear separation of roles and responsibilities.
- **Limited resources:** It is of concern that there are limited resources for the QEF, the QB, the Quality Council and for the higher education institution, where increased workload on already stretched staff has had negatively effects on other operations of the universities.



WordItOut

Figure 1 - Figure 1 - Word cloud made from official HEI answers to the Consultation Note. Frequency of words is reflected in their size in the cloud.

## Icelandic Higher Education Institutions – Key Points

### Principles:

- Positive experience with the principles, clearly laid out and student emphasis celebrated. All agree that they should continue as main principles. Other principles to consider: transparency and social responsibilities of HEIs.

### Structure:

- Implementation of the QEF and the QB are viewed as a positive step towards enhancing quality standards at Icelandic HEIs, which has raised awareness of quality matters and contributed towards a quality culture.
- Balance between maintaining the knowledge already present within the QB and introducing new members discussed.
- Suggested that the student voice be increased by adding a student representative to the QB.
- Importance of international membership of the QB.
- The QC is a useful venue for discussing quality matters, exchanging information and sharing experiences. It is also regarded as being a valuable link between different stakeholders within the system.
- Key obstacles in the future of the QC are lack of funding and excessive workload of members.

### Subject Level Reviews:

- Generally perceived as being beneficial and a valuable component in an institution's quality work.
- Call for clarity of guidelines and definitions.
- Need for an external feedback on the SLRs was discussed.

### Institution-wide Reviews:

- All agreed on the usefulness of the IWRs and were generally pleased with their experience during the reviews.
- The number of participants during meetings, as well as time allocated for meetings/reviews, needs to be considered. Also, the language aspect and possible miscommunication.
- The grading scale needs further clarification, e.g. in terms of implications and distinction between grades. Also, what kind of grading scale would be used when evaluating research?
- Contemplations regarding the connection between the IWRs and accreditation.

### Annual meetings:

- General consensus that these meetings were very useful and seen as an open forum for communication.

### Early suggestions for the second cycle:

- Incorporating research into the QEF was generally welcomed and considered as a logical step forwards. Several considerations regarding the implementation were aired.
- Majority of respondents believed that in order to secure trust and candour it should be up to each institution whether it wanted to publish its SLR reports. Producing publicly available report summaries was mentioned as a possible solution.
- Main issue with regards to accreditations was clarity of relations between the QEF activities and Ministry accreditations, as well as implications of the introduction of the "full confidence" grade.
- Access to standardised data, as stated in the Quality Handbook, called for.

## Students

### Principles of the QEF

On the whole, students were positive towards the QEF and its principles. By involving students in the process they felt that their opinions mattered and that they were being listened to. The important roles of student bodies in providing fundamental information in the evaluation of quality and standards of HEIs was also pointed out.

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We find the quality supervision of higher education levels important. We value and appreciate how the students' point of view was focused upon and included in the evaluation as the universities are here to meet our needs and demands – not vice versa. We also find it important how the graduated students' point of view was included as you often realise the quality of your studies and whether they benefited you after graduation.

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In addition, students believed the focus on the student experience had been valued in the first cycle of reviews, and one respondent mentioned that excluding research from the first cycle had been a positive move – as having at least one evaluation which focused on the quality of teaching and support services had been good. Another respondent also concluded that he/she agreed with the current principles and recommended that they be followed during further development of the framework.

### Structures of the QEF

Respondents were invited to comment on the current structures underpinning the QEF, that is, the Quality Board and the Quality Council. Two respondents commented on the structures of the QEF. One believed it to be satisfactory, whereas the other raised the following questions regarding student representatives participating in the QEF process:

- How are they appointed?
- Should there be a rule regarding from which institution they come (e.g. that both students cannot be studying at the same institution)?
- Should the students be appointed by the National Student Union (LÍŠ)?

## The Quality Board

One respondent commented on the structure of the Quality Board as such, and felt that in order for the Board to be neutral, half of the Board members would need to be replaced each term. Also, that since the focal point of the evaluation centred on students and the student experience, the same respondent wondered why students did not have a representative on the Board.

## Institution-wide and Subject Level Reviews

All institutions manage programmes of subject-level reviews covering all taught provision within a cycle as well as an external institution-wide review. The following points were made by respondents regarding reviews on the subject level and/or institutional level:

- The IWR operation creates more transparency between the students and the institution itself. It also creates a dialogue that can improve the studies in the future.
- The part of the SLR process I experienced was well organised and clear.
- It is important to have some training for students that are participating in both SLRs and IWRs.
- It is important that the students involved in the SLRs get paid for their contribution. This way it is possible to make increased demands on their involvement. Another way would be a diploma supplement.
- The Quality Handbook might be clearer when it comes to SLRs.
- It is very important that the public report<sup>5</sup> is presented with a way that is not repelling to the average reader. It might for example include descriptive statistics and bullet points.

In relation to the general involvement of students in the IWRs and SLRs, one student group responded that their participation had in both instances been in the form of focus groups. The student representatives had been involved in the planning and preparation for the reviews; selected students to participate in the focus groups; and written the parts relating to students in the reports. The same group also gave a concrete example of how students had been involved in discussing issues relating to students that needed improving after an IWR had taken place.

## Annual meetings with representatives of the Quality Board

Once a year there is a meeting at each institution between the institutional link Board member and key senior institutional representatives. One respondent remarked that these meetings were very useful and

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<sup>5</sup> Comment taken from IWR section of the questionnaire and most likely refers to the final report made public after each IWR.

necessary for a good flow of information between the institutions. It was also mentioned that the meeting between the Quality Board and the National Student Union had been very useful and inspiring.

## Early Suggestions for the Second Cycle

Respondents were invited to provide comments on specific issues that were up for discussion before the commencement of the second cycle of reviews. These include the inclusion of the evaluation of research, public information at the subject level, and accreditation.

### Inclusion of the Evaluation of Research

One student group reiterated its preference of the main focus not being on research during the first cycle. Furthermore, the importance of having at least one quality assessment which focused on the quality of teaching and the support services was restated. In addition, the respondent believed it to be critical that a follow-up on the first round was conducted as planned.

### Public Information at the Subject Level

When probed for views on the publication on SLR reports the student responses varied. Some saw the principle of transparency as being essential and that the reports would provide the students with a tool to monitor and maintain the level of quality of their studies:

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We think it is important to keep the transparency and publish the subject level review somehow, either by publishing the whole review or by giving out a headline letter like is done in the institutional review. That would be the best tool for students to create pressure on maintaining the level of quality as good as possible.

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Another group pointed out how the publication of SLR reports would provide clearer information about the institution in question, as well as serving either as a reputation enhancer or an encouragement for improvement.

One of the student groups, however, believed that the reports should remain confidential, as disclosing them might potentially alter their ultimate goal of self-improvement and impact their content:

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We think that the report should remain confidential. Ministry officials should not have access to them, but they should rely on the Quality Council and their opinion on the report. There is a risk that if the Ministry officials should have access to the reports, that it could have an impact on how the report is written and what is in it. Therefore the self-evaluation reports would no longer be for the institution itself to improve on, but to look good in the eyes of the Ministry.

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Finally, another group of respondents did not take a particular stance on whether the reports should remain confidential or not, but insisted that the reports would at least be shared with the student body of each institution so they could be informed on the matter.

### Accreditation

One student group commented on the accreditation process and stated that it was indeed important that the Ministry receive information from the QB. However, it was added that “a lack of neutrality will most likely compromise the integrity of the council.” Another respondent concluded that the QEF was highly capable of offering opinions to the Ministry.

### Other Aspects

Students also added additional comments, two of which had to do with potential language difficulties and one with student participation:

- Simplify the text in QEF, the professional language may seem appealing to professionals but students and others reading the material may have a hard time grasping the context.
- We think that it would be great if there were a short handbook in Icelandic for the students participating in the reviews, explaining the most important things concerning the students and their role in the reviews. Most students aren't bothered with reading the whole QEF handbook.
- We think it might be important to have two student participants in the assessment group to make their voice more valuable.



## Students – Key Points

### Principles:

- On the whole, students are positive towards the QEF and its principles. Focus on the student experience was valued in the first cycle.

### Structure:

- Questions raised regarding the selection of student representatives.
- Contemplations as to why no student representative is a part of the QB.

### Subject Level Reviews and Institution-wide Reviews:

- Training and compensation for students partaking in these processes discussed.
- Quality Handbook could be clearer on the SLRs and the final reports made accessible to the average reader.

### Annual meetings:

- Remarkd as being useful.

### Early suggestions for the second cycle:

- Important to have at least one quality assessment which focuses on teaching and the support services.
  - Varied views on the publication of the SLR reports - some saw transparency as being important; reports could be used as a tool for students, as well as institutions, to monitor and maintain quality. One student group believed they should stay confidential.
  - Important that Ministry receive information from the QB.
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- Simplified text in the QEF and a short handbook in Icelandic called for.
  - Important to have two student participants in the assessment group.

## Other Icelandic Stakeholders

As discussed above, this category of respondents represents those individuals or formal bodies that could neither be classified as an Icelandic HEI nor a student body. All in all, five answers were placed in this category.

### Principles of the QEF

When asked about the principles of the QEF, four out of five stakeholders stated their support, with some reservations. For various reasons, all respondents felt that the principles needed to be modified in the second round. Some argued that the principles were too focused on student experience in the first round and felt that the research focus should be strengthened. Others stated that the principles of student experience vs. research need to be more balanced in the future.

- The principles were a good start.
- The principles of the QEF are clear.
- The principles are too research focused.
- The principles are too student focused.
- Agree with the main principles relating to ownership in quality and standards.
- The student input was weak.
- Student involvement in self-reviews has been vital and valuable.
- The student experience is too narrowly focused and is more in line with general customer satisfaction measures.
- I also think it is a mistake to focus only on one of the three roles of universities according to the Bologna; Research and social responsibility of universities should not be separated from the quality of student experience.
- Lack of contact between review units and the Quality Board.

While the student emphasis was considered a favourable component of the QEF principles, the integration of research into the review process was seen as a key element by most respondents.

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We anticipate that these principles may need to be reviewed in light of the plan to focus more on evaluation of research in the second cycle of the QEF. However, care must be taken to ensure that the emphasis on research will not come at the expense of evaluating teaching and the student learning experience. However, since it is not yet

known in what way the QEF will apply to research, it is not yet possible to take a position on this.

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## Structures of the QEF

Respondents were invited to comment on the current structures underpinning the QEF, that is, the Quality Board and the Quality Council.

### The Quality Board

Four respondents had specific comments to make about the QB. Several points in need for further discussion, as well as suggestions of improvements, were made by respondents. These were diverse and touched upon issues such as the composition of the Board, communication between various parties within the HE system, funding issues, and workload of staff.

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The appointment of the QB in 2010 was a boon for Icelandic higher education institutions (HEIs), and indeed the current board has performed herculean feats in the field of higher education in Iceland. Naturally, however, in the period ahead with the conclusion of the first cycle of the QEF and preparation of the second, past experience will be reviewed and suggestions made for possible improvements.

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Comments relating to specific issues in need of improvement were categorised into the following categories: Composition of the Quality Board; Communication; Funding and workload; and other considerations.

#### *Composition of the Quality Board*

One respondent believed that the QB needed to be diverse and mentioned adding a student representative as a possible solution. Again, another respondent added that care needed to be taken when finding a balance between adding new members and ensuring consistency and continuity.

- The structure needs to be diverse, for example with the addition of a student representative.
- Reasonable changes to the composition of the QB should be considered, although it is also important that some members continue their work in order to ensure consistency and continuity.

In renewing the board, particular consideration should be given to ensuring access to sufficient specialist knowledge in the field of research evaluation. It would also be in keeping with the spirit and content of the QEF if students were represented on the board.

### *Communication*

Two respondents provided comments that had to do with the Board's communication with various parties within the Icelandic HE system. One remarked that communication between the QB and QC needed to be increased, and similarly the communication between the QB and the Ministry needed to be supported.

- Communication between the Board and the Council needs to be increased in addition to increased funding.
- A basic principle of the QB is that it should operate independently on a professional basis, separate from the HEIs on the one hand and the government on the other. It is also important that the operations of the QB are transparent, that trust is established between parties and that communication is good. Since the QEF took effect in 2011, mutual trust and effective collaboration has successfully been established between the HEIs and the QB. With the reappointment of the QC, a valuable collaborative forum in the field of quality assurance has been created for HEIs, students, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (MESC) and the Icelandic Centre for Research. The joint meetings between the QB, the QC and LÍS representatives have also been useful and stimulating.
- The factor which seems to most require support is mutual relations and communication between the QB and MESC. The objective of collaboration between these two bodies must be to ensure that the QB is always informed of the policy and decision making of the Ministry in the field of higher education and research, at the same time as policy-making and decisions at the Ministry take into account the knowledge produced by the implementation of the QEF. It is important to formalise the relationship between these parties in the revised edition of the Quality Enhancement Handbook. There are many things which need to be considered with regards to this, e.g. the ways in which the paramount confidentiality between the HEIs and the QB might be reconciled with reasonable demands from MESC concerning access to information.

### *Funding and workload*

The funding of the QB and QC were also discussed, as well as the workload and direct/indirect expenses the HEIs were experiencing after the implementation of the QEF.

