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Quality Assurance in a Small HE System
Is the Icelandic System in Some Ways Special?

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Introduction

Iceland has 340 thousand inhabitants with 10-15 per cent of foreign origin, depending on the criteria used. Iceland is a constitutional Republic, where a president is elected every four years and a parliament elected at least every four years. The number of parties represented varies, but a coalition government is the norm, representing two or three parties. The economy is now relatively strong, having in 2016, been much helped by a massive increase in tourism recovered after a bad dent due to a financial crisis in 2008. According to the *OECD Better Life Index*, Iceland (OECD, October 2015) ranked quite high, except perhaps in education,

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scoring relatively low on attainment and cognitive skills. Similarly, the indices for Iceland are relatively high on UNICEF well-being scorecards (see e.g., Report Card 13, but also previous cards UNICEF Office of Research, 2016).

Until 1944, Iceland was formally a part of Denmark, with important steps taken in the direction of independence already in 1874, but also in 1904 and 1918. Since 1874 Iceland gradually took responsibility for the development of education and has built an education system that is in essence quite similar to other European systems, in particular the Nordic systems, even though there are important differences (Jónasson and Óskarsdóttir 2016; Ministry of Education Science and Culture n.d.). With respect to higher education, home rule in 1904 opened up possibility to establish a proper university in Iceland. This was an important step as then the formal obstacles to establishing formally our own university were removed and we were allowed to institute a Law School, which was seen as an essential part of a proper university.

The Higher Education System in Iceland

An Emerging System

In 1911, Iceland set-up its own university, the University of Iceland. The university was established by unifying the School of Divinity (est. 1847), the School of Medicine (est. 1876), the School of Law (est. 1908). A humanities faculty was also created, which was at the time also thought to be indispensable for a modern university. Before 1911, the University of Copenhagen had served as the main Icelandic university, even though many Icelanders also studied at universities in other countries. During the first two-thirds of the 20th century, the University of Iceland was an institution educating the professionals for an emerging independent state. In addition to the time-honoured professional disciplines, both engineering and business studies were being developed during the middle half of the 20th century. During the 1960s and 70s, the number of programmes increased substantially with a notable demonstration of academic drift, in the sense that disciplines both in the natural and social sciences became much more academic than had been planned. There were programmes in the natural sciences, that were instituted to train teachers for upper secondary education and programmes in the social sciences programmes that were developed to provide a base for various social service professions. However, in both cases the programmes developed almost immediately into purely academic programmes, where the professional orientation either disappeared (natural sciences) or only developed much later (social sciences). This development is interesting both from the perspective of institutional development and also from the perspective of quality assessments; did the quality increase or not due to these developments? During the 1990s, the University of Iceland became a fully-fledged research university.

During the first half of the 20th century, various non-university institutions were established, offering vocational or professional programmes, such as schools for primary school teachers, technicians, nurses, pre-school teachers, social educators and art schools. In the latter part of the century, these vocational schools moved closer towards the university sector, for example by raising the enrolment requirements. This happened in gradual steps and without any changes in legislation (Jóhannsdóttir 2008). In 1971, a legislation was passed and the Teacher Training College for primary school teachers became the first of these non-university vocational schools to be elevated formally to a university level (Jóhannsdóttir and Jónasson 2012, see table 11.2 for an overview).[1] Soon afterwards, in 1973, the vocational school for technicians, which had previously operated at the upper secondary school level, was to a certain degree recognised as having the same status as a university within the educational system (Gyða Jóhannsdóttir 2008). Moreover, during the same period, nursing was also taken up as university programme. In addition to these schools, which were essentially upper secondary level schools being shifted upwards in the system, new universities were also established (Jónasson 2004b). As Jóhannsdóttir and Jónasson (2012) have noted, "all these changes were *ad hoc* changes without a governmental policy for the higher education sector" (p. 8). In 1987, the University of Akureyri was established, becoming the first university to operate outside the capital area. It offered study programmes in two faculties; the Faculty of Health and the Faculty of Management (Óskarsson, Sigurðardóttir, and Sigurðsson 2007, p. XVII). In the 1990s, several other university institutions were established, i.e. the Bifröst School of Business in 1994, and the Agricultural University at Hvanneyri and the Icelandic Academy of the Arts in 1999 (all of which had previously existed as non-tertiary institutions). The first legal framework that was created for the especially around the university system, the Universities Act, was adopted by the parliament of Iceland in 1997 (Universities Act nr. 136/1997). The law was ratified in 1998, formally incorporating the university as part of the educational system of Iceland, (Arnarson and Briem, 2005, see the English version in Annex II). An important feature of the law defined the Icelandic higher education as a unified system, i.e. all tertiary institutions, synonymous with higher education, were classified as universities.[2] Eight university institutions fell under this new Act. Moreover, all eight institutions had their own regulations, each in some respect reflecting different requirements. As an example, some of the institutions were not required to engage in research according to the law. This stipulation is written in the second article in the 1997 Act, which states that "a university is an educational institution which along with other duties conducts research if required in the specific Act of law or regulation for each institution". According to the regulations governing these institutions, research was at the beginning of the 21st century an integral part in four out of eight institutions, study programmes at master level were offered in three of them and only two of them offered studies for doctoral degrees (Jóhannsdóttir 2008).

It has been argued that the development of higher education in Iceland reflects very clearly the various institutional developments in the global higher education sector, i.e. the academic drift of staff and students, of institutions, sectors and policy (Jóhannsdóttir and Jónasson 2013). Thus, the Icelandic system, despite its relatively miniscule size, mirrors to a large extent the developmental characteristics of a much larger system. This strongly indicates that it is the characteristics of a system that matter, not its size.

