

Launch conference for the QEF2 Handbook

**Welcome and strategic view on the Quality Enhancement Framework
from the Rector's Conference.**

Jón Atli Benediktsson, Rector and President of the University of Iceland

Norman Sharp, Chair of the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education; members of the Quality Board; Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture; rectors; other distinguished guests.

It is my honour and pleasure to say a few words to open this conference of the Quality Board, held on the occasion of the formal publication of the second edition of the Quality Enhancement Handbook detailing the second cycle of the Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education.

It is safe to say that a great deal has happened since the Quality Board was established in 2010 and the first edition of the Handbook was released in 2011. Over the next five years, all Icelandic universities conducted subject-level reviews of all academic units, as well as undergoing a thorough reflective analysis and institution-level review, which concluded with a review by external experts and publication of their reports.

As we look back, it is plain to see that this has been a learning process for everyone involved. This is consistent with the main idea behind the QEF, which is to encourage the universities to regularly and systematically review all aspects of their operations, thereby incorporating quality assurance into all operations in the spirit of continuous reform.

The logical progression of this methodology is to apply these principles to the QEF itself rather than limiting them to the universities. It was therefore determined from the outset that at the end of every cycle, its implementation would be systematically reviewed in order to identify successes and areas for improvement. Therefore, last year, a comprehensive review of the QEF was conducted, with input from all interested parties, i.e., individual universities, the Icelandic Rectors' Conference, the Quality Council, the National Union of Icelandic Students, the Minister of Education, Science and Culture. A detailed statement was also obtained from an external expert nominated by student and university representatives on the Quality Council.

This process elicited a huge number of comments. Efforts have been made to take these comments into consideration in the new Handbook. I do not have time to cover in detail all the changes included in the new Handbook, but I do wish to mention a few points in particular: Firstly, transparency has been added as one of the cornerstones of the QEF. Secondly, the Framework now applies not only to teaching and learning but also to research, i.e., evaluation of the management and structure of research work. Thirdly, greater distance between the Quality Board and the universities has been ensured, since Board members will no longer be directly involved in reviews. Fourthly, a formal complaints process has been established regarding the implementation and results of the institution-level reviews. Fifth, the universities now have free choice of an external expert for the subject-level review teams; and, finally, the implementation process for the annual meetings between the Quality Board and university administrators has been clarified. I assume Norman Sharp will go over these changes in more detail in his talk.

As I said before, the Icelandic universities have also learned a lot from the first cycle of the QEF. Quality management and quality assurance processes are therefore now better defined than they were 5-6 years ago. There has been a significant increase in interest and discourse in the area of quality assurance, among both staff and students. The universities have also tailored their operations to the principles of the QEF, evident from the fact that the subject-level reviews, reflective analysis, institution-level reviews and strategic planning now form a logical continuum. I can say, for the University of Iceland at least, that both the process and the results of the evaluation proved extremely valuable as the University began work on its five-year strategy for the period 2016-2021. Ultimately, we can therefore say that the introduction of an independent and professional Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education has had a positive influence on the quality culture at Icelandic universities.

Dear conference guests, although much has been achieved already, there is still a great deal to be done and many exciting challenges await us over the next few years. It will be particularly exciting to see how well evaluations of teaching, learning and research can be integrated with each other, since the QEF will then cover university operations as a whole. I also believe it is

important to ensure more effective collaboration between all interested parties, such that the results of a quality review could form the basis of informed government policy making in the area of higher education. In this context I wish to highlight in particular the third type or category of review included in the QEF, i.e. system-wide reviews of certain areas of work at the universities and their working environments.

Although the QEF has taught us that quality assurance is a natural and necessary part of all university operations, we must take care to ensure that the work involved does not become excessive to the point of being a burden. We must never lose sight of the fact that the primary objective of quality assurance is to support real reform and improve working and learning environments for staff and students. In order to achieve this goal, we must all do our part, the government, the universities and students, to ensure that the universities have the funding and infrastructure they need to ensure that the quality of Icelandic universities continues to meet international standards.

Ladies and gentlemen, although this conference marks a new beginning, I would like to use this opportunity to thank Norman Sharp and his colleagues on the Quality Board, especially for their contributions to higher education in Iceland in recent years.

It has been an enormous boon for Icelandic universities to have these distinguished people with all their knowledge and experience working with us to enhance quality in the field of higher education.

I look forward to the presentations and discussions here today.

Thank you.