- Icelandic universities are seriously underfunded, and staff deal with heavy workloads. It is clear that the implementation of the QEF has required a significant amount of work, and incurred considerable direct and indirect expense for the HEIs. It has been particularly challenging for the smaller HEIs, in which it is difficult to distribute tasks as well as could be wished, and the workload has to a great extent been shouldered by the most senior administrative personnel. Although the QEF has certainly enhanced quality assurance and raised awareness of quality matters in Icelandic

HEIs, and although you get out what you put in, care must be taken to ensure that the workload is not excessive, such that it risks jeopardising the success already achieved and destroying the innovative spirit which has successfully been inspired within the HEIs.

- In order that the objectives of the QEF be realised, it is furthermore imperative that the government guarantee the QB and the QC satisfactory working conditions through additional funding; the QB has operated on a very limited budget, and no steady funding has been secured for the QC.

### *Other considerations*

- The Board experts have a limited view of the Icelandic HEIs sector due to short visits and lack of acculturation. I have doubts about the value of having one Board of international experts. They become neither fish nor fowl. Their role as external experts becomes compromised due to prolonged exposure to the Icelandic HE and Research sector as well as the Central HE administration. Their role as internally knowledgeable, as experts in the Icelandic context is severely curtailed by their limited exposure, short visits and lack of acculturation. I feel that the previous system of appointing fresh eyes for every round of reviews works better. Regarding the review process I have not found the current system in any way more effective, there is no infrastructure support to be had so the work rests as usually on the academic staff of each Department.

### The Quality Council

Two respondents had comments to make on the function and operation of the Quality Council:

- The reinstatement of the QC for around another half year was a logical step. In evaluating the work of the current QC, however, it is worth bearing in mind that it has only been operational for a relatively short period, as well as the fact that there were frequent changes of personnel during the first year, and the two student representatives did not join until recently. Nevertheless, the QC has already proved itself an important forum for formal and informal discussions between the university heads of quality administration and students. Furthermore, the participation of observers from MESC and the secretary of the QB in the work of the QC guarantees discussion and communication between these parties. The QC therefore has great potential to grow and flourish still further as time goes on.

In the period ahead, naturally thought will also be given to the formal role of the QC, in consideration of, e.g., the increased emphasis on research evaluation. Mention was previously made of the necessity of providing the QC with satisfactory working conditions by securing steady funding. It is also worth bearing in mind that all QC members have demanding work or studies to attend to in their universities, and that therefore work on the Council is in fact voluntary work added to their existing duties. It is therefore unrealistic to expect the QC to handle extensive tasks such as organising events and composing written guidelines unless it is also provided with access to a part-time employee.

- The function of the Quality Council is unclear and underfunded. Therefore, it has not been as successful as expected in the first round.

## Institution-led Subject Level Reviews

With regards to subject level reviews (SLR), respondents were invited to comment on the operation or effectiveness of these reviews, as well as to address any particular aspects in need of improvement when applicable.

## Experience with the SLRs

Four respondents commented on the SLR process. This was generally seen as a positive aspect and was remarked as being a good opportunity to receive outside comments from qualified colleagues and a process that had led to improvements within individual departments.

- I have found this part of the quality work most rewarding. It is a process that my department has been highly motivated and engaged in. The chance to have an in-depth discussion of the programs (both education and research) and the future directions of our Department with highly qualified colleagues in our subject area has helped us focus and see our strengths and weaknesses as members of the international academic community of our field. This is a good case of the peer evaluation that quality in academia rests on.
- Icelandic HEIs have all put a great deal of work into the SLRs, and in most cases this has paid dividends both for the academic units in question and the HEI as a whole.
- The Institution-led reviews at the subject level have been quite successful at my institute, and have led to improvements in the operation of the respective departments.
- Having an external reviewer work with the faculties was very helpful.

Those comments that were related to issues in need of further discussion or improvement were categorised into the following categories: Clarity of guidelines, Student participation and Other considerations.

## Clarity of Guidelines

Again, the clarity of guidelines provided in the Quality Handbook for the SLRs were perceived as needing further clarification by two of the respondents.

- The Quality handbook is, however, quite unclear on how to conduct this review and further guidelines would have been useful. In small institutions/departments these reviews add great strain on often thinly spread staff. It is thus important that the outcome is maximised and that all involved (staff and students) see the benefits of the exercise. In the second cycle it would be useful

to guide the institutions in how they can build on their former reviews, i.e. in order to reduce the workload somewhat.

- This is not to say, however, that the process might not have been more streamlined and efficient, with clearer guidelines in the Quality Enhancement Handbook. The current guidelines certainly leave a lot of room for interpretation, which can be both a benefit and a downside. For example, the handbook does not go into detail concerning the role of the foreign experts in the self-review teams for the SLRs, but as the process has progressed it has become ever more apparent that, when things work well, they can prove one of the most valuable components of the SLR. In revising the handbook, it is important to ensure that the role of the foreign expert is explained more clearly.
- Finally, it is worth mentioning that it would have been useful if the Quality Enhancement Handbook had included more detailed guidance on the integration of the SLRs and the IWRs. This applies in particular to the larger universities with a high number of academic units.

### Student Participation

One respondent commented on the student participation in both SLRs and IWRs, with regards to training and compensations.

- It has also become apparent that there is a real need to arrange a formal forum for the training of students participating in the reviews, both the SLRs and the IWRs.
- Finally, consideration must be given to potential ways to compensate students for their participation in the reviews, e.g. with monetary payments or by including a mention of their participation on their diploma supplements.

### Other Considerations

Other aspects or issues raised by respondents were quite diverse. The comments below contain further elaborations on the following matters: the extensiveness of the reviews, accessibility of the Quality Handbook, lack of external feedback, and the different experiences of individual HEIs in the first cycle.

- These reviews have been quite **extensive** and **time-consuming**. If an undertaking such as this one is supposed to serve the purpose of enhancing the quality of work within the faculty, it should have been somewhat less extensive. More leeway should have been allowed for each faculty to decide which aspects of their operations they wanted information on, and then setting up plans for working on whatever problems that were found. This was probably the intention; however, the volume of work required for the review was too much for meaningful work on specific areas.
- Since it is unrealistic to expect that everyone taking part in the SLRs will have specialist knowledge of quality assurance, it would be helpful to make the **presentation of the handbook more accessible**, and to include **a glossary and explanations of the main terms and concepts**.
- Another point which has been raised in connection with the SLRs is the **lack of external feedback**. Although it might certainly be said that the self-review work and writing of the self-review report

form the core of the process, there is a danger that this process could be cut short to a certain extent if the self-review is not followed up by an external review from independent experts, including comments on things that are done well and suggestions for improvement. It is important to ensure that everyone who takes part in the self-review is convinced that the significant amount of work required will prove beneficial. In light of this, it should be considered whether, in the second cycle of the QEF, there should be a particular emphasis on follow-up for the first cycle and the introduction of plans of action. With regards to this, consideration must also be given as to the impact an increased emphasis on research will have on the organisation of work, e.g. whether it will involve a two-part process, and so forth.

- It is also worth mentioning that the **scheduling of the first cycle of the QEF has meant that the experiences of individual HEIs have differed somewhat**. The first HEI to go into the IWR had not yet completed any of the SLRs, whilst the HEIs who underwent the IWRs last have been able to build on the previous evaluation of the majority of their academic units. This discrepancy will, however, likely be resolved automatically as time goes on.

## Quality Board-led Institution-wide Reviews

With regards to institution-wide reviews (IWR), respondents were invited to comment on the operation or effectiveness of these reviews, as well as to address any particular aspects in need of improvement when applicable. Comments made by respondents on the IWR process of the QEF were categories into the following categories: Experience with the IWRs; Site visit; Grading scale; and other considerations for the second cycle.

### Experience with the IWRs

- Communication with the QB has been excellent. The Reflective Analysis was helpful, especially in looking at the university in comparison with other universities. The site visit was quite helpful. The Case Study was well set up, many helpful comparisons were made, and the history was well set up. In general, this review worked well and is likely to be reviewed and considered by the faculties in the near future.
- Our institution went through Quality Board-led review prior to any Subject level review. This review was useful, especially the writing of the reflective analysis. Consequently the review has led to considerable changes in the structure and operation of the University. The review committee was broad and seemed to have good understanding of the special fields our institution operates on.
- The HEIs are unanimous in their belief that the IWRs have generally been very useful, both the self-review and the writing of the reflective analysis, as well as the site visit and final report from the external review team.
- The reflective analysis is the most important part of the review and in the preparation of it an experienced external expert such as in the institutionally led subject reviews, would be of great help. I have participated in several reviews and they have been candid and the questions from the external reviewers to the point of fleshing out issues of quality.

## Site Visit

As was expressed by one of the respondent above, the site visit was described as being helpful. Two other respondents had, however, particular issues with regards to the organisation of the site visit, as well as the meetings conducted during the visit, they wanted to share. These included, for example, the consequences of having two institutions reviewed back to back and lack of time, as well as miscommunication and a hostile environmental during the meetings.

- However, the review process could have been better organized. Having the same committee undertake reviews on two institutions back to back was far from ideal. When the review team came to us they were tired which may have resulted in less successful meetings. Also, it is likely that a review team that visits two universities in the same week automatically will start comparing those, which may not be optimal for the process. It was also apparent that the review team sometimes mixed information between the two institutions both during the review meetings with us and in the consequential review of the results.

More time was needed for the visit. Allocating shorter time for smaller institutions is not optimal. A common complain of those attending the review meetings was that their voice was not heard as the time was so quickly over. This could have been avoided by either running several meetings simultaneously, or by visiting smaller institutions for a longer time. A common complaint regarding the meetings was that the attitude of some of the members of the committee was unfriendly to the verge of being rude. This resulted in strained communication during the meetings. These two factors resulted in the visit being quite negative experience for many of those participating. This problem needs to be addressed before the second circle.

Language was a problem during many of the review meetings, thus, clearer and better organized translation services are much needed. Not all staff, university board members, or stake-holders are fluent in English, especially the English used for Quality work. However, their voice is as important as that of those that are fluent in English.

- The meetings in the visit of the last round were however not consistently of such quality. They were a rather hostile environment if I may say so. The Board members seemed tired and cranky and one meeting turned into an interrogation of a detail, which made it difficult for to get key issues across. I felt treated as a delinquent child in the Principals Office of yesteryear rather than as a 21<sup>st</sup> century academic discussing my work with peers. The meetings were too superficial, it is has more value to work through the issues to address and decide upon the structure of the report in collaboration with the external expert. Whether a case study is used and the relative importance of the half day introduction is immaterial, the main issue is that this should be PEER evaluation conducted with mutual respect and engagement. Regarding the review it was sad to see several factual errors that we had pointed out after reading the draft, that the Board did not even correct in the final version. This affects the credibility of the process for the institution and is a disincentive to staff in engaging in it. However, the review had recommendations that are being addressed, but the action plan of our institution could have been more professionally presented and executed.

From the Institution side the Quality Board visit could have been better organized and the leadership of the institution better prepared to draft the big picture. Of course it has to do with the experience and expertise of the management and therefore a closer collaboration with an experienced reviewer would be beneficial.

## Grading Scale

Two respondents also had several remarks to make about the grading scale used in the IWRs. These were issues such as clearer guidelines in the case of a “limited confidence” grade, criteria needed to receive a “full confidence” grade, and the grading scale for the research component.

- Firstly, there was surprise at the announcement following the first IWR that only part of the grading scale would be used in the first cycle of the QEF, and that it would not be possible for an HEI to receive the grade ‘full confidence’; there is no mention of this in the Quality Enhancement Handbook. Since the HEIs have, with one exception, all received the grade ‘confidence’, in practice the IWRs have concluded with a verdict on whether the HEI in question has passed or failed. In this sense, the evaluation has been more like the accreditation process than a conventional evaluation process.
- Secondly, the consequences of receiving the grade ‘limited confidence’ are not sufficiently clear, i.e. what will happen if the institution in question does or does not submit a satisfactory reform programme within a certain period? Will a satisfactory programme cause the grade to be raised to ‘confidence’ – and will this happen immediately, or not before the second cycle of the QEF? What consequences will there be if the QB does not consider the reform programme satisfactory? Does the QB continue management of the matter or is it then referred to the Minister?
- Thirdly, it is very important that before the second cycle of the QEF commences, clear information is made available detailing the criteria that HEIs need to meet in order to receive the grade ‘full confidence’. Will this be evaluated on the basis of objective data and standardised criteria, or will the verdict be based on the fitness for purpose approach? It is crucial that this is made clear, because the result will foreseeably affect the reputation of the universities, and their collaborative work together, e.g. within the QC. With regards to this, thought must also be given to better standardising the final reports of the external review teams.
- The process following a “limited confidence” ruling is confusing and not clearly stated in the Quality handbook. Furthermore, the information from the Quality Board were sometimes misleading. When an institution needs to improve its governing structure to lift limited confidence to confidence it is unrealistic to expect these changes to be done in one year, as was the requirement of the Quality Board. Some changes take time, especially those that need information gathering and evaluation. It would be more effective to work with the institution in doing a realistic four year action plan to mend issues pointed out, followed by evaluation by the institutional review in the second circle.
- In light of the plan to place more emphasis on research in the second cycle of the QEF, another question arises. Will one grade be given for quality assurance in the field of teaching, and another

for the quality of research, or will these components be evaluated together? Information must also be provided on how performance in research will be evaluated, and in this context it will be necessary to consider internationally recognised methodology and criteria.

