

Higher Education External Review: Guidelines for self-evaluation

Cp. Rules on quality control in higher education no. 666/2003

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1. Introduction

In recent years, in policy formation for higher education institutions, emphasis has been placed upon increasing their autonomy and responsibility, and also upon strengthening their internal and external quality control. In Iceland, the Universities Act of 1997 stresses that higher education institutions bear the main responsibility for their activities, while the role of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is primarily to monitor that higher education institutions meet standards for teaching and fulfil their plans. In recent years the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has been developing methods to evaluate higher education, and in this context it has been an active participant in European and Nordic collaboration on evaluation of higher education. The ministry has carried out evaluations during the past few years of several higher education institutions and faculties. In 1999 the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture issued rules on quality control in higher education, which have been revised (see appendix). The Ministry of Education has recently presented a three-year plan for external reviews at the higher education level.

The objective of quality control in higher education is to maintain and raise the quality of teaching in higher education institutions (HEIs), to improve the organisation of HEIs, to promote their greater responsibility for their own activities, and to ensure their competitiveness in the international arena.

This booklet contains guidelines for self-evaluation by higher education institutions/faculties in connection with external review; self-evaluation is a part of the external review, and is also its basis.

2. Objectives and premises of external peer review

The objectives of external review of higher education in Iceland are:

1. Methodically to gather information on the teaching carried out in the relevant institution/faculty in Iceland.
2. To encourage the relevant institution/faculty to examine its policies and work, among other things by means of self-evaluation, and to enable it to have its strengths and weaknesses evaluated by outside experts.
3. To gather information on whether the institution/faculty meets the standards required for its work.
4. To elicit proposals from higher education institutions and independent experts on emphasis, policy and improvements in education in the relevant field.

External quality control of higher education teaching may cover an HEI as a whole, specific disciplines, departments, study programmes, faculties, or other specified units within the institution. External quality control may also extend to several HEIs or units at the same time. External quality control covers all factors concerned in teaching, including management, human resources, study assessment, student affairs and facilities.

In external peer review of teaching in higher education the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture stresses the following factors:

1. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is responsible for the implementation of the review.
2. The relevant institution/faculty shall carry out a critical self-evaluation. It is important that the self-evaluation be a true evaluation of the activities, and not simply a collection of data for the reviewers.
3. A review shall be carried out by external experts, who visit the relevant institution/faculty, and verify and criticise the self-evaluation report.
4. The results of the external review shall be made public, demonstrating the accountability of higher education institutions to interested parties – students, the labour market, government and the public.

Within this framework certain factors are stressed:

- The role of the experts in the peer review group is primarily to throw light on and evaluate the perspectives of the self-evaluation, and not to investigate as such.
- The external peer review does not entail a comparison of institutions/faculties, nor the creation of a “league table.” The primary emphasis is upon evaluating the connection between objectives and performance. Higher education institutions in Iceland are of various kinds, with varying objectives and performance. The evaluation of higher education institutions is thus primarily a matter of how well they achieve their stated goals.
- Some emphasis is placed upon compilation of statistical data from the institution’s records, as such data can provide a picture of the performance of the relevant institution/faculty.
- It is important that the external evaluation should reveal the interested parties important in higher education (students, parents, alumni, employers, government and others parties who fund higher education), and how their expectations may be met. It should be borne in mind that the concept of *quality* may signify different things to different interested parties.
- By an external peer review, the aim is to encourage development within the relevant institution/faculty.

3. Procedure

The procedure of an external peer review of a higher education institution is as follows:

- The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture notifies the relevant institution/faculty of the planned external review.
- The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture sends guidelines for self-evaluation to the relevant institution/faculty, following consultation with the institution.
- The relevant institution/faculty carries out its self-evaluation, and submits a self-evaluation report to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (2-3 months).
- A peer review group makes a site visit to the relevant institution/faculty (1-5 days).
- The external review group prepares a review report. Before the report is finalised, the relevant institution/faculty shall have the opportunity to comment on the factual content of the report.
- The external review group submits its final report to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (two months after the visit).
- The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture promulgates the report of the external review group on the ministry's website.
- Within three months of the promulgation of the final report, the relevant institution/faculty shall promulgate its report on its response to the findings. Within two years of that time the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture shall ascertain whether and how the HEI has responded to the findings of the external review.