Present Structure and the Legal Framework

The legal framework for higher education is presented in the 2006 (Higher Education Act 63/2006). This law lays the ground rules for all seven universities currently operating in Iceland. The prospective mission of such a university institution is defined partly in Article 2:

> A higher education institution is an independent educational institution that pursues teaching, research, the preservation and search for knowledge, and creative activity in the fields of science, the humanities, technology or the arts.

In order to be acknowledged as an institution of higher education, an institution must go through a detailed accreditation process. Nevertheless, the criteria to succeed in such application are not laid down in the text. Article 19 of the law makes it clear, however, that the institution is post-secondary as the:

> … students enrolling at a higher education institution must have passed the matriculation examination from an upper secondary school or an equivalent final examination. Higher education institutions may accept students who possess an equivalent level of maturity and knowledge as assessed by the relevant institution.

Thus, this article defines the position of the institution in the institutional hierarchy and really is the only definition of a university, if somewhat indirect. Added to the current requirement to engage in research and the clear academic titles of the academic staff (as professors etc.), there is little question of what these institutions of higher education constitute. There are also very strong international references in a number of places in the law, such as in Article 19:

> Higher education institutions shall ensure that their admission and study requirements correspond at all times to those of foreign higher education institutions accredited in a similar academic field.

Due to the very explicit reference to foreign institutions, this is important for later discussions on quality criteria, which indeed has implicitly conducted and informed the development of higher education in Iceland from the onset.

It should be noted that there is another law on the public universities, the Act on Public Higher Education Institutions 85/2008,[3] which to a fair extent falls under the Higher Education Act, but is still a separate law.[4] This law applies to four public institutions, namely, the University of Iceland, the University of Akureyri, the Agricultural University of Iceland and Hólar University College.

The current institutions of higher education are seven (see table 11.1). They can be classified into a number of ways, i.e. according to age, in terms of when they became universities; why they were established; according to the number of students; whether they are public or private; or according to their speciality. Some of these will be mentioned in table 11.1. (See also Arnarson and Briem 2005 on the data generally and especially their table 2.2 and figure 2.1.).

In addition to the quality issues that will be discussed below, we will refer to a number of concerns within the system of higher education. There are many, including most governments, that believe that the institutions of higher education are too numerous in their country and the present ones should therefore be merged. There have been some mergers in recent years in Iceland, which may indeed result in some rationalisation in administration and such an ambition for consolidation neglects the importance of fostering institutional diversity within a system. However, the importance of diversity should not undervalue the importance of administrative cooperation. Indeed, Icelandic governments have made money available to the public universities with the aim to bolster explicit cooperation on a number of tasks that are common to all institutions. There is always a question if a unified system is to be preferred to a binary (parallel institutions) or a dual system (tertiary institutions with very different status)? There is also the question of public responsibility for running the system, i.e., whether the system should be public or private, even though these terms have a somewhat special meaning in the Icelandic, and to some extent the Nordic, context (Jóhannsdóttir and Jónasson 2011). Only four of the seven current universities are classified as public universities, which means that they fall under the law on public universities, are funded by the state and are not allowed to accept fees (aside from registration cost). But the other three universities are also funded by the state, by slightly different formulas and are allowed to charge fees, which they do; they are classified as private in the everyday parlance. Generally, the public universities are expected to enrol all students who have passed the matriculation examination (which is not standardised). Traditionally, however, a number of disciplines at the University of Iceland (notably in the health sector) have maintained enrolment quotas, and recently additional disciplines have introduced or are contemplating entrance examinations.

Growth of the System

We will indicate growth in the system in a number of ways. The left panel of figure 11.1 shows, that between 1997-2014, there was a robust expansion in the number

Table 11.1 List of Universities in Iceland in 2016. Student numbers (5A, 5B, 6), from 2014, accessed from Statistics Iceland in July 2016

	Pre-Cursors	Full University Status	Public/ Private	Students	Male	Female	% of Female	% of Student Population	Awards PhD	Emphasis
University of Iceland (UI)	Yes	1911	Public	12827	4396	8431	66	67,5	Yes	Most fields
Reykjavík University (RU)	No	1998[5]	Private/ publicly funded	3204	1862	1342	42	17	Yes	Technical and professional
University of Akureyri (UnAK)	No	1987[6]	Public	1703	361	1342	79	9		Technical and professional
Agricultural University of Iceland	Yes	1999[7]	Public	181	64	117	65	1	Yes	Agricultural and environmental
Iceland Academy of the Arts	Yes	1999[8]	Private/ publicly funded	446	157	289	65	2		Arts
Hólar University College	Yes	2007[9] (2003)	Public	144	31	113	78	1		Agricultural and environmental
Bifröst University	Yes	1995[10] (1988)	Private/ publicly funded	470	172	298	63	2,5		Business and law
Total				**18975**	**7043**	**11932**	**63**			

of students engaged in higher education, including those Icelandic students that study at a university level abroad, even though this latter number is diminishing as the education system in Iceland grows in strength. The figure shows very clearly that the education system has expanded quite robustly over the last 20 years. Moreover, gender difference is very clear; the number of females has outpaced the males quite dramatically.