## Other Considerations

Respondents also mentioned other issues that did not fit the categories above and are listed below:

- The institution level report for the University more or less ignored the subject level reports. They are only briefly addressed in one chapter but otherwise the report for the University was written largely top down from the perspective of the central administration and is in effect an independent report. This can and very likely will have the effect of undermining the significance of the subject level reports.
- Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the conferences held following the IWR for each institution have not lived up to expectations. Instead of providing a forum for (most of) the universities to brag about having received the second highest grade, the conferences should rather be used for professional discussions reviewing the results of the IWR and highlighting lessons that can be learnt.
- Finally, we would like to reiterate that before the second cycle of the QEF commences, the standardised key figures on the operations of HEIs mentioned in the Quality Enhancement Handbook must be made available. This is necessary if the evaluation is to be based on an objective foundation.

## Annual meetings with representatives of the Quality Board

Once a year there is a meeting at each institution between the institutional link Board member and key senior institutional representatives. Out of the five respondents, four addressed the question regarding the usefulness of the annual meetings. Three respondents believed that the meetings had been or would most likely be useful, as they provided a communication channel to the Board, as well as valuable discussions and assistance to the institutions. One respondent was, however, unable to comment on them due to the fact that neither memos nor meeting notes from the meetings had been made available. Another respondent remarked that the meetings had been rather one-sided, that is, they had not been used to relay information to the HEIs from the QB.

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The annual meetings with the institutional contacts have generally proven useful, enhanced trust between the parties, improved understanding of the work and given the universities an opportunity to explain the progress of their quality assurance work

in general, and the SLRs in particular. The meetings have, however, been rather one-sided and not used to relay information to the HEIs from the QB. In the future, the annual meetings can be expected to focus to a greater extent on follow-up to the universities' plans of action following the first cycle of the QEF.

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## Early Suggestions for the Second Cycle

Respondents were invited to provide comments on specific issues that were up for discussion before the commencement of the second cycle of reviews. These include the inclusion of the evaluation of research, public information at the subject level, and accreditation.

### Inclusion of the Evaluation of Research

Four respondents had comments to make on the inclusion of research into the second cycle of the QEF. Two remarked that research and teaching were an essential part of a university's operation, and, therefore, incorporating it into the next cycle would be reasonable and necessary. One respondent did, however, want to point out that including research would only partially complete the picture as universities had other obligations, such as social responsibility. Finally, two respondents commented on the methods of evaluation, and one of them another pointed out possible discrepancies between fields when evaluating research.

- Research and teaching are inextricably connected components of a university's operations, and it would be reasonable for them to be evaluated in parallel in the next cycle of the QEF, cf. also the Regulation on quality assurance of university teaching and research, no. 321/2009. However, since information is not yet available regarding how the evaluation of quality in research will be carried out, it is not possible to take a position on the matter at this stage. It must be emphasised that in order to evaluate research work within the universities, it is crucial to introduce a standardised cataloguing system for research (CRIS or another comparable system).
- Research is an essential part of the operation of each University and it is necessary that the quality of research is incorporated into the institutional review. It is important that such incorporation does not focus only on point counting (e.g. number of publications and citation), but applies an approach where the true value of research (e.g. impact on society, scientific discipline etc.) is peer-evaluated.
- Including research will only partially complete the picture of an HEI as the social responsibility aspect of community relations will still be missing.
- Evaluation of research is already done within the institution, where points are awarded for each piece of publication. However, there is no common understanding of what is a fair evaluation

framework, as the existing one is skewed in favour of the natural sciences at the cost of human, educational and social sciences. This skewness goes in the same direction as the model that is being used for distributing the small amount of money that the university is granted. This does not sit well with those that are at the other end, receiving less points for their research than the natural sciences, and less money for their operations in general. Any system set up for evaluating research must take into account that this skewed reality is in place.

### Public Information at the Subject Level

The answers provided by respondents on the publishing of SLR reports are presented below. Three respondents commented on the question and all of them contemplated whether having the reports open and public could potentially jeopardise the candour which currently characterised the reports.

- An important aspect of the review processes is that the institutions can be honest in their self-evaluations. Thus, there is a need for confidentiality on many aspects of the review, especially self-reflection reports and subject level reports. Knowing that such reports are open documents that may be used for e.g. decision on finances, or advertising by competing departments in other universities, would most likely result in the creation of documents highlighting the pros, but downplaying the cons. This might greatly underpin the whole process.
- The action plan that should follow a report should be presented to the ministry as such plans should be reflected in the overall plan and not the least, Budget of the institution. Whether the reports should be Public I do not know, the danger is that this would lead to an overemphasis in reflective analysis on the strengths and less "expose" weaknesses.
- A basic principle of the QEF is that self-reviews, both SLRs and IWRs, should be honest and critically reflective, and thereby promote the organisation of reform work within the HEIs. In order to ensure that this principle is realised, it is important that the decision of whether to make their self-review reports public rests with each individual university. It is clear that a requirement to make them public will detract from the candour which currently characterises the self-review reports, and thereby undermine the basis of the QEF. However, requests from other parties, e.g. MESC, to be granted some level of access to the reports must be taken seriously. In such a case, though, information must be given as to the reasons behind the request and the way in which the data will be used. Meeting these requests halfway might be considered, by including abstracts with the reports and making these public. With regards to this, attention might also be drawn to the contracts existing between MESC and each university, in particular their appendices, as well as MESC's work on defining key figures on the operations of HEIs.

### Accreditation

Various remarks were made with regards to the QEF and its relation to the accreditation process. Its link with the IWRs were contemplated, and one respondent believed that the connection between the QEF and

the accreditation process should be strengthened. Furthermore, another saw no issues with the current order of things, whereas yet another preferred the previous arrangement.

- Accreditation is a necessary component of operating a university. It should not be a haphazard process whether a university is recognized as such. I have no complaints with the process used in recommending to the Ministry which universities should be accredited.
- I believe that the connection between the QEF and accreditation should be strengthened.
- I think the previous arrangement with truly external experts is better.
- It does not seem clear, but is similarly important to know, how the results of the IWRs are related to the accreditation of HEIs. Generally speaking, the ideal should be that these two processes will work in tandem. With regards to this, thought must be given to whether it is necessary to make changes to the Higher Education Institutions Act and Regulations 1067/2006 and 37/2007, to ensure consistency.

### Other Considerations

Other aspects that were raised by respondents are listed below. They were quite diverse and covered topics such as: language; funding; down-up vs. top-down approaches; call for data; additional student representatives; accuracy and political neutrality; as well the usefulness of the process.

#### The process:

- This process of evaluating each faculty has been quite helpful. It has raised awareness of the possibilities in doing evaluative work within the institution without necessarily being threatening. On the contrary, it has been considered helpful, and it has generated much discourse within the faculties. The next steps could be based on what was found in this step, delving deeper into what was found missing or challenging. We look at the whole process as an opportunity for improving the quality of our work at this school. However it is important to make the financial side of this evaluation process more clear, since this is a time consuming process.
- Finally, I repeat that the QEF has been very useful for my institution and strengthen its quality of learning and teaching, as well as assisting in further developing the institutions quality culture.
- In my experience through accreditation, several subject level reviews and institutional reviews it is fundamental that they are institution led, that the reflective analysis is an ongoing process within the institution and that across the institution from the board to every staff member and student there is a clear vision of the role of the institution nationally and internationally in teaching, research and community relations. A key qualification of reviewers is an understanding of the academic principles of peer review
- Quality is about how we do things, how we operate. It is not primarily about monitoring of processes, quality standards, appropriate offices, officials and administrators. Quality control does not equal or replace quality. This should be obvious. In view of the first rounds of subject level reviews and the experience of the institute level report for the University, there is a certain amount of frustration regarding the top-down managerial nature of the final report. It does not sufficiently

reflect “how we do things” on the ground. In developing QEF-2, more attention should be paid to the subject level reviews. If they are primarily to be an internal exercise, as they currently are and potentially very useful as such, they need to be more clearly defined (and possibly written in Icelandic – if they are primarily aimed at the local staff and their working procedures and conditions).

#### **Language:**

- A major issue in all the QEF process is related to language. The working language of Icelandic universities is Icelandic, although the vast majority of their staff is fluent in English, they are often educated in countries that have different English characteristics. The universities’ regulations, frameworks, minutes of meetings, curriculum etc. are developed and communicated within the universities in Icelandic. Some of these are subsequently translated into English. Having to work and think in English for QEF purposes may thus put unavoidable constraints on documents and reports provided by the institutions. This problem is substantiated when institutions are asked to provide a high number of documents for the review purposes. Similarly, discussions in meetings etc. within the QEF takes place in English. It is important that a list of words and phrases will be developed for use within the QEF. Furthermore, institutions should be allowed, and encouraged, to write quality related reports in Icelandic that are consequently translated by professional translators into English, naturally followed by corrections by the institution. This would ensure that the quality work would take place in the operational language of the institutions.

#### **Accuracy and political neutrality of reports:**

- Since the report of the Quality Board-led reviews at the institutional level are official publicly accessible documents it is important that they are accurate, fact based and well structured. For most cases the report for my institution fulfilled these criteria. But there were statements (e.g. ..., and places a definite question mark over its future as an independent organisation.) in the report that were highly political and not based on obvious facts and data. Unfortunately, these statements fuelled flammable discussions in Icelandic politics and have since been used for political purposes. For the integrity of the Quality Board and the good collaboration between institutions and the Quality Board it is important that the Quality Board remains politically neutral in its reports and other communications.

#### **More student representatives:**

- In light of the emphasis placed on student opinions in the QEF, it is only right to consider whether the number of student representatives in the external review groups should be raised from one to two.

#### **Data gathering on expenses:**

- Finally, it is suggested that data be gathered on the direct and indirect expenses to the HEIs incurred by their work in connection with the implementation of the QEF. This would also involve information on whether and how participants in the review have been paid or otherwise compensated for their work.



WordItOut

Figure 3 - Word cloud from all answers by other Icelandic stakeholders. Frequency of words is reflected in their size in the cloud.

## Other Icelandic Stakeholders – Key Points

### Principles:

- General support for the principles, but all saw them as needing some modification for the next round. Emphasis on students and research was discussed in this regard.

### Structure:

- The work within the QEF and the QB praised.
- Several points in need for further discussion or improvement mentioned, such as: the composition of the QB, communication between various parties within the HE system, funding issues and the workload of staff.
- Balance between maintaining the knowledge already present within the QB and introducing new members discussed.
- Suggested that the student voice be increased by adding a student representative to the QB.
- Contemplations whether having only one Board of international experts is advisable.
- One respondent stated that the QC had only been operational for a relatively short period, but was nevertheless seen as an important forum for discussion amongst different parties within the HE system. Another remarked that the function of the QC was unclear and underfunded.

### Subject Level Reviews:

- Generally seen as a positive aspect and was remarked as being a good opportunity to receive outside comments from qualified colleagues and a process that had led to improvements within departments.
- Guidelines provided in the Quality Handbook perceived as needing further clarification.
- Need for training of student that participate in the SLRs and the IWRs. Also compensations need to be contemplated.

### Institution-wide Reviews:

- Generally good experience with the IWRs and different components of the process, esp. writing of the RA.
- Two respondents had particular issues with the organisation of the site visit and the meetings conducted during the visit. These included the consequences of having two institutions reviewed back to back and lack of time, as well as miscommunication and a hostile environment during the meetings.
- The grading scale and processes thereof need further clarification, e.g. in terms of guidelines in the case of “limited confidence” and criteria needed to receive “full confidence”. Also, what kind of grading scale would be used when evaluating research?

### Annual meetings:

- Generally considered useful, although one perceived them to be rather one-sided. Also one reported a lack of meeting notes.

### Early suggestions for the second cycle:

- Two respondents remarked that research was an essential component of a university’s operation, therefore incorporating it into the next cycle was reasonable and necessary. Another pointed out that universities had social obligations as well, and two others discussed various methods of evaluation and the possible discrepancies between fields when evaluating research.
- It was contemplated whether having the SLR reports open could potentially jeopardise the candour that currently characterises them.
- The link with the IWRs and QEF were contemplated. One respondent saw no issues with the current order of things, whereas another preferred previous arrangements.

## Institution-wide Review Experts

### Principles of the QEF

There was a general agreement amongst respondents regarding the main principles of the QEF. One respondent was actually so satisfied that he/she specifically stated “don’t change a thing” as an answer. Some of the experts suggested modifications to the principles in later rounds, such as further clarifying the emphasis on the student experience, as well as reviewing institutions in a coherent manner, both with certain objectives in mind, and how those objectives created a coherent institution. Another respondent wondered whether the rapid changes in learning techniques were being taken into account. Lastly, one expert stated that whilst the QEF Handbook “is an impressive piece of work” it was not well fitted for external evaluators. Following are some of points that were made:

- The QEF has done very professionally, as seen by the fact that the QEF Handbook is a real book and longer than the report my panel has produced.
- I am comfortable with the principles of the QEF because of the collegial peer review process. You cannot inspect quality into a system, universities have to be responsible for their own quality.
- I recognize that the evaluation is linked to fundamental principles, but consider it important to try to assess the institution as a whole, that is, on the one hand to evaluate the institution’s ability to achieve different objectives, while on the other to evaluate whether these objectives help to create a coherent institution. In these years we require that institutions deliver better teaching – better research – heightened business relevance; but it is important that evaluations help to ensure that the institution is not torn apart by these external requirements, which are not necessarily coordinated.
- The QEF gives a sound and clear guide on the different principles, but the question is, if any, how principles are related to rapid changes in mode of student learning in terms of techniques.
- The meaning of the centrality of students and the focus on the enhancement of the student experience is a little bit *vague* and could be clarified. There will always be different interpretations of concepts like student’s learning experience. In the worst case what follows is a collection of haphazardous polls, where everyone’s opinions about any detail whatsoever seem to have equal value. That kind of material is dubious from the evaluation’s point of view.
- I recall the Handbook as an impressive piece of work but actually not that useful for me as an external evaluator.

