Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The **Ministry of Education, Science and Culture** [1] is responsible for regular external evaluation of higher education. The system is both supervisory and enhancement-oriented. Under the **Higher Education Institutions Act** [2], all higher education institutions that wish to operate in Iceland must undergo an accreditation on basis of fields of studies in accordance with the Frascati manual of the OECD. The objectives of quality control of teaching and research in higher education institutions are: to ensure that the requirements for accreditation of higher education institutions are met; to ensure that the qualification framework for higher education and degrees is fulfilled; to improve the quality of teaching and research in an efficient way; to encourage increased responsibility of higher education institutions for their own activities and to ensure competitiveness of higher education institutions at international level. The supervisory part of the quality assurance system consists of systematic external reviews according to a plan, set by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The Ministry determines the time for conducting an external evaluation of teaching and research and sets the agenda for such evaluation for three years. In addition, the Ministry may decide to conduct a special evaluation of a higher education institution or its specific units, at the minister’s discretion.

External evaluation can involve a higher education institution or individual fields of study or science, faculties, study programmes or other specified elements of a higher education institutions operation. It can also involve several institutions simultaneously. An external evaluation must be carried out in consultation with the respective higher education institution, which is required to provide assistance and all information required for the evaluation. Evaluation reports, produced on the basis of the **Higher Education Institutions Act** [2], are to be published, together with a statement regarding how the respective university intends to react to the evaluation results.

The **Minister of Education, Science and Culture** [1] can delegate the administration of an external evaluation of teaching and research to a committee, an institution, a company or other relevant agent, national or international. Implementation of an external evaluation shall be assigned to an independent agent. The evaluation process shall involve both domestic and foreign experts, as well as a student representative.

According to the **Higher Education Act** [2], all higher education institutions are obligated to carry out internal quality assurance. The **Quality Board** [3] has published "**The Quality Enhancement Framework**" [4] to support institutions in the continuing enhancement of the
learning experience of all students whom they serve. The ultimate target of the framework is to enhance the learning experience of students and safeguard the standards of their degrees. It integrates internal and external processes into a single comprehensive model.

**Responsible Bodies**

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is responsible for the monitoring of higher education. In accordance with the Higher Education Act, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has laid down rules on quality control of teaching and research in higher education. These rules include provisions on monitoring the internal quality systems in higher education institutions and on regular external evaluations of defined units within the institutions or of the institution. In 2010 the Ministry established an international Quality Board and a consultative Quality Council for Higher Education. The Quality Board has six foreign experts in quality assurance. It is responsible for organising and carrying out all external quality assurance in higher education. The Quality Board is independent and operates outside the Ministry. The Quality Board operates according to a three-year plan ratified by the Minister. The Quality Board publishes all evaluation reports and is autonomous in its verdicts. The Quality Council is an advisory board for the Quality Board.

**Approaches and Methods for Quality Assurance**

The Quality Board is responsible for quality assurance according to a three-year plan set by the Minister of Education, Science and Culture. The three-year plan is based on the results of quality assurance plans from the last decades and on the results of accreditations of the whole higher education sector.

All quality assurance is carried out in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurances in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). All institutions should be evaluated every fifth year and all external evaluation is to be carried out in English.

**Accreditation**

All higher education institutions in Iceland must undergo accreditation, carried out on the basis of fields of studies according to the Frascati manual of OECD. An application from a higher education institution shall include a detailed description of how it is following the criteria of the law concerning critical mass, organisation of programmes in accordance with the National Qualification Framework, organisation of teaching and learning and research, student and teacher support, finances, etc. The Quality Board appoints an expert panel to review the application. The evaluation can result in full accreditation, accreditation with comments or no accreditation.

**Enhancement led evaluations**

The focus of the evaluation is decided in cooperation with the higher education institution involved. The Quality Board appoints an expert panel for the task. The panel must include at least one international member and at least one student representative. After an evaluation of an internal evaluation report from the institution and a site visit, the panel
hands in a report to the Quality Board that publishes the report. This evaluation is carried out in accordance with a three-year plan made by the Ministry [1].

Although the evaluation is enhancement-led, the result of an external evaluation can have different consequences. In most cases the aim is to raise the quality of teaching, learning and research in the institution that is being evaluated. As the institutions are run in accordance with contracts with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture [1], the results of external evaluations are taken into consideration when these contracts are renewed. In cases where external evaluations show serious flaws the results can be used as the basis for re-evaluation of the accreditation of the institution.

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