4. Self-evaluation procedures

As stated in art. 5 of the rules on quality control in higher education the rector (president) of the relevant higher education institution shall appoint the self-evaluation group and its chair. The chair of the self-evaluation group organises and is responsible for the self-evaluation, and the writing of the self-evaluation report. He/she also liaises with parties inside and outside the relevant institution, and organises the peer review group's site visit. Ideally the self-evaluation should contain a critical discussion of factors concerned with the quality of the relevant activities. The value of the self-evaluation consists of the following:

- It provides the opportunity to put forward a critical analysis of teaching in the relevant institution/faculty, which may form a basis for development and improvement.
- The evaluation is carried out by people in a good position to judge the strengths and weaknesses of the study programmes.
- It puts forward an overall picture of the institution/faculty.
- It enables members of the peer review group, who visit the relevant institution/faculty, to focus on the most important factors to be examined during the visit.

In order that the self-evaluation have its intended value, management and all those involved in carrying out the evaluation must bear in mind the following premises:

- That it be clear how the self-evaluation will prove useful to the relevant institution/faculty.
- That agreement is reached on how the findings of self-evaluation and external review are to be used.
- That those involved in the self-evaluation be prepared to undertake the work required to complete the task.
- That there be willingness to make changes to study programmes, if the findings indicate that this is desirable.

Composition of self-evaluation group

At least four members shall be appointed to the self-evaluation group. The composition of the group shall reflect the internal organisation of the unit to be evaluated. All shall be employed within the relevant unit, and they shall include representatives of the faculty, students and administration. In its work the self-evaluation group shall ensure that parties outside the group can be involved in the evaluation.

Preparation of the self-evaluation report

It is important that the preparation of the self-evaluation report be based upon the form specified below (see checklist on structure and approach of the self-evaluation report). If any item is not applicable, or cannot be answered, this should be stated in the appropriate place. In principle, information and observations should be included on each point. Each point is not required to be answered in detail; each institution/faculty should have a certain scope for its self-evaluation. Study options and organisation of study may, for instance, vary, and this will be reflected in the self-evaluation report. But it is important that headings and content be based as far as possible upon those in the checklist.

It is important that the self-evaluation report is carefully prepared, and that it contains a reasoned evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the study programmes, based upon precise data where applicable. These guidelines include definitions of the statistical data required.

The institution/faculty will no doubt wish to support its self-evaluation with detailed data. It should be pointed out that statements made in the self-evaluation do not have to be proved; it is sufficient to take examples and explain. More detailed data may be placed in appendices.

Most of the items listed in the checklist are self-explanatory. But it should be stated that the quality of the study programme should always be evaluated taking account of the essential policy of the relevant higher education institution, and the manner in which this policy is implemented in the policy of the relevant department or faculty. The organisation of study, study materials and courses should reflect and serve these objectives.

For each item of the self-evaluation report, a description and analysis of strengths and weaknesses is required, together with observations on how the institution/faculty intends to resolve the problems/faults pointed out.

The self-evaluation report shall be not more than 40 pages, excluding appendices containing statistical data. The report shall be accompanied by a 2-4 page summary of the principal findings of the self-evaluation.

5. Checklist on structure and approach of the self-evaluation report

1) Characteristics of the higher education institution

- brief introduction to the relevant institution
- educational policy of the relevant institution
- research policy of the relevant institution (including description of research evaluation system)
- brief description and explanation of administrative system and decision-making processes within the institution
- the institution's policy regarding matters of quality (how it is formulated, monitored and revised)
- description of the institution's quality assurance system and its individual factors, and its connection with the institution's quality policy
- the institution's information system (generally how the institution's information is handled, such as statistical data).
- Published information on studies at the institution