When asked if there were other important principles that needed to be addressed in the QEF process, two respondents discussed the possibility of adding new principles adopted from the Scottish QEF process.

- The Scottish QEF is itself under review and the one additional principal that seems to be emerging is the need for a Quality system to encourage diversification and innovation in Higher education provision (predominantly in relation to the increasing use of ICT to underpin education, the changing nature of learners and learner expectations, and opening up global education opportunities). While the Quality system needs to secure brand and reputation it needs to do so in a way that encourages the evolution of academic and educational practice rather than lead to risk-averse behaviours. This principle is perhaps one that could be added.
- I am a solid advocate of the importance of student involvement, on boards and committees, on the Review team, in the Review process. The Enhancement theme approach developed by QAA and others in Scotland has served it well and could be worth exploring as it may suit small countries well. Certainly the concept of enhancement is less well understood and developed in the QAA's approach in England.

## Structures of the QEF

### The Quality Board

Respondents were asked whether they would like to comment on any aspect of either the structure or operation of the Quality Board. Respondents seemed to agree that the structure and composition of the Quality Board was appropriate and professional. The following statements touched upon these issues:

- The Board secretariat at RANNIS seems to work very well and professional.
- From my perspective the role of the Quality Board seems appropriate.
- The members of the QB that I met were extremely competent and very helpful. I feel that the whole procedure was under perfect control.
- The Quality Board (QB) seems appropriate and a proactive body for supporting the Quality Council in its task to enhance the quality of higher education in Iceland.
- The regular meetings with QB and individual institutions promise an exchange of progress and problems regarding quality assurance and enhancement.

### The Quality Council

Those respondents who commented on the QC, also had a positive view, as can be seen below:

- From my perspective the role of the Quality Council seems appropriate.
- Quality Council has and will have an important role in the challenges encountered by higher education. The regular meetings with QB and individual institutions promise an exchange of progress and problems regarding quality assurance and enhancement.

One respondent commented on the recent changes to the Council and remarked that they were promising for the Icelandic HE sector:

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It is interesting that changes have been made to the Council recently. I can see the value of a formal body such as Council serving as a 'buffer body' between the Government that funds universities and the Board that develops and oversees the quality process. Quality Council has and will have an important role in the challenges encountered by higher education.

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One expert mentioned the possibilities that might arise in small countries with a small number of universities:

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I cannot comment on the operation of the Quality Council, but would simply note that in the Scottish context the relatively small number of Universities allows the sector to work collectively, and openly, around many aspects of quality enhancement and academic development (and to proactively address emerging opportunities or challenges relating to political, financial or regulatory factors). There may be similar opportunities in Iceland.

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### Institution-led Subject Level Reviews

With regards to subject level reviews (SLR), respondents were invited to comment on the operation or effectiveness of these reviews, as well as to address any particular aspects in need of improvement when applicable.

### Experience with or Views of the SLRs

Three respondents provided comments on the SLR part of the QEF.

- The subject level reviews provided very useful background material for the Institution level review. I would also imagine that the process of their creation is extremely useful to the individual faculties and entities undertaking a self-review, in increasing self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses.
- Again I have no direct experience of this in the Icelandic QEF, but can comment only in relation to the subject-level review documentation being visible to me during Institutional audit and in preparation for my visit to another institution. My comment would be that the variability in approach evident between Schools was perhaps not unexpected in the first cycle of operation. My

own experience from a number of Scottish institutions is that over repeated cycles an understanding and trust of an enhancement-led approach does build and this over time leads to more open, and purposeful, outputs from subject-level review (while at the same time allowing assurance of appropriate levels of equivalence within institutions).

Asked about which particular aspects might benefit from improvement one respondent suggested that a little more standardisation and guidelines on structure and length would be helpful, as she/he had found that the reviews varied quite a bit in length, form and perhaps also in quality.

### Quality Board-led Institution-wide Reviews

With regards to institution-wide reviews (IWR), respondents were invited to comment on the operation or effectiveness of these reviews, as well as to address any particular aspects in need of improvement when applicable. Overall, the respondents were pleased with the IWRs in which they had participated. Communication with the QB was mostly good and the reflective analysis helpful. The site visits were considered successful and well organised, and all practicalities were taken care of.

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In general I have a very positive experience of all aspects of taking part in an institutional level review. I found the overall structure of the process, including the institution's Reflective Analysis, briefing and discussion within the review team, institutional visit and production of a final report to work well.

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Below is a sample of specific issue of the IWRs addressed by respondents, which were categorised as follows: Utility of the Reflective Analysis, Site Visit, Practicalities and Logistics, Values of the case study and other considerations.

### Reflective Analysis

Those respondents who commented on the RA report generally found it useful and helpful during the review process.

- The utility of the Reflective Analysis, produced by the institution, was very useful for the review team. It consisted e.g. facts and figures that were necessary in order to get any kind of overview for the evaluation. There were also many critical observations and reflections which were valuable for the team's work.

- The reflective analysis (in both cases) has been very helpful to me in forming a clear picture of the University prior to the review visit, and open enough to clearly signpost the areas that are of interest to me or are clearly a priority/focus for University itself. My observation would simply be that given this is the first cycle of operation that this is all very encouraging.
- The reflective analysis put the institutions in a position to formulate a strategy with the support by the comments from the review report. Since this was the first evaluation conducted it will serve as a template for follow ups and forthcoming evaluations.

## Site Visit

In general the IWR external experts were pleased with their site visit during the review. Some respondents commented that the visit had been well managed and efficient, and the discussions were described as being commendable, open, transparent and insightful. One respondent remarked that the meetings during the visit might perhaps have been too many and the assemblies of groups might be reconsidered. Similarly, another respondent described his/her experience of the visit as “fairly intense” as a large number of individuals had been interviewed in a short amount of time.

- The major impression is that the direct contact with administration, staff and students gave not only insight by the review team, but also opened an understanding of critical issues at the institutions.
- There was an openness and transparency around discussions and a real sense that the University found the process both supportive and helpful. The paperwork I am currently working through for the next review of another institution is equally comprehensive.
- The members of the QB that I met were extremely competent and the review (before, on-site, and after) was conducted very efficiently.
- The review at the University was very well managed, supporting materials were comprehensive and appropriate and the level of engagement from senior staff, teaching and support staff and students was commendable (especially for a first cycle review).
- In general, the site visit was successful and very well organised. There were maybe too many meetings and the assemblies of the groups may be reconsidered. Sometimes the topics of the sessions were a bit unclear to participants.
- The institutional visit was fairly intense in the sense that a large number of groups and individuals were interviewed in a short amount of time. Obtaining the widest possible perspective from a large number of different groups at the institution must thus be balanced by the Review Team’s need to digest and discuss all the information after each group meeting.

## Practicalities and Logistics

All in all, those respondents who commented on practical issues regarding their visit were pleased.

- All practicalities were extremely well organised. The motivation within the institution itself seemed to be good, and people took their task seriously.
- Important for all of us, who were doing the first evaluation visit in Iceland. Thanks to RANNIS.
- Other than some logistical changes (e.g. preparation and discussion time for the panel between meetings with different groups on site), which I have discussed with Rannis staff at the time, there is really nothing that I would change in the operation of the institutional reviews.

### Value of the Case Study

There were various views regarding the value of the case study. One respondent thought it was helpful as it had allowed for an in-depth analysis, but suggested that during the next cycle, the QB might want to choose a topic based on the issues raised in the first round. Another respondent found the utility of the case study rather ambiguous, as it had struck him/her as rather being a criticism of the Ministry and a request for additional funds. Another topic might have been more appropriate.

- The utility of the Case Study was rather ambiguous. It seemed more like a criticism against the Ministry, and request for more resources, than useful material for the institution-wide review. Of course, the institutions themselves choose the topics of their case studies. However, from the external evaluator's point of view, problems that have not so easy solutions (just give us more money) would be more appropriate to discuss.
- The case study was very helpful in allowing in-depth analysis of a specific theme chosen by the institution itself. Perhaps in the next cycle an alternative (or additional) approach would be that the Quality Board participated in choosing a topic for the case study on the basis of issues raised in the preceding review cycle.

### Other Considerations

- Given that many of the Icelandic universities are small institutions it put additional pressure on the institution to establish external contacts in the society. It also requires development of stronger profiles and here the QB and council serve as support and guidance. The QB review gave specific recommendations in many aspects from financing to governance at the institutional level, but given the situation at the institutions many of these will not be fulfilled. This raises the question if QB should support the institution to find ways towards a solution on this enigma? For instance, more contacts with industry and stakeholders.

### Annual meetings with representatives of the Quality Board

None of the respondents commented on this aspect of the QEF.

## Early Suggestions for the Second Cycle

Respondents were invited to provide comments on specific issues that were up for discussion before the commencement of the second cycle of reviews. These include the inclusion of the evaluation of research, public information at the subject level, and accreditation.

### Inclusion of the Evaluation of Research

All respondents favoured the inclusion of the evaluation of research, with varying degrees. One argued that it was essential to involve both teaching and research in evaluations while another states that research should only be included at some levels within the departments, particularly in relation to research and teaching linkages. Here are some points in this regard:

- Serious reviews of universities should consider the "international standing" - indeed, anything below that would be too much of modesty and provincialism.
- I find it important that evaluations not only help to create high standards, but also correlate between fields, which are not necessarily related, thus teaching and research.
- For this it is absolutely necessary to consider teaching and research as a unit; excellence in one column goes hand in hand with excellence in the other.
- Including the research seems a very reasonable thing to do. It was definitely under-exposed at the review I participated in.
- Research is an integral part of academic life and is mutually dependent on good students and vice versa.

Two respondents were a bit reserved when it came to the inclusion of research. This was not because they did not agree with the inclusion, but because of other factors, such as the possible lack of diversity among reviewers and concerns about the measurements used. Below are two quotes from these experts:

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For institution level reviews, I am a little uncertain if the same review team should undertake an evaluation of both education and research, and tend to think that research should be addressed in a separate review. Evaluating the total education landscape of an institution in a comprehensive manner is already a large task, and including research in the same process would inevitably lead to some loss of depth, in particular during a site visit. Since universities worldwide tend to place more emphasis on their research than on education, this may also lead to an imbalance in the energy spent on each of the two subjects. Finally, finding a review team who are equally

proficient and comfortable with both education and research aspects, while not impossible, might be challenging.

My only comments here is that any evaluation of research should not stop with publication records and citation index, it should equally evaluate the impact and social value of the research. How was impact achieved? Who benefited by the research results? Etc. The link and feedback between higher education and research is another important measure. How is the profile of the research, i.e. professors subject, relates and fit into the overall strategy of the institution?

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### Public Information at the Subject Level

Respondents were generally in agreement that the evaluations should, at least in some part, be disclosed publically. Some felt that the reports should be fully disclosed while others were a bit more reserved and suggested a middle ground. Below are some of the points that were stated:

- I do not think that evaluations should stay confidential, since institutions can – and should – learn from each other.
- I see no reason, particularly in a second cycle, why reports or at least summaries of reports should not be published.
- Instead of publishing the report as a whole, perhaps a written response from the institution would be a possibility to consider.

One expert argued though that the decision to publish should rest with the institutions themselves, not with the QB or the Ministry:

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The QB reviews and the internal process at the institution is a process of trust. It is therefore important in my opinion that the institution themselves decide if to publish reports or not. It is up to RANNIS and the institution to agree and to decide how to inform ministry and other parties about the major conclusions and recommendations.

The review is a support for the institution not for political decisions in terms of resources and priorities.

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## Accreditation

Two respondents offered their views on the accreditation process:

- The Government of a small country like Iceland needs to have the means to ensure that its higher education system (or the funding it provides to those who travel outside the country to study subjects not offered in the country) supports the country's economic wellbeing. However this has to be integrated with the country's migration strategy, and its approach to vocational education, lifelong learning and professional development. The expertise to judge whether a university can offer a subject in quality terms is better left to the university's own quality assurance processes. The question of whether a subject area should be supported or developed for the benefit of the economy, culture and society is better addressed through funding levers and in a more high level way.
- If the standard is not upheld and recommendations for improvements not addressed the question of accreditation is an issue. The recommendations from the QB if confidence can be given are one statement to consider for accreditation. If accreditation is under consideration a decision should be accompanied with a plan of action to the institution for proper improvement and subsequent evaluation of progress. If the goals are not achieved within a certain time period, the right to give diploma in a subject should be withdrawn. Thus the question of accreditation is a feedback relationship between possibly RANNIS, QB and the institution and should be handled with the support from QB.