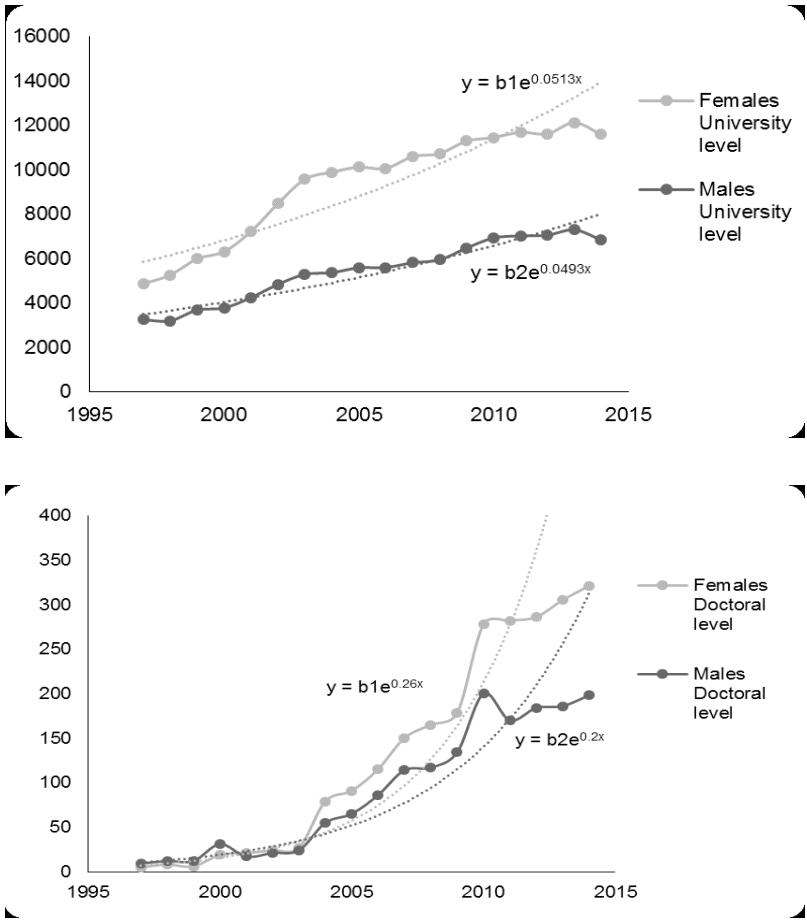
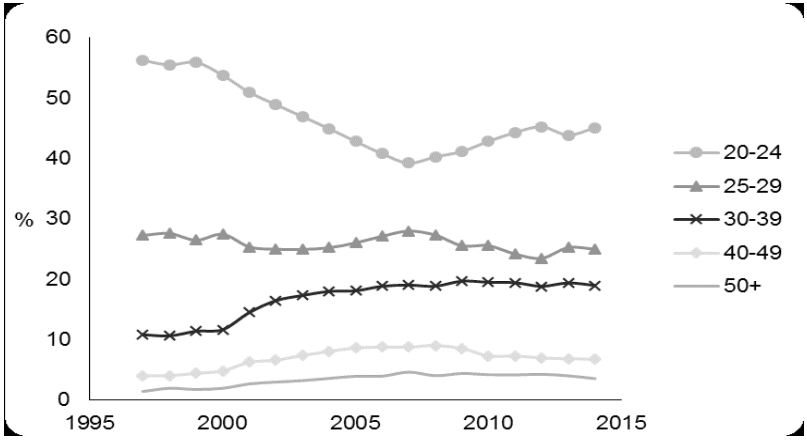


Figure 11.1. The left panel shows the overall number of students registered in higher education in Iceland. The right panel shows students registered at the doctoral level in Iceland. This covers ISCED 2011 5A, 5B and 6. Iceland has largely adopted the European Qualification Framework (Ministry of Education Science and Culture 2014) but Statistics Iceland presents data with reference to ISCED (see also (Arnarson and Briem 2005). However, the exact relationship has not been spelt out specifically for Iceland.

It has been argued that an important and a revealing way to gauge expansion of student enrolment in education is to use exponential fits (Jóhannsdóttir and Jónasson 2013; Jónasson 2003). During the 1997-2014 period, student enrolment expanded by around 5 per cent for both males and females. There are some signs (though weak) that saturation in the growth is creeping in (as expected). The right panel shows the growth in doctoral studies, with growth figures for both males and females at around 20 per cent (slightly higher for women). This is a vast increase, and there are indications that the process is reaching saturation. However, a growth pattern much more similar to many neighbouring countries emerges when we look at the combined numbers of doctoral students in Iceland and those taking their PhDs abroad (Figure 3, Jóhannsdóttir and Jónasson 2013).

A very important aspect of the Icelandic higher education scene is the wide age-range of students studying at the university level of the education system. Figure 11.2 explicitly demonstrates this point. For males, less than half of the students are at the "normal" age of 20-24, noting of course that these figures include both master and doctoral students. But nearly one-third of the male students are over 30. This tells an interesting story about whom the system is for. And it may also impact the ways in which one looks at the quality of the processes that these individuals go through. The picture for the females is even more interesting and pronounced. Well over one-third of the students are over 30 years of age, and well below 40 per cent per cent are in the "normal" age range. Again, this may have an impact on how one looks at quality of higher education. And this pattern may tell more than one story about the reasons why people decide to attend university and what they seek from their education. Also, how well the students are prepared to undertake their studies, in terms of family context, work and financial commitments. An important part of these figures is the relative stability, but it is should be emphasized that they only show proportions.