2) Department/faculty policy and objectives

- organisation and position of the faculty/department within the institution
- description of objectives with reference to policy of the relevant institution
- gender equality policy
- research policy and objectives regarding teachers' research
- policy on connection between research/scholarship and teaching
- policy on students' on-the-job training (if applicable)
- policy on weight of individual study factors

3) Internal quality assurance of the department/faculty

- organisation of internal quality assurance and connection with the institution's quality policy

- measures of quality of study/teaching
- students' involvement in internal quality assurance

4) Structure and content of study programmes

- organisation of study programmes (undergraduate, postgraduate, Ph.D.)
- connection between objectives and courses
- connection of study material to teaching
- Relative emphasis on Icelandic and foreign teaching materials

5) Teaching and teaching methods

- teaching methods. e.g. proportional weight of assignments, lectures and seminars (distance learning if applicable)
- support for students, e.g. regarding study methods and skills (distance learning if applicable)
- Connection between regular instruction and on-the-job training (distance learning if applicable)

6) On-the-job training (if applicable)

- duration and timing of on-the-job training during the study process
- preparation of students for on-the-job training
- tasks of students in on-the-job training
- organisation, responsibility and monitoring of on-the-job training by the higher education institution
- guidance, counselling and on-site instruction of students in on-the-job training
- evaluation of on-the-job training

7) Student assessment

- rules on student assessment
- methods and tools for student assessment (distance learning if applicable)

- frequency of examinations
- responsibility for content of examinations, and examination requirements
- connection of student assessment and objectives
- students' access to information on arrangements for student assessment

8) Students

- interpretation of statistical data: e.g. trends in student numbers, number of new enrolments, graduates, and place of residence, gender and age.
- admission requirements, selection of entrants.
- guidance and counselling for students at start of study programme and during study.
- drop-out rate
- progress of study, duration of study
- results of study
- teachers' guidance
- students' right to influence study
- students' responsibility for their own studies.
- student attitudes to the department/faculty
- students' progress after graduation (e.g. vis-à-vis employment, salary, postgraduate study)

9) Staff and human resources management

- interpretation of statistical data, e.g. staff numbers, proportion of full-time work (FTE), new appointments
- part-time teachers without tenure: number, proportion of full-time work (FTE), connection with organisation and management of study
- division of teachers' responsibilities in teaching, management, research (utilisation of teachers' specialist skills)
- employment policy (e.g. appointments, termination, renewal, job security, autonomy), training, ongoing education of staff etc.

- teachers' qualifications and experience
- methods of evaluating teachers, e.g. teaching evaluation.
- application of the findings of teaching evaluation to personnel management
- staff attitudes to the department/faculty

10) Facilities

- students' working facilities and support services, e.g. classrooms, facilities for practical teaching, library, computer facilities (NB distance learning if applicable)
- teachers' working facilities and support services
- institution's/faculty's funding

11) Administration

- overall management of studies
- management of specific study options
- management of on-the-job training (if applicable)
- students' right of appeal
- methods of monitoring students' progress

12) Department's/faculty's research and development work

- connection between teachers' research projects and study objectives
- connection between research and teaching and student assignments
- coordination of projects, collaboration on research
- teachers' and students' links to research agencies
- teachers' activity in research
- promulgation of findings of teachers' research
- principal means of funding research

13) External relations

- Faculty's contacts with private, public and professional bodies
- Contacts with other institutions of higher education, nationally and abroad
- participation in international student-exchange programmes
- international links and collaboration agreements between the institution/faculty and other parties
- relations with other departments/faculties with the institution

14) Other

- other factors the faculty/department wishes to state

15) Summary

- findings: strengths and weaknesses of study programmes (undergraduate and postgraduate) and proposals for improvements
- institution's/faculty's observations on the self-evaluation

6. Criteria for appendix of statistical data

The following data are requested on students and staff for the past five academic years.

1. Total number of students at the institution/faculty by:

- age (see notes)
- gender
- proportion of full-time study (see notes)

2. Number of new enrolments by:

- age
- gender
- proportion of full-time study

3. Number of graduates by:

- age
- gender
- number of foreign students
- graduating grades (see notes)
- duration of study (see notes)

4. Drop-out numbers (see notes) by:

- gender
- age
- proportion of students who graduate

5. Staff

Number of staff by job category (See I - IV).