## Institution-wide Review Experts – Key Points

### Principles:

- All agreed with the main principles of the QEF. Some suggestions were made for the second cycle, e.g. regarding students and the student learning experience, as well as ideas from the Scottish QEF.

### Structure:

- Structure and composition of the QB was considered appropriate and professional.
- QC regarded as an important body in the HE environment.

### Subject Level Reviews:

- SLR reports are useful background material, but might benefit from more standardisation and guidelines on structure and length.

### Institution-wide Reviews:

- Overall respondents were pleased with the IWRs in which they had participated.
- Communication with the QB mostly good, RA helpful, and site visits successful and well organised.
- Discussions in meetings described as being commendable, open, transparent and insightful.
- Remarks made that the number of meetings and/or participants might have been too many.

### Early suggestions for the second cycle:

- All respondents favoured the inclusion of the evaluation of research, but to varying degrees.
- Respondents were generally in agreement that evaluations should, at least in some part, be disclosed publically.

## Subject Level Review Experts

### Principles of the QEF

When asked about the principles of the QEF, as they are stated in the Quality Handbook<sup>6</sup>, and how they had underpinned the first cycle of reviews, the majority of the external experts reported a positive experience. Overall, the principles were thought of as being good, and were described by respondents as being “positive and progressive”, and also allowing for a certain degree of flexibility. Several respondents remarked that the ownership of the quality and standards by the institutions was a fundamental and important aspect, as well as the emphasis on students. The points made below, are examples of comments made in this regard:

- The quality enhancement model is a positive and progressive one. The principles have outlined the core idea of a review and also effected the way colleagues perceive on another.
- The evaluation process as it appeared to me is an open process, where faculties and faculty members have the opportunity to bring forward their opinions about strengths and weaknesses of their faculty, by writing a self-evaluation report that is the starting point for external examiners and by suggesting external experts. This openness creates the possibilities for faculty members to develop ownership towards the analyses, outcomes and conclusions. This ownership is an important condition for implementation of improvements.
- I also want to stress that I find that the focus of the evaluation (“student oriented”) was very fruitful.
- Yes, especially in relation to retaining the institutions’ autonomy and local ownership of the quality standards and methods of quality assurance and the centrality of students in the process.
- I think they have sufficiently underpinned the first round and they should be continued as such in the next round, thus enabling alignment and support comparing of results.
- These principles are good and should continue more or less as they are. I agree that ownership of quality and standards should remain at the institutions, that students should be central (*i.e.* high quality tutoring, students should have influence on decision processes at all levels) and that international perspectives should be considered very important in the Framework.
- I think the quality framework is very good. It is a role model for Europe and should continue to work as the guide for Icelandic universities. The principles are good and well designed, and well connected with international standards, such as ESG.

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<sup>6</sup> Ownership of quality and standards resting with the autonomous institutions; the focus in the QEF on enhancement of the student experience balanced with public accountability; the centrality of students; the importance of both Icelandic and international perspectives in the Framework; and, the absolute operational independence of the Quality Board but the importance also of partnership with the institutions, student bodies and the Ministry.

- I agree with the principles. I think the principles have sufficiently underpinned the first operation of the QEF and I think that they should be the main principles also for the following development of QEF.
- I think the QEF is a very useful document underpinned by quite an emancipated philosophy. It offers a set of principles to inform the institutional thinking that should underpin quality enhancement while allowing enough flexibility for institutions to own the process themselves. The potential for a truly formative approach to the management of quality is clearly evident within the document. This non-prescriptive philosophy allowed for the quality review I was involved in to respond to the needs of the area under review, to emphasise the formative nature of the activity, to be developmental in focus and to allow sufficient flexibility in its reporting so as to be authentic. By 'authentic' I mean that the report could be constructed in a way that authentically reflected the emergent narrative (and findings) of the review without being overly constrained within a generic reporting framework. This was helpful for the subject group, although I can understand how this might make overarching evaluations across many areas more of a challenge.
- The centrality of students in the process is unquestionably something to keep focus on. When it comes to the strong focus on preserving the institutions' autonomy, I have mixed views. On the one hand, it is a positive thing that the central authorities trust the local leadership which helps to foster local ownership and tends to make the quality enhancement at the level of the institution best suited for the local conditions.

This last respondent added that, unfortunately, the focus on the institution's autonomy could also result in some missed opportunities. These included (1) centrally fixed procedures (he/she sometimes experienced during the review that his/her Icelandic colleagues felt unsure about what exactly was expected of them) and more explicit demands and requirements, and (2) the possibility of comparison between institutions and promotion of best practice. Issues with regards to clarity of guidelines were reported by two other respondents in the section "Clarity of Guidelines" below.

Two respondents, however, described the process and principles slightly different from the official cornerstones of the QEF:

- The principle that the ownership of quality is resting with autonomous institutions is important and fundamental. The standards to be used are an issue for the Quality Board. The standards should be related to both Icelandic and international perspective. The quality work shall be carried out in cooperation with the students. The institution should prepare a plan of the quality work and after each review a plan for necessary improvements. Active participant of the institution is basic. The description given in paragraph B1 is slightly difference from my view.
- My experience was that the main focus was on:
  1. the students' experience of the quality of teaching,
  2. the resources available for teaching and
  3. the ways of using the resources for teaching purposes.

This focus I see as appropriate for my role.

Asked whether these principles should continue as main principles during the development of the QEF, all of those who commented on the question agreed. Apart from satisfaction with the principles, as reported above, ensuring continuity in the review work was regarded as an important factor, as well as providing the HEIs with the opportunity to understand, learn and respond within the framework.

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With any new system I would suggest it requires iterative cycles at the outset to reflect on how the HEIs respond to a second round of enhancement and review albeit with minor adjustments.

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Probed for additional or other fundamental principles or emphases, or other related issues, respondents provided the following ideas:

- Possibly, there could be more about the need for systematic dialogue with future employers. The focus is on the students as an important stakeholder, but the future employers are also important stakeholders.
- The inclusion of research (discussed later) and the relational nature of research, learning and teaching and the 'third mission' whether social or business focussed. These need to link to the research output and outcome and how these are captured – as this is where the role of a scholarly environment is vital to the currency and development of knowledge – such that those teaching refresh their own knowledge and the whole community of the HEI sustains a culture of inquiry.
- In my view, a thorough bibliometric analysis might provide an important complementary dimension to this process. Most of us agree that excellence in science is a prerequisite, although not a guarantee, for excellence in education. Such an analysis might indeed reveal areas of strength and weakness that could provide important guidance for the quality work.
- In principles it is emphasized that the student's experience is balanced with public accountability, centrality of students etc. However, I think it is very important also to see the perspective of staff members, because they have theoretical knowledge of teaching and learning processes, and should have expertise in the areas. Finally, the quality of education depends on both, students and staff input and how well both perspectives and sets of input have managed together.
- I think the first round, as I experienced it, has been very fruitful for the institution I took part in evaluating. It is of outmost important, that the focus is on improvements for the future and not on documenting the past with numbers. The review reports become alive documents that concerns future strategies. By having a future-perspective as a paradigm for the reviews, it also creates ownership for the reports among staff and students.
- The principles as described are embodied to varying degrees in the process. However, I think that collectively, the requirements are excessive and place an undue burden on small institutions. My

observation is that the staff of the institution are working continuously to conduct one type of review or another. This takes away the resources and energy of the senior experienced staff from engaging with younger or less experienced staff about quality teaching and learning practices.

## Structures of the QEF

Respondents were invited to comment on the current structures underpinning the QEF, that is, the Quality Board and the Quality Council. Only a few of the external experts commented specifically on the structural bodies of the QEF. These were mostly considerations regarding the roles of the QB and the QC:

- The structure and operation of the Quality Board is functional. I think that open and transparent way to work is necessary in order to develop reliable and well-functioning quality assurance system. I believe that a reliable system is effective and gives real results. It is important to share outcomes and thinking with all stakeholders in regular meetings, support open and transparent atmosphere and motivation of all operators to work for high quality education. The function and structure of Quality Council is also good. The students' representatives are necessary. One issue mentioned on the QEF paper is the lack of income for the council and I presume this means limited budget to operate. I think that effective work requires a regular budget to be able to plan effective and long-term strategies.
- The Quality Board should be responsible for the overall follow up of the quality work and give the standards to be fulfilled. They should be independent and meet every year as described in paragraph B5. They should have Quality Council to support the Work of the Quality Board. The description given in [paragraph B2](#) seems to be adequate.
- On the Quality Council: I would suggest you consider staff and student experience together - i.e. the experience of the community as a whole within the HEI – fulfilled staff and students will be a better outcome. The election of the chair and maintaining consistency and rigour for the duration of a review cycle is vital. This is all fine if the Terms of Reference of the Council are clear and operate effectively – it may be a little early to judge whether a rotating chair is effective or whether this is seen as a particular professional role.

## Institution-led Subject Level Reviews

With regards to subject level reviews (SLR), respondents were invited to comment on the operation or effectiveness of these reviews, as well as to address any particular aspects in need of improvement when applicable.

## Experience with the SLRs

Providing comments on their overall experience participating in the SLRs or general views (see answers on specific issues below), the respondents were generally positive and gave the following answers:

- The review in broad terms was very effective and an excellent and sustained opportunity to have a focused dialogue with the HEI in a specific field.
- Overall, I found this whole process impressive and well-structured.
- Overall this review seemed very satisfactory in terms of operation and effectiveness, and I do not have specific improvements to suggest.
- Overall, I am very grateful for having been able to participate in the self-review process. I learnt many new things about higher education and the organisation of bachelor and master programmes in this particular field.
- I have only positive experience from the evaluation process.
- I was very positive of the process I took part in, and saw an enthusiastic staff that wanted to improve the institution in many ways.
- As I have detailed in my external expert report, it is my firm evaluation that the process has been robust and that it has had and is likely to continue to have significant positive impact on the quality enhancement of the reviewed programmes.
- The process to date has been thorough and robust and genuinely reflective.
- What I would say is that I very much favour internal subject reviews based on a self-critical reflective analysis. Internal review with appropriate external membership strikes me as the most appropriate and cost effective means of reviewing subjects. I am of the view that the Icelandic system ensures the correct balance between internal driven processes and external validation. I believe that this is the best means of ensuring that the student experience is enhanced whilst at the same time maintaining and improving standards across all Icelandic HEIs.
- As an external expert I found the subject level review to include interviews, written statements, and selected individual interviews and to be thorough, candid, and unbiased.
- As always in reviews, the issue is to get a little behind the scenes, to throw an alternative light on well-rehearsed narratives about the institution and, without exaggerating the critical emphasis, investigate the peculiarities, the faults and fractures, that unavoidably exist anywhere.
- The value of the process was clearly in the involvement of the staff at the time and the reflections it unlocked based on our discussion. I do not believe that the process nor the content of the review can or should be prescribed.
- This experience reinforced the importance of staff mobility and international exchange as means of learning, reflecting and developing quality teaching and learning. This engagement is best at discipline/field specific level rather than at upper generic levels where it is more difficult to relate pedagogy and theories with specific daily challenges of teaching and learning.

Respondents also aired various issues that might benefit from improvement in relation to the SLRs or commented on specific parts of the SLR process. The answers have been categorised as possible by common subjects; Composition of the review team, Clarity of guidelines, Feedback, Remit, Preparation by the institution, Site visit, Final report; and other issues and suggestions.

## Composition of the Review Team

Three respondents reported that having another external expert on the review team might have made them feel less isolated, contributed to a richer and more balanced report, and also counterbalanced the “everybody knows everybody” atmosphere in Icelandic society:

- My impression was that most of the persons involved in the process were close to the school. I understand that this is difficult to avoid when the field is so small and when “everybody knows everybody” But this aspect could give me a slight impression of a process “among close friends”. Maybe I would suggest two external experts in the future to avoid this impression.
- This is connected to the isolated position of the external expert. As I was on my own, there was no critical friend or peer to discuss impressions and to share thoughts. This creates the risk that the findings of the external expert have a very personal character, reflecting the personal opinion and professional preferences of that specific external expert. I believe that 2 or 3 external experts with different perspectives who discuss their findings will create a richer and more balanced report.
- I would have appreciated not being the only evaluator on site. It would have been good to team up with at least one colleague to discuss the comments and analysis on the subject. Perhaps a colleague from one of the other faculties at the University.

Another respondent also believed that adding a second student to the review team would be beneficial, as being the only student in a group of experts might be difficult:

- Another aspect: If one wishes that the role of the students should be more important in the process I might suggest that there could be two student representatives in the committee. It is not easy to be the only student in a group of experts, who also are the superior and the teachers of the student. Two students may be able to support each other and that could give their input more weight.

Finally, the importance of the external expert was stated by yet another respondent:

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It is very important to use an external expert in the subject, because he/she is able to adopt a deep viewpoint in that area and share his/her ideas. I believe in that this also motivates him/her to review the subject. Also, it is important that the expert is able to figure out cultural points and to see why issues are in a certain way. He/she needs theoretical knowledge to reflect what he /she heard and saw – not reflecting only his/her own experiences.

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## Clarity of Guidelines

Two respondents reported that they had experienced a certain lack of structure during the SLRs in which they had participated. One of them did, however, not only perceive this as a weakness.