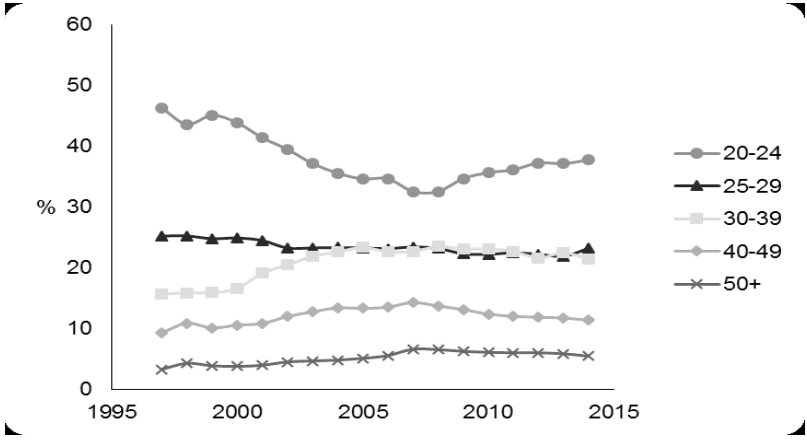


Figure 11.2 The proportion of different age groups attending university for the years 1997-2014.

Note The left panel shows the data for males and the right panel for females.

The National Quality Assurance System

The quality assurance system has a number of roots. For example, the quality and accreditation mechanisms are described in the 2006 Higher Education Act (Higher Education Act 63/2006), in which accreditation in Chapter III of the law, with substantive reference to the Bologna framework[1], and quality assurance in Chapter IV. There are four articles that frame the quality issues; Article 11 defines the objective of quality control with regard to teaching and research, article 12 refers to internal control, article 13 to external procedures and Article 14 revolves around the possible delegation of the external tasks to other bodies outside the ministry. Quality assurance is emphasised by the OECD review body, where in 2008 it notes that at the national level "the one issue that stands out is finding more effective procedures for the validation, approval and evaluation of educational programmes" (Neave et al. 2008, p. 58). Quality assurance is perhaps the strongest theme of the whole report.

In 2010, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture established two groups that were set to oversee quality measures in higher education. One is the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education, which is composed of six foreign experts, chaired by prof. Norman Sharp[2], and who are meant to oversee the external quality control of Icelandic institutions of higher education. Simultaneously, the ministry instituted the Quality Council for Higher Education, which was composed of representatives, academic staff and students from various parties related to

higher education. The role of the Board was to administer the development of a Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) for the higher education sector in Iceland. In undertaking this work, the Board was instructed to work closely with the Quality Council and thus establish a liaison with Icelandic views and interests, even though the contact was deliberately not with the institutions themselves at a formal level. The QEF was therefore, right from the beginning, firmly rooted in Icelandic higher education, without allowing the institutions themselves to have any formal control until it came to the internal evaluations. Its design also drew on European and wider international experience and expertise, and the framework was thus in keeping with international development, though tailored specifically to the Icelandic setting in several relevant aspects.

The quality control efforts are run in cycles, with the first cycle running from 2011 until 2016. A review of the different institutions was then mapped onto this period.[3] Reports have been produced for each institution separately, following the completion of the review process was completed,.[4]

The principles of the review process were developed by the Board, but in cooperation with the institutions. The rationale for the quality work and chosen procedures are clearly described in a handbook titled *Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education,* published in 2011 (The Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education 2011), hereafter referred to as the Handbook. Before the Handbook was published, there had been an institution-wide possibility to comment on its draft.

The first cycle of quality assessment focused on teaching, or rather on student learning, as stated explicitly in the Handbook's preamble:

> The [quality] framework is rooted very firmly in enhancing the quality of the student learning experience (Handbook, p. 5).

Thus, the emphasis was on education, rather than on research (even though a consensus seems to be emerging which contends that the second cycle should attend directly to research).

It was also decided that the cornerstones of the process should be constructed from the following five elements, and that were elaborated in the Handbook (Section 1 p.p 5-6):

1. Ownership of quality and standards by the institutions.
2. Enhancing the quality of the student learning experience and safeguarding standards.
3. Involvement of students in the review process.
4. International and Icelandic perspectives ensuring truly international standards.
5. Independence and partnership, such that each body arrived at their conclusions independently but with substantial consultation.

As a result, the work was carried out with, and for, the participants and stakeholders, for the sake of enhancing learning and standards in higher education, rather than passing judgement. Noting the positive reactions of the participating institutions, reported below, these objectives seemed to have been successfully achieved.

As for the operation of the exercise, it was decided that the Quality Enhancement Framework would be composed of six main elements:[5]

1. Institution-led reviews at subject level (see next section)
2. Quality Board-led reviews at institutional level
3. Annual meetings with representative(s) of the Quality Board
4. Quality Council-led enhancement workshops and conferences
5. Special Quality Board-led reviews
6. Continuing and additional accreditation

As the first cycle is not yet completed, formal reporting on some of these activities remains unavailable,[6] but stages 1-3 have been conducted and completed.

Among the innovative and interesting features of the evaluation process is the establishment of the Quality Council. It was initially populated by the universities' rectors along with student representatives, but for the period 2016-2020[7], it consists of administrators within the institutions, as well as students and representatives of other stakeholders. It will be interesting to see to what extent it can perform some of the intended tasks. In the Handbook (p. 26) it is suggested:

> …that the key functions of the Quality Council is to advise the Board on the development and implementation of the QEF… The Council and Board will jointly host an annual monitoring conference, which, amongst other things, will share annual outcomes from the monitoring of the operation of the QEF … [and] play a crucial role in advising on developments for the second cycle of the QEF … [and] play a leading role in supporting the enhancement of teaching and learning. It will organize workshops and seminars on aspects of the QEF … [and] develop a series of activities focused on aspects of teaching and learning that pose challenges across the sector.