- I. Teachers whose principal occupation is teaching. This does not include rector (president), supervisors of teaching or others who have little or no teaching duties. Those who hold an occasional lecture or course should not be included in this category.
- II. Part-time teachers without tenure, for whom part-time teaching is not their principal employment.
- III. Staff involved in educational matters other than teaching. This includes those who work on research, administrators (e.g. faculty heads etc.) and other professionals. Older teachers who have little or no teaching duties should also be included in this category.
- IV. Other auxiliary staff: office workers, secretaries, technical assistants etc.

If a person performs more than one job within the institution, he/she shall be included in the category which occupies the majority of his/her time. Positions to which an appointment has not been made, but for which approval has been given, shall be specified.

6. More detailed information on tenured teachers

- proportion of tenured/ untenured teachers
- proportion of research in the teacher's work duties
- proportion of management in the teacher's duties
- proportion of teaching in the teacher's duties
- number of students per teacher
- total number of teachers by job title

7. Definitions for data compilation

Total number of students

All those registered as students for the academic year in question. All students must be included, regardless of progress of studies.

Age

Students: Students' age is classified by year of age until the age of 30 years. After that age is classified as follows: 30-34 years, 35-39 years, 40 years and older. Age shall be stated for the year of commencement of the academic year. Age at graduation shall be calculated on the basis of year of graduation.

Teachers and other staff: staff shall be classified by age in five-year categories: 20-24 years, 25-29 years, 30-34 years, etc.

Proportion of full-time study

A student is deemed to be a full-time student if he/she completes during the academic year 75% of the courses and/or the required number of credits defined as full-time study. Should a student have failed, or opted not to take, examinations, but subsequently passed re-take examinations in these subjects later in the academic year, he/she shall be deemed a full-time student. Students' proportion of full-time study shall be calculated over the academic year as a whole when a student is studying throughout the year, but otherwise it shall be calculated for the term or part of the academic year for which the student is registered. This levels out fluctuations in numbers of credits between terms. Proportion of full-time study shall be classified as follows: 0%, <25%, <50%, <75% and 100%.

Foreign students

Foreign students are defined as those who do not hold Icelandic citizenship.

A distinction must be drawn between those foreign students who take part of their studies here in Iceland (e.g. Erasmus students, who are students at a foreign university and study temporarily in Iceland, and receive credits for those studies at their home university), and those who are permanently resident here in Iceland.

New enrolments

New enrolments comprise all students who commence studies in any subject during a specified academic year. Those who register more than once during the first year of study are thus counted as new enrolments, regardless of whether they have previously studied at this level, or whether they are

repeating the year. Those who commence studies at a later term are, however, only counted as new enrolments when they first register, but not again when they register for first-year courses at the first term of the next academic year.

Classification of grades

Grades, awarded on a scale of 1 to 10, should be classified in four categories:

Those who earn final grades of 9-10 are awarded Distinction = A

Those who earn grades of 7.25-8.99 are awarded Grade I = B

Those who earn final grades of 6-7.24 are awarded Grade II = C

Those who earn final grades of 5-5.99 are awarded Grade III = D

Graduates

Graduates are those who are registered as final-year students during the academic year in question and complete their studies with satisfactory results during that year. Definitions of completion of studies vary from subject to subject and institution to institution, and thus the higher education institution must make its own definition of which students do or do not graduate during the academic year. Also, completion of studies may or may not entail the award of a degree.

Duration of studies

The period of time during which a student is registered for studies at a specified level, from enrolment until completion of studies. Breaks from studies are subtracted if the student is not registered during the breaks. Duration is measured in years and half-years, and distribution is examined, to discern e.g. the proportion of students who complete studies in two years, three years, etc. No distinction is drawn between graduation in June and October; thus a student who originally enrolled in the autumn term (registration in June) is deemed to have been a student for three years, whether he/she graduates in June or October three years later. On the other hand, a student who graduates in February, a little more than three years later, is deemed to have been a student for 3.5 years.