- In terms of strengths, the review I undertook was enacted with a highly formative focus. A relative lack of structure allowed for a provisional agenda that I made (based upon the QEF Handbook and the findings of previous Quality Board-led review at the institutional level) to become the focus of discussions. The Review was highly discursive being characterised by rich and open dialogue with staff and students.
- The relative lack of structure did surface some weaknesses though. I was not convinced that the staff leading the Review felt fully prepared for it, the agenda I made for myself as a ‘checksum’ for my own activity become readily adopted as the agenda for the Review – in its entirety, with little modification. Given that I had constructed the agenda from the QEF Handbook this was unproblematic but still slightly surprising. I also feel that the internal Review team was quite light in number and in management agency. In part this was unavoidable due to sickness of a senior member of staff. I think greater guidance for internal Review teams to include the required person specifications of a Review team and an outline agenda for adaptation may have helped the team lead the Review. As it happened it was I who led the Review activity during the visit rather than contributing to an internally led Review. I also think more guidance about the sort of documentation and evidence that should preface the visit would be helpful.
- To my mind the QEF instructions for the self-review process were not detailed enough. The timetable as well as the exact steps and the contents of the self-review process were not exactly described in instructions, which brought unclarities and a rather lengthy delay for the implementation of the self-review.

## Feedback

Three respondents commented specifically on the feedback or follow-up process of the SLR. One respondent remarked that the impact of the institution needed to be recorded, perhaps with some self-reflective document at the end of the project. Another respondent encouraged that the QEF review its guidance to external reviewers and the HEIs regarding an initial feedback session within the institution. Lastly, the clarity of what would follow the self-review and how the results would be used was also a remark made by the third respondent.

- Impact on the Institution – appeared healthy and encourages reflectiveness and needs to be recorded – so some self-reflexive document at the end of the project
- Although there is a lot of work and reflection to be carried out after the site visit, it is important that the reviewer gives feedback on the initial/preliminary thinking re the subsequent report to as many members of the institution as wish to attend. This is not a forum for debate and re-opening

of discussions, but indicative of the reviewer's thinking. Recommendation: QEF is asked to review its guidance to external assessors and to the institutions on the purpose and limitations of an initial feedback session.

- For me, it was also not clear how the results of this self-review will be used, that is, what kind of measures or follow-up activities are expected from the universities or whether there will be a subsequent external review process that is going to follow this self-review process.

## Remit

Most of the respondents who commented on the remit and role of the external reviewer believed it to be quite clear. Two respondent said, however, that they would have benefitted from clearer guidelines or stated intentions.

- The remit for the external reviewer was clear but there was in a number of cases a need for the staff to perhaps be more professionally trained and schooled in educational techniques, the professional academic and lecturer is considerably different from a part time professional within none of these skills.
- The remit for me as an external expert was quite clear – partly because I have participated in quality processes before.
- Yes, I had an informative dialogue with the head of the SLR team before the first site visit, so it became clear at the initial stage.
- The information provided by the institution, including the QEF requirements, was sufficient and had a clarity of process and purpose. It was clear from the outset what my role was, it's terms of reference and the criteria for reporting the findings. I would recommend little or no change
- The remit might have been more substantial – not that the review should be directed and the answers more or less predetermined, but some sort of more substantial guidelines or stated intentions from the national authority behind the review process would perhaps have been inspiring: what sort of standards do Icelandic HE institution aspire to in general, and how much is this particular institution bound by those, and/or free to set its own? How does the division of labour between different Icelandic institutions look, and how is it managed?
- The role and tasks of external/foreign members were not clearly defined, which left a lot of room for individual experts to form their own role (which, of course, was not only a negative issue).
- It was not clear for me, what the task was in this first round of the review. As I have now understood it, it is to monitor the process, and I took also a lot of detailed discussions with the evaluation team.

## Preparation by the Institution

All respondents who commented on the preparation phase of the SLR were generally pleased with the preparatory work of the institution, and felt well prepared and informed:

- I find that I was well informed on the process and the ideology behind it, especially through the document *The University of Iceland's guidelines for the organization, schedule and process of institution-led review of faculties and interdisciplinary programmes* (revised version, May 2013). In addition to these *guidelines*, I received important additional information during my visit about the aims and character of this evaluation as well as about my role as a foreign expert from the Quality Manager and Office Director of the University. I learned that this evaluation was meant to be student-oriented and thus much attention was to be paid to the quality and level of academic education.
- I was well briefed prior to both visits.
- The department chair had provided me with advance information on the university's mission, governance, the self-study materials and department head's report, as well as a preliminary visit schedule. We later reviewed and adjusted the schedule slightly to include more informants. I feel that I received the information to make informed judgments about the activities and academic standing of the faculty and students.
- I found the process of review well organised, extensive and there was considerable consultation with me prior to, during and after the visit. The staff were well prepared and we developed the process together.

This was also the case with the document provided, which was described as being informative, good, and adequate.

- The University had collected comprehensive and many-sided surveys on student satisfaction on different levels of studies. I was really amazed how informative these surveys were. I received these surveys in advance and had the opportunity to become familiar with them. I am satisfied with this preparation. I find that the result of the surveys gave me a clear picture of the situation in the university and the specific faculty, especially from the student's point of view.
- The material that was sent to me in advance was adequate. The information I got during the process was enough
- A good handbook as you have is highly valued.
- In addition to the guidance given by QEF, I was made to feel comfortable in asking for and getting further information/documentation. I would recommend that the guidance notes contain advice for the institution to be prepared for such requests.

Remarks were also made regarding the importance of having standardised and comparable statistical data (e.g. figures on dropout rates, completion times and employment rates, as well as systematic employment statistics provided centrally by the Ministry):

- I would only mention that it would strengthen the quality control mechanisms, if relevant statistics were made systematically available to educational managers – and to external experts.

- Data presentation should also be consistent across HEIs to ensure that data analysis is drawn from a wide range of sources.

Respondents had varying views regarding the self-review report produced by the institution as a part of the SLR:

- The draft report [self-review report] was very thorough and identified a range of issues, opportunities and challenges for the future.
- Utility of reflective analysis - useful as the HEI was very open and honest identifying good practice wherever that may reside but also identifying areas for improvement – focusing on enhancement as the objective is helpful in this regard.
- The self-review report I received was a draft report where essential reflections were still missing, which made it harder for an external expert to have an impression of the starting point for the site visit.
- Starting point for the site visit was the draft self-review report. This was based on a given structure for the quality board. For me the structure of the self-review report lacked some essential elements to judge the quality of the faculty: the mission and vision of the faculty, translated into long term and short term strategies and strategic choices. This should be the background for judging quality and quality progress.
- The self-analysis report is always a difficult one. Despite being asked to be self-critical, understandably an institution may well be wary of being too self-critical, fearing that a reviewer may not see it as a positive process identifying issues which have been or are planned to be addressed. Recommendation: I believe the QEF should consider ways of giving institutions the confidence to be self-critical.

### Site Visit

Respondents who commented on the site visits were generally happy with this part of the SLR process. The visits were described as being useful, informative, open, insightful, fruitful, intense, as well as being important and necessary to the whole process.

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I would like to compliment the department on the planning and conducting of the meetings with the review committee in 2013. It was three very intensive days, but very well organised and with great response from staff and students. A pleasure to be so well oriented in the departmental issues, challenges and visions for the future. The programme of the meetings was very well organised and all aspects of importance covered in the planned meetings.

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As was remarked by the respondent above, the planning of the visits were generally complemented:

- The schedule of this site visit was very well planned. A meeting with the Dean of the School was included in the schedule, and it was an important and informative discussion indeed.
- In total, the whole process including my visit was well planned. I am convinced that I attained a reliable assessment of the current situation in the Faculty. Therefore I had no major problems in formulating my comments to the report that I had to produce after my visit.
- For both visits the College provided good learning facilities and maximised their use at all times.
- I felt very welcome and was given all necessary support by the head of the faculty and her colleagues. I felt privileged to have the opportunity to have a closer inside look into the faculty and its work...Once again I wish to thank them for the warm welcome I received.
- My task was well prepared and the university planned and hosted the visit in an excellent way.
- The meetings were well prepared and organised, and that the committee met a comprehensive range of people that gave important and relevant information on the department. The proceedings gave thorough insight about this important department at the institution...
- The site visits were both well-organised, intense and fruitful – and I had a chance to meet key people from the whole university and at all levels of management.
- The institution made good use of my visit, developed a full and diverse schedule of activities including student interviews, site visits, staff discussion etc. I believe it was valuable as both an affirmation of the quality standards as practiced at the institution, and also as an international benchmark given my experience in different international institutions.

One respondent was happy with the process of the site visit not being set in stone as it gave the external expert professional freedom to structure the visit as he/she deemed fit. Nevertheless, he/she also remarked that this created a burden for the external expert as she/he needed to design her/his own structure, both for the site visit, as well as the report. Another respondent added that even though the process was laid down, different experts worked in different ways. Therefore it should be made clear that the site visit schedule was determined by the subject expert and could, as a consequence of discussions in early meetings, in fact be revised. He/she recommended that the institutions should contribute to the visit schedule, but the subject expert should have the final say and could vary the schedule during the visit.

The general experience amongst respondents with the meetings conducted during the site visit was good, and they were, for example, described as being open, frank, informative, thorough, serious, critical and constructive. One respondent had experienced a certain degree of defensiveness/lack of knowledge or understanding regarding particular items of discussion during his/her meetings, and another felt that the time had been limited, which he/she was afraid might impact the depth of the interviews.

- I was impressed both by the openness and frankness of the discussion, and the responsiveness of the Review Team.

- Two meetings together with the self-evaluation team and meetings with the Faculty and different groups of students belonged to my visit. Furthermore, I was informed about the coordination of the practical training for the students in the relevant programmes. In addition to this, a very informative meeting with the doctoral students was organized according to my wishes.
- In general I was very impressed by the seriousness and thoroughness of the quality enhancement process I took part in. The committee was very willing to be both critical and constructive in the discussions to reveal and point at weaknesses in the present education and its administration and structure. And as an expert from outside I was taken serious during those discussions.
- General tenor and conduct of meetings was excellent throughout and the staff were all willing to engage – albeit their capability to capitalise in terms of pedagogic debates was consistently weaker than might be anticipated.
- Worked well – dialogue with the staff and students except where there was a defensiveness or a lack of knowledge or understanding around scholarship, research and in particular pedagogic practices – Where there was less understanding of the QA<sup>7</sup> overview and key issues of progression and retention.
- As always in these processes, the limited time has some impact on the depths of meetings with different representatives of areas outside the main educational area, such as the students, the representatives of industry, and the members of other departments within the faculty. I am not sure how to avoid it, but I would suggest that these meetings are given more time. I had the impression that some of the representatives of the external organisations were rather randomly picked out, but I may be wrong.

One respondent also commented on how valuable and necessary it was to receive a general introduction at the onset of their visit in order to receive a better understanding of the key objectives of the course and its intellectual positioning.

## Final Report

The experience of those respondents who commented on the process of writing or finalising the final report of the SLR varied. One described the preparation of the report as being positive, whilst the most common complaint concerned limited communication regarding the final version of the report. It is worth noting that during the processing of answers, this particular issue could not be contributed to one specific institution, but was reported by experts that had been involved in SLRs within various HEIs.

- I provided written comments to and early and a final draft of the report and other written material at various stages of the process.

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<sup>7</sup> Abbreviation not spelled out by respondents but presumably stands for “quality assurance”.

- My only input was that we discussed a draft that was provided to the committee. I have not seen the final version.
- Since submitting the comments on the report, I have heard nothing from the university. It would have been great to learn about the outcome of the process.
- In terms of preparation of the report, I received a fair draft within which I was able to embed a number of reflexive commentary boxes to give an external perspective on both the review activity and the emerging report document. However, I was never copied in to the final document.
- I only have one further comment here and that is that the finalising of the report from the institution to the two external review members took the better part of a year and during that process, I wasn't informed of the reason for the delay. This caused some concern from my part.
- When I read the report, I am not sure what impact I really made on the report itself. But I felt that my presence in the discussions of the committee did make a difference, because I was able to come from outside and ask questions on topics, that were already obvious for the local people. A large part of the report had been prepared before I came into the work, and for me that was good, because I could read into the different subjects of the process in advance. I would not have had time to take part in the whole process. On the other side, this fact could possibly have led to a process when I came into the committee, which was already more or less finished. My impression is, however, that the local members of the committee were very open to my thoughts and questions, and that we had good discussions during the days I was part of the process.

Two respondents also commented on the importance of having a read-through of the final report by the institution before final submission in order to minimise chances of misunderstanding or factual errors. On the structure of the report itself, one respondent believed it to be satisfactory, whilst another thought that having a standard template and guidance (e.g. what is needed and length) would benefit the report. As a result they would become comparable and comparative data would then be more easily formed. Yet another believed the requirements of the external expert in these regards was rather vague as there was neither a deadline nor a follow-up.

## Other Considerations

Other issues, contemplations or suggestions made by respondents:

- My major concern would be the full understanding of QA/QE<sup>8</sup> frameworks and how this is developed nationwide and in other professional fields.
- As an external reviewer, I feel that my involvement in this process has been quite limited. Although none of us is attracted by more duty travels, I do strongly believe that a site visit allowing personal interactions and discussions might entail a deeper analysis and more relevant feedback.

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<sup>8</sup> Abbreviation not spelled out by respondents but presumably stands for "quality assurance" and "quality enhancement".