Thus, the Quality Council is supposed to play a very proactive role in the process of quality enhancement even though its institutional legitimacy in this regard is weak. Nevertheless, this role relates the perennial question of any quality enhancement process: How to motivate people (in their institutional capacity) and thus ensure that the necessary developments take place.

The Internal Quality Assurance System

Stage 1 in the list of operations above, "institution-led reviews at subject level", (using the acronym SLR – subject level reviews) was probably the most intensive and in many ways the most cumbersome process, but nevertheless also important for the institutions. As the title suggests, this was supposed to be carried out at the subject level in each institution, by the subjects themselves. The procedure is clearly detailed in the Handbook (Section 3). The internal quality assurance process has been completed for all institutions, and the same holds for the reaction of the Quality Board. Each subject review was supposed to be based on information about the following features of the area:

> Programme/Course description; Teaching, learning and assessment strategies; Application and enrolment rates; Progression rates; Graduation rates and time to graduation; Employment/further study statistics; Indicators of relevant environment of research, scholarship and/or advanced professional practice …; Staffing and staff development; Student feedback and subsequent actions; Support services effectiveness; Development and enhancement strategies (Handbook p. 14).

This meant substantial work in collecting material which in turn provided a good overview over the operation of each subject area. All these items are part and parcel of traditional information gathering and are undoubtedly of some use for monitoring quality. In addition to this information, the subject reports were supposed to respond substantive questions that cut to the core of the Quality Board's remit and thus perhaps count as among the most significant parts of the quality exploration. The questions are as follows:

- Is the curriculum informed by research methodologies and an understanding of how knowledge has been created?
- Are students exposed to current developments in their specialist areas?
- Are students exposed to alternative and competing research perspectives and methodologies?
- Are students exposed to practising researchers in their specialist areas?
- Are students supported in undertaking research activities appropriate to their level of study?

On the basis of these guidelines, each subject area group engaged in a reflective analysis of its operation, aided by an external (foreign) expert in the area. However, the subsequent reports are not publicly available. On the basis of these reports, and extensive consultation within each institution, a reflective analysis is produced by the institution (again not publicly available, but open for discussion within each respective institution). Lastly, on the basis of the analysis, the Quality

Board and produces the findings of the institutions. These are open source in each case.[18]

The Main Impact of External and Internal Quality Assurance Procedures

It is too early to judge either the short term or the long term impact of the evaluation process. Yearly conferences have been held and organised by the Quality Board and the Quality Council. The Board has also solicited a consultative evaluation. The ensuing report, *Review of the Quality Enhancement Framework for Higher Education in Iceland First Cycle Review* (CLEVERDATA March 2015), summarises the results of a semi-structured consultation process with important stakeholders. The report notes features of the process that can be improved upon and as well as expanding on possible future outcomes, i.e. the second cycle.

The present authors, being independent of the formal quality process, also consulted the individuals, who had been at ben administratively involved at each participating institution, and asked them, in a structured questionnaire, but with open questions, to comment on the process, with special emphasis on its impact as they perceived it.

The following sections derive largely from this information. An Email containing a set of questions was sent to the person in charge of quality matters in each institution. The questions posed will be further explained at the beginning of each section, before the findings are reported. The respondents were asked for their deliberated impressions. They were informed that they would not be openly associated with the institution in question; however, their verbatim responses might be used, similarly to the approach of the Board. There is one exception to this in section below on World ranking and performance of universities in Iceland.

The first two questions probed the extent to which the external and internal quality assurance procedures has impacted the institutions' operations. A list was provided to give them some idea of issues to reflect on. The list included: institutional objectives; the curriculum; student flow; contact with stakeholders; governance; financing, and cooperation with the institution. In addition, the respondents were offered to add to the list whatever they considered relevant. Four of the seven institutions responded in a general manner to the question of external and internal QA procedures, whereas in the responses of the other three, most of the listed issues were addressed separately.

The data showed that despite the fact that formal quality assurance procedures in the higher education system in Iceland have been in place for a relatively short period, it seems that on the whole the external as well as the internal procedures were seen to have had a considerable impact. One respondent drew attention to these rapid developments when noting that:

> … external quality monitoring, as exercised by the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education … has been tremendously helpful in bringing about significant quality developments over a short period of time.

Another respondent expressed the view that

> The requirements of the Quality Enhancement Framework … and the external involvement have put structured quality enhancement on the agenda.

Yet another noted that

> … an additional impact of external QA is the current development of the internal QA system as a response to the demands made within the European Higher Education Area, and stressed that European criteria needed to be highlighted. In one institution it was mentioned that

> … working according to QEF1 [Quality Enhancement Framework –cycle one] for the last five years has had a very positive impact on quality assurance and enhancement at the University and in particular increased the quality culture of the institution and quality awareness of the staff.

Some expressed the same view in even stronger terms by stating that

> … the establishment of the Quality Board and its framework for enhancing quality in higher education in Iceland in 2010 has already (after its first five-year cycle) had enormous impact on the Icelandic universities.

All three institutions that addressed the listed issues separately reported that the external quality procedures have exerted either some or high impact on institutional objectives, as well as affecting the cooperation within the institution. Two of institutions saw the impact on student flow as minor or none. The third did not address this issue directly, but highlighted the impact of external QA procedures on students' involvement in decision making procedures, in particular with regard to the curriculum. The other two institutions disagreed as to the impact on curriculum, in regard to which one saw some impact, but the other saw less impact. The same was the case when it came to impact on financing. One perceived the impact as high, while the other considered it as a negative issue, saying that "the project is a financial restrain on the institute". The third institution did not address the financing issue.