The average duration of studies shall also be calculated for the graduates of each academic year.

Drop-out

Students who abandon their studies or transfer to a different course of study without completing studies are deemed to be drop-outs. These include those

who have not met the requirements for study progress, or other conditions for continued studies in the subject.

Drop-outs include all students have been registered for study in the past five academic years, but are no longer registered, after subtracting the number of graduates for the period.

Proportion of students who graduate

The number of students who graduate each year, stated as a proportion of number of new enrolments that year. Thus the number of graduates during the five-year period is divided by the number of new enrolments over the same period.

8. Appendix: Rules on quality control in higher education

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RULES on quality control in higher education

I. Objectives

Art. 1

The objective of quality control in higher education is to maintain and raise the quality of teaching in higher education institutions (HEIs), to improve the organisation of HEIs, to promote greater responsibility of HEIs for their own activities, and to ensure their competitiveness in the international arena.

II. Quality assurance systems in higher education institutions

Art. 2

An HEI shall fulfil its obligations to monitor quality of teaching by having a formal quality assurance system. One aspect of this is systematic internal evaluation by the HEI, or units within it, and formal consideration of the evaluation by the HEI, with the purpose of improving teaching. The work of teachers shall also be systematically evaluated. The HEI shall promulgate a description of its quality assurance system. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture may at any time request information relating to the quality assurance system.

III. External quality control

Art. 3

External quality control of higher education teaching may cover an HEI as a whole, specific disciplines, departments, study programmes, faculties, or other specified units within the institution. External quality control may also extend to several HEIs or units at the same time. External quality control covers all factors concerned in teaching, including management, human resources, study assessment, student affairs and facilities.

An HEI shall meet the expenses of its self-evaluation from its funding. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture meets the costs of external review.

Art. 4

The Minister of Education, Science and Culture determines when an external review shall take place as provided in these rules, and what the focus of the review shall be. The minister shall appoint for this purpose a peer review group, which shall be responsible for carrying out the review. Appointments to a peer review group shall take account of the following:

- a. A peer review group shall comprise 3-6 people. The group shall include individuals who meet some of the following criteria: qualifications in the relevant field of scholarship, or extensive experience of work in higher education, of quality control and of employing graduates.
- b. No member of the peer review group may have any links to the institution evaluated.
- c. At least one member of the group shall be employed outside Iceland.

The work of a peer review group shall be subject to guidance and a letter of appointment from the Minister of Education, Science and Culture, and it shall have a secretary who organises its work and writes its report. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture shall issue a schedule for the review, its time-frame and its costs, and guidelines for self-evaluation, and shall monitor the implementation of the review.

Art. 5

The rector of the HEI appoints a self-evaluation group and its chair. The chair organises and is responsible for the self-evaluation, and writing of the self-evaluation report. He/she also liaises with bodies inside and outside the relevant HEI and organises the peer review group's site visit. The self-

evaluation group shall comprise at least four and not more than six members, who shall correctly reflect the internal organisation of the unit being evaluated. They shall all work within the relevant unit, and the group shall include representatives of faculty, students and administration.

Art. 6

After self-evaluation has been completed the peer review group visits the institution, verifies the self-evaluation report, examines other factors it may deem necessary, and submits a report on its findings. The peer review group shall complete its report within two months of the conclusion of the visit to the HEI. Before the peer review group submits its final report, representatives of the relevant HEI shall be given the opportunity to comment upon the factual content of the report. The peer review group shall consider the HEI's comments and then complete its report for submission to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

Art. 7

The report of the peer review group shall be promulgated in its entirety. Within three months of the promulgation of the final report, the relevant HEI shall promulgate its report on its response to the findings. Within two years of that time the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture shall ascertain whether and how the HEI has responded to the findings of the external review.

Art. 8

These rules are issued on the basis of authority provided in para. 1 art. 5 of the Universities Act no. 136/1997, and they shall take effect immediately. Rules no. 331/1999 on quality control in higher education teaching shall also be abrogated from that time.

Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 12 September 2003.

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