- Again, I think it is very important to make alive documents that can be used in the future work of the institutions. To get continuation of the evaluation work, it may also be a good idea to have some of the same people assessing the assessors in the next round.
- According to my memory (the same caveat) we did not go too deep into the substance – most panel members were practitioners, and they have notions of higher education that are always partial one way or another. My knowledge was limited and somewhat superficial, and the self-evaluation was, as those are, very cautious. This can probably not be changed much – but again, a somewhat stronger link with the institution behind the review may be recommendable, provided independence for the panel can be preserved.

### Quality Board-led Institution-wide Reviews

With regards to institution-wide reviews (IWR), respondents were invited to comment on the operation or effectiveness of these reviews, as well as to address any particular aspects in need of improvement when applicable. A few of the SLR external experts also commented on the IWR process. Some of those were general thoughts or ideas, whereas other experts had in fact reviewed subjects at institutions that had already been through an IWR.

- Communication with the QB at all stages; this is necessary in order to have the opportunity to communicate if needed. QB has a high position and an important role through the quality system and the board has to be aware of the quality evaluation process.
- Utility of reflective analysis; The reflective analysis is essential. In order to develop education and to be aware of its quality you have to do a critical reflective analysis. This is a good way to learn how the things are and why they are as they are. Very good self-learning process. Reflective analysis helps the external expert to understand the whole education process and what the people think about that by themselves. The analysis helps to focus questions and discussion topics. It helps the external expert to see which issues are found to be good and which are critical and it helps to discuss them and find a wide perspective of them. Also, all kinds of statistics as a part of a reflective analysis report are useful for reviewers. It is an indication of the words written on the report.
- General tenor and conduct of meetings during visit: I appreciate an open, safe and constructive atmosphere where people are able to share different kind of issues and thinking. In that kind of an atmosphere also constructive criticism can be presented. People should be encouraged to share issues and to help them see that the external expert is just for them – to help them to develop the quality of education.
- Value of the first half day (introduction by the HEI): this is necessary. The external expert absolutely needs introduction by the HEI to put her/his understanding in the correct context and to understand the education system as well as cultural points.
- I cannot see the meaning with the review at the institution level carried out by the Quality Board as described in [paragraph B4](#). It will reduce the focus from the institution responsibility and the institution led review. The board should base their work on reports and plans from the institutions and the external expert reviewer. Otherwise it will be duplication of the work, which never is good.

- I had access to a Review findings document (and a follow-up Review) prior to undertaking the Subject-level Review. It was clear that the Institution-led Review had been robust and frank in its findings. I was able to use the concerns that had been expressed in the Review to frame my own visit and the questions that would be asked of staff and students.

However, it was clear to me that the direct language used in the Institutional Review had caused a degree of disenchantment in the process even though the overall need for enhancement was recognised and even embraced. A renewed focus on collegiality between reviewers and institutions would I think be useful.

- I read this and related material before and during the evaluation and as far as I remember, these were good and helpful reviews that provided good basis for our work.
- In my own experience at the review institution, the QB review at the institutional level was experienced as a top down process rather than a truly collaborative review. In the context of a small institution, I suspect that this burden falls on the shoulders of a few individuals and is experienced very differently than in a large institution.

I observed a sense of disempowerment and frustration amongst the staff with respect to the institutional review. A poor institutional review had preceded at the review I was involved in. My readings of the institutional review was that it had misrepresented the situation and it did not seem to recognise the particular constraints and opportunities of a small institution, nor the particular pedagogics and learning environments that characterised the particular fields in which the institution offers programmes. The institution teaches using PBL (problem based learning approach), which is widely recognised and very successful in a range of higher education institution across the world. However, the review appeared to have a negative stances towards PBL, lending it to a lower status of delivery (which it is not) and favouring more traditional deliveries. As a result, the institution received a poor review based on this misunderstanding.

It is important that the review process does not lead to homogenisation of programmes and teaching and learning methods because of predilections of the international reviewers. By recognising and embracing different pedagogics that are appropriate to different student markets will allow institutions to differentiate their learning environments, course offerings and distinctive UPS (unique selling points).

The international review appeared to be applying a set of international standards and preconceptions that were not appropriate to the particular circumstances. The staff were frustrated at the lack of opportunity to respond or correct these misconceptions, and it had had a negative impact on moral and frustration with the process and framework more generally.

## Annual meetings with representatives of the Quality Board

Once a year there is a meeting at each institution between the institutional link Board member and key senior institutional representatives. Although annual meetings are not a part of the SLR process, a few respondents provided their views and/or advice on this part of the QEF:

- I think annual meetings are useful to keep motivation and keep this important issue on the agenda. Also, it is important to have an official meeting to discuss and share quality issues.
- I think that meetings once a year are good for the communication between the institutions and the central authorities. Much better than requiring written reports that often will just be filed. Talking, not bureaucracy, across the table is good! Students and staff at all levels should take part.
- I have not taken part in such meetings, but my experience is that yearly meetings are quite a lot within education. To improve different issues often takes longer time, and the documentation part of the preparation for such meetings is usually quite time consuming. So the meetings have to be seen in the light of the administrative costs of the institutions.

## Early Suggestions for the Second Cycle

Respondents were invited to provide comments on specific issues that were up for discussion before the commencement of the second cycle of reviews. These include the inclusion of the evaluation of research, public information at the subject level, and accreditation.

### Inclusion of the Evaluation of Research

None of the respondents were opposed to the idea of adding research as a component of the QEF, some welcomed it, whilst other had some reservations, but both groups offered advice on the matter.

- The research evaluation as a part of QEF is necessary. Teaching and learning should be evidence based and it is necessary that HEI quality of research is also a part of QEF.
- I welcome it very warmly as it was a great part of our response to the institution during the review in 2013. Research is important and absolutely recognised in the staff. Developing a structure for how, when and who is very important.
- I could think it is possible to try to include the evaluation of research within the second cycle of the QEF. Some material about the research of the staff could anyway be added to the preparatory documents. So, I am rather positive to the suggestion to embrace research in addition to teaching and learning to the review processes within the QEF.
- Research work is a natural and important part of the work of institutions. The conditions to carry out research work will vary between the institutions. The institution led review should have good possibilities to carry out the review. The prerequisite is that the reviewer has good knowledge of research work and is very familiar with the subject. If such the research work can be included in the review work.
- I think it is positive to include evaluation of research.
- This should absolutely be a part of the second cycle of the QEF. The simple reason is that teaching and research are inseparable at high quality colleges. But take care: do not overdo the process in terms of demanding a lot of written reports all the time. We have done that in Norway, and it is

not good. Aim at simple ways for evaluating research (i.e. publishing rates related to journal quality, success in research funding, national and international cooperation, etc.).

- Seems to be a good idea, depending on the spirits in which it is carried out. The purpose should be supportive - and of course if some people are outside pedagogical reach they have to face the consequences.
- It is unclear to me whether the suggestion is that 1) the quality of the research at the institutions should be reviewed, or 2) that it is the question whether education at the institution is research based that is to be addressed. Regarding 1): that is always a good idea. Regarding 2): I think that is would be very good, if there was increased systematic monitoring of the research basing of the programmes under review (e.g. bibliometric statistics or ratio between student numbers and research-staff). This could be a requirement for all SLRs and standardized data could be provided.

Other respondents had some reservations or wanted to raise questions or possible issues in relation to research evaluation:

- I have mixed feelings on the inclusion of the evaluation of research within an academic quality review. Of course there are overlaps, doctoral programmes for example, but the review of research, the review of academic quality (as it relates to curriculum design and delivery) and the review of learning and teaching (as it relates to students' learning experience and classroom practice) are, in my mind, quite different. Reviewers will seldom have the necessary expertise in all of these areas although multiple reviewers would of course address this. What I am more concerned about is the degree to which the evaluation of research within such a framework will incur an opportunity cost in relation to the diligence given to reviewing the maintenance and enhancement of academic quality, and indeed the preparatory and ongoing work associated with this vital activity.
- Evaluation of research was not included to this evaluation process. I think that this was a good solution this time. The evaluation was student-oriented. Nevertheless, in many discussions during the site visit research was somehow present as the academic education must be research-based! The teachers of the Faculty told me about their research activities and interests, and I found additional material on research also in the internet. Some of the student s commented the use of modern research in the teaching and expressed the wishes concerning the library resources.
- I have participated in several international boards on the quality of research. It is a complicated matter when we talk about small institutions in small countries. Large countries, and particularly English-speaking countries, can rely on the various systems of research registration and citation. But small countries have a "language problem", particularly outside the natural and medical sciences. I emphatically want to warn against relying mainly on international systems of measuring research in quantitative terms. Setting up an evaluation requires intimate knowledge to the various types of research and their national tradition. Often, "research" demands particular definitions for separate research areas.
- Research is a vital function of major universities globally. The university already supports research but for some departments more than others that may also be strong in research contributions. In

the latter departments, research is necessarily passively discouraged. This problem may already have been recognized and remedied; if so, it would be one more praiseworthy institutional advance. High quality research is easily recognized by the publication outlets, paper presentations, and grants, where available. Local and national impact is important too. Highly specialized and very innovative research is more difficult to judge and international experts' opinions are always useful.

- Evaluation of research is a very difficult task. Often quality is measured through quantitative data based on bibliometric figures, H-index, impact etc. However, of utmost importance to keep the different traditions within different branches of science in mind when measuring research.
- I would urge the Board to consider carefully the options and not adopt international metrics and standards which have proven to have very significant negative effects in other international contexts. The particular circumstances in Iceland, where there are few institutions, they have different specialisation and they attract very different student markets, warrants a more nuanced and institution specific approach to the evaluation of research.

### Public Information at the Subject Level

Views on the public publishing of the SLR reports were mixed amongst respondents. Some saw it as a necessary act if it was the QEF's mission to be both open and transparent. Others commented that perhaps some information within the reports were such that they needed to be confidential, and that publishing the reports might make them less critical, and perhaps, hence, less useful. The middle ground of producing a summary of findings was also discussed, as well as sticking to the current arrangement of leaving it up to each institution to decide upon the matter. The main points of the discussion are presented below.

- In my opinion, such reports should be made available to the public. It is no use to hide criticisms.
- As a strong supporter of transparency I suggest that these reports are not confidential but rather made openly available to the particular institution.
- In QEF it is said "that reports of these reviews are not published but routinely copied to the Board...." I am wondering whether they should be published based on the principles of an open and transparent way to work. As mentioned in QEF quality of documentation, this is very important. I see this as a key issue of QEF.
- Somehow I understand the point of view that reports should be confidential to the institution. This is especially if they include some information which can be harmful to some functions. On the other hand, if the principle of QEF is to be open and transparent, the report should be public. This is also the case if HEI is paid from the state budget. Or is it possible to make the main point of reports public but this brings the question who decides those main points etc. Anyway, ministry officials should be aware of HEI quality issues.
- I think a 'middle way' would offer the best solution; certainly I believe that higher levels of (useful) reflection emerge from confidential processes but a summary précis of the review process and

outcomes would be beneficial both in terms of transparency and in terms of prompting possible wider discussion around enhancement and the dissemination of effective practice.

- The institutions should every year in their annual review summarize the quality work and the steps, which have been taken to improve the activity of the institution. I think that the quality work should be enhanced by publication of the annual review.
- I tend to believe that the reports and debates about quality may become less critical and therefore less useful and productive, if they should also factor in that they will be publicized. But, perhaps Rannis could make a précis for use in the ministry?
- The publication of reports at the subject level should be up to the individual institutions. As with the above misunderstanding of PBL, misconceptions could have a serious impact on individual departments and could be detrimental.
- I think that evaluation reports need not necessarily be strictly confidential inside the institution. This matter needs to be discussed openly inside universities and institutions before the next evaluation. The most relevant information could be given to the Ministry officials by the rector.

## Accreditation

When invited to comment on the current arrangement of accreditations, three respondents considered it to be satisfactory, whilst others provided additional views and/or advice:

- Yes, I think the current arrangement is satisfactory and have no further comments.
- I would consider the current arrangement for offering advice to the ministry.
- It seems OK that the accreditation is based on a sound evaluation.
- Agree that accreditation could be linked more firmly to the Institution-wide Reviews, including research evaluation. Internal Reflective analyses are also important tools in this respect.
- Accreditation is in my opinion a misused concept and procedure. It is in most cases laborious and abstract, and principles are often "foreign" to the institutions to be accredited. In Iceland there is a need for regional institutions which should not be subject to "normal" accreditation thresholds.
- I don't know enough about the current arrangements to give a qualified opinion. But, I do think that the decisions about accreditation should be made by those who deal with the quality reviews. Perhaps Rannis should do the all the evaluation work and the ministry only make the final decision on the accreditation?"
- I have no firm view on the issue of accreditation as described in [paragraph C4](#). The granting is the responsibility of the Ministry. It should not be delegated to the Quality Board. The QB may give recommendation if asked by the Ministry from case to case.