Turning to the impact of internal QA procedures, one institution noted that external factors, such as international certification processes, as well as the formal

qualifications made by the national system for qualification in Iceland, had to a certain extent influenced internal QA procedures. And that this impact was, e.g., generally seen in institutional objectives, curriculum and governance, to some degree in contact with stakeholders, but less in student flow.

In another institution, the degree of impact of internal QA procedures was summed up by the following:

> The institution's quality system has had substantial influence as it affects most of the major components of its operations, ranging from the enrolment of students and the hiring of academic staff, through overseeing the students' track records and the quality of the institution's output

One respondent gave the summary view that "internal quality assurance procedures have had an increased and positive impact … and that is clearly demonstrated in the Institution-led Reviews".

In the three cases where respondents addressed the listed issues, the degree of impact was described as illustrated in table 11.2.

Table 11.2 A Summary of Responses from Three Institutions which gave Responses to a Structured Open Questionnaire

The Impact of Internal QA Procedures on:	Institution 1	Institution 2	Institution 3
Institutional objectives	high	lesser	some
Curriculum	minor	high	some
Student flow	no	high	no
Contact with stakeholders	no	high	some
Governance	high	high	some
Financing of the institution	no	lesser	restraining
Cooperation with the institution	some	high	some
Other - research		high	
Other - student participation in dministration and committees		high	

The internal QA procedures were seen by all three institutions as having had either some or high impact on their governance and cooperation within the institution. The influence on institutional objectives was described as having some impact in one institution, while there was no impact experienced in another

one, and the third, estimated that the impact was as high. In that context, the last-mentioned respondent expressed the view that "both the Institution-wide Review (IWR) and the Subject Level Reviews (SLR) have generated many specific enhancement objectives and have thus had quite some impact on our operations". In two of the institutions, the impact on the curriculum was either some or high, but one reported only a minor impact. Two of the institutions detected no impact on the flow of students, whereas one described it as high. And, while in one institution the impact on contact with stakeholders was described as being none, the other two reported some or high impact. One respondent noted that both research and student participation had been influenced by internal QA procedures. Thus, the QA internal procedures were considered to have had high impact on research and also on "student participation in administration and committees". Finally, there seemed to be an agreement concerning financing, with regard to which the impact of the QA procedures was deemed practically non-existent, and if any, the impact was not positive, but was instead perceived as a factor of restraint.

The respondents were asked what issues or criteria they had found most useful in the assessment framework, which they had worked with during the internal assessment process.

In reflecting on the issue, respondents in three institutions drew attention to the fact that each institution had considerable freedom in developing its internal quality assessment system. Thus one institution's evaluation is "deemed to be fit for the purpose", as one respondent phrased it. Another respondent also emphasised the ownership of the process, noting that

> … the most important features of the quality framework, is the respect for the institutional autonomy, i.e., their ownership and responsibility for quality and the emphasis placed on quality work as a process of unceasing quality enhancement.

Another respondent expressed a similar view, drawing attention to "the fact that the institutions had considerable freedom to design their own process and approach". Moreover, one respondent noted that the full cycle of reviews had "shown to enhance general awareness and understanding of quality issues … both among students and staff". Another institution emphasized the advantage of working with data that were based on statistics, key performance indicators, survey results, etc. One respondent claimed that the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), which had been developed for the higher education sector in Iceland, had without a doubt been very useful for the internal assessment.

Thus, though highlighted aspects differed, the overall conclusion is that the internal assessment framework has proven very useful in all seven institutions. This fits indeed with the view of the academic staff in general, at least at the University of Iceland, who regard QA procedures, such as those included in the Bologna-process, as powerful modulators that contribute positively to quality, be it at faculty level or departmental level (Ólafsdóttir 2014).

Other Quality Assurance Mechanism and Involvement

It was clear that the quality review process should be formally tied to the ENQA. The Handbook specifies this as follows (p. 14):

> It is a general expectation that all approaches adopted by institutions to internal review will meet the general requirements of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*.[1]

We asked about the history of quality procedures in the institutions, i.e. whether different criteria or frameworks had been used prior to the one inspired by the ENQA. In four of the institutions, there had been no experience with formal QA procedures or framework before the ENQA. In two, before the introduction of ENQA, the QA assurance procedures were grounded on the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). However, as one of the respondents put it:

> … the establishment of the Quality Board was a watershed in the quality of higher education in Iceland. Until then the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture had been directly responsible for external assessment of quality. Even though the regulatory framework had been in place, i.e., via laws and regulations and adherence to the Bologna Process, National Qualifications Framework and *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG), before the establishment of the Board, these instruments coherently harnessed through the operation of the Board.

One respondent noted that, before the ENQA, the institution had used "its own criteria for internal QA". Three comments are in order concerning the above. The first concerns the distinction between formal and informal processes. The question relates to the formal instruments which had been instituted to some extent by the government, but as noted, had not been properly activated. The second relates to the institutional processes that were in place, in some cases and to some extent, despite lacking an explicit reference to the instruments mentioned. The third point concerns the extensive external (international) cooperation and contacts that related to a wide spectrum of activities. These international collaborations and thus influences, were (and are) substantial, involving an overwhelming proportion of academic staff, in particular those with advanced degrees, educated at various prestigious foreign institutions. Also, until recently, it was of highest importance that Icelandic students would be accepted by, even the most prestigious, foreign universities. However, recently, due to the fact that Icelandic universities have instituted their own PhD programmes, Icelandic students are increasingly recognised as desirable partners in research projects. Thus, the implicit standards set, were in many disciplines explicitly international (see Geirsdóttir 2008). It is

therefore clear that the explicit influence of the international QA protocols was limited, except in the form of formal government instruments. Nevertheless, various informal and implicit quality mechanisms affected the operations of the universities. At this stage, we don't have data that allows us to specify either the nature or extent of these mechanisms.

World Ranking and Performance of Universities in Iceland

Lastly, we were interested in exploring whether the issue of world or international ranking had been part of policy-making processes or the developments within the institutions. In six of institutions, this was not the case. However, it was noted by one respondent that "our scientists always strive to produce research of high quality, and some are internationally renowned in their field". Another respondent added that it was considered by the institution itself that "ranking systems are overrated in the Icelandic university system, and at large". But in one institution, the University of Iceland the issue of international ranking is a very explicitly a part of the institution's strategy and has according to the respondent, "enhanced its visibility markedly on the international scene and opened up many new opportunities for international cooperation". In October 2011, the University of Iceland entered the list of top 300 of universities included in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings. In 2016, the University of Iceland was ranked in the 201-250 range.

Discussion and Conclusion

The history of Iceland is a history of isolation, on the one hand, and a history of strong relations with Europe, on the other, especially with the Nordic countries, which it belonged to (first Norway and then Denmark) throughout most of its historical time. Education, both within Iceland and in its relationship to other countries, is also an interesting part of country's history. There is little question that its wealth acquired during the 20th century, combined with a spirit of autonomy, accounts for a fairly varied, effective and ambitious education system. We have seven, for a while even eight, institutions at the university level, which many people think is somewhat extravagant. However, there are at least two explanations for this number, added to the determination to have our own university, the current University of Iceland. The first explanation for the number is simply strong academic drift (Jóhannsdóttir and Jónasson 2014). A number of institutions, originally established at a lower level, ambitiously drifted upwards within the system hierarchy. This also relates to the fact that in 1997, a political decision was made to establish a unified higher education system in Iceland (like in the UK and Spain), which meant that all tertiary institutions were classified

as university institutions. Yet, both their size and mission are varied and reflect their different organs. There have been mergers, and the government dreams of even further mergers, without perhaps comprehending the importance of cultural variation at this level of operation. And now (in 2016) a discussion has emerged about establishing a technical college and thus taking a step towards a dual system (Jóhannsdóttir 2008). The second explanation is that two institutions have been established that were from the start meant to be independent and special; the first being the University of Akureyri, set to facilitate an effective rural policy; and the second, Reykjavik University, an endeavour by industry to create a university, to some extent under its influence, serving a budding labour market.

Presently, the university system is drifting, hopefully in a healthy manner, and each institution is in its own way establishing and developing the quality of its operation. They all face a difficult situation: simultaneously adopting quality criteria which are to some extent homogenous across the institutions, partly influenced by international developments, and also asserting their special, different and ostensibly unique characteristics and qualities. The university institutions are being pushed to merge by government, for the sake of economy, but in many cases remain adamant in retaining their independence and differences and thus tend to resist the mergers, but normally do not have the power to retain their independence. It can be argued that largely the same dynamics and similar issues operate within and dominate the discourse in a small system, like the Icelandic one, as in many larger systems.

It was noted that the formal Icelandic quality system arrived in two stages. The first stage revolved around an effort to establish a regulatory framework, influenced largely by European instruments and processes. In the second stage, the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education was instituted, with its members and instruments. Its composition, of acknowledged foreign experts, clearly reflects the ambition to adopt international standards. The system, however, was also was also fruitfully adapted to the Icelandic setting to the Icelandic setting, and clearly recognises the wisdom of an active involvement of the institutions and the institutional sub-units (primarily departments) being assessed, while ensuring independence of the evaluation teams. The cornerstones determined by the Board figure as an example of its expertise in the field of higher education, and also its pragmatism, noting that the only way to ensure (if that is possible) that the institutions take note of the results and positively act to improve, is to encourage them to interactively participate in the process. The general *modus operandi* of the Quality Board, its general approach, the documentation and guidelines and the way it reached its final stages, all seem to be exemplary. This is our view, looking at the documentation and also the view of those who were consulted, both by the QB^2 itself and of those consulted by us.

The preliminary exploration that was conducted must be taken at face value. We asked the people, who are directly involved in the quality assurance process at each institution, to offer their impressions of the process and its impact. The

general conclusion was clear and positive. Both the internal quality processes and the external evaluation were seen as being overwhelmingly positive (there was one exception in one institution with reference to finances). It is of course possible that the participating respondents may have vested professional interests in painting this encouraging picture and we did not ask them to provide any evidence for their statements; we asked explicitly for their impressions. But, even though the responses may be technically open to question, we have no basis to question neither the tone nor content of their responses. Thus, our provisional conclusion is that there is a clear consensus from all the higher education institutions in Iceland that the quality process has been very positive. We also infer that the satisfaction with the process ranges from being high to being very high.

As far as the external process is concerned, it is clear that the principle of autonomy in the operation and defining the quality criteria is very highly appreciated and judged to be of much value for the institutions. Also, the principle that asserts that assessment is for enhancing quality rather than for judgment, is valued. We would nevertheless surmise that the final judgement passed, which is normally positive, also produced an invigorating effect. It is also noteworthy that, in terms of the internal assessment, all the institutions formalised their own processes, which they found very or extremely valuable, irrespective of the extent to which some such processes were already in operation.

Given the visible influence of the present system, it will be difficult to ascertain what would have happened if the system had not been introduced. The various forces of academic drift are in place and the pressure to perform, cooperate and compete, is present, regardless of the quality system. Thus, some kind of process of quality assurance would have been introduced by the institutions. Moreover, the clarity and transparency of the present system seems to make it all the easier for the institutions to adopt and harness these processes. It can be inferred that the institutions are very content with the process, at least according to the spokespersons that were contacted, but also inferred from the review process performed by the Board itself.