## Other Considerations

Respondents were invited to provide further comments on other aspects regarding the OEF or their experience therewith. The following remarks were made under this particular question or were categories as such during the processing of answers:

- I would like to thank you for a very clear QEF and for the handbook for that.
- It would have been easier for me, if this evaluation had had the form of a standard survey schema.
- My final comment would simply be to commend the Board for implementing a quality process which has at its heart the enhancement of the student experience.
- As should be clear from my first report, I was very well received at the institution and I concluded that the evaluation process was thorough, well planned and well chaired. In contrast, I felt that the contact with Rannis and the Quality Board was not good. After a while, I just assumed that this was as it should be because the focus was at the institution level. Anyhow, some guidance would have been OK as I formally did this job for the central authorities. For instance, should the institution have a copy of my report? I decided that they should not, and sent it to Rannis without a local copy. If needed, Rannis would send to the institution. Also, should I comment on the final report from the department? Again, I decided not to as this should go through an internal quality control before it was submitted. My only input was that we discussed a draft that was provided to the committee. I have not seen the final version. I am sorry that this is just a short feedback, but as explained above, trying to do this after a year has its limitations! But I have to repeat that Rannis/The Board could have given more precise information about what kind of reporting that was expected from me.
- One should be aware of the fact that the quality of higher education has to be built up over time and that it cannot be obtained just by bureaucratic decisions.



## Subject Level Review Experts – Key Points

### Principles:

- Majority of the external experts reported a positive experience, overall the principles were thought of as being positive and progressive, but also allowing for a certain degree of flexibility. All agreed on continued use of the principles and suggestions of additional principles included, for example, dialogue with future employers as stakeholders; the perspectives of staff members; and the relational nature of research, learning and teaching.

### Structure:

- Only a few experts commented on the operation or structure of the QB or QC, both of which received positive marks and suggestions were made with regards to operations.

### Subject Level Reviews:

- Overall perceived as being a success; remit usually clear, site visits useful and important to the process, preparation and supportive documents good (apart from call for more statistics), and good meetings.
- Various remarks made with regards to possible improvements, in areas such as (1) having more than one external expert on the review team and adding another student representative; (2) clearer guidelines, (3) feedback or follow-up process; (4) need for standardised data; and (5) limited communication regarding the final version of the SLR report.

### Institution-wide Reviews:

- Some of the experts had undertaken a review at an institution that that already been through an IWR and remarked that having access to material related to the IWRs had been useful.

### Annual meetings:

- Are not a part of the SLR process, but comments were made with regards to the general usefulness of such meetings, but also that they needed to be seen in the light of administrative costs.

### Early suggestions for the second cycle:

- None were opposed to the idea of adding research to the QEF, some welcomed it whilst others had reservations, but both groups provided suggestions or advice.
- Views on publicly disclosing the SLR reports were mixed, some saw it as being necessary if the QEF's mission was to be transparent, whilst others stated that some information within the reports were of such nature that they had to remain confidential. The middle ground of producing a summary of findings was also discussed.
- Three respondents concluded that the current state of affairs with regards to accreditations was satisfactory, whilst others provided additional views or advice.

## Suggestions made by Clever Data

- It might have been beneficial to include questions regarding the secretariat of the Quality Board. How did it perform during the first cycle and which aspects of its work could be improved upon during the next cycle? This would also be very useful for the new secretariat staff member and would give him a feeling for which aspects of the work needed improving or which were being conducted particularly well.
- Sending out a short online survey to external experts immediately after their work during a subject level review or an institution-wide review is finished would allow for better answers regarding their experience as the whole process would be relatively fresh in their minds. At the end of the cycle, the Quality Board would then benefit from having all answers from external experts ready for processing for the second cycle review. The Icelandic HEIs would also be able to respond immediately to any suggestions of improvements made by the externals. During the processing of answers, a few respondents were unfortunately not able to comment or found it difficult as such a long time had passed between their work and now (see examples below):
  - I have no particular comments on the procedure that was followed, except that it seemed at the time to be very thorough. I'm afraid that it was quite a long while ago that I took part in the evaluation, and I can no longer recall any details.
  - I have been trying to seek out documents and e mail correspondence from a few years back but the time lag in between and pressing priorities have made it very difficult for me, in retrospect, to add anything useful to my observations and my report on what was a very useful process and a very sound model.
  - I do, however, need to say that I have forgotten much of this one year later and, alas, that my notes and the written material I had for the evaluation have been binned in the meantime. Therefore, I have no constructive responses to many of the points in the Note.
- It would make processing of answers easier if different groups of respondents were not exposed to all questions of the questionnaire as some are not applicable to them and did in some instances cause confusion.

## Appendix I – The Consultation Note

### Quality Board for Higher Education Evaluation of the first cycle of the Icelandic Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF)

The purpose of this note is to invite a wide range of contributions to the evaluation of the Icelandic Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) drawing on experience of the first cycle of operation. The evidence you provide will remain anonymous and will influence the development of the next generation of the Framework. It is intended to have the next edition of the QEF Handbook drafted by the end of 2015 and in operation from September 2016. This note is in three main parts. **Part A** provides a brief background to, and explanation of, the consultation process with the main elements and key dates outlined. **Part B** outlines the main ingredients of the current version of the QEF and hence the areas in which comments being sought. **Part C** raises some particular issues and suggestions that have already been proposed for introduction in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition of the Handbook edition and invites comment in these areas. Finally, instructions for submission of responses are provided (part **D**).

We will welcome as wide a response as possible from a wide range of constituencies. Please indicate on your response the capacity in which you are responding i.e. whether you are making the response as an individual or on behalf of an organisation. If it would be helpful to discuss any aspect of this, please contact the Board Manager, ([thorsteinn.gunnarsson@rannis.is](mailto:thorsteinn.gunnarsson@rannis.is)) If you wish to refer to the current version of the QEF Handbook, it is available at [www.rannis.is](http://www.rannis.is)

#### **A: Background and key steps in the consultation process.**

Following extensive discussion and consultation, the Icelandic QEF was agreed in 2010 and became fully operational in session 2011 – 12. At the outset it was agreed that the Framework would be evaluated at the end of the first cycle of operation. The final year of the first complete

round of operation is 2014 – 15, and the Quality Board is therefore now beginning the process of evaluation. This will involve an extensive process of evidence collection and analysis involving all parties with an interest in the QEF. The period of consultation will cover the first five months of 2015. In the light of the evidence collected and the Board’s experience of operation of the QEF, proposals for changes to the Framework will then be drawn up and discussed with the key stakeholders. This will lead to the preparation of a first draft of a 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition of the QEF Handbook in September 2015 which will then be the basis for wide discussion throughout autumn 2015, leading to a second draft of the Handbook being produced by the end of October 2015. There will be a final Consultation Conference on 10 November 2015 following which the final version of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition of the QEF Handbook will be prepared by January 2016, and published by Easter 2016. At each key stage throughout the development, formal views will be sought from all institutions, the Rectors’ Conference, from the national Union of Students and from the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition will become operational from 1<sup>st</sup> September 2016. It is likely that the first visits associated with institutional reviews will not occur before March 2017.

A senior independent external expert has been appointed to oversee the whole process outlined above and to independently contribute to the evaluation process and consequent changes and developments.

## **B: Main areas of the QEF**

Respondents should not feel obliged to respond under all categories – these are mainly provided as an *aide memoire*.

**B1 Principles.** The current Handbook identifies the fundamental principles of the QEF as being: Ownership of quality and standards resting with the autonomous institutions; the focus in the QEF on enhancement of the student experience balanced with public accountability; the centrality of students; the importance of both Icelandic and international perspectives in the Framework; and, the absolute operational independence of the Quality Board but the importance also of partnership with the institutions, student bodies and the Ministry. **Do you think these principles have sufficiently underpinned the first round operation of the**

QEF? Do you think they should continue to be the main principles in subsequent development of the QEF? Are there other important fundamental principles that should be more explicit?

**B2 Structures.** The current structures underpinning the QEF are the Quality Board and the Quality Council. **The Quality Board** comprises six international experts selected on the basis of their expertise and experience in managing quality and standards in higher education. The Board secretariat and administrative management is provided through RANNIS which houses the administration of the Board. Funding for the Board activities is provided by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture through RANNIS. In all its operations the Board has sought to work in an open and transparent way with all stakeholders and to that end has held regular meetings and conferences to share outcomes and thinking. **Do you wish to comment on any aspect of either the structure or operation of the Quality Board?**

The **Quality Council** comprises senior representatives of all the Icelandic HEIs together with two representatives of students. These representatives are the senior members of staff with institutional responsibility for oversight of the quality of student experience and the standards of awards. The Council elects its own chair from among its members. The Council has only been reconstituted in its current form for some eighteen months and its activities to date have, therefore, of necessity have been limited. The role of the Council is to collaboratively support activities and initiatives that will enhance the student experience and the maintenance of standards in all Icelandic HEIs. This can be done in a variety of ways including, running workshops and conferences; producing guidelines; undertaking shared research and development activities; undertaking joint activities across institutions etc. The Council does not currently have an income of its own but is in receipt of limited funds through the Network of Public Universities initiative. **Do you have any comment to make on the structure, role or operation of the Quality Council?**

**B3 Institution-led Review at the subject level.** All institutions manage programmes of subject-level reviews covering all taught provision within a cycle. These reviews include at least one external expert agreed by the Quality Board. Reports of these reviews are not

published but are routinely copied to the Board and are included within the material for Board-led Institution-wide reviews (see B4 below). **Do you have any comment to make on the operation or effectiveness of these reviews? Are there particular aspects that might be improved? Aspect for the external reviewers to address may include: Was the Remit clear? Adequately prepared for the task by the Institution? Quality of the documentation. Site visit. Involvement in the preparation of the report.**

**B4 Quality Board-led reviews at the institutional level.** All HEIs have undergone an external institution-wide review once in the cycle. These reviews are conducted by the Board, each review being undertaken by a team of senior international experts chaired by a Board member. The review process is based on an institutional Reflective Analysis supported by a range of evidence including the reports of subject-level reviews. The institution-wide reviews lead to public reports that conclude with judgements, commendations and recommendations. **Do you have any comment to make on the operation and effectiveness of these reviews? Are there particular aspects that might be improved? You may wish to highlight the following aspects:**

- Communication with the QB at all stages
- Utility of the Reflective Analysis
- General tenor and conduct of meetings during the site visit
- Value of the first half day (introduction by the HEI)
- Value of the Case Study
- What worked well/not so well
- Impact on the institution of these reviews

**B5 Annual meetings with representatives of the Quality Board.** Once a year there is a meeting at each institution between the institutional link Board member and key senior institutional representatives. The purpose of these annual meetings is both to share informally developments within the institution and within the Board, and also to follow-up on the various review processes. In general these meetings are intended to provide an open and informal channel of communication between the Board and each institution. **Do you think**

these meetings are useful? Are they effective in providing one channel of communication with the Board? Are there any ways in which you think they might be changed to increase their value?

### C: Some early suggestions

- C1 The inclusion of the evaluation of research.** The Board has been asked by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture to consider how it might include the evaluation of research within its activities in the second cycle of the QEF. This is a matter that was raised by virtually all the institutions in the very early discussions in the initial establishment of the QEF, and was therefore an issue which the Board indicated would be returned to in preparing the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition of the Handbook. The issue of the evaluation of research has been under very active discussion by the Board for the past few months, and we hope shortly to be publishing a separate consultation on how this might be taken forward. Our proposals will be in terms of extending the review processes within the QEF to embrace research in addition to teaching and learning. The consultation paper on research will be available during February 2015. **Any very general comment you would wish to make regarding the inclusion of the evaluation of research within the QEF would be welcome.**
- C2 Public information at the subject level.** One aspect that has been commented on during the cycle is the issue of publication of reports: is it important that these reports should remain confidential to the institution? If so, are there other ways in which interested parties (e.g. Ministry officials) can be given appropriate information regarding the outcome of reviews and intended consequent developments? Who should compile such a précis if there is to be one?
- C3 Accreditation.** Accreditation is the responsibility of the Ministry and currently sits outside the QEF. During the first cycle in relation to accreditation, the Ministry has asked the Quality Board to carry out the associated reviews of provision and consequently to offer advice to the Ministry regarding accreditation. To some extent, the accreditation process has therefore been brought within the QEF umbrella. A further proposal was made in the original QEF Handbook which linked accreditation more firmly to the outcomes of

Institution-wide Reviews in successive cycles (see pages 24-25 of the 1<sup>st</sup> Edition of the QEF Handbook). It was indicated at the time that this matter would be returned to at the end of the cycle. Bearing in mind that the granting of accredited status is a Ministry responsibility, **do you consider the current arrangements for offering advice to the Ministry satisfactory? If not, what problems do you see and what mechanisms would you prefer?**

**C4 Any other aspects.** Please feel free to raise any other matters that you think we should consider during this evaluation of the QEF.

#### **D: Submitting your feedback**

In order to secure anonymity, the processing of answers will be carried out by an independent party. Hence all submissions should be forwarded electronically to Eva Dögg Diego Þorkeldsdóttir at Clever Data ([eva.diego@cleverdata.is](mailto:eva.diego@cleverdata.is)) by 26 February 2015. There is no pro-forma for responses; we did not wish to impose constraints on the feedback at this stage. You should feel free to comment on every aspect of the QEF or to focus on only a small number of issues – whatever you feel appropriate for your context. Please indicate at the outset you name, position or role in relation to the QEF, and the status of your response –i.e. is it an individual response or is it on behalf of an organization. If you would like to discuss any aspect in more detail, please contact the Manager of the Quality Board, Dr Thorsteinn Gunnarsson ([thorsteinn.gunnarsson@rannis.is](mailto:thorsteinn.gunnarsson@rannis.is)).