The general findings regarding the effect of other formal quality assessment mechanisms are inconclusive and a detailed study would therefore be needed to determine the exact extent of this. As far as world ranking instruments is concerned, only one institution is actively involved in the Times Higher Education Ranking score card, which it considers as a clear sign of its quality both for domestic purposes (perhaps especially to government) and in the way it is viewed by the outside world, in particular foreign institutions that the Icelandic institutions might want to cooperate with.

Given the impact of the quality assurance processes on the institutions of higher education, it will be particularly interesting to see if a convergence will take place with regard to the quality criteria used by the different institutions. This would make it easier to implement mergers. Conversely, if the institutions resist mergers, the development of visibly different criteria will become of value. Only

time will tell what emerges in this arena. In the meantime, it is quite clear that the institutions are encouraged, also by internal motivators, to develop the current procedures and thus strengthen the quality of their work. In the end it should be noted that this discussion has focussed on quality assurance mechanisms and processes and ways in which these processes have permeated the Icelandic system; how the institutions have received these measures and how they have affected their quality processes. It was never the intention of the present paper to probe if the absolute quality of higher education in Iceland has been affected, nor is there any data directly on this. There is little doubt that the institutions themselves believe this is the case and hopefully they are right, but it is still a separate issue (Jónasson and Jóhannsdóttir 2008).

The issue of quality has moved to the centre of the higher education discourse in Iceland, accompanied by the emphasis on research. It is, therefore, of some interest that there is no discussion in the available discourse concerning the nature of education, and thus its quality, even though both Skúlason (2015) and Jónasson (2008) have probed these issues, taking the Icelandic setting, perhaps only indirectly, as a point of departure. Furthermore, Geirsdóttir (2008) has analysed how different subject fields talk about the quality of their disciplines and how these concerns affect their curriculum deliberation, while simultaneously and elucidating the international reference of these discussion. Furthermore, Ólafsdóttir (2014) has analysed in detail what academics think of as quality education in their own disciplines and practice and how their practice is moulded by external circumstances (*inter alia* the Bologna process). They have thus both recently carried out in depth studies of various aspects of the quality of teaching (the focus of Cycle 1 of the Icelandic quality assessment) in the Icelandic higher education setting.

There are a number of obvious questions still to be answered. What will be the real impact of this kind of procedure in the long run? Who is to judge? Presumably not only those who have dedicated their work to the process and feel, justifiably, we assume, that they have done an excellent job. It is also a methodological problem to determine what developments take place directly as a consequence of this kind of exercise and to speculate what would have happened anyway given a variety of socio-academic dynamics (Jóhannsdóttir and Jónasson 2014). It might also be mentioned that in an environment that is perhaps overly critical in its general stance, there is little criticism heard regarding overall assessment of the process or outcomes, even though some critical voices were recorded in the consultation review by the Board.

Endnotes

[1] This is somewhat incomplete as there were programmes and schools elevated by merging them with the University of Iceland, or the Iceland University of

Education, but the corresponding schools disappeared in the process. Thus we would argue that the academic drift is greater than appears without a complete list.

[2] The first sentence of the act, which is notably the universities act, says: "This Act shall apply to those educational institutions providing higher education." Thus all institutions of higher education are classified as universities. Thus all ISCED 5A, and notably 5B as well as 6 are within universities, but 5B constitutes less than 2 %of the university population.

[3] Note that the draft translation only refers to two institutions.

[4] This is somewhat hidden for international readers as the ministry does not include this in their English overview over the system. https://eng.menntamalaraduneyti.is/education-in-iceland/Educational_system/

[5] https://is.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%C3%A1sk%C3%B3linn_%C3%AD_Reykjav%C3%ADk

[6] http://www.unak.is/um-ha/um-haskolann

[7] http://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/476532/ see also that the institution received its new name in 2005 https://www.atvinnuvegaraduneyti.is/utgafa/frettir/eldri-frettir/lan-tilkynningar/nr/4631

[8] http://www.lhi.is/um-listahaskolann

[9] http://www.holar.is/almennt_efni/sagan

10 http://www.bifrost.is/um-haskolann/saga/punktar-ur-sogu-haskolans-a-bifrost/

[11] Already in 2007 the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture published a National Qualification Framework for higher education clearly adapting the Bologna structure and conceptual tools to Icelandic higher education. See also a more general description of the system in the 2014 Reference report of the Icelandic Qualifications Framework ISQF to the European Qualifications Framework for Life Long Learning EQF with very clear connection to the Bologna framework and related terminology.

[12] Prof Norman Sharp had previously chaired the Scottish Quality system for Higher Education, the QAA and was also a member of the quality board for the University of Luxemburg.

[13] See the details https://en.rannis.is/starfsemi/gaedarad/quality-enhancement-framework/review-cycle-2011-2016

[14] These reports are all publicly available, https://en.rannis.is/starfsemi/gaedarad/quality-enhancement-framework/review-reports/

[15] See pages 10-11 in the Handbook, http://www.rannis.is/media/gaedarad-haskola/Handbook_complete_1558767620.pdf

[16] In July 2016.

[17] https://brunnur.stjr.is/nefndir.nsf/committee.xsp?documentId=26752E2FA32C297400257F3F00121D6D

[18] https://en.rannis.is/activities/quality-enhancement-framework/

[19] http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition20(2).pdf

[20] This again refers to the CLEVERDATA document.

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